Nûr from Different Prisms: Exploring Syrian Women Refugees’ Faith-Commitments Through Lived Religion

Abstract

Social Sciences and Religious Studies failed to produce interdisciplinary knowledge on Syrian women refugees in regard to their diverse faith-based needs and practices. The following article presents an explorative research about Muslim Syrian women refugees’ life experiences through practices and expressions of faith during displacement. Lived religion serves as an analytical tool and a framework to delve into the question of “What are some of their self-interpretive engagements, and in what ways (if at all) they contribute to adaptation and forming resilience in women’s volatile state in a new country?” Related sections from nine Syrian women’s life stories, recorded over three years in four countries (Canada, Turkey, Greece, and Germany) are used as primary data. Literature review on resilience and coping with trauma via an interdisciplinary approach is presented, and a critical stance is taken on knowledge making mechanisms in academia. Sub-questions include “How does displacement relate to the concept of lived religion from a gendered perspective in the Syrian context? Does disowning or redefining a person’s faith influence her coping mechanisms during and after the resettlement?” Recommendations for further investigation are outlined in the conclusion.

Section 1: INTRODUCTION

There is a major lack in literature regarding Syrian women refugee voices, their faith-based needs and practices in the field of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (RFMS). Even the extensive collection The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies (2004) devotes only one chapter to discussing this issue. In it, Hollenbach reviews major religions’ views of displacement and concludes that religion plays an ambivalent role in the process as it is simultaneously a cause of forced migration and an energizer for FBOs, faith-based organizations (2014, 447-459).

Robert Schreiter lists the reasons why religion can be of significance for migrants, in which he includes refugees as the following: religion can be the reason for the move, sustain people in difficult times, serve as an identity marker in new contexts, aid the displaced in giving meaning to their migration experiences, act as a source for reconciliation and healing or help in resolving adjustment issues (2009, 157-168). In their discussion on the centrality of religion, Jung and Horstmann refer to earlier studies that religion serves as sanctuary and space of relief for the vulnerable, and they claim that it is more than a source of hope or break from suffering. Religion can be an integral part of refugees’ space-making both public and private (home) in often hostile environments (2015, 1).

The meager debates in RFMS are limited to FBOs, their policies, staff, and community feedback. The studies by Saunders et al. (2016) and Gozdziak (2008) are the only exceptions to my knowledge. The
main reason for the lack of newcomers’ narratives and perspectives, I suspect, stems from disciplinary tensions and the dominance of Social Sciences in RFMS. The research from the field demonstrates apologetic tones for subjective accounts and researchers’ demands for measurable, empirical studies to validate them. The tensions in Social Sciences at large regarding the inclusion of Religious Studies and spirituality have been criticized by several scholars (Fountain and Lau 2013; Frederiks and Nagy 2016; Lauterbach 2014; Pargament 1997, 2006; Robbins 2006, 2016).

In fact, in their edited collection that bridges “Social science studies of migration” and Religious Studies, Saunders et al. argue that scholars of religion “have focused not only on what migrants and members of the host society do in their religious practices, rituals, and organizations, but also on what they think and believe: the meanings and persuasiveness of their personal faith and religious teachings” (2016, ix). This statement is a recognition of a diverse and richly interwoven scholarship in Religious Studies over more “suspicious” Social Sciences (ix). Karen Lauterbach’s diagnosis of “a missing dialogue” between anthropology and theology also points to a broader discomfort with managing religious language and including religious experiences within Social Sciences (2014, 296).

As Lauterbach points out, the role of religion in displacement situations “cannot be analyzed in depth” when a “mono-disciplinary approach” is adopted (2014, 292). RFMS may claim to have an interdisciplinary approach by definition, however, the scholarship from Theology and Religious Studies are not used or recognized in it. This is an epistemological issue that points to a lack of communication among disciplines, which affects the refugee assistance and resettlement projects as well as policymaking during the massive displacement of the 21st century. Lack of knowledge about faith-based needs and practices of refugees will thus remain a problem for the hosting governments, NGOs, human service providers, health-care staff, and policy makers as much as the refugees themselves whose problems are not resolved through a holistic view.

This article seeks to explore the question “What are some of Muslim Syrian women refugees’ self-interpretive engagements with lived Islam, and in what ways (if at all) they contribute to adaptation and forming resilience in women’s volatile states in a new country?” along with the sub-questions “How does displacement and loss affect refugees’ faith-based practices and language during the resettlement process?”, “Does renunciation or redefining a person’s faith influence her coping mechanisms during and after the resettlement, and in what ways?”

**Section II: METHODOLOGY**

I use “lived religion” as an epistemological and analytical tool, and as a framework which welcomes interdisciplinarity. I borrow methods from oral history, feminist standpoint as well as secondary literature review on resilience and coping with trauma (Geiger 1990; Hogue 2006; Neitz 2011; Pargament 1997, 2006; Sprague 2005). I hope that the article will trigger new debates on integrating spirituality into counseling and other services that are available and/or needed for an efficient resettlement for the displaced individuals who intend to build a safer life in their new countries.

The starting point for a lived religion approach takes in religious practices and its varied expressions, namely, “what people actually do, experience, desire, hope, think, imagine, and touch” in daily contexts
This opens the path for exploring its overlapping elements with feminist and oral history methodologies in my study. For instance, the statement that emphasizes individuals’ navigation “in a continuous negotiation with their personal and social context and narrative” (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2018, 3) is compatible with and complementary to “personal is political,” a major pillar of feminist thought. In other words, women should not hesitate to create spaces for relentless negotiations through the power dynamics in their private and public circles. In addition, lived religion’s embeddedness in the context of biographies (see above) renders an organic quality to this article due to its use of selected life stories.

The primary focus of lived religion is on diverse beliefs and practices, not on reflections. Experts such as prophets, priests, imams, theologians, and their organizations are not the sole authorities and foci of interest. In fact, it is rather the lay people. “Lived religion” thus shifts the focus in order to attend to the religiosity of individuals and groups as embedded in the contexts of biographies, which implies that the phenomenon in question doesn’t have to have an overtly religious nature (Streib et al. 2008, ix-x). The concept of “lived religion” enables me to reframe traumatic events such as war and displacement in the case of Syrian refugees’ experiences, especially because these occurrences demand immediate reconfigurations when authorities spread conflicting messages, or are not available.

Mary Jo Neitz’s article on feminist methodologies is pertinent here due to her proposal on appropriating methods as a means to women’s empowerment, which has been a driving force for my work. In connection to theology, Neitz mentions ways of which scholars of religion can conduct research from the feminist standpoint (FS) of the disadvantaged (2011, 56). Among the three positions in feminist research (feminist empiricism, standpoint and radical construction), Neitz focuses on feminist standpoint (FS) for several reasons which also relate to my article (61). First, FS built a tradition of its own for studying religions that are outside of the majority or dominant culture. This includes faith-based practices of less-powerful groups such as displaced individuals in any society. Second, FS epistemology asserts that all knowledge is partial and located, and FS analysis speaks about intersectional matrices of oppression in the production of all knowledge (54). In this article, FS corresponds to bringing out authentic voices of a disadvantaged community, namely the female survivors of war and displacement in a context of faith-based engagements. A more recent development in FS is the study of the lived experience of ordinary people, which indicates a shift in attention towards the embodied practices of ordinary individuals (61). I connect FS to the concept of “lived religion” (Sremac and Ganzevoort 2018; Ganzevoort 2014) and explore it further in the context of Syrian refugees’ lives.

Lived religion cross-paths with feminist and engaged scholarship in the following ways: History of practical theology includes feminist theology that adopts critical stances and looks for possible contributions from the hermeneutical and the personal. An early call to this convergence can be found in Liz Stanley’s statement that feminist researchers should transcend the theory/research divide and recognize the symbiotic relationship between manual and intellectual activities (1990, 15). Secondly, a practical theologian is by necessity an engaged scholar, and has much in common with the engaged scholars from other disciplines (Ganzevoort and Roeland 2014, 93). Finally, I have conducted work with underprivileged non-Western women and refugees in the areas of peace, justice, and conflict resolution in the past through the lenses of a feminist and an engaged scholar (Ezer 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b). In retrospect, I realize that the expressions of lived religion have been present but were either unidentified or
implicitly touched upon that I plan to explore in near future. This article aims to be the first one in the attempt.

Within Religious Studies, life story accounts are considered a very useful method, since people’s beliefs are diverse and multifaceted, which can be harder to identify in quantitative studies. For instance, Bremborg’s interviews led her to gain insight in people’s religious lives that former studies of organized religion had not revealed (2011, 310-12). In Lived Religion, McGuire also shares that people’s religion was much more complicated than she had thought during the early stages of her research; in fact, “ever changing, multifaceted, often messy, even contradictory” (2008, 4). Oral History interviews result in rich, complex, and nuanced data also in undertaking studies on women survivors of atrocities and obtaining difficult knowledge (Leydesdorff 2014; Sheftel 2018; Spahić Šiljak 2014). An earlier study also appropriated life story interviewing in its attempt to capture female, feminist, and Muslim identities of the interviewed women and stands in evidence to effectiveness of the methodology in interdisciplinary studies (Spahić Šiljak 2012).

Life stories can provide an integrative ground for bridging Humanities to other disciplines such as Medicine, particularly to the areas of mental health and therapy due to their usefulness in eliciting accounts of suffering (as segments of life narratives) in clinical encounters. Consequently, they have the potential to act as “therapeutic tools” which might serve to refugee mental health providers (Gozdziak 2004, 208). A consistent feedback that I received throughout and after the interviews was of appreciation, and the respondents mentioned that narrating and reflecting on one’s life was a pleasant experience.

Section III: TERMINOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Refugee, Migrant, Alternatives, and Representation Issue

A brief discussion on the terms refugee, migrant, and the category of “women refugees” is apt here. The current use of “refugee” has its roots in the official definition of the 1951 Convention ratified by 145 state parties, and with the establishment of UNHCR. Although the legal definition is available on the UN websites, many people (myself included) attempt adopting less stigmatized (“newcomer”) or more explanatory terms (“forcibly displaced individual”) while acknowledging the occasional necessity in using “refugee” depending on the context. Jung and Horstmann aim to validate “refugee-migrant” since they argue that the term considers “the subjective and the legal aspects in the refugee-subject making” and its use “allows for more complexity” (2015, 3).

Other scholars have refined the concepts by dividing the category “migrant” into subcategories, such as migrants from former colonies, privileged migrants, labor migrants, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, and the like (Castles and Miller 2009, 4). However, there has been no consensus on these categories or their usefulness, and the distinctions between these groups remain rather fluid. Further debates and coinages are likely to emerge with the hopes of pointing at the intricacies of the individuals in transition as the term refugee continues to stigmatize certain people on media (Andrejč 2018; Becker 2018; Frederiks 2016).
The debate on how to depict women refugees is even more contested due to the humanitarian discourses’ use of images “to broadcast a narrative about rescue and compassion” (Fadlalla 2009, 79) with aims such as “to attract funding” with an “emphasis on vulnerability” of women rather than constructing a politicized language “around entitlement and claiming rights” (Kiwan 2016, 157). Kiwan rightly points to the tensions within the policy discourse of UNHCR, and argues for a bolder, more holistic, and contextualized approach. This involves recognizing the refugee as a whole person who moved from one particular socio-political context into a new one (160). Her article is valuable in its introduction of Syrian women refugees’ initiatives across countries to prove agency (161-165).

In her criticism of refugee representations, Kate Smith also points to how “public perceptions of refugees are primarily represented as male, overlooking women’s stories and allowing for men’s stories to be dominant narratives told about refugee’s lives” (2015, 462). She argues that direct narratives of women refugees serves to disrupt dominant narratives and helps producing a counter narrative, to which this article also contributes. She concludes that it is time to “look more to this life and the forms of assemblages” for “more nuanced understandings of displaced women’s agency against the dehistoricized representations of victimized refugee women” (2018, 57).

Ayhan Kaya criticizes Refugee Studies in Turkey for its lack of anthropological research which permits “the refugees to speak for themselves,” thus recognizing the missing element of agency of the displaced individuals in the Turkish context (2017, 368). His work on Istanbul as a city of Syrian refugees is significant but fails indicating a gender-specification, a much needed component in RFMS.


I acknowledge that religion mostly refers to human practices and behaviors concerned with seeking the sacred, but the search is often founded on dogmas, traditions, and institutional regulations. Spirituality, by contrast, is a “continuous quest for the sacred” (Pargament 2007, 32), considered more on the individual experience spectrum, and does not necessarily operate in an institutional setting. Appropriating a medieval definition, Dorothee Soelle defines spirituality in The Silent Cry as “knowledge of God through and from experience” underlining the extraordinariness and non-institutionability of spirituality (2001, 45).

Soelle argues that “only mystical language can attain to a glowing language in contrast to the cold language of theology by its attempt to stay close to lived religion” (69). In her discussion on the different modes of mysticism (of which Sufism is a part), Soelle reminds us of the famous figures such as Meister Eckhart whose “union with God to be lived without withdrawing from the world” and uses the phrase “living out a political mysticism” before her analysis of Thomas Müntzer in the Peasants’ War (84). Soelle’s sentiment on the non-hierarchical aspect of mysticism leaves no room for speculation: “Mysticism is not only for graced and elect individuals” (2001, 75). The implication is that religion is, or can be for the distinguished and elected, due to its language and authorities who claim to be in charge of powers of all kind, including definitions of the sacred.

However, there are comprehensive definitions of religion and contemporary discussions on pragmatics of (re)defining religion (Harrison 2006; Koss-Chioino and Hefner 2006; Yandell 1999). Because they
occasionally complicate “religion versus spirituality” dichotomy further, I remain in favor of more inclusive definitions of religion such as Ganzevoort’s, a prominent scholar of lived religion: “transcending patterns of action and meaning, emerging from and contributing to the relation with the sacred” (2009). His description acknowledges many practices that fall outside of formal religion. There are also scholars who argue against a separation of religion from spiritualism, particularly in the context of individual transformation and healing (Hogue 2006). Nevertheless, the present-day uses of the term spirituality have become so pervasive that incorporating “spirituality” into the concept of “lived religion” (Streib 2008, 54) as a critical proposal prove to be more efficient and supportive of my interview findings.

Another reason for considering Streib’s proposal as vital is my criticism of the dichotomy between religion and spirituality. Streib’s thesis that spirituality can be explained within the framework of religion not only clears the cacophony around multiplying definitions of religion and spirituality but also challenges the limitations of “religion versus spirituality” binary approach that I have been critical of. A supportive argument, provided by McGuire, is that “spirituality is closely linked with material human bodies” and the lived religion includes “the myriad individual ways people put [their] stories into practice” (2008, 97-98). My article provides material from RFMS for the lived religion scholars since they take the religious self-understanding of the people on the street (like the Syrian respondents) as their point of departure for conceptualization.

Integration of spirituality into lived religion (or religion-as-lived) will enrich the discussion on refugees’ experiences about displacement and religion. However, the complexity of the topic becomes even more entangled due to the specific regional and familial faith-based practices, and their impact on refugee psyche. Particularly, in regard to religion’s links to coping and resilience, I agree with Kenneth Pargament’s statement that these connections cannot be comprehended “through the person, the situation, or the context alone.” It is “the interplay of these forces” which determines the ebb and flow of religion and coping on the shores of intricacies (1997, 162). McGuire welcomes these combined forces by putting “spirituality” in brackets and defining it as “the everyday ways ordinary people attend to their spiritual lives” (2008, 98).

While brackets may work as caution signs for McGuire’s use of the term spirituality, Cornelis Laban’s reference to religion remains positive in connection to resilience and is free of inverted commas. Laban argues that religion, as an “organized form of spirituality” (2015, 202), can be considered an interpretation frame. It can strengthen one’s perseverance to live while providing a feeling to be part of a larger union, and emotional and social support of communities. In short, he concludes that religion can be an important source of resilience, and thus should be paid attention to continuously (203).

Ammerman’s definition of lived religion (“the embodied and enacted forms of spirituality that occur in everyday life”) also bridges spirituality and religion (2014, 189) while Orsi proposes novel concepts such as “abundant events” (2007, 42) under the notion of lived religion. I contend that the permeable boundaries of sacred and secular through lived religion need to be taken into account by RFMS scholars too since “the religion people live everyday weaves in and out of the language and symbols and interactions of public spaces and bureaucratized institutions” as much as in the intimacy of homes (Ammerman 2014, 196).
Finally, in regard to women’s lived religion, McGuire points to the need “to appreciate their ritual practices centered on the so-called private, domestic, familial sphere” because these are the spaces where women’s roles—traditionally more passive or non-existent—are “likely to be more active and expressive” (2008, 108). These practices are “at least as important as participation in the public” but visibly neglected in the academia (108). My article aims to fill this gap by offering several first-hand accounts of Muslim women’s lived religion such as “work as a spiritual practice/ora at labora” (109) in the Islamic context. Ora at labora is also compatible with Soelle’s “living out a political mysticism” (84) in her discussion on modes of mysticism without withdrawing from the world.

I define resilience as a positive behavioral adaptation after encountering adversity or trauma while Posttraumatic growth (PTG) refers to the positive psychological changes that individuals report after difficult life circumstances. These changes encompass personal relationships, new plans about the future, increasing personal strength, self-reliance, and appreciation for life as well as spiritual changes. Deliberate rumination (a subsequent process of reflection and purposeful re-examination of the trauma) and social support have been important factors in explaining PTG rather than persistent negative syndromes (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995; Tedeschi et al. 2017), which can be observed in the Syrian women accounts regardless of their faith commitments or practices.

3. Invisibilities and Unheard Voices in Religious Studies and RFMS

A. Scholarship on Muslims

A probable reason for the dearth of studies on Muslim refugee women’s faith practices relates to the problematics of methods in the study of Muslims in general and to the knowledge production dynamics in Religious Studies. The focus on institutionalized forms of Islam can be attributed to the practical fact that they are easier to locate when researchers plan to carry out fieldwork and interviews. This results in making the non-organized Muslims invisible on an academic level, particularly women. In the case of the interviewed Syrian women refugees, the problem of silencing emerges in triple forms: They are women, refugees, and they don’t have an active relationship to Islam such as an affiliation with an FBO or mosque. This includes the Syrian women with hijab, which is the most visible sartorial marker for the Muslim woman, but also a misleading one in the Global North.

With the exception of three agnostic-atheist Syrian women, the respondents fall in the middle of the spectrum. They personally and privately identify with Islam in some form or another but do not claim ties to institutionalized religion. They have built an implicit relationship to Islam, also termed “implicit religion” (Davie 1990). In other words, the interviewed women’s common denominator is Islam not only as religion but also as culture, which includes believing without belonging, practicing without affiliation (Spahić Šižjak 2012). The practices and interpretations of Islam disclosed by the interviewed women render this study unique, and suggest further research for a more balanced and realistic data through questioning the methods and contexts in the study of Muslim refugees, particularly of women.

Researchers of contemporary Islam regarding the interpretation of Muslim identity rarely took lived religion into consideration. The gap between “researchers’ Islam and Muslims’ Islam” is unlikely to be narrowed down in near future; thus, the need to engage in “interpretations of interpretations of Islam”
remains (Bectovic 2012, 11). Bectovic also draws on the geographical differences in the scholarship of Religious Studies (to which I add RFMS), the impact of non-academic and mediatic knowledge of Islam, but especially “the interaction between the humanistic tradition with historical and cultural ways to knowledge of Islam and the tradition of the social sciences.” Referring to the work of Martin Stokes and Hastings Donnan (2002, 2-4), Bectovic argues that to “have an interdisciplinary approach to Islam requires also an interdisciplinary critique of academic studies” (2012, 22). This statement aptly captures my concerns and criticism of the current literature in RFMS and Religious Studies due to my present academic engagement in both and extends beyond them.

In their inquiry on the lack of Muslim voices, Friedmann Marquardt et al. raise intriguing questions, “Is it perhaps harder or riskier for Muslims to voice their concerns in the public sphere about any issue when many are simply trying to avoid any attention, most of which tends to be negative?” is among them (2013, 285). I don’t discard the possibility of a strategic avoidance of being at the forefront of protests, and I agree with the authors that more research needs to be undertaken into the advocacy of non-Christian FBOs around the issue of undocumented migration or asylum seeking (284). However, I find their focus on FBOs and their definition of “voice” limited. It is exactly due to these institution-based approaches that non-organized Muslims’ voices in the Global North remain unheard. Muslim refugee women’s voices inevitably receive their share of this invisibility.

B. Studies on Muslim Women Refugees

When religion (particularly Islam) is analyzed in RFMS, the focus is heavily on the role of conflicts and politicized religious identities. The relationship between religious persecution and receiving asylum remains central both to the definition of refugee and asylee as well as to the scholarly debates on religion-refugeeism nexus. This attitude is the main reason for exclusion of women refugees’ voices when it comes to collecting data on everyday religion and its link to resilience.

Gozdizak’s works (2004; 2008) stand out as promising exceptions since they include discussions on gender and religion in the lives of refugee women. First, she acknowledges that refugee women’s engagement with religion is “very different from the experiences of refugee men” (2008, 189). After citing several studies which demonstrated that men and women react differently when faced with similar hostile circumstances, Gozdizak provides an example from her fieldwork with the Muslim Kosovar Albanians at Fort Dix, New Jersey. She observed that after the weekly Friday (*Jumah*) prayers, the men stayed with the imam to talk about politics and speculated on the outcomes of the war whereas the women inquired about the facilities available for their children, planned for weddings and child-naming ceremonies for the babies born in the camp. Expressed in the affective style of Gozdizak, “the men prayed and looked back, while the women prayed and kept walking” (189). However, she displays complexities through firsthand narratives of refugee women realistically. Her conclusion is that religion operates in competing and contradictory ways regarding the women’s experiences as refugees, serving as a source of resiliency but also as an impediment of integration processes. Had she reframed some of her fieldwork within the lived religion and distinguished the women’s quotidian practices among themselves, she would have generated more discussion on religion’s constructive and practical effects for refugee women.
Celia McMichael’s findings on Somali Muslim women refugees in Melbourne are potentially pertinent as a pathway to my work with Syrian Muslim women refugees except her polished conclusion. Despite her repeated acknowledgment of “many versions” of Islam (2002, 182, 187), she fails to designate Somali women’s denominations (e.g., Sunni) and lists their material practices without reservations: attending mosques, buying meat at halal butchers, wearing veil, fast and feast during Ramadan, sending children to Islamic weekend schools, and visiting sheikhs for good fortune and during times of crisis (180). Valuable for its integration of Muslim women refugee voices in literature, her findings nevertheless contrast with my respondents’ unsettling and irregular commentaries on their faith-based practices. McMichael’s ethnographic research needs to be problematized by the notion of lived religion to achieve more inclusivity and make non-organized Muslim women refugees visible as well.

Inspired by the work of Freire, Alys Sink is in favor of addressing the larger structural issues in a society in order to bring women refugee voices to the agenda. Her reminder that refugee women are already a part of the community but treated as if they are a separate entity also explains the difficulty of acknowledging women’s voices (2017, 58). Another reason for the lack of refugee women’s narratives is the extensive amount of time required to establish the groundwork to receive those narratives, which I have not encountered as a cause in other studies, or considered it myself (41).

Secil Dagtas joins Sink’s criticism of macro-structural issues through the analysis of her interviews with 15 Syrian women in Hatay, Turkey (2018). Shifting her focus from institutional governance to women’s everyday social relations (neighborliness, kinship, and hospitality), Dagtas argues that intersectional feminists can encapsulate the nuances of refugee women’s agency better, and thus can challenge the current representations of victimized, suffering refugee women. Her warning against the pretext that the Muslim societies enforce sexual and religious subordination of women raises timely questions on justifying anti-immigrant rhetoric and border control in the Global North. In the Middle East (Turkey included), asylum laws and resettlement policies are less structured and more dependent on local practices than their Western counterparts. This fact may indeed provide displaced women to negotiate their social roles to their benefit. These acts take place mostly in women-only spaces, “often within the home space” and as a result, Syrian women’s daily interactions are rarely recorded or brought to the public and political debates in the Global North (51). Faith-based practices fall into these unpredictable acts and need analysis as I attempt to undertake in this study.

Ruba Salih’s study of Palestinian refugee women’s embodied agency by focusing on “the ordinary, the domestic, bodily vulnerability and grief” challenges the “modern political paradigms of the subject” where agency in the public sphere is the only intelligible way to act (2017, 756). This awareness on the gender-specific silences will help us as researchers to avoid productions of misleading and/or incomplete knowledge in academia. Meredith McGuire’s reminder is telling here that “humans are creative agents, not merely oversocialized automatons” and the faith-practices that people strategically adopt to shape their experiences often “completely unforeseen by the official religion” (2008, 98). I endeavor to discover, record, and disseminate the unforeseen not only in this work but also in the future.

Section IV: BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCH

Biases, Limitations, and Recommendations
My project with Syrian women refugees (2016-19) highlighted several theme-based issues, demonstrating a potential to grow beyond biographical accounts. Among them were the links between displaced individuals’ developing and maintaining resilience through faith-based practices and whether disowning one’s faith influences her coping mechanisms during or after the resettlement (Ezer 2019a). Providing space for unheard women refugees’ voices from Syria in mainstream knowledge production channels and venues has been my priority.

My first bias was that the believers of faith systems might be better equipped to overcome trauma as refugees, experience a deeper understanding of life’s purpose, and develop better awareness of personal strengths (Acquaye et al. 2018; López et al. 2015). That is why powerful agnostic-atheist Syrian women (who use the terms interchangeably) are included in the interviews. Religious beliefs may infuse tragedy with meaning, and there are cases in which displaced individuals make sense of their exile through their religion (Mayer 2007). However, this has not always been the case and caution is needed in such claims.

My second bias relates to knowledge making mechanisms and borders of academic disciplines. I have been critical of Social Sciences whose language mirrored science for validity so I used to prioritize Humanities due to their ancient and enduring existence. Social Sciences were established very recently - mostly in the 19th century - and have been claiming to produce “scientific studies” on human psyche and body. Recent works with interdisciplinary approaches in which neuroscientific and clinical perspectives are merged into Social Sciences helped me overcome this bias (Koss-Chioino and Hefner 2006). I have noticed that the scholars and practitioners in the field are exposing and criticizing their own (outdated) methods and language use as well, especially when informed by feminist and postcolonial studies after the 1970s. The sociologist Meredith McGuire’s works present strong yet constructive criticism of her discipline which helped expanding my research with its scope (2008; 2006; 2002).

I am also convinced that reflections upon one’s own history and personality during research and writing process can add depth to understanding of one’s academic work (Sleep 2000). The self-reflections keep me alert and serve positively in my development as a researcher of gender and religion. When I reflect on the process of the research, three voices can be identified: the critical academic, the personally inflected listener, and the writer who has been working on this article. Negotiations/interactions among these voices have been challenging at times since their roles and priorities on what and how much to include don’t necessarily overlap.

As for the possible limitations, the main theoretical framework of lived religion is considered “still too much in its youth” although the body of knowledge grows, along with new keywords and concepts (Ammerman 2014, 204). It is also inherently grounded in “the detail and diversity which only ethnographic work can fully apprehend” (204). Its novelty as an approach isn’t necessarily a limitation especially after tracing its roots back to Charlotte Perkins Gilman and W. E. B Du Bois (192). However, I share Ammerman’s concerns that lived religion scholars may suffer from growing pains and negotiations in the current assessment-based academic settings. On a positive note, shared methods will allow potential bridges among history, anthropology, religious studies, sociology, and psychology (203).
Finally, my interviews were conducted in English (except the one with Lutfia) so the need for gathering data from the women refugees with no English remains as much as the need for culturally sensitive and faith-literate female interpreters. Moreover, I only utilized resources in English for the literature review, which poses a limitation to my research. English as the *lingua franca* of our time is a double-sword due to its simultaneous inclusion and exclusion in many contexts, and Religious Studies and RFMS are no exceptions.

**Section V: THE INTERVIEWS**


1. **The Interviewing Process**

There are two metaphors to describe contradictory epistemological conceptions, the interviewer as a miner, the interviewer as the traveler (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, 48–49). The mining metaphor assumes a static view of knowledge, while the travel metaphor acknowledges new knowledge production and the possibility that the traveler/researcher might transform during the journey. Epistemologically, I adopt the travel metaphor, which offers an “understanding of knowledge as something being produced, interpreted and constructed” where the mining metaphor has a positivistic stance, implying that knowledge is waiting to be discovered (Bremborg 2011, 311).

After acknowledging knowledge as construed and constructed, my stance is that the narratives on faith-based commitments and practices are not simply tools to make claims on the truth of women’s experience. Rather, the interviews were a reciprocal opportunity for me and the respondents to explore how Syrian women maintain resilience and order to their lives in the post-2011 period. Their interpretations of Islam as lived religion were meaningful at the time of sharing and that is what mattered the most. Religious concepts spread beyond metaphysical contexts as we spoke, and were embodied in a range of emotional and moral experiences. The women also demonstrated that identities are always multistrand and intersectional, and that faith-based practices are some of the many components of an individual. Not all were believers of God, yet they reflected upon Islam, religions in general or generated spiritualities that were free of God.

There were also silences around specific experiences such as not to speak of the war in detail. Instead, some women moved from pre-war Syria narratives to their arrival in the host country, while others described the war as a series of events, entailing generalizations without emotional edge. I accepted silences within narratives out of respect for women’s faith and integrity. I also acknowledge silence as a form of communication, which enabled some women to construct their narratives in meaningful and adequate ways.

2. **The Profiles**

To preserve confidentiality and safety, some of the women’s names have been changed and some were comfortable with the first-name use only. Despite sharing a refugee status, even the below three-line-summaries demonstrate the diversity in women’s backgrounds.
Lutfia (50) is from Dara, married with three children. She lives in Istanbul with her husband and her in-laws. She is a practicing Sunni-Muslim, took the hijab after marriage. She volunteers at an NGO to improve the conditions of Syrian children’s education in Turkey, finds solace in reading the Quran in hard times.

Muzna (28) is from Aleppo, single, raised as Muslim, but lost her faith after 2011. She is a well-known human rights activist with a degree in French linguistics. We met in Istanbul in June 2016 where the interview took place. Upon a grant from Nobel Women’s Initiative in Canada, she went to Ottawa, and lives in Montreal as of 2019.

Emilia (30) is from Homs, single, raised by a Muslim single mother with four older brothers. She was a high-school dropout, however, the World University Service of Canada offered her a university placement in Toronto in 2014. She completed her major in Political Science in 2018. Her faith journey was from a practicing believer to an atheist-agnostic.[1]

Sama (30) arrived in Germany with her parents and sister in 2015. She has a degree in Translation. She was raised a Sunni-Muslim, wears the hijab, and enjoys regular conversations about Islam and its history with her family. Religion is an important part of her identity. In December 2018, she got married to Syrian engineer in Darmstadt, also a practicing Muslim.

Zizinia (29) is from Aleppo, a single mother with two daughters. She has a degree in Economics. Currently, she lives and works in Istanbul after leaving her NGO work in Gaziantep, Turkey. She was raised Muslim in a liberal family. She took the hijab for two years between 2015 and 2017. Her faith practices fluctuate but are creative and energizing.

Leila (28) is from Deir Ez-Zor with a degree in environmental engineering. We met in Istanbul in 2017 and she moved to Montreal (Canada) in January 2019. She was raised Muslim, with a non-practicing Muslim mother and an atheist father. Her faith practices fluctuate but sustains her in difficult times.

Sara (27) is from Latakia, was born into a conservative Alawite Muslim family. She studied pharmacy, left Syria in December 2015, currently lives and works in Athens. Her father’s lineage as a sheik made him a respectable religious figure but also a very strict person. Sara’s faith journey was from a practicing Muslim teenager to an atheist-agnostic.

Bidaa (34) is a lawyer from Aleppo. She grew up Muslim in a close-knit family where the mother is the “big boss”. She lives in Athens, recently got engaged to a Syrian man in Germany. As a devout Muslim, Bidaa makes extra efforts to dismantle the stereotypes about Islam and Muslim women. She likes debating with her non-Muslim friends.

Ola (43) is from Damascus with a high-school diploma. She grew up with her communist-atheist father and her sisters, calls herself an atheist. She has experimented with a few faith communities in Syria with no success. She is a single mother with two children. She sought asylum from Canada in 2017 and her children joined her in Vancouver as of March 2019.
Establishing a safe space for the interviews was part of my feminist stance and methodology, that is, making the experience of sharing life stories with difficult knowledge also enjoyable, relaxing, and nurturing. I always arrived earlier to our meeting place, and tried to find a quiet and cozy spot in cafés. After the participant’s arrival and exchanging greetings, I made sure to check about the seat arrangement, ordered hot or cold drinks and/or snacks before I took out my phone/recorder and assumed the interviewer’s role. Although it was already stated in my introductory email to them, I reminded both of us to relinquish the idea of following a specific plan of my own making, which the Syrian respondent would yield. I strongly believe that creating this space of hospitality contributed to the success of the interviews, the depth, and the intimacy in the answers that I received. A reciprocal bonding was also embodied in the manner that we parted (kissing and/or hugging) after each meeting and our follow-up phone texts.

Paying attention to the details in conducting interviews is part of what Christie Neuger labels “deconstructive listening,” which I include within mindful listening methods where careful listening to women’s stories allows “opportunities to subvert the control of oppressive personal stories” (2001, 90-92). The Syrian women and I forged several moments of cultural (in particular, culinary) and religious alliances derived from our everyday lives as two conversing women. Even the thickness of Turkish coffee had the potential to serve as an embodied intimacy that seemed to affect the conventional dynamics of interviewing positively.

I don’t claim that these cultural affinities dissolved the power imbalance inherent in the interview situations in general, but in most cases at least, they reduced social distance. My construction of the interviews was intentionally against any possible exploitative nature of conventional and asymmetrical interviewing. This meant that the consent forms included statements that allowed the respondent full access to the transcriptions and the option to edit them before my presentations or publications. They could pull out from the project at any phase which happened once at an early stage. My determination on reducing the power dynamics to the minimum possible demanded longer hours of work and caused constant stress of losing a narrative unexpectedly.

My attitude was occasionally criticized by some of my colleagues whose congenial advice was on favoring my time and labor. However, their comments also demonstrated mainstream arrangements and expectations in academia regarding the interview process. Locating the issue of authority in her discussion on the relationship of the researcher-researched, Susan Geiger encourages honesty about the limitations of the relation and seeks mutual respect against the existing gaps between two people (1990, 175). She radically refers to the respondents as “the oral historian” throughout her article, and remains skeptical of the bonds (“fictive relational assertions”) that can be established during interviews since they might bring obligations that accompany these creations, not just benefits or empathy (176). Although I acknowledge Geiger’s concerns, calling each other sister or habibti didn’t impose expectations during or after my interviews. However, assuming mother/daughter or aunty roles would be more likely to raise issues.

I attempted to promote reflectivity throughout and I share Sprague’s critique on conventional ways of reporting findings that create “the effect of hiding the researcher” (2005, 22). Increasing the likelihood of
posing critical questions becomes possible by developing a relationship with the interviewee on interpersonal grounds, which enables researchers to move “outside of our closed academic conversations” (182-188). I consider this relation not as a static but a fluid, transparent, and layered bond. It also promotes a relational agency for both parties.

The relationship between the researcher/writer and the respondent is and will remain delicate and complex, particularly when the feminist methodologies and stances are claimed. Ann Oakley reminds us that “negotiating publications with research participants generated sporadic discussion, especially in feminist academic circles,” and still remains one of the unsolved methodological and ethical issues regarding research (2016, 208). This was confirmed through the criticism that I received for establishing friendships with some of my respondents and for not demonstrating a proud ownership to the end products (the book, articles, public talks) after my work with women refugees was completed.

Oakley’s point on building friendship during and post-interview periods raises an intriguing discussion from a feminist viewpoint of which I am a proponent. I partake her experience that “friendship is not a simple or unitary phenomenon in any context” because friendships, “overlapping with other types of social connection such as kinship and community,” can become a component of interviewing process (2016, 209). Therefore, the concept of friendship and its applicability to interview relations may require more exploration in oral history and qualitative research. Oakley offers the notion of “gift” in the form of vignettes about “resilience and coping, about struggle and success” as a “fruitful framework for understanding” (208-209) the interdependence of researchers and participants who agreed to contribute through their memories and life stories. More studies on conceptualizing friendship between the citizens and refugees outside of feminist paradigms are also flourishing (Häberlen 2016; Simich and Lisa Andermann 2014).

Discussing emotions among oral history practitioners should not be avoided or depreciated. In fact, it needs to be extended to other fields such as RFMS. Talking about the women's feelings but keeping my internal realm private did not seem fair or sustainable. Conversing on one’s faith-based history and practices requires emotional disclosure, open-heartedness, and sensitivity so demanding objectivity from the researcher herself, is neither ethical nor feasible, as feminist researchers have already noted (Bondi 2005; Munt 2012; Oakley 2016). Hence, I was prepared to answer personal questions when the occasion arose. This rarely happened since the women were enthusiastic about talking about their personal experiences, articulating themselves, and thus construing a voice of their own.

The selected passages below illustrate the complexity of faith-based concerns caused by displacement through various examples of lived religion. How they relate to building and/or maintaining resilience and exceed the boundaries of official Islam in Syria (imposed by religious authorities) are also part of the below section (Ai et al. 2003; Eppsteiner and Hagan 2016; McMichael 2002; Pargament 1997; Shaw and Joseph 2005). I share the anticipation with Streib et al. that the notion of lived religion can be understood as an “open space for a broader theological discussion” (2008, xii). I intend to initiate and expand innovative dialogues across multiple disciplines over time (particularly in RFMS) via Syrian women refugees’ voices on faith-based practices and beliefs.

4. The Selections: Syrian Women’s Lived Islam in Surviving Displacement and Trauma
In their rich interpretive flora of diversity in Islam, three themes among the respondents can be identified and processed through the concept of lived religion. The first relates to the workings of the Quran as an empowerment tool during the extended periods of distress and ambiguity. The second is the faith and resilience link; whether believers might be better equipped to overcome trauma as refugees and develop personal strengths differently from non-believers. It is discussed along with posttraumatic growth (PTG) by comparing the respondents’ statements on God, Islam, spirituality, and inner strength. The third is women’s reformulating the efforts of adaptation to a new country as a form of worship in Islam, that is, “work as a spiritual practice/ora at labora” (McGuire 2008, 109). This one proved to be challenging to separate from the second, and it can as well be a sub-theme in my study. Overlap between spirituality and lived religion in two women’s responses is also included in this section as examples to the related arguments in the introduction.

Lutfia whose marital problems in Syria were aggravated by sharing the same household with her in-laws in Istanbul finds solace in regular readings of and listening to the Quran: “Thank Allah that I am more knowledgeable about Islam now than in my twenties, and reading the Quran is my main guidance and consolation. When I feel down, I seek refuge in the verses of the Quran. I hope I will never forget praying or the Quranic verses since they are the most valuable for me” (Ezer 2019a, 49).

Similar to the other interviewed women, Lutfia’s discomfort about responding to the questions on spirituality subsided as soon as the questions about God and Islam were posed:

In Syria, I used to have a garden which I enjoyed tending to, and it would tend to my soul in return. Whenever I watered the plants and sat down with a cup of coffee in my hand, I felt as if I transcended of this world. Is it spirituality? (….) In Istanbul, when I sit by the coast and watch the sea and the seagulls, I forget all about this life and its issues. However, there is always something pulling me out of it, several responsibilities are waiting for me. I don’t know how to expand on these moments further; maybe it is better not to answer. (49)

Lutfia’s reluctance for further exploring her feelings of transcendence doesn’t make her statements less valuable than the ones on Islam. Bonding with nature clearly stirs some form of the extraordinariness in her that is captured by Soelle’s definition of spirituality, “knowledge of God through and from experience” (2001, 45) which I integrate into the unsystematic nature of lived religion to enrich the discussion on refugees’ experiences, following Streib’s proposal (2008, 54).

Lutfia is knowledgeable about the Quran to the extent that she quoted ayats by heart during our conversations, aptly contextualizing the lines such as her displacement or war in Syria: “No misfortune can happen, either in the earth or in yourselves, that was not set down in writing before We brought it into being” (Quran: 57: 22). She repeated more than once that her “inner strength comes from God” to keep her stamina against the verbal and psychological harassment that she has been subjected to by her in-laws. Whenever tension builds up at home and “we are about to burst, I listen to the Quran and feel that God

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1 Only the page number is given henceforth whenever Syrian women’s words are quoted directly.
calms down the whole house and grants me some peace” (49) is another powerful statement Lutfia made regarding the healing effects of her holy book.

As a younger and single refugee, Leila’s connection to the Quran and how she relates to the selected ayats in challenging times were also actualized in several occasions. As an example of lived religion, one of her integrations of Quranic prayer to daily life is a post-it note next to her mirror at home in Istanbul: “I posted a line from the Quran, ‘Fa Inna Ma al ‘usri Yusra’ (Truly, where there is hardship, there is also ease). This line from Sura Al-Inshirah gives me hope and instills the belief in me that after some challenges in life, relief will follow with the help of Allah” (125). Leila’s comments on Islam and that she doesn’t recognize herself as Muslim in the traditional sense is evidence for the necessity of expanding debates on lived religion. She expressed several times that she is a believer but only if appearance did not matter:

I’d consider myself a good Muslim and someone who is devoted to God in her own way, because I don’t hurt anyone and I treat people kindly. I may not be fasting or praying five times a day, but I sometimes read passages from the Quran, talk to God, and recite some prayers. There are a lot of people, who fast or dress conservatively, but they may not be good Muslims when you look inside their hearts. (125)

Similar passages can be found in other Syrian women’s interpretations of themselves in the context of Muslim women. Zizinia is another example: “The main principles that I believe are that there is one God, there is an end to this life, and there is an afterlife. You need to serve other people in ethical and kind ways. This world is not only about you; instead, you are a servant on this earth” (103). By using almost the same words uttered by Lutfia whose appearance is more conservative with a headscarf and loose-fitting clothing, Zizinia underlines the significance of the Quran in her life: “The Quran is the only book which I truly love and am knowledgeable about its chapters and certain passages by heart. Normally, I can’t remember a book even on the second day after finishing it, but the Quran is a big exception” (103).

Without making a direct connection unlike Lutfia, Zizinia expresses the source of her stamina under the harsh circumstances in the following: “You won’t succeed in this world unless you are spiritually strong. This is something that I still can’t manage to put into words, but I know how to embrace and practice it in my life” (103). Considering that Zizinia doesn’t pray in the prescribed manner, her confidence in the statement “I know how to embrace and practice it in my life” is a superb example to Islam as lived religion through the lenses of a Syrian woman who witnessed the discrepancy between the official and lived Islam early in life (103). I argue that these examples raise the significance of developing a discourse of Islam as a lived religion as opposed to the versions imposed by the so called authorities of Islam.

In addition to Lutfia, two more women (out of nine) wear headscarves, Sama and Bidaa. They also share a similar approach to Leila and Zizinia, and prioritize service to people and good deeds over appearance and rote praying. Evidently, they have positive attitudes toward life and imparted many plans about future despite the episodes of multiple displacements and separation from their families. Their expressions of strength and optimism activated my initial bias that believers might be better equipped to overcome trauma as refugees and develop a keener awareness of personal strengths (Acquaye et al. 2018; López et al. 2015; Mayer 2007). Another reason for my partiality stems from the cases of Sara, Ola, and Emilia.
whose backgrounds radically differ from each other but they experienced several incidents of despair and depression.

Sara, Ola, and Emilia are self-declared agnostics-atheists; and the terms were used interchangeably during the interviews. Among the small and randomly selected pool of respondents, they are the ones who felt the need or was asked to see a therapist as a result of what they have been through before and after their multiple-displacements. The quotation below displays some of Sara’s coping mechanisms to sustain her strength. In addition to what she survived as a single woman in Athens after six months in Istanbul, she is constantly exposed to narratives of hardship and trauma due to her current job at an international NGO. She has suffered from chronic insomnia even before the war, and was diagnosed PTSD in Greece which she chose to treat with marijuana.

> I’ve got my own ways of dealing with the pain that hangs on from work. I guess everybody does as a survival tactic. I take long showers, cook, and clean the house (…) I realize that when I am cleaning the house, I can be all by myself. (…) Recently, I read an online article “12 Rules of Taking Care of Yourself,” and you can also check it out and pick the ones that work for you. (141)

Unlike Lutfia, Sama, and Bidaa, who asked for examples and further explanations of spirituality, Sara’s comments demonstrate a well-thought-out stance regarding the term:

> Well, as you know, I am an atheist, or rather an agnostic, but this doesn’t mean that I am not spiritual. I disconnect this wonderful word from religion. Anyone who triggers special emotions in me, empowers me by guidance and wisdom, or makes me a better person contributes to my spirituality and is a spiritual person. Spirituality relates to inexplicable feelings. (144)

Despite Sara’s choice to appreciate a self-defined spirituality that is devoid of God, her words remain an epithet of lived religion based on the literature that I reviewed for this study. As “the embodied and enacted forms of spirituality that occur in everyday life,” her examples lead me again to the works of Ammerman, Pargament and Soelle (Ammerman 2014, 189). Analyzed through lived religion, Sara as well as Ola helped me develop a novel awareness of how boundaries of sacred and secular may become permeable and challenge an individual’s own perceptions. In fact, a reconsideration of religion or an introduction to the concept of lived religion might radically modify their insights into religion-as-lived, especially that they are now outside of the Islam that they disliked and rejected in the Syrian context.

Ola’s attitude about Islam and God may seem doubly confusing for anyone who seeks to disentangle the complexities in expressions of faith (or lack of it). Although unpublished yet, to balance the number of women who grew up Muslim but chose to part ways with Islam, I include segments of Ola’s story here. She told me that she saw Khidr one night while she was sitting at the front seat of a car in motion in Aleppo. Khidr/Khizr is believed to be a righteous servant of God and aids those in distress. Ola’s description of this male figure with minute details on that night is an example to what Robert Orsi refers to as “abundant events” (2007, 42). Seeing my expression, Ola added that her intuition shocked her former partner and family members several times, and mentioned some prophetic dreams. These events are out of the ordinary and real to those who experience them. People (in this case, Ola) absolutely know
them not to be hallucinations, delusions, or other kinds of sensory error. The events arise and exist among people; yet, as an atheist, Ola is undecisive about what to make of them, referring to them as real and inexplicable (42-43).

Ola’s resilience is attained not by praying to God but through a struggle against her therapists and prescriptions. She intends to be completely medicine-free and has been forming her spirituality via energy-healings. As many times as she repeated her denial of God, she referred to the power and effects of energies: “Inside me, I’ve positive energy, my aura. If you take my energy, I fall down. My emotional and physical being will get sick. After I left my ex, it took me almost five months to recover because he was very negative. He took my energy” (interview July 26th, 2018). I claim that Ola’s spirituality has been in transition since her multiple-displacements began. She is settled in Vancouver, recently reunited with her two children who arrived from Dubai. Ola’s faith journey is likely to go through more and major amendments in time since she too is now outside of the Islam that she rejected in Syria like Sara.

Emilia, also settled in Canada (Toronto), began working after graduating university in 2018. Constructing her spirituality devoid of God, she nevertheless enjoys debates on Islam and religions in general. She saw several therapists after surviving sexual assault and multiple displacements. She takes good care of her health, and has been completely substance-free. Her resilience emerges in the form of skepticism, challenging every context she finds herself in, and religion is no exception:

I was raised to believe in God as a Muslim child, so I developed a very intimate relationship with this untouchable and invisible being in my own way. I believed in a kind and compassionate God, so I had many imaginary conversations (…) I’ve never really believed in monotheism but only realized it when I started questioning the entire idea in 2010. (88)

From my perspective, Emilia’s stance in life, as the subtitle of her life story indicates, “I change every moment and am fine with it” (79), affects her not holding on to one particular belief. Because she failed to resolve “the tension or contradiction between free will of the individual and total submission to God,” she eventually “denounced all monotheistic religions, not just Islam” (89), especially after encountering Epicureanism. She believes that her “inner strength comes from [her] DNA and brain,” not from God so “denouncing Islam was liberating” (90).

Although these three women suffered from physical and psychological problems due to displacement, and were assigned therapy, and were prescribed medicine, during the time we spent together, they were able to express themselves elegantly and transparently. I tend to present their accounts as evidence for posttraumatic growth (PTG). They commented on personal relationships, new plans about the future, increasing personal strength and appreciation for life (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995; Tedeschi et al. 2017) regardless of their (lack of) faith commitments or practices. However, some months after the interviews, I received a few messages from Sara that she was feeling suicidal and depressed. Ola also expressed anger management problems, which affected her relation with her daughter and boyfriend. The respondents with deep connections to God, even in Lutfia’s abusive case, shared no such or similar feelings. The reasons for these differences are definitely more complicated but the links among resilience, PTG, and faith remain to be explored as a potential theme on a broader scale in the Syrian refugees context.
“Work as worship” in Islam can indeed become part of resilience narratives. In contrast to Lutfia’s feelings, Sama thinks that she was more religious in Syria and wishes that she “could invest more time in Islam” in Germany, her new country of residence (69). She is careful not to miss her daily prayers and prefers practicing in solitude. Even so, she is sometimes afraid “to lose [my] faith all of a sudden. I seek refuge in God” (75). Despite her concerns, she can justify her inability to devote more time to prayers by praising hard-work and labor to improve oneself. There are many demands that one needs to cope with in a new and unfamiliar country, such as learning different skills and acquiring a new language: “Learning German is my top priority. All these adaptation and survival efforts are distractions from my religion.” However, she also “know[s] that Islam demands its followers to work hard” (74) and is convinced that using one’s time efficiently and developing new skills are part of being a good Muslim.

Among other elements, Sama bases her resilience on a hadith in which the Prophet Mohammed praised strong believers “because they are more active and energetic in performing ritual prayers and noble deeds in life, whether obligatory or not” (75). Although I found the phrase “strong believer” too general, I avoided interrupting her at the time. Several months later, after completing the interview with another respondent in Athens (Bidaa), I noticed similarities in her emphasis on strength as a believer. Bidaa provided several examples to the positive outcomes of her calm but determined stance in facing injustice as a believer of God. In the following, she summarizes the asylum seeking interview with her younger sister:

The interview for family reunification was stressful. We were told that only one sister would be sent to Germany since we were both over 18 years old, and the other would receive asylum in Greece. As soon as my sister heard the news, she began to cry so I told her to calm down and pray. I was very relieved that they chose her for Germany and not me. (151)

Bidaa believes that praying grants a person strength and resilience, and forms an inseparable and inevitable link between them. She practices it at all times even when the risk of attack was an issue on her way to performing ablutions before the morning prayer at the refugee camp in Moria on Lesbos Island (150). The mode that Bidaa narrated her journey from the beginning (to Turkey and Greece) reads as a series of miracles granted by Allah (147-161). She managed to sustain herself active and energetic throughout as exemplified in the following statement: “It was not too difficult to find a house since God has been with us and heard our prayers all along” (151). Bidaa confidently qualifies for what Sama previously referred to as a “strong believer” (75) while expressing her wish to become more stalwart: “I have always been a strong person, especially when I witness injustice, I get even stronger while demanding justice. It’s my nature” (158). In fact, she stands out among the respondents as one of the most self-confident women and the embodiment of PTG with her appreciation for life, joyfully enlarging her network in Athens, and making new plans about the future.

The selected quotations above demonstrated the diversity in interpretations of Islam among Syrian women with a focus on the use of the Quranic verses, resilience and PTG, and practicing “work as a service to Allah” in the context of adaptation and survival in times of struggle. Coping with trauma involves processing loss(es) and rebuilding of one’s worldviews of self and others, expressiveness, and empathy. However, these positive changes are not necessarily related to or triggered by faith commitments or submission to God. The interviews revealed that having been forced to clarify life’s
meaning, one’s priorities, and ethics can indeed be very closely related to one’s religion but not always. The respondents’ life accounts can be analyzed in the concept of lived religion through modified or discarded practices during and/or after the displacement.

Section VI: CONCLUSION

I elaborated on what I consider as the problematic approach of two academic fields (Religious Studies and RFMS) for their lack or misconstruction of women Muslim refugees in the context of the Syrian conflict. Muslim women’s interpretations and practices of Islam are missing in the realm of academic knowledge in general, policy making in particular. My research was exploratory in nature and hopefully will lead to further studies in lived religion in the context of “visible and invisible Muslims” and exceed the borders of Europe from where the only collection on the issue was originated (Jeldtoft and Nielsen 2012).

Derived from my observations and analysis after interviewing Syrian refugee women (Ezer 2019a), I consider this topic primarily an urgent necessity but also a long-term project. I was captivated by the diversity of the women’s faith-commitments especially after the war began and displacement took place, both of which are regarded as traumatic events. However, I was also bothered with (as much as the Syrian women themselves) the shallowness of the contemporary discussions about Muslim women and Islam, how they have been increasingly identified as a “problem” since 2001 in the political discourse of the Global North. The debates only got worse if the stigmatized refugee was also Muslim and a woman.

When most refugee women are not understood, treated or represented as the agents of their own lives, the void in the agendas of university projects and international humanitarian services regarding the needs and practices of the women’s faith during resettlement period is hardly unexpected. Research about whether and how the everyday experiences of women refugees, their concerns, fears, and aspirations relate to their personal engagement with lived Islam is scarce. Their highly personal and sometimes (potentially) socially marginal and/or secretive practices have remained hidden, and thus been excluded from academic debates of women and Islam in Social Sciences and Religious Studies. This article aimed to crack the gates open to this unexplored area by in-depth interviewing and presenting unmediated words of Syrian women in transition.

Due to the number of interviewees (nine), the extent of the complexity regarding the faith-based practices and their self-interpretations on building resilience during displacement remains limited. The study provides individually-wrapped life accounts and modest amount of information while suggesting a rich potential throughout. Transforming this article into a full-length book in future would allow me the space for extensive quotations, thus crafting a culture of distinct and communicative women’s voices. Regarding the effects of religious commitment on refugee trauma, I am not convinced with some of the conclusions of current studies either (Acquaye et al. 2018; Simsir and Dilmac 2018), and thus call for interdisciplinary research projects and dissertations on a grander scale. The questions that are designed for gathering data on faith-related practices and language in RFMS can also be utilized in other cross-disciplinary projects. For instance, scholars and graduate students in the countries where refugee population’s needs demand urgent interventions as well as long-term planning by the stakeholders (not just the government bodies) can team up to work on faith-based practices and building resilience.
My question about the link between resilience and faith commitments in an Islamic context proved to be more complicated than the claim that Islam provided Muslim women refugees “a meaningful framework” which sustained them during the episodes of “exile, displacement and resettlement” (McMichael 2002, 171). The conclusion derived from my interviews was that Islam doesn’t essentially or necessarily offer a meaningful basis or posttraumatic growth (PTG) to the Syrian refugee women. In fact, some of them went through major crisis regarding their faith; consequently transformed, gave up or intensified their practices of Islam even in less than three years. On the other hand, some women who grew up Muslim but renounced Islam before 2011 demonstrated resilience and strength; yet, residual and cultural expressions of Islam were still part of their narratives. Some of these articulations included what Orsi refers to as “abundant events,” supernatural and transcendent moments which were conveyed in the intimacies of our conversations (2007, 42). My article also contributed to an earlier study by Berger and Weiss (2003), extending their criticism of the missing link between selected immigrants in the U.S. and PTG to a small group of Syrian refugee women in four different countries other than the U.S.

Although the necessity and the urgency of service providers’ inclusion of refugee women’s faith-based concerns remain, the provisions (if offered by mental health and counseling services) can capture only few glimpses of the complexities regarding women’s volatile and conflicting moods, expressions, and performances of Islam. The dynamics between the actual lived life (the life history) and the meanings that the individuals attach to their lived lives (the life story) are among the issues to arise in the research, and implores further investigation.

However scholars choose to define it, religion plays a much larger role at various stages of the displacement process than many researchers have assumed. Challenging as it may be, I join the selected scholars’ granting primacy to the elusive and complex nature of religion as part of ordinary life, especially when the refugee women are the subjects in question. In regard to spirituality, I took almost a reverse stance, that is, I presented spirituality’s multi-faceted, embodied, and enacted forms by examples rather than treating it as a vague and fluid concept. Expanding beyond the strict definitions Islam or Muslims helped me to locate Syrian refugee women in the framework and notion of lived religion and to reflect rich faith-based realities from the individual refugees’ lives.

In the effort, wearing feminist lenses and developing friendships enabled me unclogging the artificiality of the researcher-researched dichotomy as well as acknowledging some invisible and muted privileges with mutual respect and honesty. It is also my hope that this study serves as a point of entry into more pluralistic public debates where not only Syrians’ but Muslim women refugees’ struggles and voices at large are taken into full consideration.

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\[1\] Emilia and Sara use atheist and agnostic interchangeably throughout the interviews, thus the use of “atheist-agnostic.”
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