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# A Finnish Reception Centre for Asylum Seekers as an Environment for Informal Learning of Religion

by  
Tapani Innanen

## Abstract

*This empirical article studies practices in a Finnish reception centre for asylum seekers asking 1) what are the concrete or metaphorical places in the centre where religion could be seen, and 2) which kind of discourses about religion were present in the informal learning given at the studied centre. The data was collected using ethnographical methods, mainly by observations, discussions, and interviews. The asylum seekers in the centre had mainly come from Muslim majority countries and the centre was organised to follow the principles of secular democracy marked by Lutheran Christianity. The given main outlines of the centre considered that religion should be a private issue and not practised publicly. However, in everyday life, religion was seen in many ways: food practices, praying, setting the pace of time, and both Islamic and Christian festive celebrations. These practices challenged the idea of religion as only a private issue. There were mutual respect and openness on the part of both immigrants and residents not only to acquire new knowledge, but to learn from each other in an informal way and to develop ways of living together in mutual trust so that religion was accepted as a visible element of daily life to some extent. Religion was mostly a resource for positive meaning in the life of the centre.*

*Schlagwörter: Asylbewerber, Aufnahmezentrum, Religion, Publizität und Privatsphäre, informell Lernen*

*Keywords: asylum seeker, reception centre, religion, publicity and privacy, informal learning*

## 1 Introduction

In 2015, Finland like several other European countries took in the largest number of refugees since World War II. The total number of asylum seekers entering Finland in 2015, was 32,150, which is only of 3 percent of the respective number among the EU member states. However, the number of those seeking asylum in Finland was 822 percent up from the year 2014, (Eurostat newsrelease 44/2016).

The largest share of the asylum seekers entering Finland in 2015 came from Iraq (about 64%), Afghanistan (16%), Somalia (6%), and Syria (3%), (Migri, Turvapaikanhakijat 1.1.–31.12.2015). All of these departure areas are Muslim majority societies. While Finnish society is a Western democracy, historically strongly characterised by Lutheran Christianity, religion and religion-related issues were a part of the cultural encounter, which both immigrants and residents had to face.

During 2015, the Finnish authorities rapidly organised a network of new reception centres for asylum seekers. Several settlement organisations and commercial companies were empowered by the government to establish these centres. Viittakivi Oy, a non-profit subsidiary company of the Finnish Federation of Settlement House's social group, founded three reception centres from October to December 2015. They were located in the middle and eastern part of Finland, and offered services for almost 1,000 asylum seekers or, to use the official term clients (Lindstam, 2017, p. 5.11–14).

Viittakivi wanted to co-operate with Finnish universities in order to get research-based knowledge about the activities managed by the centres. Thus, a co-operation

project was realised with the Faculty of Theology in the University of Helsinki, (Har-tonen, 2017). This article is one of the study reports made possible by this project.

## **2 Theoretical background**

### ***2.1 Asylum seekers and reception centres in Finland***

Finland, as a state, is committed to following the international principles indicated in the 1951 Refugee Convention, (The 1951 Refugee Convention). The status of refugee can be granted in two different ways. One of these is to be allowed entry into Finland based on a proposal by the UNHCR (officially: *United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, better known as *The United Nations Refugee Agency*) with respect to Finland's refugee quota. The other possibility is to come to Finland as an asylum seeker and to be granted asylum and obtain refugee status after a special investigation.

In this article an asylum seeker is an alien person who has come to Finland and has sought asylum and the right to reside in Finland on the basis of the need for international protection. An asylum seeker will most likely receive one of the following four decisions: 1) He or she is granted asylum. 2) The person will be granted subsidiary protection in Finland. 3) The person might be able to get either a fixed-term or a permanent residence permit, based on some specified reason. 4) The person is denied the right of asylum in Finland and he or she is forced to leave the country, (Aliens Act, 2014).

In Finland the asylum seeker is entitled to be provided with accommodation and some basic services afforded by the state. An asylum seeker is able to receive these services while living in private homes, but the main alternative is to live in a reception centre, a facility which is provided by the Finnish Immigration Service to persons applying for international protection and to beneficiaries of temporary protection, (Migri, Living in a reception centre). The basic services given by the reception centre are accommodation, social and health services, some spending money, interpretation, and work and study activities, (Migri, Daily life in a reception centre).

### ***2.2 Religion and freedom of religion***

It is hard to define the concept of 'religion' in an exact way. For instance, the *Encyclopædia Britannica* gives a definition where the human beings' relation to what they regard as holy or sacred and people's dealing with ultimate concerns about their lives are emphasised, (Encyclopædia Britannica, Religion). The other angle to approach the definition is to describe the areas of human behaviour where religion plays some role; this is the case of Ninian Smart and his definition of seven dimensions of religion: the ritual, experiential, mythical, doctrinal, ethical, social, and material dimensions, (Smart, 1996). These definitions provide a useful distinction between two different sides of religion: on the one hand there are some very personal and private elements, and on the other hand, there are issues related to communities, common practices, and concrete materials.

In recent times, scholars have emphasised the diversity of religiosity even among those who belong to the same religious communities. It is important to understand religion as a 'lived religion', not only, and perhaps not primarily, as officially organised institutions, (e.g. McGuire, 2008). Both the established religious communities and the way religion is practised in everyday life should be taken into account.

Finland, as a state, accepted freedom of religion in the 1919 Constitution. The details were legislated by the Freedom of Religion Act in 1922 and renewed by the new Act on Freedom of Religion in 2003, (Act on the Freedom of Religion, 2003). Freedom of religion can be said to have two sides. There is positive freedom, i.e. “the right to profess and practice a religion, the right to express one's convictions and the right to be a member of or decline to be a member of a religious community”, and negative freedom: “No one is under the obligation, against his or her conscience, to participate in the practice of a religion,” (Constitution, 1999, section 11).

### ***2.3 Learning environments: formal – nonformal – informal learning***

During the last decades, the process of learning has been understood by scholars to happen in formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings. For instance, Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky (2018) formulate:

Formal learning occurs in organized and structured environments; ... Nonformal learning is usually also a structured preplanned activity and as such it is also intentional from the learners' point of view. However, it does not necessarily have explicitly designated learning objectives and outcomes and does not lead to certification. Informal learning is not ... organized or structured in any way. It results from daily activities related to work, family or leisure, and is accumulated over the years via individual activities. (Donitsa-Schmidt & Zuzovsky, 2018)

Donitsa-Schmidt and Zuzovsky (2018) make a further remark that “[f]ormal and nonformal learning are similar in many respects, while informal learning is more distinct”. Especially when talking about informal learning, it is better to use the concept of a learning environment when learning is taking place in a context which is not aimed at being educational.

## **3 Aim, data, and methodology of the study**

The aim of this article is to find out 1) what are the concrete or metaphorical places in the centre where religion could be witnessed, and 2) which kind of discourses about religion were present in the informal learning taking place in the studied centre.

The data were collected using an ethnographical approach in October and December 2016, and in March 2017. I was personally able to visit the studied Reception Centre for five days, and the primary original data analysed in this article was collected during these visits. There are two kinds of data: recorded interviews and remarks made during participant observation and informal discussions, that were written down in an observation diary. I interviewed nine persons in total, seven of them were employees of the Reception Centre, and two were asylum seekers. Two persons were interviewed twice, so the total number of recorded interviews in the centre was eleven. All the employees were interviewed in Finnish, the other client in English; the other client used Arabic, his native language, interpreted into Finnish by an immigrant background staff worker of the Centre.

The Reception Centre was situated in a location formerly used by an educational institution. The facilities consisted of buildings where accommodation, kitchens and dining rooms, classrooms, and an office were situated. There were two kinds of buildings for accommodation: a block of flats where young and middle-aged men without families lived, and smaller terraced house flats with a couple of rooms and a kitchen, which were used by families. In the middle of the buildings, there was an area of grounds with old deciduous trees; a nice place where the people might easily meet.

I had several discussions outside the physical area of the Reception Centre, for instance with some other authorities cooperating with centre, and with several researchers involved in the same project. These interviews and discussions provided impressions, although they have not been used as analysed data in this article.

The analyses of this article follow the principles of ethnographical work. The participatory observation provides a general impression and some details may attract the investigator's attention; these kinds of impressions are written down in the diary. These are the preliminary findings, which, in turn, affect the interviews and further observation activities. This preliminary understanding gives the context where the transcribed interviews are analysed using content analysis techniques. The final results are based on an abductive analysing process.

The results of this article are examined mainly in the context of the Finnish legislation and instructions concerning publicly produced services for asylum seekers. However, the case of one reception centre cannot be generalised to make claims about other centres in Finland, and naturally far more less in similar cases in other countries. A special note, too, should be made concerning limitations when collecting the data. Firstly, as an investigator, I had very few free days for collecting the data. Secondly, asylum seekers in reception centres live under special and vulnerable conditions, perhaps with very problematic experiences. That is why the academic research project had to be realised in a sensitive way, due to both academic ethics and the Finnish legislative instructions.

## **4 Findings**

### **4.1 Food**

The question of food was perhaps the most evident religion-related issue in the data, being mentioned in some of the interviews and manifesting itself in a number of practical ways.

Muslim food requirements were mentioned mostly in the form of the need to avoid certain substances, especially pork and alcohol. Islamic Halal food, moreover, requires that the food must come from suppliers who use Halal practices, especially when using meat: the prescribed process of slaughter according to the Islamic method includes the utterance of Islamic prayers. The requirement of Halal food was practically solved when the clients made their own food in the kitchens provided. In the immediate neighbourhood there were no Halal food groceries but a mobile shop, with Halal food for sale, visited the Centre.

The co-operation of the Reception Centre and a local sheep farmer made it possible for the clients themselves to prepare sheep for the Id al-Fitr feast. The slaughter of the animal was realised in a way that followed both Finnish food regulations and the Islamic Halal tradition. The Manager of the Reception Centre interpreted this occasion as a good example of the practical solutions needed when different kinds of ideals face each other. In addition, the occasion encouraged the local Finnish farmer and the Muslim immigrants to work together in a practical way, which, in turn, was highly appreciated by the Manager concerning the pre-integrative social aims of life at the Centre.

Muslim observance forbids alcohol, and most of the asylum seekers at the Centre did not drink alcohol. However, it was apparent to the personnel in the Centre that some of the clients were using alcohol: empty beer bottles or cans were found in accommo-

dation facilities. When the use of alcohol seemed to be minimal and did not cause any problems, it was not publicly discussed among people at the Centre.

Kristiina Janhonen (2016) has pointed out the opportunities to strengthen participation and agency of learners through food education. “[F]ood communities are no longer built merely on a national level”, and thus education “requires thinking about the connections among different locations in young peoples’ lives, ... developing novel conceptualizations of young people’s belonging ... and students’ identities”. Janhonen’s conclusions match well with the findings of the informal adult learning environment at the Centre.

## **4.2 Praying**

According to the Islamic ideal a Muslim is supposed to pray five times a day. The daily prayers were, together with food practices, the other noticeable Islamic feature of everyday life at the Centre. One of the informants (I), a staff worker, told the researcher (R)<sup>1</sup>:

I: “Of course, they have their own, own daily operations, connected to their religion, and, and rituals and quieting down and ... calls, which can be hear, heard on their mobiles. So, they bring into our everyday routines kind of, kind of ...”

R: “... a certain kind of feeling?”

I: “... yeah, yes.”

According to the Manager’s instructions, politics and religion were private issues and no one was allowed to practise them publicly at the Centre. On the other hand, all the clients had the right to practise religion privately in his or her own room, which was the home space of the client. This kind of distinction between private and public practices or spaces is obviously challenging when daily prayer practices are concerned. For instance, Adhan, the prayer call in Arabic, was openly heard on several mobile phones at the same time, including for instance its opening words: “Allahu akkbar”, “God is greatest”.

The practice of daily prayers was, according to the Manager of the Centre, promoted in a very practical and communal way, perhaps a little by accident:

I: “But those gifts of rugs! ... Well, if belief gives strength, then praying gives strength. Men have huge anxiety about their wives, children ... and, well, their connection, like to God. Connection in this way to wives and children and for them, praying. To make it possible, and to make it possible on a clean rug ... luckily enough, I happened to mention in one of the first new paper interviews that at least rugs are needed. And we got hundreds of them!”

In connection with prayer practices, the clients wanted to have the clear guidelines of privacy. They had asked the Manager if it was allowed for people living in neighbouring rooms to come and pray together in one room. The answer run: of course, it is possible for anyone to extend hospitality and welcome others to visit their home, and so praying together was allowed if it was acceptable for the occupants of the room. Consequently, it was usual that at least some men had certain prayers together in someone’s room.

During warm summer days the spaces for prayers became larger. According to the Manager, some of the immigrants prayed publicly in the yard “in the shade of the

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<sup>1</sup> All the interviews of personnel at the Centre were in Finnish. The translations into English are my own.

trees”, but he did not see anyone praying “in the middle of the yard”. Clearly, public prayers in the yard challenged rules about not practising religion publicly.

An interviewed client, a young man living at the Centre without any relatives, told – using his English – about the importance of prayers. At home, in his birth country, he had learned the practice of prayers by just following “what my father and my mother and family doing”:

I: “You, you have to pray the right time. You have to pray the right time. Because ... you can hear Adhan. ... And we just prayers like five minute. Then, if you have time ... you can go, what’s called ... because we are praying together that time. ... Here ... I’m praying inside my home. Because as, as you know that we don’t have, near, in this place we don’t have mosque.”

R: “So, in your room or?” –

I: “– I’m just room.”

The informant later in the interview emphasised afresh the importance of daily prayers: “When the time is prayer ... You have to pray wherever it is.” Holding fast to the everyday religious practice reminded him about his childhood, and his mother and father, offering continuity in a life context which otherwise was very unstable.

### ***4.3 Religion as setting the pace of time***

The Islamic tradition of prayers gave rhythm to the passing of daily time. Several other religion-related occasions of special times, more connected to the annual rhythm of life, became obvious in the data. A staff worker put it in this way:

I: “And, and then of course ... their own, own religion related, festive times and fasting times and ... And, we always were a little bit surprised ... then one slightly notices that, o-oh, well, now this kind of point is coming ... and it should be taken into account. ... And how, in what way should it be taken into account? ... Well, now Ramadan as the most common of them, so that ... it has an effect on the kind of ... everyday functions.”

The Ramadan month, mentioned here, began June 6<sup>th</sup> and ended July 5<sup>th</sup>. The Reception Centre had been actively operating for more than half a year by that time, so the very busy time starting the Centre was over. Hence, there was certainly time enough to notice that Ramadan was coming.

According to the employees, celebrating Ramadan went well allowing the Muslim background asylum seekers an opportunity to observe a traditional rite. Obviously, a remarkable number of the clients observed the prescribed fasting. A special feature produced by the Finnish geographical position and the midsummer time of Ramadan, was the long daylight hours, with the dark night time being only a couple of hours long. An interviewed client had fasted by trying to follow the local daylight hours – which was demanding. Probably some of the clients had followed that timetable of sunrise and sunset times in Mecca.

The normally active atmosphere in the Reception Centre had calmed down during Ramadan. In the daytime, many of the clients slept. Apparently, some of them, especially young men although having their background in Islamic majority societies, did not abide by the Islamic fastening rules. Even so, according to the Manager, they bore Ramadan in mind:

I: “But, single men, in turn, their behaviour in the yard, that they did not, in the yard, like shout out in their friendly manner. Nor laugh as loudly. ... during the daytime those who smoked were just not seen at all, so pretty many went, like

somewhere to hide themselves away to have a smoke ... the smoking was done more privately, like having respect for the others who were observing Ramadan.”

Ashura was another Islamic feast celebrated in the Centre. Ashura is a major festival especially for Shia Muslims. Ashura took place on Tuesday, October 11<sup>th</sup> 2016 and on that day I luckily happened to visit the Centre.

Some of the male clients had asked in good time if they could make arrangements to celebrate Ashura at the Centre. The Manager discussed things with the men and asked about their plans. According to his final stipulations, it was possible to have a common feast meal prepared by the clients, but religious ceremonial observations would not be allowed. The interviewed Manager said that he was aware of the tensions between Shias and Sunnis which, for instance in Iraq, had been related to celebrating Ashura, and about the possible violent Ashura rite manners that might occur.

Ashura celebration was organised by the unmarried young men. All the people living or working in the Centre were welcomed to the festive lunch served at 2 pm. The dining hall had a few decorations. A short text in Arabic was written on a blackboard, wishing everyone good fortune. From early morning the young men had been preparing the meal, including both vegetarian and Halal meat dishes.

All the people present that day at the Centre participated, which on the whole, was a very rare occurrence. The atmosphere was welcoming. The men serving the meals seemed to be very satisfied and proud, taking photos, which, I heard, at least some young men sent to their mothers back home. One of highlights of the gathering was the moment when small children of the client families, brought by a school bus, entered the dining hall. With happy faces and laughing voices they greeted their families and other people having the feast both in Finnish and in their own languages. The adult asylum seekers were proud about the possibility of hosting the resident personnel of the Centre; a good meal celebrated a traditional cultural festive rooted in Islamic religion; the children were happy and full of energy and they told news about their experiences in a Finnish school! There was joy in the dining hall – an emotion surely not experienced too often at the Centre!

Not only the annual festive times of the immigrants’ tradition, but Finnish festivities as well were celebrated within the rhythm of the Reception Centre life. Christmas could be seen in several ways in the Centre. A traditional Christmas tree was brought to the facilities of the Centre. There was a Christmas Eve celebration, following the Finnish tradition, including singing happy Christmas songs and presents given by Father Christmas. However, the staff workers had, after careful consideration, omitted clearly religious elements, such as songs with religious references.

In December 2015, the local Lutheran parish offered the clients a possibility to visit a Christmas celebration event in the parish hall during Advent time. Two buses were needed for those who wanted to visit this musical event. The interviewed Manager interpreted this offer as “a friendly gesture on the side of the parish”. In his point of view “our clients, Muslims, did not see the confessionalism which was present, as an attempt to coerce or attack ... against them, but ... they were guests in a house where the hosts believed in this way”.

I asked the two asylum seekers about this visit to the Lutheran Christmas celebration. The older one, a father of one of the families at the Centre, had attended, the younger man had not. The father said that it was interesting to see what kind of event it was. He was happy that he did not experience any kind of religious pressure he went to the

event. The younger man who did not attend, said that he “just told them - - we can’t, we are a Muslim”.

#### **4.4 Religious communities**

The co-operation with the local Lutheran parish came to light in some other connections as well. For instance, volunteers organised by the parish visited the Centre to help with its clients when sorting donated clothes.

The Manager had outlined how the activities of local religious communities could be realised in the Centre. According to his distinction, religious communities were welcomed “to do this kind, of purely, this non-confessional diaconal work”. Any kind of practising religion was not allowed to any religious community within the Centre. On the other hand, any religious community had the possibility to inform about their activities on the Centre noticeboard.

The Manager said that he welcomed new asylum seekers to the Centre with these words:

I: “- - I promise our staff, and I, will respect the personal belief of everyone. Whatever it may be! And every human being’s right to implement his or her personal faith. Well, in the own home, so we will give support ... in every way. And, if there is anything related, like, to faith that you feel you can’t realise your own faith. You can come and talk to me about it. Faith is not a public issue, however.”

In the quote above, the Manager used the Finnish phrase “henkilökohtainen usko” twice, two words which have several connotations. The word “henkilökohtainen” can be translated into English as “personal”, “private” or “individual”, “usko” can mean “faith” or “belief”. The implication is that faith or belief is accepted but should not be publicly expressed.

There was no Mosque community near of the Centre, although a small minority community of Muslims did exist. According to the employees, some of the asylum seekers were specifically pleased to know that there wasn’t a Mosque. This reserved attitude was probably the result of the negative occasions experienced in their home countries. However, it was apparent that some Muslim clients had visited Mosques at a distance from the Centre.

Based on the very limited data, it is difficult to provide any deeper analysis about the question whether any serious attraction for a “new” religion was taking place, or whether any interest in changing religion had taken place at the Centre. Some details can, however, be mentioned.

During the Ashura feast, I observed a young man wearing a pendant cross among the clients. A staff worker told me that he was a Christian who had come from a Muslim majority country and had a strong social status among the clients. That is why, I was told, he had no problems in living together with the other asylum seekers.

On the other hand, in an interview with an employee, the topic arose that a young adult from a Muslim majority was interested in knowing more about Christianity and was perhaps willing to become a Christian. These interests were not accepted by some of the other clients, which, in turn, resulted in this individual moving to another place of accommodation place. This solution – moving to accommodation outside the Centre – was in itself possible and was widely practiced in Finland.

One more detail can be mentioned. The Reception Centre I studied also served immigrants coming to Finland as quota refugees who have already been granted asylum by the UNHCR. A group of Eritrean refugees, who were mostly Christian, arrived at the Centre. Because they already had refugee status, their needs and social positioning differed significantly from those of the other clients at the Centre, and in practice they lived at the Centre just a short time. It is, however, important to notice the diversity of clients at the Reception Centre, also taking the clients' religious backgrounds and commitments into account.

None of the personnel I met at the Centre mentioned of his or her own religious background nor did I ask about it. It was obvious, of course that they needed to be very careful not to show their possible religious commitments at work. This was the starting point in the instructions of the Finnish Immigration Service and in the outlines of the Manager at the Centre as well. According to the impressions, given in observations, discussions, and interviews, the personnel was also personally committed to following the ideal of respect towards the clients, their well-being, and their rights.

## 5 Discussion

Several negotiation processes – i.e. learning processes – concerning the position of religion could be seen to take place at the Reception Centre. These negotiations were necessary because people from clearly different religious and cultural backgrounds lived together and encountered each other in social and physical surroundings, which had a special, limited function.

*The dimension of privacy or publicity* was one approach by which to negotiate the positioning of religion. The personnel at the Centre emphasised the privacy of religion, not only in the given instructions but as careful caution and circumspection in their work as employees as well.

It seemed to be a slight surprise for the workers at the Centre that religion was an aspect of the everyday life of the Centre. This was probably not only a question of unfamiliar customs but also a question of religion shown openly. Finland, not unlike other Nordic countries, has been described as one of the most secular societies in the world although, from some other viewpoints, religions have a fairly strong position in these countries. This phenomenon has sometimes been called the Nordic paradox, (Pessi, Angel & Pettersson, 2009). Privatising religious issues is a symptom of this paradox.

The other secular strategy is simply to interpret religion as an unimportant matter. One can ask if this attitude explains why the Finnish Immigration Service did not have any special instruction about religion when in 2015 Finland received greater number of asylum seekers. Later, in April 2017, a report entitled "Instruction taking freedom of religion and practicing religion into consideration in reception centres" was published, (Migri, Vastaanottojärjestelmän valvontaraportti).

In this context, the leaders in single reception centres had to direct the matters according to rather general legislation and instructions when facing questions of religion, especially as new centres were set up in a great hurry. The Manager of the studied Centre did it emphasising the privacy of religion which was, at the same time, a tool to ensure safety and security among those living and working at the Centre.

However, the public elements of religion became apparent in the everyday life of the Centre. Encountering religion through practical matters, like Halal food, daily prayers, and festivities, indicated how religion could be taken into account. Little by little,

the religion of the asylum seekers and even their practice of religion became more visible. This change also tells us more about *the learning process of the resident workers*. Although the personnel encountered some Islamic elements, including some surprisingly public expressions of religiosity, still the Centre's operational guidelines were followed smoothly and were adaptable to change. The resident workers learned more about Islam and, at the same time, became more aware of religion-related matters in Finnish society as well. They learned how to be sensitive to recognising religion and to act reflectively in a meaningful way.

*The religious diversity of the asylum seekers* at the studied Centre is a clear finding. Most of the asylum seekers had come from countries where Islam was the majority religion. The data, albeit limited, pointed that there was great diversity when thinking about the personal commitment to religion, or to religions. The asylum seekers included devoted Muslims who diligently followed the practices of their religion; people with a Muslim background with little interest in the ideals of Islam or perhaps of any other religion either; those interested in religions that were new to them; and committed Christians.

Religion and religion-related issues seemed to have some specific importance as *a resource to provide continuity and security* for people living in a liminal in-between situation. Asylum seekers are no longer self-evidently members of their society of origin, nor are they yet members of the surrounding society. Liminality and temporality are also recognised in earlier reception centre studies (e.g. Kaukko & Wernersjö, 2017). Religion seemed to provide several ties to the original communities of the asylum seekers, namely food culture, setting a rhythm for the passage of daily time, festive traditions, traditional sacred language, rituals to be followed, connection in memories, and prayers to loved ones.

## 6 Conclusions

Some concluding remarks can be given, although the data basis of this study is too limited for any larger interpretations.

Insofar the position of Religion and religion-related matters at the studied Centre are concerned, I am under the impression that at the start the centre leaders gave quite exact guidelines. They followed the basic rule that religion is a private issue and should not be practised publicly. This assumption, probably based on the secular interpretation of Finnish and Nordic societies, was soon challenged by the examples of the Muslim background asylum seekers: religion is not merely a private issue!

Step by step, when the life of the community had settled down without any remarkable incidents threatening the security of the Centre, more room could be given to visible religiosity in public spaces. The course of the negotiation made progress from the limitations to privacy towards more open treatment of religious matters. The Manager and other leading employees in the Centre continued to be respected in their positions of authority, and this, in turn, gave them more space to be flexible. In this climate of mutual respect and openness to learn from each other, both immigrants and resident workers learned not only new knowledge but trustful ways of living together as well.

Religion and religion-related matters were mostly a resource for several positive meanings both to individual asylum seekers and to the life of the community at the Centre. Although some tensions did occur they could be solved. The practical and flexible solutions at the Reception Centre evidence of the informal learning processes

that took place. The results of the study seem to challenge the too cautious, perhaps even insecure, interpretation of freedom of religion, where religion is forced to be only a private matter. When there is enough space for the positive freedom of religion, human rights and the well-being of asylum seekers can be better achieved, and the total aim of organising reception centres will be realised at a higher level.

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*Dr. Tapani Innanen, University Lecturer in Religious Education, Adjunct Professor, Faculty of Theology at the University of Helsinki, Finland.*