



# Time and Topos in Migratory Trajectories: Mapping Memory and Lived Experiences of Religion Among Syrian Refugees in Norway

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## INTRODUCTION

Following a decade of bloodshed and armed conflict, an unprecedented number of Syrians have sought refuge in various parts of the world. As of 2022, 34,440 immigrants from Syria were registered in Norway, constituting the seventh-largest immigrant group in the country (Statistics Norway, 2022). In this article, I present research on the nexus of religion and forced migration among a small proportion of Syrian refugees residing in Norway.

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There is limited research on the complex role that religion, identity, and belonging play in shaping Syrians' migratory patterns and experiences. Two national studies addressing mental health and the impact of ethno-religious identities among Syrian refugees in Norway are worth mentioning (Ejeld-Solberg et al., 2020; Plesner, 2020). However, the academic literature is lacking studies on the ways that lived experiences of religion inform both real and imaginary forms of temporal and spatial displacement contexts. In an attempt to more adequately capture the multidimensional and (dis)empowering aspects of religion in Syrians' migratory experiences, my research applies a dynamic trajectory lens, in which the parameters of time and space are experientially and existentially acknowledged. This perspective shows how migration trajectories span pre-migratory life, revolution, war, flight, and exile in multiple and overlapping ways. Furthermore, I explore migration trajectories as a mirror of hybrid memory practices through which the symbolic language of metaphors is narratively conveyed. By focusing on spatiotemporal metaphors of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia, I thus attempt to map the storied landscape of Syrian refugee trajectories: an ambiguous realm in which religion, identity, and belonging fluctuate between retrospective and future-oriented processes.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The findings presented in this chapter draw on my doctoral dissertation, *Narrative Battles and Bridges: Religion, Identity and Conflict in Syrian Refugee Trajectories* (Løland, 2021a), and ongoing research among a selected sample of Syrian refugees residing in Norway. This research has been carried out at the nexus of religion and migration in Syrian displacement, exploring how refugees encounter, memorize, narrate, and discursively negotiate experiences of conflict, religion, and identity processes. Building on previous publications (Løland, 2019a, 2019b, 2021b) as well as unpublished findings, I focus on the parameters of time and space to adequately capture the complex realities of religion and migration in the experiences of Syrian refugees.

In my research design, I respond to a call made by various scholars to bring temporal and spatial contexts back into migration research (Crawley & Jones, 2020; Dahinden, 2010; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020; Hardwick, 2014; Knott & Vasquez, 2014). The existing literature has continued to “weakly theorize space–time relationships and the impacts

of space, place, and time on migrants” (Hardwick, 2014, p. 209). Since the lived, spatial, and temporal dimensions of refugees’ lives are often conspicuously missing from academic research, I apply a dynamic methodology and theoretical framework to broaden our conceptual and empirical understanding of religious entanglements in forced migration. I adopt a bottom-up view that reflects the lived complexities and challenges of a heterogeneous Syrian refugee population. The research participants of this longitudinal study thus mirror the highly diverse Syrian ethno-religious mosaic, involving Sunni Arabs, Sunni Kurds, Arab Alawites, Orthodox Christians, as well as secular or non-religious voices. So far, 30 Syrians—17 women and 13 men—with different geographical, educational, and cultural origins have been recruited and purposefully sampled from various locations in Norway. Through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and informal conversations, they have shared stories mapping their previous and ongoing migration trajectories. All were informed of and consented to the research project’s ethical standards, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.<sup>1</sup> Although the number of interlocutors is a small proportion of a growing Syrian diaspora—currently amounting to over six million people worldwide—the participants have helped to bring forth a polyvocal approach with a narrative inquiry. Polyvocality ensures the incorporation of many voices to endorse diverse listening and present multiple points of view. Narrative inquiry is a way of grasping an *emic* (insider’s) perspective and understanding of the meanings that people ascribe to life as lived. A narrative lens serves as a particularly useful tool to contest generalizations, as it endeavors to encapsulate the complexity and diversity of human experiences (Bamberg, 2016; Brannen, 2013; Eastmond, 2007, 2016; Jackson, 2013; Sigona, 2014).

Adopting a bottom-up perspective to interpret the experiential realm of Syrian refugees is especially relevant since multiple voices show different ways in which the Syrian civil war and displacement crisis have affected individuals and collectivities alike. Indeed, by adding a sociocultural framework to these polyvocal and narrative inquiries, I acknowledge the close link between the subjective and the social in Syrian refugee trajectories. When studying refugees’ lived experiences, subjectivities, identities, meanings, interpretations, and discourses, a larger historical, cultural, and political canvas is needed to gain a deeper understanding of spatiotemporal contexts. Stephen Castles (2012, p. 8), for example, points out that “micro-level studies of specific migratory experiences ... should always

be embedded in an understanding of the macro-level structural factors that shape human mobility in a specific historical situation.” Given Syria’s recent history of war, violence, and forced displacement, Syrians’ stories necessarily feed into an intricate web of narrative battles and bridges, where identity politics and religion are entangled in ways that are both contested and shared. Therefore, a sociocultural narrative approach can function as a helpful vantage point to capture broader discursive patterns concerning people’s senses of identity, sameness, and otherness.

### ENTANGLEMENTS OF RELIGION IN CONFLICT-INDUCED DISPLACEMENT

In relation to migration debates, I contend that conflict-induced displacement represents a distinct category within the broader phenomenon of migration (Goździak & Shandy, 2002; Mahmud, 2021). When studying people who flee due to armed conflict, civil war, and violent uprooting, I have stressed the need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of how religion intersects with such processes. This implies that religion and religious identification processes ought to be studied within a conceptual framework more sensitively tuned toward the *coerced* nature of ruptured life courses. A dynamic spectrum of push and pull factors affects the migration of Syrians, highlighting the fact that “degrees of volition and constraints are constantly at play” (Erdal & Oeppen, 2018, p. 11). Thus, I argue for a holistic view of migration that goes beyond displacement determining circumstances. Forced migration entails multi-layered journeys, within which different temporalities and spatialities are constantly at play. A departure from a narrow gaze on migration as a linear movement from A to B calls for the inclusion of shifting trajectories that simultaneously display both backward- and forward-oriented processes (Pine, 2014).

Deciphering the entanglements of religion in these trajectories reveals highly mixed and disputed research findings. I have discerned that what we deem as an assemblage of “religious issues” are contingent upon contrasting views and shifting times and spaces. Considering that Syrians display both controversial ideas about religion and varying degrees of affiliation to particular ethno-religious identities, it is pertinent to avoid over-essentializing the role of religion for all Syrians and at all times (Beaman et al., 2017). Rabo highlights that religion, although important, is not an “all-compassing aspect of a person’s social being.”

Class background, region or place of origin, profession, clan or kin group, and political affiliations are equally important in how Syrians present themselves and in how they classify others (Rabo, 2012, p. 83).

Therefore, rather than offering a pre-defined conceptualization of religion, I have left it open to an organic interpretation as seen through the encounters, experiences, and discursive practices relayed by both the religious and secular participants of this study. “Lived religion” has proven to aptly address these discrepancies, as it concerns “ordinary people” and “everyday life” as opposed to the more institutional and doctrinal aspects of religion (Ammerman, 2016, pp. 7–9). The personalized dimension of how religion is experienced or perceived is thus of compelling value when investigating empirical variations within the stories of Syrian refugees. The field of lived religion resonates well with existential anthropology, which views the realm of experiences as a lived reality in which “human lives ... unfold and are transformed in everyday situations, events, and interactions” (Jackson & Piette, 2017, p. 6).

Although I apply an everyday take on the lived dimension of religion in Syrian testimonies, I view these realities as situated in *extraordinary* settings rather than in the trajectories of day-to-day normalcy. Presenting religion-related issues against the backdrop of war, displacement, and refugeehood, my analysis points to a complex and contested landscape of religious heterogeneity in times of turmoil. Stories range from inter-religious dialogue and coexistence to inter- and intra-relational tensions, violence, and sectarianism. Respondents’ testimonies such as “we were just like one family before the war” (Løland, 2019a, p. 750), “we were all divided,” and “sectarianism is in the blood of Syria” (Løland, 2019b, pp. 9, 16) serve as but a few examples of such discrepancies. The pool of collected stories as a whole, however, simultaneously conveys religion as a profound meaning-making framework and a source of resilience and existential hope, as well as a component of intergroup conflict, civil war, and forced displacement. Therefore, when probed against the plurality of voices and experiences of Syrian refugees, these (dis)empowering, ambiguous, and controversial aspects of religion need to be included to gain analytical depth and understanding.

## TIME AND TOPOS: MAPPING MIGRATORY PATHS AND HORIZONS

The trajectory approach I apply in my research shows how key experiences in individual Syrian life stories are always temporally and spatially situated, embedded in both real and imaginary worlds. In my research, I view migratory trajectories not merely as physical and linear movements, but also as overlapping social, existential, and symbolic forms of mobility. Furthermore, my findings suggest that trajectories can best be accessed through a narrative lens in which memory and metaphors play a vital role. Borrowing Koselleck's terminology (2004, p. 261), we see how multifarious memory practices among Syrian refugees address "spaces of experiences" that in turn generate various "horizons of expectations." When mapping the paths and horizons in Syrian refugee narratives, storytelling may be likened to a "path of memories" (Assmann & Conrad, 2010, p. 6) and religion to "a chain of memory" (Hervieu-Léger, 2000) that links vital aspects of past, present, and future. Given that both memories and narratives are creative (re)constructions, rendering any interpretation partial and selective (Eastmond, 2007), it is vital to approach storytelling as a mirror image of a plurality of meaning-making and discursive practices (Bamberg, 2016). Rather than resorting to viewing narratives solely as following the classical structure of a beginning, middle, and end, storytelling must be understood as a reflection of the often messy and contested dimensions of lived realities. For example, it is imperative to regard the unstructured elements of ruptured life courses as part and parcel of refugee stories. Indeed, as Frank (2010) argues in research on narratology and illness, we must acknowledge the narrative disorder and the indefinite nature of stories. Instead, we can see any story as "a portal" into other stories, resonating "multiple truths that have respective claims to expression" (Frank, 2010, p. 37). This interpretative openness is compelling when investigating how narrative battles and bridges reflect shared and disputed encounters and memories of the Syrian war and displacement crisis.

Addressing paths and horizons as shifting spaces and temporalities in conflict-induced displacement alludes to a dynamic understanding of the terms "roots" and "routes" introduced by Clifford (1997). Migrants' roots play a vital role in distinguishing who they are, both individually and collectively. The term thus speaks to ethnic, religious, and cultured identities, bound in place, socialized through time, and contextualized in

historical and political circumstances. While roots refer to the ideals of the past—to dwelling, belonging, and attachment to place—they are also linked to the present by forming the basis for negotiating new experiences and navigating alien terrains. Conversely, routes speak to the multiple and multidirectional ways in which migrants cross, travel, and sojourn in processes of displacement. This may entail physical mobility as much as psycho-social strategies and existential maneuvering along the “broken journeys” into refugeehood (Jackson, 2013). Rather than viewing these terms as dichotomous, I emphasize their interdependence. Both roots and routes therefore engulf human experiences, enabling memory practices to constantly cross the spatial boundaries of “here and there” as well as the temporalities of “then and now.”

In relation to narrative memory, I argue for an imaginative capacity and attentive listening when representing contested and contesting refugee stories. Stressing the importance of polyvocal testimonies, it has been vital to conduct an open-ended conversation with the empirical findings, to acknowledge the disputed, manipulated, buried, or silenced aspects of memories. My research shows that what is accounted for “front-stage” and what is hidden “back-stage” (Goffman, 1971) in Syrians’ discourse on religion and identity is often tied to cultural taboos and political constraints. While these restrictions are lingering in exile, many Syrians try to break free and (re)articulate their identities in new ways. Given this situation, I propose a dynamic perspective on Syrian refugees’ memory practices. They may be viewed as a human “struggle” (Eastmond, 2007, p. 259) to cross boundaries, overcome past traumas, and combat various religious and sociopolitical infringements. Simultaneously, they may be important devices to re-orient and explain how people change when faced with disrupted life courses. Also, as testified to in some of my interlocutors’ stories, going down memory lane may not be a desirable path for all; the pain of remembering can be replaced by forgetting as a strategy for restoring order out of chaos.

Having delineated the research background and its methodology, as well as my understanding of what underpins narrative memory when exploring religion in the spatiotemporal realm of conflict-induced displacement, I will now share some of my findings. The findings address moments of time that are linked to various topoi (themes) conveyed by my interlocutors. In order to contextualize the empirical material, I have employed the three metaphors of utopia, dystopia, and heterotopia as categorical frames enveloping the storied landscape of migratory

experiences. Metaphors are not merely figurative speech acts without deeper significance, but a form of conceptual discourse that invokes multiple perspectives and narrative standpoints. As such, metaphors may be described as representational and overlapping frames within which the entanglements of religion and identity discourses dynamically fluctuate.

### UTOPIA: NEGOTIATING PAST AND FUTURE FORMS OF COEXISTENCE

Metaphors of paradise and a longing for paradise lost appeared in many refugees' narratives regarding pre-war Syria. It was surprising that the harsh political climate invoked such paradisaical references. However, many interlocutors used such metaphors. The metaphors held varied connotations for different participants and I deemed them worthy of further scrutiny. Narratives describing interreligious tolerance, intercultural togetherness, and peaceful coexistence were woven into the identity fabric of most Syrians. Some referred to the long, multicultural history of Syria as a uniting legacy that transcended other ethno-religious identity markers. Others described the personal friendships or the brotherly relationships that existed in cosmopolitan and multi-religious neighborhoods. One Christian respondent reminisced that, before the war, Christians and Muslims were "celebrating everything together, sharing life, supporting each other. ... It was a nice and peaceful life" (Løland, 2019b, p. 16). The women participating in focus group discussions on religious identities and differing faiths corroborated this recollection. They agreed that co-workers, students, neighbors, and friends were first and foremost regarded as fellow citizens and not as intrinsically different based on ethnic, religious, or tribal affiliations. Thus, part of the findings showed that the salience of religion and religious identities appeared to be either less visible or positively fused into nostalgic accounts of a peaceful, prosperous, and religiously diverse past.

Through a theoretical lens of memory, nostalgia, and metaphors, it was possible to analyze these results within the spatiotemporal unit of utopia (Løland, 2019a). According to Ricoeur (1976), longing for and belonging to a place and time in which feelings of paradise are evoked are not merely ideas projected onto the future time, but they also embody powerful symbolic representations of the past. Participants expressed mixed feelings of pride and pain when talking about their peaceful and convivial interreligious relationships. These feelings were contrasted with



the destructive social divisions caused by war and displacement. The utopian imagery explained how, when something meaningful has been lost, nostalgia pushes forth a longing for a golden past and helps establish a sense of continuity in situations of total discontinuity (Synnes, 2015). However, the narratives of pre-war Syria were divided and not unequivocally positive regarding a paradise lost. While some stories indicated interreligious tensions lurking beneath the surface of harmonious coexistence, others recounted a fear of or compliance with the political realities on the ground. These disparate findings prompted me to probe memory practices against the ethno-religious identity politics of modern-day Syria and to interpret their negative and fear-inducing side effects for Syrian society. Thus, in order to locate the “snake” embedded within the tales of paradise, it was necessary to understand how the oppressive mechanisms of the long-asserted Assad regime had deprived the Syrian people of healthy discussions about political and religious differences.

Analyzing the utopian metaphor, I needed to scrutinize discursive expressions against the discrepancies of past tensions, whether they were perceived to be political, religious, or regarding human relations. If we define utopia as “a desire for a better life” (Levitas, 2011, p. 191), the empirical data show that imagery of such a life is drawn from both past and future aspirations. These divergences were most explicitly articulated when moving from pre-war accounts to stories describing the historical turning point that occurred in Syria in 2011. Here, the counter-narratives to the tales of an idealized past gained relevance in relation to the Arab Spring and the awakening Syrian revolution. For those who actively took part in the uprising, talk of the good old days could be perceived as both an ignorant and deceitful sort of nostalgia. For some, it obliterated the very reasons behind the fundamental calls for change, freedom, and democracy demanded by the Syrian revolution. Portraying a glorified and flawless version of Syria’s past was seen to undermine the *raison d’être* upon which the revolutionary ideals were laid. It could also support the regime’s master narrative of being the sole provider of security, peace, and prosperity. Thus, many of my interlocutors placed the notion of a utopia at the moment when the revolution started. They perceived it as the beginning of a brand-new era, in which a “tsunami of hope” would usher in a chance to “breathe freedom” and be “born again” (Løland, 2019b). Different understandings of paradise thus entered the scene, as exemplified by the many slogans and revolutionary songs celebrating radical changes and exalting a new Syria in otherworldly terms. For many, the

dream of a democratic Syria envisioned a new form of living together in which secular and ethno-religious identities were neither silenced nor subdued, but rather incorporated into an equally shared space of justice for all citizens. For some of the Sunni Muslim respondents, the revolution was an opportunity to demand justice for their long-held underprivileged status as well as a way to re-appropriate their religious identity with renewed fervor.

While the revolution may be seen as a space in which people could actively articulate changes and aspirations, in relation to religion and identity discourses, for instance, my findings show that it was a deeply contested space from the very beginning. Voiced most strongly by some Christian respondents, the uprising was perceived as threatening and destabilizing, inaugurating feelings of repulsion and fear rather than hope and freedom. As such, their stories aligned more with the regime's master narrative, in which demonstrators were characterized as terrorists and sectarian fanatics as well as foreign conspirators, intent on destroying the multi-religious Syria. At the same time, some people with minority status also sympathized with the regime critics but felt either threatened or alienated when the revolution turned increasingly violent and sectarian. As the dreams of the revolution failed to materialize and the country plunged into civil war, it left behind another "lost space." Some respondents saw it as an existential task to refill that space in exile, expressing a utopian yearning to keep the spark of the revolutionary narrative alive. Others expressed a sense of defeat or hopelessness in the face of the dystopic nightmare that was to befall all Syrian citizens in the aftermath of the revolution. Therefore, I turned my attention to the heteroglossia of grassroots experiences regarding intercultural relations and religious coexistence, claiming "history from below" (Burke, 2019) as an important lens through which ordinary people negotiate historically significant turning points from very different perspectives.

### DYSTOPIA: NEGOTIATING WAR, VIOLENCE, AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OTHERING

Analyzing war and displacement stories, I noticed that refugee stories are evocative of different aspects of dystopian experiences. Certainly, the everyday violence, with its sounds of bombs, shootings, and artillery, was enough to cause shock and disbelief among all the participants. Many of the respondents said that these dramatic and changing realities were

hard to fathom, let alone accept as a new kind of normalcy when life as they knew it had been turned upside down. One respondent described the war as “an eternal hell” where suffering and horror reigned. Another described it as “an unimaginable tragedy,” the scale of which would leave anyone “paralyzed” (Løland, 2019b, p. 17). Engulfed in these experiences of death and disaster, stories revealed that an existential kind of insecurity penetrated the social fabric of intercultural and interreligious relations in Syria. A kind of fragmentation emerged along ethno-religious lines. It became visible in people’s work life, in public discourse, on the streets, and in conversations among friends and family members. One respondent described these divisive transformations as a toxic atmosphere that was gradually “infesting all Syrians from inside” (Løland, 2019b).

An analysis of these changes within the framework of sectarianism showed that both secular and religious participants of different ethno-religious backgrounds were exposed to mistrust, alienation, and social degradation. These factors shaped their perception of their own identity and that of the (religious) others. Religion was appropriated as both a weapon and a shield for warring parties on the battlefield, dramatically affecting the felt reality of ordinary people. Indeed, my research into the macro-narrative landscape in Syrian war discourses showed that all parties in the conflict usurped derogatory sectarian language that exacerbated identity-othering and legitimized religion-related violence. As testified by many research participants, being caught between opposing factions and conspiracies pushed forward coerced forms of allegiances or situations in which balancing religious identities became a matter of life and death. One respondent provided a vivid example when his Sunni Muslim identity was questioned and severely threatened by both the regime forces and Islamist opposition fighters. Another respondent said, “I feared them all” when describing his multiple displacements within Syria as a perilous series of maneuvers between areas where the regime, ISIL, and other opposition groups were fighting for control (Løland, 2021b, para. 52). Although some participants took a meta-perspective and viewed the war as “wrapped under a religious cover” (Ibid., para. 40), cynically used by parties to disguise other power-related agendas, there could be no denying that the disempowering vicissitudes of religious identity politics were present in the collected stories. The various voices among Christian minority groups and Muslim majority

and minority groups reflected processes of sectarianization in which fear-inducing war experiences reinforced in-group solidarity and exclusionary identity discourses.

Rather than viewing identity contestations as manifestations of an ancient hatred, I argue for taking a narrative identity approach in order to understand how contexts, experiences, and encounters shaped identity dynamics at micro and macro levels of society. This approach provides insights into the historical and political climates impacting storytellers' lives. Discussing political narratives anthropologically always involves "an examination of the relationship between the stories of individuals and the stories of the communities in which they live" (Andrews, 2014, p. 355). My findings heed the call for considering historical memory discrepancies more ardently when discussing the religious and political roots of the Syrian conflict (Balanche, 2018; Lefèvre, 2013; Pearlman, 2016). One major finding, which I have called "the haunting of Hama" (Løland, 2019b), indicates that Syrians' memory practices invoke events from the past and re-inscribe them into the present. It refers to the domestic conflict between the ruling Ba'ath regime and the Muslim Brotherhood, which culminated in the 1982 Hama massacre. Shadows of this incident, and the processes that led up to it, resurfaced in most of my participants' stories, appearing to collectively affect entire generations across ethno-religious divides. However, the research shows that Sunni Muslims, Christians, and Alawites had deeply contested reasons for reinterpreting these events into the current conflict. When viewed as long-buried narratives of fear, it was possible to discern how memory imprints had created narratives of victimization, which gained renewed currency when the Syrian revolution and civil war broke out. For some of the Christians and Alawites, the haunting of Hama evoked fear of minority marginalization and religious persecution at the hands of Islamist extremists. For some of the Sunni Muslims, on the other hand, it replicated a sense of being under perpetual surveillance by the regime and of being targeted as prime adversaries based on their (perceived) religious identity affiliations. Therefore, we may see that some of these respective narratives of victimization could be well-founded from a particular group's perspective, while simultaneously reproducing latent tensions from the past that stimulated sectarian stereotyping of the religious Other.

The image of dystopia serves to describe these spaces of experience that engulfed the time of war and conflictual relations, directly impacting people's decisions to flee, either internally in Syria or across international

borders. One respondent recounted: “It was fear on all the roads leading out of Syria” (Løland, 2021b, para. 52). My research shows that fear—in all its modalities (e.g., Pearlman, 2016)—served as a complex backdrop to the narratives of refugeehood. Both identity battles of the past and the war’s scenes of havoc and horror were ingrained within these omnipresent realities of fear. In order to understand the existentially overwhelming circumstances in which violence, insecurity, and upheaval resulted in one of the largest displacement crisis in modern history, I needed to utilize vocabulary that could articulate modalities of chaos and fear more perceptively. Drawing on existential anthropology (Jackson, 2013; Jackson & Piette, 2017), I was able to discern how religion and identity ambiguously played into the arbitrary “turning points and catastrophes” of my respondents’ lives (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 169). As such, the research has provided a hitherto overlooked dimension on the (dis)empowering aspects of religion in the Syrian refugee crisis, pointing to a heterotopic landscape of in-betweens when studying religion in liminal experiences of displacement.

### HETEROTOPIA: NEGOTIATING RELIGION THROUGH THE IN-BETWEENS OF DISPLACEMENT AND EXILE

Heterotopia is a term I have borrowed from Foucault (1986) to discuss the ambiguous realm of liminality in Syrians’ stories of displacement and refugeehood. It describes all the trajectories I have investigated in my research. As a metaphor for the in-betweens of memories, encounters, and negotiating practices, it envelops the physical, emotional, and psychological experiences pertinent to an overall and dynamic understanding of religion and forced migration. However, when investigating the phase of flight and emigration (Løland, 2021b), I used it as a metaphorical prism for understanding the existential dimensions of Syrian displacement trajectories. The migratory journeys recounted by my interlocutors were reflective of new and different kinds of dystopia, in which the precariousness of life engulfed the trials of crossing land and sea in search of a safe haven. Although removed from actual scenes of war, the participants shared memories of new, fear-inducing sensations that simultaneously reflected profound transformations, choices, and redirections. As floating pieces of places (Foucault, 1986), their journeys represented multiple heterotopias, in which the perceived dichotomies between vulnerability and agency required further scrutiny. By critically examining religion and

identity re/deconstructions in these stories, I was able to identify some of the different and contradicting ways in which religion intersects with forced migration.

The results showed that for many, migration could be a “theologizing experience” (Smith, 1978, as cited in Frederiks, 2016, p. 186), in which religious faith and fellowship provided resilience, hope, and identity reaffirmation. For some, religion articulated a divine framing of experiences oscillating between life and death, thus helping to vocalize a powerful “semantic of survival” (Perl, 2019, p. 19). Religion also provided a sense of a secure place in the god-forsaken non-spaces of displacement. Whether in the desert, at sea, or along border crossings, the precarity of certain places was alleviated through religious companionship, in which prayers, rituals, and togetherness provided a sense of “*communitas*” (Turner, 1995) and structure in an otherwise drifting and unstructured existence. This resonates with spatial studies that view religion as an inherently social phenomenon, existing and expressing itself in and through space (Knott, 2005). It also echoes studies that see religion functioning as an appropriate medium that speaks to the transitional and liminal stages of migration (Hagan & Straut-Eppsteiner, 2012; Levitt, 2007). However, some of the collected stories contradicted religion’s role in providing meaning and comfort during displacement. Instead, the social alienation experienced during the Syrian war, for some, reinforced feelings of animosity and estrangement. As one respondent recounted, “Syrians have a problem with each other”; in her mind, displacement only served to intensify separation and fragmentation along political and ethno-religious lines (Løland, 2021b, para. 86). Such discrepancies in the stories called for transcending presupposed assumptions about religion and acknowledging the complex multi-vocalities that are inherent in diverse experiences.

For those who escaped Syria, the utopian impulse (Levitas, 2011) to envision a better way of life was no longer tied to their home country, but to an undefined space of refuge elsewhere. In the words of one respondent, there was “an urge to get out of fear and the need to get to safety” (Løland, 2021b, para. 52). At the point of being dislocated from Syria, respondents were painfully aware of the impossibility of return, thus pushing their quest for safety and survival in different directions. To paraphrase Bauman (2003), it may be inferred that the very topos in their utopian yearning had ceased to exist, as the Syria they once knew was left

in ruins. Nevertheless, when many of my respondents suffered from disillusionment about the future and lacked safe reference points, thinking of Syria invigorated nostalgic memories of an idealized past. Indeed, crisis “creates a consciousness of that which has been lost” (Jackson, 2013)—even when that loss represents a space of memory that was differentiated and in flux from the beginning.

### EXILE: NEGOTIATING NEW SPACES OF EXPERIENCES AND HORIZONS OF EXPECTATIONS

Locating religion in the multiple geographies and directionalities of in-between places, I have argued for reconceptualizing the complex and dynamic realities of migration journeys. Heterotopia may not then merely denote non-spaces, in which religion and identities are stuck in existential perils. They are also moving spaces where hope and new expectations are generated. Dimensions of life in exile provide new layers of understanding for these fragmented aspects of heterotopia. New forms of in-betweenness may be manifested during phases of resettlement as shadows of a painful past merge with expectations for the future. However, new experiences of marginalization, estrangement, and socioeconomic challenges can add to the strains of the present. Furthermore, the very notion of exile can be likened to an existential form of chaos in which separation from one’s native country and displacement to territories of not-belonging create the void of a “discontinuous state of being” (Said, 2001, p. 177). Indeed, resettlement can establish new liminalities, as the process of displacement generates an unfinished condition of not yet belonging “here” but no longer “there.” While many of the participants in this study expressed gratitude and relief at having found shelter in a peaceful country, the sense of being dislocated from Syria and not yet integrated into Norwegian society summoned new liminal feelings of being betwixt and between. My findings are to a large extent echoed in a national survey on mental health and quality of life among Syrian refugees in Norway (Fjeld-Solberg et al., 2020), in which a relatively high exposure to pre-, peri-, and post-migratory trauma and stress impacts life in exile.

In my ongoing and preliminary research on the role of religion among Syrians in exile, there also exist emerging patterns of religious and intercultural life that provide interesting polyvocal experiences. As can be expected, these patterns show significant variations among a heterogeneous Syrian refugee group. Some actively seek spiritual fellowship in the

churches and mosques in their neighborhoods, whereas others adhere to more private forms of religious practice. Some of the Muslim participants find that publicly displaying their religious affiliation can draw negative attention from the host society, including degrees of Islamophobic resentment. More conservative individuals have expressed concern for their children's future regarding protecting traditional values against secularism and sexual promiscuity. Many liberals and atheists, on the other hand, have expressed a sense of relief for living in a society in which identity labels are less associated with religious affiliation and where freedom of thought is guaranteed by the constitution. However, some also experience undue pressure from fellow Syrians to show greater compliance with moral and religious values. As one participant said, "I face a double fight here in Norway. As an Alawite, I am looked upon as a traitor to the Syrian revolution. But being an atheist is considered worse. I try to uphold a sense of dignity, but internal suspicion tears the Syrians apart." Another participant stated that it is not so much religion as politics that counts: "What matters here is whether you are pro- or anti-Assad." These statements show that both (non)religious and political affiliations are at stake when navigating intercultural relations among Syrians in exile. Therefore, my research shows that some of the same political, ethnic, and religious tensions that escalated and perpetuated the conflict back in Syria have been reproduced in the diaspora. My interlocutors are still wary of talking about sensitive issues, as religion and politics are considered particularly volatile in terms of experiences of mistrust and disunity. Some participants have indicated a fear of infiltration by agents of the regime and worry that war criminals from different sides of the conflict might be hiding in their communities. I believe that many of these interreligious and cultural tensions stem from the fact that the Syrian war is an ongoing and unresolved conflict, naturally asserting its continuous and disproportionate impact on Syrians abroad. However, these forms of fragmented negotiating practices provide only a partial picture of a growing Syrian diaspora. We need more research on the various manners in which post-migrating Syrians pave the way for future aspirations and navigate new contexts of belonging. This includes looking at transnational ties and practices, as well as to what degree the diaspora can generate safe spaces for (religious) reconciliation and coexistence.



## CONCLUSION

In an attempt to provide a more holistic and nuanced account of migratory paths and horizons, I set out to trace lived experiences of religion in Syrian displacement trajectories. I underscored the need to look at the nexus of religion and migration as representative of dynamic processes, enveloping a range of social and existential (mis)encounters, emotions, and contradicting imaginings. By applying a spatiotemporal framework, I analyzed various phases and metaphorical categories through which real and imaginary movements of displacement can be contextualized. When approaching trajectories as a storied landscape and a discursive field, I was able to show the ways in which memories of life-rupturing events are subject to shared and contested meaning-making. Finally, by offering perspectives from below and from ordinary people whose voices are often neglected in public and academic discourse, I highlighted the need to apply a polyvocal perspective on religion when researching the multidimensional aspects of displacement in time and space.

## NOTE

1. The Norwegian National Research Ethic Committee (<https://etikkom.no/en/>) has validated and approved the research project.

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