



# Flight Religion Resilience

Faith as a resource for coping with the  
challenges of migration and integration

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A study by World Vision Germany

## **Legal information**

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# Foreword



**Christoph Waffenschmidt**  
Chairman of the Board  
World Vision Deutschland

Over the past 10 years, World Vision Deutschland e.V. has developed a research programme that gives children a voice with its representative study on children and smaller studies on specific topics. Our aim when

starting out 10 years ago was to transform children's rights as established in the Convention on the Rights of the Child into social participation and enable children to freely express their opinions. In our first study on children published in 2007, we carried out the first representative survey of children under the age of 12 in Germany, making a remarkable contribution to public reporting that is exceptional for NGOs. Our study "Arrival in Germany. Stories told by refugee children", which we published in 2016, was also a pioneering work. At the time, there was very little empirical data that showed the situation of refugee children in Germany from their own perspectives. This study clearly demonstrated the severe stress faced many refugee children, in part due to the trauma of flight but also due to the endangerment of child welfare caused by the German asylum system.

As a children's aid organisation, our most urgent concern is to identify, record and eliminated threats to child welfare in any form. But giving children a voice also means acknowledging their abilities and ensuring that they are granted suitable opportunities for taking action.

In the age of globalisation and social change, childhood is far from a process of "growing into" a stable social context and adopting the behaviours of older generations. It is foreseeable that future generations will be confronted with entirely new ecological, economical and social

challenges for which solutions have yet to be found. One of these challenges will be international (refugee) migration.

When the religious affinity of refugees is discussed in current public and political debate, this particularly occurs with respect to potential dangers to social co-existence and obstacles for the integration of refugees. This focus on the risks of religion, which is frequently reduced to extremist examples, prevents a clear view of the opportunities for social development through religion. Our study demonstrates that refugee children have an independent religious faith and are able to use this as a resource for managing stressful life experiences. It also shows that the different religious affinities among children do not cause social boundaries and divides, but rather make it possible for them to have respectful and tolerant interactions with one another.

While public and political discourse are just beginning to address how social cohesion and inclusion can be possible under the conditions of diversity, this has long been part of the everyday lives of many children in Germany. We cannot limit ourselves merely to giving children a voice: we also have to listen to them and take their contribution to social development seriously if we want to face the challenges of the 21st century.

Thank you for you interest!



Photo: Refugee camp in Syria

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# 1. Introduction

In 2016, World Vision Deutschland e.V. published one of the first studies about the situation of refugee children in Germany. The study "Arrival in Germany" indicated that many refugee children are heavily stressed by experiences in their countries of origin, but also by the German asylum process. These include children who have experienced violence, torture and murder, who were separated from their closest family members for years; children who move from one temporary housing to the next, and children who have lived in fear of being deported since their arrival in Germany. Despite these unfavourable life circumstances, many refugee children learn German quickly, demonstrate considerable success in school and make friends with children of different origins and religions. What abilities and resources do they have to manage these challenges? What makes them resilient?

In psychology and social work, the concept of resilience describes people's ability to manage crises or difficult life circumstances by drawing on personal and social resources. Research on adults with refugee or migration experience has acknowledged for many years that religiousness and spirituality are positively correlated with psychological and social resilience and can act as potential protective factors (Weiss/Enderlein/Rieker 2001; Engelhard/Goorts 2005; Schweitzer et al 2007; Lersner 2008).

The connection between religion and resilience is relevant in individual faith "thanks to help from God" in a difficult life situation, as well as "real assistance from a community of faith" (Pirner 2017: 156). In addition to concrete support in searching for housing and work, religious communities also offer networking for their adherents (Menjivar 2003; Hirschmann 2004; Winterhagen 2019) and emotional support in

case of hostility and discrimination they may experience (Hirschmann 2004). Religious communities take on an identity-forming role that helps migrants to maintain positive self-image particularly when faced with negative stigma (Ugba 2009; Scrinzi 2016; Schambeck 2016). In this sense, faith communities can offer protective factors by enabling "a subjective sense of strong social support after trauma, coping strategies marked by personal openness and disclosure of lived experience, a feeling of coherence (that is, the ability to categorise what has happened) along with the practice of a religion" (Lernser 2008: 115f).

The existing research has focused on adults. The significance of religiousness for refugee children and how they process their suffering through religion has yet to be examined (Weiß/ Ulfat 2017: 151 and 152), as well as how their resilience can be supported given the background of religious development in childhood and youth.

Children who are currently fleeing to Germany with their families are often from areas where the majority of the population is religious. Therefore, this study addresses the significance of individual faith and affiliation to religious communities for the resilience of these children in view of the numerous stresses involved with flight and integration. The central question in the context of religion and resilience can be examined with respect to two dimensions:

**Internal psychological dimension:** How are life events (associated with migration and integration) reconciled with personal faith in terms of the image of, and relationship to God?<sup>1</sup> What is the significance of faith for psychologically coping with flight and integration? What religious abilities do the children have that serve as resources for their resilience?

**Social dimension:** What is the significance of religion for identity and sense of belonging in children? What role do religious value and practices play in shaping their social relationships and social integration processes? How do children handle religious diversity?

The present study is based on connecting refugee research with child and youth theology. Using child-appropriate surveying methods, the study aims to make visible and analyse the questions and interpretations children pose regarding their ideas about God in the context of their migration and integration experiences.

The study was conducted in collaboration with Prof. Dr Britta Konz, University Professor for Religious Pedagogy at the TU Dortmund. As in the 2016 study, we cooperated with the refugee outpatient department at the University Clinic Hamburg-Eppendorf (UKE) under the medical direction of Dr Areej Zindler.

As a data basis, we interviewed 20 families who practise Islam, Christianity or Yezidism<sup>2</sup> as the three most significant religious affiliations of current refugee populations and who come from Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Syria.

1 For the purpose of simplification, only the term "God" is used in this text. However, this is merely a translation of the terms "Allah" or "Xwede". This corresponds to the children's narratives, who primarily used the term "God" as a translation of the terms in their native languages for the interview sections conducted in German.

2 The terms "Yazidis" or "Yezidis" are both used frequently in English. We use the term "Yezidism" here, since this is frequently used for self-description by the organisations and associations in this faith community. According to Tagay and Ortac, this term is derived from the Kurdish word Ezîdî or Ezda(yî), which can be translated as "He who created me" (Tagay/Ortac 2016: 33)

## **2. Countries of origin and religious affiliation of the interviewed children**

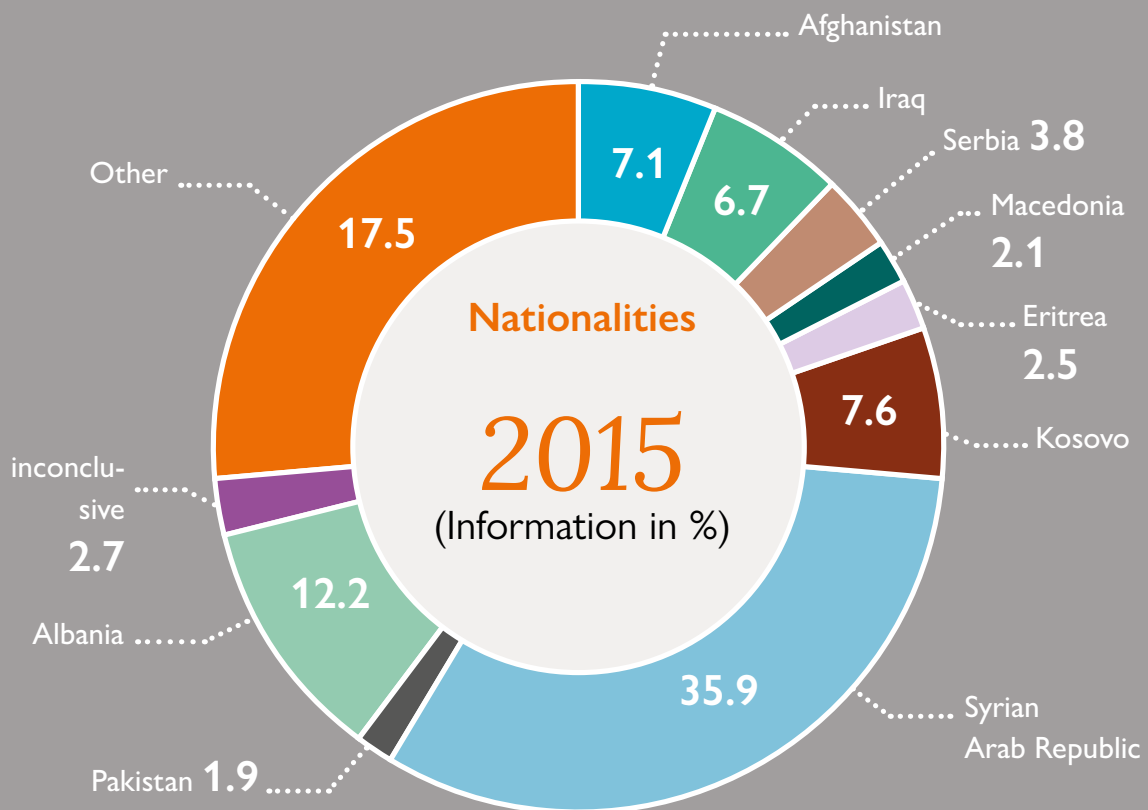




## 2.1 Countries of origin

The immigration of refugees is not a new phenomenon in Germany. After asylum applications sharply decreased in the early 2000s, they rose by approx. 150% in 2015 compared with the previous year. The peak was in 2016 with approx. 745,000 asylum applications. Since then, the numbers have fallen once again (bpb 2019c). Despite the decrease in total numbers of asylum seekers, the percentage of children and youths among them has continued to grow over the past years (bpb 2018). In late 2017, the segment of children and youths up to the age of 16 made up 39% of asylum seekers. 44% were between 16 and 35, 16% between 35 and 65 and 1% 65 or older (Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2018: 6).

Over the past ten years, the most significant countries of origin for asylum seekers in Germany have continually changed. However, since 2014, Syria has been the most significant country of origin for refugees submitting an initial asylum application. Immigration from Iraq and Iran has grown in recent years. In 2018, these countries were second and third among the most common nationalities for initial asylum applicants. Afghanistan was only sixth in 2018, but was significantly higher in prior years. The sample in this study thus covers important countries of origin in Southern Asia and the Middle East. To maintain a certain level of comparability between the cases, countries of origin in Africa and South-Eastern Europe were left out.



Source: BAMF 2018, Page 23

## Syria

The population of Syria is approximately 18.6 million people. The majority belong to the Arabic, Palestinian and Iraqi ethnic groups, while there are also other minority groups. The largest religious group is Sunni Islam, while there is also the special community of the Alawites which make up 12% of the total population as well as a variety of religious minorities which belong to Christianity, Yezidism or Druzism. There has been a civil war in Syria since 2011. The security situation has deteriorated significantly since 2014. The population is threatened by armed conflicts, attacks by the regime and radical rebel groups. The civil war has caused destruction to the infrastructure, homelessness and unemployment. These circumstances led to the flight of approx. 5.7 million people who primarily fled to the neighbouring countries (Auswärtiges Amt 2019a). From 2011 to late 2018, 770,000 Syrians came to Germany (Mediendienst 2019a). The Syrian families we interviewed are adherents of Islam.

## Iraq

The population in Iraq is approximately 39 million people, made up of various small minorities along with approx. 80% Arabic and 17% Kurdish groups. More than 95% of the population are adherents of Islam (60% Shiite, 35% Sunni). In Iraq, there are also members of various Christian churches (Auswärtiges Amt 2019c). Another religious group is Yezidism, the faith of the children we interviewed from Iraq. The reasons for the flight of the Yezidi population from Iraq are the civil war which started in 2011 and the genocide of the Yezidi population in Shingal in the summer of 2014. In June 2014, the terror organisation "Islamic State" (IS) conquered large portions of the Sunni territory in Iraq. In August 2014, IS invaded the Shingal region, which was predominantly inhabited by a Yezidi population of approximately 500,000. This triggered a panicked flight to the mountains, where 50,000 people were surrounded by IS groups in the summer heat. Several hundred people died for lack of nutrition and medical aid. Ultimately, American aid troops were able to provide supplies to the refugees by air, while Kurdish groups fought to free a flight corridor. Yezidis who were unable to flee in time were murdered or captured and enslaved (Tagay/Ortaç 2016). Overall, the civil war in Iraq has led to more than four million internally displaced persons (Auswärtiges Amt 2019c). Of these, approximately 300,000 members of the Yezidi faith live in camps in northern Iraq (Ortaç/Tagay 2017). In 2016, Tagay and Ortaç (2016) estimated that approximately 100,000 Yezidi people are living in Germany.



## Iran

The population of Iran is approximately 82 million and is made up of multiple ethnic groups. The largest groups are the Persian population (51%) and the Azeri population (14%). 99% of the believing population are adherents of Islam, of which 90% are Shiites and 9% are Sunni (Auswärtiges Amt 2019b, Länder-Informations-Portal 2019a). Christian affiliation is passed down across generations within the Armenian population, while conversions to Christianity also occur. Under the Iranian constitution, religious minorities are protected by the government. However, this principle is broken by other criminal and civil laws (BAMF 2019a). Conversion from Islam to other religions is forbidden and can be punished by the death penalty under certain circumstances. Estimates indicate that several hundred thousand people have converted from Islam to Christianity and are therefore the largest group, ahead of members of traditional churches (BAMF 2019a: 2). The families we interviewed from Iran are converts to Christianity.

## Afghanistan

The population in Afghanistan amounts to 35 million inhabitants: 42% Pashtun, 27% Tajik, 9% Hazara and 9% Uzbek along with other smaller ethnic groups. 99% of the population are adherents of Islam, of which 80% are Sunni and 19% are Shiites (Auswärtiges Amt 2019d). The reasons for flight among the Afghan population result from a long civil war that led to a takeover by the Islamic militia "Taliban" in 1996, which wanted to transform the country into a religious state. As a reaction to the terrorist attacks in 2001, the USA and Great Britain invaded the country in October of that year. Together with the Northern Alliance, the Taliban regime was successfully overthrown. A period of reconstruction followed with international involvement to restore the infrastructure, education system and health system (BAMF 2019a). However, neither side was able to win the war, and the previously toppled Taliban was able to regain strength, deteriorating the security situation and causing portions of the population to flee. People who collaborated with foreign troops are faced with specific threats and are forced to leave the country (bpb 2019b). In 2006, a peak of approximately 253,000 Afghan nationals was reached in Germany. In 2017, this figure was approximately 251,000 (bpb 2019b). The children we interviewed from Afghanistan are adherents of Islam.



## 2.2 Religions

The children and youths we interviewed developed their beliefs and religious references based on the content, traditions and rituals of their faith communities. Islam, Christianity and Yezidism are monotheistic religions. Their faith includes the belief that there is only one God who created everything that exists. One common factor among these religions is that they offer an answer to the question of how people can lead a "correct" or "good" life in this world and what happens to them after death, although these answers vary (see Gellmann/Hartmann 1997). Free or ritualised prayer plays a central role in Islam, Christianity and Yezidism, as in most other religions. They help believers to turn to God and express their own thoughts and feelings such as gratitude, fear, hope, etc.; to do this, it is necessary to believe in a God that is receptive to this individual communication.

In Islam, apart from the mandatory prayer ("sala") which is of particular importance and is spoken five times per day at specific times, there is also the free "quick prayer" ("du'a") which prayers use to seek help from God. These are spoken in various situations as a "prayer of supplication, benediction, protection, grace, praise" in which the prayers hope for God's assistance (Boumaaiz 2014: 224).

In Yezidism, the term "dua" or "nimêj" is used for this prayer. Duas are passed down verbally in this religion, composed in a lyrical style and can be spoken for various occasions. The practice of prayer is voluntary; believers can address God or the angel Tausi Melek at any time.

In Christianity, apart from the "Our Father", freely spoken prayers to God or Jesus Christ are of great importance. In addition, grace is practised in the families of the Christian children who were interviewed.

## Islam

Islam is a world religion with more than 1.3 billion adherents. It was created approximately 1450 years ago and can be traced back to the progenitor Abraham, like Christianity, Judaism and the Bahai faith. The term "Islam" comes from the Arabic word "Salam" meaning "peace" or "devotion" and can be interpreted as "peaceful devotion to God". In Islam, God is designated using the Arabic word "Allah". Allah also has 99 other names, such as "The Wise", "The Good" and "The Merciful". Members of Islam are called Muslims (singular Muslim). The central question for Islam is how believers can live their lives in devotion to Allah.

In the Muslim faith, the teachings of Allah were transmitted by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad (or Mohammad), who was a human and lived in Mecca, not God or the son of God in contrast to the role of Jesus in Christian belief. These revelations (sura) were first delivered orally as verses to the followers of Muhammad and later set down in writing in the Quran.

The most important religious practices in Islam are known as the "five pillars of Islam". These are the profession of faith, the ritualised mandatory prayer that is practiced five times a day (at sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset and after dark), giving alms, fasting during the month of Ramadan and the pilgrimage to Mecca, which all Muslims are supposed to visit once in their lives.

Affiliation with Islam is passed down by the father or grandfather, who speaks the profession of faith into the newborn's right ear. It is also possible to convert to Islam by declaring the profession of faith before two other Muslims.

In Germany, 5.4 to 5.7% of the population is currently Islam, or between 4.4 and 4.7 million people. Approximately half of these people are from Turkey. However, other regions of origin are gaining importance through new immigration (BAMF 2015).

## Christianity

Christianity has approximately two billion followers in the world. Its roots are in Judaism and it is related to Islam. Christianity originates with the itinerant Jewish preacher Jesus of Nazareth, who was probably born around the year 6 BC.

The name Jesus, "Yeshuah" in Hebrew-Aramaic, is derived from the Hebrew "jaša" and means "to save".

Jesus announced the start of a new kingdom of God which is not only distinguished by a moral afterlife but also by practising justice in this world. In the Christian faith, Jesus Christ is considered the messiah,

son of God, who resurrected after his death on the cross, which is why the cross is the symbol of Christianity. Believers are included in the hope of resurrection established by Jesus.

The Bible is the holy text of Christianity, made up of the Old and New Testament. The 10 commandments and the principle of charity are important for religious practice.

Belonging to Christianity is symbolically represented by baptism in childhood or as an adult. Conversion to Christianity is possible. In Germany, more than 60% of the population are Christian (bpb 2019c).

## Yezidism

Yezidism is a very old, independent faith whose origins and historical development are not entirely certain since the religion was primarily passed down orally. The roots of Yezidism go back to ancient Iranian religions that existed before the emergence of Christianity (Tagay/Ortaç 2016). This means that Yezidism cannot be categorised under Islam, Christianity or Judaism, although there were influences from these religions, but rather a separate, self-contained monotheistic religion with its own doctrine and religious practice. Due to the traditional oral transmission of the religion and its history of prosecution and migration, Yezidism has yet to be canonised in writing. There is no formal theology and no unified belief system that is practiced in the same way by all communities.

In Yezidism, God is called "Xwede" (translated as "Lord" or "he who created himself"). A central symbol in Yezidism is the angel "Tausi Melek" depicted as a peacock (taus means "peacock" in Kurmanji, melek means "angel"). According to the Yezidi faith, Tausi Melek is the first-created and highest of seven angels and was involved in creation (Tagay/Ortaç 2016).

Historically, the Yezidi people have repeatedly suffered repression and expulsion, particularly starting in the 16th century. The central reason for prosecution is the idea that Yezidism is a polytheistic religion involving heresy or idol/devil worship<sup>1</sup>, which does not correspond to the actual content of this faith.

Yezidism is an explicitly non-proselytising religion that members can only belong to if both of their parents were also belonged to this faith community. There is no other way to enter the religion in Yezidism, which places great importance on the principle of endogamy (marriage within the religious community).

The traditional settlement areas of Yezidis are in modern-day northern Iraq. The districts of Shingal and Sheikhan are very close to the Lalish valley, a sacred place in Yezidism with its sacred springs where religious festivals and ceremonies are held.

Members of Yezidism have been living in Germany since the 1960s as they immigrated during the so-called "guest worker immigration" from Turkey. As a result of armed conflicts in Turkey in the 1990s and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there was more immigration among Yezidi people living in those regions. Immigration from Iraq occurred primarily after the end of the second Iraq war in 2003, at the start of the civil war in 2011 and

after the genocide in Shingal since the summer of 2014 (Tagay/Ortaç 2016). Estimates indicate that there are up to a million followers of Yezidism in the world and approx. 100,000 of them live in Germany (Tagay/Ortaç 2016).

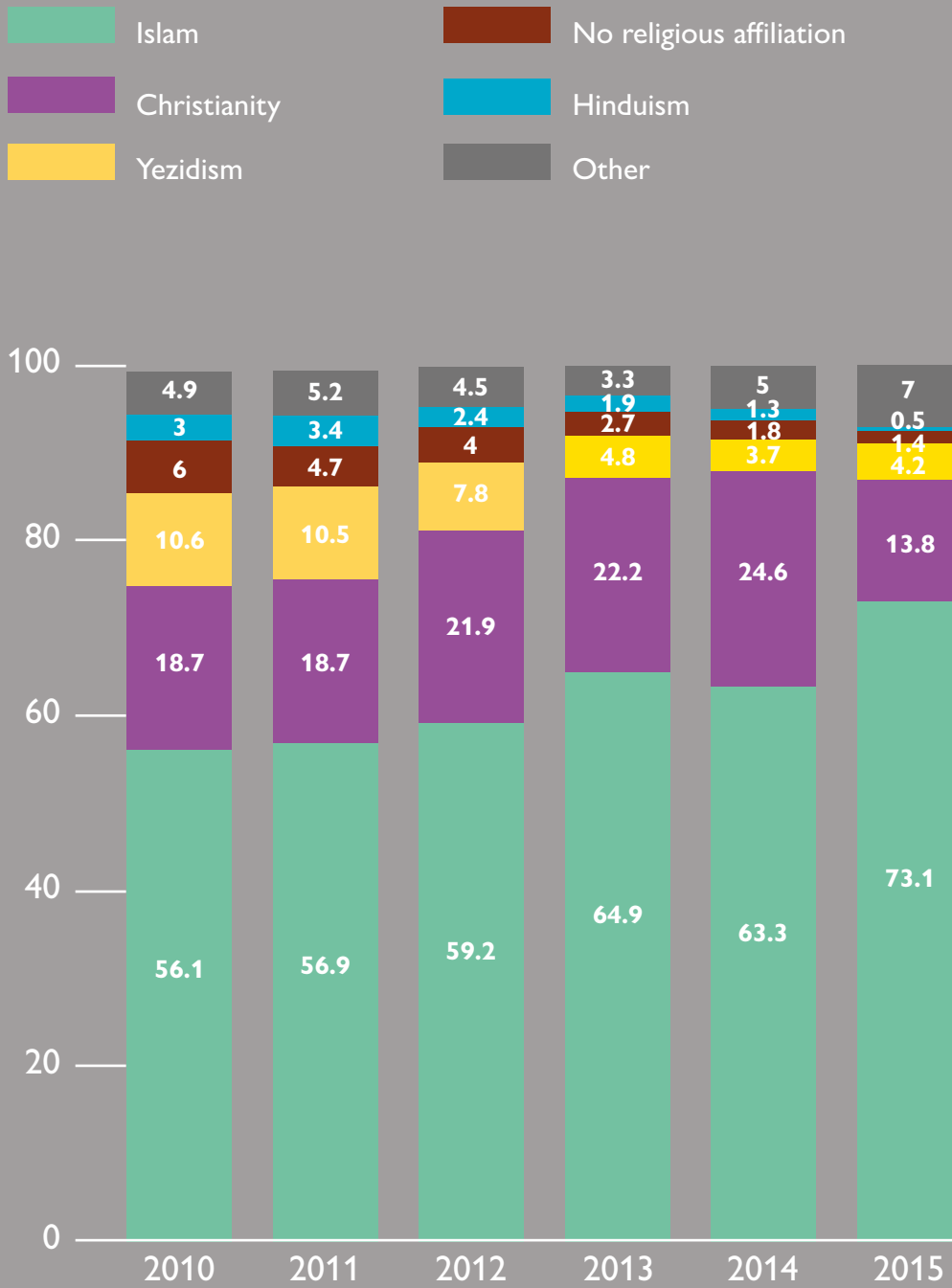
<sup>1</sup> In Yezidism, the word "devil" is avoided, since this contradicts the fundamental understanding that Xwede is all-powerful and no other power can rival his, not even an evil force. The stigma against "devil worshippers" goes back to the idea held in Islam that "Tausi Melek" is a fallen angel who rebelled against God. According to the Islamic idea, the devil refused to prostrate himself before humans because he considered himself superior (Sura 2:34). In contrast, Yezidi tradition says that Xwede ordered his seven angels to prostrate themselves before Adam. Tausi Melek was the only angel to refuse, proclaiming that he was only subordinate to Xwede. By doing so, he passed the test and was declared to be the highest angel (Tagay/Ortaç 2016: 60 based on Döchting 2004: 620 and Acikyildiz 2010: 75).



Photo: Refugee camp in Syria

## Religious affiliation

When considering the religious affiliation of asylum seekers since the year 2010, it can be determined that most of them are members of Islam, Christianity or Yezidism.



**Religious affiliations 2010–2015**

Source: fowid 2015, Page 1 using data from BAMF

A young boy with dark hair, wearing a red, white, and grey striped polo shirt and grey pants, is seen from the back and side. He is looking towards a blurred background of a refugee camp. In the background, another boy in a dark blue shirt and brown pants is standing, and other people are visible in the distance. The ground is a mix of dirt and gravel. The overall scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

### 3. A theoretical perspective on faith and resilience



Research projects conducted by the World Vision Institute are rooted in childhood studies methods that view children as social actors within their environment. As a rule, we are proceeding from the assumption that children are not merely shaped by their environment in a transitional state of 'becoming' according to which they only become fully-fledged members of society as adults (based on Hengst/Zeihner 2005). Instead, our research perspective focuses on the influence children exert over their own lives. With respect to religion, this means that we investigate how children acquire religion and which beliefs and practices they develop independently when engaging with their social environment. In order to reinforce the capacity for action among refugee children and support their integration process, their religious resources must also be considered.

The individual resources and abilities of children with migration experiences have received little attention in past research. Work with refugee children frequently focuses on the difficulties involved in migration and integration, often falling back on a deficit-oriented pedagogical approach (Seukwa 2018). Starting from a competence-based approach and focusing on resilience, migration experiences and religious coping strategies can also be seen as potential life resources. Most children from cultures where meaning is typically derived from religion have various religious competences developed in their everyday lives. Their positive religious resources need to be considered, since they can reinforce their capacity for action and encourage integration, which is especially significant for children who have suffered trauma (Simojoki 2016).

With respect to the internal psychological dimension, religiousness provides answers to questions about meaning and provides world orientations that can help believers in difficult situations (Betz et al 2014: 8). But religion can also act as a social resource by encouraging the examination of values and norms when interacting with others (Betz et al 2014: 8) and bringing believers together in communities. In this context, religion can be a significant component of personal identity that allows people to develop a "sense of coherence and continuity" for themselves and for others (Kohli 2000: 115).

For identity and resilience, belonging to social groups plays an important role that is linked to processes of emotionally meaningful identification and connection (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2011; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2013). Feeling like a member of a group can also lead to social demarcations which Wimmer (2008) refers to as "boundary making".

The process of "othering" involves identifying social groups or individuals as strange and inferior compared to one's own group because of their group affiliation, for instance their religion (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2007; Spivak 1985). This highlights the risk of social exclusion that can result from collective identity.



# 4. Methods used for interviews

**Figure:**  
Cover photo Varenka/Bernadette  
Nord-Stüd Verlag  
Hardcover / 21.5 x 28 cm / 32 Pages  
ISBN: 978-3-314-01672-1

Even though refugee children are highly endangered by their experiences during migration and in the asylum system, current research needs to turn away from the "victim perspective" (Täubig 2009: 79f., 248f.) in order to investigate how children develop resilience strategies by drawing on their personal resources. The use of a qualitative research method makes it possible to start an equal dialogue with the interviewed children in which they can reveal their perspectives on religion, integration and coping with trauma.

## Implementation

As a data basis for this study, we interviewed 20 families and a total of 29 children. In most cases, a separate one or two-hour interview was conducted with one or more children in the family and a parent. The interviews were frequently held at the families' homes or in their places of residence, or less commonly in the spaces of the religious community or social work centres as well as the Hamburg Eppendorf University Clinic. The families were recruited through previously existing or newly established contacts with religious communities and social workers, through contacts of the interpreters as well as networks of the refugee outpatient department at UKE Hamburg. The requirements for an interview were that the interviewed child personally identified as a believer, had personal migration experience and was expressly interested in discussing their own life in Germany and their own beliefs with a stranger. In addition to the interviews with children, interviews were conducted with a parent to learn more information about the importance of religion in family life and the migration history, particularly concerning whether children had no concrete knowledge about certain aspects of their migration or were unable to speak about them due to trauma. The interviews with the children were almost entirely conducted in German, in some cases interpreters or siblings translated certain words. The interviews with the parents were conducted either entirely in a foreign language by an interviewer who spoke their native language or simultaneously interpreted.

## Sample

The interviewed families currently live in the Berlin-Brandenburg region, Cologne and the surrounding area, Hamburg, Bremen and Dortmund. Six families come from Syria, eight from Iraq, four from Iran and two families are from Afghanistan. Nine of the interviewed families are members of Islam, four of Christianity and seven of Yezidism. Since multiple siblings wanted to participate in the interview in many families, it was possible to interview a large age range of children: the youngest child interviewed was seven, while the oldest was 16. The majority of the surveyed children were between 10 and 14 at the time of the interview. 14 girls and 15 boys were interviewed.

At the time of the interview, the families had various legal residence permits in Germany or are still in the process of obtaining them. Many interviewed families that were already granted asylum obtained a residence permit that will be reviewed after three years.

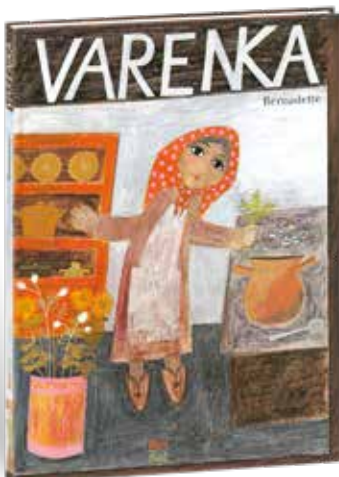
With respect to living situation it should be pointed out that many families still live in shared accommodations, even if they have been residing in Germany for multiple years; however, some have been able to rent their own flat or house.

## Methods used for interviews

The methods used for the interviews were developed by Britta Konz based on an open interview attitude that is not focused on surveying religious knowledge and experience with religion, but instead to reveal the perspectives and constructive capacity of the children. Various techniques were used in the study to create opportunities for narration and assist the children in reflecting about their beliefs. The primary challenges in this regard were to select interfaith research methods that allow identification for children from various religious affiliations and to handle religious taboos sensitively, such as the image taboo in Islam.

## Varenka's story

After a general conversation with the children about their religious affiliation and their faith practices, a modified version of the picture book "Varenka" was narrated (see Freudenberger-Lötz 2002; Ulfat 2017). In the original version, Varenka hides from soldiers; this aspect was left out due to potential traumatic experiences among the children. To back up the story, some of the images illustrated by Bernadette Watts were shown in which Varenka is depicted as a woman with dark brown hair and a headscarf. This representation enabled higher possibilities of identification for children from varying origins and religious affinities, since the headscarf can be interpreted both as a religious praxis and a traditional article of clothing for an older woman from the countryside. Varenka's story is about a woman who, though poor herself, takes in two needy people for altruistic reasons and ends up in trouble along with them. At this point, the children were asked to



**Varenka**  
Bernadette  
Nord-Süd Verlag  
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reflect what Varenka could do to escape from her plight. After that, the narration continues to reveal that Varenka prayed to God. The children were then requested to reflect what Varenka asked of God and how the story could have ended. Finally the children were asked whether they have ever found themselves in an emergency and whether they prayed to God. The story served as a stimulus for narration when discovering the children's relationship with god and their ideas about prayer or the practice of prayer. Frequently, the children referred to aspects of their flight here, for instance crossing the Mediterranean in a rubber raft or living in collective accommodations.

## Characteristics of God

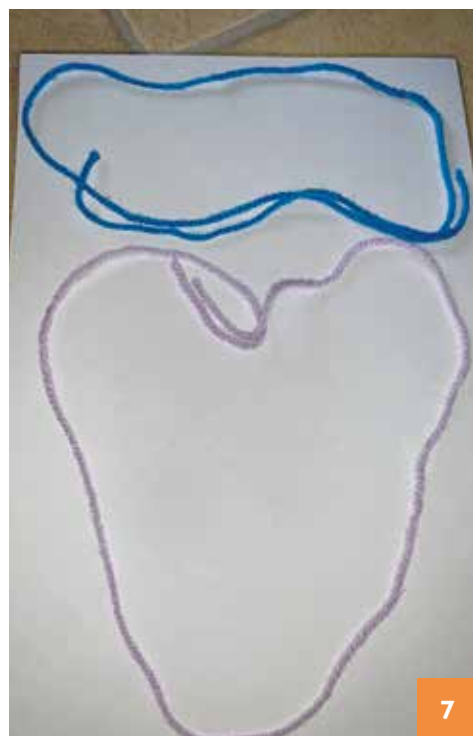
Based on the Islamic concept of the 99 names of Allah that represent his various characteristics, as well as the religion survey with a polarity profile according to Benesch (2011), the children were given cards with different characteristics, some of them opposites such as "is strong" and "is weak" or "can do anything" and "is incapable of doing anything in some situations". They were asked to sort the cards based on which characteristics they believed were true about God and which were not (Figures 1, 2, 3, Page 21). The children were asked to justify their selection and reflect whether they had experienced situations in their lives that they could associated with the characteristics that were presented. Here as well, many children referred to their experiences in flight, for instance when they said that God had protected them.

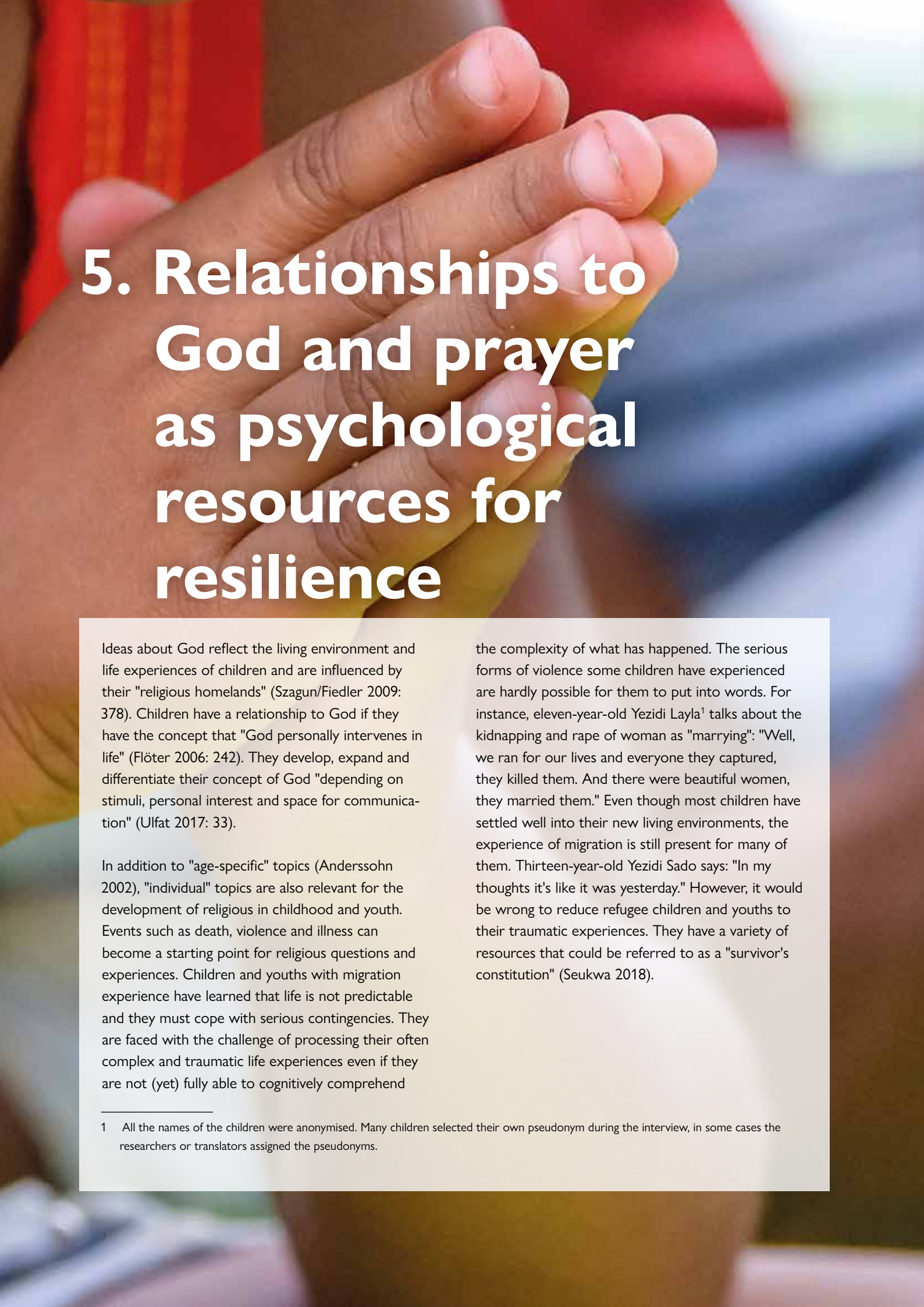
## Relationship to God

To create opportunities to discuss their personal relationship to God, the children were given a box of colourful threads in line with Oberthür (2011). They were asked to select one thread to symbolise God and one to represent themselves, and then to drape the two threads on a piece of paper to show how they experienced their relationship to God (Figures 4–8, Page 21). For this exercise, the children placed highly varying patterns that symbolised for instance that God is watching over them, standing by their side or living in their hearts. This method also offered an opportunity to discuss with the children how their relationship to God helps them during difficult phases of their lives.



**Relationship to God**





## 5. Relationships to God and prayer as psychological resources for resilience

Ideas about God reflect the living environment and life experiences of children and are influenced by their "religious homelands" (Szagun/Fiedler 2009: 378). Children have a relationship to God if they have the concept that "God personally intervenes in life" (Flöter 2006: 242). They develop, expand and differentiate their concept of God "depending on stimuli, personal interest and space for communication" (Ulfat 2017: 33).

In addition to "age-specific" topics (Anderssohn 2002), "individual" topics are also relevant for the development of religious in childhood and youth. Events such as death, violence and illness can become a starting point for religious questions and experiences. Children and youths with migration experience have learned that life is not predictable and they must cope with serious contingencies. They are faced with the challenge of processing their often complex and traumatic life experiences even if they are not (yet) fully able to cognitively comprehend

the complexity of what has happened. The serious forms of violence some children have experienced are hardly possible for them to put into words. For instance, eleven-year-old Yezidi Layla<sup>1</sup> talks about the kidnapping and rape of woman as "marrying": "Well, we ran for our lives and everyone they captured, they killed them. And there were beautiful women, they married them." Even though most children have settled well into their new living environments, the experience of migration is still present for many of them. Thirteen-year-old Yezidi Sado says: "In my thoughts it's like it was yesterday." However, it would be wrong to reduce refugee children and youths to their traumatic experiences. They have a variety of resources that could be referred to as a "survivor's constitution" (Seukwa 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> All the names of the children were anonymised. Many children selected their own pseudonym during the interview, in some cases the researchers or translators assigned the pseudonyms.

## Religion as a resource for resilience

Religion can be a resource for resilience by offering answers to questions of meaning and value orientations (Betz et al: 2014, 8) that help believers to interpret difficult life situations in a meaningful way. Regardless of their religion, many children assume that God rewards good behaviour and punishes bad behaviour. They assume that God saves people who do good themselves:

*"If you are in danger, Allah will help you, because he knows that the child or person maybe did something good and so he wants to help them because they were so friendly to him." (Samira, 9 years old, Muslim)*

*"He looks at what people are doing and sees what he can do." (Azad, 12 years old, Yezidi)*

Most of the children we interviewed have an intense relationship to God. They identify their belief as a source of power that helps them to cope with problems and integrate in their new home countries. They attribute their liberation from oppressive and dangerous life situations to help from God.

*"I always said, things will turn out well, you can do it. And then I always waited, I said, maybe, I know everything will be okay later. And then I got it, so I became very happy. Because I always said every day, you can do it, God is with you." (Maryam, 14 years old, Muslim)*

*"So for instance when we moved to Germany... when we fled, I always felt that some strong power is behind me that helps me out. And I think that was God." (Mohammed, 14 years old, Christian)*

*"When we came to Germany, we had to get in a kind of balloon [inflatable raft], it was so small. There were lots of people and there were also bad people who if they saw us, sometimes, sometimes they make the ship sink. A kind of guard, I'm not sure what they're called. And then God protected us, me and my mother." (Elham, 9 years old, Muslim)*

This narrative shows that children can frame a life situation that is associated with extreme fear and suffering for them using their understanding of faith. In the process, they emphasise that they had positive experiences with God during their flight and that they felt a force carrying them.

## Explanations for evil in the world

Many refugee children are particularly burdened with experiences of suffering caused by other people. They have to deal with questions concerning the origins of evil and find varying answers. Frequently, they say that humans were created good by God, but then change for the worse. Thirteen-year-old Muslim Shivan says: "God made them nice, but then they changed somehow."

Most children did not attribute the responsibility for evil to God; instead, this was seen as the responsibility of humans.

Muslim brothers Abdul and Issa emphasised that Allah is just and punishes people for their bad deeds. The belief in retributive justice in the afterlife helps them to bear the fact that life can be unfair. For instance, nine-year-old Abdul says about bad people: "At some point, they will be punished. That's what matters, they will be punished." Twelve-year-old Yezidi Azad, who has a very positive relationship to God and feels protected by God, believes that evil exists in the world because God is

unable to prevent it: "So if he wants, he can't kill people even if they are evil." Nevertheless, God would punish bad people for their deeds in the afterlife: "I believe that he punishes them when they are dead."

Many children, particularly Muslim children, also view suffering as a test. In their view, no one goes through life without negative experiences. What matters is to handle them and trust in God, then people will be rewarded by God at the end of life. Fourteen-year-old Muslim Dalia says: "He protects people when they need help, he doesn't leave them alone. If they need something, it might be a test and God is testing whether you are patient or not." Patience and hope are important aspects of faith for many refugee children that help them to withstand difficult phases, for instance time spent in collective accommodations, and to interpret improvements to their living situation as a sign. Fourteen-year-old Muslim Maryam says: "If you have hope, so if you also hope for what you want, and then you say, yes, God is with me, everything will be okay. So I have hope." The term "hope" seems to unite two contexts for Maryam: On the one hand, she views hope as a kind of declaration of faith in God's existence, while on the other hand it shows an optimistic attitude towards your own future that is made possible with the help of God.

A few children resolve the question of why evil exists if God is all-powerful and good by externalising the issue and attributing it to the devil. Nine-year-old Muslim Samira explains that evil entered the world through the devil ("Shaitan"). He confuses the understanding of humans who are actually created good. In her view, God is unable to prevent this since the devil lives under the earth and is not accessible to God. However, he can limit the devil's power because he is stronger and people have to account for their behaviour before God at the end of their lives. Bad people are then held accountable for their deeds before God. Samira emphasised that humans have free will and that God does not try to influence them by sneaking into people's heads the way Shaitan does. Samira does not value the punishment of bad people, but instead focuses on changing people to become good.

In her view, all people should do good things and pass "through the good door": "Yes, I wish all people would do something good so they can all pass through the good door. And I don't want anyone to go through the bad door." (Samira, 9 years old, Muslim)

Ten-year-old Muslim Naima, who quickly becomes aggressive due to her trauma, interprets this for herself by saying that the devil leads her to lose control over herself quickly in case of conflict. "For example, I don't want to touch anyone, but he makes me anyway." Externalizing evil to Shaitan helps these children to develop a positive relationship to God that conceives of God as a benevolent and just form of support that wants the best for people and doesn't want to test or punish them.

## Doubts about God's omnipotence

Although the majority of the surveyed children and youths believe that God is just and motivates people to be good, doubts also arose in the interviews about whether God can actually intervene directly in world affairs. According to the findings of Ritter et al (2006) in their study on God and suffering, ideas about the unlimited or limited nature of God's power are not restricted to the age of childhood. Some older children and youths believe in an unlimited, all-powerful God while a few of the younger children have doubts. However, older children tend to describe that God acts through people and brings assistance rather than directly intervening in world affairs (see individual portrait of Shivan).

If children have experienced suffering, this can cause a crack in their faith. Similarly to sixteen-year-old Yezidi Raman, who asks himself why God didn't save Yezidi girls from being kidnapped by the Islamic State (see individual portrait of Tarik and Raman), thirteen-year-old Sado also struggles to reconcile his experiences with his concept of God.



**Roshdar:** "Punishes people when they do bad things."

**Interviewer:** "Ok. What does he do?"

**Roshdar:** "He makes sure they can't do what they want."

**Sado:** "[...]Does that mean he punishes everyone?"

**Roshdar:** "No, only bad people. When people do bad things."

**Sado:** "Oh, okay."

**Translator:** "Do you agree with that? Not everyone, but just bad people? [...]"

**Sado:** "Yes...not everyone. I believe."

**Translator:** "Why not?"

**Sado:** "Because IS keeps going and nothing happens to them."

Later in the interview, when asked whether God had ever fulfilled a wish of his, Sado said: "I really wanted to go to Germany. I prayed 'God, I want to go to Germany', in Kurdish that is." Similarly to Raman, religious doubts and questions indicate that concepts of God change and childhood belief in a good, all-powerful God may no longer be viable. Nevertheless, Sado and Ramon also process their experiences on a religious level by positioning them in relation to their ideas of God. If their religious doubts are constructively processed, with the support of religious pedagogy is necessary, religion can also be a resource for them.

## Active attitude of faith

Belief in God does not lead to a passive attitude among children and youths. They emphasise that people can rely on God but also need to generate their own strategies for problem-solving. When the children were asked what Varenka (see description of methods) should do in her time of need, they developed proposals that can be subdivided into three categories: The largest group of children and youths propose all possible ideas for how Varenka can liberate herself from her position independently, how she can find food and who might be able to help her. The second group immediately brings in a transcendental perspective. Varenka, says nine-year-old Elham for example, can pray to God and then he will help her.

**Interviewer:** "All right, and what can she do then?"

**Elham:** "Umm, pray."

**Interviewer:** "Okay."

**Elham:** "And, umm, umm read in the Quran and think about God."

**Interviewer:** "Okay, do you think God will help then?"

**Elham:** "Yes."

**Interviewer:** Does he help people if they are in trouble?"

**Elham:** "Yes."

**Interviewer:** "All right, and how can he do that?"

**Elham:** "Hmm, I'm not sure but I think he's the ruler, he can do anything. He can change the weather."

A third, smaller group has no idea what Varenka could do other than to wait. They emphasised that people have to endure bad situations and wait. Resignation is also expressed here; some children seem to attribute their own experience with life situations that they had to endure powerlessly without being able to act onto Varenka (see also individual portrait of Shivan).

## Prayer as an active attitude of faith and resource for resilience

Prayer can be an expression of a personal relationship to God and can encourage resilience as a "dialogue with an internal force" (Kammeyer 2009: 14). During prayer, people can turn to God with their feelings and their "basic well-being" (Peng-Keller 2016: 37). Prescribed forms of prayer and texts offer "aids to articulation and spaces of resonance" that people can access even with feelings that they are not (yet) capable of articulating, as well as experiences that bring people to the limits of their understanding (Peng-Keller 2016: 37, 42).

The majority of the children and youths we interviewed formulated independent prayers that constitute a "practice for coping with contingencies" (Lübbe 2004: 161) because they help them to process their experiences.

In their prayer practice, many children draw on traditions of their religious community, but adapt them individually by wording the prayers themselves and lending a subjective meaning to the prayer. For most of them, independently of their religion, free prayer is highly important. In some cases this is connected with the fact that they have not yet learned ritualised prayers or that they are unable or unwilling to observe prayer times, particularly during the German school day. It is important to note here that they pray independently and without instructions since prayer is beneficial for them. They state that they pray during uncertain and scary situations and that prayer helps them to manage challenges.

When praying, as Yezidi Tarik reports, you move outwards and speak to the sun. After prayer, he feels "lighter, because God helps people" (Tarik, 9 years old, Yezidi). Fourteen-year-old Muslim Dalia also describes prayer as a calming connection with God, whom she can always turn to: "I always think, God can do anything, he is always with you. Even if it doesn't happen directly, it will happen later. When I'm nervous, then I feel a bit better after praying."

## Prayer during emergencies and for personal challenges

After Varenka's story, the children were asked whether they have ever found themselves in an emergency and whether they prayed to God. The majority of them spontaneously answered by talking about their flight situation or during the asylum process. In particular, living in collective accommodations was perceived as an extreme situation by children in which they turn to God for assistance:

*"...when we were in the camp it was hard for us, and we prayed the whole time that we wanted a nice life and didn't want to be in the camp any more, in such a loud place. Now we are in a house, thank God, we can cook easily here and it's better than a camp. (Maryam, 14 years old, Muslim)*

*"Yes, on this path in the forest I prayed that we would arrive as quickly as possible. I prayed a lot there."*

*(Pegah, 14 years old, Christian)*

*"It was very difficult. We prayed. We prayed to God and said to him, 'Please, dear God, save us' and that we would make it to a safe place in Germany. Because human rights are respected there. We prayed that we would get there safely."*

*(Hoger, 12 years old, Yezidi)*

An existential reason that children and youth speak with God is separation from family members such as parents and grandparents, which causes them a great deal of suffering. In prayer, they ask God to bring their families back together. Ten-year-old Muslim Naima says: "Yes, I always pray to God that my grandfather will come from Syria, because my grandmother died, because she was afraid, because there's always war there."

Across different religions, however, children and youth also stated in the interviews that they pray not only during extreme life situations but also in typical contexts of childhood life, such as the context of school testing (see also individual portrait of Maya).

*"And at school, for example, or for every test, I pray to God 'Nothing is easy except what you make easy'. I say that before every test, I have the feeling that it doesn't matter how much I've studied. God will make it easy for me. For example, I was nervous before, but since I say that sentence to myself, God always helps me. (Dalia, 14 years old, Muslim)*

The thirteen-year-old Yezidi siblings Hasret and Berat recall that they were not taught how to pray, but they watched their grandmother and would also like to learn – here they are talking about ritualised prayers. Instead, they think about God. They name the following as typical situations:

**Interviewer:** "Have the two of you been in situations before where you wanted to pray?"

**Hasret:** "Yes, to get good marks."

*Berat: "Yeah, I have too."*

*Hasret: "And that the hour goes by quickly."*

*Berat: "Or with dangerous weather, like when it's raining, when the weather is rough with traffic and things like that."*

The children we interviewed formulated prayers independently, which demonstrates their religious maturity. Prayers help them to gain courage and concentrate. The fact that religious experiences are predominantly situated in their everyday lives is consistent with their ages. The children's ability to use free prayer consciously and without instruction from adults in difficult life situations, and their reflection that it benefits them, demonstrate how they use their religiousness as a personal resource.

*"It was very difficult. We prayed. We prayed to God and said to him, 'Please, dear God, save us' and that we would make it to a safe place in Germany. Because human rights are respected there. We prayed that we would get there safely."*

*(Hoger, 12 years old, Yezidi)*



## 6. Religion as a social resource for resilience

By living in shared accommodations and attending preparatory language classes, and through integration in regular schools that have a high percentage of children with migration backgrounds particularly in large cities, many refugee children are confronted with a degree of religious diversity experienced by few other populations in Germany. Their everyday lives are "contact zones" (Pratt 1991) with a wide variety of ethnic, cultural and religious groups; this becomes evident when children like ten-year-old Naima discuss which of their classmates they particularly like: "Zaineb, Marie, Philip, Ömer, Olesya and Destiny."

Precisely because many refugee families experienced religious persecution and terrorism in their country of origin, they appreciate freedom of religion in Germany as a valuable asset of democracy. Many parents emphasise that one of their most important

goals for their children's upbringing is to teach them to be tolerant and respectful of other people, regardless of their nationality, ethnicity or religion.

In this study we examine how refugee children experience and handle religious diversity in their environment, the significance of their religious affiliation for their self image and perception of others, and how they cope with experiences of (religious) discrimination. Thus we investigate the significance of religious affiliations as a resource for social resilience that helps children to establish stabilising social relationships in a new environment and bridge differences in religion, ethnicity, culture or life experience.

## Religion and friendship

Although the drawing of social boundaries along ethnic, cultural and religious categories is a significant characteristic of German immigrant society, the children we interviewed rarely discussed these categories when talking about their friendships except when directly asked about them.

Mohammed (14 years old), who converted from Islam to Christianity, says that the children in his class are Muslim or Christian or have no religious affiliation. However, this doesn't matter for their friendships since they wouldn't be talking about religion much and are more interested in football. Fourteen-year-old Muslim Maryam said that she participates in the school radio and theatre during her free time, where children with different religious affiliations come together. Fourteen-year-old Yezidi Heve and her siblings are friends with other Yezidi children in their school but also form friendships with Muslim children, often Kurdish. Fourteen-year-old Christian Pegah says that she has a very good friend who is also Christian and that they sometimes pray at school together. But she also has friends from other religions with whom she shares other interests.

These examples illustrate that while the children we interviewed do perceive collective identities such as culture and religion, these are not of exclusive importance for their social relationships. They view themselves primarily as children before they consider affiliations with culture or religion (see Biddle 2017). Religiousness can be a shared interest or need, as it is for Pegah, but this does not prevent children from finding commonalities and cultivating friendships with children from other religious affiliations. For the children we interviewed, religion is not a category they use to divide their lives into different groups.

## Religion as a moral authority when interacting with others

Many parents emphasise how important it is for their children to freely practise their faith. They should not feel forced into religious conduct. Regardless of their religion, many of the children we interviewed mentioned values such as freedom of religion when discussing their interactions with other people. Fourteen-year-old

Muslim Dalia says: "Well discrimination doesn't exist in Islam, for example 'He's not Muslim', there's nothing like that. Everyone makes their own decision."

For children from families that converted to Christianity, love and freedom of religion are often repeated. In the view of fourteen-year-old Bilal, God wants people to decide on their faith freely and practise religion freely. Bilal considers it important that Jesus gives advice about what is good without giving people narrow instructions for how to act:

*"Jesus doesn't say, because you have to do that, neither does God. You have to do that. You have to do that. You can't do that. I [Jesus] say, I say: This is good for you! Do it if you want to, but if you don't want to, don't do it. I think that's how it is."*

*(Bilal, 14 years old, Christian)*

For children across all religious affiliations, free choice of faith and tolerance of those who believe differently are religious values with which they positively identify. At the same time, this attitude enables the children to understand their religious affiliation as a conscious freedom of choice and to present themselves as responsible for their own religious affiliation.

Many children connect their religious identities with specific desired ways of behaviour in interpersonal contact (see also previous chapter about rewards from God for good deeds). In this regard, religion is a moral authority for them: To be a believer means treating fellow humans well from a moral standpoint.

*"You also have to be good to people, when they are in need, you should give them sadakat [alms in Islam]. If someone needs help, you have to help them if you can."*

*(Dalia, 14 years old, Muslim)*

When describing her religion, Dalia refers to religious practices as well as altruism as an important social norm that occurs in a similar form in Christianity (charity) and Yezidism.

Some of the Yezidi children we interviewed wear a red and white armband. For Sado and Roshdar this is a mark of their faith that they associate with a specific moral stance.

**Interviewer:** "What does it mean if someone wears this armband?"

**Sado:** "I believe this is a symbol for Yezidis and if you have it, you shouldn't insult people."

**Roshdar:** "That means you shouldn't be bad. No bad stuff."

**Sado:** "Don't do anything bad."

(Roshdar, 9 years old, Sado, 13 years old, Yezidi)

Some children refer directly to God as a moral authority by assuming that he is sad about poor behaviour and happy about good behaviour: "So now, if I don't love you now, God is sad. If I insult your parents, God is sad. If I kill you now, God will be sad. [...] That's not okay with God." (Naima, 10 years old, Muslim) Fourteen-year-old Christian Pegah makes a similar comment: "Maybe God is sometimes sad when people do something wrong."

Children from different religious affinities express very similar values that determine how to interact with other people in their religion. Most of them name helping others in need (including alms or charity) and the taboo of causing other people mental or physical harm as the most important behaviours. In this regard, they are assuming that these values apply universally for interactions with all other people and do not differentiate between particular social groups. Their religious identification and resulting moral orientation provide them with an opportunity to establish coherence when behaviours learned in their country of origin are reaffirmed as valid for all fellow humans in their new context.

## Freedom of religion and religious practices

Based on their understanding of freedom of religion, the religious practices chosen by the interviewed children result from their own adaptations: They select traditional practices from their faith communities for themselves and adapt them to their circumstances and needs within their German life context.

Fasting occurs in all three of the religions investigated, but is practiced in different ways. For Muslim and Yezidi children, the first participation in fasting periods frequently constitutes a significant positive experience, particularly with respect to their sense of belonging and active participation in the faith community.

The fasting period is not considered mandatory in Yezidism and is practiced differently than in Islam (see individual portrait of Heve). Nevertheless, it can be an important transitional ritual for Yezidi children. Twelve-year-old Yezidi Azad recalls that he was the only one of his siblings allowed to fast when he was seven, because he was the oldest: "Some of them ate. I didn't want to eat. I wanted to participate." While his siblings have not yet started fasting, he now always participates, but also explains that he "wanted to do it", but this was not mandatory. Thirteen-year-old Yezidi Sado also says that fasting is a "voluntary thing". He recalls that his first fasting period was difficult, but that it also marked an important change of status for him as a member of the religious community (see individual portrait of Maya).

*"It was nice and difficult. It was also really nice to say, now I'm part of the religion and I'm doing what other people in my religion also do. It felt responsible, I'd say."*  
(Sado, 13 years old, Yezidi)

Thirteen-year-old Yezidi twins Hasret and Berat say that they don't participate during every fasting period since they sometimes can't manage or don't want to because of school.

**Hasret:** "So I only do a few days because sometimes I won't with school and everything."  
**Berat:** "Me too. So if I want to, I do, and if I don't want to, I don't."

In the same way, fourteen-year-old Muslim Maryam only fasts sometimes and won't fast if she has a class trip, for example, or is unable for other reasons. The interviewed children who practise ritual prayer also adjust their prayer times to the school day.

Only a few children reported conflicts in school that occurred because of religious practices. Eleven-year-old Yezidi Layla does not attend swim class since it is held on Wednesday, which is a holy day in Yezidism on which believers are not allowed to shower or wash themselves: "Some people say, why aren't you allowed to shower on Wednesdays. On Wednesdays we have swimming but I don't go, we're not allowed to, so that's why they ask me questions." Layla finds it uncomfortable that she is repeatedly faced with critical questions and doubts about this, but does not want to avoid this religious practice.

Religious practices are highly important for the interviewed children in terms of "religious self-efficacy", since for these children it symbolises the successful performance and compliance with behaviours that distinguish their faith community. They can represent their belief and personal maturity to decide on these practices within the faith community, but also sometimes to the outside world.

## Intrareligious diversity

Most of the children we interviewed do not find it problematic if members of their own religion or other faith communities practise their beliefs around them in a different way. This is particularly evident when considering the headscarf for Muslim girls. Some of the Muslim girls we interviewed wear a headscarf in public, while some don't, but both groups view the decision for or against the headscarf as an expression of their freedom of choice. Fourteen-year-old Maya, who doesn't wear a headscarf, puts it this way: "If I want to wear it, then I'll wear it, if I don't, then I won't". Referring to her headscarf, fourteen-year-old Dalia says: "In our religion, there is no compulsion. It is up to you, if you want to wear it then you wear it." The girls did not talk about their parents' attitudes concerning the headscarf in any of the interviews we conducted. The interviews with parents give no indication to assume that headscarves are worn due to family pressure. When parents discussed this topic, it was primarily in terms of their concern that their daughters might suffer discrimination because of the headscarf. In contrast, the girls seem to orient themselves based on the behaviour of their peers. Fourteen-year-old Maryam talks about experiencing in Germany that Muslim girls of her age choose very different clothing styles:

*"So actually, when I arrived in Germany I didn't have a headscarf. But then I just wore my headscarf because I saw the girls outside and they had a headscarf. Actually there are also girls who are Muslim who don't wear a headscarf. But it's what you want to...it doesn't matter if you don't wear a headscarf. But I started wearing a headscarf."  
(Maryam, 14 years old, Muslim)*

This makes it clear that diversity is multi-dimensional in the lives of the children we interviewed. A sense of belonging and boundary lines can be drawn between atheism and belief, between different religions and within a single religion. When children are skilled at handling diversity within a religion and perceive different faith practices as an expression of individual freedom of religion, this can be a crucial first step for also accepting differences between separate religions (Konz 2019). Maryam's quotation shows that in the diverse living environment of refugee children in Germany, where Muslim girls are not required to wear a headscarf, but can if they like, a particular process of reflection and choice is required. Since the choice to wear a headscarf is not a prescribed element of their living environment in Germany, the girls need to choose the time to do so themselves. Many of them opt for a class change or the change to a secondary school or start wearing the headscarf on a daily basis after Ramadan. While their fellow students did not make a further issue of the choice to wear a headscarf for the girls we interviewed, Dalia says that she has been criticised by teachers and school assistants for it. They lamented "that she had such pretty hair" that could no longer be seen. Dalia states that the teachers also doubted her freedom of choice and she perceives that school assistants have treated her differently since then:

*"They wondered about it and asked: 'You or your parents?' But by now they've gotten used to it. But there's one assistant who comes to our class, she's old. And another, they're not teachers but they come to our class and the school to help out. When I was in year 4 and didn't wear a headscarf, they always talked with me and liked me a lot. Then when I came to year 5 with a headscarf, I was amazed how much they changed. They're not like they were at first, when they spoke with me and helped me, they've changed a bit. But that's normal, I*

*don't mind."*

*(Dalia, 14 years old, Muslim)*

Dalia's example shows how discussions about the headscarf with minorities assume Muslim parents that disregard their children's self-determination and deprive Muslim girls of their capacity for self-determination. At the same time, the headscarf is unthinkingly equated with particular role expectations that contradicted the presumed gender equality in Germany. This fulfils the identification and characterisation of Muslim girls and women as "religious subjects" (Lingen-Ali/Mecheril 2016: 18) who seem to embody the negative attitudes and behaviours ascribed to their religion. It is assumed that Muslim girls and women gain freedom by taking off their headscarf, while at the same time negating that wearing the headscarf is also an expression of their personal freedom. This pattern of interpretation runs contrary to the significance of the headscarf for the Muslim girls we interviewed as a free choice for a religious practice and a marker of a transition to a new phase of life.

## Religious discrimination and bullying by children

Even though religious affiliation scarcely affects the formation of friendships, many children have experienced situations, usually during arguments or bullying, where other children make reference to their religious affiliation when behaving badly.

Thirteen-year-old Yezidi twins Hasret and Berat state that others have used words against them that they "are not allowed to hear and say", implying that they have no religion. Hasret explains that a girl in her class said to her, "You have no country, you're living in Germany, you're stateless." The teacher happened to hear her and criticised the girl for saying this. Berat also says that children "use it to tease" him during sports, but he contradicts them and says that he also has a religion. Berat says that these attacks come from a group that becomes "a clique that acts tough with others, they agitate others". In this example, the verbal attacks are prohibited by teaching staff when they notice them, but they are not worked through. As a result, the children themselves feel responsible for legitimising their religion and contradicting attitudes of stigma.

Ten-year-old Muslim Naima discusses a situation in her school where a non-religious girl made fun of her faith.

The girl said: "What kind of dumb God do you have? You're so stupid, and your God too." Naima says she was sad and angry, but she went back to her seat. Still she managed to cope with this absolutely frustrating situation using her understanding of religious freedom.

**Interviewer:** "Hmm. All right. Did you tell anyone about this?"

**Naima:** "No. I don't feel like talking to people about it. They just blabber, they say yes, that's the way it is. She's allowed to do that."

**Interviewer:** "Who says that?"

**Naima:** "I don't know."

**Interviewer:** "So you didn't tell a teacher or anything?"

**Naima:** "No. My teacher doesn't believe in God himself."

**Interviewer:** "Hmm, okay. How is that for you? Is that a problem?"

**Naima:** "It's normal. It's his life after all, not mine."

Mohammed, who converted from Islam to Christianity with his family, has experienced criticism of his conversion in the past: "I have a few friends who are like proper Muslims and they say if you change your religion then you go to hell. But I don't care actually." Mohammed, who is reinforced by a large, multi-religious circle of friends, is able to cope with his experiences by rejecting this concept as untrue and ignoring it. It is interesting that he still names children who say such comments to him as his friends, though perhaps they are closer to acquaintances.

Similar boundary marking and attacks occur not only between believing and non-believing children or between children with different religious affiliations, but also between children with the same religion. Twelve-year-old Muslim Taraneh notes that she avoids talking about religion with her best friend since she considers herself superior in terms of her religious knowledge: "So she thinks, yeah I know the Quran better. She knows, has more information than I do."

These examples show that children who experience religious discrimination or bullying by other children in their environment do not relate these attitudes to the religious affiliations of these children, but are clearly able to identify the motivation: "wanting to tease", "agitate" or "act superior". As long as different beliefs and world



views are not mobilised in these negative behaviours, they appear to be unproblematic for the children we interviewed and can be framed by the axiom of religious freedom, as shown above.

## Discrimination by adults

Many parents and children in our interviews say that they have been insulted or threatened by strangers in public; one mother even says she was spit on. Our sample is too small to draw conclusions about whether this affects certain religious groups or ethnicities more strongly than others. It can be assumed that these incidents are associated with trends of xenophobia, racism and Islamophobia that previously existed in Germany and have emerged more visibly since 2015. Due to their own experiences and the experiences of those they know with hate crimes in public, many of the families we interviewed were concerned about their safety. The experience of fourteen-year-old Muslim Maya, whose friend was attacked and injured by a stranger, indicates that this concern is not unjustified (see individual portrait of Maya). The degree of xenophobia experienced by the families and their personal feeling of safety is highly determined by where they live in Germany. Nine-year-old Muslim Elham and her mother first lived in rural Northern Germany, where there were no other Muslims, and experienced lots of hostility there. After moving to a large city with a large number of immigrants, they feel a lot better. However, xenophobia can occur in such contexts as well.

The children we interviewed reported experiencing more discrimination from adults than from other children. Most frequently these are verbal attacks by unknown adults, often older people, in public.

*"On the street it's usually older people [...] It often happens that they walk by you and swear. But that's normal, it doesn't bother me. I don't care."*

*(Dalia, Muslim, 14 years old)*

Other children report similar experiences, ignoring verbal abuse and insults from strangers (see individual portrait of Maya). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the physical and mental well-being of refugee children in Germany (this presumably also applies for children with a different immigration background) are seriously harmed by xenophobic attacks.



## 7. Portraits of refugee children

## 7.1 Maya:

*"All people are one with God, there is no difference"*

**Name:** Maya

**Age:** 15 years old

**Country of origin:** Syria

**Religious affiliation:** Islam

Maya fled to Germany in 2015 with her mother and her younger brother, since one of her mother's brothers already lived here. The family's house in Syria was destroyed in the war and they had to live in a school at first. When the school was going to be closed and Maya's father died, Maya's mother felt increasingly unsafe. She fled with her children across the Mediterranean to Germany.

During the passage, it began to rain heavily. As the boat filled with water, the motor broke down and they drifted on the sea for hours without any orientation until the refugees were picked up by the police on the Greek coast. From there, Maya's family got to Germany by bus, train and on foot.

In Germany, the family first lived with Maya's uncle, but were then housed in a collective shelter in another large German city. They lived there for one and a half year in very poor conditions until Maya's mother found a man who rented a flat to her in exchange for payment. This flat was located on the outskirts of the large city in a district where right-wing parties regularly obtain large shares of the vote in elections. Accordingly, the family has already experienced multiple racist insults in public. They try to avoid going around alone after dark.

Shortly before the interview, one of Maya's friends was attacked by a stranger and injured so severely that she is still in the hospital a week later. Maya seems shaken by this incident and concerned for her friend. The conclusion she draws is that it is dangerous to protect yourself against hostility: "Yeah, just walk away, don't talk. So her brother said the man spoke to her and she responded to him, it got tense after that [...] the man hurt her."

Nevertheless, Maya's mother underscores that they don't want to move away just yet, since her children have integrated well in school and have made lots of friends. Maya is in year 9 at a comprehensive school with students from a variety of cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Maya feels a deep emotional connection with Islam and at the same time maintains friendships with young people who belong to other religions or no religion. In her view, religion should not be misused to draw social boundaries.

*"Yes, I belong to the Muslim religion, I believe it intensely. I have no problem talking about my religion or another religion with friends."*

The important thing about religion for Maya is that people should not fight about religious practices: instead, they should act morally.

*"Well that we're good and not bad, that we should help people and not get into religion, or how she looks or that she wears a headscarf, she's not doing it right, things like that, no. All people are one with God, because there is no – except that they are Muslims or Christians or something, All people are the same to God, there is no difference."*

Maya only practices the mandatory prayers during Ramadan and rarely reads the Quran, although she learned to read Arabic characters while in Syria. When discussing her first Ramadan, she underscored that the decision to participate was her own:

*"Yes. I wanted to do it. It's not that my family said I had to or something like that. No, I decided for myself and did that because I thought it would be really nice if I also fast along with my mother and my family, otherwise people are fasting and I would be eating alone, they would be hungry too. It's better for me to fast with everyone else."*

In this quotation, she demonstrates the emotional significance of religious practices that are mostly performed in communities, such as breaking the fast. At the same time, the first Ramadan marks a process of maturity in childhood.

In contrast to her mother, Maya does not wear a headscarf in public. Both of them agree that the headscarf must be each woman's free choice: "If I would like to wear it, then I wear it, and if I don't want to, then I don't." Maya's mother does say that she doesn't like her daughter to paint her nails frequently with striking colours, but she wouldn't forbid this, since her daughter is young and should enjoy life. Maya's mother assumes that her own headscarf is the reason for the racist insults she has experienced in public. For this reason, she is relieved that her daughter doesn't wear one.

Maya seems to have coped well with the negative experiences of the war in Syria and during flight that overlap with serious conflicts within the family. She says she went through lots of bad experiences with her father's family, but that God made everything turn out for the best: "And afterwards, God made us – my uncle put our papers together and brought us to Germany."

Even though Maya doesn't necessarily fulfil Muslim obligations, faith plays a large role in her everyday life. She describes often praying to Allah during free prayer. In prayer, Maya finds an opportunity to gain courage and concentrate on the tasks ahead of her. She does this out of her own initiative and without instruction from adults, for example before a test in school.

*"So we had the test on Thursday, it's to see if you are eligible to enter vocational school. I prayed a lot that it would be easy for me, that I can do it all and do well. And it was very easy for me, I filled in the pages so quickly."*

Maya has a generally positive perception of her new life in Germany. Her family has subsidiary protection for three years. All family members who are still living and important to her are in Germany now. Despite their temporary residence permits, the family is certain that Maya and her brother will study in Germany. Her mother would like to train as a chef after her language course. Maya wants to be a lawyer when she grows up.

## 7.2 Shivan:

*"It feels as though he's with you all the time"*

**Name:** Shivan

**Age:** 13 years old

**Country of origin:** Iraq

**Religious affiliation:** Islam

Shivan fled to Germany in 2017 with his parents and his younger brother. The family are members of the Kurdish ethnic group. Due to their ethnicity, Shivan's father was no longer able to practise his profession in Iraq. The family felt increasingly threatened by the deteriorating safety situation. When Shivan's mother became pregnant with her younger son, the family decided to flee. On the Mediterranean, their boat capsized. Shivan's family were some of the only survivors.

The family was separated in Greece. Shivan's mother was able to travel on to Germany immediately with her younger son, who had been born in the meantime. Shivan had to stay behind in Greece with his father. When his father was arrested, Shivan travelled alone "with all the crowds" to Germany. Later, his father was also able to join them. The family is currently living in a room in a collective shelter in a large German city. They currently have a temporary residence permit for six months.

Shivan, who consciously experienced the traumatic crossing to Greece and the deaths of his fellow travellers and had to look after himself during his onward journey to Germany, was traumatised by these experiences of flight. He is currently undergoing treatment in therapy.

Shivan's parents are very religious, they observe prayer times and fast. However, they are mistrustful of state religion and mosques, since they fear that religion and politics will mix. They appreciate the liberal attitude towards religion in Germany and highly value that their sons are able to decide freely about their faith and religiousness.

Shivan does not yet participate in fasting, which his parents are glad of given his school attendance. However, he is very careful not to eat any pork. Shivan rarely turns to God in free prayer and says that he doesn't know any ritualised prayers yet, but would like to learn them. Shivan's faith is thus hardly defined by specific faith practices or religious traditions. Nevertheless, he describes himself as a believer, but is hardly able to put his relationship with God into words: "Somehow it's this feeling as though he's with you all the time."

In his interview, Shivan only talks about his flight experience once, which for him is connected with a religious experience. After he identified the various characteristics of God, the interviewer asked him whether he had ever felt protected by God.

**Shivan:** "Umm, yes. So... We were in a yacht, we were in it for seven hours. From Turkey to umm Greece. And for seven hours, all that time, it was raining and in the Med-"

**Interviewer:** "Yes. In what"

**Shivan:** "In the sea. The Mediterranean."

**Interviewer:** "The Mediterranean."

**Shivan:** "Yes."

**Interviewer:** "Okay."

**Shivan:** "(Pause) And yes. But then we... Well it was so high, but we survived."

**Interviewer:** "Yes."

**Shivan:** "They picked us up."

**Interviewer:** "Was there water in the boat?"

**Shivan:** "Yes."

As one of God's characteristics, Shivan says that God can do anything and brings up the example that he decides about life and death: this aspect is also part of the 99 names of Allah in the Quran. However, it seems as if Shivan has thoughts and concerns about the finite nature of life due to his specific experience with death and dying during his flight.

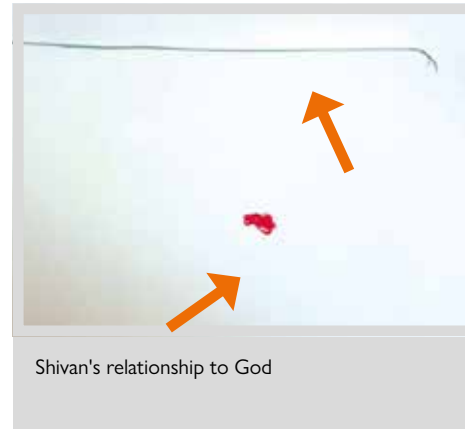
**Interviewer:** "He can do anything?"

**Shivan:** "Yes. (Pause) So he tells you when you die and when you don't die."

**Interviewer:** "Okay."

**Shivan:** "Well you don't know that, but he does know."

For his thread picture, Shivan chooses the colours red (for himself) and green (for God) because he likes those colours. He starts with the picture immediately and has a precise idea of what he wants to do. He arranges a very impressive picture. It is supposed to show that God "is above us all the time", while he is small in comparison. The red dot seems somewhat lost in the picture, while at the same time being "screened" by the green thread like a roof.



Shivan is barely able to use his faith as a resource for resilience in his current situation. When he is asked what helps him when he is sad and discouraged, he shows once again that it is hard for him to verbalise his thoughts and emotions.

**Interviewer:** "Yes. And what helped you then?"

**Shivan:** "I don't know."

**Interviewer:** "Or would you say nothing helped you at that moment?"

**Shivan:** "No, something helped, but I don't know how."

Shivan is still so heavily burdened by his experiences of migration that he is barely able to engage with a personal perspective of the future. When asked about his wishes for the future, he answers: "That's hard. (short pause) That's hard to say. I don't know. That's hard to say."

### 7.3 Heve: "He sees us all the time"

**Name:** Heve

**Age:** 14 years old

**Country of origin:** Iraq

**Religious affiliation:** Yezidism

Heve's family are Yezidi and come from the Shingal region in Iraq. Heve experienced the attack of Islamic State on her village, where even children were raped and kidnapped. Her family was able to flee to the mountains and later made it to Germany, since they already had close relatives living here. At the time of the interview, Heve's family is waiting for a decision about their asylum application. This weighs heavily on Heve and her four younger siblings and causes additional trauma since they are afraid of being kidnapped by terrorist groups if they have to return.

When she arrived in Germany, the family first lived with her relatives with nine people in one room, but were then able to move into their own small flat. During the interview, Heve appears self-confident and mature. She and her siblings form a community that provide one another with mutual support.

Since Yezidism is heavily based in rituals, Heve and her siblings learn the traditions, rituals and customs from their parents. For Heve and her siblings, belief in Xwede and Tausi Melek is important, they pray frequently and know many prayers and celebrations. Before the attack by Islamic State, Heve was able to practise her faith undisturbed. According to her mother, she "prayed in the morning, fasted, celebrated our holidays and went to Lalesh." The family continues to maintain Yezidi traditions in Germany.

Heve belongs to the caste of the sheikhs and will take on a spiritual leadership role at some point. As is typical for some Yezidi, they always fast for a period four weeks on three successive days and break the fast with a celebration. Heve animatedly describes the New Year's celebration Carşema Sor, also known as Red Wednesday. The celebration commemorates the first time Tausi Melek came to Earth and made it colourful. They dye eggs bright colours and hang colourful eggshells and red flowers on the door as symbols of the new year.

Heve wears a chain with the peacock, the symbol for the angel Tausi Melek, and the red-and-white armband that believers receive from high Yezidi officials for protection. During prayer, the women and girls like Heve cover their head with a veil. Heve proudly shows a photo of this.

For Heve and her siblings, God only has positive characteristics. He is always there for her and helps people, but also watches out to make sure that they help others and do good. In her view, there are consequences for bad deeds in the afterlife:

*"So he sees all the time, so he sees us when we're crying, when we're helping, when we're crying, and when we're not good. He sees all of us and he knows what we're doing."*

With respect to God and suffering, Heve expresses the idea that people are responsible for their actions. She believes that life is more than just good things: bad experiences are also part of it. "Yes, good things can't happen all the time, sometimes things get worse."

When Varenka's story is told to her, Heve immediately and independently contributes a transcendental perspective, saying that she should pray and then she would receive help from God. When asked whether she has ever experienced anything similar, Heve and her siblings immediately talk about their experience during flight:

*"There was a mountain and all the Yezidi went there and for twelve days there was no food, no food or anything to eat, drink, the whole family, all the Yezidi, there were 5000 people on this mountain and well then they just prayed and then they just prayed and then night and then after 12 days the sun comes and lots of people died lots of children [...] Fortunately it was summer, not winter, and they [the refugees] got lots of food, from the ground. And then there were aeroplanes and they brought down food so they wouldn't be hungry. And where we went by car, and there were lots of cars there we didn't know anybody, traffic backed up, and I saw lots of people who were pregnant, having new children."*

It weighs on Heve that many of her family members died or are still living in unstable conditions in Iraq. She says that Yezidism has a prayer of supplication for the family and the whole world that is spoken at sunset. She and her siblings also say this prayer to deal with their fear about Islamic State (here referred to as Daesh):

**Heve:** "So you will help us to make sure nothing bad happens to us or anything, like if 'Daesh?' (questioning)."

**Heve's brother:** "Terrorists!"

**Heve's sister:** "Thieves!"

**Interviewer:** "The terrorists?"

**Heve:** "Yes. When they come, if we go outside or something."

**Interviewer:** "Yes."

**Heve:** "So help us all."

## 7.4 Tarik and Raman:

**Tarik:** "He listens to people and can go do anything"

**Raman:** "My faith is more in humanity than in gods"

**Name:** Tarik, Raman

**Age:** 9 years old, 16 years old

**Country of origin:** Iraq

**Religious affiliation:** Yezidism

Nine-year-old Tarik lives together with his sixteen-year-old brother Raman and his uncle in Germany. His uncle is their legal guardian. They live in their own flat and have residence permits for a fixed period. They originally come from Iraq and are members of the Yezidi ethnic group. The brothers fled together with their uncle in 2014 to escape the genocide perpetrated by the Islamic State. They emphasise that their lives in Germany are going very well, but they miss the family members they had to leave behind when they fled.

The interview with Tarik and Raman is interesting not only because it grants insight into the particular situation of Yezidi refugees but also because the two boys have very different relationships to God. For Tarik, God is an all-powerful, protective force, while Raman has doubts about God because he did not protect the Yezidi people against the massacre.

Tarik describes God as powerful and protective. "God helps people when they are in need, for instance when they get sick (...) Yes, he listens to people and can do anything." For Tarik it is important that God doesn't let bad deeds go unpunished. He is not sure exactly how God does this, but he is sure that God rewards good deeds: "When he's angry, then he doesn't know exactly what he should do. But when he knows that someone has done something good, then he's nice." Tarik's idea of God is based on ascribing responsibility to humans for their bad deeds. He says "that God is good to the Yezidi and helps people. And if someone does something bad, he punishes that person."

Tarik's faith seems to sharply contrast his brother Raman's faith. When Raman is asked what he believes in, he responds:

**Raman:** "I believe in humanity."

**Interviewer:** "Okay. What is God like for you? What would you say?"

**Raman:** "It's not very important to me."

At the moment, Raman seems to be very preoccupied with a search for meaning, which may also be attributed to the fact he experienced the genocide more intensely than his brother due to his age. He is no longer able to believe in an all-powerful and protective God, and rejects the idea that God would "rescue people":

**Translator:** Does he rescue people from difficult situations?

**Raman:** No, for instance when Daesh kidnapped the Yezidi girls.

Raman's relationship to God is highly ambivalent. Due to his experiences, he no longer believes that God is a force for good.

**Interviewer:** "What do you like about God?"

**Raman:** "To be honest, I don't like anything."

**Translator:** "You don't like God?"

**Raman:** "My faith is more in humanity than in gods."

Raman doubts whether God exists because he sees the discrepancy between the idea of an all-powerful God and the suffering of the world. If God exists, he is unjust or weak, otherwise he would have protected the Yazidi:

**Translator:** "Why is he unjust?"

**Raman:** "I mean, look at what happened to the Yazidi. They never did anything bad."

**Translator:** "You say he doesn't rescue people when they are in difficult situations. Why?"

**Raman:** "Just like all the thing that happened to us, and he didn't do anything."

On the other hand, when asked what gave him courage on the way to Germany, Raman states that his belief helped him – and his uncle.

**Translator:** "When you were on your way to Germany, what motivated you? When you were coming to Germany?"

**Raman:** "Honestly, it did help me sometimes."

**Translator:** "Who helped you?"

**Raman:** "Well, God."

Comparing the stories of Tarik and Raman makes it clear that Raman's faith has been deeply shaken by his experiences. The childhood belief in a good and all-powerful God that characterises Tarik's narrative is no longer viable for Raman. But he also processes his experiences through religion, since he relies on God as a reference point even if he struggles with God or considers him to be unjust and weak. This indicates that Raman would need support to help him develop a viable (religious or non-religious) orientation to process his experience and offer him hope and courage.

## 7.5 Bilal:

*"I want to learn more about Jesus and God and I want to be with Jesus always"*

**Name:** Bilal

**Age:** 14 years old

**Country of origin:** Iran

**Religious affiliation:** Christianity

Bilal comes from Iran. His family were Muslim there. Bilal's father came into danger due to his political activities and fled to Germany. Due to his uncertain status as a resident, he was unable to bring his family along after him. After the family was separated for six years, Bilal's mother decided to come to Germany together with Bilal and his brother. They fled in part by foot through Serbia. Bilal's mother says that the flight with her sons was very dangerous. Bilal himself doesn't discuss the details of their flight, but says that he felt rescued and protected by God when he was very afraid.

*"So that is because we, well we are under a lot of stress, okay? And so many things are difficult and I'm afraid we won't be able to get to Germany and then, I'm a bit afraid, a bit too afraid and I prayed to God and God protected me"*

Once they arrived in Germany, Bilal initially lived in a collective shelter along with his mother and his brother. They were only able to move in with their father later. The family felt very restricted and uncomfortable in the shelter. By now the family has obtained official residence status. The judge asked many questions about their Christian faith, three priests were present as witnesses during the hearing.

Bilal's father first came into contact with a Christian congregation in Germany and gradually turned towards Christianity. During this time, he stayed in closed contact with his wife over the phone and talked about his new faith with her. As a result, Bilal's mother engaged with Christianity quite a bit while still in Iran. Bilal's parents experience Christianity as a free religion that they believe contrasts the repressive political Islam in Iran.

Bilal attends a comprehensive school and has lots of Muslim friends here, but he avoids talking about religion with him since it is difficult for him to explain his conversion. He doesn't want to get involved in discussions about which religion is better: "For instance, what I say when people want me to explain is that it would take too long."



Every Sunday, their family goes to the Persian church service, where Bilal meets other youths. Bilal was recently baptised. He decided to take this step himself.

*"I just asked my parents, can I get baptised? And then my parents said, they were glad, because they said: "Why do you want to do that?" And I said: "I want to learn more about Jesus and God and I want to be with Jesus always, that's why."*

Bilal has a rather unclouded belief in an all-powerful and protective God. Nevertheless, he adopts his faith in a highly independent manner. He asks himself questions about God and the origin of evil without having found a viable solution yet. But this does not seem to deter him from his faith. Instead, he is in the process of forming a reflected understanding of faith. He also uses the interview situation to put forward his questions:

**Bilal:** "Yes. May I ask a question?"

**Interviewer:** "Yes." (nods)

**Bilal:** "Why, for example: Jesus doesn't come back, I mean, could he live again?"

**Interviewer:** "Why it's not possible to live again?"

**Bilal:** "Yes."

**Interviewer:** "That's what you would like to know?"

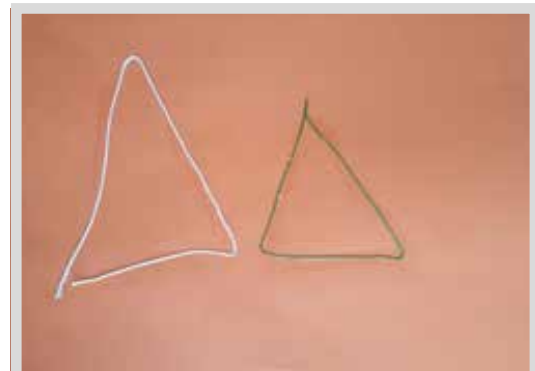
**Bilal:** "Yes, I want to know why. I've never asked that."

For Varenka's story, Bilal immediately puts himself in Varenka's place and independently contributes a religious perspective:

*"So she could say 'God, please help us, we don't have anything left. We are, we are hungry. We are too hungry and umm please help and make snow, water', you know what I mean?"*

"God is visible" is what Bilal chooses as an accurate statement, because it is not possible to see God, but it was possible to see Jesus. For the thread picture, he chooses the colour "green" (for himself) because he likes it and "white" (for God) since this is a "happy" colour. But he immediately remarks that this doesn't mean darker skin colour is a bad thing: "But I'm not saying people who are black or brown are not good, but for example I think white is a happy colour".

Bilal forms a triangle to represent his relationship to God, which is also used as a symbol for the Trinity. He



Bilal's relationship to God

tries to represent the concept of likeness to God by creating himself as a triangle also, but in a different colour and smaller than God's triangle.

*"So God is a triangle and I'm also a triangle, because I think, well I believe, God is also human like us but a bit larger, larger than us."*

When asked about his wishes for the future for himself and for the world, if everything were possible, Bilal responds that he would like to help and let miracles occur to stop war from happening and make sure everyone has enough to eat. For himself, he remarks with a laugh, he would also want to have some money.

## 7.6 Kian:

### "And then I said, but God is always with us"

**Name:** Kian

**Age:** 13 years old

**Country of origin:** Iran

**Religious affiliation:** Christianity

Kian comes from Iran and belongs to a Kurdish family. His family was forced to flee for political reasons. Kian and his father have been living in Germany for about a year at the time of the interview. While still in Iran, they were separated from Kian's mother and his younger sister, who have not yet been able to join them and suffer severe repression there.

Kian and his father had to travel on foot for a month. The flight was very taxing for Kian physically, since he injured his feet and was unable to obtain medical care. He also suffered heavily due to the separation from his mother. His father also describes this as an extremely stressful situation, since he was forced to flee to save their lives, but the conditions during flight also put his son's life in danger. Kian recalls situations in Turkey where he prayed they would make it to Germany: "So I was with my father in Turkey [...] and I prayed so much [...] And then I said, but God is always with us."

In a collective shelter in Germany, Kian and his father met other Christians. At the time they knew nothing about the religion, but received lots of support and "lots of love" from these people, they assert.

Kian asks his father many questions about the Christian religion, about their previous faith, Islam, and about the differences between the religions. He reads the Bible, but primarily obtains his religious knowledge from YouTube and Facebook. Kian attends faith instruction at a German Christian congregation and Bible study at a Persian Christian congregation. There he is able to meet children of his age every week who share his language and faith. He turns to the pastor with his religious questions.

Kian would like to get his friends and other children from his school excited about his new faith, "evangelise" them and bring them into the congregation. The congregation's orientation as a free church is evident here: Just as he was converted, he wants to talk to others about God's love. However his father stresses that it is necessary to accept other religions too, even if you would like to spread Christianity.

Kian misses his mother and sister very much. His father says that the separation of the family has had an impact on his child's psychological state, and he observes that Kian is sometimes very sad, which he had never seen before. Kian is faced with a great divide of increasingly settling in to life in Germany and making friends through his school and religious community, while on the other hand still worrying about the safety of his mother and sister in Iran.

In the interview it also becomes clear that Kian is currently in a highly ambivalent life situation that is characterised by his positively perceived friendships as well as sadness and hopelessness with respect to the separation of the family. When he was asked to continue telling Varenka's story, he said that Varenka is sad but there is nothing she can do to improve her situation.

**Interviewer:** "Tell me, how could the story continue?"

**Kian:** "She was sad? And she said, 'I can't go into the forest and find something to eat?' And I can't help myself with animals or anything. And so on"

**Interviewer:** "Okay, and what could she do?"

**Kian:** "Nothing."

Kian expresses that prayer helps "so much", because then God and Jesus Christ are there to help you. At the same time, he is aware that this does not necessarily mean all your wishes will be fulfilled. Kian's narrative of the Varenka story illustrate his current state of stress, which results from the physical separation of the family and the uncertainty concerning if and when it will be possible to be reunited with his mother and sister.

Kian also uses his faith as an orientation for ethical behaviour. In this regard, he primarily relates to the attribute "God is sad/happy" by differentiating between good and bad behaviours. As with many other children, independently of their religion it becomes evident that they associate their identity as believers equally with self-interested and altruistic values, such as hard work and help for others.

**Interviewer:** "Okay. Good. Umm, and why do you think God is sad sometimes?"

**Kian:** "Because I sometimes do poor work at school, or I hit somebody. God doesn't want that!"

**Interviewer:** "Okay."

**Kian:** "And God is sad for me."

**Interviewer:** "Mhm. Okay." And when is God happy?"

**Kian:** "Umm, when I do good work. Yeah, or I learn German really well in school. Or I do good things, I help people. And that's a good feeling."

When asked what is important to him in life, Kian answers faith and bringing the family together: "I believe in God, my mother and my sister will come here."





## 8. Conclusions

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, child welfare must be a guiding principle for all political decisions. In particular, reference is made to Article 3 Section 1 of the Convention, according to which "in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration".

The interviews with refugee children underlying this study clearly show that the German asylum system fails to meet this requirement in many respects. When refugee children and their parents arrive in Germany, most of them have already gone through significant ordeals. They have often lived for months or even years under the poorest of conditions; many have experienced violence and some have witnessed the deaths of others. But the German asylum system also contributes to the various stresses suffered by refugee children and their parents: child welfare is endangered by long phases of legal uncertainty about residence status, the difficulty of reuniting families and life in collective shelters with little family privacy under living conditions that are not suitable for children. For refugee children and their family members, these experiences can provoke extreme psychological stress and partially lead to the development of mental illness. However, this should not obscure the fact that many refugee children have mental and social skills that allow them to begin a new life in Germany despite these difficult circumstances. Our study shows that refugee children who are religious, i.e. who have a relationship to God and have a sense of belonging to a faith community, are able to use this as a resource to process their experiences of flight and establish positive social relationships in a new living environment.

One question that repeatedly surfaces in political and media discourse concerns the age at which children and youth reach religious maturity, and are therefore able to understand certain traditions or rituals of their faith community and consciously decide to practise them. This perspective neglects the concept that children are able to draw strength from their faith, often apart from visible practices and without direct instruction from adults. Most of the children we interviewed believe in an individual relationship to God. Regardless of their religious affiliation or their age, they assume that they

can reach out to God with their concerns, fears and hopes, that he wants the best for them and helps them. One highly important element of their relationship to God for most children is free prayer or talking to God, which they practise on their own and without the initiative of others. In free prayer, they can reflect their thoughts and feelings, encourage themselves or concentrate on an important task. For most children, this is the most important way of dealing actively and capably with emergencies as well as entirely mundane stress situations in everyday life such as tests in school.

Although all the interviewed children identify as believers, there are differences between them in their religious coping processes concerning their migration experiences. There are children who describe a very intimate positive relationship to God and emphasise that God has rescued and protected them. What distinguishes the resilience of these children is their ability to free themselves from their migration experiences enough to participate in an age-appropriate environment in Germany where they make friendships, develop hobbies and have positive ideas about the future, such as ideas about their dream job. Some of these children have a strong religious practice in which traditional rituals are carried out in their faith communities, though both children and parents emphasise that these rituals are voluntary. Religious practices that children decide to observe are regarded positively by the children thanks to their socialisation, allowing them a sense of identification and community in their social environment. They identify the personal process of becoming a mature member of the faith community as a form of religious self-efficacy that increases their dedication to God. However, the religious practices of children typically take the form of adaptations, where traditional rituals from their faith community and families are adjusted to their needs and the requirements of their living environment.

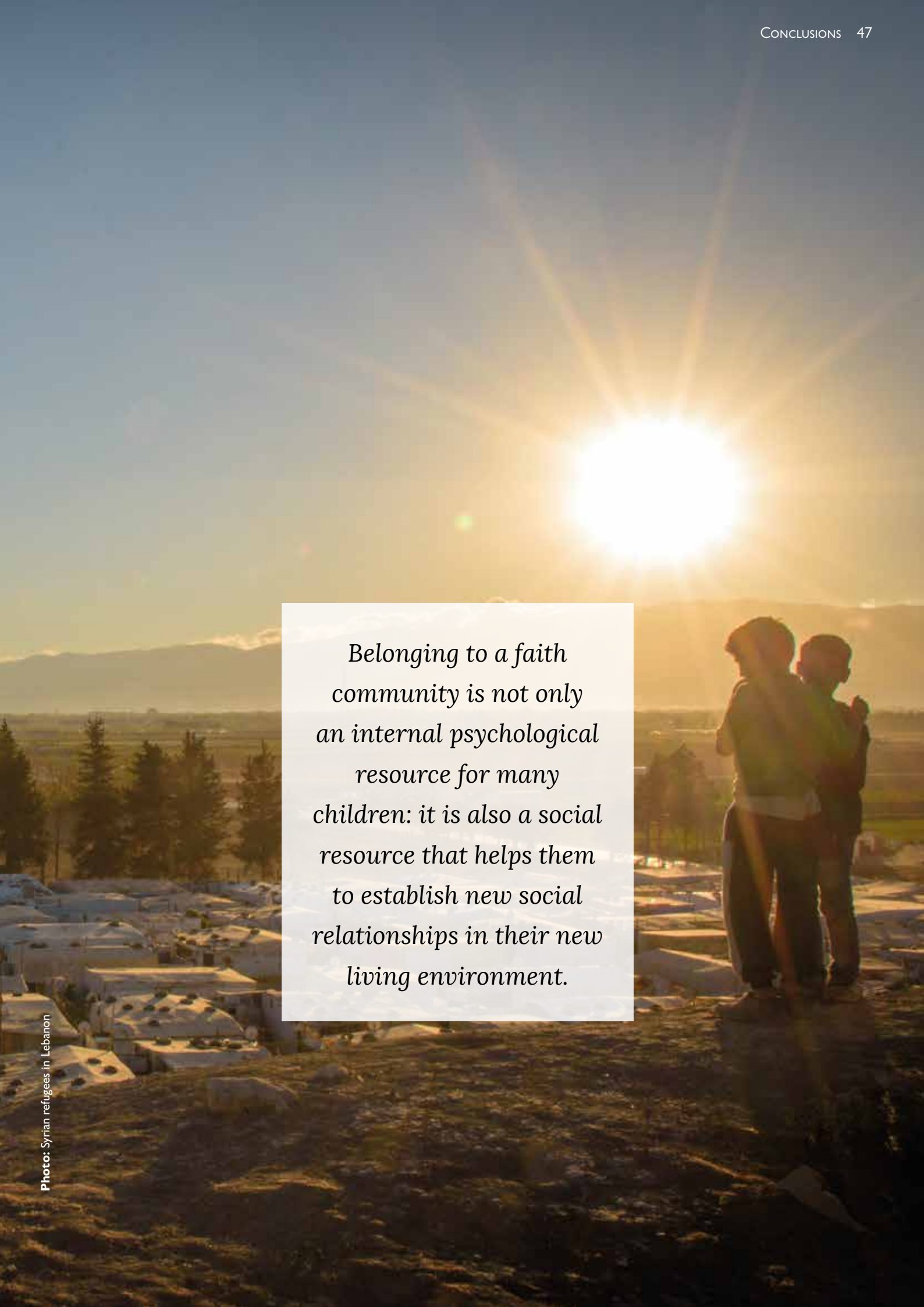
A significant factor for the resilience of many religious children is the ability to use their faith to explain the suffering they have experienced. Many children view humans as responsible for their own actions and emphasise that bad people are punished by God in this world or the afterlife. Other children view suffering as a part of life that can be managed with the help of God.

Some of the interviewed children, however, demonstrate a faith marked by an unresolved conflict between the concept of a good and all-powerful God and their personal suffering, for which they have to find an explanation. Faith does not necessarily become less important for them, since they process their experiences through religion by establishing a relationship to God even if this dynamic is a struggle. But it is often difficult for them to establish a positive relationship to God and use specific religious practices as a resource for resilience. This children frequently seem very resigned and struggle to distance themselves from their migration experience due to severe trauma. Sustained separation from close relatives or unresolved residence status can also make it impossible to find closure about the migration experience. They remain in a state of waiting, have little confidence in their own skills and ability to act and are barely able to imagine a positive future.

Belonging to a faith community is not only an internal psychological resource for many children: it is also a social resource that helps them to establish new social relationships in their new living environment. For these children, faith can be an "anchor of identity" (Simojoki 2016) in which the central ethical and moral values of the religious community offer a point of orientation for interacting with others regardless of the cultural context. The most important values shared by children from all the religions investigated are helping others in need and not inflicting mental or physical harm on others.

Arising from their concept of freedom of religion, many children are highly competent in dealing with religious diversity. For them, religion is not a category that structures their living environment; their friendship can bridge different religious, cultural and life backgrounds. When children are confronted with negative behaviours of children and adults with different beliefs, they do not attribute this to the world view of that person; instead, they identify underlying motives such as spreading hate. This shows how capably many children handle bullying and discrimination, but it should not be ignored that these experiences can also cause stress. Particularly when children or their parents experience xenophobic or Islamophobic attacks by adult strangers, this can make families seriously uneasy in their ideas of freedom of religion, democracy and safety in Germany. Yezidi families are also afraid that Islamic terrorism could develop in Germany.

Regardless of their religious affiliation, most parents highly value education about tolerance in dealing with other religious or ethnic groups as a result of the conflicts in their countries of origin. Most of the interviewed children and parents have a positive attitude towards interfaith education, since they have a general interest in other religions and view interfaith knowledge as protection against the use of religion as a tool for social boundaries and conflicts.



*Belonging to a faith community is not only an internal psychological resource for many children: it is also a social resource that helps them to establish new social relationships in their new living environment.*



## **9. Political Demands**





Photo: Syrian refugees in Lebanon

## ➔ Help for traumatised children!

A decisive factor for the well-being of refugee children in Germany is appropriate initial psychological care, for them as well as for the parents. Our study indicates that the German asylum system worsens the already severe mental stress faced by refugee children. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that political decisions must consider child welfare. This requirement is not currently being met.

For this reason, World Vision Deutschland e.V. calls for the following:

### **Guarantee medical and psychological care:**

Comprehensive creation of crisis centres that offer a diagnostic assessment that is sensitive to religion, culture and language, along with brief intervention where necessary and referral, free of charge and independently of residence and insurance status. In addition, a sufficient number of outpatient and inpatient treatment units must be provided without long waiting periods.

### **Train teachers and support staff:**

Teachers, social workers and educators that come into contact with refugee children must be enabled to identify and appropriately handle post-traumatic stress disorders and trauma disorders. To this end, teachers and support staff must be trained to act competently when faced with trauma-related reactions on the part of children.

## Recognise religion as a resource of refugee children!

Refugee children arriving in Germany over the past several years predominantly come from countries of origin where the majority of the population is religious. Religion can make a significant contribution to the resilience of refugee children. For this reason, they must be supported in practising and developing their religion.

For this reason, World Vision Deutschland e.V. calls for the following:

### **Preserving the fundamental right to freedom of religion:**

The results of our research clearly show that children develop an independent relationship to God and decide freely how to practise their religion. Religious practices such as nutritional customs, fasting periods or clothing styles are extremely multidimensional, since they can express a dedication to faith or a group affiliation, personal self-articulation or habits and are highly relevant for well-being and personal boundaries of privacy. According to Art. 4 GG, children enjoy freedom of religion in Germany and may not be discriminated based on their religion in accordance with

Art. 3 GG. Particular in the context of school, which is framed by the education goal of tolerance, religious plurality must be made possible. Regulating the religious practices of children denies children the ability to independently determine their religious identity (and parents who allow them this decision) and takes away freedom that is highly significant for the development of a self-determined religious identity as a viable resource for individual resilience. Religious compulsion in families can only be identified and resolved by appropriately qualified educators.

### **Protect basic interfaith education and in-depth interfaith training in schools:**

The results of our research indicate that refugee children and their families are highly interested in classroom or extracurricular education regarding their own religion as well as other religions. Persecution and religious conflicts in the refugee children's countries of origin can also lead to mistrust among or against religious communities in their countries of immigration and can be mobilised for fundamentalist attitudes. To prevent this risk, a capacity for dialogue between and within religions must be encouraged starting in schools by providing religious instruction based on democratic principles that also offers basic information about different faith communities. Teachers should be trained for religious sensitivity.

### **Encourage extracurricular (inter)faith education:**

Many of the children we interviewed want to participate in religious classes during their free time. But they rarely have access to such instruction, since there is nothing available for the relevant religion in the areas where they live or this instruction is targeted at a different ethnic group. We call for safe spaces to be provided in particular for smaller religious communities where they can gather and observe their religious practices. Given the great interest that children express in cross-cultural and interfaith dialogue, we also recommend for community leisure facilities to address this need and offer more relevant services.

## Use and develop the diversity skills of children!

Due to their experiences in shelters, language classes and multi-ethnic religious communities, refugee children experience more cultural, religious and ethnic plurality than almost any other segment of the population in Germany. They are often able to use their religious and humanistic values as a resource to overcome different languages, world views and life practices when developing relationships with others. At the same time, it is evident that the majority of the children we interviewed have experienced religious or ethnic discrimination. This is predominantly perpetrated by adults and has an impact on the emotional well-being of children that cannot be underestimated.

For this reason, World Vision Deutschland e.V. calls for the following:

### **Fight racism in Germany:**

Most of the families we interviewed have experienced verbal abuse, and in some cases physical abuse motivated by racism since their arrival in Germany. Politics and civil society must face the fact that racism is a reality in the lives of many migrants in Germany. World Vision calls for addressing this need for action with a large-scale development programme to encourage the acceptance of social diversity in the age of globalisation and migration and to combat racism.

### **Empowerment of children faced with discrimination:**

Since our study indicates how seriously some refugee children (and often their parents as well) are affected by experiences of religious or ethnic discrimination, it is essential to create options for affected children that empower them with coping strategies for experiences with discrimination and bullying.

### **Encourage democracy and anti-discrimination in schools:**

For the development of democracy, it is essential to encourage all children and adults in Germany to develop competence with social diversity and to adopt anti-discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. The use of religious affiliation as a tool for social exclusion and generation of conflict must be prevented. Instead, interfaith values like equality, solidarity and empathy must form the foundations of democratic teaching to help children in their development of a reflected consciousness with respect to diversity.

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