



**Blasphemy and Apostasy in the UK Asylum System: Policy and Practice in Asylum
Cases Submitted Under Grounds of Non-Religiosity**

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Declaration

I, Lucy Potter, confirm that the Thesis is my own work. I am aware of the University's Guidance on the Use of Unfair Means (www.sheffield.ac.uk/ssid/unfair-means). This work has not been previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, university.

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Abbreviations

Asylum Policy Instruction (API)

Country Policy Information Notes (CPIN)

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ+)

Nationality and Borders Act (NABA)

Particular Social Group (PSG)

Refugee Status Determination (RSD)

Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR)

United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR)

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)

West Asia and North Africa (WANA)

Abstract

This thesis explores the lived experiences of non-religious asylum seekers and refugees in the United Kingdom (UK). While religious persecution is recognised in the Refugee Convention (1951) as grounds for asylum, apostates within the British asylum system face significant obstacles to obtaining protection, which remain under-explored in the existing academic literature. This thesis employs qualitative research methods, including semi-structured interviews and document analysis. It encompasses the experiences of individuals who have sought (or are seeking) asylum in the UK (n = 12) as well as the accounts of human rights advocates who assist these individuals (n = 22). Furthermore, an analysis of fundamental human rights laws regarding freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) and Home Office asylum policies has been conducted. The theoretical perspectives of lived non-religion, coloniality of power, and bureaucracy are utilised to conceptualise apostate asylum through three analytical trajectories. First, I explore the journeys of ‘becoming’ non-religious to elucidate the lived experience and banal forms of non-religiosity. I argue that apostasy can be understood through iterative ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’ processes. As a result of these factors, participants faced fear of persecution and sought asylum in the UK. Second, the theme of ‘bureaucratising’ examines how asylum bureaucracy contributes to the (re)production of what it means to be a ‘credible’ apostate in need of protection. Third, the theme of ‘negotiating’ evaluates the effects of persistent colonial imaginaries on the representation of non-religiosity in the asylum assessment processes for apostates. The findings provide nuance to the field of migration studies by challenging scholarship that characterises refugees and their modes of belonging solely through the lens of religion. Additionally, it enhances understanding of apostasy and the identities formed as individuals leave religion. This research impacts not only the evaluation of non-religious claims, but also similar claims based on personal beliefs, including those concerning sexuality.

Key words: Non-Religion, Forced Migration, Asylum, (De)coloniality, Lived Religion

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study of Apostate Asylum Claims and Refugees

“I was devastated and scared for my life – I felt helpless and very angry. My claim was rejected because I was asked in my interview to prove my humanism by naming Greek Philosophers.” (Hamza bin Walayat - Humanists UK, 2020)

Hamza bin Walayat was born in Pakistan into a conservative Muslim family, where questioning religious doctrines is discouraged and dangerous. As he grew up, bin Walayat began to have doubts about the teachings and practices of his religion. However, insulting Islam or religious figures is treated extremely seriously in Pakistan, and it can carry the death sentence under its strict ‘blasphemy laws’. During his time in Pakistan, bin Walayat faced harsh treatment - beatings from his father and teachers, and he was forced to conform to religious practices, such as praying and fasting. Conforming to religious expectations was compulsory, leaving little opportunity to explore personal beliefs. When he moved to the UK to embark on his studies at university, he found the new environment profoundly impacted his sense of identity. By exploring his beliefs outside of societal and familial pressures, bin Walayat gradually decided that he did not believe in supernatural explanations of the world and did not want to live his life within the confines of organised religion. With further exploration, he finally discovered a label that resonated with his worldview, as a ‘humanist’ (Humanists UK, 2020).

Conversely, identifying as a humanist came at a cost. Bin Walayat received threats to his life from his family and community in Pakistan after it was revealed he had renounced Islam. Those accused of blasphemy in Pakistan have been targeted with mob violence and extrajudicial killings, even before formal trials take place (BBC, 2019), making his return to Pakistan no longer safe. Lawyers who represent those accused, as well as judges overseeing cases, have also been the targets of violence, making the pursuit of blasphemy court cases risky and dangerous (BBC, 2019; Humanists International, 2022).

Faced with no safe option to return to Pakistan, bin Walayat sought asylum in the UK, and his case went through an asylum assessment process. However, during the asylum assessment, his credibility was questioned in a peculiar manner. He was asked to demonstrate his humanist beliefs by referencing ancient Greek philosophers, including Aristotle and Plato - philosophers who, ironically, were religious. The Home Office denied his claim because he failed to name these figures, stating that his knowledge of humanism was ‘rudimentary at best’ (The Guardian,

2018). This case highlights that questioning an apostate claimant about Greek philosophy is not a viable method for determining an individual's non-religiosity, raising broader questions about the British asylum system's ability to make accurate and precise decisions.

This case became a matter of public interest after Humanists UK¹ highlighted the fundamental flaws in the asylum decision-making for non-religious asylum claims. Humanists UK launched a campaign, which included a petition with more than 12,500 signatures, including 150 philosophers in the UK, to contest the Home Office's decision (Humanists UK, 2018c). In 2019, bin Walayat was ultimately granted asylum, after a fresh application. His case drew national attention and underscored the complexities of how asylum bureaucratic processes can appropriately evaluate claims on the grounds of non-religion. Humanists UK issued a statement where they stated the Home Office 'has badly misunderstood what humanism is and as a result of their ignorance and incompetence, a man's life is being put at risk' (Humanists UK, 2018a).

Despite high-profile cases such as Hamza bin Walayat, academic research on this topic has been slow to develop. Thus, not much is known about how apostates, including but not limited to those with humanist belief systems, experience and navigate asylum procedures. Additionally, there is an underdeveloped understanding of the identities and worldviews of non-religious refugees. This study, therefore, aims to fill a knowledge gap that delves into the unique construction of apostate identities and how the British asylum system assesses them.

1.1. Context and Background of the Study

1.1.1. Freedom of religion or belief (FoRB)

Throughout history, the systematic mistreatment of religious minorities has spurred movements advocating for the establishment of the human right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), leading to the formal recognition of this right in international human rights law (McAdam, 2017). FoRB is guaranteed within Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (UN General Assembly, 1948). The right is enshrined in international law, giving it global reach, through Article 18 of the International Covenant on

¹ *Humanists UK* is a charity that supports and represents people who live without religion, promoting a humanist approach to life based on reason, empathy, and a scientific understanding of the world. Humanists UK offers services like non-religious ceremonies for key life events, pastoral care in institutions, and educational materials for schools. The organisation also campaigns for human rights, equality for all belief systems, and the separation of religion from state institutions.

Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (UN General Assembly, 1966). It is also embedded in the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (UN General Assembly, 1981) and regional human rights laws². However, despite FoRB being an established human right that includes the right not to hold beliefs or to change a religion or belief within its jurisdictions, legal scholars have argued that the freedom to be non-religious, atheist, or apostate does not receive equal protection as the freedom to be religious (e.g., Carpenter, 2017; Lerner, 2012; McAdam, 2017).

Discrimination or persecution based on religion or belief is reported in every region of the world (Grim and Finke, 2010; Humanists International, 2023). According to Humanists International, in 2022, over 70% of the world's population live in countries that discriminate against the right to be non-religious (Humanists UK, 2022b). Restrictions on the right to freedom of religion or belief affect non-religious individuals in multiple ways. The most frequent example of discrimination arises from unintentionally granting benefits and privileges to religious groups (Furseth and Repstad, 2016; Humanists International, 2023; Mataic and Finke, 2019). The latest figures, as of 2015, suggest that more than one in five countries (22%) have an official state religion (PEW Research Center, 2017). Official religions, or the favoured religious majority, receive advantages evident through legal protection, the right to religious freedom, and tax exemption (Furseth and Repstad, 2016). These privileges have consequently infringed on the rights of those outside the majority, impacting minorities and the non-religious (Nixon, 2020; Siddique and Hayat, 2008). This state preference for a particular religion can also reinforce a broader societal marginalisation and discrimination of the non-religious (Humanists International, 2023).

Moreover, regional laws can intentionally marginalise individuals who do not adhere to the state's official religion. For instance, although Iran acknowledges some religious minorities, such as Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, it fails to recognise the Baha'i faith. As a result, Baha'is experience legal marginalisation and are often excluded from state decision-making processes, maintaining their marginalised status (Alam, 2015). Similarly, non-religious identifications are censored in Iran, where it is illegal to officially identify as non-religious (Humanists International, 2021). The most profound ways non-religious rights are restricted

² Including the European Convention on Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950) and the Human Rights Act (HRA, 1998).

are through apostasy and blasphemy laws, which carry legal and social consequences (Forte, 1994; Green, 2014; Rehman, 2010). Despite international concern and advocacy for reform, the persistence of these laws highlights ongoing tensions between freedom of religion or belief and the desire of states to maintain religious control and conformity.

1.1.2. Apostasy and blasphemy

Apostasy and blasphemy are sensitive topics in most religious traditions; all three Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) have historically recognised particular acts as blasphemous (see Ali, Deng and Khalid, 2023). In contemporary discourse, researchers and human rights advocates primarily raise issues of apostasy and blasphemy concerning those who have left the Islamic faith, as they argue this population are more likely to face persecution for leaving their religion. At the time of writing, 12 countries maintain the death penalty for blasphemy and/or apostasy. These countries are Malaysia, Maldives, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Humanists International, 2024). Blasphemy and/or apostasy is punishable through prison sentences in a further 60 countries, and 19 more have some other criminal restrictions, which means 91 criminalise blasphemy or apostasy to some extent, affecting 57% of the global population (Humanists International, 2024). As a result, amongst human rights organisations and United Nations observations, there is agreement that blasphemy and apostasy laws violate human rights because they restrict rights enshrined within the UDHR, most particularly those such as FoRB (Humanists International, 2023).

In Muslim-majority states, it is usually those that enforce Sharia law, which is the Islamic legal system that has harsh penalties for apostasy, including imprisonment or the death penalty (Rehman, 2010). This has led researchers to argue that blasphemy and apostasy are treated more severely by dissenters of Islam in countries that retain Islamic legal traditions (Ali, Deng and Khalid, 2023). Not all Muslim-majority countries enforce these laws, though in nearly half (32) of the 71 countries that criminalise blasphemy, the majority religion is Islam (Lavery, 2018). The seven countries that impose the death penalty for apostasy have a predominantly Muslim population (ibid). Additionally, Islam is the most widely endorsed religion by governments, with 27 nations officially recognising it as the state religion (PEW Research Center, 2017).

This study had no specific selection criteria for apostates from Islam, however, all participants from a refugee background had left the Islamic faith. As such, this research focuses on individuals who have departed from Islam, and their unique experiences have shaped the analysis and conclusions. While much of the sociology of religion has broadly examined trends in ‘Western’ societies, with particular emphasis on those who have left Christianity (e.g., Cotter, 2020; Gilsvik, 2023; Lee, 2015; Malone, 2021), this research contributes to the small but growing interest in non-religious patterns among individuals from an Islamic background, for example, of those arising in Morocco, Egypt, Turkey and Bangladesh (e.g., Eller and Khazaal, 2024). By exploring this phenomenon in the context of forced migration, this study offers a novel perspective on apostasy and non-religion.

One interpretation of apostasy is defined as ‘an exit from a group or collective and is informed by a renunciation of the group’s foundational beliefs and values’ (Cottee, 2015, p.14). Apostasy from Islam carries significant social and legal repercussions. Socially, it is viewed as unacceptable, which can lead to ostracism from family and potentially escalating to mob violence and extrajudicial killings. Legally, the consequences can involve disinheritance, forced divorce, loss of child custody, and be subject to prison sentences and the death penalty (Schirmacher, 2020). Accusations of apostasy have been regarded as the most dangerous and powerful tool available to eliminate an opponent (political or religious), as well as being effective in suppressing religious dissent to maintain the status quo (Saeed, 2017).

Blasphemy is a term that is complex to define:

Blasphemy stands for whatever a society most abhors and has the power to prosecute. It is a form of religious vituperation against those who have transgressed the timeless truths that a society cherishes. That is why its nature, along with the timeless truths change over time. (Lawton, 1993, p.3)

Blasphemy includes a range of charges depending on the country’s context and, thus, are culturally relative (Lawton, 1993, p.4). An individual can be fined, face prison sentences, and, in some cases, lashings and execution can be used (PEW Research Center, 2022). Charges have included ‘insult to religion’ and ‘hurting religious sentiments’ (End Blasphemy Laws, n.d.). For example, Saudi Arabia has held charges for ‘insulting Islam’ and ‘producing what would disturb public order, religious values and morals’ (Manea, 2015, p.117). There are also disagreements within religions about what constitutes blasphemy. For example, within Islam,

there are debates about its sects, such as Sunni, Shi'a or Ahmadiyya, where the association with one of these sects can be treated as blasphemous to Islam, depending on the country's context (End Blasphemy Laws, n.d.). In Saudi Arabia, members of the Shi'a minority are labelled as apostates by Sunni Wahhabis. In Iran, Twelver Shi'a theocrats persecute the Sunni minority in southeastern Iran as apostates, and in Pakistan, members of the Ahmadiyya sect face discrimination based on accusations of apostasy (Akram, 2000).

Apostasy laws are less common than blasphemy laws (PEW Research Center, 2022), though the charges tend to overlap (Rehman, 2010). Apostasy from Islam, occurring when a Muslim renounces or rejects their faith, can be charged with blasphemy, as the rejection of Islam is often regarded as blasphemous (ibid). This is the case in Pakistan, where Chapter XV of Pakistan's Penal Code includes several sections of religious defamation laws (End Blasphemy Laws, 2020). This includes employing the death penalty for blasphemy while having no official law on apostasy. Thus, blasphemy laws can be used to target the non-religious and others who dissent.

Countries with apostasy and/or blasphemy laws have supported the use of them to protect culture, traditions and religion (Manea, 2016). However, upholding these laws has been argued to be a political tactic rather than one that maintains religious freedom (Rehman, 2010), and academics engaging with Islamic studies have maintained that apostasy conflicts with a variety of foundational texts of Islam (Saeed, 2017). Some scholars argue that these laws can be traced back to Western colonial powers, suggesting that colonised states enacted apostasy and blasphemy laws to preserve their identity (Manea, 2016). They also point to a direct intervention made by British colonial powers, such as the blasphemy laws found in Nigeria and Pakistan, which have colonial roots (Haq, 2019). The fact that Commonwealth countries are the most likely to have blasphemy laws may support this (Humanists UK, 2022a), including Pakistan, where charges have increased in recent years (PEW Research Center, 2022). More recent interpretations of the Qur'an by Islamic jurists have advocated for freedom of religion (Rehman, 2005), making apostasy and blasphemy highly contentious topics.

It is important to note that there are laws relating to blasphemy in countries with religious majorities of faiths other than Islam (see Ali, Deng and Khalid, p.108-116). Forte (1994) has argued that blasphemy punishments can be seen in the 'West' through 'political correctness' and hate speech laws (1994, p.28). Blasphemy is also still reported in the media. The most

notable examples are the Danish cartoons scandal (Klausen, 2009) and Salman Rushdie's 'The Satanic Verses' (1988) (Weller, 2009). In one of the most publicised cases, a fatwa³ was issued by the state of Iran on Rushdie, a British author, for depicting the Prophet Mohammed and his wives (Rehman, 2010). As of 2023, Denmark re-introduced its blasphemy law (Humanists UK, 2023). Denmark can now punish people accused of 'inappropriate treatment' of religious texts with up to two years in prison. In the UK, there are increasing concerns regarding the potential introduction of de facto blasphemy laws if an individual is prosecuted for publicly burning the Qur'an. Humanists UK has warned that if they are convicted for causing harassment, alarm, or distress rather than under the Public Order Act, which was designed to address religious and racial hatred while preventing the misuse of blasphemy laws, it would contradict Parliament's intentions and effectively re-establish blasphemy laws in England and Wales (Humanists UK, 2025).

To date, sociologists have overlooked studies of apostate persecution, perhaps due to the Eurocentric roots of the sociology of religion that have produced 'the very idea of a nonbelieving Muslim, let alone an atheist Muslim, [seem] counterintuitive if not inconceivable' (Eller and Khazaal, 2024, p.1). Research surrounding international law, human rights and forced migration regularly considers FoRB violations regarding religious minorities or converts. However, the non-religious are considered as an afterthought in wider research on religious persecution (e.g., Musalo, 2004). Attention given to the non-religious is primarily raised by advocacy groups such as Humanists International, Humanists UK and other secular organisations. Highlighting the specific challenges of assessing asylum claims based on apostasy in the UK, the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on International Freedom of Religion or Belief has raised concerns about the lack of religion or belief literacy amongst Home Office caseworkers, which has resulted in poor credibility assessments (Meral and Gray, 2016). This is concerning, as a former Special Rapporteur on FoRB has stated: 'In my observations, humanists, when they are attacked, are attacked far more viciously and brutally than in other cases' (Humanists UK, 2024).

1.1.3. Asylum policy and practice in the UK

³ A fatwa is an official ruling issued by an Islamic scholar (a mufti) or religious authority. Fatwas are released to cover various topics and the application of Islamic law (Sharia).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated 117.3 million people globally were forcibly displaced at the end of 2023 (UNHCR, 2024). Within these figures, 43.4 million are refugees, and 6.9 million are asylum seekers. Most (75%) displaced people find protection in ‘low’ and ‘middle-income’ countries. In the UK, applications were made for the year ending June 2024 (relating to 97,107 people), which is an 8% decrease from 2023 (Refugee Council, 2024). In 2022, an estimated 0.6% of the UK population consisted of people who came to the country seeking asylum (The Migration Observatory, 2023). The UK is ranked 20th in Europe for the number of applications per head of population (Refugee Council, 2024). In 2024, the top five most common countries of origin for people who applied for asylum from inside the UK were Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, Vietnam and Bangladesh (ibid). Though asylum claimants comprise a small proportion of the UK population, asylum remains prevalent in political and public discourse.

For asylum cases made in the year to June 2024, the government granted protection to 57% of asylum cases on initial decisions (Refugee Council, 2024). However, there is a high success rate in granting asylum appeals. In the year to March 2024, 48% of asylum applications were granted after appeals (ibid). Thus, asylum seekers who are eventually recognised as refugees (after an initial asylum application is denied) are higher than the initial decision stage (The Migration Observatory, 2023). Refugee organisations have criticised the high turnover rate on appeal, as it suggests inaccurate decision-making for asylum cases (Refugee Council, 2024). This inference has led researchers and human rights advocates to argue that a ‘culture of disbelief’ is embedded in asylum assessment procedures (Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Freedom from Torture, 2019; Jubany, 2017). This denotes a tendency of asylum decision-making to be oriented around making negative decisions, manifested through arbitrary, inconsistent and biased decisions⁴ (Anderson *et al.*, 2014). The culture of disbelief impacts the way credibility assessments are undertaken through flawed questioning, unrealistic expectations on the evidential burden of proof, and embedded power dynamics between bureaucrat and asylum seeker (Freedom from Torture, 2019). Thus, the culture of disbelief poses a barrier to protection for people seeking asylum.

⁴ The UK government deny there is a culture of disbelief in asylum determination processes (see UK Government, 2013).

The UK government does not record or publish data on asylum cases made on the grounds of apostasy, nor does it publish data on the religious identity of claimants. Thus, it is unknown how many cases the Home Office receive and assesses of this type. However, the PEW Research Center found that in 2024, 13% of global migrants had no religious affiliation (PEW Research Center, 2024). Although this statistic does not disaggregate data between refugees and asylum seekers, it shows there may be a significant number of people globally who move and do not identify with the religion they were given at birth.

In 1951, the ratification of the Geneva Convention relating to refugees established a refugee protection regime. It was institutionalised following the vast displacement caused by the Holocaust and the Second World War (Hatton, 2020; Mountz, 2020; Musalo, 2004). The legislation was initially designed for refugees within Europe. In 1967, the Protocol was enacted, which removed the 1951 Convention's geographical restrictions and expanded protections for refugees beyond Europe. The definition of a refugee in the Refugee Convention is:

Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it. (UNHCR, 1951: Art. 1)

The Convention and Protocol⁵ allow people to seek protection based on a 'well-founded fear' of persecution. However, despite the deliberately broad scope of the Convention, nation-states have interpreted the Convention to suit their own interests in reducing the number of refugees in their territories (Marfleet, 2006; Mayblin, 2017; Thomas, 2005). From the outset, states that were signatories introduced passports, immigration policies and border controls to restrict people from moving and accessing human rights if they do move (Hatton, 2020). Although the UNHCR offer guidance on how asylum assessments should be carried out, these have no legal power. This has led to significant variations in how asylum assessments are conducted across member states (Noll, 2006). Thus, asylum seekers have faced considerable challenges in exercising their right to seek asylum (Schuster, 2020). Countries continue to deter, detain,

⁵ For ease of reference, the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol will be shortened to the 'Convention' throughout the thesis.

return, offshore and externalise people to prevent any means for them to seek asylum (Mountz, 2020).

Despite the UK being one of many states globally that are legally committed to protecting refugees and asylum seekers (Bögner, Brewin and Herlihy, 2010), the country's asylum policies are increasingly hostile (Bhatia, 2020). Asylum seekers have been targeted by draconian and inhumane policies that aim to withdraw and limit their rights (Canning, 2019). Many asylum seekers face serious barriers to protection, such as poverty, poor healthcare, racism and Islamophobia (Canning, 2019). Both Labour and Conservative governments have ensured firmer and restrictive immigration controls, and asylum has continued to be a focal topic on policy agendas for three decades (Bloch and Dona, 2019).

Asylum in political and public debates often constructs people seeking asylum as 'opportunists', 'bogus', 'queue jumpers' and 'illegal' (Watters, 2019). They have also been described as 'economic migrants' (McDonald and Billings, 2007) despite a lack of empirical research proving this (Bloch and Schuster, 2002; Crawley and Hagen-Zanker, 2019). Asylum seekers have been perceived as dangerous and a threat to national security (Mountz, 2020). Policy agendas on asylum in recent years have become more extreme (Mayblin *et al.*, 2024). The policy agenda under the previous Conservative government (in power during the fieldwork conducted for this thesis) focused on criminalising small boat crossings, removing the right to asylum for those who arrive through 'irregular' means, and creating an agreement with Rwanda for an externalisation policy (Mayblin *et al.*, 2024). Mountz (2020) has named the eroding of asylum rights the 'death of asylum' in the UK.

To receive refugee protection in the UK, asylum seekers must meet one or more of the grounds outlined in the Refugee Convention for reasons of: 'race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UNHCR, 1951). Asylum claims progress through Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes. Refugee status is decided through a 'credibility assessment', which typically consists of an interview and the consideration of documentary evidence (Bögner, Brewin and Herlihy, 2010). The credibility assessment is regarded by many as the most crucial stage in the asylum process, as it determines whether an asylum seeker can or cannot be returned to their country of origin (Kagan, 2003). The assessments, therefore, have a considerable amount of risk, as decisions can sometimes be between life and death for some applicants. However, the Home Office, which is responsible

for making assessments and decisions on asylum claims, has been subject to intense criticism for making poor-quality decisions (Bögner, Brewin and Herlihy, 2010; Shaw and Witkin, 2004). Researchers have argued that asylum determination procedures are often inconsistent (Thomas, 2008), plagued with bias, stereotypical judgements and preconceptions (Kagan, 2003), and have made negative decisions due to minor inconsistencies or errors (Bögner, Brewin and Herlihy, 2010). In combination with the increasing hostility that has accelerated a culture of disbelief within the asylum regime, asylum decision-making has been reported as not being derived from bureaucratic policies and guidance but from decision-makers' experiences and prejudices (Jubany, 2011).

The challenge of demonstrating credibility is further complicated by cases that seek out an assessment of internal or subjective beliefs, as is the case for religion-based asylum cases. These cases are similar in essence to those made under the 'Particular Social Group' (PSG) provision within the Convention. The PSG ground includes asylum claims based on the persecution of those perceived to be LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer). Thus, these types of claims require an assessment of the genuineness of a person's beliefs, which are sometimes internally held, not publicly displayed, articulated or visible (Berlit, Doerig and Storey, 2015). They also entail assessing an individual's identity, typically shaped and cultivated in a different country than that of the decision-maker. Without the means to 'objectively' assess internally held beliefs, asylum bureaucrats have been reported to impose their personal assumptions on how they believe an asylum claimant should behave (Kagan, 2015; Selim *et al.*, 2022; Jubany, 2011). Throughout this research, participants' narratives have suggested that their non-religious identities are assessed from the standpoint of a non-religious person in the UK, which has, in turn, created misunderstandings about how these identities should be assessed.

Asylum policy is constantly in flux, and there are several noteworthy developments to consider in situating this study. Since Hamza bin Walayat's asylum case in 2018, the first mandatory FoRB training for the Home Office was rolled out. It aimed to improve the knowledge and understanding of caseworkers who assess religious persecution cases for asylum. The training was initiated through the APPG for FoRB, which involved several faith-based and civil society organisations that gave evidence on structural and interpretative issues surrounding religion-based asylum cases. The civil society representatives included Humanists UK, which advocated for the inclusion of humanists and non-religious belief systems (Humanists UK,

2018b). Former director of the APPG for FoRB, Katharine Thane, interviewed in this research project, suggested she had heard anecdotally that decisions being made on religious persecution cases were inconsistent:

We knew that in the UK and across Europe, many governments were really bad at assessing cases, and they were asking really weird questions, it was almost funny, but it was also devastating. (Katharine Thane – APPG FoRB)

In response, the APPG for FoRB advocated for the Home Office to make policy changes specifically for religion-based claims (Jones, 2018). The working group devised a FoRB training module, which consisted of a one-day training event rolled out to all asylum caseworkers. After a pilot training day, Katharine Thane was positive about the results:

I thought it was good, I thought it was really good. It was a whole day of training. I sat with other Home Office case workers who all came out really almost emotional, like grateful because they were like “we just didn't know what we were doing”. They came out and they were like “I feel a lot more confident”. (Katharine Thane)

The pilot training occurred in 2019 with the aim of nationwide implementation. Although described as pioneering by Katharine Thane, it remained uncertain throughout this research whether the training was a continuous effort and whether the pilot training had a lasting impact on asylum practices.

At the time of writing, the Home Office has issued two Asylum Policy Information (API) documents on ‘Assessing Credibility’ intended for Home Office staff to guide their decision-making. One document refers to claims lodged before June 2022 (Home Office, 2022a); the other outlines guidance for claims lodged after June 2022 (Home Office, 2022b). These dates are significant to note as the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) became law on 27 April 2022. The NABA altered the ways credibility is assessed⁶. Both policies (pre-NABA and after-NABA) note that the ‘religion’ grounds for asylum include ‘theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs’ (2022b, p.29). It goes on to describe:

Simply claiming to hold a set of beliefs which result in persecution in the country of nationality (or former habitual residence) is not enough to substantiate a claim to refugee status. You must decide whether the claimant genuinely adheres to the religion or belief to which they profess to belong, how that individual observes those beliefs in

⁶ I discuss the changes on page 183 of this thesis.

the private and public spheres, and whether that would place them at risk of persecution on return to their country. (2022b, p.29)

In 2022, the guidance on ‘Assessing Credibility’ for claims made after June 2022 updated its terminology to clarify that asylum cases on the religion grounds do cover non-religious beliefs (Home Office, 2022b). Considering Home Office APIs on assessing credibility is crucial to understand how apostasy asylum cases are being assessed. The guidance requires decision-makers to assess if a claimant has ‘genuine’ non-religious convictions. It also outlines that asylum assessments should explore how non-religious people would observe their beliefs and whether they would be at risk in their country of origin because of this characteristic. However, other Home Office APIs that provide guidance, such as Country Policy Information Notes (CPINs), still overlook the nuances of non-religious persecution. APIs are also framed through more common types of religion-based asylum claims, such as conversion cases. In effect, asylum credibility assessments are poorly equipped for the unique challenges faced by apostates and are being based on guidance aimed at *religious* belief systems. This creates conceptual and practical issues for the non-religious who must navigate their identities to fit within bureaucratic processes that tend to be restrictive on apostasy, despite apostates being at risk from persecution.

1.1.4. Racialisation, religion, and identity in the asylum context

This thesis directly explores the experiences of individuals who leave Islam and adopt non-religious identities, focusing on their journeys as they seek asylum in the UK. In doing so, it is crucial to explore how religious identities, specifically individuals from Muslim backgrounds, are racialised in social and political discourses. The racialisation of religion refers to a process in which specific phenotypical features linked to a group are attributed to perceived ‘racial’ characteristics and, through discourse, become associated with particular religions (Joshi, 2016). The racialisation of religion produces hierarchical categories, reminiscent of the racialisation practices of European colonialism (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018). Such racialisation affects how apostates are perceived, often conflating religious belief with ethnic or cultural identity. Understanding this dynamic is essential for analysing how former Muslims navigate the asylum system and how their credibility, identity, and risk are assessed within it.

In the past decade, Muslim identities specifically have attracted significant political attention (Catto, Davie and Perfect, 2024). The racialisation of Muslim identities has been evident

through discourse linked to historical imperial legacies and through the influence of current counterterrorism agendas (Meer and Modood, 2011). Taking these points in turn, Britain's colonial past influenced a hierarchical ordering of human bodies based on assumptions that Europeans were 'modern' and thus superior, and those outside the European conception were 'non-modern' and inferior (Quijano, 2000). These dichotomies implied that both Christianity and, subsequently, secularism represented measures of the European Enlightenment, portraying non-Christian religious minorities as backwards and barbaric (Nye, 2019). Racialisation processes emerge when groups identified as 'Other' are positioned outside of historical European understandings of those with perceived cultural and racial differences, particularly regarding those seen as non-European (Goldberg, 2006).

In the UK, the early 2000s saw notable terrorist activities, including the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Centre (commonly referred to as '9/11') and the bombings in London on July 7, 2005 (often termed '7/7'). These events heightened perceptions of Muslims as threats to public safety (Ansari, 2018). The UK debates surrounding freedom of religion or belief have continued through governmental measures regarding anti-terrorism laws, including the 'Prevent' strategy and approaches toward social cohesion and integration (Catto, Davie and Perfect, 2024). Terrorism and extremism have also led to successive governments criticising the concept of 'multiculturalism' on the basis that it has led to segregated communities and inefficient integration (Madziva and Lowndes, 2018). However, anti-terrorism efforts and critiques of multiculturalism have paradoxically fostered a disproportionately negative attitude toward Muslims within British society (Catto, Davie and Perfect, 2024). Consequently, such measures have intensified anti-Muslim rhetoric and increased levels of surveillance, detention, and deportation (Ansari, 2018). This has been a particular problem for immigrants from Muslim backgrounds, who are often viewed as a threat to the British public and labelled as 'suspect' (ibid), which has become justifiable due to a perceived cultural or religious incompatibility (Statham and Tillie, 2018).

The racialisation of Muslim identities in the context of asylum bureaucracy is better understood by considering this broader geopolitical context of the UK. Since people seeking asylum have generally been on the rise, many have been coming from countries outside of Europe, often ones that had been under British colonial rule (Mayblin, 2017). Asylum seekers, the majority non-European and non-white, who seek protection in Europe are viewed as a security threat and undesirable (ibid). This has resulted in categories of religion, nationality and country of

origin being politicised in the policy and practice of asylum determination (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2010). Individuals who are perceived to be Muslim experience increasing discrimination and prejudice in Britain (Catto, Davie and Perfect, 2024)⁷. Thus, markers of religious identity, real or imagined, have been stereotyped as fundamentally different from ‘Westerners’ and posed as a threat to European societies (Akram, 2000; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2010). Decision-making based on assessing an individual’s ‘credibility’ is thus challenging as it is impacted by ‘neo-Orientalism’⁸, which explains how governments and policy-makers value Western interpretations of persecution (Akram, 2000).

For ex-Muslim apostates seeking asylum, the asylum process hinges on proving the authenticity of their non-religious identity and related belief systems. However, this criterion is influenced by deeply racialised and culturally reductive assumptions. The racialising effects of perceived religious identity persist even when individuals explicitly reject that identity, underlining what Kellogg describes as the ‘reductive binaries equating Europe with Christianity and the Middle East with Islam’ (Kellogg, 2021, p. 620). In asylum assessments, these binaries contribute to dominant assumptions about the legibility of asylum cases, especially those focused on the examination of subjective identities within the British secular framework. Apostates may be positioned as more ‘compatible’ with British secularism than Muslims, but they are still read through orientalist logics that treat Muslimness as essential, immutable, or suspect. This produces a paradox where the very act of leaving Islam must be performed in ways that conform to Western secular expectations, even as racialised markers of origin continue to render the claimant's sincerity and belonging questionable (Ahmed, 2007).

These dynamics generate a particularly contested notion of belonging for ex-Muslim communities in the UK, one that is not easily captured by dominant migration scholarship, which tends to conceptualise belonging through the lens of religion and faith-based integration (Knott, 2016). In contrast, this research explores how ex-Muslim refugees negotiate belonging in relation to non-religion. Rather than merely adopting secular norms, they engage in complex, situated processes of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’ (non-)religious identity, which provides an

⁷ Discrimination and prejudice directed at individuals perceived to be Muslim is referred to as ‘Islamophobia’, Defined as ‘an unfounded hostility towards Islam, and therefore fear or dislike of all or most Muslims’ (Runnymede Trust, 1997, p.4).

⁸ The term ‘neo-Orientalism’ has evolved from Edward Said’s concept of ‘Orientalism’. Orientalism is defined as an ideology that promotes a distinction between the ‘West’ and Islam, advancing ideas that portray ‘Others’ as less than human (Samiei, 2010). Neo-Orientalism elucidates this relationship in the contemporary context.

interesting case study that helps us to consider how topics of religion or belief are sociologically important due to connections with community identity, stereotyping, socio-economic location and political conflict (Meer and Modood, 2019).

1.2. Defining Key Concepts

Several concepts used in this thesis require further explanation; these are non-religion, apostasy, asylum seeker, refugee, colonialism/imperialism, coloniality and bureaucracy, considered here in turn. ‘Non-religion’ is a term derived from, and thus conceptually entangled with, the category of ‘religion’, both of which are notoriously difficult to define. Within the social sciences, non-religion is used in diverse and sometimes inconsistent ways, often overlapping with related concepts such as atheism, secularity, and irreligion. However, much of the work within the sociology of religion has essentialised the differences between these two socially constructed categories, treating them as stable and binary (Cotter, 2022). This approach risks overlooking the historical contingent and culturally specific nature of these terms, as highlighted by scholars such as Asad (1993), who questions the presumed universality of the discourses and practices commonly labelled as ‘religious’.

To navigate these complexities, I adopt a relational and discursive approach to non-religion, rather than relying on substantive or fixed definitions (Quack, 2014). From this perspective, non-religion is understood not as a unified or homogenous phenomenon, but as a category that emerges *in relation to* religion. It includes only those beliefs, identities, or practices that define themselves—explicitly or implicitly—against or in contrast to religion (Quack, 2014, p. 441). Therefore, I use non-religion as a broad and inclusive concept, positioned in relation to religion, rather than applying specific non-religious identifications, such as atheism or secularism. Thus, the term ‘non-religious’ appeals to the multifaceted ways participants identify, and the labels constructed by individuals, legal actors, human rights advocates, interpreters and Home Office officials.

In this study, I refer to the non-religious refugees as ‘apostates’. This term is significant for a few reasons: it is a label embraced by the ex-Muslim communities I interviewed, and it also corresponds to a legal category that reflects the nature of the persecution they experienced. Apostasy and blasphemy are viewed as contentious issues in certain nations, particularly where they are legally prohibited. Traditionally, the labels ‘apostate’ and ‘blasphemer’ have been

employed to describe individuals as deviant, thus, they are sometimes considered to be seen as derogatory due to their negative implications (Sherkat, 2014; Smith, 2016). However, this conception seems to be shifting as more people self-identify with the term (Smith, 2016), likened to how 'queer' was once a homophobic slur, which is now widely used to label sexual or gender identity positively (Hall, 2020). The ex-Muslims, based in the UK, whom I have spoken to, draw on the identification of an 'apostate' to be representative of their life experiences. This position can be reflected in the activities organised by the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain (CEMB), which holds a 'Celebrating Dissent' event (CEMB, 2024) and a 'Blasphemy Day' (CEMB, 2021). It is important to note that this is not the case for all ex-Muslims or those who leave religion, but it did represent the participants who took part in this research.

There are debates on how religion and non-religion can be meaningfully studied due to a lack of consensus on the definitions of the terms (see Cragun and McCaffree, 2021; Davie, 2013). As individuals can be persecuted for leaving religion and constructing an identity or worldview system that goes against legal or social acceptability, a focus on non-religious apostates seeking asylum needs recognition. Thus, apostasy is used to denote the type of persecution participants experienced and therefore represents a legal category that led participants to make an asylum claim. Apostasy encompasses the experiences of renouncing or departing from a previously followed religion. Conversely, I view non-religion as part of a broader discourse that is inclusive of diverse identities.

It is important to note that concepts of non-religion are fluid and terminology of different non-religious identities varies across social, cultural, political and historical contexts. Hence, as I argue throughout this thesis, there are challenges in translating such concepts through asylum determination processes; these issues can also be extended to how I negotiate them. Concepts such as 'apostasy' and 'atheism' are not universally defined but are embedded in specific cultural and religious histories. In Muslim-majority societies, apostasy is often treated as a communal betrayal with severe legal and social consequences. In contrast, in Western, particularly Protestant-influenced contexts, atheism is more likely to be framed as a personal philosophical stance. These differing conceptualisations affect how claims of non-religion are perceived in asylum processes. As such, this thesis adopts a critical approach to defining these terms, particularly as they relate to asylum assessments involving apostasy.

Despite the notorious difficulties of defining concepts of religion or belief, the use of the term non-religion is relevant as a project of study because:

Religion is constantly being constructed, as political and legal authorities claim the right to define religion, some social groups vie for the privilege of being counted as religious, others seek to wrest control of the meaning of religion from dominant groups, and still others seek to restrict religion and its sphere of influence. (Woodhead, 2010, p.122)

This project employs a lens of coloniality of power to reveal the imperial implications of such categories and how the asylum process utilises religion as a mode of governance (Hurd, 2023). Thus, this research uses the category of religion as the object, not the tool of analysis (Horii, 2019, p.35). I understand that the terms non-religion and apostasy can depict meaningful identity markers that can be explored empirically, as seen in the cases of apostates who can face persecution for leaving their religion. Thus, for this study, the term non-religion is employed to consider any individual who personally identifies as being such, as an inclusive umbrella category encompassing many different belief systems but is understood in terms of anything but religious (Lee, 2015).

Throughout this thesis, legal terms such as ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’ are regularly used. A refugee is an individual who has applied for asylum on the basis of persecution outlined in the Convention and has had their case granted. ‘Asylum seeker’ is used to indicate a person has applied for asylum but is still waiting for the outcome of their case. At the time of writing, one participant was legally classed as an asylum seeker because their claim was/is going through the asylum appeals process. Throughout this research, I refer to participants from a refugee background mostly as ‘refugees’ when the legal status is not relevant. Many of the participants claimed asylum when they were already in the UK for some time, either as students or for work. Therefore, some were considered ‘sur place’ refugees. A sur place refugee is defined as:

A person who was not a refugee when they left their country of origin, but who become one at a later date, owing to intervening events. Refugees sur place may owe their fear of persecution to a change in the country of origin, such as through a coup d’état, or to bona fide political, religious or other activities undertaken in the host country. (UNHCR, n.d.)

The terms refugee and asylum seeker have been critiqued by scholars (e.g., Mayblin, 2017; Sigona, 2003; Zetter, 1991), who argue categories are ‘bureaucratic, arbitrary, exclusionary

and imply classifications of deservingness' (Mayblin, 2017, p.11). Whilst I engage with critiques of the coloniality of bureaucratic classifications regarding identity throughout this thesis, I refer to participants in these legal terms because it is necessary in answering the research objectives, aims and questions. I recognise that these do not accurately represent an individual's identity.

I engage with the histories of colonialism and thus employ the concept of 'coloniality' in this thesis. Colonialism accelerated a hierarchical ordering of human bodies based on assumptions that Europeans were 'modern' and thus superior, and those outside of the European conception were 'non-modern' and inferior (Quijano, 2000). These distinctions continue to manifest in the present day, which can be explained through the concept of 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2000), within the asylum regime (Mayblin, 2017). I distinguish between the term colonialism (sometimes used interchangeably with imperialism), which describes British colonial rule and domination, and the concept of coloniality, which refers to the nature of powers more broadly:

Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p.243)

I also use the terms 'the West', 'Western' and 'non-Western'. These terms are imaginaries of historical geographical configurations relating to Western Europe and North America (Mayblin, 2017). I employ these terms to denote dominant conceptions of knowledge originating from that region due to imperialism, such as how religion is rooted in a modern Western category (Alexander, 2021). The 'West' has produced a powerful discourse that is about 'the Other', i.e., those that lie outside of these imagined geographies (Hall, 2007), which is 'alive and well in the modern world' (ibid., p.60). What is deemed 'Western' constantly changes, and I acknowledge that using these terms does not provide accurate representations. However, due to its use in the literature regarding religion, non-religion and asylum, it will be applied to describe the 'dominant conceptions' that underpin these symbolic geographies.

Lastly, I draw on the term 'bureaucracy' to refer to the organisational structures of asylum determination processes and when referring to the everyday workings of the asylum system. I use the term 'bureaucrats' to denote individuals who work in the asylum bureaucracy. It is

important to note that in the literature, the terms ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘bureaucrats’ carry negative connotations and are used as criticism (Affolter, 2020; Eckert, 2020). However, I employ the terminology due to the established theoretical framework, which utilises the same language.

1.3. Research Aims and Focus of the Thesis

This thesis explores the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees who have faced fear of persecution for apostasy and consequently claimed asylum in the UK on the ‘religion’ ground of the Convention. The experiences of claiming asylum were explored from the perspectives of non-religious people who faced a fear of persecution due to their apostasy (n = 12). Interviews with refugees were conducted through an in-depth, semi-structured format lasting up to three hours. Interviews were conducted either online or in-person, with preference chosen by the participants. The research also draws on semi-structured interviews with human rights advocates (n = 22), consisting of those who have supported non-religious asylum seekers and include legal actors, volunteers and workers for human rights organisations and activists. Interviews with human rights advocates were conducted online and lasted up to 90 minutes. Furthermore, document analysis was conducted to explore how FoRB is articulated in international human rights law and to what extent these rights are inclusive of the non-religious. Home Office asylum policies were analysed for the inclusion of non-religious and apostasy persecution. These qualitative methods were chosen to provide a rigorous picture of the formation and assessment of apostate asylum claims.

Thus far, the experiences of non-religious individuals within the asylum claims process have been understudied. Yet, this group highlights specific concerns regarding asylum assessment procedures, such as flawed interview questioning and an unfair evidential burden of proof. Individuals seeking protection for their non-religious identities must learn to navigate complex asylum determination procedures. In this thesis, I aim to explore this understudied population by following the journeys of becoming non-religious for people who have left a religion and faced a fear of persecution on the basis of their identity. I aim to conceptualise how apostasy is articulated within human rights law and national asylum policies and understand how these are carried out in practice. This thesis also explores how people seeking asylum must fit their complex and personal experiences of leaving a religion into bureaucratic logics that create rigid and generalised assumptions of identity that are constructed from colonial conceptions of ‘race’ and religion.

The findings of the research were analysed through thematic and content analysis, and nuances were found in how non-religiosity is constructed in the everyday lives of participants, which differed from how the bureaucratic processes understand such identities. The theoretical framework draws on perspectives of lived non-religion, coloniality of power, and bureaucracy to achieve these findings. The aims of the theoretical perspectives in this study are twofold: to highlight the ‘lived’ nature of non-religiosity as enacted by ‘ordinary’ people and to provide a broader argument that the asylum process produces a construction of the ‘credible’ asylum seeker, which produces colonial imaginaries of non-religiosity. This thesis thus makes an original contribution to the literature as I argue that the nature of apostasy is complex and does not neatly describe experiences in neat typologies. By highlighting how apostate refugees construct non-religious identities and demonstrating inadequacies of the UK asylum assessment procedures, this research thus offers new sociological perspectives on the identities of the non-religious. It also offers an interpretation of how bureaucratic categories influence the identities of refugees. In doing so, this thesis offers unique contributions to the field of non-religion and forced migration, which are sometimes given less attention.

1.4. Addressing Misunderstandings in Apostate Asylum Cases

Upon studying this research area, I was regularly met with surprise as to why I was studying such a niche topic. Though official statistics are lacking, it was presumed by human rights advocates (such as lawyers) working on asylum cases that the number of refugees claiming on ‘non-religious’ grounds was low in number, especially in relation to their caseload and thus not significant to study. However, after further exploration, I found numerous people advocating for non-religious people in their asylum claims, putting in substantial effort to support them. In the cases they had worked on, there have been noteworthy misunderstandings in asylum determination processes. Though potentially low in number, in comparison to other types of asylum cases, after talking with participants who had claimed on the grounds of their apostasy and navigated the asylum process, their voices raised serious concerns about the ability of persecuted apostates to receive protection in the UK. This was also echoed in conversations with people with lived experience who did not participate in a formal interview. Therefore, despite being small, these experiences are worthy of study.

This study was conceived from the infamous apostate asylum case - Hamza bin Walayat. His negative experience brought some of the fundamental flaws to the fore in the adjudication of

religion-based claims for those with non-religious belief systems. This thesis suggests there are further cases that have been subject to inaccurate questioning that are not in the public arena, despite the pilot training put in place to respond to the bin Walayat case. This research also shows that not only humanist belief systems have encountered difficulties but also non-religious worldviews more generally. From the academic literature, this phenomenon has been almost entirely overlooked until recently. At the outset of the study, there was no research into this topic. Since the beginning of this research, three articles on the legal conceptualisations of non-religion and asylum (Baldassarre, 2024; van Schaik and Hillary, 2023; van Schaik, 2023), an ethnographic study of British apostate-asylum support services (Hagström, 2022), and an anthropologist's perspective of emotions and non-religious asylum (Laws, 2024) have been published. This thesis draws on and develops this research through a sociological investigation of the experiences of non-religious apostates in the British asylum system with primary data on the topic.

Overall, this research offers four novel insights into the sociology of non-religion and migration studies. First, it provides first-hand narratives described by non-religious apostate refugees on the ways they construct their identities. These narratives draw similarities to current research on non-religious identities, whilst also providing unique distinctions on how apostate refugees become non-religious⁹. Second, it finds evidence that the British asylum system policies and procedures for religion-based asylum claims are oriented around religious conversion cases. This gap in knowledge has led to misunderstandings in asylum adjudication, highlighted through inaccurate credibility assessments and poor country information policies. Third, this research demonstrates that non-religious claimants must negotiate their identities by translating and performing their case in line with dominant conceptions of the 'credible' refugee. Lastly, it finds that these dominant perceptions of what constitutes the ideal or genuine refugee are based on Western European conceptions of religion or belief, which overlook the nuanced identities of non-religious apostates.

With the focus of the study set out, the project's research questions, that are unpacked over the following chapters of this thesis, are:

⁹ A discussion of the similarities and distinctions between general non-religious identities and apostate identities are presented in Chapter 8.

1. How are non-religious beliefs conceptualised within Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and incorporated within Home Office asylum determination policies?
2. Within the UK's Home Office, how are legal frameworks implemented, and are there gaps or tensions between official guidance and practice?
3. What are the experiences of non-religious asylum applicants in the UK asylum system?

1.5. Outline of the Thesis Structure

This introductory chapter is followed by a critical review of the literature, covering topics spanning the sociology of (non-)religion, human rights, and asylum studies. It draws from these broad and diverse fields to outline the gaps in the literature. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework underpinning this study, discussing in-depth the justification for using three perspectives to analyse the research data: lived (non-)religion, coloniality of power and bureaucracy. Chapter 4 discusses the methods employed to research this phenomenon: semi-structured interviews, interviews with elicitation techniques and document analysis. The methodological perspectives are explained, and the participants interviewed in the study are introduced.

Following these chapters are the three findings and discussion chapters. These chapters seek to develop the points raised so far in this thesis with empirical data derived from lived experiences. They are ordered specifically to guide the reader in the journeys of apostate refugees' experience in 'becoming', 'bureaucratising' and 'negotiating' their identities to receive their right to express their beliefs. Chapter 5 follows the complex and personal journeys of refugee participants' paths of developing and constructing non-religious worldviews and identities. Despite their journeys being unique, this chapter brings narratives together by following participants' life courses in different countries of origin that were underpinned by conforming to religious practices. It puts forward the intersections of identities that have been constructed in relation to gender, class and political associations that, in turn, shaped non-religious identity. Due to these nuanced factors, I discuss how participants underwent iterative processes of 'unlearning' religion and 'learning' non-religion, thereby providing a novel conceptualisation of apostates' identities.

Chapter 6 is the second data analysis chapter. This chapter focuses on how non-religion is formed as a ground for asylum and examines how apostasy is assessed within asylum determination processes at the Home Office. I explore this by considering how non-religion is

‘bureaucratised’ as individuals navigate the asylum assessment process by taking note of the organisational mechanisms within Refugee Status Determination (RSD). The chapter begins by considering how apostate asylum claims are formed through legal apparatus and national asylum policies. It then discusses how these claims are ‘materialised’ through oral testimony, evidence and documentation. The chapter finishes with a discussion surrounding the elements of an asylum determination process of such claims, such as the credibility assessment, Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs), and a reflection on the culture of disbelief within which these claims operate more widely. In this chapter, I argue that asylum bureaucratic processes transform non-religion into a governable subject with fixed and essentialist characteristics. The implications of this are the production of expected and stereotypical behaviour of an apostate refugee, which I argue has colonial entanglements.

Chapter 7 is the final data analysis chapter. While the previous chapter focused on how the asylum bureaucracy creates dominant perceptions of the ‘credible’ apostate refugee, I shift attention to the asylum interview to highlight the dynamics of power at play. I discuss how individuals must negotiate their identities through ‘translations’ and ‘performances’ to construct narratives legible to asylum bureaucrats. I argue that the construction of non-religious identities must be translated into knowledge through discursive and embodied practices that are objectively understood and assessed by bureaucrats within the British asylum system. I examine how non-religious refugees articulate and express their identities during the asylum process through their own testimonies and the navigation of multiple actors who influence the asylum narrative: legal representatives, human rights advocates, and interpreters. By doing so, I explore how enduring colonial narratives shape the representation of non-religiosity when assessing apostates’ asylum claims and argue that rigid asylum categories fail to account for individuals’ unique experiences of leaving religion.

In the final chapter, Chapter 8, I conclude the thesis by summarising the main themes found across each data analysis chapter. I articulate the significance of the findings for the fields of forced migration and the sociology of religion, the theoretical implications and recommendations for future research. By taking apostasy asylum cases as the focus of the study, I discuss the unique and specific challenges that non-religious applicants face when seeking protection. By doing so, I raise broader implications of this research for similar assessed claims, such as those of internally held beliefs and identities. I also bring awareness to how non-religion is defined by the government and interpreted by state actors. Thus, I make

the case that there are fundamental flaws in attempts to bureaucratised non-religion and highlight a gap in asylum adjudication. The conclusions of this thesis will provide recommendations that the Home Office could use to improve the quality of asylum decision-making for apostasy asylum claims. Recommendations include updates and additions to CPINs, revising the threshold for the burden of proof, and re-implementing FoRB training for all Home Office staff to ensure credibility assessments are conducted accurately for apostasy claims.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This thesis draws on previous work found in sociological studies of religion and forced migration to fill the knowledge gap regarding apostasy asylum claims, thereby furthering the fields of both non-religion and asylum studies. In this literature review, I argue that understanding apostasy asylum claims necessitates a combined examination of religion and forced migration. To do so, this literature review is structured into three main sections: the sociology of religion, human rights and law, and understanding asylum. The sociology of religion section begins by outlining the historical formations of the field and discusses how religion became a topic of study. These discussions are important as sociologists of religion have been developing these arguments to contextualise the area of non-religious studies. The chapter then introduces the field of non-religion and contextualises non-religious identities and apostasy within this body of research. The debates surrounding the emergence of the sociology of religion are put forward, most notably the critique that concepts of religion or belief have risen in a ‘Western’ context. Secondly, this chapter examines human rights and legal literature that explores the concepts of religion and belief, as well as the degree to which human rights frameworks acknowledge non-religious rights, and the sociological impacts of these dynamics. Third, I introduce the literature relating to the asylum system and outline the key themes of research relating to this study: credibility, the burden of proof and the culture of disbelief. This section provides an overview of the scarce research concerning non-religious asylum seekers. Due to the lack of studies focused specifically on apostate asylum claims, this discussion references findings from research on religion-based conversion asylum claims and other types of asylum claims that require evaluating internal beliefs, including claims based on sexuality. In this section, I explore the concepts of the ‘credible’ and ‘deserving’ refugee.

This literature review emphasises the existing gaps in current research that this project intends to address. By doing so, this research makes an original contribution by arguing the importance of conceptualising non-religion as ‘lived’. Understanding non-religious identities in this way highlights the unique challenges of asylum assessment procedures for apostate claims because it shows differences between how individuals conceptualise their experience and how asylum logistics conceive of them. Thus, after proposing the current research in this area, I will suggest a theoretical framework that brings the perspectives together: lived (non-)religion, coloniality

of power, and bureaucracy. This framework aids in conceptualising the phenomena under research and it bridges the fields of non-religion and asylum, as it aims to highlight the colonial critiques of attempts to define the concepts of religion or belief from the dominant perspectives of Western Europe, which is at play within asylum bureaucracy.

2.2. Sociology of Religion

The sociology of religion has historically focused on religion as its object of study. The sociological exploration of religion has built upon the classical works of Marx (1818-1883), Durkheim (1858-1917), and Weber (1864-1920). These influential works have focused on conceptualising what religion is, its role in society and the future of the concept. Historically, there have been two types of definitions sociologists have put forward to define religion. A substantive definition explains religion in terms of its contents and meaning; these commonly refer to beliefs and practices (Berger, 1974; Davie, 2007) or, through a functional perspective, which explains religion in terms of its social or psychological functions (Luckmann, 1967).

Durkheim's work consisted of defining religion, being the only classical sociologist to do so officially. In 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life' (Durkheim, 1915), he explored religion through its functional aspects, stating:

Religion is a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called the church, all those who adhere to them. (Durkheim, 1915, p.47)

From Durkheim's point of view, religion can be understood as a collective which shares beliefs and practices. He emphasises religion as 'doing' not merely 'believing' (Good, 2016, p.44), noting the performative aspects of religion and thus, his definition also has substantive elements. Durkheim conceptualised religion through beliefs and practices that serve a function, such as forming a community, for those who follow it. His definition of religion is known for distinguishing between the 'sacred' and 'profane': religious beliefs and actions are oriented around the 'sacred', whilst other 'ordinary' human behaviour is the 'profane' (Durkheim, 1915). For Durkheim, these notions are 'hostile and jealous rivals of each other ... The sacred thing is par excellence that which the profane should not touch, cannot touch with impunity' (Durkheim, 1915, p.55). This progressed early thinking of religion and everyday life as binary, though some scholars today have moved beyond binary conceptions (e.g., Ammerman, 2013).

Despite devoting much of his time to studying religion, Weber famously argued that religion could never be defined. Although he still aimed to conceptualise it by offering a substantial understanding of religion by underscoring the supernatural elements of religion: charisma, spirits and the soul (Weber, 1963, p.1-19). He maintained religion could be understood as a social construct perceived through one's subjective experiences:

The external courses of religious behavior are so diverse that an understanding of this behavior can only be achieved from the viewpoint of the subjective experiences, ideas, and purposes of the individuals concerned—in short, from the viewpoint of the religious behavior's "meaning" (Sinn). (1963, p.1)

Weber understood any social phenomenon through his analytical tool of 'ideal types'. Ideal types are a construction of a given phenomenon that contains multiple abstract features often framed in binary terms, such as asceticism vs. mysticism or traditional vs. bureaucratic (Launay, 2022). By creating ideal types of complex social phenomena, Weber believed that any phenomenon can be defined 'not only by what it is but by what it is not' (Launay, 2022, p.7). Through his development of ideal types, Weber's conceptualisation of religion creates a framework for understanding the general features of religion and allows for comparisons to be drawn across the types. Since his work, understanding religion as relational has been influential in attempts to define non-religion in the contemporary sociology of religion, which will be discussed further in section 2.2.1.

Lastly, scholars have argued that Marx's analysis of religion has been 'central to the evolution of the sub-discipline' of the sociology of religion (Davie, 2007, p.27). His work situated religion as a mode of alienation used to distract the working classes from their oppression enforced by the upper class, naming this 'das Opium des Volks', translating to 'the opium of the people' (McKinnon, 2005). Religion is thus a social construction for the benefit of the ruling class to maintain their power, wealth and status (Day, 2021). This understanding of religion is critical because he was one of the earliest thinkers to argue that religion is intertwined with the social world (Davie, 2007).

Since classical social theorists have conceptualised religion, scholars have critiqued their work, and sociologists have expanded on their ideas, leading to innovative frameworks for understanding religion (e.g., Altglas and Wood, 2018; Davie, 2007; Day, 2011; Launay, 2022). Some of these critiques are essential to acknowledge for this study as they have provided

alternative ways of theorising and conceptualising religion that have informed the present-day sociology of religion. Critiques have included the limitations of focusing on the organisational aspects of religion, inadequacies of secularisation theories, and the Eurocentric underpinnings of the discipline. For example, the classical social theorists concentrated on the organisational aspects of religion by offering substantive or functional perspectives regarding what religion offers to groups, which overlooked how religion has cognitive effects on the everyday lives of its followers (Orsi, 2011; Spickard, 2017). This led some contemporary sociologists to argue for a ‘lived religion’ approach to conceptualise religion, which situates understanding of religion through how it is practised, experienced, and expressed by people in the everyday (Ammerman, 2020; McGuire, 2008). The lived religion approach is central to the theoretical framework of this research because it aids in understanding how (non-)religion manifests on the individual level. I argue that this understanding of religion is essential to consider within asylum bureaucracy, which is explored further in Chapter 3.

The social theorists were also early advocates of the secularisation thesis as they predicted that as societies become modernised, religion would virtually end (Clarke and Byrne, 1993). These debates have continued to dominate the sociology of religion in the ‘Western’ world, understood as Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (McLeod, 2005). Although there is no consensus on the definition of secularisation, it has been defined as ‘the progressive autonomization of societal sectors from the domination of religious meaning and institutions’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p.74). As assumptions of secularisation derive from patterns observed of religious practice in some regions of Europe, these theories have been critiqued for imposing ethnocentric assumptions onto other geographies (McGuire, 2008). Secularisation theories have also portrayed the move from religion to non-religion as linear (Malone, 2021) and have also focused on a lack of religion, thus conceptualising non-religion as a mere absence (Lee, 2015). However, as research on non-religion has developed, work has shown these identities and worldviews involve substantial beliefs and existential cultures (ibid). Secularisation theory is unable to create rich and empirical studies of non-religious identities (Lee, 2014). Instead, non-religious studies are concerned more with identity, experience and subjectivity (Lee, 2019). Thus, research employing a lived religion approach has maintained that secularisation theories are inadequate in explaining the changing religious landscape globally. This research adds depth by exploring how apostates develop and shape their non-religious identities in more intricate ways than a secularisation thesis would suggest.

One of the main critiques of the sociology of religion is the emphasis on Christian (specifically Protestant) and ‘Western’ ideas of religion, which the classical theorists initially advanced (Horii, 2019). In Western Europe, colonialism from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was a key event in the emergence of a modern understanding of religion (Maldonado-Torres, 2014). Colonialism accelerated the notion that Western Europe held dominant modes of thinking of the world, including Western conceptions of beliefs, institutions, norms and values (Quijano, 2000), and through the concept of religion (Maldonado-Torres, 2014). Thus, scholars argue that categories of ‘religion’ and ‘secularism’ can be traced to Western imperial legacies (Fitzgerald, 2007). Therefore, concepts of religion and belief have been critiqued for being ethnocentric (Furseth and Repstad, 2016) by using a Western European standpoint to situate other beliefs (see Asad, 2003).

Scholars have argued that due to these histories, the sociology of religion fails to encompass religion or beliefs outside of its dominant framework (Enstedt, 2020). Thus, religion can be understood as a Western social construct that cannot be applied in non-Western cultures (Launay, 2022; Nongbri, 2013). Therefore, notions of religion outside Western European are historically bound with Western colonial powers (Chidester, 2019; Josephson, 2019). However, some scholars have maintained that categories of religion can still be meaningfully discussed because religion is ‘a socially constructed category and its construction should be the subject of examination’ (Horii, 2019, p.25). Moreover, the significance of religion has become recognised as a global phenomenon due to its role in international law (McKinnon, 2002). Thus, Beckford (2003) argues the most productive way to research religion is to avoid defining ‘it’ but to explore the ‘varieties of meaning attributed to religion in social settings, to discern the relative frequency of the prevailing meanings and to monitor changes over time’ (2003, p.20)¹⁰.

Since the influential work of the classical sociologists, sociologists of religion has continued to grapple with defining the social construct of religion (Davie, 2007). There are multiple ways religion has been conceptualised in the literature (see Woodhead, 2011). One of the most common understandings of religion by academics is referred to as ‘the three B’s’: belief,

¹⁰ The arguments of the socially constructed ideas of ‘religion’ can be likened to those of the social construction of ‘race’. Even though race is not a biological reality or scientifically proven, we can still meaningfully talk about concepts of race because of social, historical and cultural interpretations that have been used to categorise people; and the consequences of these differentiations on racism.

behaviour and belonging (Cragun and McCaffree, 2021). ‘Religion as belief’ entails belief in particular things, such as doctrines or practices, or a belief in supernatural beings (Woodhead, 2011). Arguments have recently called to replace ‘belief’ with ‘worldviews’ to be more inclusive of non-religious beliefs (see Taves *et al.*, 2018). Religion as behaviour signifies something embodied or practised (Woodhead, 2011), ‘to engage individuals in orchestrated and formalized social performances, serving to co-ordinate bodily movements in synchronized and harmonious ways’ (2011, p.132). A final consideration of religion is ‘belonging’ to an organisation or community. Religion as belonging has historically been the dominant concept within the sociology of religion (ibid). This has measured the prominence of religion in terms of church membership, attendance and affiliation to an organised group (ibid). Scholars have since argued that ‘belonging’ should be replaced with the ‘identity’ (Cragun and McCaffree, 2021; Cragun and Smith, 2024). Religion as identity situates religion as a source of identity like ethnicity, gender, and sexuality and notes how someone ‘performs’ that identity (Woodhead, 2011, p.129). This shift is an essential advancement in understanding religion and non-religion because ‘all people have identities; some people have religious identities’ (Cragun and Smith, 2024, p.28). These notions of religion are important for this research as they broadly connect with how religion is defined as being a persecuted identity by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) within its Handbook (2019). Stating that religion-based asylum claims may involve religion as belief (including non-belief); religion as identity; religion as a way of life (2019, p.125). These aspects will be discussed further in section 2.4.4.

In response to the limitations of the earlier proposals for substantive and functional definitions (see Jong 2015), scholars have offered polythetic or non-essentialist definitions of religion (for example, Good 2016; Southwold, 1978). This is because ‘no one has been able to grasp its ultimate essence’ (Simmel, 1997, p.101). McKinnon (2002) states this is because there is no essence of religion outside the discourse of religion. A non-essentialist definition portrays religion as an empty category so it ‘can be activated with definitions, meanings, and communicational practices’ (von Stuckrad, 2013, p.17). Therefore:

The category of “religion” can be meaningfully studied by examining “the processes of communicational generation, legitimatization, and negotiation of meaning system”.
(von Stuckrad, 2013, p.18)

Thus, we can still speak meaningfully about religion sociologically by employing a non-essentialist definition.

The polythetic definition considers religion as definable, ‘only in relation to its signification or use, not with reference to the alleged essence of the “thing” signified’ (Good, 2016, p.45). Following similar logic to Wittgenstein’s ‘language games’ (Wittgenstein, 1968), some scholars have argued that whilst there is no essence of religion, there are a series of family resemblances (see Fitzgerald, 1996; McKinnon, 2002; Saler, 2000; Smith, 1982; 1998). By understanding religion in this way, we can still meaningfully talk of concepts of religion or non-religion, like how Wittgenstein argued how to distinguish between ‘games’ and ‘non-games’:

How is the concept of a game bounded? What still what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You *draw* one; for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word “game”). (Wittgenstein, 1968, PI 68, emphasis in original)

Thus, religion becomes a category in the language game for the academic study of religion (McKinnon, 2002, p.73). This understanding of religion poses a strength as it emphasises its open-ended character (Good, 2016, p.45). Polythetic approaches to understanding religion are also consistent with proposals to regard non-religion as relational, discussed further in the following section. Moreover, polythetic definitions of religion have been argued to be useful for application within the asylum process (by Good, 2016), though this is under-researched in the literature. As this study will show, asylum bureaucracy ‘fixes’ identities and reduces them to essentialist categories, which poses specific challenges for the non-religious, yet is ignored in current literature.

Research surrounding the concepts of ‘belief’ or ‘worldviews’ is a more recent development, subject to conceptual difficulties within academic discussions. Notions of belief have historically been discussed through philosophical conceptions (see Campbell, 1967; Price, 2014). In sociological research, belief systems and worldviews relate to an increase in New Religious Movements and New Age Movements with spiritual qualities and ethical and rationalist movements, such as humanism (Hunt, 2005). However, defining belief in sociological literature often goes unexamined (Day, 2011). For example, Davie’s notion of ‘believing without belonging’ (1994) left out a definition of belief, though it is implied that its use was ‘belief in God’ or ‘belief in Christianity’ (Day, 2011). Despite a lack of definition, Talcott Parsons argued the core definition of religion encompasses beliefs that are ‘systems of cognitive orientation relative to problems of meaning’ (Parsons, 1951, p.368). In contrast to religion, belief has been defined in legal terms, which will be discussed in section 2.3.

A worldview can be understood as a set of beliefs and assumptions that make sense of the world (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Worldviews are thus socially constructed realities that influence how an individual navigates reality (Johnson, Hill and Cohen, 2011). Taves, Asprem and Ihm (2018) propose an understanding of worldviews as a complex set of representations related to the ‘big questions’:

Ontology (what exists, what is real), (2) epistemology (how do we know what is true), (3) axiology (what is the good that we should strive for), (4) praxeology (what actions should we take), and (5) cosmology (where do we come from and where are we going), that define and govern a way of life. (2018, p.208)

From this understanding, a worldview can be formed, (re)constructed and (re)negotiated (Droogers, 2013). Recently, the terms belief and worldview have been understood as representing non-religious positioning in addition to the religious (Nynäs, 2018; Taves, Asprem and Ihm, 2018) and described as an ‘existential meaning-making processes associated with non-religious identities, such as humanist, romantic, or scientific sceptic’ (Strhan, Lee and Shillitoe, 2024, p.2). The field of non-religious studies has been interested in the construction of individuals’ and communities’ beliefs and worldviews, discussed next.

2.2.1. Non-religious studies

Historically, the study of non-religion has been neglected in the sociology of religion. The classical sociologists Durkheim, Weber and Marx, despite making significant contributions to the sociology of religion, made no reference to non-religion (Bullivant and Lee, 2012). One of the earlier researchers of the religious ‘nones’ was Vernon writing in 1968, who emphasised the neglect of the non-religious within the discipline. Vernon suggested that the possible neglect was due to the concentration on religion as serving a function for society, and as a ‘social fact’ (Bullivant, 2020). A symposium was held on the theme of ‘unbelief’ in March 1969, where sociologist Peter L. Berger labelled the event a ‘historic occasion’ and a ‘pioneering venture’, arguing for the inclusion of the non-religious within the field of sociology of religion to, ‘broaden its scope to deal with the social dynamics of contemporary nonreligious culture’ (1971, p.vii-viii). Following this came Campbell’s ‘A Sociology of Irreligion’ (1971); one of the earliest scholars to research non-religion from a sociological perspective. Campbell described ‘irreligion’ as a hostility towards religion, stating it ‘implies such attitudes as

hostility, disregard and indifference towards religion' (1971, p.21). Further commenting on the lack of research in this area, he said, 'it appears that irreligion was assumed to be self-explanatory; as the natural state of mature civilised men [...] it hardly required any discussion, let alone explanation' (1971, p.9). Whilst this work followed decades of minimal research within sociology, the academic area of non-religion has now become an established interdisciplinary research field (Smith and Cragun, 2019).

As is the case for defining concepts of religion, there are debates and concerns surrounding non-religion. Early conceptions of non-religion have solely focused on an absence, hostility, neglect or lack of religion. For example, Vernon (1968) named this group the 'nones'. The nones category was commonly used in identity surveys and polls in the US and UK which referred to having no religious affiliation (Blankholm, 2022; Lee, 2015). Thus, historically, non-religion has been primarily understood to refer to individuals without a belief in the supernatural or the lack of religious affiliation more generally (Woodhead, 2016; 2017; Quack, Schuh and Kind, 2019). However, scholars have since critiqued this negative stance of non-religion; as Pasquale (2007) pointed out, the use of the 'none' category may be drawn from survey methods rather than an accurate self-description. Baker and Smith (2009) maintain that grouping people within this broad category 'oversimplifies the diversity of the group' (2009, p.1260) as it may not capture the rich heterogeneity of identities. For example, it fails to capture the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR), religiously indifferent, and intermittently religious (Blankholm, 2022), to name a few. This led Day (2013) to lobby for the 'none' category to change to 'no religion' in the decennial census for England and Wales. She explained the importance of this alteration:

The word 'none' seemed to imply an absence of beliefs, faith or values and undermines the complex identities of people, such as secular humanists, who hold many beliefs and values, albeit not religious ones. (Day, 2013, p.107)

Conceptualisations and theorisations of non-religion have been developing over time. Although there is still no universally accepted definition of non-religion, reflected in the diversity of terms used in the literature (Beaman, Steele and Pringnitz, 2018; Blankholm, 2022), scholars have advocated for a relational approach to non-religion (e.g., Cotter, 2020; Lee, 2015; Quack, 2014). From this view, 'non-religiosity results from different configurations of the religious field they relate or are related to, influenced by the cultural and socio-political backgrounds of different societies' (Quack, 2014, p.439). The most cited definition of non-

religion and the first to define the term within academic literature was offered by Lee (2012): ‘non-religion is any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious’ (2012, p.131). Lee argues that non-religion should be understood as something ‘in contradistinction to religion’ (2015, p.32). By focusing on something other than religious, this definition differs from Campbell’s initial conceptualisation of irreligion because irreligion entails hostility or indifference. Alternatively, Lee believes that non-religion is a more inclusive concept, indicating anything identified by how it differs from religion, regardless of whether this sense of difference involves hostility, dismissiveness, or curiosity (2014, p.468). Therefore, a relational approach to understanding non-religion aids in conceptualising the identities of apostate refugees as this approach is consistent with understanding non-religion as ‘lived’ and polythetic/non-essentialist, which is helpful to apply within the asylum process because it does not aim to define non-religion with essential characteristics.

The term non-religion is recognised as serving as a placeholder term for the time being (Woodhead, 2016). Similar to the term ‘bugs’, while it does not directly refer to a biological or scientific thing, it does represent a label that identifies particular things like insects, slugs and worms (Jong, 2015). Non-religion is thus a pragmatic decision:

At this point, the reason to use the term ‘non-religion’ is a pragmatic decision. We simply have no better word to describe these positions, as the real issue is not the concept, but how much more empirical and theoretical work there is still to do. (Lee 2012, p.133)

Despite the need for more accuracy in labelling the varieties of non-religious identities, the consensus in the literature is that the term non-religion is now a firmly established and understood term (Bullivant, 2020). Smith and Cragun have argued that ‘the category ‘nonreligious’ is broad and inclusive of a diverse, even divergent, array of individuals with respect to beliefs and behaviors’ (2019, p.322). It is also helpful to understand non-religion through a relational approach, which situates non-religion within a broader religious field which contains religious, non-religious and a-religious ‘things’ (Quack, Schuh and Kind, 2019). Applying this view to the study of asylum highlights the complexities of individual journeys to religion which may not be neatly mapped onto bureaucratic understandings of identity.

Non-religion does not simply describe what is not religious; it maintains engagement with some of the elements of religion (Cragun and Smith, 2024). Cragun and Smith articulate non-religion as:

Nonreligion then, is not any one thing, but a concept subsuming a variety of related phenomena; those who study it are examining diverse sets of people, practices, and beliefs that are not themselves religious, but are related to religion in some way, be it discursively, descriptively, or practically. (Cragun and Smith, 2024, p.22-24)

Whilst the challenges of pinning down a definition of religion or non-religion will continue to be debated, it is important to consider how these concepts have social consequences (McKinnon, 2002). Therefore, whilst this study recognises the challenges of defining non-religion, it understands the concepts as socially constructed and applies a lived (non-)religion framework to shed light on how apostates live out their non-religiosity in the everyday. By considering non-religion as a factor in forced migration, we can begin to understand how non-religion is defined by societies that discriminate and persecute individuals who hold, leave or convert their religion or beliefs. Additionally, by considering British asylum assessment processes for non-religion, we can understand how bureaucrats come to define it. Within the field of non-religion, researchers have aimed to conceptualise and understand the construction of particular non-religious identities, exploring the substantive elements of their belief and how people's trajectories to non-religion. These aspects are discussed next.

There are now large studies which explore non-religion, with atheism being the most common non-religious identity to be researched (see Bainbridge, 2009; Budd, 1977; Cotter, 2011). For example, Lee's (2015) work on 'Recognising the Non-Religious', Voas and McAndrew's study of non-religion in Britain (2016), Brown's work on 'Becoming Atheist' (2017) and Cotter's 'Critical Study of Non-Religion' (2020). Non-religion is a multi-disciplinary field that includes sociology, international relations, anthropology and religious studies (Bullivant and Lee, 2012). Research has suggested individuals becoming non-religious are on the rise, especially in the UK (Woodhead, 2017). There is also emerging evidence that non-religion is growing globally. In 2010, the PEW Research Center estimated there were about 1.1 billion atheists, agnostics and people who do not identify with any religion. Stating that by 2050, the unaffiliated population is expected to exceed 1.2 billion (PEW Research Center, 2015). The PEW Research Center also estimates that 13% of global migrants are religiously unaffiliated. However, accurate figures are challenging because some states restrict the right to freedom of religion or belief (PEW Research Center, 2024). Despite these difficulties, researchers have

argued that non-religion and atheism in Muslim-majority countries is a ‘rising tide’ (Eller and Khazaal, 2024, p.1).

There have been calls within non-religious studies to move away from focusing solely on what non-religion is not. Instead, research has significantly focused on exploring the substantive and positive understandings of what it means to be non-religious (Beaman, 2017; Beyer, 2021; Manning, 2015; Smith and Halligan, 2021; Quack, Schuh and Kind, 2019). This work has devoted time to examining the construction of non-religious identities and observing their experiences, commitments and beliefs. Research has also aimed to understand the lived practices of non-religion and secularity (see Fadil, Johansen and Scheer, 2019; Lee, 2015). However, these studies are situated mainly within Western Europe, the US and Canada (e.g., Beaman and Tomlins, 2015; Lee, 2015; Lindeman *et al.*, 2019), as well as focusing primarily on atheism (e.g., Brown, 2017; Cragun, 2016; Lee, 2015) and thus, there are gaps in empirical investigations of how non-religious identities are constructed outside of these geographies. This research will build on this body of work to highlight how apostate asylum seekers from varied countries arriving in the UK create their non-religious identities¹¹.

A substantial amount of non-religious literature is interested in how individuals become non-religious and the diverse ways they construct their identities and worldviews (see Arweck, 2016; Mumford, 2014; Smith, 2011; Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019; Sumerau and Cragun, 2016). As an emerging field, there are different approaches to conceptualising non-religion. Some research has investigated the process of moving from religiosity to non-religiosity. For example, Smith (2011) outlines four stages of identity development for atheists in the US: ‘starting point/the ubiquity of theism, questioning theism, rejecting theism, and "coming out "atheist”’ (2011, p.215). Some scholars have argued that the position could be understood as a ‘continuum’ (Cragun and McCaffree, 2021) or as a ‘spectrum’ (Smith and Cragun, 2019). However, these conceptions maintain that there are still two poles of religion/non-religion that are in opposition to each other.

Other researchers have positioned non-religious identities and worldviews amongst ‘complex webs’ and ‘assemblages’ within a wider network of people, groups or institutions and their

¹¹ The participants from a refugee background country of origins were Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the Maldives (see participant vignettes in section 4.6.3)

understanding of the religious field (Quack, Schuh and Kind, 2019). By situating religious and non-religious beliefs through a relational approach, rather than binary, it offers a more accurate depiction of who the non-religious are, and what they believe. For example, Beyer, Craig and Cummins (2018) have argued that the non-religious can ‘include a fair number of people who are actually religious or spiritual’ (2018, p.39). Likewise, Thiessen (2015) states that non-religious ‘are not a homogeneous secular group. Some believe in God, in miracles, or in the afterlife, and they attend religious services, pray, or believe that religion is important’ (2015, p.94-95). I argue narratives of apostasy are best understood through following individual journeys. Through this approach, the complex journeys of becoming non-religious (through the concepts of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’) pose a challenge to how asylum bureaucracy understands non-religious identities, whereby determining something as either ‘religious’ or ‘non-religious’ can lead to making essentialist assumptions of identity. Thus, to reiterate an earlier point, a relational theory of non-religion is particularly important as it sees non-religious phenomena as distinct from the religious, though relational to it.

The non-religion literature has considered how non-religion can be a marginalised position in society and that non-religious beliefs can be subject to discrimination. For example, research has predominantly focused on the US context and atheist identities (Doane and Elliott, 2015; Edgell, Gervais and Hartmann, 2006; Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan, 2011). Anti-atheist sentiments have been identified as the most expressed prejudices in the US (Edgell, Gervais and Hartmann, 2006). This has included discrimination on hiring grounds, political distrust and different treatment in the legal realm (Franks and Scherr, 2014), as well as slander, coercion, social ostracism, denial of opportunities, goods, and services, and hate crime (Hammer *et al.*, 2012). Research also suggests that atheists are amongst the least-liked people in areas with religious majorities (Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan, 2011). Further work has addressed the consequences of social rejection and the effects of discrimination on individuals’ well-being (Abbott *et al.*, 2020; Doane and Elliott, 2015). Given the findings of this body of research, it is surprising that there are no equivalent studies on the discrimination and marginalisation of the non-religious in societies that uphold blasphemy or apostasy laws.

There are some notable exceptions to the above, including research of non-religion for specific ethnic groups. For example, there are studies exploring how non-religious worldviews are expressed in Arab societies (Elsässer, 2021; Whitaker, 2014). Research has focused on religious or non-religious expression in specific contexts such as, Egypt (Franke, 2021;

Menshawy, 2021; Karin van, 2021), Turkey (Kütük-Kuriş, 2021), and non-belief in Morocco (Richter 2021; 2023). Research has also looked at specific experiences, such as ‘religious ambivalence’ or ‘imperfection’ (Al-Ajarma, 2021). However, this body of research often considers non-religiosity within the private sphere or those who stay based in their country of origin. The experience of those leaving religion, labelled as apostates, especially from predominantly Muslim-majority countries, and the related processes and relationships, is frequently neglected. Whilst there is some research exploring religious dissenters or ‘exiters’ from Muslim identities, these again are overwhelmingly situated geographically in the UK, the US and Canada (Cottee, 2015; Peek, 2005;) and cannot fully account for apostates who flee Muslim-majority countries. Thus, non-religious apostates are increasingly in need of scholarly attention, particularly when considering numbers are predicted to be rising. The next section turns to understanding apostasy within non-religious studies.

2.2.2. Understanding apostasy

A subfield of non-religion research considers those who leave or exit religion (Enstedt, Larsson and Mantsinen, 2019). The process of leaving religion contains many different concepts and terms used differently by scholars, most note-worthy are: ‘apostasy, deconversion, disaffiliation, religious shifting, “nones” (people who claim no religious affiliation), leave-taking, and becoming an ex’ (Enstedt, 2020, p.292). In this research, I mostly refer to leaving religion as ‘apostasy’ referring to a ‘disaffiliation from a religious tradition’ (Streib and Klein, 2013). Brinkerhoff and Mackie (1993) argue apostasy involves leaving two major dimensions of religion: ‘belief’ and ‘community’. Apostasy is an important phenomenon from a sociological perspective (Bromley, 1998), yet historically, the topic of apostasy within sociological research has been marginal (Cottee, 2015). This section will give an overview of the literature considering apostasy and propose a way of understanding the journey to non-religion, through the concepts of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’.

The process of becoming an apostate has mostly been discussed from the perspective of leaving new religious movements, such as Wright’s 1987 study on ‘Leaving Cults’ and Mormonism (Brooks 2019; 2020). One of the first in-depth sociological analyses of apostasy was offered by Zuckerman (2011), who defined apostasy as a unique and gradual process. In an analysis of 87 people who have left their religion in the US, Zuckerman explored the multi-layered causes of why people either choose or are forced to exit religion, such as the effects of higher education

and personal experiences and the development of liberal politics and sexual values (ibid). Other reasons for religious exiting have been explained through a person's life course (Herzbrun, 1999): dissatisfaction with religious teachings and doctrines and official organised religion (Fazzino, 2014; Hunsberger, 1983).

The process of leaving and becoming non-religious has been explored from sociological and anthropological perspectives, all providing ways of conceptualising apostasy (see Cottee, 2015; Enstedt, 2020; Nieuwkerk, 2018; Zuckerman, 2011). Zuckerman (2011) conceptualised apostasy in different ways. The first way to characterise apostasy is acknowledging when, in the life course, the individual decided to leave, consisting of early and late apostasy. The second way to measure the depth of rejection is by naming it shallow or deep apostasy. The final approach is measuring the significance of the shift from religion to secularity, calling this mild or transformative apostasy¹². Cottee (2015), meanwhile, focuses specifically on ex-Muslims in the UK and Canada. He differentiates between the 'pre-apostasy phase', which includes early questioning and doubts of religion; the 'apostasy phase' as the realisation that these doubts are unreconcilable; and the 'post-apostasy phase', which explains how apostates adjust to their new non-religious identity (ibid). Whilst this work is useful in tracking the journeys to non-religion, it is essential to remember that leaving religion is a dynamic, fluid, non-universal process difficult to constrain neatly into stages (Cragun and Smith, 2024). Leaving religion and constructing new identities is also multifaceted, with diverse beliefs and worldviews. In 2024, research examined the varieties of non-religious identities in the 'Muslim world', arguing that ex-Muslims uniquely construct their identities in ways that do not equate to atheism or a complete repudiation of religion or Muslim identity (Eller and Khazaal, 2024). For these reasons, I conceptualise apostasy through a lived non-religion framework and focus on the ways religion is 'unlearned' and non-religion is 'learned'. This is because understanding journeys of becoming non-religious solely in terms of 'leaving' overlooks the dynamic processes that occur in doing so.

¹² Early apostasy refers to individuals raised with a religious identity who leave when they are still young. Late apostasy occurs when an individual leaves religion as an adult or later in life. Shallow apostasy refers to individuals who leave their religion but are still spiritual or not fully secular. Deep apostasy involves those who completely leave their religion and consider their identity entirely secular. Mild apostasy involves leaving a religion but not considering oneself ever very religious, thus experiencing little disruption to their lives during the process of leaving. Transformative apostasy is the experience of leaving religion that is life-altering (see Zuckerman 2011).

The ideas of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’ in the context of apostasy remain underexplored within the sociology of religion. Although some studies mention these concepts, they often do so without clear definitions, leaving them underdeveloped as theoretical frameworks (e.g., Cottee, 2015; Richter, 2023). Unlearning and learning have been mentioned in Richter’s (2023) research on non-religion in Morocco, where she posits:

Religion plays a huge role in the upbringing of many Moroccans and is an intrinsic part of daily life. Being Muslim can influence how people talk, eat, and interact with one another. For this reason, moving toward a more nonreligious lifestyle involves a process of learning and unlearning. (2023, p.116)

Cottee notes that ex-Muslims ‘unlearn’ previous behaviours, rituals, and ways of speaking (2015, p.176). However, he emphasises that a subject actively does unlearning with agency. Another study understands unlearning as a cognitive, social or emotional state:

Unlearning occurs by reading new books or listening to podcasts or socially by entering into new relations and environments where one is exposed to alternative cultural and moral codes that replace the old religious ones. New cognitive insights (or social relations) may replace, and hence help us *unlearn*, the old. (Gilsvik, 2023, p. 11 emphasis in original)

Gilsvik argues that unlearning and learning can be understood through a ‘phantom’ metaphor, akin to phantom limbs, which suggests that certain aspects of religion continue to linger. However, conceptualising leaving religion in this manner is particularly negative, serving as a constant reminder of a painful, past religious self that remains insurmountable. While I recognise that unlearning can be a psychologically challenging process, in the context of this research, learning about non-religion ultimately leads to acceptance and positive feelings of embodiment and belonging. Related terminology has described leaving faith through the lens of ‘undoing’ religion and ‘redoing’ identity, focusing on aspects like gender, sexuality, and race rather than non-religion (van den Brandt, 2025). Moreover, undoing/redoing has been portrayed as occurring simultaneously rather than in an iterative manner (ibid).

To the best of my knowledge, Knott (2024) is the sole researcher who has explored the concept of unlearning in the sociology of religion. Knott analysed the current literature on unlearning, drawing on organisational studies to suggest that this concept might be relevant to conversations about departing from religion. Knott observes, ‘In none of [the current literature] is the concept of unlearning defined or questioned. Its meaning is simply taken as read’ (2024,

p.192). She defines unlearning as ‘discarding obsolete and misleading knowledge’ (ibid), this perspective on unlearning highlights the potential for creating space and time for new learning. Thus, as an apostate ‘unlearns’ certain religious behaviours and practices, they gain increased opportunities to ‘learn’ non-religious alternatives. This process of learning non-religion illustrates how individuals establish a sense of belonging and positive feelings of embodiment. The advantage of employing these concepts lies in their ability to understand the dynamics of leaving religion as fluid, contextual, and iterative, which can be examined at the level of lived experience, a theme that will be further elaborated upon in Chapter 5.

Apostasy from Islam is still a neglected category in the sociology of religion, but research on ex-Muslims and their non-religious identities is a burgeoning topic (Eller and Khazaal, 2024). However, recent research which has focused on ex-Muslim apostates specifically are overwhelmingly about ex-Muslims in the ‘West’ (see Cottee, 2015; Mughal and Saleem, 2018; Nieuwkerk, 2018; Schirmacher, 2020; Stene, 2020; Warraq, 2003) and a consideration of those from a refugee background is absent. This could be partly explained through the colonial critiques of the discipline. Edward Said argued four decades ago that Western attitudes toward Arabs and Muslims had devolved from romantically exoticized to seeing them as ‘underhumanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric’ and, of course, irredeemably, even fanatically, religious’ (Said, 1979, p.150, cited in Eller and Khazaal, 2024). This research, therefore, overlaps with established work on leaving religion, but it emphasises the unique processes which apostate refugees go through when becoming non-religious.

Similar critiques against the sociology of religion have also been applied to the study of non-religion. There are still dominant views that Western Europe is ethnically ‘white’ and has a Judeo-Christian heritage; which positions West Asia and North Africa (WANA) as homogenously Muslim (Karim, 1997). Therefore, the field also suffers from conceptual issues as categories of religion or belief have been derived from Eurocentric conceptions. This point was raised by Alexander (2020):

Given that ‘religion’ is a modern Western category that does not refer to some essential thing but arbitrarily encases certain aspects of social life for certain purposes, what does it mean to speak of non-Western non-religion or atheism? (2020, p.100).

Horii (2019) similarly suggests that the categorisation of beliefs into religion or non-religion will remain flawed as they will always be underpinned by imperialism:

In my view, the category “religion” and its imagined distinction from “nonreligion” constitute the fundamental classification scheme which sustains subtle imperialism, by authorizing and naturalizing the ostensibly “nonreligious” narratives of social theories, as if they are rooted in “natural reason,” in contrast to the apparent irrational barbarity of “religion.” (Horii, 2019, p.27)

Smith and Cragun argue that ‘there is no doubt unrecognised cultural processes at play and novel sociological insights to be discovered’ (2019, p.327). This research aims to fill a small portion of these critiques by focusing on individuals from countries of origin outside of these dominant frameworks, albeit from the perspective of a researcher based in the UK. It grounds the narratives of self-identified non-religious individuals and how they articulate their identities. The following section discusses the legal conceptions of apostate asylum claims to provide an overview of how these identities are included within the parameters of the Refugee Convention and other relevant human rights articles.

2.3. Legal Conceptions: Religion or belief

This section examines the legal conceptions of religion and belief, specifically how FoRB is recognised as a fundamental human right in international law and asylum. The academic exploration of law and religion encompasses three primary domains: socio-legal studies, critical legal studies, and legal history (Edge, 2015). The focus of this literature has included the various legal instruments in which religion or belief is included, the nature and scope of protected freedoms and the procedural elements that protect individuals (Lerner, 2012). This section gives a brief overview of these three main themes and connect them to non-religious rights.

Similar to academic debates, religion remains undefined within international and human rights law (Gunn, 2003). Despite a lack of consensus, religion and belief are framed within numerous human rights declarations due to worldwide abuses of religious minorities, indoctrination, forced conversions, censorship and intimidation (Bielefeldt, Ghanea-Hercock and Wiener, 2016, p.5). As a response, the United Nations has devised a catalogue of rights relating to religion, under the heading of ‘freedom of thought, conscience, and religion’ (Lerner, 2012, p.5). Regularly understood as ‘freedom of religion or belief’ (FoRB), this includes: the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom to change religion or belief and not to

hold any religion or beliefs, freedom to manifest religion or belief, freedom from coercion and freedom to instruct one's children according to one's religion or belief (Meral and Gray, 2016).

FoRB is included in Article 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and enshrined in international law due to Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Paragraph 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (referred to as the 1981 Declaration) includes the expression 'freedom of thought, conscience and religion'. The term religion is also frequently applied in asylum law due to the religious ground of the 1951 Refugee Convention; its use here also entails FoRB (Gunn, 2003). The Handbook of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) states:

Persecution for 'reasons of religion' may assume various forms, e.g. prohibition of membership of a religious community, of worship in private or in public, of religious instruction, or serious measures of discrimination imposed on persons because they practice their religion or belong to a particular religious community. (2019, p.71)

Thus, legal understandings of religion tend to arise in two broad contexts: protecting freedom of religion or prohibiting discrimination and persecution of religion (Gunn, 2003).

FoRB is a complex human right, and it is discussed across international law literature regarding the concept's misunderstandings, interpretations and controversies (Bielefeldt, Ghanea-Hercock and Wiener, 2016). The protection of religion relating to theistic beliefs has historically received more attention than the protection of other beliefs, such as non-religious rights (Bielefeldt, 2013). A former UN Special Rapporteur, Arcot Krishnaswami, coined the term 'religion or belief' to include beliefs such as 'agnosticism, free thought, atheism and rationalism' (Krishnaswami, 1960). The phrase 'or belief' has recently been woven into human rights to recognise non-religious conceptions (Lerner, 2012; Tahzib, 2021). Belief is defined legally as a 'conviction of the truth of a proposition, existing subjectively in the mind, and induced by argument, persuasion, or proof addressed to the judgment' (Black's Law Dictionary, 1990, p.155).

The UN Human Rights Committee, which oversees the implementation of the ICCPR, issued General Comment No.22¹³ on FoRB to offer guidance on the meaning of ‘religion or belief’ (UN Human Rights Committee, 1993). It emphasises Article 18 of the ICCPR ‘protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief.’ Therefore, it states the terms religion and belief are to be broadly constructed in international law (Bielefeldt, 2013):

Freedom of religion or belief covers equally the rights of members of large or small communities, minorities and minorities within minorities, conservatives and liberals, converts or re-converts, dissenters or other critical voices, and, last but not least, women who, given their marginalized positions within many religious traditions, may become a driving force for theological reform. (Bielefeldt, 2013, p.38)

Therefore, human rights law has abstained from defining religion, except to include the concept of belief (Lerner, 2012). The need to address and clarify the meaning of religion or belief suggests that states made errors in interpreting the scope of such rights (Carpenter, 2017). Scholars have reflected that ‘this capacious definition of religion in international law has left it largely to individual states and individual claimants to define the boundaries of the regime of religious rights’ (Witte, 1996, p.xxiv). Scholars have continued to argue that the freedom to be non-religious or an apostate does not receive the same protection as the freedom to be religious (McAdam, 2017).

The literature discussing FoRB still tends to overlook the inclusion of non-religious rights, with a few exceptions, that have emerged in recent years. One of the earliest occasions when non-religion was emphasised as a distinct human right was in 2016, following a pressing demand to acknowledge non-religious beliefs separately from religious freedom (Iskandar, 2016). Following this call, there was research providing an extensive legal analysis of FoRB and specifically examining the ICCPR (Carpenter, 2017), which argued that this legislation is yet to be fully inclusive of religious minorities and the non-religious. Beaman, Steele and Pringnitz (2018) drew on case law in Canada to demonstrate how non-religious populations are at risk of human right abuses due to coercion into religious participation or behaviour. The authors argue non-religion and human rights are, ‘an area ripe for study and also an area of concern that has the potential to heighten social conflict, the nature and shape of which will vary

¹³ UN committees can publish interpretations of human rights treaties in the form of ‘general comments’. General comments clarify the content and scope of the treaty, make recommendations for implementation and interpretation, and outline potential violations of those rights.

between contexts' (2018, p.45). One sociological study has examined the extent of human rights law protections for the non-religious and the global restrictions of these rights (Nixon, 2020).

As discussed, protections for non-religious rights are included within FoRB, which encompasses a broad catalogue of rights. The right to apostasy is a specific aspect of FoRB which is not explicitly referenced in human rights instruments. The right to apostasy protects the rights of an individual to leave or change their religion without fearing consequences. Apostasy was specifically a cause of controversy during the drafting and preparation of human rights instruments on religious rights (Carpenter, 2017; Musalo, 2004). The absence of a clear articulation of the right to apostasy in international human rights law has provided ambiguity regarding apostasy and the extent to which it receives adequate protection (van Schaik and Hillary, 2023). This is an emerging body of research which highlights that despite the establishment of FoRB as a fundamental human right, there are repeated violations of FoRB in states around the world (Tahzib, 2021). The non-religious continue to experience human rights issues today (Nixon, 2020) as states party to the ICCPR still limit the ability of non-religious minorities to manifest their beliefs, and non-religiosity is still treated with violence and discrimination (Carpenter, 2017). However, missing from these studies is an empirical investigation into the lived experiences of apostates, the persecution they face, and the barriers put against them to receive protection based on their identity.

Despite a lack of clear legal definitions, religion and belief are articulated within international law articles. Though not unusual for phenomena such as religion and belief to lack legal definition, it raises complexities about what constitutes protection under international law (Gunn, 2003). Whilst scholarly debates have focused on what does or does not constitute religion with little agreement in legal instruments, this has a profound effect on individuals' lives as they become dependent on a definition in a legal proceeding: 'judicial decisions about what constitutes religion make a very real difference in, the lives of persons who may or may not obtain refugee status' (Gunn, 2003, p.191). A lack of definition of religion and belief has led to misunderstandings within asylum cases in religion-based claims (Gunn, 2003). Adjudicators must determine whether an asylum claimant genuinely has a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of 'religion' (Home Office, 2022a; 2022b). For example, Dolance (2012), writing in the context of US asylum law, argues that those deemed 'non-believers' may not be offered the same protection as believers. Those who do not hold religious

beliefs can be overlooked within definitions of religions. This can lead to uncertainty among people with non-religious convictions regarding whether they can be afforded protection under these acts (ibid). Therefore, this thesis fills key knowledge of this area in the context of the British asylum system and the experiences of the non-religious in accessing fundamental rights. Thus, the next section situates apostasy within the context of the British asylum system.

2.4. Understanding Asylum

Human rights are intricately bound to asylum, as Arendt articulated:

We became aware of the existence of a right to have rights and a right to belong to some kind of organised community only when millions of people had emerged who had lost and could not regain those rights. (Arendt, 1979, p.297, cited in, Morris, 2010)

Despite the international recognition of human rights, various sociological research has argued asylum is a site where decisions can contest the very nature of these rights (Morris, 2010). Paying attention to the non-religious within the asylum process highlights some of the issues regarding the practical implementation of such human rights. For example, complexities of what is included under the religion ground of the Convention and how FoRB should be interpreted. This section puts forward a review of the literature relating to asylum studies. It focuses on literature that considers the asylum adjudication process, which has been reported as an ‘invisible frontline struggle’ faced by oppressed groups (Kagan, 2015, p.123). This section introduces the main themes relevant to this study: credibility, the burden of proof and the culture of disbelief. Within this section, I discuss the conceptualisation of the ‘credible’ and ‘deserving’ refugee and the impact this imaginary has for apostate asylum claims.

The asylum system in the UK is controlled by the Home Office which is an institution responsible for immigration and asylum policy, administration as well as the operations of the UK Border Agency (Campbell, 2016). Research relating to the asylum system is vast, and the vagaries of the British asylum system are well-documented. Previous research has explained the legalities and procedures of asylum procedures (Gill and Good, 2019); problems with assessing credibility (Sweeney, 2009; Thomas, 2006); issues and absences with Country Policy and Information Notes (CPIN) (Good, 2016); expert evidence (Campbell, 2016; Musalo, 2004); structural problems of the system relating to the culture of disbelief (Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Bohmer and Shuman, 2018); and the restrictive policies surrounding the ‘hostile

environment’ (Goodfellow, 2019). Another large body of research has delved into issues within the asylum assessments on the Convention grounds. This has been most notable for political asylum claims (Bohmer and Shuman, 2018), gender (Crawley, 2000; Foster, 2014), sexuality (Akin, 2017; Berg and Millbank, 2009) and religion (Berlit, Doerig and Storey, 2015; Kéri and Sleiman, 2017). However, there remains a lack of systematic academic research specifically examining apostates in the British asylum system and an in-depth discussion of religious persecution claims made by non-religious applicants. Thus, this section draws on similar assessed claims, such as religious-conversion asylum claims and sexuality, to highlight some of the overlapping key research themes.

Refugee Status Determination (RSD) is referred to as one of the most complex assessments in the legal realm as well, as psychologically challenging (Selim *et al.*, 2022). In the UK, RSD assessments have been scrutinised for decades (Schuster, 2020). Researchers have reported ‘fatal flaws’ in asylum decision-making (Schuster, 2020, p.1371). Some of these flaws have been associated with the Convention grounds of race, political opinion, nationality, PSG and religion, due to a lack of adequate definitions in the Convention or the UNHCR Handbook. Likewise, the terms ‘well-founded fear’ and ‘persecution’ have little conceptual guidance (Gill and Good, 2019). Determining whether an individual has a ‘well-founded fear’ is, in part, subjective, and this aspect has been critiqued by scholars when adjudicators must make decisions assessing people’s individual beliefs (Black, 2019). A focal concern of research examining RSD processes is how asylum decision-makers assess ‘credibility’, discussed next.

2.4.1. Credibility

Assessing an asylum seeker’s ‘credibility’ is central to making decisions on granting or rejecting refugee status, despite it not being an explicit legal requirement for refugee recognition (Kagan, 2015). Many asylum applications made in the UK are denied due to doubts about the credibility of an application (see page 17). The issues surrounding the credibility assessment have been well-researched in the literature, mostly from the perspective of legal scholars (Good, 2011; Herlihy and Turner, 2015; Kagan, 2003; Sweeney, 2009; Thomas, 2006). Anthropologists have explored issues of credibility (Gill and Good, 2019; Griffiths, 2012; Khosravi, 2010), and psychological perspectives have looked at the impact of credibility assessments on mental health (Herlihy and Turner, 2015; Shuman and Bohmer, 2004; Selim *et al.*, 2022).

Credibility is a criterion that aim to measure whether an individual has a legitimate asylum claim. Credibility assessments typically include an applicant's oral testimony and supporting evidence such as documents, expert witness statements, and medical evidence. As asylum seekers often flee their country of origin with little to no documentation, or some may struggle to provide objective evidence for their claims (such is the case for claims based on internal beliefs), asylum adjudication regularly relies upon oral testimony alone. This requires applicants to narrate and articulate their experiences that have amounted to a fear of persecution. These testimonies are assessed mainly in terms of how credible they are (Good, 2011), and dependent on what they say and how they say it (Sweeney, 2009). This elicits decisions made on subjective experiences, relying on assumptions about 'human behaviour, judgements, attitudes and how a truthful account is presented' (Herlihy *et al.*, 2010, p.351). Thus, a key part of asylum assessments are that people seeking asylum have to provide a believable account of their experiences of persecution (Kagan, 2015).

This creates a social construction of the 'credible' or 'genuine' refugee within asylum assessment procedures. As a result, assumptions about the characteristics of credible asylum seekers are stereotyped and homogenised. Stereotypes of gender-based asylum cases have been noted as tending to favour women who present as conventionally feminine (Kagan, 2015), and have produced racialised stereotypes, such as the portrayal of Muslim men as dangerous, and Muslim women as victims (Crawley, 2022; Mishra, 2007). Decisions have been reported as being based on 'simplistic, even derogatory, characterizations of asylum seekers' countries of origin as areas of barbarism or which lack civility' (Bhabha 2002, p.162). Thus, asylum seekers who are perceived in such ways can experience barriers in the asylum adjudication process.

There are notable limitations of the credibility assessment as a reliable indicator of legitimacy, which is widely acknowledged and discussed in the literature. This includes how decisions are based on personal judgment, are unreviewable on appeal, and have the potential to be influenced by cultural differences (Kagan, 2003). The credibility assessment in religion-based asylum claims has been described as more specific and more perplexing than assessments in other refugee cases (Kagan, 2010) due to a lack of extensive guidelines from the UNHCR, its

Handbook (2019)¹⁴ or by governments. Researchers have gone as far as to argue that religious asylum claimants' credibility assessment is more likely to be negative and that they face a harder time proving the sincerity of their claims and demonstrating the plausibility of the harm they face (Mousin, 2003). Religion-based asylum cases are also affected by racialised and gendered assumptions. For example, as Muslim men are often perceived to be dangerous (Kagan, 2015), research has highlighted that migrant men must distance themselves from their Muslim background to receive protection (Crawley, 2022; Wyss, 2022). Whilst there is research regarding Muslim tropes within asylum adjudication processes (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2010; Griffiths, 2015; Tschalaer, 2020), research has not considered how apostates, racialised as Muslim (whether practising Muslim or not), must distance themselves from their social or cultural identities to be deemed credible. The exploration of how apostates' distance themselves from negative preconceptions of 'Muslimness' is another research gap that this thesis addresses.

The Home Office has issued two 'Asylum Policy Instructions' (APIs), which give bureaucrats guidance on how to assess credibility within asylum assessments (Home Office 2022a; 2022b). Despite containing applicable guidelines, scholars have argued that it perpetuates a 'deeply problematic' threshold for meeting credibility because it raises the standard of proof (Sweeney 2009, p.701), discussed next.

2.4.2. Burden of proof

The credibility assessment requires asylum applicants to 'prove' their claims, which can involve presenting material evidence to support their claims (Sweeney, 2009). RSD cases are unique as they have a notably lower standard of proof where asylum seekers must prove 'to a reasonable degree of likelihood' that they have a well-founded fear of persecution (for one of the reasons set out in the Convention) (Sweeney, 2009). The UNHCR Handbook states that refugees will be unlikely to prove every aspect of their claim and should be afforded the 'benefit of the doubt' (UNHCR, 2019). Though the Handbook elaborates that the benefit of the doubt should only be given if the decision-maker is 'satisfied as to the applicant's general credibility', clarifying that the applicant's statements must be coherent and plausible, and must not run counter to generally known facts' (2019, p.44).

¹⁴ The UNHCR's Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status is a document that gives guidance on how to determine refugee status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol.

The person seeking asylum is responsible for the burden of proof and evidence can consist of written statements and testimonies within the asylum interview and documentary sources. Scholarly research which examines the asylum claims process has noted challenges with adjudication because decision-making is based on an assessment of persecution, rather than based on historical facts (Thomas, 2005). Decision-makers will utilise external sources to assess people's claims, and although these documents are increasingly accessible, not every human rights abuse is reported (Kagan, 2015). For example, adjudicators draw on CPINs to understand the relevant risk in an applicant's country of origin (Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021). Both the credibility assessment and use of this guidance have been documented in the literature (Millbank, 2009; Noll, 2005; Selim *et al.*, 2022). A central issue for religion-based asylum claims (of conversion) put forward by Rose and Given-Wilson (2021) is that the CPINs provided by the UK government offer inadequate guidance on religion or belief. Thus, key details of how religious minorities experience persecution across countries are missing. Another challenge is providing evidence for subjective claims, as reported in cases of sexuality and religious conversion cases (Millbank, 2009). This can lead to decision-makers relying on their assumptions or personal impressions of the case which makes the assessment less objective (Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021).

This research aims to fill the knowledge gap regarding how the burden of proof uniquely impacts non-religious claimants, posing distinct challenges in comparison to other types of claims. In doing so, it investigates how individuals seek to convert their personal experiences into bureaucratic frameworks. This is particularly challenging for non-religious claimants, as bureaucratic requirements demand evidentiary proof that substantiates a lack of belief, a notably difficult task. Without external evidence, asylum claims may rely solely on personal testimony. However, human rights advocates and scholars have argued that asylum decision-making functions within a wider 'culture of disbelief', which can affect how those seeking asylum are perceived, meaning the non-religious can face further barriers to their protection, discussed next.

2.4.3. The culture of disbelief

Many asylum applications are rejected on the first instance due to non-credibility (see figures on page 17). This has led some researchers to argue that decision-making processes within the British asylum system are distorted by a culture of disbelief (Anderson, *et al.*, 2014; Griffiths,

2012; Hambly, 2019; Jubany, 2011). This leads to the treatment of some asylum claimants as ‘liars’ from the get-go and in some cases leading to the refusal of claims (Allard, 2013; Anderson, *et al.*, 2014; Griffiths, 2012; Jubany, 2011; Souter, 2011). The construction and adjudication of asylum claims relate to the wider social, political, economic and historical contexts where decisions are being made (Hambly, 2019). In the UK, this culture has been fuelled by politicians and the media over a number of years that dub people seeking asylum as ‘economic migrants’ rather than genuine refugees (Souter, 2011) and has portrayed asylum seekers as manipulators of the system (Griffiths, 2012; Kobelinksy, 2019).

The culture of disbelief emerged when racialised refugees were arriving in the late 1990s, which saw the New Labour Government (1997-2010) differentiating between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ migrants (Mayblin, 2019). The notions of the deserving and undeserving differentiate between those who deserve protection and those who do not (Smith and Waite, 2019). The ‘deserving’ asylum seekers are those who are read as vulnerable, whilst the ‘undeserving’ asylum seekers who are viewed as ‘economic migrants’, travelling to the UK to gain benefits from the welfare system (Mayblin, 2019). This rhetoric portrays those seeking asylum as a ‘subject group’ (Fekete, 2004, p.31) and therefore, treated with distrust. Research on the asylum system highlights the ways the asylum adjudication system reconstructs these beliefs through decision-making processes (Kobelinksy, 2019). In some cases, immigration officers are not trained in the complex lives of people seeking asylum and their rights and obligations, whilst they are taught how to identify inconsistencies in narratives (Jubany, 2011). Alongside research considering the UK, the culture of disbelief is also reported to be embedded within the asylum bureaucracies across Europe (e.g., Dahlvik, 2018) and in countries such as Austria (Dahlvik, 2018), Sweden (Graham, 2002), Spain (Jubany, 2017), Greece (Zisakou, 2021), Switzerland (Affolter 2021;2022) as well as the United States (Bohmer and Shuman, 2018), and Australia (Every and Augoustinos, 2008).

The perception of asylum-seeking as voluntary, due to economic reasons, overlooks the colonial histories that have forced people to migrate (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018). Asylum seekers’ reasons for fleeing religious persecution may intersect with countries’ authoritarian regimes which were motivated by global conflicts, wars, political interests and economic dynamics, as a result of colonial histories (*ibid*). Hence, the culture of disbelief has been described as a ‘colonial-style set of assumptions about applicants’ dishonesty and behaviour’

(Webber, 2012, p.2). In some places in the literature, this is argued as being derived from imperialist assumptions developed in Britain and its former colonies (Annisette, 2000).

To be granted refugee status, people seeking asylum depend on ‘having their stories heard and believed’, where being believed ‘depends on their ability to convey their experiences in a way that convinces increasingly sceptical host states of their authenticity’ (Eastmond, 2007, p.59). Thus, the culture of disbelief can influence how the credibility assessment is carried out. Researchers have specifically highlighted the difficulty of being believed in religion-based asylum cases. Asylum adjudicators have associated suspicion that claimants may be claiming to adhere to a persecuted religious group to claim protection (Musalo, 2004). This arises acutely for asylum cases, which are made *sur place*, which means an individual makes the claim whilst in the UK for some time (Musalo, 2004). This finding is relevant for apostate asylum cases, which are so far unconsidered in academic research on asylum claims and the culture of disbelief. Apostates often realise their identity after living in a new environment for some time, or can actively practice their identities in ways they were not able to in their country of origin. Thus, religion-based asylum claims raise unique issues for credibility. These aspects will be pulled out throughout the data analysis chapters. Thus, it is not only oral testimony or evidentiary proof that is important; it is the ability to present asylum claims that ‘conform not only to the categories of refugee law but also the ‘metanarratives of truth and credibility’ of the judicial system’ (Eastmond, 2007, p.260).

2.5. Religion-Based Asylum Claims

Religious persecution is a widespread form of human rights abuse and a leading cause of displacement globally (Selim *et al.*, 2022). Research regarding religion-based asylum claims, particularly for Christian conversion claims, has burgeoned since the 2015 ‘refugee crisis’ as the number of people seeking asylum on these grounds increased (Hurd, 2024). Musalo (2004) argues that claims for protection based on religion or belief are particularly complex due to the definitional challenges of religion and belief discussed in this literature review:

The approach to determining the key elements in a refugee adjudication — what is a religion, what constitutes persecution in the context of religious practice, when is the persecution ‘for reasons of’ the individual’s religious beliefs — are less clear today than they were when the 1951 Refugee Convention was drafted. (Musalo, 2004, p.165)

Scholars have argued that these claims are likely to continue to grow due to increasing fundamentalism and nationalism, the intersection of religion or belief and women's rights, and the sustained concern of FoRB both internationally and nationally (Musalo, 2004).

The Home Office does not officially record statistics on the number of asylum claims based on religion. Thus, scholars can only speculate on the prevalence of asylum claims based on religion. Rose and Given-Wilson (2021) infer asylum claims based on religious conversion, particularly to Christianity, are common in Europe due to the interpretation of case law, database searches, media reports and a rise in academic interest in this topic. One difficulty of recording the prevalence of asylum claims based on religion may be due to the challenge of ascertaining the type of persecution in asylum cases, which could be a result of various religious, gender, political or cultural factors, which makes these types of asylum claims complex (Gunn, 2003).

The UNHCR Handbook (2019) maintains that religion-based claims may involve one or more of the following factors: 'religion as belief', 'religion as identity' and 'religion as a way of life'. Religion as belief follows the premise that religions have certain practices and doctrines that should be followed. People may be at risk of persecution if they deviate from these practices by expressing apostasy or by converting to another religion (Gunn, 2003). In these types of cases, the asylum bureaucrat may base their decision on the depth of knowledge the claimant has on the converted religion or on the expression of non-religious practices. This can be inappropriate, as sometimes deep knowledge of the doctrines and practices of the religion may be less important than 'spiritual' feelings. For apostates, there are limited questions they can be asked depending on what non-religious beliefs they hold (Dolance, 2012). The focus on religion as belief can overlook other parts of belief, such as the freedom of expression and behaviour (Laws, 2024). This approach minimises the journeys of becoming non-religious by mainly focusing on a moment in time when beliefs change, overlooking that there are lived practices and expressions that occur over time that influence identity construction (ibid). These explanations explain why asylum claims for apostasy are difficult to substantiate and will be unpacked further throughout the next chapters.

In terms of religion as identity, the UNHCR outline this type of persecution situates religion as a common denominator. Those who possess it belong to the same group, 'akin to family, ethnicity, race or nationality' (Gunn, 2003, p.201). Religion as identity is less concerned with

theological underpinnings but instead revolves around personal characteristics such as shared traditions, ethnicity or nationality (UNHCR, 2004). Tensions increase when religious identities are tied to ethnicity or ‘racial’ identities (Bielefeldt, 2013, p.44). For example, religion can be viewed as an individual’s identity, such as Arabs who consider themselves Muslim despite not actively taking part in religious practices for many years (Gunn, 2003). Franke’s (2021) study discovered that this led to ‘Muslimness on demand’, where religion must be performed in public for families and strangers to avoid suspicion. In private, individuals would view themselves as non-religious. Religious identity can link ethnicity and race to religion, such as Jews being considered as a racial and/or ethnic group (Gunn, 2003). Religious identity, therefore, can trigger religious or ethnic discrimination and persecution, leading to the basis of asylum claims. Thus, the non-religious may face persecution if they do not partake in certain cultural traditions and religious practices. This is seen in cultures where Islam is not just a religion but an identity, which non-religious people must navigate carefully (Franke, 2021).

Religion as a way of life signifies how religion manifests in an individual’s everyday life. Religion can be understood as a way of life as it is connected to performing certain actions, rituals, customs, and traditions. For example, praying several times a day, avoiding certain foods, and dressing modestly (UNHCR, 2004). When religion is expressed as a way of life in certain places, anyone who undermines these acts can be deemed hostile and a danger to society (Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan, 2011; Ghanea, 2008). In the cases of apostates, in journeys of becoming non-religious, individuals navigate complex processes of ‘unlearning’ past religious ways of life and ‘learn’ non-religious ones. These elements will be unpacked in Chapter 5. Understanding religion as a way of life in the asylum assessment must demonstrate that changes in lifestyle would constitute persecution, which can be dependent on external sources to substantiate.

Thus, religious persecution can occur across these three main themes: religion as a belief, identity and/or way of life. Though these notions offer some understanding of how particular religious or non-religious behaviours may lead to persecution, there are limited academic contributions examining asylum claims based on non-religion and the root causes of persecution.

Religion-based asylum claims have been researched from two different perspectives (Selim *et al.*, 2023). First, from the experience of the person seeking asylum, research has noted the

psychological impacts of articulating their accounts of religious persecution to bureaucrats and actors who assist in claims, such as legal professionals, human rights advocates and interpreters (Madziva and Lowndes, 2018). For example, a change in religiosity may be new, and the journey to realising identities is still developing, which can lead to uncertainty in testimonies (Selim *et al.*, 2023). Second, research has discussed issues from the asylum official's perspective, such as the methods of questioning asylum applicants. For example, drawing on knowledge-based questions to 'quiz' the applicant on religious practices and doctrines (Berlit, Doerig and Storey, 2015; Kagan, 2010). Claimants' credibility has been assessed in relation to their personal behaviour and the official doctrines of that religion (Musalo, 2004), and decision-makers have expected strict compliance with the official versions of the religion (Madziva, 2020). Adjudicators also have a challenging role as they must make decisions on religious identity and faith concepts, which are notoriously difficult to define and subjective (Kagan, 2010). Additionally, some research has considered using translators or interpreters from the 'persecutors' background. In religion-based claims, there have been mistranslations of religious terms and asylum claimants have reported mistrust in working with them (Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021).

2.5.1. Non-religious asylum claims

Individuals who leave their religion for non-religious beliefs often encounter a form of religious persecution, which may allow them to claim protection under the Convention's religious grounds. However, apostates in the UK face distinct challenges due to the established asylum guidance and procedures tailored to their claims. While studies on religion-based asylum claims are beginning to emerge in the literature (see Black, 2019; Dolance, 2013; Kagan, 2010; Musalo, 2004; Rose and Öztürk, 2024), research focusing on non-religious individuals making asylum claims is notably scarce. However, a few exceptions have emerged, which will be discussed in this section.

At the outset of this research, Nixon (2018) was the only scholar to have focused specifically on non-religious asylum claims¹⁵. This research drew on publicly available asylum non-religious cases in the UK, Australia and Canada. Nixon highlights the primary challenges that non-religious claimants encounter during asylum assessment procedures. First, states have different interpretations of the Convention's religious criteria, which makes decisions on these

¹⁵ When searching for literature on this topic, I searched in the English language only.

claims inconsistent and highly variable in the country's context. Countries have varying definitions of religion, often framed around gods, spirituality, or the supernatural. Consequently, some states exclude atheism from their definitions while others include it. Second, the absence of secular NGOs supporting non-religious asylum seekers creates obstacles to accessing necessary assistance. Many refugee NGOs are faith-based, potentially influencing asylum seekers' trajectories to conversion. Third, the author discusses the difficulties of establishing plausibility or credibility, emphasising the challenges inherent in evaluating asylum claims based on personal convictions, 'this is concerning, because for non-religious applicants, who have no knowledge, ceremonies or other behaviours that would necessarily be indicative of non-religion, some of these factors could be particularly hard to substantiate' (2018, p.134). Fourth, Nixon identifies a gap in policy guidance for non-religious persecution claims within countries CPIN notes. Nixon's research grounds some of the fundamental challenges in adjudicating non-religious or apostate asylum claims. Whilst he relies on publicly available evidence, there is a need to investigate apostate cases empirically. There are more nuances to be explored, including the limitations of assessing non-religiosity based on organisational understandings and how the dominant constructions of the 'credible' refugee are formed for apostate asylum claims, which this thesis aims to fill.

Further investigation has explored the role of apostasy in international human rights law (van Schaik and Hillary, 2023). The findings suggest that the exclusion of apostasy and non-religion from the Convention has resulted in states misinterpreting non-religion as valid grounds for asylum. Consequently, the difficulties encountered in adjudicating apostasy cases mirror those related to gender and sexuality claims, as scholars contend that the absence of clear mention has contributed to the marginalisation of certain identities in asylum evaluation processes. (Crawley, 2000).

The final point to note is anthropological research investigating the intersections of asylum, non-religion, and emotions. Laws (2024) examined the lived experiences of non-religious asylum seekers who have made claims in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Norway. This research highlights the distinct challenges faced by non-religious individuals in 'proving' their identities, including the assimilation of apostasy claims into religious conversion cases by asylum decision-makers, the difficulties of providing material evidence of non-beliefs, the perception of their beliefs as a lifestyle choice rather than a fundamental part of their identity,

and the inadequately developed guidelines provided by the UNHCR and governments for these claims.

In conclusion, the existing literature on apostasy asylum claims has unveiled important insights into the difficulties faced by non-religious asylum seekers. Despite these contributions, there remains a considerable gap in research addressing this topic. Specifically, this study seeks to bridge that gap by delivering comprehensive empirical evidence regarding the experiences of non-religious asylum claimants as they navigate the British asylum system. Importantly, current studies overlook the influence of coloniality on how the definition and evaluation of the 'credible' refugee are formed and consider the banal forms of non-religiosity, which may go overlooked in asylum bureaucratic processes, which this research intends to address.

2.5.2. Asylum cases based on internal convictions

A significant amount of asylum research examines cases related to an individual's identity, which are often categorised under the 'Particular Social Group' (PSG) ground of the Convention. PSG is defined as membership in a social group that is immutable and unchanging (Bohmer and Shuman, 2018) and includes identities of gender and sexuality. In regard to sexuality, which is an internally held conviction, research has outlined the specific challenges to assess the credibility of these claims. This established research can be drawn on to understand how non-religion, an internally held conviction, can be subject to similar problems in asylum assessment procedures.

The challenges faced by all asylum claim types: credibility, demeanour, coherency and plausibility become acute for cases assessed on internal convictions (Bohmer and Shuman, 2018). Previous research on sexuality-based claims has underscored systemic issues with claims that depend on personal testimony, highlighting obstacles in providing objective evidence, navigating cultural nuances, and dealing with translation and interpretation challenges (Millbank, 2009). Applicants who face fear of persecution on the basis of their sexuality have historically not been aware that their claims are legitimate grounds for asylum since this is not explicitly stated in the Convention, which can cause delays in filing their claims (Selim *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, as sexuality is an identity that cannot be externally verified, applicants often feel compelled to 'come out' to articulate their claim (Selim *et al.*, 2022; Millbank, 2009). However, various complex factors, such as feelings of shame, guilt, or distrust

toward the officer receiving their information, can hinder an individual's ability to communicate their identity (ibid).

Another key point to highlight from the literature on asylum cases based on internal convictions, and that can be drawn on when considering apostasy claims, is the construction of what a 'credible' asylum case looks or sounds like. Asylum decision-makers draw on the Refugee Convention, national and European legislation, guidelines, laws and legal precedents when assessing claims (Griffiths, 2015). Decision-makers, in practice, also draw on assumptions of 'common sense' (Good, 2016) and 'specialised knowledge' (discussed in Chapter 3) that develop over time and experience of assessing various asylum cases. Research regarding sexuality-based claims has argued that due to sexuality being undefined and left out of explicit mention in the Convention, 'decision-makers will take decisions from their own western assumptions unaware of the importance of cultural differences between themselves and claimants' (Thomas, 2008, p.84). Scholars have argued that over time, asylum policies and practices construct an imagined 'genuine' or 'credible' refugee, which consists of the typical instances of persecution faced by certain groups of populations (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2014; Griffiths, 2015).

Forced migration scholars have examined how immigration and border controls reproduce dominant categories and stereotypes of sexuality, race, ethnicity and class during assessment procedures (Luibhéid, 2002). In sexuality-based asylum cases, research has adopted Puar's theory of 'homonationalism' (Puar, 2008), which explains how countries recognised as the 'Global North'¹⁶ have produced a dominant understanding of sexualities. In particular, this theory argues that understandings of sexual identities in the Global North are imagined as progressive and liberal. As a result of this dominant view, identities that lie outside of this benchmark are marginalised. Applying the theory of homonationalism in the context of sexuality-based asylum assessments, scholars have argued that states are most likely to grant protection in cases where the asylum seeker adopts the national/Western standards of sexuality (see, Llewellyn, 2017; Murray, 2014; Tschalaer, 2020). Whilst these aspects have been researched in relation to sexuality, there is a gap in knowledge of how asylum policies and practice (re)produces stereotypical or dominant narratives of non-religion.

¹⁶ The term 'Global North' is another geographical imaginary used to differentiate from countries regarded as the 'Global South'. The Global North broadly refers to countries located in the Northern Hemisphere that are regarded as wealthier and more economically developed than those in the 'Global South'.

To gain refugee protection in a study of Muslim LGBTQI+ asylum claims in Germany, cases were successful where there was evidence submitted relating to stereotypical, homonormative understandings that ‘confirm the moral superiority of the West’ (Tschalaer, 2020, p.1268). This study argued that German asylum assessments were conducted through Western imaginations of Islam and sexuality. Another study highlighted similar findings Dustin and Held (2018) argued that granted LGBTQI+ asylum cases included evidence regarding Western stereotypical ‘gay lifestyles’, such as visiting gay bars and attending Pride¹⁷. Luibhéid (2008) also researched sexuality-based asylum claims and stated, ‘successful asylum claims generally require generating a racist, colonialist discourse that impugns the nation-state from which the asylum seeker comes’ (Luibhéid, 2008, p.179). Similar constructions apply to apostasy asylum cases, where primarily ex-Muslims must prove their non-religious identities. This can involve adopting a liberal and progressive persona while contrasting it with their former identity. This dynamic has not been examined in the existing literature, a gap that this thesis addresses.

In summary, previous research regarding sexuality-based claims has highlighted how people seeking asylum must narrate their stories to be recognised as ‘genuine victims’ of persecution rather than illegal immigrants attempting to take advantage of the system (Kagan 2015). Asylum adjudication of such claims has posed a unique challenge, as officials must make decisions on what is considered ‘sexuality’, ‘gender’, ‘religion’, and how these identities intersect to amount to persecution, with guidance that is often inadequate or underdeveloped. This study aims to draw on this knowledge to address these challenges within non-religious asylum claims.

2.6. Conclusion: Bridging non-religion and forced migration

This literature review has put forward several gaps in the current body of research surrounding asylum cases involving apostasy persecution. It has argued that bridging the sociological fields of religion and migration is necessary to understand apostasy asylum claims. By doing so, it provides three key arguments. First, by understanding the challenges of defining concepts of religion or belief, attempts to categorise and assess religion or belief claims in the asylum claims process are inaccurate. Second, by conceptualising non-religion on the individual, everyday level rather than organisational formations, I show that non-religion does not fit into

¹⁷ ‘Pride’ refers to the gay parade movement, which raises awareness of the rights of the LGBTQI+ community. In the UK, many people part of the community and allies will join in the parades as a symbol of support.

the neatly democratised categories that the asylum process seeks. Third, a relational approach to non-religion and emphasising its polythetic nature can aid in unpacking colonial legacies of identification, which have determined identities into fixed, essential and generalisable categories. Fourth, tracing the Eurocentric underpinnings of religion helps us understand the stereotypical notions of religion/non-religion perpetuated in asylum assessment procedures.

With these findings in mind, this research seeks to explore the following questions, which are fleshed out in Chapter 4:

1. How are non-religious beliefs conceptualised within Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and incorporated within Home Office asylum determination policies?
2. Within the UK's Home Office, how are legal frameworks implemented, and are there gaps or tensions between official guidance and practice?
3. What are the experiences of non-religious asylum applicants in the UK asylum system?

Therefore, by bridging the fields of non-religion and asylum, this research highlights the arbitrary nature of how religion and non-religion are positioned and advocates for considering non-religion in asylum cases on an individual, case-by-case basis. This project draws on perspectives of lived non-religion, the colonality of power, and bureaucracy to create a framework for understanding the dynamics of non-religion and asylum, which have been overwhelmingly overlooked, as discussed next.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

3.1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the primary theoretical perspectives that helps elucidate the construction of apostate identities and asylum determination processes in the UK. As this thesis bridges the fields of religion and forced migration, the theoretical framework draws on concepts from the sociology of religion, decolonial theory and concepts of bureaucracy. Previous research into non-religious identities has focused on organisational and cognitive aspects of practising non-religiosity (e.g., Blankholm, 2022; Cadge and Konieczny, 2014; Cimino and Smith, 2007) and have tended to prioritise narratives of official leaders of non-religious movements. More recently, there has been a turn towards looking at non-religiosity through a lived non-religion framework, though this perspective is still in its infancy. This framework examines the everyday expressions and manifestations of how ‘ordinary’ individuals relate to their non-religiosity in the world (Beaman and Tomlins, 2015). Lived non-religion aids in exploring the multidimensional experiences of leaving religion and the diverse construction of non-religious identities through the concepts of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’. Concepts of bureaucracy will be utilised to situate apostasy as a human right and ground for asylum in national asylum policies and how the asylum bureaucratic frameworks are organised to assess such claims. In combination with the concept of colonality of power (Quijano, 2000), asylum bureaucracy is discussed in terms of the historically embedded categories of difference it produces. It also describes how apostasy asylum claimants are viewed in relation to conventional understandings of non-religion.

This chapter is structured in three sections. First, the lived religion perspective is presented, providing the theoretical backdrop for studying the lived and everyday aspects of religion. This section discusses lived non-religion, highlighting its advantages in researching this topic and outlining the approach for a multidimensional analysis. Next, the decolonial theory of colonality of power is put forward, which describes how the historical effects of colonialism remain in the present. I argue that to conceptualise apostasy asylum claims and their determination processes, it is essential to consider dimensions of power which categorise and classify identities through colonial logic. To support this argument, the final section explores bureaucracy as a framework for understanding the organisational factors of the asylum system.

Intersecting coloniality and bureaucracy provides a novel lens to understand the development of modern bureaucracies and relations of power over human bodies within the contemporary.

3.2. Lived Religion

Before introducing the lived non-religion framework, I start by exploring the origins of lived religion, also known as ‘everyday religion’ (Ammerman 2016; 2020) and ‘popular religion’ (Hall, 1997; McGuire, 2008; Orsi, 2010). Lived religion combines several key theoretical foundations: theories of the everyday, phenomenological anthropology, and embodiment theory (Knibbe and Kupari, 2020), concentrating on the ‘ordinary’, ‘everydayness’, and ‘embodied’ dimensions as the common reality of (non-)religion (Ganzevoort and Sremac, 2019). Taking theoretical underpinnings from the sociology of everyday life, a theory of lived religion shifted the study of religion on a smaller scale to ‘find a big story in the most trifling ordinary detail’ (Back, 2015, p.836). Therefore, the study of non-religion in everyday life is the exploration of the mundane, taking into consideration space, time, body and emotions (Trzebiatowska, 2018, p.3). Ammerman (2016), a prominent figure in lived religion, employs practice theory (see Bourdieu, 1990) to analyse the social practice of religion through embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, moral judgment, and narrative structuring (2016, p.9). This analytical approach seeks to uncover the patterned behaviours in people's actions, which are intricately woven into broader cognitive models and interaction fields, thus rendering behaviour meaningful (ibid, p.14).

Another key scholar, McGuire (2008), believes that the complexity of religion can be revealed by examining how it is practised in everyday life. She maintains that viewing religion from a sociological perspective of the ‘lived’ experience unpacks how individuals make sense of their world and the dynamics of how they put it into practice (McGuire, 2008, p.98). Lived religion is thus ‘constituted by the practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create, and combine the stories out of which they live’ (McGuire, 2008, p.98). A practice-based approach to lived religion is, therefore, a valuable lens through which to view how religion is enacted while maintaining a distance from official religious understandings of doctrines and practices (Ammerman, 2021). This approach centres on ‘ordinary’ people rather than religious leaders, seeking religion in typical sacred spaces in addition to everyday life.

Lived religion arose in the 1990s after predictions of secularisation theory that religion's influence would decline as societies became ‘modernised’ and were not a reality in every

society in the world. It was also used to counter other macro theories of religion, such as rational choice theory (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). The macro theories of religion conceptualised religious practice as a commitment to the tenets and doctrines of a particular faith (McGuire, 2008). However, this view of religion is now seen as insufficient to explain the existence of religious phenomena in daily life. Both secularisation and rational choice theory focus on the wider positioning of religion rather than individualistic practices and, hence, have faced similar critiques of generalising and oversimplifying the role of religion in society. They also reduce religion to a set of beliefs or a rational decision, which overlooks the individualised everyday dimensions of religion (McGuire, 2008). Sociologists have previously assumed that the religious worldviews of individuals would be correlated with the beliefs, moral norms and religious practices, as outlined by the religious organisation they were followers of (McGuire, 2008, p.3). However, according to McGuire, these assumptions do not adequately explain how individuals practise their religion. This understanding proved too simplistic and does not account for the lived variations of practising religion which varies within groups, between groups and amongst individuals.

Building on the challenges encountered by the macro theories of religion (secularisation and rational choice theory), the development of lived religion signified a theoretical shift in the sociology of religion. Orsi (1998) explains that the study of lived religion ‘entails a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and what it means to be ‘religious’ (1998, p.41). He argues that religion is, therefore, best studied within life’s daily and ordinary experience. In this way, lived religion takes an empiricist approach by studying not what religions believe, but what individuals do (Orsi, 1998). McGuire raised the question:

What if we think of religion, at the individual level, as an ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy—even contradictory—amalgam of beliefs and practices that are not necessarily those religious institutions consider important? (2008, p.4)

McGuire examined the complex nature of religion through the narratives of individuals who express their religiosity in ways that diverge from the stereotypical practices of their faith. For example, a Protestant minister with little connection to any church who nonetheless engages in spiritual activism; a Jewish woman who incorporates meditative dance into her practices; and a Catholic who participates in Buddhist-style meditation while seldom attending Mass. Thus, the study of lived religion encompasses intricate, ambivalent, and contradictory practices. This perspective is significant when applied to the context of apostate asylum claims, as asylum

assessment procedures aim to elicit coherent articulations of (non)-religious worldviews alongside justifications for those views. In this context, the portrayal and performance of non-religious identities are nuanced, and the boundaries of their beliefs become blurred.

A strength of the lived approach to studying religion has been hailed as moving away from a Western-centric understanding of religion (Ammerman, 2021; McGuire, 2008). As macro theories such as secularisation were prominent in the sociology of religion, lived religion scholars critiqued that not every society was conforming to this ‘universal’ theory, which only suited some European states which were experiencing religious decline (Ammerman, 2021; Warner, 2010). However, Ammerman (2021) acknowledges that lived religion can fall into similar theoretical problems, as social scientists have emphasised agency, choice, and personal preference yet have often overlooked other cultural and legal contexts where religion is practised where these aspects are restricted. In which case, this research will meaningfully engage with this research gap, as it applies the framework in a context where the non-religious struggle to realise their right to freedom of religion or belief.

In conclusion, the lived religion approach is useful for sociological analysis in exploring subjective experiences and expressions of religion. The borders of religious identity are ‘contested, shifting, and malleable as the definitional boundaries of religion’ (McGuire, 2008, p.187). Thus, individuals' religious beliefs should be understood in consideration of these complexities to propose a more nuanced approach to lived religion. By bridging the disciplines of sociology of religion and forced migration, a lived religion perspective is useful for understanding not what particular religious or non-religious institutions say one should believe, but for examining what individuals do in everyday life.

3.2.1. Lived non-religion

The field of non-religion is relatively new and still developing; thus, its theoretical contributions are also. Thus, to avoid theoretical gaps, this research draws on the established theory of lived religion and builds on it to conceptualise a lived approach to non-religion. It is particularly useful to consider the lived aspect of non-religion because it explores the multidimensional and complex journeys to leaving religion and the construction of non-religious identities through the concepts of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’. The lived religion framework paves a way to challenge the typical Western notion of religion that tends to be

understood as a set of organisationally defined categorisations of beliefs and practices (McGuire, 2008). Furthermore, lived non-religion acknowledges grand narratives are not always applicable to studying the intricacies of personal belief (Malone, 2021). This approach poses an interesting and worthwhile analysis in the present study, as the Home Office presupposes a Western conception of religion that often considers religion and non-religion as binary and seeks out chronological and logical narratives. As this research demonstrates, non-religion in practice is more complex and therefore, a nuanced framework is needed to unpack the reality of lived non-religion.

There are few studies that utilise a lived non-religion approach, with the exception of Richter (2023), Beaman (2017), Salonen (2018), Mumford (2014) and Malone (2021). A common theme running through these studies are a consideration of how the non-religious form non-traditional ‘existentialities’ (Lee, 2015; Strhan, Lee and Shillitoe, 2024). ‘Existential cultures’ developed by Lee (2015; 2019) refers to how non-religious populations include various worldviews, explaining how they conceptualise meanings of existence and reality. Existential cultures can include humanism, agnosticism, theism and subjectivism, and anti-theism. Lee (2015) argues the concept of existential cultures is rarely expressed in developed and clear explanations but tends to emerge from fragments of articulated belief. Thus, taking a lived approach to non-religion allows for an exploration of non-religion and how existential cultures/worldviews are formed through varied processes of unlearning and learning.

Existential understandings of the non-religious have led some scholars to position non-religion in relation to religion as non-binary (Holloway, 2016), which contrasts with the dominant Western theorisation of religion identified earlier. This understanding takes a similar stance to non-binary gender or sexuality to situate a diverse set of beliefs that does not conform to binary understandings of religion or belief. The lived non-religious approach, therefore, can unpack how, ‘...in practice, our lives are not lived accordingly to neatly demarcated domains (the economic, the political, the existential, etc), but rather finds them constantly and messily tangled together’ (Lee, 2019, p.181). Explaining beliefs through a rigid juxtaposition between religion and secularity does not account for the distorted complexities of religion (Nynäs, 2018). Considering the varieties of existential cultures for the non-religious reveals the unique nature of the non-religious and how it transpires through asylum assessment procedures. A lived non-religion framework is thus needed to understand how the varied identities and

worldviews within a ‘non-religious’ position and involves a consideration of motivations, interests, emotions and experiences (Schielke and Debevec, 2012).

To the best of my knowledge, Richter is one of the earliest researchers to apply the lived non-religion framework to understand non-religion and unbelief outside of a Western European lens, in her case the Moroccan context. Richter states:

Looking at the diverse experiences of former Muslims shows that becoming and being nonreligious encompasses more than a rational one-time decision that can be studied from a mere ontological-cognitive perspective. It is deeply linked to personal experiences, relations, and emotions. (2023, p.113)

The lived non-religion approach is thus a worthwhile lens in studying the ambivalence of non-religious identities, which is especially valuable to apply in the context of the asylum system. Asylum bureaucratic frameworks are systematically against contradictory and ambivalent narratives and tends to define religion in generalised and essentialised ways. Lived non-religion is salient to apply in the asylum process, as ‘the categories we impose on people are not necessarily in correspondence with how they live and experience their lives and how they further act and relate based on this within a public sphere’ (Nynäs, 2018, p.57). As explained, this does not fully capture the realities of the lived experience of non-religion, for example, for those whose non-religiosity is sanctioned or criminalised, an identity resulting in discrimination, a position not articulated or expressed outwardly, or containing a mixture of behaviours that can be deemed as secular or religious practices. For these reasons, I employ a lived non-religion approach within a forced migration context as simultaneously lived and embodied but also as private and internal depending on context.

In summary, a theory of lived non-religion applies the same theoretical underpinnings of lived religion to the study of non-religion to conceptualise the varying beliefs and practices that lie within it. The analytical concepts of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’ progress the substantial constructions of non-religious identities and worldviews. These concepts are particularly relevant in exploring the experiences of non-religious refugees, as they draw out the performance or ‘doing’ non-religion that may not be explicitly articulated. Non-religious people are expected to materialise their beliefs with objective evidence during the asylum process. They are expected to ‘perform’ behaviours associated with being non-religious to substantiate their claims. From this standpoint, lived non-religion allows for an examination of

the performative dimensions as well as revealing the underlying and unspoken ways of ‘being’ non-religious.

3.2.2. The strengths of the lived non-religion framework

This framework is used in this study because other theories that explore non-religiosity and individuals who leave religion are Eurocentric (e.g., Cottee, 2015; Peek, 2005; Smith, 2011; Zuckerman, 2011). Previous studies that have focused on processes of leaving religion (e.g., Brinkerhoff and Mackie, 1993; Bromley, 1998; Ebaugh, 1988) have historically not considered the construct of non-religious identities and worldviews until recently (Smith and Cragun, 2019). This means that theories such as critical religion, secularisation, and rational choice theory have fallen short of fully explaining non-religiosity in terms of how identities are developed across different contexts. The stark gap between non-Western perspectives in theory can be attributed to the fact that countries residing in the Global South are often conceptualised as homogeneously Muslim (Karim, 1997). Therefore, a study of non-religious identity construction of asylum-seeking individuals, through a lived experience perspective, makes a significant contribution to the field of non-religion and apostasy.

Research examining non-religion has also concentrated on organised forms of non-religion, such as humanism and other secular affiliations. However, since apostasy and blasphemy are regarded as punishable offences in numerous WANA countries, it is not feasible for non-religious individuals to officially align with such groups until they arrive in the UK, for instance. This implies that many transitions to non-religiosity are private, closed, and informal processes, or potentially evolve outside of an individual's country of origin. Therefore, examining the everyday and ordinary embodiment of non-religiosity is important (Richter, 2023) to understand how lay people construct social identities (Cotter, 2020).

Additionally, the non-religious represents a heterogeneous group that does not share a coherent worldview (Smith and Cragun, 2019). The construction of non-religious identities varies across time and place, and no set of beliefs is universally held or rejected by the non-religious (Cotter, 2020). However, asylum bureaucracy structurally restricts the experience of non-religious identities as officials seek out patterns and similarities of narratives which are in line with their training, guidance and policies, as well as personal perceptions. Therefore, analysing a lived non-religion perspective provides flexibility for diverse interpretations of non-religious

identity, allowing individuals to express them uniquely (Strhan, Lee and Shillitoe, 2024). This approach is consistent with the move to study non-religions substantive and positive understandings, commitments, and beliefs rather than focusing on the negative, insubstantial understanding of non-religion (Lee, 2015; Strhan, Lee and Shillitoe, 2024). For example, there have been calls in the field of non-religion to focus on positive understandings, such as exploring the worldview formations, beliefs, life stances, identities and ritual practices of a vast range of non-religious people to begin to understand how they construct their lives as separate from religion (Lee, 2015). In this case, this research will appeal to these new insights by focusing on how apostate refugees construct their identities in relation to religion.

The lived approach to non-religion also helps to overcome challenges of defining and conceptualising non-religion. The premise of this approach is that non-religion is formed through the meaning of individuals, and it is a personal perspective, not a generalisable concept. By framing beliefs as a unanimous set of practices equated to a particular religion, we risk accepting ‘definitional boundaries that distinguish religious practices of one religious group from another’s, viewing them as mutually exclusive’ (McGuire, 2008, p.186). This view of religion is flawed because it implies that belonging to a religious group entails adhering to a specific set of criteria, which in turn defines one's faith. This misunderstanding often surfaces during the asylum process, where the Home Office anticipates a certain trajectory towards non-religiosity that aligns with their interpretation of being non-religious. Yet through a lived non-religion framework, we can reveal that non-religion-as-lived is a convoluted and arbitrary practice of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’. Moreover, approaching non-religion through this lens focuses on everyday individuals, thus expanding on what we already know of non-religion as learned through official organisations or spokespersons and adding nuance to ‘formations of the secular’ (Asad, 2003).

3.2.3. Multidimensional approach to analyse lived (non-)religion

To explore non-religion through lived experience, this theoretical framework adopts a multidimensional approach to examine the diverse processes by which non-religiosity is embodied and expressed in everyday life. The study of lived religion encompasses a broad spectrum of ordinary experiences, revealing how spirituality, embodiment, materiality, emotion, aesthetics, morality, and narrative intertwine in daily practices (Ammerman, 2021). Drawing on these analytical lenses, I use the concepts of learning and unlearning to trace

individual journeys toward apostasy. Additionally, I engage with intersectionality, recognising that lived experiences are shaped by the complex interplay of social positions such as race, class, and gender in the formation of identity (Ammerman, 2003; Bender, 2012; Kupari, 2020). In this section, I briefly explain the dynamics I utilise in the analysis and link them to the study of non-religion.

First, spirituality has been explored as a lived experience of (non-)religion. Spirituality is a contested concept. Some sociologists have distinguished religion and spirituality (e.g., Ellingson, 2001; Heelas and Woodhead, 2004), while others have argued that some people identify as both (e.g., Ammerman, 2013; Marler and Hadaway, 2002). Historically, sociologists of religion have associated spirituality as a subjective feeling or expression of the sacred, which occurs away from formal religious organisations (Ellingson, 2001). Spirituality can be understood as feelings or experiences that create a connectedness with God, Christ, a Higher Power, a transcendent reality or nature (Ammerman, 2013). Spiritual experiences can arise through bodily practices, such as making food, listening to music and through postures or movements (McGuire, 2008). However, these practices are not solely associated with religious spirituality. Spirituality is also explained through morality, ethics, the core of self, connection to a community, awe in nature and beauty in landmarks or philosophies (Ammerman, 2013). There is a reported growing number of non-religious people who identify as ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’ (SBNR) (Wixwat and Saucier, 2021). Individuals within this group relate to feelings of spirituality through events that induce awe, such as in nature, science, yoga or meditation (Preston and Shin 2017). Moreover, some techniques that have originated from religious practice, such as mindfulness, have been adopted by non-religious communities, which have evidence that shows positive effects on mental health (Grossman *et al.*, 2004). Spiritual elements can thus be understood as subjective feelings or experiences that speak to the metaphysical or go beyond the everyday self (Wixwat and Saucier, 2021).

Understanding spirituality in this manner offers a lens through which to view how non-religion is lived and practised in everyday life. Consequently, this research provides novel insights by examining the spiritual elements that non-religious individuals engage with. For instance, considering the spiritual aspect of non-religious beliefs makes it evident that a binary, essentialist definition of religion and non-religion is flawed. For example, some non-religious individuals may attend church for a sense of community and express their non-religiosity in unconventional ways.

Embodiment is often the focus of lived religion research, and nearly all researchers engaging with this theoretical concept will consider embodied practices (Ammerman, 2021). Anthropologists of religion have long investigated religion through an embodied understanding. From their point of view, embodiment has been theorised as a paradigm: embodiment and perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and embodiment as practice (Bourdieu, 1997). Merleau-Ponty (1962) argues that the body plays an active, rather than passive, role in perceiving the world, and he maintains that perception is an embodied engagement of the everyday. Perception occurs through the lived body but also happens internally, through thoughts and feelings, before engaging the body. Embodiment as perception considers how lived experiences are relational to social, cultural and political contexts in which the body resides. From Bourdieu's point of view, embodiment is closely related to social practice, of which he argues religion not only contains beliefs but is practised and lived through the body. Thus, embodiment describes the phenomenological and perceptual experience of engaging the body and how humans act out and practice embodiment in social contexts (Jacobson *et al.*, 2016).

In religious studies, embodiment is used as an analytical concept to explore how religion shapes people's lived experiences (Jacobson *et al.*, 2016). In this context, embodiment can be understood as the 'lived body', a concept pioneered by Merleau-Ponty (1962). This concept includes positive experiences of one's body; an individual can either feel at 'one' with the body, aligned with internal convictions with a sense of freedom, and an ability to express individuality (*ibid*). It can also include negative experiences referred to as 'disrupted embodiment' that arouse feelings of disconnect from one's body, as their body is controlled to some degree by external expectations (*ibid*). The latter is important for apostates, who must conform to religious practices to some degree, depending on their social and cultural contexts. Examining embodiment in this research context provides a lens to explore how apostates 'unlearn' parts of their former religious identity and 'learn' their non-religious identity. Hence, embodied religious experiences shape individuals and communities, including empowering and constraining acts (Ammerman, 2021).

The materiality aspect of lived religion refers to how religion manifests in physical spaces or through objects in a person's lifeworld. By examining religion as lived, materiality is used to analyse the lived body through the locations and objects in which religious practices occur

(McGuire, 2008). It includes considering the spaces where religious practices arise, such as buildings, homes, nature, and online. It also includes material objects, such as furniture, books, jewellery, and other objects, either made 'religious' or non-religious, depending on their use. Non-religion thus consists of complex 'situated practices' (Schulz and Binder, 2023), which include analysis of bodily habits, clothing, and material artefacts which reflect non-religious dispositions. Exploring the materiality of non-religion as part of the analysis seeks to uncover how individuals shape their non-religious identities through the material spaces and objects used. Thus, how non-religiosity is enacted or restricted through places and objects highlights ways an individual may feel like they belong or do not belong (Ammerman, 2021). It is also used to question what the Home Office considers material evidence of non-religiosity. There are difficulties identifying materiality from other aspects of lived experience, as scholars have explained that embodiment and materiality can be conflated, as space and body are inseparable (Knott, 2014).

Leaving religion is a deeply emotional journey, especially so for apostates who face fear of persecution. Emotions are entangled throughout the stages of becoming non-religious, as there is marginalisation, discrimination, and the risk of persecution in the early stages of religious doubt. Emotions are also seen throughout the asylum processes of seeking protection and gaining access to fundamental human rights. Analysing the emotional dimension of lived non-religion can provide new insights into how apostate refugees feel and experience the process of leaving religion and their journeys of becoming asylum seekers. Drawing on emotions that arise in this process provides knowledge on how religiosity arouses negative experiences and captures individuals' personal experiences in becoming non-religious (Fadil, Johansen and Scheer, 2019; Laws, 2024).

An aesthetic of (non-)religion encompasses the concepts of spirituality, embodiment, materiality and emotion to provide an overarching view of the look and view of non-religion. All religious groups and practices have an aesthetic with certain appearances, artefacts, representations, self-presentations and performances (Lee, 2012a; Mumford, 2014). Analysing the aesthetics of the non-religious informs conceptualisations of how an individual presents themselves and performs their identity. In particular, an aesthetic of the non-religious analyses the processes of intellectual reasoning, knowledge, objectivity and rationality (Binder, 2019). Aesthetic expressions of non-religion demonstrate that non-religion is not solely about rejecting religion but examines the substantive elements of identity.

A final consideration is the narratives told by the non-religious about their experiences. Narratives explore the beliefs and meanings individuals hold, originating from the individual's perspective to understand their lifeworld (Ammerman, 2003; 2016; Edgell, 2012). The nature of (non)-religious identity can, in part, be explored through communication and the elaboration of narratives (Ammerman, 2003). Drawing on narratives is also vital to consider within asylum bureaucracy as it raises questions on the extent to which asylum claimants have agency in retelling their stories and takes note of how asylum bureaucracies can shape narratives through seeking an assessment of credibility. Examining narratives of non-religiosity can aid in understanding stories told 'for' and 'of' asylum, which will be unpacked in Chapter 6.

In conclusion, lived non-religion is relevant in three significant ways for studying apostate asylum cases in the UK. First, as discussed in the literature review, concepts of (non-)religion and beliefs remain undefined in academic and legal contexts; therefore, there is no consensus on their substance. Lived non-religion offers a framework for conceptualising non-religion based on an individual's everyday experiences without providing a formal definition. Second, although apostasy is grounds for an asylum claim, the UK Home Office provides limited interpretative guidance on what constitutes apostasy, other than offering directions to assess an individual's 'credibility'. Consequently, apostasy becomes a bureaucratic category, so applying a lived non-religion perspective to asylum assessment procedures will enhance the understanding of religion or belief claims for bureaucrats and emphasise the subtle ways non-religiosity can manifest. Third, by casting apostasy as a bureaucratic category, apostates are compelled to declare and confess their identities, articulating and demonstrating behaviours associated with that label. This necessitates that apostates reflect deeply on their beliefs and worldviews and disclose them to various social actors to seek protection. In this situation, individuals do not necessarily come to understand or define their identity until they must substantiate it to safeguard their lives. To fully conceptualise the phenomena under investigation, it is essential to consider the colonality of bureaucratic categories and the power dynamics that underpin asylum assessment procedures. In this context, the lived non-religion framework will be integrated with the concept of the colonality of bureaucracy, which I address next.

3.3. Colonality of Bureaucracy

This section discusses two concepts, coloniality of power and bureaucracy, to form the theoretical framework 'coloniality of bureaucracy'. This theoretical perspective aids in understanding how contemporary asylum bureaucracies have, in part, been formed through colonial histories that have shaped organisational practices, decision-making, and power dynamics. Asylum bureaucracies make decisions on the realities of an individual's refugee status, and intrinsic to this process is the production and management of categories. By examining international human rights laws and national asylum policies through this lens, this study highlights two intersecting themes. First, it brings into question the assessment of 'credibility' and who has the power to make decisions on an individual's identity. Second, it examines how apostasy is negotiated through translation and performance into the 'objective standards' Home Office policies require. Asylum bureaucracy constructs categories and (re)produces dominant conceptions of the refugee that have differentiated the 'genuine' refugee from the 'ingenuine'. Thus, asylum decision-making is underpinned by dominant expectations of who is worthy of protection and who is not. The dichotomies of the credible/(in)credible, genuine/ingenuine and deserving/undeserving can be delved into further through the lens of the coloniality of bureaucracy, which speaks to historical formations of power that have categorised certain bodies through these distinctions and offers a framework to analyse the policies and procedures of asylum bureaucracy.

3.3.1. Coloniality of power

In examining the British asylum system, it is essential to engage with the concept of coloniality to understand the historical frameworks associated with the categorisation and control of populations within asylum regimes (Mayblin, 2017). The engagement with coloniality proves particularly useful in exploring how asylum bureaucratic frameworks recognise the rights of apostate asylum seekers and how credibility assessment is carried out. To do so, this study will draw on Quijano's concept of the 'coloniality of power' (2000) to uncover the structures of power that emerged in the colonial era, which still exist in asylum determination processes. Concurrently, decolonial scholars have expanded the concept of coloniality to include notions of 'coloniality of being' and 'coloniality of knowledge' (e.g., Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Wynter, 2003). The coloniality of power, being, and knowledge provides a robust analytical framework to address the existing gaps in understanding of how non-religiosity is constructed and performed beyond a European context. Moreover, these perspectives allow for a critical examination of the procedures in conducting asylum credibility

assessments, thereby exposing a Eurocentric perspective on identities. Consequently, there exists a tendency to overlook interpretations of religion that diverge from dominant understandings, which tend to equate beliefs and the development of identities to linear, visible, or public manifestations. The types of power I primarily examine throughout the thesis, framed within the context of colonality of power, are as follows. First, the homogenisation of identities as they are transformed into a governable subject through the asylum bureaucratic procedures when examining apostasy. Second, the interpretation of the ‘credible’ refugee for the non-religious subject, by theorising what type of knowledge is legitimate and what types of bodies are worthy of belonging.

The decolonial Scholar Quijano devised colonality of power in the late 1980s to explain how the conquest of Latin America led to a new world order (Quijano, 2000). He argued that since the 16th Century, the world order was produced by a colonial/modern power which emerged in Western Europe through European colonialism and imperialism (ibid). Two historical processes produced this global power, which Quijano defines as ‘colonial power’. First, the idea of ‘race’¹⁸ and the second is through a capitalist economy structure. Quijano argues colonial power has been the main progressor in the classification and categorisation of people underpinned by ideas of race. During this time, race was understood as being natural and biologically determined. Thus, the notion of race was the key tool in classifying the colonised and coloniser, informing differentiations between ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ in society. This was supported by claiming these categorisations are natural and scientific (ibid). The concept of racial identity developed in two stages. First, social identities such as ‘whites’, ‘Indians’, ‘Negroes’, ‘yellows’ and ‘olives’ were produced (Quijano, 2007, p. 171). Second, racial identities developed into ‘European’, ‘American’, ‘Asiatic’, ‘African’, and ‘Oceania’, which were assigned to people based on perceived physical characteristics (ibid). Quijano and Ennis (2000) write how, in America, where these dynamics first emerged, the establishment of racial categories was a method of legitimising colonialism. Later, European colonialism expanded beyond America, constructing Eurocentric understandings of knowledge and orienting Europe as superior (ibid).

The second historical formation of colonial power was the control of labour. During colonial domination, the capitalist society emerged. The construction of racial identities and hierarchies

¹⁸ The notions of ‘race’ are socially constructed and are not based on biological truths; I use the term race in this thesis when discussing the colonial powers that accelerated the construction of racial categories, which are maintained today.

produced a division of labour and was maintained over the colonialism project. For example, Indians were serfs and blacks were confined to slavery (ibid). Those racialised as white, such as the Spanish and Portuguese, had more freedom and could be commodity producers (ibid). Quijano argues these identities were imperative in the forming and understanding of the nation-state, citizenship and belonging throughout the world. Quijano thus suggests that coloniality is maintained in the present:

[C]oloniality of power is based upon 'racial' social classification of the world population under Eurocentered world power. But coloniality of power is not exhausted in the problem of 'racist' social relations. It pervaded and modulated the basic instances of the Eurocentered capitalist colonial/ modern world power to become the cornerstone of this coloniality of power. (Quijano, 2007, p. 171)

The contemporary effects of the violent series of events that resulted in the colonial matrix of power led to 'all of the experiences, histories, resources, and cultural products ended up in one global cultural order revolving around European or Western hegemony' (Quijano, 2000, p. 540). Western Europe became the focal dominator of the world, implicating Europeans as 'superior' and others as inferior, creating distinctions of: 'East-West, primitive-civilized, magic/mythic-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern —Europe and not Europe' (2000, p. 542). Quijano strongly asserts that the relationship between European nations and others today is one of colonial domination, evident through the power of coloniality, which is 'the most general form of domination in the world today, once colonialism as an explicit political order was destroyed' (2007, p. 170). Therefore, whilst colonialism is understood as the political and economic process where a nation-state exercises power over another nation, coloniality alludes to the power dynamics maintained even after colonialism's formal end (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

Scholars have expanded this concept since its inception (e.g., Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Wynter, 2003). For Maldonado-Torres, coloniality 'refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations' (2007, p. 243). Maldonado-Torres developed Quijano's concept into further techniques of power that show how coloniality impacts an embodied subject. He continues to state that coloniality 'is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so

many other aspects of our modern experience' (2007, p. 243). He uses the concept of the colonality of knowledge to denote the dominant set of knowledge formed by categories of race, which provides an invisible mark of privilege or exclusion on certain bodies (Tascon, 2004).

Furthermore, the matrix of power also includes the colonality of being (first put forward by Walter Mignolo), which is made up of time, space and subjectivity of the lived experience of colonality (Mignolo, 2011). Whilst Quijano's concept primarily focuses on how race has been the key identifier for organising humans within the colonial encounter, religion has also played a role (Maldonado-Torres, 2014). Since this is the case, Maldonado-Torres argues, 'race and religion play a key role in the formation of modern accounts of subjectivity and human otherness' (2014, p.694). Thus, when examining apostate asylum claims, it is necessary to consider the web of colonality of power, knowledge and being that constructs dominant notions of the 'credible refugee', discussed next.

3.3.2. Construction of the 'refugee': homogenisation and simplification of identities

The lens of colonality has been applied to understand the social construction of the 'refugee', and the racialised and colonial origins of the Refugee Convention (1951) (Mayblin, 2017; Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023). Since the official legal category of refugee initially emerged after the formation of the 1951 Refugee Convention, notions of a 'typical' refugee have always been implicit in it. The Convention was devised after the atrocity of the Second World War and the impact of the Holocaust, which displaced individuals in Europe fleeing persecution. Thus, it was originally formed to protect Europeans from persecution. In Chimni's (1998) view, since the end of the First World War, the 'normal' refugee was constructed as 'white, male and anti-communist - which clashed sharply with individuals fleeing the Third World' (1998, p. 351). The legislation later expanded its geographical boundaries through the 1967 Protocol. Since the widening conception of the Convention through the Protocol, there was a shift in understanding who a refugee is, from one who holds 'geo-political' value to one who is fundamentally different as they originate from the 'third world'. As people seeking asylum were increasingly people of colour, being displaced by colonialism (Mayblin, 2017), scholars have argued that the regulation of people from a refugee ground is, 'predominantly Eurocentric

and infused with dynamics that racialise, exclude, restrict and disempower certain groups—dynamics typical of colonial logic’ (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023, p. 2).

The UK goes to significant lengths to limit obligations and prevent asylum seekers from entering the country and seeking protection despite the state having signed and ratified the Convention and its Protocol (Mayblin, 2017). Studies showing the historical changes in asylum and refugee policy have highlighted that asylum law became increasingly restrictive in the 1980s as asylum applicants were arriving from outside of Europe (Affolter, 2020). This shows that typical notions of refugeehood have been constructed and changed historically, which Chimni named the ‘myth of difference’ to explain the shift in understanding who a refugee is:

The arrival in the North, since the early eighties, of the “new asylum seekers”, initiated a process of rethinking. Once the Cold War ended, and the refugee no longer possessed ideological or geopolitical value, the rethinking translated into a series of restrictive measures which, together with those introduced earlier, constitute today what has been called the non-entrée regime. (1998, p.351)

Chatterjee (1993) argued that the colonial administration enforced this myth through the ‘rule of difference’, which positioned the coloniser as superior and the colonised as inferior, dynamics that were based on race. This dynamic remains visible within modern forms of disciplinary power. Thus, he maintains that the colonial state is essential to considering the formation of the modern state today.

The implications of this create notions of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ within the asylum regime, which has its roots in colonialism (Mayblin, 2017). The asylum system is a mode of population management within the modern state, consistent with British colonial history (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023) and an expression of empire (El-Enany, 2020). The construction of the refugee is embedded within the asylum regime and has consequently highlighted the ways in which decision-making and credibility are assessed. The ongoing notion of the refugee as fundamentally different, lacking in geopolitical value, either deserving or undeserving, and demonstrating superior or inferior power dynamics within the asylum regime can thus be explained through Quijano’s coloniality of power (Mayblin, 2014). This ‘colonial difference’ is enacted through the coloniality of power used to legitimise the subalternisation of knowledge and subjugation of people (Mignolo, 2012).

This is demonstrated today; in the UK, Bhatia (2020) states ‘asylum seekers are subjected to a whole host of disciplinary and regulatory technologies and are restricted and immobilised through punitive legislation’ (2020, p. 278). Bhatia argues it is through bureaucratic actions and inactions that asylum seekers are treated as fraudulent and dishonest. This, according to Mayblin (2017), results in:

Understanding the world in terms of hierarchically ordered groups of people was fundamental both to the project of colonialism and also to the success of projects which led Britain to become ‘modern’. Coloniality allows for a tacit understanding of the hierarchical ordering of human bodies that some are more worthy of respect, labour rights, migration rights, access to healthcare and education than others – that some are more or less corrupt, more or less enlightened. (2017, p. 29)

This has implications for how the asylum system functions today as it positions some people as civilised whilst other asylum seekers are perceived as non-modern and thus undesirable (Mayblin, 2017). These understandings are relevant in conceptualising the asylum determination processes for the non-religious subject, as they theorise what type of knowledge is legitimate and what types of bodies are worthy of belonging. It is a power that incorporates ‘culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production’ (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p.243), which is still central to asylum policies and practices. Refugees are up against colonial power ‘in a complex web of global-local colonial relationships’ (Tascon, 2004, p. 240).

Colonial logics operate through processes of ‘differential inclusion’, where certain racialised claimants are cast as ‘undeserving’ while others are selectively valorised as ‘deserving’ based on their proximity to dominant norms (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This dynamic produces the figure of the ‘good Other’, a subject who gains conditional acceptance by disavowing aspects of their identity, such as religion, that are framed as incompatible with Western secular-liberal values (Ahmed, 2000). In this way, inclusion does not disrupt colonial hierarchies but rather reinforces them through stratified recognition. The colonality of power serves as a framework in this research to illustrate how the asylum system represents a site of uneven power relations and how it perpetuates a divide between the deserving and undeserving. This has implications for non-religious refugees as they encounter the asylum system and navigate its bureaucratic structures. However, historical accounts of the evolving construction of the refugee do not entirely explain how policies are translated into asylum-determination practices. Therefore, a conceptualisation of bureaucracy is also required.

3.4. Bureaucracy

In this research, bureaucracy will serve as a framework to understand asylum's organisational procedures. By employing the techniques of power discussed above, the homogenisation of identities, and the interpretation of the 'credible' refugee for the non-religious subject, this research analyses two parts of the asylum bureaucracy. First, the use of legal categories, such as the grounds of the Refugee Convention, which transforms lived experience into bureaucratic administrative categories. Second, how 'specialised knowledge' develops alongside official policies and guidance that influence how asylum adjudication occurs in practice. By utilising bureaucracy in combination with the colonality of power, it examines how apostasy is negotiated through a translation and performance into the 'objective standards' required by Home Office policies and questions the ability of asylum assessment procedures to make accurate decisions.

Bureaucracy has been used as a term to label public administration and large formal organisations (Olsen, 2006). Bureaucracies have been explored for many years through a sociological viewpoint and, more recently, from an anthropological lens (e.g., Heyman, 1995; Hoag, 2011; Lea, 2021). Max Weber initially conceptualised bureaucracy and transformed it into an analytical concept (Olsen, 2006). Weber's main argument for the formation of modern bureaucracy was that it could be traced back to historical developments of bureaucratic administration from societies with empires and feudal states as far back as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Morrison, 2006). Although there were characteristics of bureaucratic administration in societies prior to the empire, such as the management of staff members or legal authority, he argued that a fully-fledged bureaucratic administration only emerged during the Industrial Revolution (ibid).

By the 19th Century, modern governance was formed, and empires were structured through an imperial administration, where differentiation between the coloniser and the colonised was established (Wilson, 2018). Thus, bureaucratic institutions were a powerful tool in controlling individuals and were a fundamental aspect of imperial rule (Vogler, 2019). Since the goal of colonialism was to establish and maintain power, scholars have argued that power has been embedded and preserved within institutions established during colonial rule (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023). Migration bureaucracies continue to produce these borders through state power that devises punitive policies to control populations (De Genova, 2017). Thus, the

coloniality of bureaucracy provides a nuanced framework for understanding the relations of power that underpin asylum adjudication processes.

Weber defined his ‘ideal type’ of bureaucracy as encompassing the following characteristics: written rules, an impersonal order, and a clear division of labour (Weber, 1971, pp. 124–30). He believed that a bureaucratic organisation with these characteristics would be the most efficient way of functioning and that this system would underpin Western democratic states (Morrison, 2006). From this point of view, bureaucracy is considered inevitable ‘because it is the most efficient, the most calculable, and thus ‘formally’ the most *rational* means of exercising authority in every form of organization’ (Ringer, 2010, p. 200 emphasis in original).

Since Weber’s influential work, research drawing on bureaucracy theory examines organisational characteristics, administrative practice, behaviour, performance, and change (Olsen, 2006). Contemporary theories denote ‘bureaucracy’ and ‘bureaucrats’ as negative terms (Eckert, 2020) as they are commonly associated through representing themes of slowness and delays, unnecessary paperwork and complicated guidance and policies (Hoag, 2011). For those who must navigate the bureaucracy, the organisational procedures are regularly noted as constraining on the individual (ibid). The bureaucrats, who are employees of the organisation, act like gatekeepers, as they have discretionary power to disclose or omit information or resources (ibid). It has also been described as a site of radically different ontological principles (Kynsilehto and Puumala, 2015). This means the interaction between Home Office officials and asylum seekers represents a tension of knowledge, as it represents a divide of self/other (ibid), which can be linked to colonial dichotomies of superior and inferior. This research will explore these dynamics by utilising the coloniality of bureaucracy framework, as it is relevant in exploring how non-religious identities are transformed into an analytical category in asylum adjudication.

For these reasons, scholars have argued that bureaucracy is underpinned by power relations as the state makes decisions about who can enter and on what basis. For example, Arendt (1994a) conceptualised the concept of ‘banality of evil’ (through her examination of the Holocaust and Nazi regime) on the basis that bureaucrats follow the rules without considering the harm they cause to individuals. Weber himself was also concerned with the power position of bureaucracy (1971), which he thought could risk bureaucrats exceeding the power of the sovereign (Hoag, 2011). However, often absent from sociological theories of bureaucracy is a consideration that

this power is linked to coloniality, which this thesis seeks to draw on. Moreover, most scholars who employ a bureaucratic lens to research asylum have not systematically examined how the institution (re)produces specific, dominant narratives, as well as how categorisations have shaped bureaucratic practice, which has roots in colonialism.

3.4.1. Legal categories

Migration bureaucracies produce and manage administrative categorisation procedures which determine citizenship status (Eckert, 2020). Actors at the Home Office interpret legal terms such as ‘persecution’ and ‘well-founded fear’, as well as what constitutes ‘religion’ and ‘particular social group’ as included within the Refugee Convention. The Home Office produces policies and guidance surrounding how credibility should be assessed in asylum cases, the types of evidence and documentation used to support claims, and CPINs to aid bureaucrats in making decisions. Therefore, asylum determination processes produce bureaucratic frameworks that form stereotyped identities (Zetter, 1991). Stereotyped identities form from processes of categorisation and differentiation of refugees, meaning that people seeking asylum must mould complex identities into pre-set, legal categories. Zetter (2007) uses the concept of ‘labelling’ to demonstrate how everyday bureaucratic processes within refugee status determination form and transform identities:

In the minds of policy makers and immigration officials it is necessary to fragment and make clear cut labels and categories of the often complex mix of reasons why people migrate and migrate between labels. (Zetter, 2007, p. 178)

Thus, he argued that deducing a subjective experience into bureaucratic categories simplifies their persecution: ‘a stereotypical label fails to capture the rich and multilayered ‘identity’ of any one of the over 4 million forced migrants seeking refuge in Europe over the last decade’ (Zetter, 2007, p.184). Therefore, asylum determination processes classify identities, such as (non-)religion, into an essentialist category. However, essentialist definitions of religion create narrow understandings that are not accurate articulations of identities that lie outside a Western context (Good, 2016).

Officials within the asylum system consequently attribute to the forming, transforming and manipulation of identities through enacting bureaucratic practices (Zetter, 1991). To make their assessments, they assess how an individual fits the criteria of the legal definition of a refugee

and assess the genuineness of their claim through a credibility assessment. However, researchers have recognised that asylum narratives are complex, often fragmented, and do not fit neatly into the criteria decided by asylum law (Hambly, 2019). A lived non-religion approach attests that non-religious identities are more complex than standardised and essentialised legal categories.

Further research demonstrates that, as a result, asylum seekers must construct, negotiate and transform their identities to fit within bureaucratic categories (e.g., Dagg and Haugaard, 2016; Tuckett, 2019; Zetter, 1991). However, it is difficult for complex and diverse identities to be recognised and acknowledged in a system of refugee recognition process (Dagg and Haugaard, 2016). Asylum claimants must negotiate multiple parts of their identity and navigate asymmetrical power dynamics and cultural differences to be understood within asylum application processes (ibid). This research shows that there are stereotypical understandings of identities within asylum governance which asylum applicants must negotiate. However, there has been a neglect of how categories and understandings of certain refugees are produced and translated in administrative practice (Eckert, 2020). Thus, this research seeks to outline these perspectives in the case of apostate refugees through the concept of ‘specialised knowledge’. In addition to legal and organisational categorisations, decision-makers socially construct knowledge to make decisions on claims and, in turn, shape the borders of belonging, entitlement and identity (Geddes, 2006). To explore how interpretations of the ‘credible’ refugee for the non-religious subject emerge, what type of knowledge is legitimate and what types of bodies are worthy of belonging, I now turn to how these ideas are constructed through ‘specialised knowledge’ in asylum determination processes.

3.4.2. Construction of ‘specialised knowledge’ in asylum

A key notion in the bureaucracy literature has emphasised the role of bureaucrats as mere rule-followers (e.g., Alpes and Spire, 2014; Calavita, 2005; Eule *et al.*, 2019). However, recent research has found that, in practice, bureaucrats in the asylum bureaucracy play a more active role when making asylum assessments (Affolter, 2021; Dahlvik, 2017). The everyday workings of bureaucrats go beyond following written policies, guidance or laws by playing a key role in shaping decision-making through their preconceptions of the ‘truthful’ narratives of particular persecution cases. This occurs gradually with experience as bureaucrats understand what a ‘credible’ narrative should look or feel like (Affolter, 2021). The coloniality of bureaucracy is

used to draw out the different types of knowledge, practices and discourses that bureaucrats seek to render credible (Schittenhelm and Schneider, 2017). Hence, while bureaucrats implement laws and policies, they are also shaped and mediated (Wedel *et al.*, 2005, p. 34) through what I call ‘specialised knowledge’. This section discusses the elements of specialised knowledge that can be drawn out by examining asylum assessments for apostate claimants.

Bureaucratic knowledge in this project will be conceptualised through the idea of specialised knowledge, which explains how bureaucratic administration functions and has power over its subjects. The concept of specialised knowledge goes beyond bureaucrats’ common-sense understandings of cases. Specialised knowing is the embodiment and enactment of knowledge, which is essential in implementing administrative practice accumulated through:

The individual level (concepts and skills) as well as at the collective level (stories and genres), and it can be organized tacitly, that is, at the cognitive level (skills and genres), or explicitly (concepts and stories). (Dahlvik, 2018, p. 55)

Assessing a claimant’s credibility is one of the main tools for determining asylum claims. Though notions of credibility are constructed and subjective to the bureaucrat, in asylum assessments, bureaucrats make assumptions of credible accounts, such as being emotionally expressive, being fully disclosed immediately on arrival, and being consistent over successive tellings (Good, 2011, p.45). Specialised knowledge offers a view on how administrative caseworkers ‘come to think, feel, know and act in similar ways and how this generates regularities in administrative practice’ (Affolter, 2021, p.28). The need to produce credible asylum narratives (re)produces rigid notions of identity as well as overlooking psycho-social barriers to providing narratives (Berg and Millbank, 2009). Moreover, decision-makers produce notions of ‘non-credibility’ (Affolter, 2020) and ‘(in)credibility’ (Dahlvik, 2017). A bureaucratic lens can aid in highlighting how specialised knowledge of credibility is constructed through exploring the questioning strategies and evidentiary assessments within asylum determination processes.

Thus, asylum narratives are not just assessed regarding legal or official policies and guidance; officials construct knowledge through their knowledge, work patterns, behaviours and embodied social stereotyping (Jubany, 2017). This reflects the distinction made by socio-legal scholars between ‘law in the books and law as practice’ (Eule *et al.*, 2019, p.90). This is important to note as scholars researching asylum bureaucracies have maintained that these

practices have constructed dominant notions of ‘facts, artefacts and (in)credibility’ (Dahlvik, 2017, p.369). The underpinnings of these notions are ‘Western prejudices about asylum seekers as ‘the other’’ (Jubany, 2017, p.148). Therefore, examining the colonality of knowledge will be paired with bureaucracy to reveal how specialised knowledge embodies prevailing Western European perspectives on understanding and existence.

This research does not focus on the daily practices of bureaucrats within the organisation. Rather, it examines how the bureaucracy (re)produces colonial imaginaries during the assessment of non-religious asylum cases. The social science literature on bureaucracy has explored the everyday practices of norms, rules and informal behaviour (Affolter, 2021; Hull, 2012). Yet, it has tended to overlook the role of documents in revealing aspects of bureaucracy, despite documents being able to reveal limits on categorisations (Stoler, 2002):

Documents are not simply instruments of bureaucratic organizations, but rather are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, even the organizations themselves. (Hull, 2012, 251)

Therefore, documents serve as a window to understanding the asylum bureaucracy, and what occurs in practice can be revealed through the interviewees' narratives.

In conclusion, asylum applicants in the UK must satisfy the Home Office that, to a ‘reasonable degree of likelihood’ (Home Office, 2022a), they have a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, political opinion or membership of a particular social group. The bureaucratic system of asylum is subject to an intense arena of ever-changing legislation, guidance, and policies that are often silent on the topic of non-religious persecution and in contradiction with how assessments occur in practice. Whilst also functioning within a broader context of the culture of disbelief, asylum adjudication presents unique and complex challenges for asylum seekers and decision-makers (Baillot, Cowan and Munro, 2013). Asylum bureaucracy reduces complex individual situations to simplified categories, creating tension as asylum seekers face challenges in meeting the ‘technologies of self’ within standard bureaucratic categories (Salmenkari and Aldawoodi, 2024). Non-religious asylum seekers not only construct their own identities whilst leaving a religion, but Home Office officials also govern them within the asylum process to produce an identity understood in bureaucratic terms.

3.5. Conclusion: The key foundations of the study

This chapter has introduced the three key foundations underpinning this study. Lived non-religion offers a framework for a multidimensional analysis of the everyday expressions of non-religion. Focusing on the lived aspects of non-religion reveals ordinary and mundane forms of non-religion, which differ from the expressions of official organisations or leaders. Conceptualising the construction of apostate identities through unlearning and learning, this research demonstrates that identities are diverse, intersectional, and non-linear. Thus, by drawing on lived non-religion, this research argues that non-religious identities are constructed through social and contextual dimensions, best understood as a process that is (re)negotiated over time rather than fixed. The coloniality of power analyses colonial imaginaries that are (re)produced within asylum bureaucracy, perpetuated through the dynamics of knowledge, being, and power. It argues that identities within asylum bureaucracy are homogenised, creating an interpretation of the 'credible' apostate subject and theorising which types of knowledge are deemed legitimate and which bodies are considered worthy of belonging. Lastly, bureaucracy serves as a framework for analysing the organisational structures of the Home Office through the interpretation of legal categories into national asylum policies and the development of specialised knowledge based on assumptions about claimants' credibility. By integrating both perspectives into the coloniality of bureaucracy, this lens highlights the power dynamics in determining an individual's identity, revealing how apostasy is (re)negotiated within asylum bureaucracy, which often possesses limited knowledge and experience of these complex identities. Conceptualising apostasy asylum cases through these lenses provides findings that encompass the fields of non-religion and forced migration.

This research aims to fill two theoretical gaps. First, historical social theorists have predominantly focused on the organisational aspects of religion, often neglecting how individuals personally construct and experience religion in their everyday lives. While a lived religion approach has been introduced to address this, its application to non-religion remains underdeveloped, particularly in relation to the asylum system. Apart from Selim's (2022) work, this lens has not been widely explored in asylum-related studies. Second, existing colonial critiques of the concepts of 'religion' and 'non-religion' have not been fully extended to the study of apostate asylum seekers. A lived non-religion framework has been identified as the appropriate theory to study the diverse and multidimensional experiences of leaving religion and how individuals construct a non-religious identity. This theory demonstrates how non-

religious identities are constructed, reconstructed over time, and negotiated through unlearning and learning. It supports the notion that (un)belief is subjective and can manifest in various ways, including those not typically considered (non)-religious in nature. These dimensions will be explored as they navigate through the asylum determination procedures at the Home Office, providing innovative insights into how a bureaucratic institution handles non-religious beliefs.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This chapter explains how the research study was designed and implemented to address the research questions, aims, and objectives. I begin this chapter by outlining the research questions developed with the research gaps in mind. I discuss how the research questions are answered by employing a qualitative research approach and the chosen methodologies of the study. The methods identified as the most practical and appropriate for data collection are explained in detail. This includes semi-structured interviews with refugees ($n = 12$), semi-structured interviews with human rights advocates ($n = 22$), document analysis of human rights laws pertaining to FoRB, and a selection of Home Office policies. The data analysis techniques of thematic analysis (for interviews) and content analysis (for documents) are discussed in their respective sections. Towards the end of the chapter, I outline my role and positionality and discuss how these dynamics influence the research. Throughout the research process, key ethical considerations were acknowledged; these included creating safe research environments, ensuring no harm, and preventing participant victimisation. The ethical elements are woven throughout the chapter and thoroughly explained in the final section.

As discussed in the introductory chapter of this thesis, this research was conducted in collaboration with a partner organisation that has requested anonymity. Collaborative partnerships in the context of PhD research have been recognised as being able to produce data with the potential to impact policy (Hardy *et al.*, 2016). Although the identity of the organisation cannot be disclosed, it operates within the human rights sector, which initiated the collaboration due to substantial on-the-ground expertise it brought to the project, in conjunction with a need for academic research. I (the academic researcher) led the methodological design, data analysis, and writing, the partner organisation provided contextual insights and facilitated access to relevant stakeholders in the FoRB field, as well as individuals with lived experience of apostasy. Their primary role in the research was to shape the research agenda and questions from the outset, such as providing contacts for potential participants, including both human rights advocates and refugees. Initial conversations and planning meetings helped to identify gaps in knowledge, refine focus areas, and align the project with both academic and practical goals. Their specific role in shaping the research agenda is discussed next (Section 4.2) and in the recruitment and sampling process (Section 4.5.1).

4.2. Research Questions and Aims

To address the gap in knowledge about apostasy asylum claims in the UK, this research aimed to explore non-religious asylum applicants' claims under the 'religion' ground of the Convention. The research questions and agenda were co-developed in an iterative process during the early stages of the partnership. The collaborative partner contributed significantly to framing the research questions to ensure they addressed scholarly gaps and real-world priorities relevant to their work. The research questions (RQs) underpinning this study are:

1. How are non-religious beliefs conceptualised within Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and incorporated within Home Office asylum determination policies?
2. Within the UK's Home Office, how are legal frameworks implemented, and are there gaps or tensions between official guidance and practice?
3. What are the experiences of non-religious asylum applicants in the UK asylum system?

To answer these questions, a triangulation research strategy was employed (Carter *et al.*, 2014). Three types of data sets were identified as essential for exploring the three research questions: the narratives of human rights advocates, refugees, and documents. Narratives were sought through semi-structured interviews with human rights advocates who work with and support non-religious refugees (n = 22) (RQ2/3). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore the lived experiences of people who sought (or are seeking) asylum in the UK (n = 12) (RQ3). Through interviews, this project investigated the multidimensional layers of an under-researched group: those who face persecution because they do not hold religious beliefs and their experience navigating the British asylum system. In addition, this research conducted a content analysis of the selected documents by examining the extent to which references of non-religious rights were included (or excluded) within international human rights law (RQ1). The documents were purposively selected and included Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR, 1966). Content was also analysed of the policy documents utilised by the Home Office in asylum determination cases (RQ1). These were also purposively selected and consisted of the 'Asylum Policy Instructions' (APIs), such as the 'Assessing Credibility' guidance (Home Office 2022a; 2022b) and Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) (Home Office, 2024).

This research project has two main aims. The first is to develop a PhD thesis. The second is to produce an accessible report for the collaborative partner, intended for their advocacy efforts, which will provide guidance and evidence to inform training for the Home Office. These aims are significant because, in the field of refugee studies, scholars have contended that ethical research should progress beyond the ‘do no harm’ principle towards establishing reciprocal benefits for participants or their communities (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007). Thus, research should be both academically sound and policy-relevant, creating a ‘dual imperative’ for researchers to employ (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003).

4.3. Research Philosophy

Research paradigms hold assumptions about the study of social life (Guba, 1985). Each research paradigm has philosophical underpinnings that approach ontology and epistemology differently. Ontology denotes the nature of being (Jacquette, 2014), and epistemology refers to how knowledge is understood (Bryman, 2006). This study's research philosophy draws on a socio-constructivist epistemology and ontological positioning. This approach situates knowledge as being constructed and reconstructed through different social actors, depending on their perceptions and interactions with the world around them (Castles, 2012). Due to the complex nature of social phenomena, Berger and Luckmann (1991) argued for a social constructivist approach. In their influential work, the authors posit that human reality is socially constructed through interactions, beliefs and behaviours. This approach argues that ‘knowledge about social relationships and practices is constantly being created, modified and recreated through processes of social interaction’ (Castles, 2012, p.11). Thus, this approach will be utilised to understand the social construction of apostate identities, the construction of ‘credible’ asylum cases (Sweeney, 2009; Jubany, 2017), and bureaucratic procedures more generally (Dahlvik, 2017).

A constructivist approach is most appropriate for the topic of study because there is no single understanding of non-religion or journeys to becoming an apostate. Concepts of religion have been argued as historical and social constructions (McKinnon, 2002). Likewise, Beckford (2003) proposes that religion should be considered from a social constructivist approach, suggesting religion includes ‘human knowing, feeling, acting and relating’ (Beckford, 2003, p.4). Thus, social construction is both a cognitive and performative act (Dahlvik, 2017). This approach is helpful when drawing on the theoretical perspectives of lived non-religion to

understand the everyday acts of non-religiosity whilst recognising the vast differences between how this is enacted over social, political and historical underpinnings of participants' lifeworld.

Similarly, the asylum process has also been explored using a social constructivist approach (e.g., Dahvlik, 2017). This approach is applicable in this research context because although seeking asylum is a legal process, it attempts to understand the constructions of identities and beliefs within assessment processes. This approach is consistent with the 'reflexive turn' (Amelina, 2021) in migration research, which has given greater attention to how identities are transformed into legal categories, such as 'asylum seeker' or 'refugee' through:

A variety of routinised institutional, organisational and interactive (i.e., face-to-face) routines that incorporate discursive knowledge related to manifold (gendered, racialised and classed) distinctions between 'Us' and 'Them'. (Amelina, 2021, p.2)

Asylum determination processes are underpinned by bureaucrats' construction of (in)credibility, which is heavily influenced by individual perceptions. Social constructivism is therefore useful when drawing on bureaucracy as a theoretical framework to understand how apostates construct their identities and how guidance and policies depict non-religious persecution and construct 'credible' narratives. Individuals who seek asylum navigate the asylum process differently and will translate and perform their identities depending on their individual circumstances. Within the asylum regime, identities are 'forms of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction taking place in day-to-day administrative work' (Dahvlik, 2017, p.373). Thus, a constructivist approach can aid the researcher in understanding the multiple constructions of identities, beliefs and meanings which arise throughout the research.

In sum, a constructivist approach is employed in this research due to the socially constructed nature of the concepts of religion and belief. Constructivism allows the researcher to examine how individuals from varying cultural, social and political contexts formulate the constructs of 'religion' or 'belief'. It is also used to understand how the asylum process constructs understandings of these concepts and explores how bureaucrats reproduce and reinvent these concepts within asylum determination processes (Dahvlik, 2017), to how the asylum seeker navigates and negotiates them. This research emphasises that journeys to becoming non-religious are highly individualistic, personal and unique. Therefore, to explore these subjective experiences, a social constructivist approach is justifiable.

4.4. Rationale for Qualitative Research Methods

This research employed a qualitative research design because it is the most applicable approach to answer the research questions. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate to studying concepts, behaviours and attitudes. Thus, qualitative methods were chosen due to their exploratory nature, which provides robust methods to research the experiences of ‘becoming’ non-religious and navigating the asylum process with an apostasy-based claim. To explore these experiences, methods such as semi-structured interviews and documentary analysis are most appropriate to collect textual data on the varieties of religious (non)beliefs, behaviour, identities and attitudes for analysis. In contrast to quantitative methods, which aim to produce samples that are representative and generalisable (Bruce, 2018), qualitative methods offer a deeper insight into the thoughts and feelings of individuals. Thus, these methods allowed for a rich and in-depth analysis of the social lives of forced migrants, asylum seekers and refugees (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz, 2018), which would be difficult to do solely with quantitative methods.

Additionally, qualitative methods were employed due to the absence of official data regarding religion-based asylum claims. The Home Office does not compile statistical data on cases asserted under the ‘religion’ ground of the Convention. Consequently, given the limited access to data, it would be impossible to conduct a mixed-method or purely quantitative study. Furthermore, obtaining a representative sample for a survey of individuals within the asylum system with religion-based claims would be impractical and unrealistic. Thus, qualitative research methods represent the most pertinent approach for this study as they offer an in-depth exploration of the social constructions of non-religious identities and experiences in navigating bureaucratic processes

Another justification for drawing on qualitative approaches is due to the reported methodological issues in studying non-religion, namely due to the nature of non-religious identities (Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.*, 2016). Categories of identities within non-religion are wide-ranging and complex to define, as argued in the literature review. Thus, qualitative methods will be employed to give participants the flexibility to avoid the pragmatic and semantic issues of providing religious identification options within surveys (Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.*, 2016; Lee, 2012b). For example, Cheruvallil-Contractor *et al.* (2016) examined the extent of the non-religion concept. Methodological advances in this area are

behind those in other fields, such as migration studies. To address some of these challenges, qualitative research methods are used to examine the variety of identities. As mentioned earlier, these methods allow participants to articulate their own interpretations of their identities and to convey their experiences and beliefs on their own terms. Since this research centres on apostate refugees, it offers a specific sample that alleviates the concern that ‘non-religion’ may be too broad (ibid), while still addressing the research questions.

Therefore, this project will concentrate on collecting in-depth information from a limited number of cases. Here, the purpose of qualitative research is not to achieve generalisability or representativeness; instead, it aims to provide a small snapshot of the unique experiences related to the phenomenon under study. Employing a qualitative research approach is methodologically suitable and most relevant for investigating the research aims, objectives, and questions.

4.5. Data Collection and Methods

Data collection took place from March 2023 to December 2023 until a sufficient number of participants had been interviewed for this project, and data saturation was achieved, indicated by the detection of recurring themes and patterns. As explained above, data was gathered through a multi-layered approach: semi-structured interviews, elicitation interviews, and document analysis. I begin this section by discussing the participant recruitment strategies and sampling. Second, I address the interview method and format for both sets of participants. The discussion is then divided into details regarding refugee participants, followed by human rights advocates, and finally, documents. This organisation is necessary because each data set led to different findings, challenges, and ethical considerations.

4.5.1. Participant recruitment and sampling

This section outlines the strategy employed to recruit participants for this study. It addresses the difficulties encountered in recruiting both advocates and refugees, concluding with an overview of the resulting sample.

Recruitment of advocates and refugees began from the networks of the collaborative partner. I first recruited and interviewed the human rights advocates. The partner organisation advised

and connected me with key actors working in the human rights field. The human rights advocates included current and previous staff members of the collaborative partner, legal actors, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers. The recruitment of further human rights advocates included snowball techniques (Becker, 1963) based on advocates' recommendations. The collaborative partner took on a role as a 'gatekeeper' to participants and the sample achieved provided 'particular, and limited population of respondents' (Dwyer and Brown, 2005, p. 373). In addition to the snowballing techniques, I attempted to mitigate a narrow or biased sample by recruiting participants outside of the collaborative partners' immediate network by presenting to human rights organisations that relate to the work supporting non-religious refugees. For example, I presented my research at local Humanist organisations and spoke on a podcast. I also presented to the Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) forum, and research information was distributed on a range of channels, such as FoRB newsletters and community WhatsApp groups. Further human rights advocates contacted me to participate in the research by seeing advertised calls for participants on social media, specifically LinkedIn or through the newsletter calls. Through becoming an active participant in this area, I believe I was able to build rapport with advocates and refugees who also attended events which facilitated participant recruitment.

The majority of refugee participants were recruited through the collaborative partner which had supported their asylum claim applications. The criteria for taking part included that they were aged eighteen or over, proficient in the English language and had claimed asylum in the UK under the 'religion' ground of the Convention. I recruited this group by sending out a call via email communication. The wording of the email was agreed upon in consultation with the collaborative partner to ensure it was clear and carefully expressed that there was no obligation to take part (see Appendix H). I also made clear that my role as a researcher was separate from the collaborative partner, and taking part would have no influence on the support they were being offered, or that it would affect the outcome of their asylum claim.

One refugee participant was recruited through a different organisation than the collaborative partner. This individual was a recognised 'activist' in the field and thus was approached via email. Another refugee participant was recommended to me through a human rights advocate that I had interviewed. This connection led to me editing my ethical application to broaden the scope of refugee participants and include those still waiting for a decision on their claim (i.e., asylum seekers). The reason for this was to allow people at different stages of the asylum

process to reflect on their journeys to non-religion and to discuss their experiences of the asylum process so far. The experiences of the person who was still seeking asylum felt important to include so that their experiences (of a persecuted female apostate) were not being relayed through the perspective of the human rights advocate, who holds a different positionality.

During the initial stages of fieldwork, I encountered challenges in recruiting both advocates and individuals from refugee backgrounds. For advocates, I faced typical issues associated with 'elite' interviews, including barriers to accessing participants and navigating gatekeepers. I discovered that some organisations experienced high staff turnover, leading to frequent changes in roles and making it difficult at times to find individuals with the relevant expertise. Some potential participants were unable to take part due to limitations on their capacity to engage in a research interview. Notably, some advocates handling traumatic asylum cases felt that participating in an interview on the subject would be too stressful. On several occasions, I spoke informally with one advocate who supports apostate refugees. They declined the invitation to engage in a formal interview due to concerns about vicarious trauma. I reflected on these recruitment challenges in a fieldnote entry:

There have been a few people/organisations I wanted to become involved in the research. Despite expressing great interest of the research area and had contributions to give, their work capacity made this impossible. The charity sector in this area is grossly underfunded and people are overworked. A lot of the individuals I contacted were volunteers, giving up their time on weekends/evenings outside of their 9-5. One participant expressed how gruelling (their words) this work is, hearing stories of other people's suffering, day-in day-out and to relive this in their 'own time' in an interview was inconceivable. (Fieldwork reflection - 27/8/23)

Additionally, I faced challenges in accessing people from a refugee background who were not connected to the collaborative partner. This was perhaps due in part because of a general mistrust of researchers and people viewed as authority. I also struggled to recruit female refugees specifically. To overcome these barriers, I employed flexible approaches throughout the research and came up with more creative ways of accessing participants. For example, this included presenting my research to audiences where refugees may be in attendance and communicating my research in unique ways, as discussed above. I also sent more personalised emails to females, explaining the current sample is male dominated. I received interview rejections from people from a refugee background who expressed they would not feel

comfortable taking part for mental health reasons and that they were trying to forget their traumatising experiences. In these cases, I replied to thank them and attached information about relevant support services (see Appendix F and G) in case they needed extra support (this document was also sent to all participants who agreed to participate).

As I had no prior experience of having contact with the Home Office, a key role of the collaborative partner was to secure access to employees within the Home Office, which is a notoriously hard-to-reach organisation. Previous research has outlined the difficulties of negotiating access to institutions that control migration or asylum (Lindberg and Borrelli, 2019). This recruitment approach is called ‘cold access’ (Jacobs, 2006), as contacts are made through a gatekeeper. Unfortunately, access to the Home Office and its employees, including decision-makers, caseworkers, and policy advisors, was not achieved. Repeated efforts were made to contact and invite individuals at the Home Office to participate in this research. The initial stages involved reaching out directly to Home Office staff via email, using the contact details provided by the collaborative partner. I informed the email recipients about the study and invited them, or their colleagues, to participate in an interview. This resulted in a single reply from an administrative assistant, who indicated that no suitable colleagues were available due to capacity issues. Additionally, I was in contact with the Home Office training team, consisting of four employees who had originally conducted the FoRB training module in 2019. This led to multiple emails negotiating access over six months but with no success. The collaborative partner facilitated an email introduction to the ‘Asylum, Protection and Enforcement Director’ at the Home Office. Following an initial expression of interest in participating in an interview, I received no further response.

After exhausting the contacts the collaborative partner offered, I continued to recruit Home Office caseworkers through my own means. This included searching LinkedIn for relevant job titles. Here, I contacted the former Director for Asylum, Protection and Enforcement Policy, who replied that they were unable to assist with research requests beyond published guidance. Instead, I was referred to the Home Office’s API on Assessing Credibility. I was finally able to recruit one participant who was a former Home Office administrator (‘Chris’) from a personal connection. However, after conducting an interview, I established that their experience was not wholly relevant to the topic of study. This research data has not been formally drawn on in the data analysis chapters. Thus, the lack of access to this institution provides an insight into the data collected in this project (Cleton and Meier, 2023). Due to this

lack of access, the Home Office has not been able to offer a reply, and so their key experience is absent from the data set.

The recruitment process resulted in 22 human rights advocates agreeing to participate in a research interview. Those advocates who consented to this research brought varied job roles, expertise, lengths of service in the field, and diverse experiences working with apostate refugees. A shared commitment to advocating for freedom of religion or belief linked these perspectives. Some participants wished to be identified in the research, and their full names and roles have been disclosed accordingly. Others preferred to remain anonymous; in these cases, pseudonyms have been assigned for first names. The participants who came from a refugee background came from diverse countries, which had different social, legal and cultural tolerances to apostasy and blasphemy. Each had unique experiences of leaving religion, arriving in the UK and being assessed for asylum. They all shared a common experience of facing fear of persecution for their beliefs and claiming asylum on these grounds.

The sample of participants with experience of claiming asylum was male ($n = 10$) and female ($n = 2$). Countries of origin included Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Maldives, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh. While there were no specific criteria regarding the religion the refugees had left, all participants from a refugee background were previously identified as Muslim and were consequently perceived as apostates from Islam. Consequently, the study's findings are based exclusively on a sample of refugees from ex-Muslim backgrounds, which makes the research findings specific to apostates from Islam. Some participants' claims intersected with other grounds, such as political persecution or sexuality-based persecution (see Table 1). This research thus draws on publicly available government documents, the knowledge of human rights advocates in the field, and the lived experiences of individuals from a refugee background. The next section discusses the interview methods that were employed for the human rights advocates and refugees.

4.5.2. The interview method

Interview methods have been discussed thoroughly within the social scientific literature of the last few decades, described as 'a construction site for knowledge' (Kvale, 2007, p.6). The purpose of the research interview is to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondents' views (Warren, 2001). Interview methods were thus the most applicable to this

project's topic of study because the study aims to generate a rich understanding of the constructions of non-religious identities and the individual experiences of claiming asylum in the UK. Interview methods were also used to understand how non-religious asylum cases are handled and assessed within asylum assessment processes by drawing on the perspectives of both refugees and human rights advocates.

Interviews employed an in-depth, semi-structured approach for both participants. In-depth interviewing is described as employing a conversational tone (Kvale, 1996), to discover knowledge from the perspective of an individual. Whilst this style of interviewing aims to resemble an everyday conversation, it is guided by specific objectives and questions (Legard, Keegan and Ward, 2003). The interviewer plays a key role in directing the interview story and interpreting its meaning (ibid). Knowledge is produced by both the interviewer and interviewee as they engage in the conversation, so it is vital to establish good rapport (ibid). Interviews that employ a semi-structured approach were identified as the best approach because they can create reciprocity (Galletta and Cross, 2013), enabling improvisation by the researcher for follow-up questions (Rubin and Rubin, 2012), and giving flexibility to participants.

4.5.3. Interview format

Face-to-face interviews are the gold standard and 'staple' qualitative method (Oltmann, 2016). More recently, conducting interviews online has become increasingly prevalent due to the impact of the COVID pandemic (Vaagland, 2024), which saw an increase in the use of technology such as Zoom, Teams and Google Meet. Since this change, conducting work online has become the norm to offset costs and time spent travelling, which offers greater flexibility. It has also gained widespread recognition as a viable interview method rather than a subpar alternative to face-to-face meetings (ibid). Consequently, online interviews were provided to facilitate communication for those who are geographically dispersed and/or face time and resource constraints. They were also introduced to address ethical considerations. Online meetings enabled participants to end the call instantly if desired, with instructions on how to do so explained prior to the interview. Additionally, this format allowed participants to take calls in environments where they felt comfortable discussing sensitive topics, typically in their own homes. All interviews with advocates were conducted online, primarily due to time constraints that hindered their ability to travel for in-person meetings. This arrangement also facilitated the researcher since many were situated far from them.

Refugee participants were given the choice of in-person or online interviews. Five interviews with refugees were conducted in person, while seven were online. Participants could select their preferred location for the in-person interview; however, these were conducted in public spaces rather than private homes to ensure researcher safety. In-person interviews were held in cafes or parks in the cities where participants resided. This required the researcher to travel to Manchester and London. For participants who met in cafes, I made sure to cover the cost of refreshments, which included hot drinks and, in some cases, lunch. This was important as I did not provide any compensation for their time or travel. The length of the interviews varied, with the shortest lasting 40 minutes and the longest extending up to three hours. I adopted a reflexive approach when scheduling interviews that were postponed at the last minute due to work or family commitments.

The following section discusses the approach taken with refugee participants and explains the use of elicitation tools. Afterwards, the specific approach taken to interview advocates in this study will be discussed in relation to elite interviewing.

4.6. Participants From a Refugee Background

The participants' journeys to apostasy and the construction of non-religious identities were highly contextual. They were relative to the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts where they grew up. This study used interview methods to explore the social worlds of participants and gather their meanings. In this section, I focus on the interviews conducted with refugee participants, and the subsequent section explores the advocate interviews, as they were conducted differently.

The interviews with refugee participants took place in two stages. The first stage consisted of a preliminary discussion with all potential interviewees. The first set of meetings was conducted online, and the purpose of this meeting was to build rapport with the participants, introduce them to the research topic and provide a space for any questions. As this topic could be sensitive in nature due to concepts of persecution and religion or belief, the first stage was to provide all necessary information so participants could make an informed decision about whether to take part in the next stage of the interview. For these reasons, the first stage interview was not recorded to give participants a space to ask questions more freely than within a recorded setting.

The second stage consisted of the recorded semi-structured interview. Through a semi-structured approach, the researcher determines an agenda with pre-set questions, whilst the participant can control the amount of information that they disclose (Corbin and Morse, 2003). Interviews also followed an in-depth design: ‘in-depth interviewing emphasizes the building of relationships and exploration of ideas’ (Ragin, 2019, p.111). This was initiated using open-ended questions. This approach was helpful as the researcher is not a current or former member of the social group being studied (Johnson, 2001). In-depth interviews with participants allowed for data collection of a shared experience whilst drawing on individually unique responses, ‘deep understandings allow us to grasp and articulate the multiple views of, perspectives on, and meanings of some activity, event, place, or cultural object’ (Johnson, 2001, p.4).

The interview schedule (see appendix I) was sent to all participants prior to the interview, which gave participants notice of the topics, and they were given opportunities to edit or to remove questions. The semi-structured interview guide gave more flexibility to interviewees to discuss and introduce topics (Fedyuk and Zentai, 2018). It also served as a prompt for the researcher and participant, with a broad structure so all parties had an awareness of how it was going to flow. For refugee participants, the interview was structured in four broad themes, which were constructed regarding the research questions: non-religious persecution, asylum claim process, working with officials and perceptions of the asylum system. All interviews also included an introduction and concluding remarks. The interview was flexible and mostly followed participants' narratives and threads. I offered to send interviewees a copy of the interview transcripts for their approval, and participants were able to add or clarify their points.

If interviewees consented to take part in the second stage interview, they were also asked if they consented to share their ‘asylum case file’, owned by the partner NGO (if they were/had been supported by them). Access to this file was not compulsory for taking part in the research and it was up to the participant whether they would like to share it (and some participants did not have one). The purpose of referencing individuals’ asylum case files was to provide the researcher with contextual and descriptive information regarding their specific circumstances, such as country of origin, persecution, and evidence for claiming asylum. This stage formed the basis for an agenda with several broad pre-set questions for the interview. Additionally, the case file served as an elicitation tool in some interviews (discussed further below). Thus,

alongside the established rapport, the asylum case file was used as supportive material to uncover unarticulated knowledge. It also functioned as an ethical device; if participants felt uncomfortable discussing a topic, they could refer me to the information in their case file.

4.6.1. Elicitation tool: asylum case file

Elicitation techniques are employed in qualitative research to encourage or prompt participants to talk about their experiences (Barton, 2015) and are used to devise the interview structure and guide discussions (Abildgaard, 2018). Additionally, they are used as a memory device to support the interviewer in encouraging participants to remember certain events or details (ibid). Elicitation tools can take many forms, including material artefacts, visual and graphics, photographs and music. In this study, material artefacts were drawn on in the form of documents owned by the collaborative partner, which broadly contained content relating to participants' asylum claims. These will be referred to as participants' 'asylum case file'. Six participants had an asylum case file owned by the collaborative organisation. The detail and depth within these case files differed, and the usefulness of utilising the file as an elicitation tool varied. The most detailed content within asylum case files held official Home Office documents of rejection and appeal letters, the collaborative partners' letter of support and meeting notes between the collaborative partner and claimant. Some included evidence that was being submitted to the Home Office to support their claim.

The elicitation tool was drawn on in three stages: prior to the interview, during the interview and after the interview. Prior to the interview, it aided in the construction of the semi-structured interview guide. They were also used to provide contextual or descriptive information that interviewees did not feel comfortable discussing orally, for example, instances of persecution (though this did not occur from any of the participants who took part in the interviews). During the interview, the asylum case files were used to prompt interviewees about specific experiences or events. For instance, examples of doubts arising about specific religious practices or particular books mentioned by the claimants sparked their curiosity regarding non-religious worldviews. Furthermore, when discussing the asylum claim process, participants directed me towards the Home Office documents to support their explanations. After the interview, asylum case files also proved to be a valuable resource in providing descriptive data about the participants, including their age and country of origin.

In some of the interviews, using the case file as an elicitation technique aided discussions. This is because participants who the collaborative partner had supported already had experience in explaining and articulating their beliefs and worldviews, and had material documentation of these journeys. Hence, this technique helped me to collect rich data on personal journeys to non-religion (Barton, 2015). However, as interviews progressed, I found much of the content in the case files to be lacking; some merely consisted of the collaborative partners' letters of support. I also found that having the case file visibly open during interviews obstructed the natural flow of conversation. I decided to stop using the asylum case files as a visible tool in later interviews, instead retaining their use as an elicitation tool.

Four participants did not have a case file, either because they were not supported by the collaborative partner who maintained a record of these documents or because they had only recently begun receiving support and therefore did not yet have a case on file. One participant opted not to access their file, stating it was out of date; instead, they preferred to share the facts of the case during the interview. Another participant was uncertain about the data the collaborative partner had stored, so they sent me a selection of documents they owned, such as a support letter from a different organisation.

4.6.2. The sample of participants with refugee backgrounds

Name (all pseudonyms)	Gender	Country of origin	Asylum grounds	Use of asylum case file	Format of interview
Ahmed	Male	Pakistan	Apostasy and political	Yes	In-person
Ayaz	Male	Pakistan	Apostasy	N/A [Supported by another organisation]	Online
Farshad	Male	Iran	Apostasy	Yes	Online
Hassan	Male	Maldives	Apostasy and Sexuality	N/A [does not have one on record]	In-person
James	Male	Iraq	Apostasy	Yes	Online
Mehdi	Male	Iran	Apostasy	Yes	Online
Murad	Male	Iran	Apostasy	Yes	In-person
Nadia	Female	Saudi Arabia	Apostasy and Sexuality	No [out-of-date]	In-person

Nazim	Male	Iran	Apostasy	Yes	Online
Raliya	Female	Nigeria	Apostasy	N/A [does not have one on record]	Online
Rashid	Male	Pakistan	Apostasy	Yes	Online
Shamsur	Male	Bangladesh	Apostasy and Sexuality	Yes	In-person

Table 1. Refugee participant demographics and interview format

4.6.3. Religious to non-religious: participants' stories

This section shares succinct descriptions of the backdrops of participants from refugee backgrounds. I developed these vignettes to capture the personal background and experiences of the participants, as well as the instances of what led them to claim asylum in the UK. This section highlights the diverse backgrounds of the non-religious refugees interviewed in this research, showcasing the nuances in their stories. I have included participants' pseudonyms, year of asylum, approximate age at the time of claiming asylum and country of origin (COO). Twelve people form the refugee participant group, and their ages range from early 20s at the age of their asylum claim to late 50s. Eleven participants had refugee status at the time of interviews, and one participant (Ralyia) was waiting for their appeal at the time of writing. Participants were geographically dispersed in the UK, some living in large cities such as London and Manchester and others were based in towns on the outskirts of cities.

Rashid, date of asylum 2018, aged 27, COO Pakistan

Rashid, from Pakistan, developed doubts about his religious beliefs during his childhood. However, due to Pakistan's penal code, which enforces one of the harshest penalties for the crime of blasphemy, Rashid felt he was unable to live openly and freely as an atheist. Upon leaving Pakistan to study at a university in the UK, Rashid established an atheist outlook and spoke of being influenced by thinkers such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. After Pakistan's Federal Investigations Agency raided his family's house and questioned family members about his whereabouts, Rashid grew concerned for his safety. He sought asylum while in the UK and thus became a refugee sur place.

Nazim, date of asylum 2019, aged 23, COO Iran

Nazim faced challenges participating in religious ceremonies and practices in Iran, at times losing his composure. He was vocal and engaged his teachers in debates, claiming he

consistently triumphed due to their illogical arguments. In his early teenage years, his parents sent him to the UK for college and university, recognising that his views could lead to trouble for them all if he remained in Iran. He had a strong passion for science, a field he felt would have been limited in his home country. When his family went bankrupt, he found himself in the UK without support or a plan for his future. As his beliefs evolved, he identified as non-religious. He began joining small campaigns, advocating for human rights issues in Iran, often framed by humanist values. As political tensions increased in Iran, his family and friends were becoming increasingly vulnerable. Ultimately, he faced the tough choice to seek asylum in the UK.

Shamsur, date of asylum 2020, aged 34, COO Bangladesh

In the early 2000s, Shamsur visited an internet café in Bangladesh and witnessed a terrorist organisation executing a journalist online. He vividly recalls the brutal scene, marked by a complete lack of remorse and mercy. Following this, he reflected on other global terrorist incidents, including 9/11 and 7/7. This led him to recognise the potential dangers tied to religion, prompting him to seek distance from it entirely. Alongside his doubts about religion, he also embraced his bisexuality and began writing about religious freedom and LGBT rights in Bangladesh. Moving to the UK as a student allowed him to express these views more openly. However, his name ended up on a list related to two blasphemy charges and fearing identification upon his return to Bangladesh, he sought asylum in the UK.

Nadia, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, COO Saudi Arabia

Nadia's formative years in Saudi Arabia were limiting; the male guardianship system restricted her, and the internet was not widely accessible. This lack of access made it impossible for her to encounter worldviews outside of Wahhabism. She adhered to Islam until attending university in the UK, where she developed an interest in a scientific field that exposed her to diverse belief systems beyond Islam. Her uncertainties about Islam increased as she struggled to rationalise the death penalty and the notion of an afterlife. During this period, she also explored her sexual identity. With her emerging sexual identity and newfound atheistic perspective, she recognised that living safely in Saudi Arabia was no longer feasible, prompting her to seek asylum in the UK based on these grounds.

Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan

Ahmed grew up in Pakistan as a Muslim. During his childhood, he began to have doubts about his faith, but he had to keep these feelings hidden due to the physical abuse he suffered from his father, a powerful figure in the country. He referred to himself as a lone wolf, as he often found himself in trouble for voicing uncertainties about religion. In his early 20s, his family pressured him to marry his cousin, a proposal he consistently rejected. He persuaded his father to allow him to attend university in the UK, assuring him he would marry upon his return. Whilst in the UK, he adapted to British life, made numerous friends, and enjoyed social outings. He faced confusion regarding his religious identity, feeling reluctant to marry or live according to his family's customs. After exploring online, he discovered humanism, which helped him articulate his feelings. Fearing persecution for embracing a humanist identity, he sought asylum in the UK.

James, date of asylum 2018, aged 57, COO Iraq

Since the 1990s, James has been residing in the UK, identifying himself as British whilst feeling little connection to his birthplace, Iraq. Originally named differently, he changed his name to dissociate from his religious roots. He enjoys reading works by religious critics like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, often visiting Speaker's Corner to share his thoughts openly—something he felt he could not do in Iraq. However, during a difficult period of poor mental health, he committed a serious offence, resulting in the loss of his indefinite leave and a prison sentence in a Foreign National Prison. Facing deportation, he claimed asylum upon his release due to the risks associated with his atheist beliefs. His asylum claim was accepted, and he was found not to be a 'threat' and continues to live his life in Britain.

Hassan, date of asylum 2022, aged 20s, COO Maldives

Hassan was from the southern region of the Maldives, where Islam is legally required for all citizens. During his upbringing, the Maldives was under a dictatorship that allowed little religious freedom and maintained a culture of fear. He became aware of individuals being tortured and killed in prisons for opposing the country's enforced religious unity. In his daily life, Hassan presented himself with a 'halal persona'¹⁹ (described in his words), but he also cultivated an online identity where he expressed his atheist beliefs and homosexual identity. Although he wrote under a pseudonym, some people uncovered his true identity, leading to its

¹⁹ Halal, an Arabic term meaning 'permissible,' refers to actions or behaviours that align with Islamic teachings.

publication in a local newspaper. Consequently, he had to escape his home, ultimately finding himself in the UK.

Raliya, date of asylum 2023, aged 40s, COO Nigeria

Raliya is from Northeastern Nigeria, known for its rich ethnic diversity. Growing up in a Muslim household, she felt her life was deeply intertwined with both religion and culture. Her father had four wives, resulting in a large family. For much of her life, Raliya felt trapped and restricted from the outside world. Describing herself as a challenging child, she resisted numerous arranged marriages, but eventually, tired of the struggle, she married to escape her family home. Unfortunately, she found herself confined again, this time by her husband. Discontented with how Islam was practised in her society, she disagreed with the belief that a woman's role should be limited to the home under her husband's control. Her disillusionment led her to stop praying and question her surroundings, resulting in depression. Raliya became vocal about the perils of religion, sharing her thoughts online and discussing them with her extended family. This activism led to trouble, prompting her to flee with her children to the UK to seek asylum. As of the time of writing, Raliya is still awaiting a decision on her application.

Murad, date of asylum 2018, aged 36, COO Iran

Murad is from a remote region in southern Iran, where he was raised in a Muslim family. His father had two wives, and many children shared the same household. His religious upbringing was much stricter than that of those in Iran's larger cities. Eager to understand the Qur'an, he taught himself Arabic, discovering numerous contradictions within its text. This prompted him to begin criticising Islam, which led to a conversation with a Mullah at a local mosque. Afterwards, Murad was reported to the authorities and spent two years in prison. His criminal record and reputation as an atheist hindered his ability to obtain a passport, leaving him unable to work. He escaped Iran to a neighbouring country, where he lived for several years apart from his family. In this new country, he lacked the right to work, open a bank account, or leave the city, ultimately finding himself in a worse situation than before. Consequently, he fled to the UK and sought asylum, later applying for family reunification, and now resides there with his family.

Mehdi, date of asylum 2018, aged 46, COO Iran

Mehdi was born into a Muslim family in Iran. During his childhood, he frequently questioned how the government enforced religion and pressured citizens to adhere to it. This led him to seek distance from religion entirely. While attending university in Iran, he enjoyed some time away from his family, allowing him to research religion. As he aged, he gradually came to realise he was not Muslim. He began sharing atheist perspectives on social media with a few close friends, aiming to disseminate this information to Iranians. This activity drew the attention of the authorities, resulting in the arrest of two of his friends. Consequently, Mehdi fled to the UK and sought asylum.

Farshad, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, COO Iran

Farshad grew up in southern Iran amidst contrasting religious beliefs. He frequently stayed with his religious grandparents, whilst his parents showed indifference and did not practice Islam. This conflicting environment left him uncertain and confused about his identity. During his youth, he was influenced by an Iranian singer, an atheist whose music was banned in Iran. His songs alleviated his guilt about his conflicting beliefs. As he shed this guilt, Farshad began exploring religion more critically, developing an interest in philosophy and science, ultimately identifying as an atheist. He made a joke during mandatory prayers at school, resulting in his expulsion. This incident prompted him to move to the UK for studies, a common practice that raised no suspicions. After settling in the UK, he lost all contact with his parents in Iran and thus could not pay his tuition fees. Eventually, he learned that authorities had raided his home and discovered his book by Richard Dawkins. It was no longer safe to return to Iran, and Farshad claimed asylum in the UK.

Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan

Ayaz, who was raised in Pakistan within a strict Muslim family, was taught to follow Islam closely. Growing up, he developed a keen interest in reading the Qur'an and stumbled upon teachings about the religion that he had not encountered before. This led him to uncover immoral and unethical behaviours that contradicted what he was taught through his upbringing. Gaining a reputation for questioning religious doctrines, he faced backlash one day, resulting in his father's involvement with the mosque. This prompted Ayaz to keep his beliefs private until he moved to the UK to pursue his studies, where he was exposed to a variety of new perspectives. After struggling with his identity for several years, he discovered a supportive ex-Muslim community. He eventually publicly declared his status as an apostate, notified his

family in Pakistan, and sought asylum in the UK. Now, Ayaz advocates for the rights of individuals to express their beliefs freely and to blaspheme.

In conclusion, participants from a refugee background displayed diverse experiences of persecution related to their non-religious identity. These narratives of transitioning to non-religiosity hold particular significance, as evidenced in the data analysis chapters. I will illustrate how the British asylum bureaucracy fosters a limited understanding of what a non-religious person ought to look, think, and behave like. The next section will explore the job roles and experiences of the human rights advocates interviewed in this study.

4.7. Human Rights Advocates

This study focuses on how non-religious asylum rights are conceptualised within international law, how this is translated into Home Office policies, in what ways Home Office actors draw on human rights discourse to legitimate their positions or actions, and how these positions make refugee status possible or not possible for apostate asylum seekers. To explore these dynamics, interviews were conducted with ‘elites’, consisting of human rights advocates who work around FoRB human rights. Elites denote individuals in a position of power or privilege, usually working in a professional environment (Huggins, 2014), with experience and access to information and resources unavailable to others (Aberbach and Rockman, 2003). By working with this group, I took an elite interviewing approach, which will be discussed in this section. Elites or ‘researching up’ has been considered by researchers as including actors of, ‘elevated decision-making authority within any formal or informal organization, such as an NGO, political party, government agency or business’ (Morse, 2019, p. 278). The human rights advocates approached to participate in this research were considered elite as they were the holders of inside knowledge (Dexter, 1970 [2006]; Liu, 2018; Morse, 2019).

The elites interviewed in this study are labelled broadly as ‘human rights advocates’ because they all play a role in working with and supporting non-religious asylum seekers or refugees. They consisted of legal professionals, including solicitors, legal advisers, and a barrister. Advocates interviewed also worked for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that advocate for Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). These organisations consisted of the All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG), Humanists UK, Humanists International, Humanists Global, local humanist groups, Faithless Hijabi and Amnesty International. Other participants

defined themselves as ‘activists’, which included people with experience of leaving religion themselves and becoming apostates who now support others in the journey. The role of activists included advising people who are thinking of seeking asylum and supporting them in their asylum claim process. Their work was usually offered in more of a personal rather than professional capacity, in comparison to the work the NGOs do. Activists in this study had established online profiles where they spoke of human rights abuses relating to religion. I was also in contact with further groups that, in the end, could not participate in a formal research interview due to issues with capacity; these included Secular Rescue, Atheist Alliance and Rainbow Migration.

Similar to refugee participants, I conducted interviews with advocates in two stages. First, an introductory meeting occurred that allowed me to learn more about the advocate, the type of work they do, and how their experience relates to non-religious asylum seekers. This stage was important because I found expertise on this specific topic to be varied and somewhat ad hoc. This led to many meetings not progressing further, either due to the advocate's decision or my own. However, this was beneficial as it often resulted in recommendations for additional connections and provided me with more time to focus on interviews with advocates who had the relevant expertise. The second stage, semi-structured interviews, lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. While still maintaining a semi-structured approach, the interview guides were more carefully designed to centre around the actors’ roles and responsibilities. I produced a unique interview schedule for each advocate based on their distinct roles and types of experience (see appendix J for an example). I offered to send a copy of the interview transcripts to the interviewees, which were sent to the majority for their approval if they requested it.

4.7.1. Participant sample of human rights advocates

Name/pseudonym	Job role/affiliation	Organisation (if applicable)
Ana Gonzalez	Immigration Lawyer	Wilsons Solicitors
Andrew	Former immigration judge and volunteer at a local humanist group	N/A
Ben	Immigration Lawyer	International human rights charity
Brian Grim	Researcher and author	PEW Research Center

Charlotte	Social worker	Local council
Chris	Former Home Office administrator	Home Office
Clara	Legal advisor	Local charity
Clive Aruede	Co-founder and volunteer	Association of Black Humanists
Elleanor Bell	Caseworker	Duncan Lewis Solicitors
Gill	Volunteer	Local humanist group
Harper	Immigration Lawyer	N/A
Jamie Bell	Immigration Lawyer	Duncan Lewis Solicitors
Joseph	Volunteer	Humanists Global
Katharine Thane	Former Operations Director	APPG FoRB
Layla	Activist	Charity
Linda	Support manager	Apostate support charity
Mark	Volunteer	Humanist organisation
Nuriyah Khan	Activist	N/A
Rachel Taggart-Ryan	Former Campaigns Officer	Humanists UK
Rebecca	Immigration Lawyer	N/A
Sophie	Spokesperson	Humanists International
Thomas	Immigration barrister	N/A

Table 2. Professional roles and organisational affiliations

4.7.2. Advocate descriptions

This section briefly describes the roles of human rights advocates and their experience working with apostates.

Ana Gonzalez (waived anonymity) is an Immigration Lawyer at Wilsons Solicitors in London, specialising in gender and sexuality-based asylum claims as well as apostasy. She has participated in both online and in-person meetings organised by ex-Muslim and apostate communities to discuss the asylum claims process.

Andrew is a former immigration judge and a volunteer with a local humanist group. He has previously adjudicated religion-based asylum cases, primarily concerning Christian conversion cases. He continues to support several refugees and individuals seeking asylum who have left their religion, helping them feel part of a community through his local humanist group.

Ben is an Immigration Lawyer who primarily supports unaccompanied children in their asylum claims. Currently, he works for an international human rights charity. In this role, he has made third-party interventions that involve providing expert evidence reports on human rights conditions. He has worked on several cases concerning young individuals who claimed asylum in the UK as unaccompanied children for political or other reasons and who faced reapplication or removal upon turning 18. He has advocated for their right to remain, arguing that they would be at risk upon return due to their secular beliefs and practices.

Brian Grim (waived anonymity) is a religious freedom advocate and the author of *The Price of Freedom Denied: Religious Persecution and Conflict in the Twenty-First Century* (2010). This book explores the extent of ongoing religious persecution in contemporary society. He is also a senior researcher in religion and world affairs at the Pew Research Center.

Charlotte is a social worker on a new arrivals team that supports unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. In this role, she provides pastoral care to ensure that young people have a safe place to live, access to healthcare, education, and legal advice for their asylum cases. In her experience, young people often question their religious beliefs and adopt secular practices that may not have been acceptable in their countries of origin. She offers informal support and advice for those who are exploring their faith. Additionally, she accompanies them during asylum interviews.

Clara is a legal advisor for a small charity that exclusively assists asylum seekers whose appeal rights have been exhausted. She helps individuals make fresh claims and has experience in supporting apostate asylum claimants.

Clive Aruede (waived anonymity) is an ex-Christian apostate. He is a co-founder of the Association of Black Humanists, based in London, which organises events on the intersection of race and humanism. The group has experience in supporting apostates and individuals seeking asylum.

Chris is a former administrator at the Home Office, where he carried out screening interviews with asylum seekers.

Elleanor Bell (waived anonymity) is a caseworker at Duncan Lewis, specialising in supporting vulnerable women. In her role, she has assisted with apostate asylum claims.

Gill is a passionate advocate for refugee and migrant rights in her local community. She founded a charity aimed at helping local women and their families feel welcome in her town by organising social events and fundraising activities. In addition, she is a humanist and a volunteer for a local humanist group. Within this group, she has supported several refugees and people seeking asylum who have left their religion and are exploring their humanist identity.

Harper is an Immigration Lawyer with experience in handling apostasy asylum cases. She is also a former Pentecostal Christian who now identifies as a humanist. As a co-founder of a non-religious organisation, she supports people seeking asylum and refugees, as well as others who have left their religion. She is a passionate advocate for humanists and other non-religious individuals.

Jamie Bell (waived anonymity) is a solicitor at Duncan Lewis with significant experience in representing and advocating for apostate asylum claims. In this position, he served as the solicitor for the submission of Hamza bin Walayat's fresh asylum claim.

Joseph volunteers at Humanists Global, where he worked with the 'Humanist Mutual Aid Network', established to advocate against the persecution of the non-religious. His role involved travelling to regions of the 'Global South' to teach humanist and secular values in schools.

Katharine Thane (waived anonymity) is a former Operations Director of the APPG FoRB (2016-2019). The group's purpose is to 'raise awareness and profile of international Freedom of Religion or Belief (Article 18, UDHR) as a human right amongst UK parliamentarians, the media, government and the general public. The group also seeks to increase the effectiveness of the UK's contribution to international institutions charged with enforcing this human right' (Parliament, 2017). During her tenure as Operations Director, Thane advocated for a more

inclusive asylum determination process for individuals claiming asylum on religious grounds under the Convention.

Layla is an ex-Muslim and secular activist. She co-founded an NGO aimed at supporting apostates with mental health assistance. She aids atheists facing immediate risks and collaborates with other secular organisations to facilitate emergency relocation. In this capacity, she supports apostates suffering from poor mental health and religious trauma and provides advice for asylum cases.

Linda serves as a support manager for an NGO that assists several former members of ‘high-control religions’, including ex-Muslim apostates seeking asylum. In this role, she connects individuals with legal aid, composes letters of support for asylum applications, and occasionally attends tribunal hearings.

Mark is a retired civil servant and a long-term member of national and international humanist organisations. He is a former trustee for a humanist school, where he raised funds in the UK to support the establishment of humanist schools in Africa. He also writes for a humanist newsletter, publishing personal stories of persecuted humanists. Through this role, he came into contact with a persecuted humanist and has since personally supported her by offering housing and legal representation.

Nuriyah Khan (waived anonymity) is a social media activist under the name ‘Holy Humanist’. Identifying as an ex-Muslim, she embraces a humanist worldview. Through her social media platform, she fosters discussions surrounding Islam and human rights while emphasising the importance of recognising women’s rights.

Rachel Taggart-Ryan (waived anonymity) is a former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK. Humanists UK (HUK) provides support for asylum claimants facing the risk of persecution due to being humanist or non-religious. A part of her work involved managing the HUK asylum support service. Support included writing support letters, attending tribunals, and assisting in finding legal aid. During her time at HUK, she provided support for many individuals seeking asylum on these grounds. She has advocated for improved training for Home Office asylum assessors on these matters.

Rebecca is an Immigration Lawyer; she intervened in an apostasy asylum case in Sweden. In this intervention, she advocated for the case to be granted on the grounds that the applicant lacked male protection and would be perceived as ‘Westernised’, thereby facing risks if returned to her country of origin.

Sophie is a representative of Humanists International. Humanists International campaign on various issues related to humanist belief systems and worldviews. They provide support to humanist and non-religious individuals internationally and advocate for the recognition of these beliefs, ensuring they are free from persecution and violence. As part of their mandate, they assist humanists at risk, which can include individuals seeking asylum in different regions of the world.

Thomas is a barrister specialising in immigration and asylum law. He has supported apostasy asylum cases and advocates for the human rights of non-religious people.

This section has examined the participants in this study: individuals from refugee backgrounds and human rights advocates. The next section will explore how I analysed the data gathered from the interviews.

4.8. Interview Analysis

Before analysis, the interviews' audio recordings were transcribed verbatim written format. The data was uploaded to NVivo and analysed using thematic coding guided by key themes broadly related to the project's research questions and theoretical framework (as advised by Bryman et al., 2022). NVivo served as a data management tool to store interview transcripts from human rights advocates and refugees and a range of documents. NVivo assisted me in analysing across data sets, coding material, and making comparisons. This influenced the data analysis sections, highlighting key themes such as personal journeys to apostasy and the ways identities were interpreted and managed within bureaucratic contexts frameworks.

Thematic analysis was utilised due to its prominent use in qualitative research and its ability to be accessible and theoretically flexible (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It is also compatible with social constructivist ontology and epistemology frameworks because it can be used to examine the experiences and meanings produced by various methods (ibid). The broad analytical

approach is used in ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). A step-by-step process of carrying out thematic analysis is provided by Braun and Clarke (2006):

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Table 3. Braun and Clarke’s phases of thematic analysis (2006)

Codes were constructed from the themes in the literature review and theoretical framework. Sub-codes were developed as analysis had begun, and themes were drawn out of the narratives; both inductive and deductive codes were used (Gibbs, 2007). Thus, analysis was an ‘iterative process’ (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.159), which conveys a repeated and reflexive approach to understanding the data that I collected. This included reading my fieldwork notes, thinking about the introductory meetings with participants, reviewing the main interviews and consulting the documents I collected to conceptualise the stories I gathered from interviews. This approach is consistent with thematic analysis, as it can work to conduct a more in-depth exploration of the phenomena under study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It was also used as a way of understanding how participants’ experiences drew similarities to each other despite being so unique.

4.9. Document Analysis

Document analysis as a qualitative method refers to the process of reviewing the content of documents to elicit meaning, gain understanding and develop empirical knowledge of the chosen topic (Bowen, 2009, p.27). The documents under consideration were derived from two sources. First, at an international law level, I collected human rights articles and guidance provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR). Second, I focused on Home Office documents relating to asylum determination policies. In this category, the Asylum Policy Instructions (API) on ‘Assessing Credibility’, were selected as it

is the most relevant guidance that decision-makers draw on to make judgements based on credibility. The Home Office also referred me to this guidance on the occasions I contacted them. Additionally, I drew on the API for conducting asylum interviews and Home Office CPIN reports, as these provide specific country guidance to Home Office officials to inform decisions in asylum claims (Home Office, 2024). This section discusses how document analysis was used as a method and how the documents were analysed by employing a content analysis approach.

There were three main reasons for using document analysis in this study. Firstly, it captured contextual and descriptive information on non-religious human rights laws and how this was translated into Home Office policies. Hence, it was used as a triangulation technique to strengthen the data collected from the interviews to provide material evidence or refer to legal or policy frameworks. It is also a useful method to employ when drawing on accessible documents, thus allowing researchers to conduct studies they might otherwise be unable to conduct due to lack of access to participants (Morgan, 2022). In this project's case, direct access to Home Office officials was not feasible. Thus, the documents provided a 'window' into asylum bureaucracy. Lastly, document analysis was a useful tool to explore the frequency and use of key terms. By storing the data on NVivo, I was able to search terms within the texts (Mackieson, Shlonsky and Connolly, 2019). Searching for the frequency of keywords aided in understanding the inclusion of the non-religious within the chosen documents and allowed for a comparison to other grounds for asylum, such as sexuality or gender-based persecution. Thus, documents were used to uncover the backdrop and context of refugee rights and the conceptualisation of non-religiosity within these, to guide research interviews, and to provide supplementary research data and verify findings from interviews (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis was key to answering research questions one and two.

Despite the benefits of employing document analysis, sociological literature on utilising document analysis as a method is surprisingly scant (Morgan, 2022; Tight, 2019). Thus, there are variations in how it should be conducted. I followed the 'content analysis' method proposed by Krippendorff (2004):

[1] sample text, in the sense of selecting what is relevant; [2] unitize text, in the sense of distinguishing words or propositions and using quotes or examples; [3] contextualize what they are reading in light of what they know about the circumstances surrounding the text; and [4] have specific research questions in mind. (2004, p. 87)

In this study, documents were selected through an iterative process of viewing and reading a range of documents to identify relevance to the study (Mackieson, Shlonsky and Connolly, 2019). Documents that were of interest consisted of human rights articles (namely, Article 18/19 of the UDHR and Article 18 of the ICCPR), UNHCR's Handbook and Guidance (2019), Home Office official policy documents and CPINs. Drawing on both legal documents and Home Office policies situated how refugee status determination processes are defined by the UNHCR and how asylum adjudication processes are followed in the British asylum system. Both documents offered different perspectives. The legal documents provided guidance for asylum/refugee for signatories of the Refugee Convention, whilst the Home Office offers policy and practice guidance specifically for asylum decision-makers based in the UK. Both perspectives aided in forming an understanding of how non-religion is afforded internationally recognised rights and how the Home Office infers this guidance into practice.

4.9.1. International law review

As discussed above, document analysis was conducted in two stages. I began at the international scale and focused on analysing human rights and refugee law and guidance. The legal documents in the analysis consisted of the Refugee Convention, the UDHR, ICCPR, General Comment No. 22 of the ICCPR and the UNHCR Handbook. Although the Handbook is not legally binding, it is considered to have persuasive authority (Sweeney, 2009) and the Home Office guidance suggests it should be used alongside their documents (Home Office, 2022a; 2022b). These documents were selected through purposive methods because they contain human rights laws ascribing to FoRB, and the guidance for implementing it for asylum practice. There were further documents initially included, such as the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief; Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities; and the European Convention on Human Rights. These documents were not included in the analysis, even though they included FoRB, as they were not as relevant to consider in the context of asylum determination. Table 4 displays the legal documents that were selected, the context of the document and a brief description of the content that was analysed.

4.9.2. Home Office policy review

The second stage involved analysing the Home Office's Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs) to view how language and guidance of human rights law trickled down into national guidelines.

The documents are non-legislative but are designed to aid Home Office assessors in making decisions on claims. The UK Border Agency website states that ‘this collection contains asylum policy guidance used by UK Visas and Immigration to make decisions on asylum applications’ (GOV.UK, 2024). Thus, APIs bridge the gap between law and practice as they translate complex legal terms into accessible information for asylum assessors (Sweeney, 2009).

The key Home Office policy document was the API on ‘Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims’. There are two APIs for assessing credibility. One is offered for claims lodged prior to 28 June 2022 (Home Office 2022a), and one for asylum claims lodged after 28 June 2022 (Home Office 2022b), the latter reflecting the changes under the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA). These documents were the focus because they explicitly discuss how credibility is assessed and include information for the specific Convention grounds such as race, religion, PSG, political and nationality. I also included an analysis of the API on ‘Asylum Interviews’ (Home Office, 2022c) specifically, page 49, which discusses ‘questions about the basis of the claim’: religion or belief, religious conversion and apostasy. This guidance informs Home Office bureaucrats on how to carry out effective asylum interviews.

Additionally, the Home Office produces several CPINS (Home Office, 2024). Employees of the Home Office write these documents with the purpose of providing guidance on human rights issues in a selection of countries. They often refer to wider grey literature on human rights issues, which governmental and non-governmental organisations cover. The country guidance notes are often the first resource bureaucrats will draw on when making decisions on claims (Panjwani, 2023). Purposive sampling was used to identify the relevant CPIN documents. I initially read all the available country documents and selected the country documents that were most relevant to the study. I searched for content on apostasy, blasphemy, atheism, and non-religious persecution. This resulted in Bangladesh, Iran, Iraq and Pakistan being selected to be analysed through content analysis. Table 5 displays the Home Office documents which were chosen for analysis, the context of the document (version and relevant updates), and a brief overview of the key sections identified as relevant to the research.

4.9.3. Content analysis

Content analysis of qualitative data sets contains a different set of techniques for the systematic analysis of texts to analyse content, the themes and core ideas found in documents (Drisko and Maschi, 2015). Overall, qualitative content analysis is used as a systematic method for searching for particular knowledge and how it is described within documents (Kohlbacher, 2006; Morgan, 1993). There were two approaches used to analyse the content of the documents. As the documents required a low level of interpretation of the texts, content analysis was employed as the analysis method. One approach was to read the full documents and inductively code for relevant themes, terms and definitions which appear in the texts (Krippendorff, 2019). This step was descriptive as it aimed to understand how non-religious persecution was formulated in the texts. This descriptive level coding was used to make sense of the content in the documents as it relates to themes of apostasy or blasphemy persecution, and it was used to identify core consistencies and meanings (Patton, 2002). Inductive coding was used due to an exploratory approach to document analysis (Mayring, 2000), which was useful to maintain the original wording and use within the original data (Drisko and Maschi, 2015). I summarised quotes and highlighted the relevant sections of the documents, which could aid in exploring the research questions and objectives (Schreier, 2012) seen in Tables 4 and 5.

At the international level, documents were analysed to see the extent to which non-religious and apostasy persecution was included or discussed and to what extent the guidance provides information on these claims. For Home Office policies, content analysis was used to track change and development of guidance, such as how asylum assessment procedures changed under the NABA, where language was altered to provide more clarity on non-religious inclusion. It was not possible to track all the policy changes due to documents not being publicly available. In my analysis, I considered the following when examining the documents: purpose, origin of the document, and how a given document constructed guidance relating to apostasy asylum cases. The second approach employed conceptual content analysis to quantify the number of times a word is used in a document (Laurence and Margolis, 2003). In NVivo, I searched for terms relating broadly to 'non-religion'. These included: 'agnostic', 'apostasy', 'atheist', 'belief', 'blasphemy', 'humanist', 'non-religious', 'nontheist'. These key terms were selected because they give a broad conceptualisation of identities and persecution the non-religious may face. To make comparisons to other similar types of asylum claims, I searched the key terms 'gender', 'sexuality', 'conversion' and 'religion'.

4.9.4. Legal document analysis

Table 4 provides a structured summary of the legal documents analysed in this study. It details their classification, titles, contextual backgrounds, and analytical findings. It incorporates descriptive content analysis, which identifies key features, patterns and themes. It also includes the conceptual content analysis, which examines the quantity of specific concepts and ideas. This approach enables a systematic and nuanced examination of the documents' content and their broader significance.

Type of document	Document title	Context	Analysis
Legal	Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)	United Nations General Assembly, 1948 8 pages – 30 articles	Descriptive Content Analysis • Article 1 • Article 2 • Article 18 • Article 19
			Conceptual Content Analysis Belief (3) Religious (1)
Legal	The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)	26 pages – 53 articles Developed most of the rights already enshrined in the UDHR, making them effectively binding on States that have ratified them. Together with the UDHR, the Covenants (including ICESCR) comprise the International Bill of Human Rights.	Descriptive Content Analysis • Article 18 • Article 19 • Article 27
			Conceptual Content Analysis Belief (4) Religion (3)

Legal	General Comment No. 22: The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1993 11 paragraphs. Human Rights Committee offers its General Comment to interpret the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 18 of the ICCPR). Emphasises the broad scope of the freedom of thought and clarifies that article 18 protects all forms of religion, including the right not to profess any religion or belief.	Descriptive Content Analysis Articles 1-11
			Conceptual Content Analysis Atheistic (2) Belief (39) Non-religious (1) Religious (16)
Legal	Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees	The UNHCR: The UN Refugee Agency. 1951/1967 56 pages. The only amendment is the 1967 Protocol, which removed the geographic and temporal limits of the 1951 Convention. The Conventions scope was widened through the Protocol, giving the convention universal coverage.	Descriptive Content Analysis • Article 1A • Article 4
			Conceptual Content Analysis Religious (1) Sexuality (1)

Legal	Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status and Guidelines on International Protection	The Handbook is intended to guide government officials, judges, practitioners, as well as UNHCR colleagues in applying the refugee definition (2019, p.9) Part one: discusses criteria for determining refugee status and elaborates on the terms used in the Convention e.g., ‘persecution’, ‘discrimination’. It gives a general analysis of each Convention ground. Part two: puts forward procedures for determining refugee status such as, establishing the facts and benefit of the doubt. Section: Guidelines on International Protection No. 6 ‘Religion-Based Refugee Claims’: • Does not offer definition of religion • Aims to provide guidelines to decision-makers to assist in asylum determination cases	Descriptive Content Analysis • Section 3: “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion” (2019, p.23) - Section C. Religion (2019, p.23) • Section: Guidelines on International Protection No. 6 ‘Religion-Based Refugee Claims’ (2019, p.123) Conceptual Content Analysis • Apostasy (2) • Atheism (1); Atheistic (2) • Belief (70) • Blasphemy (2) • Coercion (7) • Nontheist (1) • Conversion (18) • Gender (333) • Religion (164) • Sexuality/Sexual (290)

Table 4. Legal documents selected and analysed using content analysis.

4.9.5. Home Office document analysis

The following table presents a summary of the documents analysed from the Home Office, detailing the title, contextual relevance, and analytical insights. The analysis applies a dual approach: descriptive content analysis, which identifies key themes, features, and patterns, and conceptual content analysis, which explores the presence and relationships of specific concepts within the documents. This methodological framework provides a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the content and context of the Home Office documents.

Type of document	Document title	Context	Analysis
Home Office: Asylum Policy Instruction	Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims lodged before 28 June 2022	Version 10.0 This was likely to be the guidance in use for asylum applicants who applied before June 2022 (note, there were previous versions at use, but I do not have access to these) Published for Home Office staff on 28 June 2022.	Descriptive Analysis - This guidance is for decision-makers on how to assess credibility of asylum claims that were made before the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 came into force on 28 June 2022 - The main elements of assessing credibility are, which are specifically relevant for the non-religious are: obtaining evidence and the burden of proof (p.18), use of CPIN information (p.24), religious conversion and apostasy (p.28)
			Conceptual Content Analysis Belief (39) Conversion (21) Religious (30)

Home Office: Asylum Policy Instruction	Assessing credibility and refugee status in asylum claims lodged on or after 28 June 2022	Version 11.0 This guidance explains how to consider asylum claims that were made on or after the Nationality and Borders Act (2022). Published for Home Office staff on 28 June 2022.	Descriptive Analysis • Overall, the guidance for assessing credibility has remained the same as the guidance for ‘pre-2022’ asylum claims • There are two significant changes to the policy that is relevant to non-religious cases: 1. Updated terminology, ‘where appropriate, for example to reflect this guidance applies to religious and non-religious beliefs’ (p.7) 2. Asylum decision-making changed into a ‘two-stage test’ for assessing well-founded fear of persecution due to changes under the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act
			Conceptual Content Analysis • Agnostic (1) • Apostasy (5) • Atheistic (1); Atheist (1) • Belief (39) • Conversion (20) • Gender (37) • Non-religious (1) • Religious (33) • Sexuality/sexual (35)
Home Office: Asylum Policy Instruction	Asylum Interview	Version 9: June 2022 Published for Home Office staff, ‘This guidance tells you how to carry out effective asylum interviews to obtain relevant	Descriptive Analysis Relevant sections: • Religion or belief (p.49) • Religious conversion and apostasy (p.49)

		information to establish, as far as possible, whether the claimant meets the requirements for an asylum or human rights claim to succeed. It applies to any member of staff conducting a substantive asylum interview' (2022, p.6)	• Christian converts (p.51)
			Conceptual Content Analysis • Apostasy (4) • Belief (27) • Blasphemy (2) • Conversion (13) • Gender (39) • Non-religious (3) • Religious (24) • Sexuality/sexual (44)
Home Office: Country guidance information	UK Government country policy and information notes	Countries identified to include information of non-religious, atheists or mention of apostasy or blasphemy. Bangladesh: Includes information on the persecution faced by atheists. Iran: Document is about Christians; it includes a section on apostasy and proselytising, but it is mostly used in a Christian conversion context. Iraq: Includes information on the persecution faced by atheists. Pakistan: Does not discuss in detail non-religious persecution but does discuss blasphemy and apostasy laws and punishments. Focuses on Christians and Muslims.	Bangladesh: 'Religious minorities and atheists' (Version 3, 2022) Descriptive Analysis • Section 4.6 Blasphemy/religious defamation • Section 5.5 Atheists and secularists • Section 6.5 Atheists Conceptual Content Analysis • Agnostic (1) • Apostasy (4) • Atheist (44) • Belief (23) • Blasphemy (23) • Conversion (17) • Gender (4) • Humanist (6) • Non-religious (1) • Religious (315)

				• Sexuality (1)
			Iran: ‘Christians and Christian Converts’ (Version 7, 2022)	Descriptive Analysis 3.2: Apostasy and proselytising Conceptual Content Analysis • Apostasy (14) • Belief (5) • Conversion (11) • Gender (1) • Religious (75) • Sexuality (2)
			Iraq: ‘Religious Minorities’ (Version 3, 2021)	Descriptive Analysis Section 7: Atheists Conceptual Content Analysis • Apostasy (2) • Atheists (29) • Belief (12) • Blasphemy (3) • Coercion (1) • Conversion (18) • Humanist (1) • Nontheist (1) • Religious (177) • Sexuality (7)
			Pakistan: ‘Christian and Christian Converts’ (Version 4, 2021)	Descriptive Analysis Section 5.3 Apostasy Section 5.4 Blasphemy Section 6.6 Arrests, convictions and imprisonment under blasphemy laws

				7.1 Accusations of Blasphemy
				Conceptual Content Analysis • Apostasy (22) • Atheists (2) • Belief (14) • Blasphemy (152) • Conversion (64) • Gender (5) • Non-religious (1) • Religious (248) • Sexuality (2)

Table 5. Home Office documents selected and analysed using content analysis

4.10. Researcher Positionality

Researcher positionality is an important factor to consider due to the role it plays in shaping methodological positioning and analytical strategies. As the philosophical underpinnings of this study orientate from a social constructivist approach, the data collected has been interpreted from the social construction perspectives of the researcher. Positionality has been defined as the researcher's opinions, values, beliefs and social background. These factors can be shaped by political backdrop, religion or belief, gender, sexuality, geographical location, race and class (Berger, 2015). Acknowledging positionality allows for a 'continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation... and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome' (Berger, 2015, p.220). This is because the researcher's values and subjectivities can play a role in the construction of knowledge (Sánchez-Ayala, 2012). This section will discuss the methodological and epistemological considerations relating to my position as a researcher and how I navigated researching apostate refugees. There are three broad steps to reveal positionality which, will be discussed throughout this section: acknowledging personal positions that may influence research, situating the researcher in relation to participants and locating the researcher in relation to the research context and process (Manohar *et al.*, 2017, p. 3).

Researchers have discussed positionality in relation to the insider-outsider divide (Best, 2003; Kusow, 2003). The outsider researcher within migration research is sometimes argued to have colonial connotations (Agyeman, 2008; Amelina, 2021). In migration research, this division typically consists of an insider researcher who is a member of the migrant group under study. In contrast, an outsider researcher is a member of the majority population in the country of settlement (Carling, Erdal and Ezzati, 2014, p. 36). The insider may share similar cultural, linguistic, ethnic, national and religious heritage and thus carries advantages (Ganga and Scott, 2006). On the other hand, the outsider positionality can pose particular challenges, such as rapport building and an imbalance in power (Botterill, 2015). Thus, migration scholars have argued that researchers critically reflect individual positionality and reflexivity to overcome some of these challenges.

As a white, female researcher based in the UK with no experience of forced migration, I believe my positioning both facilitated and obstructed the research in various ways. As an outsider to the refugee research group, and outside the professional realm of human rights advocates, I

navigated my position as a researcher with care. For instance, as a PhD researcher exploring asylum decision-making in the UK alongside a collaborative partner, it was crucial not to be perceived by refugee participants as working for the collaborative partner or the British government. This is because being perceived in such a manner might have influenced individuals' decisions to participate in the study. While navigating my role during research interviews with refugees, I would occasionally convey an understanding and express disappointment regarding participants' negative experiences with the system, all while maintaining a professional stance. Across both groups of participants, I ensured that I made my position as a researcher clear. My role was thus, 'not *studying them*, as participants, but the *asylum decision-making itself*' (Cintra de Oliveira Tavares, 2023, p. 342 emphasis in original). This was important because I wanted to avoid people from a refugee background taking part in the process if they believed it would impact their claim or refugee status.

My role as a woman in the research process also may have influenced how the research was conducted. Similar to other female researchers, I found male participants to be 'approachable, friendly and eager to share their stories' (Kusek and Smiley, 2014, p. 160). Male participants were eager to share their experiences and express their opinions on the asylum process. This is consistent with other research that suggests men can be more comfortable sharing their personal experiences with female researchers than males (Vähäsantanen and Saarinen, 2013, p. 495). At times, I found my position as a woman made it difficult to interject narratives with questions to stay on track with the semi-structured interview guide and to draw interviews to an end. It was important to give participants the time to express their thoughts, though some interviews exceeded 2.5 hours which became too lengthy. Rapport was established more easily with female participants and the narratives elicited were different. Discussions with the female participants differed from those with the males, as they focused more on the gendered dynamics of their experiences, such as the persecution and marginalisation they encountered due to being women in their society of origin.

As a young researcher, my age influenced how I was perceived and the rapport I built. For instance, I quickly established a connection with younger participants, who shared their experiences of becoming apostates, including discussions about university, attending parties, listening to specific music, and living in various towns or cities in the UK, as well as family dynamics—topics to which I could relate. I also felt rapport developing with older participants, as they mentioned having children of a similar age, among other things. Therefore, I believed

that being a young female helped me appear non-threatening when discussing sensitive topics, fostering a comfortable environment for the research participants.

Although I was raised Catholic, I identify as non-religious now and mostly agnostic. Whilst my non-religious beliefs draw similarities with participants, I have not experienced trauma or discrimination for my identity and thus resonated more as an outsider. I found being an outsider in comparison to the apostates was a strength, as participants would openly criticise their previous religion without being concerned that I would be offended. I felt that participants had to explain their thoughts that relate to Islam in more detail to me, for example, in terms like halal or haram. As a ‘cultural outsider’ (Manohar *et al.*, 2017), I was perhaps able to gain a deeper understanding as participants tended to elaborate further for my benefit. Some participants inquired about my beliefs, which I felt comfortable sharing. Consequently, I occasionally engaged in ‘strategic self-disclosure’ to help build rapport and address power imbalances (Abell *et al.*, 2006). Interestingly, there was an expectation that I was from a Christian background, as some participants would use the practices or behaviours of Christianity as an example to explain Islamic practices to me. It also led one participant who was struggling with translating the word for ‘baptism’ to me, in which he described the practice and asked me, “Don’t you know?”

Overall, I aimed to address the potential ignorance of my positionality in understanding participants’ experiences. I achieved this by developing an interview schedule and sending it to participants before the interview to gather feedback on the questions. The participants who had an asylum case file with the collaborative partner also contributed to my understanding. I included space for participants to share anything else that I had not covered in the schedule. Participants were given the option to receive their transcripts back to correct any mistakes or make additions. I consistently reflected on my own position and how it influenced the research process, using a fieldwork diary to note my thoughts and feelings about how the interviews went and how the researcher’s role may have impacted the results. It is not unnoticed that my positionality could have influenced participants’ narratives, so ensuring ethical reflexivity allowed me to take a ‘continuous process of critical scrutiny and interpretation’ (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004, p. 275).

4.11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were rigorously considered prior to starting the project and continued throughout the research process. Key ethical principles were adhered to for the three different data sets: participants from a refugee background, human rights advocates, and documents. Additional measures were taken to protect the partner's identity and interests. This included omitting identifying details, ensuring informed consent processes accounted for collective as well as individual participation, and maintaining regular check-ins throughout the project. The partner was consulted on how their involvement was represented, to align with their preferences regarding anonymity and attribution. This section will outline the primary ethical considerations that were addressed for each source of data and how the relationship with the collaborative partnership upheld ethical integrity.

Ethics are particularly important in research where potentially 'vulnerable' participants are included, such as refugees or asylum seekers. Prior to conducting research, I considered the ethical dilemmas involved with this group, including but not limited to creating safe research environments, doing no harm and preventing victimisation (Cintra de Oliveira Tavares, 2023). Organisations that work with refugees have issued ethical practices and guidelines for conducting research with displaced people. The guidelines followed in this research consisted of the Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice, which the Refugee Studies Centre adopted at the University of Oxford (Refugee Studies Centre (Refugee Studies Centre, 2007) as well as the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM, 2018), which applies these guidelines specifically for forced migration.

I translated some of these guidelines into practice through this research's methodological and practice choices. For example, throughout the research, I aimed to create a comfortable environment for participants to disclose personal information to me, balance any power dynamics, and separate my identity from that of the collaborative partner or government and legal officials. An example of this included deciding on the most suitable interview location. There were many conversations with the collaborative partner surrounding this. The collaborative partner initially suggested the interviews take place in their office based in London. Upon visiting this site, I decided that the open-glass offices would not provide enough privacy for participants. I also wanted to distance myself from the collaborative partner to ensure my position as a 'researcher' was clear. Travelling to London would also not be accessible for all participants, as several were located in Northern cities. Thus, I made the

decision to offer online or in-person interviews in a location chosen by the participant to mitigate these issues.

Additionally, I aimed to avoid undue intrusion into the lives of participants. In recognition of the fact that individuals from a refugee background are often required to retell their life story of persecution multiple times and to different actors: immigration officials, legal professionals, service providers and decision-makers (Clark-Kazak, 2017). As I discuss in the data analysis chapters, refugee participants construct their narratives to meet the aims of the asylum procedure. I felt it was important to allow refugees space and time to relay their personal narratives in a way that they would remember or recall their experiences rather than in ways the credibility assessment calls for. Therefore, I employed ‘autonomy’ as a key principle (IASFM, 2018, p.2), which upholds respect and promotes the rights of people to make their own decisions about their lives. Thus, the interview was an opportunity for participants to make their own decisions about how they would explain their narratives.

Within the interview, I was aware that there was a risk of re-traumatisation for participants through the recalling of sensitive events. Therefore, I gathered verbal and written consent. All participants had to sign a consent form to participate, outlining these risks. Researchers have critiqued consent forms to be used for some communities, such as those with low literacy rates or those with mistrust in signing documents (Block *et al.*, 2013). To overcome this dilemma, researchers have argued for an ‘iterative’ approach, which involves gaining consent at multiple stages of the research process (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway, 2007). To follow this approach, I sought verbal consent at multiple stages, in stage one and stage two interviews. Written consent was collected through emails when scheduling interviews and when sending transcript copies of the interviews. I also made myself available for questions for all the participants; this included in initial emails, prior to and after the commencing of interviews, as well as continued communication after interviews had finished.

The asylum case files of refugee participants, held by the collaborative partner, served as an elicitation tool. Key ethical considerations included informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and ownership. I first explained how the asylum case file would be used in the interviews, then requested explicit permission for its use. While some participants agreed, others chose not to share their information, indicating that informed consent was achieved. I ensured that no identifying details from the documents were included in the data analysis,

maintaining confidentiality regarding specific events. Considering the files belong to the collaborative partner, I established a data sharing agreement, which was reviewed and signed, and is discussed further in the final section of this section.

All participants had the right to confidentiality and anonymity. To ensure this, I issued pseudonyms to those who wished to remain anonymous. This was important because many participants from a refugee background were applying for their leave to remain whilst one was still navigating the asylum appeal process. The right to remain in the UK is precarious, and this right can be revoked at any time in particular circumstances, making the data collected in this project potentially risky (Clark-Kazak, 2017). Moreover, participants also reflected on social and political circumstances in their country of origin, which potentially posed a risk if identities were exposed. Thus, the exact dates of asylum claims have not been included. Instead, the year of the initial asylum has been included. Countries of origin were not anonymised, as their identities would still be protected with the other measures, and it was important to discuss the specific social and political situations relating to the countries of origins.

The ethical considerations for human rights advocates were also considered. There are specific ethical issues involved with the study of elite groups (Lillie and Ayling, 2021). The main considerations included the risk of damage to social standing or reputation. This was the case because some advocate job roles could potentially be identifiable due to the small number of people working in the industry (Alvesalo-Kuusi and Whyte, 2018). To mitigate this, participants were given pseudonyms and job roles or organisations were anonymised. Some advocates chose to waive anonymity; thus, some were named in the research. In these cases, I explained the potential risk of harm and I employed an iterative approach to ask advocates on multiple occasions if they would still like to waive anonymity. It was understood that discussions of religion, belief and persecution could have been sensitive to all participants interviewed in this study. Due to the daily experience of working on these sensitive topics, the advocates were well-versed on these topics. Thus, these participants are not considered vulnerable, though it was anticipated that discussing sensitive topics could cause emotional distress, which was outlined in the participant information sheet and consent form. The researcher ensured to take notice of advocates' behaviour in the interviews, and I was prepared to end the interview in the event of distress (though this did not occur).

The project received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield; thus, the institution's ethical guidelines were adhered to for all participants. This encompassed an information sheet that detailed the aims, process, outcomes, and potential risks involved. An information sheet was created for each participant group (see appendices I and J). The information sheet included the contact details of the project supervisors and the Head of Department for any concerns or complaints. Participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to withdraw at any time. Data was stored securely on a password-protected computer. A consent form was mandatory for all participants to sign in order to take part. The consent forms confirmed understanding of the research's purpose, explained how their data would be utilised, outlined their right to withdraw, and for those with asylum case files, included permission for accessing these files.

Researchers must access state bureaucracies or gain proximity to policymakers or caseworkers (Cleton and Meier, 2023) to study asylum assessment procedures. However, as access to the bureaucrats was not possible, knowledge of human rights and asylum procedures was accessed through the study of documents. Document analysis was subject to ethical considerations. For example, I considered whether solely relying on documents as a source of data raised issues of biased selectivity (Bowen, 2009). I mitigated this by selecting the most relevant and essential human rights laws and policies that ascribe to FoRB or discuss decision-making practices. Documents were used through a triangulation technique to supplement the data in interviews with different actors, thus strengthening the data collection by drawing on other sources. Moreover, the documents used in this study were publicly available, so the ethical risks of revealing data were minimised. Documents were analysed at a descriptive level, taking note of the content at face value rather than making interpretations of the text and thus, studying bureaucracies which impact public policy, should arguably be accessible to social scientists because the information is of public interest (Nader, 1972). As access to employees of the Home Office was not possible, the use of publicly available documents was agreed to be justifiable.

Additional ethical measures were taken due to the collaboration with the human rights organisation on this project. Prior to beginning research, the partner was consulted on how their role was to be represented. The partner organisation requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of their work and context as well as the limitations on their asylum service provision, of which concerns were raised at risk of putting undue stress on their asylum support. This included omitting identifying details, ensuring informed consent processes accounted for collective as

well as individual participation, and maintaining regular check-ins with representatives of the organisation. In response, all identifying details, including organisational name, personnel, location-specific references, and contextual clues, were removed or generalised in all publications and thesis materials. I also developed a safeguarding and data management plan agreed upon with the collaborative partner. The safeguarding plan considered the risks of harm to members of partner organisations, including the discussion of sensitive topics and reputational risks. These risks are mitigated by establishing clear responsibilities for reporting incidents or concerns and agreeing to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the collaborative partner upon request. A data management plan was also created and approved by the collaborative partner, which outlined how asylum case files (owned by the partner) would be shared securely through Google Drive and subsequently anonymised in protected University of Sheffield storage, but only if the participant consented to sharing.

4.12. Conclusion

This chapter provides an outline of the study's methodological and epistemological positioning, along with ethical considerations. This research takes a qualitative approach, with research questions crafted to address existing gaps in the literature. As discussed throughout the chapter, employing a qualitative research approach is the main way of collecting data that provides an analysis of apostasy asylum claims in the UK. The selected methods to adequately explore these questions include interviews with human rights advocates, interviews with individuals from refugee backgrounds, the use of elicitation techniques, and document analysis. Data collection stages and triangulation were implemented to create a robust research plan aimed at understanding how apostasy is transformed into a concept to be adjudicated within asylum processes. I adopted a flexible research strategy, continuously reflecting on the research's progression and the data collected. This allowed me to consider ethical implications and my role as a researcher, making necessary adjustments along the way. The next three chapters provide an in-depth discussion of the findings from the analysis of the varied narratives and data sets collected.

Chapter 5: Becoming Non-Religious: Worldview and identity construction

5.1. Introduction

This chapter focuses on the narratives of apostates who constructed non-religious identities as they moved away from Islam. Before moving on to understanding how the asylum assessment process handles apostate claims, it is essential to consider how non-religious identities are constructed and formed from the perspectives of those with lived experience. This is important because although official statistics are lacking, researchers suggest that in European asylum bureaucracies, the most common occurrences of religion-based claims are for individuals persecuted for converting to another religion. This is mostly understood as converts from Islam to Christianity (Kraft, 2013; Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021; Stene, 2020). Thus, non-religious asylum seekers operate outside the ‘norm’, and their paths to apostasy are unique. To comprehend the lived experience of apostasy, we must understand the contextual structures that shape these subjectivities. While each participant’s narrative is distinctive, this chapter presents their journeys through four thematic threads, influenced by the theoretical perspectives of lived (non-)religion: life course and religious upbringing in everyday life, intersectional identities, ‘unlearning’, and ‘learning’ lived non-religion in the UK. In these sections, I examine how the participants performed and (re)negotiated religious practices, beliefs, and rituals in their daily lives. I argue that the processes of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’ (non-)religion are essential for understanding the journey to apostasy.

This chapter offers a conceptualisation of non-religious identity construction through the narratives of refugees (n=12) interviewed in this research. By applying the lens of lived non-religion, this chapter will expand from a broad, organisational view that tends to offer a generalised understanding of non-religion. The focus on the everyday forms of non-religiosity can aid in drawing out expressions or practices that may otherwise be overlooked. Through this lens, I conceptualise the construction of apostate identities as multidimensional, intersectional and non-linear as they experience (re)negotiation of identity through social relations and contexts. This understanding complicates the standard religious/secular divide, adding nuance to the asylum determination process, which evaluates credibility within a framework of logical narratives. The first section of this chapter will discuss the participants' life course and how religion has been entangled with their upbringing by drawing out elements of lived religion,

such as performance, embodiment, and materiality, which amounted to emotional responses about their religiosity. The second section discusses how non-religious identities are formed in relation to intersectional characteristics such as gender, class background and political opinion. Section three outlines the participants' experiences of 'unlearning' religious behaviours and practices and the gradual 'learning' of non-religious ones. In the final section of the chapter, I conclude by considering the diverse ways participants described their non-religious identities and navigated belonging in the UK.

5.2. Life Course and Lived Religion: Religious upbringing in everyday life

It is generally considered that identity is best understood as a process of 'becoming' rather than purely 'being' (Jenkins, 2014). Thus, this section shares participants' narratives of their religious upbringing over the life course to have a greater understanding of the social, political and cultural expectations that governed their identities in relation to religion (Lee, 2012b). This is because 'a religious life is inseparable from the wider course of life which involves different pursuits and interests, different emotions and experiences, varying periods and degrees of engagement, and complex motivations' (Schielke and Debevec, 2012, p. 8). A lived religion approach can aid in understanding how religious identities are constructed in participants' everyday lives; as Orsi (2005) argued, it is through the practices of an experiencing body that the sacred becomes real. Although this section articulates participants' stories through a life course approach, the experiences of navigating religion and becoming non-religious were not linear nor straightforward. Identities are formed through cultural processes, understood here as 'dynamic social processes operating in contested terrains' (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 93). Thus, this section discusses how identities are constructed through spatial and contextual dimensions, which are suited to be understood as a process that is (re)negotiated over time (Anthias, 2006), rather than fixed.

In the context of this research, the practices of religion were fundamental in the societies where participants grew up. Religious identities are constructed through day-to-day interactions through participants' social realities (Beaman and Tomlins, 2015, p. 13), and thus, religion surfaces in everyday activities and practices. All interviewees reported on their experiences of being brought up in relation to their religion, their Muslim identity being shaped by their

everyday lives, and vice versa. Ayaz and Ahmed (see Chapter 4 for participant vignettes) were both raised in Pakistan and were in their late 20s when they claimed asylum. They described their upbringing in relation to religious practice:

Multiple times in the evening you go to the mosque and after every prayer you just talk about Islam and pray. I was taught Islam at least three or four hours every single day in my life from the time... let's say seven til I was 18. I had a pretty clear picture of what Muhammad was, what Islam meant and what Allah's Commandments are outright. Everything is laid out to me for 12 years every single day, and then we go to do the pilgrims, the big Hajj. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

I used to have to go to Mosque and pray, I used to wear washed clothes before I go there, I need to be in certain frame of mind and I need to be in certain hygienic condition to go to the mosque, to pray and I cannot go against any of that and it was like I was doing something against my own will, I was being forced to do all that. (Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

In a different context, Raliya was raised in Northern Nigeria. She was in her 40s when she claimed asylum and is currently (at the time of writing) going through the appeals process. Raliya also spoke of the everyday practices of religion and routines of prayer:

You're supposed to understand and pray five times a day like, I hate the prayer part. Imagine having to do this five times a day. The process itself, to do the ablution it takes forever because for every hand you're washing or what you are since you are reciting things. It's too much for one to handle, and then you are being told that without this prayer, you're going to hell, so imagine the trauma you want to keep up with this prayer, but it's just too much in a day that you have to repeat it the next day. (Raliya, date of asylum 2023, aged 40s, COO Nigeria)

These narratives show how religion is performed in everyday life and manifested in the mundanities of daily life. Religion is performative and can be illuminated through praying numerous times a day, rituals of sanitising, attending Islamic lessons, and collective worship in the mosque. Rituals are bodily practices enacted to participate in their community. However, for the participants, practising these rituals turned into a negative experience of religion. Applying a lived religion lens instead of focusing on organisational formations shows how religion is embodied in the actions participants conduct in their everyday lives (Ammerman, 2021). Whilst much of the embodied experience of religion, such as singing, dancing or praying, has been considered the production of a sense of community (e.g., McGuire, 2008), this research argues these religious experiences constituted a negative experience for the individuals who took part in this research.

The everyday lens of lived religion reveals how, in participants' views, religion was ubiquitous in societies and their upbringing. Thus, opportunities to explore non-religious worldviews were more difficult to access. This is highlighted by Hassan, originally from the Maldives, who said:

So, when you are brought up in that kind of society, there is very little room for exploration within religion, other than exploration of Islam. I was born and raised to a Muslim family as is pretty much everyone. (Hassan)

This is reiterated by Nadia, from Saudi Arabia, who described 'only a specific version of Islam was practised there. Sunni Islam, basically. So, for a long time, I didn't question the faith' (Nadia). Due to the all-encompassing nature of religion growing up, this led most participants to first explore and express their non-religiosity in the UK. These findings shed light on the non-chronological stages of apostasy, as participants would continue to maintain religious practices in their country of origin because that is how they were raised, despite having doubts or no longer holding sincere beliefs.

The broader literature on identity formation shows that identities are shaped by both internal and external factors (Peek, 2005). This was particularly clear in this research, where participants shaped their identities through their individual perceptions as well as through societal dynamics. In terms of societal processes of identity construction, participants shared how their culture was entangled with religion, which they believed determined expected behaviour. Raliya, growing up in the northern part of Nigeria, reflected how different the religious practices were compared to southern Nigeria. Islam is the majority religion in northern Nigeria, and she believed cultural and religious expectations were linked. Raliya described how her religion was both shaped and constrained by the culture of her society. She explained:

Women especially are beginning to reject some things when you say things like a woman is not supposed to go out, women want to go out, women want to have a business, women wants to study, so there's these debates that maybe this is our culture because if you look at other countries that are Muslims, they don't really cage their women, I'm not even going to take it far even within Nigeria in southern Nigeria. We have women that are Muslims, but women are very free there. So, in Nigeria, Northern Nigeria, we don't even know what this is. It's mixed up. (Raliya, date of asylum 2023, aged 40s, COO Nigeria)

Raliya believed her positioning as a Muslim woman in her society was structured around learning Islam:

It's like I never really had a good childhood because all we ever did was constructed by my dad. You come back from school, we have a very big classroom in the house when you come back from school. The Malam comes to us [...] the Islamic teachers. They come to the house and teach you till evening time. You have to read this Qur'an often and we don't even know what the Qur'an is saying. We don't understand Arabic but you are reading this stuff in Arabic and I can literally just read the Qur'an off the top of my head. (Raliya)

Raliya thus discussed how she formed her non-religious identity in relation to cultural and gender expectations, which will be explored in the following section. For Raliya, reciting the Qur'an represented a specific performative practice connected to religion. She regularly engaged in this activity and could recite the Qur'an from memory, even though she did not comprehend Arabic.

Hassan, from the Maldives, also reflected on the cultural dimensions of religion in his country of origin. He explained that whilst Islamic studies are part of the national curriculum, families were expected to send children to 'village teachers' before they officially start school. He said:

The more cultural thing is that when you're young, you would go to this village teacher in a way more like, traditional village teacher to study there before you start school before your six, you would go to this village teacher. And she would teach you to read and write the Qur'an. (Hassan)

Through a lived religion lens, these narratives show that societal and cultural expectations differ from organisation formations of religion. In Orsi's (2010) research on lived religion, he argues rituals, gestures and postures, praying and the words spoken hold specific meanings in the inner life of a community's culture. Thus, this lens differentiates some of the practices derived from organised religion from the cultural expectations that have developed outside the structures of organised religion.

Additionally, regarding the wider cultural expectations of following religious practices, participants described 'performing' the role of a Muslim in their communities. Nazim shared his experience of attending a school in Iran where religion was important, 'I had to dress open, close my collar and everything, look like a proper Muslim boy'. Similarly, Hassan explained 'I was brought up a goody two shoes Muslim boy and I fully embodied that goody two shoes'. Both Nazim and Hassan were aware of the performative aspects of their belief, and they knew how to portray their Muslim identity despite having private, internal doubts regarding religion.

Wider theories on identity construction maintain that individuals select and negotiate the ways they are presented (e.g., Chatman, Eccles and Malanchuk, 2005). Thus, Day's (2010) concept of 'performative belief' can also be applied here, which would suggest that, for the participants in this study, religious rituals are 'forms of identity that actors strategically create in order to adapt to and integrate themselves into various social situations' (2010, p.10). Therefore, this research found that the construct of religious identities was linked to cultural and social expectations.

Further research highlights that an increasing number of people associate their religious identity with their cultural background, even if they hold no supernatural beliefs (Voas and Day, 2010). The culturally religious can be described as:

A group that has a kind of default religious identity as a result of their family membership, but which does or believes very little that they consider as manifesting that religion, and when they do perform religion, it may even be largely devoid of religious belief or commitment. (Beyer, 2014, p.141)

Beyer (2014) situates culturally religious individuals as part of a 'punctuated continuum' of religion and non-religion. This suggests that within the construct of an identity, there are varying degrees of atheism and religiosity fluctuating through elements of spirituality and culture (ibid, p.140). The notion of the culturally religious is complexified in this research as the participants in this study felt they were culturally expected to be religious, thus removing agency in their identification. Agency is an important concept in a lived religion lens as it explains how experiences are constructed in the everyday. Agency and acting with agency are interactive and negotiated within the community. Thus, agency is always bound to social, cultural or political contexts (Katajala-Peltomaa and Toivo, 2022). In this study, there were cultural expectations which controlled how religion was practised in the everyday. Understanding religious identity as shaped by cultural processes shows how individual identities can vary across time or location (Edgell, 2012). In this view, religious identity should be understood as fluid and intersectional through boundaries that are actively made and defended or, at times, blurred and changed (ibid, p.12).

In addition to the social and cultural context in which participants grew up regarding religion, religious teachings and practices were also integrated into the educational institutions of their

countries of origin. Participants reflected on their upbringing in terms of how often they learned about Islam at school:

I basically continued being religious up until I started University because up until that point my parents put me through Qur'an schools rather than other schools that focus on other things being scientific subjects or anything. It was Qur'an all the time, every day, all day. (Nadia)

Likewise, Hassan described:

The Qur'an classes existed basically forever and all the kids were made to go to the Qur'an classes after school and basically, read the Qur'an almost every day. After school, you have to go to Qur'an class... because if you were a parent who didn't do that, people would give you a side eye and why are you being so irreligious? (Hassan)

The frequency of being taught religious subjects and the societal and cultural expectations of religiosity limited contact with worldviews beyond Islam. These narratives also emphasise that the transition from religion to non-religion is non-linear, as it may occur at a particular moment or be part of an ongoing process. Both Nadia and Hassan, although they had developed doubts in their late teens, continued to maintain religious practices and teachings until they left school and embarked on further education, showing that 'doubt is always on the move' (Pelkmans, 2013, p. 13).

In relation to education, participants also reported having to suppress or manage their doubts to avoid confrontation with teachers. Apostates have been particularly described as having 'inquisitiveness, intellectualism, academic engagement, and/or a love of reading' (Zuckerman, 2011, p.174). Participants in this study resonated with these characteristics, and many reported how it was difficult to keep their views private during their time in education, especially when being taught about their religion in definitive terms. Farshad recalled that 'a lot of problems happen for me in a school because from the beginning of this research [into atheism] I started to be more critical'. Nazim described how he had engaged in debates with teachers during this time:

We would have debates with the teacher and it would never go anywhere because at one point there wasn't any logic in the argument anymore and... so they were, for example, make up their logical argument with verses from the Qur'an and saying but that the basis of the argument was that these are God's words. So anything that is in the

Qur'an is absolutely right so we couldn't argue with that. (Nazim, date of asylum 2019, aged 23, COO Iran)

Farshad and Nazim's narratives of school had similarities; they are both from large cities in Iran and reported having some degree of expression or outspokenness towards religion in the home. However, in school, they reported greater difficulties in expressing opinions as there was a risk of being deemed blasphemous. During this time, Nazim experienced 'trouble' for his outspoken views on religion, which he had to suppress to protect his family:

I had trouble in that school, but I was also like someone that I didn't want to cause any troubles for my family or anything. So, it's still trying to keep the status low profile as much as possible. (Nazim)

This was one of the reasons Nazim left Iran to study in the UK, linking his personal views to the development of a non-religious identity. Similarly, Farshad conveyed his aspiration to become a philosopher and his interest in disciplines within the arts and humanities. He believed that the education he received in Iran would hinder him from exploring this aspect of his identity. These narratives also illustrate how some participants faced silencing due to their beliefs, with the threat of being accused of apostasy or blasphemy leading them to keep their non-religious expressions private.

Family households were also a factor of religious identification. Many participants were raised in a religious household where particular traditions were followed. In some cases, this included polygamous families and arranged marriages. Although not all participants had tension with their family regarding religion, many did and described having to conform to the standards set out by the family unit:

It started with simple questions in what we call having two wives, polygamy. Yeah in Islam because my father married an 18 years old girl when I was 12 as a second wife. And as the result of family life, it went so bad, so difficult and always arguing between them. We live together in the same house and situation is worse than I can explain and then it was the first question, why do they execute people for adultery? And they are justified by, we want to keep the family core safe. And it's a strict rule to keep families together. But at the same time, Islam alone allows every man to get married to four wives. It is difficult to handle two wives in the same house with different children. (Murad, date of asylum 2018, aged 36, COO Iran)

Whilst many people worldwide support these religious practices, participants in this research (those who ultimately left their religion) described feeling trapped within the confines of their family.

The majority of participants described being brought up in conservative religious environments where the practices were strictly imposed. However, this was not the case for all participants. As discussed earlier, Nazim and Farshad had a complex upbringing in relation to practising religion. Nazim described his parents as not being religious, and Farshad was able to explore and discuss alternative worldviews within his family. Farshad reflected on a conversation he had with his grandfather:

I can remember that I was discussing the Big Bang with my grandparents, and we had a long conversation. It was very funny. He went to the toilet, went out and said, “I don't care, you can believe everything that you would like and I can believe in my god. Let's watch a movie”. (Farshad, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, COO Iran)

Watching a movie might be seen as an ordinary action in everyday life, but for Farshad, it was a moment of acceptance for his worldview. These accounts show how religious practices and expectations vary between contexts and are related to other aspects of society. A lived religion lens reveals how domains of society overlap, such as culture with religion and family and religion. Thus, (non)-religious identity is shaped by an individual's family background positioned in the life course and social context (Beyer, 2014).

In conclusion, participants' accounts of their upbringing and the influence of religion, particularly Islam, revealed the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they lived. Participants faced varying expectations of religious practices influenced by their country of upbringing and their specific region within that country. This section discussed how identities can be both shaped and constrained by participants' contexts, which underpin their transition to non-religious beliefs whilst acknowledging that these journeys differ widely. Although for many Muslims, the Islamic religion represents peace and harmony, for the participants in this study, performing religiosity was not a choice. This created a dissociation from the body in the everyday, highlighting the importance of religiously influenced perceived connection to one's body (Jacobson *et al.*, 2016). Thus, this chapter delves into everyday religious practices to show some of the ways participants' identity formation was restricted in their countries of origin. Conceptualising identity ‘encourages a focus on how it is a process of being or

becoming that is always fluid, contingent and dependent on historical circumstances, tied to dominant truths and specific versions of history’ (Britton, 2024, p. 31). From a lived religion perspective, whilst everyday religious practices are embedded in traditions, culture and social dynamics, they are not determined by them. Thus, the next section considers another critical aspect of becoming non-religion by examining the intersections of participants’ identity.

5.3. Intersectional Identities: Gender, class and political opinion

The previous section outlined the fragments of participants’ life course that aided in constructing religious identity. This section explores the journey to self-discovery and the construction of a non-religious identity intertwined with other characteristics of participants’ identities. An intersectional approach reveals how there are multiple ways individuals form their identities (Collins, 2009) and shows the dynamics of practising religion in the everyday are often shaped by an individual’s race, class or gender (Ammerman, 2003). In this research, (non)-religious identities had clear links to gender, class and political associations, and how these identities were performed in the everyday constituted the performative aspects of non-religion. Thus, this section will unpack some of these dimensions that shaped participants’ non-religious identity construction.

Some participants shaped their non-religious identity in response to gendered expectations of religiosity in their countries of origin. For instance, in certain societies, there is an expectation for both men and women to marry a partner chosen by their families. This was particularly evident in the narratives of participants from Pakistan (Ahmed, Rashid and Ayaz).

My brother started to say to me... you need to get married, and then they started forcing me and saying you have to do it. You have to get married. I said I don’t have to do it, I know my rights. (Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

For Ahmed, being forced to marry a religious family member would go against his worldview and belief system. Removing himself from the situation of forced marriage followed an ‘outing’ of his non-religious beliefs as his father confronted him. Ahmed recounted, ‘he goes to me “What’s wrong with the religion? You are a Muslim”. I said “No, I’m fucking not.”’ Raliya, from Northern Nigeria, also struggled with the aspect of marriage. She described finally

agreeing because she wanted to leave the family home where she felt ‘caged’ due to religion and cultural expectations (explained earlier):

I really wanted to leave home. I got tired of waiting and so most girls now that's how they just end up accepting the marriage only because they want out of their parents' house because of the strictness and the caging. (Raliya)

The two female participants interviewed for this study discussed the gendered aspects of religious practices which influenced their non-religious identity construction. For Nadia, she expressed how difficult it was to be a woman in a Muslim-majority country due to the male guardianship system:

As a woman you had to wear a hijab every time you went out. I have to do the daily prayers. I wanted to wear nail varnish, but I couldn't, because you need to wash all your body parts for praying. The feeling of being stuck there, being imprisoned in the country. Like if my father went to the police station, and was like, I don't know, Nadia is at this mall, and I'm not happy about it. They bring you back to him. (Nadia)

Nadia described religion as a barrier to expressing herself in society. One example she used to highlight this was the restriction on nail varnish. Although the wearing of nail varnish may seem trivial on the surface, Nadia felt that this restriction demonstrated how deeply rooted the control of her identity was. If she was seen wearing nail varnish, this would be an outward non-religious expression, as it raised suspicion that Nadia was not praying.

Similarly, Raliya also had a battle with grappling with her identity as a woman in relation to her religiosity. She said:

I felt like what is my purpose as a woman? Is that it, to come and just marry and have children and raise them and then they will have their own lives and now it didn't make sense to me. I wanted more, and I was confused as to why am I feeling like that? (Raliya, date of asylum 2023, aged 40s, COO Nigeria)

In her personal experience, she viewed her role as a woman in this society as unequal to a man. She highlighted this with an example, ‘he can marry four women. You can't marry more than one man’. She goes on to say:

I feel like [religion] is just a way to control women. I don't know why they're afraid of women. More about controlling women because if you look at it, what is the religion saying against men? I don't find any in Islam. It's always about the man controlling the

woman. He has the power over the woman. He is supposed to be the ruler like he's supposed to be in control and provide for you. (Raliya)

Thus, in her view, she constructed her non-religious identity as a result of the societal positioning of women and the unequal expectations of men and women. Raliya's motivation for leaving religion and seeking sanctuary in the UK came from a desire to raise her children differently, as she stated, 'I don't want my children to go through this'.

Another gendered aspect of embodying non-religious expression was through narratives of dress. In the societies Raliya and Nadia grew up in, Northern Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, respectively, wearing the hijab was a non-negotiable performance of religion. Nadia described that once in the UK, where she travelled to pursue educational opportunities, taking off the veil was a physical expression of her non-religiosity through the ceasing of certain material religious practices. This is consistent with other research on unveiling, 'unveiling is not only about religion, but particularly about "uncovering their selves"' (van Nieuwkerk, 2021, p. 3).

Nadia also believed her position as a woman influenced how she expressed her non-religiosity when she was in the UK. She explained how she did not experience freedom immediately as she was still under supervision from her relatives. Thus, her experience of becoming non-religious differed from the ways the male participants in this study:

During that year, I was applying for scholarships and trying to find a way and eventually I got it and I came here. It was such a relief, but I didn't get to enjoy freedom completely straight away because my family sent me to the UK deliberately because my sister was coming here to study as well. They demanded that I live in the same building as her to keep an eye on me. (Nadia)

She had to negotiate her identity by continuing to wear religious dress around her family members but described being able to unveil when she was away from them.

The class or educational background of the participants also played a role in the construction and access to non-religious identities. The majority of the participants in this study were from middle-class backgrounds, which gave them the resources to move to the UK to study higher education. This was linked to the construction of their non-religious identity as they described studying in the UK led to greater opportunities for self-discovery. Ayaz commented, 'I come from a good middle-class family where money was never an issue' which led him to embark

on study in the UK. For Nazim, the reason for studying in the UK was a calculated response to wider treatment of non-religious views in Iran due to the political environment at the time which was becoming increasingly hostile towards non-religious expression:

It was a collective decision in the family that I couldn't really keep my mouth shut well and I was getting really frustrated. I was getting into arguments with teachers, and I kept thinking also because, if you want to get a job in Iran for example, or if you want to get a good Uni position, it gets even more intense. You have to actually act like you care about those stuff or just comply with everything. And go to the group prayers, even if you don't actually pray, it's like show yourself and stuff like that. (Nazim, date of asylum 2019, aged 23, COO Iran)

He shared that his family comes from a middle-class background in Iran and thus had the means to move:

If I just didn't belong to that environment and it was getting really bad and at the time, my dad had the money, I had the option, he was like if I can get you a visa to go and I was like, yeah, if you can support me why not use that chance?

As alluded to earlier in this section, educational opportunities in the UK led some participants to discover non-religious worldviews in ways not previously accessible in their countries of origin. For example, Mehdi spoke about how studying in the UK led to having access to YouTube, which was not widely accessible in Iran (at the time). YouTube was a key platform for Mehdi, who explained he had more time to access non-religious related videos, which he correlated with having a good outcome on his asylum claim. In addition to having the freedom to explore a new lifestyle once in the UK, being highly educated is also favourable within the asylum process. Many participants spoke of self-study, being able to advocate for themselves and being knowledgeable about the asylum claims process. These aspects will be explained further in Chapter 7.

The political context in which participants lived was prominent in narratives of their upbringing in relation to religion. Apostasy and blasphemy laws have been argued to be more political than they are religious (Forte, 1994; Rehman, 2010). This rhetoric was strong in some of the views of the participants. For example, Mehdi discussed wanting to oppose an oppressive Islamic regime which was enforced through the government as well as culturally. For Mehdi, it was the inability to question religion as put forward by government and official leaders that made him distance himself from Islam altogether:

It was always a question of mine that how the government and the country pushes us and pressures us about our religious and how we should be converted to Islam and be Muslims and when I went to ask questions about this matter everyone would stop me say that it's not okay to talk about it, to question it, it's taboo and you're just supposed to listen to whatever they say and follow them and this made me to realise I want to be far away from Islam and any religions at all. (Mehdi, date of asylum 2018, aged 46, COO Iran)

Mehdi seemed to have developed his beliefs in response to political Islamic and nationalist regimes; this was the most important part of constructing his beliefs rather than the focus on the existence of God. This type of non-religious belief can be characterised as a type of Freethinking that encompasses secularism, defined as: ‘to criticise dogmas and certain social and political effects of religion, but brackets the question of belief itself’ (Elsässer, 2021, p. 3).

Farshad also discussed the state’s opposition to atheistic beliefs; he found the pressure to conform was mostly enforced by the government. He reflected on a conversation he had with his grandparents where they ‘hadn’t any kind of problem with me becoming or being an atheist’ whilst he had to censor himself at school. Furthermore, Rashid spoke of a government crackdown on non-religious expression. He was extremely concerned about being discovered and so used a pseudonym during his blogging on secular topics. Members of his society were actively encouraged to report others for suspected blasphemous behaviour. He described:

This crackdown happened in Pakistan where they just tracking everyone down, any online bloggers or anyone posting anything on social media. They launched a service, and that service is on the FIA website. Anyone can go and even though take a screenshot of any or maybe of WhatsApp message or thing and a lot of complain against you. (Rashid, date of asylum 2018, aged 27, COO Pakistan)

This influenced Rashid’s decision to move to the UK for work; however, after a few of his close friends’ houses were raided in Pakistan, it was no longer safe for him to return, so he claimed asylum.

Beyer’s (2014) concept of ‘lived atheism’ captures how individuals construct their non-religious identity in the everyday. Beyer contends that to establish a non-religious identity, one must embrace the idea that atheism represents a negation, defined by what one does not believe in contrast to what one does believe. Therefore, as participants in this study grew up with a

Muslim identity, they constructed their non-religious identity in relation to what they opposed. In these particular examples, it was the political regime that Mehdi and Rashid opposed. This links to Zuckerman's (2011) suggestion that apostates who are more likely to question official religious practices may be more likely to question other official political powers (2011, p.11). Zuckerman explains:

It seems plausible that people who question the status quo are suspicious of political leaders; are concerned with inequality, power dynamics, and corruption as they exist in the wider society; and might also be sensitive to such things as they play out in religious institutions, leading to an increase of skepticism and doubt. (ibid, p.11)

Due to the politicised nature of religion in certain countries, laws against apostasy and blasphemy are enforced. The consequences of apostasy and blasphemy laws led some participants to flee to the UK. Murad was arrested and sentenced for apostasy after having a discussion with a Mullah at the mosque. In response, he was imprisoned for two years and exiled to a different part of the country. Moreover, Ayaz was reported after asking a question to the Mullah in the mosque:

He'd make a big issue out of this. He said first of all questioning Muhammad and questioning Islam is not allowed [...] My dad got called into the mosque and told "your son's been asking these stupid questions he shouldn't be asking". So he was pressed quite quickly. Even the question, it was completely inquisitive. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

From the participants' perspectives, these accounts show that 'polite' or 'inquisitive' conversations about Islam are controlled in some contexts.

This section has aimed to show the boundaries of identities intersect with other characteristics such as gender, class and political opinion. The gender, class orientations and political views of the participants in this study were consistent with the findings of other studies examining apostates. For example, apostate research has consistently reported that they are more likely to be men than women, to be more liberal in their political views as well as better educated or describe themselves as 'intellectually orientated' compared to their religious counterparts (Zuckerman 2011). Looking at identity construction more widely, Mort (1989) argues individuals' identities are constructed over time and places, and our identities are often fluid depending on location:

We carry a bewildering range of different, and at times conflicting, identities around with us in our heads at the same time. There is a continual smudging of personae and lifestyles, depending where we are (at work, on the high street) and the spaces we move between. (Mort, 1989, p.169)

This quote shows the relevance of considering the intersections of how non-religious people constructed their identity, as ‘historically contingent and are embedded within and responding to both local and global processes’ (Bugg, 2014, p. 1935).

In conclusion of this section, considering an individual’s intersecting characteristics of identity is significant, as individuals rarely view their apostasy as an isolated identity but rather in relation to their other traits. By considering the intersections of individual identities, we can appreciate the diversity and heterogeneity in their experiences of becoming non-religious. Through highlighting the intersections of gender, class, and politics, with considerations of non-religious identity construction, it also becomes evident that discrimination is intersectional. Through a lived, intersectional lens, this section has examined how identities produce interconnected systems of exclusion and marginalisation. Discrimination along these lines led participants to experience a disrupted sense of embodiment. Disrupted embodiment, where one feels their true self is detached from their body, prompted the participants in this study to seek alternative ways of living. The following sub-sections will explore how this led participants to navigate processes of ‘unlearning’ and processes of ‘learning’ (non)-religiosity.

5.4. Conceptualising Apostasy: ‘Unlearning’ and embodied perspectives of leaving religion

So far, this chapter has discussed how religious practices, beliefs, and rituals were prominent in the participants' daily lives. It has outlined how non-religious identities can be shaped and constrained by social, cultural, and political dimensions in diverse societies where Islamic practices are prominent. It has demonstrated that non-religiosity development does not occur in linear or chronological stages but is instead constructed alongside other intersectional characteristics. This section shifts its focus to conceptualising the participants’ experiences of apostasy and becoming non-religious. There are multiple ways to conceptualise the process of leaving religion, such as through processes of deconversion (Nica, 2020; Streib, 2021), disaffiliation and disengagement (Van Tongeren and DeWall, 2023), and ‘exiting’ (LeCount, 2017). However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the consideration of people who leave religion and

face persecution for doing so is somewhat missing from this literature. Thus, the final two sections in this chapter will build on previous research on leaving religion by drawing on the concepts of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’ to understand the multifaceted journeys of becoming non-religious. This section discusses the process of unlearning through the embodied perspectives of meaning, practice, community and identity (Knott, 2024). The next section will discuss how participants went through a process of learning, discovering belonging in a new community and being at one with one’s body. This understanding of becoming non-religious is important as it goes beyond mere disaffiliation from a religion. Instead, the concepts of unlearning/learning highlight some of the everyday practices, behaviours and expressions included in journeys to apostasy. It also suggests that becoming non-religious is an iterative and multifaceted process that is (re)negotiated over time and place.

As discussed so far in this chapter, religious practices were enforced, and non-religious expression was tightly restricted. Thus, the development of non-religious beliefs and worldviews can be understood through a process of unlearning and learning (Richter, 2023). The first stage of unlearning consists of ‘meaning’, where an individual internally challenges previous beliefs and worldviews²⁰. Internal contradictions of religious doctrines and personal experiences led to questioning and unlearning religion. Rashid illustrated this:

You have to follow your religious teaching. But for me, I would say since from my teenage I have this thing in my head, and I was questioning the religion because for me it’s more of a fairy tale story. (Rashid, date of asylum 2018, aged 27, COO Pakistan)

The second stage manifests these doubts in practice, leading individuals to withdraw from religious practices and rituals gradually. This was evident across all the narratives of refugee participants; for instance, Raliya experienced a withdrawal from prayer while still residing in Nigeria. Ralyia who described, ‘the more I prayed the more I became so miserable. I felt empty.’ After a period experiencing depression and other health conditions linked to stress, when Raliya stopped praying and she began to feel better:

I just stopped. I was ready for whatever I was going to happen. And guess what? I felt happier. I felt more relieved like, fine so I can say alive right if I stopped praying look nothing is happening to me. I began to love life more. I did exercise more. I changed my diet. When I stopped praying, I actually changed everything about me at the time. I changed my diet. I began to eat healthy. I would Google a lot of things like how to be

²⁰ I refer to these processes as ‘stages,’ though they do not necessarily unfold in a logical sequence.

healthy, how to lose weight. I was skipping ropes. My husband saw this change in me after I stopped praying and I lost weight, I became healthier. (Raliya)

Other participants mentioned stepping back from religious practices, such as removing religious attire upon arriving in the UK (e.g., Nadia's experience put forward in the previous section). The gradual dropping of religious practices, such as withdrawal from praying, has been described as a non-religious embodiment (Richter, 2023). When people stop praying and attending mosque, time is made available to explore other practices; withdrawal from religious behaviours can result in the adoption of alternative practices, to fill a gap. For example, while in the UK, participants engaged in activist-related activities concerning human rights issues, explored non-religious worldviews and belief systems, attended events and debates, interacted with science, discovered new communities, and developed coping mechanisms for trauma, such as mindfulness techniques. Nadia discussed that one of the first things she did once in the UK was attend an ex-Muslim panel event:

The day I entered the UK for the first time I booked my tickets to an ex-Muslim panel by creators that I had been following in secret for a while. I was desperate to kind of meet like-minded people. First time entering, that's what I did. (Nadia)

The third stage revolves around the community, as members of society face pressure to withdraw, leading to marginalisation and ultimately leaving the community. Raliya described her experience of breaking bonds with her family and relatives:

Everyone resented me. Everyone hated me because they felt I was doing something that I shouldn't be doing. I was because I didn't even clearly come out to say I am not a Muslim anymore, but because of what I write and...the things I do they definitely suspected that. (Raliya)

This stage can also explain how unlearning religion can lead to forced migration. The fourth stage considers the impact and (re)constructions on identity. The dismantling of previously held worldviews can lead to the (re)negotiation of beliefs and the formation of a new identity, which will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Navigating through the stages of unlearning religion is an extremely difficult process, described as iterative and emotionally fraught (Knott, 2024). Knott (2024) suggests that those who leave religion unlearn previously held beliefs, practices and commitments. Research has shown that many individuals go through a fundamental shift of identity (Beaman and Tomlins, 2015;

Brinkerhoff and Burke, 1980; Streib, 2021) and can experience a loss of family and friends, a sense of meaning and purpose as well as a sense of belonging (Nica, 2020). Those interviewed in this study often shared emotional narratives of feeling out of place and marginalised for their beliefs. Participants experienced hardships in coming to terms with developing a new sense of identity, distinct from Islam, an identity that was deeply embedded in the religious system. Discussing her departure from their religion and country, Nadia said it was not something she ever wanted to do:

So, I never wanted to do it. I know how hard it is, and I know what a big decision is to not be able to return to your home country, where you grew up and community. That's why I was trying to keep it to myself. (Nadia)

Hassan also felt a reluctance to leave, as every part of his life had been explained through religion; to leave would completely alter his perception of the world.

I didn't want to let go of religion because a lot of my... how do I explain this? A lot of my worldview, a lot of my worldview was based on religious things and taking that away from it basically crashed my whole perception of the world. (Hassan)

Ayaz also spoke of being scared to leave; he grew up believing if you left Islam, then you would be cursed:

First of all, it's a religion that was enshrined within me. It was given to me as if I needed it in my life and then doubting that ideology it felt like I was cursed like somebody had done something to me like black magic or something, dealing with that. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

Thus, unlearning religion is not merely an intellectual process but a deeply emotional experience that is embodied. Cottee (2015) articulates the emotional process of leaving:

There is a lot of pain and torment in the lives of ex-Muslims. This is to do, in part, with feelings of shame: the sense that they've failed their families and the wider Muslim community, that they're not right, that they're wrong. Not normal. To do, also, with feelings of alienation, a sense of being out of place. Not belonging. (Cottee 2015, p.xiv)

Trauma can affect psychological memory and, in narratives explaining journeys of becoming non-religious, may appear disjointed or fragmented. This poses problems for the asylum bureaucracy, which seeks logical narratives to be considered credible. This remains consistent

with other research on lived non-religion as a journey of heightened emotions and struggles to grapple with identity (e.g., Cottee, 2015; Richter, 2023). Ammerman (2021) outlines part of her approach to lived religion regarding emotions; where she argues to pay attention to how religious practice encompasses and arouses particular feelings. She argues that individuals belonging to a community become most apparent when it is disrupted, ‘when everyone else is acting joyous, but you are unmoved or when you are feeling great sorrow but no one else seems touched, you may have the first clue to the possibility that you are out of place’ (2021, p.57).

In conclusion, as this research is being understood through the lens of lived non-religion, this section drew out the ways participants ‘unlearnt’ religion and the emotional toll this had on participants’ perceptions of their identity. Religion was unreconcilable for the participants in this study, leading them to unlearn religious behaviours and withdraw from religious practices gradually. Withdrawal of such practices can lead to new opportunities to explore alternative worldviews. The next section will consider how participants’ non-religious identities are learnt as they are (re)negotiated and consider how non-religion arouses a new sense of belonging.

5.5. ‘Learning’ Non-Religion: (Re)negotiating identity and belonging

This section introduces lived non-religion as a conceptual tool that allows us to explore how individuals construct and express their non-religiosity as they move away from religion. Whilst there is no single set of practices for non-religious individuals, non-religiosity can be understood as an embodied, performed and emotional experience (Richter, 2023). The current literature on lived non-religion suggests the non-religious individual can be identified through the absence of religious symbols revealed in the mundane (Lee, 2015). Identities within the non-religious umbrella also contain several substantial aspects such as beliefs, ritual practices and identities that provide an alternative position to religious ones (Lee, 2015). Through the process of deconverting (disaffiliating from religion), sociological research demonstrates that individuals can have an active role in constructing their non-religious identity (Smith, 2011). However, research has not often discussed how apostates who face discrimination and persecution for being non-religious construct their identities. This section will share the participants’ narratives of how they position and explain their identities and draw out some of the ways they materialise their beliefs in the everyday through processes of ‘learning’. As a

result of the processes of unlearning religion (discussed in the previous section), this final section will consider how participants constructed new beliefs, identities and worldviews that replace what was unlearned.

The participants in this study had varied experiences of non-religious expression in their countries of origin. For most participants, the catalyst of becoming non-religious developed when moving to the UK and thus became refugees 'sur place'. Over half (eight)²¹ of the participants travelled to the UK initially for education or for work purposes. Other participants, Raliya, Murad, Mehdi, Hassan faced fear of persecution in their countries of origins, forcing them to flee to the UK and claim asylum. In both occurrences, the UK provided new opportunities for belonging through self-expression in ways they previously could not. For example, many participants cited exposure to a different way of life and meeting people from diverse backgrounds which led to constructions of non-religious identity. This was highlighted by Ayaz:

I was 18 when I moved to Britain for my studies. Exposure to different kind of people, in Pakistan in 97% of population is Muslim even the 3% they don't live with Muslim people [...] Just getting the exposure, meeting different people, getting to know them and realising, okay, maybe Islam isn't needed for you to be a good human being first of all. (Ayaz)

While in the UK, participants in this study engaged in various expressions that shaped their identity. For example, when in the UK, one participant changed their name, which was an outward expression of their non-religious identity. James had moved to the UK to study in the 1990s and after a difficult time finding a job and the gradual distancing from his country of origin, Iraq, James made the decision to change his name. This is consistent with other research on leaving religion that involves the reversing of religious resemblances, such as changing a name, acquiring a nickname, or the removal of religious dress (see Richter, 2023).

Participants also described 'doing' and performing things that led to the construction of their non-religiosity. For example, this included watching comedy shows, listening to music, and reading books. Ayaz described that during his crisis of identity, he fell into a deep depression in which he found some relief in watching stand-up comedy shows. He found people making jokes about religion and Islam, which was the first time he had experienced this:

²¹ Ahmed, Ayaz, Farshad, James, Nadia, Nazim, Rashid, Shamsur are all classed as refugees 'sur place'.

Within those comedy shorts, stand up and panel shows. They talk about these things. They'd mention God or they make jokes about Mary and then they sometimes, there would be jokes about Islam and all that. It wasn't contempt but it was blasphemous. So to say, because for my understanding religion is something that needs to be respected at all cost. That led me to being exposed to atheism. I looked a bit into it. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

From then on, he had unlocked a new understanding of religion and learnt there are people who deny doctrines and are still able to live a fulfilling life. From this point, he began to investigate atheism online, and this led him to discover an ex-Muslim community. This finding can be explored through the lens of lived non-religion as it reveals how comedy was utilised not only as an escape from religious trauma but also as something which aided the construction of a non-religious identity.

In addition, music was cited as a path into the exploration of non-religious beliefs. Nazim described his experience:

When I grew older I was into listening to a singer called [...] he was an atheist and actually the government of Iran, the governor put a kind of bounty like cowboy things. Yeah, if someone kills him we are going to pay him 1 million dollar or two million dollars something like this. Yeah and when I started to listen to his songs it was like rap songs, rock songs and it made me feel less guilty about struggling between these two world views and when you lose your guilt about something you will become more free to think about it more clearly. (Nazim, date of asylum 2019, aged 23, COO Iran)

The music sung by an Iranian atheist who has a fatwa on them by the Iranian government was significant for Nazim's non-religious identity. For him, it reconciled his emotions of guilt for struggling with his worldview, and it made him feel better about his lack of religion.

Non-religiosity also materialised in the everyday is through the reading of literature. Material religion notes how religion is practised in material places with objects (Ammerman, 2016). Participants were inquisitive and often engaged in self-study of theology to delve deeper into the meanings and read religious subjects independently. This was an important stage of exploring their non-religious identity by the participants. Many sought out a critical analysis of religion to make a logical and sensical reason to abandon their religion. This was materialised through spending time reading religious texts and, in some cases, learning Arabic to understand the text themselves. Hassan explained:

I actually read the Islamic Scriptures, the Qur'an because when you read the Qur'an in the Maldives. They don't like... it's just sounds. They don't have any meanings because you don't really understand what you're reading. But I read the translations, I read the secondary sources. I got really deep into it. I read about Islamic theology, jurisprudence, Civilization Manners, which is also a field of study within Islam, manners. (Hassan).

This represents the 'intellectualization of non-religiosity' (Lee, 2015, p.62). This position denotes non-religious as 'fundamentally intellectual in character' (ibid) with strong links to topics of philosophy, humanism and ethics understood as intellectual movements. As apostates, the participants in this study took on a specific stance of an intellectual understanding of non-religion. Alongside the studying and critique of religious texts, many participants read non-religious books authored by prominent thinkers associated with the 'New Atheist' movement. Hence, the purchasing and reading of non-religious texts are a material, embodied mode of non-religion (ibid).

The internet as a material platform was used as a tool to express non-religiosity. Most participants noted they used the internet to explore and express their non-religious identity. For Rashid, YouTube revealed the identity of 'atheism' to him, which he felt he could relate to:

He [a YouTuber] mentioned the 'atheist' word, and then that's the first time I came across what an atheist is. And then, from there, I started to do my own research more into what atheism is, what the theory of evolution is. I came across Richard Dawkins. Once I came across to him, then I could relate myself like this is my identity. (Rashid, date of asylum 2018, aged 27, COO Pakistan)

For Ayaz, access to the internet allowed him to accept his identity as an ex-Muslim, and there was a community built around this:

There are people like me, there are some people who've been through. It's not unique. I'm not cursed. Maybe why not look up who these people are? I looked it up and realised there are people who call themselves Ex-Muslims. They are people who are building a life after Islam without the need of religion. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

As well as being a platform for other belief systems, the internet was also used as a tool to express non-religiosity, and this was deeply important to some participants. In their view, setting up blogs discussing the rights and beliefs of non-religious people was important. Ayaz describes:

I started my blogging website so I can start compiling information in one base, and then if someone comes to me to ask or giving me some reference from the Qur'an. I can counter them back. So that's how I started blogging. (Rashid)

For Hassan, the internet was both a platform to express his non-religious thoughts as well as a site of persecution. He describes:

I pushed back against the hate campaign. I talked about Islam. This is the route of all our evils in the Maldives. This is the root of all our evils in the Maldives and they did not like that. They did not like that. So basically the major opposition newspaper. They doxed me and they ran the first article at night around like 9pm basically, they put it out and basically, the whole of Maldives social media started buzzing because it's just a little bit of blood and everyone will come for their piece of me. So they dropped that bit of blood in the water. And everyone started going crazy in a frenzy. So I left. (Hassan)

Each participant expressed and defined their non-religious identities in unique ways. In the remainder of this chapter, I outline some of these variations. Mehdi's country of origin is Iran, he was 46 when he claimed asylum in the UK in 2018. Mehdi is an outspoken critic of religion. His beliefs were mostly in response to organised religion as a political ideology, which he viewed as a tool of control. Mehdi described himself as a 'non-religious person overall and an atheist'. Interestingly, as the research interview progresses, he goes on to refer to himself as agnostic. For Mehdi, he understands the definition of atheism is to deny the existence of God, and he argues that to identify as an atheist, he felt that an individual had to prove this. For this reason, he shifts his narrative towards identifying with agnosticism, as he believes that belief in God is less important than behaviour, morality, personality and character. In his words:

I had that belief maybe two or three years ago. I'm an atheist but there is quite a difference between an atheist and agnostic person. Feel yourself, this is my opinion. Maybe I am in the wrong place. If you feel yourself as an exact atheist you should prove there is no God and there is no way to prove there is God or there isn't God. Nobody cannot prove if there is or there isn't God. That's why when I see myself I'm quite agnostic because I can't prove there is God or there isn't God. But for me that's not a big deal. It doesn't matter. Behaviour, morality, your personality, your character is much more important than those stuff than if you think there is a God or if there isn't a God, that's why I'm absolutely non-religion person. (Mehdi, date of asylum 2018, aged 46, COO Iran)

Participants from Pakistan (Ahmed, Ayaz and Rashid) discussed their identities differently from each other. Ayaz preferred the label ex-Muslim or apostate, whereas Ahmed and Rashid

preferred humanist and atheist. The identity label 'atheist' was only understood thoroughly when they were living in the UK; they all discussed how they were not aware of the term atheist and its meaning when in Pakistan (from the perspective of the Western European use of the word, denoting a disbelief in God). For example, Rashid stated, 'I never heard that word in Pakistan, 'atheist''. Ayaz explained the reasoning behind this:

For us strangely. So again, there is no awareness of these issues. We were aware of Atheists so people who don't believe in God but not the term atheism for most part of my high school we thought they were communists. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

Schielke (2013) acknowledges that the term atheism, whilst a common identity in a Western context, might not clearly translate in WANA countries. This could mean that in an Arab context, 'the dividing line between theism and atheism is often less important than one's stance towards other key issues of a religious worldview' (Schielke 2013, p. 639). This leads Elsässer (2021) to argue that atheism is a relatively new phenomenon in the Arab world, despite religious criticism being an age-old practice. Participants' narratives fit within the findings of Schaffner and Cragun's (2020) research into non-religion and atheism identities. They suggest that there are various ways atheists construct their worldview, and not all atheists define their worldview in the same way, suggesting that non-religious worldviews are varied and nuanced (ibid).

Humanism was also a label that some participants adopted, referring to a secular worldview that centres on living ethical and fulfilling lives by 'taking up the mantle of reason, the tools of science, and the potentials of free thought' (Engelke, 2015, p.72). A humanist approach provided an outlook on morality for some participants. Participants in this study viewed religious doctrines or practices to be immoral, leading them to distance themselves from it:

I started to read Qur'an in the library of the school. Actually I saw a lot of things and I read a lot of things which I don't know how to explain... I realised that there are a lot of things which are not very logical or not very ethical. What is happening? Am I more ethical than God or what is going on here? (Farshad, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, COO Iran)

Religion is often correlated to morality and so departing from this can arise feelings of moral depravity (Zuckerman, 2011). For these reasons, participants discussed how they had no other choice but to leave their country of origin and go to somewhere that tolerated non-religious

worldviews. For some participants, this entailed the learning of humanism. Humanism, as a non-religious worldview, was also a popular stance for the participants in this study. Humanism was mostly discovered when participants were in the UK, and it was not a label they were familiar with in their countries of origin. Ahmed, who came to the UK initially for education, described in length his search for an identity label:

As I was doing my research and I'm like, I came across humanism [...] it said, you don't believe in anything. There is no imaginary friend, I'm like, Yeah, that's me. It sounds like me and then I just carry on, reading and it says basically, we care more about human beings and human nature and what's around us and I'm like, yeah that's a real. There's no all other religions. It's like people come first, laws come after. Whereas here there's no set laws, there's no set rules, and you can do as you feel what it should be positive towards the community where you live in and I'm like, yeah, that's me man. (Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

When Farshad first heard of humanism, he did not know the meaning; after reading more about it, he felt this suited his identity. Farshad first heard of humanism in the UK after thinking about what it means to be a 'good' human without God:

Let me clarify this way. For example when you say let's become a good human. What does a good human mean? In a kind of religious worldview or perspective a good human is a religious human who obeys all of the laws of God. But one day actually, it happened for me or a lot of people. You will find out that being religious doesn't mean that you are going to be a good human. You can be a religious human and kill a lot of people with reason. But you can be just a human and be kind to other humans and that's it. Firstly I understood the meaning of humanism in terms of this understanding so we are all human. Let's be kind together. (Farshad, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, COO Iran)

Thus, Farshad and Ahmed related to their humanist identity in similar ways. They both constructed their identity through ethical values and being 'good' in a community. Thus, leaving Islam is not merely about abandoning faith, but also a journey towards constructing new worldviews and values underpinned by humanism (Richter, 2023).

In contrast, Nazim explained he didn't fully identify as 'humanist' he outlined:

I wouldn't say I'm a humanist. That's it. I'm a person but I would say that my thoughts are still very close to what humanism promotes and I think that's the point in it as well. I think humanism itself doesn't want followers who blindly follow it. It's about having tolerance, being open to new ideas, not having prejudice. (Nazim, date of asylum 2019, aged 23, COO Iran)

For Nazim, it is not important for him to label himself as a humanist and does not see it as necessary to live a moral life without religion. Instead, Nazim would align with the definition of ‘secular activism’ formed as:

Secular activism refers to being open and public about one’s secular beliefs or nonreligious identity, which can involve actively promoting secular beliefs and criticizing religious ones. (Cragun and Smith, 2024, p.8).

These varied accounts demonstrated that participants held deep beliefs about the world, and that they constructed their worldviews in response to ethical and moral principles. Lundqvist states, ‘reconciliation or disaffiliation with religion should not be considered a static two-sided coin (that is, believing or not believing) but rather as a dynamic process of doubt, ambivalence, and religious crisis’ (2020, p.220). In this way, seemingly ‘ordinary’ views on ethical and moral standpoints can be viewed as an ‘intermingling rather than a clear separation of religious and non-religious perceptions’ (Richter, 2023, p.116). Moreover, all the participants searched for community and belonging through spiritual outlets or civil society organisations. The navigation of these alternative belief systems and worldviews shows participants situated themselves not as victims of persecution, but through the exploration of non-religion, they produced positive embodiment within society by forming a community (Fassari and Pompili, 2024). To explain this process, Catto and Eccles (2013) put forward their notion of ‘(dis)believing and belonging’, which they describe as a set of (non)belief constructed through relationships, emotions, and social and cultural forces, which in turn creates a sense of belonging which is at a distance from religious ‘others’ (2013, p.41).

These discussions have shown that the apostates in this study have complex and diverse identities. Becoming non-religious entails, a (re)negotiation of identity consisting of unlearning religious beliefs, practices and behaviours and learning non-religious worldviews. For the apostates in this study, these dynamics were often private or internal within their countries of origin, only being able to develop outwardly whilst in the UK. Whilst in the UK, participants performed acts of non-religiosity, such as taking off religious clothing, verbalising their beliefs (online or offline), or ‘coming out’ to friends and family. Their beliefs were also materialised, evident through books and blogging. Participants articulated their non-religious identities, such as atheist, agnostic, humanist and secular activism, where they were able to form a new community and sense of belonging (Nica, 2020).

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with participants' diverse life course, their experiences growing up in a religious society, and how they constructed their non-religious identity when leaving Islam. By observing these experiences through a lived (non-)religion approach, this chapter has shown there are four focal elements in the journey of becoming non-religious. First, the establishment of a (non)-religious identity is governed within broader social, cultural and historical contexts. Second, (non)-religious identities and worldviews are not only constructed through faith alone but entail a complex negotiation of gender, class and politics. In light of these factors, this chapter has explored how participants experienced a disrupted embodiment of religion, which resulted in depersonalisation or dissociation from one's body (Jacobson *et al.*, 2016). Third, when leaving religion, individuals experience iterative processes of 'unlearning' religion, which can be understood through embodied and emotional aspects of leaving religion. Fourth, unlearning leads to dynamic processes of 'learning' non-religious beliefs and worldviews.

Conceptualising apostasy in this way is novel as current research reports that individuals who deconvert go through stages to establish their new, non-religious identity, which implies a chronological journey (e.g., Cottee, 2015; Nica, 2020; Zuckerman, 2011). Alternatively, this research demonstrates that the stages of disaffiliation for the apostates in this study are experienced, expressed, and embodied in unique ways and that they do not occur in chronological order. Therefore, for these individuals, departing from religion involves more than just a rejection of faith; it encompasses a complex shift in social, political, gendered, and class dynamics and is thus fluid, diverse, non-chronological and intersectional. These findings have implications when considering the asylum claims process, which will be discussed in the following chapters. The next two chapters (Chapters 6 and 7) discuss the implications of the key themes arising from this chapter, situated in the context of asylum bureaucratic processes. I now turn to Chapter 6, which discusses how asylum assessment procedures shape identities. The narratives of human rights advocates are introduced, with individuals from a refugee background, to discuss how asylum bureaucracy forms and materialises apostasy asylum claims.

Chapter 6: Bureaucratising Non-Religion: Forming and materialising asylum claims

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter followed participants' journeys in becoming non-religious and constructing alternative worldviews. It showed how non-religious identities and worldviews are multifaceted and constructed non-chronologically and over time and space. Through the lens of lived non-religion, the chapter discussed how participants from a refugee background went through a complex process of unlearning and learning (non-)religion. Due to these multifarious factors, participants claimed asylum in the UK on grounds of their apostasy. The circumstances that led the participants to claim asylum differed, and their experiences of the asylum regime were unique. The participants' stories converge in the fact that they all claimed asylum through the religious grounds of the Refugee Convention. In the process of claiming asylum, non-religious identities are bureaucratised, meaning the asylum process shapes the narratives of identities through bureaucratic apparatus. In this chapter, I analyse how the complex and nuanced nature of non-religious identities and worldviews are understood from the perspective of the organisation which assesses these claims - the British asylum system.

This chapter discusses the bureaucratic elements that shape apostate asylum claims through the narratives of human rights advocates (n = 22) and refugees (n = 12), along with the legal and policy documents analysed as part of this study. It explores the bureaucratisation of non-religion in four sections. First, it examines the legal and official grounds for asylum outlined in international asylum law and Home Office policies. In this section, developments in Home Office asylum determination policies are discussed, alongside an assessment of CPINs regarding their effectiveness in guiding the specifics of apostate persecution. Second, I address how a non-religious asylum claim is articulated and evaluated based on evidence. The third section focuses on the asylum assessment procedure for religion-based claims and explores the implications of a system crafted, in part, for cases of religious conversion. Finally, the fourth section reflects on the broader 'culture' within which asylum decision-making operates concerning disbelief and the impact of these assumptions on non-religious claims.

The main aim of this chapter is to outline the official legal classifications of non-religious asylum and discuss how these are interpreted through the Home Office's asylum bureaucratic

frameworks in practice. Thus, this chapter shifts focus from personal journeys of becoming non-religious to how non-religious identities are produced and formulated through bureaucratic processes. Understanding how personal experiences of leaving religion are framed within the asylum assessment process is important as the asylum bureaucracy tends to seek out a different narrative (Halonen, 2024). As Shuman and Bohmer (2004) articulate:

An ordinary life has been disrupted, and, at the moment of disruption, the cause is often unclear. Each dimension of experience - of ordinary life, persecution, and the journey - creates a different sense of self and follows different cultural conventions for representing experience. Each contains different sorts of memories and requires a different form of self-reflection and evaluation. (Shuman and Bohmer, 2004, p.406)

During asylum adjudication, there is a dichotomy between the lived realities of the processes and factors underlying reasons for leaving religion and how the asylum bureaucracy understands these experiences in terms of the risk of persecution. By applying the theoretical perspectives of the colonality of bureaucracy, this chapter argues there are dimensions of power underpinning asylum bureaucracies that contain colonial logic of categorising and controlling identities into universalising tropes, of which apostates must define themselves in these terms to receive protection.

6.2. Forming an Asylum Claim: Non-religion as a ground for asylum

The first step of formulating an asylum claim is choosing a suitable ground for one's claim based on those specified within the Convention. In this process, legal discourse categorises individuals into fixed identities in order to produce subjects to be assessed (Merry, 1992). Persecuted religious minorities or converts are often formed under the 'religion' ground of the Convention. Similarly, those who face persecution for leaving their religion or for having no religion may also claim on these grounds. However, in practice, it has not been clear that the non-religious/apostates are included under the religious ground of the Convention. A lack of knowledge that the non-religious are included under this ground shows that international human rights law is ambiguous on apostasy (van Schaik and Hillary, 2023). This research also suggests that this gap in knowledge extends to asylum assessment procedures at the national level.

There are two practical effects of this, which will be discussed in this section. First, it can influence the conduct of Home Office asylum determination assessments, resulting in flawed questioning during the asylum interview and subsequent inaccurate evaluations of credibility. Second, the uncertainties of where one's persecution belongs in legal terms can lead asylum seekers to be unaware their experiences can be protected and lead them to delay their claims, which can also impair their credibility. State interpretations of who belongs in legal categorisations of the Convention is an example of power to control and regulate individuals, which is instilled with colonial logic (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023). Thus, this section puts forward the legal conceptualisations of non-religion within human rights law and how these have been transcribed into Home Office policies. It specifically discusses the ambiguities surrounding policy and practice of non-religion asylum cases, flaws of the credibility assessments, as well as the use of CPIN reports. In doing so, this chapter highlights the problems for the recognition of non-religious asylum applicants in the inclusion of the religion ground of the Convention and the repercussions this has on the conduct of credibility assessments for these claims.

The grounds for applying for asylum are set out in the Convention for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion (UN General Assembly, 1951). The grounds for asylum are an essential set of criteria used by bureaucrats to assess and categorise asylum seekers' narratives (Jubany, 2017). However, legal scholars have argued that the Convention is inconsistently applied by states that are signatories to it worldwide and that the right to FoRB does not receive adequate protection (Annicchino, 2015; Jamal, 2015; Madera, 2022). There is uncertainty about whether the non-religious are included in the parameters of refugee protection due to the wording of the Convention, which makes no specific mention of atheism, apostasy or non-religion (see Musalo, 2004; Nixon, 2018; 2020; van Schaik and Hillary, 2023).

The UNHCR is responsible for overseeing the application of the treaty by signatories of the Convention. One role of the UNHCR is to provide interpretations of the legal articles set out in the Convention. The UNHCR has produced a 'Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status' (2019) to do this. Part of the Handbook sets out guidance for assessing religion-based asylum claims, including an introductory paragraph, a 'substantive analysis' and a conclusion. Notably, the introduction section states that religion-based claims

are amongst the most complex and acknowledges there are inconsistencies in interpreting religion in asylum practice:

Decision-makers have not always taken a consistent approach, especially when applying the term “religion” contained in the refugee definition of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and when determining what constitutes “persecution” in this context. (2019, p.124)

It thus recommends drawing on international human rights law legislation to aid in understanding religion:

In determining religion-based claims, it is therefore useful, *inter alia*, to draw on Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the “Universal Declaration”) and Articles 18 and 27 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (the “International Covenant”). Also relevant are the General Comments issued by the Human Rights Committee, the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief, the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the body of reports of the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance. (2019, p.124)

In the substantive analysis section, the UNHCR breaks down the elements within the Convention: defining religion, a well-founded fear of persecution, special considerations (gender), and procedural issues (up-to-date CPINs and particularised knowledge, credibility and sur place claims). In this section, the Handbook states that the right to freedom of religion or belief is a fundamental human right, and religion-based claims may involve ‘religion as belief (including non-belief)’ (2019, p.125). It states that belief should be interpreted to include theistic, nontheistic and atheistic beliefs (*ibid*). However, the Handbook only explicitly mentions atheism once, referring to it as ‘no particular religious conviction’ (2019, p.127). There are only two mentions of apostasy in the Handbook. In the first mention, the guidance recognises asylum claimants may be recognised as apostates. In the second and final mention, the guidance refers to it as ‘converting to a different faith (apostasy)’ (*ibid*), which overlooks apostates who construct non-religious convictions.

The section on procedural issues highlights that religious practices are complex and multifaceted, emphasising the need for detailed and accurate CPINs, for decision-makers to be objective and, not to make assessments based on personal understandings. In addition, it states that credibility is a central issue in religion-based claims (*ibid*, p.129), further commenting that

questioning claimants on their knowledge of a particular religion or its tenets is not useful in determining the sincerity of their beliefs. Despite the UNHCR offering these guidelines on religion-based asylum cases, there are still errors in the interpretation of the law for non-religious applicants made by the Home Office. Across the findings of this research, participants reported the challenges of proving their identity. Specifically, participants reported challenges in materialising their identity to satisfy the burden of proof, navigating assessment processes that lean towards conversion claims and the culture of disbelief, all of which are absent within the guidelines of the UNHCR's Handbook.

There are two APIs issued by the Home Office on guidance for assessing credibility (outlined on page 21 of this thesis). This includes the Home Office policy (Home Office, 2022a) for claims lodged before 2022 (prior to NABA). This policy was in place for most participants in this research²² who made their asylum claims before June 2022. This policy states that the asylum assessment is evaluated against the grounds articulated in the Convention:

The 1951 Refugee Convention is a core legal document which outlines the rights of refugees and the legal obligations of its signatories to protect them. Under the Immigration Rules, all asylum decisions must be made in accordance with the Refugee Convention. (2022a, p.25)

This policy includes a section on religious conversion and apostasy (2022a, p.28), defining apostasy as, ‘‘apostasy’ means the renunciation, abandonment of or withdrawing from a former religious identity or principle’ (ibid). It differentiates between apostates who have converted to another faith or those who leave a religion and do not adopt a new faith:

Some asylum claims are based on a claimant’s fear of the consequences of their conversion from the religion of their birth or upbringing to a different religion, or of simply no longer believing in or practising that faith, that is without necessarily adopting a new faith. (ibid)

To assess credibility, the policy requires decision-makers to assess whether a claimant is a ‘genuine’ member of the professed religion or belief:

You must decide whether the claimant genuinely adheres to the religion or belief to which they profess to belong, how that individual observes those beliefs in the private

²² This was the case for: Ayaz, Mehdi, Murad, James, Ahmed, Nadia, Nazim, Rashid, Shamsur.

and public spheres, and whether that would place them at risk of persecution on return to their country. (2022a, p.27)

However, in practice, this guidance applies certain expectations regarding the bureaucrats' understanding of religion or belief matters and the extent to which they are trained to evaluate the genuineness of an individual's beliefs. It also raises the question of whether bureaucrats are qualified to assess the manner and openness of how beliefs are practised in various social, cultural, and political contexts (Madziva and Lowndes, 2018). This guidance also seeks the articulation and expression of one's identity in accordance with the Convention, and consequently, credibility is assessed based on how well it aligns with legal definitions of persecution. This guidance overlooks the challenging task of expressing and articulating non-religious identities, which will be explored in the following two chapters.

The Home Office policy (2022a) outlines that religion is inclusive of non-theistic and atheistic beliefs. However, interviewees in this research highlighted that, in practice, there was a lack of awareness that non-religion or apostasy could be grounds for an asylum claim. Rachel Taggart-Ryan (former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK) indicated this point in her research interview. Taggart-Ryan stated that there are structural issues in policy and practice within the asylum assessments for these claims. As explored in Chapter 1, these problems came to the fore after a notorious apostate asylum case, Hamza bin Walayat, had his claim rejected because he could not specify which ancient Greek philosophers were humanists. Taggart-Ryan explained the asylum rejection letter issued by the Home Office suggested bin Walayat was not protected under the Convention because he had an absence of religion:

They had sort of said, "well you can't claim to be the victim of religious persecution because you're not religious", which is a kind of a very low-level semantic misunderstanding of the Refugee Convention. (Rachel Taggart-Ryan, former Campaigns Officer, Humanists UK)

Likewise, Sophie (a representative of Humanists International) supports individuals with apostate asylum claims. In her experience, she suggests non-religion is overlooked as a viable ground of claiming asylum:

I think that there is a lack of understanding that the right 'freedom of religion or belief' applies to the non-religious as a ground and that being non-religious, they just think that's not something that has kind of has intrinsic value to that person that means

something to them so it wouldn't be harmful in any way for them to go home and to just not talk about it and pretend. (Sophie – Humanists International)

The failure of Home Office bureaucrats to know that non-religion is a valid basis for an asylum claim and denying cases based on that basis shows inaccurate interpretations of refugee law and Home Office guidance. It also overlooks a basic expectation of informing applicants how they can claim asylum and for what grounds (Jubany, 2017), highlighting a bureaucratic knowledge gap and power by controlling who can and cannot claim asylum and on what grounds they must do so.

In addition to state-level misunderstandings on the application of FoRB, to be granted asylum, refugees in this study expressed confusion on the eligibility of their personal experiences to satisfy legal conceptions of persecution. Ahmed and Ayaz were unaware that non-religious worldviews would be protected under religious grounds, and this was the case also for participants whose asylum claims intersected with sexuality-based persecution (Hassan, Nadia, Shamsur). This poses a specific problem for non-religious asylum cases as asylum seekers must provide a 'credible' account of their persecution based on one of the Convention grounds (Hambly, 2019). Ahmed, whose initial claim for asylum was in 2017, described his experience of realising that apostasy and a lack of religious beliefs could be grounds for claiming asylum. In his screening interview, he was asked, 'What is your religion?' which confused him. He describes, 'I stopped for a bit, and I started thinking, I'm like... I don't know'. The Home Office bureaucrat responded, 'What do you mean you don't know?' Ahmed said he replied:

Because humanism is not a religion, do you know what I mean, it's a set of beliefs. So you cannot define it as a religion and I'm like "what should I say?" She said, "you need to answer me something, there are options". I need to choose an option. So, Islam Christian, Judaism blah, all that shit you know. How can I write down humanism? I needed to choose something, so she put down humanism. (Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

This is complementary to wider research on asylum adjudication (e.g., Jubany, 2017; Hambly, 2019), which has shown that many people seeking asylum do not articulate their fear of persecution in the language that satisfies the Convention grounds as 'many asylum stories are complex, fractured accounts that do not fit into the technical requirements of refugee law' (Hambly, 2019, p.201). Moreover, the Home Office administrator on this occasion presented

Ahmed with a leading question, ‘What is your religion?’ which highlights the Home Office officials’ stereotypical presumption that Ahmed would have any religion at all (Zetter, 1991).

Being uninformed about how an asylum claim fits within the Convention grounds can adversely affect the outcome of an asylum claim (Jubany, 2017). Uncertainties regarding one’s grounds for asylum have caused individuals to delay making a claim. This issue has been particularly noted for claims related to identity, such as sexuality (Berg and Millbank, 2009; Bohmer and Shuman, 2018). In this study, a lack of awareness that apostasy is a ground for asylum resulted in individuals postponing their claims or articulating their apostasy later in the process. This can impact the outcome of their claims by undermining credibility. However, anticipating that those fleeing persecution will arrive in the UK and immediately articulate their grounds for applying for asylum clearly within the legal language overlooks the complexities that underlie the development of non-religious identity, as discussed in Chapter 5. This highlights a gap in asylum policy regarding the clarity of who is included in protective measures.

Prevalent themes in the narratives of apostates were feelings of depression and confusion around the construction of their identity. Ayaz, who made a claim for asylum in 2018, described his experience of becoming an apostate:

I was quite alone, isolated and then realisation of why that was happening kicked in and that was because maybe I was no longer a Muslim. I hadn’t admitted it to myself. After a bit of soul searching so to say I realised that I no longer believe in Islam. First step was to at least admit to myself. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

It took years for him to come to terms with his apostate identity, and the slow disassembly of his Muslim identity resulted in the deterioration of both familial and personal relationships. Recognising that returning to Pakistan would pose significant risks, coupled with his struggles navigating language and cultural differences in the UK and his estrangement from the community, Ayaz’s mental well-being was affected. Ayaz explained that he needed to address these emotions before he could proceed with an asylum application.

However, despite the complexity of lived non-religion, demonstrating one’s credibility is partly dependent on making an asylum claim at the first available opportunity. The Home Office state that ‘failure to take advantage of a reasonable opportunity to make an asylum or human rights

claim whilst in a safe country' damages the credibility of a claim (Home Office, 2022a, p.54). As such, credible asylum cases are influenced by 'Western conceptions of linear formation' (Berg and Millbank, 2009, p.197). Chapter 5 detailed the reasons why a linear stage of becoming non-religious and claiming asylum is not always possible:

The idea of a linear staged process of identity development may be all too readily collapsed into a 'progress' meta-narrative in which the end point of self-actualization is represented by entry (and assimilation) into the receiving country. (Berg and Millbank 2009, p.214)

Thus, these accounts have highlighted that it can be unlikely that when apostates eventually realise their non-religious dispositions, these are neatly and logically formed upon arrival to the UK and articulated into the language of the Convention (Berg and Millbank, 2009). However, the need to meet the requirements set out in the Convention and interpretations of Home Office policies is a form of power. This denies individuals' agency and transforms the lived experience into an administrative purpose (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Picozza, 2021), thus enforcing the 'coloniality of being' (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The coloniality of being is made evident here as bureaucrats are given the power to, 'manage categories of thought and knowledge production to use that managerial authority to assert themselves by disqualifying those [...] who at once are barbarians and traditional) are classified as deficient, rationally and ontologically' (Mignolo, 2011, p.82).

Since its conception in 1951, the Refugee Convention has depicted 'typical' notions of a refugee as deriving from European histories and contexts (Barber and Ripley, 1988). The inclusion of non-European refugees only occurred through the development of the 1967 Protocol, an expansion Britain opposed (Mayblin, 2014). This was despite nation-states, such as the UK, being aware that people were being displaced due to colonial conflicts (ibid). Hence, it is argued that negotiations regarding who is included and who is excluded within the parameters of the Refugee Convention have devised conceptions of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' present from the outset (Jubany, 2020). Even though the geographical constraints were lifted through the Protocol, ideas of those who are deserving and undeserving have been maintained implicitly (Mayblin, 2019). Thus, historically, the right to asylum has been routinely restricted for colonised people and continues for racialised people in the present during asylum adjudication processes (Mayblin, 2014).

An example of this can be highlighted in religion-based asylum claims, as states define who belongs in the religion category of the Convention by categorising individuals into essentialised and discrete groups (Nixon 2018). The Convention transforms the contextual, contingent and fluid nature of identities into immutable and innate categories based on 'essentialist understandings' (Rehaag, 2008, p. 32). Thus, the asylum bureaucracy 'is not accustomed to multidimensional analyses. Instead, legal culture routinely categorises in unidimensional terms' (Valdes, 2016, p. 102). Therefore, as Chapter 5 discussed, identities are best understood as contested, multiple and shifting according to cultural and historical practices rather than fixed, singular, essential or universal (Bhatia, 2002).

The coloniality of bureaucracy brings into question the assessment of credibility and who has the power to make decisions on an individual's identity. In the context of religion-based asylum claims, asylum bureaucrats also make decisions surrounding the social and cultural configurations of identity (Jubany, 2020). The construction of asylum stories is more likely to be understood when they align with the adjudicator's view of the world (Berg and Millbank, 2009; Noll, 2006). Thus, 'the granting of asylum is increasingly subject to social control functions, further reproducing colonial bureaucratic forms of domination' (Jubany, 2020, p.352). This theoretical lens highlights how bureaucrats seek out clear narratives, where one must articulate and disclose their identities regarding what they understand to be a persecuted religion-based claim. Whilst doing so, the nation reaffirms its norms and values by deciding who it considers to be worthy of protection:

In asylum decisions, constructions of a particular cultural identity are cloaked in the universal language of human rights. A central role is played by the assessment of credibility of the applicant, which is modelled on the Christian practice of auricular confession. An applicant is credible where her "true identity" and that of the state of asylum correspond. Credibility assessments are but a reconfirmation of the identity of the asylum state and its protagonists. (Noll, 2006, p.491)

In the production of knowledge and criteria regarding credibility, people seeking refuge are hierarchically ordered based on racial and religious oppressions, which is a demonstration of neocolonial bureaucratic logic (Jubany, 2020).

To conclude this section, the legal jurisprudence and Home Office policies transform identities, such as religion, into administrative categories. By doing so, the asylum process fixes identities and reduces them to an essentialist understanding and constructs non-religious identities with

innate and immutable characteristics (Rehaag, 2008). However, the complex life experiences, beliefs and worldviews of apostates challenge this understanding of non-religion. A simplified view of what constitutes non-religion can overlook cultural nuance and can also lead to the improper assessment of asylum claims. The homogenisation of identities reinforces dominant narratives present in the framework of religion-based asylum claims, which potentially puts the credibility of cases that lay outside of this at risk. The reduction of identities into fixed administrative categories is reminiscent of the colonial context, where black men's and women's identities were fixed on racial and sexual lines (Khosravi, 2010). Therefore, positioning asylum-seeking individuals to be categorised and assessed within asylum adjudication echoes and reinforces colonial hierarchies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018; Picozza, 2021). This section has provided an argument that asylum adjudication based on religious identity is subject to fundamental flaws; as has been argued by scholars of religion, 'religion is too unstable a category to be treated as an isolable entity' (Hurd, 2015, p. 6).

6.2.1. Updates on asylum policy

Hamza bin Walayat's asylum case prompted Rachel Taggart-Ryan, the former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK, to advocate for the recognition of non-religious rights as distinct belief systems in asylum assessment procedures (see Appendix K). Since bin Walayat's case was granted in 2019, the Home Office updated its API on 'Assessing Credibility' (see Home Office, 2022b) to reflect that the religious ground includes non-religious beliefs. The changes saw 'terminology updated where appropriate, for example, to reflect this guidance applies to religious and non-religious beliefs' (2022b, p.7). Three refugee participants claimed asylum after these changes²³ and thus will be briefly outlined in this section as it may pose challenges to future applicants.

Under the changes from the NABA (2022), asylum cases lodged after June 2022 are assessed in two stages (Home Office, 2022b). In the first stage of assessment the decision-maker must determine two statements:

- a. Whether the asylum seeker has a characteristic which could cause them to fear persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion (or has such a characteristic attributed to them by an actor of persecution);

²³ This was the case for Farshad, Raliya and Hassan.

b. Whether the asylum seeker does in fact fear such persecution in their country of nationality (or in a case where they do not have a nationality, the country of their former habitual residence) as a result of that characteristic. (2022b, p.26)

In a non-religious asylum assessment, establishing Part A requires a determination on whether the claimant has ‘non-religious characteristics’. However, decision-making on defining ‘non-religious characteristics’ is difficult, as non-religion (like religion) is not defined in detail within international law (Gunn, 2003) or within Home Office policies. Likewise, among academics, there is still no universal definition of what constitutes non-religion (Beaman, Steele and Pringnitz, 2018). Thus, this makes asylum determination on religious grounds ‘exceptionally difficult’ (Rose and Öztürk, 2024, p. 5) as it requires bureaucrats to define what characteristics are distinctively non-religious. Asylum determination processes transform the category of religion into a mode of governance (Hurd, 2024); identities that are assessed as worthy of protection are constructed by external actors, which has been referred to as the most distinguishing feature of modern secular power (Hurd, 2015, p.11). However, in practice, there is evidence of state adjudicators having serious misunderstandings about what constitutes religion (see Musalo, 2004 for an overview), much of which accords with decisions made on non-religion, which will be discussed further in the next chapter of this thesis.

Part B of the asylum assessment requires a determination of whether the claimant faces fear of persecution due to this characteristic. In both parts of the first stage assessment, Home Office officials must identify the material facts and assess the credibility and reliability of evidence. However, there are challenges associated with providing material facts and providing a coherent and reliable narrative on non-religion, which will also be fleshed out in the next two chapters. Moreover, the Home Office explicitly outlines the importance of determining Part B as ‘there may be other reasons why a claimant wants to remain in the UK, such as reasons connected to their private and family life or for economic factors’ (2022b, p.26). Thus, the asylum credibility guidance offered by the Home Office has an element of suspicion for the alternative reasons why a claimant may be making a case, to be discussed in section 6.5.

In stage two of the asylum assessment, the decision-maker assesses whether there is a risk that a claimant would face the harm they fear if they were returned to their country of nationality. At this stage, the decision-maker must assess whether the claimant would be at risk identifying as non-religious if returned. This requires a sophisticated understanding of how non-religious rights are upheld in countries of origin, although this aspect is often overlooked in CPINs.

Home Office officials are encouraged to consider the guidelines produced by the UNHCR's Handbook. However, as mentioned, this guidance notably lacks a thorough exploration of the persecution that apostates can face, making only two references to 'apostasy' throughout the document, compared to 334 references made for gender and 290 for sexuality.

6.2.2. Country Policy and Information Notes

Asylum decision-makers are required to assess a claimant's 'subjective' elements of credibility in relation to external and 'objective' evidence (Madziva, 2020). In the UK, asylum officers regularly draw on 'Country Policy and Information Notes' (CPINs), which the Home Office provides to aid their decision-making (see Home Office, 2024). CPINs offer information on country-specific human rights risks and provide decision-makers with insight into the key issues that might surround an asylum claim. Therefore, CPINs form part of the credibility assessment as they are used to determine the risks an applicant would face if returned to their country of origin. CPINs are important in all types of asylum claims, but they pose specific challenges for apostasy claims. For example, there are challenges in collecting reliable, up-to-date and objective information relating to non-religious identities in some countries. Non-religious people may be wary of reporting crimes committed against them for fear of state persecution. Discrimination or persecution committed against the non-religious may not be recognisable as such in countries where states do not officially recognise their identities. CPINs also aim to collect standardised information about specific countries. However, documents that do consider religious persecution lack the nuance in considering the unique problems faced by apostates with non-religious belief systems. Persecution of apostates is diverse and, thus, CPINs risk implementing a 'one size fits all' approach, which does not reflect individual experiences. This section discusses these challenges with the CPIN reports that were systematically analysed as part of this research and examines their effectiveness in informing asylum determination processes for apostasy.

Table 6 contains information on the countries included in Home Office CPIN reports (n=46). I purposefully added countries that have apostasy or blasphemy laws, which were not included in current CPIN reports. This included the additions of the Maldives, Mauritania, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. I analysed the CPIN documents for inclusion of information or guidance for non-religious persecution. I deliberately left this broad, and I searched for any information on apostasy, blasphemy, atheism, agnosticism and non-religion.

The table shows the country, whether they have blasphemy and/or apostasy laws, and whether the Home Office CPIN is inclusive of non-religious persecution. The results of this search can be found in the table below:

Country	Blasphemy Laws	Apostasy Laws	Inclusion of Persecution Against Non-Religious Apostates
Afghanistan	Death penalty	Death penalty	No
Algeria	Prison sentence	No law	No
Bangladesh	Prison sentence	No law	Yes
Brazil	De facto ²⁴	No law	No
Cameroon	Prison sentence	No law	No
Egypt	Prison sentence	No law	No
El Salvador	Prison sentence	No law	No
Eritrea	Prison sentence	No law	No
Ethiopia	Prison sentence	No law	No
Gambia	Prison sentence	No law	No
India	Prison sentence	No law	No
Iran ²⁵	Death penalty	N/A	No
Iraq	Prison sentence	No law	Yes
Jamaica	De facto	No law	No
Kenya	Prison sentence	No law	No
Kuwait	Prison sentence	De facto	No
Lebanon	Prison sentence	No law	No
Libya	In question	In question	No
Malawi	Prison sentence	No law	No
Malaysia	Prison sentence	Death penalty	No
Maldives	Prison sentence	Death penalty	N/A
Mauritania	Death penalty	Death penalty	N/A
Myanmar	Prison sentence	No law	No
Nigeria	Death penalty	Death penalty	No
Pakistan	Death penalty	No law	No
Russia	Prison Sentence	No law	No
Rwanda	De facto	No law	No
Qatar	Prison sentence	Death penalty	N/A
Saudi Arabia	Death penalty	Death	N/A

²⁴ A ‘de facto’ blasphemy laws are laws that ban insult to religion; offend religious feelings or sentiments; ridicule religious beliefs; restrict the expression of insult, ridicule, satire, or criticism of religion (End Blasphemy Laws, N.D.)

²⁵ Apostasy is punishable by death in Iran, however, the Islamic Republic has never codified the crime of apostasy (IHRDC, 2014)

Somalia	Death penalty	Death penalty	No
South Africa	De facto	No law	No
Sri Lanka	Prison sentence	No law	No
Sudan	Prison sentence	No law	No
Syria	Prison sentence	No law	No
Turkey	Prison sentence	No law	No
United Arab Emirates	Prison sentence	Death penalty	N/A
Yemen	Prison sentence	Death penalty	No
Zimbabwe	Prison sentence	No law	No

Table 6. Analysis of Country Policy and Information Notes

Table 6 demonstrates that only two CPINs include specific guidance for apostasy or non-religious persecution. Information on non-religious persecution is included for Bangladesh (Home Office, 2022d) and Iraq (Home Office, 2021a). Bangladesh's (2022d) CPIN is called 'Religious Minorities and Atheists' and is the only CPIN that specifically mentions atheism in its main title. Section 6.5 of this document considers 'atheists' as a group at risk. Here, the guidance focuses on the instances of journalists and bloggers from a secularist or atheist background who are at serious risk of persecution. The Iraq (2021a) guidance on 'Religious Minorities' includes a section on atheists (2021a, p.46). It states that whilst Iraq does not have direct laws prohibiting atheism, blasphemy is punishable, and individuals who are seen to blaspheme can experience societal repercussions.

Figure 1 presents a world map that highlights the countries detailed in Table 6. This map has been colour-coded to indicate the countries with apostasy laws and the extent to which these laws are criminalised (death penalty, no law, no information, prison sentence, de facto or under question):

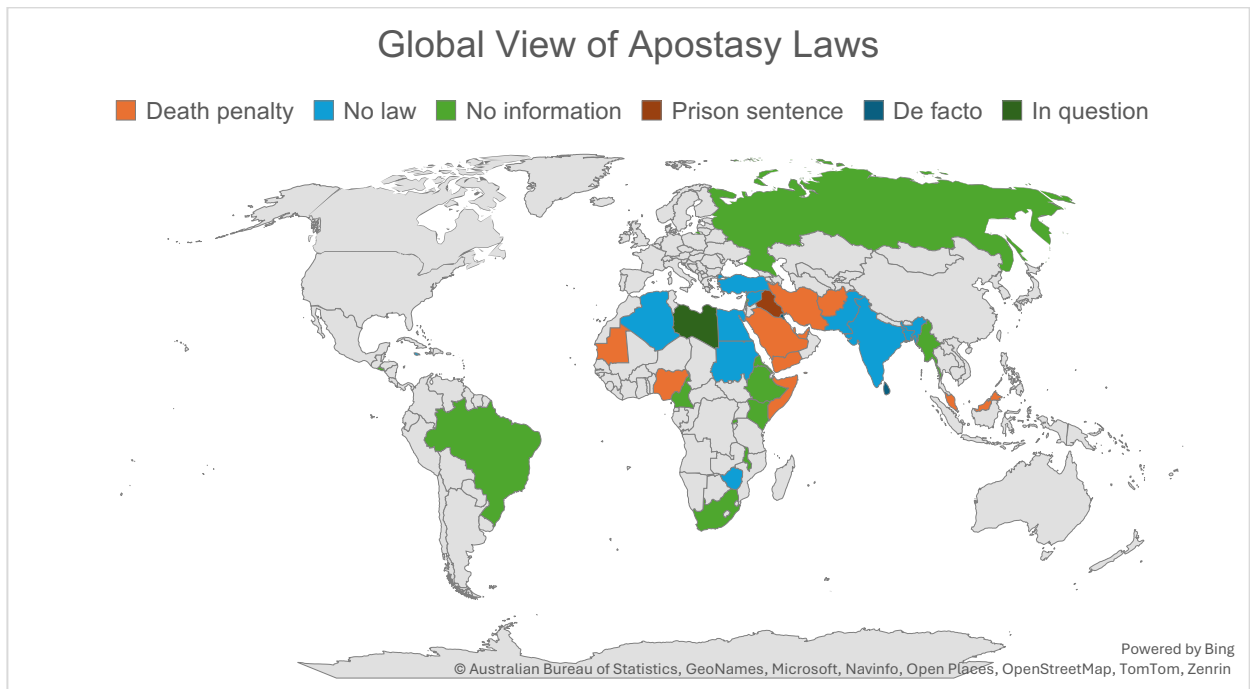


Figure 1. Global view of countries with apostasy laws

Figure 2 presents a world map that highlights the countries listed in Table 6. This map is colour-coded to indicate whether the countries have blasphemy laws and the extent to which it is criminalised (death penalty, prison sentence, de facto, in question):

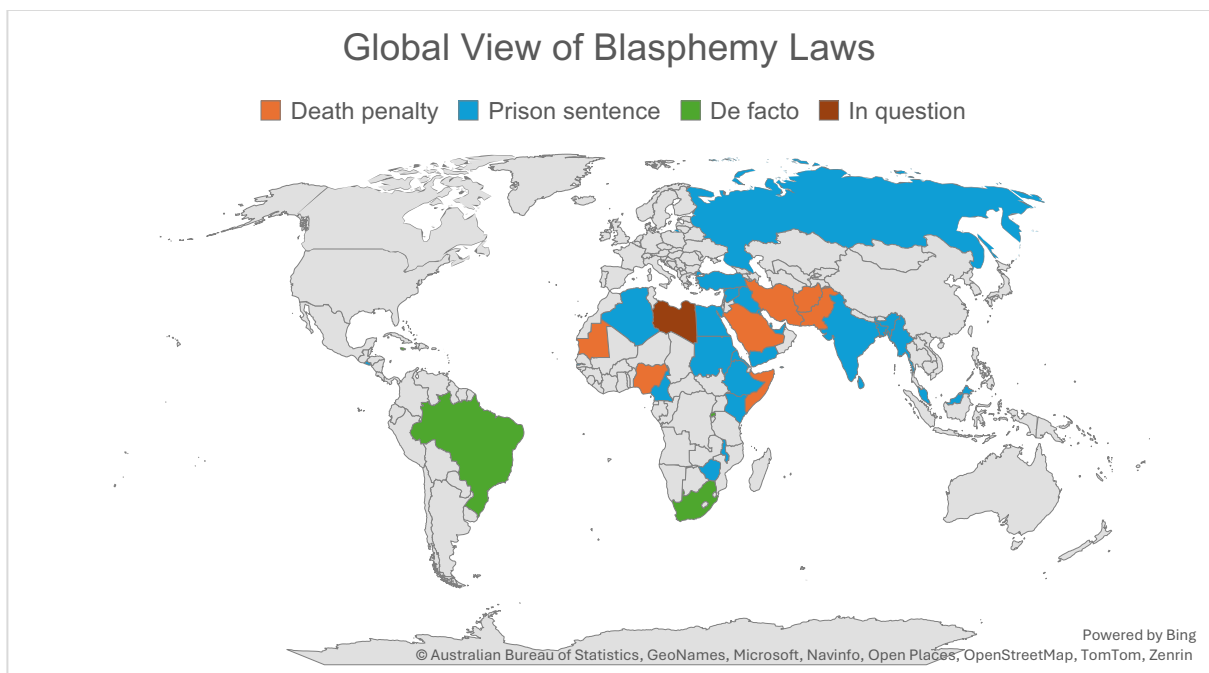


Figure 2. Global view of countries with blasphemy laws

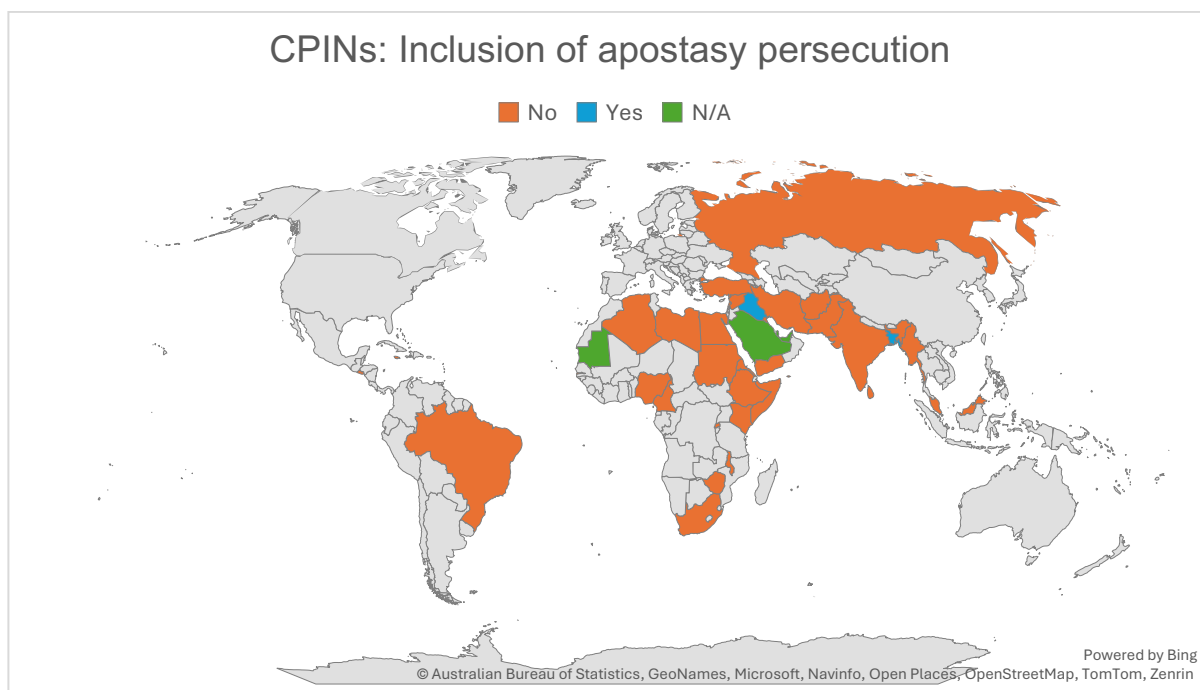


Figure 3. Overview of countries indicating the presence or absence of Home Office CPINs on apostasy persecution²⁶

The Home Office APIs on ‘Assessing Credibility’ (Home Office, 2022a; 2022b) state that decisions should be made with a ‘reliable, relevant and up-to-date country policy information note’ (2022a; 2022b, p.24). From the Home Office’s guidance, the purpose of the CPIN is to contextualise and understand the claimant’s account, prepare questions in the interview, determine how credible the account made is, and assess the credibility and risk of return (ibid). However, Figure 6 shows that CPINs that are inclusive of non-religious persecution are overall absent. As of this writing, Saudi Arabia and Mauritania entirely lack a CPIN document regarding any human rights issues, even though both countries uphold the death penalty for blasphemy and apostasy. Other countries without a CPIN include the Maldives and Qatar, both of which impose prison sentences for blasphemy and enforce the death penalty for apostasy. The United Arab Emirates also does not possess a CPIN despite issuing prison sentences for blasphemy and administering the death penalty for apostasy. Conversely, Afghanistan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Somalia, and Yemen do have CPINs available. However, these documents fail to contain any information on non-religious persecution, even though all mentioned countries implement the death penalty for apostasy.

²⁶ The data source of Table 6, Figures 1, 2 and 3 is Home Office CPINs (2024). ‘Not Applicable’ (N/A) has been used for countries with either blasphemy/apostasy laws but are not included in the list of countries covered by Home Office CPINs.

Where dedicated CPINs are provided for the persecution of religious minorities, they typically focus on Christians and Christian converts, as seen in Iran, Pakistan, and Egypt. For Iran, there is one page on ‘apostasy and proselytising’ (Home Office, 2022e, p. 12) and ‘apostasy’ and ‘blasphemy’ (Home Office, 2021b, pp. 22-23) Egypt has information on blasphemy laws (Home Office, 2023, p. 15). However, absent from these sections’ discussion is a consideration of atheists and specific non-religious identities. Also, this information is placed within the guidance on Christians, which again overlooks the prominence and instances of apostates who are atheists and consideration of their unique discrimination.

CPINs that include information on ‘religious minorities’ do not consider the non-religious or atheists as a persecuted group within lists of minorities. For example, India includes information on Christians, Muslims and Sikhs but none for atheists (Home Office, 2024). This is despite the fact that India’s Penal Code criminalises ‘insulting religious beliefs’ and punishes this crime through prison sentences, and there have been some cases where atheists have been assassinated for spreading rationalism (Humanists International, n.d.). Iran’s section on religious demography (2022e) has information for ‘ethnic’ Christians and Christian converts but includes no information on non-religion despite having the death penalty for blasphemy.

The significant flaw of CPINs is that they risk overlooking non-religious apostates as a persecuted category. Furthermore, the gathering of accurate information regarding the situation and treatment of apostates (who identify as non-religious) faces challenges due to a lack of official reporting or cases of violence or discrimination that may not be officially recognised as instances of non-religious persecution. Persecution may also be perpetrated by non-state actors and within the private sphere, making it difficult to substantiate. Therefore, even with updated CPIN documents, capturing the range of persecution remains challenging.

Human rights advocates interviewed in this project reflected on the inadequacies of CPIN documents. Ben, an Immigration Lawyer claimed, ‘the guidance is general at best, that sort of generality is more steered towards refusing people than granting them’. Rachel Taggart-Ryan also echoed the concerns of the guidance being too general, especially considering that decision-makers at the Home Office often do not have a complex understanding of the history of atheism in countries where it is persecuted. She described:

The Home Office decision-maker is you know a non-graduate role. They don't know anything themselves about the history of atheism in Pakistan. So they go to their guide, which is, you know, the Home Office guide on this country. And a lot of the time, we're just not mentioned. (Rachel Taggart-Ryan – former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK)

Research suggests the lack of official policy and guidance on specific cases can lead some officials to make decisions based on their assumptions or inner feelings and common sense (Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021). However, the common sense of the decision-maker can be influenced by their own personal religious background or identity, education or stereotypical views (ibid). Asylum decisions are also made through specialised knowledge which are constructed stereotypes of 'typical' asylum stories of the 'genuine' refugee (discussed in section 3.3.2). As Madziva and Lowndes argue, 'evidence is actively constructed, embodying processes of meaning making that are underpinned by particular sets of power relations' (2018, p.77). Decision-makers can also rely on the narratives which are portrayed within CPINs, in turn creating generalised views of what asylum claims should entail (Rose and Given-Wilson 2021). When examining non-religious based claims, adjudicators may incorrectly assume they are not at risk or draw their assessments on the basis of religious minority and conversion cases.

The practical usage of CPINs by bureaucrats were brought into question during research interviews with human rights advocates. Immigration Lawyer Jamie Bell reported that sometimes there are disparities of facts between the CPINs and the narratives of people seeking asylum. He outlined:

What you get is the CPIN [Country Policy Information Note] being adhered to and all the other policies in the documents being ignored. So there'll be the CPIN says this happened in 2018 but you said that happened in 2019. You've obviously just been researching this yourself and you're lying and you just spouting what you think we want to hear or something. So like I would say that's probably one of the bigger problems. (Jamie Bell – Immigration Lawyer)

Although such policy notes exist for conversion cases, Bell reported that, in practice, this is not followed:

There is an asylum policy instruction that particularly deals with conversion cases and apostasy cases and regarding credibility and kind of how to deal with these cases or an

interview and it's all very reasonable. However, actually in an interview, it's not really like that. (Jamie Bell)

He explained that, in practice, decision-makers draw on their own assumptions of what they would do if in the claimant's position:

What often happens is you have a decision-maker making a decision based on their own prejudices and bearing their own understanding of the situation when they shouldn't be doing that. They should be assessing it based on kind of the situation in the country in question. (Jamie Bell)

A clash in the worldviews between the bureaucrat and the applicant can impact their ability to understand experiences of leaving religion and becoming non-religious outside of a British context perspective:

If someone's an atheist in the UK they've probably got a different experience or reason of being an atheist [than] in a different country. So, it's kind of like, "actually I don't think that makes sense" based on my experiences in the UK, so that's the kind of problems you have. (Jamie Bell)

In her research conducted on the Norwegian asylum system, Liodden (2020) argues that, over time, bureaucrats begin to recognise and detect patterns in applicants' cases. In what she calls 'pattern recognition', bureaucrats merge sets of individual cases into a shared pool based on their supposed similarities. This connects to my argument that bureaucrats develop specialised knowledge of cases. Due to this, the credibility thresholds are constantly shifting, where 'stories down the line are probably evaluated according to somewhat different criteria than those at the beginning' (2020, p.661). The asylum bureaucracy's dual expectations—for cases to be original yet conform to bureaucrats' specialised knowledge—create a paradox (Laws, 2024) that, in turn, makes the outcomes of asylum assessments unpredictable. The shifting decisions on the 'genuine' refugee can still, in part, be determined through national conceptions of interpretations on asylum law and personal understandings of bureaucrats (Liodden, 2020)

In summary, the availability of CPINs that include the unique types of discrimination and persecution faced by apostates and the non-religious, are overlooked. When they are acknowledged, they are often integrated into broader guidance on religious conversion claims. This leads the Home Office not to recognise non-religiosity as an identity in its own right, with specific needs that differ from those of other persecuted groups. When asylum bureaucrats refer

to applicants' country of origin CPINs to categorise their claims, they construct a set of characteristics that they believe are shared by all members, which influences how they interpret those claims. The vast majority of CPINs concentrate on religious minorities; consequently, the asylum adjudication process for religion-based claims is intended with these types of claims in consideration. A lack of specific guidance compels bureaucrats to develop specialised knowledge on religion-based asylum cases centred on conversion as well as influenced by their own perceptions of how a persecuted atheist might behave. While the burden of proof lies with the applicant, bureaucrats also need to understand the religious, social, and cultural contexts of the country of origin in question. Without accurate CPIN information, bureaucrats may fail to recognise that the non-religious are a persecuted group deserving of protection and may struggle to assess apostasy asylum cases.

In conclusion, this section has outlined how apostasy asylum claims are formed in the UK, noting the relevant asylum law and guidance that inform the Home Office's asylum assessment policies. This section has highlighted the knowledge gaps in this specific context, including the lack of awareness that apostasy is a ground for asylum in both policy and practice. The evidence from the multiple perspectives explored in this research indicates that there is much more to understand in the adjudication process for apostasy asylum claims, as the identification and application of the concept of apostasy may remain conceptually unclear (see van Schaik and Hillary, 2023). This leads Nixon (2018) to argue that legal and policy frameworks need further clarity on whether non-religion is protected under the religion grounds. I argue that the ambiguity surrounding concepts of religion and belief, along with the distinct types of persecution faced by the non-religious, has resulted in misunderstandings within asylum assessment processes. The factors I discuss in the subsequent sections of this chapter include the burden of evidence, the broader framework of religion-based asylum cases, and a culture of disbelief.

6.3. Materialising Claims: Increased burden of evidence

In asylum assessments, bureaucrats look for evidence that can be objectively scrutinised. Proving an asylum claim with material evidence for a non-religious asylum case is particularly challenging compared with other types of persecution or belief claims. The key issues that face all asylum applicants, such as credibility and burden of proof, are especially acute. The Home Office states that material evidence may consist of documentary evidence, expert evidence and

CPIN reports (Home Office, 2022a; 2022b). Whilst the guidance recognises the difficulties of providing evidence for threats of persecution, which may not be recorded in the form of documents, it outlines that the burden of proof is placed on the applicant (ibid, p.19). This section will focus on the difficulties of producing documentary evidence to prove an apostasy claim. The main challenge is that non-religiosity is often a private and personal experience, especially in contexts where apostasy and blasphemy have social and legal repercussions (Richter, 2023). Although it is not mandatory to produce documentary evidence to support their claim, this issue raises the question of how an individual can prove an absence of a belief. It thus situates apostasy asylum claims at a disadvantage in attempting to demonstrate credibility.

The two key challenges of materialising apostasy asylum cases through evidence are the difficulties of demonstrating an absence and proving internally held convictions and beliefs. Brown's (2017) research on 'becoming atheist' (in the 'West') highlights the challenge of articulating non-religiosity because 'it is a negative or absent category, no theology, little history and, for the first-generation atheist and indifferentist, [there are] rarely any family traditions or recollections of unbelief to recall' (2017, p.71). Brown goes on to raise the question of how one can speak about being an atheist, especially when the process of becoming was gradual:

Atheists are seldom made in a single process or act of conversion. They go through stages which are often personal, quite subdued affairs, perhaps lacking key signs – even to the individual. Atheists speaking about how they got to that state of being find difficulty in identifying dates or stages, or even processes. The atheist may not be aware of when he or she became one. (2017, p.71)

This is transformed into a fundamental problem when adjudicating an asylum claim based on non-religion, as there is an unfair burden of proof placed on the claimant. Harper, an Immigration Lawyer, articulated the challenges of providing objective evidence for the absence of religion:

Most of the time, I think, almost everyone that I have met or have read, their story it's usually something that has been bothering them since they were young, they have depression, in what they've been told about their religion and then things have not been adding up for them. Then over time and then maybe something will happen and then it will come together. I don't believe in this anymore and most of the time, it's happening to them alone, on their bed, in their living room and then it takes them time to even speak to other people about it. (Harper - Immigration Lawyer)

Harper explained that she first held the assumption (similar to the view of many asylum assessors) that journeys to becoming non-religious should follow a clear delineation of religion to apostasy. However, after supporting individuals with apostasy asylum cases, she found that an individual's non-religiosity can often be invisible in nature (as outlined in Chapter 5). Harper described how the internal nature of coming to realise one's non-religiosity is often private and is not spoken about publicly, at least until an individual has come to terms with it. Similarly, Layla, an ex-Muslim activist, helps individuals in their transitions away from Islam. She noted that becoming an apostate is frequently an 'internalised' process.

I think they've just gone through it, they have internalised it and really longed for their freedom and sometimes there are women who have never told their parents or women or men. Never told their parents about their apostasy. (Layla – Ex-Muslim Activist)

The internal nature of non-religiosity thus makes it difficult for asylum claimants to provide objective evidence that the Home Office values. If there is objective evidence that can be documented, it is usually where a claimant has publicly expressed their non-religiosity, which has its own risks:

If you're public, you can substantiate that a bit more with the evidence they have, or even evidence of abuse. But when it's individual and I think specifically women it's a very complex issue. (Layla)

The social psychological research on leaving religion considers non-belief as primarily a personal experience (Selim *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, as a private identity which is often undisclosed, it is important to create a space within the asylum interview where relations between the decision-maker, advocate and interpreter are managed to set a space that is comfortable to disclose that identity (Berg and Millbank, 2009). However, as research in the literature on asylum bureaucracy shows, these relations are often filled with unequal dynamics (Campbell, 2016; Dahlvik, 2018), which may systematically obscure the ability of individuals to speak coherently about their beliefs.

The literature on the forms of materialising religious conversion claims is increasing, yet research outlining the material aspects of non-religious claims remains inadequate. Studies on other types of asylum cases, such as those based on sexuality, have shown that officials expect claimants to substantiate their claims, for instance, by demonstrating evidence of belonging to organised social communities (Millbank, 2009). In Christian conversion cases for asylum,

claimants often materialise their claims through their church or religious leaders, such as by providing a baptism certificate (Laws, 2024), having a religious wedding, or presenting proof of their visibility at congregations (Fossdal, 2024). However, atheists frequently lack comparable evidence and should not be expected to substantiate their claims in the same manner as religious converts.

The human rights advocates interviewed in this study spoke of the type of evidence they found helpful in demonstrating non-religious identities. One dominant thread of evidence included membership and asylum support letters from the relevant social communities, such as Humanists UK, Council of Ex-Muslims Britain and the National Secular Society. However, there are challenges in terms of discovering such groups, being accepted in, or building a sense of belonging within a group that supports non-religious people, which will be discussed further in the next chapter. Thus, non-religious beliefs pose a specific problem for asylum assessment procedures regarding credibility, which values written material documentation to support one's testimony (Bohmer and Shuman, 2017).

Participants from a refugee background discussed the challenges of providing evidentiary proof to support their claims of non-religiosity. Farshad explained how there is a lack of support and awareness for non-religious people who seek asylum:

There are some problems for atheist cases or for atheist people claiming asylum, when you are going to become a Christian, everything is obvious. You need to attend a church and get a letter, something like this. And you will find a lot of friends there. You will get a lot of support there, community, but for atheists there aren't like this. Most of the people don't know about Humanists UK or about ex-Muslim all of these organisations. (Farshad, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, COO Iran)

Farshad explained that, due to the unique nature of non-religious belief systems, it is challenging to identify something objective that can be presented as evidence. He also added that this poses particular difficulties for individuals with limited English proficiency, as it is hard to articulate these views clearly:

There are a lot of unique ways and there are a lot of unique atheistic belief systems so that's a little bit harder and also for some of the people who are not able to speak English adequately. It is very hard to translate for the translator. (Farshad)

On the contrary to other participants, Hassan (who claimed asylum in June 2022) reported that his asylum case was granted within four months, which he found surprising. Discussing the reasons why he thought this was, he believed it was due to ‘good evidence’. In his case, there were news reports and press coverage of his alleged blasphemy:

Basically, they got my case done in about four months. Which is very quick in asylum cases. I mean, I think in the guide they say it takes six months on average but sometimes it takes a year and for some of the people staying in my hotel there were two years. I got it in four months because there was national press coverage, so I guess good evidence. That was solid evidence. I mean it was I guess conclusive evidence. (Hassan, date of asylum 2022, aged late 20s, COO Maldives)

Moreover, Hassan discussed being ‘outed’ as an apostate in his country of origin, the Maldives. Thus, this meant Hassan had publicly verifiable evidence for his claim, which he thought led to the granting of his case.

Ex-Muslim activist Nuriyah Khan explained that for some of the apostates she has supported, individuals will consider posting blasphemous content publicly due to the burden of proof within these cases:

A lot of people in these countries, when they're thinking of claiming asylum are actually putting themselves in even more danger. Because in order to meet that threshold, that's kind of taking the risk of openly blaspheming where the risk is they would be kind of put to death by a mob but they're doing that just to kind of gather evidence or get some kind of, like tangible evidence that their life is under threat. Whether it's through a DM [Direct Message] or a WhatsApp chat or something just to show them to the asylum officers. (Nuriyah Khan – Social Media Activist)

Further human rights advocates in this study reflected on the difficulties of proving non-religiosity. Comparing non-religion to sexuality-based claims, Immigration Lawyer Ana Gonzalez stated:

There is no definitive evidence to prove somebody's gay, for example ... you may sort of have be involved in number of online dating. You might go to SONOS, but, you know, some people don't do that, not everybody does that. Yes, so, with apostates it is the same. (Ana Gonzalez – Immigration Lawyer at Wilsons Solicitors)

Similarly, Immigration Lawyer Harper said, ‘to make your claim as an atheist is very difficult because of what it is, there is no doctrine. There is no baptism, there are no rituals that you

have to go through'. Rachel Taggart-Ryan also commented on the difficulties that can arise for the non-religious in proving their identities due to the absence of adherence to a set of doctrines beliefs:

It's a lot harder if you don't have a set of doctrinal beliefs by which you actually live your life and can demonstrate that. I do this, X, Y, and Z because this is my commandment to do so. And that's one of the unique problems I think for the non-religious community. (Rachel Taggart-Ryan – former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK)

Lastly, Linda (an apostate supporter) argues that you cannot prove a negative or unbelief, which creates a problem for non-religious people seeking asylum:

Let's say you left Iran, because you're non-religious and you became non-Muslim and you're now Christian, you go to three Sunday services and two bake sales and bingo, the priest will write your letters to say that you're Christian. You can't prove a negative though. So, if you've left Iran, and now you are an unbeliever completely, how do you prove that you're an unbeliever? (Linda – Apostate Supporter)²⁷

Therefore, while all individuals seeking asylum may find it challenging to meet the Home Office's burden of proof, the evaluation of religion-based claims can further complicate this process (Madziva, 2020). Mousin (2003) articulates this point: 'persons of faith or holding beliefs, for which they have suffered, have had difficulties meeting their burdens of proof because violence against faith or belief may violate their conscience but fails to leave physical scars' (Mousin, 2003, p.575).

Due to the challenges of demonstrating non-religiosity in participants' countries of origin, most of the participants in this study provided evidence of their identity whilst living in the UK. Human rights advocates who have supported non-religious asylum seekers in making their claims provided examples of this evidence. For instance, they include social media accounts and posts related to non-religious expression, participation in events and protests concerning human rights issues like Pride, evidence of owning or reading books containing philosophical testaments, and letters from local and national secular organisations. Rachel Taggart-Ryan explained her experience of supporting apostates:

²⁷ It is important to note that religious conversion cases are not 'easily' demonstrated because they can, in principle, materialise their claims through evidence. Christian converts are sometimes disbelieved, and their evidence can be considered self-serving. For an overview of the challenges faced by religious converts, see Lena and Rose (2023).

You say you can talk about, you know, what books they've read, collaborate stories, about events, they've been to. They've been involved with the British Council of ex-Muslims. I've got lots of people taking photos of them at various events. PRIDE marches... (Rachel Taggart-Ryan – former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK)

A theoretical lens of the colonality of bureaucracy highlights some unique challenges in materialising non-religious claims in three ways. First, it demonstrates that the burden of proof serves as a dynamic of power employed by bureaucrats to control and regulate the behaviours and actions of non-religious claimants (Walsh and Ferazzoli, 2023). It governs the material evidence considered adequate to substantiate beliefs stemming from Western interpretations of non-religious identities. For instance, the British asylum system acknowledges philosophical texts, human rights activism, and belonging to organisations as means to evidence disbelief. This stereotypical evidence is imbued with neo-colonial logic as bureaucrats based in the UK (re)construct the form of knowledge that satisfies the idea of the ‘credible’ refugee. Certain types of evidence are necessary to demonstrate that an individual is ‘progressive’ and, therefore, ‘civilised’. Second, an expectation that non-religious apostates will understand and be engaged with philosophy and related works reflects more on the ‘analytical cognitive style’ of the belief system (Selim *et al.*, 2023, p. 778), which risks overlooking other reasons why individuals leave their religion, such as influences of ‘culture, motivation and personality’ (ibid).

Third, the expectation for particular types of evidence may lead to dismissing other evidence as untenable. For example, some evidence provided to human rights advocates was specific and featured individual, personal expressions of non-religiosity. One example was a photo of a claimant hugging a dog, ‘one guy gave me a photo of him hugging a dog which one... you'd have to have quite a good level of like religious literacy to know that dogs in Islam are haram’ (Rachel Taggart-Ryan). Therefore, the burden of proof in apostasy reveals the colonality of power by converting evidence into a bureaucratic means of control. In doing so, asylum cases influence an individual’s sense of ‘self’, affecting how a person seeking asylum behaves in ways that embody stereotypical non-religious identities. For these reasons, approaching asylum adjudication through the lens of lived non-religion is useful. There is rarely direct agreement between what religious institutions and leaders advocate and what individuals believe and practice (Enstedt, Moberg and Plank, 2024). Therefore, a lived non-religion lens would highlight ‘the existence of individual variations in religious belief, practice and identity, and

indicating that such deviations do not necessarily diminish applicants' credibility' (Selim *et al.*, 2023, p.781).

In conclusion, materialising belief and the evidentiary burden of proof in apostasy asylum assessments shape ideas of the 'credible' refugee. A common reason for disbelieving a claimant is their inability to provide documentary evidence (Souter, 2011), but as previously discussed, there are significant challenges regarding how non-religious individuals can offer such evidence. The burden of proof lies with the claimant; however, demonstrating evidence for internal and often invisible beliefs is complex and presents difficulties for those seeking asylum. The Home Office may seek proof of apostates joining local organisations for support, attending related events such as Pride, and engaging with philosophy through reading and being able to quote it. However, the colonality of bureaucracy suggests that the asylum assessment process homogenises identities and reduces them to generalised understandings of identity from the viewpoint of bureaucrats based in the UK. Thus, individuals perceived as credible must conform to stereotypical notions of non-religiosity despite the lived non-religion framework illustrating that identities are much more nuanced. Categorisations and labels within asylum determination are influenced by Western prejudices concerning assumptions of identities, the effects of racism, colonialism, and the construction of 'the other' (Jubany, 2017, p.186). Consequently, this implies that asylum assessment procedures may affect how apostates behave in the UK to gather the empirical evidence necessary to satisfy the burden of proof, even though non-religion often lacks 'objectifiable' evidence. Therefore, asylum assessment procedures for apostates have profound embodied impacts on individuals and the ways they navigate bureaucracy, which will be explored further in Chapter 7.

6.4. Specialised Knowledge: Religion-based claims for religious converts

So far, this chapter has explored asylum determination processes for religion-based asylum claims. It has discussed how these asylum claims are formed under the Convention grounds, Home Office assessment policies, the adequateness of CPINs, and the challenges with the evidentiary burden of proof. Throughout this chapter, I have shown how bureaucratic frameworks are orientated around religious conversion, that are often incompatible with non-religious claims. The non-religious, who have unique identities that are set apart from religious

conversion cases, thus face challenges in navigating asylum determination frameworks that orientate around conversion. This section will bring these threads together through the lens of the colonality of bureaucracy to draw out the specialised knowledge that bureaucrats develop and the specific challenges it creates for apostates.

Although there are no available statistics, it is estimated by researchers that, since 2015, there has been an increasing number of individuals who have converted to Christianity in Europe (Kéri and Sleiman, 2017; Schlüter, 2024; Stene, 2020). Religious-based asylum claims in the literature are overwhelmingly researched in the context of Christian conversion cases, and it is predicted that these are the ‘typical’ types of asylum cases (Madziva, 2018; Musalo, 2004; Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021; Rose and Öztürk, 2024). This suggests that asylum cases which are claimed on the grounds of religion received by the Home Office are Christian conversion claims, which creates an unfamiliarity of non-religious persecution (Laws, 2024). The administration and assessment of asylum claims are a site that (re)produces official and informal knowledge (Schittenhelm and Schneider, 2017). As a result, asylum bureaucrats develop ‘specialised knowledge’ of religion-based asylum cases that are biased toward more well-documented or frequent types of cases, such as religious conversion.

As discussed in the literature review, there is a hierarchy of religion and belief protections in international human rights law, which tends to frame the protection of religion more explicitly than other belief systems (McAdam, 2017). This hierarchy situates ‘well-established’ religions (the Abrahamic religions) with high protection and low regulation at the top and the non-religious with weaker protection despite enduring high persecution (ibid). This research found that a hierarchy of protection concerning religion or belief claims exists within asylum law and is evident through asylum determination processes. Human rights advocates and refugee participants reflected on the difficulties of navigating a system that hierarchically prioritises religion-based asylum cases. For instance, the refugees interviewed felt disadvantaged when attempting to demonstrate their identities during the credibility assessment. Nazim noted that he was the only Iranian asylum seeker, residing in his accommodation, claiming on the grounds of non-religiosity:

I was the only one that wasn't a Christian convert in the whole, throughout the time and everyone would be like you have to do it. You've got no chance. They don't really care about that. It was just like even the guy who was interviewing me. It was as if he hadn't

had much experience in interviewing an Iranian who's not a Christian, he was trying to get creative with questions. (Nazim, date of asylum 2019, aged 23, COO Iran)

Refugees also reported that the questioning in the asylum assessment was orientated around how a Christian conversion case would be questioned:

There was a question. That was very interesting. I think the people that came up with it were looking at it from a Christian perspective. So, they asked, have you ever renounced your faith officially? And I think certain religions like you get a paper where they officially kick you out. But for Islam we don't have that. I just didn't know. If I wanted to renounce it officially, I can't renounce it publicly but it's different to officially yeah. So, they were using that frame of reference. (Nadia, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, COO Saudi Arabia)

There is no officially recognised way of renouncing Islam; thus, to ask an apostate, 'Have you ever renounced your faith officially?' shows inaccuracies in the bureaucrat's theological knowledge²⁸. The solicitor told Murad that his case took a long time because the Home Office was unfamiliar with this type of claim. He explained how his narrative did not fit with the pattern the Home Office expected to see:

He [the solicitor] told me your case took 10 months after your main interview to make a decision because it's difficult, they are not familiar with this type of case and you didn't answer based on the pattern that they wanted to see in a real case. I didn't know that I should be Christian. I was just myself. (Murad, date of asylum 2018, aged 36, COO Iran)

Bureaucrats who draw on the knowledge learned from the 'typical' cases of religion-based claims (e.g., Christianity) exemplify the colonality of knowledge. This concept highlights the power dynamics that empower bureaucrats to shape asylum interviews according to their understandings and expectations of 'real' religion-based claims. Furthermore, this supports the argument that these power dynamics are entrenched in historically constructed hierarchies of knowledge concerning religion or belief protections, which are also evident in asylum determination processes, favouring certain narratives as credible over others.

Human rights advocates highlighted the issues of asylum assessment procedures for religion-based asylum cases. Immigration Lawyers reported a problematic line of questioning for the

²⁸ Whilst it is not possible to officially renounce Christianity either, members can write to the church expressing their wish to leave; and it is possible to publicly renounce the Catholic faith.

non-religious by asking claimants if they have ‘converted’ to atheism. Ana Gonzalez, an Immigration Lawyer, stated:

They want to be satisfied that you are telling the truth, really, and the truth and things like, but then the Home Office of something really confused often, they get really confused with atheism and they ask you, they ask people have you ever, when do you convert to atheism? That confuses people. (Ana Gonzalez - Immigration Lawyer at Wilsons Solicitors)

Likewise, Immigration Lawyer Jamie Bell stated:

I've heard the Home Office describe and talk about converting to atheism before, so seeing atheism as a religion. So it's really, really strange and they start quizzing them on atheism. And you have to write back and say, yeah, that's not a religion, it's not conversion, it's not church. (Jamie Bell – Immigration Lawyer)

The examples provided indicate that bureaucrats view the shift from faith to a non-religious perspective as a conversion. According to Bourdieu (1997), bureaucracy influences officials' roles, actions, beliefs, and discourses. Consequently, knowledge is formed through the routine functions within the asylum bureaucracy. Specialised knowledge emerges through habituated practices in asylum assessment procedures. There are two main implications for this on asylum assessment practices in this context. One effect of this is that it constructs officials' specialised knowledge, which ‘enables [bureaucracies] to uphold and reproduce constructions of a particular cultural identity through the universal language of human rights’ (Noll, 2006, p.492). The other effect of officials' specialised knowledge is its impact on how credibility assessments are conducted. If specialised knowledge is oriented around religious belief systems, this leads to flawed credibility assessments for the non-religious.

Constructing specialised knowledge of religion-based asylum claims around Christianity has specific colonial entanglements. The spread of Christian missionary projects was central to European colonialism, utilised to impose ‘civilised’ and ‘modern’ ways of living on the ‘uncivilised’ and ‘primitive’ communities (Johnston, 2003). In Britain, essentialist notions of ‘Britishness’ are embedded through notions of homogenous, Christian and White (Ansari, 2018). Through specialised knowledge, the Home Office creates a norm of Christianity as the most common type of religion-based claim, which risks reproducing colonial relations by only considering those who are in close proximity to Christian values as deemed worthy of

protection. Stereotyping in this way feeds into orientalist assumptions that there are significant differences between Arabs and those of ‘westerners’ (Good, 2016, p.39):

Persecution is therefore represented, not as the outcome of localized social practices or specific political regimes, but as the inevitable consequence of a monolithic, socially repressive Islam which, according to this essentialist Western view, is always and everywhere the same. (Good, 2016, p.39)

Through the categorisation of refugees, states (re)produce the idea of the ‘nation’ and who belongs within it (Carver, 2019; Noll, 2006). This reflects the colonality of power as the asylum seeker is constructed as an ‘unreliable informant’ of their own identity, whilst the asylum bureaucrat can ‘discover’ one’s identity through the ‘tools of the enlightened West’ (Carver, 2019, p.155). The granting of asylum is discretionary on the decision-maker, so to be granted leave to remain, the asylum claimant must narrate their identity in accordance with what the bureaucrat considers a credible refugee story (Allard, 2013). However, if the bureaucrat is framing their understanding of religion-based asylum claims on the stories of conversion, it risks setting up Christian conversion cases as a benchmark against which others are judged.

To conclude this section, this research has demonstrated how the administration and assessment of religion-based claims have evolved through specialised knowledge of the dominant types of cases, particularly Christian conversion claims. Earlier in the chapter, I discussed how the bureaucratic structures governing credibility assessment policies and CPIN guidance influence the creation of specialised knowledge. This section has examined the impact of bureaucrats’ expertise on the routine practice of conducting asylum interviews and assessments. Consequently, decision-making processes are hindered by the presumption that religion-based claims will predominantly involve conversion cases. As a result, apostate asylum claims are processed within the same frameworks as religious conversion cases. This section has shown that treating non-religious cases within the established frameworks for conversion and through the specialised knowledge that arises from them has, in turn, affected credibility assessments. This aligns with other research indicating that asylum assessment procedures are knowledge-producing, as they both (re)produce both official and informal knowledge (Schittenhelm and Schneider, 2017).

6.5. Culture of Disbelief: The believability of non-religion

As discussed in this chapter, apostate asylum seekers attempt to demonstrate their identities by substantiating them with documentary evidence. This proves challenging as it raises questions about what proof can be provided for inner convictions such as non-religiosity or unbelief. In the absence of evidence, oral testimony is examined alone. Whether evidence is supplied or not, asylum decision-making is shaped by a culture of disbelief in both scenarios (Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Jubany, 2011; Zisakou, 2021). The culture of disbelief has been argued to be the main driving force behind decisions on asylum claims that are not deemed ‘credible’. As discussed throughout this chapter, credible non-religious asylum claims are assessed based on their ability to be categorised within the Convention grounds, their applicability to externally known facts (CPIN reports), and internal credibility, which includes the ability to produce material documentary evidence. Thus, apostasy is translated into the objective standards of asylum assessments. However, I have argued that decision-makers construct the genuine refugee in terms of fixed, essentialised categorisations of a ‘non-religious’ identity, which is largely understood in relation to Western conceptions of atheism. The ways in which non-religious asylum applicants interviewed in this study negotiated and navigated their identities will be discussed in the next chapter. This section will examine the culture of disbelief as a bureaucratic and structural dimension underpinning decision-making processes. Whilst this theme has been readily discussed in relation to other types of asylum cases, its effects have not been explored for the non-religious.

In this research, human rights advocates reflected on the culture of disbelief and the effects that this has on non-religious claims. Rachel Taggart-Ryan stated that there is an overall dismissal or disbelief proposed against non-religious belief systems specifically:

There was that, kind of, level of dismissal... people just see us as not as much of a problem as the religious, you know? Oh, you can, you know, you really don't believe in anything. Therefore, it doesn't matter to you. And there's just not the same parallel of esteem to non-religious beliefs. (Rachel Taggart-Ryan – former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK)

Taggart-Ryan also reflected that due to the culture of disbelief, from her perspective, assessors are more uneasy about non-religious claims because they require a greater understanding, for which time pressure and resources within the bureaucracy may not allow:

The culture of the Home Office, it is there to turn people down at the end of the day. It's an adversarial system. So, there are certain grounds which I think the asylum

assessors are kind of belligerent towards nuanced cases and nuanced belief systems that they don't understand. (Rachel Taggart-Ryan)

Immigration Lawyers also reflected that the asylum system is systematically orientated around disbelieving claimants, particularly those that lie outside the 'norm' of typical cases. Ana Gonzalez stated:

The system is stacked against you and there will be overworked, not necessarily nasty people, but overworked. The case workers that are really badly trained and you need to advocate for yourself, have somebody really fighting your corner with a set of representations, a statement and any other evidence that you go to (Ana Gonzalez – Immigration Lawyer)

Thus, the need to for asylum applicants to advocate for themselves and articulate narratives to asylum assessors is imperative; these aspects will be discussed in the next chapter. Immigration Lawyer Harper, also echoed this concern:

I have to say in my experience, and I'm happy to say this out loud, that the way the Home Office deals with asylum seekers, it's from a point of disbelief. They don't believe you right at the beginning... But the law also says that the burden is on the claimant, the asylum seeker to prove that they are a genuine asylum seeker, it's just that sometimes the burden is not fair the extent, because there are certain things that it's just difficult, I said being an atheist, being LGBT too sometimes is very, how do you prove it? (Harper - Immigration Lawyer)

Immigration barrister, Thomas, stated the granting of religion-based asylum claims often come down to being believed and providing a 'convincing' account:

If a claimant can demonstrate that leaving a religion in their country can be grounds for persecution, it comes down to being believed and providing a convincing account. If you are believed, you are allowed in. (Thomas – immigration barrister)

Immigration Lawyer Ana Gonzalez agreed with this point; she stated that if you provide the Home Office with testimony and evidence for your claim, a positive asylum determination hinges on being believed:

When you got that sort of evidence and you put it to them. The Home Office will not necessarily know that but you give them the links or print out the articles and you give it to them. And you argue, "Look this is what happens where I come from. Yeah, so now, this is how much it is and how dangerous it is for apostates." Now you know all

that remains, you need to believe that I'm telling the truth. (Ana Gonzalez – Immigration Lawyer)

However, providing a 'believable' account of persecution can be impeded by decision-makers' assumptions about what they personally think is genuine. Eleanor Bell explained that there may be preconceptions affecting whether claimants from certain backgrounds will be believed or not:

There's probably institutional racism as well. For some reason, I think because there's such a high level of Iranian claims, they're less likely to be believed whereas there's a relatively low rate of Saudi claims and Saudi is traditionally seen as more conservative so they are more likely to be believed. (Eleanor Bell – immigration caseworker at Duncan Lewis Solicitors)

The assumptions regarding the believability of racialised individuals demonstrate the colonality of power within asylum assessments. This power marks particular races as either 'deserving' or 'undeserving' from the outset and thus disembodies the ability of racialised groups of people to receive protection (Picozza, 2021). Additionally, there are also internal assumptions (specialised knowledge) of what is a 'believable' story with the asylum process:

They want genuine and detailed and believable, so your personal story that led to the decisions of abandoned religion, that's kind of what they want and then that means it requires a lot of detail. It requires something that is deemed to be believable by the interviewer and kind of credible reasoning that led to the conversion. So, they kind of want everything to make sense in accordance with what their expectations would be for someone who converts from that country. (Jamie Bell – Immigration Lawyer)

However, the issue of drawing on personal assumptions to make decisions has been well-researched by scholars. For example, 'decision-makers will take decisions from their own Western assumptions unaware of the importance of cultural differences between themselves and claimants' (Thomas, 2006, p.84). Thus 'when officers "don't believe" a story, they are not only disbelieving a particular case or individual, but they are making a much wider generalisation about a "type" of applicant' (Jubany, 2017, p.160). Hence, authentic asylum narratives must be consistent with bureaucrats' perceptions of what is considered a refugee story (Allard, 2013).

The wider culture of disbelief often categorises people seeking asylum as 'bogus' if they do not meet the bureaucrats' standard of credibility (Gibson, 2013). Refugee participants reported

the difficulties of articulating their narratives in hostile conditions and reported concern about being disbelieved. Nadia, originally from Saudi Arabia, spoke of the difficulty of speaking of an experience that has been traumatic and triggering to a Home Office bureaucrat:

So, talking to an interviewer, they have this attitude, where they are sceptical about what you're saying. It's just extremely triggering, and to go through very very difficult things and they take you back to your childhood and in just two hours, it was just intense. The second I left the building I just broke down crying because of the intensity just hit me. (Nadia, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, COO Saudi Arabia)

Ahmed, from Pakistan, also raised concern for how he thought he was treated:

I went in the building there, all the people there, they looked at me like some dirty immigrant or something. They look down on you, they're not very welcoming, they should be welcoming. They make it look like you are welcome here but deep down they're thinking what the hell are you doing here. (Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

Providing a credible testimony relies on translating lived experiences into bureaucratic frameworks (Gibson, 2013). Yet, the broader culture of disbelief fosters a hostile environment within asylum assessment processes, wherein the validity of a 'credible' asylum narrative hinges on being accepted as true. Examining this process through the lens of bureaucratic coloniality reveals that racialised preconceptions permeate it. The racialised asylum seeker is perceived as 'other' within immigration and asylum systems (Bhatia, 2020). Although overarching bureaucratic frameworks guide asylum assessments, they are also shaped by the specialised knowledge of bureaucrats, which can often act as 'a screen behind which racism and prejudice thrive' (Jubany, 2017, p.11). Consequently, the criteria for asylum assessment that distinguish between deserving and undeserving refugees are rooted in postcolonial perspectives that view non-Western individuals as the 'other' (ibid). Therefore, the challenges surrounding the adjudication of non-religious asylum claims are intensified by the culture of disbelief, which is underpinned by a set of assumptions regarding the credibility of certain individuals embedded within the British asylum system.

6.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how the complex and nuanced nature of non-religious identities and worldviews are understood from the perspective of the British asylum system. As is the case

for all types of asylum claims, applicants must conform to national bureaucratic frameworks to receive protection. However, I argue that asylum bureaucratic procedures are inaccurate and flawed for apostasy asylum claims, and thus, non-religious asylum applicants face unique barriers to receiving protection. I focused first on the bureaucratic processes that transform non-religion into a governable subject by detailing how apostasy is framed within the legal conceptions of the Convention and Home Office policies. In analysing the language used in asylum law, I sought to trace how the non-religious asylum seeker was constructed in national policies. I argue that there is a knowledge gap of apostasy in both discourses. This discussion included an update in asylum policy that makes asylum assessments through a two-stage test. Second, I discussed the burden of proof and how apostasy asylum claims are materialised. Third, I considered how the asylum assessment processes for religion-based claims are tailored for more commonplace instances of religious persecution, such as conversion. Lastly, I reflected on how the asylum bureaucracy functions within a widespread ‘culture of disbelief,’ which may result in doubts about the legitimacy of personal beliefs, including non-religion.

By examining these bureaucratic elements alongside perspectives of lived non-religion and the colonality of bureaucracy, this chapter presents a series of arguments that have implications for asylum assessment processes regarding apostate claims. First, the asylum process fixes identities and reduces non-religion to an essentialist and generalisable category with inherent and immutable characteristics. Through this process, lived experiences are transformed into legal and administrative categories of asylum, which are grounded in Western European frameworks. This approach overlooks the complexities inherent in the lived experience of becoming non-religious, which were discussed in Chapter 5. By simplifying identities, the asylum bureaucracy produces homogenised characteristics. Thus, bureaucratic procedures contribute to the (re)production of what it means to be a ‘credible’ apostate in need of protection. Whilst doing so, the nation reaffirms its own norms and values by deciding who it considers to be worthy of protection imbued with colonial logic of the deserving and undeserving refugee.

Second, the asylum bureaucracy establishes credibility through linearity and chronological storytelling; however, claiming asylum at the first available opportunity overlooks the intricate identity construction of apostates and the psychological challenges they may face, which could prevent them from claiming asylum in the first instance. For these reasons, the asylum bureaucracy enforces the colonality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007) by presuming that

those fearing persecution should conceive of their lived experience of apostasy in terms of persecution. Third, state interpretations of who fits within the legal categories of the Convention exemplify the power to control and regulate individuals infused with colonial logic. Thus, asylum bureaucracy reinforces power dynamics between the decision-maker and asylum seeker. Consequently, non-religious and apostate identities are frequently misunderstood, unrecognised, and overlooked in decision-making processes at the Home Office. However, how identities are bureaucratised does not fully reflect how non-religious asylum cases are constructed. Therefore, the next chapter will discuss the consequences of persistent colonial imaginaries on non-religious representation and how individuals seeking asylum navigate these complexities in practice.

Chapter 7: Negotiating Non-Religion: Performing and translating identity within the asylum system

7.1. Introduction

In this final data analysis chapter, I seek to understand how non-religious refugees negotiated their identities and navigated asylum assessment processes in the UK. The adjudication of asylum claims consists of making decisions based on legal and administrative procedures (Bodström, 2021). Hence, the previous chapter focused on the bureaucratic processes at the Home Office. This chapter focuses on how non-religious refugees navigate these bureaucratic systems and construct their narratives in a highly controlled environment (Tipton, 2008). This study revealed that although the refugee participants shaped their non-religious or apostate identities differently from British or Western European views, asylum seekers are required to navigate their identities through dominant assumptions of what their experiences should entail. This chapter thus explores these perspectives and examines how the refugee participants negotiate their identities in a cross-cultural setting ‘before, during and after their hearings and struggle to make hidden, invisible or highly personal aspects of the self-legible according to the terms and rules of refugee system’ (Murray, 2014, p.27). As the terms and rules of the system rely on differentiating the credible refugee from the ingenuine, this has significant implications for how people seeking asylum present and articulate their identities.

In the UK context, asylum applicants must make their experiences of persecution readable to bureaucrats. By drawing on the theoretical perspectives underpinning the coloniality of bureaucracy, this chapter aims to reveal how asylum is a powerful bureaucratic institution that impacts the everyday lives of non-religious people seeking asylum. Within the accounts presented in this chapter, I seek to draw out the effects of unequal power dynamics between bureaucrats who act as a gatekeeper of protection and asylum seekers who seek authentication to receive safety (Bhabha, 2002). Scholars of forced migration have argued asylum determination is underpinned by the ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ dichotomy (Mayblin, 2019), where the deserving are those deemed to be credible. This is a form of coloniality of being as it demonstrates how colonial hierarchies influence the experiences of individuals seeking asylum and negotiating their identities to be perceived as ‘credible’ (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Wynter, 2003). It is important to reiterate this point, as the production of asylum narratives is shaped and controlled by what the state sees as deserving. To explore this dynamic, I focus on

how the construction of non-religious identities must be translated into knowledge through discursive and embodied practices, objectively understood and assessed by bureaucrats in the British asylum regime. Doing so raises questions about the quality of decision-making within the asylum system for claims based on an individual's inner beliefs, such as non-religiosity. It also raises implications for how non-religion comes to be defined and understood by bureaucrats and the state more widely.

This chapter draws upon empirical data collected through interviews with refugees (n = 12) and human rights advocates (n = 22). Through these narratives, this section will examine the theme of negotiating the ways in which apostate asylum applicants 'translate' their lived experiences and 'perform' their identities to be legible to Home Office officials. The ability of an individual seeking asylum to articulate their worldviews credibly depends on several factors. The factors that emerged in this research, which will be discussed further in this chapter, include the roles of legal representation, advocates, and the participants' class and educational background.

7.2. Translating Non-Religiosity: Narrating a credible account of apostasy

Non-religiosity, as an inner conviction, becomes visible through a narrative which is assessed in its ability to be credible. Within this process, there is a translation of the lived experience of the asylum seeker into legal and administrative categories of asylum – within the framework of Western conventions (Carver, 2019). However, in practice, narratives are often assessed using national ideologies, which can overlook the trans-idiomatic nature of asylum (Jacquemet, 2009)²⁹. As Chapter 5 discussed, the lived non-religious lens conceptualises the journey of becoming non-religious as gradual, non-linear and non-chronological. However, as I set out in Chapter 6, the asylum bureaucracy is framed to seek out credible narratives that consist of logic, the linearity of moving from religion to non-religion, and demonstrable through public expressions. Asylum narratives, therefore, can be understood as a translation of identity through universalising tropes that are 'rendered conventional and therefore readable' (Akin, 2017, p.469) in relation to British understandings. This section provides empirical evidence

²⁹ The term 'trans-idiomatic' refers to communication, expression, or interaction that crosses between different linguistic, cultural, or idiomatic systems (see Jacquemet, 2009).

from the participants interviewed in this research, which outlines how people seeking asylum translated their lived experience of apostasy for British bureaucrats. It thus moves from focusing on the bureaucratic functioning of asylum policy and practice to how individuals navigate and negotiate them. This section argues a series of points. First, it argues that through asylum determination processes, bureaucrats define non-religion. It argues that the construction of the ‘credible’ non-religious asylum case is in line with how bureaucrats in the UK situate these beliefs. Second, it puts forward how asylum applicants navigate these stereotypical and generalised assumptions of non-religious identities. I will draw out the specific challenges refugee participants faced, such as providing well-articulated narratives for their rejection of religion, explaining the significance of apostasy/blasphemy to officials with limited prior knowledge and navigating cultural or ethnic assumptions.

Asylum determination processes for religious-based claims are particularly complex due to the nature of bureaucrats having to define what it means to be non-religious. In the context of this research, asylum officials construct the ideal refugee based on Western European conceptions of non-religiosity. This interaction is made hyper-visible during the asylum interview and, when analysed through the lens of the coloniality of bureaucracy, reveals ‘conflicting norms’ and ‘power struggles’ (Dalvik, 2018, p.81), which is reminiscent of the powers utilised by the British during colonial administration. In an example from this research, participants discussed how their story was written differently to how they remember articulating it:

Some of the questions, like they gave me the interview transcript afterwards. They say it's a transcript but it's the interviewer's summary of it, like note-taking. And many of the questions that are on the kind of summaries, I don't remember answering them in this way. That was so strange... you know when you look at something, and like I never thought that, I didn't say that. (Nadia, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, COO Saudi Arabia)

Thus, the interview is a site where ‘different logics and worldviews clash, and aims and strategies are staged against each other’ (Dalvik, 2018, p.81). Danstrøm and Whyte (2019) maintain that two different narratives are produced through asylum accounts, which they call ‘for’ and ‘of’ asylum. Narratives produced ‘for’ asylum are those created and verified by officials, which are employed in the decision-making process of claims. In contrast, narratives produced ‘of’ asylum are the stories of asylum seekers that often emphasise different aspects. This creates an unequal dynamic where ‘one must have the ability to translate one's life story into Euro-centric juridical language and to perform the role expected of a refugee’ (Khosravi,

2010, p. 33). The problems associated with the for/of dichotomy include that it creates a ‘divide between civilized countries of asylum and uncivilized countries of origin. It casts the North as rational and enlightened, whilst the South still has not come out of a state of nature’ (Noll, 2006, p.493).

Researchers examining asylum claims based on the verification of identities (in the UK, US and Europe) have repeatedly reported that credibility assessments are based on understandings of identities or beliefs constructed from a Western European perspective (e.g., Akin, 2017; Bianchini, 2022; Musalo, 2004; Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021). For example, the ‘ideal’ refugee within sexuality-based claims is constructed in relation to a ‘homonationalistic’ view (Puar, 2008), which privileges homonormative constructs of identity in relation to white, Western, gay male sexual politics (Llewellyn, 2017), and the embrace of LGBT rights, progressive and liberal politics (Murray, 2014). Research conducted on the German asylum system argued that the normative refugee in religion-based asylum claims is measured in relation to the receiving state's historical Christian identity (Rose and Given-Wilson, 2021). In the context of apostasy asylum adjudication, participants in this study were questioned about organisational or official forms of non-religiosity, such as dominant conceptions of atheism, secularism, or humanism, to verify their identities. Similarly, participants were questioned on their dietary preferences and lifestyle choices.

Interviews with human rights advocates highlighted the conceptual misunderstandings of being questioned for non-religiosity, which can lead to asylum cases being ‘mistranslated’. For example, Eleanor Bell, a caseworker at Duncan Lewis Solicitors who has supported apostate asylum claims, said:

Sometimes they might quiz you on humanism. So, if you said “I’m a humanist”, they’d be like, “do you go to church?” “Is there a humanist church?” “Who are the main, sort of writers in humanism?” etc (Eleanor Bell – Legal Caseworker)

A representative at Humanists International, Sophie, explained in her experience she has seen non-religious and humanist asylum seekers asked to recite the Amsterdam Declaration (a statement of the fundamental principles of modern Humanism):

In an attempt to get someone to prove that they're a humanist or prove that they're non-religious they're questioned about philosophers or expected to be able to recite the Amsterdam Declaration, which is just preposterous. (Sophie - Humanists International)

Explaining why the ability to recite the Declaration is not adequate in proving one's non-religion, Sophie expanded:

You don't need to have the 10 commandments to quote, you don't need to have those things under the right to FoRB to be guaranteed these rights and to have these rights and so it's a fundamental sort of misinterpretation and misunderstanding of what FoRB is and how it manifests that there's some form of dogma that you're meant to be able to spout to prove that you're not religious. (Sophie - Humanists International)

Focusing on the organisational perspectives of belief systems, such as those articulated by representatives of humanism or detailed in the Amsterdam Declaration, risks presenting a misleading portrayal of individuals' beliefs. The lived non-religion framework suggests that the realities of how non-religion is practised are best understood by examining everyday experiences.

Asylum cases adjudicating internal beliefs have been dubbed a 'peculiar kind of knowledge', as they aim to prove the unprovable (Ramsauer and Çağlar, 2024, p. 61). As discussed in the previous chapter, which considered the challenges of meeting the evidentiary burden of proof due to non-religiosity's subjective and inner nature, participants reflected on how this affected the negotiation of their identities in practice. In practice, asylum claimants were asked to articulate and make visible their identity by demonstrating certain behaviours. Questions in asylum interviews were said to rely on stereotypes associated with the Islamic faith. Ana Gonzalez, an Immigration Lawyer, stated one line of questioning her client's face is, 'whether you drink alcohol. Have you had pork? Have you ever tried pork?' Ahmed, an apostate refugee who now supports others in their asylum applications, said that he comes across these issues frequently, 'they'll be like okay... if you're straight, why are you going to Pride? Is it just about eating bacon?' (Ahmed). As highlighted in Ana's example, asking an apostate if they have ever tried pork is based on the officials' assumption that anybody not Muslim would eat pork. This overlooks cultural factors or personal diet preferences. This simplification of identities has dehumanising effects and trivialises the beliefs of a large population (Akram, 2000), and it also reflects the homogenising of Muslim identities by asylum decision-makers.

These instances highlight several important points relating to asylum assessment procedures for apostates. First, apostates who construct humanist worldviews and identities are misunderstood. Rachel Taggart-Ryan explained that for humanists, there are particular things

they could be questioned on, but the Home Office lacks that level of detail for different belief systems, she stated ‘there are things that humanists believe and can be questioned on to validate their claims, but people don't know how to do that or what those would be’ (Rachel Taggart-Ryan – former Campaigns Officer at Humanists UK). Second, knowledge-based questions used in asylum assessments are not accurate ways of determining the sincerity of an individual’s belief, nor do they capture an individual’s fear of persecution. Researchers have outlined elsewhere the issues of relying on knowledge-based questions in determining one’s belief (for religious conversion cases, see Kagan, 2010; Meral and Gray, 2016; Musalo, 2004). This frame of questioning also requires abstract knowledge of the foundations of humanism (and other non-religious worldviews), which may not be important to the individual in practice. Lastly, it provides evidence that apostasy asylum cases are assessed from the point of view of secular convictions, as observed in the UK, showing that cultural assumptions are embedded within asylum assessments, which brings into question the ability of the British asylum bureaucracy to make accurate decisions.

Another way participants in this study were also expected to translate their identities by providing justification for the reasons for rejecting their previous religion. As articulated by non-religious asylum applicant Mehdi:

When you come from Islam to Christianity, you only need to know about Christianity and why Islam didn't work for you. But when you're converting from Islam to non-religious and humanist, you have to know about all the other religions that are available like Jewish, Christianity, Buddhism, all of them and you need to have a good reasons why you think they don't work for you and why you're converting to non-religion and why you do not have any beliefs at all. (Mehdi)

This puts an extra burden on non-religious asylum seekers as they are expected to be articulate and coherent about the formation of their worldviews and identities. The asylum bureaucracy creates an ‘institutional script’ which seeks a narrative of events that leads to the rejection of religion and the formation of non-religion (Laws, 2024). However, being knowledgeable about different religions or beliefs and providing reasons for rejecting them requires abstract thinking, where simply ‘not being religious’ is not sufficient to satisfy the threshold of credibility. This is consistent with other research on Christian convert cases (Halonen, 2024; Ramsauer and Çağlar, 2024; Schlüter, 2024). For example, in Ramsauer and Çağlar’s (2024) work, the authors found that asylum appellants are expected to elaborate reasons for the rejection of religious

doctrines in detail. It was not satisfactory to make claims such as ‘in Islam, women have no rights’ without a detailed justification as to the reasons why (Ramsauer and Çağlar, 2024).

Non-religious people seeking asylum can face further difficulties in translating their identity as it intersects with ethnic and cultural assumptions. Assumptions are made in the asylum regime, such as viewing someone from their perceived ethnicity, such as Pakistani and Arab, which is often associated with being Muslim (Britton, 2024; Madziva, 2018). Whilst religion can change, ethnicity is usually viewed as fixed and unchanging (Britton, 2024). This is problematic as it associates asylum seekers in relation to their perceived faith, ‘a politics of identity that requires Muslims to recognize themselves primarily in relation to faith, which is unsatisfactory not least because it makes misplaced assumptions about uniformity of faith’ (Britton 2024, p.33). Ayaz highlighted this challenge:

First of all, it started right in the morning where I went to the window and the woman who was filling up a form for me asked for my name and in the religion section, she had already ticked Islam for me because my name was [name]. It started there. And I had to when I was looking at this, excuse me, why I mean, come on. Yeah. She was Pakistani and she thought I'm Pakistani. My name's [Ayaz] but no you cannot do that. I had to get that corrected. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

During the asylum administration of Ayaz’s asylum claim, an assumption was made by the officer that he was Muslim due to his appearance and name. This is consistent with Western European assumptions that individuals from WANA countries are homogeneously Muslim (Karim, 1997). The racialisation of those perceived to be ‘Muslims’ has included framing them as a threat ‘to the white (Christian, “European”) identity of “the West” (De Genova, 2018, p. 1776) and thus are particularly subject to suspicion and investigation within the asylum procedure. The asylum process, therefore, sets about sorting and assessing racialised bodies into ‘good’ or ‘bad’ (De Genova, 2018; Malloch and Stanley, 2005). Within the binary of the good/bad asylum seeker, non-religious asylum seekers from Muslim-majority countries can suffer from ‘identity prejudice’ as they are assumed to be Muslim and hence a potential threat (Madziva, 2018; 2020). Feeding into the perception that ‘some bodies more than others are recognisable as [dangerous], as bodies that are out of place ... because of some trace of a dubious origin’ (Ahmed, 2007, p. 162). Non-religious claimants must, therefore, distance themselves from ‘Muslimness’ (Franke, 2021). This included removing religious dress, changing names and being vocal about ‘blaspheming’. In another example of the coloniality of power, asylum seekers are viewed through the ‘border gaze’, which depicts how the border

does not ‘see’ an individual but ‘reads’ them in racialised and gendered ways (Khosravi, 2010, p.77).

Feeding into these nuances are the difficulties for apostates to clearly articulate their identities and beliefs when they have been exposed to and internalised negative stereotypes of ‘apostasy’. In the cases of sexuality-based claims, Berg and Millbank (2009) found that because of social and legal punishments for homosexuals, gay asylum seekers struggled to come to terms with their identities. When an identity must be disclosed at the border, immigration controls play a role in constructing, contesting and (re)negotiating identities (Luibhéid, 2002). In addition to having to disclose an identity that was internalised as being negative, for some participants, it was the first time they had spoken out loud about their identity. For example, Hassan stated, ‘I came to the UK, I told the border agent, and it was probably the first time I said it out loud’. This is an example of discursive power structures at the border, as asylum claimants who have just arrived in the UK need to disclose their identity immediately. This can be exacerbated by a feeling that their identity as an apostate refugee is not the norm. Hassan felt the border agent was surprised, stating, ‘because I got a sense that I did not fit what they considered to be like the stereotypical refugees’. Similarly, at his screening interview, Murad felt his appearance and his claim were also taken by surprise by border officials. He described:

They ask you about your religion as well. They asked me and I said, “I’m an atheist”. They just looked at each other and said “wow, we have a new one”. I realised that it’s strange for them and it’s not usual. (Murad, date of asylum 2018, aged 36, COO Iran)

In the context of non-religious identities, countries globally view atheists as untrustworthy and immoral (Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan, 2011), which could lead some to struggle to reveal their identities to an asylum official. As outlined in Chapter 5, participants in this study described a turbulent process of accepting their identities and struggles of realising their worldviews, which could lead to challenges in translation. However, these struggles must be articulated to the asylum adjudicator in the asylum process. The participants discussed the challenges of doing so:

For someone who’s not lying, it’s traumatic because this is extremely hard. And just understanding the vulnerable position that the other person is in they’re talking about very traumatic things and then getting safety depends on you believing them. At that moment, you have so much power over this person, so much power like you have to be a bit more emphatic. (Nadia, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, COO Saudi Arabia)

Ahmed echoed the worry of the power the asylum officer held over his decision:

I had a feeling that they are not on your side and I might be in big trouble if I do get sent back. I will get killed straight away. So I was quite scared and she did let me go that day, subject to you having to sign into the Home Office and reporting and that. (Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

When participants' asylum claims intersected with other grounds for asylum, which was the case for Nadia, Hassan and Shamsur (sexuality and apostasy), and for Ahmed (political and apostasy), some reported their non-religious identity being overlooked in the asylum interview. Hassan explained that his interview focussed on his sexuality:

I think they based it; I mean obviously when I submitted my claim I did have a multifaceted claim just like this, sexuality and religion. Yeah so it's a multifaceted thing. They did ask me a little bit about Islam but I think they were more interested in my sexuality. (Hassan, date of asylum 2022, aged late 20s, COO Maldives)

His lawyer also placed greater emphasis on his sexuality, which he believed stemmed from a lack of familiarity with apostasy:

Yeah, I think they focused more on the sexuality part. I think even more lawyers focused more on the sexuality parts, I guess they were unfamiliar with the apostasy and blasphemy part. So, it was just easier to go with the sexuality part, I guess. (Hassan)

Likewise, Nadia stated she was asked ‘nothing on humanism. Because being non-religious is not a doctrine that they can question you about’. In relation to her non-religious identity, she said she was questioned as follows:

But they asked me things like “how did it feel to be myself as a non-religious person in the UK?” “Do you feel life is more enjoyable now as a non-religious person in the UK?” (Nadia, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, COO Saudi Arabia)

Reflecting on this type of questioning style, she said:

Life is always a mixture of both. Like if I answered that question if it's more enjoyable, my answer was yes, if I said no, would that have a massive impact on my claim? Is it really relevant to establish it? Would a yes or no make any difference? Maybe my life isn't enjoyable because of the trauma, what information are you looking to get? (Nadia)

To summarise this section, the asylum assessment process transforms lived experiences into bureaucratic categories. The lens of coloniality in bureaucracy highlights that this transformation is underpinned by complex power relations, which apostates must navigate to be recognised as ‘genuine’ or ‘credible’ claimants. The non-religious asylum applicants interviewed in this study reported that their interview transcripts were recorded inaccurately; they faced difficulties in demonstrating subjective beliefs; encountered misleading questions based on flawed understandings of non-religious identities; were required to provide detailed answers regarding the rejection of faith; were subjected to ethnic and cultural assumptions; and grappled with internalised negativity. Thus, non-religious asylum applicants must navigate their complex identities within bureaucratic processes in these various ways. Translating experiences into credible cases entails performing the role of a ‘credible refugee’ to render the ‘invisible’ visible, which is discussed next.

7.3. Performing as a ‘Credible Refugee’: Making visible the invisible

People seeking asylum are required to go through an assessment process to determine whether their cases provide a credible account that amounts to a fear of persecution. The credibility assessment typically consists of considering information about the claimant’s country of origin, documentary evidence (these elements have been discussed in the previous chapter), and oral testimony given in the asylum interview, which will be drawn on here. Those who face fear of persecution for their identities are thus required to disclose and articulate their identities to asylum bureaucrats who will decide on their application for protection. This process requires refugees to logically explain their worldviews by knowing what to say and how to deliver it. Thus, asylum narratives become ‘performances’ (Bodström, 2021; Maryns, 2015; McKinnon, 2009; Tipton, 2008). However, as put forward in Chapter 5, there is no predetermined set of practices or behaviours a non-religious person will act out (Richter, 2023), and the non-religious are not ‘ready-made’ identities with a ‘specific and definable set of roles or behaviours’ (Smith, 201, p.232). Moreover, non-religiosity is an often internally held conviction which may not be publicly declared. Despite this, the asylum regime is a site where the asylum seeker must perform in ways that can be legible by the asylum assessor, and asylum seekers must make visible the invisible. In this way, the asylum narrative:

...becomes audible not because of its content, but by the performance of how, when, at what pace and in relation to what kind of publics and authority a particular kind of knowledge of acquired, lived through, and communicated, and by whom it is evaluated. (Ramsauer and Çağlar, 2024, p. 74)

The asylum interview is where the performance of being non-religious is made most evident. It is a site of unequal power dynamics (Bodström, 2021) as it distinguishes between what is deemed knowledge and who is the subject of knowledge (Dagg and Haugaard, 2016). The colonality of bureaucracy lens demonstrates that bureaucrats develop ‘specialised knowledge’, which is used to make decisions on these aspects. This knowledge is used to assess and evaluate the asylum seekers’ narrative, viewing them not as unique and personal experiences but are instead examined through their own perspectives of what they consider truthful and factual (Jubany, 2017). The underpinnings of this power relation are, ‘Western prejudices about asylum seekers as ‘the other’’ (2017, p.148). This way of thinking is linked to the colonality of power as the asylum narratives that are sought in asylum assessments are considered from a Eurocentric view of how one should behave and act, casting non-Western behaviour as inferior and dangerous as a result. Thus, the performance of an asylum narrative is an idealised version of refugeehood (Woolley, 2017) that is negotiated to fit with the conventional and organisational view of non-religious identities.

The following sections present arguments for how apostate asylum seekers perform their identities. Current research suggests that asylum determination interviews are a socially heterogeneous site consisting of multiple participants: asylum applicants, asylum officers, legal actors, interpreters, and decision-makers, who all play a role in the co-construction of identities (Campbell, 2016; Maryns, 2013). I contend that for apostates to be considered conventional and to satisfy the protective criteria upheld by the asylum bureaucracy, they must successfully negotiate their identities with the assistance of legal representation, advocates, interpreters and also benefit from class or cultural capital. Similar to Akin’s (2017) study on sexuality-based asylum claims, the refugee participants in this study were ‘active participants in this process, and eager to mobilise all their resources to communicate their case better’ (2017, p.471). However, this scenario is underpinned by constructions of what it means to be ‘non-religious’ and acquiring knowledge of these functions within privileged spaces, to be discussed in the subsequent sections.

7.3.1. Legal representation

The successful outcomes of asylum cases often depend on accurate legal representation (Hambly, 2019; Jubany, 2017). Lawyers have been referred to as ‘translators’ as they shape a claim to fit within legal categories (Galanter, 1983). They also make decisions on what evidence is deemed relevant (Hambly, 2019). Lawyers aid in advising asylum claimants on how to articulate their answers in ways that meet the expectations of asylum bureaucrats (Jubany, 2017). Expanding on what evidence the Home Office look for, Jamie Bell explained:

They want genuine and detailed and believable, so your personal story that led to the decisions of abandoned religion, that's kind of what they want and then that means it requires a lot of detail. It requires something that is deemed to be believable by the interviewer and kind of credible reasoning that led to the conversion. So, they kind of want everything to make sense in accordance with what their expectations would be for someone which converts from that country. (Jamie Bell – Immigration Lawyer)

Ana Gonzalez (Immigration Lawyer) stated, ‘You need to do your work; you need to do your research. That is why it's important to have legal representation, which is very short in supply at the moment’. Jamie Bell and Elleanor Bell explained that for them ‘I would say, for us, it's quite easy to submit a non-religious claim because we know what evidence to get, and they generally get accepted on first instance’. They elaborated, ‘If you know what evidence to get, it can be convincing’. Thus, collecting persuasive evidence can depend on having access to experienced legal representatives knowledgeable about the complexities surrounding non-religious-based claims.

However, strong legal representations can be difficult to find, especially for apostate asylum cases, which are less common than religious conversion claims; as Ana Gonzalez remarked, ‘There’s not many of us doing this work’ (Ana Gonzalez). More broadly, there is a well-documented shortage of legal aid providers, with some regions of the UK having no lawyers at all (Wilding, 2021). Poor legal representation can lead to claims being rejected on the first instance, as explained by Elleanor Bell, ‘I would say a fair amount of the claims get rejected at first instance, because they're just like, if you're not represented and you don't know how to submit all of that’ (Elleanor Bell). Clara, a legal advisor who supports asylum seekers in making fresh claims, said she often supports ‘people with probably quite strong claims that have had poor representations’.

Some of the refugee participants interviewed in this study found their legal representatives’ awareness of apostasy to be sparse. For example, Hassan said, ‘He did guide me through the

process, and it was genuinely helpful at times. It was genuinely helpful at times, but I don't think he really got it, got it'. Medhi recalled:

The lawyer didn't do much for me. He just took notes from everything I told him and made a statement for me. I did most of my work about research and of course Humanists UK helped me as well. (Mehdi)

Ahmed personally felt his claims were not dealt with sufficiently due to competing (perceived) beliefs of his legal representation, 'I didn't have a good experience with their solicitor there. The lawyer there, who was given to me from the firm, was a Turkish Muslim lady. She was very rude with me' (Ahmed). Such experiences led some participants to take the initiative in collecting their own evidence. For example, Rashid utilised the legal advice he had to prepare his own evidence bundle, 'I prepared my own bundle. I did my own because obviously they don't do it. They can't give you legal advice in that way'.

Translation is particularly problematic when looking at asylum applications based on the grounds of non-religiosity because, by bureaucratising identities, asylum determination processes create essentialist dichotomies between religion and non-religious identities. Campbell (2016) writes that there are inherent problems with Home Office interviews due to insufficient access to lawyers and legal aid, which creates challenges between cultural and linguistic barriers to 'translate' asylum seekers' narratives. Campbell highlights:

An applicant's often incoherent and incomplete story of flight is pieced together by a caseworker and interpreter and translated into a coherent claim for asylum which is indexed against objective evidence of human rights violations. The actual process of taking a claim is, however, fraught with cultural misunderstandings as well as linguistic and practical problems involved in taking and translating the story. (Campbell, 2016, p.64)

Murad explained his experience of cultural misunderstandings when working with a legal actor. His solicitor told him he should have narrated something in an alternative way to how he had expressed it during an asylum interview. Murad had been arrested and sentenced for apostasy in Iran. Whilst in prison, he firmly kept his beliefs to himself and would conform to the daily prayers. He explained the reasons for this: atheists are seen as 'bad luck'; if a prisoner received any bad news, they would put the blame on the atheist. During his asylum interview in the UK, he was asked by a Home Office official if he would tell anyone he is an atheist if returned back to Iran. Due to the threat to life and the danger of being discovered as an atheist in a prison,

Murad replied honestly that he would not reveal his identity. He described the discussion he had with his solicitor:

After they gave me the transcript of the interview I showed that to my solicitor. He said you answered some questions wrongly. But, it wasn't. For example, you shouldn't tell a prisoner, I told you about the reason why you shouldn't tell other prisoners why you are an atheist. They asked me. What will happen if you return to your country? And I said, the only thing that I can think of is they will arrest me at the airport and they will send me to prison. And they said would you tell anyone that you are an atheist if you came back? I said, do you mean other prisoners? She said yes, the interviewer. Then I answered. I would never tell them. Because it's very dangerous in case of my experience. (Murad, date of asylum 2018, aged 36, COO Iran)

However, his solicitor told him:

My solicitor said you should say yes, I will do that. I said why? Because they used to interview Christianity cases and in Christianity, you should say yes, it is my religious duty and Jesus wants me to spread this message to everybody to invite them. (Murad)

In an additional example, Murad was asked by the Home Office if he had ever attended church in the UK, where his lawyer instructed him to say no:

They asked me. Have you ever been in a church here in the UK? My solicitor said you should definitely say no. I hate any religion. I told them yes, I was with a friend who invited me to a church and I was there and it's a natural need to be in a community.

Murad made an important point that attending church offered him a sense of community, support, and access to resources. This was especially significant for him while he was still seeking asylum. He elaborated:

I was there in a church few times just to see people, I can't stay a year in just my room and don't talk to anybody. And my solicitor said no, you're an atheist, why would you be in church? (Murad)

His account is an example of how legal actors try to construct non-religious identities to fit within decision-making processes. The Home Office bureaucrats, and to some extent legal actors, employ essentialist dichotomies between religion and non-religious identities, which overlook the ways the breadth of non-religious identities can be constructed in other contexts.

Applying the lens of coloniality of bureaucracy provides an in-depth examination of how the narratives above demonstrate asylum applicants must meet Western normative constructions

of non-religion, which are essentialised behaviours constructed from a UK standpoint. For example, applicants are expected to be able to quote humanist philosophers and writers, with little recognition that these texts are often banned in countries with apostasy or blasphemy laws. In support of these arguments, research on sexuality-based asylum claims can be drawn on where scholars have argued that ‘authentic’ identities are bound with dominant socio-cultural understandings and histories in the country of refugee determination (Luibhéid, 2002; Murray, 2014). As such, asylum determination functions as a gate-keeping mechanism of protection in the UK, only to be unlocked through the deliverance of a normative narrative of identity (Murray, 2014). However, normative ideas of identity are saturated by national identity discourse that enforces the privileged position of the state (ibid). In apostasy asylum cases, this plays out through the role of the asylum seeker who portrays themselves as a ‘civilised’ non-religious actor who is opposed to the ‘uncivilised’ society in which they fled.

7.3.2. Advocates

Advocates in asylum cases are crucial players in shaping the translation and performance of apostate asylum claims. In this research, advocates comprised employees of charities who assist asylum seekers in making their claims, writing letters of support, and providing evidence at tribunals. Asylum advocates draw on various factors, such as interpreting human rights discourse and utilising their positions to influence the assessment and decisions of claims. All the refugee participants in this study were supported by an advocate in some capacity, with varying degrees of success. This section discusses some of the roles of human rights advocates in this study and how they worked to assist asylum applicants in the translation and performance of their cases. Human rights advocates for apostate refugees presented particular challenges, such as organisational or personal assessments of an applicant’s credibility and meeting the criterion of non-religion before offering support. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, having the backing of human rights advocates, particularly those with a visible reputation and experience in supporting apostates, proved beneficial in most instances.

Linda works for a charity that assists apostates as they leave their faith, including those from a refugee background. In her role, she helps apostate refugees with their asylum claims in the UK. A part of her responsibilities involves assessing the authenticity of the refugee before providing support them:

I'm now literally assessing someone's... kind of deciding if someone is non-religious. If I think they are non-religious based on the evidence that I can see and an opinion that I form, I will write them a letter to provide that evidence that they need for the Home Office. (Linda – Apostate Supporter)

Gill is a volunteer at a local humanist group, her role entails:

I mean doing things like writing, well I'd take people to the MP and stuff like that. I write letters of support for the asylum system, things like that. All the practical stuff or direct them to the Red Cross or anybody else who's giving help. (Gill – Local Humanist Group Member)

Thomas, also a volunteer for a local humanist group, stated:

We've been going to tribunals, making representations, writing statements of support. I can't really say anything about you until I've got to know you. So, we ask them to come along and get involved and some of them do and those are the people we can get to know, otherwise we can't really write anything. (Thomas)

The support and visibility of advocates have been highlighted in the literature as an advantage in asylum determination, providing reliability and legitimacy to the cases (Hambly, 2019). This was also evident in this research; for instance, Thomas, a member of a local humanist group and former tribunal judge, discussed attending tribunal appeals for individuals in his community. Attending a tribunal, he said, 'It was a friend of mine sitting that day, and immediately she saw me, basically waved him through'. Thomas had social capital that enabled him to simply present himself at a tribunal to support a refugee, which was seen as highly valuable by the judge at the time (Hambly, 2019). Moreover, advocates from secular and non-religious organisations occupy a recognisable position. If they are able to support an asylum seeker, they can draft a letter endorsing the individual's legitimacy and the likelihood of facing persecution upon their return. Many participants in this study received letters of support, which were reported to be beneficial in their asylum process application:

I myself got a letter from [refugee organisation] because I got to be a member of [refugee organisation] and they interviewed me and they gave me a letter... I think this was an effective process for interviewing and deciding about my situation. (Mehdi, date of asylum 2018, aged 46, COO Iran)

Likewise, Rashid recalled in the asylum interview that his non-religious identity was not challenged in-depth, as he had expected. He suggested this may have been because he had the support of a refugee organisation:

He asked me a few questions of how I became an atheist, but he didn't challenge that thing, maybe because I had a [refugee organisation] supporting letter where they recognize me as an atheist or humanist, so I think that's the reason he didn't, challenge me. (Rashid)

In the experience of participants in this study, having a British and secular organisation to advocate for their case is beneficial for establishing credibility. As a result, non-religious identities are made visible through support from such organisations, and this can be seen as a mark of belonging to a secular community, thus enhancing credibility. Clara, a legal advisor, highlighted this issue: 'Many judges will be very critical if no one else is present, particularly if there is no one who is white and British to testify for you.' These observations illuminate the hidden privileges of having a white advocate in spaces that are not neutral and are influenced by colonial legacies that assess individuals based on how deserving they are (Puwar, 2004).

Despite the benefits of having support from human rights advocates, some challenges resonate with the lens of the colonality of bureaucracy. Although a key role of human rights advocates is creating persuasive and credible asylum claims to maximise chances of protection, they also risk falling into the same pitfalls as asylum assessment practices. For example, advocates who write 'expert' reports or asylum support letters that describe human rights abuses in countries of origin also risk perpetuating derogatory stereotypes of barbarism or incivility (ibid). Some secular and non-religious organisations facilitate their asylum support through word of mouth, often without wide advertising. This results in those receiving help typically being 'insiders' in one way or another, such as by becoming members and attending events and support groups. However, becoming an insider and obtaining official support—such as the writing and signing of official letters of support for asylum cases—can depend on being deemed 'credible' from the perspective of the support organisations. Similar to the asylum system, advocacy groups also have their own standards for credibility, often establishing criteria that their 'service users' must meet before they agree to assist.

One advocacy organisation clarifies that its users must be atheists; a representative for this group stated, 'They have to no longer be observant, and they must be demonstrably pursuing an atheist belief system' (Linda – an apostate supporter). Layla, an ex-Muslim activist working for an asylum advocacy group, mentioned that her organisation is limited to those who have left Islam. The rationale for this specific group operating within this criterion is because:

Previously, we had spoken to a lot of Muslims who were questioning but it was becoming quite a tiring process I guess, tiring process because I think personally, I wouldn't want to influence anybody's decision. And those conversations can very quickly become perceived as coercion. Or maybe inviting to atheism. (Layla)

Human rights advocates differentiate between deserving and undeserving refugees through their support criteria. By doing so, they legitimise certain types of persecution as genuine and worthy of protection. Through support and translation of individuals' cases, advocates simplify and generalise personal and diverse accounts of persecution (Bhabha, 2002). The lived non-religion framework suggests that defining non-religion as synonymous with atheism is overly simplistic. Apostates comprise a diverse group that can include religious converts and those perceived to have left, or those accused of blasphemy. Consequently, the challenges faced by the non-religious within the asylum regime may also extend to the organisations that provide support to individuals meeting specific identity criteria. Thus, the position of asylum advocates also plays a role in differentiating groups of people seeking asylum as deserving or undeserving and thus contributes to the dynamics of power in refugee status determination processes (Bhabha, 2002).

In conclusion, when we observe how refugees, legal advisors, and advocates attempt to construct non-religious narratives, it brings into question how historical and socio-cultural understandings of such identities have been framed within the nation-state (Murray, 2014). Asylum determination processes produce a particular narrative of non-religious identities and experiences which 'emerges as hegemonic or normative, thus producing a template of the "real" or "authentic"' (Murray, 2014, p.22) non-religious refugee. The discursive strategies in asylum narratives transform the lived experience of persecution and the concept of the apostate asylum seeker into an immutable essence. Thus, immigration control 'literally constructs the nation and the people' granted within it' (Luibhéid, 2002, p. xviii). Nation-making processes are imperial processes where social constructions of identities emerge, which are made visible in immigration and border controls (Anderson, 2016; Luibhéid, 2002; Stoler, 2002). Hall describes the divide between Western and non-Western knowledge as 'The West and the Rest' (Hall, 2007). This represents the 'West' as a historical construct that imagines some states as 'developed' and therefore knowledgeable and superior over those perceived as outside of this construct. This dynamic is an example of the colonality of power that can be found in how

apostate identities are translated and performed. The next section considers the position of the interpreter within this process.

7.3.3. Interpreters

Interpreters play an important role in asylum adjudication processes as they aid with articulating asylum narratives, thus contributing to constructing an ‘authentic voice’ (Tipton, 2008, p.2). Their role is to interpret and translate language, but research shows their role has expanded into a more involved role by ‘filtering, or even guiding narratives in some cases (Jacquemet, 2009; Jubany, 2017). Reports of issues working with interpreters during asylum interviews are widespread across asylum literature (e.g., Killman, 2020; Maryns, 2015;) and have been noted as a specific issue for religion-based claims (Selim *et al.*, 2023). The challenges of working with interpreters on religion-based asylum claims include mistrust and fear regarding the possibility of an interpreter inaccurately translating concepts of religion or belief (Madziva and Lowndes, 2018). There are also reported concerns that some interpreters have little familiarity with religious matters and thus lack the vocabulary to translate concepts accurately (Selim *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, research has argued that interpreters have the ability to transform asylum applicants’ narratives, altering their statements as to what fits with their personal understandings of religious matters (Selim *et al.*, 2023). These specific problems have notably been neglected for apostate claimants, and thus, this section will discuss the challenges that arise during the translation and misinterpretation of participants’ narratives.

Katharine Thane, the former director of the APPG for FoRB, explained that in her experience of supporting individuals seeking asylum, she discovered translation issues related to dialect:

The other issue was around dialect. So, there's a big difference between Farsi and Afghan and Iran Farsi for example and sometimes the Home Office had an Iranian Farsi speaking person and the person was Afghan Farsi and they didn't really understand each other. (Katharine Thane)

She also acknowledged that there are sometimes clashes between personal views of religion that affect the interpretation:

If you had, someone who does not share your beliefs and that often might be the only interpreter that the Home Office can get. They would not, they were not sensitive to how religious persecution works or personal views work. And it might be that they only have two or three people who speak the language or dialect and in their books, they use

that person. This person disagrees with why the applicant is applying for asylum. They are even, might think they've committed blasphemy, and they'll give a really bad interpretation. And one of the issues was that the meetings at that point were not being recorded. So, it felt like applicants could be intimidated or were being intimidated by some of the interpreters. (Katharine Thane)

According to the views of the refugee participants, Ahmed declined to work with an interpreter whom he believed was associated with his perpetrator group:

He was a Pakistani guy and he looked at me up and down, and I thought there's no way, I don't need an interpreter. There's no way I'm saying all that stuff in front of him here. He might know people here and that way I'm putting myself here in danger. (Ahmed, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

Rashid also reported mistrust when working with perceived persecutors, he said 'They arranged the interpreter who was Pakistani and Muslim and if I say something against, Muhammad or something like he might get triggered'.

Mehdi reported a power imbalance between himself and the interpreter, which resulted in him struggling to practice his autonomy and articulate his own answers in the asylum interview:

The interpreter was not being neutral to both parties and this made me more stressed. He was rushing us and it felt like he was the police and we had to answer him because he is the authority. (Mehdi, date of asylum 2018, aged 46, COO Iran)

He also reported that there were inaccuracies with the interpretation:

When I looked at this screening interpretation later I was seeing that the interpreter said stuff that I didn't say and there was stuff that the interpreter just said by himself and I didn't say those things. (Mehdi)

Farshad noted that an important element of his asylum interview was demonstrating his knowledge around Nietzsche's teachings on philosophy. This not only required the interpreter to translate accurately but also to have some conceptual understanding of the philosophical texts to ensure accuracy in the interpretation:

I had to explain the philosophy of Niche because I mentioned that I read one of his books and then I became interested. I read all of his books and the interviewer wanted to become sure that I read something that I mentioned, but the interpreter couldn't interpret so I decided to say to myself....it is not just about understanding the language.

They know what is Persian and they know what is English, but they do not know the philosophy of Nietzsche. You need to have a lot of actually pre-studying for becoming ready to understand that text. (Farshad, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, COO Iran)

Through these issues, interpreters function as ‘gatekeepers’ who can either facilitate or prevent access to asylum (Campbell, 2016). The participants’ narratives on the role of interpreters reveal they play a more active role than expected by the Home Office. Interpreters may situate themselves against the claimant, which has been reported in cases of ethnic-group conflicts (Dahlvik, 2018).

Translation is another dynamic of coloniality of power, and in Mignolo and Schiwy (2003) view, translation is an articulation of colonial difference. The translation and interpretation of asylum narratives involve reducing complex, lived experiences into terms legible within the dominant, Western discursive frameworks. However, an apostate refugee might describe their departure from religion using rich, nuanced cultural vocabulary. Interpreters risk, knowingly or unknowingly, simplifying these expressions and losing critical details that could strengthen the asylum claim and thus participate in the reduction of identities and experiences. This poses particular problems for apostates, as scholars of religion have acknowledged that concepts of religion or belief outside of Western European frameworks are not directly translatable. Arabic-speaking countries have their own non-religious discourse where ‘belief’ is not recognised as a concept, and ‘religion’ differs in its meaning and understanding across societies (Eller and Khazaal, 2024). In Arabic, there is no Indigenous word for ‘secular’ and the terms ‘atheism’ or apostate (‘riddah’) have negative connotations referring to someone as deviant or a heretic (ibid):

The language of nonbelief, nonreligion, and atheism is, thus, a complicated and contested arena in Arabic, as it is also in other religions. Note firstly that most if not all of the terms hail from a religious viewpoint; accordingly and secondly, many if not most entail heavy normative implications: who would want to be called, or call oneself, a deviant, a heretic, or a rebel? (2024, p.4)

Thus, as apostates navigate a diverse range of identity labels, they also must negotiate meaning cross-culturally with the aid of an interpreter, of which interpreters may choose labels that fail to capture the applicant’s lived experience. This reinforces unequal power dynamics as asylum narratives must be translated for British asylum determination processes (Danstrøm and Whyte, 2019), saturated by power differences between those who can speak. Therefore, in asylum

determination processes, translation becomes a site of power where colonial hierarchies shape language, identity and knowledge (Mignolo and Schiwy, 2003).

7.3.4. Class and cultural capital

As discussed in this chapter, asylum seekers, advocates, and interpreters produce and formulate asylum narratives. Asylum narratives are labelled as a ‘peculiar kind of knowledge’ (Ramsauer and Çağlar, 2024, p. 61) because they translate the experience of persecution into ontology (Kynsilehto and Puumala, 2015). For the non-religious, who are questioned on the philosophical underpinnings of their worldviews or asked to articulate summaries and quotes of prominent non-religious thinkers, the ability to answer intersects with an individual’s educational background or cultural capital (Ramsauer and Çağlar, 2024; Shuman and Bohmer, 2004), discussed in this section.

The intersection of class and cultural capital in articulating one’s apostasy during the asylum process was highlighted in interviews with refugee participants. For instance, Ayaz, who came from a middle-class family in Pakistan, stated, ‘Back then, I was delving deeply into theology. I could explain my apostasy more effectively because I was still trying to make sense of it.’ Similarly, Mehdi noted that having knowledge and awareness of beliefs led to being more articulate during the asylum interview. He attributed this knowledge to his educational background:

In my opinion I knew more about atheist cases and non-religious cases because I was a person who went to University and had a degree. I say this because I know people who have the same case as me but they're not as knowledgeable as me and they don't know as much as I do. And if you don't have as much as knowledge, research and resources about your case this can affect your case in Home Office. (Mehdi, date of asylum 2018, aged 46, COO Iran)

Ana Gonzalez, a lawyer with expertise in non-religious and sexuality-based asylum claims, reflected extensively on the intersections of class and the success of asylum cases. The majority of her claimants were individuals who came to the UK as students and, on embarking on education within a secular state, had changed their views. She described:

If you put them in a university, a very multicultural university, they will probably talk [to] people... people who already doubt and people who are naturally, very, very, very

inquisitive and curious will engage and that will contribute, or kick start the journey to apostasy. (Ana Gonzalez – Immigration Lawyer)

She explicitly argues that the Home Office responds well to individuals who can advocate for themselves and coherently articulate their identities and beliefs, ‘So the Home Office really responds to educated people, and they think they have something else to offer. They really, really respond to that’.

Harper, an Immigration Lawyer, reflected on a granted apostasy case that she believed was influenced by class elements. She supported a woman originally from Iraq who had lived in the UK for twenty years. She said, ‘You know she had been in the UK for a long time, she had become Westernized, she didn't want to have any outward, she would not want to wear a Hijab or anything’ (Harper). This case was granted on the first instance, and reflecting on why Harper thought this was, she explained the claimant had four degrees, including a masters, ‘One of the things that the Home Office look for is credibility. To believe what you are saying, she came across as a very, very credible person. Very intelligent, articulate’. This draws similarities to McKinnon’s study; she argued narratives that were deemed credible were performed by ‘speaking well, rationally, and evenly’ (2009, p. 218). The ability to ‘tell a good story’ is central to the credibility assessment (Wikström and Johansson, 2013, p. 94). When examined through the intersections of class, participants are able to articulate and perform their narrative well with in-depth justification on why they are claiming asylum.

A coloniality of bureaucracy lens suggests that this implies ‘proper subjects are political, modern and rational actors’ (McKinnon, 2009, p.218). Thus, the notion of performing in refugee determination speaks to colonial discourses as it entails a subject to act out certain behaviours to be recognised as a ‘refugee’ and thus deserving of citizenship (McKinnon, 2009). Narratives that lie outside of the typical performances and expectations are disbelieved (Jubany, 2017). Hence, the asylum narrative should be better understood as ‘a product of this complex and asymmetrical social interaction rather than an accurate account of what the claimant actually thinks, feels or remembers’ (Halonen, 2024, p.23).

However, not all individuals have the ability to articulate their non-religious beliefs in clear and succinct ways. Linda reflected on how she asked an individual who she was supporting, “Tell me about your atheism,” and he replied, “atheism means I go to the gym”. For this

individual, non-religion is manifested through attending the gym at times he should be at the mosque. Linda explained:

So not everyone has the language, not everyone has that academic privilege and literacy to be able to say, “Yes. I’ve been reading Dawkins, and I’ve been doing this and that and the other and here’s a photo of me with Andrew Copson [CEO of Humanists UK]”. Some people they’ve been standing under really harsh pressure of loads of people text them saying, where are you? It’s Friday prayers and they’re like now. I’m at the gym. (Linda – Apostate Supporter)

Research of asylum bureaucracies has repeatedly shown that officials seek out logical and linear narratives (Shuman and Bohmer, 2004), which links to the colonality of power within asylum because it takes a ‘Western’ and Eurocentric view of narrative explanations. This extract shows the differences in assumptions between the asylum seeker and officials of what constitutes knowledge. For example, asylum seekers may have different impressions of what is deemed significant in their asylum case than bureaucrats or advocates (Khosravi, 2010), as the abstract above shows. Asylum narratives that possess poor consistency, structure and logic are thus associated with weaker credibility assessments (Wikström and Johansson, 2013). Therefore, higher class association and educational background can inform a claimant’s ability to narrate and perform their identity consistently, in line with how the Home Office constructs the credibility of cases.

Moreover, expecting well-articulate answers does not take into account the impact of trauma or poor educational background in some personal cases. This was highlighted by Elleanor Bell (immigration caseworker):

Their level of education is so low and maybe their trauma is so high the memory and their understanding of things is not there or just not high enough to answer those kinds of questions. So that kind of happens whether I’ll ask you specific questions, but just not take into account the fact that it is not, not credible. It’s just because of circumstances. (Elleanor Bell)

To support this point, asylum officers in Jubany’s (2017) study reported applicants with a higher educational background are considered ‘better’ and that this influenced a positive outcome in the asylum interview. This leads to the granting of cases based on the most eloquent narratives (Schluter, 2024). Thus, asylum applicants with a larger cultural capital and higher-class background can have the ability to produce more ‘credible’ narratives, as they can

articulate their risk of persecution, logically explain the dismantling of their religious worldviews for non-religious ones and can more easily access third-sector actors to support their claims. Applicants from lower-class backgrounds and those who have experienced trauma can thus experience deeper challenges to translate and perform as an apostate read as genuine.

7.4. Conclusion

Alongside the universal challenges faced by all asylum seekers in establishing their credibility, apostate refugees must also navigate prevalent assumptions held by bureaucrats about their expectations of non-religion. This chapter explored the negotiation processes that occur when apostates navigate asylum assessment procedures. I argue that this negotiation takes place through translations and performances, aiming to be perceived as credible within asylum logistics. The substantive asylum interview represents a crucial phase in which applicants articulate an oral account of their identity to the Home Office. This chapter discusses how asylum seekers are expected to convey their personal experiences by narrating them in accordance with dominant conceptions of non-religious beliefs such as atheism, secularism, or humanism. Apostates are anticipated to exhibit stereotypical views of leaving Islam, such as consuming pork and participating in cultural events. They must also provide justifications for rejecting all religions, not just Islam. Consequently, the development of non-religious identities must be transformed into knowledge through both discursive and embodied practices, rendering the invisible visible to bureaucrats within the British asylum system. By examining negotiation through the lens of power, we gain insights into the asylum interview as a critical site of power dynamics and the manifestation of bureaucratic practices.

Utilising the lens of the colonality of bureaucracy, I elaborated on the power dynamics present in asylum determination processes, which can be theorised in the following ways. Colonial imaginaries of non-religiosity are produced within asylum bureaucracy, shaping expected performances and influencing translation, notably as applicants must distance themselves from ‘Muslimness’. Thus, I argue that asylum assessment processes are imperial processes wherein social constructions of identities emerge. This reinforces the colonality of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Wynter, 2003) and demonstrates how colonial hierarchies impact individuals seeking asylum while negotiating their identities to be perceived as credible. Consequently, the Home Office and other actors employ essentialist dichotomies between religious and non-religious identities, overlooking how various non-religious identities may be constructed in

other contexts. Examining asylum narratives through the colonality of bureaucracy demonstrates that these go beyond a simple recall of events as ‘it involves a complex interplay between time, space, biography and rhetoric within the encounter of co-presence’ (Tipton, 2008, p.10).

The translation appears in a context where the asylum seeker and asylum official hold different vernaculars (Bohmer and Shuman, 2018). Thus, the bureaucratic processes at the Home Office construct the narratives of non-religious persecution, often in contrast to how the asylum seeker would recall, think or feel about their journey (Halonen, 2024). Individuals who cannot access support in translating and performing their cases thus ‘might get lost in translation, as their means of communication run the risk of not being understood correctly’ (Akin, 2017, p.470). As Tipton (2008) points out, being able to construct a legible asylum narrative does not suggest they are falsely put together, but ‘it merely highlights their fragile nature as constructs since they are open to reinterpretation’ (Tipton, 2008, p.3). In conclusion, throughout this chapter, I have argued that certain narratives of apostasy are anticipated and are (re)interpreted within asylum bureaucratic processes. Bureaucrats seek narratives that portray the apostate refugee as one experiencing progress, prioritising essentialised Western European understandings of non-religion and narratives that construct identities as ‘civilised’ in contrast to the applicant’s ‘uncivilised’ countries of origin. The interaction reveals how colonial logics operate through differential inclusion: constructing the nonreligious claimant as a ‘good Other’ while reaffirming the undeservingness of those who do not, or cannot, conform (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Puar and Ochieng' Nyongó, 2017).

Chapter 8: Conclusions: Contributions, future research and policy recommendations

8.1. Introduction

The experiences of apostates, who face persecution for non-religious beliefs, and an exploration of the unique ways they form non-religious identities have largely been omitted from sociological considerations of religion and forced migration. Thus, the overarching aim of this research was to contribute to the small yet burgeoning academic literature on this topic (e.g., Laws, 2024; Nixon, 2018; Richter, 2023). Through the theoretical perspectives of lived non-religion and the coloniality of bureaucracy, this research has sought to advance knowledge across both disciplines. This thesis has progressed studies of religion by providing a conceptualisation of how apostates construct their non-religious identity and the lived expressions thereof. By doing so, it has provided nuance to migration research, which has largely focused on the role of religion in explaining how refugees construct identity and community in asylum-receiving countries (e.g., Fiddian-Qasmiyeh *et al.*, 2014). In contrast, this thesis has argued that non-religion is an embodied practice and a means of belonging in countries of asylum. Although this project centred on the experiences of apostate refugees, its insights can be applied to other comparable asylum claims, including those involving an absence of attributes, such as being non-political, or those concerning internally held beliefs, such as sexuality.

This concluding chapter returns to the research questions and reminds the reader of the thesis narrative that has been told through the data collected in this research. Individual chapter summaries can be found at the end of each section and will not be repeated here. This conclusion instead discusses and summarises the main themes in each chapter to synthesise the most significant findings on asylum and apostasy. After discussing the thesis narrative, I give an overview of the thesis' theoretical contributions to understanding apostasy within the sociological literature of religion and forced migration. Specifically, I discuss how lived non-religion has offered a strong framework to conceptualise apostasy. Here, I adapt the well-established framework of lived religion to the study of non-religion, arguing that the lived level offers a fine-textured approach to uncover non-religious practices that otherwise may be overlooked from an organisational point of view. To demonstrate this, I discuss several key findings of lived non-religion that arose in participants' narratives: performance, materiality,

embodiment and emotions. Through these analytical concepts, I put forward the notions of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’ to capture the complexities of leaving religion and identifying with non-religion. Next, I discuss the theoretical contributions of bringing together two theoretical concepts: the coloniality of power and bureaucracy. The perspectives of bureaucracy provide an investigation into the organisational policies and practices of apostasy asylum cases, taking note of the legal conceptions and ‘specialised knowledge’ that bureaucrats develop with experience. Incorporating the coloniality of power with bureaucracy offers a lens to interpret these findings in relation to the hierarchical ordering of human bodies. This hierarchy is constructed through dominant understandings of ‘credibility’ and the ‘genuine’ refugee, which allows for exploring the dichotomy between the deserving and undeserving refugee that operates in asylum determination processes.

Deriving from this research's empirical and theoretical findings, this chapter puts forward five policy recommendations aimed at the Home Office to improve the policy and practice of apostasy asylum claims. Through the policy recommendations, I demonstrate the practical implications of this research. With all sociological research, the study has some limitations, which will be discussed further at the end of this concluding chapter, with suggestions for future research.

Returning to the research questions, this thesis explored:

1. How are non-religious beliefs conceptualised within Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and incorporated within Home Office asylum determination policies?
2. Within the UK's Home Office, how are legal frameworks implemented, and are there gaps or tensions between official guidance and practice?
3. What are the experiences of non-religious asylum applicants in the UK asylum system?

8.2. The Thesis Narrative

This thesis has followed the experiences of apostate refugees in their diverse journeys of becoming non-religious and navigating asylum bureaucracy in the UK. Chapter 5 explored the complex dynamics underpinning how apostates became non-religious. Chapter 6 shifted focus to how the asylum system in the UK situates these identities through bureaucratic frameworks. Chapter 7 explored the experiences of non-religious apostates as they negotiated their identities and navigated asylum bureaucratic processes. The chapter considered how apostates negotiate

their identities through translation and performance of lived experience into asylum logic. Over the course of this thesis, the construction of non-religious identities in the everyday has been explored, as well as how individual identities are negotiated to derive personal experience into the site of asylum adjudication. In the following three sub-sections, I summarise the key analytical themes discussed in each data analysis chapter: becoming, bureaucratising and negotiating non-religion.

8.2.1. Becoming non-religious

Identity construction has been a focal topic in social science research. Identities have been foundational to the sociology of religion (Gareau, Bullivant and Beyer, 2018) as well as in migration research (La Barbera, 2014). However, the intricate dynamics of legal, social, cultural, political and historical responses to apostasy and blasphemy in shaping the construction of non-religious identities are notably overlooked. Chapter 5 thus aimed at providing an overview of the drivers behind participants' non-religious identity construction, which were discussed through the general themes of participants' life course, intersectional identities, unlearning religion, and learning non-religion. The chapter showed the varied constructions of non-religious identities and the multifaceted ways individuals lived their non-religiosity in the everyday. By drawing on a lived non-religion framework, this chapter focuses on the ordinary or banal forms of non-religiosity as acted out by individuals rather than focusing on the organisational formations of religion which have previously been dominant in the field (e.g., Engelke, 2015).

In Chapter 5, I contended that non-religion is often experienced as a private matter due to blasphemy or apostasy laws, alongside various institutional limitations. In the chapter's concluding sections, I show that as individuals arrive in the UK and 'learn' non-religion, it begins to be expressed both outwardly and verbally. By framing a lived non-religion model within the context of forced migration, I argue that non-religion encompasses both private/internal experiences and public/embodied expressions, revealing a multifaceted view of how individuals engage with non-religion. Therefore, I further strengthen the proposals of anthropologists that embodiment is as a paradigm, the 'lived' non-religion is explored through both embodiment and perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) and embodiment as practice (Bourdieu, 1997).

There were two primary instances in which apostates in this study sought asylum. First, some realised or developed their non-religious identity while already in the UK for other reasons (such as education) and thus claimed asylum as refugees *sur place*, after realising that they would be in danger if they returned to their country of origin. Others faced the fear of persecution for blasphemy or apostasy while in their country of origin, prompting them to flee and seek asylum. These trajectories differ, and both deserve attention. While acknowledging the significance of these different trajectories, this research aims to identify common motivations underpinning apostate identity construction and thus offers a generalised overview of the lived experiences of this phenomenon while being careful not to essentialise experiences.

The research findings in Chapter 5 draws parallels with the broader literature on non-religious identity construction which is primarily viewed from a ‘Western’ context. These encompass the idea that non-religious identities signify more than just a lack of religion; they embody a mixture of substantial beliefs (Strhan and Shillitoe, 2019). It also identified parallels with studies of non-religious identities that examine their development in relation to intersectional categories and social, political, and historical contexts (Beaman and Tomlins, 2015; Cottey, 2015; Malone, 2020; Zuckerman, 2011). The chapter unpacked some of the lived aspects of non-religion discussed in current literature, such as the performative aspects (Malone, 2020), materiality (Lee, 2017), embodiment (Lee, 2015) and emotional experiences (Mumford, 2014). This research has highlighted the similarities in how non-religious identities are formed and practised in countries beyond dominant European conceptions. The chapter has demonstrated that non-religious identities are fluid and (re)negotiated; consequently, it has revealed the diverse ways in which apostates ‘live out’ their non-religiosity.

In their countries of origin, non-religiosity was largely private and undisclosed, while in the UK, it was expressed and manifested through the ‘unlearning’ of their past religious selves. Thus, alongside similarities, this research has uncovered several unique ways in which apostates, particularly those who face the fear of persecution, construct their non-religious identities. For instance, extensive research conducted in Western contexts (though not exclusively) links the development of non-religious identities to possessing ‘agency’ in the process. Agency has been characterised in terms of self-determination, autonomy, free will, and personal freedom (Bowden and Mummery, 2009, p.125). It, therefore, refers to individuals taking an active and deliberate role in the construction process (Gareau, Bullivant and Beyer, 2018). In contrast, non-religious apostates in this study faced barriers in exercising their

agency. For example, legal and social structures in their countries of origin deliberately hindered their non-religious expression. The presence of blasphemy or apostasy laws affects one's ability to self-identify as non-religious. Furthermore, some motivations for becoming non-religious arose from external factors beyond the participants' control. Consequently, some apostates in this study were compelled to migrate because of their identity, which adversely impacted their agency in choosing to move.

Another reflection on the differences between apostate refugees and other non-religious identities is that apostates must consciously decide on a label to represent their worldviews. In comparison, non-religious identities in the UK can be more passive, allowing for greater flexibility with labels or associations to various identities³⁰ (Cheruvallil-Contractor, Purdam and Weller, 2021). For the asylum process, apostates must declare and confess their identities and be able to articulate and act out particular behaviours associated with that label. This requires apostates to think deeply about their beliefs and worldviews and reveal them to a range of social actors in a 'credible' manner to receive protection. Whilst some non-religious identities can choose to conceal their identities, apostate refugees are not afforded the same privilege.

An additional example of the uniqueness of apostate refugees is the use of the word 'apostate'. Apostasy, especially when used in the context of ex-Muslims, can be regarded as a negative or derogatory label (Cottee, 2015; Smith, 2016). Typically, but again not for all, the non-religious in countries such as the UK (see Mumford, 2014; Woodhead, 2016) are described as having the freedom to choose to be non-religious. They often have a variety of identity labels to navigate, for example, atheism, agnosticism, humanism and secularism. While apostate refugees can still navigate identity categories, the participants in this study were primarily defined by their apostate identity. This is particularly relevant because ex-Muslim apostates construct their non-religious identity in relation to their previous religion, and apostasy formed the basis of their asylum claim. Due to the negative connotations associated with apostasy, the process of constructing a non-religious identity that holds positive meaning is challenging for ex-Muslim apostates. Individuals who leave a religion risk bearing the stigma of apostasy and trauma. For the participants in this study, the label of apostate was imposed upon them, and it

³⁰ Cheruvallil-Contractor, Purdam and Weller's (2021) study of non-religious identities in England and Wales found some participants who reported experiences of unfair treatment and discrimination because of their identities.

was a concept that at times proved difficult to process and overcome in their lives. However, due to the sample of refugee apostates included in this research, most of whom had settled in the UK for around four years, they had reached a point where the term apostate conveyed a positive meaning. This does not diminish the fact that they must negotiate this label in their everyday lives, as some participants reflected on the challenges of living their daily lives in light of this.

As this research mostly considered how non-religious identities were constructed from the experiences of ex-Muslims, the processes of 'race' and racialisation add further nuance in conceptualising their identities. Two perspectives on racialisation have been highlighted in this thesis. First, the impact of racialisation in asylum determination processes and second, how it impacts notions of belonging. Political debates about asylum in the UK are particularly linked to distrust surrounding migrants associated with Islam (Wyss, 2022). Racialised perceptions that portray Muslim men as dangerous, which have derived from colonialism, continue to influence asylum assessment processes. These notions have extended suspicion to people who are not Muslim but face racialisation (De Genova, 2016). Thus, the racialisation of ex-Muslim apostates has marked them in terms of an imagined religious identity that affects the way identities are performed within the asylum process (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Qasmiyeh, 2010). Consequently, apostates from countries with a predominant Muslim background navigate assumptions regarding religion, culture, and ethnicity and must distance themselves from being perceived as threats related to terrorism and criminality. On an individual level, these individuals encounter additional complexities in how they connect with other facets of their identity, such as their social or cultural background. Ex-Muslims may be excluded from broader Muslim communities in the UK, struggling to negotiate their sense of belonging in ways that are unique and distinct from those of other non-religious individuals. Thus, apostates face marginalisation and challenges of belonging stemming from both their countries of origin and the society that receives them as asylum seekers.

In summary, Chapter 5 explored the intricacies of becoming non-religious. It examined how participants are deeply embedded in religious contexts throughout their life courses, which provides limited opportunities to explore non-religion. The chapter discussed how social, cultural, political, and historical processes related to religion influenced participants' development of doubts and questioning. It highlighted the intersectional characteristics of participants' identities that shape the formation of non-religiosity, taking into account gender,

class, and politics. The chapter explored the impact of religion on participants' lived experiences and its negative influence on their feelings of embodiment. Lastly, it addressed how non-religion manifested in the UK and the various identities participants navigated. The journey to becoming non-religious occurred in a gradual, non-linear, and non-chronological manner, spanning across different spaces and places. Within participants' countries of origin, the process of non-religion was a (re)negotiated, private, and often undisclosed journey. In contrast, the experience of non-religion in the UK highlighted the multifaceted ways participants constructed their identities through unlearning religion and learning about non-religion.

8.2.2. Bureaucratising non-religion

Chapter 6, 'Bureaucratising non-religion', discusses the organisational processes that transform apostasy into an asylum claim. Set within the British asylum system context, the chapter examines the structural frameworks in determining asylum for apostate claims. The Home Office assesses the credibility of such claims and, specifically in apostasy cases, evaluates the authenticity of an individual's professed identity. Chapter 6 highlights the particular challenges associated with determining asylum cases related to apostasy. It has been argued that the frameworks of the British asylum bureaucracy are insufficient for making decisions based on subjective identities. The chapter focuses on two dimensions of power underpinning the asylum bureaucracy. First, the establishment of legal criteria for asylum derived from the Refugee Convention, which confines identities into essentialist categories. Second, the homogenisation of identities perpetuates stereotypical and dominant preconceptions of a credible refugee. Practically, the implications of these power dynamics manifest through the notion of specialised knowledge, which influences the narratives bureaucrats seek during the credibility assessment, rooted in British interpretations of non-religion.

Through these analytical threads, the chapter detailed apostate asylum seekers' specific and unique experiences in navigating asylum bureaucratic frameworks. First, the oversight that non-religion or apostasy can be a ground for asylum within bureaucratic frameworks is an example of the colonality of power that permeates asylum determination processes. For people seeking asylum, the lack of explicit legal conceptualisation of claiming asylum for apostasy devalues the lived realities of individuals who face persecution for apostasy. Such oversight

reproduces colonial hierarchies of knowledge, which privileges Western European understandings of legitimate forms of persecution over those from other contexts. Moreover, it overlooks colonial histories of the emergence of apostasy in postcolonial states. For example, the criminalisation of apostasy can partly be explained through the means of states to strengthen their political identity, apart from Western powers (Manea, 2016). By failing to recognise apostasy as a ground for asylum, the UK reinforces asymmetric power structures and denies protection to individuals whose persecution arises from colonial legacies (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2018).

Second, apostate asylum cases face increased difficulty in demonstrating their beliefs and materialising claims. Most apostate asylum cases are situated within the overarching ‘religious’ persecution category, and the typical type of religion-based claims tends to be conversion cases, most notably converts from Islam to Christianity. Asylum bureaucratic frameworks are thus oriented around a different type of asylum claim. This creates an unfair benchmark against which non-religious cases are measured. For example, religious converts can be assessed more ‘easily’ through objective methods in asylum adjudication processes. This is because converts may have substantive beliefs that can be articulated. Most importantly, they may have official conversion letters or baptism certificates. They have spaces where they can practise their faith publicly, such as churches, and they can engage in online practices of their religion, including sharing prayers, making videos, and preaching. Converts can explain the logic and reasons for leaving one faith for another; they may describe their motivations by referring to the new religion’s beliefs, tenets, or doctrines. There are also symbols and objects converts can wear or possess, such as the cross, the Bible, or rosary beads. However, for non-religious individuals—those who leave religion for no particular belief system or turn to humanism, secularism, or rationalism—it is difficult to prove the sincerity of their beliefs. For ex-Muslims, there is no official way of leaving their religion, and thus, no official certificate can be issued. Atheists do not have official public buildings or spaces where they congregate and discuss non-religious matters. The nature of apostasy is often internal and private. For these reasons, the burden of evidentiary proof for non-religious individuals is unfair and overlooks the personal experiences of those who leave religion. It also questions what proof can be provided for inner convictions such as non-religion or unbelief.

Third, for apostate asylum seekers to receive protection, they must meet the credibility threshold set by bureaucrats. As outlined in Chapter 6, individuals seeking asylum often find it

challenging to fit their complex identities within legal and bureaucratic frameworks, leading to delays in claims that can adversely affect credibility. Apostates also face difficulties in providing empirical evidence to substantiate their claims. Further nuances in the chapter illustrate how asylum bureaucracies (re)produce both official and informal knowledge concerning ‘credible’ asylum cases. Due to a lack of expertise in bureaucrats’ understanding of the intricate religious, social, cultural, and political contexts of the asylum applicants’ countries of origin, knowledge in such cases may stem from personal assumptions. Consequently, the questions asked in a credibility assessment are often based on a limited understanding of non-religious identities. Moreover, through specialised knowledge, the asylum bureaucracy fosters standardised characteristics and contributes to the (re)production of what it means to be a ‘credible’ apostate in need of protection. Thus, apostates seeking asylum are compelled to present a stereotypical narrative that aligns with a British interpretation of credibility regarding how a persecuted apostate ought to look or behave.

Lastly, the chapter examines how the broader culture of disbelief is acutely brought to the fore for non-religious claims, primarily due to the challenges of establishing credibility. Crafting a ‘credible’ asylum narrative often hinges on obtaining the belief of asylum bureaucrats and requires fitting lived experiences into bureaucratic frameworks. Since non-religion necessitates assessing the authenticity of an individual’s internally held beliefs, relying on personal testimony in the absence of objective evidence poses distinct difficulties for apostates due to systematic disbelief and suspicion. Given that non-religious claims do not conform to the ‘typical’ form of religious persecution, bureaucrats are likely to scrutinise these cases even more stringently. When decision-makers can dismiss cases they doubt to be credible, they further generalise about which narratives are regarded as believable. Through the lens of the coloniality of bureaucracy, it is evident that this process is permeated by racialised preconceptions, which carry a set of assumptions regarding the credibility of certain individuals.

8.2.3. Negotiating identities

Chapter 7, ‘Negotiating non-religion’, examines how non-religious individuals seeking asylum navigate the challenges of negotiating their identities to be perceived as credible within the asylum bureaucracy. As highlighted in Chapter 6, colonial imaginaries of non-religiosity are (re)produced within bureaucratic frameworks. Chapter 7 evaluates the ramifications of enduring colonial imaginaries on the representation of non-religiosity and how these manifest

in asylum cases for apostate seekers. In the chapter, I contend that being perceived as credible involves a complex translation and performance of non-religiosity to attain refugee status in ways comprehensible to British understandings. Furthermore, the chapter posits that by viewing negotiation through the lens of power, we can understand the asylum interview as a key site of power dynamics and the manifestation of bureaucracy. There are three focal arguments presented in this chapter.

First, the participants in this study emphasised the necessity to translate and narrate their personal, lived experiences in relation to the fixed, legal categories of asylum. As discussed in Chapter 5, the lived non-religious lens provides an alternative explanation for the journey of becoming non-religious. The apostates' journeys in this research were gradual, non-linear, and non-chronological. However, as outlined in Chapter 6, asylum bureaucracy is structured to seek credible narratives that consist of logic and linear explanations. In effect, the apostates in this study had to make their personal convictions visible in ways deemed conventional. This, however, overlooks the specific struggles apostates face in identifying as non-religious. For instance, apostates faced struggles with recognising their identities, experienced shame, and encountered a breakdown of relationships, mental health challenges, and 'crashing' worldviews. These psychological effects can hinder the articulation of non-religious asylum cases in clear and concise terms. Asylum applicants interviewed in this research had to translate their identities into official forms of non-religiosity, such as relating to dominant conceptions of atheism, secularism, or humanism. Reducing worldviews to 'known' Eurocentric identities vastly simplifies the diversity of non-religious belief systems and risks excluding those not recognised as non-religious identities. Thus, asylum assessment procedures are imperial processes that produce social constructions of identities, which asylum claimants navigate through a series of performances.

Second, another implication of translating personal accounts into bureaucratic frameworks is the necessity to perform as a non-religious individual. Asylum systems often require applicants to prove their beliefs or lack thereof. However, there is a tension of how a claimant could prove their non-religiosity, if they had internalised the process, compared to an individual who had lived it out in the everyday. This also reflects a broader structural problem: asylum systems often fail to accommodate non-religion precisely because they expect religious-like visibility or performativity. For some, this performance required articulating non-religious identities or worldviews, such as humanism or atheism, which were only learned after arriving in the UK.

Becoming an active and engaged member of civil society or secular organisations and receiving support from secular groups in the UK proved beneficial. Performance manifested through attendance at human rights protests, such as Pride, and involvement in activism concerning non-religious themes. Furthermore, the act of performing non-religiosity was exemplified through behaviours and lifestyle choices that distanced oneself from perceived 'Muslimness'. This was realised through removing religious attire, non-participation in religious activities, and questioning religious beliefs and practices. In some instances, there was even an association of leaving Islam with dietary choices. Through coloniality, such performances and processes of distancing allow an asylum applicant to portray themselves as 'civilised', while simultaneously implying that their previous identity and country of origin are 'uncivilised'.

Third, to achieve the threshold of credibility defined by the Home Office, I found that asylum seekers greatly benefit from having access to reliable and experienced legal representation, human rights advocates, and interpreters. Additionally, claimants from upper- and middle-class backgrounds possess a knowledge set that they can utilise to create a credible narrative. Thus, the negotiation of non-religious identities is intertwined with participants' agency, personal connections and networks, language skills, knowledge, and experience. I found that these factors may influence how an asylum claim is interpreted and the ability to present as credible. Consequently, participants with greater cultural capital were better able to navigate the asylum processes in what might be considered an 'easier' manner compared to those who lack such resources. This has further implications for apostates seeking refuge. It is well-documented that the effects of trauma and mental health issues related to facing persecution and experiencing violence can hinder the ability to effectively navigate the asylum system. This research has emphasised how apostate asylum claimants who struggle or lack certain factors will consequently struggle to articulate and present a credible identity. Therefore, Chapter 7 argues that the adjudication of religion-based asylum claims entails a complex negotiation of bureaucratic procedures that asylum seekers with less social privilege or different social backgrounds from those in this study may find difficult to comprehend.

In conclusion, the three overall analytical themes of the thesis: 'becoming', 'bureaucratising', and 'negotiating', have been used to tell the story of the manifold processes apostate asylum seekers must navigate to receive refugee status. Each theme has been discussed regarding the complex, lived processes the non-religious must negotiate, such as unlearning and learning, bureaucratising, translating and performing. The overarching determining factor of granting

refugee status is through the assessment of credibility. Through the theoretical perspectives utilised in this thesis, the investigation of the credible refugee has raised two important points. First, there are power dynamics underpinning asylum determination processes which categorise people based on Eurocentric understandings of (non-)religion, identity and persecution. Second, this power affects the ability of apostates seeking asylum to receive their right to protection. Thus, the asylum assessment processes' focus on uncovering the credible narrative of an apostate asylum seeker is flawed and risks essentialising particular experiences as genuine and disregards others which do not conform to their view. As such, asylum assessment procedures (re)negotiate identities which belong in the nation-state, which socially constructs and normalises 'deserving' and 'undeserving' identities.

8.3. Key Findings and Implications

8.3.1. Theoretical contributions

The theoretical approaches employed in this research are innovative because they adopt a lived and decolonial lens to explore non-religious asylum seekers' life trajectories. To understand the complexities of participants' lived experience of apostasy, I adapted the well-established lived religion lens and bridged two theoretical concepts, coloniality of power and bureaucracy, to form 'coloniality of bureaucracy' to provide a novel frame for understanding processes of ordering based on racial and religious categories. By doing so, this thesis has advanced sociological understandings of apostate asylum claims, discussed in this section.

By focusing on non-religious refugees and drawing on theoretical perspectives derived from lived (non-)religion, this thesis examines the unique and diverse ways in which apostates construct their non-religious identities. To achieve this, the research expands the established theory of lived religion by applying it to the study of non-religion. It particularly emphasises non-religious manifestations that transcend organisational understandings, concentrating instead on individual and everyday forms of identity expression. In doing so, it investigates non-religious beliefs and practices and broadens understandings beyond dominant groups, such as atheism and humanism.

This thesis has sought to build upon previous contributions regarding leaving religion in two ways. First, focusing on a population of non-religious individuals who face persecution in their

countries of origin has provided findings from those who lie outside the dominant Western European conceptions of religion or belief. Second, taking a multidimensional approach to the lived nature of non-religion has unravelled varied beliefs that may not always be explicitly formed or articulated without deeper exploration. The theory of lived non-religion aims to enhance understanding of the processes involved in moving away from religion from the perspective of those who are persecuted for non-religious beliefs, adding nuance to discussions about believing and belonging – specifically how non-belief can serve as a source of belonging and providing an analysis of non-religious embodiment. This theoretical contribution is evidenced by the participants’ unique and diverse narratives of leaving religion. Through the focus on the banal forms of non-religiosity enacted by individuals, this thesis has highlighted the non-religious expressions and performances that would likely go overlooked if they had solely concentrated on organisations.

For the reasons outlined above, I have argued that we should conceptualise apostasy through the concepts of ‘unlearning’ and ‘learning’. This is a novel contribution to current research as current literature reports that individuals who deconvert go through stages to establish their new, non-religious identity (e.g., Cottee, 2015; Nica, 2020; Zuckerman, 2011). Alternatively, this research shows that the stages of disaffiliation for the apostates in this study are experienced, expressed and embodied uniquely and that they do not occur chronologically. Considering these factors, I have argued that for apostate refugees, religion is experienced through a disrupted embodiment, resulting in a dissociation from one’s body. Thus, non-religion can be viewed as a positive embodiment and, therefore, a source of belonging for refugee populations, offering new perspectives on how migrants connect with feelings of belonging that were previously conceptualised in relation to religion.

I have further argued that the lens of lived non-religion should be applied within the context of understanding asylum bureaucracy. A lived non-religion lens has shown that journeys to non-religion are non-linear and non-chronological, thereby challenging asylum assessment procedures that seek clear and logical narratives of persecution. This lens highlights the differences between how apostate refugees express their lived experiences of leaving religion and facing persecution and how the asylum bureaucracy interprets them. Consequently, persecuted apostates present unique challenges for the asylum regime in the UK, raising questions about how ‘religion’ or ‘belief’ are defined and understood by the state. A key strength of lived non-religion in asylum is that it offers a framework for conceptualising non-

religion through an individual's everyday experiences without imposing a formal definition. In this regard, I have argued that the lens of lived non-religion should be applied alongside two other theoretical perspectives, the colonality of power and bureaucracy.

The colonality of bureaucracy lens reveals how asylum bureaucratic frameworks assess and manage non-religious asylum claims. This lens challenges the understanding of non-religion and the evaluation of 'credibility' within a network of asylum governance shaped by power dynamics rooted in colonial histories. Through this analysis, the thesis highlights the unique challenges in assessing asylum claims related to apostasy. It finds that the asylum process is structurally restrictive for individuals with non-religious identities and that the assessment of credibility is fundamentally flawed. For instance, bureaucrats require claimants to demonstrate their beliefs by scrutinising organisational forms of non-religiosity, such as reciting official declarations of non-religion like the Amsterdam Declaration. Furthermore, there is an expectation to identify key philosophical or atheist thinkers, predominantly those originating from Western Europe. Employing Quijano's concept of colonality of power helps in understanding how colonality remains embedded within the asylum bureaucracy. This concept examines how asylum bureaucracy categorises individuals based on race, constructing ideal notions of the credible refugee, which is supported by the deserving/undeserving dichotomy. This has significant implications for asylum assessment processes, as the bureaucratic logic creates an essentialist and generalisable image of the apostate refugee, which claimants must embody and perform to be viewed as credible. By proposing that the process of apostasy is a universal journey, where individuals experience similar events, it minimises the unique and diverse realities that are inherent to them.

In summary, throughout this thesis, I have argued that the identities and worldviews of non-religious asylum seekers and refugees are multifaceted and intertwined with the social, cultural, political, and historical contexts in which individuals have been raised. Apostates leave their religion and undergo a complex process of identity (re)construction. Consequently, due to their identities and worldviews, some apostates face the fear of persecution and are compelled to seek protection. Transformed into the legal category of 'asylum seeker', they navigate the asylum bureaucracy in the UK and must negotiate their identities to be deemed worthy of protection. Examined through the lens of colonality of bureaucracy, asylum bureaucracy evaluates religious-based asylum claims according to how Home Office officials perceive non-religious individuals should behave. Therefore, the 'genuine' refugee must perform in ways

that are regarded as credible from the bureaucratic perspective, which illustrates a colonial-like distinction between the deserving and undeserving refugee.

This thesis bridges two disciplines that are often not considered together: non-religion and forced migration. Therefore, it presents several theoretical contributions. It significantly advances the lived (non-)religion approach, which is still in its infancy. Given the lack of an official consensus on the definition of non-religion, this research has employed a lived lens to examine the multidimensional, everyday, and nuanced facets of non-religion that might otherwise be ignored if the theory focused solely on official or organisational interpretations. By emphasising the everyday, this perspective investigates the varied experiences of apostates leaving their religion. It highlights how non-religiosity is practised, performed, and manifested in daily life, as well as the extent to which it is restricted and the marginalisation of non-religiosity within society. Current studies on lived (non-)religion have not specifically examined apostate refugees; therefore, this research has introduced new lived dimensions to existing understandings of apostasy. These findings further bolster the argument that religion and non-religion should not be perceived as a binary. For these reasons, the British asylum bureaucracy merits critique for homogenising identities through an objective assessment of credibility. The interpretation of the ‘credible’ apostate should thus be scrutinised as it theorises what forms of knowledge are considered legitimate and which individuals are deemed worthy of belonging.

8.4. A Note on the Limitations: A call for future research

As with all social science research, this study has its limitations. This section outlines the key constraints and reflects on potential future research directions.

A primary limitation stems from the nature of qualitative research. I gathered a relatively small sample of participants, and so the findings are not generalisable to all apostasy asylum cases. Instead, I captured a small, rich sample aimed at highlighting detailed experiences from a select few cases, thus offering its own merits. Even though I implemented strategies to reduce selection bias, such as reaching out to individuals outside the collaborative partners' networks, I faced challenges in recruitment, particularly for participants from a refugee background. As a result, most refugee participants were recruited through the collaborative partner, consisting of individuals who had utilised their services. At the time of assistance from this organisation,

these individuals met the criteria of having no belief in God, signifying an atheistic belief system. Although some beliefs may have shifted by the time of my interviews, this sampling may overlook a broader population of those accused of apostasy or blasphemy who maintain religious beliefs or worldviews. Apostasy persecution cases can also involve individuals who are falsely accused. This sample also risks excluding agnostics and others who do not entirely reject the idea of a deity but do not align with any formal religious affiliation. Thus, future research could consider individuals who face the fear of persecution and possess varied belief systems other than atheism.

This study's findings are based solely on participants from ex-Muslim backgrounds. As such, the results are shaped by participants' experiences and perspectives of Islam. While this focus provides depth within a specific demographic, it limits the generalisability of the findings to broader populations affected by apostasy and/or blasphemy laws. Individuals from other religious or secular backgrounds may hold significantly different views or experiences. Future research should aim for a more diverse sample to explore how these issues vary across different belief systems and cultural contexts. Future research might compare the findings in this research with those from non-Muslim migrant backgrounds to further understand how religion-specific constructions of difference operate in the UK asylum regime.

Furthermore, the sample is skewed towards male participants, reflecting the demographics of most asylum seekers. This bias presents a challenge in representing female experiences, as recruiting women for the study proved to be difficult. Future research could utilise an intersectional and gendered approach to focus on the specific experiences of female apostates, the persecution they encounter for being non-religious, and how they navigate the asylum system. This research examined two female apostates and found that their experiences of leaving their religion differed from those of males in that they faced stricter surveillance from their families. Thus, research that considers the experiences of female apostates is an important area of study that is currently overlooked.

Participants came from various countries, including Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, the Maldives, and Nigeria, where experiences related to apostasy differ significantly. I endeavoured to avoid generalisation and diminish individual experiences while I sought to synthesise narratives by identifying common themes. Thus, due to data limitations, I did not take into account regional differences among participants from the same countries. Further

studies could explore specific country contexts and examine regional variations in the social, political, and cultural frameworks shaping attitudes towards apostasy and blasphemy. The participants involved in this research also originated from Muslim backgrounds. Although similarities could still be drawn regarding the challenges of apostate asylum assessments, future research could consider apostates from other religious backgrounds who are persecuted on the basis of non-religiosity.

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to demonstrate proficiency in English, as securing interpreters or translators for this PhD project was not financially viable. Although I have noted that there is mistrust in the use of interpreters, especially in cases of apostasy, this criterion may have inadvertently excluded some refugees due to language barriers. I recognised the difficulties in discussing personal matters outside of one's native language and thus took the necessary ethical considerations, such as providing breaks and reassurance. Future research should consider the use of interpreters or translators to suit individual needs. Despite these limitations, the overall evidence found relating to apostasy asylum claims, particularly concerning the assessment procedures and the inherent flaws, remains valid.

8.5. Concluding Thoughts and Policy Recommendations

The findings from this research regarding how credibility assessments are carried out for the non-religious may be used to inform asylum policy and practice at the Home Office. This research has shown there are structural barriers embedded within bureaucratic procedures and policies for apostate asylum claims. It has also demonstrated asylum officials have significant gaps in knowledge on how to assess non-religious asylum claims. This thesis has argued that the specificities of apostate asylum seekers' and refugees' experiences are unique and should be assessed distinctly from other claimants. There are several practical outcomes that could be employed by the Home Office to address these issues, discussed below.

First, language should be updated throughout Home Office guidance and policies to make explicit that the 'religion' ground of the Convention is inclusive of the non-religious and to provide clarity that apostates are able to claim under this ground. For asylum claims based on religious persecution, it is usually established that the persecution experienced is either religious or non-religious in character. Thus, asylum officials would benefit from being aware of scholarly definitions in cases where there are judicial debates concerning religious character.

Due to variance and differences in how individuals become non-religious and practice their beliefs, there should also be greater awareness of the differences between how these beliefs and practices differ depending on context. Thus, guidance, policies and practice should move away from essentialist definitions to a polythetic understanding of religion and belief. Given the sociological complexities in defining as a religion or belief, it is advised that the Home Office work with the assistance of professionals with relevant expertise on the issue (Musalo, 2004).

This research has shown the strengths of utilising a lived (non-)religion approach, and thus, training and decision-making at the Home Office could benefit from this understanding of religion/non-religion. Non-religion encompasses a ‘complex constellation of positions’ (Eller and Khazaal, 2024, p.3). This approach will highlight individual variations in understanding, identification and practice of religion or belief systems and acknowledge that disparities do not affect a claimant’s credibility (Selim *et al.*, 2023). It is particularly important for officials to understand that apostasy from Islam is not always synonymous with atheism or the refutation of god(s) (Eller and Khazaal, 2024). Thus, measuring or assessing non-belief in relation to atheism is not always accurate for ex-Muslims.

Second, it is imperative to maintain the continuation of the FoRB training (outlined in Chapter 1) and the momentum of the training as it stood in 2019. It should provide balanced case studies for all religion or belief asylum cases. The Home Office should implement refresher training for staff members who have previously engaged with it; due to high staff turnover at the Home Office, this should be conducted more than once a year. While FoRB training has been previously devised for caseworkers, it could be extended to other officials who encounter refugees or make decisions on claims, such as administrative staff, border guards, and interpreters. The outcomes of the training should be closely monitored to ensure that the knowledge gained is practically applied within credibility assessments.

Third, this research has shown improvements are needed for the Home Office’s API on credibility and CPINs. This research has shown that flawed knowledge of non-religious identities and inaccurate and out-of-date policies and guidance have led to erroneous credibility assessments. Kagan’s (2015) approach to an objective credibility assessment could be drawn on to improve the criterion of credibility. Kagan argues that the question should not be whether decision-makers believe the applicant but whether there is a reasonable basis for the applicant

to be believed (Kagan, 2015). As a result of analysing the contents of the available CPINs, far more detail is needed for the context of non-religious persecution. CPINs must be added for those countries that have apostasy or blasphemy laws. Specific guidance must also be added for non-religious persecution in other countries, ensuring it is given as much attention as religious conversion cases and treated as a distinct belief system. These should be navigated carefully, as CPIN information can often become out-of-date and inaccurate; thus, updates should be made on a rolling basis.

Fourth, the Home Office should record and publish disaggregated data on asylum claims on refugee grounds. This data would provide clarity on the number of people seeking asylum on these grounds, which are currently estimated or anecdotal. Breaking down these figures will show the extent to which non-religious people are persecuted and would aid the advocacy work of human rights organisations.

Fifth, the UK government should ensure apostate refugees have access to and receive adequate support in the UK. Cottee (2015) writes that a crucial policy issue is ‘how to provide better support for wavering and ex-Muslims in moral jeopardy’, and he specifically mentions the need to properly train ‘social workers and mental health care professionals not only about the intricacies of the Islamic faith but also the difficulties and dilemmas involved in leaving it’ (2015, p.212). This should be extended to apostate refugees as there is a need for services for the effects of religious trauma.

In conclusion, this thesis has provided empirical evidence regarding the challenges that apostates face when seeking protection from persecution and the freedom to exercise their right to expression. Apostates who arrive and settle in the UK continue to navigate intersecting identities while continually developing their identities, beliefs, and worldviews. I have captured only a small snapshot of their lives and experiences. This research highlights the urgency of recognising that the right to apostasy and non-religion is fundamental to one’s identity and to how some individuals wish to live their lives. The UK government needs to acknowledge the complexities of religion-based asylum assessment processes for the non-religious to ensure their right to protection. As long as asylum assessments rely on the current policies and guidelines (at the time of writing), assessors risk making inaccurate determinations regarding apostasy claims, thereby putting individuals’ lives at risk.

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Appendix A – Call for Participants from a Refugee Background

Calling for Participants

Do you have experience of claiming asylum in the United Kingdom (UK) due to facing persecution for non-religious beliefs?

Hello, my name is Lucy and I am a PhD researcher from the University of Sheffield.

I am looking for people to take part in my research project to explore the experiences of non-religious people who have navigated the British asylum system.

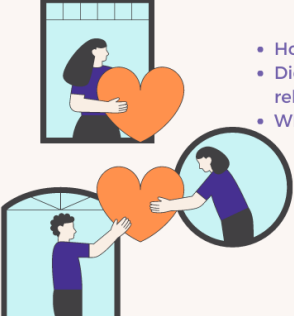
ARE YOU ELIGIBLE?

You are eligible if you:

- Have refugee or humanitarian protection in the UK
- Are 18 years old or older
- Have a good level of spoken English

WHERE AND WHEN

- Online via Google Meet or in-person (in a public space)
- 1-1.30 mins interview at a time that suits you



Some of the topics I'd like to learn more about:

- How was your experience going through the asylum process?
- Did you experience any barriers of seeking asylum due to being non-religious?
- What would have made your experience better?



CONTACT INFORMATION

lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk
@LucyPott_
<https://tinyurl.com/bdd4j8kj>

Taking part in Research

Before you decide whether to take part in the research, it's important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve:

What is the purpose of the research?

This research will investigate the barriers faced by non-religious people who have claimed asylum under the 'religion' ground of the 1951 Refugee Convention. It will seek to understand how religious persecution cases, from the perspective of non-religious individuals, are assessed by the UK's Home Office. It will aim to understand the lived experience of non-religious people who have navigated the UK's asylum system.

What will I need to do?

If you are interested in taking part, you will have an initial online meeting with me (Lucy) to explain the project, the interview process, and ethical procedures. This includes ensuring you are participating voluntarily and that you are aware you are free to withdraw at any time before we arrange an interview. The main interview will be up to an hour and a half long (which can be split up if this works better). Interviews will be conducted online or in-person (in a public space) depending on your preference.

Do I have to take part?

No. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. You can still withdraw from this research without any negative consequences.

Will people know I have taken part?

No. Your participation will be kept completely anonymous and confidential and only accessible to the researcher (Lucy) and her supervisors Dr. Lucy Mayblin and Dr. Hannah Lewis. Any answers collected from you will be stored securely and you will not be able to be identified in reports or publications unless you specifically request this. Nothing that you say in an interview will be shared with Humanists UK unless fully anonymised.



Taking part in Research

Before you decide whether to take part in the research, it's important to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve:

Disadvantages and risks taking part

The risks or discomforts which may arise from taking part relate to discussing potentially sensitive topics of persecution, religion or belief, and discussions relating to asylum. The risks of taking part in this research are minimised as participation is voluntary, there are no compulsory questions, and participants are free to withdraw (until the data has been aggregated). The researcher will send the interview guide prior to the main interview so you can decide if there are any questions you do not wish to answer. You will also be given a transcript of the interview, you will have the opportunity to make amendments to the transcript up until a given deadline (for example, two weeks).

Benefits of taking part

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you from participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will assist Humanists UK with their advocacy work with asylum-seekers. It will provide academic evidence that may be used to work with the Home Office to inform their training when assessing asylum claims based on religion. It will also contribute to the research on this topic as no research has previously been undertaken on this topic.

What will happen to the results of this research?

Results will be written up and published as a PhD thesis. Due to the nature of this research, it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. Therefore, anonymised data will be accessible after completion of the thesis. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way.



Appendix B –Participant Information Sheet for Individuals from a Refugee Background

Blasphemy and Apostasy in the UK Asylum System: Policy and practice in asylum cases submitted under grounds of non-religiosity

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

The key research tool utilised in this project is interviews. This research will investigate the barriers faced by non-religious people seeking asylum under the ‘religion’ ground of the 1951 Refugee Convention. It will seek to understand how religious persecution cases, from the perspective of non-religious individuals, are assessed by the UK’s Home Office. It will aim to understand the lived experience of non-religious asylum applicants who have navigated the UK’s asylum system. This project constitutes the assessed work for completion of a PhD at the University of Sheffield.

Why have I been invited to take part in the study?

You have been chosen as you have experience of seeking asylum in the UK claiming on the ‘religion’ ground of the 1951 Refugee Convention and you identify as being non-religious. The project will interview other participants including approximately 20 other people who have sought asylum as well as approximately four Home Office decision-makers and four human rights advocates.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you to decide whether or not to take part and participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw from this research without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason.

There will be a point of time where participants are unable to withdraw their data due to it being anonymised and aggregated. Withdrawal from research will be considered on a case-by-case basis, but it is envisaged removal of data will not be feasible 3 months after the interview took place.

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact Lucy Potter (lead researcher): lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk. Or the supervisory team: Lucy Mayblin (l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk) and Hannah Lewis (h.j.lewis@sheffield.ac.uk)

Please note that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?

The interviews are planned to take place between Feb 2023-December 2023. The research project commenced in Feb 2022 and is due to end Feb 2025 with a duration of three years. There will be initial online meeting to explain the purpose, methodology and rationale of the project and answer any questions you may have, this will approximately be an hour long. The main interview will be up to an hour and a half long. Interviews will be conducted online or in-person (in a public space) with the choice being given to participants who wish to take part.

Interviews are being undertaken in this research to understand the experiences you had while applying for asylum in the UK. It will explore understandings of non-religion and any barriers you faced claiming asylum on these grounds. This is relevant for achieving the research project's objectives by gathering an understanding of how the UK Home Office assesses these claims, and if there could be improvement to their guidance and training.

The research methods used in this project will consist of interviews. Questions will cover your experience of going through the UK asylum system as a non-religious person.

What the possible disadvantages and risks in taking part?

The risks or discomforts which may arise from taking part relate to discussing potentially sensitive topics of persecution, religion or belief, and discussions relating to asylum.

The risks of taking part in this research are minimised as participation is voluntary, there are no compulsory questions, and participants are free to withdraw (until the data has been aggregated). The researcher will send the interview guide prior to the main interview so you can decide if there are any questions you do not wish to answer. You will also be given a transcript of the interview, you will have the opportunity to make amendments to the transcript up until a given deadline (for example, two weeks).

The importance of the knowledge gained from this research is anticipated to be reasonable in relation to the potential disadvantages of discussing sensitive topics.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for you from participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will assist [collaborative partner] with their advocacy work for people seeking asylum. It will provide academic evidence that may be used to work with the Home Office to inform their training when assessing asylum claims based on religion. It will also contribute to the research on this topic as no research has previously been undertaken on this topic.

Will my participation in the study be kept confidential?

Research participants have the right to remain anonymous and their rights to privacy and confidentiality will be respected. All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to Lucy Potter and her supervisors, Dr. Lucy Mayblin and Dr. Hannah Lewis. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. If you agree to us sharing the information you provide with other researchers (e.g. by

making it available in a data archive) then your personal details will not be included unless you explicitly request this.

Nothing that you say in interviews will be shared with the collaborative partner unless fully anonymised.

What is the legal basis for processing personal data?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that ‘processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest’ (Article 6(1)(e)).

Further information can be found in the University’s Privacy Notice
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.>

As we will be collecting some data that is defined in the legislation as more sensitive (information about religious, spiritual, or other beliefs and political asylum), we also need to let you know that we are applying the following condition in law: that the use of your data is necessary ‘for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific research purposes or statistical purposes’ (9(2)(j)). For more guidance on legal bases, including the additional conditions that apply to ‘Special Category’ personal data, refer to the University’s Research Ethics Policy Note, and Specialist Research Ethics Guidance paper, on ‘Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Protection’:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/homepage.>

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

The data collected will be accessible by the lead researcher. Due to the nature of this research, it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. Therefore, anonymised data will be accessible after completion of the thesis. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way. A Data Management Plan (DMP) outlining all uses of the data will be shared on request.

Who is organising and funding the research?

University of Sheffield

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the Sociological Studies department.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact Dr Lucy Mayblin: l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk in the first instance. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Department of Sociological Studies Prof Nathan Hughes: Nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the project's Designated Safeguarding Contact Dr Lucy Mayblin: l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk. If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this Contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the Head of the Department of Sociological Studies Prof Nathan Hughes: Nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk and/or the University's Research Manager Ethics Co-ordinator Dr Tim Highfield: t.j.highfield@sheffield.ac.uk

Contact for further information: Lucy Potter (Lead Researcher: lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix C – Information Sheet for Human Rights Advocates

Blasphemy and Apostasy in the UK Asylum System: Policy and practice in asylum cases submitted under grounds of non-religiosity

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Thank you for reading this.

Purpose

The key research tool utilised in this project is interviews. This research will investigate the experiences of non-religious asylum claimants who have claimed asylum under the ‘religion’ ground of the 1951 Refugee Convention. It will seek to understand how non-religious rights are protected within international human rights law (such as Articles 18 and 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) and explore how these rights are exercised within Home Office (HO) asylum determination cases. It will investigate the qualitative context in which religion-based asylum claims are made by analysing documents used in decision-making processes and through interviewing HO officials, Human Rights Advocates and individuals who have experience of claiming asylum. This project constitutes the assessed work for completion of a PhD at the University of Sheffield.

Why have you been chosen?

You have been chosen because you have experience working with non-religious asylum applicants in the legal or public sector. This project will interview other participants including 25-30 people who have claimed asylum on these grounds, approximately four Human Rights Advocates and four HO officials.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part and participation is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. You do not have to give a reason.

There will be a point of time where participants are unable to withdraw their data due to it being anonymised and aggregated. Withdrawal from research will be considered on a case-by-case basis, but it is envisaged removal of data will not be feasible 3 months after the interview took place.

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact Lucy Potter (lead researcher): lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk. Or the supervisory team: Lucy Mayblin (l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk) and Hannah Lewis (h.j.lewis@sheffield.ac.uk).

Please note that by choosing to participate in this research, this will not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship between you and the University of Sheffield.

What will happen to me if I take part and What do I have to do?

The interviews are planned to take place between February 2023 and December 2023. The research project commenced in February 2022 and is due to end February 2025 with a duration of three years. There will be an initial online meeting to explain the purpose, methodology and rationale of the project and answer any questions you may have, this will approximately be an hour long. The main interview will be up to an hour and a half long. Interviews will be conducted online or in-person (in a public space) with the choice being given to participants who wish to take part.

Interviews are being undertaken in this research to understand the legal basis of non-religious asylum-seekers claiming on the 'religion' ground of the Refugee Convention. Interviews also seek to understand decision-making processes of considering asylum claims based on non-religion. This is relevant for achieving the research project's objectives by gathering an understanding on how the UK Home Office assesses these claims and if there could be development towards guidance and training.

The research methods used in this project will consist of interviews which will focus on your role and reflections on dealing with non-religious asylum claims.

Disadvantages and risks taking part

The risks or discomforts which may arise from taking part in this research include discussing potentially sensitive topics relating to religion or belief and asylum claims. The risks of taking part in this research are minimised as participation is voluntary, there are no compulsory questions, and participants are free to withdraw (until the data has been aggregated). The importance of the knowledge gained from this research is anticipated to be reasonable in relation to the potential disadvantages of discussing sensitive topics.

Due to the small sample size of this group, the risk of being personally identifiable is higher. Anonymisation and the protection of personally identifiable characteristics will be of highest priority. For this reason, you will be asked how you wish to be named in the research and any individuals you name will be anonymised. You will also be given a transcript of the interview, you will have the opportunity to make amendments to the transcript up until a given deadline (for example, two weeks).

Benefits of taking part

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will assist [collaborative partner] with their advocacy work with asylum-seekers. It will provide academic evidence that may be used by [collaborative partner] to work with the Home Office to inform their training when assessing asylum claims based on religion. It will also contribute to the literature on this topic and fulfil a gap in this under-researched area.

Confidentiality

Research participants have the right to remain anonymous and their rights to privacy and confidentiality will be respected. All the information that we collect about you during the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to Lucy Potter and her supervisors Dr. Lucy Mayblin and Dr. Hannah Lewis. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications unless you have given your explicit consent for this. If you agree

to us sharing the information you provide with other researchers (e.g. by making it available in a data archive) then your personal details will not be included unless you explicitly request this. Unless otherwise agreed, you will never be referred to by name or gender in publications and the nature of your role will be discussed only in very general, non-identifying- terms. You will not be quoted if that quote could potentially indicate your identity.

Legal basis for processing personal data

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that ‘processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest’ (Article 6(1)(e)).

Further information can be found in the University’s Privacy Notice
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general.>

As we will be collecting some data that is defined in the legislation as more sensitive (information about religious, spiritual, or other beliefs and political asylum), we also need to let you know that we are applying the following condition in law: that the use of your data is necessary ‘for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific research purposes or statistical purposes’ (9(2)(j)). For more guidance on legal bases, including the additional conditions that apply to ‘Special Category’ personal data, refer to the University’s Research Ethics Policy Note, and Specialist Research Ethics Guidance paper, on ‘Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Protection’:
<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/homepage.>

What will happen to the data collected, and the results of the research project?

The data collected will be accessible by the lead researcher. Due to the nature of this research, it is very likely that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. Therefore, pseudonymised and anonymised data will be accessible after completion of the thesis. We will ask for your explicit consent for your data to be shared in this way. A Data Management Plan (DMP) outlining all uses of the data will be shared on request.

Who is organising and funding the research?

University of Sheffield

Who is the Data Controller?

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield’s Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the Sociological Studies department.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact Dr Lucy Mayblin: l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk in the first instance. If you feel your

complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the Department of Sociological Studies Prof Nathan Hughes: Nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>.

If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the project's Designated Safeguarding Contact Dr Lucy Mayblin: l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk. If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this Contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the Head of the Department of Sociological Studies Prof Nathan Hughes: Nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk and/or the University's Research Manager Ethics Co-ordinator Dr Tim Highfield: t.j.highfield@sheffield.ac.uk

Contact for further information

Lucy Potter (Lead Researcher: lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix D – Participant Consent Form for Refugee Participants

Consent Form

Blasphemy and Apostasy in the UK Asylum System: Policy and practice in asylum cases submitted under grounds of non-religiosity

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet and/or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer no to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include taking part in an interview that will audio and/or video recorded [if online].		
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.		
If applicable, I consent for the researcher to access my personal asylum case file owned by [collaborative partner].		
The asylum case file will be used to give the researcher background knowledge of the circumstances of asylum of the participant. It will also be used as an elicitation tool, where the researcher may ask you questions about the file during the interview.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study*; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I give permission for the interview data that I provide to be deposited in University of Sheffield repository ORDA so it can be used for future research and learning		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of participant [printed]

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher [printed]

Signature

Date

Project contact details for further information:

Lead researcher: Lucy Potter lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk

Supervisor: Lucy Mayblin l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk

In case of a concern or complaint please contact Head of Department: Nathan Hughes, nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

**There will be a point of time where participants are unable to withdraw their data due to it being anonymised and aggregated – this is expected to be up to 3 months after the interview took place*

Appendix E – Participant Consent Form for Human Rights Advocates

Consent Form

Blasphemy and Apostasy in the UK Asylum System: Policy and practice in asylum cases submitted under grounds of non-religiosity

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet and/or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer no to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.)		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include taking part in an interview that will be audio and/or video recorded [if online].		
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time <i>[though there will be a point of time where participants are unable to withdraw their data due to it being anonymised and aggregated – this is expected to be up to 3 months after the interview took place]</i> ; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.		
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.		
I understand that I will not be named in these outputs unless I specifically request this.		
Do you specifically request to be named in the research?		
If you do not want to be named and wish to remain anonymous, how would you like to be referred? (e.g., job title/pseudonym)		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I give permission for the interview data that I provide to be deposited in University of Sheffield repository ORDA so it can be used for future research and learning.		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of participant [printed]

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher [printed]

Signature

Date

Project contact details for further information:

Lead researcher: Lucy Potter lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk

Supervisor: Lucy Mayblin l.mayblin@sheffield.ac.uk

In case of a concern or complaint please contact Head of Department: Nathan Hughes, nathan.hughes@sheffield.ac.uk

Appendix F – Asylum and Mental Health Support Services

Support Services

Please find below a list of support services that specialise in refugee support and mental health services which are available for you to contact if you need it.

Refugee Council

The Refugee Council are a leading charity working with refugees and people seeking asylum in the UK. Founded in 1951 following the creation of the UN Refugee Convention, they exist to support and empower people who have fled conflict, violence and persecution in order to rebuild their lives here in the UK.

- They provide crisis advice, mental health counselling and practical support to help people settle and integrate into their new community
- They are specialists in working with refugee children who arrive in the UK alone
- They work with refugees and our partners to fight for improvements to the asylum protection system
- They inspire change in attitudes towards refugees and people seeking asylum—speaking out for compassion fairness and kindness.

Website: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/>

Refugee Action

At Refugee Action, they help people who've survived some of the world's worst regimes. They get them the basic support they need to live again with dignity. Then they help them build safe, happy and productive lives in the UK. Their vision is that refugees and people seeking asylum will be welcome in the UK. They will get justice, live free of poverty and be able to successfully rebuild their lives.

Website: <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/>

British Red Cross

Practical help for refugees and asylum seekers in the UK. They can help refugees by giving essentials including:

- Food
- Small amounts of cash
- Toiletries

They also offer specialist services for [young refugees and asylum seekers](#).

Website: <https://www.redcross.org.uk/get-help/get-help-as-a-refugee>

The UNHCR

UNHCR leads international action to protect people forced to flee conflict and persecution and those denied a nationality.

Website: <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/supporting-refugees-uk>

City of Sanctuary

[City of Sanctuary](#) is a movement committed to building a culture of hospitality and welcome, especially for refugees seeking sanctuary. City of Sanctuary UK coordinates, supports and grows these networks of welcome. From community groups to schools and

universities, local councils to libraries and theatres, we work with individuals, groups and organisations in every area and in every sector to encourage inclusivity, solidarity and compassion for people from a forced displacement background.

Women for Refugee Women

They empower refugee and asylum-seeking women to speak out, become leaders and advocate for change through English lessons, drama and other activities they support women to build their confidence and skills. Their network helps to combat the isolation faced by women seeking asylum and creates pathways for women to rebuild their lives with dignity.

Website: <https://www.refugeewomen.co.uk/>

Samaritans

Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year they provide a listening ear for whatever if you are going through.

Website: <https://www.samaritans.org/>

Mind

Mental health support.

Website: <https://www.mind.org.uk/>

Appendix G – Faith to Faithless Support

Information provided by Faith to Faithless

Information about Faith to Faithless Peer Support Services

Faith to Faithless raises awareness of apostasy in the UK and supports those who leave controlling religions.

We hold online, free peer support meetings for anyone in the UK who has left a controlling religious community behind. These events are held on Thursdays 7-8pm on Zoom and are run by trained facilitators. Whilst these are not professional therapy, we find that many of our service users tell us that they find it really helpful to chat with others who have been through similar experiences and to make friends. On average we have about 10 or so people in each session, and you don't have to talk if you don't want to. We often start with a topic of discussion, for example; do your family still talk to you, or how has your approach to food, music, dancing etc changed since leaving religion? And then people can share if they want to. Sometimes the conversations can be quite deep, and other times they can be about having fun and laughing. You will meet a diverse range of adults who have left a range of different religions, and are diverse in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and age.

We also run regular in-person social events around the country. These might be in a cafe or a pub and are a chance to chat with others who share a similar past, talk, and make friends. If you are interested in attending these events, please can you register for our services using this form: Peer Support Initial Registration.

Alternatively, if you have further questions, contact Terri at info@faithtofaithless.com

Appendix H – Example Email of the Call for Refugee Participants

Dear [Name],

I'm getting in touch as I'm a researcher exploring the experiences of non-religious people who have claimed asylum in the United Kingdom (UK). I am working in partnership with [collaborative partner] to better understand how persecution for having no religious beliefs can form the basis of an asylum claim. I want to introduce you to my project and invite you to take part should you wish to.

My research project is examining the experience of claiming asylum in the UK on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) grounds; and specifically for people facing persecution for being non-religious. I work closely with [name redacted], the team at [organisation] and [collaborative partner]. We hope that my research will help to improve the experience of claiming asylum on the grounds of Freedom of Religion or Belief, to improve outcomes for non-religious people, and to make the asylum process inclusive for those of all belief systems.

There is almost no research specifically looking at non-religious persecution and asylum. This research will create knowledge and recommendations for support, and government policy to improve understanding of this type of asylum claim. To do so, I would like to understand the experiences of individuals who have navigated the asylum system.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research interview to discuss and reflect on your experiences of claiming asylum. This decision should be made freely, and of course, will not impact other opportunities to be involved with [collaborative partner] or how you receive support from them.

If you are interested in taking part, you will have an initial online meeting with me (Lucy Potter) to explain the project, the interview process, and ethical procedures. This includes ensuring you are participating voluntarily and that you are aware you would be free to withdraw at any time before we arrange an interview.

The main interview will be up to an hour and a half long (which can be split up if this works better). Interviews will be conducted online or in-person (in a public space) depending on your preference.

A participant information sheet and consent form will be sent if you'd like to take part, which has been approved by The University of Sheffield Ethics Review. I will also send an information sheet about support services available to apostates and refugees that are open to you whether or not you choose to participate in this research.

Please contact me should you have any questions and/or if you'd like to arrange an introductory meeting. I can be reached at: Lpotter2@sheffield.ac.uk

Best wishes,
Lucy

Appendix I – Interview Guide for Refugee Participants

Preamble

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of this research project ‘**Blasphemy and Apostasy in the UK Asylum System: Policy and practice in asylum cases submitted under grounds of non-religiosity**’. The purpose of this interview is for the participant to reflect on their experience claiming asylum in the UK under grounds of non-religiosity. Exploring non-religious persecution cases and how these claims are handled within the British asylum system is important because currently there are significant misunderstandings in asylum determination. This research is being conducted because there is currently no academic work in this area and very little is known about non-religious asylum cases. To fill this gap, interviews will be conducted with key actors in this area who can provide valuable insights into the policies and procedures in place as well as people who have lived experience of the system.

This semi-structured interview schedule has six themes: introduction, non-religious persecution, asylum claim process, working with officials, your thoughts of the asylum system and any recommendations or suggestions.

Please feel free to speak about any matter you feel is relevant to the general topic.

Introduction

1. Can you tell me about yourself and your background?
2. If you'd like to, can you explain the circumstances that led you to seek asylum?

Non-religious persecution

3. If you'd like to, can you share any specific incidents of persecution or discrimination which you led to an asylum claim?

Asylum Claim Process

4. Could you describe your experience of the asylum claim process in the UK?
5. Were there any challenges you faced when presenting your apostasy or non-religious claim? If so, what were they?

Working with officials

6. How did you obtain legal representation during the asylum claim process and did you face any difficulties in finding a lawyer who understood your specific situation?
7. If you worked with an interpreter or translator, could you tell me about your experience of this?
8. How was your experience of dealing with Home Office officials?

Perceptions of the British Asylum System

9. How do you feel about the way your asylum claim was handled by the UK Home Office?
10. What changes, if any, would you like to see in the UK asylum system to better support individuals claiming asylum on these grounds?
11. Based on your own experiences, what recommendations do you have for lawyers, support organizations, and policymakers to improve the asylum process for individuals in similar situations?

Conclusion

12. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences as a refugee who has claimed asylum based on apostasy or non-religious claims in the UK?

Thank you for sharing your experiences. Your insights will be valuable for better understanding and improving the asylum system for others in similar circumstances.

Appendix J – Example Interview Guide for Human Rights Advocates

Example interview guide for an Immigration Lawyer:

Preamble

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. The purpose of this interview is to reflect on your experiences of working on within the legal sector on religion-based asylum claims, with a particular focus on apostasy and/or blasphemy claims. This interview will explore non-religious persecution cases and how these claims are made and handled within the British asylum system. This interview schedule is organised into themes with suggested questions. As it is semi-structured the schedule can change as conversation flows. Discussions will cover the **individual's role and experience in this area, general asylum related questions, consider non-religious persecution claims and personal reflections on the development and effectiveness of policy and practice.**

This research is being conducted because there is currently no academic work on this area and very little is known about non-religious asylum cases. To fill this gap, interviews will be conducted with key actors in this area who can provide valuable insights into the policies and procedures in place.

Role

1. Can you tell me about your current job role and your work on asylum issues in the UK?

Asylum

2. Can you tell me the process of how an apostasy asylum claim can be made, and how this is evaluated by UK government?
3. How does the assessment of non-religious persecution asylum claims differ from other types of asylum claims?
4. How does the British asylum system assess credibility of non-religious asylum claims?
5. In your experience, what role does country of origin information play in non-religious asylum claims, and is there anything missing from current guidance?
6. In your experience, are there misunderstandings clients face in proving credibility of apostasy claims?

Non-religious persecution

7. In your experience, do you find religious persecution against non-religious minorities to be widespread in your work?
8. Do you have an example of a challenging apostasy asylum claim and how you achieved a positive outcome?
9. Can you tell me how the British asylum system evaluates claims of non-religious persecution and what evidence is typically needed to support claims?

Changes in law and policy

10. Can you tell me about any changes in asylum law and policy that has impacted the ability of non-religious asylum seekers to gain protection?

Interpreters

11. How do you work with interpreters when representing clients?

12. Have you experienced any challenges or misunderstandings when working with interpreters in non-religious asylum cases?

Conclusion

13. Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you make to improve the UK asylum system for individuals seeking protection on the grounds of non-religiosity?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic?

Appendix K – Written Evidence: Equality and the UK Asylum Process

Written evidence from Ms Rachel Taggart-Ryan, Humanists UK [EAP0002]

ABOUT HUMANISTS UK

1. At Humanists UK, we want a tolerant world where rational thinking and kindness prevail. We work to support lasting change for a better society, championing ideas for the one life we have. Our work helps people be happier and more fulfilled, and by bringing non-religious people together we help them develop their own views and an understanding of the world around them. Founded in 1896, we are trusted to promote humanism by 100,000 members and supporters and over 100 members of the All-Party Parliamentary Humanist Group.
2. We are a human rights-based organisation with particular expertise in freedom of religion or belief. We work closely with Humanists International, the global representative body of the humanist movement, uniting a diverse range of non-religious organisations and individuals. Our Chief Executive is also the President of Humanists International. We are also a member of the European Humanist Federation (EHF). We hold strong relations with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, having regular bilateral meetings with relevant ministers. We are on the steering group of the UK Freedom of Religion or Belief Forum, an active stakeholder of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion and Belief, and are a member of its Asylum Advocacy Group. We also are accredited at the UN Human Rights Council – the only national humanist group to hold such accreditation – and make interventions there every session. We contribute annually to Humanists International's *Freedom of Thought Report*, and are part of the End Blasphemy Laws campaign, which has successfully prompted ten countries to repeal their blasphemy laws since it was founded in 2015.
3. Over the past three years, our asylum support service has supported over 50 non-religious asylum claimants. We are the only organisation in the UK providing support to non-religious claimants. In addition to supporting individual claimants, we have played a key role in advocating improved treatment of non-religious asylum claims. We helped the Home Office develop a training course for asylum assessors on claims concerning persecution based on religion or belief and assisted in its roll-out, delivering training directly to hundreds of asylum assessors on how to identify genuine non-religious claimants. We are also a member of the Home Office's Asylum Equality Stakeholder Group.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This response focuses on the experience of non-religious asylum seekers in the UK and the particular barriers they face within the asylum system.
- We call upon the Home Office to publish data on the number of asylum claimants claiming (both successfully and unsuccessfully) under each of the five asylum grounds under the Refugee Convention and, where their claim is based on holding a particular protected characteristic of the UK Equality Act 2010, what this characteristic is. Without this information it is impossible to determine the state of equality within the asylum process.
- There are structural inequalities in the way that the Home Office interviews, assesses, and determines non-religious cases. Most notably its guidance on credibility assessments is not inclusive of the non-religious as a distinct belief group, whose manifestations of belief are

not comparable to those of persecuted religious minorities or converts from one religion to another. Furthermore, it is often the case that country information guidance, which caseworkers use to determine if a person is likely to face persecution, is often not inclusive or entirely silent on the persecution of the non-religious, leading to a poor understanding and decision-making regarding such claims. The Home Office must develop specific policy on assessing credibility for non-religious claimants and review country information guidance to make it fully inclusive of the non-religious.

- We are concerned that Clause 29 of the Nationality and Borders Bill, which raises the evidence bar for demonstrating persecution, will have a disproportionate negative impact upon non-religious claimants for the reasons cited above. Thus, we recommend that this clause be removed from the Bill.
- The Home Office must ensure that all Afghan resettlement programmes are inclusive of non-religious and apostate refugees, who are at particular risk of persecution, alongside those of minority religious groups.

Question one: What is the nature and extent of UK asylum claims based on discrimination or persecution relating to the protected characteristics?

4. It is not currently possible to answer this question as the Home Office does not publish disaggregated data on the number of asylum seekers claiming on four of the five grounds of asylum under the Refugee Convention of 1951 (i.e. religion, race, political opinion, membership of a particular social group)^[1] nor a breakdown of the demographics of those applying for asylum by the nine protected characteristics under the UK Equality Act 2010. Without such information it is impossible to determine the nature and extent of persecution they have faced. The only information available about asylum seekers is the number of applicants in the total caseload and at what stages they were successful or not.
5. It is unclear why the Home Office has not published this as it collects data against all of the nine protected characteristics in the initial screening interviews conducted with all asylum seekers. In this interview, they are asked to provide information on their sex, nationality and race, religion, disability, age, whether they are pregnant, and have a spouse or partner. It would also be possible to gather information on sexuality and gender reassignment as this information would be elucidated, where relevant, under questions on reasons for seeking asylum. The Home Office publishes similar disaggregated data on hate crime broken down by five protected characteristics. There is no reason why this data should be beyond the ability of the Home Office to analyse and publish.
6. Recommendation: We strongly advocate that the Home Office publish disaggregated data annually on asylum claimants by refugee ground and protected characteristics.

Question two: Are those with certain protected characteristics more or less likely to be granted asylum in the UK?

7. There are several structural barriers within the Home Office's approach to handling asylum claims made on the basis of persecution of non-religious beliefs that make it less likely that non-religious people are granted asylum.

Need to address the exclusion of non-religious victims of persecution

8. Non-religious individuals who experience persecution can flee to the UK and claim asylum under the 'religion' ground of the 1951 Refugee Convention. However, with a refugee system that is primarily understood in terms of persecution of people because of their religion (religious minority groups or converts from one religion to another), the Home Office has failed to adequately consider the experience of an often invisible group, those who are persecuted because they are non-religious. The simple fact that the asylum ground is commonly known as "religion", and much Home Office documentation repeats this language (for example the asylum application pages) means that many, perhaps most, non-religious people don't even realise they can claim under it.
1. Currently the standards used to form credibility assessments are not fit for purpose when applied to the non-religious. An asylum claim made on the ground of religion rests upon establishing the credibility of the claimant: being able to demonstrate they genuinely hold persecuted beliefs. However, there is a lack of clear guidance on how a genuine lack of belief can be manifested and assessed by the Home Office. This has led to a failure to recognise non-religious claimants and adequately assess their claims compared to those of traditional religious beliefs. This in turn has unfairly led to negative credibility claims. Amnesty International's 2004^[2] and 2013^[3] reports concluded that poor credibility assessment is an endemic problem within the Home Office. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief^[4] has also raised concerns about how there is a severe lack of religion or belief literacy among caseworkers, leading to poor credibility assessments. This problem needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.
2. For example, in 2018 the Home Office rejected a claim for asylum on the grounds that the humanist claimant, when asked to name ancient Greek philosophers who were humanists, did not name Plato and Aristotle (neither of whom were in fact humanists!). The claimant, Hamza bin Walayat, an ex-Muslim 'apostate' and member of Humanists UK, would as a humanist face ostracism, violence, and persecution if returned to his native Pakistan.^[5] During his substantive interview, he was subjected to an extraordinary line of questioning, revealing a fundamental misunderstanding of equality and human rights protections by the Home Office with regard to non-religious people. He was chastised for stating 'your religion as Humanist despite knowing that this is not a religion.' Semantics aside, it has been long established in UK and international law that references to religion must be read as including references to non-religious beliefs. The law protects non-religious people from persecution just as it protects religious people. This case was ultimately successful with the Home Office granting Mr Walayat asylum.
3. The fact that humanists do not subscribe to a set of religious beliefs does not mean humanism isn't treated the same as religions for the purposes of prevention of persecution. However, the Home Office currently does not have sufficient capacity/understanding to accurately and fairly assess the credibility of people claiming to be non-religious. As described in more detail below, Humanists UK has worked with the Home Office to develop a new training course on religion or belief claims, which is inclusive of the non-religious, which was rolled out in 2019 to all existing and new asylum caseworkers. Yet more needs to be done to develop a better understanding of how to interview and assess non-religious people and their experience of persecution.

Lack of correct information to assess level of persecution against the non-religious

9. Country guidance and policy notes on which asylum caseworkers rely to determine the risk faced by a claimant if returned to their country of origin often do not include the treatment of the non-religious. This has wrongly led caseworkers to conclude that there is no risk, or to treat the non-religious in the same way as other named minority groups, such as Christians or Ahmadis, whose situation and treatment is distinctly different and not comparable. For example, the country policy and information notes on Pakistan contain separate reports on the treatment of Christians, Shias, and Ahmadis. However, there is no mention in any of the guidance of atheists, humanists, or other non-religious people.^[6] This is significant because although the aforementioned religious groups are subject to various forms of persecution, they also enjoy a degree of tolerance that is not afforded to apostates, those who leave Islam, who comprise the majority of Pakistan's non-religious population. It is not acceptable that the lack of accurate information on the treatment of non-religious people should continue.
10. In 2019, we helped the Home Office develop a training course for asylum assessors on cases of persecution based on religion or belief, and drafted case studies on the persecution of the non-religious for inclusion in the training materials. We also assisted in the roll-out of this course, delivering training directly to well over 100 asylum assessors on how to identify genuine non-religious claimants. Although this training was a positive step forward, there is still a long way to go to ensure that interview practices, country guidance, and credibility assessments are correctly carried out to ensure those from non-traditional religions, religious dissenters, and the non-religious receive fair treatment.

Question three: What is the nature and extent of the dangers for those with protected characteristics who are seeking asylum in the UK?

'In my observations, humanists, when they are attacked, are attacked more viciously and brutally than in other cases.'^[7]

11. These are the words of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, Dr Ahmed Shaheed, highlighting the fact that humanists are one of the most vulnerable belief groups around the world – vulnerable to hate crime and state-sponsored persecution. In 13 countries being non-religious is a capital crime under blasphemy and apostasy laws and it is an imprisonable offence in over 40 more. In the past five years there has been a worrying global trend of increased communal and vigilante violence against humanists, which has resulted in numerous high-profile murders – for example, that of Mashal Khan, who was beaten to death by fellow students at his University in Pakistan, simply for calling himself 'The Humanist' on Facebook.^[8]
12. The result is that in many countries, there is virtually no openly non-religious community at all – it is simply impossible to be so. Speaking in 2020, Dr Shaheed stated 'Humanists are the invisible people of the present 21st century. While almost everybody is persecuted when they are in a minority, the attacks on humanists are particularly violent. They are exposed to harm in the communities where they live, and of course, for many of them, the family is not a safe place.'^[9]

Question four: Is the UK asylum process safe and fair for those with protected characteristics? Are individuals with certain protected characteristics more at risk of harm or unfair treatment when going through the UK asylum process? Are particular protected characteristics given priority in the asylum process?

1. We are concerned that non-religious people claiming asylum in the UK, for being persecuted because of their beliefs, might encounter prejudice when accessing language services at the Home Office. Specifically, that translators and interpreters could share negative views about apostates or those who have expressed blasphemous views that the asylum claimants had fled in their countries of origin. Such interpreters might consequently be unwilling to translate some of what such an asylum claimant says, do so inaccurately, or indeed refuse to be involved in an apostate's case at all, potentially affecting the outcome and fairness of the process.
2. In 2019, we surveyed nearly 40 non-religious asylum claimants, finding that around a quarter said they had directly experienced difficulties with prejudiced translators, finding independent translators willing to translate criticisms of religious beliefs, or, even among those who did not request such services, there was strong concern that they would have experienced this bias if they had used the Home Office's translators. One claimant stated 'most non-religious asylum applicants who write against religions face difficulty finding a translator or interpreter they can trust with documents and personal safety.' A second stated, 'Yes there is an issue to address with the translators and interpreters at the Home Office because of their religious beliefs. Mostly Pakistani interpreters are Muslims and it can be an issue for an apostate and someone who has committed blasphemy against their prophet.' Whilst another reported that an interpreter had hung up the phone during an asylum interview when the claimant was asked about his decision to leave Islam.

Question five: Do current domestic and international laws and conventions governing the UK's asylum process provide effective protection against discrimination for those with protected characteristics?

3. In a refugee system that is primarily understood in terms of religious persecution (religious minority groups or converts from one religion to another), those who are persecuted because they do not hold religious beliefs, or because they positively hold certain non-religious beliefs, are placed at a distinct disadvantage.
1. Although General Comment 22 of the UN Human Rights Committee makes clear the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion within the universal declaration of human rights includes 'non-theistic and atheistic' beliefs,^[10] the conceptual framework that defines beliefs favours traditional religions over other belief systems. The Comment describes how the right can be manifested through 'worship, observance, practice and teaching' specifically formal worship, use of ritual formulae, objects, and symbols, the observance of holidays, dietary regulations, and distinctive clothing rules. None of which are applicable to non-religious beliefs. This highlights the deficiencies within the right, leading to the non-recognition of beliefs that are not represented by institutions, or do not have doctrinal behaviours. This has created a hierarchy of beliefs within the international legal regime, with established religious beliefs being given greater consideration over non-traditional religions, religious

dissenters, and non-religious beliefs, and a disconnect between the law and the lived experience of belief for those groups. When applied to asylum the deficiencies within this framework become starker. The 1951 Refugee Convention is not inclusive, stating only 'religion' as a ground. This non-inclusive language, although not uncommon for its time, already creates a hierarchy of belief in which persecution is primarily seen as something only experienced by religious people. As described above the deficiencies with regards to the non-religious are mirrored in policy at the Home Office. It does not have an adequate policy with regards to assessing the validity of non-religious beliefs, nor country guidance that is inclusive of the persecution such people face. Considerations of the non-religious, as far as both international and domestic law are concerned, remain an afterthought.

Question six: How is the Government addressing any discrimination or specific dangers for those with protected characteristics in the asylum process, and what more could be done?

2. As described above, we worked with the Home Office to create and roll out a compulsory training course on religion or belief claims for all asylum caseworkers. We were able to include case-studies on non-religious persecution in the training material and ensured that the language used was always inclusive of the non-religious. We took part in the roll-out of this training throughout 2019, giving training on identifying non-religious claimants and non-religious persecution around the globe to over 100 caseworkers. Subsequently, an internal review of the efficacy of the course has revealed that it has had a positive impact on the quality of asylum decisions. The Home Office concluded,

'Asylum Operations continue to quality assess claims based on religion/belief to ensure they are approached correctly, taking into account the principles from the above specialist course and we can confirm that there has been an improvement in the quality scores of such cases since the training was rolled out. We continue to seek new ways to enhance the capabilities of all Asylum Operations' Decision Makers and we would welcome any ideas from yourselves as to how we can further support this.' [\[11\]](#)

3. Although this training course has been a positive development there is still a lot more the Home Office could be doing to ensure equality for non-religious asylum seekers. The Home Office must develop and roll out a policy document about how to interview and assess the credibility of non-religious claimants that highlights the deficiencies and lack of inclusion of this group in international law and guidance, and how their needs and manifestations differ from those of religious minorities or religious converts. It is also essential that all country information guidance is reviewed to ensure that it includes the treatment of the non-religious as a distinct belief group.

Nationality and Borders Bill: Clause 29: Article 1(A)(2): Well-Founded Fear

13. This clause raises the standard of what is considered 'a well-founded fear of persecution'. Currently, the Convention does not elaborate on the definition, so the Courts have developed case law, under which the claimant must show that there is a 'reasonable degree of likelihood' of persecution due to one, or more, of the reasons outlined in the Refugee Convention. This provision raises the bar of evidence for proving persecution to the 'balance of probabilities' standard.

14. This is especially problematic for non-religious claimants as the level of understanding of non-religious beliefs and the persecution of the non-religious globally is severely lacking, and often not included Home Office Country Guidance. It is inherently more difficult to show a reasonable degree of likelihood, given that the persecution is so severe that there is often no visible non-religious community at all in the country of origin. It is often illegal or simply not recognised to identify as non-religious on censuses or on identity documents and to publicly make a statement of non-belief would contravene apostasy laws. The Government needs to consider how it can improve the quality and accuracy of decision-making and credibility assessments within the asylum process before proposing to change the threshold for evidence. This clause should be dropped from the Bill.
15. Recommendations: The Home Office must develop specific policy on assessing credibility for non-religious claimants and review country information guidance to ensure that it is fully inclusive of the non-religious. Clause 29 should be removed from the Nationality and Borders Bill.

Question seven: What measures are needed to support people with certain protected characteristics arriving via the Afghanistan Citizen's Resettlement Scheme route?

16. Even before the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was one of the 13 countries where blasphemy or apostasy is punishable by death. The Taliban's history and current actions suggest that they will use such laws to systematically persecute religious and non-religious minorities, including humanists, Sikhs, Christians, and Shiite Muslims. The Home Office must ensure that all resettlement programmes are inclusive of non-religious and apostate Afghan refugees, who are at particular risk of persecution, alongside those of minority religious groups. The UK must also declare a moratorium on forced returns to Afghanistan.

November 2021

[1] The Home Office does provide data on the country of origin of asylum seekers which gives an indication, but not the full picture, of their demographics by nationality. As the definition of nationality under the Refugee Convention includes ethnicity, language, tribal affiliations, and other markers of a national identity and not just solely the nation state they left, this is not a precise measure of nationality. Even though this gives us an indication of the nationality of a claimant, this tells us nothing about the extent of persecution under any protected characteristics as we do not know if it was upon that ground or one of the other four that they claimed asylum. Those claiming on the grounds of persecution because of sexuality or gender reassignment would be included in the statistics for membership of a particular social group.

[2] J Shaw and R Witkin, *Get it Right: How Home Office decision-making is failing refugees*, Amnesty International, 2004. https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/get_it_right_0.pdf

[3] J Shaw and M Kaye, *A Question of Credibility: Why so many initial asylum decisions are overturned on appeal in the UK*, April 2013. Amnesty International https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/a_question_of_credibility_final_0.pdf

- [4] Z Meral, and A Gray, *Fleeing Persecution: Asylum Claims in the UK on Religious Freedom Grounds*, All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 2016. <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/Fleeing-Persecution-Asylum-Claims-in-the-UK-on-Religious-Freedom-Grounds.pdf>
- [5] Humanists UK, ‘Home Office tells humanist he’ll be deported for not identifying Plato or Aristotle’ 17 January 2018. <https://humanism.org.uk/2018/01/17/home-office-tells-humanist-hell-be-deported-for-not-identifying-plato-or-aristotle/>
- [6] UK Visas and Immigration, ‘Pakistan: country policy and information notes’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pakistan-country-policy-and-information-notes>
- [7] Dr Ahmed Shaheed, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, speaking at Humanists International’s 2017 General Assembly in London. <https://humanism.org.uk/2017/08/07/humanists-uk-hosts-international-conference-on-threats-to-liberal-democracy-and-humanism/>
- [8] Humanists International, “‘Humanist’ murdered by fellow university students for alleged ‘blasphemy’”, 13 April 2017: <https://humanists.international/2017/04/humanist-murdered-fellow-university-students-alleged-blasphemy/>
- [9] ‘Humanists International, Pandemic measures misused to roll-back rights of humanists and the non-religious, new report shows’, 10 December 2020: <https://humanists.international/2020/12/freedom-of-thought-report-2020/>
- [10] CCPR General Comment No. 22: Article 18 (Freedom of Thought, Conscience or Religion), 1993. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/453883fb22.html>
- [11] Correspondence between the Home Office and the APPG on International Freedom of Religion or Belief, 27 January 2021.