

Cross-cultural Understandings of the relation between “Religion” and “Politics” in the Dutch Process of Determining Refugee Status

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Abstract

Following the social constructionism paradigm, this thesis investigates different understandings of the relation between “religion” and “politics” present in the refugee status determination process in the Netherlands. A discourse analysis has been employed in order to uncover subconscious cultural assumptions present in Dutch culture about the relation between “religion” and “politics”. Subsequently, two biographical narrative interviews with former asylum seekers have been conducted in order to gain insight in the experiences of people experiencing forced displacement. An ex-IND employee has been interviewed to learn how the policy papers of the IND are employed during the Dutch process of determining refugee status. The results show that secularism is the backdrop against which the concepts of “religion” and “politics” are interpreted. What this research shows is that these concepts are clearly defined, and that refugee status is determined according to these definitions. However, the biographical narrative interviews with former asylum seekers show that these definitions limit the expression of their experiences during the hearing with the Immigration and Naturalisation Service. The relation between “religion” and “politics” is often an entanglement that is not explicitly acknowledged in the analysed policy papers.

Keywords: religion, politics, cultural concepts, understanding, secularism, forced migration

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Introduction

As part of my internship with VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, I attended hearings between the Dutch Immigration- and Naturalisation Service (IND) and people applying for refugee status and protection. During one of these hearings, a refugee told the IND official about an incident where a friend filmed her taking off her niqab in the streets of a city in Iran¹. The video was meant to be an act of resistance against the ruling regime. She told the IND official that she was arrested, physically and sexually abused in prison and the police told her that they would kill her if they saw her again. They tortured her for three days. Yet, when the IND official asked if she experienced problems due to her political activity, she answered “No.” When the IND asked if she experienced problems due to her religion or religious or spiritual convictions, however, she answered: “Yes.”.

This thesis investigates different understandings of the relation between “religion” and “politics” present in the refugee status determination process in the Netherlands. The process of refugee status determination involves ascertaining the source and degree of threat faced by a person seeking asylum. In the questions they ask, the IND make a clear distinction between “religion” and “politics” as reasons why people may be in need of protection. The nature of that distinction and how the IND understands the relation between “religion” and “politics”, however, is never explicitly communicated. Yet how this relationship is interpreted can mean the difference between being granted or denied protection.

While I attended the interviews with the IND, I found that the IND asks two main types of questions: ad hoc and standard questions. The first questions are inquiring into the asylum seeker’s personal situation and experiences in order to identify that the person is who he or she claims to be and to gain an in-depth understanding of the asylum seeker’s flight story. These types of questions depend on the story the refugee tells during the interviews. The second type of question is those that are standard and are the same in every interview with all asylum seekers. These questions inquire into the grounds on which a refugee applies for asylum in a direct way. Among these questions, seven are most important. These are:

- Have you experienced problems due to your religion or religious or spiritual convictions?
- Have you experienced problems due to your Ethnicity?
- Have you experienced problems due to your Nationality?
- Have you experienced problems due to your political activities?
- Have you experienced problems due to your Sexuality?
- Have you experienced problems due to military obligations?
- Have you experienced problems due to your profession?

The questions stated above contain grounds on which refugee status can be granted. They inquire, among others, about “religious” and “political” reasons for flight in clearly separate questions. Thereby making a distinction between the two and forcing the refugee into mindset of clear distinctive categories. As shown in the example above, categories can overlap and are often intertwined. Refugee status is granted on these grounds due to the European treaty European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) on which the Dutch Aliens Act is based. The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the European treaty European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) form the basis for the conditions on which an asylum residence permit can be granted as described in the Dutch Aliens Act. Additional grounds for asylum are if the asylum seeker is likely to

¹ The name city is not mentioned due to privacy reasons.

fall victim to random violence in his former habitual residence and if the asylum seeker cannot be repatriated due to physical or psychological medical reasons.

How we interpret the relation between “religion” and “politics” more generally, can mean the difference between being granted or denied protection for people seeking asylum.” The main question that I will try to answer is: What is the difference in the understanding of the relation between “religion” and “politics” that can be of influence on the process of determining refugee status in the Netherlands? In order to discover the possible difference in understanding of these concepts, I will conduct research into how these concepts are deployed by both IND officers and people applying for refugee status. Because these different understandings are directly related to the asylum process in which the goal is to determine refugee status, two main parties can be distinguished: The IND and the refugee. The IND is charged with the mandate to implement the immigration policy. A core task is conducting the hearing of refugees in order to determine whether they are granted refugee status and receive the protection of the Dutch state. The goal of the asylum seeker is to be classified as a refugee and enjoy the rights this official designation entails. In order for the asylum process to gain reliable and valid results mutual understanding is key. This research was conducted during my internship at VluchtelingenWerk Nederland in Ter Apel. VluchtelingenWerk Nederland is an independent organisation that promotes the rights and interests of refugees and asylum seekers and is another important partner in the Dutch process of determining refugee status. The VluchtelingenWerk departments in Ter Apel is mainly focussed on asylum seekers because the IND location where asylum applications are processed is located there. During my internship, one of the main tasks was to conduct flight-story analyses (VVA). During a VVA the asylum seeker and I sat together in a room and talked about the reason why they left their country. These experiences gave insight in the worldview of asylum seekers and their understanding of the relation between “religion” and “politics”. Another main task was attending the hearing between the IND and asylum seekers in order to monitor the procedure and provide the lawyer of the asylum seeker with a report of the hearing in order to improve legal aid. In order to answer my research question, I need to find out what assumptions the IND officials are making about the understandings of “religion” and “politics” of the refugee and what assumptions asylum What is the current situation regarding displacement and forced migration globally?

Sub-questions

In order to answer the question: “What is the difference in the understanding of the relation between “religion” and “politics” that can be of influence on the process of determining refugee status in the Netherlands?” sub questions have been formulated. All parties in the process of determining refugee status have their own understanding of the relation between religion and politics as well as what these concepts signify. The main research question can be divided into two parts. The first part focusses on the asylum seeker and the second part focuses on the IND. The understanding of the relation between religion and politics needs to be uncovered in order to answer the main research question. To do so, the following sub questions must be answered.

1. *How do people who experience displacement understand the relation between the concepts of religion and politics?*

It is necessary to answer this question in order to answer the main research question. It allows us to make a comparison of the understanding of the relation between the concepts of religion and politics between the people who experience displacement and the IND. It focusses on the first part of the main research question. The understanding of people who experienced displacement plays a

role in their flight story and shapes the account they give of it during their hearing with the IND. It determines what part of their account they put emphasis on and what they might exclude. It also determines the answers to the standard questions as stated in the introduction. Whether they experienced problems due to religious reasons or political reasons depend on their understanding of the relation between the two. The answers to these questions are paramount for the determination of their refugee status.

2. *How do the policy papers and worksheets of the IND reflect the organisation's understanding the relation between the concepts of religion and politics?*

In order to make a comparison of the understanding of the relation between the concepts of religion and politics between the people who experienced displacement and the IND, the understanding of these concepts of the IND must be uncovered. This is one of the questions needed for the second part of the main research question. The understanding of the IND as an organisation determines the way they shape their policy papers and worksheets that are provided to the individual employees. These policy papers and the worksheets of the IND shape the way the hearing is conducted. The answer to question two in addition to question three and the answer to question one enables me to make a comparison between the different understanding of the relation between "religion" and "politics" present in the process of determining refugee status in the Netherlands.

3. *How is the understanding of the relation between the concepts of religion and politics of the IND as stated in their policy papers and worksheets employed in the process of determining refugee status?*

It is not sufficient to just analyse the policy papers and worksheets of the IND and draw a conclusion about the understanding of the relation between religion and politics of the IND. The IND as an institution is different from the individual IND employee. The IND as an institution has the mandate to carry out process of determining refugee status and produces policies for that end. These policies, however, are provided to the individual IND employee who must interpret these policies in order to employ them during their work. One important factor is the interpretation of these documents that the individual IND employee makes. The relation between the IND employee and the policy papers and worksheets is what determines how these documents will be employed during the hearings. How the individual IND employee understands the relation between "religion" and "politics" is an important topic in answering this question. How these documents will be employed determines the way the hearings during the process of determining refugee status are conducted. Only then can the actual influence of the policy papers and worksheets on the process of determining refugee status be ascertained.

4. *What are the different understandings of "religion" and "politics" in the process of determining refugee status in the Netherlands between the IND and asylum seekers?*

In order to understand the relation between the concepts of religion and politics, knowledge is required on how these concepts are understood. To answer the main research question about the relation between religion and politics, it must be uncovered what this relation is between. It is paramount for the validity of this research that a clear distinction or separation is not implied while conducting research with the participants. This question is relevant because the IND has a set of standard questions (as stated in the introduction) they ask all asylum seekers. These questions imply a different understanding and definition of these words and that they are separate categories.

Research paradigm and methodology

The foundational idea that underlies this research is that knowledge of this world is socially constructed. In order to recognize different understandings of the concepts of “religion” and “politics”, the social constructionism paradigm must be adopted. The idea is that our understanding of the world is created through relationships, social interactions, and experiences. These understandings are contextually- and socially relative from the ontological perspective which means multiple understandings can exist simultaneously. This paradigm allows me to approach ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ as concepts that are infused with meaning by the person that has a relation with it. This also means that bias is unavoidable. While conducting research, there is the risk that the collected data is slightly tainted by individual and cultural biases. (Spencer, Pryce, & Walsh, 2014) Because of the unescapable presence of biases, reliability and validity is paramount. Reliability and validity can be achieved by paying attention to biases throughout designing and conducting research. In order to resist the influence of a bias, I have remained as neutral as possible by not advocating a particular position. This also means that data in itself has no meaning. It is the analysis of the data that imbues it with meaning. Acknowledging the presence of a bias, we have to interpret the data with the aim of revealing *a* truth and not *the* truth.

The approach under social constructivism used in this research is phenomenology. Phenomenology is rooted in the notion that all of our knowledge and understanding of the world comes from our experiences (Hein & Austin, 2001). It falls under the umbrella of social constructivism because it focuses on the way experiences create meaning for individuals. The central idea of phenomenology is that there is no objective reality, but rather our perceptions on our lived experiences. In order to uncover the subconscious assumptions that underly the understanding of the concepts ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ we need to make explicit what is taken for granted. A phenomenological perspective can support this endeavour. From that perspective, we need to study how to make sense of the understandings of the participants. Approaching a research question with the assumption that experience forms the basis of understanding lends itself to certain research methods. (Spencer, Pryce, & Walsh, 2014) To this end, biographical narrative interview is chosen to be the method used in this research because it focusses on the meanings individuals give to their experiences.

In order to discuss the relation between the IND and the asylum seekers and their different interpretations of the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’, the policy papers used during the process of determining refugee status will be critically analysed. The research paradigm that guides this analysis is critical theory. As a form of social constructionism, critical theory also holds the idea that social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender-based forces shape social structures (Milliken, 1999). Context is not only a variable but as an essential part of subjectivity. It acknowledges that reality can only be studied through a subjective frame and that reality is shaped by values and mediated by power relations. Due to its focus on socially and historically constituted power relations, critical theory is the paradigm suited to identify unequal, disproportionate, and unfair social relations. Critical theory concerns itself with unequal distributions of power. From this position, social reality can be criticized, actors can be identified, and practical goals for social transformation can be formulated.

The Critical theoretical approach taken in this research is a hermeneutic one. Because this qualitative research is based on critical theory, the most important aspect is the interpretation of information. The hermeneutical aspect of analysing the policy papers of the IND is crucial for revealing multiple understandings of the concepts of ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ and how these are deployed in real-life situations. These situations are crucial for the hermeneutical methods. Not only the policy papers are the subject of this research, but the conditions in which they exist are crucial

for their interpretation. Discourse analysis is a hermeneutical method deployed to make sense of texts. It is used because critical theory prescribes that the use of language is a social practice whose meaning shifts depending on context (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011). From the critical theory perspective, language is not used to convey descriptions of the world but are also used to construct it. The methods described below are based on the social constructionism paradigm and their shape is inspired by critical theory.

In order to gather information to answer the questions posed above, I conducted a discourse analysis, a semi-structured interview with an ex-IND employee and two biographical narrative interviews with Refugees from Iran. The method I will use for the analysis of the policy papers and worksheets of the IND will be discourse analysis. The first step of a discourse analysis is situating the discourse in its proper context. To that end, relevant literature has been reviewed in order to provide insight in the current situation regarding displacement and forced migration globally. Subsequently the Dutch context of where the discourse is situated is clarified by researching the different ways in which religion and politics are understood, particularly in the Netherlands. In order to assimilate the employment of the analysed policy papers and worksheets of the IND, I have reviewed how is refugee status determined in the Dutch context.

Discourse analysis can be used to research to uncover the understandings of religion and politics of the IND by focussing on the language used in the construction of these policies. Language is a crucial site through which assumptions and ideas about the cultural categories of religion and politics are socially constructed. (Milliken, 1999) By providing policies in the form of instruction sheets to IND employees, hegemonic discourses, and the status quo that they engender are maintained. Using instruction sheets during the process of determining refugee status fixes meaning and silences alternative discourses. Analysing these policy papers and worksheets should therefore provide me with an insight on the understanding of the relation between “religion” and “politics” of the IND.

In order to improve the validity and reliability of this method, I have supplemented the discourse analysis with a semi-structured Interview with someone who applied the policy papers and worksheets during the process of determining refugee status. This has given me insight in the practical employment of the policies and the worksheets of the IND. It was crucial that the participant felt that she could speak without constraint. I managed to find someone who is no longer employed by the IND and therefore has no risk of it impacting their relationship with their employer.

The biographical narrative with refugees was used to gain insight in the personal narrative refugees. The narrative tells the story of the lived experiences with the relation between “religion” and “politics” of two Iranian refugees. During my Internship with VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, I had a lot of experiences with Iranian refugees who told me their account of their flight story. During my internship is conducted what is called a flight story analysis. The purpose of the biographical narrative interviews was to get an in-depth appreciation of the understanding of the relation between “Religion” and “Politics” of the participants. The information gained from these interviews where aimed to supplement the knowledge I gained while working with asylum seekers during my internship. Despite of the pandemic the world suffered during the process of writing this Thesis I managed to find two Iranian persons with a refugee status. I chose to interview refugees from Iran because the social political context is largely shaped by a regime that is heavily guided by strong religious influences. (Ambtsberichten, 2019) As a result of the intriguing social political situation of Iran, a lot of the Iranian asylum seekers I encountered had a case that involved (presumed) conversion or apostasy. The relation between “religion” and “politics” was therefore always a central topic of their account.

Key concepts

Refugee

There are multiple ways to refer to people experiencing displacement. The term “refugee” is often used by the media to refer to all forced migrants. Clarification is needed on the different terms used in this thesis because different definitions of groups of people have serious implications. Certain definitions not only refer to a specific group of people but also entail certain sets of rights. One of the main purposes of the asylum process is to categorize people in groups in order to determine what they are entitled to. Rights and resources are allocated on the basis of the group one belongs to. For example: Refugees have rights similar to those of nationals of a state. Although the UNHCR offers guidelines regarding the proper treatment of asylum seekers, they do not have access to the same rights as refugees. (UNHCR, 2007) Another reason it is important to clarify the difference between groups of people is because different terms convey different messages. In politics and the media, a certain definition can reveal different positions politicians, institutions and the communication industry occupy. (Polman, 2019) Definitions not only have implications of entitlement but also connotations that can greatly influence perceptions of certain audiences. In order to overcome these tasks, I will state what definitions will be used and the meaning attached to them. A person experiencing displacement and is forced to migrate is a person who seeks refuge in a host country or in a different region of his own country of habitual residence.² However, this generalization is analytically unhelpful. In the paragraph below I will explain the terms that distinguish groups of people I have settled on.

In this Thesis, I distinguish different groups of people who have experienced displacement. All of them are forced migrants because they are unwillingly on the move. (Betts & Loescher, 2011) A distinction can be made between forced migrants who cross national borders and those who do not. Forced migrants who do not pass over national borders are called internally displaced people (IDP). (UNHCR, 2007) Forced migrants who have arrived in another country and apply for asylum are then official asylum seekers. Asylum seekers have been processed in the system in place in the host countries and will go through the refugee status determination process. The word “refugee” is a legal designation of a person who is then entitled to the protection of the host country. Yet, people experiencing forced displacement are often referred to as refugees by the media. In this case, the term does not refer to legal status. In this thesis, the word refugee is used when a person has received the official determination. In line with the definitions stated above: People experiencing displacement are forced migrants. Forced migrants that apply for asylum in a state other than their former place of habitual residence are asylum seekers. If the state acknowledges the legitimacy of the flight story of the asylum seeker, refugee status is granted. All asylum seekers and refugees are forced migrants. However, not all forced migrants are asylum seekers or refugees. A forced migrant who receives the protection of the host country is a refugee.

Religion

The main concerns of this thesis are the ideas of individuals and institutions about what religion is and the place it takes within one’s worldview. By approaching the concept of religion as something that is undefined and whose content relies on historical, cultural, and individual context, I allow the

² One’s country of former habitual residence means the state in which one lived. This does not mean one was a citizen of that state. This formulation is chosen to account for the stateless.

individual participants of this research to convey their own understanding of the concept and its possible boundaries. With an appreciation of the analytical problems of universally defining religion and its boundaries with the political one can analyse different perspectives. In order to analyse the particular, one has to abandon the idea that a singular and universal definition is neither possible nor advisable. Religion is still something that carries a wide variety of meanings for a wide variety of people within a wide variety of cultures. Connotations and denotations of the religious and its relationship with the political are grounded in one's worldview and depends on the norms and values of a specific culture. It is nonetheless a reality that seems to be important in our contemporary global society.

Culture

In order to avoid the risk that defining culture is just as problematic as defining religion or politics, I will state my definition of culture. In this thesis, I refer to religion and politics as cultural categories. I do this because I investigate the differences in the understanding of the concepts religion and politics. I will treat define "religion" and "politics" as conceptual categories that take on different meanings depending on the cultural, political, economic, and religious context. In situations like refugee status determination interviews, different such contexts meet, that of the IND official and that of the person seeking asylum. Consequently, different meanings of these terms could be in play yet neither party may be aware of these differences. In situations where they are aware of different interpretations, parties will have to estimate each other's assumptions in order to attempt mutual understanding.

The interpretation of both parties of the distinction between "religion" and "politics", can mean the difference between being granted or denied protection for people seeking asylum. This is the case because a strong contrast between different understandings can harm the credibility of the story of an asylum seeker. A different interpretation of religion can also allow or deny access to multiple grounds in which an asylum seeker can apply for asylum. The process of determining refugee status takes place between the Dutch government and foreign displaced people which makes it a cross-cultural endeavour. The concepts 'religion' and 'politics' are cultural categories. The definition of culture I use is that coined by the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins. (Sewell, 2005) He states that culture is the hierarchical structure of ideas and categories and the relation between categories. This structure informs action and gives ideas of categories and their relations. Structure is also reinforced by action because it becomes real when a structure is acted out in empirical performance. Answering the seven standard questions listed above is an empirical performance of one's structured categories that is the asylum seeker's culture. The focus on the cultural categories and their relations allows for a framework which helps uncover the differences in the structure of these categories between the IND and asylum seekers.

While conducting this research the world suffered a disastrous pandemic. This had a considerable impact on the way research was conducted and the information I was able to obtain. I will discuss the limitations of this thesis and elaborate on the taken actions in order to maintain validity and reliability.

Limitations

While writing this Thesis there were some limitations on what could be achieved due to circumstances that endangered the validity and reliability of this research. The limitations can be distinguished into two categories: limitations due to the pandemic and limitations encountered while working with participants. In this paragraph, I discuss the implications of the pandemic, the

challenges I encountered while interacting with participants and partners and the actions that I took in order to protect the validity and reliability of this research.

COVID-19 had serious implications on the process of conducting research and the setting in which it had been done. The interlocutors could be easily approached during my internship with VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. Due to the pandemic I was not able to be on location and interact with the asylum seekers. I worked from home from March until May. This created less time to get to know the research participants and to build a relationship. Another way the pandemic influenced the relation between the researcher and the participants was the setting in which the interviews had to take place. For a biographical narrative interview, it is crucial that the level of comfort is optimal. However, due to the pandemic the spaces that offered a relaxing setting apart from the static office look were not viable. Instead, I made use of an office that had a plexiglass screen installed. Sitting across from the participant with a glass screen in between created a setting that did not emit comfort. This issue was solved by shifting the first phase, the phase that is aimed at building a relationship outside of the building of VluchtelingenWerk. In that way, a relationship could be established while reducing the risk of COVID-19.

In my experience, asylum seekers and refugees are not eager to respond to someone they have not met. It can be quite daunting for an individual who has experienced displacement to talk about a personal topic due to the uncertainty of my role in the asylum process. Firstly, it is hard to openly speak of topics which may have caused harm in the past with someone whose face is unknown. Secondly, a refugee has received a temporary residence permit. It is temporary because refugee status is re-evaluated after five years. Speaking with a student and an intern at VluchtelingenWerk about topics which are relevant for the preservation of refugee status has no further implications. However, this may not always be clear for a person unfamiliar with the complicated Dutch bureaucracy. In order to get interlocutors to participate a relation of trust must be established. It has been challenging to establish trust between me and the participants during a time where there was little to no interaction possible. In order to establish trust, I have chosen to approach former asylum seekers using the contacts I had at VluchtelingenWerk. I asked employees on different locations where VluchtelingenWerk was active if they wanted to approach the intended target audience. By doing so, the former asylum seekers were approached by a face they knew and trusted.

There are certain challenges while conducting interviews with the target audience of this research. The first challenges occurred during the biographical narrative interviews. The participants of this research were people experiencing displacement. During my internship with VluchtelingenWerk I spoke with asylum seekers during a flight story analysis. They spoke about their experiences of displacement and their attempts to stay out of reach of prosecuting regimes. Often, these regimes have a long reach due to their available resources or political connections. That means that they can find and survey, and harm perceived opponents from a distance. Although the Iranian government has limited resources and cannot follow every individual, they have established a widespread fear of being tracked. (Ambtsberichten, 2019) Due to the experiences of being followed or approached by individuals affiliated to a regime, even in places far from their former country of residence, people who have experienced displacement can be very suspicious of translators. It is hard for some to trust the voice on the other side of a telephone.

Because of the personal nature of a biographical narrative interview, comfort and a feeling of security was critical. For this research I have used Global Talk, the translator service that is used by VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. Most displaced people coming to the Netherlands do not speak Dutch but rely on organisations that do for their basic needs. These organisations utilize the service of Global Talk for the communication between them and the displaced person. Because of this, most

displaced people are familiar with the translator service. It was paramount to continue to use the service of Global Talk in order to utilize the familiarity the participants had with the service.

My internship with VluchtelingenWerk Nederland provided me with a network which I utilized while looking for a location where I could best conduct interviews. I used the facilities of VluchtelingenWerk to conduct the interviews because these are the facilities the participants are familiar with. The location in combination with the translator service were chosen to increase the level of comfort of participants. The goal was to increase the validity and reliability of this research by creating a safe and secure environment to the best of my ability which allowed the participants to speak openly and sincerely.

One of the main tasks of VluchtelingenWerk is to guarantee a fair and equal process of determining refugee status for the asylum seeker. This means that a member of VluchtelingenWerk attends the hearing of the asylum seeker in order to monitor the execution of the process of determining refugee status. When the execution of the process is not satisfactory, VluchtelingenWerk will hold the IND accountable. This creates a relationship where IND employees might be reluctant to speak freely because they might experience the interview as a performance assessment. To tackle this problem, I have chosen to conduct the interview with a former IND employee. By doing so, the participant could speak freely without the thread of it impacting their relationship with their employer.

Chapter outline

The example at the beginning of the introduction is a description of my personal experience during my internship with VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. This example is what sparked the question about the differences in the understanding of the cultural concepts religion and politics and their relation in the process of determining refugee status in the Netherlands for both the IND and refugees. The purpose of this research is to give an answer to this question and to identify practical implication in order to inspire adequate action for the improvement of the process of determining refugee status. In the first chapter I will review current refugee studies literature and the global governance of forced migration. I will discuss the workings of the UNHCR and state responses to mass displacement. I will review Hannah Arendt's work with an emphasis on her argument for the right to have rights for people who experience displacement. In the second chapter I will discuss the current state of the field of immigration studies and the study of religion and culture. I will go deeper into the problems of defining religion as stated in the beginning of this introduction. Chapter two focusses on the specific situation in the Netherlands. In this chapter I will focus on the specific context in which this research is located. I will describe the current trends around the Dutch immigration policy. I will also describe the cultural context and literature around cultural concepts and deep culture in order to develop a more comprehensive, nuanced understanding of how terms like "religion" and "politics" are understood by IND officials and the challenges this presents for people applying for refugee status from other cultural contexts

The third chapter describes the methods I used while conducting this research followed up by the results of each method. In this chapter, I will present my key findings. The fourth and last chapter contains the discussion conclusion. In it, I will answer the research questions and give an overview of the knowledge produced by this research. I will interpret the results gained by the research methods using relevant literature. Subsequently, I will elaborate on the implications of these results on the Dutch process of determining refugee status. I will conclude this thesis by providing an answer to the main research question.

Answering the main question requires a thorough review of the literature in which it is situated. The forced migrants who are subjected to this process do so in search of a guarantee for their basic human rights. In their search, they are at the mercy of the global governance of forced migration. Once arrived in the Netherlands, they encounter subconscious cultural assumptions present in Dutch culture. The Dutch process of determining refugee status is where the difference in the understandings of the relation between “Religion” and “politics” meet. This Thesis aims to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive of these understandings. Next to the interviews, a central component of this thesis is the discourse analysis. An important first step in conducting a discourse analysis is situating the discourse in its proper context. The following two chapters explore the concepts of human rights, the governance of forced migration, religion and politics in the Dutch context and secularism as the backdrop against which cultural concepts as religion and politics are interpreted.

Human rights and the governance of forced migration

Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that all human beings have a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. The refugees that are the subject of this thesis apply for asylum in the Netherlands based on issues they had with what either they or the IND conceptualized as religion. These issues are mostly some form of prosecution on the basis of beliefs and practices that are defined as religious by governments, militant groups, or other authorities able to deprive your freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, just as any other right, must be recognized and affirmed in institutions and communities with the authority to act on them in order to guarantee these human rights. The authority with the legal power to politically act upon rights is the state. While all human beings are entitled to basic human rights, states draw narrow distinctions between citizens and non-citizens. In order for a human being to claim their rights, they must be members of a political community (UNHCR, 2007). That is why the distinction between citizen and non-citizen is so important. This distinction relates to the access one has to certain rights. International law prescribes that each state has the authority to determine who qualifies as a citizen (UNHCR, 2007). A non-citizen is a person who is not recognized as having an effective link to the country where he or she is located. Among these non-citizens are forced migrants. In order to promote human rights for non-citizens, the United Nations have constructed covenants for the protection of the rights of non-citizens.³ It can be difficult and sometimes almost impossible for non-citizens to gain access to human rights. There can be a large gap between the rights guaranteed by international human right law and the realities they face. There are institutional and pervasive problems confronting non-citizens in many countries (UNHCR, 2007). States may deprive people from access to rights if it is proportional to the achievement of state objectives. For example, the detention of non-citizens after September 11th, 2001 was rationalized by states as a counter terrorism measure in order to promote national security. This thesis focusses on the differences in understanding of religion present in the process of

³ E.g. The international Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, The International covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. (UNHCR, 2007)

determining refugee status. Different interpretations of this concept can be one of the problems asylum seekers are confronted with during the procedure of their asylum application.

This chapter focusses on the governance of forced migration and the perplexities of human rights. The analysis of human rights is based on Hannah Arendt's critical inquiry that examines the perplexities in human rights institutions, laws, norms, and practices in order to understand contemporary problems of refugees. I will review literature that argues that refugees are at the mercy of the international nation-state system for their access to basic human rights. Because human rights only mean something when there is an entity that upholds them, I will first focus on the global governance of forced migration. Gil Loescher offers a comprehensive analysis of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and its struggle to define its autonomy in an international system dominated by state and power interests. (Betts en Loescher 2011)

"The conception of human rights, based upon the assumed existence of a human being as such, broke down at the very moment when those who professed to believe in it were for the first time confronted with people who had indeed lost all other qualities and specific relationships except that they were still human. The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human." (Arendt, 1973, p. 299)

There is a tension between the fact that we share a common humanity but not a universal practice and idea of what it means to be human. Basic human rights are often believed to be inherent in human nature as distinguished from political status. When human rights are understood as natural, that they are grounded in some kind of shared abstract nature, they are assumed to exist independent of a political community. (Gundogdu, 2015) However, when we encounter forced migrants who are stripped in practice from political association, the problems with the presupposition that human rights can exist without a political community become evident. One's bare humanity is not sufficient for being recognized as a subject entitled to human rights. The problem is that without a community of actors rights become meaningless and void. Rights need artificial, conventional laws if they are to be effective. Human rights that are not immediately incorporated into law are sadly impotent. (Arendt, 1973) They are in need of laws and institutional structures to effectively offer guarantees for the equality and freedom of forced migrants.

In the next paragraphs the governance of forced migration is discussed. It shows the tension between human rights and institutions that results in conflicts due to the failure of nation-states and institutions to respond effectively to demands of human rights from forced migrants. All forced migrants are at the mercy of nation-states since all territory is divided among states. A state legitimizes itself as the supreme legal institution in charge of the protection of all inhabitants in its territory. The word "nation" refers to an exclusive community and the word "state" refers to a polity with a system of governance. (Gundogdu, 2015) The idea of the nation-state is that the state is responsible for its citizens who are nationals. It is the perilous position of forced migrants to appeal to a state to take responsibility and allow forced migrants access to human rights at the same level as nationals. An example of the difference between human and citizen can be seen during the rise of imperialism. Arendt states that the expanding of territorial boundaries put constraints on the responsibility that nation-states were willing to take for the inhabitants within their territory. It is not the case that imperial states allowed all persons within their claimed territory the same access to human rights as their own citizens. Although all were human, categorization occurred along a variety of conceivable lines e.g. race, religion, or gender. The categorization of humans has hollowed out the notion of humanity that is central to human rights. (Arendt, 1973, p. 157) The unwillingness of nation states to take responsibility for those who are not their citizens resulted in unprecedented crises with the holocaust as the most horrific example. When Jewish refugees fled the Nazi regime

and arrived at the Dutch border, many were sent back to Germany. (Polman, 2019) Crises like these led to the foundation of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

In 2018, 20353 people applied for asylum in the Netherlands. According to estimates, there are over 79 million people on the move. (UNHCR Global Data Service, 2020) According to the UNHCR, there were 101837 refugees in the Netherlands at the end of 2018. 12303 people were still waiting for an official decision on their asylum application. The total of asylum seekers in Europe in 2018 was 586530. 2018 is the year that sees the most refugees than ever with a 70,8 million people fleeing their place of residence. The last record year was 2017 with 68,5 million refugees. Half of these refugees are younger than 18 years old. 84% of refugees are sheltered in third-world countries. (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2019) It is complicated to give exact numbers on the number of refugees in a certain location. The most important reason is the use of multiple definitions. The UNHCR arrived at the former mentioned numbers by using the following definition based on the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugee:

“owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

In the case of a person who has more than one nationality, the term "the country of his nationality" shall mean each of the countries of which he is a national, and a person shall not be deemed to be lacking the protection of the country of his nationality if, without any valid reason based on well-founded fear, he has not availed himself of the protection of one of the countries of which he is a national."

This definition is used to determine if a person is to be granted refugee status. Being granted this status a person can invoke protection from another state. The definitions the UNHCR uses for asylum seekers is: *“Those who have applied for asylum and are awaiting an official determination.”* The Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the European treaty European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) form the basis for the conditions on which an asylum residence permit can be granted as described in the Dutch Aliens Act.

The refugees coming to the Netherlands come to apply for asylum. This implies that they seek the protection of the Dutch state because they -owing to such fear- are not able to seek the protection in their country of origin or, in the case of the stateless, from the country of their former habitual residence. Refugees are forced migrants because they have to flee their place of residence unwillingly because they are deprived of basic human rights. (Betts & Loescher, 2011) When trying to access these rights they are met with the unbalanced power relation between refugees and the authorities able to provide access to rights. Being forced to migrate and becoming a refugee puts them in a precarious position. Intensified border controls around the world have criminalized various forms of international movement and impaired migrants' entitlement to rights. (Gundogdu 2015) Refugees have no other choice than to surrender to the policies of the international governance of forced migration in order to claim access to certain human rights. They are met with the problem of who has the power to determine the status of an individual.

Human rights are not moral entitlements that are inalienable that all human beings possess by virtue of being born. (Arendt, 1973) As stated before, they derive their legitimacy from authorities that act upon them. Rights have only relative validity. They are dependent on the political practices of

affirming and upholding them for their ongoing validation. (Gundogdu, 2015) If human rights are only provided when there is an institution that upholds them, the asylum procedure becomes a question of responsibility. The question is: To which individuals are states required to give asylum and thereby access to human rights? To answer this question, the IND has been charged with the mandate to determine which migrants are deprived of human rights. Those are the migrants that receive refugee status and are the responsibility of the Dutch state. The perilous position of those forced to migrate is that before they are recognized by a state as being a refugee, there is no authority that acts on human rights in order to uphold them. The authority that is charged to uphold human rights is the nation-state according to article two of the universal declaration of human rights. Before the state recognizes a migrant as a refugee, the migrant's rights are not guaranteed, and they exist in the precarious state of being rightless. There are NGO's like VluchtelingenWerk Nederland who advocate for the rights of people on the move when they are in this precarious position. They do not guarantee their rights, but they work to ensure their rights are upheld.

Forced migrants find themselves at the mercy of the international nation-state system. Initially, there was the UNHCR designed by the UN to protect forced migrants in their perilous position. (United Nations, 1950) The Executive summary of the mandate of the high commissioner for refugees states that: "UNHCR is primarily mandated to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance, and to seek permanent solutions for persons within its core mandate responsibilities." The effective exercise of UNHCR's mandate presupposes and is underpinned by the commitment from Governments to cooperate and acknowledge UNHCR's role. In order to enhance the protection of forced migrants, the UNHCR takes a supervisory role in its collaboration with governments. Due to the access to resources of the UNHCR, the access to rights of forced migrants is still under control of individual nation-states.

The UNHCR is recognized as the refugee agency of the United Nations. They are the organisation with the mandate to ensure access to protection and durable solutions for forced migrants. The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines the obligation of states towards refugees and identifies the UNHCR as having supervisory responsibility for its implementation. (Loescher & Milner, 2011) The 1951 Convention also stipulates that refugees are not to be returned to any country where they risk persecution and should have access to national courts, the right to employment and education and a host of other rights on par with nationals of the host country. Because of this agreement, it becomes evident why being granted refugee status is critical for forced migrants. For the migrant it is essential that a state recognizes refugee status and takes responsibility by allowing the refugee access to rights on par with nationals of the state.

In the current international political system, states remain predominant actors (Betts & Loescher, 2011). Because of this, the UNHCR has tried to convince states to meet their obligations towards forced migrants by convincing states furthering the protection of forced migrants can improve domestic and inter-state stability and is in the benefit of national interests. It is the challenge of the UNHCR to persuade states to meet their obligations towards refugees while relying on voluntary contributions to carry out its work. However, the UNHCR has little political power of its own. Its main tools for promoting its normative agenda is through political advocacy and persuasion. These tools derive their effectiveness from the fact that states care about their international reputation and gain reputation by cooperating with the UNHCR. By financially contributing to the bulk of the budget of the UNHCR a limited number of states gain significant influence in the UNHCR's operation. The influence of states over the operation of the UNHCR is the result of earmarked donations. (Polman, 2019) Earmarking is the practice of stipulating action by providing financial support under strict conditions. Influence of donor states is increased through their ability to specify how, where and on

what basis their contributions can be used by the UNHCR. By providing earmarked financial support, governments can use humanitarian relief as a substitute for political action that could address the root causes of conflict and mass displacement. (Polman, 2019) The UNHCR is dependent on voluntary contributions from donors to pursue its mandate. The interests and priorities of donor states play a significant role in the work of the organisation due to the tight control of the organisation's resources. Even though the UNHCR acts as a monitor for the protection of forced migrants, how, where and on what basis protection is realised is in the hands of a few individual nation-states.

Religion, secularism and Asylum in the Netherlands

The experience I had while attending the hearing of an Iranian asylum seeker as described in the introduction provoked me to ask the question: "Is taking off your niqab in a country whose ruling enforces laws based on Islam a religious or political act?" It is not the objective of this thesis to answer that question. Rather, the main goal of this research is to examine the differences in understanding of religion and politics amongst different actors in the asylum application procedure in the Netherlands. Consequently, before exploring the differences in understanding, it is first important to consider the different ways in which to make sense of "religion" and "politics" as analytical categories and cultural concepts. This chapter is the first step of conducting a discourse analysis which will be described in the chapter below. Discourses can only be analysed in certain contexts. The relation between religion, secularism and asylum in the Netherlands is the context in which this research takes place. That is why the process of determining refugee status and the subconscious assumptions about the religious and the secular are paramount for conducting a discourse analysis.

This chapter argues that the concepts of religion and politics are not universally defined but rather take on different meanings dependent on context. Subsequently, the knowledge of the different ways in which these concepts can be understood will be applied to the context of the process of determining refugee status in the Dutch asylum process. In order to conduct research in the field of religion we not only need to illustrate what we are talking about but also what we are not talking about.

This chapter aims to tackle the problem of defining concepts central to this thesis by reviewing current literature and subsequently identifying and describing the space for difference in understanding. It is often stated that defining religion is too problematic to be of any use at all because it is too limited or too general. In addition, its meaning is often too entwined with political ends to make a clear distinction. (Beyer, 2003) A universal definition of religion would be analytically problematic because it is historically and culturally particular. Talal Asad argues against a universal definition of religion because its elements and relationships are historically specific. He states that the definition of religion itself is the product of historical discursive processes. (Asad, 1993) The main concerns of this chapter are to establish a theoretical framework and examining approaches for analysing religion and politics in the context of international refugee and asylum seeker protection. Using these key concepts allows us to put emphasis on the ideas of individuals and institutions about what religion is and the place it takes within one's worldview.

This chapter will explore the relation between the concepts of religion and the secular by examining the mutual influences in different cultural and historical contexts. It is crucial to discuss problems of defining the boundaries between religion and politics. The aim is to explore the entwinement between the religious and the secular and the politics that shape the relation and the definition of the two. It is not my intention to argue for or against the use of definitions of cultural categories. My goal is to expand the concepts of religion, the secular, and politics to open them up to multiple understandings and explain why definitions can only be constructed when taking into account specific temporal and cultural contextual aspects.

Another key concept that needs to be analysed in this chapter is the understanding of cultural concepts. Cultural concepts are categorized and hierarchically structured in an elaborate system that differs between cultures. (Dumont, 1986) A deep dive in what culture actually is helps us understand the encounter between culturally different individuals. An understanding of this is important because the IND and refugees may have different ways in which they create the categorization of cultural concepts such as “religion” and “politics” and structure them in hierarchical systems. If we want to understand how these differences influence the process of determining refugee status, we need to know why the IND and refugees use certain terms and what meaning is attached to them. According to Johan Galtung, culture is a symbolic aspect of the human condition that tells us what is good and bad, right or wrong, sacred or profane. It also tells us what is true and more importantly, why it is true. The collective subconscious is a collectively held set of assumptions about what constitutes normal or natural reality. Another word for this is cosmology as coined by Johan Galtung. (1996, p.212) It is the socio-cultural code of a civilization that carries essential messages about how reality is constructed. The ideas that are subconsciously held are fundamental ideas that legitimize certain actions and thoughts and condemns others. Combining the thoughts of Louis Dumont with those of Johan Galtung yields the following definition: Culture is the hierarchical structure of concepts that shape fundamental assumptions that an individual holds about the nature of reality. The subconscious assumptions that are fundamental for our construction of our worldview is called deep culture. (Galtung, 1996) It is a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways. In order to determine the status of refugees, their stories need to be put in a cultural perspective. (Wannet & Haagsma, 2019)

How we conceptualize “religion” or “politics” is guided by fundamental subconscious assumptions about the nature of reality. (Galtung, 1996) During the process of determining refugee status, the IND employee and asylum seeker will engage in a cross-cultural conversation that involve the concepts ‘religion’ and ‘politics’. Stacey Gutkowski (2012, p.88) argues that the secular is an integral part of our modern deep culture. It contains political assumptions, unquestioned sensibilities, and embodied practices of modern life. It is a factor that influences politicians, IND employees and policymakers who are an integral part of the way that the process of determining refugee status takes shape. Gutkowski states that scholars across a variety of disciplines have argued that value judgements of Western political traditions (especially the political subordination of religion to state authority) has negatively distorted the West’s understanding of the relation between “religion” and “politics” in other cultures (see Asad, 2003; Hurd, 2015; Cavanaugh, 2009). In order to grasp the understandings of “religion” and “politics” that are present during the process of determining refugee status, we need to understand the backdrop against which these concepts are interpreted. Drawing on the definition of culture from Johan Galtung and the research conducted by Stacey Gutkowski, I argue that secularism is that backdrop.

Religion and the secular

In order to understand the backdrop against which the concepts of “religion” and “politics” are interpreted, it is paramount to critically explore the category and concept of religion and its counterpart: the secular. The meaning attached to the concepts differ from place to place because its definition is shaped by contextual historical processes. Talal Asad (2003) formulates secularity as a project, or series of interlinked projects, that is to be achieved by people in power. The scholarly concepts of religion and the secular are products that have been shaped by these projects (Schewel, 2019). They must therefore be critically analysed if we are to use them to generate a theoretical framework and model for this research. Approaching religion and the secular critically means to understand them as categories and concepts within global politics that have multiple forms in different contexts.

Like religion, secularism is not a singular entity. It is diverse, its meaning differs and changes according to context. (Daulatzai, 2004) Definitions can signify power relations and are deployed in order to serve specific agendas and goals (Wilson, Being 'Critical' of/about/on 'Religion' in International Relations, 2018). A critical approach means to explore the normative assumptions about religion and the secular. Erin Wilson has made a summary of the assumptions secularism makes about religion. Although there is not one definition of secularism, there are ‘family resemblances’ that characterize ideological forms of secularism across different manifestations. The resemblances in assumptions as listed by Wilson (2018, p.150) are:

1. Religion is something that can be identified and can be clearly distinguished, defined, and separated from the also clearly defined secular.
2. Religion should be clearly defined and separated from the secular.
3. Religion is institutional, particular, individual, and irrational.
4. Religion is the fundamental cause of violence, intolerance and therefore a cause of disruption in social order.
5. Because religion is the cause of disruption of social order and individual, it must be kept out of the public sphere and must be relegated to private sphere. In this way, the distinction between the religious and the secular is managed through the public and the private sphere.
6. Religion is subordinated to the secular authorities and institutions.

These resemblance in assumptions are not always present to the same extent. The summary above by poses secularism as an ideological perspective that can be held by individuals instead of a universal mode of public reasoning which must be true at all times for it to be universal. It is not just the organizing structure for elements of social organization – public, private, political, and religious – but a discursive operation of power that generates these spheres, establishes their boundaries and suffuses them with content. (Mahmood, 2016) Secularism is a fundamental subconscious assumption about the relation between religion and other spheres of endeavour. It is the backdrop of western cosmology. This perspective allows us to unpack secularism and analyse it and religion through multiple perspectives which is the aim of this thesis.

Secularization is a process that is a core part of modernization. Jose Casanova (1994) analysed modern public religion and he argues that modern secularist theorists advanced three different theses about the role of religion in modern society. The first is the differentiation thesis. It claims that religion is removed from its social-foundational role and has become just one domain, among others. (e.g., politics, law, science, morality, economics). Benjamin Schewel (2019) states that only the differentiation thesis stands up to extensive scrutiny. Differentiation does not mean that religion stops influencing other domains of social endeavour, but that the question of ‘influence’ could not

have arisen before because these domains were facets of a broader religious matrix. Modernization has disrupted pre-modern ways of being religious and brought about a new socially differentiated way of being religious. This thesis refers to the continual clear separation of power between secular institutions and authorities and religious institutions and authorities. The modern nation state has disrupted pre-modern ways of being religious by using its sovereign power to reorganize substantive features of religious life, provide definitions of what religion ought or ought not to be, assign its content, disseminating its beliefs and practices. (Mahmood, 2016)

The second secularization thesis highlighted by Casanova (1994) is that religious adherence and belief will gradually decline and eventually disappear. Religion was understood by secularization theorists as something that is pre-modern and irrational. Its irrationality made it irrelevant to public life and politics. Yet religion appears to be abundantly present as an important factor in violence and political activity. Religious influences in society do not seem to disappear or even decline but rather transform according to context specific factors. It is the case that modernization has fundamentally disrupted the pre-modern religious mode of operation. That does not necessarily mean, however, the decline or disappearance of religion but rather the emergence of new patterns of religious life.

The third secularization thesis Casanova (1994) identifies is the privatization thesis, which suggests that religion will shift from the public to the private sphere. An important source is the book of Saba Mahmood: "Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report". In it she explains the problems of defining the boundaries between religion and politics in multiple instances in the history of Egypt. The book gives an explicit account of the entwinement between the religious, the secular and the politics that shape the relation and the definition of the two. The private sphere is formulated as the sacred sphere of religious belief and individual liberty. Its separation from the public sphere is maintained by the liberal nation-state. (Mahmood, 2016) According to the secularization theses, religion has become something that is believed to be only relevant for individual beliefs and practices. However, the modern government intervenes and regulates many aspects of socioreligious life thereby dissolving the distinction between the public and private sphere. Secularism often subordinates religion to the political by claiming the authority to regulate it. It also places religion in the private sphere to free it from state intervention in an attempt to separate church and state. These two characteristics of the secular have a phenomenal power to regenerate itself. The subordination of religion to the political by defining and regulating it often endangers the demand for keeping church and state separate, thereby replenishing the desire to separate them. The question of where and how to draw a line between religion and politics and what is public and what is private is characteristic for liberal polities. (Mahmood, 2016) Because it is subject to legal and political contestation definitions of religion that arise are the product of discursive processes Talal Assad mentioned.

Religion and the secular in the Dutch context

In order to examine the different understandings of "religion" and "politics" present in the Dutch process of determining refugee status, the relation between the two concepts in the Netherlands must be investigated. The Netherlands have a particular history regarding the way in which "religion" and "politics" are understood and experienced. Maykel Verkuylen (2007) has done research about religious intergroup relations in the Netherlands. In his article, he states that questions of religious differences and conflicts have become core issues in political debates relating to Dutch Christian heritage and its secular culture. In 1980, a policy of multiculturalism was adopted in the Netherlands due to an increase of influx of foreign labourers. Since the last decade, Muslims have increasingly become the 'negative other' in Dutch media. Some politicians have defined Muslims as a backward religion. Verkuylen's research shows that in the Netherlands, it is often

thought that Muslim identification implies low identification with the Dutch identity. This is thought because Muslim identity is thought to be contradictory to Dutch identification due to incompatible values, norms and beliefs (Verkuyten, 2007). However, Verkuyten's (2007, p.352) research shows that a common national identity implies that religious group distinctions are subsumed into a superordinate category that can reduce negative feelings because of a shared national identity. Identifying with the Dutch identity improves religious intergroup tolerance. This shows a piece of the Dutch cultural hierarchical structure of values. Religious identity looks to be subordinated by national belonging.

The particular understanding of the relation between "religion" and "politics" is the result of historical and cultural processes that go back to the sixteenth century. The relation between the Dutch nation-state and religion is ambiguous. Dutch religious intergroup relations are easy to romanticize. There existed a tradition of relative tolerance towards the freedom of conscience and religion throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth century (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1996). However, this tolerant tradition is tainted by persecution of Gypsies, outbursts against Catholics, slave trafficking and colonization. The Netherlands is historically known for its Christian heritage and later its secular culture (Verkuyten, 2007). The relation between the Christian heritage and the secular culture is demonstrated by the 'pillarization' tradition. Pillarization is institutionalized pluralism in order to provide a wide range of cultural opportunities. (Verkuyten, 2007) Examples are local voting rights for non-nationals and public funding for Islamic schools.

The pillarization system of intergroup relations characterized Dutch government policy regarding intergroup relations over the past four centuries. (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1996) The pillarization of Dutch society originates in its Christian heritage. This form of institutionalized pluralism has been invented to ensure 'separate-but-equal' access to resources for Protestants and Catholics and to avoid religious conflict between them that plagued much of Europe. This relation between "religion" and "politics" is coherent with the theory of Mahmood (2016) The Dutch state has the tradition to subordinate religion to the political by claiming the authority to regulate it. The action of state intervention dissolves the distinction between what is considered religious or political. The pillarization shows the strong tendency to maintain itself which can be explained using the privatization secularization thesis Casanova (1994) identified. The subordination of religion to the political by defining and regulating it often endangers the demand for keeping church and state separate, thereby replenishing the desire to separate them.

The Dutch process of determining refugee status

The assumptions listed above shape the process of determining refugee status. These assumptions are captured in the policy papers and instructions sheets of the IND provided to its employees. IND employees base the execution of the process of determining refugee status on the policy papers and the worksheets provided to them. Therefore, close examination of these documents is paramount. The next chapter will discuss the method I use to examine these documents. In order to locate the discussion about assumptions about the religious and the secular in the relevant context, I will now present an overview of the Dutch process of determining refugee status. The policy papers and instruction sheets are used to shape this process and to decide upon one's asylum application. It will

be evident that the asylum procedure is aimed at determining the legitimacy of the account of the asylum seeker. Legitimacy is the paramount factor for assigning refugee status to asylum seekers.

After arriving in the Netherlands, migrants who are not in possession of a visa have to report their arrival in Ter Apel or Schiphol at the application centre. There they will enter the collective reception location in order to start the application procedure that takes three days. The actual process of determining refugee status can take multiple shapes that are called tracks. These tracks are tailored to the migrants situation. The application procedure is aimed at placing migrants in their respective track in order to make the determination of refugee status as efficient as possible (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2020). At the first day of this procedure, the migrants sign their asylum application and thereby becoming asylum seekers. The application procedure is conducted roughly in the following way: firstly, the asylum seeker will be interviewed in regard to their identity and travel story. Secondly, evidence such as telephones or documents are examined. Thirdly, biometric and personal data is recorded. This information is used to place asylum seekers in their respective track.

There are five tracks in which migrants can be placed. The first track is for asylum seekers whose asylum application is the responsibility of another state. They will follow the Dublin procedure (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2020). The second track is for those asylum seekers who migrated from a country that is considered safe by the Dutch state or for those who already received the protection of another state. The first two tracks are aimed at asylum application with a high chance of rejection. The third track is aimed at asylum applications of well documented Syrian, Turkish, Yemenite, and Eritrean asylum seekers with a high chance of approval. The last and fourth track is aimed at asylum application that will be processed during the regular process of determining refugee status.

The regular process of determining refugee status takes eight days under normal circumstances. During these eight days the IND will determine if the asylum seeker will receive refugee status thereby deciding if the Dutch state is responsible for guaranteeing access to the rights described in the European Convention on Human Rights (UNHCR, 2007). The IND does so by conducting two interviews before and after which the asylum seeker can seek council with a legal professional. The first interview is aimed at verifying the information gained during the interview that was held during the application procedure. The second interview is paramount in this process. This is the interview in which the asylum seeker can give their account of their flight story and explain why he or she must be granted asylum based on the grounds as discussed in the introduction. The asylum seekers must tell their story as completely and plausibly as possible. It is the task of the IND employee to ask relevant questions in order to be able to judge the legitimacy of the account of the refugee.

Determining legitimacy is complicated by multiple risks. There is a high chance that asylum seekers fail to give a plausible account which is necessary to be granted refugee status. The following risks are described in the literature of VluchtelingenWerk Nederland to help volunteers support asylum seekers during their asylum application. Due to the circumstances in which a person was forced to migrate, it can be very difficult to gain possession of all relevant documentation such as birth certificates, a marriage licence, proof of employment, police reports, documented threats and the list goes on. The chance for preparation is crucial but not always possible.

Another problem that can impede the determination of the legitimacy of the account of the refugee is the fact that a lot of people who were forced to migrate have had traumatic experiences with governmental authority. Similarly, due to psychological damage, a person might not be eager to give a personal account to a stranger. The last frequent problem is that the asylum seeker does not

always understand what information is relevant for their account of their flight story. The problem discussed in this thesis is not described in literature of VluchtelingenWerk Nederland. That is the fact that different understandings of the concepts of 'religion' and 'politics' have serious implications for one's process of determining refugee status.

Cultural conceptions during the process of determining refugee status

The experience I had during the hearing with the refugee as described in the introduction made me realize that different cultural conceptions of the religious and the political can mean the difference between being granted or denied refugee status. Identifying these implications is an important part of this research. When these implications are identified they can be recognized, and proper action can be taken to secure a reliable and valid asylum process. Cultural conceptions are important in the asylum process for two main reasons. Firstly, an understanding of it can improve the legitimacy of the story of a refugee. Secondly, by arguing on multiple grounds for an asylum residence permit, the chance of receiving one and the chance of having it extended for an indefinite time increases. In order to show the way in which different cultural understandings can influence the process of determining refugee status, I want to share the research below which analysed multiple Afghan asylum cases in order to uncover how credibility is determined in different cultures.

Marjolijn Wannet, researcher employed by Buro KleurKracht that conducts research on intercultural questions and Joost Haagsma employed by VluchtelingenWerk Nederland conducted a research project, analysing the arguments given by the IND for judging the legitimacy of accounts of asylum seekers. Their question was if cultural aspects that play a role in the estimation of legitimacy in Afghanistan should be taken into account more explicitly. All refugees whose files are analysed for this research have had negative experiences with the Taliban. The goal was to examine the stories of the refugees and the considerations of the IND officials in a cultural perspective. The research demonstrates that the transmission of information is one of the main arguments the IND uses to deem the story of a refugee not credible. The central concern of the IND was the basis on which the refugees can draw a conclusion. The basis on which a conclusion can be drawn and the sources of information that are deemed viable and trustworthy differ in importance between the IND officials and the refugee. Policy paper WI 2014/10 prescribes that the specific cultural factors of where the flight story of the refugee is located should play a role in order to arrive at an objective and transparent decision. The research concludes that none of the analysed cases explicitly explains the role local context and culture plays in the decision making of the IND. Both Wannet and Haagsma and the policy paper WI 2014/10 state that this is essential for a decision to be objective and transparent. An IND official can deem the story of a refugee not credible if it contains contradictions, incongruities, or inconsistent information. In the analysed cases these requirements were not met but the stories were not deemed credible due to unsatisfactory information sources. The estimation of trustworthy or viable sources differs between cultures. The report mentions some examples. In contrast to Dutch culture, Afghan cultures value collectivism more than individualism. The collective knowledge of a village is deemed more valuable than personal experience. When an IND official asks how information is obtained, an Afghan refugee is likely to say: "The whole village knows this." The IND official will most likely find that information unsatisfactory.

Dutch and Afghan societies also differ in their valuation of Authority and logic. Refugees from Afghan cultures are likely to value the authority of the person that provides information more than the logic behind it, which is the other way around in Dutch society. In the case of the refugees in the analysed cases, they told their flight story during their hearing according to their own understanding of

cultural concepts. As shown above, these understandings can have a significant impact on the estimation of credibility of a flight story during a hearing. The result of the decision that a flight story is not credible is that refugee status will not be granted. This means that the asylum seeker will be deported, with the result that he or she returns to the life-threatening situation from which they fled.

Just as policy paper WI 2014/10 prescribes what the requirements are for comprehensive and transparent decision making so does policy paper WI 2019/18 prescribe the definition of religion. In the event that a refugee applies for asylum on the basis of religious grounds, the refugee's credibility will be judged according to the definition of religion given in the policy paper WI 2019/18. Just like the Afghan refugees in the analysed cases above, refugees will most likely argue for religious grounds based on their own understanding of what religion is, or what understanding of religion they think the IND has. It is of value to understand multiple cultural definitions of religion in order to assure objective and transparent decision-making as stated in policy paper WI 2014/10. It also increases the credibility of the story of the refugee which in turn, increases the chance that refugee status is granted.

The second reason that the cultural conceptions of the religious and the political is important is because refugees can apply for asylum on multiple different grounds. When refugee status is granted, the residence permit will last five years. After five years, the temporary residence permit is revised. It can be revoked, or a permanent residence permit can be granted. This depends on the grounds on which a temporary residence permit is granted. (VluchtelingenWerk Nederland, 2020) If the grounds on which a temporary residence permit was granted are no longer applicable, which means that it is safe for the refugee to return to his country of origin, the permit will be revoked and the refugee will be sent home. If the grounds on which a refugee was granted a residence permit still apply, a permanent residence permit can be granted. For this reason, it is paramount that the refugee argues his case as exhaustively and thoroughly as possible. If the refugee has multiple grounds on which he applies for asylum he needs to include them all during this hearing. The reason for fleeing one's country is rarely singular and is often an accumulation of occurrences that can take place in multiple domains at once. It is important to be exhaustive during the hearing with the IND because if one of the grounds on which a temporary residence permit was granted is no longer applicable, another may still be. On that ground a permanent residence permit can still be granted.

The example at the beginning of this chapter shows a refugee can interpret the act of taking-off her niqab in a country whose regime and legislation are based on Islamic Sharia as something religious and not political. Her interpretation of the concepts of religion and politics is shaped due to her cultural upbringing and her experiences with these domains. Her experience with religion is excessively repressive. It is not surprising that the ground on which she applies for asylum is religious or more precisely, her aversion to Islam which is quite problematic in certain regions in the Middle East. It is a strong claim to make because prosecution on the basis of one's personal beliefs or religion is grounds on which refugee status can be granted as stated by the European Court of Human Rights on which the process of determining refugee status is based. (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, 2019) However, if five years have passed and her refugee status is re-evaluated, the situation may have changed and the situation in her country of origin could be considered safe. That means that the ground on which she has previously applied for asylum is no longer valid, and she will lose the right for protection and her residence permit.

If her understanding of the interaction between the religious and the political had been different she could have argued on multiple grounds and received a permanent residence permit after the re-evaluation. When the IND official asked if she experienced problems due to her political activity, she

could have easily said yes. One could say that taking off your niqab and having your friend film it is a political act. It directly challenges the power structure that is present and is directly related to the governance and the legislation around veiling in this country.

This situation highlights the need for an analysis of how different understandings of “religion” and “politics” affect the asylum process across different cases. This same difference arises in other cases with other people seeking asylum. The participants of the biographical narrative interview face the same challenges as the Iranian person in this story. There is a wide variety of states, all with their own governmental system. These systems are products of contextual and historical processes that shape current reality. The variety in different understandings of “religion” and “politics” can be immensely large. Just as defining religion, defining politics is too problematic because again, that would be too problematic to be of any use at all whether it is too limited or too general. Relating to a certain cultural context, the political is often entwined with in a certain way with religion. (Beyer, 2003) It is paramount that different understandings of cultural concepts are understood, and that this awareness is taken into account when determining the status of refugees. This awareness might offer more perspectives on the grounds on which an asylum residence permit is requested and granted. The analysis of different conceptions of “religion” and “politics” can contribute to a nuanced and comprehensive process of determining refugee status.

Methodology and results

In this chapter I will describe the methods used to answer the research question. I have used qualitative research methods to analyse policy papers and to collect data. The goal of my research is to gain insight into the different understandings of the relation between “Religion” and “politics” present in the Dutch process of determining refugee status. I will discuss per method, how I have used them and why they are the most appropriate for answering the main research question.

I have conducted a discourse analysis, applied on the policy papers of the IND. I complemented this method with two biographical narrative Interviews with Iranian migrants who have experienced the process of determining refugee status and with semi-structured interview with an ex-IND employee who conducted hearings with asylum seekers. Using a critical discourse analysis of the policy papers of the IND, I have analyzed how concepts like “religion” and “politics” and their relation are constructed and are used to determine the legitimacy of the asylum seeker’s story and the grounds on which refugee status can be granted. The biographical narrative interviews are used to uncover experiences with different understandings of the relation between the concepts of “religion” and “politics”. The semi-structured interview with the ex- IND employee was used to inquire into the deployment of the policy papers and work sheets the interpretation of religion and the assessment of credibility during the process of determining refugee status.

Participants

The participants of the biographical narrative interviews were former Iranian asylum seekers with a refugee status. The most decisive moment that dictates if the asylum seeker is granted refugee

status is during the interviews between the asylum seeker and the IND employee. It is that moment that the asylum seekers can give their account of their flight story and the IND employee can ask questions accordingly. The IND employee will decide on the status of the asylum seeker based on the information gathered during the interviews. The interaction between the asylum seeker and the IND employee is where the difference in the conceptions of the categories of 'religion' and 'politics' are located. Building on the research conducted by Wannet and Haagsma, I argue that a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the differences in the ways IND officials and people applying for refugee status understanding "religion" and "politics" will contribute to a more comprehensive and thus more just application process. The participants chosen to be a part of this research will therefore be former asylum seekers and the IND. It may seem odd to work with former asylum seekers who are no longer part of the process of determining refugee status and to work with IND, which is an institution and not a participant, and cannot be interviewed as a person. Below, I will discuss these choices.

I have made the choice to interview former asylum seekers based on two reasons. Firstly, it can be quite distressing to be part of a process where the outcome may determine the difference between living in safety and being repatriated to where safety of one's life and basic human rights are not guaranteed. The stress that comes with this process is intensified by the prolonged and uncertain waiting times. In addition, from the perspective of an asylum seeker, the myriad of actors, institutions, and organisations one has to deal with is quite daunting. My role in the process of determining refugee status is that of an intern at VluchtelingenWerk Nederland and being a student at a University. Because VluchtelingenWerk Nederland is an independent organisation and my University is excluded from the asylum procedure, I have no influence on determining one's refugee status. To an asylum seeker, my influence on their process can be rather uncertain. What VluchtelingenWerk actually is and its role in the processes it is engaged with, can be unclear. Due to the insecurity of the position of asylum seekers and the openness that is required of this research I have chosen not to conduct research with asylum seekers.

Secondly, Asylum seekers waiting for their process have had minimal engagement with the IND. Their interaction has been marginal during the asylum application phase and virtually non-existent during the lengthy waiting period. This research is focussed on the interaction between the asylum seeker and the IND in order to uncover different understandings of 'religion' and 'politics' during the process of determining refugee status. Experience with this process and the interviews with the IND employee can yield valuable insights about different understandings of concepts in the practical setting in which this research is located. In conclusion: Because of the daunting and uncertain position in which the asylum seeker is located, and the lack of experience with interactions with the IND, I have chosen to conduct research with former asylum seekers.

I run into similar challenges while conducting research with the IND as with asylum seekers. The role of VluchtelingenWerk Nederland in the process of determining refugee status often results in collisions with the IND. VluchtelingenWerk is the organisation which is mandated with the task of ensuring a proper progress of the process. This involves providing critiquing feedback and addressing any inadequate functioning of the IND processes or its employees. The result is that the relationship between VluchtelingenWerk and the IND has the potential to have a contentious tendency. It is paramount for my research that my interaction with the IND is not experienced as belligerent. With that in mind I used the policy papers and work sheets provided by the IND as my primary information source. A conversation with an ex-IND employee can support the information gathered from the primary source by locating it in the process of determining refugee status. The ex-IND employees role in the research was to provide an insight into how the policy papers and work sheets

of the IND are deployed. This approach allows me to engage in a conversation with the IND without the uncertain prospect of me inquiring in the functioning of the individual IND employee.

Methodology

The methods to research the final research question will be conducting discourse analysis, biographical narrative interviews, and semi-structured interviews. The target audience of the biographical narrative interviews will be Iranian refugees and the target audience of the semi-structured interviews IND officials. The choices of who I can interview and how many participants I can reach depends partly on the current pandemic situation. I have chosen to conduct these two types of interviews because a deep qualitative understanding of the target audiences is needed. A description of how these methods were implemented in practice and the justification of these methods will be provided in the paragraphs below.

For information about the definitions of the cultural categories of 'religion' and 'politics' that are prescribed by the IND and their approach towards them during the determination process of refugee status, discourse analysis will be conducted. A qualitative approach allows me to gain in depth knowledge about how the different understandings of religion and politics affect the determination of refugee status. Insight in policy construction will be gained according to the results of this research.

Discourse analysis of IND policies

I choose to conduct a discourse analysis to analyse the Instruction sheets on religion provided by the IND. The purpose of this method is to gain an insight of the understanding of the IND of the concept of 'religion'. It allows me to unravel the hegemonic, cultural assumptions about the individual's relation to the state, power, and religion. Discourse analysis helps me highlight the assumptions about religion that is crucial in determining refugee status. Thereby stressing the role of religion in the process of including and excluding persons from protection of the Dutch state.

As explained in Chapter Two, the definition of concepts like 'religion' and 'politics' are problematic. The ambiguous nature of the concept leaves it open to definition by an authority with the power to do so. During the process of determining refugee status, the state is the authority with the power to set definitions of what religion is and what it is not. In order to aspire to secure a fair and equal process of determining refugee status, the understanding of religion is fixed in the policy papers of the IND.⁴ These policy papers are provided to IND officials to be used during the process of determining refugee status. The IND is a governmental organisation which offers free access to their policies on their website. Policies are described in instruction sheets that are provided to IND employees. Instruction sheets state the way IND employees approach certain subjects during the asylum process. My attention will be focussed on analysing the conception of religion and the implications of that on the asylum process. I chose to analyse policy papers because it is required that IND officials base their understanding of the story of refugees on the definitions and conceptualizations described in the policy papers. Discourse analysis is grounded in the assumption

⁴ Werkinstructie 2014/10 Inhoudelijke beoordeling (asiel), Werkinstructie 2019/15 Richtlijnen voor de toepassing van artikel 8 EVRM, Werkinstructie 2019/18 Bekeerlingen.

that knowledge and meaning are created by discourse. When text is officially prescribed the creation of meaning is fixed to a single understanding.

Discourses are structures of signification which construct social realities. (Milliken, 1999) They constitute a particular way of articulating a specific interpretation and/or representation of phenomena. Discourse analysis enables a fuller understanding of the multiple ways in which conceptions of religion and politics are socially constructed through language, and its influence on the process of determining refugee status. By analysing what is written and what is not written, discourse analysis can uncover how social reality is constructed by focussing on implicit meanings. This often involves common knowledge in society because discourses serve to reproduce 'collectively held subconscious ideas concerning what constitutes normal and natural reality'. (Wilson, 2012) Often, implicit meanings are related to underlying beliefs that are not thoroughly asserted. (van Dijk, 2001) This can be done consciously or not to achieve some ideological objective by emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain aspects in discourse. Discourse analysis focuses on manifestations of particular ideologies and how these ideologies are impacted on the perceptions and actions of actors. (Wilson, 2012)

The method I will use for the analysis will be discourse analysis. Discourse analysis can be used to research to uncover the understandings of religion and politics of the IND by focussing on the language used in the construction of these policies. Language is a crucial site through which assumptions and ideas about the cultural categories of religion and politics are socially constructed. (Milliken, 1999) Using this method, I aim to uncover hegemonic views of the understanding of religion and politics. Discourse analysis not only uncover hegemonic views, they also produce ways of being in and responding to the world. The policy papers of the IND have the means to emphasize certain interpretations of religion and politics while excluding others. Religion can be a fundamental piece of one's identity. (Seul, 1999) Due to the extend in which religion can hold a central place in one's identity, the policy papers presents an interpretation of identity while excluding other possible ways of being in and responding to the world. (Milliken, 1999) By providing policies in the form of instruction sheets to IND employees, hegemonic discourses, and the status quo that they engender are maintained. Using instruction sheets during the process of determining refugee status fixes meaning and silences alternative discourses. The interviews with refugees can be used in combination with this method to discover if there are understandings of cultural categories that are suppressed.

During the process of determining refugee status, the IND decides which individuals are eligible to receive protection from the Dutch state. The target audience in this thesis are the forced migrants who fled their country based on religious reasons. During the process of determining refugee status, the story of asylum seekers is assessed to decide whether the asylum seeker has valid grounds to receive protection based on the European convention on Human Rights. The definition of religion in the instruction sheets provided by the IND is a form of state action because the IND is a governmental body. The instruction sheets that describe the approach the IND takes towards religion reproduce and reinforce traditional representations of the secular identity of the state. Discourse analysis can help uncover this identity. The process of determining refugee status is an exercise of who is included and who is excluded from the Dutch nation-state. Reproducing and reinforcing identity, by employing instruction sheets in the context of determining refugee status, becomes an exercise of national identity construction.

The policies of the IND privileges an official definition of religion while excluding other possible interpretations or representations, thereby augmenting one representation of the identity of the nation state. The policies of the IND are constructed through reproducing and empowering one identity over another. "By privileging one conception of a state's identity over another, particular avenues of state action are opened up and these choices are made to appear 'logical' and 'rational', 'natural' and 'common sense' within the privileged identity." (Wilson, 2012 p.130). The ways of thinking about religion that are embedded in the Dutch state and are manifested in the policy papers of the IND become logical, rational and natural justifications of including one forced migrant and excluding the other. The policy papers demonstrate the relation between state action and identity.

An important insight that the method of discourse analysis offers is the relation between power, identity, and state action. Through the language used in the policy papers of the IND and the incorporation of these policies in the instruction sheets, power is constructed and reproduced. A clear form of power is the ability to define or be defined. (Weldes & Saco, 1996) As demonstrated in chapter one, there is an evident power imbalance between asylum seekers and nation-states. This imbalance is enacted in the process of determining refugee status. During this process there is an asymmetry between the participants in the context of the power to define what religion is and how this definition is employed during the process of determining refugee status. Chapter Two also discusses the entwinement between religion and politics and argues that the line between them is often blurred or non-existent. Because the concepts of politics and religion can be entwined and power relations play a role in this entwinement depending on different contexts, discourse analysis is an appropriate method for exploring different understandings of it in a context where an indisputable power imbalance is present.

The selection of instruction is based on several criteria. The instruction sheet 1) states the approach towards defining religion the IND employee has to take during cases that possess an religious element, and 2) states the approach towards assessing credibility the IND employee has to take during cases that possess an religious element.

Results discourse analysis

The discourse analysis yielded results that can be divided in three topics. The first topic is that one of the core focus points of the IND is religious expression. In order to determine an asylum application as probable, the credibility of the account of the asylum seeker must be assessed. This is done by inquiring about the way religious expression is exercised by the asylum seeker.

The second topic is similar to the first. The policy papers show a focus on the private religious experience of the individual asylum seeker. As stated in the chapter above, one of the main premises of the secularization theory is that there exists a strict private and public divide. The analysed documents show a great emphasis on the individual experience and the influence of their religious belonging on their lives. While doing so, the policy papers and worksheets seem to ignore the fact that in a setting where the state system is heavily infused with religion public and private affairs start to blur. The third topic is about definition. The policy papers and worksheets do so thoroughly and allow for individual difference in lived religious experience. In order to understand the individual religious experience, the account of the refugee needs to be interpreted. During the process of interpretation, multiple definitions of religion and politics meet. What is excluded from

the policy papers and worksheets is to assess the understanding of these concepts that the asylum seeker holds in order to increase the validity of the process of interpretation. Below, I will expand on these topics.

In the case of an asylum application based on conversion, the IND has three main focus points. The first being the motives of a conversion, the second is the knowledge asylum seekers have about their new belief system, and the third is the way asylum seekers express their new beliefs. (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, 2019) In the policy papers and worksheets used by the IND, the relation between religion and state systems is not mentioned. One of the main focus points of the IND is religious expression (see Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, 2019, p.6) while it is not the case per se that one applies for asylum based on difficulties as a result of their inability to express themselves religiously. A convert may experience problems beyond the individual expression of a belief system. The problems that led to displacement can be traced back to the relation between religion and a state system. In a state where the governmental system is deeply infused with religion, bureaucratic and legal problems arise for persons not adhering to the state religion. The policy papers do acknowledge that the motivation for conversion can be because of dissatisfaction with the ruling regime or the current governmental system. However, the credibility of the account of an asylum seeker is assessed by focusing on the three main points mentioned above. While the IND acknowledges the relation between the individual and the state, it does not specify clearly how this relation is of influence when assessing the credibility of the account of the asylum seeker. It does not specify how the relationship between religion and politics affect the individual whether one is a believer or not. The policy papers state (p.6) that IND employees must inquire about the way asylum seekers express their new belief system and why it is important for them. In the case of apostasy or imputed apostasy the policy papers do not specify how to assess expressing the lack of a belief.

The second topic that is important for the analysis of the policy papers and worksheets is the focus of the IND on the individual as the acting subject. The policy papers show a perspective that focuses on the individual as an actor instead as the object acted upon by a governmental system. It does acknowledge that problems arise due to prosecution by a regime or group with the power or authority to do so. However, in a state where the governmental system is infused with religion, religious adherence can be a key factor in one's legal existence, the distribution of resources like economic, cultural, political, and social capital. A person can be forced to migrate due to living conditions that are abhorrent without fear of persecution. That which acts upon the object, being the individual, does not necessarily have to be an actor and can be in the case of a close relationship between religion and politics be a system. This is an example of indirect violence. (Galtung, 1969)

As stated above, one of the main focus points for assessing the credibility of the account of the asylum seeker is to inquire about the way of religious expression, why that is important for the individual and how it is the reason for flight. However, a person does not become dislocated due to his own expression in all of the cases. The entwinement of religion and politics can create living situations that motivate forced migration. However, in the policy papers and worksheets, this entwinement stays absent when assessing the credibility of the account of the asylum seeker.

In a setting where refugee status can be determined based on one's religious and philosophical beliefs it is important to give a description about what one is talking about. The policy papers describe thoroughly what they mean by religion and a conversion (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, 2019, p1). Religion is divided into two categories: Belief systems and religion. Religion being theistic non-theistic religions and belief systems are atheistic or agnostic. In addition, they acknowledge practising and non-practicing and conversion and imputed conversion. What stands out is the focus on the intellectual property of the belief system or religion. While that is a

core component of what a religion or belief system is, it does not cover the extent of the term as demonstrated in Chapter two. When deciding on an asylum application it is necessary to supply employees with a universal procedure to ensure a fair and equal process of determining refugee status. The approach the IND takes towards a religion and belief is its intellectual property that an individual person can hold. While religion can be described as something private and personal, it is also a public domain in society and a cultural category.

Semi-structured Interview with an ex- IND employee

The policies of the IND analysed during this research are applied during the hearing between the IND employee and the asylum seeker. Between providing and implementing policies is a process of interpretation. The IND employee has to make sense of the policy papers and convert it into knowledge and skills that can be utilized during the process of determining refugee status. Solely focussing my attention on conducting discourse analysis would impair the validity and reliability of the data gathered in this research. That is why it is important to engage in a conversation with an IND employee to discuss the process of interpretation and implementation policies during the process of determining refugee status. Their own understanding of the concepts of 'religion' and 'politics' may shape the process of interpretation and implementation of policies. The subconscious assumptions made about cultural concepts that are present within the 'deep culture' that shapes the worldview of the IND employee can play a vital role during the process of determining refugee status.

IND employees are charged with the responsibility to conduct interviews that helps them determine the status of refugees. During these interviews they gather basic personal information and they listen to the flight story of the refugee. After the account of the refugee, the IND official will ask additional questions relevant to the determination of refugee status. For an asylum seeker to be recognized as a refugee, certain requirements have to be met. The story has to be credible and the refugee must have grounded reasons to be granted the refugee status. To increase credibility and to argue for grounds upon which the refugee status can be granted, the IND official and the asylum seeker discuss concepts such as religion and politics. This process is guided by policy papers. From these policy papers, work sheets are formulated. How to interpret the answers given by the asylum seekers and what questions to follow up with are examples of what is prescribed by the policy papers.

The goals during the interview with IND officials is to uncover how the policy papers of the IND are employed during the process of determining refugee status and to inquire about what the influence of the IND is on the way individual IND employees conduct their interviews. This will be done during semi-structured interviews based on their procedure and the relevant policy papers provided by the IND that have previously been analysed using discourse analysis. Why I chose to interview an ex-IND official will be explained in the discussion.

Results of the interview with an ex- IND employee

In order to gain information about the way policy papers and work sheets are employed during the process of determining refugee status a semi-structured interview with an ex-IND employee was conducted. Next to the policy papers, IND employees are offered worksheets that state example questions that can be asked during a hearing. IND employees are allowed some freedom in applying these questions because not one asylum seeker's account is the same. The results of this interview

show that the IND puts the majority of its emphasis on the factual knowledge the asylum seekers had about his new beliefs in order to gauge credibility of their account. The knowledge the IND expects the asylum seeker to know about their newly adopted belief system consists for example of knowledge of religious holidays, names of prominent church leaders, names of saints or locations of holy sites. In addition to factual knowledge, the motivation for conversion or apostasy and the impact it had on one's daily life are central topics of inquiry. The participant was aware of the problems this focus brings.

The expectation that the asylum seeker has sufficient factual knowledge is neglects two points the participant put forward. The fact that conversion or apostasy is a process and the value of factual knowledge varies between cultures. The participant mentioned that she was aware that conversion or apostasy was a process. A process that does not necessarily has to have reached full completion at the time of the hearing. The participant stated that knowledge about the relevant belief system or the impact on one's life may not be fully internalized by the asylum seeker during the time of the hearing. She talked about individuals that were still in a spiritual process due to the new experiences during and after migration. The encounter with a wide range of new individuals and a new church and spiritual or religious leaders still shape the process that the migrant is subjected to.

Another reason that the conversion or apostasy is still an ongoing process according to the participant is that people who experienced forced migration likely do not have the opportunity to engage in the activities that are necessary for a full process of conversion or apostasy. Fully immersing oneself in a new belief system is often impaired by the regime that forced the migrant to flee their former country of residence. Because the limited possibilities for expressing and immersing oneself in a new belief system, the process of conversion or apostasy is still in development.

Secondly, the emphasis on factual knowledge is already an assumption as stated by the participant. The participant mentioned encounters with individuals that value knowledge about their belief system less than that the IND expects. For some religious groups, the emotional and personal relation between the regarding ideas or deities is far more important than factual knowledge. Assessing credibility based on knowledge therefore can lead to a misguided determination of refugee status.

I posed the issue of discrimination of certain populations on the basis of their religion as a result of regime that is heavily infused with religion. I wanted to know if the policy papers of the IND offer any guidance on what grounds asylum can be granted in these cases. The policy papers of the IND offer little help in discerning between religious and political reasons. A probable solution for this problem is that asylum can be granted based on experienced problems due to ones membership to the disadvantaged ethnic group. Basing discrimination based on membership of an ethnic group avoids the acknowledgement of the entanglement between religion and politics. The participant stated that the relation between the concepts of religion and politics is overlooked in the policy papers and worksheets of the IND. The participant stated that it can be the case that people are forced to migrate because their basic human rights are no longer guaranteed because of discriminatory practices of a regime that is heavily infused with religion. In these cases, the focus of the IND is assessing membership of the disadvantaged ethnic group of the asylum seeker.

Biographical narrative interview with refugees

The concept of religion is interpreted by different individuals who experienced it in multiple contexts. As stated before, a single definition of religion would neither be helpful nor accurate. In

order to conduct research where the concept of religion plays a central role, the methods used must accommodate concepts whose definition may vary between participants. Biographical narrative interviews allow for such an approach. This method helps the researcher to explore and understand lived experiences of forced migrants and their conceptualization of religion. It allows the participants of this research to influence the content and structure of the story they share. (Wengraf, 2011)

In order to prepare for the biographical narrative interviews, I have read the official report on Iran from the Dutch ministry of affairs. This allowed me to focus on the understanding of the relation between religion and politics of the participants without trying to understand the context of their accounts. In order to answer the questions of the IND official, the refugee has to understand the question that is asked. When the refugee is being asked about his religion, he can interpret the term according to his own understanding of it or according to what the refugee thinks that the understanding of religion of the IND employee is. This method aims to discover what these understandings entail.

The questions that will be asked during the interview will cover the experiences of the refugee that shaped their conceptualization of religion. The questions asked will be related to the period relevant to his or hers flight and his or hers experiences during the process of determining refugee status where an understanding of religion and politics played a role. I plan to gain an understanding of the refugee's conception of religion and politics during the period where their flight story takes place and their approach towards the concept of religion and politics during the process of determining refugee status. The results of these interviews echo a more general experience of people who have had similar experiences. A lot of my knowledge and experiences with people experiencing displacement is gained while doing flight story analyses during my internship at VluchtelingenWerk. I often spoke with forced migrants about their experiences with regimes where lines between "religion" and "politics" were blurred. The biographical narrative interviews allow me to expand on these stories.

The purpose of the biographical narrative interview is to allow the participant to narrate their self-lived experience without interruption or interjection of the researcher. (Kaźmierska, 2004) It aims to obtain a first-person account of the participant. The process of conducting a narrative interview is often divided in multiple sessions or phases. (Wengraf, 2011, Kaźmierska, 2004) The phases described in this research are inspired by Kaja Kaźmierska and are supplemented by the work of Tom Wengraf. The first phase of the biographical narrative interview is the initial to stimulate a narration. This phase aims to comfort the participant in order to inspire them to speak candidly. Because of the personal nature of the narratives and the emotional and intellectual effort that is required by the participant and the researcher, it is important to create an encouraging atmosphere.

The second phase is the main-story phase. It constitutes the key phase and it is prepared in advance to allow for sincere narrative storytelling and it is not to be interrupted. This is not the phase where the researcher asks for additional information or clarification. It is the task of the researcher to listen carefully without commenting or interrupting. It is often the case that during parts of the story, the participants get emotional or are silent for an extended period. It is important to keep the storytelling flowing using non-verbal signs of communication to show empathy and interest. The role of the researcher is to listen conscientiously and analyse the story in preparation of the next phase.

The next phase starts when the researcher is sure that the participants narrative has ended. If needed the researcher can incorporate a break of 30 to 60 minutes. At this point, the researcher can ask questions related to the main narrative. Questions must be asked strictly in the order of which the topics they are regarding were raised. The questions must also contain the wording of the

participant in respect of those topics. (Wengraf, 2011) These questions are asked to clarify portions of the story where incomplete information was given and where inconsistencies occurred that made the story unclear to the researcher. Theoretical questions can be asked in order to elicit the participants opinion and commentaries on important concepts.

The last phase is the moment where the participant and the researcher can unwind and embark on ordinary conversation without an active recording device. At this moment, the gathering of data is ended. Although additional information can be collected unintentionally, the main goal of this phase is ensuring proper research ethics. It is proper conduct that the researcher devotes some attention to the participant in order to treat him or her as an interaction partner instead of a data source. (Kaźmierska, 2004) The participants can speak freely about their experiences during the biographical narrative interviews.

Results of the biographical narrative interview

The participants of this research were forced to migrate Iran in search for safety. This is represented in the results of this interview by the negative way they speak about the relation between religion and politics. That is not surprising because of their experiences with a regime that violates human rights often (Ambtsberichten, 2019). One participant stated: "My renunciation of Islam is related to the legislation in Iran. I worked as a public servant for a department that handled divorce. I quickly learned that women have no rights." She told me stories about her experiences at work. One of the stories was about a woman who cheated on her husband. That is illegal in Iran. After a while, the participant learned that the woman was killed by her brothers. With their fathers permission, they apparently had the right to do so. The participant stated: "The murderers were not prosecuted because the father permitted the murder."

The participants were born Muslims but can be considered apostates and converts according to their own accounts. In Iran, it is prohibited by law to be an apostate if you are a born Muslim. Their trouble began when the state discovered they were no longer Muslim. Their apostasy is considered a crime against the state and it is approached from a safety and security perspective (Ambtsberichten, 2019). People who are follower of a recognized religion or former Muslims are thus considered dangerous individuals and can be prosecuted for their beliefs. One participant stated: "I started writing down my grievances with Islam. A colleague of mine who showed interest in my thoughts asked me if he could read my work. He betrayed me and contacted the authorities. After that, it was no longer safe for me to stay in Iran." This quote shows not only the prosecution of apostasy but also the effect the regime has on society. Expressing one's beliefs is made impossible because of trust issues. Only by succumbing to oppression one can ensure safety.

During the interviews we talked about their views and definitions of politics and religion and what the concepts mean to the participants. The participants of this interview stated that political action is strictly something one partakes in with membership to a certain party. Political acts are seen in state systems and institutions. One of the participants stated: "A government infused with religion has the power to diminish basic rights and freedom and even to destroy them completely." Immediately after he emphasized that secular institutions and governments have that same capability. The account of the participants is consistent with the information provided by the official rapport on Iran from the Dutch ministry of foreign affairs. The participants emphasize the security perspective that guides the policies of behaviour of the Iranian government. One of the participants was not sure if being prosecuted based on apostasy is a religious or political act because he is well aware of the entanglement between religion and the governmental system. Another participant

spoke about demonstrations led by women against the law that allows for polygamy. I asked her about her views on this demonstration. She stated: "According to my opinion, the demonstration was against religion. I cannot tell you for sure. Religion and politics are entangled in Iran. To my opinion, religion leads politics."

Both participants show the desire for a separation between religion and politics with religion being delegated to the private sphere. One participant stated: "In my opinion religion should be kept apart from politics. It should be something private." When I asked her what her thoughts on politics were, she explained: "Politics is legislation. But in Iran legislation is provided by Islam. All political figures are Mullah. They do not understand politics. Politics has goals, seeks solutions and is about results. Religion is not interested in results. It is undisputable and absolute. Religion is only interested in obligations and rules." This view is shared with the other participant. He stated "Religion is about commandments and proscriptions. It is not concerned with current society."

According to the research participants the focus of religion is on the afterlife instead of the present. The experience of religion the participants had was that it divides the world into interconnected and reinforcing binary oppositions such as the sacred and the profane, man and woman, approved and condemned behaviour and most importantly: 'true' believers and infidels. The separation in binary oppositions such as male and female is affirmed by another participant. She stated: "When I was fifteen, I was no longer allowed to interact with males. I also was forced to wear a Hijab." This classification of society into binary oppositions creates a dynamic of an ingroup of accepted individuals and an outgroup of those who are condemned. One participant stated: "All endeavours were under duress. One has a lot of obligations and there was no room to enjoy life. It was mandatory to take part in prayers and religious holidays." The position religion holds in ones worldview is acknowledged by the participants. One stated that after the Islamic revolutionary army took control, the minds and the behaviour of people changed. One participant stated: "The introduction of Islam was detrimental for society. The smallest parts of existence are guided by religion. The government wants everyone to be Muslim. For me, that had the opposite effect."

Lastly, I spoke with the participants about their experiences during their process of determining refugee status. We spoke about cultural assumptions. There was a lot of understanding about cultural assumptions. One of the participants said that having assumptions is normal and that he felt understood by the IND. The other stated that the questions of the IND were very personal. They asked about her conversion to Christianity and her experiences with Islam. The participants had the feeling they were understood.

Ethical Statement

While conducting this research have adhered to the principles of research ethics in order to avoid malfeasance. I have minimized the risk of harm by obtaining informed consent, protecting the participants anonymity and confidentiality, avoiding deceptive practices and by providing the right to withdraw. I have obtained informed consent by clearly stating to the participants that they are taking part in a research and by clearly explaining the methods and possible outcomes of the research.

I have protected the participants anonymity by making sure that interview transcripts are not seen by any other person than myself, my thesis supervisor and the second assessor and I have offered the possibility to have personal information be excluded from the final product. Interviews were recorded and published only with permission of the participants. Data has at all times been

protected to the best of my abilities. I will not leave my storage device unattended outside my home, my storage devices are locked behind a password and I will not allow anyone but me to access research data. I have avoided deceptive practices by providing the participants with my identity and the aims and goals of my research. The content and the plan of the interviews were discussed beforehand. I will, if possible, offer the opportunity to share the results of this research with the participants. The right to withdraw from the research is available at any moment before and during the interview. I will explain before the interview that withdrawing after the interview will be challenging if it is done anonymously because the interview that needs to be removed cannot be identified.

Discussion

“People need freedom and the possibility to make their own decisions. Freedom is deprived by religious interference in politics. The religious governmental system is a system that deprives or even completely destroys freedom. However, secular systems have that same capability.” – Anonymous participant

The results show some confirmation of the theory analysed in chapter two. In this chapter I will discuss the results and make an interpretation to show what the results mean. I will further discuss the implications of the results in order to show why they matter for Dutch immigration policies and how diverse understandings of the relationship between religion and politics influence the process of determining refugee status. The discussion below constitutes the answers to the subquestions as stated in the introduction. The main research question will be answered in the conclusion.

The perspective of people experiencing displacement

The understanding of people experiencing displacement can differ from that of the IND because cultural concepts are categorized and hierarchically structured in an elaborate system that differs between cultures. (Dumont, 1986) The main conclusion that can be drawn from the results of the biographical narrative interview is that the participants hold their own opinion about the relation between politics and religion. It is clear that they rather see a separation between the two as a result of their experiences with the current Iranian context. One of the participants stated: “Religion and politics should be kept separate. Religion has had a destructive effect on society. The smallest parts of life are prescribed by religion. Religion should be something personal.” At the same time, they acknowledge the entanglement between the two concepts that is present in Iran. In the understanding of the relation between the concepts of religion and politics can be divided into the ideal and the empirical experience. The participants show astute awareness of the difference. This is unsurprising because their experience forced their migration because they valued their experiences against the backdrop of an ideal. One of the participants stated: “The reason I have been prosecuted could be either religious or political. It is hard to say because they are not separated in Iran.” The current situation in Iran is undesirable when it is measured against their own idea of the relation between religion and politics.

As seen in the results of the discourse analysis, the implications of the entanglement of “religion” and “politics” is not explicitly acknowledged in the policy papers of the IND. This is consistent with the secular thesis that states that the religious and the political should be strictly separated. The participants that took part in this research talk about such separation as being desirable. This desire can be traced back to their experiences that led to displacement. The results show that religion can be a dividing point in society. The author Jeffrey R. Seul (1999, p.558) writes that Religion can be an integral part of the construction of individual and group identity. The results of the biographical narrative interview show that the respondents are very aware of the role of religion in group identity. According to them, religion is one of the main factors that determines an individual’s moral worth. According to one participant: “It divides the population in ‘true believers’ and others and male and female.” In the eyes of the participants, religion divides the world in binary oppositions and creates an in- and outgroup. This is consistent with the theory that religion is a strong building block of identity. (Seul, 1999) The creation of binary groups with distinct moral worth is visible in the account of one participant where she talks about her work with couples in divorce. The murder of a woman who was convicted of adultery was approved by her father and therefore, the murderers did not face prosecution.

According to the understanding of the participants the religion and politics are both concepts with their own definition, but their meaning is created by their place and relation within a certain system. They speak of no separation of religion in a governmental system but the concept religion and politics both have their own definition. De defined religion by what it does. An example was given by a participant: “Religion should give peace of mind.” What can be concluded is that there the relation between religion and politics is acknowledged. Religion is related to the beliefs of an individual and politics is related to public affairs and the power relation between political parties. Political action is strictly something one partakes in with membership to a certain party. Political acts are seen in specific governmental systems and institutions. One participant stated that: “politics is legislation.”. It is the relation between the concepts of religion and politics that takes a central role in the account of their flight story. It is the influence of religion on state policies that defines an individual’s life within a state. This ranges from their legal status, their rights, and the level of freedom one gets to enjoy. This is clearly illustrated by a story one of the participants told me. She worked as a government official with couples going through divorce. She told me about a case where the husband won custody based on his gender while he was an unemployed addict. The woman who was financially and mentally stable did not have the right to care for her children. “My renunciation of Islam is related to the legislation in Iran. I worked as a public servant for a department that handled divorce. I quickly learned that women have no rights.” According to the understanding of the relation between religion and politics of the participants, politics is what defines a governmental system. Religion is an influential factor that infuses governmental policies and thereby obscures the separation of the two.

According to Johan Galtung, culture is a symbolic aspect of the human condition that tells us what is good and bad, right, or wrong and sacred and profane. It also tells us what is true and more importantly; Why it is true. The collective subconscious is a collectively held set of assumptions about what constitutes normal or natural reality. In the case of the participants, religion is the foundation that shapes the natural reality that the Iranian government tries to achieve using its executive power. The experiences of the participants with the prosecution of apostasy shows the security paradigm behind state action. Expressing one’s beliefs is made impossible because of trust issues as a result of the covert operations of the Iranian regime. Only by succumbing to oppression one can ensure safety.

The perspective as seen in the policy papers of the IND

According to the results of the discourse analysis, the answer to this question can be divided into three parts. The first is the focus on religious expression. The second is the relation between religion, the state and violence. The last one is the definition of religion as a belief or belief system. The context in which the understanding of the relation between religion and politics plays a role is when someone applies for asylum based on religious reasons. The policy paper that proscribes definition focusses its attention on conversion or apostasy. In the case of my research participants, (attributed) conversion or apostasy was the main cause of displacement. The experience they had with the IND was thus strongly influenced by the policy paper regarding conversion and apostasy (Werkinstructie 2019/18 Bekeerlingen).

The results of the discourse analysis show that the IND maintains a strict separation of religion and politics when assessing the credibility of an account of an asylum seeker. One of the main focus points of the IND is religious expression while it is not the case per se that one applies for asylum based on difficulties as a result of their inability to express themselves religiously. A convert or apostate may experience problems due to the belief system one has but not because of expression. Atheist who do not abide by religious prescriptions can be classified as a danger to the state. The problems that led to displacement can be traced back to the relation between religion and a state system. In a state where the governmental system is deeply infused with religion, bureaucratic and legal problems arise for persons not adhering to the state religion. The Baha'i for example, is the group whose rights are violated most harshly in Iran (Ambtsberichten, 2019). Within the focus on religious expression lays the subconscious secular thesis of differentiation. Differentiation claims that religion is removed from its social-foundational role and has become just one domain, among others. Differentiation does not mean that religion stops influencing other domains of social endeavour, but that the question of 'influence' could not have arisen before because these domains were facets of a broader religious matrix. Focussing on expression in order to assess the credibility of a flight story assumes that the cause of the problems are the religious acts performed by the asylum seeker. However, in a state where the governmental system is heavily infused by religion problems may arise for people not adhering to a certain religion due to the social-foundational role it has. Even though a person is not being prosecuted a system of government can be violent.

The results of the discourse analysis show that the definition of violence is rather restricted. The policy papers show a perspective that focuses on the individual as an actor instead as the object acted upon by a governmental system. What the results of the discourse analysis did show is that the IND acknowledges that problems arise due to prosecution by a regime or group with the power or authority to do so. However, as seen in the policy papers, in a state where the governmental system is infused with religion, religious adherence can be a key factor in one's legal existence, the distribution of resources like economic, cultural, political, and social capital. Depriving certain groups of people of that can be seen as an act of violence. (Galtung, 1969). A person can be forced to migrate due to living conditions that are abhorrent without fear of prosecution. That which acts upon the object, being the individual, does not necessarily have to be an actor and can be a system in the case of a close relationship between religion and politics. A situation where violence occurs when there is no violent aggressor is not direct violence but systemic (Galtung, 1969). Forced migrants who intend to apply for asylum based on experiences with systemic violence may have a smaller chance of receiving refugee status when the credibility of their story is assessed in the framework of violence between subject and object as proposed by the policy papers and worksheets that were analysed. This problem is enhanced due to the fact that the IND bases their definition of a refugee on the definition proposed by the UNHCR which puts emphasis on persecution. In reality,

not all forced migrants fear prosecution but migrate because of abhorrent living conditions as a result of systemic violence that can be intensified by the relation between religion and politics in certain governmental systems that create dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Seul, 1999).

When deciding on an asylum application it is necessary to supply employees with a universal procedure to ensure a fair and equal process of determining refugee status. The results of the discourse analysis show that the IND maintain a strict definition of religion during the process of determining refugee status. The act of defining and the definition reflects subconscious assumptions about religion that are present in Dutch deep culture. The Dutch state has the tradition to subordinate religion to the political by claiming the authority to regulate it. (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1996) Strict definitions were historically necessary for the pillarization system. The action of state intervention dissolves the distinction between what is considered religious or political. This relation between “religion” and “politics” is coherent with the theory of Mahmood (2016) The act of defining and the definition show a secular perspective. Stacey Gutowski (2012) argues that the secular is an integral part of our modern deep culture. It contains political assumptions, unquestioned sensibilities, and embodied practices of modern life. It is a factor that influences politicians, IND employees and policymakers who are an integral part of the way that the process of determining refugee status takes shape.

The results of the discourse analysis show that the IND divides religion into two categories: “Belief systems” and “religion”. (Immigratie- en Naturalisatiedienst, 2019, p.1) “Religion” being theistic and non-theistic religions and “belief systems” are atheistic or agnostic. In addition, they acknowledge practising and non-practising and conversion and imputed conversion. The results are consistent with the theory discussed in chapter two. Saba Mahmood writes that the secular framework consists of different theses. One of these suggests that religion will shift from the public to the private sphere. The private sphere is formulated as the sacred sphere of religious belief and individual liberty which separation from the public sphere is maintained by the liberal nation-state. (Mahmood, 2016) In order to maintain this separation, religion must be clearly defined and framed. The alternative is that individuals are allowed to shape and divine their own spiritual or religious experience. However, that could potentially raise challenges in the process of developing government policies.

What the results of the discourse analysis show is the focus on the intellectual property of the belief system or religion. While that is often a core component of what a religion or belief system is, it does not cover the extend of the concept. The approach the IND takes towards a religion and belief is its intellectual property that an individual person can hold. While religion can be described as something private and personal, it can also be a public domain in society and a cultural category. The policy papers of the IND show no acknowledgement for that fact and instead focus on the private beliefs of the individual. The participants from the biographical narrative interview were from a state where the governmental system is heavily infused with religion. It is apparent that the Iranian government intervenes and regulates many aspects of socioreligious life thereby dissolving the distinction between the public and private sphere. The question of where and how to draw a line between religion and politics and what is public and what is private is characteristic for liberal polities. (Mahmood, 2016) This characteristic is visible in the policy papers of the IND. The implications of this for the process of determining refugee status is that the account of an asylum seeker is not accurately judged because the ground on which refugee status can be granted can be hard to determine.

The results of the interview with the ex-IND employee also show a focus on the knowledge of the intellectual property of a belief system or religion. This focus neglects the fact that one’s conversion

or apostasy is a process. A process that can be still in development during the time of the hearing. Determining the refugee status of the asylum seeker can be problematic. The assumption is that the process of conversion or apostasy is completed at the time of the hearing. This assumption neglects the possibility that the asylum seeker is still fully submerged in this process and that it is still in development. The lack of acknowledgement of the relation between religion and politics can be recognized in this assumption. In a regime that where the governmental system is heavily infused with religion, it can be challenging for converts or apostates to undergo their process of spiritual, philosophical, or religious change. Freedom and access to basic human rights can be heavily impaired under regimes like that of Iran which can undermine the process of conversion or apostasy.

The role of policies and worksheets in the process of determining refugee status

The results of the semi-structured interview with the ex-IND employee show that the relation the concepts of religion and politics is not fully described by the policy papers and work sheets provided by the IND. The participant of the interview stated that the focus during the hearing with the asylum seeker is on the factual knowledge and expression of the belief system of the asylum seeker. This focus confirms the results from the discourse analysis. The intellectual property is one of the main focus points of the IND during the process of determining refugee status.

IND employees are offered example questions that they can use during the hearing. The IND allows employees to deviate from these questions because no story is identical. The worksheets provide possible avenues of approach that are guided by the policy papers. The policy papers state the framework in which definitions are set and set guidelines for the execution of the process of determining refugee status. The worksheets state practical tips and literal questions that can be utilized during the hearings. According to the participant of the interview, the IND is aware of subconscious cultural assumptions within the organisation. According to the participant, the IND is actively trying to engage the challenges that are associated with these assumptions. It does so by continuously improving policies and awareness by a method of trial and error.

Conclusion

More research is needed in this area of the field of forced migration. The relation between “religion” and “politics” is a focus that does not comprise the extend of cross-cultural understandings during the process of determining refugee status. The relation between religion and politics and other concepts like ethnicity, nationality, gender and sexuality are areas where additional research can be beneficial for a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the differences in the ways IND officials and people applying for refugee status understanding “religion” and “politics”.

My experience during my internship with VluchtelingenWerk with the IND made me understand the impact of secular worldviews on how issues around religion are approached specifically within the context of forced migration. During the Dutch process of determining refugee status, the IND employee and asylum seeker will engage in a cross-cultural conversation that involve the concepts “religion” and “politics”. How these concepts are interpreted can be of influence on deciding who gets granted asylum and who does not. This research aimed to answer the following research question: *“What is the difference in the understanding of the relation between “religion” and “politics” that can be of influence on the process of determining refugee status in the Netherlands?”*

What this research has shown is that the subconscious idea of the relation between “religion” and “politics” present in Dutch culture are reflected in the policy papers of the IND. Whether it’s for designing the system of pillarization to regulate the relation between church and state or for determining refugee status, religion is something that can and must be clearly defined. That definition is not always reflected in the stories of people experiencing forced displacement. The participants of this research share the idea that “religion” and “politics” are concepts with a clear separate definition. However, due to their experiences, they acknowledge that in reality definitions become blurred. In order to assess the credibility of the account of the asylum seeker in cases regarding “religion”, the IND focusses on the impact of their (imputed) apostasy or conversion on their daily lives. However, it is often the case that people experiencing displacement encountered problems due to the relation between religion and the state without acting on their beliefs. People not adhering to the state religion or partaking in its rituals are often categorized as a danger to the state. These problems range from persecution to an unfair distribution of recourses among different ethnic groups.

The policy papers of the IND also show a focus on the knowledge of the asylum seeker of the intellectual property of their belief. However, adopting a new belief is a process that is often not complete at the time of the hearing with the IND. The asylum seeker’s account might be estimated to be not credible due to a lack of knowledge about their new belief. The assumption that the process of conversion or apostasy is complete neglects the possibility that the asylum seeker is still fully submerged in this process and that it is still in development. In a state like Iran, the potential to fully complete a conversion or apostasy process is impaired. The assumption that an individual has sufficient knowledge of their belief can lead to an incorrect determination of refugee status.

How we conceptualize “religion” or “politics” is guided by fundamental subconscious assumptions about the nature of reality. It is paramount that different understandings of cultural concepts are understood, and that this awareness is considered when determining the status of refugees. This awareness might offer more perspectives on the grounds on which an asylum residence permit is requested and granted. I argue that a more nuanced understanding and appreciation of the differences in the ways IND officials and people applying for refugee status understanding “religion” and “politics” will contribute to a more comprehensive and thus more just application process.

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