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Conceptualising Identity Transformations of the Apostate Refugee through Un/Learning

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sor**Lucy Elizabeth Potter¹****Abstract**

This article proposes an analytical framework of ‘un/learning’ to conceptualise the non-linear identity transformations of ex-Muslim refugees in the UK. While previous studies on leaving religion (apostasy) focus on populations in secularised contexts, identity shifts from Christian traditions and non-displaced individuals, this study addresses an empirical and theoretical gap: the lived experience of apostasy from Islam within the precarity of forced displacement. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 12 refugees who sought asylum in the United Kingdom (UK) due to fear of persecution for apostasy, I argue that ‘leaving’ religion occurs through simultaneous and iterative experiences of: (1) learning religion through everyday life; (2) unlearning religion through processes shaped by gendered, classed and political identities; and (3) learning non-religion, whereby participants develop new ways of knowing and being within the precarious context of displacement. By engaging with and extending the un/learning framework, I utilise rich original data to portray identity transformation as a (re)negotiation of learning, unlearning and relearning. In doing so, the study advances non-religion and asylum studies by revealing how identity is shaped through the overlapping pressures of displacement, deconversion and bureaucratic assessment. More broadly, this framework provides a lens for examining other contexts of identity transformation, such as those related to gender, culture or politics, where individuals must simultaneously unlearn inherited frameworks and relearn their place in the world.

Keywords

apostasy, Muslim, refugees, un/learning, United Kingdom

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Introduction: The Apostate Refugee

I was not happy with myself, quite alone, isolated and then the realisation of what was happening kicked in, maybe I was no longer Muslim? . . . If I'm not Muslim, am I even Pakistani? (Karim, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, Pakistan)

Karim's account captures the complexities inherent in the identity transformations of apostate refugees. This article argues that leaving religion is not only characterised by a change in belief or worldview; it is also an embodied and affective experience that relates to broader forms of cultural and national belonging. Despite the significance of such transformations, current conceptualisations of ex-Muslim identities remain limited, largely confined to non-displaced populations and/or those residing in the Global North (e.g. Cottee, 2015; Enstedt, 2019; Vlieg, 2021). While the sociology of non-religion has effectively mapped how individuals move away from religion in stable, non-displaced settings (e.g. van Nieuwkerk, 2018), it has yet to fully account for those who are simultaneously displaced under conditions of persecution. Concurrently, migration research frequently overlooks the identities of the apostate refugee by focusing on how *religion* facilitates integration and belonging (e.g. Levitt, 2007), thereby failing to theorise the profound identity disruptions that occur when displacement coincides with the active rejection of one's religious origin.

Bridging the gaps between these fields, this article builds on recent research that applies a 'lived' lens to conceptualising leaving religion, focusing specifically on those shaped by iterative practices of 'un/learning' (see Knott, 2024; van den Brandt & Rantala, 2024). As an emerging analytical tool, un/learning refers to the intertwined processes of questioning, relinquishing and reconstructing religious and non-religious ways of knowing, being and belonging. By moving beyond traditional theories that characterise leaving religion as a linear, stage-based process, which implicitly reinforces the religion/secular binary, the concept of un/learning captures an oscillation between passive and active identity transformations whilst also accounting for the wider socio-political landscape in which individuals live and move. Extending this framework, I adapt it to analyse the high-stakes identity negotiations of apostate refugees, responding to recent calls for enhanced conceptual clarity in the field (see van Tongeren & van Cappellen, 2026).

Drawing on the aforementioned research, I argue that asylum-seeking contexts produce a distinctive form of un/learning manifested in gendered, socio-spatial, political, racial and epistemic systems. This occurs first in contexts of coercive control, alongside restrictions on apostasy and blasphemy in participants' countries of origin, and second, through the experience of forced migration and the process of securing refugee status. By moving beyond predictable deconversion models, un/learning offers a nuanced lens to capture how the spatial, temporal and embodied dimensions of leaving religion intersect with the factors underpinning displacement. In doing so, I demonstrate how un/learning reflects the complex renegotiations of thinking, feeling and doing that accompany both religious and geographic displacement, shaping how apostate refugees reconstruct their identities as they make their lives in British society.

In what follows, I situate the study at the intersection of migration studies and the interdisciplinary literature on non-religion, apostasy and deconversion, highlighting the burgeoning contributions of the 'un/learning' framework. Second, I outline the qualitative

methodology employed in this research. Third, I present three empirical sections: (1) religious socialisation: learning to be religious; (2) intersectionality and the un/learning of religion; and (3) learning non-religion: new ways of knowing and being. Lastly, I offer a conclusion that reimagines apostasy through processes of un/learning.

Approaching Deconversion, Non-Religion and Identities: From Linear Stages to the Lived Experience

So-called ‘apostate’ refugees, who leave religion for a *non*-religious belief system and face fear of persecution, are an underexplored group within both research on forced migration and on (non-)religion. While there are parallels between apostate refugees and others who disaffiliate from ‘high-cost’ religious groups defined as ‘theologically and culturally exclusive religious groups’ (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010, p. 326), and those experiencing coercive control and spiritual abuse (Sharp, 2014), the experiences of those who leave religion in the context of forced displacement are unique. Apostate refugees must navigate their identities under the immediate threat of persecution, the precarity of societies that infringe on human rights such as the freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), and the struggle to have their identities recognised within asylum protection. Unlike current scholarship that considers apostates from Islam (also known as ‘ex-Muslims’), in secularised contexts where they are generally ‘not living in fear for their lives’ (Cottee, 2015, p. 11), this article focuses on apostate refugees whose experiences of leaving Islam are shaped by displacement, asylum processes, and ongoing negotiations of identity within contexts of precarity and constraint.

Studies of non-religion in the UK and Europe have been highly influential in developing understandings of identities defined in relation to religion (e.g. Cotter, 2020; Lee, 2015). Much of this work has been conducted in contexts shaped by historically dominant Christian traditions and secularisation narratives, conceptualising non-religion in relation to declining Christian affiliation. Concurrently, foundational work on apostasy and deconversion has focused on mapping the trajectories of religious disaffiliation and identity change, considering the factors and processes involved in decision-making and the psychological effects of belief change (Enstedt, 2019; LeCount, 2017; Streib, 2021).

In the literature, leaving religion is often used synonymously with ‘deconversion’, defined as ‘a process of biographical change that parallels conversion and involves multiple dimensions’ (Streib, 2021, p. 139). While terms such as apostasy, disaffiliation, disengagement, deidentification, religious shifting, nones, leave-taking and ‘becoming an ex’ circulate in the literature, ‘non-religion’ is used as the *de facto* term to describe identities defined in relation to, or in the absence of, religious belief (Lee, 2015).¹

Many of these studies have tended to portray leaving religion as a series of linear, chronological stages, through typologies or predictable processes (e.g. Cottee, 2015). For instance, Smith (2011) outlines four stages of identity development (for atheists in the United States): starting point, questioning, rejecting and ‘coming out’, while Cottee (2015) proposes a three-stage model of ex-Muslim identity transformation: pre-apostasy, apostasy and post-apostasy, amongst others (see Mauss, 1969; Zuckerman, 2011). On the whole, these studies have mostly focused on Euro-American geographies, for example, apostates in North America (Cottee, 2015; Smith, 2011; Zuckerman, 2011), Canada

(Cottee, 2015), the UK (Cotter, 2020; Lee, 2015) and Nordic contexts (Haugen & Hiilamo, 2025). Although scholars have recognised that processes of deconversion are dynamic, research conceptualising the trajectories of leaving religion has been critiqued, for instance, for universalising experiences or relying on hidden normative assumptions of stability (e.g. van Nieuwkerk, 2018).

Contemporary scholarship in non-religion has responded by moving toward more fluid and 'lived' frameworks for the (re)construction of non-religious identity. This approach aligns with influential shifts in the field: most notably Lee (2015), who transitioned the study of non-religion from a focus on mere 'absence' to a relational understanding of non-religious identity (see also Quack, 2014). For example, recent work has suggested that apostasy should be understood as a 'continuum' (Cragun & McCaffree, 2021), a 'spectrum' (Smith & Cragun, 2019) and through 'pathways' (Cragun & Smith, 2024). While these terms have offered greater fluidity than binary models, they still often frame the transformation as a unidirectional movement between two fixed poles.

Approaching Un/Learning Religion in Asylum-Seeking Contexts

Drawing on recent contributions such as Knott's (2024) call for a more sustained engagement with un/learning within the conceptual space of religion and those who leave it, this article extends the un/learning framework to the experiences of ex-Muslim refugees within an asylum-seeking context. While apostasy has long been a sociological interest, its theoretical foundations were built primarily through research on New Religious Movements and so-called 'cults' (e.g. Bromley, 1998), with comparatively less attention paid to religious exit from Islam (see Enstedt et al., 2019). As a result, conceptualising identity transformations of those who identify as former Muslims and those in displaced contexts has been largely neglected in broader sociological frameworks.

To date, the interdisciplinary literature on apostasy from Islam has been dominated by theological and legal analyses (e.g. Saeed & Saeed 2004); however, these studies typically do not account for apostate refugees or the specific legalities of the asylum-seeking context. Conversely, anthropological research has explored ex-Muslim apostates through narrative and ethnographic lenses (e.g. Vliek, 2023). This scholarship conceptualises post-Muslim identities as highly nuanced and 'in-between' (Richter, 2025), effectively shifting the enquiry from *why* one leaves to *how* (Vliek, 2023). Such studies offer valuable alternative frameworks, including 'religious ambivalence' or 'imperfection' (Al-Ajarma, 2021), 'Muslimness on demand' (Franke, 2021) and 'moving in and moving out' (van Nieuwkerk, 2018). Despite these developments, research has stopped short of offering a fully developed, alternative framework to conceptualise the identity transformations of ex-Muslims who are forcibly displaced.

Building on this foundation, van den Brandt and Rantala (2024) conceptualise religious disengagement as a multi-layered, gendered and embodied process: it involves un/learning how to dress, move, speak, and inhabit social space. Situated within the relatively stable, secularised Northern European contexts of Finland and the UK, and focusing on those leaving Christian traditions, they define un/learning as a liminal experience of being and moving between religion and non-religion. I engage closely with this

embodied understanding of identity transformation, particularly its emphasis on spatial-social and epistemic unlearning, but extend it by situating the framework within the heightened precarity of forced migration and refugee status determination. Furthermore, while existing un/learning literature has prioritised women-centred approaches, this study extends the scope to men's experiences. In doing so, this article posits that un/learning is a gendered process, one wherein the lived realities of exit and displacement are uniquely contingent upon societal presumptions of both femininity and masculinity.

As global levels of non-religion rise, important questions remain regarding how ex-Muslims construct their identities in the wake of renouncing their religion, especially of those displaced from countries with strict apostasy and blasphemy laws and while seeking sanctuary in the UK. Ultimately, this article advances our understanding of apostate refugees by foregrounding their lived and relational experiences. It analyses how un/learning religion is deeply embedded within displacement, operating not as a linear progression toward secularity, but as a recursive (re)negotiation of the self within the host environment.

Methodology

This article draws on a three-year qualitative study exploring apostate refugees and their claims for asylum in the UK. Data collection took place between March and December 2023 and followed a multi-stage process that involved interviews with refugees and human rights advocates, as well as a document analysis of human rights and national asylum policies. For this article, I draw specifically on the semi-structured interviews with individuals from refugee backgrounds ($N=12$) who have sought, or are seeking, asylum in the UK on grounds of apostasy (see Table 1).

While a sample of 12 participants is modest by quantitative standards, in keeping with qualitative traditions in the sociology of non-religion (e.g. Lee, 2015), this approach allows for a deep sociological exploration of non-religion and marginalisation that a larger, less intensive sample might obscure.

This research received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield (application number: 049626). The research also facilitated a formal partnership with a non-governmental organisation (NGO) specialising in human rights and asylum support (who wish to remain anonymous). Although the researcher had overall direction over the project, the organisation's involvement was multi-faceted, including contributing to research aims and objectives, providing essential contextual knowledge and facilitating access to participants. The collaboration also provided a bridge of trust between me (the researcher) and the participants.

The recruitment process began with a gatekeeper-facilitated approach, working closely with the collaborative partner to identify and invite eligible participants. Recognising the limitations of relying solely on one organisation, I expanded the search beyond their proximity by engaging with local community hubs and digital spaces. I also employed snowballing techniques, asking participants to refer others within their own social circles. Despite these efforts, the majority of the sample was ultimately secured through the organisation. This outcome reflects the inherent challenges of reaching 'hidden populations' within the intersection of refugee status and religious apostasy (see Eller & Khazaal, 2024).

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Name	Gender identity	Country of origin
Samir	Male	Pakistan
Karim	Male	Pakistan
Arman	Male	Iran
Bilal	Male	Maldives
Adam	Male	Iraq
Idris	Male	Iran
Zain	Male	Iran
Layla	Female	Saudi Arabia
Rami	Male	Iran
Amina	Female	Nigeria
Tariq	Male	Pakistan
Kamil	Male	Bangladesh

There were no specific selection criteria beyond having claimed asylum on the Refugee Convention grounds of religion; however, all participants had left Islam, which shapes my analytical focus in this article. As a result of the recruitment pathways, the sample was composed of individuals identifying with non-religion, including atheism, agnosticism and humanist worldviews. I use the term ‘humanist’ to denote a non-religious life stance. Following Humanists UK, I recognise that humanism has historically informed religious thought and that ‘religious humanism’ and ‘secular humanism’ are established academic categories. However, in the context of this study, situated within the UK, ‘humanist’ refers to a modern non-religious identity grounded in naturalism and human reason (see Humanists UK, 2026).

Nevertheless, the qualitative depth of the study ensured that identity categories did not obscure the heterogeneity of participants’ experiences, as individuals were able to self-identify. Some explicitly identified as ‘apostates’ or ‘ex-Muslims’, while others rejected fixed labels altogether, preferring more fluid or ambivalent descriptions of their relationship to worldviews. The findings offer a wide-ranging exploration of the lived realities of apostasy, demonstrating that even within a shared analytical category, experiences of displacement and persecution remain deeply personal and varied.

Participants are given pseudonyms, while countries of origin are retained to preserve contextual understanding. Participants originated from diverse social, legal and cultural contexts with differing tolerances toward apostasy and blasphemy, including Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, the Maldives, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh. The sample consisted of 10 men and 2 women. The male-dominated composition of this sample reflects the broader gendered dynamics which underpin patterns of forced migration, apostasy and the asylum intake of the UK. Consequently, while this article offers a balanced conceptual framework that accounts for both femininities and masculinities, the sample asymmetry itself highlights how the structural possibility of becoming an ‘asylum-seeking apostate’ is fundamentally gendered.

Participant ages ranged from their early 20s at the time of their asylum claim to their late 50s. Participants were geographically dispersed in the UK, some living in large cities, such as London and Manchester, and others were based in towns on the outskirts of cities.

Interviews were conducted either online or in person, depending on the participant's preference, and ranged from 40 minutes to 3 hours. Interviews began with an overview of the participants' upbringing, instances of persecution, and their experiences of navigating the asylum system. The interviews provided insight into the complex and varied experiences of their Muslim identity, processes of leaving religion and becoming non-religious. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and uploaded into NVivo for analysis.

Research involving refugees and asylum seekers requires careful ethical attention due to the potential vulnerability of participants. Thus, during each stage, I prioritised creating safe interview environments, minimising harm and preventing re-traumatisation. To do so, participants were provided with clear information about the study and informed of their right to withdraw at any time. An iterative approach to consent was adopted, with verbal and written consent obtained at multiple stages, including introductory calls, interview scheduling and the return of transcripts. Ongoing communication before, during and after interviews ensured that participants could raise questions or concerns throughout the research process.

My status as an 'outsider' relative to participants from a refugee background also required a rigorous reflexive approach to ensure their experiences were represented accurately. Notably, as a British citizen from birth with no lived experience of forced migration, I occupied a position of structural privilege. My non-religious identity, having personally transitioned away from a Christian background, further layered this dynamic. While my non-religiosity allowed me to genuinely relate to their experience of leaving religion, I recognise that my own identity transition occurred in a radically different, low-stakes context. Furthermore, as a female researcher interviewing a predominantly male cohort, I remained highly conscious of how gender influenced the dialogue: my gender ultimately appeared to invert conventional academic power dynamics.

While traditionally understood as an 'outsider', the research space revealed unexpected points of connection. For instance, not originating from a Muslim background arguably fostered a unique sense of trust, bypassing the complexities often present for individuals navigating communities characterised by religious coercive control. My outsider status also encouraged participants to provide deeper detail and richer contextualisation of their religious background. There was further alignment with those of a similar age and/or life-stage, a mutual affinity for humanist worldviews, and shared life within a British context, which created overlapping spaces of distance and proximity. Acknowledging these shifting boundaries allowed the interviews to become collaborative sites of understanding and meaning-making.

Analysis followed thematic coding, guided by key themes broadly related to the project's research questions and theoretical framework. The process was iterative: as I engaged with the data, I found that existing models of apostasy and deconversion, which tend to depict identity transformation as linear, were inadequate for understanding the lived realities of apostate refugees. I found that their experiences are shaped by displacement, coercion and negotiation across multiple social and cultural contexts. In response,

I found the analytical framework of un/learning able to capture the iterative and embodied nature of apostasy, rooted in a lived religion approach (Ammerman, 2016). Through the analysis, I identified recurring patterns relating to un/learning.

I now turn to the findings, which are organised into three empirical sections applying the un/learning framework to participants' journeys of apostasy within refugee contexts, offering a more nuanced understanding of apostate identities and contributing to broader theorisation of non-religion in everyday life. First, I examine how coercive religious socialisation shaped the initial formation of religious identity and practice.

Religious Socialisation: Learning to be Religious

People don't really question it, but I went into a rabbit hole, learning about religion, and what I found horrified me. (Bilal, date of asylum 2022, aged 20s, the Maldives)

Religion operates not only as a system of belief but as a structuring force within society, shaping political institutions, public discourse and everyday social norms (Edgell & Yukich, 2020). This section explores early religious identity formation through the analytical lens of learning to unpack how participants' understandings and practices of religion emerged through specific spatial, familial and socio-political contexts. Although participants were born in diverse national and regional settings, they all described growing up within environments where Islamic belief and practice were deeply embedded in everyday life. While expectations of religiosity varied across contexts, each participant emphasised the centrality of learning to be Muslim as a formative and compulsory part of their upbringing. Their accounts illustrate how religion was not simply taught but was something to conform to, and how everyday routines, schooling, family and home dynamics, and community relations functioned as key sites of religious socialisation.

Participants recalled learning to pray, performing ritual purification, attending Quran lessons and participating in collective worship at the mosque as integral parts of daily life. Samir, from Pakistan, described this sense of compulsion:

I used to have to go to the mosque and pray. I used to have to wear washed clothes before I went there. I needed to be in a certain frame of mind and hygienic condition to go to the mosque, to pray, and I couldn't go against any of that. It was like I was doing something against my own will. I was being forced to do all that. (Samir, date of asylum 2017, aged 28, Pakistan)

Similarly, Layla, from Saudi Arabia, recalled:

As a woman, you had to wear a hijab every time you went out. I have to do the daily prayers. I have to wash. I'm the kind of person that really loves to engage in intellectual conversations with other people, but whenever I was doing it, I was censoring myself. (Layla, date of asylum 2022, aged 27, Saudi Arabia)

These experiences reveal how participants learned to engage with religion as a set of obligations, rather than as a chosen identity. Many spoke of the emotional toll of this enforced religiosity, describing feelings of frustration, anger and entrapment (see Potter, 2026a).

Religious socialisation was reinforced through education and family structures. Participants were raised in conservative households where religious and cultural norms were intertwined. Layla reflected:

I basically continued being religious up until I started university. Up until that point, my parents put me through Quran schools rather than schools that focused on scientific subjects or anything. It was the Quran all the time, every day, all day.

For some, this included growing up in polygamous families or within systems of arranged marriage. Zain, from Iran, reflected on how his early questioning of such practices was met with moral and religious justification:

It started with simple questions about polygamy. . . We live together in the same house, and the situation is worse than I can explain. I asked, why do they execute people for adultery? They justify it by saying they want to keep the family core safe. But at the same time, Islam allows every man to marry four wives. (Zain, date of asylum 2018, aged 36, Iran)

Due to the pervasive enforcement of religion in these societies, opportunities to explore alternative worldviews were limited. As Bilal articulated:

When you're brought up in that kind of society, there's very little room for exploration within religion, other than exploration of Islam. I was born and raised in a Muslim family, as is pretty much everyone. (Bilal, date of asylum 2022, aged 20s, Maldives)

Two interlocking forms of learning operated here. First, learning as practice: religion was acquired through repetition, ritual participation and everyday behavioural norms, embedding belief in embodied habit. Second, learning as socialisation: religious knowledge functioned as a mechanism of normative regulation, shaping moral frameworks, social belonging and the boundaries of thought. Together, these modes left little discursive or social space in which alternative epistemologies could be explored or legitimised.

Such conditions also prevented many participants from questioning religious authority until after moving (or being displaced) to the UK. For many of the interlocutors, it was only after living in the UK for some time that they began to explore or express non-religious perspectives, a transition that will be explored below.

In their countries of origin, participants described learning to embody the 'correct Muslim'. This performative dimension of learning involves outward conformity to religious norms as a strategy for social belonging and safety. Bilal discussed this: 'I was brought up to be a goody two-shoes Muslim boy, and I fully embodied that.' Layla also reflected: 'I essentially was thinking constantly what would a Muslim person think about this and then try to say that instead of saying what I actually thought.' Here, learning operated as a process of internalised self-surveillance, in which the 'correct' religious subject was produced through repetition, anticipation and the suppression of alternative expressions of self.

This resulted in self-censoring practices. Layla reflected on the effects of doing so: 'It became so hard, I just stopped socialising with people, like being alone is a lot easier than having to pretend.' The performance of Muslimness relates to Franke's (2021) research

on how Islam's dominance of everyday life in Egypt leads to self-silencing strategies: 'While "Muslimness" in all its facets and intensities is possible and accepted, "non-Muslimness" (including atheism and non-belief) exists, but cannot be articulated – certainly not in public and hardly in private' (Franke, 2021, p. 2).

Several participants recounted experiences that demonstrated how questioning religion could lead to punishment or persecution. Zain, from Iran, was arrested and imprisoned for two years after challenging a Mullah during a discussion at the mosque, a moment that marked his identification as an apostate. Even after serving his sentence, he remained at risk of violence from the community and was forced to flee the country. Karim, from Pakistan, described a similar experience:

I asked a question to the Mullah, just an inquisitive question. But he said, questioning Muhammad and questioning Islam is not allowed. My dad got called into the mosque and told, 'your son's been asking stupid questions he shouldn't be asking'. (Karim, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, Pakistan)

This section analyses early religious identity formation through the lens of learning. It explores how participants, though from diverse backgrounds, all navigated everyday life where Islamic belief and practice were foundational to their spatial, familial and socio-political environments. In contrast to studies of Muslims in Euro-American contexts, where religious identification is frequently framed as a matter of personal choice, the participants described upbringings in which adherence to religious identities was deeply shaped and constrained by the contexts in which they lived. Religious learning operated as a socialising mechanism which left little space for the exploration of other world-views. Yet at the same time, participants' narratives also show the fluid character of (non-)religiosities, including strategic negotiations of identities to protect themselves from discrimination or physical harm. These formative experiences underpin the complex processes of unlearning religion and learning non-religion that emerge in the subsequent sections. I now turn to explore the intersectionality of (non-)religious identities in processes of un/learning.

Intersectionality and the Un/Learning of Religion and Non-Religion

Sometimes it could impact how you see your body yourself, if you've always worn the hijab and you go out, it's scary. (Amina, date of asylum 2023, aged 40s, Nigeria)

Approaches in lived religion have highlighted the need to recognise intersectionality when examining identity formation (Ammerman, 2016). Religion actively mediates identity by intertwining with gendered norms, constructions of sexuality and the racialised positioning of the individual within the social hierarchy (Ammerman, 2016). It follows then that leaving religion is also intersectional. An account of un/learning religion must therefore attend to how religious norms are embedded within overlapping structures of power and identity. This section specifically explores how participants' journeys toward non-religious identities were shaped by intersecting dimensions of gender (including femininities and masculinities), social class and cultural capital, and political positioning.

For several participants, rejecting religion was inseparable from resisting gendered norms and expectations surrounding both femininity and masculinity, each of which reproduced distinct dynamics of power that constrained agency in varied ways. In their countries of origin, religion operated as a mechanism for enforcing family authority, shaping expectations around marriage, dress and behaviour.

The two female participants, Layla and Amina, discussed un/learning specifically in relation to gendered expectations, such as dressing modestly and controlling one's appearance. They highlighted how navigating an everyday life defined by these norms shaped both their initial religious socialisation and their subsequent departure from it. For Layla:

As a woman, you had to wear a hijab every time you went out. I had to do the daily prayers. I wanted to wear nail varnish, but I couldn't, because you need to wash all your body parts for praying. The feeling of being stuck there, being imprisoned in the country.

Layla's account demonstrates how religious expectations were deeply entwined with state-sanctioned gender control, as a seemingly minor issue, such as wanting to wear nail varnish, symbolised how religion regulated her bodily autonomy and self-expression. The act of wearing nail varnish became, in effect, an unlearned religious gesture, a small but powerful expression of non-conformity.

Both Amina and Layla spoke about the gendered symbolism of clothing in their journeys toward non-religiosity. In Northern Nigeria and Saudi Arabia, respectively, wearing the hijab was a compulsory and visible performance of religiosity. After seeking asylum in the UK, removing the veil became an act of unlearning that extended beyond the material; it represented an embodied reclaiming of identity. As van Nieuwkerk (2021, p. 3) observes, 'unveiling is not only about religion, but about uncovering the self'.

Amina explained the significance of the veil and dressing modestly. She recalled how a family member said to her that by expressing non-religiosity, 'You are tarnishing the family's image, and you're supposed to represent the religion.'

However, unlike male participants, Layla also noted that freedom was not immediate upon arriving in the UK. During her time at university in the UK, she remained under the supervision of family members who sought to monitor her behaviour and maintain her religious conformity:

I didn't get to enjoy freedom completely straight away because my family sent me to the UK deliberately, because my sister was coming here to study as well. They demanded that I live in the same building as her to keep an eye on me.

Her experience reveals how unlearning religion is not a linear process, as even in the UK, she continued to negotiate her identity, wearing religious dress in the presence of relatives while unveiling in private spaces.

For the male participants, raised within high-demand religious contexts, marriage emerged as a recurring theme, linked to expectations of being the head of the household and the establishment of social authority. For example, the male participants from Pakistan, Samir, Tariq and Karim, described the pressure to enter arranged marriages as

both a cultural and religious obligation. Samir recalled how this expectation became a flashpoint for his emerging non-religious identity:

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

In other participants' accounts, they felt pressure from their family and wider community to marry within their religion as well as ethnicity.

I was going out with this girl, and I was happy to get married to her and I called [my parents]. There is this girl that I want to get married to, and she's Bengali. No, no, you can't get married to a Bengali. You're not allowed, and then I had to break the relationship because of that. (Karim, date of asylum 2018, aged 28, Pakistan)

Explaining further, the idea of marriage was consistently invoked as a form of resolution or repair: 'the notion of getting married has always been there. It's to a point, they would literally own me back if I were married. It's such a big deal to them.' Karim's narrative indicates how expectations of marriage were learnt and internalised, giving families a sense of ownership and control over one's identity. With this framework, refusal was not only seen as being disobedient but as undermining religious practice, which had to be overcome by un/learning gendered expectations of religion. Dating and exploring partners and relationships then becomes an active attempt at unlearning.

Both male and female participants had to un/learn their place in the world as not confined to gendered religious and cultural expectations. In this sense, un/learning religion functioned as a challenge to embodied gender performances and the hierarchies they sustained. Departing from religion, therefore, involved renegotiating one's position within gendered structures of authority, respectability and social legitimacy.

Social class and educational background also mediated participants' capacity to learn non-religious identities. Most participants came from middle-class families, which afforded them access to higher education, mobility to the UK and English language proficiency, key avenues of cultural and social capital through which alternative worldviews became accessible.

For Karim and others, studying in the UK represented a layered process of un/learning. Educational spaces provided exposure to critical thinking, free speech, debate and pluralistic environments that contrasted sharply with their experiences in their home countries:

I was 18 when I moved to Britain for my studies. Exposure to different kinds of people. . . Just getting the exposure, meeting different people, getting to know them and realising, okay, maybe Islam isn't needed for you to be a good human being first of all. (Karim)

This exposure enabled a re-evaluation of inherited beliefs and opened pathways for self-discovery. The privilege of class also intersected with risk, leaving behind economic security and social status, which entailed personal and familial loss. Un/learning religion, therefore, was not evenly available; it was structurally enabled by classed

resources that created distance, geographical, intellectual and social, from their previous religious environments.

The political dimensions of participants' journeys were also deeply entwined with their processes of un/learning. For many, religion was not only a personal or spiritual matter but also a political force. The politicisation of religion was a system embedded in state governance and reinforced by social and cultural norms. As several participants explained, their apostasy from Islam was inseparable from their disillusionment with political structures that used religion as a mechanism of control. Idris, for instance, spoke about the Iranian government's enforcement of Islam as both a political and cultural project. His early questioning of religious authority was met with silence and discipline:

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

Idris's reflection thus highlights how unlearning religion was simultaneously an act of political dissent.

As well as the state, participants also drew attention to the role of non-state actors in maintaining environments of fear and intolerance. As Bilal, from the Maldives, explained:

So this sort of intimidation by non-state actors is what defined most of the 2010s. The state had taken a step back, but new actors had come and taken its place to maintain that intolerance of dissent against religion.

Despite rejecting their religious identities, participants faced persistent external racialisation within the UK. This often manifested as 'religious profiling' by the state; for instance, Karim noted that during his asylum screening, the interviewer had already ticked 'Islam' in the religion section based solely on his name and origin. Beyond institutional settings, this racialisation extends into everyday life and diaspora spaces. Samir described a continued need to manage his identity, hiding non-religious expression to avoid the social repercussions of apostasy within his community. His statement, 'I don't tell people that I am not religious', illustrates that even in a theoretically 'secular' society, the UK remains a site of complex social surveillance for apostate refugees.

In summary, the process of un/learning religion is inseparable from the 'religio-racial' (that refers to how religion and race are mutually constituted) and the national contexts that shape the refugee experience (see Riedel & Rau, 2025). By moving beyond traditional frameworks that define migrant identity solely through the lens of continued religiosity, this study highlights the active political labour required to distance oneself from religious structures. This transition is thus a deeply political act that forces a renegotiation of gendered expectations, class mobility and racialised positioning. Ultimately, for the forced migrant, identity transformation is a site of resistance against both the theological mandates of the past and the reductive, racialised categorisations of the present. The final empirical section explores the multi-faceted journeys through which participants developed and embodied non-religious identities.

Learning Non-Religion: New Ways of Knowing and Being

It took me about nine years to unlearn, to fight to create my own version. (Amina, date of asylum 2023, aged 40s, Nigeria)

In leaving both their countries of origin and the religious communities in which they were raised, participants described dynamics of unlearning the religious frameworks that had shaped their previous lives and relearning new ways of knowing and being in the world. Building on the previous discussions, this section draws attention to the everyday practices, behaviours and expressions that constitute journeys to becoming non-religious. Rather than representing a sudden breakaway from faith, these processes unfolded gradually through dynamic processes of un/learning, which were facilitated by seeking asylum, online spaces, criticism, activism and encounters with new ideas.

For many participants, moving to the UK and the subsequent process of navigating the asylum claims process created both practical and intellectual opportunities to explore new worldviews. Participants arrived through different paths: some came to the UK to study or work and later claimed asylum after becoming non-religious, known as ‘sur place’ claims, while others fled persecution and claimed asylum as soon as they arrived. Over half (eight) of the participants travelled to the UK initially for education or for work purposes; other participants, Amina, Zain, Idris and Bilal, travelled irregularly.

The asylum assessment was a key site for epistemic un/learning. Applying for asylum was also, on occasion, the first time a participant had declared their identity. The act of declaring one’s identity to an asylum official transforms un/learning from a personal and informal shift to an outwardly articulated stance, requiring a level of coherence and clarity that may not have previously existed (see Potter, 2026a). These experiences underscore the socio-spatial elements of un/learning, where displacement caused participants to navigate both a new physical place and epistemic justification of their identities.

Beyond the formalised constraints of the asylum process, the broader landscape of being displaced in the UK led to more informal or self-driven forms of un/learning. For example, participants’ access to the internet in the UK expanded their capacity to un/learn, uncovering new perspectives and online spaces where criticism of religion could be safely explored. Tariq described how access to YouTube was transformative in introducing him to non-religious ideas:

When I came to the UK for my higher education, that was a completely different story for me because that gave me exposure to different religions, different cultures and different lines of thought. . . I was watching videos on YouTube, one guy asked a question about the theory of evolution, and then he mentioned the word ‘atheist’ – that was the first time I came across what an atheist is. (Tariq, date of asylum 2018, aged 27, Pakistan)

This contrasted with their countries of origin, where, according to respondents, digital environments were often monitored, filtered or socially surveilled, and where accessing particular material could carry social or legal risk. Access to relatively uncensored digital spaces in the UK, therefore, functioned as a means for un/learning. It enabled participants to encounter atheist, agnostic and humanist worldviews, to engage in discussion forums, and to test doubts without immediate social sanction.

Other everyday processes of un/learning included creative outlets, such as humour and music. Karim described how exposure to comedy and satire became an entry point into atheistic thought:

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

Similarly, for Rami, music was an enabler for un/learning:

When I grew older, I was into listening to a singer, he was an atheist. . . and when I started to listen to his songs, it was like rap songs, rock songs, it made me feel less guilty. (Rami, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, Iran)

These accounts show how the process of learning non-religion was both affective and cognitive. Through humour and music, participants encountered non-religious perspectives in ways that felt emotionally safe and relatable, allowing moments of laughter, identification and relief to become small acts of un/learning. This resonates with Richter's (2021) research on 'laughing about religious authority', which suggests non-religious expression is subtle, seen in everyday behaviours such as mocking religion. In the case of un/learning, humour becomes a strategy of identification and music a coping mechanism, which provides a safer, more accessible way of expressing non-religious beliefs than verbal speech, especially for individuals from highly religious or persecutory backgrounds.

Several participants also described dynamics of un/learning through self-study and critical engagement with religious texts. This process began within an intellectual curiosity that gradually evolved into criticism. As Zain explained, 'I started to read the Quran. My Arabic wasn't good at that time, but I started self-study. I started to criticise Islam.'

For some, learning non-religion also meant re-educating themselves through exposure to philosophy, science and ethics:

I realised that there are a lot of things which are not very logical or not very ethical. What is happening? Am I more ethical than God or what is going on here? And then I started to research more and read more, I got actually familiar with the theory of evolution, Charles Darwin, and I started to read Albert Camus and Nietzsche. (Rami, date of asylum 2023, aged 19, Iran)

Through unlearning, participants questioned religious dogma; through learning, they engaged with new philosophical and scientific frameworks that reconstructed their moral and existential frameworks, shifting from religiously grounded understandings to secular humanist or rationalist ones. Following Franke (2021), criticism can be understood as a mechanism of individualisation, one that simultaneously deconstructs learned systems of belief while learning new forms of autonomy. Yet, this process remains entangled with religiosity: participants' acts of critical un/learning were shaped by the very belief

systems and moral codes they sought to challenge. In this sense, un/learning is not a straightforward rejection of religion but a dynamic negotiation between religious and non-religious ways of knowing through which the self is reconstituted.

In addition to intellectual exploration, some participants gradually engaged in performative acts to outwardly express their new identities. For some, this included changing their names, adopting new forms of dress, or creating digital spaces to express secular values. One participant described founding an online initiative modelled on humanist values: 'it's about working on human rights culture, raising awareness about it, humanist values, and it was kind of my version of Humanists UK for Iranians'. Acts such as these demonstrate how participants did not merely learn about non-religion, but learned to *do* non-religion, embodying new forms of belonging and meaning-making. This resonates with Richter's (2023) observation that leaving religion often involves reversing its visible resemblances through changes of name, nickname or dress, as symbolic acts of redefinition.

For others, the process was more internal and emotional. Karim reflected on the gradual emergence of contentment and self-acceptance that followed his departure from faith:

I started being okay with myself, starting building my life back up one by one. Still took me about three or four years before I could say that I'm alright. Life is not so bad. With those, I made some good friends who I call family now. It was spiritual for me to actually start being okay with myself.

This sense of peace was not framed as religious, but as spiritual in a humanist or existential sense, suggesting that learning non-religion did not necessarily entail a rejection of spirituality altogether (Lee, 2015).

These narratives suggest that leaving Islam is not simply about abandoning faith, but also about actively constructing new worldviews and values (Richter, 2023). As Zain explained, 'We can choose lots of labels, one of them, which I chose for myself, is humanist.' Similarly, Samir described his humanist identity: 'As I was doing my research, and I'm like, I came across humanism [. . .] it said, you don't believe in anything. There is no imaginary friend. I'm like, "Yeah, that's me".'

In contrast, Karim's preferred label was an ex-Muslim or an apostate, which he framed as a reclaimed identity rather than a negative marker. Idris described himself as a 'non-religious person overall and an atheist', emphasising that the broader label of non-religion captured more about 'behaviour, morality, your personality, your character' (Idris). This echoes Schielke's (2013) observation that in some Arab contexts, 'the dividing line between theism and atheism is often less important than one's stance towards other key issues of a religious worldview' (p. 639).

In the asylum context, however, articulation of identities carried particular weight. Applicants were required not only to declare these identities but to explain, evidence and narrativise them within legal frameworks of persecution. Un/learning religion, therefore, became entangled with processes of bureaucratic self-definition, in which complex, gradual and often ambivalent journeys had to be rendered coherent, fixed and credible. The act of naming oneself was thus both empowering and risky, a consolidation of

self-understanding and a response to the institutional demand to make one's non-religious identity legible as a ground for protection (Potter, 2026b).

Apostasy in a forced migration context thus highlights the social, legal and epistemic conditions under which doubt could be entertained, expressed and consolidated. The journeys recounted here reveal that un/learning religion is a multilayered process through which participants' experiences are both relational and reflexive, involving continuous negotiation between past and present selves, between inherited frameworks and newly chosen ones. Through this process, apostate refugees do not merely abandon religion; they learn how to inhabit new worldviews.

Conclusion: Reimagining Apostasy Through Un/Learning

This article has argued for the application of an un/learning framework to conceptualise the identity transformations of apostate refugees. By moving beyond well-established deconversion models, un/learning provides a more nuanced lens to capture the spatial, temporal and embodied nature of leaving religion within the context of forced migration, filling a gap where 'lived' non-religion intersects with the unique effects of displacement.

By offering a way of exploring the lived dynamics of apostasy, the un/learning framework has demonstrated the multi-layered dynamics of identity transformations. For example, leaving religion is rarely linear; instead, transformations oscillate between the passive, through everyday social mixing and encounters, and the active, such as deliberate study and the adoption of specific non-religious labels, and how un/learning is linked to shifts in the wider socio-political landscape of belief and non-belief.

For the displaced apostate, un/learning is circumstantial and closely related to other intersections of their identity. The unlearning of religion and the learning of non-religious modes of knowing and being occur within a highly pressurised environment. In asylum governance, the individual must perform a definitive non-religious identity for an official audience while simultaneously navigating the unsettling realities of displacement, where social networks, safety and a sense of self are already in flux. Thus, applying this framework to an apostate refugee population reveals that un/learning is not merely a private project of the self; it is a process that can be shaped by asylum governance and the national context of the UK. While the UK is often considered 'secular', democratic and pluralistic, the legacy of colonialism has also produced a hierarchy of 'race' and enforced racialisation processes. These dynamics cast racialised individuals according to their ability to be perceived as an 'authentic apostate refugee' and the extent to which they can be assimilated into wider society. Both points remain underexplored in the literature, specifically in relation to non-religious refugees, and would be a fruitful area for further study.

By extending un/learning as an analytical tool, this study makes several distinct contributions. Empirically, it draws on the narratives of ex-Muslim refugees to illustrate how identities are negotiated at the intersection of deconversion and forced migration. Theoretically, it offers a conceptualisation of apostasy that extends beyond dominant Euro-American and Christian-centric frameworks to advance scholarship. This analysis frames (non-)religious identity as a fluid, intersectional and ongoing process of becoming rather than a fixed binary state.

While developed in the context of apostate refugees, the framework of un/learning extends far beyond this specific case. This article challenges asylum governance in the UK, as well as other countries with similar processes of asylum adjudication, which looks for doctrinal knowledge as a proxy for belief, as in cases of religious conversion (see Rose & Öztürk, 2024). This article also highlights the fluid, ongoing negotiation of an apostate identity in exile, offering a timely critique of recent asylum reforms in the UK that propose a re-evaluation of claims every 30 months (see Home Office, 2026). More broadly, it can be used to understand how migrants, in general, negotiate and resist frameworks that demand linear, 'authentic' narratives of selfhood. By viewing identity as a dynamic and relational practice, un/learning offers a powerful tool for interrogating broader regimes of belonging, from citizenship and education to integration programmes, where normative scripts enforce colonial hierarchies of knowledge. Ultimately, this approach opens up a wider range of (non-)religious expressions and points toward new possibilities for unsettling dominant narratives and imagining alternative modes of being in a postcolonial world.

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Note

1. I use the hyphenated form 'non-religion' despite the conceptual argument made by Schulz and Binder (2023) that 'nonreligion' (unhyphenated) is used to signal that these identities are substantive phenomena in their own right, rather than 'oppositional' to religion. I retain the hyphen here for two reasons: first, to maintain consistency with linguistic conventions in the UK-based sociology of non-religion (e.g. Lee, 2015); and second, to stylistically emphasise the process of leaving religion central to this study.

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