

# Race, Religion, and Afghan Refugees' Practices of Care in Greece

---

---

*Zareena A. Grewal*

## **Introduction: Muslims and the Politics of Recognition in Greece**

On 7 June 2019, Greek Education and Religious Affairs minister Costas Gavroglou addressed a crowd of about one hundred Muslims, journalists, and state officials at the “inauguration” of the government’s partially constructed, purpose-built mosque in Athens: “Athens now has a dignified place of worship for Muslims whether they are citizens or migrants, refugees, or visitors. The right to pray to the god you believe in, like the right of a child to go to school, does not depend on the circumstances under which someone arrived here. Everyone has these rights. They are non-negotiable human rights” (Speed 2019). By 2019, there were nearly 300,000 Muslims in Athens, yet it remained the only European capital without an operational mosque. After the offer of Saudi Arabia’s King Fahd to build an exquisite mosque in Athens was refused, a 2006 presidential decree committed the Greek government to build the first mosque in the city since Ottoman rule ended in 1821. Numerous delays halted construction, including in 2014 when contractors refused to take on the project out of fear of violent attacks from members of the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party; Muslims are the most frequent targets of their racist attacks (Palivos 2018: 272). With the leftist SYRIZA party’s electoral success in 2015, plans for building a mosque re-

sumed as the population of Muslims in Greece skyrocketed, with more than one million refugees arriving that year alone—the majority fleeing wars in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. A vote in Parliament to accelerate the mosque’s construction was passed in 2016, despite publicly voiced opposition from the powerful Eastern Orthodox Church and the white supremacist-fascist Golden Dawn party’s leader, Nikolaos Michaloliakos, who denounced Parliament as traitors building a “shrine to slavery” (Speed 2019). “Are we returning to Turkish occupation?” he continued; “Because the Parthenon too was a mosque. We cannot rule out that they demand it becomes a mosque once again.”

While Golden Dawn represents an extremist, populist far-right fringe within Greece (constituting its third largest political party although they were voted out of Parliament in 2019), Greece has seen a marked rise in xenophobia and anti-Muslim racism alongside a severe economic crisis and pervasive unemployment since 2010. In 2017, a national survey found only 36.3 percent of Greeks had positive associations with the word “Muslim,” and another survey found 76 percent of Greeks believe being an Orthodox Christian is essential to being “truly Greek” (Georgakopoulos 2017; Pew Research Center 2017). Like its drab structure, the long delays in the building of the mosque in Athens reflect the contested place of Muslims in Greece. Lacking a loudspeaker for calls to prayer, domes, minarets, or any kind of aesthetic detail at all save a simple sign, the small rectangular building in the capital’s Votanikos district resembles a military office, situated within a navy compound surrounded by a high wall topped with barbed wire, surveillance cameras, and a twenty-four-hour security detail. Critics of the leftist SYRIZA party government, which was in majority at the time, dismissed the inauguration of the partially constructed mosque a few weeks before an election as a political stunt to attract minority votes (SYRIZA ultimately lost the 2019 election). Rather than celebratory, the tone of the government officials at the inauguration was cautious. The Muslims in attendance were visibly pleased, but one Pakistani activist, whom I first encountered in Athens in 2018, expressed more frustration than relief over what he described as a “small, half-victory.”

Muslims’ long-standing political organizing to establish an official mosque in Athens and to be recognized by the state is a form of resisting the oppressive conditions and real damage they suffer as a result of political, legal, and social exclusion (Cabot 2014). Charles Taylor (1994) names this form of identity politics a “politics of recognition” particular to modern liberal-democratic polities whereby marginalized groups claim rights from the state ultimately on the basis of an equal right to difference. Although 90 percent of Greeks identify as Eastern Orthodox Christians, Greece’s eastern land and sea borders have long been the primary point of entry to the European Union for all “mixed migrants,” an umbrella term used by the United

Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR 2018) and defined as “complex population movements including refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants . . . environmental migrants, smuggled persons, victims of trafficking and stranded migrants,” and most of these migrants are Muslims. The process by which states determine whom among the “mixed migrants” are morally legitimate suffering bodies who deserve asylum or immigration status produces what Miriam Ticktin (2011: 5) calls a “new humanity”: refugees are considered second-class, disabled, and disadvantaged, but welcome such that their arrival simultaneously produces new forms of state “policing or surveillance—harsher security measures [are] pushed through under humanitarian pretexts, and victims [are] moved all too easily from endangered to dangerous, innocent to delinquent.” Refugees are typically (and simultaneously) represented as pitiful charity cases and as national security threats. Michaloliakos’s vitriolic diatribe against the mosque extended the racial logic to its most extreme: the refugees running for their lives from war and desperate circumstances are recast not only as potential terrorists but as threatening conquerors, a latent Islamic imperial force.

The opaque process and slow bureaucratic drag around the government’s construction of the mosque mirrors the highly traumatizing bureaucratic processes millions of migrants endure as they wait to be granted asylum in Europe. While the Greek government struggles to meet the overwhelming needs of displaced people stuck in the country as a result of the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, glossing the rise in bigotry as a simple reaction to the “refugee crisis” erases Europe’s role in the deep histories and geopolitical contexts that create refugees. A “carceral humanitarianism,” as Kelly Oliver (2017) terms it, in which refugees are “rescued” but then sorted, contained within fences and checkpoints, commodified and surveilled, has replaced actual political solutions to the so-called refugee crisis. Although the UNHCR’s mandate is humanitarian and claims to be nonpartisan and apolitical, Oliver (2017) argues that humanitarian aid and human rights discourses are always political, often co-opted by states, and operate according to a logic of exclusion that values some lives over others, rendering some “collateral damage.” This carceral humanitarianism creates classes of refugees and upholds rather than challenges racism, xenophobia, disaster capitalism, and state violence. Of course, Oliver’s (2017: 6) critique of the European Union’s carceral humanitarianism and her attention to “the uneasy alliance between humanitarian aid, human rights, and military operations,” which produces refugees as criminals, a societal burden, or “collateral damage,” is not simply a call to dispense with humanitarian aid and human rights. Rather, she critiques the calculating machine and lesser-of-evils utilitarian approach of states and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to refugees in light of Hannah Arendt’s ([1964] 2003: 36) reminder that “those who choose the lesser evil forget very quickly that they chose evil.”

Numerous critics have demonstrated that the militarized internment and the inhumane conditions of the Greek camps are by design, a deterrent strategy, which the European Union has hailed as a success since the overall numbers of refugees reaching Greece have gone down since 2016, despite the grim, alarming fact that the ratio of deaths to the number of arrivals has dramatically increased (IOM 2018). Clearly, discrimination and the restriction of people's rights do not end after refugees have left their countries of origin; rather, cycles of violence, insecurity, marginalization, and discrimination often continue or emerge in the country of asylum, including forms of violence that are linked to religion in different ways.

For their part, Muslims in Greece are not waiting to be recognized or embraced by the state or society in order to perform their weekly congregational prayers on Fridays (*juma*); in camps such as Moria in Lesbos, refugees have created provisional prayer spaces behind the barbed wire fences, and Muslims in Athens have established more than 120 makeshift mosques scattered in neighborhoods throughout the city in converted and carpeted garages, warehouses, factories, and basements (Speed 2019). Ethnic community centers and NGO offices run by Muslim immigrants and refugees who also serve refugee populations such as the Afghan Community Center near Omonia Square in central Athens, which I visited, also offer spaces for communal prayer. Although this Afghan organization is inclusive and secular in orientation, serving both Muslim and Christian Afghans in Athens, it is also an important node in refugees' transnational Islamic charitable networks, which operate on the fringes of the NGO ecosystem, providing important, and often invisible, relief to and, importantly, often from, refugees. In what follows, I examine how Afghan Muslim refugees articulate a collectivist politics of care that expands narrow, secular conceptions of "basic rights" and social obligations through invocations of the *umma*, the global Muslim community, and *baraka*, the concentration of blessings in particular practices or spaces.

Examining refugee-initiated Islamic aid in the Greek borderlands illuminates the operations and exclusions engendered by anti-Muslim racism and carceral humanitarianism that reduce refugees to security risks or moochers. Such an examination also captures the richness and complexity of refugees' everyday religious practices and lives in community as those of an "unsettled" racial minority. Eric Tang's (2015) term captures the ways refugees figure in existing racial hierarchies and recurring, life-long cycles of displacement and captivity beyond a linear redemption story of being uprooted, displaced, and, finally, resettled. My findings on the religious dimensions of encounters between service providers (who are usually Muslim refugees themselves) and refugees receiving services parallel the Islamic networks of charitable giving and care that Amira Mittermaier (2019) tracked in Cairene slums, in which Muslims operate from an ethical refusal to locate justice in

the future. Mittermaier (2019: 4) argues that this Islamic ethical thinking and praxis is often politically illegible within liberal conceptions of charity and neoliberal discourses of development.

My inquiry into the religious dimensions of refugees' mutual care is not to give religion exaggerated primacy but to show religion as one of several factors that nurture obligational ties between refugees. Even those refugees who self-identify primarily in ethnic, national, and regional terms find themselves increasingly identified and apprehended as Muslims in Greece by the state and by ordinary Greeks regardless of their individual religious commitments due to the dominance of Islam as a racial super-category in discourses about refugees. In fact, several of the refugees I interviewed who had been raised in Muslim families identified as atheists, agnostics, nothing in particular, and newly converted, born-again Protestant Christians. Scholars understand the racialization of Islam not as something "done to" Muslims and those whose bodies are "read" as Muslims but as a process that weaves through all of our political, social, and economic lives. Rather than fall back on the term Islamophobia, which individualizes the phenomenon, I refer to it as anti-Muslim racism to signal that it is a form of racism with a legacy connected to the history of race, racism, and white supremacy, which affects many minorities and not only Muslim refugees in the Greek borderlands (Rana et al. 2020). Attention to the everyday lives of refugees reveals that their experiences of displacement are framed by a range of intersecting and overlapping identity markers (including race and ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and age) and also by a range of oppressive structures (such as racism, including anti-Muslim racism, xenophobia, patriarchy, and homophobia). Despite the fetishization of refugees as Muslims, when it comes to Muslim refugees' care for one another, the religious dimensions of it are often made invisible. At the same time, the profoundly Christian genealogy of secular humanitarianism is unacknowledged, which is its own form of epistemic violence (Oliver 2017).

## **Methods**

This chapter is based on a pilot study—part of a larger multisite study—on the role of religion in refugee-centered social justice organizations in Greece (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2020). The material presented is based on two short research trips to Athens and Lesbos, Greece, in October 2017 and March 2018, during which I conducted fifty-two structured and semistructured, recorded interviews with Afghan, Pakistani, Syrian, Iraqi, and Iranian refugees/migrants and their "solidarians" who live in communities and provide and/or receive aid. I was accompanied by research assistants; however, I conducted the interviews myself in English or in the refugees' native

language, and translations are my own except for those conducted in Dari/Farsi by a professional translator. Through 2019, I conducted follow-up interviews with research participants after I (and sometimes they) left Greece by WhatsApp.

Anthropologist Heath Cabot (2019: 292) critiques the ways “ambulance-chasing” has implicated anthropology as a discipline in the violence and apartheid-like regimes of the “refugee crisis” in Europe, raising troubling questions about disciplinary relevance, funding structures, and lack of nuanced analysis. Although my time in Greece was short, I see the work as a form of the kind of “patchwork ethnographic processes and protocols” feminist anthropologists have designed around short-term field visits and enduring relationships. According to Günel, Varma, and Wantanabe (2020), “Patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking.” In that sense, my research in Greek borderlands is part of a larger research project in my primary field sites in the United States, where I also work with Muslim Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees. Furthermore, my research in Greece would not have been possible without the support and guidance of colleagues who have done years of research in Greek borderlands, particularly Loubna Qutami’s (2018) work on transnational Palestinian networks. I hope that the findings, however preliminary, shared here reflect what Cabot (2019: 263) names as the best of what anthropology can offer: “an attention to deep, locally specific, contextualized knowledge that exceeds the anthropologist’s own ways of knowing.”

## Islamic Care in Life and Death

Ali (a pseudonym), a friendly Afghan man and a leading refugee activist in his Afghan Athens community, arrived in Greece in 2006 as a fourteen-year-old unaccompanied minor, yet he considers himself blessed and lucky because he was already fluent in English. His language skills afforded him semiregular work as a translator and an opportunity to go to school in Greece. His close work with the international NGOs (iNGOs) over the years has given him a cynical view of how money moves from hand to hand in Greece without aiding refugees, reproducing the carceral humanitarianism that criminalizes and punishes them. In an interview, Ali reflected:

Sixty thousand refugees in a country with twenty million, and they are keeping them in cages to make a business, profits for the NGOs and governments. If I had the money, all of these refugees would have food and shelter, be living in hotels, but groups like ours [the Afghan Community Center] don’t have access to this NGO money. I didn’t come to Greece to start an NGO; I

came because I was in danger. Then I was in danger here for criticizing the government.

A devout Muslim, Ali sarcastically reassured my white American research assistant Patrick that he was Buddhist. From time to time, he would jokingly ask Patrick if he was also Buddhist or liked yoga, jabs at the ways Islam is constructed as a threat while other “Eastern religions” are perceived by Westerners to be benign and exotic. Ali affirmed his strong belief that life is a series of accidents, explaining that he experienced what God has willed as a series of events that happened to him rather than choices, including making a tight-knit group of friends in Athens. He explained that his arrival in Greece from Afghanistan (via Pakistan and Iran) was more akin to floating in a directionless hot air balloon than to traveling by airplane or ship with concrete points of departure and destination, yet Afghans struggle to be officially recognized as refugees rather than immigrants. Ali recounted his own frightening, bewildering arrival and life in a refugee camp in Athens in a time when most Greeks, he claimed, had never heard of Afghanistan. Contrasting the longer histories of Afghan refugees in Athens with the spectacle of crisis focused primarily on Syrian refugees since 2012, Ali added, “We were the old refugees, under the old system. They ignored us then and even though everyone is talking about the new refugees, they ignore us old refugees even now. We’re not eligible for family reunification. They see us and they say, ‘No, you don’t look like a refugee.’”

Ali explained how, with little support from the state and from NGOs, Afghans in Athens organized and relied on one another for help and support:

We have never gotten a penny from anyone *because* we are refugees. We don’t have documents so no one will give us money. Most of our budget [for the organization] is from my personal savings and [my] network of volunteers. A lot of people have benefitted from our suffering. If you cannot support a woman or a child or a man in their time of extreme need, then what is the purpose of your NGO, your democracy?

A few weeks before I interviewed Ali in his Athens apartment, which doubles as the headquarters for another Afghan community group, the tragic news of the sudden death of a small Afghan boy accompanied only by his father in a refugee camp had reached him and sprung him and his Muslim charitable network in Athens into action. The boy’s father was beside himself with grief, and as a show of support Ali and his friends had reached out to other Muslim Pakistanis and Afghans to collect money for a proper Muslim burial in a Muslim cemetery more than two hundred miles north of Athens. Ali and his friends pooled the community’s resources and oversaw the proper Islamic washing and shrouding of the boy’s body. They also navigated the paperwork and bureaucracy in order to arrange the Muslim burial and a hearse to drive the long distance. Ali and his friends accompa-

nied the grieving Afghan father to northern Greece, attended the funeral, and then returned in a caravan of cars to Athens the next day.

Ali, a Shi'i Hazara, a persecuted religious and ethnic minority in Afghanistan, described the Afghan funerary details. He described in detail the adorning of the gravesite according to practices he characterized as traditional and syncretic, combining both Islamic and Buddhist elements that might be unfamiliar to non-Afghan, non-Hazara, Sunni Muslims such as myself and the local Sunni Muslim population that runs the cemetery in northern Greece. Deeply saddened by the case, Ali took some solace in the fact that he and his Afghan community had given this boy a proper Afghan Muslim burial: "I pray to the one God. It is my personal belief that there has been a lot of *baraka* (blessings) in my work because of God. He's judging everything, seeing everything. I think that God gives a heavy box to the people who can move it. He doesn't give it to everybody, and I've been given a heavy burden." Pointing to himself and shrugging, Ali laments, "I wish there had been an Ali waiting for me here when I was fourteen and scared. What I have been for the new Afghan refugees, I gave them things, support, and opportunities I could not give myself and which no one gave me. But this is my duty as a Muslim."

Like the political controversy and drawn-out bureaucratic process over the Athens mosque, Muslims in Athens have long been agitating for a Muslim cemetery to no avail. In 2009, the Greek Orthodox Church offered plots of land outside of Athens, near the port city of Piraeus, to Muslim communities, but either the plots were deemed not up to code, or complications surrounded the transfer of the deed, or zoning excluded individuals from other districts. While many faith communities prefer to be buried among their own families and religious brethren, Muslims have concerns about the particularities of Greek funerary practices, which include disinterring human remains from temporary, shallow graves to permanent, deeper graves after a few years once bones are removed and collected in a communal ossuary. As anthropologist Tina Palivos (2018) has shown, this has led some Muslim communities in Athens to spend precious resources on repatriating human remains to their countries of origin, such as Pakistan and Nigeria, or to the Muslim cemetery in Thrace, where local Greek Muslims (i.e., not immigrants) form a majority in the region, near the Greek-Turkish border. Deaths among displaced populations ignite existential and political questions about "home, community building, grief and mourning, the symbolic significance of the material body, and the state management of religious pluralism" (Palivos 2018: 276).

I am particularly interested in how the culturally loaded concept of "basic needs" in humanitarian situations is often intimately related to the religious identities and belief systems of refugees, with local (and sometimes religious) conceptualizations of "basic needs" transcending secular organi-



zations' definitions, as well as the Greek government's recognition of non-negotiable human rights. Basic needs and dignity must also be viewed in relation to the importance that displaced people may give to celebrating key rituals pertaining both to life and to death; indeed, being able to bury a loved one with dignity can be as, if not more, important than what the "international community" often assumes to be the "immediate" emergency needs for food and shelter. Deeper histories of the region, including Afghan refugees' history of processes of migration and displacement that precede 2015, not only challenge the periodization of the "refugee crisis," but also contextualize new and unexpected formations of solidarity and political organizing. The Athens Afghan community's relationships with the "old" Sunni Muslims in Thrace, who are not immigrants but a local Greek population officially recognized as a Muslim minority under the Treaty of Lausanne, ties them to a population the government recognizes as having rights to educational, linguistic, and religious freedom. At the same time, the urgency of "crisis" (even when manufactured) may produce political pressures and opportunities for rights claims on the state that did not exist before. In Lesbos in 2016, Khazer Hussein, a British-Pakistani expatriate and representative of the British Muslim charity All4Humanity, secured a small plot of land, donated by the municipality after a legal dispute over discovered remains of drowned refugees, in order to establish the island's first Muslim cemetery, where Islamic funerary rites were instituted a few miles from the refugee camps.

Muslim refugees' Islamic care and their expansive understandings of "basic rights," which accord religious rights to those living and mourning as well as to those who have passed away, demonstrate that intense suffering, violence, and exclusion are not inevitable for displaced populations. Such a view builds on the pervasive false assumption that refugees will be rejected by local populations of citizens and residents of their arrival countries and, equally, the false assumption that heterogeneous groups of refugees sharing a particular space will be hostile toward one another on the basis, for instance, of nationality, religion, or ethnicity.

## **Can Muslim Students Be Greek?**

It is ironic that at the Athens mosque inauguration, Minister of Education Gavroglou made the case for Muslims' nonnegotiable rights to have a place of worship through the analogy of Muslim children's rights to an education because Greek public schools, like mosques and Islamic cemeteries, are another highly contentious battleground for Greek religious pluralism. In the most extreme cases of harassment of refugee students, Golden Dawn members have padlocked public schools to prevent migrant children from

entering. During my fieldwork, a racist attack on an eleven-year-old Afghan boy, Amir, made international headlines. Through Ali and the other volunteers at the Afghan Community Center who were supporting Amir, I came to know him and his family and saw firsthand how profoundly the Greek state failed them and how tightly the Afghan community joined together to protect them.

The controversy began over a school assembly memorializing Greece's role in World War II on 28 October 2017, Ochi Day, which was to be held at a neighborhood church in the Athens suburb, Dafni. The assembly included speeches and presentations of schoolwork by the children and involved a formal march of the children in celebratory formation, led by a student carrying the Greek flag. Names for the leader were drawn at random and Amir's name was selected in the lottery, much to his excitement. Arzoo, his mother, recalled his joy over being chosen when he returned from school that day until that evening when they received a call from Amir's principal. The principal explained that some felt a Muslim boy could not lead a procession in a church and should not be carrying the Greek flag. Amir and his mother conveyed their bewilderment to the principal over the phone, insisting that as Muslims they recognized churches as houses of worship of the same God worshipped in mosques, but the principal was not persuaded. She begrudgingly let Amir keep his role as line leader but told him he would carry a sign with the school's name on it rather than a Greek flag.

The night of the assembly, Amir's apartment was attacked in the middle of the night. White supremacists threw rocks and smoke bombs made of beer bottles through the window of the bedroom Amir shared with his younger brother and sister. The glass shattered over Amir's younger brother's sleeping body, an event that deeply traumatized him. The assailants left a cardboard sign which read in Greek, "Go back to your village. Leave." Amir's mother, Arzoo, awakened by the attack and her screaming children did not call the authorities initially but other members of the Afghan community, such as Ali and Masud (a pseudonym). It was only after Afghan leaders arrived at her apartment that the police were called, and an investigation began. Masud explained why the community sees the police as more of a threat than a source of support with a personal example: Golden Dawn members also attacked Masud in the street, nearly breaking several of his bones. When Masud reported the incident to police at the Agios Panteleimonas station, they taunted him. "They said, 'What kind of man are you? Fight back if they fight you; don't come running to us.'"

Crypteia, a reference to a group of ancient Spartans infamous for attacking slaves, is a neo-Nazi vigilante organization and breakaway group from Golden Dawn that claimed responsibility for the attack on Amir's apartment and threatened refugee organizations with more vigilante violence. While little is known about Crypteia, as the group benefits from being shrouded

in mystique, the religious dimensions of their ideology were detailed by the founder, a professor indicted on multiple charges in 2019, and reflect a global trend of white supremacist movements embracing paganism and claiming pre-Christian roots (Pew Research Center 2018; Vrakopoulos and Halikiopoulou 2019). A focus on the ways religion inflects global racist ideologies sheds light on the particularly local and global dimensions of their thought but also dislodges the assumption that religion belongs “naturally” to the poor, to people of color, to foreigners, to refugees, and not to white Europeans (Orsi 2005: 188). Ultimately, Ali, Masud, and the other Afghan leaders decided not to tell Arzoo about Crypteia and Golden Dawn, though they did bring Amir’s father in Germany into the loop. When I expressed surprise at this paternalistic decision, they explained it was made collectively to try to protect her and the children, that it was best to assuage her fears over an isolated attack by a few individuals rather than to talk to her about a concerted movement that viewed her son, her family, and her entire community as ready targets.

The violent attack led to a media storm and scrutiny over the mishandling of the assembly by the school officials. The principal and teachers were publicly reprimanded by the mayor of Athens, Yiorgos Kaminis, and the prime minister, who apologized to Amir at an official event; the prime minister gifted him a Greek flag. Amir was transferred to a different school, though he was too terrified to attend for several weeks, and his family was moved from the apartment where they were attacked to another across town, provided by an iNGO.

It is the Afghan Community Center that bears the burden of providing Arzoo and her children with daily emotional and material support. The gifted flag hangs above Arzoo’s small bed in the living room of their new, spare apartment, but Arzoo wanted only one thing: to leave Greece with her children and be reunited with her husband in Germany who was irate over the attack. The refusal to expedite her case made the gifted flag seem like an empty public relations gesture on the part of the government, although Arzoo and the children did ultimately receive formal asylum in Greece. In the interim, the stresses on the marriage grew and Amir’s father divorced Arzoo. Although Amir was at the center of the media controversy, it is his younger brother who struggled the most to recover from the trauma. He spoke little and slept fitfully even six months later, Arzoo explained to me, when I visited them on Amir’s twelfth birthday. Amir cut the cake Arzoo baked, celebrating with his family and his best friend and neighbor, another Afghan boy his age also named Amir. The next day, on 23 March 2018, the Afghan community offices were set ablaze and their computers smashed, with almost everything in the office destroyed. Naim Elghandour, president of the Muslim Association of Greece, received one of several threatening phone calls earlier in the year from Crypteia in which a man said, “We

are the ones who kill refugees and Muslims, who burn mosques and who attacked Emir's [*sic*] home" (Strickland 2018).

It is important to note that in interviews, Afghan refugees stressed that they knew nothing about white supremacist movements in Greece before arrival; refugees who, like Ali, had come before 2015 often wanted to recount much older stories of racist harassment and violence, challenging the temporality of the crisis and the narrative of the recent rise of Golden Dawn and its splintered groups. They also expressed frustration that they found the police were racist too.

## Christian Conversion and Care

In Athens, I encountered, in addition to Muslim Afghan communities, a group of predominantly Afghan refugees who had converted to evangelical Christianity and formed a secret church in Athens because they fear for their lives due to their conversions. The Afghan Community Center, though secular in orientation, was run by a volunteer staff of Muslim Afghans who provided various forms of aid and public health education to the church group, particularly around sexual health and the prevention of STDs. The staff and the church members enjoyed an amicable relationship despite the new converts' missionary zeal and disdain for Islam.

Jibril (a pseudonym), the Afghan minister originally from Parwan, where the U.S.'s Bagram Airbase is located, proudly showed me a painting of a map of Afghanistan with a cross planted in it, symbolizing a future in which Afghanistan would be a fully Christian country (see figure 14.1). I did not ask him outright if he imagined such a goal would be reached militarily, but I did make note that, in contrast to all the other refugees with whom I spoke who drew direct parallels between U.S. war-making and their own circumstances as refugees, no one in the church whom I interviewed offered any critique of the U.S. proxy wars in Afghanistan or beyond. Instead, they focused on the brutalities of the Taliban and the hatefulness and violence of their previous religion, Islam, which did not seem to bother the Muslim Afghans listening in who also fled Afghanistan and the Taliban. (I found they occasionally offered mild protestations to negative representations of Islam on Jibril's Facebook page, typically in the form of calls for tolerance and respect.) I asked several Afghan church members why they abstained from the protests on the anniversary of the EU-Turkey deal, protests that filled the streets of Athens and eleven other major cities in Europe with millions, and again they were evasive. I surmised that the Afghan church is funded by American evangelical groups, such as Franklin Graham's Samaritan's Purse, whose tote bags and other paraphernalia were scattered throughout the Afghan church. The Iranian and Afghan refugees in the church were



**Figure 14.1.** Painting of the Flag and Map of Afghanistan Foregrounded by a Cross. This large painting is the most prominent piece of artwork displayed in the central chamber of the church. Photo by the author.

also the only refugees I encountered who expressed a desire to settle in the United States rather than in northern European countries (the church offers classes only in English, not in Greek or German). When I asked Jibril if they received any money from NGOs he answered after an awkward pause: “Only Jesus helps us.” I smiled and answered, “Well, Jesus is not an NGO!” Everyone standing around the church listening burst out laughing, some a bit nervously, and that line of questioning was closed.

Religion, like race, usually corresponds to power and resources in the humanitarian industrial complex. In the context of the war on terror, humanitarian work is an important site of power, of claiming that Westerners are humanitarians and good people in a world filled with violence, suffering, and endless war (Grewal 2017). The very term “humanitarianism” centers the giver rather than the receiver, fusing the work of self-help with the work of “helping others.” In 2015, *Forbes’* list of the twenty-five largest U.S. charities included nine Christian charities; four are evangelical charities with a significant footprint in Greece: World Vision, Compassion International, Cru (formerly Campus Crusade), and Samaritan’s Purse. In

the United States, after 2001, President George W. Bush built on many of President Bill Clinton's neoliberal policies supporting the role of Christian and Jewish faith-based organizations in providing welfare, while reducing welfare as a right for many others in the United States. As development and humanitarian assistance shifted from governments to NGOs and carceral humanitarianism, Christian nonprofits benefited the most. The evangelical charity World Vision was already the largest privately funded development organization in the world by the 1990s, and by 2008 it had an annual budget of \$2.6 billion. As American Muslim charities endured a crackdown after September 11, Christian groups internationalized and flourished with U.S. government support (McAlister 2018). Samaritan's Purse was a small nonprofit in the 1990s, and by 2015 its budget was \$520 million; it follows in a long-standing imperial tradition of delivering aid while trailing behind the tanks (or fighter jets) that created refugees in Afghanistan and Iraq, what Oliver (2017) calls humanitarian warfare, the flip side of carceral humanitarianism.

## Conclusion

A focus on refugee-led, religiously motivated practices of care forces us to rethink the assumptions widely held in practitioner and policy circles that refugees are passive recipients of aid, or that international practitioners always know best about what the refugees' most urgent needs are. In documenting the ways in which different groups of refugees support other refugees in Greece, I do not mean to suggest that all refugees support each other or have the same politics. For example, the refugee church members exhibited the most remarkably conservative politics compared to any other refugee community I encountered in Athens; many of them described Islam as a violent, hateful religion in contrast to the loving nature of Christianity. Their scathing characterizations of Islam might echo global elements of anti-Islamic rhetoric, but they also must be contextualized in terms of their real suffering at the hands of violent religious extremists in Afghanistan, whether the Taliban, ISIS, or other groups, as well as the stigma they live with being racialized as Muslims in Greece. Given their traumatic experiences in Afghanistan, Iran, and Greece it is understandable why they would demonize Islam and idealize Christianity (and I am in no position to question their religious sincerity as Christians). It is also interesting to note that Afghan Hazara Shi'i Muslims' and Christian converts' shared suffering at the hands of the Taliban and/or in Greece may be more important than their religious differences. The kinds of connectivity and mutual care religion might create or foreclose among refugees in the Greek borderlands deserves further study.

My focus in this chapter has been on small local acts of Islamic care between refugees in the Greek borderlands in order to shed light on the range of refugees' activism, practices of care, and religious commitments, which thus far lack sufficient scholarly attention. The same kinds of structural exclusions apply to the cases of Islamic iNGOs operating in Greek borderlands. Like the exclusion of local, refugee-led initiatives, I encountered representatives from Islamic iNGOs Charity Right and Islamic Relief, based in the United States and the United Kingdom, who struggled with access to the refugees in camps in order to offer aid, while evangelical NGOs such as Eurorelief (which has U.S. funding through the evangelical Hellenic Ministries) enjoyed full access to the camps and considerable power, despite headline-grabbing reports in which missionaries withheld food and internet access to refugees who did not express an interest in converting to Christianity. Understanding refugees' religious lives is all the more important under these circumstances of intense religious and racial discrimination, contexts in which refugees rely increasingly on one another within and across religious communal lines.

## Acknowledgments

I thank the participants and my research assistants Frances Fagan, Maysan Haydar, and Patrick Sullivan. This research was supported by grants from the Luce Foundation. This is dedicated to Amir and his family.

**Zareena A. Grewal** is an associate professor of American studies, religious studies, anthropology, and ethnicity, race, and migration at Yale University. Her first book, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority* (New York University Press, 2013), is a historical ethnography of transnational Muslim intellectual networks that links U.S. mosques to Islamic movements in postcolonial Middle East through debates about the reform of Islam, and is based on fieldwork in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Grewal is currently working on a historical and ethnographic study of the Quran as a racialized text-object at the center of the culture wars in the United States.

## References

- Arendt, Hannah. (1964) 2003. "Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship." In *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited by Jerome Kohne, 17–48. New York: Schocken Books.
- Cabot, Heath. 2014. *On the Doorsteps of Europe: Asylum and Citizenship in Greece*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- . 2019. "The Business of Anthropology and the European Refugee Regime." *American Ethnologist* 46(3): 261–275.
- Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena, Zareena Grewal, Unni Karunakara, Aydan Greatrick, Alastair Ager, Catherine Panter-Brick, Louisa Lombard, Lyndsey Stonebridge, and Anna Rowlands. 2020. *Religion and Social Justice for Refugees: Insights from Cameroon, Greece, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, and Mexico*. Washington, DC: Bridging Voices Report to the British Council.
- Georgakopoulos, Thodoris. 2017. "What Greeks Believe in 2017." dianNEOsis Research and Policy Institute, April 2017. <https://www.dianeosis.org/en/2017/04/greeks-believe-in-2017/>. Retrieved 3 July 2020 from <https://www.dianeosis.org/en/2017/04/greeks-believe-in-2017/>.
- Grewal, Inderpal. 2017. *Saving the Security State: Exceptional Citizens in Twenty-First Century America*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Günel, Gökce, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe. 2020. "A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography." Society for Cultural Anthropology. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.
- IOM (International Organization of Migration). 2018. "Mediterranean Migrant Arrivals Reach 20,927 in 2018; Deaths Reach 587." 27 April. Retrieved 3 July 2020 from <https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivalsreach-20927-2018-deaths-reach-587>.
- McAlister, Melani. 2018. *The Kingdom of God Has No Borders: A Global History of American Evangelicals*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mittermaier, Amira. 2019. *Giving to God: Islamic Charity in Revolutionary Times*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Oliver, Kelly. 2017. *Carceral Humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Orsi, Robert. 2005. *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Palivos, Tina. 2018. "Moral Masculine Intimacy: The Care and Protection of the Living and the Dead among Muslim Migrant Men Living in Greece." In *Reconceiving Muslim Men: Love and Marriage, Family and Care in Precarious Times*, edited by Marcia C. Inhorn and Nefissa Naguib, 262–278. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Pew Research Center. 2017. "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe." 10 May. Retrieved 3 July 2020 from <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>.
- Qutami, Loubna. 2018. "Before the New Sky: Protracted Struggle and Possibilities of the Beyond for Palestine's New Youth Movement." Dissertation, University of California, Riverside.
- Rana, Junaid, Evelyn Alsultany, Carol Fadda, Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, Arshad Ali, Sohail Daulatzai, Juliane Hammer, and Nadine Naber. 2020. "Pedagogies of Resistance: Why Anti-Muslim Racism Matters." *Amerasia Journal* 46(1): 57–62.
- Speed, Madeleine. 2019. "The Battle to Build a Mosque in Athens." *Financial Times*, 1 February. Retrieved 3 July 2020 from <https://www.ft.com/content/ae4fa654-2416-11e9-8ce6-5db4543da632>.
- Strickland, Patrick. 2018. "Neo-Nazis Attack Afghan Community in Greece's Office in Athens." *Al Jazeera*, 23 March. Retrieved 3 July 2020 from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/23/neo-nazis-attack-afghan-community-in-greece-office-in-athens>.



- zeera.com/news/2018/03/neo-nazis-attack-afghan-community-greece-office-athens-180323125800155.html.
- Tang, Eric. 2015. *Unsettled: Cambodian Refugees in the New York City Hyperghetto*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. "The Politics of Recognition." In *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, edited by Amy Gutmann, 25–74. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ticktin, Miriam. 2011. *Casualties of Care: Immigration and the Politics of Humanitarianism in France*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. 2018. *Global Trends 2018*. <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf>
- Vrakopoulos, Christos, and Daphne Halikiopoulou. 2019. "Vigilantism in Greece: The Case of the Golden Dawn." In *Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities*, edited by Miroslav Mareš and Tore Bjørgo, 183–198. New York: Routledge.