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Becoming Non-Religious: Exploring the Emotional Experiences of Apostasy and Refugee Status Determination

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ABSTRACT

Leaving religion is a profoundly emotional process that is experienced and expressed in various ways. Those labelled as 'apostates' (individuals who leave a religion) in societies with restrictions on blasphemy and/or apostasy undergo a particularly unique experience, yet their accounts remain absent in research on non-religion and forced migration. This paper aims to address this gap by foregrounding the role of emotion across three stages of the refugee journey: leaving a religion in societies with restrictions on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB), the challenges in proving apostasy during Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures, and the dynamics of belonging, identity, and recognition after asylum. Drawing on qualitative analysis of international human rights law, Home Office asylum policies, and interviews with both individuals with lived experience of seeking asylum in the UK (n = 12) and human rights advocates (n = 22), this study shows how fear, grief and relief shape (non-)religious identity construction. The findings suggest that these emotional dynamics, coupled with complex identity reconstructions, create inherent risks for successful bureaucratic recognition. By exploring these affective dimensions, this paper offers insights into how non-religious refugees construct their identities and the shortcomings of RSD processes for claims of apostasy. These findings connect the fields of non-religion and forced migration, which are often treated as separate, to deepen scholarly understanding of the process of becoming non-religious. In doing so, it emphasises the need for asylum systems to better engage with the lived realities of apostasy.

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INTRODUCTION

Individuals who leave their religion and become non-religious are classified as 'apostates', a term denoting the act of apostasy, which signifies a 'disaffiliation from a religious tradition' (Streib and Klein 2013). Disaffiliation usually includes renouncing a group's foundational beliefs and values (Cottee 2015). As such, becoming non-religious represents a profound transformation for those previously identifying as religious, generally involving the dismantling of a previous identity, belief system, and way of life while adapting to new ones. The experiential and deeply emotional nature of this process is exacerbated within contexts of forced migration. In such situations, individuals may not have openly expressed their non-religious identities until their asylum claim, when their lives depend on it. Focusing on the experiences of apostates within an asylum-seeking context, this paper argues that non-religious refugees face unique emotional challenges, including ones that hinder their ability to manifest their freedom *from* religion, to articulate their identities within Refugee Status Determination (RSD), and to navigate social recognition post-asylum.

The social scientific research on leaving religion has readily discussed how experiences related to apostasy can be emotionally demanding, harming mental health and psychological well-being (e.g., Nica 2020). Current research has also considered how becoming non-religious can be a positive journey that encourages new perspectives and a more 'embodied'[1] way of living, fostering a renewed sense of belonging in everyday life (e.g., Lee 2015). However, the emotional dynamics involved with apostate refugees who have both left a religion and their country due to social and legal repercussions are largely omitted from sociological research (with the exception of Laws 2024).

Compounding this emotional invisibility is a broader conceptual limitation within the sub-discipline. Historically, the sociology of religion has been rooted in Eurocentric perspectives, focusing primarily on those leaving Christianity in Euro-American contexts (e.g., Cotter 2020; Lee 2015). While there is a small but growing interest in non-religious patterns among individuals from an Islamic background, for example, Morocco, Egypt, Turkey and Bangladesh (e.g., Eller and Khazaal 2024), the Eurocentric roots of the sociology of religion have produced 'the very idea of a nonbelieving Muslim, let alone an atheist Muslim, [as] counterintuitive if not inconceivable' (Eller and Khazaal 2024: 1).

This bias has neglected apostates' experiences beyond these geographies and religious backgrounds, reinforcing a narrow understanding of apostasy that ignores diverse socio-cultural and legal contexts. Thus, a significant gap persists regarding the emotional and legal trajectories of apostates of those struggling to exercise their right to be non-religious. By failing to engage with the 'lived' and emotional dimensions of disaffiliation, scholars have overlooked the profound material, psychological, and social consequences of leaving religion in varied global contexts. This paper addresses these omissions by exploring the emotional journeys of refugee apostates from highly religious environments beyond the Euro-American sphere, thereby underscoring the role of power dynamics in state-managed protection. By doing so, this paper advocates for improved Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes that integrate empathetic, lived realities into assessment frameworks.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF EMOTIONS IN RELIGION AND FORCED MIGRATION

Sociologically, emotions are a fundamental lens for understanding how human life is experienced in the world (Bericat 2015). Emotion has been defined as a lived, situated, and temporally embodied experience that transforms an individual's reality (Denzin 1984: 66). Applying this to journeys away from religion provides a crucial analytical tool for examining several key areas. First, using emotions as an analytical tool helps reveal the micro-level social processes of how non-religion is enacted and sustained in everyday life. Second, attending to both the positive and negative emotions associated with leaving religion, such as grief, fear, and relief, allows for a richer understanding of how apostate identities are constructed and sustained (Ammerman 2021), revealing how people live, navigate, and sometimes detach from religious traditions. Third, in contexts where blasphemy and apostasy laws restrict public expression, non-religious identities are often internally held and invisible; these emotional complexities collide with the bureaucratic requirements of Refugee Status Determination (RSD) that often demand that applicants provide a logical, coherent account of their worldviews (Potter, under review).

In parallel, social science research regarding emotions in asylum have found that assessors hold preconceived assumptions about the 'appropriate' emotional expressions, such as how fear or sincerity should be embodied (e.g., Kobelinsky 2019). Similarly, the importance of 'looking credible' is raised in the literature of asylum decision-making, discussing how credible applicants tend to conform to stereotypes (Rogers, Fox and Herlihy 2014). In non-religious asylum cases, certain emotional markers are frequently treated as proxies for an 'authentic' narrative (Laws 2024). This creates a requirement for 'emotional legibility,' where the claimant's internal state must be translated into a performance that the institutional 'gaze' recognises as valid (see Potter, forthcoming). However, this paper argues that the intense emotional strain of apostasy can actually impede an individual's ability to provide the linear and logical testimony required by officials, creating an inherent conflict between the lived reality of trauma and the rigid expectations of bureaucratic recognition.

REFUGEE STATUS DETERMINATION (RSD) AND THE ROLE OF RELIGION

In the UK, the Home Office is responsible for assessing asylum claims under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (known as the 'Refugee Convention'), which requires applicants to demonstrate a 'well-founded fear of persecution' based on factors like religion (UN General Assembly 1951). This process is psychologically challenging and high-risk, as decisions can literally be a matter of life or death. Despite its gravity, the RSD process has faced decades of criticism for inconsistent decision-making, bias, and a reliance on stereotypical judgments (Schuster 2020).

Refugee Status Determination (RSD) policies, guidance and practice for religion-based asylum claims have focused on more common instances of religious persecution, such as conversion *to* a religion. As a result, non-religion is often marginalised, usually within the broader category of world religions. In practice, this prevents non-religion from receiving the recognition it deserves as a distinct and significant identity (McAdam 2017) and as an important factor in proving the risk of persecution. While there is a vast body of research considering religion-based asylum claims (e.g., Rose and Öztürk 2024), there is limited focus on *non*-religious individuals seeking asylum. Consequently, little is known about how the UK asylum system handles the unique challenges faced by non-religious individuals whose 'lived' experience of leaving religion does not fit conventional bureaucratic templates.

The UK Home Office does not currently record or publish data categorised by religious identity or the specific grounds of apostasy (as of the time at writing). Consequently, the annual volume of such claims remains statistically invisible. However, on a global scale, a significant proportion of migrants identify as having no religious affiliation (Pew Research Center 2024). It is therefore reasonable to infer that the criminalisation of apostasy in countries of origin is reflected in the UK's asylum intake, even if these claims are not explicitly tracked as a distinct category. Although not explicitly mentioned in the Refugee Convention, national asylum policies[2] recognise that apostasy poses a human rights risk and that non-religious beliefs can be grounds for persecution. For religion-based asylum claims (broadly conceived), the UK Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs) outline how to assess credibility in the following way:

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

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

However, there are distinct challenges in the assessment of apostasy within Refugee Status Determination (RSD). The guidance above states that asylum assessments are conducted to determine if a claimant 'genuinely adheres' to the religion or belief, how they observe it, and whether this would put them at risk.

Nixon (2018), one of the first to examine non-religious asylum claims explicitly and distinct from religious-conversion claims, explains how inconsistent legal definitions of religion, limited Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) support, and the absence of observable practices make credibility particularly difficult to establish in asylum status determination procedures. Subsequent research from legal scholars has expanded the field, such as Van Schaik and Hillary's (2023) legal analysis on the recognition of apostasy in international law. Laws (2024) documents the emotional and evidentiary challenges faced by applicants in Europe, where non-belief is often assimilated into conversion claims or dismissed as a lifestyle choice. Together, this scholarship demonstrates the conceptual and procedural obstacles non-religious asylum seekers face and underscores the need for further empirical studies on their experiences of apostasy.

Drawing on the social psychological research on leaving religion, non-belief is primarily considered a personal experience (Selim et al. 2023). Brown's (2017) research on 'becoming atheist' (in the 'West') highlights the challenge of articulating non-religiosity because 'it is a negative or absent category, no theology, little history and, for the first-generation atheist and indifferentist, [there are] rarely any family traditions or recollections of unbelief to recall' (2017: 71). Brown goes on to raise the question of how one can speak about being an atheist, especially when the process of becoming was gradual:

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

This gradual and deeply personal nature of deconversion can become a fundamental problem when evaluating apostasy and its credibility within Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes. This relates to findings concerning sexuality-based asylum cases, where claimants have heightened levels of mistrust in sharing their stories with people in power, and the fear of disbelief

heightens the risks of disclosure (Vitikainen and Lenard 2024). This again highlights the importance of emotions, such as internalised shame and guilt related to stigma stemming from the home-country context, silencing expression and affecting asylum-seeking (Berg and Millbank 2009). Concerningly, like non-religion, sexuality may not be externally verifiable, compelling applicants to 'come out' to substantiate their claims, putting themselves at increased risk (Selim et al. 2022; Berg and Millbank 2009). Likewise, the emotional toll of proving one's risk of persecution has resulted in some applicants taking risky means of demonstrating their apostasy (see Laws 2024).

Altogether, an analysis that foregrounds emotions offers critical insights into the lived experience of leaving religion and how apostate asylum seekers navigate the complexities of the asylum process. By tracing emotions such as fear, shame, and grief throughout these trajectories, it becomes possible to see how emotional aspects influence the act of leaving religion. It also shows how these impact apostates' ability to prove their credibility and how ambivalence persists even after their refugee status is confirmed, as they continue to seek belonging and recognition. Emotions thus serve as an important perspective for understanding both the personal transformation of renouncing religion and the structural workings of asylum systems, illustrating the lived experience of apostasy and the ways asylum-seekers construct their 'sense of self' (see Frada 2024).

METHODS

This paper draws on qualitative data collected through a doctoral research project exploring apostasy asylum claims in the UK. The data collection took place from March 2023 to December 2023, until a sufficient number of participants had been interviewed for data saturation, as indicated by the detection of recurring themes and patterns.

Three types of data were identified as essential for exploring asylum claims related to apostasy: the narratives of human rights advocates, refugees, and relevant documentary data. The data, therefore, includes semi-structured interviews with individuals from a refugee background who have (or are seeking) asylum in the UK upon grounds of their apostasy (n = 12), semi-structured interviews with human rights advocates (n = 22), and a range of the Home Office's Asylum Policy Instructions (APIs) and Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) relevant to credibility assessments and religious persecution.

The refugee informants were from diverse countries with varying social, legal, and cultural tolerances toward apostasy and blasphemy. Each had unique experiences of leaving religion, arriving in the UK and being assessed

for asylum. However, they all shared a common experience of facing the fear of persecution for their beliefs and navigating asylum bureaucratic processes based on their non-religious identity. The participants with experience of claiming asylum comprised males (n = 10) and females (n = 2). Countries of origin included Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Maldives, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh.[3] Interviews were conducted online or in person, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews with people from a refugee background lasted between 40 minutes and three hours. Although there were no specific selection criteria for apostates from Islam, all participants in this study had left the Islamic faith. As a result, this research focuses on individuals who have departed from Islam.

To strengthen the analysis and to capture professional perspectives on the barriers faced by non-religious asylum seekers, human rights advocates were also interviewed. While often described in the literature as 'elites,' these participants are referred to here as human rights advocates to reflect their direct involvement in supporting non-religious asylum seekers and refugees. The human rights advocates included legal professionals, such as solicitors, legal advisers, and a barrister, as well as advocates working within Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) dedicated to promoting Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB). Collectively, they represented a diverse range of roles, levels of expertise, and lengths of professional experience in assisting apostate refugees. Although their roles and levels of seniority varied, all participants possessed extensive experience navigating the procedural challenges inherent in apostasy-based claims. The higher number of advocate interviews relative to refugee participants reflects both the practical challenges of accessing vulnerable populations and the value of capturing the broader institutional perspectives held by these professionals. Individual interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in duration.

In addition to interviews, this study draws on content analysis of the purposively selected documentary data. I analysed the policy documents utilised by the Home Office during the time of fieldwork, most relevant in asylum determination cases. These consisted of the 'Asylum Policy Instructions' (APIs), such as the 'Assessing Credibility' guidance (Home Office 2022a; 2022b)[4] and Country Policy and Information Notes (CPINs) (Home Office 2024).

The ethics board at the University of Sheffield approved this research (application number: 049626). The study was conducted adhering to ethical guidelines adopted by the University of Oxford Refugee Studies Centre (2007) and the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (2018). As ethics are particularly important in research involving potentially 'vulnerable' participants, the study design considered possible ethical dilemmas involved with interviewing

asylum seekers. These include, but are not limited to, creating safe research environments, doing no harm, and preventing victimisation (Cintra de Oliveira Tavares 2023). During the interviews, I was aware of the risk of re-traumatisation for participants through the recall of sensitive events. Therefore, I gathered verbal and written consent outlining these risks. I also employed an 'iterative' approach to consent, which involves gaining consent at multiple stages of the research process (Mackenzie, McDowell and Pittaway 2007) and made myself available for questions for all the participants for the whole duration of the research.[5]

Rather than seeking generalisability or representativeness, this paper provides a focused snapshot of the unique experiences associated with the phenomenon under study. The following sections first explore how emotions facilitate an understanding of leaving religion within highly religious environments and shape the subsequent transition to non-religion. Second, the analysis unpacks the emotional strain inherent in proving apostasy during the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process. The final section examines the persistence of these emotions after asylum is obtained, as former believers navigate the complexities of belonging, identity, and social recognition within a new, cross-border context.

LEAVING RELIGION IN A HIGHLY RELIGIOUS ENVIRONMENT

Journeys of apostasy are deeply personal and shaped by individuals' social, cultural, and political contexts. Leaving religion in a highly religious environment can evoke a range of conflicting emotions, including relief and acceptance, as well as guilt and loneliness (Cottee 2015). During interviews, participants were asked about their upbringing, and most relayed how religion was a central aspect. All 12 participants from a refugee background were raised in countries where the Islamic faith was predominantly practised, and Islam played a significant role in their lives during their formative years. For example, Ayaz was raised in Pakistan and was in his late 20s when he claimed asylum. He described his upbringing in relation to religious practice:

> I was born in Pakistan and raised in an Orthodox Salafi Muslim family. Growing up, Islam represented everything for me like any big life [event]… you need to build your life on, everything is based on Islam. (Ayaz, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, COO Pakistan)

Many of the informants reported negative feelings of having to practice religion, noting that the frequency of praying was consuming in their previous, highly religious contexts. For example, Raliya explained that the expectation to pray five times a day and the ways she felt praying was imposed upon her became too much, causing emotional strain:

> You're supposed to understand and pray five times a day, like, I hate the prayer part. Imagine having to do this five times a day… it's too much for one to handle, and then you are being told that without this prayer, you're going to hell, so imagine the trauma. You want to keep up with this prayer, but it's just too much in a day then you have to repeat it the next day. (Raliya, date of asylum 2023, aged 40s, COO Nigeria)

Mirroring the experiences of disaffiliates in other cultural contexts, informants described a growing realisation that their attributed religious identity was fundamentally at odds with their internal convictions, thoughts, and emotional states (Cottee 2015). In the early stages of recognising this process, many participants reported feeling lonely and identified adverse effects on their well-being. As one example, Rashid, a refugee from Pakistan, described this loneliness leading to a 'depression mode':

> Now, I think for me, previously, maybe I would say I don't have a reason in my life. I was in a depression mode. I went into some sort of a depression when I became an atheist because I started to feel lonely. I started to feel like I don't have anyone around me who I can communicate. (Rashid, date of asylum 2018, aged 27, COO Pakistan)

Similarly, Raliya described her experiences of depression, 'I was always depressed and stuff. So, 2018. I stopped praying. I was so angry. I wasn't very safe mentally. I was in a very dark place. I would cry a lot and out' (Raliya), showing how leaving Islam can be an 'emotional rollercoaster' (Richter 2023: 120).

Cottee (2015) conceptualises the apostate trajectory through three distinct stages: the 'pre-apostasy,' 'apostasy,' and 'post-apostasy' phases. The 'pre-apostasy' stage is characterised by nascent questioning and religious doubt, often manifesting in a sense that something 'isn't right' (2015: 33). The loneliness of the participants in their 'pre-apostasy' stage shows how these internal misgivings do not exist in a social vacuum; rather, they foster a profound sense of marginalisation and alienation, as respondents' private convictions become increasingly incongruent with the religious consensus of their wider community.

As a result of being disconnected from the religious majority and its social norms in their country of origin, participants expressed sensations of being trapped, caged, censored, and imprisoned. For example, Nadia

(refugee from Saudi Arabia) described that she had 'the feeling of being stuck there, being imprisoned in the country'. Raliya, from Northern Nigeria, felt ostracised in her community when she withdrew from praying and began posting critiques of religion on social media, stating, 'Everyone resented me. Everyone hated me because they felt I was doing something that I shouldn't be doing'. Since religious conformity was compulsory and apostasy was not accepted in the participants' home countries, these individuals sought protection in the UK due to fears of persecution for their non-religious beliefs.

The above accounts from refugee participants highlight the emotional strain of leaving one's religion in a highly religious context. Psychological research on the impact of trauma on the credibility assessment of asylum seekers has argued that extreme stress can affect the emotional behaviour of asylum applicants, including affecting memory and testimony, which can result in inconsistencies appearing (Roger, Fox and Herlihy 2014). The following section traces these personal experiences of leaving religion to the emotional strain involved in proving apostasy during the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) processes.

EMOTIONS, CREDIBILITY, AND THE BARRIERS TO PROVING APOSTASY IN REFUGEE STATUS DETERMINATION

Emotions play a crucial yet often overlooked role in legal processes, shaping both how asylum seekers present their claims and how decision-makers assess credibility. The emotional complexities of apostasy, such as ones marked by fear, guilt, and shame, are amplified when an individual's safety hinges on their ability to convince sceptical host states of their authenticity (Eastmond, 2007). This can lead to challenges in three main ways: difficulties in articulating apostasy credibly, the lack of objective evidence for non-religious identities, and the emotional burden of navigating a culture of disbelief. As mentioned, these difficulties become more evident when asylum claims are based on identity markers that are not immediately visible, such as non-religion (see Tskhay and Rule 2013).

As outlined, the UK asylum framework is structurally oriented toward traditional, institutionalised 'religion', a focus that frequently results in the oversight of non-religious forms of persecution (UK Government 2025). Consequently, Home Office criteria for conversion and minority group claims frequently fail to account for individuals fleeing apostasy-related violence or non-belief (Home Office 2022a; 2022b). This was discussed by several informants, including Sophie, a spokesperson for Humanists International, who advocates for individuals seeking asylum due to apostasy. In her research interview, she noted that non-religion is often ignored as a valid reason for asylum claims:

> I think that there is a lack of understanding that the right 'freedom of religion or belief' applies to the non-religious as a ground and that being non-religious, they just think that's not something that has kind of has intrinsic value to that person that means something to them so it wouldn't be harmful in any way for them to go home and to just not talk about it and pretend. (Sophie, Humanists International)

As a result of this ambiguity, the non-religious asylum seekers in this study experienced frustration, as they found that their identities are disbelieved, misrepresented, or misunderstood by decision-makers. At his screening interview, Murad (refugee participant) felt that his appearance and his claim were also taken by surprise by border officials. In his words, 'They ask you about your religion as well. They asked me and I said, "I'm an atheist". They just looked at each other and said, "Wow, we have a new one"'.

In addition to the vagueness of whether non-religion is included within asylum protection (e.g., the UNHCR's Handbook 2019), a key challenge for apostasy-based asylum claims is the ability to provide objective evidence. Asylum claims based on grounds of religious conversion can be substantiated by providing baptism certificates, demonstrating church attendance (Laws 2024), having a religious wedding, or presenting proof of participation at congregations (Fossdal 2024). However, non-religious identities such as atheists frequently lack comparable evidence. Thus, non-religious claimants must work harder to prove that atheism or apostasy constitutes a legitimate risk in their country of origin, which has specific emotional effects.

The participants from a refugee background discussed a range of stressful experiences they had when trying to articulate their stories to asylum assessors. For example, Ahmed described his position in relation to the asylum assessor as one of unequal power dynamics: 'I'm an asylum seeker. Do you know what I mean? To them, an asylum seeker is like an ant crawling. You are a person with no standing, no legal standing, nothing'. Nadia, a refugee, made similar reflections:

> It's traumatic because this is extremely hard and just understanding the vulnerable position that the other person is in. They're talking about very traumatic things and then getting safety depends on you believing them. At that moment, you have so much power over this person, so much power, like you have to be a bit more emphatic. (Nadia)

For a positive outcome in Refugee Status Determination (RSD), asylum seekers depend on 'having their stories heard and believed' (Eastmond 2007: 259). However, some researchers argue that through focusing on an

assessment of credibility, along with the rising political emphasis on border control, the asylum system has fostered a 'culture of disbelief' (Anderson et al. 2014). Thus, from the outset, there is an assumption that asylum seekers are 'liars', which in some instances leads to the outright rejection of their claims (ibid).

For apostasy-based claims, in a similar vein to sexuality-based asylum cases, the culture of disbelief is particularly acute because of the subjective nature of their identities. Immigration lawyer, Harper, reflected that the burden of proof is unfair, especially when apostasy has been undisclosed or kept private, as decision-makers may believe there is no real fear of persecution:

> I have to say, in my experience, and I'm happy to say this out loud, that the way the Home Office deals with asylum seekers is from a point of disbelief. They don't believe you right at the beginning... But the law also says that the burden is on the claimant, the asylum seeker to prove that they are a genuine asylum seeker, it's just that sometimes the burden is not fair the extent, because there are certain things that it's just difficult, I said being an atheist, being LGBT too, sometimes is very... how do you prove it? (Harper, immigration lawyer)

During the research interview, Miriam, a human rights advocate experienced in supporting apostate asylum cases, believed that the subjective nature of non-religiosity leads to a general tendency to dismiss or disbelieve non-religious belief systems:

> The culture of the Home Office is there to turn people down at the end of the day. It's an adversarial system. So, there are certain grounds which I think the asylum assessors are kind of belligerent towards – nuanced cases and nuanced belief systems that they don't understand. (Miriam, a human rights advocate)

Thus, the burden of proof is emotionally draining, as it requires applicants to relive past traumas while at the same time articulating their journeys coherently and logically. In the British asylum system, recognition hinges on demonstrating a 'well-founded fear of persecution,' thus emotions are not incidental but integral to the negotiation of protection, where the success of a claimant's case partly depends on their ability to provide adequate testimony and evidence.

Research on the RSD process has found that the asylum process itself puts pressure on asylum applicants to create objective proof to become 'believable victims' (Kagan 2015). For non-religious asylum claims, Laws (2024) found that, due to the burden of proof, two interlocutors resorted to recording themselves burning the Quran. Although no participants in this research project took such extremes, a human rights advocate reflected on the burden of proof and the risks involved for apostates to evidence their beliefs:

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

Therefore, while all individuals seeking asylum may find it challenging to meet the Home Office's burden of proof, apostasy claims introduce additional complexities that necessitate intense emotional labour. As Mousin (2003) notes, individuals persecuted for their faith or belief struggle to substantiate their claims because such fear of persecution, though profoundly damaging, may not leave physical evidence: 'persons of faith or holding beliefs, for which they have suffered, have had difficulties meeting their burdens of proof because violence against faith or belief may violate their conscience but fails to leave physical scars' (p. 575). This observation resonates with the situation of non-religious asylum seekers, many of whom conceal their identities to avoid harm and, consequently, cannot provide material evidence of persecution, or put themselves at risk by being forced to 'perform' their non-religiosity.

In conclusion, for non-religious asylum seekers, the asylum interview itself becomes a site of emotional struggle, where they must relive past traumas while facing scepticism from decision-makers. The culture of disbelief within the asylum system means that expressions of fear, distress, or frustration can be misinterpreted as exaggeration or fabrication, further marginalising non-religious identities within asylum assessment procedures. It can also result in asylum seekers feeling compelled to 'come out' or display their non-religious stance in a performative way, such as by burning the Quran (as observed in Laws' study). This section has emphasised the emotional toll these challenges take on individuals with lived experience of persecution, aiming to foster a more compassionate understanding of how Refugee Status Determination (RSD) affects people, beyond purely legal perspectives.

EMOTIONS AFTER ASYLUM: BELONGING, IDENTITY AND SOCIAL RECOGNITION

As discussed earlier, personal stories of apostates reveal how emotions are intertwined with the journeys of the non-religious across different phases: pre-apostasy, during apostasy, claiming asylum, and post-apostasy with refugee status in the UK. This section specifically addresses the emotional difficulties involved in developing new identities, finding a sense of belonging, and feeling acknowledged within society in a new context.

Refugee participants experienced hardships in coming to terms with developing a new sense of identity distinct from Islam, an identity that was deeply embedded in the religious system. Discussing her departure from her religion and country, Nadia explained:

> So, I never wanted to do it. I know how hard it is, and I know what a big decision is to not be able to return to your home country, where you grew up and community. That's why I was trying to keep it to myself. (Nadia, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, COO Saudi Arabia)

Hassan expressed a profound reluctance to abandon his faith, noting that because his entire worldview had been constructed through a religious lens, apostasy required a total cognitive and existential realignment. He struggled to articulate the magnitude of this shift, yet he described the emotional fallout of his departure as follows:

> I didn't want to let go of religion because a lot of my... how do I explain this? A lot of my worldview, a lot of my worldview was based on religious things and taking that away from it basically crashed my whole perception of the world. (Hassan, date of asylum 2022, aged 20s, COO Maldives)

Ayaz similarly described a pervasive fear he saw rooted in his upbringing; the internalised belief that apostasy from Islam invited divine retribution or a 'curse'. This continued to exert a powerful emotional influence even as he intellectually navigated his departure from the faith:

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

These findings connect with broader research examining the journey of leaving religion that suggests many individuals experience a significant shift in their identity

(Beaman and Tomlins 2015; Brinkerhoff and Burke 1980; Streib 2021), and individuals can experience a loss of family and friends, a sense of meaning and purpose, and a sense of belonging (Nica 2020). As Cottee articulates:

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

When receiving refugee status, the journey is not over, and emotions are involved in settling down and building new communities and networks. Apostate refugees can struggle to 'fit in' and negotiate their identities in the UK. A lawyer who has supported apostate refugees in their asylum claims explained, 'So often it's like this is a narrative, you'll come to the UK and you'll be free and stuff, and you're not, it really messes with people' (Laura, an immigration lawyer).

Non-religious refugees also pose specific challenges to dominant ideas of 'belonging' within refugee populations. Unlike religious conversion, individuals can find a sense of belonging through their new religious communities, such as attending church, where refugees are welcomed and included (see Morgan 2024). Being accepted into new communities gives refugees a sense of purpose and place in society; however, for the non-religious who do not tend to gather in such groups or have official meeting places like churches or mosques, it becomes more challenging to establish a sense of belonging.

This was brought up across the interviews with people from a refugee background. Ahmed described his personal struggles with navigating life with refugee status in the UK:

> You struggle to find friends, even the ex-Muslims, they are very scared of talking to each other because they are paranoid someone will report them, especially if you're living in a community that is Muslim based. (Ahmed)

This echoes Cottee's (2015) research, as he found from interviews with his ex-Muslim respondents that 'Islam never left them because leaving it had been so difficult and so traumatic that they never fully recovered from it' (p. 206).

In contrast to these experiences, the individuals from a refugee background in this study also experienced a sense of relief when they received their asylum status, enabling them to start their new lives, which is closely linked to positive feelings of belonging.

> To realise, there are people like me, there are some people who've been through. It's not unique. I'm not cursed. Maybe why not look up who these people are. I looked it up and realised, there are people who call themselves ex-Muslims. They are people who are building a life after Islam without the need of religion. (Ayaz)

For some, becoming non-religious involved finding new communities, and this was essential for emotional healing. Some connect with secular and humanist organisations, while others build relationships through work, education, or activism. The ability to share experiences with others who understand their journey is a key factor in overcoming isolation and fostering a sense of belonging.

These dynamics create a remarkably complex notion of belonging for ex-Muslim communities in the UK. This is difficult to fully capture using mainstream migration scholarship, which often views belonging mainly through religion and faith-based integration (Knott 2016). Specifically, belonging is challenged because non-religion is typically seen as a personal, internal belief. Conversely, non-religion can also serve to forge a sense of belonging, especially through the construction of a positive identity, such as humanism. These intricate dynamics within the lives of apostate refugees are still largely unexplored in social science literature and could be further specified in future studies.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the intersection of non-religion and forced migration, highlighting the profound, yet often invisible, emotional labour involved in the apostate refugee journey. By moving beyond Eurocentric frameworks of secularisation, the study demonstrates that leaving religion in contexts of high religious restriction is not merely a cognitive shift in belief, but an embodied and affective transformation. This process is marked by a complex interplay of fear, grief, and relief, emotions that are often silenced by the social and legal risks of apostasy.

Theoretically, this research bridges the disparate fields of non-religion and forced migration studies. While apostate refugees represent a distinct demographic, their experiences, characterised by forced compliance, heightened trauma, and the legal precariousness of displacement, have been largely absent from the literature. By integrating the sociology of emotions, this study reframes apostasy as a form of 'lived non-religion,' where the transition is a radical reconfiguration of identity rather than a simple change in conviction. Consequently, these findings expand the sociology of religion by centring the visceral, embodied experiences of those navigating disaffiliation across borders.

At a societal level, an emotional lens highlights the relational and political dimensions of apostasy. It reveals how the transition to non-religion is judged, sanctioned, or resisted across both micro and macro scales. Because legal apparatuses, such as blasphemy laws, and entrenched cultural intolerances, often force non-belief into the private sphere, these lived experiences remain critically under-researched. This paper addresses this gap by illustrating the complex trajectories of apostates as they navigate the transition to non-religious identities within highly restrictive environments.

Furthermore, this analysis uncovers a critical tension within the UK's Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process. Current asylum literature often fails to account for how internal emotional shifts conflict with rigid 'credibility' requirements. Within the RSD framework, the state assesses claimants based on how their emotional performances align with institutional expectations of 'sincere' belief or 'genuine' fear. By failing to recognise the non-linear nature of apostasy-related trauma, the system risks misinterpreting authentic, albeit fragmented, testimonies as inconsistent. Centring emotions thus serves as a dual lens: it highlights the personal reality of apostasy and exposes the bureaucratic power dynamics through which the state regulates protection.

Ultimately, this research underscores the necessity of a more empathetic, trauma-sensitive approach within the asylum system. Recognising the intense emotional labour involved in proving one's non-belief is a prerequisite for ensuring that apostate refugees are treated with dignity. By advocating for support tailored to the specific needs of non-religious claimants before, during, and after their legal cases, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by apostates and the urgent need for the protection of their fundamental rights.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Data and materials supporting the analyses in this article are not available due to the sensitive nature of the information and the requirements of confidentiality agreements with participants.

NOTES

1   Embodiment describes the engagement of the body with the world, including the relationship between people's bodies and their social contexts. Embodiment is relevant hereas it explains how social, cultural and religious practices are lived through and expressed by the body (see Jacobson et al. 2016).

2   Home Office draws on 'Asylum Policy Instructions' (APIs) when evaluating asylum claims. The primary guidance for assessing credibility is the document *Assessing Credibility* (Home Office 2022a; 2022b), which includes a section on 'Religious Conversion and Apostasy'.

3　Interviews were conducted in English without a translator present. This was due to several reasons: first, most participants were confident in their English skills. Additionally, there was systemic distrust of translators, particularly in apostasy cases. Financial constraints in PhD research also hindered the ability to afford a translator.

4　This document has two versions. One applies to claims made before June 2022, covering nine refugee participants of this study (Home Office 2022a). The other outlines guidance for claims made after June 2022, applicable to three of the participants (Home Office 2022b). These dates are important because the Nationality and Borders Act (NABA) came into effect in the UK on 27/04/2022, changing the way credibility is evaluated. Under NABA (2022), asylum claims submitted after June 2022 are reviewed in two stages (see, Home Office 2022b), though broadly guidance on apostasy remained the same.

5　A consent form was mandatory for all participants to sign to take part. The consent form confirmed the participants' understanding of the research's purpose, how their data would be utilised, and their right to withdraw from the study.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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