"What's religion got to do with it?"

A case study on the regulation of religious diversity and practice in Danish Red Cross asylum centres

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Abstract

This article is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with managers of Danish Red Cross-operated asylum centres regarding religion and religious freedom at asylum centres. Three main findings are reported. First, asylum centre managers view religion as largely irrelevant while having very limited understanding of the right to freedom of religion. Second, this knowledge deficit and the general absence of any substantive guidelines on managing religious freedom issues in asylum centres has resulted in incoherent and contradictory approaches. Third, asylum centre managers' understanding of the concept of neutrality is at times overly restrictive, contradictory, and inconsistent. The article concludes with suggestions for improvement.

Keywords asylum centres, asylum seekers, freedom of religion, religious diversity, religious practice, neutrality, Christonormativity, Denmark.

1. Introduction

On numerous occasions over the last few years, the Danish media have reported on cases in which asylum seekers have been harassed, intimidated, and in some cases physically attacked by other asylum seekers in Danish asylum centres. Religion has frequently played some kind of role in these incidents (Borg 2015; Straka and Jeppesen 2016a). In many instances, asylum centre managers have been criticised by local religious leaders over their responses to these cases and, more generally, concerning how they manage the religious diversity of asylum centres (Straka and Jeppesen 2016b). Moreover, other reports have highlighted the frustration of local religious leaders with regard to how asylum centre managers regulate religious practice in asylum centres ("Præster og imamer" 2015; "Asylcentre holder" 2016). Criticisms have focused on overly restrictive approaches to prayer rooms,

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religious symbols, and visits by local religious leaders, as well as on the justification for these restrictions, especially the principle of neutrality (Birk 2015).[2]

The topic of freedom of religion at asylum centres has been extensively contested in Danish public discourse, but it is largely unregulated in international human rights law and has received scant attention in the scholarly literature on human rights, religion, and migration.[3] Moreover, the operators of Danish asylum centres have little or no framework guiding them as to how to handle matters of religious freedom.

This article does not attempt an overall analysis of human rights in Danish asylum centres, nor does it seek to explain Denmark's obligations towards asylum seekers with respect to freedom of religion or belief. Rather, it offers a glimpse into the actual conditions of asylum seekers' practice of religion at these centres, and it identifies the key challenges and issues that arise in connection with their religious practice. Numerous surveys have provided insights into these issues from the perspective of asylum seekers, but they provide only part of the picture by overlooking the views of centre managers.[4] To properly understand the situation, it is necessary to investigate the knowledge, attitudes and policies of centre managers as well – something this article seeks to achieve.

The research that forms the basis of this paper includes a series of qualitative, semi-structured interviews, conducted in 2018, with managers of asylum centres operated by the Danish Red Cross and with representatives of religious and civil society organisations in Denmark. Following the context and research methodology sections, section 4 discusses the illiteracy of asylum centre managers with respect to religious freedom. Section 5 describes their approaches to managing religious conflict in their centres. Section 6 examines how they deal with different aspects of religious practice such as the place of prayer rooms in asylum centres. Section

[2] See also the country report by Heiner Bielefeldt (2017), then UN Special Rapporteur for freedom of religion or belief, on Denmark. He highlighted the limited opportunities for religious practice in Danish asylum centres and posited that, in some circumstances, this might amount to a violation of asylum seekers' right to freedom of religion or belief.

[3] There exist some regulations applicable to detained asylum seekers, such as the UNHCR Detention Guidelines published in 2012, but the situation of non-detained asylum seekers, who were the focus of the research that forms the basis of this article, remains an underdeveloped research area. See also notes 9 and 10 below.

[4] For example, a 2014 survey, conducted on behalf of the Danish Lutheran Church or Folkekirken, found that one-third of Christian convert asylum seekers had been harassed or intimidated in Danish asylum centres (Ejsing 2014). Furthermore, in 2016 the Danish newspaper Kristeligt Dagblad conducted a survey of Christian priests working with asylum seekers, to obtain their assessment of the situation. The priests reported that 45% of Christian asylum seekers are harassed or intimidated because of their religious beliefs (Straka and Jeppesen 2016a). The Danish Red Cross has conducted a survey of asylum seekers in their care that examined "feelings of security" amongst asylum seekers. On a scale from 1 (insecure) to 5 (most secure), Muslim asylum seekers averaged 4.1, while amongst Christian asylum seekers the score was only fractionally less at 3.9. See "User Survey Among Asylum Seekers in Denmark: Results and Assessments" (January 2016), unpublished.

7 considers the malleability of neutrality and the inconsistent way in which centre managers have applied this principle in handling matters of religious practice. The article then concludes with some reflections and recommendations as to how the situation of freedom of religion in Danish asylum centres could be improved.

2. Context

2.1 Religion and the refugee crisis

Religion has been at the centre of public and political discourse on the so-called refugee crisis across most of Europe over the last few years.[5] This is due in large part to the identification of religion as the principal characteristic by which "refugees are imagined and understood," leading to the conflation of the terms 'asylum seeker' and 'Muslim' (Wilson and Mavelli 2016, 2017). Indeed, Ulrich Schmiedel (2018:299) has written that religion has been "interpreted and instrumentalized" as a symbol to differentiate between a Europe construed as "Christian" and asylum seekers as "non-European and non-Christian." This tendency was apparent, for example, when Hungary's prime minister, Victor Orbán, and Italy's former interior minister, Matteo Salvini, claimed that Europe is experiencing an "invasion" by Muslim asylum seekers that threatens Europe's Christian roots (Goździak 2019; Monella 2019). Such rhetoric has led to calls in some countries, including Denmark, Poland, Cyprus, Slovakia, and the USA, for policies that would prioritise Christian asylum seekers over Muslims solely on the basis of religion, despite the obvious illegal discrimination that policies to this effect would represent (Eghdamian 2017a).

Beyond the supposed threats to European identity lie a myriad of other claims. Politicians across Europe have raised the spectre of terrorism, linking Muslim asylum seekers with radicalisation and terrorism (Cesari 2013; Eghdamian 2020). Meanwhile, religion has been part of discussions of the refugee crisis in Europe in other ways. The phenomenon of asylum seekers converting to Christianity (Birk 2018; Ejsing 2016), debates over the veracity of these conversions (*The Economist* 2016), and the introduction of so-called 'Bible quizzes' (Bulman 2019; Sherwood 2016) reveal religion's prominent role in the public and political discourse on the refugee situation. Although religion is commonly presented in these discourses as something undesirable and highly problematic that needs to be urgently regulated and controlled, in reality the relationship between religion and asylum is much more nuanced and complex.

2.2 Religion and religious freedom matter for asylum seekers

Although freedom of religion or belief rarely features in the "hierarchy of refugee needs", a hierarchy that typically starts with "physical safety and health, followed

[5] See the introduction to Schmiedel and Smith (2018) for an interesting discussion of the extent to which the refugee 'crisis' can actually be understood as a crisis.

by shelter, food and … education and employment" (Eghdamian 2017b), religion and religious freedom are also of great importance to many asylum seekers, and this fact should be acknowledged and taken seriously by all those involved in receiving and caring for them. Religion matters to them because it fundamentally defines their lives and experiences. Asylum seekers are much more likely to value religion in their daily lives and have much higher levels of religious observance, such as weekly worship attendance and daily prayer, than most Europeans (Pew Research 2018).[6] Moreover, countless academic studies have demonstrated the myriad of ways in which religion represents an important resource for asylum seekers in dealing with the challenges of displacement. Religion is often a source of emotional support and an important way of dealing with loneliness and depression (McMichael 2002). Religious beliefs can serve as a source of resilience and a method of coping (Khawaja et al. 2008), while also providing asylum seekers with an alternative framework by which to make sense of their suffering (Goździak 2002). Religion can also serve as a fundamentally important and enduring part of an asylum seeker's identity in a time of great upheaval and change in their lives (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2010). Moreover, the work of local churches, mosques, and religious organisations is not limited to the provision of practical assistance to asylum seekers, such as food and accommodation. Rather, they can also offer spiritual nourishment through religious guidance and counselling – forms of assistance that the state and secular organisations cannot offer. The religiosity of asylum seekers is thus not only a matter of controversy, but also an important and potentially valuable resource in the provision of care and assistance to asylum seekers.

Religious freedom matters for asylum seekers because it is essential for them to be able to draw upon everything their religious beliefs provide to them. Moreover, religious freedom is a fundamental human right to which all human beings are entitled, irrespective of immigration status, nationality or religious beliefs.[7] Everyone who values human rights should be concerned with protecting religious freedom because, as Brian J. Grim and Roger Finke (2013:203) have shown, human rights are deeply interconnected and consequently "the denial of religious freedoms is inevitably intertwined with the denial of other freedoms."

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[6] Most asylum seekers arriving in Europe over the last few years have come from countries that, according to Pew Research (2018), have much higher levels of religious commitment than most countries in Europe. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that many of them will highly value their religious beliefs and will want to practise them in their new setting.

[7] In addition to the international and regional human rights provisions for freedom of religion or belief, see also Article 4 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, which requires that refugees receive "at least as favourable" protection of religious freedom as that afforded to the nationals of the signatory state in question.

Freedom of religion is not limited only to the right to hold religious beliefs, but also necessarily includes the right to *practise* those beliefs. This right comprises, among other things, the right to worship and assemble for religious purposes; the right to display and wear religious symbols, including religious clothing; and the right to observe religious holidays and festivals.[8] Of course, the right to practise is not unlimited, but it is absolutely necessary so that people can live in accordance with their religious beliefs.[9]

3. Research methodology

To investigate the knowledge, attitudes, and policies of asylum centre managers concerning religious diversity and religious practice, face-to-face, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted in the first half of 2018 with managers of centres operated by the Danish Red Cross. These interviews were supplemented with interviews and email correspondence with representatives of civil society organisations and religious organisations working closely with asylum seekers in Denmark. All interviewees were assured of anonymity, and therefore measures have been taken to avoid the possibility of deductive disclosure, including the use of fictional names such as 'Manager A.'

At the time of research, the Danish Red Cross operated about half of the asylum centres in Denmark, with local municipalities and the Danish Prisons and Probation Service managing the other half. In total, five asylum centre managers or senior management representatives, who had responsibility for eight 'open' asylum centres were interviewed.[10] This represented about half of the total number of Danish Red Cross-operated asylum centres – although the total number of centres is constantly in flux depending on the need. The Danish Red Cross was the only operator to respond positively to requests for interviews. However, the Danish Red Cross has been managing asylum centres in Denmark for the last 25 years and, as such, is generally considered the leading expert on the topic of their operation.

The assistance of the Danish Red Cross asylum department was indispensable. The asylum department encouraged its managers to respond favourably to inter-

[8] See Bielefeldt et al. (2016), especially Part 1, pp. 55-305.

[9] A human rights analysis of freedom of religion or belief in the context of asylum centres, with a view to defining what religious freedom means in asylum centres is urgently needed. In its absence, this article defines religious freedom in broad reference to the relevant international and regional human rights instruments, namely Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

[10] The term 'open' asylum centres usually includes reception centres (where asylum seekers live while their application is processed) and accommodation centres, and is used in order to necessarily distinguish these types of asylum centres from deportation centres in which the freedom of asylum seekers is more limited.

view requests and also provided useful documents such as the organisation's operational contracts with the Danish Ministry for Immigration and Integration, as well as internal Danish Red Cross documents such as policy guidance and investigative surveys conducted with asylum seekers. These documents were very useful in supplementing and contextualising the information acquired from the interviews.

4. Religious freedom illiteracy

All of the managers interviewed demonstrated a very limited and at best elementary knowledge of the right to freedom of religion or belief. Although they recognised that freedom of religion entails "the right to have a religion"[11] and "the freedom to choose a religion,"[12] they could not articulate a definition that went beyond these statements to encompass the right to practise one's religious beliefs.

Additionally, asylum centre managers receive very little substantive information or guidelines on how to manage religious diversity and other issues related to religious practice. The operating contract between the Danish Immigration Service and the Red Cross explains that "meals should be adapted to the cultural, religious and age composition of the residents [i.e. asylum seekers] as far as possible."[13] But beyond this single fleeting reference, religion is not mentioned anywhere else in the contract.

In light of a growing number of religion-related issues in Danish asylum centres, the Danish Red Cross has issued its own guidelines to its centre managers. They state that "in accordance with the movement's principles in all operations, including compliance with the principle of neutrality … residents should be guaranteed the right to practise their religion, as evidenced by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights."[14] This document also explains that local religious representatives should be permitted to use the notice boards in the asylum centres to advertise religious services, and that asylum centre management teams should be knowledgeable about the opportunities for religious practice in the local community, so that they can advise asylum seekers about these options. The document undoubtedly represents a well-intentioned attempt to educate asylum centre managers about religious freedom, but it offers no specific guidance on such issues as how to handle requests for prayer rooms in asylum centres. Moreover, although all the asylum centre managers interviewed were familiar with the document, they

[11] Interview, asylum centre manager B (22 January 2018).

[12] Interview, asylum centre manager D (19 January 2018).

[13] "Accommodation and Provision for Asylum Seekers at Asylum Centres" (Danish Ministry for Immigration and Integration, December 2018). All such quotations are translated from the original Danish.

[14] "Guidelines for the Handling of Religion in Red Cross Asylum Centres" (September 2017), internal Danish Red Cross document.

were unable to explain its practical significance for their daily work at the asylum centres. Therefore, the managers' illiteracy concerning religious freedom and the paucity of clear guidelines on freedom of religion in asylum centres have significantly negative consequences in terms of how religious diversity and religious practice are managed.

5. Managing religious diversity and conflict

Asylum seekers in Denmark are diverse in nationality, language, culture and religious belief.[15] Although the vast majority of asylum seekers arriving in Denmark over the last few years have come from Muslim-majority countries, not all asylum seekers are Muslim. Indeed, there are substantial groups of Christian asylum seekers and those who do not adhere to any particular religious tradition. People who have converted from Islam to Christianity represent a smaller proportion of asylum seekers, estimated at between 1.5% and 3.5%.[16] However, when addressing religious diversity, one must also account for the diversity within religious traditions and, by extension, amongst individual believers in terms of their beliefs and practices (Wilson and Mavelli 2016).

The mere existence of religious diversity does not mean that conflict is inevitable; however, the very particular and unique environment of an asylum centre provides an increased potential for conflict, or at least misunderstanding, on the basis of religious difference. The heightened levels of religiosity likely to be found amongst asylum seekers find expression in a context in which people are grappling with an ambiguous future and with emotional and psychological trauma, in a setting characterised by limited access to a private or personal space, and by a requirement to share bedrooms and kitchens, often with complete strangers.

Most asylum centre managers, however, saw religion as largely irrelevant in explaining conflict between asylum seekers. For example, one manager said that "religion doesn't matter" in explaining conflict[17] and another said that "we don't have a religion issue" (i.e. religious conflict) at the centres.[18] At the same time, they

[15] Religious diversity here is understood as a descriptive term and does not imply a particular model of management. It should not, for example, be equated with religious pluralism. See, for example Spickard (2017) for a brief but useful discussion of the difference between diversity and pluralism. See also Harvard University's Pluralism Project (https://pluralism.org/from-diversity-to-pluralism).

[16] This figure is based on a simple average of asylum centre managers' estimates. In reality, it is difficult to assemble a reliable picture of the religious demography of Danish asylum centres, because there are no records of this information. Asylum centre management teams do not ask asylum seekers about their religious beliefs on arrival, nor do they have access to the records of the first interview between asylum seekers and the Danish Immigration Service, where the individual's religion is recorded. Moreover, conversions could occur without the managers being aware of them.

[17] Interview, asylum centre manager C (18 January 2018).

[18] Interview, asylum centre manager A (6 January 2018).

described conflicts between asylum seekers, such as one case in which a non-Muslim asylum seeker was verbally abused and called "dirty" and "unclean" by Muslim fellow residents because he was cooking pork in their shared kitchen.[19] In another case, an argument broke out because a Muslim asylum seeker refused to lower the volume of the Islamic call to prayer on his mobile phone.[20] Although religion obviously played some explanatory role in these cases, the managers described the cause of these conflicts as "about something practical"[21] and as the result of "issues of living together"[22] rather than as conflicts over religion.

Undoubtedly, it can be difficult to ascertain the precise causes of any given conflict; for example, there may be differences between the intentions and perceptions of the perpetrator and those of the alleged victim. Moreover, there is often a complex interplay between religious and other factors. But even if religion and religious intolerance are not always the primary explanation for a conflict, it is hard to deny that, at the very least, these conflicts often have religious undertones and that, as such, it makes no sense to remove religion completely from the explanatory equation. In doing so, asylum centre managers reveal an underlying secular bias in their conception of religion as something irrelevant and necessarily relegated entirely to the private sphere. This bias can lead them to ignore the role of religion in these conflicts.

Interestingly, in interviews with representatives of civil and religious organisations, religion-related conflict was viewed as a much more serious problem. These informants were more likely to identify religion, and more specifically religious intolerance, as the primary cause of conflict between residents of asylum centres. The under-reporting of cases of harassment and intimidation to asylum centre managers may explain why the problem is perceived differently by them. One religious organisation representative explained that asylum seekers "do not always feel comfortable sharing [incidents of harassment and intimidation] with the asylum centre management teams."[23] Fears of retribution if an incident is reported to managers and/or concerns about the consequences of a possible police investigation for the individual's asylum application could also explain the discrepancy in how the issue of religion-related conflict is perceived. However, one civil society representative stated in an email that asylum centre managers "don't pay much attention to religious minorities who don't feel secure" and "could try [harder] to work for better protection" of these minorities.[24] Unfortunately, follow-up emails failed to illumi-

[19] Ibid.
[20] Interview, asylum centre manager C (18 January 2018).
[21] Ibid.
[22] Interview, asylum centre manager A (6 January 2018).
[23] Interview, religious/civil society representative B (12 December 2017).
[24] Email correspondence, religious/civil society representative A (November 2017).

nate any further meaning of this somewhat vague statement. But the comments of centre managers help to clarify the situation to some extent.

In terms of not paying attention to claims of harassment and intimidation, some asylum centre managers expressed strong scepticism and suspicion with regard to asylum seekers' claims of harassment and intimidation, regarding them as attempts to secure special treatment. One manager indicated that Christian asylum seekers "reported feelings of insecurity" but that "it was more of a feeling rather than anything actual" and that their situation "is blown out of proportion to sell newspapers."[25] Another manager explained that Christian asylum seekers "use [their reports of harassment and intimidation] as an argument to get more attention; they use religion as a tool for better treatment."[26]

Although all managers affirmed a zero tolerance policy towards all forms of harassment and intimidation, the effectiveness of these policies requires a willingness to accept the role religion can play in conflict situations, and this necessarily entails the suspension of cynical and dismissive attitudes towards claims of harassment and intimidation. Moreover, it also requires asylum seekers to have confidence that their reports of harassment and intimidation will be handled in a proper, fair, and non-prejudicial way.

6. Regulating religious practice

Managers' illiteracy with respect to religious freedom contributed to a situation in which the regulation of religious practice in asylum centres is often incoherent and contradictory. For example, some managers strongly opposed establishing prayer rooms in asylum centres, saying that "providing a prayer room is not our job"[27] and that "religion is a private thing,"[28] whereas others managers expressed openness to the idea. Yet even among those managers who expressed openness to prayer rooms, attitudes were sometimes incoherent. For example, one manager stated that prayer rooms should be used only for private individual worship and not communal worship,[29] whereas another manager said precisely the opposite.[30]

As for religious symbols in asylum seekers' bedrooms, most managers took a very hands-off approach, respecting bedrooms as the residents' private space. However, one manager adopted an unduly invasive approach, explaining that "you [asylum seekers] cannot decorate your rooms. If you have a prayer rug, you have to

[25] Interview, asylum centre manager C (18 January 2018).
[26] Interview, asylum centre manager A (6 January 2018).
[27] Ibid.
[28] Interview, asylum centre manager C (18 January 2018).
[29] Interview, asylum centre manager D (19 January 2018).
[30] Interview, asylum centre manager B (22 January 2018).

take it away after praying. You cannot leave it there. You cannot convert your room into a religious room. If you have something, you have to remove it."[31] Although this manager explained that he was trying to avoid conflict between asylum seekers, this approach is overly cautious and could actually increase the potential for conflict rather than limiting it.

The absence of uniformity and consistency among asylum centre managers was also reflected in whether they permitted local religious communities to advertise on notice boards. Some managers explained that this was permitted while other managers explained that the Red Cross principle of neutrality prevented this – even though the Red Cross guidelines on managing religion in Danish asylum centres explicitly inform managers that this is permissible.[32]

Only the right of asylum seekers to follow a diet in accordance with their religious beliefs was protected across the board. In all asylum centres with a canteen, the managers explained that a vegetarian or halal meal was always served. Beyond this, however, a single and coherent approach to issues of religious practice was absent; instead, the managers' approaches represented a myriad of contrasting and contradictory positions.

7. The principle of neutrality

Asylum centre managers cited various reasons to justify their approaches towards limiting religious practice in asylum centres. Conflict prevention and logistical reasons were sometimes cited, but the requirement to be 'religiously neutral' was by far the most common justification. Managers explained that this was a Red Cross operating principle and that they had to ensure that it was upheld and respected in their centres.[33] However, neutrality, as articulated by the asylum centre managers, was understood in different ways and lacked a single, clear, and universally applicable definition.

On one hand, neutrality at times embodied a restrictive approach to religious practice akin to French *laïcité*, meaning that religion was understood as something private that should be limited to asylum seekers' bedrooms and should not be a part of the public life of the asylum centre. Some managers seemed to equate this kind of secularism with neutrality. However, this is deeply problematic because far from representing a neutral mode of regulation, it actually prioritises secular approaches

[31] Interview, asylum centre manager C (18 January 2018).

[32] Interview, asylum centre manager E (17 May 2018).

[33] Asylum centre managers cited neutrality as one of the Red Cross' seven fundamental principles. See "Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement: Neutrality," International Red Cross (11 April 2016), https://www.icrc.org/en/document/fundamental-principles-red-cross-and-red-crescent.

over religious ones.[34] Although some managers were motivated by a commendable wish to avoid the possibility of conflict, restrictive approaches to religious practice will not always make sense to asylum seekers, whose religiosity pervades all aspects of their lives and cannot be neatly confined to their private activities.

On the other hand, neutrality did not prevent asylum centre managers from placing a Christmas tree, to which undoubtedly some degree of religious significance is attached (Warburg 2017), in public areas of their centres or organising Christmas parties for asylum seekers. Managers justified these practices as introducing asylum seekers to Danish traditions. One of them explained, "We have to prepare them for Danish society. It is our culture and it is important for them to learn about our traditions."[35] Another said this should not be considered problematic "because this is what we do in Denmark."[36] One manager did admit, however, after explaining that songs with explicitly Christian lyrics were sometimes sung at Christmas parties, that there are 'grey lines' in terms of how neutrality can be understood.[37]

In these instances, the managers prioritised not secularism but rather what has been termed Christonormativity (Langer 2019).[38] This means that although they may speak of neutrality with regard to religion, "their thinking moves along Christian norms and they imagine neutrality within Christian frames" (Langer 2019:195), leading to situations where aspects of Christian culture and tradition are privileged over non-Christian ones – even in a context where the vast majority of residents are not Christian. Moreover, such attitudes are also related to wider developments in Danish political discourse, where culturally nationalist conceptions of Danish identity have been fashioned that involve the appropriation of Christianity, and its associated symbols and traditions, as representing the foundational elements of what it means to be Danish. Such nationalist discourse is usually expressed in clear distinction and strong opposition to Islam, and Muslim immigrants and refugees, as incompatible with Danishness (Mouritsen and Oslen 2013; Haugen 2011).

The contention here is not that Christmas trees and Christmas parties in asylum centres are fundamentally problematic, but rather that asylum centre managers should be encouraged to critically re-evaluate and re-examine the partiality of their own assumptions and approaches towards the regulation of religious diversity and practice in asylum centres; whether these assumptions and approaches are rooted

[34] See Ahdar (2013) for a discussion of how secularism, particularly of the hostile kind, cannot be understood as typifying a neutral position.

[35] Interview, asylum centre manager E (17 May 2018).

[36] Interview, asylum centre manager A (6 January 2018).

[37] Interview, asylum centre manager D (19 January 2018).

[38] Although Langer's study concerned Berlin's Neutrality Laws, his critique of these laws carries wider relevance and applicability to other contexts. As Langer writes, his goal is to show "that the West is not a religiously neutral entity" (2019:195).

in secular ideals or religious ideas; and how they could be interpreted by asylum seekers. Additionally, rather than conceiving neutrality in a fictitious zero sum framework, in which the choice is between inevitable conflict or restricting freedom of religion, asylum centre managers could be encouraged to reconceptualise neutrality in a broad, inclusive, and pluralistic way in which a variety of approaches are respected and utilised.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

These research findings represent only a relatively small case study, and one cannot infer that the situation is the same in all Danish Red Cross-operated asylum centres or in centres managed by other operators. However, it is possible to highlight a number of areas of potential improvement.

First, religion and religious freedom absolutely matter for asylum seekers, as a matter of law, and as an anthropological and sociological reality. Therefore, asylum centre managers should be better acquainted with what freedom of religion means generally and specifically within the context of asylum centres. The development of a more comprehensive set of guidelines of both a general and specific character, in conjunction with training seminars or workshops where the meaning and intention of these guidelines are expounded and elaborated, would go a long way towards addressing the religious freedom illiteracy of asylum centre managers. This, of course, would require giving the topic of freedom of religion in asylum centres greater attention than it has received thus far in the field of human rights law. Such work is of utmost importance in addressing the troubling implementation gap between the expressed meaning of religious freedom in international statutes and the reality of religious freedom in asylum centres.

Second, the incoherent and contradictory nature of asylum centre managers' attitudes and policies towards different aspects of religious practice has meant that the various aspects of religious freedom have been managed very differently across centres. Although relatively minor differences in approaches are inevitable and should be tolerated – for example, due to logistics or genuine safety concerns – the overall uniformity of approaches must be ensured so that religious freedom is equally respected and protected in all asylum centres. The guidelines and training seminars proposed above would, of course, go a long way towards achieving this.

Third and finally, a reconceptualisation of the principle of neutrality, through critical analysis of presumed meanings and assumptions, could help to precipitate the construction of a new definition of neutrality freed from secular biases. Asylum centre managers would, in other words, recognise that religion has indeed 'something to do with' their work, for better or for worse – whether in terms of its role in conflict situations in asylum centres or as a supernatural, spiritual and material

source of respite and well-being for asylum seekers. Moreover, this reconceptualised neutrality would embrace a plurality of approaches and attitudes, including the viewing of asylum seekers' religiosity as a resource rather than as something irrelevant and problematic.

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