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Transformative Stories

Religion and coping among first-generation Evangelical Iranians in the Netherlands

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1. Introduction

Every Sunday afternoon, an Evangelical church services takes place in a ecumenical church building in the neighborhood Almere-Haven. This building is shared by several churches, among them several migrant churches. The service, that officially starts at 14:30, is that of the Iranian Church of the Netherlands (ICN).

People start arriving at the church building around 14:00, and new attendees keep coming in until well after the service has started. The congregants who enter the church building extensively greet their friends and acquaintances with hugs, and greet others with handshakes. People who attend the church for the first time are welcomed by one of the church's pastors, or by the special 'welcome team' that stands at the doors. Visitors are offered coffee or tea, although the regular attendees do not drink anything before the service starts. The attendees converse in Farsi with each other, but most of them are also able to speak Dutch and/or English. However, the children and some of the youths tend to speak Dutch amongst themselves, since for most of them this is easier and more natural due to their better mastery of the Dutch language and limited knowledge of Farsi, in which most of them are illiterate. Most weeks there is also a table on which Christian books, CDs and DVDs, and some necklaces with wooden crosses are displayed, which can be bought, although I have never seen anyone actually buying anything on this table. Almost all of these items are in Farsi only. The congregants spend their time socializing and catching up with friends in the main social space of the church, while the precentors, musicians, and the person responsible for the audiovisual equipment rehearse and prepare for the service in the chapel, where the service takes place. When they are done rehearsing, the others are called in.

The service of the ICN takes place in the chapel room of the building, although the pastors have the ambition to get enough regular attendees to fill the large church room. In the chapel, there is an altar, a baptismal font, which is not used by this congregation, and a screen on which various pictures and the lyrics to the songs are projected during the service. Rows of chairs are placed on three sides of the room, facing the altar and projection screen, which stand on the fourth side. Opposite of the screen, on the first seating row in the middle, there is a table with a laptop and a

projector. In the corner, behind the altar, are the musicians; there is a piano, which is usually accompanied by percussion and keyboard, sometimes with the addition of a flute, but the exact composition of the band depends on how many of the musicians are present. The service is held mainly in Farsi, but every week one of the congregants is responsible for translating it into Dutch. Those who need this translation have to be seated close to the translator, on the left side of the church. If only one or two people need translation, they just sit next to the translator, if more people need it, a system of headphones and a microphone is used. The translation is of varying quality, depending on the capabilities of the translator on duty, and the speaking rate and difficulty of the speaker.

The service usually lasts anywhere between two and three hours, and it consists of communal worship and singing, prayer, healing, and a sermon. For the children, there is a special Sunday school. On the first Sunday of the month the Eucharist is celebrated, and on those Sundays the service is followed by an extensive communal meal that is prepared by a group of women in the kitchen of the church. On the other Sundays, the service is followed by coffee and tea, and usually there are sweets or cake as well – which can be both of Iranian or of Dutch origin. The members of the church spend some more time talking to each other or consulting with a pastor about personal matters, before they leave to go home.

Before I turn to the aim of the fieldwork I did in the ICN, and the research questions for this study, I will first give some information on the church and its background. The ICN is a part of the international Iranian Christian organization 222 Ministries, which is based in England. The religious community that is now the ICN came into existence in 1992, when a few Iranian Christian families decided to come together for prayer. They soon contacted other Iranian Christians from other places in the Netherlands, who decided to join them. Right from the outset, evangelization at asylum centers was an important activity of the church. The first services took place in the building of a Pentecostal congregation in Amsterdam – although the very first service had to be held in the parking place in front of the building, due to the fact that the door was locked and no-one in the group had a key. Since this somewhat rocky start, the newly formed congregation has moved to a different building several times.

In 1994, the ICN was officially founded, and the location of the Sunday services moved to the city of Almere, where the services have been taking place up to today. Nowadays, the church does also organize services in other places in the Netherlands and Belgium, but these do not take place every week. The cities of Amsterdam and Almere hold the biggest populations of Christian Iranians in the Netherlands, therefore the services in Almere are attended by the highest number of people, about fifty to a hundred people every week. The services in Almere are generally considered most important by the leaders of the church.

The church has an office in Almere, which also accommodates a recording studio for television programs that are broadcast via satellite in Iran and the diaspora. The Board of Directors now consists of five people, but many more are active in the church in one way or another: for example by playing music or translating from Farsi to Dutch during the services, by organizing the Sunday School for the children, by preparing food for the communal meals on the first Sunday of the month, et cetera.

The first time I attended a Sunday service of the ICN, a young man there told me he was surprised that I was so interested in their church, and that I wanted to study it, because, as he said, “this church is really ordinary, not very different from other churches”. In my description of the service, there are indeed many elements that are a part of the services and practices of many other churches. What makes the ICN special, however, is that it is an Iranian church, with firm roots in Iran, but is forbidden there. This led many of the members of the church to leave Iran and start a new life in the Netherlands. Others first came into contact with Evangelicalism through the ICN after migrating to the Netherlands.

1.1 Migration and coping

Probably, all migrants do experience difficulties in building a new life in a new environment. The interesting question, I believe, is whether it is more difficult for certain groups of migrants than for others to cope with these difficulties and to overcome them. Research that has already been done on this subject, for example, focuses on ethnic background, education level, gender, and age, as relevant factors that could explain difference in coping success, but there is little research done on other aspects,

such as comparative studies of religious background and beliefs, or comparative research on refugees and other categories of migrants. In this study, I will focus on the way the members of the ICN cope with the experiences of their migration to the Netherlands. Likewise, most of the research studies a specific ethnic group, or people from a specific country or region, such as the Maghreb[1] or the Former Soviet Union[2], and recently, there is a lot of attention to the specific experiences of women in contexts of migration.[3]

Much research on the ways migrants cope with the experiences of migration has been done in the field of psychology, often with a focus on psychopathology and symptoms of specific mental illnesses and psychiatric disorders, such as PTSD and depression. In the field of anthropology, other approaches to the study of migration and coping are used, that are focused more on the migrants' perception and experiences, without categorizing these in a psychopathological framework. A narrative approach is used, to study the way people talk about their life and create coherent stories in which all important life experiences are fitted.

Some research has been done in anthropology on the role that religion plays in contexts of displacement, although the results of this research have mainly been published in articles and theses, and not in extended forms in books. An exception is the interesting work of Jacqueline Maria Hagan[4], which describes the role religion plays for people from Latin America who try to migrate illegally to the United States. Hagan interviewed these undocumented migrants in different stages of the migration

1 For example:
Henriette Dahan Kalev and Shoshana-Rose Marzel, "Liberté, Egalité, Islamité : Coping strategies of female immigrants from the Maghreb in France", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 2012, 35(5), 354-362

2 For example:
Liat Yakhnich and Hasida Ben-Zur, "Personal Resources, Appraisal, and Coping in the Adaptation Process of Immigrants From the Former Soviet Union", *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 2008, 78(2), 152-162

3 There are a lot of studies on this, but some examples are:
Floya Anthias, Maria Kontos, Mirjana Morokvasic-Müller (eds.), *Paradoxes of Integration: Female Migrants in Europe*, Springer New York, 2013
Florence Andrew, *The effects of forced displacement and migration on rural women in Sudan : towards the development of coping strategies: the economic activities performend in Khartoum State* (ISS The Hague, 1997)
Mesfin Araya, Jayanti Chotai, Ivan H. Komproe, Joop T.V.M. Jong, "Gender differences in traumatic life events, coping strategies, perceived social support and sociodemographics among postconflict displaced persons in Ethiopia", *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 2007, 42(4), 307-315

4 Jacqueline Maria Hagan, *Migration Miracle: Faith, Hope, and Meaning on the Undocumented Journey*, (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2008)

process, she investigated the role religion played for them, and the religious stories they tell about migration. She found that religion is very important for migrants as something to rely and fall back on. Both the faith and beliefs of the migrants, and also the role the religious community plays in decision-making processes along the way, are of practical and spiritual importance for the migrants on their journey.

Many experiences of conflict, crisis and loss can be experienced in situations of migration and life in exile and diaspora. The way people cope with such difficult times in life, is also an important topic in many studies in different areas of academia, especially in psychology. This coping research originally built on studies of the physiological responses people have to stress, a concept that originated in biological research. It primarily focused on symptoms that soldiers showed after they had been fighting in wars, which were attributed to biological reactions to explosions and physical violence.[5]

Over the course of the twentieth century, other explanations for symptoms of stress and trauma were developed, based on the idea that people have different psychosomatic predispositions in dealing with negative life events.[6] Others were more interested in the socioeconomic factors that contribute to the development of certain responses to stress, in the tradition of Emile Durkheim, who researched suicide rates for different groups of people, such as religious communities, in Europe. He concluded that suicide is less prevalent in both individuals and groups that are well-integrated into society: those who are more socially embedded and who experience more social support, are less likely to commit suicide.[7] This same argument has also been made with respect to the Iranian diaspora, and I will return to this later.

After Durkheim's study, many others followed that tried to identify social factors that contributed to the ability to cope with difficult times in life. However, others started to question the image of the person that is implicit in this research, and that assumes that individuals are the product of biological or social predispositions. Relations theorists focused on the way individuals developed a certain personality in inter-

5 Kenneth Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice*, Guilford Press, 1997, 76
6 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping,* 74-75
7 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping,* 55-56

personal relationships.[8] Theorists such as Maslow[9] and Erikson[10] started to point to the human need growth, fulfillment, love, and meaning in life, and argued that people are intrinsically prone to want to develop their potential, if they get the opportunity to do so.

Most current studies do not focus on one aspect of coping with stress, such as biology, social factors, and invariable patterns based on these factors, but on the interplay between these different approaches. These types of research show a considerable diversity in responses to hardship, and shows that coping is a process that changes over time, and develops in different ways among different people.[11]

1.1.1 The coping process and religion

The process of coping starts with a critical event.[12] This can have many different forms; experiences of persecution, migration, and displacement can qualify as critical life events. The next step in the process is the appraisal of the situation. The person assesses the situation, its relevance for himself, and whether this relevance is positive or negative. In case one judges that the situation is relevant and negative, one starts to judge the options there are to change the situation for the better. There are three general possibilities for this assessment, which are loss, threat, or challenge. In case the critical event is a loss, for example, the death of a loved one, there is nothing one can do to change the situation. A threat causes expectations of difficult situations with possibly negative outcomes one is going to get involved in, while a challenge opens up possibilities for development and growth. The way one judges the situation, largely determines the options one has, or perceived to have, to deal with it. People can either focus on the perceived problem or on the solution, the past or the future, and this also has and effect on coping behavior. This element is also important for my current study, because people assess the critical event of migration in different ways, which is relevant for coping behavior and outcomes.

8 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping,* 78-80
9 For example in:
Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, (second edition) Harper and Row, New York, 1970
10 For example in:
Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, International Universities Press, 1959
11 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping,* 71-89
12 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping,* 95-97

In every stage of the coping process, there is room for many different interpretations of the situation. Here, religion can play an important role in guiding the process in a certain direction. Religion influences the way one perceives the world and the life event.[13] In this way, religion influences the success of coping efforts. Later in the process, religion can also serve as a strategy to give meaning to the new situation after the critical event.[14] A religious discourse can reframe the situation, and thereby it changes the appraisal and judgment of the situation. This can give people the feeling they have more control over the situation. This will be an important starting point for the analysis of the data I collected among the members of the ICN.

Kenneth Pargament, who studies religion and coping, identified different styles of coping that involve religion.[15] The first one is deferring coping, or coping through surrender to a god and his will, thereby giving all responsibility for the situation over to this god. This type of approach is associated with orthodox religion, with a focus on laws and authority. The second strategy is collaborative coping, in which someone tries to establish a collaborative relationship with a god in order to solve the situation, with a shared responsibility for the way it develops. This type of coping strategy is associated with internalized forms of religiosity, that focus on faith, such as Evangelicalism. The third type of coping method is the self-directive approach, which places all responsibility on the shoulders of the individual person. It is associated with forms of religiosity that emphasize individual freedom and responsibility for one's actions, in which god can only give strength to the suffering person. Prayer and ritual can also help in the coping process, to give people the possibility to gain a feeling of control over the situation.[16] This helps in reducing feelings of insecurity. Participation in

13 An example:
Julie Exline, Joshua Smyth, Jeffrey Gregory, Jill Hockemeyer and Heather Tulloch, 'Research: Religious Framing by Individuals With PTSD When Writing About Traumatic Experience', *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2005, 15(1), 17–33

14 Chrystal Park, 'Religion as a Meaning-Making Framework in Coping with Life Stress', *Journal of Social Issues*, 2005, 61(4), 707-729
Chrystal Park, Donald Edmondson, Amy Hale-Smith, 'Why Religion? Meaning as Motivation', in: Kenneth Pargament (ed.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2013, chapter 8

15 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 180-183

16 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 180-183
See also:
Kenneth Pargament (ed.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2013, chapters 16 and 18

rituals gives people the possibility to participate in an alternate, higher reality, that gives an image of a perfect situation in the future, a possibility to work towards.

A problem with most of the studies done by psychologists on the subject of coping, is that often, the respondents are mainly highly educated college students and Westerners, which may lead to a bias in the results of coping research. However, recently there has been more attention for this problem and there have been more studies that focus on different populations.[17] Coping research withing anthropology usually focuses on a specific ethnic, socioeconomic or religious group, and therefore this problem is smaller here.

1.2 Research questions

In this study, I will try to bring together the fields of religious studies, anthropology, migration and refugee studies, and narrative research. I will focus on first-generation Iranian Evangelicals in the Netherlands, and study the stories they tell in order to cope with migration, displacement, and exile, while trying to build a life in a new and very different country. Of course, religion is very multifaceted, and finding a suitable way to define it is the subject of ongoing discussions in the field of religious studies. I will not go into these matters here, because I believe it is not necessary for the current endeavor. The subjects of this study, Iranian Evangelicals, have their own definitions of religion and faith, which focus respectively on organizational structures, and a personal relationship with God combined with living a life based on Biblical guidelines. I will return to this later on. I have chosen to use the definition of religion that is used by the Iranian Evangelicals I studied for the purpose of this study, because the emic perspective is central throughout. This way, I am trying to remain as close as possible to the lived experiences of my informants. I am interested in the whole of religion, and by specifying it further in my research questions I run the risk of a bias towards specific aspects of religion, such as beliefs, or social community. Both aspects, and others, are important and function in interplay. I chose to use the concept of religion only when talking about studies by others who used it, especially in the

17 An example is the study I presented above:
Nazanin Saghafi, Joy Asamen, and Daryl Rowe, “The Relationship of Religious Self-Identification to Cultural Adaptation Among Iranian Immigrants and First-Generation Iranians”, *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 2012, 43(4), 328 –335

context of coping research. For my own argument, I will limit myself to Evangelical Christianity, which I will describe in depth later on.

Likewise, I use coping not in the narrow definition of some areas of psychology, but in a broader way that includes everything that helps people make sense of a situation, place it into a framework, make it less distressing. In a later chapter I will show that research has proven coping and meaning-making to be closely related, and I treat these concepts as such in this study. I will use a narrative approach in order to answer the question:

> In what way are membership of the ICN and the Evangelical faith important for first-generation immigrant Iranian Evangelicals in the Netherlands in the process of coping with their migration?

In order to be able to answer this question, I will analyze the data that I gathered in my fieldwork project, to identify the stories people tell, and the effects these stories have on people's well-being, and their orientation towards Dutch society and Iranian society. I will study the Evangelical Christian religion and religious community of the ICN, by looking at beliefs, practices, and networks. These are of course not the only possible aspects of Evangelicalism there are, but these are most important for our current endeavor. The questions I will answer along the way, are:

> What are the challenges Iranians in the diaspora face after their migration?
> Which beliefs of the ICN can play a role in coping with these challenges?
> Which practices of the ICN can play a role in coping with these challenges?
> What is the importance of conversion experiences for the members of the ICN?
> What is the importance of conversion narratives in coping and identification processes?

Most of the terms I use in these questions, will be applied in a broad way and with a broad meaning that is open for interpretation and expansion over the course of the study. I chose to focus on the first generation immigrants, because they remember

their migration from Iran to the Netherlands, and they tell stories about this first-hand experience. Of course, these experiences do play a role in the lives of their children, even though they did not experience the migration itself, but this is a different process and dynamic I do not have space for to study here.

The aim of this project is to shed more light on the role religion plays in coping processes in migrants, through this case of Evangelicalism. The narrative approach gives space for the investigation of stories; religious stories from the Bible or other stories with religious elements, and the way they function in identification and coping processes. This is also of societal importance, since debates about the well-being and identity of minorities in society usually treat religious affiliation only as an identity marker. In public debate, many seem puzzled when they find out that religion and faith are very important for some groups of immigrants, and religions are usually seen as a problematic barrier to integration and assimilation. This study will look at the matter from a different perspective, without assuming that religiousness and religious involvement are necessarily obstructive for integration. Interestingly, knowing more about the way different religions function in coping processes, and how they influence well-being, can be important for policymakers who want immigrants to become happy, productive participants in society.

The questions I introduced above already mention several elements that are of interest when studying Evangelicalism, migration and coping. Throughout this study I will also look at these different elements, which are important in the coping processes I am interested in, in order to answer my research question. My main focus will be on three themes, which are the theology of the ICN and the beliefs of its members, the practices of the ICN and its members, and the role these beliefs and practices play in the context of conversion. I am aware that there are also many other factors at play, but for reasons of space I will not touch on them here.

After this introduction, I will first give some background information on Christianity in Iran, the Iranian diaspora, and the place of the ICN in it. Then, I will focus on the beliefs and practices of the ICN that play a role in the way its members cope with the experiences of their migration. A very important subject in this context is conversion and the beliefs, practices and narratives surrounding it. Therefore, I will focus on conversion in my last chapter.

1.3 Christianity in Iran and the Iranian diaspora

To proceed, I will now look at the background against which the ICN exists: the history and position of Christianity in Iran, the Iranian diaspora, and the history and worldwide spread of Evangelicalism. There is evidence of the presence of Christians in Iran from the first century CE onwards, making it one of the oldest Christian communities in existence.[18] Today, several larger denominations are represented in the country. The position of Christians in Iran has varied over the course of the centuries, and different groups of Christians have different statuses. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Christians adhering to denominations that are considered 'foreign' or 'Western' have faced persecution, while the Assyrians, Armenians and Chaldeans, who are considered 'native ethno-religious minorities', are relatively free, but restricted in practicing their faith. Evangelizing among Muslims has become a crime punishable by long prison sentences and in some cases even death; conversion from Islam to Christianity is considered apostasy, and this is also punishable by death. This has caused Iranian Christians of different denominations to migrate abroad.

Missionaries of many different Protestant denominations came to Iran over the course of the centuries. The Protestant churches today all face persecution and restrictive measures to some extent, because they are considered a 'foreign influence' by the authorities. For the purpose of this study, I will now take a closer look at Evangelicalism in Iran. I will also include Pentecostalism here, because it is strongly interrelated with Evangelicalism in this context. I will return to the definitions and relationships of Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism later.

The most important Evangelical church in Iran was founded in 1920 in Tehran by Sayeed Kurdistani, a Kurd and former Muslim, together with a group of Armenians. Initially, it was called the Brethren Church, although it became part of the global Assemblies of God denomination in the 1960s. One of their first members was the Armenian Seth Yegnazar, who later became a very important figure in the Iranian Evangelical diaspora, together with his children and grandchildren of whom many live in Europe and the United States. The church used Farsi as its liturgical language

18 Mark Bradley, *Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance* (London/New York 2008), 137-139
A. Christian Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran* (Lanham 2010), 24-25

and was from the beginning very active in evangelizing among Muslims. These efforts only increased after the Islamic Revolution, which caused the church to grow rapidly, but also brought about negative attention from the authorities.[19]

From 1985 onwards, the authorities implemented more and more measures in order to keep the AOG church from evangelizing among Muslims. For example, they forbade the church to sell books and distribute leaflets and pamphlets on the streets. The then superintendent of the church, the charismatic pastor Haik Hovsepian Mehr, was summoned to stop preaching to Muslims by the Minister of Information, who also demanded that church services were not to be conducted in the Farsi language; all church members were to be issued with membership cards; photocopies of the membership cards and membership lists, including addresses, were to be handed over to the Government authorities; meetings were to be held on Sunday and not on any other day, in particular Friday; and no new members were to be admitted without prior permission from the appropriate department of the Ministry of Information and Islamic Guidance. Hovesepian openly refused. From that moment on, several prominent members and leaders of the AOG church were arrested and detained on charges of apostasy, and some of them were executed. In January 1994, a few days after refusing to sign a declaration directed to the United Nations that stated that all Christians enjoyed full freedom of religion in Iran, Hovsepian went missing. Ten days later, his tortured body was found outside a police station.[20]

Despite persecution, during the 1990s and 2000s, the AOG church kept growing. In May 2013, the AOG church in 2013 was forcibly shut by the Iranian authorities, leaving a note that stated the church is 'closed for major repairs', and that anyone who tries to enter the church will be arrested.[21] It is still unclear how the authorities will move forward with their policies on Christianity. These government restrictions forced the church to be more careful: members started to come together for worship

19 Bradley, *Iran and Christianity*, 155-158
20 Bradley, *Iran and Christianity*, 168-174
21 Only Christian or other activist groups have reported on the matter:
http://www.mohabatnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6888:the-largest-persian-speaking-church-in-tehran-closed-amid-presidential-elections&catid=36:iranian-christians&Itemid=279
http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/06/church_shut_down/
http://www.fcnn.net/index.php/en/news/iranianchristians/184-shutdowncentralassemblyofgodchurch
http://www.persecution.org/2012/07/25/forced-closure-of-assembly-of-god-church-in-tehran/

and Bible study in houses rather than churches, in order to evade government espionage and keep their religious identity hidden from their neighbors. Because of these practices, it is hard to give any figures on how many Evangelicals there are in Iran today.

In the 1980s and 1990s many Evangelicals fled from Iran and applied for asylum in Europe or the United States, among them the families of Seth Yeghnazar and Haik Hovsepian. Others did not apply for asylum, but settled in another country on a work or education visa. Of the 1,340,000 Iranians living outside Iran for various reasons, only 75,615 have been recognized refugees according to the UNHCR, since many try to avoid having to ask for asylum.[22] Not all of these migrants and refugees have left Iran for religious reasons, but also for other reasons such as the persecution of political dissidents, journalists critical of the government, and the LGBT community. Not only Evangelicals are among the victims of religious persecution, but Jews and especially Baha'i as well.

Today, around 100,000 Iranian Christians live outside of Iran, according to a report on religion and migration from the Pew Research Center.[23] By far most of them, 80,000 people, went to the United States. Not all of these people are Evangelicals. Iranian Evangelical websites claim that their number in the diaspora is around 20,000 people.[24] This is again a figure that is hard to verify[25], however, considering the absolute number of Iranians in the United States and the number of Iranian churches there, it is safe to say that the Iranian Evangelical community there is largest. Some of the Evangelical organizations based in the United States are Elam Ministries and Eternal Life Agape Ministries, which are both founded by two sons of Seth Yeghnazar; Iranian Christians International; Iran Alive Ministries; Iran for Christ Ministries; Persian Ministries International; and Hovsepian Ministries, founded by the family of Haik Hovsepian, who moved to the United States in 2000. These organizations focus on supporting Evangelicals and churches in Iran, and evangelization

22 UNHCR website: http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486f96.html

23 The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Faith on the Move; The Religious Affiliation of International Migrants* (Washington 2012), http://features.pewforum.org/religious-migration/origin-by-religion.php?sort=grandTotal

24 For example Iranian Christians International: http://www.farsinet.com/ici/who.html

25 This is also noted by Kathryn Spellman in her book on Iranians in Britain: Kathryn Spellman, *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain* (New York/Oxford 2006), 169

among Iranians abroad. They do not seem to be rivaling, but work together and focus on different regions and social groups.

1.3.1 Iranians in the Netherlands

Let us now take a closer look at the Iranian diaspora in the Netherlands, and the Iranian Christians in particular. Iranian Christians get a rather large amount of attention in Christian circles and in the Christian media. A quick search in the archive of Dutch newspapers shows that over the past ten years, more than 2000 articles have appeared concerning Iranian Christians in the Netherlands.[26] Most of these have appeared in the Protestant Christian newspapers Reformatorisch Dagblad and Nederlands Dagblad, which tend to address issues regarding Christian immigrants in a positive light. Probably, the reason for this attention lies in efforts to counter the strong emphasis on Muslim immigrants in the public debate, since these conservative Christians welcome immigration of Christians, while they are negative towards immigration of Muslims. Very few of the articles in these newspapers address the issue of Iranians 'converting' to Christianity because these Iranians allegedly believe the Dutch government will give them a resident permit if they are Christians. However, this idea is popular among the native Dutch population and is very widespread on blogs and Internet forums.[27]

It is almost impossible to give a well-founded estimate of the number of Iranian Evangelicals in the Netherlands, because there are no structural research or censuses on ethnicity and religion. Most Iranians in the Netherlands have come to the country as asylum seekers, a smaller number has arrived with work or education visa; this accounts for 9 percent and 21 percent respectively.[28] Over the past five years, Iranians have been the fourth largest group of asylum seekers, accounting for 1185 applica-

26 LexisNexis Search carried out on 18 October 2013, duplicates hidden, search terms 'Iran! OR Iraans! AND christe! AND in w/1 Nederland', in 'all Dutch news'

27 Of course, these kinds of conversions do indeed happen, and conversion to Christianity is used in order to have a bigger chance a receiving asylum in Europe. An interesting article about this phenomenon is:
Sebnem Koser Akcapar, 'Conversion as a Migration Strategy in a Transit Country: Iranian Shiites Becoming Christians in Turkey', *International Migration Review*, 2006, 40(4), 817–853

28 CBS (Han Nicolaas, Elma Wobma en Jeroen Ooijevaar), *Demografie van (niet-westerse) allochtonen in Nederland*, page 26
http://www.cbs.nl/NR/rdonlyres/240E5858-D04D-47EA-9C22-AB8E9297E2D2/0/2010k4b15p22art.pdf

tions in 2011 and 1195 applications in 2012.[29] It is unclear how many of these applicants are Christians, although the Immigration services do register religious affiliation.

On the Internet, one can find some percentages of Iranians in the Netherlands who are Christian, which range between 40 and 75 percent.[30] However, in 2009, the Dutch Institute for Social Research (SCP) did an extensive survey among 'new immigrant groups' in which they asked questions about religious adherence among the first and second generations, and they found that 34 percent of Iranians in the Netherlands say they are Muslim, while only 20 percent say they are Christian.[31] In another publication by the same SCP from 2011, however, it is stated that 51 percent of Iranians in the Netherlands consider themselves religious, of which 21 percent are Christians, which would amount to only 10.7 percent of all Iranians.[32] The Dutch Statistics Agency (CBS) does provide figures on the number of immigrant populations and their nationalities. Their latest publication on the matter are fairly recent, giving the number of Iranian immigrants in the Netherlands on 1 January 2013, subdivided between the first generation, which counts for 27,754 people, and the second generation which consists of 7641 people.[33] From the figures above would follow that somewhere between 3787 and 26,546 Iranians in the Netherlands would be Christian. Of course, these calculations do not give us much information, and they are to be considered with great caution. The sources of the estimated percentages found online are very unclear and likely to be related to Iranian churches or other Christian organizations, who count every Iranian who has been visiting a church or has been baptized at some point as a Christian. However, I think it is still safe to conclude that these highest esti-

29 http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=81478NED&D1=0&D2=0&D3=0&D4=a&D5=16,33,50,67,84,101&HD=131017-1451&HDR=T,G4&STB=G1,G2,G3

30 Which is also the range that is mentioned in this article in Het Reformatorisch Dagblad: Jacob Hoekman, “Iraniërs in Nederland worden massaal christen”, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, 29 January 2011

31 SCP (Mieke Maliepaard en Mérove Gijsberts), *Moslims in Nederland 2012*, page 87 http://www.scp.nl/dsresource?objectid=33077&type=org

32 SCP (Edith Dourleijn en Jaco Dagevos (red.)), *Vluchtelingengroepen in Nederland: Over de integratie van Afghaanse, Iraakse, Iraanse en Somalische migranten* , page 180 http://www.scp.nl/dsresource?objectid=27621&type=org

33 http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=37325&D1=1-2&D2=0&D3=0&D4=0&D5=96&D6=14-17&HD=131017-1356&HDR=G2,G1,G3,T&STB=G4,G5
The second generation contains both those with one Iranian-born parent and those with two Iranian-born parents.

mates are probably quite unrealistic, since the only official estimates, which are those of the SCP and CBS, are fairly low at 10.7 and 20 percent. Nevertheless, this percentage is still higher than that of Christians in Iran, due to selective migration processes.

1.3.2 Studies on the Iranian diaspora

Relatively little research has been done on Iranians and Iranian communities outside of Iran, as I mentioned above, especially considering the size of the Iranian diaspora. In this section, I will focus on some research that has been done over the last two decades on Iranians in several Western countries, with special attention to the conclusions that the authors draw with regard to the well-being of Iranians in these countries, their assimilation or integration into mainstream society there, and their coping mechanisms. The studies I will introduce here are those of Annet te Lindert, Maryam Jamarani, Halleh Ghorashi, Kathryn Spellman, and Saghafi, Asamen and Rowe.

Te Lindert focuses on the acculturation of Iranian immigrants in the Netherlands, through study of the self-narratives of Iranians.[34] Her PhD thesis is based on data collected in the early 2000s[35], through different research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, and her main question is how Iranians in the Netherlands perceive their own acculturation process, and whether this perception is different for men and women. Te Lindert states that almost all Iranians in the Netherlands are 'push immigrants', who did not actively choose their migration and new country. According to the researcher, this is the most important reason why many Iranians in the Netherlands report high levels of homesickness and longing for Iran, the beautiful nature there, and their family who still live in Iran, as the qualitative data show. Furthermore, many Iranians feel like they experience much less warmth and closeness in social relationships in the Netherlands, for which they blame the welfare state and the materialistic and individualistic Dutch culture.

Te Lindert furthermore concludes that traumatic experiences related to persecution in Iran, migration experiences, and the experience of having to build a new life in a

34 Annet te Lindert, *Acculturation of Iranian immigrants in the Netherlands*, Proefschrift Universiteit van Tilburg 2007

35 The exact years are not mentioned in the publication.

new country, are still very much alive and relevant in Iranians' everyday lives. According to Te Lindert, much of this trauma is still unresolved. Although Iranians in the Netherlands are considered to be 'doing well' from a materialistic point of view, having high eduction levels and employment rates, many do not feel welcome and at home. However, these feelings are much stronger in men, who in turn speak in more positive terms about their past in Iran. Women are generally negative about their life in Iran, reporting feelings of powerlessness and low self-esteem when thinking about it. Another important factor is the degree of flexibility of identifications as 'Iranian', 'Dutch' or 'Iranian-Dutch': the more flexible these are for a given person, the more positive feelings and higher well-being he or she reports.

Overall, also based on additional quantitative data, Te Lindert concludes that many Iranians in the Netherlands do not feel at home, and experience discrimination. They would prefer to go back to Iran when this is possible, or move to the US, where they are allowed to live among other Iranians in ethnic neighborhoods, of which the most notable example is in Los Angeles.

The research of Maryam Jamarani, who is an Iranian exile in Australia herself, primarily deals with the creation of a diasporic identity among Iranian women in Brisbane, Australia.[36] The study was carried out between 2005 and 2012, and is based on fifteen case studies of Iranian women of different backgrounds and ages, based on semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and observation at community events.

Jamarani shows that the most important reason for these women to leave Iran, was to secure a better future, with better perspectives for education, income and freedoms, for themselves and their children. Only two of the women questioned mentioned political reasons for leaving Iran, because of their husbands' political activities. Most of the women were positive about the decision to migrate at the time, and only one of the women was unhappy with her life in Australia. However, all of them missed their family and other social contacts who still live in Iran, and they felt sorry for depriving their children of the warmth, love and care of a large extended family. They also saw that Australian culture had a large influence on their children, although they tried to raise them with Iranian norms and values. Still, the women felt like these sacrifices were justified, because their children could get a much better education in Australia,

36 Maryam Jamarani, *Identity, Language and Culture in Diaspora: A Study of Iranian Female Migrants to Australia*, Clayton, 2010

something they considered very important. This is also reflected by the figures, since a relatively very high number of Iranians in Australia holds post-school and university degrees. Most of the women said they wanted their children to learn the Farsi language. The most important reason for teaching their children Farsi, was to make it possible for them to communicate with family members in Iran. Only two women suggested language maintenance was also an important way to preserve Iranian culture. However, all women experienced some degree of tension between Australian and Iranian values and norms. This experience was stronger for women who did not speak English very well, and they were also more negative towards Australian society as a whole.

All of the women questioned by Jamarani were Muslim, but almost all of them reported becoming more relaxed in their religious practicing after coming to Australia. Most of them considered themselves 'cultural Muslims'. Despite there being a population of over 1100 Iranians in Brisbane, the participants in the study did not feel like there was an Iranian community there, and they did report not having felt supported and helped by such a community on arrival. According to Jamarani, the Iranians in Australia tend to form groups along religious, and, to a lesser extent, ethnic lines. When identifying as Iranian, they make an explicit distinction between the Iranian identity propagated by the government of the Islamic Republic, and an older historic-national identity, often related to ideas of pre-Islamic Persia. This national identity is mainly celebrated on Nowruz, the Persian New Year festival, although Jamarani notes that this festival is celebrated separately by the different ethnic communities.

Like Jamarani an Iranian exile herself, Ghorashi focuses on Iranian women exiles in the Netherlands and Los Angeles, and the formation of hybrid identities, in her dissertation.[37] The women Ghorashi interviewed between 1996 and 1998, forty-three in total, were forced to leave Iran because of their political activities during the Islamic Revolution in 1979. All of the women experienced some level of violence and persecution by the hands of the government, before being able to leave Iran for the Netherlands or the United States. The interviews that Ghorashi carried out were biographical life story interviews, and she also gathered material from participant observation at cultural and religious gatherings.

37 Halleh Ghorashi, *Ways to Survive, Battles to Win: Iranian Women Exiles in the Netherlands and United States*, Proefschrift Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, 2001

Ghorashi argues that the activist background of these women shapes the way they integrate into the new societies. They tend to be optimistic and enterprising, especially in the beginning, and they quickly learn the new language, find a job, and often start a new study. However, Ghorashi finds that the women in the Netherlands also feel alienated from society; they do not feel at home and are worried about the future, while the women in Los Angeles feel accomplished and at home. Ghorashi explains this difference by identifying some factors that shape the construction of a new identity in a new country, which are the specific history of the migration, the structure of the host society, the culture and life styles, and the prevalent discourses on migration and national identity in this society. In the Netherlands, the dominant discourses on migration tend to see it as something that is temporary, and they also focus on 'guests' returning 'home' someday. In the United States, the dominant discourse on national identity leaves much more room for immigrants to become truly American, and migration is considered permanent.

In the Netherlands, the women feel homesickness and longing for Iran, although they are aware that the image they have created of Iran in their mind is not realistic, but nostalgic. This realization leads to a sense of loss, because this imaginary homeland does not exist. They do not feel at home in their new country either. In Los Angeles, this longing for Iran is less prevalent, and the women feel more at home in this new environment. This is also caused by the high concentration of Iranians living together in Los Angeles, which creates a sense of community. Ghorashi concludes that this double sense of belonging, to both the mainstream society and an ethnic community, makes these women feel at home in Los Angeles, while women in the Netherlands feel like they have no home anymore.

In her study, Spellman describes the local and transnational religious networks of Iranians in Britain, based on fieldwork done between 1996 and 2000 in both Islamic and Christian religious organizations, mainly based in London.[38] She signals that religious practices of Iranians in Britain are consciously constructed as distinct from, and contrasted favorably against, both negative stereotypes of Muslims in British society, and negative stereotypes of the politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Since Iranians in Britain are generally well-integrated into British society, with on average high

38 Kathryn Spellman, *Religion and Nation: Iranian Local and Transnational Networks in Britain*, Berghahn New York 2004

education levels and high employment rates, Iranians do not want to lose their position in society by rebelling against British culture, and they do not want to be disliked or mistrusted. For the Iranian communities in Britain, Nowruz is also very important, because it is celebrated by all political and religious groups and emphasizes ethnic identity as a binding agent, thereby creating an image of Iranians as a distinctive social group.

One of the religious communities where Spellman has done fieldwork, is the Iranian Christian Fellowship church in London, which is part of the international Iranian Evangelical organization Elam Ministries, which I introduced above. She argues that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 is very often named as the most important element or the root of the conversion stories of those church members who came from Muslim backgrounds: converts tend to argue that this is where their problems and doubts started, and that after the Revolution, they and their families were forced to take a new stand with regard to Islam in the light of the teachings of the new Islamic Republic. Eventually, it was the Islamic Revolution that 'opened their hearts to Christianity', and prepared them for the Christian message that would later be given to them by evangelizing Christians. Those who converted to Christianity in Iran, usually came in contact with Elam Ministries in Britain through Christian networks in Iran.

Spellman concludes that the many fundamental changes in the lives of Iranians in Britain, like the Islamic Revolution, the migration process, and the process of settling in a new country, created a need for a new framework with clear rules and social support, which Sufism, Sofreh-gatherings, and Evangelical Christianity managed to provide. She argues that Evangelicalism is particularly suited to help those who are struggling with social, economical and emotional problems, through the integration of psychological theory into Christian teachings that these churches provide.

In a psychological research project by Saghafi, Asamen and Rowe, the researchers examined whether there is a correlation between religious self-identification and cultural adaptation to American society among 107 first-generation Iranians in the United States.[39] They also studied the relationship between ethno-religious background and orientation towards either American or Iranian society. Of the subjects of

39 Nazanin Saghafi, Joy Asamen, and Daryl Rowe, “The Relationship of Religious Self-Identification to Cultural Adaptation Among Iranian Immigrants and First-Generation Iranians”, *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 2012, 43(4), 328 –335

this study, 53 identified as Jewish, and 54 identified as Muslim. The researchers did not include Christians in this study, because "identification with Christianity [...] more strongly connects this group of Iranians to the majority religious culture of the United States. Although this particular religious subgroup held minority status and were severely persecuted in Iran post-Revolution, their emigration from Iran to the United States aligned them with the majority religious group of the host nation." This assumption is as interesting as the results of the study, however, I do not have time to investigate it further here.

The subjects of this study were examined according to five selected dependent variables of cultural adaptation: (a) orientation toward the Iranian culture, (b) orientation toward the U.S. culture, (c) multicultural orientation, (d) stress related to immersing oneself in the American culture, and (e) stress related to resistance encountered in the American culture. The researchers found that religious identification correlated significantly with different forms of cultural adaptation: the Muslim participants were more oriented towards Iran, while the Jewish participants were much more oriented towards the United States. Therefore, and also because they are used to be in a minority situation, Jewish Iranians tend to find it easier to adapt to American society and experience less acculturative stress, while Muslim Iranians resist acculturation more and retain an Iran-oriented lifestyle. From this study I can conclude that religious identity plays an important role in cultural adaption and the experience of stress related to acculturation processes.

The studies I presented above suggest some topics of interest for our present study. All authors note that the Iranian exiles they studied often experience feelings of loneliness and loss. As Ghorashi suggests, these feelings are less severe when people feel embedded in a cultural or religious community with other Iranians. If this is true, then active members of religious communities, such as the ICN, may have different and more successful ways of coping with stress. However, as Jamarani and Spellman mention, these close communities often fail to be established, because of a general distrust of other Iranians, and because of the major internal divisions along ethnic and religious lines. These authors also suggest that an Iranian identity fails to transcend the various ethnic and religious identities that people feel to be important. An example of this, given by Jamarani and Spellman, is the celebration of the Iranian New Year

festival of Nowruz, which is celebrated separately and in different ways by different ethnic and religious groups, even though it has the potential of uniting all Iranians. Spellman argues that even though Nowruz is celebrated separately, most people do feel primarily 'Iranian' on this day. Spellman also notes that Iranian identities are often formed through a process of 'othering' Muslims in Britain and the Islamic authorities in Iran. In the following I will investigate how these dynamics work in the context of the ICN, because this Evangelical church claims to be open for all Iranians regardless of their religious or ethnic background. I will also return to processes of 'selfing' and 'othering'.

1.5 Methodology

As I mentioned above, the studies I discussed show that people who are embedded in a religious community may be more successful in coping with the experiences of migration. In the overview of the theory on coping and religion above I also explained how religion and religious beliefs can be important in coping in general. Religion is important in processes of meaning-making when a critical event, such as migration, takes place. Something that is special in the case of the ICN, however, is that almost all of its members, and virtually all of the 'first generation' of its members in the Netherlands, have converted to Evangelicalism. This leads to an emphasis on conversion in the discourses of the church. Moreover, conversion experiences, or born-again experiences, are very important in other Evangelical churches as well. I will return to this subject later on. Religion, which in the context of the ICN is Evangelicalism, is closely associated with conversion. Therefore, I choose to use the case of conversion and conversion stories to illustrate my argument throughout this study.

This thesis is based on fieldwork which I have done in the ICN, on over thirty Sundays like I just described, between March 2013 and January 2014. To introduce this subject of Iranian Evangelicals in the Netherlands, I will look at the background of this group, Evangelicals in Iran, and the Iranian diaspora. But first, I will explore the issues surrounding methodology, and the way the fieldwork went. In order to answer the questions I presented in the previous section, I did fieldwork in the ICN over a period of ten months. The fieldwork focused on participant observation,

conversations with members, leaders, and visitors of the Sunday services, and six in-depth interviews with members of the church. Over the course of my fieldwork, I got to witness a Persian New Year festival, a baptism, the inauguration of a new minister, and a Christmas celebration. I first came in contact with the ICN after I found them in a database of migrant churches in the Netherlands. I sent an e-mail in which I introduced myself and explained my research plan. The ICN's contact person agreed to arrange a preliminary meeting with me. In this conversation I already learned a lot about the history and background of the church, and its relationships with other Iranian churches, Dutch churches, and churches in Iran. The person I was speaking to told me he would have to consult with the other members of the Board of Directors about my plans, but he also allowed me to come visit their service the next Sunday. There I got permission to start my fieldwork in the church.

Before this first contact with the church, I did not know any of its members – I did not even know that it existed, which, I believe, makes it all the more interesting to study.[40] Because I had no established contacts within the church, I entered my 'field' as a complete outsider. From the very beginning, I was aware of the fact that my presence at the Sunday services and some other events might raise suspicion with some people in the church, since they had to trust that I was being honest about my intentions, that I was not going to write 'bad' things about the church, and that I was not somehow spying for the Iranian authorities. Fears that such spies are active among Iranian communities outside of Iran may be founded[41]; however, me being white, blond and Dutch with no ties to Iran or Iranians whatsoever, probably helps in diminishing the suspicion. Still, I tried my hardest to emphasize that I was aware of these issues, that I intended to protect the anonymity of the people participating in my research, and that I would do everything in my power to avoid publishing any information that could harm anyone in the church or their families in Iran.

40 Of course I knew that there were Iranian Christians in the Netherlands, through the media and through my own experiences volunteering for the Dutch Council for Refugees (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland), but I did not know much about how or whether they were organized.

41 Members of the ICN and other Iranian churches in the Netherlands told me many stories of how other congregants were beaten up by strangers on the streets, how they were approached and threatened by Iranian Muslims online, and about the frequent intrusions of the 222 Ministries' headquarters in Almere, whereby only information (on paper or harddisks) is stolen, not valuables like computers or money.

Another issue I was aware of before entering the church, was that I might experience a language barrier because I do not speak Farsi. This was true to an extent: a large majority of the church members did speak Dutch and/or English. However, most of the informal conversations among members took place in Farsi, and it was harder for me to judge whether I could start a conversation with people, because it was harder to assess the topic and atmosphere of the conversation among congregants.

In the first weeks after I came in contact with the ICN, I decided to focus on participant observation during the church services on Sunday, and the social gatherings before and after the service. During these activities I sometimes relied on translations from Farsi to Dutch, mainly during the service. These translations were provided by members of the congregation. The services themselves were very interesting, because in the various texts that were used, like songs, prayers and sermons, I could identify many of the narratives which the church members also used in their stories. Furthermore, I studied how the congregation responded to the various songs and prayers: what did they get enthusiastic about, which songs were sung along with most fervor, et cetera.

During my visits of the Sunday services, I felt like I was welcome and people were willing to talk to me. Soon, I got the opportunity to introduce myself and my research during a church service, so that the congregants were informed about my intentions when I was talking to them before and after the services. I gathered most of my information from these informal conversations, which I mainly had with the regular visitors of the church and the pastors. Some of the church members were very open and interested in my research, while others rather chose to watch me from a distance. Overall, I had conversations of varying lengths with about three quarters of the regular visitors of the Sunday services in Almere. I took notes of these conversations directly afterwards, usually on my way home from the church.

In addition to the participant observation, I also did some more in-depth interviews with six members of the congregation. Initially, I wanted to do more interviews, but due to reserves from many congregants I chose to switch my focus to informal conversations. The interviews I did carry out were semi-structured and focused on the interviewees' life stories. I did try to let them tell their stories in their own words and format as much as possible, because I am interested in the subjects and narratives the

interviewees would come up with themselves. I asked more specific questions about the experiences of migration, their conversion or born-again experience, and the way they interpreted these significant events in their lives. I found that the people I interviewed were very happy to be able to tell their story, although they were somewhat surprised that I was interested in them. Throughout this study, I will use examples from these interviews to illustrate the patterns and stories I heard more often during the conversations with regular church attendants. I will also use an interview with the main pastor of the ICN in Almere, which was done by the Dutch Christian newspaper Het Reformatorisch Dagblad, after this pastor had been freed from prison in Iran, where he had been detained for a year because of his missionary activities in Iran. Since this man does not speak enough Dutch of English yet to be interviewed by me, I decided to use this interview as a substitute.[42] When I use citations from the interviews, the English translations are all mine, because the interviews all took place in Dutch. Other quotations from sermons, conversations, et cetera are also translated by me.

An issue that kept coming up over the course of my fieldwork, was that church members and leaders often tried to shift the focus of the conversation to me and my personal life. The most important topic of their concern, was my own religious background. Once they found out that I am not an Evangelical Christian, many tried to convince me that I needed to investigate the beliefs of the church further, read the Bible, and pray to God for a conversion experience. I tried to handle this by consistently but politely shifting the focus of the conversation back to the person I was talking to and their beliefs and experiences. However, this did not always work well. The conversion efforts nonetheless diminished over the course of my fieldwork.

In order to protect the anonymity of the people in the church, I will not use any names here. This may be very important, because the Iranian authorities are very much opposed to the missionary activities the ICN and mother organization 222 Ministries undertake. As I said above, I will not publish any information that could potentially harm the members of the church or their families, and I consulted with the leaders of the church about these issues as well. I am confident that I have succeeded in protecting them.

42 Jacob Hoekman , “Ontsnapt aan het Iraanse regime ”, *Reformatorisch Dagblad*, Friday 23 September 2011 , page 2

2. Beliefs

Let me now start by examining the theology and beliefs of the ICN, and the way they relate to the processes of coping with migration of its members. First, I will focus on the definition of Evangelicalism, and I will briefly describe how Evangelicalism is related to other groups or movements, such as Pentecostalism. Then, I will highlight some of the ICN's beliefs that are important in coping. In this chapter, I will not focus specifically on conversion yet, because I will address this subject in a separate chapter later on.

2.1 Defining Evangelicalism and related movements

Because the concept of Evangelicalism, or Evangelical Christianity, is central in my research questions, as I discussed above, I will now focus on defining it.

The ICN considers itself an Evangelical church, although they prefer not to actively use this label. As I mentioned above, they prefer to just call themselves 'Christians' – however, when asked where they position themselves in the Christian landscape, the leaders of the church identify the church as Evangelical. The same goes for mother organization 222 Ministries, that also does not actively use the term. However, on its website[43] the organization does mention that it 'embraces and adopts' the Lausanne Covenant of 1974, which is one of the most influential texts in Evangelical Christianity, drawn up at the International Congress on World Evangelization, that was attended by Evangelical church leaders from all over the world.[44] Both the ICN and 222 Ministries have been founded by Iranian Christian migrants who did have ties to the Assemblies Of God churches in Iran, which I will return to later. This AOG movement is a Pentecostal movement, and some Pentecostal elements are also present in the rituals and teachings of the ICN. The most notable example of this is the practice of speaking in tongues, which sometimes happens during worship or healing sessions in the church. I will also return to this subject in the next chapters.

As I mentioned, both 222 Ministries and the ICN use the label 'Evangelical' with some reservations. Essentially, they believe themselves to adhere to the only true

43 http://www.222ministries.org/ (last visited 5 June 2014)
44 http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html (last visited 5 June 2014)

Christian faith, and therefore they believe that their way of being Christian is the only valid way. As a result, they do not believe that other Christian groups are real Christians, so they feel that they do not have to describe themselves as anything other than just 'Christian'. However, they do not reject the 'Evangelical' label, since for them it refers to the rootedness of their faith and beliefs in the Gospel. The Gospel, and the Bible in general, are very important for the ICN, and they are also central to Evangelicalism.

For this study, I define the ICN as an Evangelical church, since this is a term the leadership of the church agrees with as well. However, in its beliefs and practices, the church also shares characteristics with another movement, which is Pentecostalism. In the literature on Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism, and related movements, many terms are used, sometimes to refer to the same things. Therefore, in order to prevent confusion, let us now define how these terms are used in this study.

The history of Evangelicalism as a Protestant Christian movement is usually traced back to the eighteenth century, when in Britain and the American Colonies some Protestants started to place more and more emphasis on personal experience, holiness and worship.[45] These people came together in small groups, trying to emulate the apostles and the early church. At the same time, the influence of the ideas of the Enlightenment created a focus on the individual and his active role in his own salvation and responsibility for reading of the Bible. Evangelicalism became very popular in the Anglo-American world, and from the eighteenth century onwards, the Evangelicals also started to spread their faith around the world through mission. Today, there are around 285,480,000 Evangelicals around the world, of which 38.4% live in Sub-Saharan Africa and 20.8% live in Asia, while 32.9% live in the Americas.[46]

It is hard to give a precise definition of Evangelicalism, because there is a lot of debate about it, especially among those who are usually grouped under this term. Some of the most striking outward characteristics of Evangelicalism, which many people identify it by, are intense personal worship using the whole body, a centrality of music in services, and impassioned sermons. The most widely used definition is

45 Mark A. Noll, 'What is “Evangelical”?', in: Gerald R. McDermott (ed), *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, Oxford University Press 2011

46 The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Global Christianity : A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World’s Christian Population* (Washington 2011), *http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/*

proposed by David Bebbington[47], and it consists of four basic characteristics, which are conversionism, which points to the importance of conversion experiences; activism, expressed through active participation of the laity in mission and good works; biblicism, as the Bible is considered very important en literally true; and crucicentrism, which means the centrality of salvation received through the suffering and death of Christ on the cross.

In reaction to Bebbington, Timothy Larsen proposed to add to these characteristics the requirement of being "(1) an orthodox Protestant (2) who stands in the tradition of the global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements associated with John Wesley and George Whitefield", since otherwise, many people from other denominations could also be considered Evangelical.[48] This points to the difficulty of distinguishing between Evangelicalism and other related denominations or movements, such as Pentecostalism, Born-Again Christianity and Charismatic movements. The latter two terms merely refer to movements that emphasize certain characteristics and teachings and their importance for a Christian life. In theory, members of these movements can be a part of any Christian denomination. The phrase 'born-again' refers to John 3:1-8, in which Jesus explains that in order to see the Kingdom of God, one has to be born again of the Spirit. Born-again Christians believe that in order to be saved, one has to have an emotional experience of the Spirit, which indicates a complete turn away from your past and from sin.[49] Evangelicals and Pentecostals generally hold this belief. The Charismatic movement is a renewal movement that teaches the importance of the Holy Spirit, which is reflected in personal worship and experiences of being filled with the Spirit. These experiences will give worshipers the power to use the gifts of the Spirit, such as healing and prophecy. The Charismatic movement became popular in the 1960, and it is commonly believed that this popularity was a response of mainline churches to the growing popularity of Pentecostalism.

47 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–17

48 Timothy Larsen, 'Defining and locating Evangelicalism', in: Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier, *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2007

49 Randall Balmer, *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2002, 78-79

2.1.1 Pentecostalism

Pentecostalism can be considered a subgroup of Evangelicalism, but it has its own history and theological priorities. Its roots are usually traced back to the Holiness and revival movements around the beginning of the twentieth century. In a handbook on global Pentecostalism, several possible definitions of Pentecostalism are proposed, while accentuating the complicatedness of such an undertaking.[50] The author, Allan Anderson, proposes the use of the plural 'Pentecostalisms', especially when applied on a global scale. Many of the Pentecostal churches want to remain independent and are therefore not organized in larger organizations or denominations. Another complicating factor is that many members of churches that could be considered Pentecostal do not want to call themselves that way: they for example, prefer to call their church 'non-denominational', 'full-Gospel', or 'Evangelical, Bible-believing, Spirit-filled, and Baptist'[51] instead, as Claudia Währisch-Oblau found in her study on Pentecostal church leaders from the global south in Europe.

Anderson suggests using the term 'Pentecostal' 'for describing globally all churches and movements that emphasize the working of the gifts of the Spirit'[52]. Based on anthropological research, Währisch-Oblau prefers an approach based on several elements she saw in many of the churches she visited, which are an oral and non-formal liturgy; room for 'praise and worship'; movement, dance and showing emotions; sharing testimonies; healing; and prophecy[53]. Another important aspect is the spiritual gift of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, which is sometimes seen as the final proof that someone is 'baptized in the Spirit'. With respect to theology, she includes a spiritual interpretation of all areas of life; a clear delineation between the natural and supernatural; a literal reading of the Bible and the belief that no theological training is necessary for understanding it; and a centrality of the concepts of free will and the need to make a 'decision for Christ'. Many of these, Pentecostalism has in

50 Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, André Droogers, Cornelis van der Laan (eds.), *Studying Global Pentecostalism. Theories and Methods*, University of California Press, 2010, 13-27

51 Claudia Währisch-Oblau, *The Missionary Self-perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe: Bringing Back the Gospel*, Brill Leiden, 2009, 42

52 Anderson, *Studying Global Pentecostalism*, 13

53 Währisch-Oblau, *The Missionary Self-perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders*, 43

common with Evangelicalism, and it has even once been described as 'Evangelicalism plus speaking in tongues'.[54]

For individual churches or small religious organizations such as ICN and 222 Ministries, I think it would be possible to use many different labels, depending on your own position and point of view. One could say they are Born-again Christians, Charismatic Evangelicals, or even Pentecostals, because occasionally, a few people speak in tongues during worship sessions. However, again, I choose to use the 'Evangelical' label, because this is what the church leaders prefer to use themselves.

2.2 Iranian Evangelicals in the Netherlands

For the scope of this project, I only focus on Iranian Christians in the Netherlands who adhere to the Evangelical movement within Protestant Christianity. Considering the difficulties with determining the number of Iranian Christians in the Netherlands, it should be no surprise that it is almost impossible to determine how many Iranians in the Netherlands can be considered Evangelicals. Not all of them are members or regular attendees of Iranian churches, since many join Dutch churches upon arrival in the Netherlands. However, there are some Iranian Evangelical churches, which I will describe now. All information in the rest of this section, I gathered through the websites of these organizations, and through conversations with people in all of these churches.

The majority of Iranians enters the Netherlands as an asylum seeker, and therefore many spend the first part of their stay living at an accommodation center for asylum seekers. Officially, it is not allowed for non-residents to evangelize and carry out religious activities at these centers, but churches and Christians organizations do find ways to reach out to the asylum seekers, for example, to provide transportation to churches on Sundays. All of the Iranian churches described below are to a greater or lesser extent active in reaching out to Iranian and other Farsi-speaking asylum seekers in this way. For some Iranians, this is the first time they come in contact with Christianity, and it also results in conversions. At most centers, one or more small groups of Christians come together to practice and profess their faith together. These groups

54 Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, Hendrickson Publishers 1987

may or may not be led by Dutch people. Because the residents of these centers come and go in rather short periods of time, as a result of the many transfers to other centers most asylum seekers undergo, the composition of these groups varies, and it usually contains people of several nationalities.

As I already mentioned above, many Iranians who already adhered to Evangelical Christianity in Iran, are used to practicing their faith in underground house churches. When they arrive in the Netherlands, many join or start a similar house church. Some of these house churches are independent, but most are linked to churches or other Christian organizations, which provide materials and theological guidance. An example of a Christian organization aiming at Farsi-speaking people in the Netherlands, organized around house churches, is Sama Centrum. Their subsidiary, Father's House Movement, is dedicated to the founding of house churches and the organization of regional and national 'celebrations', where the members of house churches come together for worship and social activities. Sama Centrum provides these house churches with study materials, Bibles, music and songs, and it organizes training sessions for the leaders of the house churches. Their evangelization efforts are mainly focused on Farsi-speaking Muslims, and secondarily on other Muslims from the Middle East. Their mission is to eventually lead all Muslims 'back to God's home in the true faith', which they believe is Christianity. At the moment, around 35 house churches all across the Netherlands are related to Sama Centrum. The ICN also has good contacts with Sama Centrum, and considers it a like-minded church.

The Persian Church Cyrus (Koreskerk), is the largest and most well known Iranian church in the Netherlands, with weekly services in Apeldoorn, and biweekly services in Buitenpost and Venlo. Their prominence is mainly due to their active efforts to get their message across in the media and their political activities and standpoints. The church has organized demonstrations against the Dutch legislation on asylum, and presented petitions on these matters to the responsible minister. They also work together with other advocacy groups in order to challenge the Dutch immigration policies. The pastor and founder of the church is very actively evangelizing at asylum centers, under the pretext of mental health care, because evangelization is officially forbidden in asylum centers. Although the leadership of Church Cyrus does not refer to it as an Evangelical Church, only calling it 'Christian', based on their teachings and

the materials used, one could argue the church is in fact Evangelical, based on their theological views, and the mostly American Evangelical literature that is available for sale after the services. In the services, there is a strong focus on Iranian national identity as a source of pride.

2.2.1 222 Ministries

Another Iranian Evangelical church in the Netherlands is of course the ICN, which is the church where I did my research for this study. I have introduced the ICN above.
In 2001, the ICN became a part of the international Iranian Christian organization 222 Ministries. This organization was founded in the early 1990s by leaders of several churches in the Iranian diaspora, who had been loosely working together for a few years before that. The current leader of 222 Ministries is one of these founders, Lazarus Yeghnazar, who is a son of Seth Yeghnazar, the founder of the first AOG church in Tehran. In 1991, the first Iranian Christian conference was organized in Denmark, where Christians from the diaspora came together to practice their faith in freedom. Since then, 222 Ministries has organized an International Farsi Christian Conference for Iranian Christians every few years. The name of the organization, 222 Ministries, refers to the Bible verse of 2 Timothy 2:2, which says:

> *And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses, entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others*

2 Timothy 2:2 also reflects what 222 Ministries considers the core of its mission, namely to teach Iranians in the diaspora about Christianity and train the best among them to become missionaries and teachers themselves, with the intention of one day returning to Iran in order to overturn the Islamic Republic and bring the Gospel to the Iranian people. On its website, 222 Ministries formulates what they consider to be God's mission for their ministry as follows:

> *Iran will one day be open to the Gospel. Your mission is to help the Iranian church, particularly Christians in the Diaspora, prepare for this opening and*

> *the harvest it will bring. Raise leaders who can pass on the baton and raise others. Prepare the workers. Get the people ready!*[55]

They also explicitly state the political implications of this mission:

> *Our vision is to see Iran transformed into a nation that bears the image of Christ – renewed in every level of society from spheres of influence in government and business, through to everyday relationships, families and the whole community. Our heart is that this transformed nation of Iran will be a blessing and influence on its surrounding countries and throughout the Middle East*[56]

As I showed in the previous chapter, the concept of transformation is important for 222 Ministries, not only on a macro level, but also on the level of the individual. There is a strong emphasis on the creation of leaders, people who have charisma and authority, and who can also serve as a living example of Christian life. During the services I attended and in what my interviewees told me, I found a strong rhetoric of transforming one's own life and character, in order to be able to help others to transform themselves. This is a focus which 222 Ministries shares with many Evangelical born-again organizations and churches.

In 2003, 222 Ministries started a Bible college in Iran, at which 40 resident students were being prepared for ministry. However, this theological college was closed only one year later, in 2004, by the Iranian authorities. Since then, 222 Ministries has helped Iranian church leaders to attend conferences and training sessions abroad. In 2006 the Bible college was reopened – but this time online. At the Bible College's website[57], one can now follow theological courses in Farsi. Although a subscription to the online college is required, it gives Christians in Iran the opportunity to study anonymously and from the privacy of their own homes. At the moment, the college has around a thousand students, both from Iran and from the diaspora. 222 Ministries considers the shutdown of the physical Bible college in Iran by the authorities a sign of God, to encourage the organization to develop alternative, and more

55 http://www.222ministries.org/about/vision-and-mission/ (last visited 5 June 2014)
56 http://www.222ministries.org/about/vision-and-mission/ (last visited 5 June 2014)
57 www.222bc.org

cost-effective, ways to teach large numbers of students. Access to theological resources is also important for the organization's plans to transform Iran and Iranians 'from the inside out', by conversions of individuals.

Another way of reaching many people in Iran and in the diaspora with their message, is by being present in the media. Soon after the ICN joined 222 Ministries, its leaders became involved in making TV programs that were broadcast in Iran through satellite TV. To this day, Christian TV programs are recorded in a small studio in the Netherlands and broadcast in Iran and in the diaspora. Satellite TV is a good way to reach people in Iran, since it is very difficult for the government authorities to censor or block the signal of one TV program or station only.

Some of the programs that 222 Ministries makes give general information about Christianity and its teachings, but there are also programs that deal with important problems in Iranian society from a Christian perspective. An example of the latter is the show 'Pearl of Persia', which addresses issues like prostitution, drug abuse, relationships and sexuality. The title of the show refers to Isaiah 62:3 “You will be a crown of splendor in the Lord's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God” - which is also sometimes translated and known as the saying 'a pearl in God's hand'. It tries to reach people on the margins of society, and those who feel unimportant and despised, and wants to show them that they are in fact extremely valuable and important in the eyes of God. Like many other programs made by 222 Ministries, this program is part of a larger project, which also comprises a website.[58] There people who have seen the show on TV can find more information and contact 222 Ministries for more information about Christianity. On the TV show, viewers are often also given a phone number that they can call. A team of Christian volunteers answers these calls, listens to the questions and problems of those who call, introduces them to the Christian faith and tries to give some practical advise to answer their questions. They can also refer people to churches and ministers close to where they live. Of course one has to be careful with giving this information, because government officials also call these phone numbers, pretending to be interested in converting to Christianity.

222 Ministries actively uses its websites to reach Iranians and introduce them to Christianity, because of the possibilities for Iranians to remain anonymous and

58 http://www.pearlofpersia.org/ (last visited 5 June 2014)

circumvent government espionage. 222 Ministries' own website[59] also contains a blog which addresses social and political developments in Iran, such as elections, earthquakes and the forced closing of the Assemblies of God church in Tehran, and gives a Christian perspective on them. All over the website can be found testimonies that people have sent to 222 Ministries, about how the websites and TV shows have led them to become a Christian, testimonies. The use of these statements shows that 222 Ministries believes that these media are a very important tool for evangelization and education, which are two of their most important goals.

In addition to the aforementioned activities that reach out to Christians in Iran, 222 Ministries also has programs for personal evangelization in Iran. This is one of the organization's core businesses, which is closely related to its mission statement and to the Bible verse it is named after. The main aim of 222 Ministries is to educate Iranians, in Iran and in other countries, and equip them with the tools to teach and convince others. Every now and then, pastors from churches in the diaspora, also from the Netherlands, go to Iran in order to evangelize. They mainly focus on disadvantaged groups such as prostitutes, drug addicts and alcohol addicts, and homeless people, because, they say, these people are more open to the Christian message because they need the help op Jesus the most. Also, they usually feel excluded from society, something for which Islam and the Islamic regime in Iran are to blame, according to 222 Ministries. They consider it their duty to reach out to these people and help them by teaching them about Jesus and the Christian faith.

2.3 Theology and beliefs of the ICN

To proceed, I will discuss the beliefs of the ICN, and the role these specific beliefs play coping with migration experiences. I will also focus some more on Evangelicalism and its beliefs, and I will compare these to the theology of the ICN and 222 Ministries. I will discuss these beliefs in the light of Bebbington's definition of Evangelicalism, which I have introduced above, and other theories and cases of coping and religion.

59 http://www.222ministries.org (last visited 5 June 2014)

2.3.1 Evangelization

The ICN actively encourages its members to evangelize. This is presented as a duty of every true Christian, because God is believed to work through his followers in order to reach everybody on earth with the message of the Gospel. 222 Ministries considers it its most important mission to educate Iranians in the Christian faith, in order to send them to Iran to evangelize there. In line with this mission and vision, the ICN primarily focuses on converting Iranians and other Farsi-speaking people, such as Afghanis, to Christianity, although efforts to convert others, such as the Dutch, are not discouraged. This approach differs from the approach of Evangelical and Pentecostal migrant churches in Europe that has been documented in several studies: many of these migrant churches believe they have been sent to Europe in order to bring the 'true' Christian faith back to the people there.[60] Overall, the ICN has a more positive attitude towards Christianity in the Netherlands, although the wide spread of atheism is considered a cause for concern. The ICN seems to argue that all Dutch people, on the one hand, grow up with at least a basic knowledge of Christianity, its beliefs and its values, and it therefore comes down to their own personal responsibility to make the right decision for Christ. Iranians, on the other hand, do not grow up with much knowledge of Christianity, and they have limited access to information about it through books, television, or the Internet. Therefore, they are believed to be less responsible for the fact that they are not Christian, and they need active help from people who reach out to them to tell them about Christianity.

The members of the ICN are encouraged to take their Iranian friends and relatives with them to the Sunday services in the church. People who attend the service for the first time are welcomed by the pastor, and they are given a Farsi Bible. The Bible on its own is believed to be powerful enough to convert those who start reading it, and it is also a central theme in many conversion testimonies members of the ICN have told

60 This is argued for example in:
Allan Anderson, *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity*, Oxford University Press, 2013
Claudia Währisch-Oblau, *The Missionary Self-perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe: Bringing Back the Gospel*, Brill, Leiden, 2009
Danielle Koning, *Importing God: The Mission of the Ghanaian Adventist Church and Other Immigrant Churches in the Netherlands*, Proefschrift Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2011

me. The rational aspect of conversion is mentioned often in these testimonies, but what is considered most important is the emotional experience that is central to conversion. Many describe this as a deep love for Jesus, and often even as being in love with him. Romantic language is used a lot to describe the conversion experience, and the personal relationship with God that is the result of conversion. I will return to the subject of conversion later on.

2.3.2 Individualism and responsibility

As can be derived from the way the ICN, and other Evangelicals, look at evangelization and conversion, the ICN emphasizes the importance and responsibility of the individual, most importantly the individual responsibility for leading a life without sin and keeping a relationship with God. This individualism is a much-noted trait of Evangelical Christianity. Every individual is responsible for their own salvation, and also has the obligation to evangelize among non-Christians. This is related to the idea of the priesthood of all believers, which is also stated as one of the basics of faith on 222 Ministries' website:

> *The Church, the body of Christ both local and universal, the priesthood of all believers – given life by the Spirit and endowed with the Spirit's gifts to worship God and proclaim the gospel, promoting justice and love*[61]

This focus on the individual and his responsibility, however, does not mean that ideas of community or family are not important. Rather, they are considered groups of individuals, that still need each other to guide one another on the 'right path', and support one another in several ways. Moreover, the idea of organized religion is rejected by many Evangelicals and also by the ICN: they emphasize the importance of a personal relationship with God, based on the Bible, which in theory one could also have outside of the church, although joining a church is still highly encouraged. Joining a church does not take away your individual responsibilities. This idea of the rejection of organized religion, or sometimes all religion, is also found by Kathryn

61 http://www.222ministries.org/about/basis-of-faith/ (last visited 5 June 2014)

Spellman, who studied an Iranian Evangelical church in London.[62] She argued that the pastors of this church portrayed organized religion as a wall that stands between humans and God, keeping them away from a truly Christian life. At the end of a sermon about the Christian use of media in the ICN one Sunday, one of the pastors also touched on this theme, saying:

> *After this sermon, you may think we are like the Muslims, and we want to restrict your freedom. But this is not something we do. We can only try to give you some ideas, but we do not force anyone to do any of this.*

Here, Islam serves as the primary example of organized religion, against which the ICN positions themselves. This pattern of using Islam as a primary self-defining other is subtly present in much of the ICN's discourse. I will show more examples of this later.

2.3.3 Evangelization and the importance of Iran

The second point Bebbington names in his definition of Evangelicalism, is activism. This is connected to the belief that it is very important for those who are 'saved' to engage in missionary activities that aim at bringing other people to God as well. This is believed by Evangelicals to be important for those who are not saved yet, because after becoming born again they will have a better, more fulfilling life. However, it is also very important for Evangelicals, because they believe that the end times will begin sooner, once the word of the Gospel has reached everyone on earth.[63] This belief is based on the Bible verse of Acts 1: 6-8:

> *Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my*

62 Spellman, *Religion and Nation*, 175
63 Trevor Hart, 'Eschatology', in: Gerald R. McDermott (ed), *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, Oxford University Press 2011

witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Based on this verse, mission is considered an obligation for everyone who is saved. This responsibility is also felt strongly by the ICN. 222 Ministries considers it the core of its mission to teach Iranians in the diaspora about Christianity, and train the best among them to become missionaries and teachers themselves, with the intention of one day returning to Iran in order to overturn the Islamic Republic and bring the Gospel to the Iranian people. This is also related to the organization's beliefs about the importance of Iran in the Bible and in God's plan for the world. The ICN believes that Iran is of special importance to God, and has an important place in the history of Christianity, but also in Gods plan for the future and the end-time. In the Old Testament, there are stories and prophesies concerning the kingdom of Elam, which was located in the south half of current Iran from the 6th to the 4th century BC, and some concerning the Persian Empire that succeeded it. The most important prophesy is in Jeremiah 49:34-39, and this is also very important for 222 Ministries, the ICN and its members:

This is the word of the Lord that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning Elam, early in the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah:
This is what the Lord Almighty says:
"See, I will break the bow of Elam,
the mainstay of their might.
I will bring against Elam the four winds
from the four quarters of heaven;
I will scatter them to the four winds,
and there will not be a nation
where Elam's exiles do not go.
I will shatter Elam before their foes,
before those who want to kill them;
I will bring disaster on them,
even my fierce anger,"

declares the Lord.

"I will pursue them with the sword

until I have made an end of them.

I will set my throne in Elam

and destroy her king and officials,"

declares the Lord.

"Yet I will restore the fortunes of Elam

in days to come,"

declares the Lord.[64]

This prophesy is considered to be materializing in developments that have been taking place in the present era. Iranian Evangelicals generally believe that over the last two decades, hundreds of people have converted to Christianity each month, which is believed to be a precursor to the establishment of a Christian state in Iran. The ICN believes that those Iranians who are already Christians, are called by God to help make these prophesies come true. Therefore, the missionary activities of the ICN and 222 Ministries are almost all targeting Iran or the Iranian diaspora, although evangelization among Dutch people or people of other nationalities is also considered a good thing and being encouraged almost weekly in the sermons. In theory, it is rather uncharacteristic for an Evangelical organization to discriminate in their missionary efforts in this way, because Evangelicals try to convert as many people as possible, regardless of their ethnic or national background.[65] However, in practice ethnicity-based churches are known to sometimes discriminate in their evangelization efforts, primarily targeting their 'own'.[66]

2.3.4 The importance of the Bible

The third part of Bebbington's definition is biblicism. This refers to the belief that the Bible is God's word, written by human beings inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit;

64 New International Version

65 Michael J. McClymond, 'Mission and Evangelism', in: Gerald R. McDermott (ed), Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology, Oxford University Press 2011

66 Danielle Koning, "Place, Space, and Authority. The Mission and Reversed Mission of the Ghanaian Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Amsterdam." *African Diaspora*, *2009*, 2(2), 203–26.

that it is literally true, infallible, and that it contains everything one needs to know in order to be a good Christian.[67] One needs no elaborate special training or other tools for interpretation, because the Bible is self-explanatory: for understanding a specific verse, one can find clues elsewhere in the Bible. Furthermore, Evangelicals believe that people who are born again are guided by the Holy Spirit while reading the Bible, who helps them to understand its meaning correctly. It is therefore also important to pray for guidance before reading the Bible, and to always accompany reading with prayer in general.

For the ICN, the 'Evangelical' qualification emphasizes the importance of the Gospels and the whole Bible as a source, or indeed by far the most important source, of truth and information about God and reality. Therefore, this is a characteristic that they share with most, if not all, Evangelical churches, where the Bible is of crucial importance. The Bible is believed to contain the answers to all questions and directions on how to act in accordance with God's will in any situation one can find oneself in. These answers and directions can be found in individual verses or sections, which can be singled out from the context they are in, because they contain universal truths. This 'fragmented' use of the Bible is also visible in the church services, where individual verses or sections are used to support the message of the sermon, but longer Bible texts are never read, although the preachers sometimes encourage the congregation to read certain chapters in their entirety.

Whenever one has a question to which one wants an answer from God, or if one wants to know the plan God has for one's life, a popular method to get answers from God, that has been suggested to me by members of the ICN, is to pray to God and ask if he will show the answer in the Bible. Then one should open a Bible, and it is believed that God will make sure that the verses one then comes across contain the answers to the questions. This method is known as bibliomancy. The answers required through this method might be indirect or cryptical, but it is never impossible to figure out their meaning, since in order to be able to understand the message of the Bible, no special skills or knowledge are required: God wrote it so that every human being could have access to the truth, regardless of their education. Elaborate knowledge of language or history is therefore not necessary for understanding God's message in the

67 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 12-14

Bible, although it will enrich one's understanding if one has knowledge of it. However, this knowledge is not believed to fundamentally change the way one understands God's message.

Although people should be able to understand the Bible on their own, contact with other, preferably also Evangelical, Christians is considered very important by the leaders of the ICN. This is not only the case because of the encouraging effect of interaction with like-minded people, but more importantly because people do need each other to strengthen each other to stay on the right path. Individual Christians without contact with a church, but also individual churches that are not part of a larger organization, are believed to be preyed on by the Devil, who wants to lead them astray. The leadership of the ICN, but also some of the church members I spoke to, emphasize that this is also a reason why it is very important to be part of 222 Ministries; because this way, the individual churches owe responsibility, in the most literal sense of the word, to each other and the larger organization. I will return to this subject later on.

2.3.5 Victory and salvation

The fourth and last characteristic of Evangelicalism named by Bebbington, is crucicentrism. This refers to a whole set of interconnected beliefs that are central to all strands of Christianity: the belief that Jesus was the son of the triune God, who lived on earth as both human and God, and who died on the cross. Through this act, he took away original sin, which is now forgiven. Because of this, people who live a good Christian life, can now go to heaven and live forever. These events are believed to be foretold in the Old Testament. The image of the cross is an important symbol of all these beliefs for Evangelicals, also considered an image of victory of life over death, of salvation over sin. Therefore, it is a powerful image, that gives people power and a feeling of invincibility in Christ.

In the ICN, this centrality of the figures of Jesus and the cross is also visible. Out of the three persons the Trinity is believed to consist of, Jesus is emphasized most. Most of the songs that are sung during the worship part of the service are about the concept of salvation, and the images used as a background to the lyrics that are

projected on the screen, are almost always images of a cross or of a Jesus-figure. Jesus is portrayed as a personal friend or brother who the Christian believer has a relationship with, and can communicate with. Jesus is considered the main source of strength and wisdom. One young woman I spoke with, who was in a difficult position because her husband's asylum application in the Netherlands was rejected, while hers was still pending, phrased it as follows:

> *Life at the asylum center is difficult, but still I am filled with joy every day. That is because of Jesus. Every day when I wake up, I am so happy and joyful, it is another beautiful day, given by God. I can be happy and joyful because Jesus is God, and he lived and died for me. Jesus dies for me every single day. Whatever may happen, I rely on Jesus, he lives in my heart.*

In this relationship, God is believed to communicate through prophetic dreams and visions, that contain indications about the future and the path the believer must take. This centrality of dreams and visions is also mentioned by Spellman in her study, and she emphasizes the important role they play in conversion.[68] In the interviews I did with members of the ICN, dreams and visions were also a recurrent theme, and it was also mentioned in sermons during the services several times. For example, the leaders of the ICN decided to actively start working on developing satellite TV shows for broadcasting in Iran, after one of them repeatedly dreamed about “angels circling the earth”, accompanied by the Bible verse of Revelation 14:6: “Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation, tribe, language and people”. The ICN believes that the person who receives a vision or dream, can also know its meaning. In this case, the pastor who had the vision said that he thought it was clear that this vision referred to satellites and their possibilities for mission in Iran.

Apart from these visions and dreams, the stories of the members of the ICN are also laced with accounts of miracles. God is believed to perform miracles in order to convince those who are not Christians yet, but also to counter the efforts of the Devil to obstruct his plans. Many miracles occur when people are at their lowest point,

68 Spellman, *Religion and Nation,* 182

which for some of the congregants means imprisoned in Iran on charges of apostasy. God is believed to rescue the believers out of these situations because he has important plans for them in the future, which he needs them for. This helps making people feel useful and important. Throughout this chapter, I showed that the ICN believes that God has a plan with humanity, and with Iran in particular. This belief is related to the idea that God is omnipotent and good, and that everything that happens is part of God's plan, which in the end is stronger than anything the Devil can ever do.

2.3.6 God's plan for humanity and coping with loss and trauma

This belief in God's plan seems to help church members in coping with a loss of control in their lives. During the services, it is often encouraged to let go of control in your life, and instead let God be in control, because he has a plan that will lead the good Christian believers to eternal life in Heaven. This line of reasoning is developed by Marian Tankink in her study of born-again Christians in Uganda, who have to cope with the aftermath of a very violent war.[69] She argues that it is easier to cope with loss and trauma for the born-again Christians, because they tend to rely on the belief that God will care for them, and that he will provide them with everything they need. Tankink calls this the belief in 'imaginary security', and claims this is very important for people who have to cope with major life events that completely turned their world upside-down, undermining everything that used to provide security and reliability. Paradoxically, giving up personal control over one's life and giving all control over to God, can result in a feeling of increased control: Tankink argues that the people in the community she studied who were born-again, reported feeling more in control over their lives than those with other religious backgrounds.[70] Tankink explains this by saying that the feeling of 'having God on your side', or, more precisely, 'being on God's side', can give enormous strength and power.

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69 Marian Tankink, "`The Moment I Became Born-again the Pain Disappeared': The Healing of Devastating War Memories in Born-again Churches in Mbarara District, Southwest Uganda", *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 2007, 44
and
Idem, *Beyond Human Understanding: De invloed van de born-again kerken op het omgaan met pijnlijke oorlogsherinneringen in Mbarara district, Zuidwest Oeganda*, Doctoraalscriptie UvA 2000

70 Tankink, *Beyond Human Understanding*, 221

The belief in God's plan may make it easier to adapt to a new life, where one's plans for one's life may have to change. A similar argument is developed in the case of 'desplazados' in Colombia by Susana Borda Carulla, who shows how the combination of beliefs, practices and social networks help displaced people to reintegrate into society and reclaim control over their lives.[71] From the conversations I had with members of the ICN, I also gathered that many feel more calm and acquiescence when coping with events that are beyond their control. Knowing that God does have control over these events, helps in reducing stress. An example is given by a woman in her twenties, who told me about a period in her life when her father was imprisoned in Iran because he was evangelizing there:

> *It sounds like a really crazy thing to say, when you fear your father will be hanged, but then, I really experienced that God is alive. [...] And the things I read in the Bible, that suddenly, the penny dropped, it is true. When you pray, things will happen, and if you trust in God, then, even if it is really hard, even if the situation is very complicated, then things will work out. And even though we did not know where my father was, and how is was doing, or what would happen to him, deep down in my heart I felt some kind of peace. [...] And I could not explain it, and it was actually bizarre, because the chance that I would never see my father again was really big, but I just did not worry. And that does not mean that I did not feel sadness, or that is was not difficult, because it was very difficult, but deep down inside I knew that things would be alright in the end.*

Another effect of the belief in God's encompassing plan, is the idea that in a certain way, one is never displaced. How could a child of God ever be out of place on God's earth? Therefore, if God sends someone somewhere, he or she already has the right to be there, regardless of the laws and agreements of and between nation-states he or she may travel through or settle. In a study about Latin-Americans who try to enter the United States illegally, Jacqueline Maria Hagan mentions this belief, and calls it

71 Susana Borda Carulla, “Resocialization of “Desplezados” in Small Pentecostal Congregations in Bogotá, Colombia”, *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 2007, 26(2), 36-46

'God's universal visa'.[72] She argues that this belief comforts and supports both Catholic and Evangelical migrants on their way, when faced with discrimination and aggression by Americans, and that it also helps in resolving inner conflicts caused by such encounters both in real life and in the media. In several studies, these beliefs are connected to religious coping mechanisms with positive outcomes. In a study on coping processes of refugees in the Netherlands with physical sickness and other health problems, by David Engelhard and Inge Goorts, religion is identified as the main source of meaning and strength for this group of refugees, for both Muslims and Christians.[73]

The idea that everything that happens is part of God's plan, gives meaning to even the most difficult and painful situation. Suffering can be interpreted as God's way to teach someone a lesson, and thereby give them an opportunity to deal with the situation in the religiously right way, or an opportunity for self-development. This can also make coping more difficult, because it is hard for people to accept that God is responsible for sending such hardships their way. However, the researchers found that none of their respondents thought that sickness and displacement were punishments of God, caused by their own misbehavior. They all emphasized that God is good and loving, and has their well-being in mind. Therefore, everything that happens is meant by God to ameliorate the life of the individual, even if this goal has to be attained by harsh means. People do not always find it easy to understand the meaning of the situation they are in, but they do tend to rely on God, even if they still mull over the question why things are happening. This relying on God and religion is also expressed through searching for a religious cure for sickness and psychological distress.

This study by Engelhard and Goorts also found that the respondents gain strength from reading stories in the Koran or the Bible, because it is easy for them to identify with religious figures that have also faced hardship, sickness of displacement, such as Jesus, Abraham or Job.[74] This identification with figures that are believed to be religious examples, loved especially by God, has an empowering effect. This, however, is

72 Hagan, *Migration Miracle*, 159

73 David Engelhard and Inge Goorts, *God zal voor mij zorgen: Religieuze coping van vluchtelingen met gezondheidsproblemen*, Pharos, 2005, 38-39

74 Engelhard and Goorts, *God zal voor mij zorgen*, 68-69
The same argument is made by Peggy Levitt, '"You Know, Abraham Was Really the First Immigrant": Religion and Transnational Migration', *International Migration Review*, 2003, 37(3) 847-873

not something I encountered during my research in the ICN. Specific Biblical figures are rarely spoken about, and nobody I spoke to spontaneously compared their situation to that of the persons mentioned above.

Migration can significantly change the social position of the migrant, and the way one is perceived by the society in which one has come to live. It can be a comforting thought that, even though things seem to have deteriorated, everything that happens is necessary in God's plan for your life, that will end in eternal life if only you accept it and participate. This way, it can lead to an improvement of one's self-esteem and confidence, because one believes one is doing the right thing. Moreover, the ICN also believes that those who had to leave Iran for another country, are carefully picked by God to play an important part in his plans for Iran. The belief that one is chosen to participate in the 'liberation' of one's home country, can create a sense of purpose and meaning, which is important in coping. However, beliefs never exist on their own, and the beliefs of Evangelicalism in particular also hold a call for action. Beliefs are strongly linked to practices, also for their effectiveness in processes of identification and coping. Therefore, I will turn to the practices of the ICN.

3. Practices

Because I mainly focused on the Sunday services in my fieldwork study, most of this chapter will be about the practices that are part of these services, such as worship, music, prayer, the Eucharist, and ritual in general. I will start by giving a description of how an average Sunday service takes place. Then, I will take a closer look at some of its most important elements.

When at least the majority of the attendees has taken a seat in the chapel room where the Sunday service takes place, the precentors greet the congregation and the first song starts. The first part of the service is made up of worship, typically about five songs, emphasizing God's greatness and power, and expressing love of God. Children are strongly encouraged to be present during this segment of the service, because it is considered the most important part. However, most of the children do not really participate in singing and dancing, but rather play video games or read books. The songs are accompanied by a band, which consists of a piano, a keyboard, and percussion, although not all musicians are present at all services. During and between the songs, several people pray out loud, encouraged by the precentors. These prayers always praise God and the things he has done for humanity in general, for Iran, and for the individual person praying. While singing, some people also clap their hands or raise their hands in the air, although most only stand up and sing. This is also related to the specific song that is sung, because the congregants sing along more loudly and emotionally with some songs than others. Most of the songs that are sung during the services are in Farsi, but some English and Dutch songs are also used, although these generally are not sung as enthusiastically by the congregants as the Farsi-language songs. Some of the Farsi-language songs are translations of American or Dutch Evangelical songs, and they are different melodically and rhythmically from the original Iranian compositions. The songs come from a variety of different sources, but many are compositions and lyrics by Iranian bishop, composer and martyr Haik Hovsepian, mentioned above, who is lovingly referred to as 'Brother Haik'. The lyrics to the songs are projected on the screen in the middle of the chapel, against a background of Christian images showing Jesus, people who pray, crosses, doves, and beautiful natural scenes. Often-used images include one of Jesus pulling a drowning man out of a

stormy sea unto a boat, a luminous cross against a black background, and a little girl with folded hands, deeply engaged in prayer. During one of the songs, offering bags are passed around, and the precentors encourage people to give by promising that money offered to God and the church will be return manifold in the form of blessings in life. The bags are collected at the altar, and the precentors pray that the generous givers may be blessed and the money may be well spent to further God's cause.

3.1 Ritual

Evangelical worship is usually characterized by spontaneity, due to the general disapproval of ritualization in Evangelical churches. Ritual is usually rejected, because it is believed to fixate too much on form and too little on contents. In the ICN, the example of the Islamic prayer ritual is often used to illustrate this point, like this man did in his interview:

> *From an early age, I did not want to follow my father's religion – let me put it this way: I thought it was not logical. I did not think it was logical that, for example, you would repeat the same sentences seventeen times every day, in a language that you do not have the slightest idea of what it means, and things like that. For example, my grandmother used to do that, she could not speak or understand any Arabic, but still, throughout her entire life, she would always do those repetitions, those same sentences, and then she would bow down, stand up... I could not understand.*

Here, Islam is again used as the primary 'other', against which the church and its members position themselves. Of course, this concerns a certain interpretation of what Islam is, and the members' experiences with various expressions of Islam are also selectively presented to support its representation as a negative other, which, in this case, is characterized by an emphasis on 'empty' ritual. However, rituals do also take place in the ICN, and the most important example is the Eucharist that is celebrated once a month, and that has a fairly fixed course.

This ritualization of church services and other practices of Evangelical and other Charismatic churches, has recently been noted by several scholars, and recently an edited volume on this subject was published.[75] In its introduction, Martin Lindhardt explains that there has not been much attention for ritual within Charismatic movements, such as Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, because of Protestantism's general negative attitude towards it. Protestants associate ritual with Roman Catholicism, and usually insist on the absence of it from the way they practice their faith. This belief is particularly strong in Charismatic churches, where there is a strong emphasis on spontaneity. However, Lindhardt argues that this spontaneity is also ritualized, since it is performed in similar ways and following similar patterns, and it is interlaced with symbolism and meaning. The experiences that occur in settings of communal worship and singing, are interpreted in a religious way, and actively invoked through these specific practices of bodily movements, singing, and rhythm. Members of the community learn how to perform these rituals and how to interpret the experiences that result from them in ongoing socialization processes. These experiences and their interpretations can be very powerful in coping processes, creating formats that establish a feeling of control because they are always at hand, ready to use in order to establish a connection with God and the power that he can give to believers. Lindhardt furthermore argues that for many active Charismatics, the whole of everyday life is in a way ritualized. Specific phrases and ways of speaking are used in everyday conversations, and certain phrases are used in a ritualized way to ensure protection of Jesus or God from evil forces that may lead people astray. Again, these rituals give people the tools to get a feeling of having a grip on their lives.

Rituals are considered important in religious coping methods and processes. Ritualized practices often consist of many different elements that engage both the body and mind with sensory, physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. This is also one of the reasons that ritualization occurs, because some level of routine is necessary in order to coordinate all aspects of the practice at the same time.[76] Religious rituals are important on different levels. On a physical level, rituals evoke experiences such as I mentioned above, including trance and shivering, but they can also increase or

75 Martin Lindhardt, *Practicing the Faith: The Ritual Life of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians*, Berghahn, New York, 2011

76 Ellen Idler, 'Ritual', in: Kenneth Pargament (ed.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, 331

decrease the heart rate and respiration, which can have a lasting effect.[77] Attending Sunday service can also offer believers an opportunity to escape from their everyday lives and the worries that come with it, which is proven very helpful in coping with stress. The repetitiveness of the ritual causes the production of endorphins, causing positive feelings and alleviating anxiety. Overall, studies find that people who often take part in religious rituals are healthier and have a higher life expectancy.[78] On a psychological level, rituals focus attention, thereby distracting it from worries and problems that one usually mulls about. Moreover, rituals have a unifying effect, resulting in cognitive resolution of tension and division, most importantly the division between self and others. This results in feeling part of a unified group in synchronized ritual, and resolving conflict and divisions on a social level.[79]

3.2 Worship

Worship is one of the ritualized practices that are part of the Sunday services, and it is considered by Evangelicals to be a way of offering oneself up completely to God, based on the biblical verse of Rom 12:1-2[80]:

> *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship*[81]

Worship is of course a term which comprises many different elements and practices, such as prayer, music and singing, dancing and other bodily expressions, and sometimes speaking in tongues.[82] All of these practices can take place in a state that resembles a trance. Worship is often characterized as a changed state of consciousness, in which one completely gives up one's self and self-control to God. This way, it can be

77 Idem, 341
78 Idem, 342
79 Idem, 343
80 John D. Witvlied, 'Worship', in: Gerald R. McDermott (ed), *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, Oxford University Press 2011
81 New International Version
82 John D. Witvlied, 'Worship', in: Gerald R. McDermott (ed), *Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, Oxford University Press 2011

seen as much as a state of mind as an act or practice. Furthermore, worship is a way to come together as a community and have these powerful experiences together, an aspect that is important to the congregants in the ICN. When asked for their reason to come to the Sunday services regularly, the regular visitors usually name the opportunity to worship God together with other believers as one of the main reasons. Another reason the congregants emphasize this communal worship as very important may be the fact that practicing the faith together is forbidden in Iran, and in the Netherlands it is therefore experienced more as a valuable privilege. The act of worshiping God is often described as the most delightful thing to do as a believer, and as an inner urge that one cannot stop if one has given oneself to Christ completely. During worship, the believers can have strong religious experiences, which can deeply impact them. In her work on coping with war experiences among born-again Christians in Uganda, Tankink also argues that worship and the experiences that it evokes are an important part of the explanation why born-again Christians seem to be able to cope with wartime memories better than others.[83] She argues that the setting of a worship session can give space for breaking the silence on personal experiences and memories, which would otherwise not be told at all. In these safe spaces, surrounded by familiar people who are considered brothers and sisters, people can talk about these experiences, even if they wish only to reveal small parts of their personal stories. In the Ugandan context where Tankink did her research, worship forms a rare opportunity for this, because in the rest of society it is believed that speaking about bad things that happened in the past prevents them from 'going away' and causes depression. Born-again Christianity creates this space by introducing new discourses on the meaning of emotions, memories, and experiences, and new frameworks to interpret them in. I think this may also be argued in the case of Iranians in the Netherlands. Charismatic branches of Christianity tend to value emotions and experiences positively, and focus on their role in the spontaneous and authentic expressions of worship. This validates experiences and puts them in a framework that is based on a narrative of salvation and a personal conversion. Through practices in the religious community, these new discourses are learned, thereby changing the convert's personal narratives and life story.

83 Tankink, *Beyond Human Understanding*,

3.2.1 Music, song and dance

An important aspect of worship as it takes place during the church services, is the music that accompanies it. Much of the worshiping is done by singing songs that praise God and Jesus, and the things they have done for people throughout history. Often a need on the part of the believer for God's presence and support is expressed, along with praise and glorification. Many of the congregants sing along loudly and become visibly emotional while doing so. It is also common to clap hands, or raise opened hands in the air. The musical style that is popular especially in Charismatic churches, and also in the ICN, is designed so that it can have a profound emotional effect.[84] In emic terms, the music is meant to open the heart of the believer for the Holy Spirit, so that it can work its power in his or her body and mind. Emotional responses such as crying or falling to the knees are considered signs that the Holy Spirit is working. To make this possible, the believer has to be brought into a state of mind that is open to the Holy Spirit, and music is believed to be helpful in this. As Miller and Strongman also show, singing, dancing and listening engage many parts of the body and mind.[85] There is often a build-up of different songs with different tempos and varying levels of intensity, all in order to create the important 'open' state of mind. In this way, worship resembles certain types of meditation, that also center around the repetition and rhythm of certain sounds or mantras. Much research has been done on the role of meditation practices in coping, and it is often found that it helps to reduce stress, anxiety and depression. Further research could focus on whether this is true for Evangelical and Charismatic worship as well.

Psychological research has shown that certain compositional devices and musical elements are connected to intense emotional responses and physiological arousal, and many of these elements can be found in worship or praise music that is used also in the ICN.[86] If the musical stimulation lasts longer, it is possible to arrive at a state of

84 Mandi M. Miller and Kenneth T. Strongman, 'The Emotional Effects of Music on Religious Experience: A Study of the Pentecostal-Charismatic Style of Music and Worship', *Psychology of Music*, 2002, 30(8)

85 Idem

86 Idem, and John Sloboda, 'Music and Worship: a Psychologist's Perspective', in: Jeff Astley, Timothy Hone, Mark Savage, *Creative Chords: Studies in Music, Theology and Christian Formation*, Gracewing Publishing, 2000

trance or dissociation.[87] In order to arrive at this state, a long sequence of songs of varying tempo and lyrics, but of ascending intensity is needed. The emotional and physiological responses the believer experiences are interpreted by believers as signs of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and these shared experiences are also demonstrated to reinforce social bonding.[88] Moreover, these experiences are stronger in a group, because of the phenomenon of 'emotional contagion'.[89] Research on worship music in a Pentecostal church has shown that religious music can, for believers, also elicit strong emotional experiences outside of a church setting.[90] The pastors of the ICN frequently encourage the congregants to listen to worship music outside of the church setting, and to do so often. Listening to worship music is considered a way to be remembered of the importance of worship in everyday life, and as a way to counter, and almost purify, the negative influences of non-Christian pop culture one can hardly avoid in society. The research of Miller and Strongman shows that the more familiar one is with a certain song, the stronger are the reactions it causes. This is something that can be observed in the services of the ICN, because the congregants display more visible emotional responses, and sing along more enthusiastically and loudly, when they sing a song that is sung frequently in the context of the Sunday services.

3.2.2 Prayer

Prayer has, just like praise music, an important place in the church sermons of the ICN. Every element of the service is accompanied by prayers from the pastors, precentors, and from the congregation. Between and during the songs of the first part of the service, there are prayers that praise God and the things he has done. Later in the service there are prayers that ask for blessing, for example, for Iran and the Christians there, for the congregation and its leaders, for 222 Ministries, or for the children in the church. During worship, the congregants are encouraged to pray out loud,

87 For example:
Gilbert Rouget, *La musique et la transe: esquisse d'une théorie générale des relations de la musique et de la possession*, Gallimard Paris, 1980

88 For example:
Max Kaplan, *The Arts: A Social Perspective*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990

89 Miller & Strongman, 'The Emotional Effects of Music on Religious Experience',
Rouget, *La musique et la transe*,
Kaplan, *The Arts*

90 Miller and Strongman, 'The Emotional Effects of Music on Religious Experience', 19-21

which some of them do, and they are also advised to pray frequently outside the church, for example, before and after reading in the Bible, before making important decisions, or in situations where there are temptations that may 'lead them astray'. Another activity that is organized by the church, and that has been brought to the attention of the congregants during the Sunday service almost weekly, is a prayer group that meets every week to pray for the attendees' personal matters, the church, the situation in Iran, the mission, and other issues that are considered in need of special attention and prayer. This group also organizes prayer marathons, during which congregants can participate for an hour or more, and they alternate so that for a period of 24 hours there is always at least one person praying. Participating in the weekly sessions or the marathon is described by the participants as a very special spiritual experience, and the ICN's leadership strongly encourages the members to take part.

Prayer is believed to be a very important aspect of everyday life for a Christian believer, and the most important way to maintain the personal relationship with God. In prayer, God is believed to really be there to support and comfort the believer, which can help them to get through difficult situations. One of my interviewees, who has been imprisoned in Iran because of his Christian faith, described this:

> *I knew that God was really, actually with me there. In that cell. And from that day on, every day, I just felt like the Father was sitting next to me, and I could sleep in His lap. [...] And you cannot sleep, you fall asleep late and early in the morning you suddenly wake up. Because of those annoying Islamic prayers [broadcast through speakers throughout the prison]. So one night, I said to my Father, tomorrow I do not want to wake up so early, only at half past eight, when they bring my breakfast. And it happened like that. I woke up the next day at half past eight, and I felt like there were hands over my ears, and at that moment when my breakfast came, the hands were gone. It was great! Fifteen days of experiences of life and death, but because of the presence of God there, it was a wonderful period.*

Research on religious coping suggests that prayer is the most commonly used coping strategy for religious people, even more important than secular coping strategies such as going to a doctor or therapist.[91] A similar result is also found by Engelhard en Goorts in their study of religious coping among refugees in the Netherlands: only eight percent of their respondents indicated that they did not receive any support from prayer in coping with their situation.[92] In emergency situations, or situations that strongly affect the emotional state of the subject, prayer is often used. It can help in forming a clear image of the situation, and be of great support in situations of disorientation, threat, or loss.[93] Also, prayer can give people who otherwise feel powerless a means of influencing a situation they can not influence by themselves, by asking God to help them and give them power. Engelhard and Goorts also mention that praying that God will give you strength and power in itself is an empowering activity.[94] This empowerment helps in creating self-esteem, through the feeling of doing something about an unacceptable situation, such as the political situation in Iran, or Christian political prisoners there, or the situation of Iranian refugees in Turkey.

The importance of prayer for people in difficult situations, such as situations of migration, has been documented by many scholars. In her work on Latin Americans who try to migrate illegally to the United States, Jacqueline Hagan also mentions that people of all denominations say that they pray very often, usually to ask for protection on the road and for a successful journey.[95] Before they leave home, the future migrants pray over their decision to leave, hoping for a confirming response from God. Hagan notices that some even postpone their departure until they have received a sign from God that he approves of their decision to migrate. Praying before making important decisions, such as the decision to leave Iran, is also common in the ICN, and it is often accompanied by a ritualized reading of the Bible, through which they believe God will send his messages. As Hagan argues, prayers for guidance, help, and protec-

91 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 138
Kevin L. Ladd & Bernhard Spilka, 'Prayer: A Review of the Empirical Literature', in: Kenneth Pargament (ed.), *APA Handbook of Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, American Psychological Association, Washington, DC, 2013, chapter 16

92 Engelhard and Goorts, *God zal voor mij zorgen*, 70

93 Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 270
Mary K Bade, Stephen W Cook, 'Functions of Christian Prayer in the Coping Process ', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2008, 47(1), 123–133

94 Engelhard and Goorts, *God zal voor mij zorgen*, 73

95 Jacqueline Maria Hagan, *Migration Miracle*, passim

tion give people a feeling of not being alone, of not having to make difficult decisions all by themselves. Receiving approval from God gives believers the self-confidence to face the difficulties of migration. All of the people I spoke to in the ICN expressed similar views on the importance of prayer and 'listening to God'.

Most Evangelicals use prayer as a way to talk directly to Jesus and God, the same way one can have a conversation with a close friend or relative. Anything can be spoken about in these conversations, since God already knows everything that is in one's thoughts. This way, God becomes someone to talk to, when you want to talk about experiences you do not want to burden other people with. Evangelicals always have a friend to talk to, who is there for them, and who wants to help them to become happy. This makes it easier for them to create a feeling of security.

3.2.3 The sermon

Testimonies and public prayer are also important in the services of the ICN, as I mentioned before. This creates and atmosphere of interaction and participation, which also remains important during the sermon, when the speaker usually asks the congregation questions and asks them to praise God by saying 'hallelujah', or 'amen'. However, during the sermon the atmosphere does become more serious.

The preacher can be someone from the congregation, but on the first Sunday of the month, the sermon is also sometimes given by a guest preacher, for example, a pastor from another evangelical church in Almere, the founder and leader of 222 Ministries, or an evangelical pastor from another migrant church in the Netherlands, which is often the case. Because a different preacher is speaking almost every Sunday, the content, style and tone of the sermon differs greatly from week to week. The sermon is normally in Farsi, but if it is in a different language, a translation to Farsi is given by a church member standing next to the speaker. However, there are recurring themes, such as the necessity of trusting blindly in God, of accepting Jesus as ones personal savior, and of living a Christian life by following biblical guidelines. The sermon is generally practically oriented, organized in lists or guidelines, but the speakers usually assert that these are just suggestions, not rules that will be strictly imposed on the congregants. The sermon is always interspersed with verses from the

Bible, often different verses that are taken from different books and are put together out of their specific contexts. The Bible is believed to be relevant for contemporary situations, and to hold promises for today as well. This use of Bible verses without much explanation throughout every service seems to be ritualized: a ritual of the invocation of God's powerful promises and his actions over the course of history. Sometimes, the preacher repeats the verses he uses several times, like a mantra of sorts, in order to make people 'fully understand their meaning'.

Another important aspect of the sermon is the frequent use of insights of popular psychology. This is also noted by Joseph Williams in his book on healing in Pentecostalism, and he shows how this use of popular psychology has become omnipresent within Charismatic churches since the 1980s.[96] He argues that much of this 'Christianized' psychological discourse focuses on psychological or emotional healing, by using techniques borrowed from psychology, such as positive thinking, mindfulness and methods for dealing with anxiety. In this way, the church also functions as a mental health resource for its members, conveying tools for dealing with emotional problems.

3.3 Coping

In this chapter, we have seen how ritual can be a powerful element in coping, by creating physical and emotional states that have calming and empowering effects, while also strengthening the religious community through shared experiences and emotional states. The same is true for musical worship, with communal song and dance. As we have seen in the studies of the Iranian diaspora, this feeling of social cohesion and embeddedness is very important for Iranian migrants all over the diaspora, and it is something that people often feel is lacking. Ritualized practices might therefore make members of the ICN feel more involved with the religious community and the other members of the church. This may help in making it easier to build a new life in the Netherlands. Moreover, worship and ritual also provide the members of the church with an opportunity to tell their personal stories, be it in words in prayer or testimony, or through dance, speaking in tongues, and other forms of non-verbal

96 Joseph Williams, *Spirit Cure: A History of Pentecostal Healing*, Oxford University Press, 2013, chapter 4

discourses. This gives them an opportunity to open up about things that are usually not talked about or even suppressed in everyday life. At the same time, ritualization also creates a predictability that people can hold on to in the midst of changes and difficulties in their life. It provides them with guidelines, that they can also find in written form in the Bible.

On a more individual level, worship and prayer also help congregants to feel connectedness, but in this case, it is a feeling of being connected to a loving and powerful God. As I explained, this powerful relationship can also have an empowering effect, and be a source of strength when coping with the hardships of migration and life in a new country. Another resource that the ICN offers to help its members cope with many physical and emotional problems they face in their everyday life, is the use of 'Christianized' popular psychology. This connects the theological message to more common and popular discourses of Western society, and I think that this can also make the transition from one cultural environment to another a little easier for these migrants.

4. Conversion

In this chapter, I will focus on the beliefs and practices surrounding conversion. I chose to dedicate a separate chapter to this subject, because it is central in the theology and experienced faith of the ICN and its members. I will now explain why conversion important in the process of coping with migration and displacement as well, arguing that joining a religious community in such a dramatic way can not only give migrants stability, a social network, and a belief system to hold on to, as we have seen before, but also helps in shifting the focus in their lives away from the experiences of migration.

First, I will explain the importance of conversion in Evangelicalism in general and in the ICN in particular. Then, I will present some excerpts from the interviews I did with members of the ICN, concerning their conversion or born-again experiences. Based on this material I will argue more in depth why conversion is so important in the coping processes of the members of the ICN.

4.1 Conversionism

The first belief listed by Bebbington as part of his definition of Evangelicalism, which I mentioned above, is the belief that everyone needs to be born again, or converted, through an individual, radical experience. The belief in the importance of making an informed and conscious choice to become a 'true' Christian and accept Jesus as one's personal savior, is emphasized regularly in the ICN. This choice is partly believed to be a conscious, rational decision of the person in question, but more importantly, it is the result of an emotional experience of God's presence and love, in which God leaves the person no other choice than to give himself or herself to God. When one makes this decision, one is born-again in Christ. This means that one is believed to have become a truly different person, someone who now has a personal relationship with God. Even if one has been raised in an Evangelical Christian church by parents who have been born-again, it is necessary to start, or rather accept, an individual relationship with God. For those who have not grown up in an Evangelical church, this rebirth usually overlaps with what is generally considered a conversion.

The difference between conversion and being born-again can be explained as a difference in the religious history of the believer: if someone was a Christian before the experience, but finds a new spiritual commitment or joins a Charismatic church, the experience is usually called a born-again experience, while someone who adhered to a non-Christian religion before, or to no religion at all, is converted. However, many Evangelicals equally consider a conversion experience a born-again experience, because of Biblical references to rebirth in Christ. In the following I will use 'conversion' as including born-again experiences.

4.1.1 Introductory course and baptism

In the ICN, new attendees and people who are interested in the church are expected to take part in an introductory course, that teaches the basics of the Evangelical Christian faith, theology, and how to lead a Christian life. The leaders of the church strongly emphasize the importance of this course, by saying that it is crucial to know exactly what the faith one is about to convert to is about, in order to be able to make a informed and conscious choice, and to scare off those who want to be baptized for non-religious reasons, such as to make it easier to receive a residence permit in the Netherlands based on a claim to refugee status. It is also mentioned frequently that 'the other Iranian church' in the Netherlands, which is the Persian Church Cyrus in Apeldoorn, usually baptizes newcomers immediately, the first time they visit. This practice is rejected because it give the church a bad image: a church who does that, is naive enough to let people abuse them in order to receive a certificate of baptism that is useful to them in their asylum procedure. The leaders of the ICN emphasize that at their church, only those who are truly interested in becoming Christians are welcome. This effect is strengthened by the fact that a baptism service takes place only once a year, so after completion of the introductory course, one has to wait for the next opportunity to be baptized. Again, this contrasts with many other Evangelical migrant churches, who usually baptize everyone who claims to have had a born-again or conversion experience – who has already been 'baptized with the Spirit'.[97] The ICN's introductory course consists of four parts. Upon completion of a part of the course, the

97 Craig Keener, 'Holy Spirit', in: Gerald R. McDermott (ed), Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology, Oxford University Press 2011

attendee receives a certificate; one who receives all four certificates is eligible to be baptized and thereby become a full member of the church. In order to pass and receive a certificate, one has to attend all meetings and lessons of the course.

The baptism service usually takes place during the summer, either in open water or in an indoor swimming pool, according to the weather conditions. During the baptism service and ceremony, those who are going to be baptized and the pastors who carry out the baptism are completely dressed in white, symbolizing pureness and a new beginning. The new church members are baptized in the presence of a large majority of the church members, by pastors of the church, by immersing them completely in water. Before that, the people who are to be baptized are asked whether they believe in God, Jesus Christ, and that Jesus has died for their personal sins, accepting Jesus as a personal savior. The new church members answer all these questions with 'yes, I do/I believe'. They are also asked to tell the congregation why they want to be baptized, what the Christian faith means to them, and what Jesus has done in their lives. Then they are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. After the immersion, the congregation applauds the 'rebirth' of their new member, and all of the baptized receive a personal verse from the Bible, which is read to them by one of the members of the congregation. Then, a Farsi-language song is sung, which is also a different song for every person baptized, and pictures are taken.[98] After the baptism service, songs are sung for the baptized, they are congratulated by the other members of the congregation, they receive flowers and gifts, and sweets are doled out among the attendees. The baptized are now fully part of the congregation.

4.1.2 The responsibility of the 'saved'

Conversion in Evangelicalism is usually experienced as a pervasive presence of God or Jesus, which calls the individual to make a radical choice for a Christian life guided by Biblical rules and inspired by the Holy Spirit.[99] It is considered evidence of God's love, grace and transformative powers. This call is almost impossible to resist. At the

98 The taking of pictures, however, is something not all of the new church members are comfortable with, since some fear this may put them or their family members who are still in Iran in danger.

99 Entire paragraph: Miyon Chung, 'Conversion and Sanctification', in: Timothy Larsen, Daniel J. Treier (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 2007

same time, one experiences in its fullness one's sinfulness, self-righteousness, shame and guilt. The conversion is fully complete if one decides to make a clean break with one's past, which is now perceived as characterized by sin, regardless of one's religious affiliation before the conversion took place. Therefore, this experience is not only a gift from God, but also a huge responsibility for the converted, who are now supposed to radically transform and reorient their life. Furthermore, in a way this experience is also a call to martyrdom: conversion entails uncompromising surrender to Christ's Lordship in radical identification with his suffering and death. Evangelicals also believe that repentance and conversion are requirements to experience the reality of God's Kingdom, both right now and at the end of times.

Conversion is closely related to the concept of salvation. At the moment of conversion, one receives salvation as an act of God's divine grace. This happens because of the faith of the believer, not because of any kind of penance or good works. The believer's sins are immediately forgiven, and he is born again as a person who is justified before God and adopted into God's 'family', which is the community of true believers.[100]

This format for conversion as I just described it is rather uniform, and it almost goes without saying that not everyone experiences a conversion exactly this way. This reality has become more and more accepted by Evangelicals over the last decades, mainly due to the globalization of Christianity, and, to a lesser extent, scientific research on conversion. Therefore, this paradigm is shifting towards a view in which conversion has a less central place as the locus of transformation and the start of a personal relationship with God, and which sees these things more as a continuing process that may have a different course for different people, and that integrates salvation, baptism with water, the baptism of the Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit.[101] Also, the inward process of sanctification and renewal is believed to be interrelated to doing the acts of living a Christian life, and both processes are made possible because of God's saving grace and guidance.

100 'Evangelicalism', in: Walter Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Academic, 2001, 406

101 Gordon Smith, 'Conversion and Redemption', in: Gerald McDermott (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, Oxford 2010

4.2 Conversion stories

Throughout my fieldwork, many of the members of the ICN I spoke with emphasized the importance of conversion, or, put in their own terms, of giving your life and your heart to Jesus. Conversion is often an important subject in studies of Evangelicalism, and I found out that the ICN puts much emphasis on it as well. Near the end of most Sunday services, people who have not yet converted are asked to come to the altar and 'give themselves to Jesus'. Also during these services, congregants share their testimonies, which often have the structure of a conversion story, contrasting life before and after conversion. Congregants told me that these testimonies are also talked about more in depth in the Bible study groups and courses that the ICN organizes, but I did not have the opportunity to visit these gatherings myself.

During the interviews I did with six of the members of the ICN, all of the interviewees brought the story of they conversion up themselves, when I asked them to tell me about themselves and their past. The sections quoted below are excerpts from longer versions of the stories that the interviewees told me, but for reasons of space only the focus of the story, the defining moment of the conversion experience, is quoted here. The rest of the story was always told in the light of these experiences, giving indications of why one's life was already pointing in the direction of the conversion experience before it happened, and accounts of the changes the experience has brought about, such as deliberations on the sinfulness of one's life before conversion.

I chose to quote these stories here at length, in order to make it easier to see common themes and patterns, but also to give an impression of the diversity of the stories, and different perspectives.[102]

> *I was a Muslim, the kind of Muslim who hates Christians. My entire family was Muslim, my wife, who I was married to at the time, was also a Muslim. I worked as a metalworker at a large, international company, with colleagues from many different countries. I had friends from many countries as well, especially Turks and Moroccans. We were very good friends, we saw each*

102 All translations of these stories from Dutch to English are mine.

other a lot at work. They actually led me astray: we were selling stolen goods, we drank alcohol, things like that.
My brother was the one who was interested in Christianity. He owned a Bible, and he talked about it frequently as well. He tried to convince me to read the Bible, and he told me he was praying for me and he was asking others in his church to do the same, so that I would also see the truth of Christianity. I did not like that, I was annoyed by his insistence. This caused fights, and our relationship deteriorated. I was not interested in religious matters at all.
Some time later my ex-wife had a vision in her dream. She told me that she saw me in a church, with my brother standing behind me and a large group of other people, and that we were all praying. In hindsight, I know that happened because my brother and those other people were praying for me. Some time later again, I got the feeling that I had to visit my brother. Without any reason, just a feeling that urged me to visit him, so I did. Of course, he started to talk about faith and the Bible again. He started reading verses from the Bible to me. I was still annoyed by it, but he kept going. Then, suddenly, I was touched by the verses from the Bible and by God's love that spoke from them – that was the most important thing. That entire night I spent talking to my brother about the Bible, from nine 'o clock at night, until four 'o clock the next morning. The next day I noticed that I had changed. At work my friends came to me again, but I could no longer do those things we always used to do. That was because that night, five demons had left me, among them lying and stealing. I could no longer associate with them the same way as before.
-- Man in his forties, who converted in the Netherlands

My parents, they have very carefully asked me, we are going to church, do you want to come with us? I said, well, why not? Actually, God had prepared me for this moment. Well, I went to church, and after a short while I became friends with the son of the pastor. He gave me a present that touched my heart: he ordered this item for himself, because he really needed it, and when it arrived he gave it to me. At that moment I was so touched, I went to my room and I said 'God, I am not leaving this room until I have received Your love'.

Because I thought, when I have too much of something, or two of the same, or I do not need it, I can give to others, but not something I need for myself that is important to me. This way I said 'God, this love is not human, this must really be of You, that You can do something like this, live in him so that he can do this'. And you know, if you ask God something seriously, it happens. I remember that God was present there, I was full of the love and presence of God, and I was in love with people I hated before, I wanted to hold them and say 'I love you, because God created you'. And I was so in love, I opened the windows and and I shouted at the world, people before me, behind me, 'I am crazy about you, I love you, because God created you'. And then God spoke to my heart, very clearly, He said 'I gave my best for you as well, I have given myself, Jesus Christ, for you'. Then I understood who Jesus is for me, and then he came to live in my thoughts and my soul and my heart. I was in love with Him at that moment, and until now. And it keeps going on.
-- Man in his forties from a Muslim background. His parents converted to Christianity before he did so too in his early twenties, after joining them in the Netherlands.

Against my wife's will, we sold everything in Iran. First we went to a church, and I bought a Bible, because I knew that I could be interviewed here and if I would say I was a Christian, I had to know what is in the Bible. So I started to read the New Testament thoroughly, but I did not get further than Matthew 5, 6, that you have to forgive each other, you have to love each other, all those beautiful things. This was the God I had been looking for since I was eighteen years old. [...] So I went back to Tehran, especially to visit that church, because I thought that I needed to get a paper, from those Christians, I did not know. That time, the Eucharist was celebrated. And during the Eucharist I had this small cup of wine, and I had never tasted such great wine. Later people told me that in that church wine is never used, but it is always replaced with grape juice. But mine was real wine, I got warm. And it was very special for me that in church I could drink wine and still be a good person, loved by God.

In this other city, I had a group of friends with whom I met every weekend. Every weekend we would drink, we would get drunk, me too. But after I read the Bible, I felt like for the first time in fifteen years, this desire for alcohol was suddenly gone. [...] I did not want to drink anymore. My friends kept calling me, so I went to meet with them one last time, to show them I did not want that anymore. We were drinking vodka, and the person who poured in the vodka gave me twice as much to make me drunk and sociable. I drank a lot, but the only thing that came from my mouth, were the words from the Bible I was reading. The effect of alcohol on my brain was gone. That was a miracle for me: I tried hard to quit drinking for fifteen years, but now it happened at once. My wife saw this, and she saw that I did not visit my friends anymore. Then she became interested as well, in this book that changed the beast I used to be.

-- Man in his sixties, from a Muslim background. He converted when he was in his early forties, in Iran.

I visited an Evangelical church in Tehran. Before I had been in touch with this church, I had been there several times, but I was not open to it. I used to have asthma after my second child was born, and there I was healed. They prayed for me, I received healing, but I left the church just as spiritually blind.

Until my mother fell sick. The first person in my life, so to say, who played a major role in my life. In hindsight I would say she was my idol. But because of her visions and dreams I started thinking. She had seen Jesus, at the foot of her bed, and she had been comforted by the Lord. And after a few days, she dreamed about this church again, and the martyred pastors of this church, and she said 'What does this church and these martyred pastors want from me? Why do I keep seeing them?' And I said, not understanding what I said – now I understand this was the work of the Holy Spirit – I said 'Mum, maybe this church is the true church of God; let us agree, when you get better, we go there and see what they have to say'. And I think this was the radical decision in my heart. I do not know why, but this happened at once. [...]

And the pastor came to visit, and my mother told him about her visions and dreams, and he said 'Sister, God is speaking through you, these are prophetic visions you have received. My mother was very open, but I, because of my religious and nationalist limitations, was restricting her. [...] Later, my mom was allowed to go home [from the hospital], but she was very weak. Still I thought, it is Friday, I have to go to church. And my father opposed it, saying 'Come on, this is not the time to go to church', things like that. I have never been so rude to my father, but I said 'When is the time to realize that we need God, dad? We have been so stupid, this is the time, now we need God, and if you do not go, I will'. [...] But he went with me, and he went inside as well. And this is how the revival in my heart started. And I saw those people and I approached them, 'Oh, aunt, uncle...', and they were stunned, because I approached them there before like they came from Mars, but now I said 'Aunt and uncle, you do not know, my mother's health is so bad, please pray for her'. And they said 'Praise God, praise God', and I thought, these people are crazy, I am sharing bad news, and they say 'Praise God'. But they had seen something in me that I had not seen: my heart was now open to God. [...] And there in Tehran my rebirth happened.

-- Woman in her forties, from an Armenian Apostolic background. She converted to Evangelicalism in her thirties while visiting Iran, when she had lived in the Netherlands for over a decade.

The four stories above show how the conversion experience is portrayed as a single moment, a sudden, unexplained change that has taken place in one's attitude, and an experience that changes one's entire view of life. However, this instant is part of a much longer process of change, that often starts with a feeling of dissatisfaction with life and general unhappiness. One starts a search for meaning in life, or at least some distraction from meaninglessness, such as alcohol, drugs, or friendships. Then, in some way, Evangelical Christianity crosses one's path, usually in the form of a friend or relative who is a Christian. There is a mix of initial resistance against Evangelicalism, Christianity, or religion in general, and some attraction to aspects of it, such as specific teachings or the behavior of Christians one meets, but at some point an

emotional experience changes everything. After this experience, there is no turning back. One has to break with all that was sinful in one's life before, and give one's life completely to Jesus. Although it is not considered strictly necessary, this also encompasses membership of and active participation in an Evangelical church. Life after conversion is conceptualized as more whole, happier, and completely meaningful. In a way, a conversion experience is also an experience of healing: it heals all that was wrong in one's life, all depression and anxiety, and all spiritual brokenness. When talking about depression, many of the members of the ICN I spoke to used one or both of the following formats: “I used to be depressed and lonely, but since I have become a Christian, I no longer am”, and “I do feel depressed or lonely from time to time, but I know that I still have the support of Jesus and the church”. The leaders of the church also claim that faith can cure depression, and that therefore the members of the church are less often suffering from it, although Iranians are “generally prone to depression and addiction”.[103] I will return to the subject of healing later in this chapter.

In the rest of this chapter, I will use the conversion stories I quoted here to further explain the role beliefs and practices surrounding conversion play in the ICN, and how this relates to the coping mechanisms of its members. First, I will now turn to the narrative aspect and how this relates to identity and identification processes.

4.3 Narrative, identity, and coping

By stating that the experiences surrounding migration and living in a country that is not one's 'own' are something that needs coping with, it is implied that these experiences are difficult or challenging to a person. Migration shakes one's world view, belief system, and also the way one sees oneself, which is also argued by all of the authors on the Iranian diaspora we have seen above. They also focus, to different extents, on the influence migration has on identity formation and maintenance, for example in the way Iranians in the diaspora handle assigned identities, such as 'immigrant' or 'refugee'. As I also discussed above, being away from one's home country, and especially from the social networks that one was a part of there, such as

103 A gendered look at this matter is provided by William Mirola, 'A Refuge for Some: Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Religious Involvement and Depression', *Sociology of Religion*, 1999, 60(4), 419-437

family, friend, neighborhood, and religious community, can result in feelings of loneliness and loss. In this section, I will focus on these processes of identification, by using Dialogical Self Theory.

4.3.1 Identity and Dialogical Self Theory

Dialogical Self Theory, a theory that is developed by psychologist Hubert Hermans, explains the way identification processes take place in a modern and globalized world in which different cultures are less geographically localized than before, where people are part of several different networks and communities, and aware of even more diversity around them.[104] It shows how people are able to function in many different contexts without feeling fragmented, and create a balanced identity that feels like a organic whole to the person themselves. The theory is inspired by the psychology of the self in the tradition of William James and the dialogical school in the tradition of Mikhail Bakhtin.

The core principle of Dialogical Self Theory is that our self is a composition of a large number of different voices who all represent different I-positions.[105] These voices are constantly engaged in dialogue with each other, in which power dynamics are constantly at play, and they can also cause internal conflicts. Every I-position corresponds to an identification, and the positions are constantly moving while they are engaged in dialogue, much like the way people are dynamically changing and moving in the modern world. In addition, there are also I-positions that represent the voice of someone else outside the self, like a family member or friend, a group, but also, for example, a novel or an admired artist. Although they are not experienced as internal, these I-positions are part of one's identity, because they are related to internal I-positions and influence them. In this area, where internal and external voices intersect, much debate and discussion takes place. This is the main starting point for constructive conversation between people that are otherwise completely different, and these conversations can be both imagined and real. However, internal I-positions can

104 Hubert Hermans, "The Dialogical Self: Toward a Theory of Personal and Cultural Positioning." *Culture & Psychology,* 2001, 7, 243-81
and Hubert Hermans, *Dialoog en misverstand. Leven met de toenemende bevolking van onze innerlijke ruimte* (Soest 2006)

105 Hubert Hermans, *Dialoog en misverstand*, 99-105

become external, and the other way around, over the course of one's life. A special type of I-position is the meta-position, which can to a certain extent 'stand above' other positions and can also integrate and synthesize these positions in order to achieve a sense of unity of the self, by creating a third position that integrates two conflicting I-positions.[106] An example of such a meta-position in the case of the ICN, is that of I-as-Christian, and, to a lesser extent, I-as-diasporic-Iranian. I will return to this later.

Some of the I-positions represent collective voices, that represent communities and ideologies. Hermans argues that these I-positions are separate from others that represent individual members of a certain group, because it is possible for an individual to agree or disagree with the ideas of the community or ideology as a whole.[107] Collective voices are powerful, because they constrain the dialogues of other voices and the outcomes of these dialogues: they precede the dialogue, influence its tone and form, and color its discourse with meaning, definitions, and power imbalances. However, it is not impossible for individual voices to 'fight back', as Hermans puts it, and go against a collective voice. The I-position attached to the collective voice may play a more or less important role, and give the collective more or less power, according to the situation a person is in.

The concept of the collective voice is important in my study, because I argue that the collective voice of Evangelicalism and the ICN shapes the congregants' view on their personal lives, and their migration in particular.[108] Because conversion is believed to be such a radical, all-encompassing life change, the converts are encouraged to make this collective voice the central one for their identity and positioning. Besides, focusing on this collective voice can be something to hold on to when everything else seems to be 'repositioning' and in a state of chaos.

106 Hubert Hermans, *Dialoog en misverstand*, 41-47
107 Hubert Hermans, "The Dialogical Self", 262
108 An interesting article connecting Dialogical Self Theory and the study of diaspora is:
Sunil Bhatia, "Acculturation, Dialogical Voices and the Construction of the Diasporic Self", *Theory & Psychology*, 2002, 12(1), 55-66

4.3.2 Narratives and the act of storytelling

In all the stories I heard in interviews, testimonies, and conversations in the ICN, it was possible to identify a common format of a conversion narrative. Similar narrative frameworks are identified in studies of other Charismatic Christian groups. A well-known example is Susan Harding's classic study of the rhetoric of conversion among fundamental Baptists.[109] She argues that these conversion narratives are not only important for the convert's identity formation, but also a way of presenting the faith to the outside world, with the intention to bring about conversion of others through telling the stories. She argues that witnessing and preaching are closely related, and that witness to some extent mimics the conversion experience as an encounter of 'lost' and 'saved', of sinner and God, since the Holy Spirit is believed to speak through the saved. Deliberations on the sinful life before conversion are important in order to relate to the listener who is not yet saved. Harding concludes that the process of conversion, and thereby of learning the language of conversion, starts if one is willing to listen to witness. However, conversion needs to be completed by witnessing, by the act of speaking the language of conversion.

The act of storytelling as a social practice, and the way this relates to processes of identity formation and coping, has been studied by several scholars lately in different academic fields. The role the stories that are told is studied in the field of Narrative Theory, although the process of storytelling and the person telling the story are not neglected. The main starting point of Narrative Theory is the idea that stories and storytelling are important in the processes of identity formation and coping with hard-ship in life. People form a sense of their identity by telling stories about themselves, sometimes to others, but also to themselves in dialogues between different voices in their selves. These stories are made up of many different elements which are taken from many different discourses one comes across in life, and then mixed and matched to create new stories. Membership of certain categories in society, such as a gender, ethnic group, religious community, or minority, can profoundly influence the access one has to discourses and thereby also influence the stories people construct. These processes of creating stories and thereby creating identities are usually taking place on

109 Susan F. Harding , 'Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion', *American Ethnologist*, 1987, 14(1), 167-181

a subconscious level, while the person telling the story usually thinks he or she is only 'telling things as they are', or talking about 'what really happened'.[110]

In research of narrative, a distinction is made between 'big' stories and 'small' stories: the stories that are relatively extensive and coherent narratives, and the stories that speak from single utterances, fragmented narratives that are told in everyday life.[111] Researching stories can be challenging, because people tend to tell their stories differently when they are explicitly asked about them. Therefore, more attention has been given to the research of small stories recently, in order to get access to the more fragmented materials stories are made of.[112] In small stories especially, the process of composing stories is as much a social process as a psychological one. People form their stories through dialogues within themselves, but also with other people. These dialogues shape the narratives because of the interlocutor giving feedback, asking questions, suggesting new turns in the plot, et cetera, but also because the person telling the story may, consciously or subconsciously, tell different versions of the story in different contexts and to different people.[113] Through everyday interactions, one participates in various discourses which hand narrative elements that can be used in new stories. These discourses can be related to certain cultures or religions, which are usually rich with narrative material such as myths and legends, holy texts, spiritual and mystical accounts, and so forth, but also narrative examples such as testimonies and conversion stories.

In summary, narratives and storytelling are part of ongoing processes of identification, through which people constantly redefine and adjust the way they present themselves and the stories of their lives. When their lives and circumstances change,

110 As Marita Eastmond argues: “Narratives are not transparent renditions of ‘truth’ but reflect a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story”
Marita Eastmond, 'Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2007, 20(2), 248-264
See also: Susan Kwilecki, 'Religion and Coping: A Contribution from Religious Studies', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 2004, 43(4), 477–489

111 Small Story Research is also known as Narrative Practice Research.
Michael Bamberg, “Who am I? Narration and its contribution to self and identity”, *Theory & Psychology*, 2010, 21(1)

112 A leading scholar in this field is Alexandra Georgokopoulou, for example in this work:
Alexandra Georgakopoulou, *Small Stories, Interaction and Identities*, Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2007

113 Claudia Holler (ed), *Rethinking Narrative Identity: Persona and Perspective*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, 2013, 6-8

the stories change with them, and find new representations of identity both for the storyteller, and the outside world. In the next section, I will focus more on the ways narrative and storytelling are related to processes of coping and identification as well.

4.3.3 Narrative coping

Narrative research usually focuses on processes of identity formation and maintenance: narrative can even be argued to lie at the heart of identity construction.[114] Telling stories is an interpretative and constructive practice, and therefore it is occupied with meaning-making. Assigning meaning to things that happen, in turn, is an important aspect of coping. At the same time, one also has to cope with others telling stories that conflict with, impeach, or call into question one's own stories and identity, by creating counterstories to deal with the consequences or such narrative damage.[115] In the case of migrants, this process can also be observed. When arriving in a foreign country, the migrant is confronted with many new stories, and discovers that in some of them, he is constructed as the 'bad guy'.[116] The prejudices and stereotypes that are present in discourses in this new country are presented to the migrant in stories, which may be felt as attacks on the stories the migrant has constructed about himself, and thereby on his very identity. One aspect of learning how to live in another society, is learning how to play another role in the stories that are told. At the same time, the stories about the country of origin are re-constructed continuously, in the light of new events and experiences, in which some elements are memorized actively, while others are forgotten. These processes of telling stories can also give people a sense of empowerment and agency, of being able to determine their own role, and not only being allowed to play a supporting role, an extra in someone else's story. Anthropologist Michael Jackson, who wrote about storytelling and the experience of refugees, argues in a similar way that storytelling is not only a pastime, but an existential

114 James A. Holstein, Jaber F. Gubrium, *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*, Oxford University Press, 2000, 104

115 Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, Cornell University Press, 2001, chapter 5

116 An example of the way stories are used to counter this experience, is:
Robyn Ramsden and Damien Ridge, ''It was the Most Beautiful Country I have Ever Seen': The Role of Somali Narratives in Adapting to a New Country', *Journal of Refugee Studies*, published online July 26, 2012

need.[117] While in the face of traumatic experiences and loss, one is often less and less capable of using language to describe one's experiences, constructing and telling stories is essential to keep a feeling of being connected to these experience, to the world, and to other people. Jackson argues that in order to be recognized by others, to exist in a way, one needs to exist in public space, and one can do so by telling stories to others, bringing one's experiences and identity in the open.

An Iranian exile in the United States herself, Zohreh Sullivan has collected and analyzed the stories of other Iranians on the way they narrate their experience of exile. In line with Jackson's theory, Sullivan also states that she wants to collect these stories and publish them, in order to make sure they are not forgotten, to recognize and respect the storytellers. She argues that Iranians are educated in narrating exile, because Iranian literature, poetry and religion have a long history of writing about 'prolonged lamentations for that from which the subject has been separated'.[118] She argues that childhood memories of Iran are often contrasted with the harsh realities of exile, which results in feelings of loss, longing for a return to this childhood state, and melancholia. How these feelings are interpreted and expressed is influenced by religious and cultural systems of beliefs, which, as Sullivan puts it, 'structure desire'. However, she concludes that the intense experiencing of this melancholia is particularly 'Iranian'.[119]

In conclusion, migrants need to negotiate many different stories, that can also become internalized I-positions that are constantly in dialogue. By engaging in these dialogues and negotiating these stories, migrants create and represent new identities in new ways, which gives a clarity in and grip on their lives that is very powerful in coping. Regaining control in this way is important for migrants, because the migration process is one that has many factors one cannot control. Religious discourses and narratives are one of the discourses that migrants engage in, and therefore conversion stories and the formats for these stories can become important for the identification of those migrants who choose to turn to religion in the process of migration and coping. Religion can be this powerful, because of its abilities to create meaning in seemingly

117 Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression, and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusculanum Press, 2002, 93

118 Zohreh Sullivan, *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2001, 264

119 Idem, 264

senseless events and circumstances. In the next section, I will focus on this subject by introducing Miranda Klaver's study of Evangelicalism and conversion.

4.3.4 Attributing meaning to experiences

An example of the approach to the study of conversion that focuses on narrative, discourses, and the construction of identity, is Miranda Klaver's study of Evangelicals in the Netherlands.[120] Klaver focuses on the question of 'what kind of meanings of conversion are generated through the semiotic practices within contemporary Evangelical churches'. She uses narratives and semiotics to answer this question, and she bases her study on fieldwork in an Evangelical and a Pentecostal church in the Netherlands and some interviews of converts in these churches. Klaver argues that the existing paradigm in research on conversion has too little applicability with regard to different religious traditions and modern religiosity, which is characterized by more dynamic patterns of affiliation and commitment.[121] Therefore, she concludes, a universal model of conversion is unattainable. She has a dialogical approach to conversion, and argues that “the meaning of conversion is the outcome of a dialogue that takes place between different discourses surrounding the potential convert and the person’s life story ”.[122]

Furthermore, Klaver found that the converts she interviewed did not focus their conversion narratives on beliefs, where these do play an important role in theories of conversion. Instead, converts emphasized experiences and miracles, in which material objects also play an important role.[123] This is something I also observed in the ICN: it is not a specific set of beliefs that convinces most people of the 'truth' of Christianity, but an experience, that often revolves around miracles and visions. Klaver argues that the conversion narrative also turns into a testimony, a ritualized format, and converts are encouraged in the church to often give their testimony. This repetition of the story, with the elements of a new discourse the convert learns over time in the church as part of a socialization process, keeps the process of transformation going, so the narrative

120 Miranda Klaver, *This is my Desire: A Semiotic Perspective on Conversion in an Evangelical Seeker Church and a Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands*, Proefschrift Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2011
121 Idem, 78
122 Idem, 402
123 Idem, 74 and 91-92

itself plays a part in changing the convert's life.[124] There is a dialogical relationship between beliefs and practices.

The adoption of a new discourse gives words to religious experiences the new believer cannot otherwise express, which also aids the meaning-making process, and again contributes to the socialization into the new religious group. This draws attention to the social networks the new believer becomes a part of, and the role of songs and rituals in learning a new discourse, of which, for example, also bodily expressions, such as kneeling, dancing, or lifting one's hands up, are a part. Klaver emphasizes the importance of non-verbal expressions and implicit narratives in the process on conversion and adopting a new discourse. These non-verbal expressions are related to the religious experiences and emotions that are very important for the converts themselves. Klaver concludes: “conversion observed in the context of new Evangelical churches is the outcome of participation in formative bodily practices that acknowledge the senses as a source of knowledge within a larger framework of compelling biblical narratives”.[125]

Thus, Klaver argues that the beliefs and practices that surround conversion give Evangelicals verbal and non-verbal ways to create meaning and cope with things that happen in their lives. When faced with a disruptive life event such as migration, these beliefs and practices, and the narrating of conversion stories, can help in creating new meaning and order in one's life. Another, more explicit way to restore order, can be found in the Evangelical practices of healing, that I found to be very important in the ICN as well. I will now elaborate on this subject.

4.4 Healing

Near the end of the service, the pastor usually asks for those who need healing in their lives to come forward, so that the congregation can pray for them. The pastors and some prominent members of the church, such as the pastors' wives and those who work for 222 Ministries, also walk up to the altar at this point, in order to pray for those who need healing. They put their hands of the head or shoulders of the person who requested prayer, while they pray out loud with their eyes closed. Men can pray

124 Idem, 89
125 Idem, 404

for women in this setting, but women cannot pray for men. This prayer normally takes up to ten minutes. The subjects of the prayers often start to cry, and they sometimes pray along or utter praises to God. Through these prayers and bodily contacts, the Holy Spirit is believed to flow into the person's body, while working healing powers. Not only physical sickness or injury is believed to be healed by this practice, but also mental and spiritual problems and 'weakness' can be cured. Healing can be either of physical, mental or spiritual illness, although it can also be used as a more holistic concept that includes suffering as a result of materialistic deficits. This way, health and wholeness are connected to spirituality: it is believed that one is not completely healthy if one does not have a 'healthy' relationship with God, for example, if this relationship is 'troubled' by any kind of sin. At the same time, a spiritually 'healthy' life is also believed to protect one from physical or mental illness or injury, and to cure all ailments, ranging from cancer to depression. This kind of life is believed to fill the believer with the Holy Spirit, whose healing powers are then working constantly.

Outside of the Sunday service, healing and worship sessions are also held in the ICN, and at least once a year the entire Sunday service is dedicated to healing through prayer and worship. God's power to heal any illness and disorder is very important in the discourse of the ICN's leadership. Healing is an important topic in the Bible, especially in the New Testament, where many accounts are given of Jesus healing and exorcising demons.[126] When it comes to sickness and healing, three seemingly conflicting views can be found in the Bible: one sees sickness and suffering as a punishment from God for sin and disobedience, the second sees them as opportunities for God to show his greatness and healing powers for people to recognize them and convert, the third considers sickness the result of possession by demons.[127] During an exorcism, these demons are commanded to leave a person's body or mind, by invoking God's power. In the ICN, both physical and mental conditions are explained largely in two different ways: they are either caused by God, as a punishment for sin or as a way of directing believers back to the right path, or they are caused by the Devil and his demons, because the believer's relationship with God has weakened and

126 For example in Matthew 4:24 and 8:16; Mark 3:22; Luke 4:41

127 'Healing', in: Walter Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Academic, 2001, 539-540
'Exorcism', in: idem, 427-428

his soul has opened up for such evil influences. The specific cause for a certain case of illness is determined individually, but the cure can always be found in asking God to exert his healing powers. This is done in prayer, in a setting of worship. Even though God is believed to be able to cure any ailment, the ICN does not reject modern medicine, and does not discourage its members from seeking medical help. However, they do believe that modern medicine alone will not cure people's sickness: if people remain sinful or distanced from God, they will not be truly healthy. Healing is about more than just alleviating pain and suffering, but about restoring wholeness in all aspects of life, physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually.[128]

Faith plays a crucial role in healing, since the person seeking to be released from sickness should not doubt God's healing powers, mediated by the person who is given this spiritual gift after conversion. Some Evangelicals, and also other groups of Christians, believe that the only right way to cure sickness is through divine healing.[129] They therefore object to seeking medical help, because they believe this is an invention from the Devil, meant to unsettle the believer's faith in God's healing powers. They argue that because the cause of sickness is spiritual, caused by God either as a punishment or as a way to show his greatness, the only real cure can be a spiritual one. This belief is more widespread with regard to mental illnesses, which are believed to be only truly curable by God, but not by psychologists or medication.

Practices of divine healing and exorcism are more prominent in Pentecostalism than in other Evangelical churches, although the popularity of Charismatic movements has made for renewed interest in divine healing within Evangelicalism. Some authors suggest that the globalization of Christianity is also a reason why its popularity has increased, since divine healing is very important for Christians who live in countries or circumstances where other sources of healing and medical or psychological care are not available or accessible.[130] Faith healing is often also one of the most striking features of migrant churches in the West, and it is often discussed in the public debates about the integration of migrant Christians into Western society. Migrants on average experience more health problems, both mentally and physically,

128 See also Candy Gunther Brown, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, Oxford University Press, 2011
129 Candy Gunther Brown, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, 5
130 Candy Gunther Brown, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, 6-8

than non-migrants.[131] Refugees experience even more ailments, mainly mental health issues like PTSD, anxiety disorders and depression, and their health situation also becomes worse during the asylum procedure due to the uncertainty of the outcome of the procedure.[132] Often, migrants do not know how the health care system in their new country functions, and where they have to go in order to get medical or psychological treatment. Moreover, there are language barriers and financial barriers for accessing health care. Because of these issues, migrants more often than non-migrants turn to faith and religious institutions to cure their sicknesses. Also, religious migrants sometimes interpret their symptoms in religious terms rather than scientific, medical terms, and this causes misunderstanding when seeking medical help.[133] Turning to faith healing is empowering: it shows that one has God on one's side and that he is the most powerful healer.[134]

4.4.1 Storytelling and healing

Another study that focuses on healing, narrative and coping, is that of Tankink I cited above in my chapter on the theology and beliefs of the ICN. She studied the way born-again Christians in Uganda deal with painful aftermath and memories of war, and how they fit these experiences into their narratives of conversion.[135] Her research

131 Engelhard and Goorts, *God zal voor mij zorgen*, 12
See also for different populations:
Van Willigen and Hondius, *Vluchtelingen en gezondheid*, Swets en Zeitlinger Lisse, 1992
Sundquist, Iglesias and Isacson, 'Migration and Health: A Study of Latin American Refugees, Their Exile in Sweden', *Scandinavian Journal of Primary Health Care*, 1995, 13(2), 135-140
De Jong, *Trauma, War, and Violence: Public Mental Health in Socio-Cultural Context*, Kluwer Academic New York, 2002
Guus van der Veer, *Counselling and Therapy with Refugees and Victims of Trauma: Psychological Problems of Victims of War, Torture, and Repression*, Wiley, Chichester, 1998

132 Laban and Gernaat, 'Impact of a Long Asylum Procedure on the Prevalence of Psychiatric Disorders in Iraqi Asylum Seekers in the Netherlands', *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 2004, 192(12), 843-851

133 Engelhard and Goorts, *God zal voor mij zorgen*, 14

134 Candy Gunther Brown, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*, 16

135 Marian Tankink, "'The Moment I Became Born-again the Pain Disappeared': The Healing of Devastating War Memories in Born-again Churches in Mbarara District, Southwest Uganda ", *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 2007, 44(2), 203–231
Idem, "Not talking about traumatic experiences: harmful or healing? Coping with war memories in southwest Uganda ", *Intervention*, 2004, 2(1), 3-17
Idem, *Beyond human understanding: de invloed van de born-again kerken op het omgaan met pijnlijke oorlogsherinneringen in Mbarara district, Zuidwest Oeganda*, 2000, Doctoraalscriptie Culturele Antropologie en Sociologie der Niet-Westerse Samenlevingen, Universiteit van Amsterdam

focused on the power the act of storytelling can have. She furthermore shows how conversion and healing are related, and how the elements I discussed previously work together. She argues that becoming a member of a Born-again Christian Church might help people to deal with the memories or war and trauma. These churches provide people with a new perspective on reality and on past and future: through a conversion experience, people can focus on the future, break with their past, and make a new start in a symbolic way. They are provided with a new framework of meaning, in which everything that happens is part of God's plan; a belief that helps them to cope with what happened in the past. Furthermore, born-again Christians believe that God will give them the power to overcome everything that he of the devil puts in their path. Painful memories and experiences in the past are reinterpreted as caused by the devil of by demons, which can be fought by letting Jesus into one's heart and invoking God when one feels attacked by them. This way, 'evil' memories can no longer harm the saved. Divine healing is also done in church settings with the intent of freeing people from the demons of painful emotions. During the healing, God is believed to take over the person the healing is directed to, which makes it possible for this person to let go of controlling his emotions. The church members are instigated to open their hearts and minds up to God, so that they put themselves into in state in which God can do miracles. Furthermore, the churches provide a space where it is possible to talk about traumatic experiences in the past in the format of prayer, conversion narratives and personal testimonies, and where people can build solidarity and trust again in a cohesive communal setting, that soon becomes very close as a result of shared beliefs and experiences.

Several of the mechanisms Tankink describes, can also be observed in the ICN. Although there are of course many large cultural differences between Uganda and Iran, the members of the ICN also use the religious conversion or born-again testimonies they develop in the church in order to reinterpret their personal histories. An experience that is often traumatic to some extent, is the experience of international migration, which for many members of the ICN can be considered a forced migration. This experience can easily be interpreted as the most important, defining experience of their lives, completely turning life upside-down. However, in the life stories of the members of the ICN, the conversion experience is constructed as central, and as the

most important, defining experience of their lives. The migration experience merely plays a secondary role in their stories, or is not mentioned at all when they are not asked about it. The focus of the convert's life is no longer on the loss, uncertainty, and negativity of the migration experience, but on the positive change that Christian life has brought about. As Tankink argues, this focus shift also placed the emphasis of the story on the future, rather than on the past. Of course, this does not mean that all painful experiences of the past are instantly forgotten, but in combination with the support of the church, friendship with other Christians, and the practical advise that is given by the pastors, conversion to Evangelical Christianity can give people tools to tell their life story differently, and therefore to also have better ways to cope with the experiences of the past.

4.5 Conversion and the transformation of identity

In this chapter, we have seen that conversion and conversion narratives are important in creating and representing identity, thereby shaping identification processes. They can also be important as meaning-making tools, which can create order and give people a sense of having more control on their lives. In Evangelicalism, conversion is closely linked to practices and discourses of healing, which similarly is a way to restore a good world, and the way things should be.

Religious and nationalistic identifications can be very powerful, because they can transcend other identifications.[136] Put in a different way, religious and nationalistic I-positions are able to become dominant in one's inner dialogues, and also reconcile other I-positions that are conflicting. In the case of the members of the ICN, the identification with a transnational Christianity transcends identities such as 'immigrant', 'asylum seeker', 'refugee', 'stranger', 'minority', but also identifications with ethnic groups that were more important back in Iran. Identification with transnational Christianity also changes the way the members of the ICN position themselves in the Netherlands, symbolically stating: 'we are not like the Muslim immigrants you dislike and fear, but we are Christians like you'. This change in attitude towards Dutch society can be seen in the conversion stories of members of the ICN, where the

136 This is argued by Catharina Kinnvall, “Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security”, *Political Psychology*, 2004, 25(5), 741-767

moment of conversion also marks a change in they way one looks at Dutch people. One of my interviewees, a woman in her forties, phrased it as follows:

> *For years I wondered, what am I doing here, in this, sorry, damn country? I was not a Christian yet, then. And I thought, it is dark, it is raining, the people are so individualistic, they do not even say hello, after five it is so quiet on the streets. [...] Even with my colleagues, the conversations were about their vacations, how a certain wine tasted; I usually listened, but all conversations were superficial. It did not help me, I felt really lonely. But after I became a believer, I saw God's love in the church. [...] Therefore, I think that from the moment on that I found my spiritual family here in the church, the Netherlands was no longer a damn country for me, everything became sunny, everything became more beautiful, I saw the grass, I saw nature, I saw the Dutch Christians, who are so open to our ministry. I also saw the blessings, and I saw how the churches in the Netherlands have also blessed my brothers and sisters, and how many people came to believe here, because of the Dutch and their hospitality, you know, I started seeing that.*

After starting to identify as Christian, this woman started to position herself differently over against the Dutch people she met. Before, she clearly thought of all Dutch people as 'them', while Armenians, especially the Armenians from Iran, were 'we'. For her, these two groups had different, opposed characteristics: one was cold and distant, while the other was warm and caring. After becoming a Christian, the woman no longer used this binary categorization. 'We', is still 'we', but Dutch Christians, and Christians with any national or ethnic background, for that matter, can now also be part of the 'we'. The added position of I-as-Christian gave this woman a feeling of belonging in the Netherlands, although she does not identify as Dutch:

> *And I started to feel at home. I will never feel Dutch, that is not who I am. When I go to Armenia, which is my fatherland*[137]*, I do not feel at home there, either. But you know where I feel at home? When I am in a church. It does not*

137 This woman belongs to the Armenian ethnic minority in Iran. Although she never lived in Armenia, she still considers this her 'fatherland', because of her ethnicity.

matter who are there: a Dutch church, an Antillean church, an American church, an Armenian church, a Farsi-language church – I feel at home in a church, that is my place. Even if they speak or worship in Arabic, I still feel at home. That is what God does. That is Jesus' cross, that brings all nations, all languages, all people with different backgrounds together. And that is the peace I have in my heart, even though I still feel lonely sometimes, but I know I am not alone.

The position of I-as-Christian therefore is also a 'mobile' identity: one is not bound to a particular country or region, and one is therefore never 'displaced' as a Christian. This powerful I-position makes it possible to cope with assigned identity components such as the ones I mentioned above: 'immigrant', 'asylum seeker', 'refugee', 'stranger', 'minority'.[138] Based on the belief that the whole world belongs to God, and is given as a whole to all of his children, these labels can be rejected. This small story is therefore powerful in coping with the significant impact that migration, discrimination and prejudice have on people.

However, other I-positions can still exist alongside I-as-Christian, and conflicts between them can still arise. The identifications I-as-Iranian, I-as-Armenian/Azeri/Pars are still powerful as well, and all of the people I asked told me they would certainly return to Iran if it would be possible to freely practice their faith and evangelize there. This longing to return, or maybe even the obligation to return, is also very prominent in the mission and vision of 222 Ministries. There is also a strong identification with pre-Islamic Iran and the Persian civilizations throughout history. As I showed previously, there is considerable pride that Persia, Elam and its leaders are mentioned in a positive way in the Bible. Because of this, many Iranians prefer to identify as 'Persian' instead of 'Iranian'.[139] Due to this link between I-as-Iranian/Persian and I-as-Christian, the national identity is enforced, while the importance of ethnic identifications seems to have faded. This is also mentioned by Sullivan in her study of Iranians in the United States:

138 H. Grotevant, 'Assigned and Chosen Identity Components: A Process Perspective on Their Integration', in: G.R. Adams, T.P. Gullotta, R. Montemayor, *Adolescent Identity Development*, Newbury Park, London, New Delhi: Sage , 1992, ch.5, pp. 73-90

139 See also Jamarani, *Identity, Language and Culture in Diaspora*, 184

> *The nostalgia for Iran, however, produced a discourse of unity and shared values in spite of frequent reminders that Azaris, Kurds, Baha'is, and others were groups whose distinctions were blurred in the construction of the nationalist imaginary. Almost all seemed to assume that what connected Iranians to each other and separated them from Americans was, in diaspora, more important than their ethnic differences. While their sense of difference is essentialized, their understanding of differences between Iranians is complex*[140]

However, a study by Ron Kelley of Iranians in Los Angeles argues that ethnic divisions are very important, but often overlooked by outsiders.[141] Kelley argues that people with the same ethnic background live in the same areas of the city, and almost exclusively have contacts with others from the same ethnic group. However, this is not true for the members of the ICN, who have contacts and friendships across ethnic lines with other members of the church. Here, religious divisions are most important. At the same time, it is important not to overlook the heterogeneity of the Iranian diaspora, even within the Evangelical Iranian category.[142]

Apart from the identification with Iran, the members of the ICN also identify strongly with the Iranian diaspora. This position of I-as-diasporic-Iranian more specifically focuses on the Christian diaspora, but also creates a sense of oneness with other Iranians who left Iran, for whatever reason. This I-position is more flexible than that of I-as-Iranian, because it is a hybrid identity, or, as Sullivan calls it, a 'traveling identity, one that disturbs the boundaries of location, power, and politics in the process of migratory transformation'. While some exiles may retain a strong connection with 'home', others prefer a more 'uncentered' identity, but all of them live in several spaces at the same time, including cyberspace, which is Sullivan believes is becoming more and more important for Iranian exiles.[143] The mention of cyberspace is very important, because it contains important tools, such as social media, that bring and keep members of the diaspora in contact with each other. This also works on a micro level:

140 Zohreh Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 14
141 Ron Kelley, Jonathan Friedlander, Anita Y. Colby (eds), *Irangeles: Iranians in Los Angeles*, University of California Press, 1993, chapter 2
142 A similar point is made by Pnina Werbner, 'The Place Which is Diaspora: Citizenship, Religion and Gender in the Making of Chaordic Transnationalism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2002, 28(1), 119-133
143 Zohreh Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 265

many of the people in the ICN whom I spoke to, said they had family members or friends in other countries as well, with whom they stay in touch through social media, e-mail and Skype.[144] These media contribute to the identification with a transnational group, such as the Iranian diaspora, but also Christianity.

Above, I argued that identifications, also among the members of the ICN, are complex issues. Being a part of a larger whole and identification with this larger group, such as transnational Christianity of the Iranian diaspora, can be empowering and give people a new self-esteem. At the same time, it may create problems in everyday life in the Netherlands, because it may create a detached attitude towards Dutch society. However, I did not get any indications that this is the case with members of the ICN, and the leadership also encourages people to be active in society and make Christian Dutch friends. Further research on the relationship between international orientated identifications and 'local lives' might be interesting here.

In conclusion I can argue that religious practices, in interplay with religious beliefs, can contain powerful tools for coping with hardship in life. Important are the beliefs that God's power and goodness culminate in his plan for humanity, linked to practices that symbolically hand over the individual's power to God. Furthermore, the beliefs of salvation and grace are linked to the ritualization of everyday 'Christian' life, by accepting Jesus as a savior and the forgiveness of sin through actions in everyday life, that aim at helping the believer to be a 'good Christian'. The belief of God as a healer also contains empowerment for believers, who can overcome any illness by invoking God's healing powers. This power can often seem to be lacking in other areas of life, but religious beliefs and practices can help to get a feeling of renewed empowerment.

144 An interesting article on this subject is
Halleh Ghorashi and Kees Boersma, 'The ‘Iranian Diaspora’ and the New Media: From Political Action to Humanitarian Help', *Development and Change*, 2009, 40(4), 667–691

5. Conclusions

Throughout this study I have showed that many factors are in play in processes of identification and coping among the members of the ICN. Moreover, there are of course also many individual differences between these people, that make it impossible to make any absolute general claims about the way religion and religious narratives influence coping with migration and displacement. The experiences are different for those with a Muslim background and those with a Christian background, for different ethnic groups, for men and women, for those who came to the Netherlands as children and those who were older, and for those who converted in Iran and those who converted in the Netherlands. However, I argued that the factor that unites all these different people, which is Evangelical Christianity and the community of the ICN, does give us some clues about identification and coping strategies.

First, I showed that the beliefs that are central in Evangelical Christianity are also endorsed by the ICN. These beliefs focus on the necessity of completely devoting one's life to God in order to be a good person. This results in a lot of important practices, such as mission and evangelization, attendance of activities organized by the congregation, and prayer, worship and healing. The dedication of leading a completely Christian life also gives people support and grip on their lives: in any situation, there is a good, Christian way to act, and the believer can find out what the right decision is through prayer, reading the Bible, and talking to a pastor. This makes it easier to deal with difficult decisions and obstacles in everyday life, because the believer leaves the decision-making to God and therefore does not have to do it on his own. In the case of migrants, who are often already dealing with many other difficulties in their everyday lives, this can help in coping with feelings of being overwhelmed and lost. Although still making the final decisions themselves, many people told me they felt like a weight was lifted off their shoulders after they converted and started leading a 'Christian life'.

Another belief that is central to most Christian denominations, is the belief that in Jesus' death, all human sins are forgiven. In the ICN, the Evangelical belief is adhered to that in order for the individual to be forgiven for all sins, one needs to convert and accept Jesus as a personal savior. After a conversion experience one is 'born again',

and all sins from the past are forgiven. This is a very important concept in coping with feelings of guilt or doubt with regard to past decisions, attitudes and behavior. For migrants, these feelings are often prevalent. Was it the right decision to leave Iran? To leave my family and friends behind? Should I have stayed and fought for change, instead of 'fleeing'? For Evangelicals it may be easier to come to peace with these past choices, because even if they were wrong, these mistakes are forgiven by God. Moreover, the belief that God is omnipotent and omnipresent gives meaning to all that has happened in the believer's past, because it all has to be part of God's plan. So even when you did not yet communicate with him about the decisions you had to make, he still made sure you acted in line with his plans. For the Iranian Christians in the diaspora, migration was part of God's plan, because he wants them to grow in their faith in an environment where they are free to practice this faith and learn from others. This can give believers a feeling of peace.

Because the identification of I-as-Christian demands total dedication and commitment from members of the ICN, it can become a dominant meta-position for them. As I argued above, this connects them with Christians all over the world, and provides a 'mobile identity'. This can resolve conflicts between other identity components, such as nationalistic and ethnic identifications on one hand and assigned identity markers such as 'immigrant' (often with the implication that one does not belong and is not welcome) or 'asylum seeker'. The position of I-as-Christian also changes attitudes towards the Netherlands and the Dutch, and reaches out to Dutch people who also identify as Christian. The ICN actively maintains contacts with many churches and Christian organizations in the Netherlands, and encourages its members to attend a Dutch church as well on Sunday mornings. At the same time, members of the church generally do not identify as Dutch, or as Iranian-Dutch. The position of I-as-diasporic-Iranian plays almost the same role as I-as-Christian, in providing a mobile identity while connecting one to many other people.

Another factor that helps the members of the ICN in coping with migration and its aftermath, is the importance of prayer, worship and healing. In these practices, the believers give themselves completely to God, and therefore temporarily hand over the control over their life. This is closely related to the belief that everything that happens is part of God's plan: in prayer and worship, the believer asks God to show them his

plan and tell him what to do, which choices to make, for example, through visions or Bible verses. This makes believers feel like they are not alone. Religious experiences that one has during meditation and similar practices are generally linked to lower levels of anxiety and stress, and this may be true for worship and prayer as well. The use of popular psychology mixed with Christian beliefs in sermons and other discourses in the church may contribute to lowering stress and anxiety as well. Another factor that contributes to this, is the ritualization of prayer and worship, and the religious ritualization of everyday life.

The context of prayer and worship also gives believers the opportunity to share their thoughts and difficulties with others in the church, while praying out loud. This can be an empowering experience, because one connects oneself to the power of God, which one is praising. Testimonies and witnessing also create space to tell one's story, while at the same time reinterpreting it in Christian terms. Here the concept of conversion is again very important, because the conversion or born-again experience is usually placed at the center of such testimonies. This creates a new order in one's life story, while interpreting everything else in the light of this experience. It makes that the suffering connected to migration no longer stages central stage in one's life story, but instead becomes an example of the way God has worked in one's life. The ICN, together with other Iranian Christians, believes that Christian Iranians in the diaspora are chosen by God to play a special role in his plans to make Iran a Christian nation, from where he will reign. This helps in creating a new self-esteem for members of the ICN.

On the basis of this study, it is not possible to claim that among the members of the ICN depression, loneliness and anxiety are less prevalent than among Iranians with different religious backgrounds. However, based on the material I did discuss here, one could argue that Evangelical Christianity gives Iranians, and others, a number of tools that may be helpful in coping with the experiences of migration.

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