

A Voice for the Voiceless: Public Theology and Queer Refugees in Germany and Sweden

Introduction

Stop suffocating queer Muslims. The handwritten cardboard sign is held highly and proudly by a young, assumingly queer and Muslim, person in the crowd at Hannover Christopher Street Day in May 2024, in a few words highlighting the consequences of the perceived dichotomy between queerness and religiosity, especially non-Christian religiosity.

As almost 120 million persons are forcibly displaced worldwide, a figure that has nearly doubled in the last decade,¹ there is a rising hostility towards immigrants in Europe.² Queer refugees are acutely aware of this political reality,³ embodying the perceived tension between a queer friendly, liberal society, and the supposedly queerphobic culture of migrants. Immigrants and Christians alike are often assumed to be queerphobic in the eyes of public opinion, while secular western European countries like Sweden and Germany are seen as utopian for the LGBTQ-community. However, this utopia may be an illusion, as a queer refugee stated in a YouTube interview:

There's this myth....how Sweden is some kind of utopia, where, when you come here you will be accepted as you are you won't be persecuted for who you love or how you look or how you perceive yourself, or how others perceive you. And I feel like there's a dramatic like reality check when you get here, where government officials obviously won't kill you or hurt you...for who you are, but there's still like stigma and there is like a language that is used, that is not welcoming...⁴

The anti-immigration tension was ignited by the so-called refugee crisis of 2015, when an unusually high number of refugees crossed the Mediterranean Sea to seek asylum in Europe,

¹ UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder," 2025, <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/data-summaries>.

² E.g. Darrell Jackson and Alessia Passarelli, *Mapping Migration, Mapping Churches' Responses in Europe: Belonging, Community and Integration: The Witness and Service of Churches in Europe* (World Council of Churches Publications, 2016), 24.

³ Jane Freedman et al., eds., *A Gendered Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis*, 1 edition (Routledge, 2017), 1.

⁴ *NEWCOMERS - for LGBTQI MIGRANTS*, performed by Victoria, with Queers of the world, 2021, 00:07:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBMosHy4-bE>.

partly due to the drawn out Syrian Civil War which began four years earlier.⁵ The influx of refugees was initially met with empathy and care in both Sweden and Germany, but then triggered harshened immigration policies,⁶ causing religious leaders to speak out for the rights of refugees. As a result, the Church of Sweden, the Christian Council of Sweden, and Die Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD) have all received criticism for being too political.⁷

Public and political theology are seen by many as the white, privileged, male scholar's frameworks – done by privileged elites for privileged elites.⁸ But queer experiences, especially the intersectional queer experience of religiosity, immigration, and non-white ethnicity, is inherently political. Serving the community and fighting for social justice has long been seen as an ecumenically uniting practice that moves beyond doctrine,⁹ but LGBTQ-rights is often an exception.¹⁰ Without a public and political theological engagement of queer theology, queer Muslims and others will continue to be suffocated.

With queer refugees as a focus population, I have interviewed Christian and secular queer refugee organization leaders in Sweden and Germany to understand how the public theological engagement for social justice in the intersection of migration and queerness is negotiated. I use a queer public theological framework to analyze ethnographic research material collected from the three case study cities – Hannover, Dresden, and Stockholm – to explore the ecclesiological Christian faith-based political action for the population. My aim is to understand the Church's negotiation of its politicality, and the impact this has on the social justice movement for and by queer refugees coming to Sweden and Germany.

In this article I first identify the particular challenges that queer refugees face, before I go on to create a framework of queer public theology which will be used to analyze the

⁵ Muneeb Ahsan, "The Theology of Hospitality: Religious Responses to Migration and Refugees," *International Bulletin of Theology and Civilization* 7, no. 2 (2024): 79.

⁶ Birgit Meyer and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Refugees and Religion: Ethnographic Studies of Global Trajectories* (Bloomsbury, 2021), 1; Lina Landström, "Open Your Hearts, We Can Do This! The Faith-Based Response of Sweden and Germany to Queer Refugees Following the Refugee Crisis of 2015," *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Forthcoming.

⁷ Konstantin Sacher, "Ist Die Kirche Zu Politisch?," *Chrismon*, July 29, 2024; Jimmie Åkesson and Aron Emilsson, "SD: Sveriges kristna råd tar politisk ställning," *Aftonbladet* (Sweden), September 26, 2019, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/debatt/a/mRaql1/kyrkan-ska-inte-lagga-sig-i-flyktingpolitiken>; Joel Halldorf, "Biskopar Och Kyrkoledare Kritiserar Sveriges Migrationspolitik," *Substack*, *Vit Rök*, March 3, 2026, <https://vitrok.substack.com/p/biskopar-och-kyrkoledare-kritiserar>.

⁸ Esther McIntosh, "'I Met God, She's Black': Racial, Gender and Sexual Equalities in Public Theology," in *A Companion to Public Theology*, ed. Sebastian Kim and Katie Day, Brill's Companions to Modern Theology, ed. Tom Greggs (Brill, 2017).

⁹ Barbara Brown Zikmund, "Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, First edition, ed. Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 331–32.

¹⁰ *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way: Invitation to Journey Together on Matters of Human Sexuality* (World Council of Churches, 2022), 86; Linnea Helgesson, "'Den Mest Splittrande Frågan'. En Queerekumenisk Undersökning Av Kyrkornas Världsråds Syn På Sexualitet" (Master thesis, Lund University, 2024).

ethnographic material. I then paint the religious context of Sweden and Germany, before presenting the methodology, followed by an analysis of the ethnographic material based on the emerged themes of the political church, LGBTQ-rights as interreligiously dividing, and challenges with queer refugee work.

Challenges for Queer Refugees

Queer refugees are twice marginalized, both as forcibly displaced and possibly an ethnic and religious Other, as well as a gender and/or sexual non-normative Other. This can cause experiences of isolation in both the receiving society, and in refugee communities.¹¹ Because of this, queer refugees are arguably more vulnerable than the general refugee population.

The past decade Europeans have experienced ever-changing asylum laws, generally in a continuously more right-wing and immigration-opposing direction. After years of debate, the European Union decided on a pact on migration and asylum in 2023. This has so far failed to create stability in the migration politics of individual countries. In addition to social challenges like racism and queerphobia, there are practical, legal, and safety issues for queer refugees. For many queer refugees, the biggest challenges include a faltering asylum procedure, and an unsafe housing situation.¹² To be granted asylum as a queer refugee in most of Europe, “proof of prosecution or ‘active enforcement’ of the criminal provision is needed.”¹³ This includes both Germany and Sweden.¹⁴ Additionally, Sweden has made temporary residence the rule which creates long-term uncertainties for queer refugees.¹⁵ A Swedish report from 2020 explores reasons for which queer refugees have been denied asylum, including an assumption that LGBTQ persons should have felt shame about their sexual orientation (or gender identity), and that asylum seekers should have come out and shared their queerness early in the asylum-seeking process.¹⁶

For a short while in 2017, the situation for LGBTQ asylum seekers became ground for public debate in Sweden after opera singer Rickard Söderberg engaged in the case of a young

¹¹ *Rainbow Response: A Practical Guide to Resettling LGBT Refugees and Asylees* (Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, 2012), 53.

¹² Sabine Jansen and Thomas Spijkerboer, *Fleeing Homophobia: Asylum Claims Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Europe* (COC Netherlands, 2011), 77.

¹³ Thomas Spijkerboer, ed., *Fleeing Homophobia: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Asylum* (Routledge, 2013), 7.

¹⁴ Spijkerboer, *Fleeing Homophobia*, 7.

¹⁵ Erik Wiman and Magnus Wennman, “WANTED: För att de älskade fel person,” *Aftonbladet* (Sverige), November 16, 2020, <https://www.aftonbladet.se/a/JJJGAP>.

¹⁶ Aino Gröndahl, *Avslagsmotiveringar i HBTQI-asylärenden: En rättsutredning av Migrationsverkets, migrationsdomstolarnas och Migrationsöverdomstolens prövning av sexuell läggning, könsidentitet och könsuttryck*. (RFSL, 2020), 106.

man denied asylum, as he had failed to make his sexuality credible. The newspaper *Expressen* together with the queer magazine *QX* published a series of articles on the issue,¹⁷ including one where Söderberg, who is openly gay, got to complete the test LGBTQ asylum seekers go through to prove their queer identity. When Söderberg failed making his homosexuality credible,¹⁸ it got public attention as people asked themselves who could possibly pass this gay test if such a flamboyant and LGBTQ-community engaged openly gay man as Rickard Söderberg could not. However, a couple of years later journalist and LGBTQ-activist Jon Voss suggested that the Swedish engagement for justice in the cases of vulnerable queer refugees is dependent upon those refugees staying outside the Swedish border.¹⁹

Being a queer asylum seeker of faith creates additional challenges in asylum claims, as well as in social settings, raising “questions about the role of policy in reinforcing harmful dichotomies, suggesting a need for alternative approaches that validate the lived experiences of LGBTQRAS [LGBTQ religious asylum seekers].”²⁰ The Swedish report from 2020, mentioned above, states: “Migration authorities generally expect LGBTI believers to relate primarily to religion and its views on LGBTI and that there is an internal conflict between their faith, religion and LGBTI identity.”²¹ This further complicates the intersections of migration and queerness in the church context.

The regulations for cases of LGBTQ asylum seekers across Europe are changing, for example queer asylum seekers can no longer be expected to have a generalized experience of queerness and an ability to reflect on their identity.²² Yet, it is too early to know the practical consequences of this change.

Public Theology

Following the Second World War, a political theology developed in Europe with particular foundation in Germanic and Scandinavian lands,²³ questioning the lack of resistance to the

¹⁷ Viktor Ahldén and Matilda Thorén, “Homosexuella skickas tillbaka till förföljelse – klarar inte Sveriges statliga homotest,” *Expressen* (Sweden), May 30, 2017, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/homosexuella-skickas-tillbaka-klarar-inte-sveriges-homotest/>.

¹⁸ Viktor Ahldén and Matilda Thorén, “Rickard Söderberg Svarade På Migrationsverkets Frågor,” *Expressen* (Sweden), May 30, 2017, <https://www.expressen.se/nyheter/rickard-soderberg-gjorde-homotestet-fornedrande/>.

¹⁹ Jon Voss, “Imponerande Uppvisning Av Praktisk Solidaritet,” *QX*, October 2021.

²⁰ Diego García Rodríguez, “Critiquing Trends and Identifying Gaps in the Literature on LGBTQ Refugees and Asylum-Seekers,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (2023): 539.

²¹ Gröndahl, *Avslagsmotiveringar i HBTQI-asylärenden*, 73. Author’s translation.

²² Emilia Aro, “Nya riktlinjer för hbtqi-asyl – efter år av kritik,” *Sveriges Radio*, December 28, 2024, <https://www.sverigesradio.se/artikel/nya-riktlinjer-for-hbtqi-asyl-efter-ar-av-kritik>.

²³ Max Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?,” *Political Theology* 5, no. 3 (2004): 281.

Holocaust within Christianity.²⁴ This political theology was “guided by the idea not only that the pastor, believer and theologian may address public matters, but in fact must do so, since the policies of every political order needs direct guidance and transformation at the hands of theological-ethical insight.”²⁵ Public theology builds upon political theology in expanding the notion of the public to go beyond the state into all that is public life.²⁶ Heinrich Bedford-Strohm calls political theology and liberation theology the “forebears of Public Theology,”²⁷ where public theology “is liberation theology for a democratic society.”²⁸

The term “public theology” was coined in 1974 by Martin Marty, and uses theology to connect the church with the politics.²⁹ Its framework is helpful in providing tools and language to research the undeniable politicality of religion, and quickly gained traction capturing a part of classical theological tradition, combining biblical insight, philosophical analysis, and the responsibility to push a more just society.³⁰ Public theology wants to change the social system, without, as with political theology, seeking political power or calling for a revolution in the creation of a utopia; public theology is both realistic and optimistic.³¹ Another important aspect of public theology is its challenging of the self-secularization of the church.³² Using public theology as a framework means resisting the idea of the Church being reduced to a civil organization for social justice among others, acknowledging the need for a theological-ethical guidance of politics.³³ Public theology thus becomes useful in believing that religion can be the liberator, and not just the oppressor.³⁴

While both Germany and Sweden are secular countries, in the definition that religion is clearly separated from the state and a comparably small number of the population practices their faith, Christian norms still form a critical societal foundation.³⁵ German theologian Jürgen Moltmann suggests that after the Holocaust, theology has become a matter of public discussion

²⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, “European Political Theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey and Elizabeth Phillips (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 8–9.

²⁵ Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?,” 282.

²⁶ Christine Schliesser, “Why Retiring Public Theology Is Not A Good Idea. An Intervention from German-Speaking Public Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 28, no. 1 (2026): 23.

²⁷ Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, *Liberation Theology for a Democratic Society: Essays in Public Theology*, ed. Michael Mädler and Andrea Wagner-Pinggéra (Lit Verlag, 2018), 20.

²⁸ Bedford-Strohm, *Liberation Theology for a Democratic Society*, 20.

²⁹ McIntosh, “‘I Met God, She’s Black’: Racial, Gender and Sexual Equalities in Public Theology,” 302.

³⁰ Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?,” 284.

³¹ Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?,” 284.

³² Schliesser, “Why Retiring Public Theology Is Not A Good Idea,” 33.

³³ Schliesser, “Why Retiring Public Theology Is Not A Good Idea,” 24.

³⁴ Elaine Graham, “Feminist Theology, Northern,” in *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Second edition, ed. William T. Cavanaugh and Peter Manley Scott, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion (John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2019).

³⁵ Jonathan Evans et al., *Spirituality and Religion: How Does the U.S. Compare With Other Countries?*, 2025; Sergei A. Mudrov, *Christian Churches in European Integration*, 1 edition (Routledge, 2016).

rather than a private matter in Germany.³⁶ Theologian Mary E. Hunt argues that religion is still the backbone of how people understand their society, particularly in relation to family, sexuality, and relationships.³⁷ Queering public theology, then, means acknowledging that some bodies are inherently political in the current societal climate, and they do not stop being political because they move out of the public sphere. By using public theology, I aim to bring my research beyond academia and into conversation with all of what David Tracy calls the three publics: church, academy and society,³⁸ under the assumption that the church is as much part of the problem as part of the solution for queer people.³⁹

Ecumenism has been an aspect of public theology since the beginning.⁴⁰ Ecumenical and interreligious organizations focused on social justice have existed since the first half of the 20th century,⁴¹ and this work has oft been seen as a unifying practice.⁴² However, LGBTQ-rights are instead often a dividing factor among churches, denominations, and religious organizations.⁴³ Brock Perry argues for a queer political theology “that presses the boundaries of both the theological and the queer.”⁴⁴ Thinking with Perry, I believe that queer theology can offer the field of public theology an opportunity for expansion that resists the dichotomy of queerness and any religion, in theory and in practice, while acknowledging that a invisibilized, politicized body continues to be so also in private spaces. Post-colonial scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in the famous article *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, that subalterns indeed cannot speak, because when they attempt to do so they are ignored, silenced, or instead spoken for by a more powerful representative.⁴⁵ Framing a queer public theology means reflecting upon who has a political subjectivity, both in the eyes of oneself and in the eyes of a larger society, who is allowed to speak and be heard on behalf of themselves,⁴⁶ as well as who’s cry for justice is worth the potential societal, ecumenical, and interreligious push-back for the faith organization. Being queer, especially a queer refugee, certainly a queer refugee with a non-white ethnicity

³⁶ Moltmann, “European Political Theology,” 3.

³⁷ Mary E. Hunt, “Gender and Sexuality in the Context of Religion and Social Justice,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Religion and Social Justice*, First edition, ed. Michael D. Palmer and Stanley M. Burgess, Wiley Blackwell Companions to Religion (Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2012), 542.

³⁸ McIntosh, “‘I Met God, She’s Black’: Racial, Gender and Sexual Equalities in Public Theology,” 302.

³⁹ Tony Franklin-Ross, “Looking Behind the Blue Cards: Understanding Contested Ethical Approaches in the Ecumenical Space,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 16 (2022): 40–41.

⁴⁰ Schliesser, “Why Retiring Public Theology Is Not A Good Idea,” 27.

⁴¹ Brown Zikmund, “Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue,” 333.

⁴² Brown Zikmund, “Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue,” 331–32.

⁴³ *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way*; Helgesson, “‘Den Mest Splittrande Frågan.’”

⁴⁴ Brock Perry, “Towards an Ontogenesis of Queerness and Divinity: Queer Political Theology and Terrorist Assemblages,” *Culture and Religion* 15, no. 2 (2014): 185–86.

⁴⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988).

⁴⁶ Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

and a non-Protestant faith, is a political embodiment that requires a theological response that is political, public, and queer.⁴⁷

Having laid the foundation for the queer public theology framework that will be applied in this article, I now explore the religious landscape of Sweden and Germany, after which I present the ethnographic material to understand how Christian faith-based organizations perceive the public theological aspect of their work with (queer) refugees.

Religious Landscape

Both Sweden and Germany have a long history of Evangelical Lutheranism. Sweden does not have a prominent presence of the Roman Catholic church, while Germany is regionally divided between Evangelical Lutheranism and Catholicism. 20 regional Protestant denominations collaborate in the German association Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD). Religious membership is on a decline in both Germany and Sweden. In 2022, Germany reached the point when the majority of the population no longer belonged to one of the two the major churches, Protestant and Roman Catholic.⁴⁸ A similar development is seen in Sweden. According an internal report, the Church of Sweden is expected to become a minority church in 2026 with less than 50 percent of the Swedish population being members for the first time ever.⁴⁹

British historian James Hawes argues that religion in Germany is not just a matter of faith but also a sign of which historical Germany one stems from.⁵⁰ For example, the single most statistically important factor for who voted for Hitler in 1932 was whether the person was from a Catholic or Protestant region; only 17% of the Nazi vote in 1932 came from majority Catholic regions.⁵¹ Both Dresden and Hannover are predominantly Protestant. The link between religiosity and political leaning continues in the 21st century, research shows. While political parties on the far-right often claim to be defenders of Christian values, research suggests a negative correlation between religiosity and voting for a party on the far-right.⁵² The strong foundation of AfD in East Germany correlates not only with a worse economic situation than

⁴⁷ Perry, "Towards an Ontogenesis of Queerness and Divinity," 185–86.

⁴⁸ Schliesser, "Why Retiring Public Theology Is Not A Good Idea," 29.

⁴⁹ Jonas Bromander, *Svenska Kyrkans Medlemmar 2023-2051* (Svenska kyrkan, 2025), 6.

⁵⁰ James Hawes, *Tysklands Historia: Från Caesar till Merkel*, trans. Kjell Waltman and Inge RL Larsson (Lind & Co, 2019), 182–83.

⁵¹ Hawes, *Tysklands Historia*, 182.

⁵² Joel Halldorf, *Gud: Återkomsten*, First (Libris förlag, 2018), 37; Kathleen A. Montgomery and Ryan Winter, "Explaining the Religion Gap in Support for Radical Right Parties in Europe," *Politics and Religion*, no. 8 (2015): 398.

West Germany, but also a higher level of self-reported non-religiosity.⁵³ The negative correlation of, at least Protestant Christian, religiosity and voting on the far-right exists also in Sweden, even more so with Christians belonging to the free churches.⁵⁴

Methodology: Asking the Experts

This article uses an ecclesiological perspective, focusing on the religious caregiver, in order to understand the role of religion in advocating for the rights of queer refugees in an ever-changing political landscape. The ecclesiological perspective is chosen to understand the motivations of those receiving refugees,⁵⁵ aiming to begin filling the knowledge-gap stemming out of research focused on the population itself, to understand how religious organizations act in order to work for social justice for queer refugees.

For this article I have conducted 13 interviews, seven in Stockholm and three in the former Eastern German city Dresden and the former Western German city Hannover respectively. 10 of these interviews were with employees of churches or Christian organizations who works with (queer) refugees, and three with employees of non-religious organizations receiving queer refugees. Several of the Christian employees worked in ecumenical or interreligious settings, although all of them represented protestant Christianity. Sweden and Germany are similar enough historically, politically, religiously, and culturally to be compared, while still experiencing significant differences allowing broader conclusions. They are comparably LGBTQ-friendly⁵⁶ and famously secular.⁵⁷ While Sweden has been a united country for decades, Germany was divided until recent memory causing significant differences both politically and religiously between Western Germany and Eastern Germany, for example the anti-immigration party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has a stronger support in the East.⁵⁸ Throughout the article, *queer* and *LGBTQ* are used interchangeably to describe a self-identified non-normative sexual or gender identity. Likewise, *refugee* is used as a self-identifying term, irrespective of legal status.

⁵³ Pascal Siegers and Alexander Jedinger, "Religious Immunity to Populism: Christian Religiosity and Public Support for the Alternative for Germany," *German Politics* 30, no. 2 (2021): 150.

⁵⁴ Joel Halldorf, "Ny Studie: Equmenia Och Pingst Röstar Olika – Men Alla Avvisar SD," Substack, *Vit Rök*, April 22, 2026, <https://vitrok.substack.com/p/ny-studie-equmenia-och-pingst-rostar>.

⁵⁵ Meyer and Veer, *Refugees and Religion*, 35.

⁵⁶ ILGA Europe, *Rainbow Map: Reflection the Legal and Policy Situation for the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex (LGBTI) People in Europe 2024*, Rainbow Map (ILGA Europe, 2024), <https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org>.

⁵⁷ Evans et al., *Spirituality and Religion: How Does the U.S. Compare With Other Countries?*

⁵⁸ Meyer and Veer, *Refugees and Religion*, 1.

While I sought out my interviewees because of their position in their respective Christian society, I did not initially consider my method elite interviewing. My informants are religious leaders and I asked them, as experts, about the work their congregations are attempting, thus elite interviewing in some sense of the term.⁵⁹ Elite interviewing offers an opportunity to speak with decision makers in organizations, companies, or larger society,⁶⁰ “respondents are selected based on their organisational position, and they typically hold high social status and associated privileges, possess specialised expertise, and wield decision-making power within their organisations.”⁶¹ Aside from these benefits of elite interviewing, the method also comes with challenges, such as complex power relations between researcher and respondent, a need for advanced knowledge on behalf of the researcher, and difficulty in recruiting informants.⁶²

I discovered throughout the process that I, as a researcher and queer Christian Swede, was co-creating knowledge together with the leaders I interviewed, who are doing theology every day. This is reflected in how I am using the material; my interviewees are not just informants, they are experts of their fields, several with advanced theological degrees, many ordained, and all of them with deep insights from working in the real world. Their reflections deserve a conversation with the literature. Because of the nature of their work, the communities which they serve, and the sensitivity of the topic on hand, they are kept anonymous and the context around each expert is intentionally vague.⁶³ The interviews included questions of how the organization conducts advocacy work for queer refugees, asylum seekers, and the queer community, the church’s theology on queerness and refugees, as well as potential push-back for social justice work for queers and refugees. In addition to the interviews, I have also explored the churches and refugee-oriented NGOs of the cities, as well as attending pride and pride-related church events in both Hannover and Stockholm. The themes that appeared in my research is the political church, LGBTQ-rights as interreligiously dividing, and challenges with queer refugee work. In the next section, I analyze these themes using queer public theology.

⁵⁹ Huidan Niu, “Navigating Power Dynamics in Elite Interviews,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 2024, 1, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220620.2024.2394055>.

⁶⁰ Niu, “Navigating Power Dynamics in Elite Interviews,” 1.

⁶¹ Niu, “Navigating Power Dynamics in Elite Interviews,” 2–3.

⁶² Niu, “Navigating Power Dynamics in Elite Interviews,” 3.

⁶³ Niu, “Navigating Power Dynamics in Elite Interviews,” 11.

The Political Church

The Church of Sweden has been involved in welcoming and advocating for refugees for decades,⁶⁴ and has a deep commitment to the LGBTQ community, with ordination of LGBTQ individuals, performance of same-sex weddings, and participation in pride festivals around the country, causing the church to occasionally be accused of being too political.⁶⁵ The Church of Sweden pushes back against this critique by saying that it is not politics, but theology, that motivates their work, stating on their website:

Christian belief tells us that humans are created to live together. We all have a responsibility for one another, all over the world. All humans are of equal worth and should be treated with respect and care, no matter their religion or skin color. Therefore, it is a given for the Church of Sweden to meet people who are displaced.⁶⁶

This sentiment is also reflected in my interviews, with Swedish and German experts alike, one saying:

It's one of our things we have to do, otherwise we can't call ourselves Christians. Everyone who seeks refuge, who seeks help, who needs to be supported and asked us we should answer them in a way that which is supportive and helpful. And not only that, I would go further. We have to as a church, as big as we are, as rich as we are we have to engage in these issues in a proactive way, so don't have to wait for someone to knock on our door and say I need help, but to engage in political discussions...

Another one of my experts called it their mission: “the church's task is to be a voice for those who have no voice, but also to be some kind of sign of hope in a kind of generally hopeless world.” Yet another one put it in the words “caring and curing,” meaning that they did not just want to be there to solve the emergency, but to also be part of creating a long-term solution for the root cause.

In a blog post from March of 2026, Swedish theologian Joel Halldorf explores a recent public debate between the government, primarily the governmental party the Christian Democrats, and Swedish church leaders over the Swedish migration politics. The debate started with the Church of Sweden Stockholm diocese bishop Andreas Holmberg criticizing the migration politics and ending up in a live tv-debate against the Church of Sweden pastor and

⁶⁴ Kristina Hellqvist and Andreas Sandberg, *En tid av möten: Arbetet med asylsökande och nyanlända i Svenska kyrkans församlingar 2015-2016* (Ineko AB, 2017), 18–22.

⁶⁵ Halldorf, “Biskopar Och Kyrkoledare Kritiserar Sveriges Migrationspolitik.”

⁶⁶ “Svenska Kyrkans Arbeta För Människor På Flykt,” Svenska Kyrkan, November 26, 2019, <https://www.svenskakyrkan.se/migration/vart-arbete>. *Author's translation*.

Christian Democrats politician Hans Eklind in one of Sweden's biggest news programs "Aktuellt" in public service tv. The politician argued that the "that "austere policy" was an expression of "Christian social responsibility."⁶⁷ As a result, additional bishops of the Church of Sweden, including the archbishop, as well as the Catholic bishop of Sweden and several church leaders from the free churches, have publicly criticized the migration politics and deemed them unchristian. Halldorf comments the events as unifying the churches of Sweden, going beyond the occasional criticism of the Church of Sweden being too political or left-leaning: "It is significant that it is not only bishops from the Church of Sweden who are speaking out, but also Bishop Anders Arborelius of the Catholic Church and church leaders from free churches. This shows that the criticism unites all churches in Sweden and is not due to the Church of Sweden having a particular political profile."⁶⁸ This becomes a practical example of how social justice work for vulnerable populations often serves as ecumenically unifying.⁶⁹

It was common among my church-representative experts to work for social justice, within the church or in society at large, for either or both refugees and LGBTQ-people. Generally, the motivation was found in theology and Biblical references. One expert said that they saw it as being a "prophetic voice" and that this has become even more important in a society with a growing hostility towards those deemed Other. Although, the expert said, "it should not be our job," yet, as Christians they are "the voice of the weak, standing on the side of the oppressed, as many do not have the capacity to fight for their rights." While most of my experts, to varying degrees, saw the church as being a voice for the voiceless, only two cited actively connecting refugee populations with local politicians through for example town halls, making sure they are able to influence their communities and politicians directly.

A majority of the church leaders in Sweden, and one in Hannover, cited that they actively participated in moving their denomination in a more queer-inclusive direction and participated in working for the queer community at large. Within the congregation and denomination, most experts said they took very firm stances on the side of inclusion. A pastor mentioned their sermons as an arena for speaking "about rights or about empowerment or about how can we organize each other so good that we can open rooms for [LGBTQ people]." Several church-leaders had been invited to speak in front of various political parliaments, local and national, on issues that they worked on – most often refugee issues. One was invited to speak in front of parts of the government ahead of a vote on rights of self-determination for transpersons,

⁶⁷ Halldorf, "Biskopar Och Kyrkoledare Kritiserar Sveriges Migrationspolitik."

⁶⁸ Halldorf, "Biskopar Och Kyrkoledare Kritiserar Sveriges Migrationspolitik."

⁶⁹ Brown Zikmund, "Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue," 331–32.

“because [the politicians] know that I hear a lot from queer people in this pastoral care.” This shows the connections between politics and religion also in secular societies like Germany and Sweden.

In Saxony, the Evangelisch-Lutherische Landeskirche is the major Protestant church, which an informant described as “quite conservative on the whole” although they noted that there might be individual congregations that are affirming. I was also informed of local initiatives with queer friendly worship services and study groups, often informally organized. The Protestant church participated in pride in various ways and to varying degrees in all three cities, and in at least two of them there was also a level of participation from Catholics. I constantly ran into LGBTQ flags, pride-symbols, rainbow altars, information about rainbow masses, and the like in Stockholm churches. On the other hand, in Germany, I could not find any of the like despite a lot of searching. Even when I knew there would be a queer inclusive worship service in a church in Hannover a specific week, I could not find it in their church calendar – suggesting the work is not as integrated in the German church as in the Swedish. My research suggests that the Protestant churches of Sweden have come further in terms of queer inclusiveness, while Germany has come further in terms of queer-friendly Muslim communities and the conversation of queerness within the Catholic church.

Despite the expansive advocacy work on behalf of refugees and the LGBTQ-community, it was uncommon for the church communities to advocate the rights of queer refugees. Three experts who actively did social work for queer refugees, one secular and two church-representatives, shared a hesitation to be involved in the political plight for queer refugees in order to stay out of the public eye out of safety concerns for the population. These instead spoke of direct advocacy in relation to authorities and within individual cases. Public advocacy for queer refugees was more common in Germany than in Sweden. Separate housing was the primary issue my German experts advocated for. In Saxony, the state of Dresden, there is an exception in the asylum seeking housing rules so that queer asylum seekers with the help of an organization are able to be moved out of the assigned housing and into an accommodation in a larger city, which my German experts advocating for queer refugee justice championed.⁷⁰

The state of Saxony is seen as a model and pioneer when it comes to receiving queer refugees in Germany with a heightened knowledge from the municipality on the many difficulties these refugees meet and attempts to solve them through systematic and organized

⁷⁰ „Die Holen Wir Da Raus“ – Sachsens Soforthilfe Für Queere Geflüchtete, Germany, n.d., <https://www.iwwit.de/gayzine/die-holen-wir-da-raus-sachsen-queere-gefluechtete/>.

help.⁷¹ Yet, Dresden has also gotten an increasing reputation of being right-wing and hostile towards foreigners. In 2020, there was a deadly homophobic attack in Dresden, in which a Syrian refugee stabbed a gay couple, killing one and seriously injuring the other. The incident was described by the media as Germany's "first deadly Islamist assault targeting gay people."⁷² All Dresden experts shared that it had heavily impacted their work. At the same time, this hostility within Dresden has caused an increased response by those caring for refugees. One expert brought up the formation of the Pegida organization in Dresden, as a response to the so-called refugee crisis of 2015:

...those Monday demonstrations by this group were terrible. But I have to say, it shook the church communities awake. They became lively. And I would say that almost every church community in Dresden has been very committed to helping refugees. So actually, thanks to Pegida, the church communities have started to get involved in helping refugees. It wasn't a pleasant situation, but it also had a positive effect.

None of my experts argued for a non-political church, although one found it important to state that the congregation they serve do not take political stances, rather their work is based in a theological conviction. Some did not immediately identify the work they did as political, as it did not directly include politicians or political policies. However, to an extent they all argued for social justice for the LGBTQ-population and/or refugees.

Thus, my research shows that it is very common for churches in Sweden and Germany to be involved in a plight for a more just society, within the church, within public policy, within politics, and in society at large. This work was motivated with theological conviction. One of my experts framed it: "It's just about humanity, and some kind of credibility in what we believe in." Their acts are supported by theologians who argue for a theology of migration that "invites Christians to persuade the state to protect the vulnerable."⁷³ Yet, this social justice work rarely includes advocating for the rights of queer refugees. In the next section, I will explore the ecumenically and interreligiously unifying nature of social justice advocacy, and the role of LGBTQ rights within this justice work.

⁷¹ Ich Weiss Was Ich Tu, „*Die Holen Wir Da Raus*“.

⁷² "Jihadist Gets Life for Deadly Attack on German Gay Couple," *AFP* (Germany), May 21, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210521-jihadist-gets-life-for-deadly-attack-on-german-gay-couple>.

⁷³ Muthuraj Swamy, "Refugee Migration Today: Challenges for Doing Theology," *Theology* 120, no. 5 (2017): 340–41.

LGBTQ-rights as Interreligiously Dividing

Queerness was either explicitly or indirectly described by a majority of my experts as the elephant in the room in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation. Working with LGBTQ rights within the church seemed to be the most controversial in Dresden, where there was also the most outspoken experience of homophobia from Muslim migrants, making the church itself hesitant of Muslim immigrant communities:

...we have to be aware of anti-Democratic, anti-freedom, anti-Christian, anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic tendencies among the Muslim refugee part of society. ... I think we have to not close our eyes before that ... But we have to talk about these aspects of strange and unfamiliar and alien movements within this refugee group which are there.

Another expert explained the existing intra-refugee hesitation against Muslim and Arab immigrants:

...some groups or some people who see themselves and are also seen as society, as a group, like, for example, the group of Venezuelan people or people coming from Latin America, who reproduce this kind of discourse about this group that is labeled as the Arab refugee group being homophobic and a threat. And this there is this reproduction. The reproduction of this discourse of Arab people or this refugee people being a threat to queer people in general and to European queer people specifically.

Most mainstream Protestant churches of Germany and Sweden have a more or less queer-inclusive theology. Yet, this inclusive theology proves thin as churches enter ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation. In cooperation with (potentially) non-affirming congregations or other religious groups, my experts shared that their organizations were much more hesitant to speak out on LGBTQ-issues compared to other contexts. Some congregations, particularly outside of the inner-cities, find working on LGBTQ issues harms their ecumenical and interreligious work and not all are willing to be affirming at that cost. One inner-city informant shared an experience from a meeting with other congregations:

A deacon wants to work more in this direction [of LGBTQ inclusion] and is told that “we can't do that right now because our interfaith relations would react so badly to us drawing this line”. And to think that we would lose the good [ecumenical and interreligious] relations we have if we stand firm on this issue, it makes you very sad.

In the public eye of both Germany and Sweden, being queer and religious are often seen as mutually exclusive, even more so within Islam.⁷⁴ The perceived tension between queerness and Islam became tricky to navigate for many of the experts' organizations, since Islamic associations and mosques are important actors of refugee care in both Germany⁷⁵ and Sweden, and many refugees identify as Muslim. This affects the lives of queer Muslim refugees, including their legal protection. Because of the perceived incompatibility between queerness and a (practicing) Muslim identity, it is not uncommon for queer Muslim asylum seekers to be denied international protection on this ground.⁷⁶ Thus, the very existence of queer Muslims is a resistance to the societal queerphobia and Islamophobia.⁷⁷ A non-religious informant working with queer refugees stated:

Something that I encounter a lot in my work is a lot of internalized racism in the sense of the idea that white European people are per se more advanced, like in a democratic way, and that for example, homophobia or transphobia don't exist as much in European countries. And there's an internalizing and reproduction of these kinds of ideas. That's something I see in my work, people talking about themselves, their group, their country, their communities as being more homophobic and sometimes with the use of words like underdeveloped and this reproduction of this kind of discourse, that's something that happens.

The rising hostility of immigrants within Europe is commonly justified through a protection of the LGBTQ friendly culture. Queer refugees, embody the tension between this homonationalist agenda where some LGB bodies are deemed worthy of protection, and the racist nationalist assumption that immigrants are against this.⁷⁸ The homonationalist tendencies of the current political policies of both Sweden and Germany, create an invisibility of queer refugees and a hierarchical suggestion that prioritizes some queer persons over others.⁷⁹

Among my informants there were also examples of LGBTQ-inclusive congregations having functioning ecumenical and interreligious collaborations on social issues with outright LGBTQ-hostile religious groups. Several of the church leaders I interviewed for this study made a point to separate interreligious dialogue from interreligious cooperation. None of the

⁷⁴ Momin Rahman, "Queer as Intersectionality: Theorizing Gay Muslim Identities," *Sociology* 44, no. 5 (2010): 948.

⁷⁵ Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith, eds., *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, Religion and Global Migrations (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 93, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-67961-7>.

⁷⁶ Luca Mavelli and Erin K. Wilson, *The Refugee Crisis and Religion: Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*, Critical Perspectives on Religion in International Politics (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), 21.

⁷⁷ Rahman, "Queer as Intersectionality," 952.

⁷⁸ Leon Freude and Núria Vergés Bosch, "Homonationalism in Europe? A Quantitative Comparison of the Values of Europeans," *Sexuality & Culture* 24 (2020): 1292–314.

⁷⁹ Perry, "Towards an Ontogenesis of Queerness and Divinity," 178.

leaders I spoke to engaged in interreligious dialogue on the topic of queer inclusion, however, several cooperated in caring for refugees in ecumenical and interreligious settings with non-affirming organizations. They described a culture where queer issues simply are not talked about:

...those questions have probably never been raised in those contexts. It has not been the case that there has been a need to do so in these collaborations.

Three of the church leaders I interviewed cited co-signing opinion pieces speaking of welcoming refugees, but the majority of the experts instead argued that their act of existing, of doing the work, of meeting queer refugees or of interreligious collaboration, was a defiant act in itself. One church leader, representing a particularly queer-inclusive church, who cooperated with the local mosque in the work for refugees, stated:

...it becomes some kind of advocacy just that we exist. That we show that it is possible to cooperate, that we like each other, invite each other to each other's parties. They come to our Christmas party, we come to their Eid. It's also a kind of opinion-forming.

One expert, representing a secular organization, argued that religious communities need to be better educated on the lives of queer refugees:

...they should educate their communities ... What does queerness mean and what does refuge mean? So not only collecting people from the street and offering them a community They had a story, they came to this certain community. And address their lives, address their struggles they had, so the society can change in terms of hostility, in change of racism, in change of reasons why people have to flee.

This expert expresses the way queer refugees move in society as an embodiment dichotomy, resulting in an invisibilization best treated with education. Possibly, churches are more prominent advocates for refugees, and to some extent the LGBTQ-community at large, than for the vulnerable intersecting population of queer refugees, due to a lack of knowledge. May the solution then be to educate religious communities on the needs of queer refugees, creating a unifying empathy that can turn religion from being the problem into being the solution?

My research supports previous arguments of that LGBTQ-rights is an exception to the ecumenical and interreligious unifying practice of social justice work.⁸⁰ While cooperation between LGBTQ-inclusive and LGBTQ-exclusive religious groups for refugees was both possible and common, it was never benefitting LGBTQ-people, be them refugees or not.

⁸⁰ *Conversations on the Pilgrim Way*; Helgesson, ““Den Mest Splittrande Frågan.””

Challenges with Queer Refugee Work

Considering pushback may impact the willingness to participate in social justice work, I asked my experts of the potential pushback they received from outside or inside their community for the work they did for LGBTQ-people, refugees, and/or queer refugees. The answers varied from a simple “no” or “I get the occasional email or phone call” to more active, albeit rarely open, pushback. One expert bluntly stated:

I think that those who resent us already resented us. So when [we started hosting queer refugees] it was just the icing on the cake. And they've already stopped resenting us because we're beyond saving in some way... Those who are bothered by us just think we're politically correct, whatever that means. And if politically correct means that you should care about your fellow human beings, then I'm happy to be that.

Several interviewees reflected about the criticism they received coming from a lot of preconceived notions and biases:

...there is a lot of Islamophobia...there is a tremendous fear and suspicion. And I've also seen that in the context of the church and so on, that there is a lot of support too. ... but just like everywhere else, there are those who would rather divide and conquer. That is the way it is.

Most experts shrugged and said that there are always individuals who are critical or hateful, but that it was not bothering them.

One church leader spoke of how especially in the initial phase of the refugee crisis of 2015, the work took a lot of time from the church, where some members of the church felt like they – as members of the church – were being deprioritized:

...it took a lot of our time, it was a huge amount of work we put in, so I could agree with the criticism from both the church council and members. ... when you took time and explained, even to the church council, they thought it was great. It was just that you have to stop and explain what it is that... why are we doing [what we are doing].

None of my experts brought up receiving criticism of that working with queer refugees, or LGBTQ issues or refugees, was a threat to the unity of the church. Rather, it was a feeling of competition over the slim resources of the church, or an intersectional unawareness:

I found interesting that you asked specifically about this, and I think I wouldn't be able to name a specific direct pushback, but I think it's more a lack of interest, awareness and intersectional thinking, like projects and professionals who label

themselves as intersectional and as like a thinking different like forms of discrimination together and wanting like to, for example, advocate for certain groups, but then not doing it or showing a lot of resistance towards processes that go in this direction.

One expert spoke of how they had received pushback by the secular LGBTQ-community, for fighting for LGBTQ-rights within the church:

It's not too easy for them to understand that there are other people in the church who support queers, who like queers, who bless queers. And who give queer people spaces like everybody else.

Non-religious actors cited experiences of organized pushback from “far-right parties or groups targeting the project or targeting the organization, trying to stop the work that we do or publishing defamation campaigns.” This was not at all brought up by my experts from religious organizations.

The experience of pushback, especially from one’s own community, could be a contributing factor to the lack of political engagement for queer refugees. However, considering church leaders in both Sweden and Germany continue to push for the social justice of refugees,⁸¹ and many cite working for the rights of the LGBTQ-community both inside and outside of the church, the lack of outspokenness on behalf of queer refugees rather suggests being due to an unawareness of the need.

Concluding Thoughts

Queer refugees – especially non-white, non-Christian queer refugees – embody an assumed dichotomy between queerness and refugees, queerness and religion, and thus do not afford the privilege of choosing to be non-political. That Christian religiosity is negatively correlated with voting for anti-immigration political parties in both Sweden and Germany suggests that the Christian context impacts voters in the direction of social justice. Just like a new political theology grew out of the lack of Christian resistance to the Holocaust, my research shows that growing anti-immigration sentiments, and violence as in the case of Dresden, triggers Christian engagement for vulnerable populations.

In contrast to the ecumenically and interreligious unifying social justice work for the refugee population in an anti-immigration Europe, LGBTQ-rights continue to be a dividing issue. The question is whether the vulnerable and twice-marginalized, oft invisibilized,

⁸¹ Sacher, “Ist Die Kirche Zu Politisch?”; Halldorf, “Biskopar Och Kyrkoledare Kritiserar Sveriges Migrationspolitik.”

population of queer refugees has the potential of raising empathy within church leaders. Using the analytical frame of Spivak's theory of the subaltern, queer refugees may be identified as a silenced, invisible, and forgotten subaltern without access to their own voice for social justice.⁸² Despite being more vulnerable than other refugee populations, falling outside the protection of homonationalist policies,⁸³ justice for queer refugees is seemingly not on anybody's agenda. Until the needs of queer refugees are added to the societal, academic, and political agenda, they will continue to be an invisible embodiment of a dichotomy without access to even the fight for justice.

A queer public theology argues that churches should go beyond being a voice for the voiceless, instead moving subalterns out of the silent margins and into the fight for social justice. The role of the Church thus not only becomes holding the state accountable and being a reasonable voice in civil society, but to also notice who is invisible, silenced, and excluded from the plight for justice. It then becomes the task of progressive churches, carrying a queer-inclusive theology and believing in the plight of refugees, to put justice for queer refugees on the societal agenda. Not to be their voice, but to make it possible for them to speak.

⁸² Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

⁸³ Freude and Vergés Bosch, "Homonationalism in Europe? A Quantitative Comparison of the Values of Europeans."

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