



MARI TURUNEN

PEOPLE UNDER PRESSURE

Experiences of ex-muslims in Finland

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Author's note

Q: *Do you feel you are in danger in Finland because of your faith?*

A: *Yes, of course. One of my relatives lives in Finland and my photograph has already been sent to him.*

In autumn 2015 an unusually large number of asylum seekers arrived in Finland. Many organisations, including churches, rushed in to help those who had escaped war and misery. Fairly soon, from different parts of Finland, some unexpected messages arrived: many asylum seekers had converted to the Christian faith.

At that early stage I wanted to find out how many of them had converted from Islam to Christianity. I contacted 165 Lutheran parish priests during April and May of 2016 and asked them how many Muslim asylum seekers had joined their churches and been baptised since August 2015. All baptisms were preceded by baptismal classes lasting three months. When doing the survey, I mentioned that the information would be published anonymously in a newspaper article and that the names of the parishes would not be mentioned. Nevertheless, many priests wanted to emphasise how important this was. They wanted to keep the baptised converts safe.

Since spring 2016 the number of those baptised has increased rapidly. At the same time, many ex-Muslims have become targets of serious harassment in Finland. I began to investigate how

widespread this phenomenon was and what form the harassment experienced by ex-Muslims took.

I interviewed dozens of ex-Muslims whose experiences made me realize that in a model country for religious freedom there is a group of people who must put up with serious harassment because of their faith.

This book was published in 2017. Since that many students and scholars from faculties of theology, religious studies and social service studies have used this book as material for their research. The Swedish NGO Set my people free translated the book in Swedish. Now I'm happy that it's available also in English. The imam of the Islamic Society of Finland, Mohamad Anas Hajjar was interviewed for the book in 2017. He passed away in December 2022.

The Constitution of Finland guarantees freedom of religion, conscience and expression. My hope is that this book will wake us up to defend these human rights. This task does not belong solely to the authorities but to all of us.

In Lahti 2nd October 2023,

MARI TURUNEN

Introduction



One Sunday evening at half past nine I went out for a run. Next to me a BMW slowed down and inside it a bearded men shouted: “Are you Ahmed? Are you proud of yourself now that you are a Christian?”

I understood immediately that those men staring at me from the car were after me, because they repeated my words from a church service from the previous week. I had talked about my faith publicly. Now I wondered what to do. Should I claim they had the wrong person? Instead, I stopped and removed my headphones. “Yes, I am,” I replied. Three men got out of the car. They repeated verses from the Quran. I saw that one of them was holding a metal pipe. The first one kicked me in the eye, the second one standing behind me hit my shoulder three times with the pipe. The pain was unbearable. When I turned round, he hit my hand with it. My forefinger broke and my knuckle was pushed in. “You need to be killed!” the men shouted.

Then another car turned into the street. The headlights frightened the men, and they ran away. “If you tell anyone, we’ll kill you!” they shouted as they went. I also left the place quickly.

After I had returned to the reception centre, my Muslim roommate laughed at me and said: “You got what you deserved.”

I feel that nobody cares. This harassment of ex-Muslims takes place everywhere, not just in my home country.



Not many have the courage to tell their story in such an identifiable way as “Ahmed”. There are good reasons for remaining silent. There is emotional abuse, harassment and name-calling, which can be so severe that it affects people’s mental health. Often this includes intimidation and threats against the individual or their family. There is also brutal violence.

1.

Different forms of pressure

Verbal abuse is most common

So, what is worst in Finland? Can you measure it? Continuous, daily harassment is really hard. I know a family living on their own in the midst of 200 Muslims. The father of that family has been admitted to hospital twice because of heart problems.

The material in this book consists of 31 interviews of asylum seekers who have converted from Islam to Christianity. Most of them (27) had converted in Finland. The clear majority (87%) had faced difficulties because of their conversion. Most commonly they had experienced verbal abuse (25), ostracism (19), intimidation (17) and harassment (15).

Most frequently they experienced verbal abuse. Many respondents downplayed this type of abuse since they felt that it was to be expected. Few, however, wanted to repeat what names they had been called. The most common were words meaning an apostate: *kafir* and *murtad*.

At the reception centre they noticed that I was wearing a cross. It caused problems and I was called names. It was difficult to share a room with Muslims, and in the kitchen I was harassed constantly.

No one joined me at mealtimes at the reception centre, and I was beaten and called names.

He told me I was an animal and quoted from the Quran.

There are 14 Muslims and 2 Christians in the same room at the reception centre. I have not mentioned my conversion to them because I am frightened. When I did not take part in Ramadan, they hurled insults at me.

We told people at the reception centre that we are Christians and go to church. It surprised many. They said we would go to hell because we have left Islam.

It has been 18 months of constant name-calling. "You are a kafir, you can be punished by death. You have traded belief [for unbelief]," they say. There is a lot of cursing.

What is an apostate in Islam? For most Muslims apostate is a terrifying word because turning your back on Islam is the worst thing that you can do. It is a sin which, according to the Quran, cannot be forgiven (Surah An-Nisa 4:48).

From early childhood children are warned about the horrible fate of a *murtad* or a *kafir*. In a community-centred culture, leaving one's religion also means being disowned by the community. In some cases, the respondents explained that the use of the word *murtad* or *kafir* contained a threat.

Kafir means an apostate. In many countries he can be killed without any penalty. The murderer enters Paradise as the Quran promises. I have not personally been threatened but I did hear at the reception centre people saying that all Christians should be killed.

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According to the Constitution of Finland everyone has freedom of religion and conscience:

Freedom of religion and conscience entails the right to profess and practise a religion, the right to express one's convictions and the right to be a member of or decline to be a member of a religious community. No one is under the obligation, against his or her conscience, to participate in the practice of a religion. (Constitution of Finland, Section 11.)

What does it mean to be a murtad?

TIMO KESKITALO

PASTOR, CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY TO MUSLIMS

M*urtad* is an Arabic theological term with a very long history. It is based on Islamic teaching on how to deal with a person who has renounced Islam.

When a Christian convert hears this word, he understands that the speaker thinks he deserves to die. Therefore, even hearing the word means a threat. Often the threat arises from within his own family.

There must be no turning away from Islam. This is the accepted teaching in all schools of sharia even in the moderate ones. This is how it is according to Islam. Of course, some moderates do not kill converts but disown or hide them.

I have visited several mosques in Finland in the 1990s and the early 2000s. In Finland, even moderate imams acknowledge that apostates should be killed but that it is not possible in Finland. They cannot ask people to break Finnish law. Imams seek justification for this different teaching and ponder how to apply the Quran when you live as a minority under infidel rule.

The aim of Islam is to follow Sharia law in regions where there are Muslims. This objective has also been documented in Finland as early as in the 1990s. The application of sharia law is not sought by force but by democratic means.

In a family environment the word murtad can be used to admonish a young person, who is not thought to practise their faith actively enough. The more serious meaning of the word is an

apostate whom the Islamic community condemns to death. This interpretation does not have the force of law in many countries.

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According to Islam, sharia is an unchangeable law given to people by God, based on the Quran and the sunnah, the example of Muhammad. The differences between Islamic denominations are reflected in their interpretations of sharia.

Ostracised in the kitchen

In the survey, ostracism most frequently manifested itself in people refusing to eat with converts. Often, if an ex-Muslim sat down to eat, other people left the table. Almost as often, respondents described a refusal to speak. People no longer wanted to communicate with them in a normal way and did not even respond to their greetings. This kind of ostracism is a shocking experience for someone who has grown up in a community-centred culture. Nineteen respondents said they had experienced ostracism.

I'm not allowed to join a football game. They will not talk to me. Muslims will not eat with me at the same table.

There are very radical Muslims at our reception centre. That is why I didn't want to mention my baptism. They know anyway. They will not eat with me. If I sit down at the same table, they take their trays and leave.

They would no longer eat with me or let me join them. They didn't talk to me, or they challenged me about being a Christian.

We are excluded: no one wants to eat with us at the same table, they don't reply to our greetings. They avoid us and don't allow their children to play with ours.

Customs related to eating are very central in many cultures. Not just who you eat with but also who prepares the food appeared to be significant in the experiences of the respondents.

I would like to help in the kitchen, but my help is not accepted. In the beginning the cooks were Finnish but the residents protested because they didn't think the food was halal enough. The Arabs demanded Muslim cooks so that the food would be ritually clean. The cooks were changed.

During Ramadan those who fasted were offered particularly delicious food in the evening. There were sweets and other things. Others got ordinary food. During Christian celebrations, the food has been ordinary. At Christmas it was a little bit better.

There are some awful things taking place at the reception centre. They don't talk to me anymore and they call me names. There is a lot of talk in the kitchen.

During my shift in the kitchen there was an argument when I pointed out to the Muslims that some water damage had been covered up. It resulted in terrible verbal abuse, and I burst into tears.

We were told that if you do some voluntary work at the reception centre, you will get a certificate. I was doing the washing up for a few months until Ramadan. The Muslims protested and claimed that because I was a Christian, the dishes remained unclean. They do not think this of the Finns, only of us, the apostates, those who have rejected Islam.

Spitting and soiling of clothes – harassment diminishes human dignity

Besides verbal abuse and ostracism, the interviews revealed harassment to be fairly common. It manifested as attempts to make life difficult or as behaviour diminishing human dignity.

My roommate recited the Quran at night just to annoy me. When I didn't react, he got angry. He pushed me and threw my belongings out of the room.

I couldn't sleep because they banged on my window at night.

One time when I was having a shower, I had hung up clean clothes on a hook. Muslims threw them on the floor and walked over them so that they became very dirty.

I was in the bathroom in the morning washing my face when a Muslim came in to perform wudu. My presence irritated him, and he recited the Muslim profession of faith. I was very scared of what would happen next. (Wudu means ritual purification before prayers.)

Our daughters have been spat at because they do not cover their heads.

They spit on the ground when they see me on the street. They call me names.

They spread lies and rumours about me.

Many of those interviewed revealed situations which they had found unfair in the reception centres. They felt that Muslims were favoured, particularly if the staff were Muslim, but also when the employee was Finnish and non-Muslim.

Often the instances related to food. Respondents explained how during Ramadan Muslims received preferential treatment at mealtimes. Christian celebrations were not catered for in the same way.

The respondents were also troubled by the fact that reception centres did not organise any suitable space for Christians for quiet times.

They wanted an imam to lead Friday prayers. One room was turned into a mosque in which prayers were led by an elderly resident. Christians didn't have a space of their own for contemplation. That was why we went to church or met at the homes of Christians. Now there are more Christians than Muslims at the reception centre. Many have converted.

I didn't feel free at the reception centre and therefore we often went out. I attend church regularly, many times a week.

Many respondents felt vulnerable when they had to share a room with a Muslim. It was particularly in the shared rooms that people experienced serious harassment or violence. Changing rooms was rarely permitted.

We once asked for a room for Christians. It was not allowed.

“The fear was constant” Many people are familiar with death threats

Sadly, intimidation was familiar to many. Of the respondents, 17 (55%) had faced threats. Sometimes the situations escalated and there was a threat of violence in the air. Many respondents mentioned fear and the need for constant vigilance. Children too had to live in this kind of atmosphere.

At the reception centre we had many problems and name-calling. “Why read the Bible?” they mocked me. There were many arguments about religion, intimidation and even death threats. The fear was constant. Some imams who visited the reception centre started to threaten my relatives in my home country and threatened to kill me as well.

An article about me was written for a Finnish newspaper. It caused a lot of difficulties. I received death threats on Facebook. I lived with a Muslim family when I converted to Christianity. When they found out, they threw me out and put all my belongings in the rubbish bins. Later a Muslim girl phoned me and asked how I was. Her uncle checked the phone and noticed we had been in contact. “You are not to speak to a kafir,” he shouted at her. He threatened to kill me.

An acquaintance of mine threatened me: “I’m a Taliban and I can do whatever I want to you.”

One Christian family was harassed constantly. People were not even allowed play with their children. One time they invited an Iranian priest to lead an event at the reception centre. The priest's words made the Arabs angry, and they went from door to door gathering people to oppose the family and the priest. They attacked the family, went into their room and shouted that they should be killed. The guards called the police, and the police took the priest to safety.

One Muslim tested me in the sauna of the gym. He came to me with two friends and said: "If I knew someone had converted to Christianity, I would cut his throat myself." He knew I was a Christian.

The deputy imam of one mosque came to listen as we were sharing about our faith in a marketplace near the mosque. He came to me and wanted to pull me aside. "I have a present for you. Come with me and I will show you," he said. He grabbed my hand and tried to drag me along. A pastor intervened and the imam lied that it was about money. "I will find you," he said.

A relative of mine works as an imam in Finland. He is married to a Finnish woman. One day he said to me that if he does something, he will not be sent to prison because he is "a little bit mad". He then showed me a piece of paper which described his mental health problems.

Those who had converted to Christianity were also threatened by Muslims who had lived in Finland for a while. The phenomenon is therefore not limited to asylum seekers.

People also received threats from their home country and often not just against them but their family members too.

The information about my conversion had reached my home country and my wife received a phone call from there. "You no longer have a place to return to," she was told.

One asylum seeker returned to my home country. He found out where I had worked and threatened to tell everyone that I have converted to Christianity. He has photographs of me. He has sent me very bad threats. "I know where your family are, and I know people who know you." He wanted to harm me. I changed my phone number.

Physical violence

Of the respondents, 5 (16%) had experienced physical violence in Finland because of their conversion.

I was assaulted at the reception centre. Other people hit the soles of my feet.

I was once beaten and kicked.

One time a man visiting my roommate shouted, "Why did you convert?", and attacked me.

In the introduction "Ahmed" described how he was beaten up during his evening run. The culprits were not asylum seekers but Muslims living in the same town.

I was angry and I cried. My eye swelled shut and my shoulder and hand were very sore. I felt that no one could help me. When a Finnish friend of mine came to see me, he became concerned and contacted a pastor. At the reception centre the pastor was told that the nurse could check my finger the following day. The pastor replied that this could not wait and took me to the hospital. There they found out that my finger was broken. It was bandaged. We reported the beating to the police, but I felt that they did not take it seriously. I have not heard from them since the visit. If something similar happened again, I would not go to the police station again because it is no use. (The pastor confirmed this story.)

Some respondents had witnessed scuffles caused by religion in the reception centres, but they had not been part of them themselves.

At another time I saw how three Muslims attacked a couple of Christians and it turned into a fight. They were all taken to the police station and were released the following day. It was Ramadan in 2016.

Freedom of religion clashes with the Quran

The divorce takes effect immediately, and a person who has left Islam will not inherit from their parents.

— ANAS HAJJAR

IMAM OF THE ISLAMIC SOCIETY OF FINLAND

According to the Quran, “And whoever associates others with Allah has indeed committed a grave sin” (An-Nisa 4:48). It is unforgivable.

What does the Quran then say about leaving Islam? The whole idea is considered absurd. Instead, the Quran says a lot about infidels, those who are not Muslims. The Quran advises to avoid them because they are unclean (At-Tawbah 9:28a), and to convert them to Islam or to subjugate them to Muslim rule. If infidels agree to pay taxes to Muslims, they should be left alone. There are also calls to fight:

Fight those who do not believe in Allah and the Last Day, [...] until they pay the tax, willingly submitting, fully humbled. [...] the Christians say, “The Messiah is the son of Allah.” Such are their baseless assertions, only parroting the words of earlier disbelievers. May Allah condemn them! How can they be deluded from the truth? (At-Tawbah 9:29–30.)

“According to sharia it is not possible to leave Islam,” says Dr **Ilkka Lindstedt** from the University of Helsinki in an interview with Finnish newspaper *Keskisuomalainen*. Dr Lindstedt, who

has researched the early history of Islam, states that leaving Islam is punished by death in countries in which sharia is observed in criminal law, as for example in Saudi Arabia.

"In many Muslim countries legislation is essentially secular and leaving Islam is not punishable by death," Lindstedt explains. "It is, however, rare for people to convert from Islam to another religion and therefore there are very few case studies."

Syrian-born **Mohamad Anas Hajjar** was the imam of the Islamic Society of Finland and a familiar commentator on Islam in TV studios. I asked him how a Muslim should deal with an apostate and what he himself taught about apostasy or leaving Islam. Why does the Muslim community in Finland disown those who have left Islam and threaten them with death? Should an apostate be condemned in this life already? Who is the right person to judge? How should a Muslim relate to a person who has left Islam and converted to Christianity?

Anas Hajjar wanted time to consider his answers to these questions, which he described as difficult. A week later he replied in writing and demanded that the text should be published unabridged.

In his extensive reply, the imam, who has been portrayed as representing moderate Islam in Finland, began by reflecting on the death penalty. In his reply he said that the leader of the Muslim community decides the treatment of an apostate. In addition, the marriage of an ex-Muslim will be dissolved immediately, and he will not inherit from his family. The imam did not condemn the death threats or ostracism by the Muslim community, which I had mentioned.

This is what he wrote:



Many understand apostasy superficially, just as a death sentence, which leads to problems. There is an obvious reason in Islam for "Let there be no compulsion in religion, for the truth stands out clearly

from falsehood,” and “And say ‘This is the truth from your Lord. Whoever wills let them believe, and whoever wills let them disbelieve.’”

How to treat a Muslim, who has freely chosen to become a Muslim after much thought and then suddenly decides to reject this choice? Some impose a superficial death penalty in accordance with the fatwa. This is considered superficial because without proper knowledge it is easy to confuse two different sets of rules: rules about leadership and governance and rules by divine revelation.

Rules by divine revelation mean rules which God gave to the Prophet Muhammad. The prophet has no right to alter these rules or change them at will, and people have no right to change them until the day of judgement. For example, usury and the use of intoxicating substances is forbidden. There are certain rules regarding selling and buying, and the degrees of punishment for a killer are clear. As these cannot be altered, they are called rules by divine revelation.

By contrast, the rules regarding leadership and being head of state are general guidelines, which God gave the prophet and allowed freedom to move within the limits of this broad framework as the public interest requires. For example, declaration of war is one of them. If the leader considers that the public interest and the public good require a declaration of war against the enemy, who has started the hostilities, he can choose when to do it, whether to do it or not. He can wait and decide when a ceasefire and peace agreements can be negotiated.

The apostasy falls, based on historical evidence and practice, under the rules of leadership, where the leader and through him the court (if the case even goes that far) has the sole right to decide what to do with a person who declares he is rejecting his faith. In other words, only the ruler decides how to achieve the public good: by dropping the case, by discussion or by bringing the person before a judge.

Through history, we know of many cases in which the apostasy of an individual has not led to a death sentence, provided that the individual's choice has been the result of reflection and not a declaration of war against the state. In the case of a declaration of war, it is no longer a question of free choice but of the security of the state. This was also the case at the end of the prophet's life when individuals

proclaimed apostasy by taking up arms and gathering troops to fight against the state. In this case, you can no longer speak of freedom of belief but of a declaration of war, in which the claim of apostasy was a means of concealing one's aims.

Although apostasy is a personal choice, it has religious and practical implications. These include, for example, the loss of past virtues on the day of judgement and the immediate annulment of a marriage. And if the person does not return to the faith before the reflection period is over, the divorce is final. An apostate cannot inherit from Muslims or vice versa. Other consequences are that [previous] prayer and fasting become void, and if the person returns to Islam, the pilgrimage will have to be repeated, if possible.

If a person has converted to Christianity or Judaism, he has left the latest revelation, Islam, and chosen the previous revelation. Therefore, the rules and the special status that apply to those who are by birth Christians or Jews, as people of the Book, do not apply to him. Hence also the seriousness of the issue and the fact that the choice of religion is not a casual matter.

Families take a different stance depending on their level of understanding. Some will talk to the person, while others will express their dissatisfaction with the person's choice in various ways, as families of other faiths do with their relatives.

I would encourage discussion and dialogue with the person, and especially within the family, because as Muslims we hope for salvation for all on the day of judgement, but ultimately it is the person's own will that counts.



So writes the most widely known imam in Finland. His comments confirm the experiences of the respondents. At the same time, he happens to reveal that in Finland, there is already a law at work within the Muslim community when it decides the fate of a person who has rejected Islam. At the very least, such a person loses his spouse and inheritance rights. This way of thinking gives

rise to the experience of many respondents that they are like outlaws. Even when they are not in danger of losing their lives, many are treated cruelly. However, what has been widespread practice in their country of origin may still constitute a criminal offence in Finland. These clashes are serious. The incidents revealed in the interview material were in breach of several articles of the constitution of Finland. Above all, freedom of religion and conscience and freedom of speech and expression caused a direct conflict. (The Constitution of Finland, chapter 2, sections 11 and 12.)

Freedom of assembly and association, and the right to life, personal liberty and integrity were also violated. The right to privacy, guaranteed by the constitution, means the privacy of the home and the secrecy of confidential communications, such as telephone calls or letters. (The Constitution of Finland, chapter 2, sections 7, 10 and 13.) Respondents reported that relatives monitored each other's phones, making it impossible to send or receive private messages. Sometimes the consequences of such forbidden messages were harsh.

The current situation in Finland is exceptional, with hundreds of Muslims converting to Christianity. Similar conversions are happening at least in Sweden and Germany. At the same time, the right to change religion, understood as a human right, clashes with the interpretation of Islam. This was evident in a 2016 report by Open Doors on attacks on Christian asylum seekers in Germany.

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On its website, the Islamic Society of Finland states that it is the leading Islamic organisation in Finland and that it strives to promote Islamic culture by following the values of moderate Islam. The association wants to operate in society in a transparent way and in cooperation with other organisations. The activities of the second oldest Islamic community in Finland are multicultural.

Disowned by their extended families

Sylvia Akar, lecturer in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Helsinki, explained in an interview with *Kirkko ja Kaupunki* (The newspaper of the Lutheran Church in Helsinki) that, in practice, leaving Islam means leaving one's family and relatives. "It brings great shame to the family and in Iraq, for example, where there is no functioning judicial system, people sometimes resort to vigilante justice." Akar pointed out that there is no justification for violence.

Not all ex-Muslims interviewed had dared to tell their families about their conversion. Of those who had, a clear majority had been disowned. A total of 19 respondents (61%) said they had been disowned by their family. The information about their interest in Christianity in Finland had sometimes reached relatives via smartphones and social media even before the respondent had had a chance to tell them. Although the distances are long, cutting off any contact and harsh words hurt even over the phone.

I haven't told my family about my baptism because I fear for them. I know that my acquaintances in Finland have phoned my relatives in my home country saying that I go to church. I don't want to get my family into trouble.

My family found out about my conversion and with my wife they turned against me. I had not understood that this could happen. My family disowned me, I am no longer part of it. They no longer talk to me, and I am like a stranger to them.

Many troublemakers came from the same village as me, and when they were returned, they told my family.

My brother lives in Germany. He threatened to come and kill me because of my conversion. My relatives don't want to have anything to do with me.

My family is very devout, and my mother teaches at a Koranic school. She said to me that I can no longer come to her home.

My family disowned me. They don't answer the phone and they removed me from their Facebook page. My father said to me that I am no longer his son, no longer his flesh and blood. I have received many death threats from relatives and friends in my home country.

I haven't had problems in Finland but my uncle who lives in Australia saw a video I posted on social media of me singing a Christian song. After that my family has stopped answering the phone.

After I told my mother about my faith, she wished that I had died in my home country rather than converted. A month later she was calmer and said that I should not tell anyone because "you know what happens to those who are unclean".

My parents-in-law disowned their daughter. My parents don't know.

My family was shocked when I told them about my faith. They cut off all contact because they are devout. I also told my relatives and friends. No one has threatened me or my family.

My family said to me: "You caused us problems, took our honour and brought us disgrace." My father and brothers threatened to kill me.

My family found out about my conversion and demanded that I return to their religion. They are incredibly angry and will not even talk to me. [...] A kafir is so unclean that even his family must not have anything to do with him. I am not frightened of relatives who live in Finland, but I don't want to have anything to do with them.

When I was baptised and started to spend time with Christians, some who had been returned told my father that his son had converted. My father phoned and asked if it was true that I had converted, spent time with people who are kafirs and spoke about my faith. When I admitted this, he said: "You are no longer my son. I no longer want to talk to you."

Family under pressure

Family members of converts had also been victims of harassment. In a community-centred culture, the whole family can be held responsible for the choices of one person. Often the price has been high. Respondents reported ostracism and harassment (4), intimidation (7) and violence (1) aimed at the family. The pressure experienced by family members was very stressful for the respondents.

Everyone can see on Facebook that I am a Christian. Neighbours taunt my parents, and they have received threats. There is no privacy in my home country unlike in Finland where you can be anonymous.

My parents became angry when I told them about my conversion. Other relatives will no longer speak to my family because I have converted.

My mother has been asked intrusive questions.

My home village is very devout. Neighbours heard about my conversion and said to my parents: "You could not control your son. You did not teach him to defend Islam. It is your fault!"

My mother was thrown out of the house and now lives with friends. I cannot be in contact with her because a family member doesn't want me to.

I phoned my parents. They had already heard I had converted to Christianity. They were very angry. They told me they had been forced to leave their home village and go to the capital because the village community put pressure on them. I have not heard from them after that call. I was told that our home had been destroyed and later that my family might have been killed.

Messages are not always just words. When I was collecting information for the survey, a Finnish pastor showed me pictures on his mobile phone that had been sent to ex-Muslims in connection with threats. One picture showed the body of a man, sawed off at the abdomen. According to the pastor, the picture was accompanied by the message: "This is what happens to a kafir."

Another picture showed the back of a little girl's hand which had been burnt. The girl was tortured so that her father would return to Islam.

A volatile situation

*So far no one has died.
We are working to make sure that it doesn't happen.*

— ZARPADSHAH NURI

SPECIALIST IN INTERNAL MEDICINE AND CARDIOLOGY,
DEPUTY CHIEF PHYSICIAN, PIETARSAARI

Zarpadshah Nuri, who graduated with a degree in medicine, moved to Finland in 1995. The following year, the Afghan converted to Christianity. He has now lived in Europe longer than in his home country, having studied medicine in Poland in the 1980s before coming to Finland. In Finland, Nuri marvelled at the peacefulness of the country and met friendly people who told him they were Christians.

“When people showed me love, I emphasised that I was a Muslim. They said it was okay.”

Gradually he became interested in studying Finnish history and wondered, how such a small country survived the war. What was its peaceful society based on? He had discussions with Finnish Christians and studied the Bible.

“It is important to integrate into a new country. I have integrated into Finland through Christianity. God-given faith has healed my heart.”

A specialist in two medical fields and deputy chief physician at Pietarsaari Hospital, Zarpadshah Nuri is truly integrated into Finnish society. Now he wants to help other Afghans adapt to the values and culture of their new country. There is still work to be done.

“When I told the Afghans in Pietarsaari that I was a Christian, they accepted it, but when another Afghan converted, he was beaten up.”

He knows of many converts from Islam to Christianity who have been put under pressure in Finland, and some have even experienced violence.

“The threat is real and there are bad things happening.” Nuri describes how a woman in Germany was seriously injured in a stabbing after talking about her faith.

“I am not aware of anything like this happening in Finland yet. We are working to make sure that no one is killed. Finns cannot really believe that this kind of thing is taking place.” He sees this as a problem because it means many people are left without help.

“A couple of months ago, an Afghan Christian received a warning that a Muslim who had been refused asylum was planning to kill this active Christian before being deported.”

Nuri went to meet the man making the threat, because, according to Nuri, talking is the most effective way to deal with it.

“His body is healthy but his thinking is unsound. I understand where this comes from and I want to love and help him.”

According to Nuri, the pressure experienced by ex-Muslims is not limited to reception centres, where religious differences between people living in cramped conditions are exacerbated, but also affects people who have lived in Finland for longer.

“Such pressure is everywhere. If a Muslim converts to Christianity, he will face all sorts of problems. The reason is the clear teaching of the Quran that no one may turn away from Islam.”

To help his compatriots, Zarpadshah Nuri founded the Afghan Christian Fellowship in Finland in 2009. In the beginning there were only four members but now there are already four hundred. He says the association is working to combat fear. 400 of the 10,000 to 15,000 Afghans in Finland are estimated to be Christians. In recent years, people who have joined the association have arrived in Finland as asylum seekers.

The association organises gatherings for Afghan Christians. An opportunity to meet safely is empowering for them.

“We lose everything because of our faith: fathers, mothers, siblings. But the church becomes our new family.”

Zarpadshah Nuri stresses that if a Christian Afghan is returned to Afghanistan, he will certainly be murdered. He hopes that the Immigration Service would understand this better than currently. In Finland, the police should take threats against Christians more seriously. Nuri says that nowadays the association can offer a person in trouble the help of a Christian lawyer. In future, the association will try to organise a Christian interpreter for interviews with the Immigration Service for ex-Muslims.

Nuri’s activism as an advocate for Christians has been noticed, and he himself has received threats.

“ISIS is present in the Nordic countries. They can come here and kill me. The murderer gets a lot of money and glory and will even go to paradise. They can calculate that they will get 4–5 years in prison, but what is that? It does not scare anyone. And the police cannot intervene until something happens. For me, currently, it is more dangerous to live in Finland than in Afghanistan.”

Nuri says that people who support terrorist organisations should be removed from the country as early as possible. This would improve the security of Finnish citizens.

About faith, the cardiologist speaks like a doctor.

“I don’t want a suicide bomber at the railway station in Helsinki. I don’t want Finns to have to be afraid, for I am afraid. We are working to prevent this from spreading to Finland. For that we need the right diagnosis, the right medicine, the right treatment plan. It is important to love an immigrant and to show genuine love: not just to take care of physical needs. Here in the West, we have Christianity and freedom. That is what we must tell these newcomers.”

2.

Specific characteristics
of pressure on women

Shaming and separation from children

The pressure put on converts is driven by fear. When aimed at women, it seems to have two specific characteristics. Firstly, the interview material revealed that slander against women called their reputation into question.

Men forbid their wives from talking to me because I am a 'bad woman'. This is because I go to church with men. As a Christian, I know I can talk to men. This is why Muslims call me a slut.

A similar case came up in an interview with a father of a family:

I haven't told others about my conversion at the reception centre, but they have found out. Their behaviour hasn't been nice. When I was asked directly and admitted that I had converted, I was called names. No one will eat with my family. We've been threatened with violence several times, and I fear for my children. I've been accused of pimping out my wife.

Another form of pressure on women is that of being separated from their children. One respondent has experienced this. Her husband is a Muslim.

My husband beat me and has created distance between me and our child. He tells our child I am a slut. I feel that his father's words have cooled our child's relationship with me. I miss him.

While gathering material for this book, I heard of cases in which women living in Finland who have rejected Islam have lost their children or some of the children because of their conversion. **Rahmo Mohammed**, a Somali woman, has spoken publicly about her own experience. The conversion of a mother of nine children to Christianity shocked a close-knit Somali community, and she was threatened for three years: “If you do not return to Islam, we will take your children.” Eventually, the husband and father-in-law abducted three of the children and took them to Somalia, where they spent the years 2003–2010. One of the children returned to Finland only in 2012.

There are other cases, but many people are afraid and want to protect their children not only from further abductions but also from publicity. In some instances, women have been forced to acquire a new identity and are living quietly in a new area.

The greatest fear: what happens to my children?

*Within a community people might think
that to 'save' the children they must be
taken away from the mother.*

— MINNA OIKARINEN

SOCIAL ADVISOR IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR,
CHURCH SOCIAL WORK VOLUNTEER

Minna Oikarinen has extensive experience of working with immigrants. She became closely acquainted with Somali culture when she took part in a social project with Somali families for about three years. She has seen at close quarters the ways in which the community exerts pressure when a Muslim woman converts to Christianity. The woman then becomes haram, unclean. This is clearly shown to the convert.

“Usually, the first step is to try to bring the person back to Islam by talking to her. Relatives and members of the tribe may visit the home and, if possible, religious leaders may also join them. Phone calls start to pour in too, often from all over the world.”

According to Oikarinen, the aim is to talk ‘sense’ to the convert. Then the language becomes harsher: the person is cursed and insulted. If that has no effect, harder pressure is applied. This includes taking the children away, threatening with violence and even with murder.

”A woman’s sexual morality may be called into question and false rumours are spread, for example that she has been paid to convert. Attempts are made to ruin the woman’s reputation, and other members of the community are forbidden from having anything to do with her.”

Over time, contact with some family members may gradually be restored, but this must be done in secret, as the community exerts very tight control. For someone used to living surrounded by their extended family, this is extremely difficult.

”Social relationships are very important for women, even for managing their everyday life. I would see this ostracism as serious emotional abuse, which can affect a woman’s mental health.”

Minna Oikarinen knows many Christians with a Somali background across Europe and the United States. Often her help has been needed because of threats from compatriots. But the women’s worst fear is the impact of conversion on their children.

”The community may think that in order to ‘save’ the children, they must be taken away from the mother. Child abductions have taken place. The family and the religious community may arrange for the children to be moved to a ‘safe place’ by illegal means, most often to other countries, from which it is challenging and almost impossible to return them.”

Sometimes, under pressure from the family, older children turn against their mother. If the children stay with the mother, contact with the rest of the family and with their cultural roots is lost. This can influence children’s identity and psychological development.

Oikarinen does not want to label all Muslims as harassers of those who have left Islam, and she knows that many Muslims condemn the acts described above.

”However, it is important to highlight this everyday reality faced by many ex-Muslims in Finland. Muslim communities should be made to take responsibility for the harmful, even dangerous, attitudes and practices among them.”

Oikarinen points out that, according to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, everyone should have an equal right to choose and express their religion.

”This is an important value and right upheld in Finland. Everyone living here has the right to live a peaceful life without fear of violence, discrimination or harassment.”

Forced divorces

Although the majority of respondents were men, their stories also echoed the despair of women. A few men said that their conversion to Christianity in Finland had put their wives back home in danger.

When my relatives heard about my conversion, my family had to flee. If they were found, I would never hear from them again because I am an 'infidel'. My wife and children have been threatened.

The news of my conversion has reached my parents. My wife lived with them. When they heard that I had converted to Christianity, my parents threw my wife out.

I told my wife. She cried but accepted my faith. A man from my home region phoned me and asked if it was true that I had converted. When I said yes, he said: "Then I'll take your wife when they make you separate." He must have been joking.

Two respondents were shocked to discover that the talk of divorce was not a joke. They were forced to divorce their wives.

Our marriage was annulled. Since she is no longer my wife, I am not allowed to have any contact with her. I was in shock.

It was a horrible experience for both the wives and the husbands.

The family pressured my wife to get a divorce. I love my wife, but the family kept us from talking to each other. My wife's brother

took her to the imam for a divorce. [...] I was forced to divorce. If I had not agreed, the children would have disappeared.

After the divorce, I could not speak with my wife. After a month, my wife sent me a text message saying that the children were fine. After that, I didn't hear from her for a week. I was worried.

My wife's brother saw the text message on his sister's phone and he assault her. My brother-in-law broke her legs and arms so she couldn't move. He then threw petrol on her and set her on fire.

A week after the incident, a relative sent these photos taken at the hospital. (The man shows a picture on his phone of her shoulder area, from which the burnt skin has peeled off. Another picture shows a swollen, purple, badly beaten face.)

It is six months since the assault. My wife has been discharged. She's been married off to another man. The family forced her so that she would not run away to me. My wife's brother sent me a text message:

"She is no longer your wife. When you return, I will crucify you in the same way as Isa was." (Isa is the name used for Jesus in the Quran.)

Honour-based violence

Honour-based violence is violence, which is constructed and sustained within a community, where the perpetrator may feel justified in his actions or believe that there were no other alternatives.

— SATU LIDMAN

HISTORIAN AND RESEARCHER OF VIOLENCE

In 2016, The Finnish League for Human Rights conducted a study on honour-based violence in Finland. The study highlighted honour which relates to gender role expectations. Honour was upheld and shame was avoided by controlling the behaviour of women and girls particularly.

Honour-based violence against women and girls included mutilation, isolation, physical violence, threats of defamation and forced marriages. The study also highlighted honour-based violence experienced by homosexuals. Restoring honour was perceived as a community responsibility and violent action could involve more than one person.

“However, honour-related violence is not specific to any one ethnic group, culture or religion, and no culture can or should be defined as an ‘honour culture’. The notions of honour which lead to violence are much more complex, and not all people of the same nationality or ethnic group think about them in the same way,” the report stressed.

While it can be difficult to distinguish between violence in close relationships and honour-based violence, recognising the specific characteristics helps prevent honour-based violence. Researchers recognised that in an atmosphere of overheated debate, the findings of the survey could lead to the stigmatisation of an entire ethnic or religious group. Nevertheless, the issue needs to be addressed.

“We should not stop talking about difficult issues in case it might provoke unwanted reactions. In this study people who have experienced and witnessed honour-related violence have repeatedly expressed their gratitude that their stories are heard and that someone has the courage to discuss them.”

The findings of the study by The Finnish League for Human Rights come very close to those of the interviews of ex-Muslims. There is a pattern to honour-based violence and similar means of coercion, whether it is to ‘restore chastity’ to a woman or to punish a relative who has rejected Islam. The underlying motive, support from the community and methods appear remarkably similar.

According to the Council of Europe (2009), honour-related violence and honour killings are on the rise in Europe as immigration increases. There is also greater recognition of this phenomenon.

How to remove shame

An open society cannot protect a person who is threatened by this kind of totalitarian religious community.

— TIMO KESKITALO

PASTOR, CROSS-CULTURAL MINISTRY TO MUSLIMS

Timo Keskitalo first encountered honour-based violence or threats of honour-based violence against Muslim converts to Christianity in Finland in the early 2000s. Since then, he has met numerous ex-Muslims and tried to help them as best he can. He has frequently accompanied them to the police station and tried to act as an interpreter between the two cultures.

“A few years ago, I was involved in a conversation with the police about a situation in which the brother-in-law of a woman who had converted to Christianity had threatened to kill the murtad. The man had told me that he had studied the criminal law and calculated how long his sentence would be. It was a price he was prepared to pay,” recalls Keskitalo.

When discussing the case with the police, they concluded that a threat made in private, one person’s word against another, would be difficult to prove. The police officer suggested a restraining order or change of name and moving to another area, but he himself said that it would not be much use in a situation like this. Keskitalo agreed.

“The community will find them. In the end, this woman decided not to pursue her case. It shows that an open society cannot

protect a person who is threatened by this kind of totalitarian religious community.”

Timo Keskitalo, who has worked with immigrants for decades, is keen to stress that honour-based violence does not stem directly from Islam but from Middle Eastern culture. This is why it is also found among Christians in the Middle East.

But it is difficult for someone brought up with Western values to understand how violence can restore lost honour. It is therefore important to consider the concepts of honour and shame.

According to Keskitalo, they are some of the most central issues in Middle Eastern culture.

“Honour supersedes everything else as a value: speaking the truth, loving one’s neighbour or family ties. Therefore, honour is guarded above all else, and shame is removed at all costs. In a culture of honour and shame, it is thought that if honour is lost, then all is lost.”

In a Muslim community within this culture, leaving Islam is the most shameful act of all. This is why the moral shame, which the report by The League for Human Rights focused on, is similar to religious shame. Families take both very seriously.

“Shame must be concealed or removed in order to restore honour. If, for example, a daughter of a family goes through a divorce, her family may use a softer approach and the daughter is kept hidden and no longer appears in public.”

Tougher measures are also used.

”Shame can also be cut out, which is a more honourable way to act in the eyes of the community. This is why, for example, a daughter who has been raped can be killed. There is even more reason to cut off an apostate, who brings shame upon the family. The logic of shame works in this way. Just as we do not understand the world of honour and shame, they do not comprehend the Western concept of guilt.”

The study by The League for Human Rights found that the threshold for reporting violent crimes related to religious beliefs

to the police was often high. Reasons included a low level of trust in the authorities and not perceiving the incidents as crimes.

Timo Keskitalo has noticed the same. Many people feel that contacting the authorities does not work as a deterrent. Above all, authorities do not recognise honour-based violence.

“The police can still think that ‘it’s just immigrants fighting, let them sort it out’. There is no understanding of the seriousness of the issue, that the threat of physical violence becomes real very quickly.”

It is a recurring pattern, but it is not yet fully recognised. Honour-based violence is not a marginal phenomenon. There are too many cases.

”This is a crime that is repeated over and over again.”

It would be important for the authorities to become familiar with the culture of honour and shame, as, according to Keskitalo, increased knowledge would help defuse tensions. It should also be recognised that religion motivates Muslims to put pressure on ex-Muslims.

“We have a blind spot if we believe that religion is a private matter. In Islam, religion is without doubt a public matter, part of visible behaviour. When someone converts to Christianity, that too is of course a public matter. I would like to see that the authorities would acknowledge that religion is a motive.”

Keskitalo points out that values related to Islam could be controlled by laws or regulations.

“There is no need to throw up our hands. In Muslim countries, there are heavy-handed restrictions on radical Islam, i.e. religious elements that Muslims are prepared to regard as dangerous. We don’t even dare to talk about this in our own context because it is seen as stigmatising a minority.”

3.

How do ex-muslims
react to pressure?

Keeping a low profile

Withdrawal and avoidance. Many respondents tried to keep a low profile in reception centres to experience less harassment.

We didn't tell anyone, but everyone understood that we were Christians. We have been called names, but I don't want to have anything to do with them and I withdraw.

I have been asked if I am a Christian, but I avoid answering. I dare not read the Bible at the reception centre, so I go into town to read.

There is a lot of unrest at the reception centre and there are fights all the time. Some attacks are directed at Christians. Refused applications are causing the situation to escalate. I have not been threatened personally, but they would certainly do something if they were not afraid of the authorities. Fortunately, there are security cameras in the reception centres. I don't know what would happen without them.

Turning to the authorities

With such negative experiences, it seems surprising that more than half of the respondents remained silent. 18 respondents (58%) had not sought help from reception centre staff or the police. Often the reason was the inability of the authorities to help them.

To the question “Have you sought help from the authorities?” they answered:

No, because they answer that if nothing has happened, nothing can be done. Moreover, it would become clear that I have spoken to the authorities and I would be harassed even more.

At the reception centre, I told an employee about the threats several times, but it didn't help. The threats were not believed. I also went to the police, but the police cannot access that reception centre.

I have not bothered to tell about the name-calling and the ostracism at the reception centre, because I am afraid that the situation would not change. Muslims would probably say they were just joking.

No, because a police officer or social worker coming to the reception centre would have made it worse. A minor problem would have become a big one. There are 200 Muslims there.

At the reception centre, I didn't talk about my problems, because many of the staff are Muslim. Not all Finns are nice, and they don't listen to me. They take the side of the Muslims.

At the Immigration Service, I told them about the threats. We don't want to tell the authorities everything because they start to doubt our [Christian] faith.

There were also those who had sought help. Of the respondents, 12 (39 %) had reported their situation to the reception centre staff or the police. This had often been helpful.

The police took the death threat seriously.

I told several times about being verbally abused and beaten up in the reception centre. The harassers were taken in for a talking-to and the situation calmed down. It only continued when they were drunk.

I have asked for our family to be transferred to another reception centre. This is being organised.

I told them [at the reception centre] because the extremists had really drastic plans. Now the situation there is better.

The police have taken my case seriously and helped me. I kept all the threats on my phone, and in court the person making the threats got a restraining order.

I told the director of the reception centre about my problems [with my roommate]. I was given another room. I don't want to talk to the police about death threats because that would only cause more problems.

Considering suicide – when harassment causes a mental breakdown

In September 2016, MIELI Mental Health Finland raised concerns about suicides and attempted suicides in reception centres in the Greater Helsinki metropolitan area. Several cases were reported by the interpreters used by the organisation and the clients of its Crisis Centre. Mental Health Finland emphasised that suicides and attempted suicides are an indication of a serious loss of hope, which should be addressed early enough. According to **Outi Ruishalme**, director of the Crisis Centre of Mental Health Finland, these cases took place in the autumn and winter of 2016.

In the material collected for this book, two respondents also said they had contemplated or attempted suicide. There is no information on how traumatic their experiences were before they arrived in Finland, but they mentioned that their distress was primarily due to the harassment they experienced as ex-Muslims in Finland.

I was desperate. I went to the lakeside thinking I was going to drown myself. I was transferred to another reception centre. I've been in hospital for mental health problems.

I was desperate and contemplating suicide. I was admitted to hospital and given antidepressants. Now I live in a Christian family.

It is alarming that in 31 interviews with ex-Muslims, there is a person contemplating and another attempting suicide. It sadly

illustrates the seriousness of the harassment of those who have left Islam.

The Finnish Immigration Service collects aggregate data from reception centres. What is their view of violent incidents in reception centres, the motives behind them and instances of suicide?

According to **Olli Snellman**, Head of section at the Finnish Immigration Service in charge of the reception centres, there are known cases of violence, but he does not want to estimate their number. Violence or threatening situations are filed under the term threat.

According to Snellman, these incidents of intimidation mainly arise between residents. He says that in 2017, there were around 20,000–22,000 people within the reception centre system. At the beginning of that year, there were 77 reception centres and 49 underage units, but the number decreased during 2017. By the end of September, the system was aware of 230 threats.

It is difficult to categorise threatening situations.

“Particularly difficult are situations where categorisation requires speculation about the reasons and motives of the person, and situations where there are different factors involved. [...] For example, the situation may be that the client is unwilling or unable to talk about it.”

Snellman declines to comment on the number of suicides or attempted suicides. What he does reveal, however, is that there were no accomplished suicides in 2017.

“We have stated in the past that we do not comment on these. The cases are quite varied in terms of severity, methods and also causes.”

As a motive for silence, he cites the best interests of clients and the concern that news coverage would increase the risk of suicide.

4.

Do ex-muslims
feel safe in Finland?

A third of respondents live in fear

Do you feel at risk because of your Christian faith in Finland? Of the respondents, 11 (35%) answered 'yes' to this question. This feeling of insecurity was caused by relatives who have lived in Finland for a longer period and by Muslims living at the reception centre or in the neighbourhood.

Yes, of course. One of my relatives lives in Finland and has already been sent photos of me. I am scared. When I think about it, I remember a word from the Bible: "When they speak evil of you, do not be afraid." The Bible reminds us, "Love your enemy." Yes, that's why I'm afraid to reveal my conversion.

I am frightened. That's why I don't talk about my faith. I would be beaten, ostracised and verbally abused.

When I converted to Christianity, I went home earlier than previously because I felt less safe on the street. There are many devout Muslims in my neighbourhood. Often the authorities favour Muslims and listen to them.

I am not safe in Finland. In my home country, the situation would be even worse. At the same time, I feel safe in my faith. Of course. I can't walk alone at night. I look over my shoulder because so many people hate me and wish me harm. It's stressful. It's not safe at the reception centre.

A few respondents raised concerns about the possibility of attacks by extremists in Finland. Their descriptions convey an impression that the threat could be directed at the wider society.

Yes, because there are a lot of extremists here. Last year in Denmark, two Afghans stabbed an Iranian Christian to death. The local reception centre claimed that it was a normal fight, but a friend of mine lives there and told me that it was a killing of an ex-Muslim.

To be honest, I'm scared. My life is in danger because there are people at the reception centre who want to go into a crowd and kill non-Muslims.

Yes, there is some kind of threat in Finland too.

In danger if returned

Almost all respondents felt that they would be at serious risk if their asylum decision was negative, and they had to return to their country of origin.

I'm in danger [in Finland]. I'm awake at night because of my family. I have nightmares. What would I do if I had to return? If Finland sends me back to my home country, my life will be in grave danger.

I am not [in danger] in Finland but I am elsewhere. I'm a target for the Taliban.

Not in Finland, but if I'm sent back, I am in danger.

I can never return to my home country. Family, friends, my clan or a militant group... someone will definitely kill me.

I'm worried that they will send me back.

Respondents fear being returned to their country of origin. Broadly speaking, there were differences between nationalities regarding who the respondents feared most. If returned to their country of origin, Afghans and Iraqis are most afraid of their relatives and communities, while Iranians are afraid of the police.

I didn't reveal my coming to faith in Iran, but the police found out that I had converted to Christianity, and I had to leave the country secretly. The police were looking for me at home, which caused difficulties for my family. My father told the police, "If I

get my hands on my son, I will kill him myself, because he is a kafir, an apostate.”

No father wants to kill his child, but no father likes conversion either. Because the police were monitoring my parents' conversations, they got a new phone line. My father might agree to talk to me because my mother is sick with worry.

I have given an interview to a magazine and a YouTube video. The Iranian government knows about them and it has spies in Finland too. If we are returned to Iran, we will be executed already at the airport. We will be led from the plane to an interrogation room where the material against us will be presented. Then we will be executed.

One Persian family came to Finland as refugees. A member of this family, who was born in Finland, went to visit Iran. He did not pass the interview at the airport, so he was tortured to death. He had written something unpleasant about the mullahs and the Iranian regime. Perhaps that was the reason.

I had to leave Iran because of my faith. I'm afraid of the police and my relatives. In Iran, a man who leaves Islam is hanged and a woman is imprisoned for life. The police were looking for me to arrest me. After I had been a few months in Finland, the police came looking for me at my parents' home.

Some feel safe in Finland

Of the respondents, 4 (13%) did not think they had experienced any difficulties because of their faith in Finland. Three of them were from Afghanistan and one from Iran.

I haven't experienced harassment because of my faith as I haven't talked about it.

I was the only Christian at the reception centre. I was introduced by the social worker to a Finnish Christian with whom I was able to go to church.

I haven't experienced any difficulties because of my faith.

Do you feel in danger in Finland because of your faith? Of the ex-Muslims, 14 (45%) answered in the negative. They felt safe in Finland even though some of them had been subjected to serious harassment, intimidation or violence in Finland. However, there was an impression that at least some of them seemed to mean that they did not feel that their lives were in danger in Finland, as they often compared the situation in Finland to that in their home country.

Finnish law helps. Muslims are afraid of Finnish law and have done nothing here. In my country we would definitely die. Finnish society is peaceful.

I am not afraid in Finland. If I am returned to my home country, the Finnish government is risking my life. But if that happens, I am proud to suffer like Christ. If I am returned, I will

certainly be killed, because I was already a human rights activist in my home country.

There is peace in Finland. Here my life is not in danger.

Muslims are afraid of the authorities. Finland is a free country. Why don't Muslims here accept that I'm a Christian? This is a real problem in Finland.

This is the safest country, and I am in the safest of hands (God's).

Turning the other cheek

Many respondents saw difficulties as being part of the Christian life. This was possibly one of the reasons why they were reluctant to report the harassment they had experienced.

I didn't talk about the harassment because Jesus warned that believers would suffer. Patience is a good way to respond.

I have not spoken out because there has not been sufficient evidence. I pray to the Lord to change them.

Because God is with me, I am not afraid. Nothing can happen to me if God has a purpose for me. When my time comes, they can kill me, but I have nothing to worry about.

Some respondents said that the atmosphere at their reception centre has changed as the number of converts has increased. More and more people are interested in Christianity.

When I read the Bible at the reception centre, I was called a kafir and a murtad. One man was particularly difficult. He taunted me: "You can't talk to your wife any more now that you've converted." There was always trouble with him. A couple of months later I went to him and tried to make peace. Later he came to my room and asked me: "Why are you so good to me, even though I speak badly of you?" Now he goes to church. The situation at the reception centre is better now. Many are open to Christianity.

The Bible says: "Turn the other cheek and do not return evil for evil." More people are becoming Christians.

It is a great joy when a former harasser praises God with me.

We already have 30 Christians at my reception centre, and there are not so many problems anymore.

There are so many converts here now that the situation is easier.

Some of the respondents had been accepted to study at a Christian college. They enjoyed the tranquillity of the environment.

The pastor who baptised me helped me to move to a Christian college to live.

Also, after having been granted asylum, staying in a privately owned flat brought relief.

Now we live in a privately owned flat and enjoy being left in peace.

Baptisms are not recorded because of security risks

*It is shocking that we must act
like this in our own country.*

— MARJA-LIISA LAIHIA

SPECIALIST ON IMMIGRATION AND MULTICULTURAL ISSUES
AT THE CHURCH COUNCIL OF THE EVANGELICAL
LUTHERAN CHURCH OF FINLAND

The phone started ringing more often than usual after the arrival of asylum seekers in autumn 2015. Lutheran parish workers from all over the country contacted the specialist at the national church council to ask what to do when asylum seekers visit churches and want to be taught about the Christian faith and baptism.

Marja-Liisa Laihia gave them advice. In subsequent conversations, many parish workers said that almost everyone interested in Christianity had encountered various forms of harassment.

“I got the impression that this is systematic and countrywide.”

The pressure is not only on those who attend baptismal classes or church services. “Just visiting a church, reading the Bible or anything that indicates an interest in Christianity can lead to harassment.”

Parish workers encounter two types of interested people: the bold, who often march into a church in small groups, standing

tall, and the timid, who whisper discreetly to a parish worker that they would like a Bible.

“What does it say that people need to whisper hiding in a corner? Parish workers have realised that these people need to be protected.”

According to Laihia, churches have begun to see the security risk to ex-Muslims more clearly than before. In such cases, information about the baptised person is not recorded in the church register, but only on the baptismal certificate issued to the person baptised.

“It is shocking that we have to act like this in our own country. There is a profound contradiction here.”

Marja-Liisa Laihia has overseen the Church Council’s immigration work for 18 years. She says that the exerted pressure is not only visible in the recently overcrowded reception centres, but that there have been cases since the early 2000s.

“When the first Somali was baptised in Finland, I said, ‘The long arm of persecution reaches far.’ People’s mouths fell open then. Most Finns do not recognise this phenomenon because it is hidden.”

Fifteen years ago, Laihia was putting together a network of churches in the same areas as the reception centres. Even then, she noticed that the attitude of the staff, especially of the director of the centre, towards religion was crucial.

Laihia sees that there are going to be problems at the reception centres if religious literacy is lacking. Often, unfortunately, there are anti-religious attitudes.

“Religion is not seen or heard. It is as if religion does not exist, and then they might say that the reception centre is a religiously and politically neutral space, which is absurd. They are always full of religion when these people are there,” Laihia exclaims.

Too often, she says, reception centres resolve serious cases of harassment against ex-Muslims by removing the converts.

“Is that the right thing to do? It’s not a solution. There will be

no change in what harassers do if victims are moved to a safer place. We have had to discuss this with the immigration service. I think it is dangerous if the reception centres are not able to deal effectively with behaviour that threatens religious freedom.”

According to Laihia, it is exactly within the reception centres that it would be possible to bring people together and discuss with them the fact that freedom of religion in Finland means freedom to practice one’s religion and freedom to change it.

“If you don’t have the courage to tackle this issue in the reception centres as people arrive in the country, you won’t be able to bring them together in the same way once they have moved to the private housing market.”

Laihia suspects that the biggest obstacle is lack of courage.

“As long as there have been asylum seekers in Finland, Muslims have been feared. Their actions have often been overlooked. In the case of Somalis, for example, there was no courage to take disciplinary action because of fear of religion. The problem is not knowing how to deal with issues related to religious thinking or behaviour.”

Fortunately, there are positive examples too. For example, the director of a reception centre who ensured equal access for all to a space for religious worship at the centre. The rules are the same for everyone.

“I remember him telling me that he was not religious, but that he saw religious practice as a fundamental right.”

But more widely, the pressure on ex-Muslims is hardly recognised in reception centres, according to Laihia.

“Many centre workers say: ‘Finland has freedom of religion, you have nothing to fear.’ So they have no idea.”

Parish churches help those who are harassed. Many parish workers and volunteers listen to them and at the same time become overburdened themselves alongside people who are distressed. In situations where the harassment is severe and acute, the parish church can arrange alternative housing.

“It’s a painless solution for everyone, including the reception centre, but it doesn’t solve the problem,” Laihia points out.

They also try to prevent harassment, for example by organising transport to church events.

“It is understood quite well now that the church is a place of refuge. The church is a place of peace, where there is no need to be afraid.”

When I interviewed ex-Muslims, I heard of cases where people attending church services or baptismal classes were filmed. Some were concerned about the motives – was it for their own viewing later or for blackmail.

A harasser could turn out to be in the same group that went out together to find out about a local church.

Laihia gives an example of a fictional group of Iraqis who attend church and are baptised together. Then one of them backtracks and attacks the group.

“He may still be a Christian in public, but in private he blackmails and threatens these converts. You need be careful in assessing what all this is about. Sometimes it can relate to some other kind of mutual harassment.”

According to Laihia, Finnish society is influenced by an anti-religious sentiment, which leads to a blinkered view when it comes to pressures experienced by Christians. Finns need not only religious education in schools, which ensures religious literacy, but also action to preserve religious freedom.

“Religious freedom will be nullified if we do not implement it. We must actively safeguard and protect religious freedom. At the same time, we must set an example to those who come here that religion can be practised, and that religion can be changed. This is something that has not been given much thought in Finland.”

5. Conclusion

Freedom of religion in Finland must be defended

The material in this book consists of interviews with 31 ex-Muslims. They have come to Finland as asylum seekers and were found through people working with immigrants. The aim of this survey was to find out, through case histories, what kind of experiences of pressure those who converted from Islam to Christianity have in Finland. It is not possible to deduce directly from the material how many ex-Muslims have experienced pressure in Finland.

The experiences of respondents are startling. It turns out that harassment is serious, countrywide and takes many forms. Nine out of ten respondents said they had experienced difficulties because of their Christian faith in Finland. Various levels of harassment and verbal abuse seemed to be the rule, not the exception. There were also five respondents who had been assaulted. The harassment experienced by three respondents was so severe that they had been moved to private homes found through the local church. These cases involved serious violence or suicide risk.

A third of respondents said they feared for their safety in Finland. The perpetrators were not only other asylum seekers living at the reception centre, but also Muslims who had lived in Finland for a long time.

The small number of interviewees, 31, can only offer a glimpse into the situation of religious freedom among ex-Muslims in Finland. The material was therefore supplemented by interviews with experts, selected for their extensive expertise in the situation of ex-Muslims in Finland. Timo Keskitalo, Marja-Liisa Laihia, Zarpadshah Nuri and Minna Oikarinen each have a unique van-

tage point to this phenomenon. Their description of the religious freedom situation is consistent with the experiences of the interviewees.

Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan. The respondents come from countries listed by the international human rights organisation Open Doors as among the top ten countries that persecute Christians. According to the World Watch List 2017, Christians in these countries experience extreme persecution. North Korea, Sudan and Somalia also top the list.

Attitudes do not change when you cross a state border. It is therefore important that immigrants are clearly informed about what freedom of religion, conscience and expression mean in Finland. The Finnish constitution also guarantees integrity, freedom of movement and equality.

The interview material in this book reveals that converting to Christianity can put your life at risk. Death threats were received both by converts in Finland and by their loved ones in their home countries.

In spring 2016, Lutheran priests wanted to ensure that news reports about the baptisms of asylum seekers did not mention localities. Indeed, parish workers and volunteers have the greatest expertise in the pressures faced by converts from Islam to Christianity. The seriousness of the situation is illustrated by the fact that not all baptisms are recorded in parish registers for security reasons. And we are now talking about Finland.

The need for discussion also arises from within the immigrant community

Clearly, Islam and Western culture will collide if the Muslim community does not recognise the right of an individual to change religion or renounce Islam. The need for this debate also arises from within the immigrant community.

Kareem Emam, who moved to Finland from Egypt, told the Finnish Broadcasting Company, Yle, in an interview that he left Islam years ago but only dared to speak publicly about it in 2017. Emam, who was studying in Oulu at the time, also posted a video on YouTube in which he said he had abandoned Islam and was now an atheist.

In addition to encouragement, Emam also received threats wishing him imprisonment or death. His parents no longer wanted to talk to him. Death threats also came from abroad. Kareem Emam believes that freedom of religion and freedom of expression should be defended in Europe. That includes the right to build mosques or wear headscarves. At the same time, he warns about sharia law and jihadism. He says Muslims who follow the Quran to the letter are dangerous.

“Opposing all Muslims can only make problems worse. Most Muslims want to be normal people and do not support jihadism or other extremist ideas.”

There are others in Finland who have rejected Islam, but they dare not reveal that they are atheists or agnostics because they fear pressure. For example, the blog of Finnish ex-Muslims aims to provide a forum for those who are critical of Islam. The anon-

ymous writers on the website seek to discuss the shortcomings of Islam and Islamic culture in a constructive way.

The website also calls for action, for example by boycotting mosques that incite hatred:

“Do not support hate. In Finland, too, Islamic organisations have organised events to which, for example, people who support the death penalty for apostasy have been invited. Do not put your money in the pockets of those who stoke hatred and contribute to the spread of a violent literal interpretation.”

These exhortations show that there is tension between Western values and the Islamic culture of honour and shame, which people hope to change. We need a debate and a willingness to defend the freedoms that exist in Western democratic societies, even if it means transcending cultural sensitivities. We must dare to actively defend individual freedom of religion and expression.

The Muslim community, in turn, must decide how it teaches about dealing with those asylum seekers, immigrants and native Finns who have left Islam. The description by the imam of the Islamic Society of Finland, Anas Hajjar, of the treatment of those who have rejected Islam in the community shows that in Finland too, those who have rejected Islam find themselves in a vulnerable position in their community. This is worrying.

It is impossible to say how many ex-Muslims are at risk in Finland. Many keep such a low profile that it is difficult to even find them. Therefore, no one knows for certain the number of apostates who have been subjected to pressure, but I venture that the phenomenon is not confined to a particular area or a particular reception centre.

Pastor Timo Keskitalo estimates that almost all converts from Islam have experienced verbal abuse and harassment. Converts do not speak out because they know to expect verbal abuse. Keskitalo estimates that just under 10% of converts face serious threats of violence or outright violence. Many Christians are therefore at risk in Finland.

The material also highlights the need to improve religious

literacy and cultural knowledge. Religiously motivated pressure needs to be recognised and therefore discussed. If we remain silent, many will remain without help. Thirteen respondents found it easier when they had the courage to talk to the authorities or the staff at the reception centre. Preventing religiously motivated violence seems possible, but it requires determined action by the authorities.

We need to talk about courage

Talking about specific issues publicly can be dangerous because of the self-fulfilling prophecy of the words. Therefore, instead of focusing on pressure on Christians, **Timo Keskitalo** would put more emphasis on the courage of converts, because talking about it gives people even more courage.

As a journalist, I have interviewed many people and I am used to listening to their stories. Sometimes people are convincing, sometimes not. In gathering the material for this book, I met people whose experiences were so painful that it was difficult to think them through to the end. Nevertheless, they conveyed a deep faith that you come across very rarely.

One man told his story in an unassuming way. His greatest pain was the uncertain fate of his family back home. *But I have found a living God.*

His words reflected a firm faith.

In Finland, we are not used to the idea that someone is willing to choose Christian faith even at a terrible cost. These people I interviewed did not make their decision lightly. They knew that after months of baptismal classes and baptism, difficulties would follow. But they felt they had found something of value.

Because God is with me, I am not afraid. Nothing can happen to me if God has some purpose for me. When my time comes, they can kill me, but I will be all right.

I would like to thank everyone I interviewed for their trust in me, as you opened up to me about some of the most painful issues in your lives. Thank you for your openness and courage.

I challenge us all with this exhortation from the book of Proverbs:

*Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
for the rights of all who are destitute.*

*Speak up and judge fairly;
defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

(PROVERBS 31:8–9)

Who were interviewed?

The material for this book was collected between July and September 2017. When planning the survey, it soon became clear that finding interviewees directly from the reception centres and conducting interviews in that environment would be risky for the respondents.

Respondents were therefore reached through networks working with immigrants. Interviews were conducted in private homes and at meetings of ex-Muslims, where several respondents were interviewed at the same time.

It was emphasised that respondents could answer anonymously and that identification would be made more difficult by removing detailed information about respondents.

33 people took part in the survey, but I decided to exclude two respondents. One of them converted to Christianity from a religion other than Islam, even though his country of origin was a Muslim state, and the other one had not yet converted to Christianity but was just becoming interested in it. One respondent had not yet been baptised, but I kept him in as he was due to be baptised the following day.

The respondents included 8 Iraqis, 17 Afghans and 6 Iranians from different parts of Finland. Respondents were aged 55 years and under. They were predominantly between 20 and 30 years old. The majority of respondents had arrived in Finland in 2015 (27 respondents). Six respondents had been granted asylum. The majority had received a negative decision but had appealed against it. (See table on page 78.)

The interviews were conducted in five locations. The respondents had lived in 16 reception centres in different parts of Finland. At the time of their conversion, 27 respondents were living

in reception centres. Therefore, it was there that they experienced most conflicts. Only 4 respondents were living in private accommodation, such as in a relative's home or in a shared flat at the time of their conversion. Most ex-Muslims still lived in reception centres. A few respondents were relieved to have been accepted to study at a Christian college.

Most of the interviews (21) were conducted at events with ex-Muslim participants. I explained the survey and its aim in general terms, and then those who wished to participate were invited to do so.

Four respondents said they had not encountered any problems since converting to Christianity. They were reached at these events. They participated possibly out of a desire to help.

I used an interpreter with 21 respondents. It was essential that the respondents trusted the interpreter, and therefore all the interpreters were Christians and often people the respondents already knew. Interpreters were crucial for the quality of the material.

Along the way, I learned to ask more questions myself. When describing their experiences of pressure, respondents highlighted the most difficult experiences. Did they leave out the more everyday occurrences, such as verbal abuse? As the survey material increased, I learned to ask specifically: have you experienced verbal abuse, what about rumours, what about ostracism, and so on.

There were only two female respondents. However, the interviews also touched on the situation of women, with husbands talking about the harassment their wives faced in Finland or forced divorces in their home countries.

A clear majority of respondents had converted to Christianity in Finland. Of these, 14 had been baptised in a Lutheran church. The next largest number belonged to a Pentecostal church or to independent free churches (see table on page 78).

Appendix

TABLE 1

Asylum decision	AFG	Iran	Iraq
Positive	4	1	1
Negative	2	–	–
Negative, appealed	5	5	5
No decision yet	6	–	2

TABLE 2

Where the baptisms took place	
The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland	14
Pentecostal church	6
Another free church	7
In Greece or Turkey when travelling	3
Not yet baptised	1

TABLE 3

Forms of pressure	AFG (17)	Iran (6)	Iraq (8)
Verbal abuse	13	5	7
Harassment	8	3	4
Ostracism	10	2	7
Intimidation	8	3	6
Gossip	1	1	–
Shoving	–	–	1
Physical violence	4	–	1
Harassment/ ostracism of family	3	–	1
Intimidation of family	3	2	2
Violence towards family	–	–	1
Disowned by family	8	5	6*

* No answer from two respondents, likely to have been disowned.

TABLE 4

Have you sought help from the authorities (reception centre staff, police etc.)?			
	AFG	Iran	Iraq
Yes	5	3	4
No	12	3	3
Not known	–	–	1

TABLE 5

Do you feel at risk in Finland because of your faith?			
	AFG	Iran	Iraq
Yes	3	3	5
No	9	3	2
Difficult to say /no reply	5	–	1

Questionnaire

1. Age and gender
2. Country of origin
3. Year of arrival in Finland
4. Asylum decision
5. When did you convert to Christianity?
6. Have you been baptised (and in which church)?
7. Where did you live when you converted?
8. How have you been treated since your conversion?
Have you faced difficulties because of your faith? Ostracism, harassment, verbal abuse, shoving, intimidation, violence, false claims, intimidation of extended family.
9. Have you sought help from the authorities?
10. Do you feel you at risk in Finland because of your faith? Who/what group is threatening you?

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