



## Being Finnish, Being Muslim: National Identity, Citizenship, and Belonging among Muslim Women in Finland

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### Abstract

This article explores Muslim women's views of their religious and national identities, citizenship, and belonging in Finland. The primary material consists of 20 semi-structured interviews collected in 2021 and 2022. The interviews convey three different understandings of the relationship between Finnish and Muslim identity: the perception of oneself as a Finnish Muslim; the perception of oneself as a non-Finnish Muslim; and the perception of oneself as a multicultural citizen. Additionally, two notions can be observed regarding Muslim identity: one sees Muslimness as a central and unchanging aspect of one's core identity; the other views it as a highly fluid and context-dependent group identity. Islamic religiosity does not in itself seem to reduce attachment to Finnish identity. Instead, those distancing themselves from Finnishness often referred to experiences of not having their Finnishness acknowledged by society. Identification with the ummah, the worldwide community of believers, proved to be relatively low or completely rejected.

*Keywords: citizenship, national identity, boundary-making, Muslims, Islam, Finland*

During the last couple of decades debates about Muslims' presence and belonging in the countries of the Global West have become increasingly common. Behind controversies over sharia councils, prayer rooms at workplaces, and women-only swimming hours at public pools lie more fundamental, intertwined questions about national self-understandings and definitions of liberty. In their loyalties Muslims are often assumed to prioritize their religious above any national affiliation. Scholars have also occasionally posited this: Bernard Lewis characterizes Islam as 'not just a religion in the limited Western sense of the word, but a complete system of

identity, loyalty, and authority' (Lewis 2010, 29). In countries with growing Muslim minorities this understanding of Islam as a totalizing identity has prompted an alarmist discourse concerning the alleged weakening of social fabric and the emergence of 'parallel societies'.

Research on Muslims' religious and national identities has been conducted in numerous European countries, particularly in those with sizable Muslim populations. While there are common observations across different locations, the national context also plays a role. Research on this topic in Finland has thus far been relatively scarce and has focused on specific Muslim subgroups, indicating the need for further research. My objective is to expand the current scholarly understanding by focusing on the experiences and views of Muslim women from various age groups and backgrounds. I address the following questions. How do Muslim women's religious identities reflect how they see themselves in Finnish society? Does Islamic religiosity affect their feelings of national and civic membership? I approach this topic using a constructionist framework that understands all social groups as ideas made and remade in social processes rather than clearly demarcated entities with essential characteristics (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Gergen 2001; Burr 2004). I focus on boundaries and boundary making.

Women have been chosen as the focus of this study because their position tends to be at the centre of many debates concerning Islam in the West. The age-old dichotomies reproduced in these debates manifest themselves above all in questions about women's bodies. They emerge time and again in controversies over issues such as gender segregation, veiling, family law, and exemptions from compulsory education (Ahmed 1992; Roald 2001; Fekete 2006; Kundnani 2012; Cesari 2013). By focusing on these women's experiences and views, the study aims to shed light on the factors that shape their belonging and participation, and on how they negotiate their roles and identities within both their communities and wider Finnish society.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section I describe the religious diversity context in Finland and the history and current situation of Muslims in the country. I then outline the main findings of previous research, including both quantitative studies based on large samples and qualitative studies focusing on individual countries or cities. I then describe the theoretical framework used and present my research method and material. Finally, I discuss the findings and present concluding remarks.

## Background

Finland's Muslim community was small throughout most of the twentieth century. It began to grow in the early 1990s due to immigration from Somalia, the Balkans, and the MENA region. It is somewhat difficult to estimate the number of Muslims in the country, as most are not registered members of an Islamic congregation. According to recent estimates there were approximately 120,000 to 130,000 Muslims with an immigrant background living in Finland in 2019. In addition, there were approximately 550 Tatars and a few thousand converts (Pauha and Konttori 2022; Pauha and Martikainen 2022). This equates to 2.2 to 2.4 per cent of the total population. However, the estimated number of Muslims with an immigrant background is based on countries of birth and their religious distribution, which means the number of practising Muslims is likely to be smaller. Even in a fictitious 'zero migration' scenario, their relative share of the population is expected to grow due to their being much younger on average than Finns: in 2023 approximately half of ethnic Finns were aged 45 or older, and less than a third (31%) were under the age of 30. In contrast, almost half of Iraqis and two thirds of Somalis in Finland were under 30 (Statistics Finland, n.d.).<sup>1</sup>

Where citizenship and belonging are concerned, it is more common for Finns to emphasize civic rather than nativist elements of Finnishness: in a survey published in 2018 respect for the country's institutions and laws and the ability to speak Finnish were widely seen as important for national identity, with 98 and 68 per cent concurring respectively. However, over half (51%) the respondents felt that to truly share Finnish identity, having a family background in the country was either very or somewhat important, and almost a third (32%) saw being a Christian as similarly relevant (Pew Research Center 2018, 55). The prevailing view was that there was a fundamental contradiction between Islam and national culture and values. This view was expressed by 62 per cent of Finnish respondents, the highest percentage in the sample of 15 Western European countries included in the survey (*ibid.* 66). Almost half (49%) the research participants either completely or mostly agreed with the statement, 'Our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others', and 31 per cent either completely or mostly agreed with the statement, 'In their hearts Muslims want to impose their religious law on everyone else in Finland' (*ibid.* 57, 71).

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Finland's classification determines a person's origin and background country based on their parents' birth country information.

To summarize, significant changes in cultural and religious diversity have occurred in Finnish society in the last couple of decades. Compared with many other European countries, large-scale immigration from Muslim-majority countries to Finland is relatively recent. Further changes are also bound to take place not only due to continuing immigration but also because of the respective age structures of both the Muslim minority and the general population in the country. However, perceptions of Islam as foreign and incompatible with Finnish culture remain quite common.

### **Previous research**

The relationship of European Muslims' religiosity and religious identity to national attachment has been studied in many countries, with both qualitative and quantitative methods and various theoretical frameworks. Quantitative research shows that strong Muslim identification is often negatively related to national ('host-country') identification. However, these studies also suggest that there is no inherent conflict between religious minority and national identities. While there are significant variations in how Muslim identity interacts with national identity across different European countries and cities and among different groups of Muslims, perceived discrimination consistently emerges as an important mediating factor (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007; Kunst et al. 2012; Martinovic and Verkuyten 2012; Karlsen and Nazroo 2013; Fleischmann and Phalet 2016).

Qualitative studies of European Muslims' religious identities, belonging, and civic engagement have been carried out in various countries, including Spain (Boland 2020; Collet-Sabé 2020), France (Beaman 2016), Germany (Peucker 2018), Great Britain (Mustafa 2016; Shazhadi et al. 2018), and the Netherlands (Hass and Lutek 2018). While the subgroup of Muslims in focus varies from one case to another – young adults, teenagers, women, visibly observant, members of the middle class, and so on – a recurring finding in most studies is that while respondents see no conflict between their religious and national attachments, many feel others do not always recognize their claims to national membership. Another observation in several studies concerns how respondents reinterpret the meanings of both citizenship and Islam. They may frame citizenship as a membership based on civic engagement rather than ethnicity or national culture, or their religious practice and identity in ways that correspond to the prevailing liberal ideals of religion in society (Beaman 2016; Mustafa 2016; Shazhadi et al. 2018).

Several studies have explored this topic in Finland. A study based on group discussions examined how immigrants and majority Finns negotiated cultural citizenship and integration in Finnish society. They found that while Russian- and Estonian-speaking participants often expressed support for the idea of immigrants conforming to mainstream society, Somali participants did not see becoming Finnish in cultural terms as feasible or desirable (Varjonen et al. 2017). In his doctoral dissertation Teemu Pauha (2018) investigates the construction of religious and national identities among young Muslims in Finland, using the framework of the social psychology of religion. The thesis consists of three sub-studies that utilize different methodologies and datasets. While Pauha's young informants valued their Finnish citizenship, they seemed to perceive Finnish nationality as antithetical to Muslimness (Pauha and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013; Pauha 2015). Even when not depicted as inherently incompatible, Islam and Finnish nationality appeared to exist as distinct and separate: 'They are like two different clubs; one can belong to both the Islam club and the Finnish club, but "a Finnish Islam club" is not on offer' (Pauha 2018, 56). The study indicates that young Muslims in Finland identify with transnational, de-ethnicized Islam, which corresponds to their lived reality as members of peer groups that are both multiethnic and multicultural (ibid. 55–56.) By drawing a clear boundary between Islam and Finnishness, the informants reflect the prevailing narrative of Islam as foreign to Finland and Finnish culture.

To summarize, Muslims' religious and national identities have been studied in many European countries, particularly in those with relatively long immigration histories and larger Muslim minorities. Based on the results, it is clear that although certain observations recur from one location to another, national context also matters. Studies of this topic in Finland have thus far been fewer, the aforementioned ones suggesting that the notion of Muslimness as alien to Finnishness is shared not only by the non-Muslim majority but also many Muslims themselves. As these studies have focused on individual subgroups of Muslims in the country, however, further research on the subject is needed. I aim to complement the current picture by examining the experiences of Muslim women of diverse ages and backgrounds.

### **Theoretical framework**

I use a social constructionist framework approach for my research topic, according to which identities and boundaries between social groups are products of social processes (Berger and Luckmann 1967; Gergen 2001;

Burr 2004). Boundary-making approaches to groups draw on the works of Max Weber and Fredrik Barth. Weber defines ethnic groups as 'those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent', irrespective of 'whether or not an objective blood relationship exists' (Weber [1922] 1978, 389). It is primarily the political community that inspires the belief in shared ethnicity, not the other way around. Barth (1969) criticizes the simplistic view of cultures that treats ethnic diversity as an outcome of mere geographical and social isolation, pointing out that ethnic boundaries tend to persist despite interaction and mobility across them. The continuity of an ethnic unit, he argues, depends on a boundary's maintenance, and the focus of research should thus be 'the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses' (ibid., 15). Group identity is therefore always relational, and a key part of claiming an identity is having that identity acknowledged by others as well (Jenkins 2000; 2014). The conceptual distinction between groups and categories is relevant here. A group is formed when its members recognize themselves as part of it. A category, meanwhile, is defined by outsiders, and its members may not recognize or accept it. Collective identities emerge simultaneously through both group identification and categorization (Jenkins 2014, 113).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979) posits that all individuals strive for a positive self-understanding, and that the stability, legitimacy, and permeability of group boundaries influence the strategies they choose to achieve this goal. Stability refers to how changeable group positions are; legitimacy to the acceptance of the status structure; and permeability to an individual's ability to move between groups. In stable and legitimate structures with permeable boundaries minority members are likely to prefer national identification and individual mobility to group identification. When boundaries are impermeable, group identification increases, as minorities are unable to improve their individual position. In Europe religion has been said to constitute a 'bright boundary' that separates Muslims from the mainstream (Alba 2005). Derived from Social Identity Theory, the Rejection-Identification Model (Branscombe et al. 1999) argues that experiences of discrimination increase minority group identification, while the Rejection-Disidentification Model (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2009) suggests that perceived discrimination discourages minorities from identifying with the superordinate national group, leading to national disidentification and increased hostility towards the national out-group.

Aristide Zolberg and Long Litt Woon (1999) explore immigrant incorporation and boundary dynamics through three concepts: crossing; blurring;

and shifting. Boundary crossing resembles assimilation, in which immigrants adopt attributes of the majority culture, while group distinctions remain. Blurring involves societal changes with overlapping memberships and less rigid boundaries, making distinctions less relevant in daily life. Shifting refers to the boundary's relocation through inclusion or exclusion. Andreas Wimmer (2008) uses a mostly similar typology but adds the concept of transvaluation, involving the reinterpretation of the normative hierarchy between groups through normative inversion or equalization. The former reverses the hierarchy, elevating the marginalized group; the latter aims for moral and political equality between groups.

In summary, the relevance and permeability of a given boundary varies across historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. In some situations social groups are clearly defined by easily identifiable markers; in others the boundaries are more fluid and open to interpretation. In Europe religion has been seen to constitute a clear dividing line, especially for Muslim communities.

### **Data and methods**

This study's primary material consists of 20 interviews conducted in 2021 and 2022. Most of the interviewees lived in the Helsinki metropolitan area, and a few in Turku and Tampere. The interviewees' median age at the time of the interview was 27, and the mean age was 31. Nine interviewees were employed full-time at the time of the interview, the majority (six) working in the field of social services and healthcare. Six women were students in tertiary education, some also working part-time. Ten interviewees were converts, and the majority (eight) had converted when they were in their late teens or early twenties. The youngest converts had been Muslims for a few years; some older ones for several decades. Three women were born abroad, the others in Finland. Of those born abroad, one had immigrated to Finland as a small child, one as a teenager, and one as a young adult. All held Finnish citizenship and spoke Finnish. To ensure anonymity, details such as exact ages, background countries, or the professions of individual interviewees are not included here.

The interviewees were found using purposive and volunteer sampling through various channels, including personal contacts, Muslim associations, and social media. The only eligibility criteria for the interviewees were that they identified as Muslims and had strong ties to Finnish society through long-term residence, proficiency in Finnish, and/or formal citizenship. The

type of purposive sampling used was maximum variation sampling. It aims to collect data from the broadest possible spectrum of perspectives and to find patterns that ‘cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity’ (Patton 2002, 235). In the research data there is variance in interviewees’ ages, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and religious paths. A semi-structured interview was chosen as the data collection method. Interviews were conducted in Finnish. In each interview the same topics were discussed, but the participants were also allowed to raise issues they themselves felt were relevant. Interview questions were relatively specific but open-ended and varied slightly, depending on each interviewee’s background. Some questions were modified along the way if a given choice of words produced only very short and superficial answers, for example. The interviews ranged from approximately 40 minutes to two hours. Interviews were discontinued when the point of saturation was reached.

Both social and subjective religiosity were explored by asking interviewees about their religious practices and beliefs. Social religiosity was explored by discussing habits such as participating in religious gatherings (e.g. communal prayers, study groups), active participation in Muslim online communities, and organizing or attending events held by Islamic associations. Subjective religiosity – the experienced importance of faith and commitment to it – was explored by discussing the interviewees’ thoughts on Islam’s meaning and impact on daily life and their observance of Islamic practices (fasting, five daily prayers, zakat, and halal diet).<sup>2</sup> Interviewees were also asked questions regarding various modes of political participation and civic engagement, and their thoughts on topics such as democracy, citizenship, Finnish culture, discrimination, and minority rights. All the women interviewed for this study considered themselves religious to some degree. When asked to describe their religious identity in their own words, almost half identified simply as ‘Muslim’ or ‘ordinary Muslim’. Four described themselves primarily as Sunni. Most interviewees did not mention

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2 It should be emphasized that the aim was not to place each interviewee on any particular religiosity scale: ‘measuring’ religiosity by behaviour is far from straightforward. What counts as active involvement differs significantly not only by religion but also by denomination, local context, and gender. For example, whereas many studies focusing on Christianity often measure religiosity by asking about church attendance, communal prayer at a mosque is usually only expected of men, and many mosques do not have spaces for women. Furthermore, in Muslim-minority contexts the lack of adequate easily reachable mosques and prayer rooms generally reduces communal religious practice, and the reasons for attending regularly may often be social rather than purely religious.

any particular school of thought. When asked, many stated that they used various sources and combined them in their own practice. One interviewee identified primarily as Salafi.

I used thematic analysis to analyse the interview material. This is an interpretative approach that involves identifying patterns or themes within a dataset. I coded the interviews using Atlas.ti software, utilizing both semantic and latent coding. I also paid attention to how things were said (e.g. pauses, hesitation, irritation, laughing). The codes included respondents' descriptions of their religious identities and practices, their perceptions and experiences of belonging and participation, and the boundaries they drew around their identities. These codes were then used to define themes. My approach to thematic analysis is reflexive. Unlike various coding reliability approaches, reflexive thematic analysis rejects any positivistic notions of data analysis. It is accepted that codes and themes are always the researcher's interpretations that someone else may not reproduce identically. Themes do not simply 'emerge' from the data as if they were merely residing there for the researcher to find (Braun and Clarke 2006; 2021; Braun et al. 2022).

Most discussions concerning ethics in qualitative research revolve around questions of harm, informed consent, and privacy (Bryman 2012; Bhopal and Deuchar 2016). It is often difficult to reach and motivate marginalized groups to involve them in research. There may be reluctance to participate due to a lack of trust, especially if the researcher is an outsider. To overcome mistrust, I sought to be fully transparent about the entire research process, my own positionality, and my motives for researching this topic. During recruitment and interviewing I avoided terminology that might be considered unrepresentative or alienating. I discarded the idea of using labels that denoted sects or schools of thought because they did not correspond to the various ways people self-identified. I was also mindful that although it might seem unproblematic for the researcher to approach this topic using language that highlighted stigma and vulnerability, individual research participants might not see themselves that way. Before the interview I informed participants about the specifics of the process: I told them the material would be used only for this research, that they were free to discontinue the interview at any point, that they could decline to answer individual questions, that they had the right to request the withdrawal of their material at any point after the interview, that the material would be stored in password-protected folders separately from any personally identifiable information, and that it would be deleted after the research project's completion. I also encouraged the research participants to contact me should

any questions or concerns arise later. As Muslim communities in Finland are relatively small, anonymization was undertaken with particular care. Weak indirect identifiers were either removed or categorized.

## Results

The material reveals three different understandings of the relationship between Finnish and Muslim identity: the perception of oneself as a Finnish Muslim; the perception of oneself as a non-Finnish Muslim; and the perception of oneself as a multicultural citizen. Additionally, regarding Muslim identity, two notions can be observed: one sees Muslimness as a central and unchanging aspect of one's core identity; the other views it as a highly fluid and context-dependent group identity.

### *'Different routes, common destination'*

The first understanding perceives Islamic faith and Finnishness as two perfectly compatible elements of one's identity. This notion was common among – though not exclusive to – converts, most of whom identified strongly as both Finnish and Muslim.

I'm Finnish. My lifestyle is very Finnish, my family are completely Finnish, and it's perhaps the biggest part of me, Finnishness. [...] I live like a Finn, I eat Finnish food, my home looks Finnish.

I do identify as Finnish. Like, I feel profoundly Finnish. But I would say there have perhaps been periods in my life when I've felt I'm not accepted as a Finn. So [...] I've felt like 'okay, if I'm not accepted as a Finn then maybe there's no point in being one' [laughs]. But then I've come to the conclusion that I can't erase the Finnishness from myself so I should just be proudly Finnish, that I have the right to be and to define myself as such.

Women who took this stance stressed that there was nothing inherently foreign about Islam. When asked what they associated with Finnishness, the answers revolved mostly around Finnish nature, food, sauna, design, and decor. They acknowledged that some of their habits, opinions, and values differed from those of the majority, but these differences were seen as comparable to any variance in opinions and lifestyle choices within the general population. This is quite similar to Tina Gudrun Jensen's (2008) find-

ings in her research on 'ethnic Danes' who have converted to Islam. Some of Jensen's interviewees maintain that diversity is a characteristic of Danish culture and society, 'so they go against the homogenous and exclusionary definition of "Danishness"' (ibid., 396).

The interviewed converts included some women who abstained from voting, questioned or expressed uncertainty about the compatibility of Islam and representative democracy, wore a niqab, and adhered to strict gender segregation. Moral superiority was occasionally implied in relation to both the non-Muslim majority and 'cultural Muslims', and a boundary was maintained between 'folk Islam' and their own faith. Conservative Islam appeared to be a counterculture here, in which donning the niqab was an emancipatory act. Yet they also asserted that they were Finns through and through. Although theirs was a view of supranational Islam purified of culture, it still existed alongside other identifications. They entertained no ideas of moving to a Muslim country and saw no contradiction between their religious views and national belonging. Interestingly, despite their conservative views on gender roles and their stated misgivings about popular sovereignty, all were civically active in some way: in third sector organizations; through their studies or work; and occasionally even by petitioning the very members of parliament whose legitimacy they did not recognize.

The second understanding views Islamic faith as distinctly non-Finnish. In this perspective the bright boundary between Islam and Finnishness is accepted and enforced. Finnishness is understood in ethnocultural terms as a closed community into which one either cannot or should not integrate. This view was expressed by some second-generation Muslims who identified primarily as Muslims. Being Muslim was described as 'the core', 'the meaning', or 'the overarching theme' in one's life. Religious interpretations or practices appeared to have no substantial impact on the likelihood of holding this view. Instead, each of these respondents described having experiences of not having their Finnishness affirmed by others, which had made them question whether this was a label they needed after all.

My Muslim identity is very strong. [...] There are many other parts in it, but the Muslim part is the core. [...] When I was younger, I really wanted to be Finnish, but then I realized I didn't need to be, so I don't really identify as one. [...] I don't define myself through nationality. Religion is more important to me.

When interviewees distanced themselves from Finnishness, both transvaluation strategies were observable in their comments. Equalization was evident in responses in which Finns and Muslims were perceived as distinctly different groups, yet principally equal as citizens. Normative inversion was discernible in a few comments highlighting the difference between Muslims and Finns by referring to the latter's alcohol consumption, materialism, phony religiosity, or godlessness.

The third understanding considers both Finnishness and Muslimness as components of a person's multicultural, hybrid, or hyphenated identity. Finnishness is primarily understood here as civic membership, though the responses also included some references to traits (e.g. being honest or down-to-earth) perceived as culturally Finnish. This conception was expressed by both second-generation Muslims and those who had immigrated to Finland. In this case, too, many had experiences of not being seen as part of the imaginary of Finnishness, but rather than accepting Finnishness as ethnocultural membership and their own position as outsiders, they redefined it. As one participant expressed this, '[it's] kind of like cars that are going in the same direction but might take slightly different routes to that common destination'. While Finnishness usually appeared as something positive in these civic nationalist understandings of national identity, some interviewees also challenged the prevailing moralistic narrative that portrayed citizenship and national belonging as something minorities needed to earn through model behaviour. They described their refusal to play the part of the deserving, respectable, grateful immigrant or 'ambassador' for Muslims:

Even though I'm a Muslim and a woman, it doesn't mean I'm obliged to always be like 'hey, we're good, hey, don't think like that, I'm a good person'. [...] [T]hat you're not the sort of immigrant who's totally dependent on welfare benefits, for example. You must show the Finns how good you are and [...] then, this thought came to me about two years ago that it's a really onerous job to do. Why do I have to, why doesn't a normal Finn have to constantly show that they're good? [laughs] Why does all this burdensome work fall on us? That's why I no longer do it.

Many interviewees wished to see the existing boundary between Muslims and Finns either blurred or shifted. The idea was thought of as a certain 'mainstreaming' of Islam in Finnish society. Highlighted commonalities concerned work, consumer choices, and lifestyle. A frequent word in this context was 'ordinary':

There could be more stories [about Muslims], like, for example, the sort of amusing stories about someone's life in which [...] religion or life values are not brought up. Instead, they could be about that person talking about their hobby or something they're interested in or their business. Like, sort of, ordinary things [laughs]. So that the point of departure wouldn't always be religion or some trauma or racism.

I'd like to see, like, you know those [media pieces] where they show someone's home, for example – there could be a Muslim family showing their ordinary home furnished with Ikea furniture [laughs]. So Muslims would somehow be normalized. That it wouldn't always be that family with, like, only oriental decor because I think there's perhaps a tendency to exoticize. [...] That ordinariness is missing.

*'My religion is Islam, not Muslims'*

When asked to freely describe the meaning of faith in their lives, approximately half the interviewees stated that their faith was a very important or even the most important part of their identity, or that it affected every part of their daily life. The rest described their religious identity more mundanely as one part of them that might show in many situations because of the Muslim-minority context – or not. In most cases being Muslim merged with other self-identification markers like class, immigrant background, ethnicity, or country of origin. No one brought up the global Muslim ummah; the concept was discussed only when I specifically asked about it. When asked, most interviewees described it as either a beautiful idea that sadly had very little to do with reality or as utter nonsense to begin with.

The ummah is more divided than the parliament's political parties [laughs]. We have no united ummah. It's a dream. It's a dream of being part of something. Which is immensely ... like, [sighs] imams argue with one another, or they pretend not to know one another. Mosques are divided according to countries of origin. [...] Speaking of the ummah is, you could say it's utter nonsense.

The idea is not, like, *Muslims* are not my religion, my religion is Islam, it's God and His revelation. [...] Perhaps some people feel they find a family in Islam and sure, that sort of thing is also possible, but I'm not that dependent on other people. [...] I don't feel it's immensely important to be surrounded by people to somehow take care of me because I put my trust in God in all things.

When probed about whether they felt invested in Muslims' struggles and grievances in other countries, many interviewees appealed to common humanity rather than shared faith. To quote one respondent: 'Well, yes, I'd say I care about what goes on in places like Palestine, but so should everyone else.' Many interviewees questioned the notion of any kind of shared Muslim experience. This finding is in line with Jocelyne Cesari's (2013) observations based on focus group discussions in Amsterdam, Berlin, Paris, Boston, and London. Here, too, Islam seemed to be 'a strong personal identity marker rather than a sign of communal or group identity' (ibid. 33). When feelings of group belonging were expressed, they were mostly connected with being a member of a visible minority. A Muslim 'us' emerged occasionally when interviewees described their experiences of prejudice or harassment. While Islam was not the primary basis for group identity for most interviewees, many referred to it as a role imposed on them in daily interactions with the majority society. This external definition largely corresponds to Jenkins's (2000; 2014) notion of categorization. A recurring theme was the contradiction resulting from the prevailing expectation that a good Muslim citizen was one whose faith remained firmly in the private sphere on the one hand and the experience of many that, regardless of what they did, their faith was the one thing through which their entire persona tended to be defined on the other. Some described how life under constant scrutiny had made them monitor and adjust their own behaviour to avoid reinforcing any negative impressions.<sup>3</sup>

Here in Finland it [being Muslim] shows more because many of the things I did when I was still in [country of birth] were things I wasn't thinking that people would go like 'look at what that Muslim is doing'. But here, in many situations, I've abstained from doing something because I've thought that everyone would then assume that all Muslims are like that. [...] Over here you feel you have to make sure you don't give the wrong impressions about Muslims.

When describing their religious identities, respondents also created boundaries around what it meant to be a 'real Muslim'. Religion in opposition to culture was a recurring topic. Women with very differing religious views embraced the notion of an Islam purified of cultural elements. Associated values were equality, autonomy, and women's empowerment. Those born

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<sup>3</sup> Teemu Pauha also mentions similar descriptions of internalized governance (2015, 94–95) in his article on young Muslims in Finland.

Muslim tended to distinguish between pure Islam and the 'folk Islam' of their parents' generation, whereas some converts drew the same line between themselves and those born Muslim in general. In both cases the interviewees contrasted what they saw as blind adherence to tradition with their own active quest for truth.

There's this difference between me and my parents. I was born into a religious minority, whereas my parents were born in a Muslim-majority country and lived there for a while. There's this difference between us where my parents are like 'this is how we've always done things', kind of like Christians going to church in Finland. They don't necessarily think what for, whereas I think: 'Why? Where does this originate? Is this culture? Is this religion?' I go through these kinds of thoughts. At some point my parents can no longer answer because they realize they haven't been actively thinking [about the issue].

The way I see it is like, in the case of a convert to Islam who has studied their religion, their way of practising may be in a sense purer than that of a Muslim immigrant because for them their culture has had a significant impact on their practice. [...] If we think of Finnish converts who return to Islam, they usually take their religion from books – they don't get it, in a way, in their mother's milk like many Muslim immigrants do.

In addition to boundaries maintained between folk Islam and pure Islam and between born Muslims and converts, class was another factor used to create crosscutting categories. When conversation touched on issues like social inclusion or marginalization, interviewees generally did not see themselves as potential recipients of support. Some highlighted their own middle-class background and contrasted it with the image of a 'troubled Muslim', usually an uneducated immigrant at risk of lifelong welfare dependency, criminality, or radicalization. Such a person was considered in need of support and some form of intervention, and attitudes towards them ranged from sympathy to contempt. In a few cases interviewees also openly expressed critical sentiments concerning immigration from Muslim-majority countries. One respondent said she had considered voting for the right-wing populist Finns Party at the next election, saying she was fed up with 'immigrants being pampered'. She did not consider the Finns Party's anti-Islam rhetoric a major problem and said it stemmed from a lack of information that could be addressed. Rhetoric emphasizing differences in

social class and cultural background not only creates a boundary between middle-class respondents and the 'troubled Muslims' they describe, it also blurs the boundary between educated middle-class Muslims and the Finnish majority.

While almost all interviewees made some kind of distinction between folk Islam and what they saw as a purer Islam embraced by many young Muslims living in the West, there was significant unease about and rejection of concepts like 'Finnish' or 'European' Islam. Although researchers and journalists have used such terms to describe local and regional developments in identification and practice, interviewees saw them above all as terms that implicitly questioned the faith's universality. Similar unease was discernible when interviewees were asked whether they thought young European Muslims should find their own way to live as Muslims. Although many saw their way of life as clearly different from that of their parents' generation or from ways of life in Muslim-majority countries, they perceived such statements as less an assertion of freedom than an expectation placed on them from outside. They felt the modern European Muslim officials and the media favoured was of a very specific kind: moderate, thoroughly assimilated, and loyal to European values and institutions.

That can be understood in so many ways [laughs]! Like, if you look at politics in France, how they want to modify how we live, it's pretty wild. Like, they don't want to see scarves in public places and so on. Someone who's in a position as high as the president or like that, that they deem it their right to dictate how their citizens should live. It's pretty wild. I would say that as European Muslims, we should find our own way to live in this society – specifically on our own terms – and not like, someone coming from above to say [that].

I feel that originates from the assumption that a Muslim cannot practise their religion and still belong to European culture or Europe. It's like when I hear something like that, I get the impression that it's said by a non-Muslim who accepts Muslims only when they don't practise Islam – or at least don't practise it visibly.

The diversity of the Islam practised in Finland reflects the apparent paradox in Islam's Europeanization Cesari (2007, 63) describes: the liberal democratic context fosters the individualization of religious practice, while the lack of local authorities and places of learning means the religious market

is dominated by the neo-fundamentalist voices of online da'wa. Alongside this conservative strand is a significant number of young Muslim women who are challenging conservative beliefs by distinguishing between religion and tradition and contextualizing religious decrees, especially in questions concerning gender equality. While most of the research participants were deeply committed to their Muslim identity, they practised their faith in diverse and personalized ways, drawing influences from various sources. This was no less true of those characterizing themselves as strictly observant. Despite their rhetoric stressing the importance of religious authorities and doctrines, their actual way of consuming religion was based on the ideals of individual choice and an active quest for authenticity.

## Discussion

The interviewees' accounts indicated that Islamic religiosity alone did not diminish their attachment to Finnish identity. Not identifying as Finnish appeared more strongly influenced by ethnic minority status than by merely being part of the Muslim minority. Characterizing oneself as equally Finnish and Muslim or even 'Finnish Muslim' was slightly more common among converts but clearly not exclusive to them. Civic notions of Finnishness were common, especially among those born Muslim. Although many interviewees described their faith as a key part of who they were, it was not the only determinant of group identity – and for some not even the strongest. There is a boundary between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority in Finland, but it coexists with many other crosscutting societal cleavages. Respondents drew boundaries not only around their religion but also between themselves and other Muslims based on differences in ethnic and class backgrounds, countries of origin, religious practices, and conversion.

Some women rejected norms and cultural practices prevailing in Finnish society or stated that they could not see themselves in the imaginary of Finnishness. However, most also deemed Finland a place where they were free to practise their religion and live according to their values. Importantly, those rejecting certain aspects or notions of Finnish culture and those expressing some kind of attachment to Finland or Finnishness were in many cases the same individuals. My findings thus somewhat resemble but also partly diverge from Pauha's of Muslim youth. He observes the same fluidity in meanings of Finnishness and the shifts of interviewees' identifications, depending on these meanings (Pauha 2018, 48). Yet he also observes that

his young informants see themselves as part of a transnational Islamic community (Pauha 2015, 89) and portray Finnish national identity as an 'other to Islam' (Pauha 2018, 60). Possible reasons for this difference include the different age distribution in my study and the fact that one of Pauha's sub-studies focuses specifically on Islamic and other civil society organization activists (Pauha 2015). It seems plausible that young Muslims who are active in Islamic associations are more likely to embrace a supranational Muslim identity. Another possibly relevant – and partly age-related – factor is employment. Muslim-born respondents who identified as partly or fully Finnish were often slightly older and had been in the workforce for a relatively long time. Employment, livelihood, and occupational community also appeared in their discussions concerning belonging and participation in society. This also applied to women born abroad. I would therefore say that this study's findings complement rather than contradict Pauha's.

This study has its limitations. As with all research based on voluntary participation, both self-selection bias and desirability bias are possible. As one channel used to seek participants was Muslim associations, it is possible that the call for participants reached relatively few women who identified as Muslim but were not interested in these organizations' activities and did not follow them on social media. Furthermore, the lack of longitudinal data inevitably means the study cannot offer insights into any changes in views and experiences over time. This is especially unfortunate regarding the sample's converts, half of whom had converted to Islam less than ten years earlier. As a non-Muslim, I was an outsider, which may have affected the recruitment of interviewees and increased social desirability bias: some interviewees may have felt it necessary to downplay differences in values and highlight commonalities to seem polite. However, the outsider position can also be seen as an asset in that it enabled interviewees to be more open about certain issues such as intra-community tension.

## Conclusion

Islam has sometimes been portrayed as more than a religion – an overarching identity, a complete way of being that transcends all other bases of identity, whether local, national, or transnational. Another oft-repeated claim is that Islam is inherently incompatible with the basic tenets of liberalism, thus making it impossible for practising Muslims to integrate into Western societies.

This study contributes to the scholarly understanding of how Muslim minorities navigate their identities within European contexts and to the broader

discussion of citizenship in multicultural societies. Its findings complement those of previous research, indicating European Muslims' diverse attachments to their local communities, countries of residence, countries of origin, and the imagined transnational ummah (Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007; Kunst et al. 2012; Martinovic and Verkuyten 2012; Karlsen and Nazroo 2013; Pauha and Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013; Pauha 2015; 2018; Beaman 2016; Fleischmann and Phalet 2016; Mustafa 2016; Varjonen et al. 2017; Hass and Lutek 2018; Peucker 2018; Shazhadi et al. 2018; Boland 2020; Collet-Sabé 2020). Muslim identity, while often quite important, coexists with other identities, and the relative relevance of a given boundary depends on context. Varying from one individual to another, being Muslim can be described as antithetical to national membership, as largely irrelevant to it, or as a significant motivator for civic engagement.

Discrimination and negative stereotypes undermine Muslims' ability to feel national belonging in Europe, often despite formal citizenship. Muslim women experience multiple discrimination because of their gender and religious and ethnic identities. Furthermore, even sympathetic quarters sometimes fail to consider the relevance of factors such as education, income, immigrant background, and social capital. This has consequences for how and by whom Muslim women's identities, interests, and grievances are portrayed in public.

As in many other European countries the number and relative share of Muslims in Finland is expected to grow over the coming decades. Meanwhile, negative attitudes towards them are not only quite common but actively peddled by political entrepreneurs. If feelings of belonging and civic membership among the Muslim minority are to be strengthened, the effects of discrimination and securitization need to be taken seriously.

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