

Article

Multi-Layered Roles of Religion among Refugees Arriving in Austria around 2015

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Abstract: Violent conflicts and social unrest in the Middle East, in Central Asia, and in Africa have led to growing numbers of persons seeking refuge in Europe since 2011. The phenomenon culminated in 2015. In that year, with 88,300 new asylum applications, Austria was the 4th largest receiver of asylum seekers in the EU, thereby increasing visibly religious diversity in the country. Using two social surveys carried out in 2015 and in 2017 among asylum seekers and refugees, we study religious affiliation, religiosity, and attitudes as well as participation in religious groups. By focusing on the time span shortly after arriving in Austria, we aim to shed light on first steps in the host society and the multi-layered roles of religion for participation and integration. We provide a comparison with the host society in terms of religious affiliation and religiosity, and discuss recent qualitative research on refugees and religiosity. Insights into the engagement of refugees in several activities related to religion or not are valuable to shed light on the multi-layered characteristics of the recent inflow of forced migrants in Austria.

Keywords: religion; displaced persons; refugees; Austria; religiosity

1. Introduction

Violent conflicts and social unrest in the Middle East, in Central Asia, and in Africa have led to growing numbers of persons seeking refuge in Europe since 2011. The phenomenon culminated in 2015. In that year, with 88,300 new asylum applications, Austria was the fourth largest receiver of asylum seekers in the EU. While religion has been one of the aspects underlying the sectarian conflict since its very beginning¹, the religion of refugees became a prominent theme when they entered Europe, as it was a source of fears in both the public and political discourse (Schmiedel and Smith 2018).

Empirical evidence on recent inflows of refuge-seeking persons in Europe is becoming more and more available, including topics like human capital, integration, economic consequences, and—more generally—effects on the welfare state of the host society (e.g., Buber-Ennsner et al. 2016; Hainmüller et al. 2016; Ichou 2016; Weber and Weigand 2016; Worbs and Bund 2016). However, there is little evidence on the role played by religion in the life of the displaced persons who came to Austria

¹ E.g., in Syria, president Assad has been alleged to favor the Shia Alawites over other affiliations, particularly the country's Sunni majority. Persecution of religious minorities (both Islamic and of different traditions) has been particularly rampant in the areas conquered by the Islamic State (ISIS) terrorist organization. Religious identity is thus a sensitive issue for many Syrians, as well as for Iraqis and other refugees arriving from areas where sectarian violence has been virulent.

and other European countries. Nevertheless, it has been shown in other settings that religion can play an important role in sustaining a displaced population through their journey, such as in the case of the Vietnamese refugees (Dorais 2007), and also in fostering personnel reconstruction and social economic adaptation and integration in the host-society where refugees have resettled—see for instance with several case studies of Ethnic Albanians resettled in Kosovo or Somalis displaced in Australia or in the US (Gozdziak and Shandy 2002).

In this paper, we will present the case of Austria through the lens of two studies on refugees that were completed in 2015 and in 2017. Further available quantitative and qualitative data sources capturing aspects of religion and religiosity of refuge-seeking persons, as well on the population residing in Austria, were included to portray the faith of refugees and discussion thereon in the host society.

2. Religion and Displaced Persons Arriving in Austria in Recent Years

Austria, a country in Central Europe, with a population of 8.8 million inhabitants at the beginning of 2018, is characterized by a significant level of secularization. At the same time and like many European countries, Austria has become ethnically and religiously diverse in the past decades due to international migration flows (Castles et al. 2013). The religious composition of the population has changed substantially since the 1960s, when nine out of ten Austrians were Roman Catholic. That proportion had dropped to only 64 percent by 2016 (Goujon et al. 2017). Leaving the church to become nonaffiliated was the main driver behind the change in the Catholic share in Austria, with declining religious socialization within the family leading to the process of religious disaffiliation, apart from migration (Berghammer et al. 2017; Zulehner 2011). According to the 2001 census, the religious composition of Austria was as follows: 74% were Roman Catholic, 5% Protestants, 4% Muslims, 4% belonged to other religions, 12% were without religion, and for 2% religious affiliation was unknown (Goujon et al. 2007). More recent census data on the religious composition of the population are not available, as the 2011 census was based on register data that did not include information on religious affiliation.

Goujon et al. (2017) reconstructed the Austrian population in 2016 by religious affiliation based on estimates of the demographic determinants, especially fertility and migration of the different religious groups and secularization patterns of Catholics and Protestants. Their estimates point at an increase in religious diversity (8% of the Austrian population is Muslim and 5% are Orthodox) and the share of the non-affiliated population (17%). Both trends of diversification and secularization are accentuated in Vienna, the capital city where Goujon et al. estimated that there were almost as many Catholics as non-affiliated (35% vs. 30%) in 2016, and the population affiliated to Christian Orthodoxy (10%) and Islam (14%) constituted a substantial share of the population. As mentioned, the changes in the religious composition of the population are mostly the result of long-term trends that started in the 1970s (for disaffiliation) and in the 1980s for migration. The considerable inflow of refugees in 2015 that was preceded by increased migration since 2011 has intensified this latter trend.

The majority of the refugees who arrived in recent years in Europe originate from predominantly Muslim countries in the Middle East and Asia (i.e., Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria) and from Africa (i.e., Nigeria and Somalia)². In the period 2015–2017, about 156,000 asylum applications were filed in Austria. Syrians (26%) and Afghans (26%) comprised the largest shares, and the proportion of persons with Iraqi (11%) or Iranian nationality (4%) was substantially lower (BMI 206, 217, 2018). In the period 2015–2017, roughly 77,000 individuals were officially granted asylum³. Given the time needed for

² Proportion of Muslims in the country of origin: 99.7% in Afghanistan, 99% in Iraq, and 92.8% in Syria, 48.8% in Nigeria, and 99% in Somalia (PEW 2012a).

³ They have officially been granted either asylum status under the Geneva Convention or subsidiary protection or other humanitarian protection. Among them, one in two had Syrian nationality (49%), one in two Afghan (18%). Iraqis and Iranians comprised only a small proportion of positive asylum applications in 2015–2017 (7% and 3% respectively).

processing the applications—the time limit for completing the asylum procedure in Austria is 6 months (Aida 2016)—a substantial number of asylum applications are still pending and lead to a certain time lag in peaks of asylum applications and granted asylum status.

In late 2015, when large numbers of asylum seekers arrived in Austria, and even more crossed the country on the way to Germany and the Nordic countries, voluntary organizations and initiatives were crucial. They provided shelter and support to increasing inflows of asylum seekers “in a context where limited resources and unclear policies kept governmental actors and established NGOs from providing adequate administration and services” (De Jong and Ataç 2017, p. 28). A “welcome culture” dominated the country until the turn of the year 2015/16, characterized by the large involvement of civil society. In line with this, in-depth interviews with refugees in late 2015 and at the beginning of 2016 revealed that only few respondents reported experiences of xenophobic attitudes of local people towards them. This observation is related to the general mood of the political and media-fostered “welcome culture” at that time (Kohlbacher 2017).

The inflow of large numbers of displaced persons in Europe in the last decade was characterized by recurring discussions about the religious identity of refuge-seeking persons, for example Culik (2015). Particularly since the Al-Qaida attack on 9/11, Muslims, whether recent immigrants or not, are often perceived as a menace for different and confused reasons, which may be economic, physical, political, or value-related (Croucher 2013). In fact, negative attitudes towards Muslims have been observed in most of the receiving countries (see for example Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2011) in France). Contrary to the US, where religion is regarded as facilitating the adaptation process, immigrant religion—especially Islam—is viewed as a problem both for the integration and adaptation process in Europe (Foner and Alba 2008; Schmiedel and Smith 2018).

When contempt against refugees was expressed—far and foremost by populist politicians—it was mostly expressed as the threat that Islam was posing to the social and religious cohesion of the receiving societies. Across Europe, the nationalists warned against Islam and the threat it represents to Christian European culture⁴, and made political gains, partially because of this stance, as evidenced by election results and polls⁵. Austria, which received 88,300 refugees in 2015 (corresponding to 1% of its population), was no exception. The presence of religion of migrants and refugees in the public debate increased even more as the country had both presidential elections in 2016 and parliamentary elections in 2017, in which religion became one of the recurrent themes. The coalition of the socialist party (SPÖ) and the conservative party (ÖVP) which was in power since 2007 lost the legislative elections, with a coalition of the conservative party (ÖVP) and the far right-wing party (FPÖ) being in power since fall 2017. In this context of mistrust within the Austrian host society, it is particularly interesting to inquire about the religion and religiosity of migrants, which was a component of a survey implemented among refugees in Austria, and to link it to other surveys on the theme in Austria.

3. Method

The current study is based on a quantitative survey among displaced persons arriving in Austria in 2015 (called DiPAS: Displaced Persons in Austria Survey). This survey—the first of its kind among refuge-seeking persons arriving in Europe in this specific year—focused on human capital, attitudes and values and comprised—in a first wave (DiPAS#1)—514 adults⁶ (Buber-Ennsner et al. 2016; Kohlenberger et al. 2016). In general, DiPAS is a two-stage purposely selected random sample; interviews were carried out in Arabic, Dari/Farsi, and English, using computer assisted personal interviews (for details on the field phase and methodological aspects we refer to Kohlenberger et al. (2016)). Personal interviews in the participant’s native language permitted the avoidance of possible

⁴ “Diverse, desperate migrants have divided European Christians” in *The Economist*, September 6, 2015 (The Economist 2015).

⁵ See for instance Bird (2015).

⁶ As the survey includes also information on spouses and children, in total 1391 individuals were captured in the survey, 972 of them living in Austria at the time of the interview and 419 living abroad (Buber-Ennsner et al. 2016).

bias due to illiteracy or knowledge of English language. Moreover, a follow up survey (DiPAS#2) was carried out in 2017, which focused on first steps in social networks and cultural immersion two years after arrival in Austria. In total, 353 persons participated in this second round (either as panel respondents or as a refresher). Unfortunately, panel attrition was high due to the lack of contact information, but not to non-cooperation⁷. Therefore, results based on the second wave are only explorative, but might nevertheless allow valuable insights. Overall, DiPAS includes 799 interviewed displaced adults.

Approval for the DiPAS survey was obtained from the Ethical Committee of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Participants provided their verbal informed consent to participate in the study; the interviewer read out the introductory text to the questionnaire and the participant verbally agreed to participate. Written consent was not obtained to ensure anonymity of the participants. We did not document participant consent, as only the participants giving their consent were interviewed. The ethical committee approved the procedure.

Among the 514 respondents participating in DiPAS#1, 38% were Iraqi, 36% Syrian, 16% Afghan, and 10% had another citizenship. Figure 1 visualizes the origin of Iraqi and Syrian respondents. Iraqi respondents came mainly from Baghdad, Nineveh, and Basra (Figure 1a); Syrians came mainly from the governorate of Aleppo (Figure 1b), but also from Damascus and Homs. Given the geo-political situation in summer 2015 in Europe, almost all respondents travelled to Europe through Turkey, that is, via the so-called “Balkan route”. This transit route through Southwest Europe was closed in 2016, with Austria being one of the countries initiating and supporting the closure of this route, which resulted in a remarkable decrease in asylum seekers in Europe (Fendrich 2017). One in two were married, 43% were single, and a minority was widowed or divorced (6%). Eight out of ten of the respondents were male, with an average age of 30 years among male and 33 years among female respondents. The low number of female respondents constitutes a limitation to gender-specific analyses within DiPAS#1 for the analysis of the questions on religion, which were only asked to the main respondents, whereas we have other information from household members in other areas (e.g., age, education, former employment, etc.).

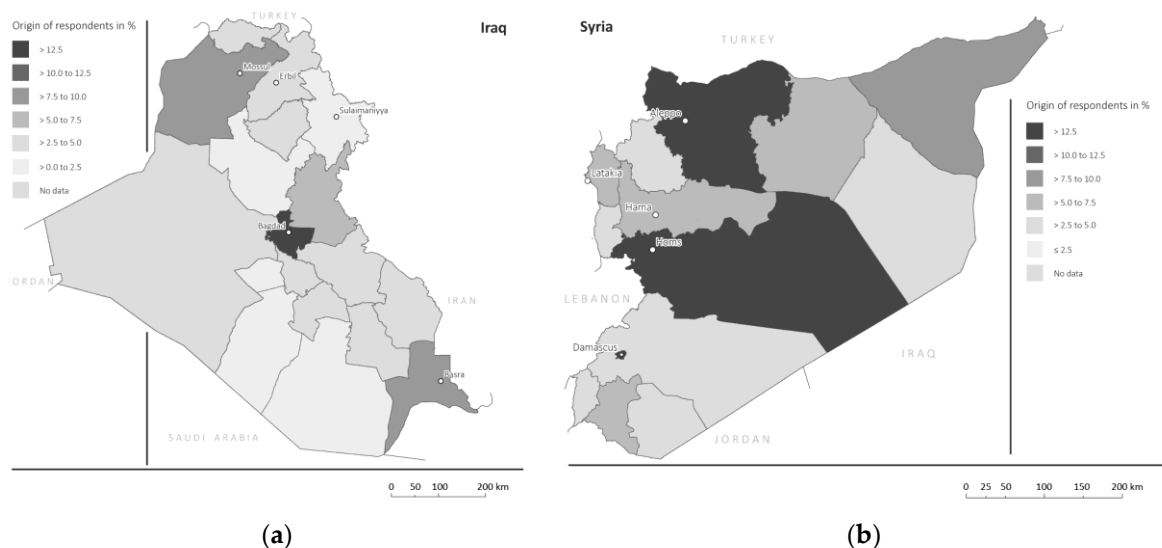


Figure 1. Origin of adult Iraqi (a) and Syrian (b) respondents. Source: DiPAS ($n = 196$ Iraqi and 184 Syrian individuals).

⁷ Most telephone numbers provided at the time of the interview in 2015 were no longer valid.

The DiPAS#1 questionnaire captured religious affiliation as well as religiosity. For religious denomination, respondents had to choose between broad categories, namely Islam, Christianity, other religions, and atheism⁸. We do not know the specific denomination of Muslim respondents, such as Sunni, Muslim, Alawite, etc. This question was dropped after the pre-test phase as it proved to be a sensitive question. Measuring religious intensity is never an easy task (Hill and Hood 1999). Questions on religious service attendance are not appropriate for all religions and can even become irrelevant for a displaced population who may not have had access to a place of worship for some time. Therefore, self-assessed religiosity was evaluated by asking the respondents to rate their religiosity on a scale from 1 (not religious at all) to 10 (very religious)⁹. Many respondents found it problematic to quantify their religiosity and some even explicitly said that it is difficult to answer to this question, regardless of their religious affiliation.

For a comparison between the interviewed refugee population and the Austrian host society, we use the “Quality of Life in Vienna survey 2012/13”, a recent survey conducted in the city of Vienna as well the first wave of the “Generations and Gender Survey (GGS)”, carried out in 2008/9 among men and women living in Austria and aged 18–45 years¹⁰. Finally, a survey among evangelical pastors on baptism of asylum seekers and refugees in Austria on the one hand as well as data on baptized adults in the various Austrian (Roman catholic) dioceses is used for addressing conversions of refuge-seeking persons to Christianity.

To supplement and contrast findings from *DiPAS*, we include qualitative data from the following studies and surveys in Austria: First, we refer to an ethnographic fieldwork conducted in February and March 2016 among Syrian refugees in Austria (Jolliffe 2017). This dataset supplements findings on the role of religion on the national and collective level with a more individualized perspective. In addition to participant observation in German language classes and visual ethnography based on participants’ photographs from their home countries, Jolliffe conducted three in-depth interviews and twelve semi-structured interviews with asylum seekers in an Orthodox Church in Vienna and with aid workers and volunteers catering to refugee populations. In these contexts, religion can act as both a source of division and union.

Second, we refer—at the political and societal level—to an empirical study on parliamentary immigrant integration debates in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, which was conducted between 1993 and 2013, with a focus on the use of the category ‘Muslim’ (Mattes 2018, forthcoming). While the timeframe of this study slightly precedes the height of the European ‘refugee crisis’, it is noteworthy for the purposes of this paper insofar as it allows us to address the question of when, by whom, and in which contexts religion is activated as a key conceptual category to discuss immigration, asylum, integration, and security. Indeed, contexts vary from the exceedingly negative, such as jihadist terrorism, to the productive and pragmatic, such as the accommodation of Islam into the receiving societies with a predominantly Christian and secular population.

Third, our study will be complemented by a qualitative content analysis of Austrian and German governmental policy programs between 2005 and 2013 (Mattes 2017b). In this period, each government issued eight programs. In addition, results eclectically also refer to selected information from campaign material and press releases. Together, the qualitative material gives an insight how different religions are construed in immigration debates and how a rhetorical boundary is drawn between a Christian majority narrative and Muslim immigrant identity. Such a discourse profoundly shapes integration possibilities and outcomes by defining national unity in predominately Christian terms. In addition,

⁸ We refer to <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0163481.s004> for the English questionnaire.

⁹ The exact wording of the question was: “Apart from the fact of belonging to a religious community or not, how religious do you consider yourself?”.

¹⁰ The Austrian GGS carried out in 2008/09 comprises 5001 men and women aged 18 to 45 years. The survey on “Quality of Life in Vienna” was conducted in 2012/2013 and interviewed 8400 individuals.

we include findings from a 2017 study on the involvement of Islamic associations (so-called faith-based organizations, FBO) in integration policy in Germany, Austria and Switzerland (Mattes 2017a).

4. Results

4.1. Religious Affiliation and Religiosity

The religious profile of the countries of origin of DiPAS#1 respondents is difficult to quantify in the absence of recent censuses or surveys capturing the religious composition of the population. Taking Syria as an example, the latest full count dates back to 1960. Nevertheless, experts estimate that the majority of the Syrian population belongs to the Sunni branch of Islam (around three-quarters of the population) (Commins and Lesch 2014)¹¹, while the rest of the Syrians are divided among Alawi and Shia Muslims (10–15%), Christians (5–10%), and Druzes (3–5%). In contrast, Shia Muslims have a narrow majority (51%) over Sunni (42%) in Iraq (with 5% identifying themselves as “just a Muslim”), while as many as 90% of Afghanistan’s Muslims are Sunni (PEW 2012b).

Almost all surveyed displaced persons from Iraq and Syria were Muslim (96% and 97% respectively) (Figure 2). In the comparably small group of Iranians, three out of four interviewed persons were Christians and only a few reported affiliation to Islam. This might be related to the observation that migrants of the Iranian diaspora often seek to reject the rigorous Islamic identity imposed by the Iranian state (Gholami 2015). The share of Muslims was also high among Afghans (87%) and persons with other citizenships (e.g., Palestinians in Syria, stateless) (87%) and persons with other citizenships (e.g., Palestinians in Syria, stateless) (87%).

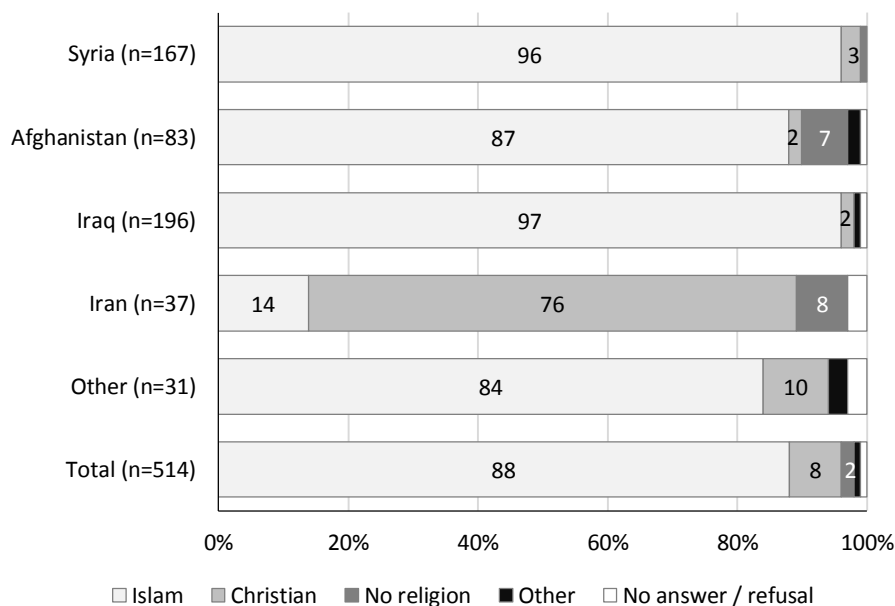


Figure 2. Religious affiliation of DiPAS#1 respondents by citizenship. Source: DiPAS#1 ($n = 514$ persons, among them 196 from Iraq, 184 from Syria, 83 from Afghanistan, 37 from Iran and 31 with other citizenship).

Regarding religiosity, first analyses of DiPAS revealed that a large share of the respondents (40%) chose 5, the median value, when self-assessing their religiosity (Buber-Ennser et al. 2016). Moreover, a distinction in low, medium, and high level of religiosity (answering 1–2, or 3–8, or 9–10, respectively, on the scale ranging from 1 to 10) indicates that more asylum seekers are not religious (20%) than very religious (11%). In line with the literature, women and the less educated were found to be more religious than men and the more educated (Johnson 1997; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012).

¹¹ To the contrary, Carpenter (2012) estimates the share to be much lower (around 60%).

Compared with a recent survey conducted in the city of Vienna¹², the mean score for Syrian and Iraqi respondents in the present survey (average score 4.8) is closer to that of the Viennese Roman Catholics (average score 4.8) than to that of the Viennese Muslims¹³, who expressed much higher levels of religiosity (average score 6.5) (Potančoková and Berghammer 2014)¹⁴. At the other end of the scale, only 10% of Muslims in Vienna indicated they were not religious compared to 18% of the Syrian and Iraqi respondents in the sample. The respondents in both surveys are very different in terms of their country of origin, gender, and age. It is possible that the respondents in the refugee survey are less religious because they are predominantly young males, but this interpretation is highly speculative. Furthermore an interesting information of the study by Potančoková and Berghammer (2014) is that religiosity declines over cohorts in the city of Vienna for all religious affiliations. It is steeper for Roman Catholics and Protestants but it is also present among the younger Muslims compared to older age-groups. The weaker religiosity of young people across all religious groups is likely to result in weaker religious socialization of future generations which could lead to further secularization.

We further compare the surveyed displaced population with the Austrian population. In the age-group of 18–45 years, one in ten Austrians reported to be very religious. Contrary, 23% reported a low level of religiosity¹⁵, whereas two in three assessed their religiosity as medium (Table 1). Despite the slightly different numerical scale in DiPAS#1, results on religiosity among the surveyed refugee population are very similar: one in ten reported to be very religious, and 20% reported low levels of religiosity, and the large majority (69%) assessed their religiosity as medium.

Table 1. Religiosity among surveyed refugee population and Austrian population, by sex ¹.

	Religiosity	Men	Women	Total
Refugee population	Low level (1–2)	24%	4%	20%
	Medium level (3–8)	67%	78%	69%
	Very religious (9–10)	9%	18%	11%
	Total	100%	100%	100%
Austrian population	Low level ² (0–2)	27%	20%	23%
	Medium level (3–8)	66%	66%	66%
	Very religious (9–10)	7%	14%	10%
	Total	100%	100%	100%

¹ Sources: DiPAS#1; *n* = Generations and Gender Survey 2008/9; *n* = 4993 men and women aged 18–45 years. ² Categories in DiPAS#1 and GGS were slightly different.

Another aspect we want to address in this paper is the conversion from the Muslim faith to Christianity. A survey within the evangelical church on baptism of asylum seekers and refugees in Austria provides valuable insights: among 126 evangelical pastors participating in the survey, six in ten reported that since 2010, they know of cases of asylum seekers or refugees who have either joined the evangelical church through baptism or have been candidates for baptism (and enrolled in religious classes and other preparatory courses). In total, 767 individuals were reported, most of them male adults (63%), and fewer female adults (25%) or children (12%). Converts to the evangelical confession were often from Iran, and rarely from Syria, Iraq, or other countries. Whereas evangelical baptism of refuge-seeking persons was rare in 2010/11 (only 5 cases), numbers increased with time, from 50 persons in 2015 to 209 persons in 2017. Although these numbers are low when compared to the overall figures of asylum seekers in the period 2015–2017, results are valuable in the broad

¹² Quality of Life in Vienna survey 2012/13.

¹³ Mostly of Turkish and Bosnian origin.

¹⁴ However, at the time of the survey, the ISIS did not occupy large parts of Syria and Iraq, and attacks by Muslim fundamentalists in Europe were less frequent compared to 2015. Therefore, Viennese Muslims may not have felt worried at the time of the survey about being mistaken for extremists if they reported being very religious.

¹⁵ 12% were not religious at all, and 11% reported having low levels of religiosity.

context of religion. Apart from the mere numbers of baptism, several aspects of integration in the evangelical community were captured in the survey among pastors. It turns out that the new members of the evangelical church regularly attend church, are often very actively involved in the protestant community and approach the pastors with their concerns about housing, job searching, financial issues, and asylum application procedures, but also questions of faith (Kitzberger 2018).

Further evidence stems from the Roman Catholic Church: between 2012 and 2017 the numbers of baptized adults increased from 250 to 863 in the various Austrian dioceses. Baptism of adults is a rather new phenomenon in Austria, which is driven by Muslims converting to Christianity on the one hand and an increasing number of non-affiliated persons who join the Roman Catholic Church in adulthood. Available statistics for the diocese of Vienna reveal that a substantial share of newly baptized adults had either Iranian or Afghan (Hazara) nationality and were Shiites before converting to Catholicism¹⁶. Most converts from Iran and Afghanistan had a refugee background.

4.2. Secularization

Secularization is the foremost reason why the share of Roman Catholics in the population has been declining in Austria. Since 2000, between 30,000 and 60,000 members have been leaving the Catholic Church every year in Austria, as shown from the data collected from Statistics Austria. The pattern is similar for the Protestant Church although to a different extent. Similar data on secularization do not exist for other religions. However, the second wave of the GGS study (2012–2013), in which the respondents (men and women 18 to 50 years old) were asked what their religious affiliation was at the time of the survey, whether they had a different religion previously, and if so, what denomination it was, allows us to measure the importance of religious switching for other affiliations. It turned out that only about 5% of Orthodox or Muslims changed their affiliation, with most leavers joining the unaffiliated.

Data on the religious mobility of refugees are scarce. As mentioned above, a survey was recently performed on refugees who became Roman Catholics or Protestants after their arrival in Austria. The study shows that a negligible—but nevertheless existing—minority of refugees converted to Christianity. Moreover, insights from the DiPAS#1 field phase reveal further aspects related to religion: some interviewed persons answered—when asked about religiosity—that they lost their religiosity due to their experiences during the war and/or due to the fact that ISIS warriors were fighting for religious reasons.

4.3. Social Attitudes and Religiosity

A study of Muslim migrants who moved to Western countries by Norris and Inglehart (2012) has shown that they follow assimilation theory and hence progressively absorb much of the culture in the recipient country. Religious tolerance was an aspect addressed in DiPAS#1. Respondents—who were evidently at the beginning of their journey towards integration—were asked if they would mind if their child(ren) were taught in school about other religious traditions, as is the case in Austrian public schools. Overall, 68% of respondents would not mind if their children were taught about other religions. Only 9% would disapprove and another 23% do not know or do not care (Figure 3). Overall, differentials are quite low among the different groups, but more pronounced when looking separately at religious affiliation, religiosity, and education: Christians (0%), low or medium religious persons (3–8%), as well as the highly educated (2%), mind less if their children are taught about other religions compared to Muslims (10%), very religious persons (31%), and those having completed lower levels of education (11–12%). Also, the Iraqi respondents tend to be more tolerant (78%), compared to Syrians (68%), and to respondents from other countries (56%).

¹⁶ Shiah Islam is believed to be closer to Christianity culturally and in the scriptures compared to other Muslim sects.

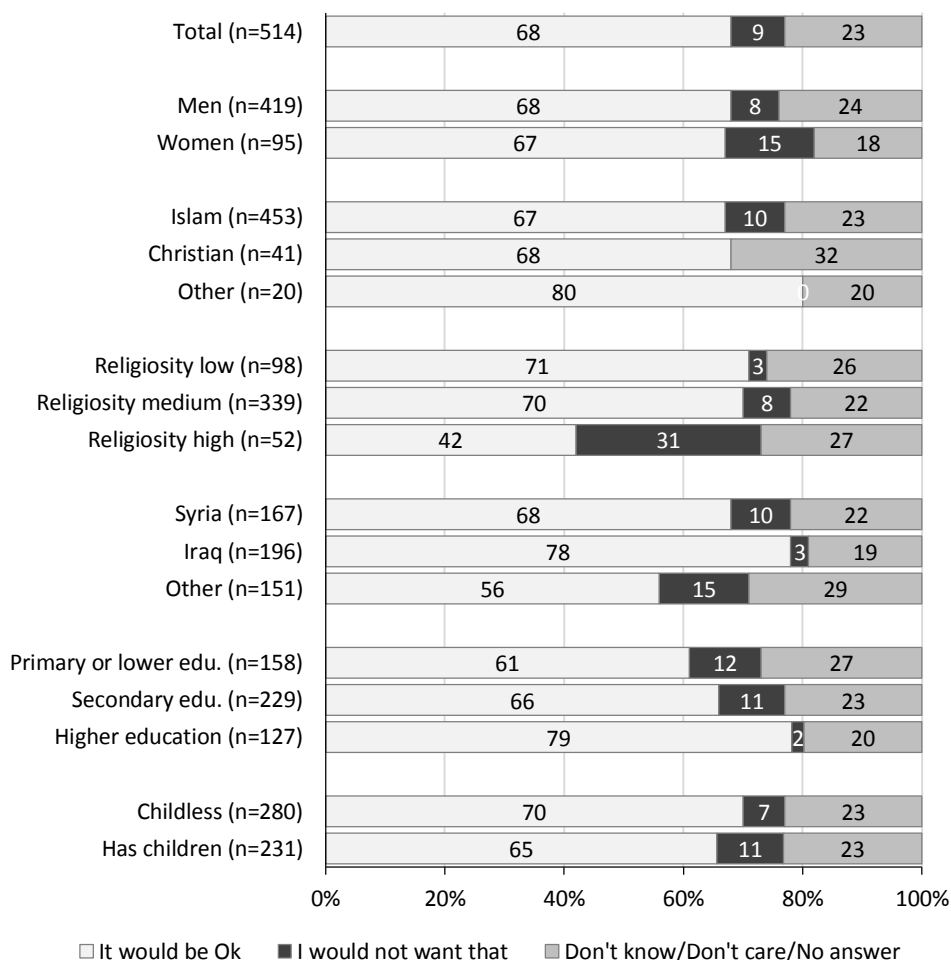


Figure 3. Tolerance towards teaching of other religions to own children in school. Source: DiPAS#1 (n = 514 persons).

DiPAS#1 also surveyed attitudes about gender roles by asking respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women”. Roughly 50% of both men and women responded in the affirmative (Figure 4). Similar to religious tolerance described above, differences in gender roles are more pronounced when looking separately at religious affiliation, religiosity, and education: agreement towards the statement was comparably low among Christians (20%), among persons reporting low level of religiosity (36%), and among the highly educated (31%). On the contrary, agreement was substantially higher among Muslims (53%), very religious persons (58%), and low educated persons (63%). Overall, women appear to be more decided and chose both “agree” and “disagree” more frequently, avoiding the neutral option, although it has to be noted that the total number of female respondents is low.

4.4. Religion and First Steps in the Host Society

In DiPAS#2, the refugees that were interviewed had spent more time in Austria, compared to those in DiPAS#1, therefore allowing the study of their engagement in different activities after settlement in the host society. Results suggest that participation in religious groups proved to be less common than participation in sport clubs (17% vs. 34%). This difference is particularly pronounced for male respondents, among whom 36% indicated that they are member of a sports club (e.g., football clubs and gyms), but a substantially lower share had a membership in a religious group (16%), such as in a local parish (Table 2). Overall, 47% were participating in clubs and organizations. Participation increases with educational level: 30% with no formal education and 56% with upper secondary education

are members of an organization, which may also relate to levels of language proficiency in German. Moreover, participation rates depend on marital status; not surprisingly, single respondents (56%) more often participate in clubs than married respondents (36%) (results available on request).

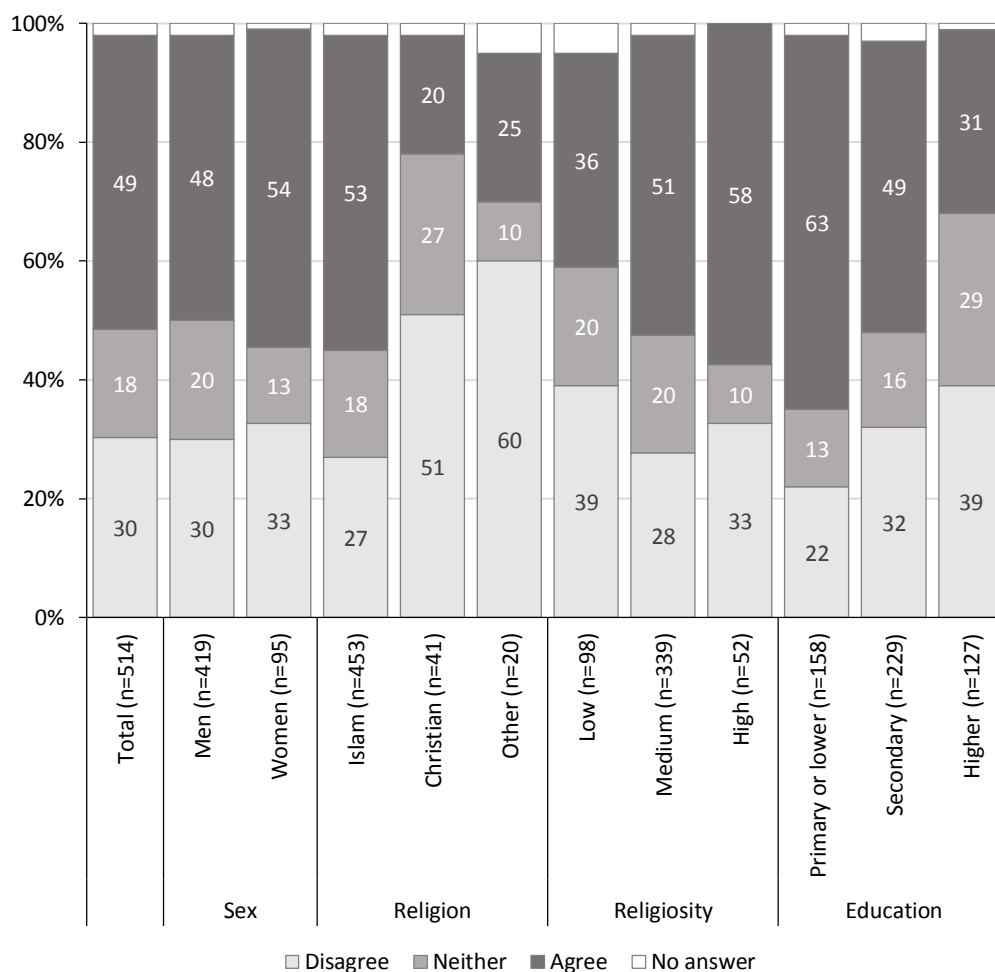


Figure 4. Agreement to the statement “When jobs are scarce, men should have more rights to a job than women”. Source: DiPAS#1 (n = 514 persons).

Table 2. Involvement in religious groups, sports clubs and other groups or organizations, by sex.

	Men	Women	Total
Religious groups	16%	22%	17%
Sport clubs	36%	20%	34%
Other groups	7%	7%	7%

Source: DiPAS#2, n = 350 respondents.

In line with this, a pilot study among refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan arriving in Austria in 2013, 2014, or 2015 revealed that participation in confessional activities seems to be of minor importance for establishing social ties in the host country (Kohlbacher 2017). “Muslim respondents did not mention mosques and religious institutions as important contact fields for establishing interethnic contacts with compatriots or Muslims from other countries. The reason may be that during the early phase of their stay in asylum shelters it was difficult to participate in the activities of mosque associations. Some Christian refugees on the other hand highlighted the church as a place

in which contacts and even friendships with members of the church community have flourished.” (Kohlbacher 2017, pp. 177f).

4.5. *Collective and Individual Religious Identity*

As suggested by Kohlbacher (2017), the role and significance of religion, particularly for Syrian refugees who are principally Muslim and, to a minor degree, Christian Orthodox, immensely depends on the personal and political context in the host country. In general, religion can act as both a cause for division and for unity. The latter especially holds true for inter-group solidarity among different refugee populations, who may feel united in their Muslim or Christian faith against a secular regime. At the same time, different religions or sects may act as a dividing factor, stressing differences over commonalities. Hence, Jolliffe (2017) reports that established Syrian Christians were upset with the welcoming attitude of Austrians towards Muslim refugees in the fall of 2015. Syrian Christians and Muslims living together was hence problematized by their varying times of arrival in the host country, with more established Christian communities being reserved towards the predominantly Muslim newcomers.

While formal religious affiliation can be key for identification processes, the overall political climate also plays a major role in how the religion of refugees is perceived and practiced. Findings indicate that the collective identity promoted by European governments in the context of immigrant integration are essentially liberal, and, in a second dimension, either Christian or secular (Mattes 2017b). Indeed, a resulting, conflated ‘Christian secular’ identity is frequently accepted as a fusion that defines the core of collective identity in Western European countries like Austria, which leaves Islam as the illiberal ‘other’. Muslim identities are hence established as ‘inferior’ to Christian, native European identities (El-Tayeb 2011, p. 16) which may foster in-group identification with Islam as a source of unity within refugee communities.

4.6. *The Role of Religion and Religious Communities in the Wake of the European ‘Refugee Crisis’*

While Islam has been officially recognized as a religion in Austria since 1912, it is the FBOs that dominated public welfare debates as well as aid and volunteering work during the height of the European ‘refugee crisis’ in the fall of 2015. Whereas Mattes (2017a) finds that German Islamic FBOs are much more involved as religious representatives and as civil society actors than Austrian or Swiss FBOs, it is the Christian welfare organizations like Caritas and Diakonie which shoulder most of the integration policy measures in Austria. Indeed, both organizations together carried out 20% of all integration projects funded by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs (Mattes 2017a). Several major (emergency) accommodations for newly arrived asylum seekers were run by Christian organizations (Buber-Ennser et al. 2016) and continue to dominate the asylum and integration sector.

In addition to these established, church-related players, additional, grass-roots refugee support initiatives, such as Flucht nach Vorn, KAMA, PROSA, and Queer Base, were established in the course of 2015 (De Jong and Ataç 2017). In contrast to the new players in the field, FBOs traditionally limit their activity to providing goods and services, such as accommodation, clothing, food, and counselling. Political activism, as with many new refugee initiatives, was not part of Christian or Muslim FBOs’ agenda.

While religious communities can act as key mediators for integration into the host society, public discourse on Islam as produced by the media and politics also shapes integration outcomes of refugees and asylum seekers. Over the last decade, and further fueled by the European ‘refugee crisis’, Muslim became a key category for integration debates in Austria and neighboring countries. In particular, the “the politicisation [sic] of ‘Muslim’ integration is pushed by populist right-wing actors in their interests of differentiating ‘us and them’ by cultural markers and exclusive identity concepts” (Mattes 2018, forthcoming). Accordingly, Islam is most frequently referenced in Austrian, German, and Swiss parliamentary debates between 1993 and 2013 as a category in relation to issues of

integration, security, and values; the debates in 2001 refer to 9/11. The issue cluster dialogue, referring to religious diversity and the coexistence of religions, ranks considerably lower (Figure 5).

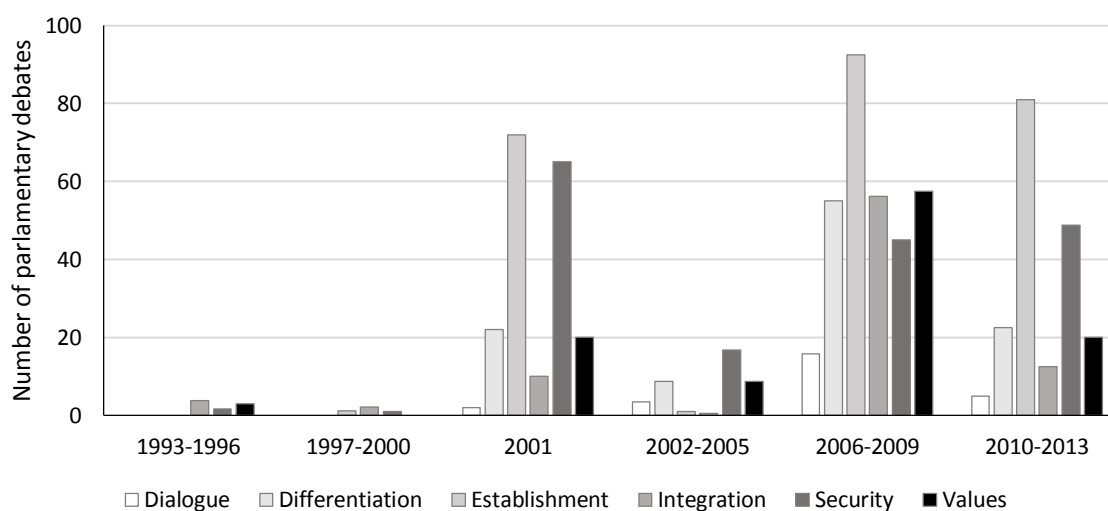


Figure 5. Issue clusters in references to Islam/Muslim in parliamentary integration debates in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, yearly averages. Source: (Mattes 2018, forthcoming), $n = 811$ parliamentary protocols between 1993 and 2013.

As concerns development over time (Figure 5), it is noteworthy that recent debates on Islam stress the issue of *establishment*, that is, the accommodation and legal regulation of religion and religious practices. In Austria, this trend appears to relate to the discussion and eventual passing of the *Islamgesetz* (Islam Law) in 2015, which regulates, among other issues, financing and education of imams. As latest figures for the period after 2014 are lacking, further research beyond political actors and discourses would allow a better understanding of the developments in the wake of the heightened refugee migration to Europe.

5. Discussion

The religious identity of refugees and asylum seekers had been a key element in the political and media discourse from the very onset of the ‘European refugee crisis’ (Carrera et al. 2015; Culik 2015). In the majority of the affected host countries, negative, mostly pejorative and hostile attitudes towards Muslim immigrants had prevailed even before the fall of 2015 (e.g., Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2011) in France). Individual, highly mediatized events, like the events on New Year’s Eve 2015/16 in Cologne, Germany, added fuel to an already heated debate. An often-voiced concern was that refugees from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan would, on the basis of their conservative religious views, reject Western values, in particular concerning democracy, secularization, and women’s rights, and would thus threaten social peace and inclusion (Bawer 2007; Fetzer and Soper 2005).

Our findings do not corroborate these assumptions. While religion may be an important influence on refugees’ attitudes and values, results show that even among the more religious respondents, predominantly gender-egalitarian views prevail (Buber-Ennser et al. 2016). When asked to rate how religious they consider themselves, the share of respondents reporting not being religious (20%) far exceeded the very religious (11%). Levels for religious tolerance were rather high, with Iraqi respondents showing highest approval of children learning about other religions at school (78%), compared to Syrian respondents (69%), and respondents from other countries (53%). The significance of religion and religious practice for everyday life is low compared to other factors of inclusion: pilot studies find that participation in confessional activities is of minor importance for forming social contacts in the receiving country (Kohlbacher 2017). Consistent with these findings, analyses revealed that participating in sports or social clubs (including football teams, gym membership, and other

recreational facilities) is far more frequent among Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees who arrived in the fall of 2015.

The current study contains several limitations. First of all, we combined available data on religion and recent arrivals of refugee seekers in Austria. DiPAS was a quantitative survey, unfortunately without further qualitative interviews, which is certainly a caveat in the realm of research on religion. Overall, we refer in our study to mainly quantitative data, as—to the best of our knowledge—no qualitative investigation capturing the manifold aspects of religion among refugees has been carried out so far in Austria. In reporting results from our quantitative sources, it has to be noted that several biases may blur the picture. First of all, the question is highly subjective and it is difficult to say what “very religious” or “not religious” means in different socialization contexts. Moreover, respondents’ answers were strongly correlated with the language and the gender of the interviewer: Male respondents who were interviewed by English-speaking women tended to be less religious than when the interviewer was Arabic-speaking. It is therefore likely that some of the respondents were trying to please their interviewer in order to maintain a positive self-image, possibly with an aim not to be mistaken for Islamic fundamentalists or supporters of ISIS (Kohlenberger et al. 2016).

We understand the present study as another contribution to gaining a more comprehensive picture of the demographic and religious profiles of new refugee arrivals to Europe. At the height of the ‘European refugee crisis’, popular discourse suggested that persons seeking refuge in EU member states were largely uneducated, illiterate, and conservative in terms of attitudes, values, and religious faith. By now, several major studies (e.g., BAMF/SOEP 2016 for Germany, DiPAS for Austria) have shown that, in particular, Syrian and Iraqi refugees who made it to Europe stem from the well-educated middle classes of their home countries and hold less traditional values on gender equity than their peers. Concerning religiosity, the current study cannot corroborate popular assumptions about refugees’ allegedly highly traditional Muslim understanding. Results from the presented quantitative data sources and exemplary qualitative field research indicate that refugees from the fall of 2015 hold mediocredly to low levels of religiosity, tend to be secular rather than conservative in the execution of their faith, and emphasize social over religious networks and intuitions. These findings are consistent with overall solid levels of education, as self-assessed religiosity and religious practice tend to decrease with increasing formal education levels. While the Islamic or Christian faith of Syrian refugees can be an important factor for fostering inter-ethnic community ties in the host country, other indicators of integration, such as education, human capital, and social networks, seem to be more relevant for recent refugee cohorts. The empirical basis established in this paper is intended to assist international efforts in appraising refugees’ and asylum seekers’ religious profiles and contribute to an evidence-based social debate on their social and religious inclusion in European host countries.

Religiosity is not a fixed characteristic and many aspects related to the growth of minority religions will be relevant for the future and will not solely be driven by immigration but also by the relatively strong demographic momentum of particular migrant groups with youthful age structures and high fertility rates (see also Kulu and González-Ferrer 2014). On one hand, immigrants and people belonging to minority religions tend to have a higher level of religious intensity in order to strengthen their self-identity, but also they often come from countries where religion remains important in shaping the social life and levels of religiosity in terms of beliefs and practice. However, it has been shown that religious pluralism and freedom, and societal attitudes towards religion in the host country, play a much more important role in determining the religiosity of the migrants after arrival than the level of religiosity in the country of origin (Aleksynska and Chiswick 2011). These findings are in line with the fact that descendants of immigrants show a general convergence towards the religious intensity and demographic behaviour of the host society (Norris and Inglehart 2012), but they also are coherent with the fact that a revival of religiosity has been documented within certain second or third-generation Muslim communities (e.g., Maliepaard et al. 2012; Simon and Tiberj 2013) in some societies where Islam is mostly seen as a threat.

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