

### "Zwei Herzen schlagen in meiner Brust": An analysis of the positions of church asylum actors during policy changes from 2018-2020 affecting sanctuary practice in Germany

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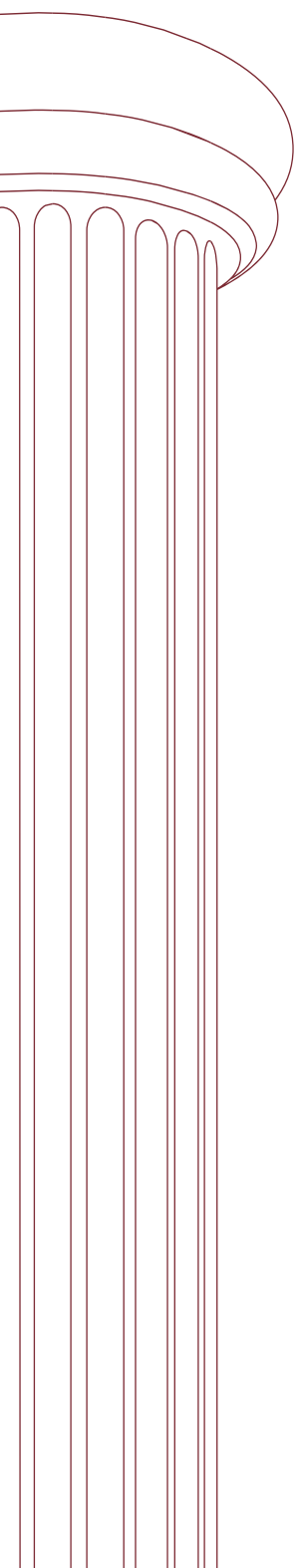
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# MAECENATA



Bente Kruijer

## **„Zwei Herzen schlagen in meiner Brust“**

An analysis of the positions of church asylum actors during policy changes from 2018-2020 affecting sanctuary practice in Germany.

## The Author

**Bente Kruijer** is a social science researcher who focuses on the topics of European integration, interreligious dialogue, and civil society. Her interdisciplinary scholarly perspective is based on her BSc in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences at the University of Amsterdam, enriched with ethnographic field work on migration and conflict studies in Sweden, South Africa, and Israel. This paper is an updated version of her master thesis written in 2021 as part of her international Master Religion & Culture at Humboldt University, Berlin. The publication qualifies as a peer reviewed research paper.

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## **Abstract**

Religious actors in public life and political work have been argued to break with secular assumptions about their expected role in modern societies. Previous interdisciplinary research in the field of international relations has analyzed this development for organizations as religious actors but tends to overlook the individual. The current study investigates this individual experience and explores the positioning of self-identified Christian religious actors as they reflect on the implications of their engagement in church asylum practice in Germany. Through semi-structured interviews with sanctuary actors operating from the summer of 2018 to the winter of 2020 in Berlin and Brandenburg, it provides insights into the challenges of church asylum in Germany during its most recent impactful happening, the nationwide changes of the application of the EU Dublin III Regulation. Supported by theories related to migration, religion, and (post-)secularism, the study identifies three areas in which sanctuary actors may position themselves when reflecting on the implications of their involvement: the personal, institutional, and societal. The research demonstrates that in their reflections, sanctuary actors both differentiate between and unite Christian being and political action. It concludes that, in their self-reflections, church asylum actors both reproduce and challenge a secular narrative of contingent “religious” and “secular” categories and situate themselves through this in the midst of German secularizing society.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Questions concerning the role of religious actors in the political realm and public life are not a novelty in social sciences (Casanova, 1994; Davie, 1994; Habermas, 2006; Stark, 1999; Taylor, 2007). Their answers, however, have changed over time and place. Especially in societies across Western Europe, the idea of the role of religion has been shaped by the secularization thesis, suggesting that religious significance in society is declining. As a consequence, during the past century, religion in the European context has been discursively framed as an irrelevant, private matter to politics and public life and a threat to modernization (Berger, 1967; Luckmann et al., 1967). This view was nuanced in the early twenty-first century, as critical scholarly voices started to challenge this “secularist bias.” Instead of a strict separation between the contingent religious and secular spheres, they noticed an increased visibility and significance of religious worldviews in the public space of civil society in particular (Casanova, 1994). Supported by post-secular analyses, this acknowledgement of religion in considered secular societies has been argued to primarily appear in refugee and asylum practice (Lynch, 2011; Wilson, 2014).

Amidst these changes of perceptions and contingent categorizations regarding the relationship between the secularized state and religion, German church asylum is situated. *Kirchenasyl* or church asylum is the act of Christian congregations opening their doors to shelter and support migrants, as a final attempt to find legal grounds for their asylum application in Germany (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Asyl in der Kirche [BAG], 2017). Rooted in historical conceptions of sanctuary and encouraged by the sanctuary movement in the United States, German church asylum in its contemporary form enjoys various analysis, covering theological, anthropological, political, and juridical perspectives. As wide as its range of interpretations stretches, as rich is its criticism. Labeled as migrant favoring, missionary, unconstitutional, or even sharia practice, church asylum in Germany is disputed (BR-Fernsehen, 2022; Deutschlandfunk, 2015). Its contested existence in German society is apparent in the agreement on kirchenasyl in 2015 between Christian Churches and the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge [BAMF], where church asylum is said to be solely tolerated as an expression of Christian-humanitarian tradition. Since it reassesses hardship cases of migrants convicted of deportation, church asylum, however, tends to be thought of differently than just a mere religiously motivated practice (AfDKompakt, 2018). The most recent remarkable example of the disputed nature of church asylum are the restrictions implemented by the German Ministry of Interior Affairs in the summer of 2018, where it labeled asylum seekers sheltered in church asylum as fugitives. This illegality claim resulted in the extension of the deportation deadline of Dublin III cases, which include most church asylum cases in Germany, and consequently

prolonged the duration of the practice. A decline in the number of existing and approved church asylum cases followed, as the congregation's resources to facilitate the necessary extension of the asylum were limited (Katholisch.de, 2019). Even though the policy was lifted in the winter of 2020, the number of German church asylum cases remains low and its existence is as challenged as before (BAG, 2021; BR-Fernsehen, 2022; Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2021).

The changes to the Dublin III Regulation expose a disputed interpretation of the contingent line between religion and state in which religious actors active in German church asylum operate. When rethinking the relationship between “the religious” and “the secular”, post-secular literature on international relations and religious studies demonstrates it is right in these experiences of religious actors where the ambiguous conceptions of religion and secularity are mirrored (Wilson, 2014; Wilson & Mavelli, 2016; Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). Closely related to theories on migration, humanitarianism, and globalization, religious actors operating in refugee and migration work in particular have been argued to contest and redraw the boundaries of these conceptions, taking up tasks that were previously considered as state responsibilities (Lynch, 2011). Although relevant post-secular studies on international relations like those of Clarke (2006) or Haynes & Henning (2011) have investigated this by analyzing faith-based actors such as religious organizations, churches, and networks, those religious actors operating as individuals remain underrepresented in this matter. This study therefore introduces religious individuals, such as church representatives and congregation members, as sanctuary actors and investigates their self-understanding amidst the contingent categorizations of religion and secularism.

### **1.1 Relevance and research questions**

The lack of an ethnographic, local perspective on religious actors and their actions as individuals has also been apparent within the research field on church asylum in Germany. In fact, published empirical data providing a scholarly ethnographic analysis regarding the self-reflections of religious actors that engage in church asylum remain absent after the studies of Oda (2006; 2012) and Dethloff and Mittermaier (2011). Considering, however, the argued significant experience of the contested categories “religious” and “secular” by religious individuals operative in asylum practice, this study focuses on sanctuary actors’ individual experiences (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016; Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). To locate this experience, it concentrates on the region Berlin-Brandenburg, where the political significance of religion is debated and at the same time a relatively high number of church asylum cases can be identified (Asyl in der Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg, 2022; Hafner et al., 2018; Pickel, 2013). Considering the high impact but lack of existing analysis on the developments on German

church asylum from 2018 to 2020, the research studies the self-reflections of sanctuary actors within this timeframe. Based on seven semi-structured interviews with nine individuals active in sanctuary practice in Berlin-Brandenburg from the winter of 2018 to the summer of 2020, this study answers the question: *how do religious individuals who engage in church asylum position themselves when they reflect on the implications of their involvement?*

The research question is differentiated into three sub-questions that deal with the reflections of sanctuary actors on their involvement, experienced implications, and positioning toward these. In detail they are:

- A. How do church asylum actors understand their involvement in church asylum?
  - 1) What are the motivations of church asylum actors to get involved in church asylum?
  - 2) How do church asylum actors describe the meaning of church asylum?
  
- B. Which implications of church asylum practice do church asylum actors experience?
  - 3) How do sanctuary actors describe the goal of their involvement in church asylum?
  - 4) Which complications do sanctuary actors experience through their involvement in church asylum?
  
- C. How do church asylum actors position themselves toward these implications?
  - 5) Which explanations do sanctuary actors provide for their experienced implications?
  - 6) How do their explanations relate to social-political perceptions of religion, migration, and church asylum in Germany and Europe?

The three sub-questions find support in the history and literature overview on church asylum (chapter 2). A theoretical contextualization of perspectives on what ought to be religious or secular work within the field of church asylum is provided in chapter 3, where theories on (post-) secularization (section 3.1 & 3.2), migration and religion (section 3.3), and religious actors in migration work (section 3.4) are discussed. The methodological process is performed through qualitative content analysis as per Kuckartz (2018) (chapter 4). Chapter 5 delivers the main outcomes of the field research. It identifies three key areas in which church asylum actors experience the implications of their involvement – the personal (section 5.1), institutional (section 5.2), and societal (section 5.3) – and suggests the actors position themselves across these three levels. The final chapter summarizes the results and formulates a concluding contribution to



scholarly views on the role of religious actors in the public space of asylum and migration aid work. As the study finishes with an outlook for future research (section 6.2), it pleads for a nuanced view on categorizing conceptions of religious actors in considered secularizing societies like Germany and emphasizes the context-dependent meaning of religion.

## 2. HISTORICAL AND LITERATURE OVERVIEW

To understand the positioning of church asylum actors regarding the implications of their work, one must first consider the societal framework in which they operate. Church asylum has a rich history, in which theological, juridical, and ethical aspects are present. Providing context to the challenges of church asylum actors' actions, this chapter presents a short outline and literary insight on the history of church asylum in Germany and closes each section by posing the respective sub-questions which additionally guide my analysis.

### 2.1 Church asylum: a sanctuary tradition

Sparked by the US Central American sanctuary movement of the 1980s<sup>1</sup>, the first church asylum in contemporary Germany took place in 1983, as the Heilig Kreuz Gemeinde in Berlin opened its doors to shelter and assist three Palestinian families with their asylum application process in Germany. Soon after, several other congregations followed their example, after which in 1994 the Ökumenische Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Asyl in der Kirche (BAG Asyl in der Kirche) was established and nowadays holds office in Berlin. This nationwide ecumenical church asylum network informs, lobbies, and connects Christian congregations and initiatives that offer church asylum. The BAG describes church asylum as a last, legitimate attempt (*ultima ratio*) of a congregation to support refugees by granting them temporary shelter and conduct a renewed, careful examination of their situation. Following the definition of the BAG (2017, p. 4), congregations that grant church asylum intercede on behalf of people whose life, limb, or freedom are endangered because of sentenced deportation. By granting church asylum, they intervene between the authorities that carry out the deportation orders, and the migrants.

In the times of the Roman Empire, Christian sacred buildings were already considered sanctuaries, places that protected outlaws against violence from external laws. This changed with the birth of the nation state in the late sixteenth century, as the sovereign state claimed the right to politically protect foreign individuals, justified by the inviolability of their borders (Marfleet, 2011). As a result, what was understood as the ecclesial traditional right of asylum now was restricted and by law solely executed by the state (Abe, 1968, cited by Oda 2012, p. 157). In Germany, the idea of asylum as a legal institution as monopoly of the state is enacted in the constitution, which states that

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<sup>1</sup> The US Sanctuary Movement (USM) started off as a peace and solidarity movement in Central America. In the past two centuries, it has developed itself into a transnational and political social movement, engaging with ecumenical networks and religious organizations worldwide to connect local communities that search for solutions for individuals who are at immediate risk of deportation. See for more detailed analysis Freeland (2010).

persons persecuted on political grounds have the right of asylum (Art. 16a para. 3 Grundgesetz [GG]). Rather than the right of the state to exercise political power *over* refugees, German state asylum thus grants a foreign refugee the absolute entitlement to receive protection, asylum, *from* the state. From a legal perspective, this monopoly on asylum executed by the state is relevant to acknowledge, as it means that church asylum cannot be considered a legal act of ecclesial asylum and therefore does not legally affect asylum as exercised by the state (Kraus, 1996, pp. 63–64). Instead, contemporary church asylum has been argued to revive the tradition of the inviolable space of sanctuary, this time however protecting the stranger, the refugee, instead of the outlawed criminal<sup>2</sup> (Dethloff & Mittermaier, 2011; Just, 1993, p. 80).

Perspectives from humanities and social sciences, too, have observed a reinvention of the classical idea of sanctuary outside the state's monopoly on asylum. Based on ethnographic fieldwork on church asylum in Germany, anthropologist Hiroshi Oda (2006) identifies the revival of sanctuary as the *appropriation of tradition*, arguing that sanctuary tradition as a practice is reappropriated by the church. Theologian Andreas Lob-Hüdepohl (2003, pp. 54–55) continues that, as a result, the emphasis of granting asylum through the church has shifted from asylum *in* the church itself to asylum *with* the church as a mediating entity. He explains that, rather than the expression of the historical extra-legal status of sanctuary, contemporary church asylum is an expression of moral-symbolic authority and manifestation of theological-ethical convictions, based on the infrastructure and facilities of the congregation.<sup>3</sup> In this light, two sorts of asylum can thus be identified in Germany: state asylum on the one hand and the contemporary practice of church asylum, or sanctuary, on the other (Oda, 2012, p. 157).

## 2.2 Church asylum: situated between church and state

The past of church asylum shows its integral connection with historical power dynamics of state and church in Germany. The structure of the relation between state and church in Germany today originates from the differentiation of considered “secular” spheres from religious institutions and norms through the Religious Peace of Augsburg in 1555 (Oda, 2006, p. 21). This idea of differentiation is substantiated in Germany's present constitution and states that, just as any other religious

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<sup>2</sup> In the past decade, the dominating discourse on migration and security has discursively framed the terms refugee, migration, and asylum seeker in a negative light (section 3.3). Since church asylum addresses cases of both forced and voluntary migration, this research uses the terms “migrant” and “migration” as formulated by the UNHCR (2016). Migrant in this regard is the umbrella concept of people that cross a border, unless clearly referred to as refugee or asylum seeker.

<sup>3</sup> The church' resources such as knowledge, facilities, and trust have proven valuable in the coordination of great numbers of refugees by faith-based actors in collaboration with civil society actors (Wilson, 2014). Habermas (2006) discusses this role of religious actors in civil society in more detail. In the German context, Adloff (2009) and Jäger (2019) provide insights on the role of the church in German civil society (see also section 3.1).

organization in Germany, the Christian Church holds the freedom of religion (Art. 4 para. 1 and 2 GG) and enjoys state neutrality (Art. 140 GG). This second article also grants larger religious communities<sup>4</sup> the status of corporation by public law (*Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* [KdöR]) (Casanova, 2011, p. 71; Art. 140 GG). For manifested Christian Churches in Germany, such as the Protestant, Catholic, and *freikirchliche* churches, this means they hold a legally guaranteed status that enables them to govern themselves and enact their own law, whilst respecting the constitution, such as to collect and be exempted from taxes (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa, n.d.; Wissenschaftliche Dienste des Deutschen Bundestags [WDDDB], 2007, p. 5). The arrangement of the corporation by public law rejects the concept of established state churches but does not strictly separate religious institutions from the state itself. On the contrary, Germany's contemporary constitution establishes a functionalist separation between church and state through the freedom from and of religion, yet at the same time it supports the potentials of open collaboration between the two. In fact, a strict separation of church and state is clearly forbidden. Rather, the state is responsible for fostering religious communities and tradition, respecting the principle of neutrality (WDDDB, 2007, pp. 4–5). While previous research on church asylum has greatly elaborated on the juridical rights and legitimacy of church asylum, the history of the phenomena shows that, to its practitioners, church asylum work can mean much more than just a matter of legality, as it also relates to tangible actions and theological-ethical convictions (Lob-Hüdepohl, 2003; see section 2.3). Therefore, my analysis brings in this theological-ethical perspective and focuses on the religious actors' subjective interpretation of their work. In doing so, the first sub-question acknowledges sanctuary actors' own interpretations and asks for their understanding of their involvement in church asylum practice.

### **2.3 Theological-ethical considerations of church asylum actors**

One meaningful motivation for individuals to engage in church asylum practice is compassion (Oda, 2012, p. 154). Compassion in the context of sanctuary relates to the expression of hospitality to strangers, inspired by the history of Abrahamic religions, where Christians consider themselves to once have been exiles in strange lands (New International Version Bible [NIV], 2011, Exodus, 23:9), and the conviction of creation of human beings in the image of God (NIV, 2011, Genesis 1:27), which is the idea that all humans are created equal through the image of God, and the sense of obligation

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<sup>4</sup> The status of KdöR has most notably been granted to religious communities from Jewish-Christian tradition. Decided on federal state level, non-Jewish-Christian religious organizations such as Islamic communities are regularly excluded from the status (Weiß, 2000). In the federal state of Berlin and Brandenburg, no Muslim community enjoys the status of KdöR (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa, 2018; Land Brandenburg, 2017).

to help those in need and be kind to your neighbor (NIV, 2011, Luke 10:25–37) (Oda, 2012). In the chapter *Jeder Mensch ist ein Heiligtum*, theologian Wolf-Dieter Just (1993) illustrates the theological-ethical dilemma that appears when church asylum is motivated by compassion: “Where the church takes [the Old Testament’s right of strangers] seriously, it must oppose any national-egoist politics that discriminate against strangers, deport them, or do not even allow them into the country” (p. 81, own translation). The opposing stance of congregations practicing church asylum regarding state policies is both framed by the media as well as internally understood as *civil disobedience*, that is “the justification of a limited violation of the law in the presence of state injustice” (Morgenstern 2003, p. 19, own translation).<sup>5</sup> Just (1993, p. 73) theologially problematizes civil disobedience for this exact violation of the democratically constituted law, asking what this means for individuals that identify themselves as both Christians and democratic citizens. Should they adopt Pauline’s words – “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established” (NIV, 2011, Romans 13:1) – or does the Book of Acts of Lucas (NIV, 2011, 5:29,) – “We must obey God rather than human beings!” – apply to them?

Lob-Hüdepohl (2003) adds to these theological and social-ethical questions of church asylum, asking: “Who can ultimately be held accountable for church asylum: the individual, the congregation, or the church itself?” (p. 51, own translation). He argues that this question of responsibility only enjoys satisfying answers once the actors involved are considered.<sup>6</sup> In his argument, two elements are significant. First, the emphasis that the decision to provide church asylum is a conscious one. This he calls the question of conscience. Second, the acknowledgement that the decision to act will always be personal and individually made, however the congregation as a whole will eventually practice and manage it. Essential for this is what he calls the *cooperative decision of conscience*, which is the dynamics of decision making between the operating actors of church asylum (Lob-Hüdepohl, 2003, pp. 64–67). For the structure of the Protestant Lutheran Church, which is the denomination of all interviewed respondents in this study (see section 4.3), this typically consists of the *Kirchengemeinde*, which covers the complete parish, the governing bodies of the congregation, called the *Kirchenrat* or *Kirchenvorstand* (the parish council), the cleric, and the congregation members (Oda, 2006, p. 21). Additionally, church asylum is usually assisted by a so-called supportive circle. The circle consists of congregation members and sometimes both religious and non-religious external individuals who are closely involved in the refugees’ church asylum period. They provide aid such as translation, communication with authorities and the

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<sup>5</sup> Following Rawls’ (1971) leading definition, civil disobedience supports the idea that to achieve law enforcement and avoid a violation of justice and democracy, the law must first be challenged, or broken.

<sup>6</sup> Legally too, the question on the responsibility of church asylum remains disputed. Huber (1993) has provided a more detailed account on the legal situation of church asylum and the question of responsibility.

congregation itself, groceries, potentially babysitting and support in health issues (Just & Sträter, 2003, pp. 249–250; Oda, 2012, p. 157). The cooperative decision of conscience takes place through this structure of the congregation, where the personal and individual decision making of the members of the parish council results in a cooperative decision of the whole parish (Lob-Hüdepohl, 2003, p. 67). This means that, even though the responsibility for church asylum is eventually carried by multiple actors, the personal decision of the religious individual is ultimately decisive for the existence of church asylum. The term church asylum actors might thus encompass migrants as well as religious and non-religious actors (Oda, 2012, p. 155). However, since the decisive aspect lies at the religious individual, for this analysis, church asylum actors are considered those religious actors engaged in church asylum as church representatives or congregation members.<sup>7</sup>

As the works of Just (1993), Lob-Hüdepohl (2003), Morgenstern (2003), and Oda (2006; 2012) indicate, one can identify a range of interpretations and expressions of church asylum throughout history. Shaped by the history of sanctuary, the legal conception of asylum, and theologically inspired motivations, church asylum actors appear to be confronted with implications of church asylum such as civil disobedience and the question of responsibility. More recent empirical research on church asylum in Germany mostly comes from either BAG internal or (under)graduate research. Here, the issues of church asylum are foremost discussed by analyzing the implementation of church asylum, such as its specific structure concerning temporary housing (BAG, 2008), its possible effects on the congregation (Krannich, 2006), or by focusing on the federal state of Bavaria (Siebert, 2017). This study however considers the recent developments around church asylum to be relevant when discussing its challenges and emphasizes the individual experience in this. While it recognizes the theological and legal analyses on church asylum so far (Huber, 1993; Kraus, 1996; Just, 1993; Lob-Hüdepohl, 2003; Morgenstern, 2003), the study develops the anthropological perspective as introduced by Oda (2006; 2012), as it turns to sanctuary actors themselves and situates their self-reflections in its recent history. Therefore, the second sub-question of the research investigates the current experienced challenges of church asylum as formulated by church asylum actors. To provide context to this question, the next section illustrates the societal and political developments in which religious actors have practiced church asylum since 2015.

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<sup>7</sup> The definition of the religious and religious actor is situational (Asad, 1993). In this research, the term religious actor refers to the Christian religious individual, such as a church member or church representative (Wilson, 2014; Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). A more detailed discussion on this matter is delivered in chapter 3.

## 2.4 Church asylum: developments since 2015

One significant moment in the contemporary history of church asylum took place in 2015, as representatives of the German Protestant and Catholic Church and the president of the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge<sup>8</sup> agreed that church asylum should solely operate on Christian-humanitarian traditions and by no means define itself as an institution that functions independently from the constitution (Bundesministerium des Innern [BMI], 2015). The reason for this arrangement was the increase of church asylum cases as a reaction to the growing number of migrants coming to Germany in the summer of 2015. In practice, the agreement means church asylum is mainly offered to people categorized as Dublin cases. These are migrants subject to the so-called Dublin III Regulation, the European Union's unified asylum system, which regulates the responsibility of asylum procedures between European member states (Bugge, 2019, p. 93). The idea behind this is that, when entering Europe, a migrant is registered in the first European country of entrance. This country is then responsible for the migrant's asylum procedure. If the migrant applies for asylum in a third country, this country needs to deport the asylum seeker back to the country of entrance within six months of notice (Bugge, 2019, p. 93). If this does not happen within the assigned time, the third country, Germany in this case, becomes responsible for the asylum process, which is the so-called *Selbsteintrittsrecht* (right of self-entry). Church asylum takes place exactly during this six-month period, circumventing deportation and legalizing the migrant's stay in Germany. In fact, in May 2021, 320 of the 354 registered German church asylum cases were Dublin cases (BAG, 2021).

In the summer of 2018, the practice of church asylum became dramatically disrupted as the German Ministry of Interior Affairs labeled asylum seekers sheltered in church asylum as fugitives. The Dublin III Regulation states that the deportation deadline for refugees with a fugitive status may be extended by up to eighteen months (Art. 29 Regulation (EU) No 604/2013). Consequently, the number of church asylum cases in Germany drastically lowered, as the state's reinterpretation of the Dublin Regulation limited the congregations' financial, practical, and time resources. The number of successfully completed church asylum cases, which usually leads to a recognized asylum status for the migrant, lowered from 80 percent in 2016 to only 1.4 percent in 2019 (Katholisch.de, 2019). Immediately after the implementation of the deadline extension, the BAG and various congregations criticized this "illegality claim" on migrants in church asylum, since the main criteria of illegality, the lack of an official address, is not met in the case of church asylum. Indeed, their address is that of the church (Abmeier, 2015, p. 5). After several federal and national court cases in

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<sup>8</sup> The Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) is the German governmental body that is primarily responsible for the execution of asylum procedures.

the two years that followed, the Federal Administrative Court of Germany confirmed the BAG's claims by the start of 2021 (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2021). With the waiver of the restrictions, migrants sheltered in church asylum are not considered illegal anymore. The little researched, but highly important events concerning church asylum from 2018 to 2020 provide a context in which perceptions of the relationship between church, state, and church asylum have influenced the experiences of sanctuary actors. By investigating the implications of church asylum practice in this specific time frame, the research may provide insights on the direct consequences of church asylum targeted policies. Learnings from this research might therefore support sanctuary actors and members of the BAG with concrete knowledge on how to respond to such abrupt policies in the future. To understand the impact of the events in 2018–2020, the research's third sub-question investigates sanctuary actors' explanations of the challenges of church asylum and how these relate to social-political perceptions of religion, migration, and church asylum in Germany and Europe. The theoretical body of these research questions is presented in the following chapter.



### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship between societal perceptions, political developments, and individual experiences in the case of church asylum can be understood from a broader perspective on the general ruling idea in considered secular, West-European societies on what responsibilities church and state are thought to have on issues of migration and refugee policies and where in this regard actors of “the religious” are expected to operate. Relevant scholarly works regarding these questions will be outlined in the theoretical framework below.

#### 3.1 Secularization, the secular, and the religious

Some of the core concepts linked to religious actors and their relationship to migration are those connected to the conceptualization of “the secular” and “the religious”, and the related secularization theory. Following a growing scientific interest in the loss of social significance of religion in the modern world as initiated by sociologists Max Weber (1930) and Émile Durkheim (1912), the secularization theory poses that empirical-historical processes of institutional differentiation and transformation are intrinsically and structurally linked with the modernization of societies, resulting in a decline of social relevance and a consequent privatization of religion (Casanova, 2011, p. 55; Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009, p. 303). The secularization thesis grew stronger among social scientists in the 1950s and '60s, predicting a normative-teleological development of religion, stating that the more modern a society, the less religious will be its population (Wilson, 1966).<sup>9</sup>

The teleological account of the significance of religion in European societies finds its origins in the Enlightenment critique of religion, where it has been put aside as predominantly irrational, individual, and institutional, which subsequently strengthened the idea of the secular as modern and enlightened, confirming its superiority over the religious (Casanova 2006, p. 84; 2011, p. 59 & p. 68). Various scholarly critiques<sup>10</sup> have pointed out that this categorization of secularist thinking in social sciences has subtly seeped into modern society’s understanding of religion, its position in society, and its relationship to politics. A significant contribution of this critique comes from sociologist José Casanova (2011), who identifies secularism as a taken-for-granted worldview or ideology which is commonly shared in modern societies today, and in the European region in particular. Through the secular narrative, people define their own, as well as their society’s,

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<sup>9</sup> Critiques against the secularization theory focus on the fact that it springs from Western European Christian ideas of thought and is therefore not necessarily applicable in other parts of the world. See for example Davie (1994) and Taylor (2007).

<sup>10</sup> More prominent critical comments have been delivered by Casanova (1994) and Asad (1993), but also more recent research by Lynch (2011), Wilson (2014), and Wilson & Mavelli (2016), also discussed later in this chapter.

secularized relationship to religion as a natural result of the progressive history of being modern, Western, and enlightened (Casanova, 2006; p. 89; 2011, p. 59). Within this secular narrative, religion is framed as intolerant and dangerous, something that disturbs development and needs to be overcome. Casanova (2006, p. 82; 2011, p. 69) argues that, in contrast to a predominantly Protestant Christian conception of religion in Europe, the secular is nowadays perceived as tolerant toward cultural pluralism, respecting the fundamental values of modern societies such as individual freedom and rationality.

As a result of secularism's rigid categorizations of the features of the religious and the secular, the location of religion in the modern world has become to be thought of as a private matter, something that ought to be kept out of the political realm, and within the domestic, intimate place of the individual (Wilson, 2014, p. 359). This "privatization of religion" or "invisibility of religion" (Luckmann et al., 1967) has become institutionalized through the differentiation of state and religious institutions into public and private spheres. Following the argument that bureaucratic "public" structures should function by rationality, as if God does not exist, Taylor (2007) has argued that the emancipation of secular spheres from ecclesial control became considered fundamental to modern societies. Along Casanova's (2011) line of argument, critics of secularist thinking denounce the normative nature of the secularist bias: "Binaries such as sacred/profane, transcendent/immanent, private/public, premodern/modern, and illiberal/liberal all grasp at distinctions between the religious and the secular" (Lynch, 2011, p. 205), which stipulate the place and meaning of religion in modern societies (Asad et al., 2013, pp. ix-x). However absolute these dichotomies might appear, as Casanova (2011, p. 63) puts it: "It remains hotly disputed [...] how, where, and by whom the boundaries between [these categories] ought to be drawn."

In fact, scholars like Talal Asad (1993) have argued that what religion is and what it ought to be is intrinsic to historical, social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics of social life and with that under constant change. In his text *The construction of religion as anthropological category* Asad (1993) criticizes the phenomenological conception of religion in post-Enlightened, modern society for its universalizing definition of religion and its marginalization as an individual belief (Asad, 1993, pp. 124-125). His argument says the definition of religion and religious representations are the product of changing practices and discourses of social life and thus cannot be ascribed one universal meaning (Asad, 1993, p. 116 & p. 129). This also means religion can only be understood in reference to what social life has reproduced as its opposite: the secular. From this understanding, the secular and the religious do not stand alone, but are continuously and mutually constituted by each other's

conceptions (Casanova, 2011, p. 54). May et al. (2014, p. 339) warn of the risks of scholarly analysis failing to acknowledge the secularist categorizing conception of religion and the secular, as it classifies political acts articulated by religious actors as religious rather than “political”. By pushing religious adherents out of the realm of politics and diminishing them as apolitical, their actions are considered politically insignificant. It is however right in this intersection between religious actors and political actions where research from various disciplines<sup>11</sup> has noted a growing visibility and importance of religion in the public space, especially visible in European societies (Pickel, 2017, p. 71).

From a sociological perspective, leading remarks on this matter come from Casanova (1994). In his work *Public religions in the modern world* he argues against one global meaning of secularization and introduces three sub-theses which he claims underlie the secularization process: the differentiation of secular spheres from religious institutions and norms (1); the decline of religious beliefs and practices (2); and the disappearance of religion into the private sphere (3). It is in the latter where Casanova (1994, p. 5) identifies a development which challenges the normative understanding of the location of the religious and the secular. Far from a marginalization of religion into the private sphere, religious traditions throughout the world refuse to restrict themselves to the privatized role which theories of modernity, individualism, and secularization have confined them into. In fact, Casanova (1994, pp. 65–66) recognizes contemporary religious actors and traditions abandon their “assigned place in the private sphere and enter the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society<sup>12</sup> to take part in the ongoing process of contestation, discursive legitimation, and redrawing of the boundaries”, a process he calls the deprivatization of religion.

Despite his critique of the existence of one global, singular form of secularism, Casanova (2006, pp. 83–84) acknowledges that at least in Europe, an inevitable presence of some characteristics of secularization in the form of sub-theses 1 and 2 can be identified.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Germany, sociologist Gert Pickel (2013; 2017) supports this finding. He demonstrates that when it comes to the decline of religious beliefs and practices, former East Germany is generally ranked as one of Europe’s largest undenominational regions of the last century (Pickel, 2017, p. 45). Its explanation

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<sup>11</sup> These include international relations (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016), social sciences (Herbert, 2003; Casanova, 1994), humanities (Taylor, 2007), and religious studies (Pickel, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Civil society can be defined as a social space in society which is located beyond state, market, and private family spheres. Civil society actors cover a pluralist community of self-mobilized, self-regulated associations, groups, and organizations, but also unrestricted engagements such as strikes, which voluntarily collaborate and network to transcend democratic and human rights interests into the public sphere (Herbert, 2003; Adloff, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion on the decline of religion and in particular its said absence of political influence in Western Europe, see Berger’s revised work on the idea of secularization (1999).

lies partly in the history of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR), where religious affiliation has been suppressed through socialist state policies. As a consequence, Pickel (2013, pp. 78–79; 2017, p. 48) explains that Christian churches reinterpreted their position toward the state, and with that their own religiosity. An example of this phenomenon from that time was the GDR’s overall absent recognition of church and denominationally educational organizations as state academic institutions. Grelak and Pasternack (2016, p. 15) explain that this exemption meant less monitoring of theological institutions by socialist rules, which, as the authors argue, in its turn created a parallel space in which Christian Churches and communities repositioned themselves toward the state. More recent research on the post-GDR region by Hafner et al. (2018) explores today’s visible outcomes of the region’s argued decline and reinterpretation of its religiosity. They explain that believers of considered traditional religious beliefs such as Christianity did not stop believing but shifted to alternative religious worldviews that resulted from the repressive period, arguing for a rise in religiosity in the East German region (Hafner et al., 2018, p. 13). Pickel (2013) acknowledges these what he calls *patchwork religions* too. He argues, however, that this contemporary religious landscape in East Germany led to an individual focused religiosity, and a consequent low social significance of religion in politics, at best meaningful in case of individual political action (Pickel, 2013, p. 71).

Yet on a broader, global account, scholars<sup>14</sup> argue that the significance of religion in the public sphere has never been low, but that unnoticed characteristics of religion have only started to enjoy attention as the enlightened, Kantian take on religion became challenged as a result of globalized, post-Cold War conditions. The same remarks, I suggest, can be mentioned regarding sanctuary practice, which, as Oda’s (2006) argument previously showed, can be considered a revival of existing religious activity. As Wilson (2014, p. 359) explains: “Churches, synagogues, mosques and religious charities have been caring for the poor and marginalized of society for millennia.” Whether the idea of a universal secularization in the Western world thus predicted the diminishing of religious traditions or promoted an individualistic attitude toward them, in both cases it resulted in the general conception of the religious and religious actors as irrelevant, outside or even opposite to politics and other considered secular matters.

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<sup>14</sup> Juergensmeyer (1993) for example argues that after the Cold War, scholarly research shifted its focus away from the bipolar USA/USSR relations to other cultures, providing a new perspective on politics and its relation to religion. Recently, academic connections between religion and nationalism, terrorism, democracy, and fundamentalism have emphasized the increasing significant role of considered non-state actors in modern societies (May et al., 2014, p. 341).

### 3.2 The post-secular

One relevant perspective to nuance the categorizing understanding of religious traditions and organizations in relation to politics in the European region has been provided through studies of international relations, introducing the post-secular. Following Habermas' (2006) formulation, the post-secular is primarily applied as a descriptive term that aims to explain the simultaneous decline of social significance of religious institutions, actions, and consciousness on the one hand and the increasing presence of religion in public life on the other (Wilson, 2014, p. 353; Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009, p. 301). In this attempt, the post-secular criticizes the idea of the normative distinction of the religious and secular. Wilson (2014) demonstrates the relevance of this criticism, identifying a broader development visible in contemporary societies where religious traditions experience a growing acceptance and support as significant promoters of the wellbeing of the public and consequently gain more sovereignty on political legitimacy. She clarifies:

Spiritual, metaphysical, and transcendent worldviews, I suggest, are gaining ground as forms of political activism and as means for challenging the power and legitimacy of the state (and indeed other dominant forms of power in contemporary global politics, such as transnational corporations), but this does not necessarily come at the expense of more immanent, physical worldviews. Rather, these differently grounded actors and discourses are finding new ways of working together in order to challenge dominant paradigms of oppression and exclusion. (Wilson, 2014, p. 354)

She explains that the worldviews and actions of religious actors “are necessarily embedded in these multiple scales, because they are engaged with local populations, yet exist in transnational networks, affected by national, regional and global decision-making bodies, international trade and political dynamics” (Wilson 2014, p. 350). Other than simply the idea of a resurgence of religion, the post-secular thus provides a graduated perspective on religion and politics and acknowledges that in our current globalized world, religious worldviews, and actions, practiced by religious actors are not excluded *from*, but are rather highly embedded *in* multiple scalar dynamics which cover and merge both the public and private realm (Wilson, 2014, p. 350; May et al., 2014, p. 336).

However progressive this idea may sound, Ziebertz & Riegel (2009) point out that despite its critique of the secular bias, the post-secular is still formulated through the concept of secularism, complicating a complete dissociation from a secularist analysis. Wilson (2014) additionally warns of the fact that self-identified religious actors tend to interpret what is public or private, what are

political or religious activities, within a secularist framework of understanding. She argues that in this way,

[t]he religious/secular divide both produces and is produced by self-identified faith-based actors and serves to confine, restrict and separate certain actions from others. As such, it represents a limited conception of what both the political and the religious are. It implies a view of the political as purely concerned with the day-to-day activities of the state, with policy and with elections and party politics. (Wilson, 2014, p. 358)

In addition, formulated by the scholarly agenda of international relations, post-secularism tends to hold a state-focused interpretation of religion and politics (Wilson, 2014, p. 350). Consequently, the conception of religious actors in post-secular analysis refers to religious organizations and institutions, indicating an institutional differentiation between the private and public, just as the secularization thesis dictates. Although acknowledging the growing presence of transcendent worldviews, post-secular analysis of religious actors such as formulated by Clarke (2006) understands self-identified faith-based actors mainly as organizations and overlooks the role of the individual experience of the religious actor. The same critique can be raised for Haynes and Henning's (2011) post-secular analysis of religious actors in the public sphere in the European region. Even though they develop that there are more than only the considered traditional religious actors such as Christian churches or religious parties as types of religious entities in the public sphere, the religious actor as an individual remains largely undiscussed. At the same time, as Ziebertz & Riegel (2009, p. 294) suggest, it is in the individual experience of religious actors, such as church representatives and congregation members, where the ambivalence of the identified simultaneous decline and increase of religion's social significance and their related secular categorizations is mostly experienced.

### 3.3 Migration and religion

One relevant field of research in which the boundaries between the secular and the religious are contested is in the context of refugee, migration, and displacement issues. A dominant narrative on migrants and migration in host countries of the Global North is described by various scholars as the *securitization of migration*.<sup>15</sup> During the past twenty years, contemporary state policies on foreign and immigration issues have been articulated based on the principle of security. Through this

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Buzan et al. (1998) for a discursive analysis on the securitization of migration and Balzacq (2005) for an analysis including non-discursive practices of the securitization of migration. For an analysis on the securitization of migration in Europe, Ceyhan and Tsoukala (2002) and Huysmans (2000) provide detailed studies.

language, migration became structurally framed as a danger to the stability of the democratic nation state (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016, p. 254).<sup>16</sup> Wilson and Mavelli (2016) argue that in contemporary Western societies, one can identify an increasing number of religious actors that object to this narrative:

This “demonizing” of migrants by political elites goes against the central tenets by which many of the religious actors involved in the migration sector operate and thus generates a significant conflict of values for religious actors who want to be at the frontline of government responses to forced and irregular migrants while at the same time not wanting to compromise their own principles. (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016, p. 265)

In their objection, religious actors who engage in migration and humanitarian aid advocate a behavior grounded in religious narratives and duties and a rhetoric of humanitarianism (Wilson 2014, p. 354). In this regard, Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2011) and Ensor (2003) warn of the pitfall of what is called *disaster Evangelism* in which one can recognize an underlying power structure in humanitarian aid where religious actors tend to proselytize and convert people who are in powerless, vulnerable circumstances. This phenomenon has subsequently fueled skeptical attitudes of (inter-)governmental, non-governmental, and other secular actors toward the motivations of religious actors in the fields of migration and refugee work (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016, p. 267). Wilson & Mavelli (2016, p. 274) explain that this secularist skeptical framing may result in a dichotomous categorization of religion as “good” or “bad”. Here, religion is considered good once it contributes to the democratic, neoliberal values of the state, such as individualism, modesty, and privacy, resonating with the traits of modern Protestantism. Religion is considered bad if it is said to conflict with these secular agendas and expectations, drawing upon collective, visible aspects of religion (Wilson, 2014; Casanova, 2011). The secularist bias of bad and good religion relates to Casanova’s idea of *Europe’s Fear of Religion* (2015), in which he argues that the image of bad religion in Europe perpetuates through the demonization, or securitization, of migrants and their assumed religious tradition. Embedded in a rhetoric of security, secularization, and privatization, religion, Casanova (2015) argues, whether understood as traditionally Protestant or connoted with migration, becomes discursively framed as intolerant, irrational, and a private matter in the European context.

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson and Mavelli (2016) explain that the securitization of migration results from a type reasoning that tries to reconcile evil and suffering in a democratic society. Through this reasoning, called sociodicy, state authorities and host countries justify the suffering of migrants by constructing them holding personal responsibility for the dangers they face on their getaway, legitimizing passive behavior toward refugees.

### 3.4 Church asylum actors: religious individuals active in migration work

The rhetoric on the religious and the secular of the past twenty years sets a clear frame in which the work of religious actors and religious worldviews in refugee and migration work are understood. In her work *Religious Humanitarianism and the Global Politics of Secularism*, Cecelia Lynch (2011) explains that this framework is part of greater international developments such as the liberalization of politics and globalization which have led religious organizations, among civil society actors, to be expected to take on tasks that were previously thought to belong to the state. This growing visibility and appreciation of religious actors in considered political issues of policy and regulation primarily applies to those who engage in humanitarian and social work that promotes human flourishing. These actors provide healthcare and disaster relief to people in need under harsh conditions, for example to migrants suffering under the hopelessness of systematic oppression (Lynch, 2011, p. 208). Wilson (2014, p. 350) elaborates that it is through the work of self-identified faith-based actors active in the asylum, displacement, and refugee sector that the rolling back of the divide between the religious and the secular becomes even more apparent. This can be explained through the ambivalent meaning of humanitarianism, which touches both on political and religious convictions. While engaging in humanitarian practice based on religious convictions, religious actors both address political and religious aspirations and emphasize the ambivalence of the secular/religious divide of the post-secular age (Lynch, 2011, pp. 207–208). Another explanation may be the multi-layered embedding of religious worldviews and actions that religious actors in the migration sector are confronted with, such as international migration networks, national refugee policies, and local humanitarian aid, as earlier quoted by Wilson (2014, p. 350). Lynch (2011, p. 221) explains that it is thus through the actions of the religious actor in humanitarian and refugee work that the tension of the categorizing thought on the religious and secular is experienced. If we zoom in on this humanitarian aid practice by religious actors in the host country, Wilson and Mavelli (2016) have argued that:

In these contexts, religious actors provide social support in the form of a community to belong to and build networks, alongside vital services, such as housing, furniture, assistance with applications for residency and/or refugee status, language classes, healthcare, education, and food services, often stepping in to fill gaps left by the increasing privatization and neo liberalization of government services. (p. 270)



This “filling of gaps” through social support by religious actors, I argue, can be identified in the practice of church asylum in Germany as a host country. Articulated as a last, legitimate attempt of Christian congregations to assist refugees threatened with deportation and aim toward a renewed, careful examination of their asylum application, inspired by historical, theological-ethical considerations (Just, 1993; Lob-Hüdepohl, 2003; Morgenstern, 2003), it may be said that sanctuary actors who engage in church asylum show an example of the mentioned shifting responsibility for migrants from the state to religious actors and communities. Research has shown that religious actors in migration practice do not only challenge the notion of what constitutes a state, and what a religious issue (Lynch, 2011), but also the legitimacy of the state (Wilson, 2014). As Ziebertz and Riegel (2009), Lynch (2011), and Wilson (2014) have indicated, it is the individual experience of the religious actor where the ambivalence of these contingent conceptions of the religious and secular are mirrored.

Set against this theoretical framework, the study turns to church representatives and congregation members who work in church asylum. Building on the scholarly identified growing visibility of religious actors in the sector of refugee and migration work, this research considers sanctuary actors as a relevant case of religious individuals to explore the ambivalent situation where different perceptions of the role of religion and religious actors in the political or “secular” realm meet, by investigating their personal views on the implications of their engagement.

## **4. RESEARCH METHOD AND PROCESS**

The study investigates the positioning of church asylum actors as they reflect on the implications of their involvement in church asylum practice in Germany. The explorative nature of the research question emphasizes the religious actors' subjective experiences, suggesting a phenomenological epistemology. As the analysis considers the practice of church asylum meaningful to the individual's self-understanding, it has an interpretative character (Bryman, 2001, pp. 30–33). Finally, the research question carries the fundamental assumption of religious actors to be subject to the conceptions of the religious and the secular, arguing for a constructivist ontology. From these considerations, this research uses a qualitative approach, reflected in the research design, method, and process, as described in this chapter.

### **4.1 Research design**

To locate the religious actors' experiences, the research introduces sanctuary actors engaged in church asylum practice from the summer of 2018 until the winter of 2020 in the region Berlin-Brandenburg as a representative type of case study (Bryman, 2001, p. 70). The BAMF's reinterpretation of the fugitive status of migrants in church asylum was announced in August 2018 and officially lifted in December 2020. Since this policy change has been recognized to have severely affected the local experiences of church asylum workers and to have addressed questions on the role of religious actors in public life and the political space, the case study focused on this specific timeframe. The case study's regional focus on the area Berlin-Brandenburg rests upon different arguments. The first is the region's argued low rate of religiosity and disputed political significance of religion (Pickel, 2013; Hafner et al., 2018). Moreover, the relatively high number of church asylum cases in Berlin-Brandenburg during the research period increased the chances of finding respondents with a matching profile.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, pragmatic reasons like proximity and direct contacts also supported the case study's regional focus.

### **4.2 Research method**

More recent (under)graduate research on church asylum that discussed congregation members' personal experiences and reflections on church asylum practice (Krannich, 2006; Müller, 2007) has proven helpful when data was collected in a structured manner, while at the same time being mindful to leave room for personal stories and explanations. This acknowledgement argued for a

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<sup>17</sup> In May 2021, 36 of the 323 listed church asylum cases were registered in Berlin-Brandenburg (BAG, 2021; Asyl in der Kirche Berlin-Brandenburg, 2022).

research methodology of semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2001, p. 471). Semi-structured one-on-one interviews proved the most efficient method to respect the balance between research-specific questions on the one hand and allowance for personal reflections on the other (Müller, 2007, p. 7). Considering the national lockdown in Germany due to the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of data collection, individual interviews provided the most convenient and safe research method for both parties.

#### **4.3 Population group and recruitment**

The research population included religious individuals who engaged in church asylum during the deadline extension of Dublin III church asylum cases. The strict selection criteria for the respondents were therefore 1) individuals who considered themselves religious and 2) who were active in church asylum during the period 2018–2020. Additionally, only respondents active in church asylum in Berlin-Brandenburg were recruited. The population recruitment kicked off through contacts at the BAG Asyl in der Kirche in Berlin. The efficient and personal snowball sampling that followed highlighted the dense network of church representatives and congregations active in church asylum in the region.

As a result of the successful sampling, the study eventually recruited nine interviewees. Six of these respondents have offered church asylum before and after the 2018–2020 timeframe, varying from just one to more than thirty times. In contrast to the objectives to recruit a balanced population group based on religious denomination, it turned out all respondents considered themselves Protestant. In hindsight, this could have been expected, as the number of Protestant church members in the federal state of Berlin is almost double the number of Catholic members. For Brandenburg, the figure is four times as many (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung [BpB], 2020). Other explanations might have been the overrepresentation of Protestant congregations in civil society in general, which is argued to be rooted in the denominations' different interpretations of their relation to the state (Jäger, 2019, pp. 132–134). Four of the respondents were pastors, one a pastor in education (vicar), two respondents were retired, one unemployed, and one was a social worker and parish deaconess. Six women and three men were interviewed; six of the respondents were aged 50 or older and three were in their thirties. Due to practical constraints, two of the Brandenburg interview sessions were conducted in pairs, leading to six representatives from Brandenburg and three from Berlin. To protect the identity of the respondents and the sheltered migrants, all person and most geographical names have been anonymized.

#### **4.4 Research process**

The data collection was divided into two phases. The first phase included several exploratory conversations with representatives of the BAG, to gain relevant technical insights on the general structure of church asylum work, the network itself, and the actualities related to church asylum in the region Berlin-Brandenburg. The interviews of the first phase took place from April to the beginning of June 2021 and included five interviews with six respondents. Simultaneously, two online information nights of the BAG were visited, providing valuable notes and a network with key contacts. After analyzing the first five interviews, the second phase of two interviews with three respondents was executed by the end of July 2021. The respondents of the second round were all recruited via previous conversations, again highlighting the tight network of church asylum actors and congregations in the region.

The break of data collection in June–July was foremost implemented to enable transcribing, coding, and summarizing the first data. Thanks to this first analytical phase, certain themes, topics, and patterns could already be identified during data collection (Kuckartz, 2018, pp. 95–96). This enabled the fine-tuning of the structure of the interview and formulating some preliminary findings. During both data collection phases, the structure of the interviews remained the same.

#### **4.5 Language and Zoom video call**

Due to the COVID-19 lockdown in Germany, five of the seven interviews were conducted through video calls on Zoom, a cloud-based videoconferencing service. As acknowledged by Archibald et al. (2019), convenience in terms of time, distance, secure storage, and costs were additional arguments for this service. Negative effects of this tool such as technical issues and poor sound and video quality did occur, but positive outcomes overruled, such as its user-friendly and inclusive setup and close-up recording. The latter facilitated an interpersonal connection, helping to respond more easily to nonverbal communications of the respondents and increasing the possibility for the collection of rich data (Archibald et al., 2019, p. 4). One negative effect of Zoom was the limitation of a spatial impression of the respondents' actual working area, as it set a rather distant format. A longer introduction provided a solution but led to the interviews lasting longer than planned. The personal visits to the congregations in contrast provided context to the respondent's stories and helped to formulate targeted questions. It might be because of this reason that the richest interviews were those conducted in person.

Despite being a non-native speaker, I conducted the interviews in German, with positive effects. First, speaking in German provided space for the participants to express themselves freely, which increased the possibilities of rich data (Davidsson Bremborg, 2011). Additionally, awareness of this matter created a thoughtful atmosphere in the conversations, which resulted in long, in-depth conversations. Since the respondents were aware of the different mother tongues, they would occasionally pause and check to see if everything said was understood and would happily repeat if required. In this regard, it also provided a legitimate argument to ask for clarification or examples. To protect the readability and accessibility of this study, all respondents' quotes are translated from German into English. Occasionally, the original text is added in brackets, to avoid misinterpretations of the original phrasing.

#### 4.6 Operationalization

For the operationalization of the research question, a differentiation between concepts, dimensions, and indicators was applied. The starting point included the two main concepts of the research question: the *implications* of sanctuary and the *positioning* of church asylum actors toward these. Identifying the latter concept, church asylum actors' *self-understanding* of their involvement in sanctuary work was investigated. This was mapped out through two dimensions. They inquired indicators on the respondent's *motivation* to engage in church asylum (religious references, objection of securitization of migration narrative) – which follows from research by Lob-Hüdepohl (2003) and Wilson and Mavelli (2016) – and their understanding of the *meaning* of church asylum (sanctuary tradition, *ultima ratio*, state criticism, manifestation of theological-ethical convictions) – based on findings by Just (1993), Lob-Hüdepohl (2003), and Morgenstern (2003). Then, the concept of implications was operationalized by exploring which *consequences*, *complications*, and *challenges* the respondents identified as harming the *goal* of their church asylum engagement. Therefore, the interview questions examined the goal of church asylum as formulated by the respondents, asking for indicators on the effectiveness of church asylum, its visibility, and publicity. Relevant implications of church asylum that served as indicators in the interview were the question on civil disobedience (Morgenstern, 2003), disaster evangelism (Ensor, 2003; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011), the Christian Church's status as *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* (Casanova, 2011) and the securitization of migration (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016).

Subsequently, the concept *positioning* was then indicated by mapping out the context against which the respondents reflect on their position. This was done by inquiring indicators that follow from the research of Lynch (2011), Wilson (2014), and Wilson and Mavelli (2016) on religious

humanitarianism in the refugee sector. These include educative, spiritual, and administrative support, social networking, and the promotion of human flourishing of others, as actions to fill the voids left by the host country (Lynch, 2011). Another indicator that served to explore the respondent's explanations of the implications was their assessment of the social-political framework in which they operate. To examine this, the interview inquired about indicators on social-political images on religion, church, and church asylum, which have been argued as relevant in the recent history of church asylum in Germany (Dublin III Regulation, increase of migration in 2015, the 2015 agreement on the tolerated status of church asylum) (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2021; BMI, 2015). Asking for these indicators enabled the church asylum actors' faced implications and their self-reflections to be located against the background of the Dublin III deportation deadline adjustments.

#### **4.7 Data processing and analysis**

To serve the explorative nature of the research question, the data were processed through qualitative content analysis as described by Kuckartz (2018). Its method of complete coding of the transcribed research data enabled identifying initially invisible codes and themes, including these in the analysis process and consequently connecting them to the research question (Kuckartz, 2018, pp. 64 & 82). This iterative character of this type of analysis aligned with the two-phased structure of the research process, allowing for interaction and adjustment between research question, data, and analysis (Kuckartz, 2018, pp. 4546).

#### **4.8 Ethical considerations**

Regarding ethical considerations, prior attention was given to the danger of the categorizing secular narrative slipping into the research's vocabulary. As Asad's (1993) conceptualization emphasizes, the religious and the secular and their related binary categorizations are highly context-dependent concepts and have diverse meanings. Caution to the risk of categorizing language is reflected in the direction of the research question, as its explicit focus on the personal experience of the respondents allows for subjective reflections.

Further ethical considerations concerned the safety and anonymity of the respondents and sheltered migrants. In the past years, the latest case in February 2022, clergy people mostly from Bavaria offering church asylum have been put under preliminary investigation or were fined (Süddeutsche Zeitung, 2022). In this context, together with the mentioned critique toward church asylum as a tolerated phenomenon, "sharia practice", and other migrant- and church-skeptical attitudes, the anonymity of the respondents and their congregations has been prioritized.

## **5. RESULTS**

This chapter discusses the most relevant outcomes of the semi-structured interviews. Exploring the research question on the positioning of church asylum actors as they reflect on the implications of their involvement exposed three different areas in which the respondents identified the implications: the personal, the institutional, and the societal. The results below illustrate how the challenges on each level come to life in the reflections of the respondents and show that these implications and related positionings are strongly connected rather than isolated from each other. To support this, the first section of the results discusses the respondents' understandings of the meaning and goal of church asylum. Against the background of these definitions, the sections that follow explore the experienced implications and self-reflections of the respondents. Following the data, the question on publicity turned out relevant in the respondents' reflections on the implications. The chapter therefore concludes by interpreting the respondents' positioning regarding publicity.

### **5.1 The meaning and goal of church asylum**

The study shows that the positioning of the respondents with respect to the implications of their involvement in church asylum is rooted in what they formulate as the meaning and goal of their work. This remark arises from a comprehensive reflection on the procedure of most interviews. In the explorative phase of the interview, respondents identified their role, background, and motivations. These topics were directly linked to their personal understanding of the goal and meaning of church asylum. Setting the framework of these two aspects subsequently paved the way to, at a later stage of the interview, dive deeper into how these understandings are harmed or strengthened and cause complications.

When asking how the respondents see the future of church asylum, one repeating answer was the following: "I wish for [church asylum] to eventually no longer be necessary. That is the ultimate goal" (Ella, aged 65). In most interviews, the respondents related this reasoning to the Christian virtue of protection and equal treatment of strangers and the weak. That is, in general, they formulated the goal of church asylum as to provide perspective to a person's life, by encountering the migrant as a mutual individual and assess their situation in a humane, just, and respectful manner. When asking the respondents to specify under which circumstances they feel this goal is threatened, they turned their criticism to national and international politics that bring migrants into a problematic situation. Rather than a direct criticism of the state in general, five respondents identified the international Dublin Regulation and the national bureaucratic processes of the BAMF as problematic reasons that

harm the integrity of migrants and conflicts with their Christian virtue of love to strangers: “Well, I would say: ‘There is a very, very, very, very big deficit in the Dublin Regulation.’ That is the way it is” – words spoken by Anna, a Berlin pastor who has been active in church asylum practices since 2016.

The critique of both national and international asylum policies as a motivation to engage in church asylum is reflected in what four respondents defined as the meaning of church asylum practice. To them, church asylum means a provocation or reminder toward the state of its own responsibility to take up the asylum procedure in the context of the Dublin Regulation (*Selbsteintrittsrecht*): “To me, church asylum is the reminder. It is a bit of reminding the state of its own promises” said Fritz, a 39-year-old pastor. At the same time, as most other respondents confirmed too, they also define church asylum as an evaluation of the individual hardship case of the individual (*Einzelfall*): “First of all, it really is about making sure that these [sanctuary actors] are people who acknowledge the individual person” (Cyrill, vicar, aged 31). The respondents thus define the meaning of church asylum as somewhere between a provocation or reminder of the policy duties of the German government and individual-focused help. Though these two aspects might seem hard to unite at first, some respondents explained they are inevitably connected: to understanding the migrant as an individual case who deserves humane treatment, as Christian virtue demands, inevitably means reminding the German authorities to act according to the Dublin Regulation, that is, to evaluate the hardship cases of each migrant individually and justly:

The purpose of church asylum is to say: ‘Germany, here is a person, a family, where we say: if this person is deported to Sweden or Austria, wherever, we know that they [will be deported] to their home country – and we see a danger in that. We ask you, Germany, according to the Dublin Regulation, [...] there is a right to say: I [exercise] my *Selbsteintrittsrecht*. Since we see: woah, this is such a need, we acknowledge it.’ (Anna)

The respondents thus expressed two elements to describe their understanding of the meaning of church asylum: that of helping the individual on the one hand and of critically evaluating the decisions of national and international asylum policies on the other. For the respondents, motivated by the religiously inspired goal to provide perspective to those equal to you in need, the urgency and danger of the individual hardship case of the migrant thus inevitably leads church asylum to mean a reminder for the state of its duties toward migrants. It is important to distinguish these two meanings, as the conversations with the respondents illustrated these meanings to interact with



and impact their experienced challenges and consequent positioning. This will be illustrated in the sections below.

## **5.2 Personal implications: Christian duty, individual biographies, and criticizing asylum policy**

The identified meaning of church asylum as both protection of the individual and critical assessment of asylum policies resonated in the respondents' motivations to engage in church asylum work. One important finding here are the respondents' diverse motivations that follow from individual biographies and personal understandings of being Christian.

Regarding the respondents' biographies, two respondents have expressed that their intercultural background of patchwork families is a fundamental reason for them to feel so closely related and responsible to strangers, migrants, and marginalized communities: "There are several motivations. First, I also come from a family with an immigrant background [...]. And because of that, I have always experienced in my family that my parents have helped many other people", said Isa, a young pastor based in Brandenburg. Building on the meaning of church asylum to remind the state of its duties, two respondents mention how their experience of growing up in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) provided them with a state-critical perspective, like the 50-year-old Anna: "If you ask me personally, it is a total motivational thing for me: civil courage. To say: 'No, if laws are not good, then you have to act against them.' Otherwise, the GDR would still exist if it had not been done back then." The GDR history also affected the respondents' theological aspirations, as a state-independent degree in theology provided them a way out of the GDR education system and to find their voice in German society:

I wanted to study theology in the GDR era [...] not because it was important to me to do politics, but because it felt right for me to be able to change something in the church, in the political conditions or in the social conditions. I knew: 'I have the freedom and opportunities to reach people and help them, or to change something for all of us, which I don't have in other areas.' (Gesina, aged 56)

As some respondents explain, theological reasoning and biblical references provided them with a frame of reference, which builds the foundation of their involvement in church asylum. Theological in the sense of referring to the history of sanctuary and its sacred position in society: "That is an ancient tradition which exists in other cultures and religions too, that one is safe in the sacred and

the holy place” (Heike, aged 54), but also in the sense of having a framework outside that of the modern constitution, which provides guidance, answers, and a possible critical view on the actualities of society:

And even in the GDR era, it was always important for me to say: ‘Well, that is what the state says and that is what the Bible says.’ It is basically a good correction sometimes. That when I try to compare, when I simply know: ‘I will look again, what does the Bible actually say about this topic?’ (Gesina)

The personal experience of growing up in the GDR thus inevitably led some of the respondents to be intrinsically state critical, strengthened by the theological framework of the Bible. The most frequently mentioned critique directed toward the state which the respondents brought to the fore is the violation of the safety and dignity of migrants due to the strict bureaucratic asylum policies. To some respondents, this critique developed from a universal and inclusive understanding of humankind, grounded in the religious conviction that all human beings are children of God:

We are all human beings and that is, that is actually: citizens of this world, yes?  
Because we are children of God, no matter how we, where we live and who we are.  
And also of which faith we are, we are somehow all still children of God. (Heike)

Three respondents translated this religious conviction into a sense of togetherness, responsibility, and peace work toward the world community: “And in this respect, this commitment to peaceful coexistence is for me also one of the foundations of my Christian faith. And I would say that refugee work is also always peace work, because that is the way it is”, says David, a retired supportive circle volunteer based in Brandenburg. Another motivation closely related to this was addressed by five of the respondents as the Christian duty to treat your neighbors how you wish to be treated and protect them against harm:

That is, I think, the prior task of churches. [...] If one for example looks at charity (*Nächstenliebe*), that is actually the most important thing. One says: ‘The most important commandment is, if I respect God and act according to his words, that I then devote the same attention to people and take them seriously and take care of people just as I take care of myself’, yes? (Gesina)

This understanding of Christian duty to help others in need resonated throughout the conversations. Closely related to the formulated goal and future of church asylum work, four respondents explained the expression of the religious duty of caring for others in need is and should be a normality among Christians. Ella, a retired voluntary teacher who was active in a church asylum case in Brandenburg, for example clarifies: “And for the future [...] I hope that [...] it will become more self-evident that practically every congregation shall and wants to prepare itself to carry out asylums. That this will become self-evident, that is what I wish for.” Heike, active as a member of the supportive circle of a Brandenburg church asylum case, adds: “From my point of view, it is an ecclesial mission, because there I live this universality that God is for me.” Following the respondents’ reasoning, the self-evidence to support others in need is embedded in Christian ethos and makes church asylum practice a duty: “The faith commits” (Ella). Four other respondents mentioned this too, for example the Brandenburg-based pastor Fritz:

And that is how I understand the blessing we say in every service: ‘Lord, bless you and keep you (*Herr segne und behüte dich*)’, which means: ‘Walk in protection, live under the protection of God.’ And I think that is our task, to make sure that there where people want to live together peacefully, that they can also live under protection and not be criminalized and deported.

The Christian-motivated sentiment to define the individual in need and provide targeted care for the individual case was however not celebrated by all respondents. Even though the respondents formulated individual-focused help as a meaning of church asylum, four respondents criticized the slogan of this idea as expressed by the BAG, *der Einzelfall zählt* (the individual case counts), most vehemently by Cyrill, a young pastor in education based in Brandenburg:

That is somehow what is understandable and makes sense, to somehow also frame the work in this way. And at the same time, what I often experience on the fringes [...] in our congregation, this reinforces this diaconal thinking of: ‘Okay, this one person is in a really bad state, and we are supporting him now’ and I find that somehow problematic.

Thus, to some respondents, thinking in strong diaconic terms to specifically help the “weak” individual might remind the state of its duties, but in its practical form creates a situation in which the diaconal ethos might take away the agency of the migrant.

The conversations thus showed that the personal motivation of the respondents to help others in need is grounded in their individual biographies and varies from growing up in multicultural families, in the GDR, and their individual understanding of being Christian. One of the most significant implications that comes with this has been formulated by some respondents as the double loyalty to the democratic state and the Bible. While three of the respondents positioned themselves in this question loyal to Jesus – “And I would actually say that as Christians, we are in the first place responsible only to Jesus and then perhaps also to the state” (Fritz) and “For example, I do not want to prioritize this loyalty to the state, instead I am primarily responsible to God” (Isa) – others seemed to argue juridically, and not theologically, when positioning themselves critically toward the state’s asylum policy. Beate, active member of her Berlin church’s parish council and experienced sanctuary volunteer, for example argues that knowing that church asylum practice is *de facto* legally tolerated relativizes for her the question of conflicting loyalties, since it is not necessarily an illegal practice:

It is also religiously motivated that I have such a strong belief in [...] this justice, that I actually do not consider myself subject to the applicable laws, because it is such a gray zone. It is actually not this– this law that allows it and there is also not the law that prohibits it. It is just such a gray zone, like that. (Beate)

In the end, the Christian duty of *Nächstenliebe* provided the respondents two frameworks in which they located their involvement in church asylum. First, it sets the duty to help others, the weak and the stranger. Second, it provides a setting in which state structures and policies around migration can be criticized. On the personal level, religious motivations therefore trigger a moral implication for the individuals engaged in church asylum: the religiously motivated, to them Christian, drive to help others in need might complicate not only the relationship of moral loyalty to the constitution and Jesus, but also to that of the migrant. At the same time, the solution to this as suggested by most respondents was in fact religious too: to be Christian is to have access to a biblical frame of reference, which allows for a parallel framework of arguing and criticism toward state policies. The personal background of the GDR and multicultural biographies provided a background against which these thoughts were articulated as either criticisms of state policies or often religiously motivated altruism.

### 5.3 Institutional implications: the church and the BAMF

This section describes the institutional dimension of the respondents' experienced implications of church asylum and how they position themselves in this field. In their reflections, the respondents identified two main active institutional actors: the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge and the Evangelical Church as an organization. All respondents granted church asylum support during the period in which changes in national politics concerning the application of the Dublin Regulation in some way affected their practice of church asylum. For example, three respondents noted that the changing policies marked a shift in communication and collaboration between the church and the BAMF, where the reassessed asylum applications written by church asylum actors were continuously declined by the BAMF. This led four respondents to not feel taken seriously anymore: "If you have the feeling: 'No matter what you write, you are not even listened to anymore', then at some point you just feel screwed" (Beate, aged 52). Anna, who has been engaged in a larger number of church asylum cases in Berlin, adds:

A big frustration was also that we made a lot of effort with this dossier. [...] And no matter what we wrote, there was always a rejection. So that we almost thought to ourselves: 'Ey, we can also write three lines.' (Anna)

For Fritz, this even brought him into the situation where state authorities challenged his integrity as a pastor, undermining his religious identity: "[Then suddenly] the judge of the administrative court [...]tells me: 'You know yourself that nowadays religion is a private matter, is no longer so important?'" He concluded from this that "what the state is doing is lavishing and undermining church asylum at the same time. Permanently. From my point of view." He was not alone with this thought. Some respondents mentioned they consciously changed their communication tactics with the BAMF and now anticipate the discrediting answers to their hardship applications by interpreting the bureaucratic process between the BAMF and the church as a game: "At some point I started to see it like a game" (Beate). Because of this continuous undermining of sanctuary actors by the BAMF, Fritz even started to consider offering hidden asylum, prioritizing the meaning of church asylum as individual case support above that as state provocation:

In any case, I do not know if that is true, but I have the feeling [that it] is no longer being read. I have every now and then also had the question whether it is now, so to speak, meaningful to make this completely public, or whether one simply

withdraws the families for half a year from the state authorities, so that they can then make a new application again. (Fritz)

Moreover, the changes of national politics regarding the use of the Dublin Regulation caused various complications for the respondents. Most mentioned were the financial difficulties, but also the pressure on emotional, time, and practical capacities were addressed by most participants. Reflecting on these challenges, the respondents said it highlighted the importance of supporting the refugees in church asylum even more. This was either because the emergency reasons for them to be sheltered in the church did not change a bit after the extension of the deportation deadline, as pastor Anna explains:

This was not so much because we wanted to say from the beginning: ‘We will show you that we are right’, which was perhaps the case with the lawyers. But because we said: ‘The need why people apply for this is just as pressing, and the time dimension should not be an exclusion criterion for us.’

Or because it worsened the mental, ethical, and health situation of the refugees even more, calling upon the Christian motivation to help others in need. Pastor Isa also mentioned it encouraged her to look for the advantages of an extended church asylum: “The advantage is that those [...] who were then also lucky [...] to find many contacts during this time in church asylum, really supporting contacts, so that they could learn German properly.”

Another implication on the institutional level that turned out relevant in the respondents’ reflection is the privileged position of the Christian Churches in Germany. Respondents have mentioned that on the one hand, it enables the church to execute church asylum, on the other it violates the idea of equality and freedom from religion in the democratic state. Except for two respondents living in Brandenburg, interviewed as a pair, who said they experience the privilege as something positive:

We also experience it as something positive, that is quite clear, if one has of course also the encroachment [...] [to cooperate with] the church community, and also those who are on the same page. That is already important. A positive pulse results from it. (David)

Most of the respondents acknowledged having difficulties expressing their position when reflecting on the privilege of the church. Illustrative for this is the young vicar’s quote below:

Here, two hearts beat in my chest (*zwei Herzen schlagen in meiner Brust*). [...] Now, as a church-thinking person, I find that– theologically I find that totally great that we can offer shelters. But as a democratically thinking person, I would also say at the same time that they really should not have to, that this privilege should not really be granted to the Church. That is, with this contradiction I am still on it, like that. (Cyrill)

The privilege of the Christian Church to take its space in German society to express church asylum was for some respondents thus hard to deal with and resulted in different responses. Together with two other respondents, Cyrill for example emphasized that the privilege can only be accepted when it is explicitly instrumentalized for a solidarity cause, using the infrastructure of the Evangelical Church: “I think it is good when infrastructure that is there can be used by as many people as possible and can be used effectively.” Pensioner David explains: “I think it is important that we as a church show solidarity and make possible what is possible.” Alternatively, five respondents approached it rather from a cost/benefit perspective, emphasizing the effectiveness of one single church asylum on a person’s life:

But in the meantime, I find, even if I sometimes compare the cost calculation to what it actually brings [...], that giving a human life a security, somehow giving a person a new perspective and not leaving them alone [...], that it is worth more than the thousands of euros that of course also have to be financed there. (Gesina)

According to them, this opportunity of delivering an existential contribution overshadowed the issue of the privileged position of the church: “And then you realize: ‘Wow! My actions have an existential impact on people!’”, thoughts shared by Heike, the parish deaconess of a Brandenburg congregation. Supportive circle member Beate continues: “That was the most fulfilling thing for me in this whole framework of work with refugees, to really be able to do something with church asylum, something that really makes a difference.”

Summarizing, the implications of the respondents’ involvement in church asylum experienced on institutional matters include firstly the rigid bureaucratization of communication between state authorities and church representatives, leading the respondents to regard it as simply a game or to consider providing asylum outside the bureaucratic radar. Moreover, the national politics’ new interpretation of the Dublin Regulation caused the respondents to be strengthened in their

motivation to engage in church asylum, as the unchanged emergency situation of migrants appealed to their Christian, religiously motivated expression of altruism, to help others in need: “I think [the motivation to continue] is the combination. By all means, I would say our priority was definitely Christian, Christian-religious-ethical, yes?” (Anna). For the respondents, changes in the Dublin Regulation thus emphasized the individual-supporting meaning of church asylum. Lastly, the implication on how to deal with the privileged position of the church created positive, avoiding, instrumentalizing, and conflicting responses of the respondents to deal with this.

#### **5.4 Societal implications: the coronavirus pandemic and the image of church, migrants, and church asylum**

The respondents repeatedly related their experiences to societal events around them, or legacies of the past. This section describes the respondents’ experienced implications of their sanctuary work and their positioning toward these in relation to the developments and sentiments they recognized in German society. To begin with, two recent noticeable events in Germany turned out to be relevant in the reflections of all the respondents: the changes in the BAMF execution of the Dublin Regulation and the coronavirus pandemic, hitting Germany in January 2020. In fact, these two events were closely related, as the BAMF used the lockdown of bureaucratic authorities due to the coronavirus as an argument to extend the Dublin deadline: “Then deadlines have been interrupted again by the Covid pandemic” as David, part of the supportive circle of a church asylum in Brandenburg, explains. Ella adds:

In practice it is like this, that they then simply said: ‘It was Covid, this whole thing cannot be processed, it will be interrupted, the Dublin decisions have been interrupted.’ And then it was extended for another six months. And that, you could even object to– that is actually unlawfu.

Additionally, the lockdown situation limited social contact, which complicated one of the most mentioned positive outcomes of church asylum practice: the personal contact and relationship that results from the close work with the migrants. From coffee breaks to cultural nights, Christmas gifts to cooking together: every respondent mentioned feeling enlightened by these shared experiences, and that the lockdown limited this drastically. Personal encounters, stories of friendship or even mother-child-like relations between the respondents and migrants were continuously mentioned and provided a great source of examples: “Church asylums [...] [are] always an enrichment for the community. We are blessed, yes? Jesus once said: ‘I was a stranger and you welcomed me.’ So, hey,



we have a chance to meet Jesus!”, the young pastor Isa explained. If it were for some of the respondents, cross-cultural friendships were the preferred interview topic. In fact, both Heike and Isa even expressed gratitude for their paired interview, as it provided a reflection of these experiences. Due to time and interview structure limitations it remains unknown which further rich examples the respondents could have provided.

Most of the respondents mentioned an increasingly strict attitude of the BAMF toward church asylum practice and a rigid procedure of the evaluation of asylum applications in the last five to ten years. Respondents’ voices from the countryside of Brandenburg clarified this development to be a result of what they described as an underlying “conservative atmosphere” (David, aged 66). The Brandenburg-based respondent Cyrill said he experienced this too: “One is not completely washed over by a right-wing sentiment there, but one senses it just subtextually. And in many other cases, one can work there effectively.” On a broader account, the respondents interpreted these sentiments as skepticism toward migrants, xenophobia (*Fremdenfeindlichkeit*), racism, and nationalism embedded in the colonial, fascist German history and still present in society today: “National socialism, of course. But colonialism too. And yes, just in general, the demarcation of German nationalism. These are all things that are still weighing heavily on society” (Beate). This conservative, xenophobic, racist sentiment which most respondents have said to currently sense in German society sets the context against which they eventually situated the complications they experienced on a societal level.

The first implication of this noticed stranger-critical attitude was for five Brandenburg respondents the fear of external right-wing attacks on the sheltered family. Additionally, four respondents explicitly noticed this underlying conservative sentiment in society to spark a critical, distant, and sometimes even hostile stance from both their congregation and the surrounding region toward church asylum. Many times, when conversing about this specific topic, respondents turned hesitant and contemplative, and whispered when talking. This indicated a sense of discomfort among them when speaking of their congregation members. Even after prompting further explanation, the respondents remained reluctant to share their thoughts, complicating a full understanding of what they were tempted to say. When formulating their responses toward this underlying skepticism, the respondents showed some remarkable differences. Whereas for example the paired interview with the Brandenburg-based respondents Ella and David revealed they found an opportunity to counter xenophobic sentiments in their congregation and regional community through the practice of church asylum, Cyrill condemns the objectification of migrants as a means of widening the horizon of narrow-minded people, something he often recognized around him:

I am somehow by no chance someone who would advocate that through encounters, something would change politically in people [...]. I consider it very problematic. [It] makes people very much into objects, that is, the non-white and say marginalized, somehow it makes them objects of 'Please help me to deal with my narrow-minded worldview.' (Cyrill)

Fritz also said he faced the difficulty of resistance within his congregation toward migrants, and therefore toward church asylum itself: "I have tried to give them [the migrant family] a basis in the community somehow. And it was very difficult, because there was a great skepticism toward strangers in the village and in the congregation." It must be noted that these quotes only come from representatives of congregations in Brandenburg. In Berlin, the respondents experienced a relatively low amount of external and internal resistance toward church asylum. On a broader, societal account, however, the Berlin-based respondents too sensed this – as formulated by Fritz – "skepticism toward strangers". That is, they sensed a structural seclusion toward strangers in the minds of Germans and Europeans:

In any case, it is not possible to say: 'We are rebuilding the wall', which is happening in a certain way at the moment, [...] in Germany, too, of course. I do not mean the old wall, but it is in the heads, and also around Europe. (Gesina)

Pastor Gesina's remark is closely related to another implication the respondents described: the societally dominant perception of migration and migrants, which the respondents recognized both outside and inside the church community. A remarkable way in which this became visible was in the respondents' wording on migration, migrants, and refugees, hesitating and picking their words carefully. Isa explains:

I would say that it is the task of every Christian to make sure that people are much more sensitive in their language. And also, to simply make clear that when people leave their homeland, that they do not do so voluntarily and that you can therefore not assume, like it is done now, that a tsunami, a wave of refugees washes over us.

Isa's last sentence highlights which dominating image most other respondents tried to avoid in their language too: the depiction of migrants as dangerous, a threat to job opportunities, security, and social care, flooding Germany in a big wave: "Through the whole refugee- I, refugee movement- I

always want to say: ‘It is not a refugee crisis, it has rather been a solidarity crisis from our end’, yes?’ (Ella). Some respondents actively countered this criminalizing image of migrants which they identify as problematic in public discourse: “I disapprove of the criminalization of refugees” (Heike). In doing so, it seemed like the interviews provided a platform for the respondents to problematize and counter the negative image of migrants and encourage cautious wording on the topic. This became foremost clear in the respondents’ explicit appreciation of this research taking place and the possibility it allowed them to make the phenomenon of church asylum visible: “I hope that it [this research] will also have an impact somehow. [...] That it also becomes a building block. That it also raises more public awareness that it [church asylum] is an important matter”, says David, who started getting involved in church asylum one year earlier.

Asking the respondents why they feel it is important to bring the work of church asylum to the fore, for example in an interview like this, it appeared that the image they challenged reached beyond the idea of migrants and migration, but also applied to what the respondents experienced as the prevailing image in Germany on the church and consequently on church asylum. After taking a long pause for her thoughts, Beate answered my question:

Well, that it inspires others to do the same [...]. And also, a little bit, maybe to improve the bad image of the church a little bit- well, I think that a large part of society, which is actually critical of the church, but who would find something like this good, would maybe allow for a different, a little bit different, more differentiated view of the church. So that one does not associate something negative with the church, as those that somehow [...] missionize in Africa, or something else, do evil, but that they say: ‘Hey they also do really good things.’ So, I find that quite nice. (Beate)

This self-awareness of the darker pages of the Christian Church’s history is what resonated in other respondents’ reflections too. In fact, it was even experienced by two respondents as the burden and subsequently the duty to deal with this prevailing negative societal image of the church: “Of course, I know that many atrocities were committed in the name of the church, so you always have to consider that” (Beate) and “There, [the church] has made enough mistakes in the past” (pastor Gesina). In contrast to the rather skeptical responses to the idea of church itself, the respondents said to experience mostly excited, encouraging, and surprised reactions to their work in church asylum. Anna for example was once told: “‘Oh! That you people from the church do that, that is super!’ and ‘that is finally a reason to like the church again!’” In her last sentence, Anna provided

one of her considerations to express church asylum: to pave the way and put the church in a positive light. Others confirm: “In my environment, as in, my circle of acquaintances and friends, church asylum is rather the only thing they say is positive about the church”, supportive circle member Cyrill mentioned.

The respondents mentioned the perception of the church to be related to the perception of church asylum. In this regard, four respondents said that in general, the phenomenon of church asylum is unclear or carries prejudices among parish members, society, and the media. Again, the image results from what the respondents described as the colonial and missionary heritage of the Christian Church to “convert” strangers in the name of civilization and humanitarianism, something which they disagreed with: “Well, we do not want to proselytize” (Beate). This urgency to clarify church asylum as by no means a proselytizing practice came to the fore in multiple conversations. Pastor Anna for example explained that she repeatedly rejected the request of migrants that she sheltered in church asylum to convert from Islam to Christianity. Only when it turned out to be a serious wish of the migrants did she perform their baptism. The same can be said for pastor Fritz, who converted various Muslim migrants who came to his parish in Brandenburg, but always under the prerequisite of their intrinsic wish.

Based on this proselytizing image of the church, and thus church asylum, three respondents experienced church asylum and themselves as practitioners specifically to be depicted as a type of “helper syndrome”. From this perspective, church asylum is seen as excessive help which creates a situation of mutual dependency between the helper and the one helped: “There is such a negative. There is this helper syndrome, and our professions are predestined for it. So, these are wonderful helper professions, [...] where a dependency somehow develops, and I find that this becomes somehow unhealthy,” pastor Isa illustrated. Gesina experienced the resonance of this image both within her Berlin congregation and across German society:

To me, it is important that this criticism is countered, that church asylum violates the law and is somehow just a helper syndrome or something. In fact, that really exists, that it is passed on like that. I would really like to work against that. [...] [I experience these prejudices] also in the communities sometimes and in the discussions with the people, yes, also with political dissidents, who are against people who come from another country anyway, especially the conservatives, or right-wing parties. Yes, sometimes even so in the circle of acquaintances, who, when they respond, smile about this: ‘Well, you are a pretty cool one, you make quite the show. Yes, you help the poor.’ (Gesina)

She touches upon a third image of church asylum in German society which at least three other respondents identified too: as unconstitutional and illegitimizing the state. These respondents challenged this image by emphasizing the stabilizing and supportive contribution church asylum provides to Germany's asylum policy processes. Rather than a sabotage of state practices, the respondents argued for a reevaluation of the role of churches in the happening of church asylum: instead of a state-limiting practice, it should be understood as a constitution-supporting practice:

Well, what I wish for the work of Asyl in der Kirche or for those who grant church asylum is that it is not made so difficult for them. That we are not seen as opponents, but as supporters of people. (Heike)

Altogether, the societal implications the respondents identified are centered around three images: that of migrants, of the church, and consequently of church asylum. These perceptions seemed conflicting with their own values (migrants), confronting with their history (church), and contradictory to their own understandings (church asylum). In other words, against the backdrop of the dominating idea of migrants as a threat to society, the church of missionizing doctrinal institution, and of church asylum as a hindrance to state policies, the respondents concluded they had to be self-aware in their wording, their history, and the way they communicate about church asylum. Among the participants, it turned out that speaking about these implications of discrepant perceptions was a way to deal with it:

Because if you say somewhere 'church', then immediately comes this: 'Ühh what is that?!'. But if I say 'church asylum', then comes: 'What is this then?' So, it is at least already something that is not totally just rejected like that, but just verified what it is. (Beate)

This finding relates to one central theme that became visible throughout the conversations: publicity, which is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

## **5.5 Church asylum and publicity**

Publicity emerged as a central theme for the respondents, where they both identified the challenges of their work and formulated responses to these. According to the respondents' explanations, publicity of church asylum can take shape in different forms. For example, it is the decision to have

open communication within the parish on the developments of the current church asylum, it means the public registration of church asylum at the BAMF, which is officially mandatory, or it means actively providing public attention to church asylum work through interviews, television reports, crowdfunding, and cultural events. Closely related to the findings of societal challenges, increasing the visibility of church asylum, such as through interviews, proved to be a useful tool for the respondents when challenging the negative images they experience of the church, migrants, and church asylum itself. However, publicity provided not only a tool, but also a complication. That is, bringing the specific individual church asylum case to the fore might harm the safety of the sheltered migrant: “That was the main question. To what extent do we currently want to talk openly at all about the fact that we have a church asylum here? Or do we then have to fear that the police will be on our doorsteps?”, David asks from experience. Isa adds:

I think it is good when it is public, but there is [...] always a bit of fear [...]: ‘Are we also endangering the church asylum if we [employ] too much the individual church asylum for a political demand?’ I would also separate that more.

Publicity on the existence of a church asylum case thus risks the safety of the sheltered individual. This complicates the reconciliation of the two meanings of church asylum; to remain critical toward asylum policy and to protect the individual. Together with three others, Anna concluded in these situations the individual case should be prioritized above the political statement that church asylum is: “The political is not important to us in individual cases. Or, no, the other way around, not important is not true. The political is not a priority in individual cases (*Das Politische steht für uns im Einzelfall nicht im Vordergrund*)”. Anna’s quote shows that the question on publicity challenges her priorities of church asylum practice, locating the political statement at the backstage and the individual cause at the front of her attention. Pastor Gesina explained the two priorities operate side-by-side, distinguishing two different levels: “So, in this work with refugees, we have always concentrated on saying: ‘Assistance of individual cases, that is daily business and that is our priority.’ But, next to that, there is always the upper level (*obere Ebene*)”. Just as Anna identified the political statement as something which belongs at the backstage of church asylum work, Gesina also identifies a similar “upper level”, which runs parallel to the individual case prioritized work of church asylum. Alongside church asylum practice as individual support, the respondents thus identified a parallel space, or level, where they express their political engagement. It is through targeted activities such as demonstrations, petitions, open letters, and networking with like-minded actors such as Pro Asyl or Bürgerasyl, five of the respondents explained that they had become politically active and were making a political statement: “On the other hand, I write to Mr. Seehofer

or to Mrs. Merkel and say: 'What kind of stupid system are you exercising here? What is this?' Or sign petitions saying: 'The Dublin Regulation III must be adjusted'" (Anna). Experienced church asylum actor Gesina continued: "[At demonstrations] it is sometimes that I think: 'Is this effective now or not?' But, once in a while, I need to know again: 'I am not alone here in this world (*in weitem Raum*).'" "The backstage", or "the upper level", the Berlin pastors Anna and Gesina respectively described illustrate how, according to the respondents, the act of going public and becoming politically vocal is not necessarily church asylum practice: "I am not going to stand somewhere and say: 'Hello! We are sheltering people here!' It is actually not something where you literally go public with currently" (Beate). Rather, public political engagement is something that happens simultaneously, on a different level or stage. The respondents however explained this does not mean church asylum itself does not have a political nature. As Anna puts it, church asylum's existence is intrinsically a critique of the state: "And at the end of the day it is crazy, because the act of church asylum authorized by the state is always, always a criticism of the existing law." According to her, it is thus not she herself as a church asylum actor who expresses critique through the practice of church asylum, it is already in its existence, the critique is present: "Every church asylum is a political statement. Because it says: 'I think it just sucks how you decide', that is so to say, that is it" (Anna). Respondents operative in Brandenburg, Cyrill and David, confirmed too: church asylum in its essence is a signal, a statement, undermining the asylum policies.

The respondents thus differentiated between the political statement of the existence of church asylum, and the parallel level or stage where they become politically vocal. For the respondents, church asylum should thus not be an instrument to become politically vocal: "I think I do not need church asylum to get politically active", retired supportive circle member Ella said. On the contrary, the respondents identified political engagement as the intrinsic duty and meaning of Christian life:

Being political belongs to service, to Christian life. So, if I am a Christian, then there are different areas of activity or impact, so to speak, and they belong together. So, I cannot pray and go to church and read the Bible and hear Jesus say: 'The story of charity says...', or something, and at the same time remain inactive, that's very difficult for me. (Isa)

To practice church asylum is to stand and address the issues where, according to the respondents, Christians should stand for, such as love for your neighbors and the responsibility toward Jesus, with the Bible as a parallel ethical framework of reference. However, to instrumentalize church

asylum to critically address all of this, is not up to church asylum practice, as it harms the individual case. The interview question whether church asylum could be considered a political or religious act was therefore mostly answered as follows:

That is like both. And that is also, that lies in its essence [...]. So, I also see myself as a pastor, I am a pastor, at least professionally and there are many areas that reach into politics. And that is also– that is just the way it is, so, that is through the, like I said, that is the nature of it. (Gesina)

Gesina explains what many other respondents reflected on too. To them, the nature of Christian work is to work politically. By expressing church asylum, the respondents self-evidently expressed an integral part of what they see as the duty of Christian people: to help others in need. And that, according to most respondents, is already political in its essence: “[The role of my Christian faith is] actually just that, yes? That I encounter people who are not doing well, and I have actually heard from Jesus from the Bible: ‘Do not close your eyes, acknowledge this’” (Ella). Parish deaconess and experienced supportive circle volunteer Beate continues:

Exactly, it is religiously motivated political work for sure. But I would also waver. So, it is in some things, it is more a matter of church work and the other, for others, from the point of view of others it is certainly more a political work.

Her quote illustrates that, even though to her church asylum is both political and religious work, she expects external critics to assess it as purely political work. She explained this idea derived from the previous discussed image of church asylum as state intervention and sabotage. In the conversations, however, it turned out that the respondents themselves do not assess church asylum as a political act because of its label as a critical, or “sabotaging”, act. Rather, as mentioned, the existence of church asylum itself is already a political statement: “Our churches are still sacred places to which one can take refuge, and this is also a piece of political statement: ‘Here is a border that shall not be crossed’” (Heike). The conversations have indicated that for the respondents, to converse and express yourself outside church asylum practice, to be religious and stand for your Christian convictions, is to be political.

In the end, the question on publicity turned out a delicate one, where the respondents struggled between aiming for an open conversation about migration, the church, and church asylum, to follow their Christian duty and express their understanding of being religious on the one hand, on the other



hand to prioritize the goal of church asylum and provide perspective to these people, where discretion was often demanded. Identifying two parallel levels in which church asylum actors tend to operate has shown that to them, it is neither through the granting of church asylum itself they considered themselves political, nor through the external images of church asylum as state sabotage. Rather, by positioning themselves as Christian, religious beings, they are political.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets the key findings of the results and formulates answers to the sub-questions and the main research question: how do religious individuals who engage in church asylum position themselves when they reflect on the implications of their involvement? The answer to these questions provides suggestions on how sanctuary actors express their self-understanding in German society and its challenged perceptions of “the religious” and “the secular”. Relating the results to actualities and underexposed topics, the final section of this chapter provides a discussion and outlook for future studies on the role of religious individuals in asylum and displacement aid work.

### 6.1 Conclusion

Set against the happenings of the reinterpretation of the Dublin III Regulation, religious individuals active in church asylum in Germany from 2018 to 2020 faced a broad range of implications and challenges. They vary from the dilemma between conflicting loyalties to Jesus and the democratic state, also discussed by Just (1993) and Morgenstern (2003) as the theological-ethical issue of civil disobedience, the sometimes uncomfortable, yet useful privileged position of the Evangelical Church because of its status as *Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts* (Weiß, 2000), or the sensed xenophobic, racist, and conservative sentiments across German society. This research has shown that the discovered implications might be identified on different levels: the personal, institutional, and societal. A closer analysis of the religious individual’s positioning toward these experienced challenges has shown that these dimensions are not isolated. On the contrary, they strongly relate to each other. Answers to the first and second research questions of this study on the meaning, goal, and motivations of church asylum provide an explanation to this.

The study disclosed one leading narrative sanctuary actors employ to describe the goal of church asylum: to provide perspective to a migrant’s life by encountering this person as an equal individual and assess their situation in a humane, just, and respectful manner. The meaning of church asylum has been described in two ways. First, as the help of the individual in need and second as a critical evaluation of (inter)national asylum policies. The formulated goal of church asylum turned out to be rooted in the motivations of the sanctuary actors. Personal biographies on resistance in the GDR or migration stories within the family, or theologically inspired arguments like the appropriation of tradition of sanctuary (Oda, 2006) and a sense of Christian duty (Lob-Hüdepohl, 2003; Just, 1993) all turned out to be relevant motivations and beliefs that led sanctuary actors to their involvement. These personal motivations were however directed toward broader societal affairs affecting

migrants, where religious actors saw the dignity of migrants harmed. The same dynamic could be identified reflecting on the described meaning of church asylum: the individual-focused help stems from Christian convictions on equal treatment of others (NIV, 2011, Genesis 1:27). At the same time, these religious convictions provided sanctuary actors a framework to critically assess policy decisions. While indicating the meaning, goal, and motivations of church asylum described by sanctuary actors, a layered experience was thus identified, in which attitudes toward the implications of church asylum reached beyond the level in which they were experienced.

A post-secular perspective enables an explanation of the interrelatedness of the three identified areas of church asylum's implications. It might be argued church asylum actors articulate their religious convictions and worldviews by positioning themselves in relation to and amid institutional and societal dynamics. This study has disclosed examples of this, such as the playful attitude toward the BAMF bureaucracies and the instrumentalization of the privileged status of the, in the case of this study's respondents, Evangelical Church. Post-secular theories of May et al. (2014) and Wilson (2014) on religion and migration have demonstrated that it is exactly this presence of religious worldviews and actions across multiple scales of regional, national, institutional networks and political dynamics which defines the position of religious actors in modern society. Based on the interrelatedness of levels of experience that this study has disclosed, I introduce the suggestion that religious individuals engaged in sanctuary work hold a post-secular self-understanding of their involvement in church asylum. This is since their religiously motivated work turned out not to be formulated as an isolated meaning or act but embedded across multiple levels of interactions and experiences in society. In fact, post-secular perspectives have argued that challenging the legitimacy of state decisions, something which this study has shown church asylum actors in Germany express, is a possible means for religious worldviews to appear in the midst of society (Wilson, 2014).

One significant finding of this research that illustrates this is the sanctuary actor's rejecting attitude toward the negative, disrespectful framing of migrants they recognize in bureaucratic procedures of international and German state policies. This can be identified as the narrative of the securitization of migration that conflicts with their religiously motivated, altruistic stance toward strangers (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016). Surprisingly, it was not the concrete policy adjustment around the Dublin III Regulation which sanctuary actors provided as explanation of the existence of this narrative. Rather, they saw it resulting from conservative, xenophobic, and narrow-minded worldviews they experienced across German society. Fueled by these sentiments, religious individuals sensed that

narratives on the danger of migrants and strangers were circulating within and outside the congregation, resulting in a critique of church asylum practice. Additionally, they identified narratives about the church as proselytizing. They said that consequently, church asylum has been framed as helper syndrome, state sabotage, and unconstitutional. One can interpret these perceptions of church asylum through what Wilson and Mavelli (2016) have identified as the effects of the idea of disaster evangelism (Ensor, 2003), where religious action in migration work is understood as a proselytization of vulnerable, powerless people. Although sanctuary actors also received positive reactions to their involvement, these did reaffirm a negative perception of the church, labeling church asylum as something to “finally” appreciate “the church” again. With this, sanctuary actors found themselves embedded in a categorizing structure of “good” or “bad” religious practice, sustained by the societal-political perceptions of migrants as dangerous and the church as missionizing. This categorization of religion as either good or bad are dichotomous conceptions of the religious that could also be recognized in secularist frameworks (Wilson & Mavelli, 2016, p. 274). With this study, I however suggest that church asylum actors’ own understanding of the meaning and goal of church asylum argues for a rather post-secular interpretation of their practice (Wilson, 2014; Asad, 1993). The question of publicity provides insights on how sanctuary actors deal with this disclosed discrepancy between the external and their own perception of church asylum.

Communication, visibility, and publicity about church asylum have shown to be effective ways for religious actors in sanctuary practice to position themselves toward the experienced issue of the securitization of migration. In fact, not only did the interviews provide a space to encourage a new language on migration as an objection to the criminalization of migrants, but also to deconstruct the negative image of the church. Yet, the opportunities of publicity also brought complications, as it harmed the protection and security of the sheltered migrant. The religious actor’s solution was to emphasize the religious-ethical meaning of church asylum and prioritize the protection of the individual above the expression of state criticism. In these cases, sanctuary actors identified a parallel level of communication on political matters through demonstrations, petitions, open letters, and networking. These practices were articulated parallel to church asylum itself and utilized for political expression. The study shows that when the goal of church asylum might be harmed, sanctuary actors distinguished their political actions from church asylum work, emphasizing the theological, individual-focused meaning of church asylum, instead of criticizing the state. Another example of this can be identified in the sanctuary actors’ attitude toward the

adjustment of the Dublin III regulation, as they prioritized their religious-ethical motivation of engagement during this time.

What is striking about this finding is that it suggests church asylum actors are not solely subject to secularist framing but in fact reproduce the secularist assumptions of their work through their own separation of actions. The sanctuary actor's distinction made between religious-ethical motivated church asylum work and publicly expressed political work suggests that it is not only the external perceptions of the "bad" church, "dangerous" migrants, and "good" church asylum that describe the secular narrative in which sanctuary actors understand their actions. Rather, as Wilson (2014) and May et al. (2014) addressed before, it is with their differentiation of actions between church asylum work and political engagement that a secular narrative on political and religious practice is reproduced, limiting a realistic perception of what the religious and the political are.

The decision not to address or communicate political issues through their church asylum engagement did not necessarily mean church asylum actors excluded their political engagement from their religion. In fact, this study has shown that it is exactly the sanctuary actors' self-reflection of being Christian that they assess as intrinsically political. In their reflections of Christian being, the respondents expressed that the religious and political belong together, instead of being reciprocal counterparts. It might therefore be argued sanctuary actors understand their own engagement in church asylum as a matter of Christian, and thus political being. From a theoretical point of view, the research's findings on the interrelatedness of the implications of church asylum support this idea, as it argues for the religious individual's post-secular interpretation of church asylum, breaking with the rigid distinction between the political and religious (Wilson, 2014; Ziebertz & Riegel, 2009). With the practice of church asylum, sanctuary actors thus seem to express what the post-secular scholars Lynch (2011), Wilson (2014), and Ziebertz and Riegel (2009) have identified as the ambivalence of the different conceptions of the role of religion in modern society, reflected in the actions of individual religious actors. This study's findings argue that in the case of church asylum, political being is already intrinsically embedded in the self-understanding of sanctuary actors as Christian beings. Just as the post-secular suggests religion was never gone, it is in the self-reflection of Christian church asylum actors that we notice: being religious has never been apolitical.

Based on the discovered differentiation between political engagement and church asylum work and the definitions of the church and church asylum as respectively "bad" and "good", the research concludes that secularist categorizations of the religious may be identified in the experiences of

church asylum actors. At the same time, the study argues sanctuary actors as religious individuals challenge the boundaries set by the secular narrative, as they formulate Christian life in particular and religious duty in general as intrinsically political. The examined individual experiences of sanctuary actors thus embody multiple differentiations, interpretations, and prioritizations of the meaning of religion, all depending on the situation itself, one of them being the changed interpretation of the Dublin III Regulation and its consequences for sanctuary practice. What is a religious or secular, a Christian or political, or a church or state issue is thus not set in stone, but rather is context dependent. With this conclusion, the story of religious actors in sanctuary work nuances the categorizing conceptions of the role of religious actors in asylum and displacement practice. Indeed, they provide another example of the context-dependent and multifaceted characteristic of religious being (Asad, 1993). Religious actors have never been absent from political and public life. It is just within the ever-changing social-political context that we see their presence arrive in the midst of secularizing societies like Germany.

## **6.2 Discussion and outlook**

Based on the outcomes of this study, several comments and suggestions for further research can be made. First, as the conclusion suggests for a situational interpretation of religion and religious expression, future research might want to investigate experiences of religious actors other than Protestant Christians. Inclusion of other Christian denominations, German federal states, or even countries where church asylum is practiced might provide greater perspective to the topic. In addition, the study's emphasis on church asylum in Christian congregations ignores the existence of less perceived forms of sanctuary, such as by mosques or synagogues (Wilson, 2014, p. 359). Including religious individuals operative in non-Christian types of sanctuary work could also open up the discussion regarding the role of religious actors in asylum work and move away from a purely secularist, Christianity-focused analysis.

The study showed that challenges experienced during the Dublin III policy changes were not that different from the ones expressed outside of this timeframe. Examples here are financial and healthcare issues, and rejections from the BAMF. As the study however showed, the happenings from 2018 to 2020 encouraged closer collaboration, exchange of resources, and knowledge among the congregations and reinforced the Christian-ethical motivations of sanctuary actors. In fact, the exchange of experiences activated other congregations practicing church asylum to challenge the court's decisions that eventually turned back the Dublin Regulation. Suggestions for the BAG and church asylum congregations in case of similar issues in the future could therefore be to utilize such

a momentum of setbacks to activate more church asylum cases, since motivation, collaboration, and network exchange among the actors are expected to intensify.

Moreover, attention should be given to the actors' language on religion, religious being, or religious action. While sanctuary actors differentiated between political and religious *activity*, their *phrasing* on religious being attached the two. The wording of the religious individuals thus turned out decisive in how their experiences were explained. Wilson (2014, p. 364) mentions that faith-based actors employ language that does not make clear distinctions between "purely political, purely secular or purely religious language". Rather, it includes both secular and religious language, "depending on the target audience". This could mean that for this research, a conduction of the same interviews by different researchers and at other locations could have triggered new wordings on religion, religious action, and religious being. The sensitivity of words and stories this research has uncovered therefore suggests a narrative analysis of religious actors in church asylum work (Freeland, 2010).

Finally, the conclusion of the research emphasizes the weight of one's self-understanding as a religious being in relation to political engagement. This finding suggests a deeper analysis on the concept of religious identity in the context of political engagement in the public space of civil society. Suggestions here could be the introduction of the concept of religious citizenship, where elements of the rights of a person as citizen in a community or nation are exercised through religious expression, including the right of religious freedom (Hudson, 2003). In the light of the findings of this study, questions like this demand caution, since how and in which regard religion is articulated as a form of civic identity indeed depends on the situation itself (Lichterman, 2008).

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