

# Praying for One *Umma*<sup>1</sup> — Rhetorical Construction of a Global Islamic Community in the Facebook Prayers of Young Finnish Muslims

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## Abstract

In this paper, I demonstrate how a universalising Muslim identity is constructed in the Facebook prayers of young Finnish Muslims. By analysing the rhetorical devices utilized in the prayer updates, I argue that the prayers serve a function similar to the ‘flagging’ of national identity; the prayers portray the Islamic *umma* as a unified community and seek to diminish possible counter-discourses that emphasise ethnic divisions among Muslims. This study thus supports earlier observations of a novel ‘*umma* consciousness’ that is on the rise among young Muslim generations in Europe.

Keywords: *Islam, Facebook, Prayer, Identity, Rhetorical Psychology*

In the last few decades several analysts have observed that a new kind of Islamic consciousness is emerging in Europe. As Islam increasingly becomes a religion of native Europeans instead of immigrants, it is also being delinked from ‘any given culture in favour of a transnational and universal set of specific patterns (beliefs, rituals, diet, prescriptions and so on)’ (Roy 2004, 120).

At the same time as Islam has been decoupled from its ethnic and national underpinnings, it has also become the most salient identity marker and a mobiliser of collective action for many European-born Muslims. In other words, ‘Islam’ has largely replaced labels such as ‘leftist’ or ‘Turkish’ as a common denominator of political activists (Adamson 2011, 902).

A similar disdain for the ethnic and national has been witnessed in the Finnish context: in a previous study I conducted interviews with some ac-

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tivists of Islamic youth organisations, and discovered that they explicitly rejected certain religious practices of their first generation immigrant parents because they were ‘ethnic’ or ‘cultural’ instead of ‘Islamic’. From this I concluded that young Finnish Muslims are showing signs of a universalising Muslim identity. (Pauha 2015; cf. Jensen 2011, 118.)

‘*Umma*’ has become a catchword in the construction of transnational Muslim identities. Derived from the word *umm* (mother), the word *umma* has come to mean the Islamic community – and in today’s usage especially the Islamic community as transnational and pan-Islamic (Cesari 2013, 130; Jones & Mas 2011, 4). The subtitles of two central works, Olivier Roy’s *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (2004) and Peter Mandaville’s *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (2001), hint at the centrality of the *umma* concept as well as a few of its connotations; the *umma*, as it is understood today, is transnational and global.

Just like the Muslim *umma* the internet reaches beyond national and ethnic boundaries, which makes it especially valuable to transnational and diasporic communities. According to Peter Mandaville (2001, 169) ‘we need to understand [new] media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined’. Accordingly, the internet has become a key platform for the construction of a novel ‘*umma* consciousness’ that is on the rise among new generations of Muslim thinkers (cf. Mandaville 2001, 140 & 175). Furthermore, the World Wide Web has proven especially important as a site of religious agency for those, such as young people, who fall outside traditional positions of power (cf. Helland 2004; Linjakumpu 2011, 38f.).

The importance of the internet for transnational identity construction is thus well acknowledged. What needs to be better understood, however, are the mechanisms that lead to the development of such an identity. What kind of online activities are involved in the development of an *umma* consciousness?

If scholars such as Christoph Wulf *et al.* (2010, vii–viii) are correct, prayers and other rituals have a natural connection to identity construction, because the function of ritual is to create social cohesion and to reduce intragroup conflict. Ritual activities provide a stage for performing and thereby reinforcing feelings of intimacy, solidarity, and oneness (Wulf *et al.* 2010, vii–ix). Rituals are thus a tool for bringing people together and for constructing a communal identity. Thus, ritual may provide an effective mechanism for constructing a universalising *umma* consciousness.

In this paper I provide further evidence of the developing *umma* identity among young Finnish Muslims, and argue that online prayers can be

understood as media rituals that serve to create and maintain an *umma* consciousness among them. My main goal, however, is to explicate some of the discursive mechanisms that the prayers employ. Working within the framework of rhetorically oriented discursive psychology (see, for example, Billig 2009; Kaposi 2008), I claim that such mechanisms are not merely a means of identity representation but also of identity construction. Viewed discursively, identities are not things inside people's heads but processes that occur between them. Identity – like prayer – is argumentative communication, and can be analysed as such.<sup>2</sup>

### **Finnish Muslims on Facebook**

Besides revolutionising communication and media, the internet has deeply affected business, politics, and religion (cf. Dawson & Cowan 2004, 5f.). The internet has become a major forum for seeking information on religion, but also a site for practising it – doing a pilgrimage, getting married, or praying.<sup>3</sup> There are, for example, several Facebook pages dedicated to praying for a sick or otherwise troubled child.<sup>4</sup> The father of one such child described his experience of Facebook prayers as follows: 'Facebook had suddenly become my digital, virtual temple. I was surprised to connect with others on such a spiritual level. For me, the social network had long since transcended the trivial and entered the divine' (Moret 2011).

With other religious studies scholars, researchers of Islam have reacted to the growth of online religiosity (see, for example, Aly et al. 2017; Al-Kandari & Dashti 2014; el-Nawawy & Khamis 2009; Hoekstra & Verkuyten 2015; Johns 2013; Kalinock 2006; Larsson 2016; Larsson 2005; Rothenberg 2011; Sands 2010; for a review, see Larsson 2011). Of special importance here are

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2 By background, I am a psychologist of religion with clinical experience of child and adolescent mental health. I am especially interested in identity formation in adolescence, which I understand as a thoroughly interpersonal and interactional process. Accordingly, in my research I have adopted a social psychological approach that is especially informed by rhetorical and discursive psychologies. In my view one's sense of self is constructed of culturally available representations, to which I have previously referred as 'identity scripts'. At times these raw materials of identity can be easily combined, but at others there may be tensions (cf. Pauha & Jasinskaja-Lahti 2013). For example, the widespread othering of Islam in Europe (cf. Creutz-Kämppi 2008) may make it difficult for young Muslims to construct an identity as both European citizens and Muslim believers.

3 Gary R. Bunt (2009, 77–129) has provided an extensive, if somewhat outdated, survey of the basic religious practices of Islam as they appear online.

4 'Prayers For Bryson Fowler', 'Prayers For Kali Le Ann', 'Praying for Tim', etc.

the journal *CyberOrient*<sup>5</sup> as well as the Islamic studies scholar Gary R. Bunt (see, for example, 2009; 2003; 2000). Increasing scholarly attention has been devoted to Facebook because it is one of the most popular internet sites of any kind (see, for example, Al-Rawi 2016; Carvalho 2016; Croucher & Rahmani 2015; Jarvandi 2014).

Recent years have seen a proliferation of social media forums both maintained by and aimed at Finnish Muslims. Muslim youth organisations, such as *Nuoret Muslimit Ry* (the Young Muslims NGO in Finland), as well as mosque associations such as *Helsingin Muslimit* (Helsinki Muslims), have their own Facebook pages. *Tulevaisuus.org* has, among other things, a chat room and a message board. There are also plenty of Finnish Muslim blogs, several of which, for example, are maintained by young female converts to Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Next, I will present data collected from the Facebook group *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit*,<sup>7</sup> which is – at least where the number of subscribers is concerned – probably the most important online forum for young Finnish Muslims.<sup>8</sup> The group was launched in February 2012 with the self-stated goal of providing ‘information and *da’wa* to Muslims and non-Muslims’. Most updates to the group are posted by its voluntary administrators, whose composition has varied over the years. These updates are the work of relatively few people, but as the number of likes and shares demonstrates, the updates mirror the sentiments of many more.<sup>9</sup> The group is not explicitly

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5 *CyberOrient: Online Journal of the Virtual Middle East*. <<http://www.cyberorient.net/>>, accessed January 9, 2017.

6 The proliferation of online spaces for young Finnish Muslims reflects the changing demographics of the Finnish Muslim community: in Finland, there are ca. 70,000 Muslims, the majority of whom are first-generation immigrants who have come to the country as refugees or asylum seekers or through family reunion (Pauha 2017, 248; Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2013, 12). In 2011 the size of the second generation was estimated to be between ten and fifteen thousand, but since then the numbers have grown and continue to grow. The average age of Finnish Muslims is therefore low, with approximately 50 percent being less than 20 years of age. Compared to many other European states the Muslim community in Finland is markedly multi-ethnic (Pauha & Martikainen 2014, 218–219). Finnish Muslim youth confront a variety of forms of Islam in their everyday lives, and share their RE classes with co-religionists from all over the world. For a more thorough overview of Islam in Finland see Pauha & Martikainen (2014).

7 *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* <<https://www.facebook.com/MuslimiNuoretSuomessa>>, accessed May 19, 2016.

8 In May 2016 the Facebook group had ca. 6,400 members, thus greatly outnumbering other important sites, such as *Suomen Muslimit* (ca. 1,600 members), *Nuoret Muslimit ry (numu)* (ca. 1,800 members), *Tulevaisuus.org* (ca. 1,000 members), *Nuorten Muslimien Foorumi* (ca. 600 members), and *Suomen Islamilainen Neuvosto - Nuorisio ja opiskelijalautakunta* (ca. 600 members).

9 Not all the site’s followers are young. Nor are they all Muslims. However, young Muslims are decidedly the site’s target audience, as revealed, for example, by its choice of name: *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* translates as ‘the Muslims of the Finnish youth’.

linked to any mosque association or other offline religious community. The preachers recommended on the site, for example, are not defined by a common nationality or school of thought but by fluency in English and a slightly humorous approach to the topic at hand.

Besides the Facebook page, the group administrators also maintain YouTube and Instagram accounts. Regular updates include educational stories, inspirational images, aphorisms, religious instructions, and quotations from the Quran or Hadith. The site also features translations of videotaped sermons. Regular topics, in turn, include respect for parents, the life of the Prophet, the *hijab*, and gender relations. In discussing these topics the group administrators lean towards the conservative and, for example, present strict norms of modesty in dress and interaction as binding to all Muslims. However, the conservative content comes in a modern package: the group administrators are very familiar with internet genres and employ, for example, popular memes to convey their message. Humour and irony are an integral part of the group's contents.

The emphases of *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* generally resemble those of neo-fundamentalist and *dawa*-oriented groups as described by Marko Juntunen (2008, 41f.): for them, being a Muslim is about making a conscious commitment to a global community of believers and structuring the minutiae of one's life according to the principles of *sunna*. Furthermore, religious authority that is independent from a traditional religious education and established religious institutions is typical of both European Islam (see, for example, Juntunen 2008; Linjakumpu 2011, 37–9) and online religiosity in general (see, for example, Cheong 2013; Howard 2011). Similarly, the administrators of *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* do not claim any religious credentials, but they nevertheless display religious authority.

### Online prayers as virtual rituals

In this paper I concentrate on a very specific kind of content on the *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* site, namely, petitionary prayer or *dua*.<sup>10</sup> Over the years

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10 The five daily prayers (*salat*) are considered one of the pillars of Islam and are compulsory for all Muslims. In addition, one may pray the voluntary *dua* prayers. *Duas* are often petitionary in nature and include requests for the fulfilment of specific needs and wishes. *Duas* may be spontaneous and free in form, but there are also collections of traditional *duas* that one may use. Unlike the prescribed daily prayers, *duas* may be prayed in a language other than Arabic (O'Connor 2009, 558; Parvez 2016, 37).

the site administrators have published several such prayers – indeed, so many that a separate ‘*Dua* folder’ (*Dua-kansio*) has been created for them.<sup>11</sup>

A typical *dua* is featured in Figure 1 in appendix. As in Figure 1, all the *duas* feature an image and a prayer text. Sometimes the text is embedded in the image and sometimes, as in Figure 1, the text and the image are separate. The images of the early *duas*, especially, often contain just the prayer text and a simple background, such as a nature scene. Most often, however, the images portray people, especially Muslims. The people are typically pictured deep in prayer.<sup>12</sup> Children and families are also common themes, as we will see in what follows. Compared to the rest of the group’s contents, humour and irony are downplayed in favour of a more serious tone; the *duas* convey a general sense of solemn piety and earnestness.<sup>13</sup>

The published *duas* address several different topics, and the visitors to the group have been invited to pray, for example, for a sick relative or a deceased friend. In preparation for my analysis I read through all the site’s *dua* updates. However, because of the focus on transnational and universalising Muslim identities, I have excluded from my data all prayers that did not concern the Muslim community at large but, for example, one’s family or one’s own spiritual life. In analysing the *duas* I have examined both the images and the accompanying texts, as well as the comments posted by the visitors to the site.<sup>14</sup>

The use of both word and image to convey a prayer distinguishes the online *duas* from their offline equivalents. Apart from multimodality, however, the online *duas* embody relatively few characteristics typical of digital religion (cf. Grieve 2013, 108). Hypertextuality and interactivity, in particular, are employed only in a limited way. Despite the possibilities as a platform afforded by Facebook, the online *duas* do not connect to other internet resources, and visitors’ contributions are mostly limited to exclamations signalling agreement (cf. Figure 1). Such exclamations are almost

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11 On 18th May 2016 the folder contained 84 *duas*. The figure does not represent the total number of published *duas*, because not every prayer is included in the folder. However, a more precise number cannot be given because – especially with regard to short comments written by site visitors – it was difficult to determine in some cases whether a certain post constituted a prayer or not.

12 Hands with palms facing upwards are regularly used as a synecdoche for prayer.

13 For a noteworthy exception see Figure 6, which makes a playful reference to the popular ‘Keep calm and carry on’ motif.

14 *Duas* are often published on the initiative of the administrators of the group, but there are also examples of visitors asking for a prayer. For example, on 1st December 2014 a plea for prayer was published on behalf of a bereaved family.

always derived from the context of Islamic prayer, which suggests that the site visitors do indeed perceive the updates as prayers.

After examining the communications in one Islamic Facebook group, Ahmed Al-Rawi (2016, 28, 30) concluded that the group 'functions like a virtual mosque' in that it is a 'a congregation where people meet and pray together' [.]. The role of the site administrator is to serve as 'a virtual preacher' and the role of the group members is to join in the prayers he initiates (Al-Rawi 2016, 28f.). Similar dynamics between the site administrator and visitors were also evident in my data.

Al-Rawi (2016, 28) posits an equivalence between online and offline prayers, and claims his study demonstrates that the prayers 'performed online resemble what goes offline in real life' [.]. However, outward verbalisations do not necessarily correspond to internal experience. Indeed, several authors have expressed overt scepticism concerning the ability of online rituals to transmit the experiential aspects of religion (see, for example, Bunt 2009, 78f.; Dawson 2005; O'Leary 2005). Instead of conveying a certain experience, the ritual exclamations may be used, for example, as a means of identity performance. The participation in the Islamic language game thus serves as a badge of identity that demonstrates one's self-identification as a Muslim.

Influenced by Émile Durkheim, media anthropologists have tended to conceptualise media rituals from a functionalist standpoint as tools for creating a community. In short, rituals such as prayers bind people together by gathering them around a common symbolic core such as a totem (Sumiala 2010, 47f.). In contrast, post-Durkheimian theorists, especially Nick Couldry, have challenged all assumptions of a unified community as anything but a social construction. From a post-Durkheimian perspective there is no common symbolic core shared by the whole community. The purpose of the media ritual, however, is to create and maintain a belief in such a core. Although no community is ever unified, media rituals work to create a representation of such a community, or a 'myth of the centre' (see, for example, Couldry 2003, 45f.; Sumiala 2010, 54–7). The prayer updates in my data are also engaged in creating the 'myth of the centre': a belief in a unifying foundation behind the diversity apparent among the world's Muslims (cf. Couldry 2003, 45f.; Sumiala 2010, 57).<sup>15</sup>

The examples on the following pages have been chosen to illustrate the variety of the *duas* analysed. As can be seen, the prayers in the data were

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15 In a somewhat similar vein Al-Rawi (2016, 21) and Bunt (2009, 31) have noted that, despite the rhetoric of a single *umma*, the virtual *umma* is hardly singular but divides into several separate communities.

often, but not always, associated with wars and conflicts. The images on the following pages may therefore be uncomfortable or even shocking. Dead or injured children, blood and open wounds, firearms, heaps of corpses, and crying faces are all typical elements of the *duas* under study, and the peaceful nature scenes typical of other *duas* are all but absent.

### **Rhetorical psychology and Facebook prayers**

Like previous authors (see, for example, Gill 2005, 7367; Sumiala 2010, 34f.), I emphasise the communicative nature of prayers and other rituals. Ritual is communication on at least two different levels. On one hand, the ritual participants are communicating with each other. This is especially true of my data published in social media and therefore reaching a large number of people. On the other hand, ritual, and especially prayer, is communication with God. The prayers in my data, for example, directly address God and make petitions to him. The main purpose of a prayer is not to claim truth but to make things happen – to express emotions, to bind a community together, and, hopefully, to secure divine assistance. A prayer is thus a textbook example of an Austinian speech act (cf. Gill 2005, 7369).

To accomplish things through words, one must persuade and convince others. Where prayer is concerned, the ultimate target of persuasion is, of course, God, in that the person praying is trying to convince God to intervene on her or his behalf. Thus, prayers are not just communication but argumentative communication, and they are analysed as such in this paper.

In seeking to understand the argumentative structure of online prayers, I aim to offer an insight into the formation of a universalising Muslim identity because, as Michael Billig (1996, 141) has stated, ‘the structure of the way we argue reveals the structure of our thoughts’. As Billig (1996, 140–2; 1991, 48) and other rhetorical psychologists have claimed, human beings tend to think in the form of argumentative dialogue. Arguing and broader cognition may even be developmentally interdependent in that learning to argue paves the way to attaining other cognitive abilities (Billig 2009; Billig 1996, 141; Billig 1991, 49).

If Billig (1996, 142f.) is correct, internal arguments are also the method by which religious identities are formed. The formation of a religious identity involves deliberation – that is, an imagination of alternative futures and



assessment of reasons for aiming either towards or away from any of them (Billig 1996, 143).<sup>16</sup>

The prayers are thus analysed here as arguments. They argue for a universalising Muslim identity and, as such, serve as a mechanism for identity development: as a person is trying to persuade God or other people with her or his prayers, she or he is also persuading her or himself to commit to a certain kind of Muslim identity.

My analytical process followed the three-part structure introduced by Sakki and Cottier (2012, 375f.). In other words, the data was analysed concerning its content, form, and use. The analytical process was thus guided by the three questions, what, how, and why?<sup>17</sup>

First, the content of the updates was categorised in a bottom-up, data-driven manner, following the principles outlined by Billig (1997). The key content in Figure 2 in appendix is a young and seemingly dead child, half-buried in rubble. The lower part of the picture features a caption that reads: 'Her fate was not in my hands, why should I care...'<sup>18</sup> Accompanying the picture there is also a prayer 'for the whole Muslim *umma*'. In the prayer God is called on to 'save all Muslim countries and to bless Muslims all over the world'.

Having identified the key contents, I proceeded to the second phase of the analysis and investigated how the contents were used to demonstrate a point. Like Sakki and Cottier (2012, 375f.), I did this by identifying the rhetorical devices used in the updates (on rhetorical devices, see Jokinen 1999; Potter 1996). Examples of such devices include footing, detail, fact construction, and categorisation (cf. Potter 1996, 122f., 162, 177).

The rhetorical device of special importance to the prayer accompanying Figure 2 is that of metaphor. The metaphor of *umma* as one body permeates

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16 In a somewhat similar vein a giant of developmental identity research, James E. Marcia (1966, 551), considers identity formation to involve two aspects, crisis and commitment: 'Crisis refers to the adolescent's period of engagement in choosing among meaningful alternatives; commitment refers to the degree of personal investment the individual exhibits.' In other words, identity formation is about considering alternative lifestyle options and then committing oneself to some of them.

17 The same principles were also applied in the analysis of the prayers' visual aspects. In this I have followed Halla Beloff (1997, 56, 58), who treats an image as a rhetorical stance or as a 'psychological argument'. Therefore, according to Beloff (1997, 56) images are subject to the techniques of rhetorical and discursive analysis (cf. Hayes 1997, 14). Gillian Rose (2001, 137) also maintains that visuality constitutes a form of discourse. Visual images define reality by rendering certain things visible and others invisible (Rose 2001, 137). The focus is thus on how the images attempt to persuade a viewer of the truthfulness or naturalness of a certain worldview (Rose 2001, 139).

18 All excerpts from the data are translated from Finnish by the author.

the whole prayer update. The metaphor is borrowed from the Prophet and further elaborated by likening the suffering of others to experiencing hurt in one's own body; sympathy for other Muslims is 'fever' and 'pain'.

The Prophet (sAas) has said: 'The love, mercy, and care among Muslims is like a single body; if one part is hurting, the whole body is suffering from sleeplessness and fever.' [...] When one part of your body is trying to fight the enemy, the whole body gets involved in this process. This is why the Prophet (sAas) compared the Muslim umma to a human body. Thus, if Muslims are hurt anywhere in the world: in the core of the body or in its extremities, in fingers or in toes; you should also feel that pain. If you are interested only in your own safety and the safety of your family, something is wrong with you. You are not part of this body (July 12, 2014).<sup>19</sup>

Besides being explicitly likened to body parts, believers are also visually represented as such; in addition to the dead child, the image features several other people that appear to be uncovering her or him from the rubble. However, the helpers are shown only in part. More specifically, only their hands are visible. The believers are thus, quite literally, body parts in service of one another. Hands are also used as a metaphor for agency in the picture's caption.

In its use of metaphor the prayer defines the sympathy felt for one's co-believers worldwide as a religious duty. The metaphor of *umma* as one body is also used to encourage people to act: if Muslims are hurt somewhere, the whole *umma* should 'feel that pain', but also engage in 'trying to fight' it. Perhaps even more evocative is the final sentence in the quotation above, in which those who care only for the immediate family are deemed not to belong to the body. Instead, they appear as severed limbs or removed organs – and as such, useless without the rest of the body.

Besides arguing for the universality of Islam, the prayer takes an equally explicit stand against any ethnic or national division among Muslims. Furthermore, even sectarian divisions are viewed negatively.

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19 Interestingly, although it does not explicitly mention it, the quoted text is in large part an obvious translation of an English text that has been circulating on the internet (see, for example, <<https://www.kalamullah.com/story-of-the-bull.html>, <http://www.ummah.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-351937.html>>, or <<https://www.facebook.com/islamfordunya/posts/715441995172252>>). The quotation provided here is my own back-translation of the Finnish version.

Sometimes the way we see things is that only me and my group are true Muslims, but why? Because someone does not do what I do? As long as you cannot prove that someone is a kaafir (a non-Muslim), he is a Muslim. As long as you do not have proof that a person is a hypocrite, he is a Muslim. Whether he belongs to the same sect, group, or nationality, it makes no difference (July 12, 2014).

The first part of the quotation above anticipates a sectarian view that recognises only the people of one's own nationality or 'group' as Muslims. The quotation demands justification for such a position by asking 'why?', but instead of waiting for an answer the quotation denies the validity of any justification. The update thus provides a good example of the argumentative structure that, according to Michael Billig, characterises psychological processes. 'Thinking is a form of internal argument', and argument always entails a counterargument (Billig 1996, 2). Indeed, to understand what kinds of identities are offered, one needs to analyse what kinds of identities are opposed (cf. Billig 2009). In the previous two excerpts identities that prioritise family, sect, group, or nationality are represented as alternatives to a universalising Muslim identity, and as such, vehemently rejected.

### **Muslims as helpers and in need of help**

Figure 2 is in many ways illustrative of the data more generally. The *topos* of dead or wounded children, for example, is widely used in the updates. This may be because children are often associated with innocence and vulnerability, and thus may be used to arouse strong feelings of sympathy, sadness, and even anger.<sup>20</sup>

Figure 3 in appendix and the text accompanying it are another example of the key characteristics just described. The text starts with 'Some readers may be bored with this news and scroll past this petitionary prayer'. Having acknowledged the reader's potential resistance, the text immediately counters it by making the request: 'This will only take a few seconds from you, so I ask that you pray with me.' The text then continues by quoting from the Quran (2:250) and asking for 'consolation', 'faith', 'trust', and 'a better tomorrow, in which those who have fled the war get to go back home'.

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<sup>20</sup> In a somewhat similar vein film theorist David Bordwell (2008, 52) has suggested that filmmakers employ the seemingly universal tendency to feel sympathy for children to evoke strong feelings in their audience.

I have so far discussed the first two phases of the analytical process. Until this point the analysis has stayed close to the data as I have identified the key contents of the prayer updates and the ways in which they are used to demonstrate a point. In the third phase the analysis moves beyond the data, and the updates are studied in the context of Islam in Finland (cf. Sakki & Cottier 2012, 375f.).

In this broader context all the updates may be viewed as counterarguments to the widespread perception of Muslims as perpetrators of violence: as a number of media researchers have observed, the Finnish media tends to associate Islam with terrorism and represent it as a threat (see, for example, Creutz-Kämppi 2008; Taira 2014; for a review, see Maasilta, Rahkonen & Raittila 2008). The prayer updates turn the tables and portray Muslims as victims in need of ‘consolation’ and ‘a better tomorrow’, or alternatively as helping and caring for victims of violence. The images in Figure 3 show Muslims in both roles: as caring mothers and vulnerable babies; or as children taking care of a puppy or lying in hospital.

Neither the images nor the accompanying texts discussed so far identifies a specific war or other crisis to which they refer. In this way the updates are sufficiently generic to appeal to a wide audience. In reading the update, a visitor to the site may associate it with a context that concerns her or him the most, whether that context is Palestine, Syria, Iraq, or somewhere else. If, in contrast, a certain context was specified, it might distance those whose primary concerns are about another part of the world. As I will demonstrate later, this geographical ambiguity appears to be a conscious decision by the site’s administrators.

### **From global to local – and back again**

Figure 4 in appendix provides an interesting parallel to the previous update. As in Figure 2, the key contents in Figure 4 include children who appear to be wounded or, at the very least, sad and needy. Furthermore, as in Figure 2, Figure 4 features a caption that implicitly attributes responsibility for the suffering of children to every Muslim.

However, unlike the previous updates, this image is set in a very specific time and place: ‘On 15.3.2014 the war in Syria will have lasted for THREE YEARS[.]’ Specificity is further accentuated by a list of concrete facts and figures. The plausibility of the figures is reinforced by crediting them to a source, the Huffington Post:

The number of the dead is already well over 130,000 (information from December 2013, Huffington Post). 95 percent are c i v i l i a n s [...] Almost 50 percent of the population of Syria have been forced to leave their homes, and are refugees either within or outside the borders of the country[.] 2 million Syrian children have been forced to quit school (March 14, 2014).

Such fact construction is yet another rhetorical device and an important part of effective rhetoric. It involves portraying a controversial statement as objectively true (Jokinen 1999, 129). More specifically, and to use Jonathan Potter's term, (1996, 122f.), the use of facts and figures in the description of a controversial issue may be seen as an example of distanced footing: because exact numbers have a certain aura of neutrality and objectivity, they can be used to frame an account as impartial and reliable. As a result, the writer no longer appears as partisan, but as a neutral reporter who presents the truth of an issue.

Besides fact construction, another rhetorical device and a key aspect of practically all rhetoric is categorisation, that is, endowing objects with properties such as 'good' or 'violent' (Jokinen 1999, 129f.). In my data the category of Muslim is especially endowed with the properties 'compassionate' and 'caring'. It is important to note that such properties are not mere ideals or goals, but are presented as essential characteristics of the category of believer. Figure 4 above, for example, is accompanied by a text that states: 'For believers these people are not just statistics, but OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS! We also know that faith involves caring for others' (March 14, 2014).

Instead of the metaphor of the body, the prayer here draws on a different metaphor, that of the family, to argue for solidarity with the whole *umma*. This is one of many instances in which the metaphor occurs. Besides brothers and sisters, the prayer updates also refer to other Muslims as 'my mothers', 'my children', etc. For example, 'my mother(s), my sister(s), my child(ren) in the middle of the terrors of war! I have not forgotten you!' (May 3, 2013).

The comment stream of Figure 4 contains an interesting dialogue that further exemplifies the rhetorical construction of the category of Muslim. The dialogue begins with a non-Muslim visitor answering the question posed in the caption: 'I have done nothing to them [Syrians] so my conscience is clean[.]' The site administrators' response is in line with the general argument made in the update: 'The Muslim believer's way of thinking is different in that (s)he feels guilty if (s)he could have helped but did not do so.' The category of 'Muslim believer' is thus endowed with an essential 'way of thinking' – that of feeling guilty for not helping enough.

### Breaches in unity

At this point it is worth considering the special features of Facebook as a platform. Like many other social media sites, Facebook allows the user relative freedom in constructing her or his online identity. When designing her or his profile, a Facebook user can freely choose how to portray her or himself. As a result she or he can suppress certain aspects of her or his identity, while at the same time emphasising or even inventing others (cf. Lövheim 2013, 42–6).

Thus, ideally, a Facebook group can become a utopian space, a place without ethnicity and race. However, as several commentators have noted, the online lives of people are in many ways linked to their offline existence (see, for example, Dawson 2005, 32f.; Grieve 2013, 111–5; Nordenson 2016). Offline causes may have online effects, and offline ethnic conflicts may penetrate the online. Accordingly, despite all the efforts to diminish ethnic and racial boundaries, ethnicity sometimes seeps through into the virtual *umma*.

In this respect an interesting exchange occurred on a thread that concerned the arrest of three Finnish Muslims on suspicion of participating in terrorist activities in Syria. The administration of the *Suomen Nuorten Muslimit* group posted a statement in defence of those accused, to which one visitor reacted angrily:

*Visitor:* [...] Kurds have demonstrated constantly and you have not said on your site LET US SUPPORT THE KURDS! AND THE INSTANT THAT SOME TERRORIST IS ARRESTED YOU WRITE HERE!! [...] (12.10.2014, 17:47).

*Suomen Nuorten Muslimit:* My brother [...]. Your comment is oozing with blind nationalism, and you are forgetting completely what Islam teaches a believer [...] (12.10.2014, 19:25).

*Suomen Nuorten Muslimit:* SNM-site has been established for the purpose of *dawa*. Not as a political ad channel. We have purposely avoided taking a stand on a conflict of any single people (if you ever happen to watch any news but that from your home country, you will notice that everywhere in the world there is a war going on somewhere). For this reason, whenever we make a *duaa*-related posting on our wall ... we formulate the petitionary prayer so that it covers ALL MUSLIMS EVERYWHERE [...] (12.10.2014, 19:27).

*Visitor:* Read again the post that you wrote! NOT AS A POLITICAL AD CHANNEL! How about your previous postings that BROTHERS AND SISTERS SHOULD PRAY about GAZA! (October 12, 2014, 19:31).

The above exchange is revealing in several respects. It defines the group's explicit policy with regard to *dua* updates. As noted above, the updates are kept vague in terms of geographical location, which is here confirmed as a conscious decision of the site administrators. The purpose is to formulate *duas* so that they concern all Muslims everywhere, and 'politicality' is therefore to be avoided. However, one does not need to follow the site long to notice that politicality is deemed problematic only with regard to issues that divide the Muslim community. Expressing even harsh criticism of Israel or the United States, for example, is not seen as similarly problematic. Indeed, as the visitor remarks in the exchange above, the site administrators explicitly endorse, for example, demonstrations against the Israeli presence in Gaza.

That support for the Kurds is considered political, whereas support for the Palestinians and the related critique of Israel is not, is another instance in which categorisation is used as a rhetorical device; the Palestinian cause is not political, because politics are about opinions and values, whereas sympathy for Gaza is something that should be felt by every reasonable person. In a similar vein an update made on 12th July 2014 proclaims: 'You don't have to be a Muslim to defend Gaza, it's enough that you are A HUMAN BEING!!!' Support for Palestinians is thus not about a political worldview, but about being human. Furthermore, the wording implicitly portrays opponents as something other than human beings.

It appears that being critical of Israel is allowed or even encouraged in the group for precisely the same reason that the highlighting of disagreements among Muslims is discouraged: both of these serve to demarcate the boundaries of the Muslim community. To use the Durkheimian term, Palestine serves in the updates as a kind of totem that provides a common symbolic core for the site's visitors. The struggles of the Palestinians represent the common struggle of the whole Muslim *umma*. Israel, in contrast, appears in the updates as an Other – an outside adversary that is to blame for communal suffering. The updates make a clear-cut distinction between us and them, Muslims and the Other. The unity of all Muslims, in turn, is emphasised and the differences between them downplayed.

However, as the post-Durkheimian notion of the 'myth of the centre' implies, the unity of the community is more or less imaginary. It therefore needs constant support and renewing. Conversely, debates such as the one

above are perceived as a problem because, by bringing up divisions internal to the Muslim community, the debates challenge the myth of the centre.<sup>21</sup>

### Tackling with theodicy

Figure 1 constitutes an interesting parallel to the updates discussed so far. The atmosphere of the image is calm and serene; the Earth is pictured from afar, making 'worldly problems' appear small and distant. The feeling of serenity is further accentuated by the lack of a caption. It is as if the force that is holding our world together is so majestic that no words can do it justice. The dead and dying children are nevertheless not absent: instead of being in the picture, they are in the prayer accompanying it. The peacefulness of the picture is in stark contrast with the vivid brutality of the words accompanying it:

This is a dua for all the brothers and sisters who have died in Egypt and Syria, for all the mothers who are crying in Afghanistan, for all our sisters who are crying in Iraq, to all those who have been burned alive or hanged in Burma, for all the crying children of Palestine [...] (August 17, 2013).

The suffering women and children are again featured in the update, but this time in words, not in images. Interestingly, a similar contrast between word and image characterises several updates. Sometimes a peaceful image is coupled with gruesome words; sometimes the opposite is the case. An example of the latter case, a shocking image accompanied by a calming text, is provided by Figure 5 in appendix.

The figure features a black and white photo of an uncovered grave with a corpse. The corpse is in an advanced state of decomposition. Indeed, it would be difficult to recognise the corpse as a human being were it not for its head in the lower left corner. Its head is slightly twisted backwards and its mouth is wide open, as if screaming. The corpse's posture elicits pain and agony.

Although Figure 5 is set in a specific context ('Srebrenica 11.7.1995'), the accompanying prayer associates it with other tragedies affecting Muslims: 'The history of mankind repeats itself constantly, and worse is yet to come before the Final Day. Let us pray for our dead brothers and sisters in faith

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21 In an interesting contrast to the updates discussed above a *dua* posted on 16th March 2014 commemorates a historical atrocity that was committed by Muslims against other Muslims – in this case the killing of Kurds by Saddam Hussein. However, despite discussing a conflict internal to the Muslim world, the *dua* is far from challenging the myth of the centre. On the contrary, the event is condemned especially because it involved Muslims who turned against their co-believers: 'We nevertheless want to remember and remind of these events because here those who caused the destruction were supposed to be believers?! Did they forget that a believer does not kill a believer! [...] Our nationality is certainly a part of our identity... But the most important thing uniting us is our faith! It makes us brothers and sisters!'



all around the world.’ After these gloomy words, however, the update provides something in the way of consolation: ‘As Muslims we believe that everyone will get what they deserve on Judgement Day. May God reinforce the feet and hearts of the believers in the right way, may He give comfort to the wounded and those bereaved in the war. Aamiin!’<sup>22</sup>

This tension between hope and despair is generally characteristic of the updates. Instead of concluding at one end of the axis, the updates keep the tension alive between both ends. Billig (1997, 42–4, 49f.) paid special attention to similar contrasts in his own data, and even considered contraries to be an essential feature of human psychic functioning.

In expressing the tension between the all-good Creator and the pain-filled creation, the virtual prayers tackle the problem of theodicy.<sup>23</sup> Their aim, however, is not to provide a rationally satisfactory answer to the problem but an existentially satisfactory one. As Jan Koster (2003) has suggested, rituals do not operate on the level of the rational mind but more on the level of ‘deep emotions’ and ‘the direct, visceral experience’. Therefore, they may be especially effective in dealing with theodicy and other problems that are hard to resolve with logic and intellect.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the Facebook rituals of

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22 As Robert Fuller (1995, 8, 22) has noted, the apocalyptic expectation of the ‘end times’ in which the tables will be turned may emerge as a way to find meaning and comfort in the midst of disaster or deprivation: ‘[A]pocalyptic writing commonly originates during times of crisis and tension. [...] Apocalyptic thinking helps the believing community by locating its problems in a transcendental or mythic context in which a victorious outcome is assured. Its purpose is to show that people can and must endure such crises, secure in the knowledge that their tribulations are part of God’s plan for the final triumph over evil.’ Fuller’s (1995) own focus is on Christian apocalypticism, but his description corresponds very closely to my data.

23 In an article on martyrdom and media Hannele Koivunen (2005, 116f.) has compared the motif of suffering children and grieving mothers to the *Pietà* in Christian art. According to Koivunen (2005, 101) both the sacred art and the modern mass media tackle the problem of explaining evil, or theodicy, by sanctifying human suffering. Certain individuals, such as Mohammed al-Dura, a twelve year-old child killed in a gunfight between Israeli and Palestinian forces during the Second Intifada, have come to represent suffering for the media audience. As the Christian Church has glorified the suffering of Christ, Mary, and the martyrs, so the modern media glorifies the suffering of its heroes. Suffering thus becomes an extraordinary affair of extraordinary people. By turning suffering into a sacred act, the media creates distance between an ordinary audience and human anguish. Martyrs are thus essential for the media. Martyrdom, in turn, involves innocence, which makes children ideal martyrs (Koivunen 2005).

24 Johanna Sumiala and Matteo Stocchetti (2007, 340) have also conceptualised the circulation of pictures of Yasser Arafat as a collective attempt to make sense of his death and to reduce anxiety about the future without him. To survive the loss of a leader, the community needs to interpret it as somehow meaningful. The way the images of Arafat were used in the media ‘presents patent ritualistic connotations that are inspired not by the search for an “objective truth”, but rather by the discursive construction of a “narrative truth”’ (Sumiala-Seppänen & Stocchetti 2007, 340).

the young Muslims attempt to make sense of the senseless. This does not mean avoiding tensions and contradictions but embracing them: the prayers fully acknowledge the injustices endured by the Muslim *umma*, but at the same time they place faith in future justice.

### Concluding thoughts

In this paper I have examined petitionary prayers, or *duas*, that have been published in a Facebook group for young Finnish Muslims. The prayers exemplify the development of a novel *umma* consciousness that has been documented in a variety of contexts. Olivier Roy (2004, 120), for example, has noted that 'Islam is not taking (and cannot take) root in the West along cultural lines imported from the pristine cultures. These cultures usually do not survive the first generation as such, either fading away or being recast along "Western" lines.' In a similar vein the young Muslims who were interviewed for my previous study expressed strong criticism of ethnic influences in Islam and considered them to be a corruption of the true Islam, free of any ethnic dimension (Pauha 2015).

The prayers in my data exemplify similar processes as they appear online: like the young interviewees in my previous study, the Facebook prayers were concerned with the unity and diversity of the Muslim community. More specifically, the prayers strongly endorse a view of Islam as the supreme identity of all Muslims, and at the same time strongly oppose the alternative view of national and ethnic identities as primary.

The prayers thus portray a universalising *umma* identity. However, in this paper my aim has been to show that the online prayers do more than just portray a certain identity. They are, in fact, a mechanism that is used in its construction. The dynamic at play resembles the psychological notion of 'flagging' (as described by Michael Billig 1995). In a Billigian view national identity is not something stable or permanent, but is maintained through everyday flagging practices.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the recurring Facebook updates calling young Muslims to sympathise with their co-believers worldwide 'flag' the Muslim identity and recreate the *umma* as a trans-national community.

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25 Despite its name, flagging is not necessarily about waving flags, but such ordinary and scarcely noticeable matters as referring to national events with a definite article (for example, 'the weather' or 'the prime minister'). Even the division of news into domestic and foreign reminds people of their place in the world and thus sustains their national identities (cf. Billig 2009; Billig 1995, 93–6).

Although not working within a Billigian framework, Jan Koster (2003) also makes the connection between ritual and flagging: 'Ritual performance is like planting a flag on a symbolic piece of land, it is the tribal impulse of claiming a territory for the collective body at hand. [...] It is appealing to deep emotions, the direct, visceral experience of collective unity at the cost of one's individual and more rational self.' The overall tone of Koster's definition is rather negative, the reason for which is made clear in his paper: according to Koster (2003) rituals contain 'aggressive potential' that may 'overflow', causing violence and death. My analysis may also help in understanding the identity processes that motivate people to fight against perceived injustices, sometimes even violently.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, identifying with the global *umma* and wanting to relieve its suffering have been shown to be among the most important factors motivating Finnish Muslims to travel to Syria as foreign fighters (Creutz 2015, 17, 33–8, 46).

Figure 6 in appendix summarises the dynamic I see at work behind the updates well. First and foremost, the updates aim at encouraging the site visitors to 'pray for one *umma*'. The view propagated here is that Muslims form one community, regardless of their ethnic, linguistic, and national differences. Elements of the universalising Muslim identity as they appear in the prayer updates include a sense of being part of an *umma*-as-one-body or an *umma*-as-a-family. The Muslim *umma* is imagined<sup>27</sup> as a seamless whole, the parts of which are useless without each other. The unity of the *umma*, however, is maintained by constructing a strict boundary between Muslims and their oppressors. Palestine, Syria, and other Muslim-majority conflict areas serve as a kind of totem around which the virtual *umma* can gather – or, in other words, as a synecdoche for the suffering of the worldwide Muslim community.

However, the listing of adversities that have fallen upon the Muslim community may have the unintended side effect of creating doubt and despair. The updates seek to counter this by making promises of justice in the afterlife. It is important to be patient and have faith because God will one day fix everything, if not in this life then in the next. Thus, besides calling for transnational solidarity among Muslims, the updates also carry the hopeful

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26 It is worth noting, however, that despite all the anger and the rigid boundaries that are drawn between Muslims and those perceived as their foes, I am hesitant to view the updates as encouraging extremism and violence. Rather, it may be that the *Weltschmerz* and the black-and-white thinking reflect the general turmoil typical of adolescence.

27 In the sense of the imagined communities of Benedict Anderson (1983) (cf. Mandaville 2001, 170).

message to 'keep calm'. In the words of one *dua* update, in reference to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza: 'Is there something else we can do other than just grieve and get depressed? YES! 1) Don't stop the *du'a!* God will hear our prayers .... but He alone knows when things will change.'

\* \* \*

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Appendix:

Figure 1. A typical *dua* update.

**Suomen Nuorten Muslimit** löysi uuden valokuvan  
 albumin Dua-kansio  
 17. elokuuta 2013 ·

Tämä on dua'a kaikille Egyptissä ja Syyriassa kuolleille vaimille ja siskoille, kaikille Afganistanissa kuolleille äidille, kaikille Irakissa kuolleille siskollemme, kaikille heille jotka on poltettu hengiltä tai hirtetty Durmassa, kaikille Palestinan kuolleille lapsille ja kaikille Somaliin unohdetuille siskoille ja vaimille... Sekä kaikille muslimisiskoille ja -vaimille, jotka elävät ja tukevat kärsivänsä keskellä ympäri maailman.

"Allah (swt) suokoon heille kaikille oikeutta ja palkan Jannahissa, Amin."



Tykkää · Kommentoi · Jaa

166 henkilöä tykkää tätä. Huippukommentit ·

1 jako

Kirjoita kommentti...

**Aillahomina amin**  
 Tykkää · Vastaa 2 · 17. elokuuta 2013 kello 14:20

**Aamiin!**  
 Tykkää · Vastaa 1 · 17. elokuuta 2013 kello 10:06

Figure 2. 'Her fate was not in my hands, why should I care...' (July 12, 2014)



Figure 3. 'The dua of the day' (June 14, 2013)



Figure 4. 'What will we answer to God when he asks us about them on Judgment Day?!' (March 14, 2014)



Figure 5. 'Srebrenica 11.7.1995' (July 11, 2013)



Figure 6. 'Keep calm and pray for one umma' (14.10.2014).

