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**GUIDELINES ON INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION:
Religion-Based Refugee Claims under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention
and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees**

UNHCR issues these Guidelines pursuant to its mandate, as contained in the 1950 *Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*, in conjunction with Article 35 of the *1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees* and Article II of its *1967 Protocol*. These Guidelines complement the UNHCR *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees* (1979, re-edited, Geneva, January 1992). They are informed, *inter alia*, by a roundtable organised by UNHCR and the Church World Service in Baltimore, Maryland, United States, in October 2002, as well as by an analysis of relevant State practice and international law.

These Guidelines are intended to provide interpretative legal guidance for governments, legal practitioners, decision-makers and the judiciary, as well as UNHCR staff carrying out refugee status determination in the field.

GUIDELINES ON INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION
Religion-Based Refugee Claims under Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention
and/or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Claims to refugee status based on religion can be among the most complex. Decision-makers have not always taken a consistent approach, especially when applying the term “religion” contained in the refugee definition of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and when determining what constitutes “persecution” in this context. Religion-based refugee claims may overlap with one or more of the other grounds in the refugee definition or, as can often happen, they may involve post-departure conversions, that is, *sur place* claims. While these Guidelines do not purport to offer a definitive definition of “religion”, they provide decision-makers with guiding parameters to facilitate refugee status determination in such cases.

2. The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is one of the fundamental rights and freedoms in international human rights law. In determining religion-based claims, it is therefore useful, *inter alia*, to draw on Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (the “Universal Declaration”) and Articles 18 and 27 of the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (the “International Covenant”). Also relevant are the General Comments issued by the Human Rights Committee,¹ the 1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief, the 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities and the body of reports of the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance.² These international human rights standards provide guidance in defining the term “religion” also in the context of international refugee law, against which action taken by States to restrict or prohibit certain practices can be examined.

II. SUBSTANTIVE ANALYSIS

A. Defining “religion”

3. The refugee definition contained in Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention states:
- A. For the purposes of the present Convention, the term “refugee” shall apply to any person who: ...
 - (2) ... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former

¹ See, in particular, Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22, adopted 20 July 1993, UN doc. CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/ADD.4, 27 September 1993.

² The latter can be found at <http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/FramePage/intolerance+En?OpenDocument>. Relevant regional instruments include Article 9 of the 1950 European Convention on Human Rights; Article 12 of the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights; Article 8 of the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights.

habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

4. The *travaux préparatoires* of the 1951 Convention show that religion-based persecution formed an integral and accepted part of the refugee definition throughout the drafting process. There was, however, no attempt to define the term as such.³ No universally accepted definition of “religion” exists, but the instruments mentioned in paragraph 2 above certainly inform the interpretation of the term “religion” in the international refugee law context. Its use in the 1951 Convention can therefore be taken to encompass freedom of thought, conscience or belief.⁴ As the Human Rights Committee notes, “religion” is “not limited ... to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions”.⁵ It also broadly covers acts of failing or refusing to observe a religion or to hold any particular religious belief. The term is not, however, without limits and international human rights law foresees a number of legitimate boundaries on the exercise of religious freedom as outlined in greater detail in paragraphs 15–16 below.

5. Claims based on “religion” may involve one or more of the following elements:

- a) religion as belief (including non-belief);
- b) religion as identity;
- c) religion as a way of life.

6. “Belief”, in this context, should be interpreted so as to include theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs. Beliefs may take the form of convictions or values about the divine or ultimate reality or the spiritual destiny of humankind. Claimants may also be considered heretics, apostates, schismatic, pagans or superstitious, even by other adherents of their religious tradition and be persecuted for that reason.

7. “Identity” is less a matter of theological beliefs than membership of a community that observes or is bound together by common beliefs, rituals, traditions, ethnicity, nationality, or ancestry. A claimant may identify with, or have a sense of belonging to, or be identified by others as belonging to, a particular group or community. In many cases, persecutors are likely to target religious groups that are different from their own because they see that religious identity as part of a threat to their own identity or legitimacy.

8. For some individuals, “religion” is a vital aspect of their “way of life” and how they relate, either completely or partially, to the world. Their religion may manifest itself in such activities as the wearing of distinctive clothing or observance of particular religious practices, including observing religious holidays or dietary

³ A key source in States’ deliberations was the refugee definition set out in the 1946 Constitution of the International Refugee Organisation (IRO). This included those expressing valid objections to return because of a fear of persecution on grounds of “race, religion, nationality or political opinions”. (A fifth ground, membership of a particular social group, was approved later in the negotiating process for the 1951 Convention.)

⁴ See, also, UNHCR, *Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status*, 1979, Geneva, re-edited 1992 (hereafter “UNHCR Handbook”), paragraph 71.

⁵ Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22, above note 1, paragraph 2.

requirements. Such practices may seem trivial to non-adherents, but may be at the core of the religion for the adherent concerned.

9. Establishing sincerity of belief, identity and/or a certain way of life may not necessarily be relevant in every case.⁶ It may not be necessary, for instance, for an individual (or a group) to declare that he or she belongs to a religion, is of a particular religious faith, or adheres to religious practices, where the persecutor imputes or attributes this religion, faith or practice to the individual or group. As is discussed further below in paragraph 31, it may also not be necessary for the claimant to know or understand anything about the religion, if he or she has been identified by others as belonging to that group and fears persecution as a result. An individual (or group) may be persecuted on the basis of religion, even if the individual or other members of the group adamantly deny that their belief, identity and/or way of life constitute a “religion”.

10. Similarly, birth into a particular religious community, or a close correlation between race and/or ethnicity on the one hand and religion on the other could preclude the need to enquire into the adherence of an individual to a particular faith or the bona fides of a claim to membership of that community, if adherence to that religion is attributed to the individual.

B. Well-founded fear of persecution

a) General

11. The right to freedom of religion includes the freedom to manifest one’s religion or belief, either individually or in community with others and in public or private in worship, observance, practice and teaching.⁷ The only circumstances under which this freedom may be restricted are set out in Article 18(3) of the International Covenant, as described in paragraphs 15–16 below.

12. Persecution for reasons of religion may therefore take various forms. Depending on the particular circumstances of the case, including the effect on the individual concerned, examples could include prohibition of membership of a religious community, of worship in community with others in public or in private, of religious instruction, or serious measures of discrimination imposed on individuals because they practise their religion, belong to or are identified with a particular religious community, or have changed their faith.⁸ Equally, in communities in which a dominant religion exists or where there is a close correlation between the State and religious institutions, discrimination on account of one’s failure to adopt the dominant religion or to adhere to its practices, could amount to persecution in a particular case.⁹ Persecution may be inter-religious (directed against adherents or communities of different faiths), intra-religious (within the same religion, but between different sects,

⁶ For further analysis of credibility issues, see paragraphs 28–33 below.

⁷ See Universal Declaration, Article 18 and International Covenant, Article 18(1).

⁸ UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraph 72.

⁹ In this context, Article 27 of the International Covenant reads: “In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.”

or among members of the same sect), or a combination of both.¹⁰ The claimant may belong to a religious minority or majority. Religion-based claims may also be made by individuals in marriages of mixed religions.

13. Applying the same standard as for other Convention grounds, religious belief, identity, or way of life can be seen as so fundamental to human identity that one should not be compelled to hide, change or renounce this in order to avoid persecution.¹¹ Indeed, the Convention would give no protection from persecution for reasons of religion if it was a condition that the person affected must take steps – reasonable or otherwise – to avoid offending the wishes of the persecutors. Bearing witness in words and deeds is often bound up with the existence of religious convictions.

14. Each claim requires examination on its merits on the basis of the individual's situation. Relevant areas of enquiry include the individual profile and personal experiences of the claimant, his or her religious belief, identity and/or way of life, how important this is for the claimant, what effect the restrictions have on the individual, the nature of his or her role and activities within the religion, whether these activities have been or could be brought to the attention of the persecutor and whether they could result in treatment rising to the level of persecution. In this context, the well-founded fear “need not necessarily be based on the applicant's own personal experience”. What, for example, happened to the claimant's friends and relatives, other members of the same religious group, that is to say to other similarly situated individuals, “may well show that his [or her] fear that sooner or later he [or she] also will become a victim of persecution is well-founded”.¹² Mere membership of a particular religious community will normally not be enough to substantiate a claim to refugee status. As the UNHCR Handbook notes, there may, however, be special circumstances where mere membership suffices, particularly when taking account of the overall political and religious situation in the country of origin, which may indicate a climate of genuine insecurity for the members of the religious community concerned.¹³

b) Restrictions or limitations on the exercise of religious freedom

15. Article 18(3) of the International Covenant permits restrictions on the “freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs” if these limits “are prescribed by law and are

¹⁰ Interim Report of the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, “Implementation of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion or Belief”, UN doc. A/53/279, 24 August 1998, paragraph 129.

¹¹ See also, UNHCR, “Guidelines on International Protection: ‘Membership of a particular social group’ within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees”, HCR/GIP/02/02, 7 May 2002, paragraph 6. Similarly, in internal flight or relocation cases, the claimant should not be expected or required to suppress his or her religious views to avoid persecution in the internal flight or relocation area. See UNHCR, “Guidelines on International Protection: ‘Internal Flight or Relocation Alternative’ within the Context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees”, HCR/GIP/03/04, 23 July 2003, paragraphs 19, 25.

¹² UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraph 43.

¹³ UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraph 73.

necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others”. As the Human Rights Committee notes: “Limitations may be applied only for those purposes for which they were prescribed and must be directly related and proportionate to the specific need on which they are predicated. Restrictions may not be imposed for discriminatory purposes or applied in a discriminatory manner.”¹⁴ In assessing the legitimacy of the restriction or limitation at issue, it is therefore necessary to analyse carefully why and how it was imposed. Permissible restrictions or limitations could include measures to prevent criminal activities (for example, ritual killings), or harmful traditional practices and/or limitations on religious practices injurious to the best interests of the child, as judged by international law standards. Another justifiable, even necessary, restriction could involve the criminalisation of hate speech, including when committed in the name of religion. The fact that a restriction on the exercise of a religious freedom finds the support of the majority of the population in the claimant’s country of origin and/or is limited to the manifestation of the religion in public is irrelevant.

16. In determining whether restrictions or limitations rise to the level of persecution, the decision-maker must not only take into account international human rights standards, including lawful limitations on the exercise of religious freedom, but also evaluate the breadth of the restriction and the severity of any punishment for non-compliance. The importance or centrality of the practice within the religion and/or to the individual personally is also relevant. The decision-maker should proceed cautiously with such inquiries, taking into account the fact that what may seem trivial to an outsider may be central to the claimant’s beliefs. Where the restricted practice is not important to the individual, but important to the religion, then it is unlikely to rise to the level of persecution without additional factors. By contrast, the restricted religious practice may not be so significant to the religion, but may be particularly important to the individual, and could therefore still constitute persecution on the basis of his or her conscience or belief.

c) Discrimination

17. Religion-based claims often involve discrimination.¹⁵ Even though discrimination for reasons of religion is prohibited under international human rights law, all discrimination does not necessarily rise to the level required for recognition of refugee status. For the purposes of analysing an asylum claim, a distinction should be made between discrimination resulting merely in preferential treatment and discrimination amounting to persecution because, in aggregate or of itself, it seriously restricts the claimant’s enjoyment of fundamental human rights. Examples of discrimination amounting to persecution would include, but are not limited to, discrimination with consequences of a substantially prejudicial nature for the person concerned, such as serious restrictions on the right to earn a livelihood, or to access normally available educational institutions and/or health services. This may also be so where economic measures imposed “destroy the economic existence” of a particular religious group.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 22, above note 1, paragraph 8.

¹⁵ See generally, UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraphs 54–55.

¹⁶ UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraphs 54 and 63.

18. The existence of discriminatory laws will not normally in itself constitute persecution, although they can be an important, even indicative, factor which therefore needs to be taken into account. An assessment of the implementation of such laws and their effect is in any case crucial to establishing persecution. Similarly, the existence of legislation on religious freedom does not of itself mean individuals are protected. In many cases, such legislation may not be implemented in practice or custom or tradition may, for instance, in practice override this.

19. Discrimination may also take the form of restrictions or limitations on religious belief or practice. Restrictions have, for instance, included penalties for converting to a different faith (apostasy) or for proselytising, or for celebrating religious festivals particular to the religion concerned. The compulsory registration of religious groups and the imposition of specific regulations governing them to restrict the exercise of freedom of religion or belief can also have a discriminatory aim or results. Such actions are legitimate only if they are “specified by law, objective, reasonable and transparent and, consequently, if they do not have the aim or the result of creating discrimination”.¹⁷

d) Forced conversion

20. Forced conversion to a religion is a serious violation of the fundamental human right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and would often satisfy the objective component of persecution. The claimant would still need to demonstrate a subjective fear that the conversion would be persecutory to him or her personally. Generally, this would be satisfied if the individual held convictions or faith or had a clear identity or way of life in relation to a different religion, or if he or she had chosen to be disassociated from any religious denomination or community. Where a claimant held no particular religious conviction (including one of atheism) nor a clear identification with a particular religion or religious community before the conversion or threat of conversion, it would be necessary to assess the impact of such a conversion on the individual (for example, it may be an act without correlative personal effects).

e) Forced compliance or conformity with religious practices

21. Forced compliance with religious practices might, for example, take the form of mandated religious education that is incompatible with the religious convictions, identity or way of life of the child or the child’s parents.¹⁸ It might also involve an obligation to attend religious ceremonies or swear an oath of allegiance to a particular religious symbol. In determining whether such forced compliance constitutes persecution, the policies or acts with which the person or group is required to comply, the extent to which they are contrary to the person’s belief, identity or way of life and the punishment for non-compliance should be examined. Such forced compliance could rise to the level of persecution if it becomes an intolerable interference with the

¹⁷ Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, interim report annexed to Note by the Secretary-General, “Elimination of All Forms of Religious Intolerance”, UN doc. A/58/296, 19 August 2003, paragraphs 134–35.

¹⁸ This would be likely also to interfere with the undertaking of States to respect the liberty of parents or legal guardians to ensure the religious and moral education of their children in conformity with their own convictions under Article 18(4) of the International Covenant.

individual's own religious belief, identity or way of life and/or if non-compliance would result in disproportionate punishment.

22. Forced compliance may also involve the imposition of a particular criminal or civil legal code purported to be based on a religious doctrine to which non-observers might object. Where such a code contains discriminatory substantive or procedural safeguards and especially where it imposes different levels of punishment upon adherents and non-adherents, it could well be regarded as persecutory. Where the law imposes disproportionate punishment for breaches of the law (for example, imprisonment for blasphemy or practising an alternative religion, or death for adultery), whether or not for adherents of the same religion, it would constitute persecution. Such cases are more common where there is limited or no separation between the State and the religion.

23. A specific religious code may be persecutory not just when enforced against non-observers, but also when applied to dissidents within or members of the same faith. The enforcement of anti-blasphemy laws, for example, can often be used to stifle political debate among co-religionists and could constitute persecution on religious and/or political grounds even when enforced against members of the same religion.

C. Special considerations

a) Gender

24. Particular attention should be paid to the impact of gender on religion-based refugee claims, as women and men may fear or suffer persecution for reasons of religion in different ways to each other. Clothing requirements, restrictions on movement, harmful traditional practices, or unequal or discriminatory treatment, including subjection to discriminatory laws and/or punishment, may all be relevant.¹⁹ In some countries, young girls are pledged in the name of religion to perform traditional slave duties or to provide sexual services to the clergy or other men. They may also be forced into underage marriages, punished for honour crimes in the name of religion, or subjected to forced genital mutilation for religious reasons. Others are offered to deities and subsequently bought by individuals believing that they will be granted certain wishes. Women are still identified as “witches” in some communities and burned or stoned to death.²⁰ These practices may be culturally condoned in the

¹⁹ For more information, see UNHCR, “Guidelines on International Protection: Gender-Related Persecution within the context of Article 1A(2) of the 1951 Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees”, HCR/GIP/02/01, 7 May 2002, especially paragraphs 25–26.

²⁰ For description of these practices, see “Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective Violence against Women, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Ms Radhika Coomaraswamy, submitted in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 2001/49, Cultural practices in the family that are violent towards women”, E/CN.4/2002/83, 31 January 2002, available at [http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/0/42E7191FAE543562C1256BA7004E963C/\\$File/G0210428.doc?OpenElement](http://www.unhcr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/0/42E7191FAE543562C1256BA7004E963C/$File/G0210428.doc?OpenElement); “Droits Civils et Politiques et, Notamment: Intolérance Religieuse”, Rapport soumis par M. Abdelfattah Amor, Rapporteur spécial, conformément à la résolution 2001/42 de la Commission des droits de l’homme, Additif: “Étude sur la liberté

claimant's community of origin but still amount to persecution. In addition, individuals may be persecuted because of their marriage or relationship to someone of a different religion than their own. When, due to the claimant's gender, State actors are unwilling or unable to protect the claimant from such treatment, it should not be mistaken as a private conflict, but should be considered as valid grounds for refugee status.

b) Conscientious objection

25. A number of religions or sects within particular religions have abstention from military service as a central tenet and a significant number of religion-based claimants seek protection on the basis of refusal to serve in the military. In countries where military service is compulsory, failure to perform this duty is frequently punishable by law. Moreover, whether military service is compulsory or not, desertion is invariably a criminal offence.²¹

26. Where military service is compulsory, refugee status may be established if the refusal to serve is based on genuine political, religious, or moral convictions, or valid reasons of conscience.²² Such claims raise the distinction between prosecution and persecution. Prosecution and punishment pursuant to a law of general application is not generally considered to constitute persecution,²³ although there are some notable exceptions. In conscientious objector cases, a law purporting to be of general application may, depending on the circumstances, nonetheless be persecutory where, for instance, it impacts differently on particular groups, where it is applied or enforced in a discriminatory manner, where the punishment itself is excessive or disproportionately severe, or where the military service cannot reasonably be expected to be performed by the individual because of his or her genuine beliefs or religious convictions. Where alternatives to military service, such as community service, are imposed there would not usually be a basis for a claim. Having said this, some forms of community service may be so excessively burdensome as to constitute a form of punishment, or the community service might require the carrying out of acts which clearly also defy the claimant's religious beliefs. In addition, the claimant may be able to establish a claim to refugee status where the refusal to serve in the military is not occasioned by any harsh penalties, but the individual has a well-founded fear of serious harassment, discrimination or violence by other individuals (for example, soldiers, local authorities, or neighbours) for his or her refusal to serve.

de religion ou de conviction et la condition de la femme au regard de la religion et des traditions”, E/CN.4/2002/73/Add.2, 5 avril 2002, available (only in French) at <http://www.unhchr.ch/huridocda/huridoca.nsf/2848af408d01ec0ac1256609004e770b/9fa99a4d3f9eade5c1256b9e00510d71?OpenDocument&Highlight=2,E%2FCN.4%2F2002%2F73%2FAdd.2> .

²¹ See generally, UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraphs 167–74.

²² UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraph 170.

²³ UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraph 55–60.

III. PROCEDURAL ISSUES

a) General

27. The following are some general points of particular relevance to examining religion-based refugee claims:

- a) Religious practices, traditions or beliefs can be complex and may vary from one branch or sect of a religion to another or from one country or region to another. For this reason, there is a need for reliable, accurate, up-to-date, and country- or region-specific as well as branch- or sect-specific information.
- b) Refugee status determinations based on religion could also benefit from the assistance of independent experts with *particularised* knowledge of the country, region and context of the particular claim and/or the use of corroborating testimony from other adherents of the same faith.
- c) Decision-makers need to be objective and not arrive at conclusions based solely upon their own experiences, even where they may belong to the same religion as the claimant. General assumptions about a particular religion or its adherents should be avoided.
- d) In assessing religion-based claims, decision-makers need to appreciate the frequent interplay between religion and gender, race, ethnicity, cultural norms, identity, way of life and other factors.
- e) In the selection of interviewers and interpreters, there should be sensitivity regarding any cultural, religious or gender aspects that could hinder open communication.²⁴
- f) Interviewers should also be aware of the potential for hostile biases toward the claimant by an interpreter, either because he or she shares the same religion or is not of the same religion, or of any potential fear of the same by the claimant, which could adversely affect his or her testimony. As with all refugee claims, it can be critical that interpreters are well-versed in the relevant terminology.

b) Credibility

28. Credibility is a central issue in religion-based refugee claims. While decision-makers will often find it helpful during research and preparation to list certain issues to cover during an interview, extensive examination or testing of the tenets or knowledge of the claimant's religion may not always be necessary or useful. In any case, knowledge tests need to take account of individual circumstances, particularly since knowledge of a religion may vary considerably depending on the individual's social, economic or educational background and/or his or her age or sex.

29. Experience has shown that it is useful to resort to a narrative form of questioning, including through open-ended questions allowing the claimant to explain the personal significance of the religion to him or her, the practices he or she has engaged in (or has avoided engaging in out of a fear of persecution), or any other factors relevant to the reasons for his or her fear of being persecuted. Information may be elicited about the individual's religious experiences, such as asking him or her to describe in detail how he or she adopted the religion, the place and manner of

²⁴ See also, UNHCR, "Guidelines on Gender-Related Persecution", above note 19.

worship, or the rituals engaged in, the significance of the religion to the person, or the values he or she believes the religion espouses. For example, the individual may not be able to list the Ten Commandments or name the Twelve Imams, but may be able to indicate an understanding of the religion's basic tenets more generally. Eliciting information regarding the individual's religious identity or way of life will often be more appropriate and useful and may even be necessary. It should also be noted that a claimant's detailed knowledge of his or her religion does not necessarily correlate with sincerity of belief.

30. As indicated in paragraph 9 above, individuals may be persecuted on the basis of their religion even though they have little or no substantive knowledge of its tenets or practices. A lack of knowledge may be explained by further research into the particular practices of that religion in the area in question or by an understanding of the subjective and personal aspects of the claimant's case. For instance, the level of repression against a religious group in a society may severely restrict the ability of an individual to study or practise his or her religion. Even when the individual is able to receive religious education in a repressive environment, it may not be from qualified leaders. Women, in particular, are often denied access to religious education. Individuals in geographically remote communities may espouse adherence to a particular religion and face persecution as a result, yet have little knowledge of its formal practices. Over time, communities may adapt particular religious practices or faith to serve their own needs, or combine them with their more traditional practices and beliefs, especially where the religion has been introduced into a community with long-established traditions. For example, the claimant may not be able to distinguish between those practices which are Christian and those which are animist.

31. Less formal knowledge may also be required of someone who obtained a particular religion by birth and who has not widely practised it. No knowledge is required where a particular religious belief or adherence is imputed or attributed to a claimant.

32. Greater knowledge may be expected, however, of individuals asserting they are religious leaders or who have undergone substantial religious instruction. It is not necessary for such teaching or training to conform fully to objectively tested standards, as these may vary from region to region and country to country, but some clarification of their role and the significance of certain practices or rites to the religion would be relevant. Even claimants with a high level of education or schooling in their religion may not have knowledge of teachings and practices of a more complex, formal or obscure nature.

33. Subsequent and additional interviews may be required where certain statements or claims made by the claimant are incompatible with earlier statements or with general understandings of the religious practices of other members of that religion in the area or region in question. Claimants must be given an opportunity to explain any inconsistencies or discrepancies in their story.

c) Conversion post departure

34. Where individuals convert after their departure from the country of origin, this may have the effect of creating a *sur place* claim.²⁵ In such situations, particular credibility concerns tend to arise and a rigorous and in depth examination of the circumstances and genuineness of the conversion will be necessary. Issues which the decision-maker will need to assess include the nature of and connection between any religious convictions held in the country of origin and those now held, any disaffection with the religion held in the country of origin, for instance, because of its position on gender issues or sexual orientation, how the claimant came to know about the new religion in the country of asylum, his or her experience of this religion, his or her mental state and the existence of corroborating evidence regarding involvement in and membership of the new religion.

35. Both the specific circumstances in the country of asylum and the individual case may justify additional probing into particular claims. Where, for example, systematic and organised conversions are carried out by local religious groups in the country of asylum for the purposes of accessing resettlement options, and/or where “coaching” or “mentoring” of claimants is commonplace, testing of knowledge is of limited value. Rather, the interviewer needs to ask open questions and try to elicit the motivations for conversion and what effect the conversion has had on the claimant’s life. The test remains, however, whether he or she would have a well-founded fear of persecution on a Convention ground if returned. Regard should therefore be had as to whether the conversion may come to the notice of the authorities of the person’s country of origin and how this is likely to be viewed by those authorities.²⁶ Detailed country of origin information is required to determine whether a fear of persecution is objectively well-founded.

36. So-called “self-serving” activities do not create a well-founded fear of persecution on a Convention ground in the claimant’s country of origin, if the opportunistic nature of such activities will be apparent to all, including the authorities there, and serious adverse consequences would not result if the person were returned. Under all circumstances, however, consideration must be given as to the consequences of return to the country of origin and any potential harm that might justify refugee status or a complementary form of protection. In the event that the claim is found to be self-serving but the claimant nonetheless has a well-founded fear of persecution on return, international protection is required. Where the opportunistic nature of the action is clearly apparent, however, this could weigh heavily in the balance when considering potential durable solutions that may be available in such cases, as well as, for example, the type of residency status.

²⁵ Such a claim may also arise if a claimant marries someone of another religion in the country of asylum or educates his or her children in that other religion there and the country of origin would use this as the basis for persecution.

²⁶ See UNHCR Handbook, above note 4, paragraph 96.