

Conversion controlled: Missiological reflections on churches' involvement in assessing conversions to Christianity among refugees in the European Union

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The aim of this paper is to identify and address theological-missiological questions arising from recent practices of churches advising immigration offices in assessing conversion based asylum claims in Europe. Christian churches and organizations in Europe have a long history of encounters with the issue of asylum seeking and asylum seekers. They have been present among asylum seekers assisting them with social, diaconal, and educational services, with acts of hospitality, advocating their cases in national and international policy making on asylum seeking, and as missionaries, evangelists, and pastoral counselors as well (e.g. Snyder 2012, Nguyen 2009). In these dynamics the issue of conversion usually did not regularly hit the media. Recently, however, the asylum legislation of some of EU countries leave more space for conversion implying that asylum seekers who converted to Christianity as asylum seekers and come from countries where Christians are persecuted, may add conversion as a valid argument for their case (Akcapar 2006, Johannesson 2012). Churches and Christian organizations in the processes generated by legislation have been invited to become co-controllers of conversions of asylum seekers. The present paper while focusing on primary sources (material produced by churches and Christian organizations on this issue) and empirical data (interviews) from the Netherlands uses material from other EU countries as well. In analyzing the data it seeks to point to theologically-missiologically relevant questions related to the plausibility of conversion and to possible discrimination practices such as assessments may hold. The paper argues for conversion as a valid locus in the theology of mission.