Classing religion, resourcing women

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Abstract

Approaching Islam as a discursive terrain, this article challenges the tacit understanding of Islam as a repressor in young women's lives and argues that well-educated, young female Muslims in Denmark use a discursive distinction between 'real' Islam and 'misguided' ethno-cultural traditions to challenge restrictive gender norms. Inspired by research on everyday lived religion and lived Islam, we show how the women ─ backed by their middle-class identity formations ─ posit a culture/religion dichotomy turning the discursive terrain of Islam into a resource in intergenerational discussions with their own families and wider communities. Addressing a gap in research literature on European Muslims, the paper illustrates how middle-class formations play a significant part in the women's responses to conventional authorities as the women apply Islamic sources in negotiations of gender boundaries.

Keywords

Muslim women in Denmark; Islam; middle-class; religious authority; social mobility.

Introduction

In European public discourses and notable strands of research on racialized issues deemed social problems, ethnic minority women's sexual reputation serves as a focal point, especially when discussing non-Western and Muslim minorities (Honkatukia and Keskinen, 2018; van Es, 2017; Carbin, 2014; Keskinen, 2012). Guided by assumptions of how young ethnic minority women are oppressed by their families due to so-called honor notions and patterns of social control allegedly rooted in their culture(s) and religion(s) (Predelli, Halsaa, Thun et al., 2012: 262), Scandinavian research, policies and public debates depict religion in general, and Islam in particular, as an oppressive dimension in these women's lives. For instance, a major Danish survey on ethnic minorities, citizenship, and integration reports that young people practicing religion experience a

higher degree of social control from their families compared to respondents who do not practice religion (cf. Udlændinge-, Integrations- og Boligministeriet, 2016).

Approaching Islam as a discursive terrain,[1] this article questions the tacit understanding of Islam as a repressor in young women's lives by turning common assumptions upside-down and instead probing how the Muslim women themselves employ this terrain as a resource in intergenerational negotiations of gender boundaries and family relations. Based on fifteen interviews, derived from a larger sample of interview material with religiously 'independent', non-organized Muslims, we show how our female interlocutors draw on the Islamic tradition or Islamic sources to negotiate and expand what we refer to, following Kelly (2003), as their "space for action." Inspired by research on everyday lived religion (Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008) and lived Islam (Asad, 1986; Jeldtoft, 2011), we point to the ways in which the women, backed by their middle-class identity formations, turn the discursive terrain of Islam into a resource in their intergenerational discussions with their own families and wider communities.[2] Addressing a gap in research literature on European Muslims, we simultaneously illustrate how middle-class formations play a significant part in the women's responses to conventional authorities as they apply Islamic sources in negotiations of gender boundaries. We delineate (middle) class based on our interviewees' (prospective) educational attainment levels and professional statuses.[3] The study thus adds to the existing literature on diasporic, revivalist and feminist Islam, and concurrent gender formations within it, by emphasizing the hitherto unnoticed aspect of social class.

In the section that follows, we introduce the Danish context of the women's accounts and reflect upon our methodological choices when conducting research on everyday lived Islam. We proceed by introducing our analytical approach, which centers on how our interlocutors navigate gender possibilities and limitations, focusing on both agency and structure. In the analytical sections, we explore how the women negotiate gender boundaries through religious-cultural demarcations and, in doing so, also come to display (majoritarian) middle-class affinities through religious dis-identifications.

Composing the field and setting the scene for studying everyday negotiations

Citizens with a Muslim background constitute around 5.2% of the total population in Denmark, which equates to around 299,000 individuals (Jacobsen, 2018: 210). Most Muslims in Denmark have a family history of migration and, similar to the situation in other European countries, they represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Over the last few decades, Danish immigration and integration policies have increasingly moved from the protection of social welfare for all citizens to

a culturally influenced agenda focusing specifically on religious encounters with Muslims (Jønsson and Petersen, 2012: 139). Securitizing and racializing policies have led to legal interventions, such as a 2018 ban against face covering targeting certain Muslim dress codes, banning particular Islamic preachers deemed radical, and the issuing of a double penalty for crimes committed in so-called ghetto-areas – residential, social housing spaces with a high number of non-western residents. In the Danish context, social policies on honor crimes and religious radicalization have primarily been defined in ethno-religious terms and, thus, are projected as instances of religio-cultural deviances particularly ascribed to Muslim minorities.

Our study is situated within said political climate, and is part of a larger research project exploring intergenerational negotiations of gender norms and family relations among ethnic minority individuals in two different Danish localities. Overall, we have interviewed fifty-three interlocutors, most of them Muslims, of ethnic minority descent living (or having lived) in either Slagelse or Vollsmose, Denmark; from these, we base this paper on fifteen qualitative interviews with female Muslims who were among the first informants recruited for the study. With origins in Muslim-majority contexts such as Somalia, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan, Kosovo or Turkey, respectively, the women represent a vast array of those non-Western minorities who are described in public and policy discourses as being suppressed by misogynistic customs and cultures. The women are aged between fifteen and thirty-nine years and are either attending high school/higher education or are trained professionals working outside their homes. As most are in their twenties and we are analyzing their negotiations of gender boundaries vis-à-vis older generations, in the following, we refer to them as being "young."

All interviews were conducted in Danish by one of the female, non-Muslim journal authors who assured informed consent from the interviewees prior to launching the interviews. Due to reasons of confidentiality and safety, all interviewees, including interviewee references, are anonymized and have been replaced by pseudonyms.[4]

Importantly, we did not mobilize informants through religious organizations but used 'gatekeepers' and snowball sampling techniques and chose (former) living space as a recruitment criterion because we wanted a sense of how the women approached prospective intergenerational disagreements with family and community members in their everyday lives and living spaces. We were interested in how they as individuals, independent of institutionalized, religious settings negotiate gender norms and potential restrictions in relation to their families, communities, ethno-religious backgrounds, and areas of living. By initially opting for "ordinary," non-organized ethnic-minority citizens (Muslims and others), we enable analyses of how religion may come into play in

the women's everyday encounters and disputes (McGuire, 2008; Jeldtoft, 2011), but does not necessarily do so, thus avoiding overly institutionalized responses and narratives (Liebmann, 2014, 2020).

Although we set out to interview ethnic minority youth as well as representatives from their parental generation, incorporating both sexes with diverse ethnic, religious, and educational and/or professional backgrounds – in equal numbers – we finished with a majority of young Muslim women. Despite various efforts to reach a broad ethnic minority sample, well-educated, relatively young female Muslims outnumber other ethno-religious and social "categories" in our interview material, which is interesting in its own right because it says something about their societal engagement, skills, and resourcefulness.

Analytical approach

Subject formations and identity politics have been the objects of a vast array of studies on ethnic and Muslim minorities in Europe during the last ten to fifteen years (e.g. Beaman, 2016; Christiansen, 2011; Jacobsen, 2011; Minganti, 2008, 2012; Ryan, 2011; Selby, Barras and Beaman, 2018; van Es, 2016). However, as Pauha (2015, 80) points out, for the most part, the focus has been on how minority subjectivities are negotiated in relation to, or governed by, the ethno-religious majority. Whereas this tendency is, perhaps, most vividly expressed in studies on revivalist Muslims in Europe, Jeldtoft (2011: 1136) maintains that Muslims who are less visible and activist are similarly influenced by the objectification and so-called "deterritorialization of Islam" (Roy, 1998: 83). As she emphasizes, this influence is simply expressed in different ways.

However, minorities are not just reactive – responding to the majority, "they have their *own* politics," as Ortner convincingly argues (2006: 46). Ortner criticizes a dominant social science approach to minority practices and strategies, which tends to emphasize them as "ad hoc and incoherent, springing not from their own senses of order, justice, and meaning, but only from some of the ideas called into being by the situation of domination itself" (Ortner, 2006: 50). Pauha follows a similar line of thought, arguing that Muslim minorities are not only governed from the outside but also from the inside (2015: 80) – that is, by families, friends, and communities – locally as well as trans-locally.

In contrast to studies based upon minority responses to majoritarian discursive power, this article focuses on how young, female Muslims strive for agency and finding space for action in the face of multiple discourses and power dynamics. By applying this focus, we adopt the concepts of

space for action and everyday religion, adding the analytical dimensions of gender, social class, and generation as key aspects of the women's negotiations of social mobility. While agency is a widely used and much-discussed concept (e.g. Asad, 2003), we draw on Mahmood's understanding of multiple modalities of agency embedded within diverse discursive traditions, not confined to Western, secular, or liberal traditions (2005). Studying the Muslim women's piety movement, Mahmood shows how the women consciously build up a pious self by cultivating ethics within; morals that also restrict their conduct. These women deliberately work to hand over authority to the divine rather than simply striving for individual authority. Put differently, agency can also involve a deliberate choice of disempowerment, or endurance and, in addition to resisting social norms, agency may also be a matter of inhabiting ethics (Mahmood, 2005: 34–35).[5] We consider how cultivating moral selves through the embodied formation of textually mediated traditions may provide our interlocutors with capacities to undertake moral actions that find support in both majority and minority discourses. In doing so, and as part of their mobility negotiations across generations, the women adopt a double modality of agency in their quest for authority. In interview situations, the young women position themselves vis-à-vis a variety of discourses that seek to define and institutionalize "proper" ways of being in the world – as Muslims, women, citizens, adolescents, etc. Thus, they navigate the effects of multiple – majority and minority – discourses about themselves as well as their own potential for agency (cf. Pauha, 2015: 79; Jeldtoft, 2011: 1147).

In the analysis we adopt the term "space for action" developed by Kelly (2003) in reference to qualitative research on violence against women. Exploring gender norms and potential restrictions in relation to young Muslim women's families, communities, and ethno-religious backgrounds and living spaces, we find the concept of space for action fruitful because it brings to light the complex power dynamics at play in these women's lives. Even though our interlocutors are not victims of violence, they have nonetheless experienced various attempts by others to control their actions, and they are striving to rework some of these restrictions while embracing others.

Writing within the tradition of everyday religion and lived Islam means that we look at forms of Islam that are non-dependent on religiously institutionalized settings and focus on individual experience within diverse social contexts (cf. Ammerman, 2007; McGuire, 2008). As Jeldtoft puts it, "the everyday is where people negotiate identity on a micro-level; it is where the larger frameworks of Islam are lived out" (Jeldtoft, 2011: 1138). Delving into the relations between agency and structure in the women's lives, our analysis focuses on everyday negotiations, directing

attention to how, and about what, Islam as a discursive terrain is used on an everyday basis (cf. Henriksen, 2016). Such everyday discourses, practices, and negotiations may be seen as expressions of minority identities that unlock a perspective on what it means to be a young female Muslim in Europe today. Yet, despite the shared experiences of being an ethno-religious minority – part of which is the inherent experience of finding oneself defined by the ethnic and (non-)religious majority – Muslim minority experiences also differ according to variables such as gender, social class, age, generation, living space, etc.

In the following, we explore how the women employ Islamic references in their negotiation of everyday practices, and how, through these negotiations, they come to mobilize religion as a tool for their empowerment. In this way, most of the women convey experiences of religious literacy, linked to middle class formations, as resources in everyday, cross-generational disputes.

Negotiating gender boundaries through religious-cultural demarcations
A significant number of our interviewees distinguish between Islam and ethno-cultural traditions. The women posit a universalized, "true" Islam, which they assert can be derived directly from the Quran and the Sunnah, as opposed to localized, ethno-cultural beliefs, customs, and practices. Whereas the former represents an authenticated, "real" Islam to which the women adhere, various ethno-cultural customs and interpretations are associated with that of "other" Muslims – with whom they disagree. Obviously, this is not a novel tendency. On the contrary, this discursive mode has been a trend among Muslims of the European and American diaspora for the last 15+ years, as described in several studies on the deterritorialization of Islam and Islamic revivalist movements (e.g. Jacobsen, 2011; Jouili and Amir-Moazami, 2006; Jouili, 2011, 2015; van Es, 2016; Mahmood, 2005; Minganti, 2016). A majority of our interlocutors tap into this discourse as they discursively separate culture from religion. Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006), Jacobsen (2011), Jouili (2011; 2015) and Minganti (2016) position the discursive distinction between Islam and ethno-cultural traditions within a broad, transnational Islamic revival movement, in which the search for "pure" Islam plays an important role in the fashioning of the "pious self" (Mahmood, 2005). The authors equally note how references to "pure" Islam allow young Muslims to challenge regimes of power within Muslim minority communities. That is, entrenched within struggles for precedence of interpretation (Minganti, 2016: 48), these Islamic references function as an important resource, especially in young women's challenging of strict gender norms within their families. Exploring

this point further, we draw attention to how formations of gender and social class are enacted beyond the lines of activist groups such as those within Islamic revivalism and Islamic feminism.

Speaking from a privileged, religious position

Asma, Asli, and Azza, three professionals in their late twenties, met us separately over a cup of coffee to discuss their everyday lives. Wearing different Islamic veils, all three of them were competent women engaged in discussing their lives. At the time of the interviews, Azza and Asli were on maternity leave from their respective studies, while Asma was occupied with managing her full-time job and volunteer engagements, and only found time to meet us between work appointments. Reflecting on gender dynamics within their families and communities, all three women soon came to suggest that, to them, culture and religion are two completely different things:

> Asli: And the same goes for all [the girls and boys in the family]. And, funnily enough, it's the same within religion but it's very much the culture[6] preaching this thing with [how] boys are to get something different than girls, and stuff like that, right?
> [Danish-Somali, Slagelse]

> Azza: Sometimes I have this discussion with my husband where we sit and go: "religion is one thing and culture something else." And where we choose the religion it's because that's the best thing, right? […] And it's very different. For instance, in our culture – and some of the things are also very old-fashioned – that thing with differences between girls and boys. And it's not so in religion, and we've often discussed that it will never be so in our house. There will be no differences [between girls and boys].
> [Danish-Syrian, Slagelse]

Asli and Azza both emphasize "religion" as promoting gender equal awareness whereas they the blame "culture" for being responsible for gender discriminatory practices. According to all three women, culture constitutes the basis upon which the norm of men-as-initiators (and women as passive recipients) rests. As Asma puts it below, women are supposed to be indifferent in terms of approaches from, and to, the opposite sex, which is an attitude she sees cropping up in the institution of marriage too. Yet, this attitude, or "culture," is not understood as being Islamically correct because female-initiated proposals and marriages took place during the time of the Prophet:

Asma: It's also a cultural thing. That thing with… the man as initiator. You may find the same in the Western world. It's men who should take the initiative. You can't appear to be too eager-ish. So, that has transformed into the whole marriage apparatus, you know. It's not like the girl's family goes to ask the boy's family [for marriage]. You just don't do that. That's simply culturally. Islamically, that is from a religious perspective, there's nothing wrong with it. Because people did so when the Prophet lived, at that time it was very common. If you want to follow the religion you can actually do that [initiate marriage as a woman], it won't be a problem. But for cultural reasons it's turned into men taking the initiative and anything else will seem desperate.

[Danish-Syrian, Vollsmose]

As Asma's statement exemplifies, and as will be further elaborated below, a majority of the women interviewed invoke their "Islamic rights" by referring to authentic Islam based on the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his contemporaries, the first *umma.* Such empirical invocations occurred whether it was to initiate marriage, work professionally, volunteer, take part in physical activities such as cycling or boxing, relocate to an area away from the family in pursuit of studies or jobs, or simply to move about unchaperoned.

Asma's statement on the different expectations of men's and women's conduct concerning marriage may be seen as an attempt to circumvent gendered obstacles such as a lack of gender equality in relations between the two sexes. This line of reasoning is an important step in her efforts to broaden Muslim women's, and her own, space for action. One – widespread – way to do so among European Muslim youth is to claim deeper piety and superior knowledge of Islamic reasoning than their parental generation. As noted, such claims are often formulated through a distinction between "cultural traditions" in the sense of habits not (or less) reflected upon, versus carefully contemplated "true Islam" (Mahmood, 2005; Minganti, 2014 [2007]: 65–66).

Focusing on how stigmatization processes affect Muslim women in Norway, van Es argues that we must approach the discursive separation between Islam and ethno-cultural traditions in terms of a "diffused Islamic feminism" (2016: 118). According to her, central ideas in Islamic feminism have been adopted by Muslim women across the world. While these women identify as neither Islamic feminists nor Islamic revivalists, they nonetheless exhibit central notions from both movements. One way to understand the women's dichotomizations is as a modality of Muslim minority agency enabling critiques of misogynistic practices without discrediting their Islamic beliefs (2016: 129).[7] Yet, while this argument is certainly convincing and constitutes an aspect we must take into account when conducting research in a Danish setting that is at least as stereotyped

and hostile towards Muslims (Hansen and Herbert, 2018: 205–206) as the Norwegian one, van Es'
analysis does not account for if, why – or how – Muslim women employ this dichotomy internally.
We will come back to this point further on.

Asked to relate to notions of honor as they are presented in the media and elsewhere, Ahlam,
another professional, in her early 30s, responds:

> Ahlam: We [our family] don't have that at all, the thing with honor. And, again, because we [our
> family] are not cultural. If we were, then, honor would've meant a great deal. But since we go by
> Islamic values then honor is not a concept as such [to us]. You take responsibility for your own
> actions, that's what you… But, of course, it means something for the community that you take care of
> one another. Then, you don't want people to live by that. You don't want people talking about you or
> that your honor has been tarnished. But we've just never worked along those lines in our house.

> Interviewer: So, that's… If you're really culturally oriented it's… then it means something?

> Ahlam: You hear about honor killings. Because… All of a sudden, a woman has started seeing a guy
> and her parents don't want that. Now she's tarnished the family honor. Then, she has to be killed.
> Killed? Killed! That goes directly against Islam; killing another human being. It's a human being, after
> all! That's really grotesque. Yet, again, then they've put a lid on the issue, and she's had "her
> punishment." If there were to be a punishment! We don't at all operate like that [in our family].
> [Danish-Palestinian, Vollsmose]

Repeatedly referring to "we," Ahlam does not convey experiences of her space for action being
restricted by her own family but, as she described elsewhere in the interview, she occasionally felt a
need to set a positive example for other Muslim girls in her neighborhood. For instance, cycling
around as a Muslim woman was unusual when she was a child, back in the early 1990s, she told us.
This form of physical activity, and means of physical mobility, was sometimes met with
astonishment by Muslim community members. Yet, by (tacitly) reassuring herself of her Islamic
right to do just that, she soon inspired other Muslim girls to do the same. Today, she relayed, it is
quite common to see Muslims girls cycling around in Vollsmose as, Islamically, they can. Such
Islamic justifications not only challenge hitherto established customs but also work to encourage
fellow Muslim women and girls to broaden their physical mobility and question previous
(de)legitimizations.

For a majority of the young Muslims interviewed, distinguishing between Islam and culture is essential, because being "cultural" is understood as the root cause of men's privileged family, community, and societal positions or, as described by Ahlam, of outright misogynistic practices such as honor killings. Whereas ethno-cultural traditions are explained as being localized, and thus contaminated, in, and by, time and place, "real" Islam is portrayed as a universal, historically immutable monolith that transcends time and place. Importantly, the women project a notion of Islam as an entity unquestionably teleologically superior to culture, as Azza explicitly states above. Implicitly understanding it as a clearly delineated entity, the women portray Islam as allowing, providing for, and in some instances even urging room for, gender mobility (both figuratively and physically) and, thus, as essentially conveying gender-equality concerns. As such, they understand Islam as a religious tradition that has distanced itself historically from gender suppression and continues to theologically break with it.

Interestingly, our male interviewees of the same generation did not bring up the discursive distinction between misguided culture and true Islam to the same extent. In the instances in which the men did posit a notion of an authenticated Islam versus mistaken cultural interpretations, they did so in a different context and on a lesser scale. For instance, when the young men – briefly – referred to this discursive division, it was often in an effort to justify gendered divisions of labor, gender complementarity, or other practices that could seem "backward" to us as non-Muslim outsiders representing Danish majority society. Only a few of the young men elaborated upon how they negotiated their mobility within their own families, communities or neighborhoods and none of them employed a religious vocabulary to do so. In other words, the young male Muslims' occasional invocation of the culture-religion dichotomy seems more related to how Islam is repeatedly defined as a problem-space in majority society than as part of any internal negotiation of space for action.[8]

Salima, a professional in her mid-twenties, makes the distinction between a gender-progressive Islam and culturally infused gender suppressive customs very clear:

Salima: I distance myself from cultural Muslims and my definition of cultural Muslims is people raised by Muslims but who, at all times, would choose culture over religion. For instance, such as [saying] a girl cannot travel on her own, you know, some people… those are cultural things that a woman can't do, and according to religion there are totally different grounds there. And that thing with mixing up [culture and religion] and making culture control your everyday life, I simply can't stand that. That makes my hair stand on end.

Elaborating upon gender differences in "Arabic" and "Middle-Eastern" cultures where, according to Salima, women receive little education and are supposed to stay at home to give birth, raise children, look after the husband, and maintain their home while the husband provides for his family through labor and is the primary decision-maker, Salima continues:

> Salima: And while the woman's role is within the home, the husband [and his role] is outside, and that's culturally speaking, it's not Islamically speaking – and that's where people use the term *haram*; that something is prohibited according to Islam. You know, "it's prohibited to work according to Islam." Of course, it's not prohibited to work! Well, you hear about the wife of the Prophet who hired him where she worked, right? That is, the Prophet encouraged his wife to work, so that's where people go in and mix up religion and culture, which makes – if you don't have knowledge of Islam and you're not educated within Islam and [you haven't] acquainted yourself with these restrictions – [which makes] you ignorant about what's prohibited and what's not. […]. According to Islam, it says that a woman cannot travel by herself *back then* because *back then* you would have to cross the desert by yourself, on a horse, and that was unsafe, or on a camel, and that was unsafe. There were a lot of rapists and there were a lot of robbers in the desert and that's why these restrictions were made, these restrictions don't apply today. […]. Also, that thing with women not having to educate themselves. The first *ayah* [verse], you know, from the Quran, revealed to the Prophet, is *Iqra. Iqra* means "read!" And that's why, you know, that's where people mix [religion with culture].

In the interview with Salima, she elsewhere recounted how her uncles would try to restrict her social and physical mobility when explicitly probing her capacity, and legitimacy, to choose her own marriage partner, pursue education, work voluntarily, take up a professional job, and move about unchaperoned at night. Faced with the indirect questioning of all Muslim women's authority to do the same, Salima responds with what DeHanas has called a "deculturated view of Islam" (2013: 77). Discursively purifying Islam from all elements deemed cultural, Salima counters her uncles' conservative understandings of culturally infused Islamic gender boundaries by invoking cues to (other) Islamic narratives. Thus, Salima dismisses whatever claims her uncles are making by, ultimately, classifying them as "cultural," and thus un-Islamic. When doing so, she employs the methodology of *ijtihad,* independent analysis of religious sources, and *tafsir,* interpretation of the Quran, to reject their stances (cf. Minganti, 2015: 96). In employing this way of legitimizing her

views, she affords herself the authority commonly ascribed to the first *umma* who theologically preceded, and sanctioned, the *sunna*.

By constructing their own religiosity as objective and enlightened, Asma, Asli, Azza, Salima, and Ahlam position themselves as competent to take responsibility for their own religious practices (cf. Pauha, 2015: 92). Authority to select and reinterpret Islamic scripture and practice is thus given to the individual, and conventional authorities, such as theological scholars, men, and parents, are sidestepped (Minganti, 2016: 48) while ethno-cultural traditions are regarded as either less important or outright wrong. What is strongly emphasized instead is a carefully deliberated Islamic ethos supported by various Islamic references, together with a personal relationship to the divine.

While not all fifteen of our female interlocutors dichotomize religion and culture – or use the dichotomy on an equally consequential basis – they all speak of Islam as a positive influence providing them guidance and corroborating ethical dimensions in their lives. Because the women identify Islam as an ethos and frame of reference, various restrictions are rendered meaningful and thus become more manageable. Thus, when contending that the discursive separation of culture and religion serves as a tool in negotiations of space for action that ascribes these women religious authority, we are not claiming that they do not face any gendered restrictions or limitations; for example, Salima elsewhere in the interview emphasized veiling in connection with purity and virginity. Yet, precisely through this discursive modality, Salima submits to gender restrictions imposed by alternative – selected – authorities and discourses separate from those she associates with her parental generation.

By lending themselves religious authority through invoked mythological references interpreted, and made to work, in their favor, several of the interviewees are able to speak, discuss, and dispute through a "privileged speaking position" (Sørensen, 2001: 3–4) that is ascribed to, and within, religious texts. A privileged speaking position is invoked in religious texts when the women imbue their stances with divine expertise and (pre)historical weight internally perceived to transcend any "cultural" arguments. From this vantage point, the women create an advantageous position through which they base and justify their thoughts and actions. As the culture/religion dichotomy provides a way of sidestepping some of the predefined customs and beliefs while embracing others, the women carefully navigate their space for action, sometimes broadening it while at other times imposing its limits on themselves. However, when further examining the modalities of agency embraced by these women, their adoption of an Islamic ethos converges with

markers of social class, which provide the young Muslim women with an alternative space for action.

Displaying middle-class affinities through religious dis-identifications

As seen in a number of studies on young Muslims in Europe (DeHanas, 2013; Göle, 2015; Jacobsen, 2011; Pauha, 2015; van Es, 2016), our interlocutors distance themselves from the elderly or from other families by emphasizing cultural differences between generations. As we will elaborate below, the women use different religious and, we will argue, classed arguments to make a case for the legitimacy of their own religious (and non-religious) practices through different displays of disassociation.

Through various discursive divisions, the women distance themselves from purported ethno-cultural practices and ethno-cultural Muslims. Salima strongly dis-identifies with "cultural Muslims" who know nothing – or little – about "real" Islam. It is precisely this dis-identification that illustrates the class journey Salima, and many of her fellow well-educated Muslim women peers, has gone through. "Class journeys" refer to the trajectory of changing social position when an individual who has grown up in one type of social environment relocates to a different environment through, for example, education, changing financial resources, or migration (Gullestad, 2002). While social life mainly takes place within the new environment, the individual maintains transnational ties, generally from the country of origin, and particularly with close relatives. In this way, the class journey is not a linear movement.[9] Holm Pedersen suggests that the concept of the "class journey" may also be applied to the transnational context, where migrants move between different nation-states (2012: 1103).[10] Her emphasis on the multi-layered nature of class journeys comprising mobility across various forms of borders – national, educational, etc. – is important in our study because our interlocutors, as second- or third-generation migrants, are native Muslims who inherited Islam from their parental generation and have come to embody and project a "post-migrant Islam" (Göle, 2015: 55).[11] Adding to Holm Pedersen's perspective, we see that class journeys also take place across different generations, and that such class journeys may significantly alter religious identities and dynamics.

How the young Muslim women's negotiations of space for action, and their ensuing religious convictions and practices, may be understood as a classed disposition is particularly visible in

twenty-eight-year-old Melek's view of her own struggles. A highly religious, aspiring medical doctor, Melek not only dichotomizes an array of characteristics and qualities but also distances herself from the qualities and characteristics she ascribes to "cultural Muslims":

> Melek: It means something because… What's really up with Kurds from the older generation is that, generally… The ones in my circle of acquaintances is that they don't practice [Islam]. For instance, the other day I was standing with my friend who wears a long veil – she's married to a Turk, she's Kurdish. Then, her uncle made an unpleasant comment [saying]: "why do you walk around with that thing on?" and so forth. I don't recall if he said it at exactly that point, but my dad sometimes says: "Why are you like ISIS?" Even though it [wearing a veil] has nothing to do with that. We've just contracted this label, as it were, because we're wearing what we're wearing. He was like…: "you're young, take off some clothes." That was really unpleasant. "You only live once," he said. Where I just thought: "yes! I only live once. So, I'll live the way I want to." That was a bit… But that's how the typical Kurdish older generation is, especially in [and from] my village. Very few [people] of the older generation practice [Islam]. Most of them are against it and generally have nothing to do with religion. I don't even know if they believe in it or how… It's really a grey area. I know, in terms of myself, and I also know other young people who want to wear the veil and practice [Islam] but then they can't because their parents or someone in the family won't let them.
> [Danish-Kurdish/Turkish, Vollsmose]

In this account, Melek posits an older, Kurdish generation of non-practicing Muslim migrants against a young non-ethnicized generation of pious, practicing Muslims. To the extent to which the former do, in fact, practice, they do so according to ethno-cultural customs and along ethno-national divisions. In contrast, the young generation is described as worshipping across those boundaries, unified as "Danish" Muslims who practice an uncontaminated and atemporal Islam based on their direct – intellectual – access to Islamic source material:

> Melek: What I like about attending the Arab mosque is that we're of different nationalities [there]. There's no bad-mouthing, you don't interfere with the private lives of one another. You only wish what's best for each other and that's because we share the same goal: we're Muslims in Denmark. It doesn't matter whether you're Danish, Turkish, Arab, Moroccan – or whatever you may be – Bosnian. To us, everyone's equal, we're human beings. I like that. I find a lot of peace there. I'm simply perceived as a young Muslim there. […] We've come to Denmark and a generational change has occurred. We have some values from our own culture but, in addition, we have values from Danish

culture. So, to us, when practicing our religion, we don't do that on the basis of culture. Our point of departure is only religion. We're not affected by culture. Those affected by culture can be of concern to you. Whereas I experience that those who practice [religion] non-culturally, they're more patient since they find it easier relating to religion compared to those who're affected by culture. […] Even though my mom practices, she's influenced by culture, so she can't… [she asks:] "Why do you go to the Arab mosque?" [Melek:] "Look, it's in Danish. Nothing will happen. Everything you've been told in the Turkish mosque – it's the same." That's also what I read in the books, what I see on YouTube, and so on.

Skeggs has coined the term "(dis)identification" (1997) in relation to women's projected class identities, relating the term to the process whereby the – in her study white, British – working-class women attempt to disassociate themselves from the negative stigma of being working class by only speaking about what they are *not*. As is especially evident in Melek and Salima's accounts, in a similar manner, several of the women in our study put a lot of energy into describing what they do not do, or condone, and what they distance and disassociate themselves from; namely, "cultural" Muslims:

> Melek: I think, it's really… They get affected by the media a lot, the older generations. Also, because… They're not used to go searching for knowledge or being source-critical. Perhaps they aren't as independent [as us]. That's something we learn as young children in school. The thing with…: "Now, go find out by yourself." Many of them [the older generations] don't have an education.

Continuing her account, Melek characterizes her parental generation of fellow Kurdish Muslims as media-influenced, less educated, dependent and not source-critical. In doing so, she implicitly contrasts her own and her fellow young Muslims' education and ensuing ability to access and consume Islamic source material. Moreover, she refers to how she accesses and utilizes modern media technologies such as YouTube to seek knowledge and guidance on given topics. In addition to direct personal study of authoritative textual sources, secondary literature usually found on the internet, such as YouTube videos, constitutes a prime source for constructing visions of Islam among young, revivalist European Muslims (cf. Minganti, 2016: 42). While Melek qualifies as a revivalist Muslim by being extremely pious and emphasizing her obedience to Islamic law and strict ritual observance, many of our other interviewees do not. Interestingly, the invocation of the

culture-religion dichotomy crosscuts revivalist and feminist circles, stretching beyond these, and other, social movements and religious organizations and into the vocabulary of everyday, non-organized female Muslims' lives and family negotiations.

Through a range of dichotomizations supporting her dis-identification, Melek distances herself and likeminded peers from the imaginaries of first-generation Muslim migrants, and she is far from alone in doing so. Such assertions, while often purportedly about religious beliefs and practices, ultimately reveal the women's classed anxieties about their co-religionists (Rogozen-Soltar, 2016: 619). In this regard, it is important to note how the women's discursive dispositions are produced along the same lines as those of social class (Jeldtoft, 2012: 225). As noted elsewhere, representations of lower-class citizens and Muslim minorities often overlap, indicating that class as an identity marker is connected to moral standards and hierarchical evaluations (Jeldtoft, 2012: 225). Being cast as belonging to "the right" middle or upper class makes one a "good", respectable person while being cast as a member of "the wrong" lower class marks one a less respectable, "bad" person (Sayer, 2005: 1–2; Jeldtoft, 2012: 225).

In terms of the everyday lives of young Muslims in Denmark, social class may have an impact in relation to individual background and access to resources in both their parental generation's place of origin and the new social position acquired through the society to which their parental generation initially moved. The issue of social class is thus relevant both in terms of a socio-economic and educational position in society and as a component of personal identity (cf. Ortner, 2003: 12). As such, class position is equally central to young female Muslims' negotiations of change and continuity in their social positions and networks.[12] Certainly, social class is a cultural rather than an objective category, which is always relative to its context of concrete social relations (Olwig, 2007: 89). While our interlocutors' parental generation, as migrants, may have experienced social mobility in terms of increased material welfare, this does not necessarily imply a corresponding increase in social status. Instead, they may indeed have experienced quite the opposite. As a result, upward class journeys are primarily to be seen in relation to younger generations and, for a number of reasons, especially in regard to women (Indvandrere i Danmark, 2016: 47; Faktaark, 2018: 1, 26).

Based on this perspective, how young Muslim women negotiate – and seek to increase – their space for action is closely connected to their classed positions in Danish society, and, in reverse, the social class(es) of the people and communities with whom they disagree, dispute, and negotiate (Almila 2015: 87). Claiming authority by, often, demonstrating their mastery of Islamic literature

and tradition, namely the Quran and the *Sunnah*, is not only a viable, and even acknowledgeable, way of proclaiming authority within a Muslim context (by referring to the highest possible sources and thereby proclaiming a privileged speaking position from which they can better their status/arguments within the negotiations). This way of asserting authority is also a mode of, subtly, demonstrating their academic credentials. By doing so, the women using this technique display and perform their independence through their educational and intellectual superiority when they refer to different *suras* in the Quran, the Hadith, and sometimes even reference different Islamic law schools.[13] Hence, these Muslim women launch an order among different Muslim generations; "cultural" Muslims who base their religious beliefs, customs, and practices on various ethno-national traditions and notions versus an atemporal, and thus more authenticated, culture-cleansed, "pure" Islam. In effect, the women come to establish a hierarchy of different "forms" of Islam and thus create two classes of Muslims who stand in opposition to one another.

In a study of young pious Muslim women in Turkey, White refers to her female interlocutors' ambition to gain upward social mobility as efforts equaling "de-proletarianization" (2002: 208). For her interlocutors, the most viable avenue for distancing themselves from their working-class backgrounds was through education. In a similar manner, what could be referred to in our interview material as "low-class Islam" is invoked when our interlocutors characterize those "cultural Muslims" who believe and practice according to ethno-cultural traditions, and who are relatively uneducated in Islamic literature, source material, and tradition, *fiqh*, as mistaken. According to our interlocutors, these Muslims are primarily, although not always, less educated, older than our female interlocutors, speak poor Danish, and are portrayed as having double standards, and being uninformed or otherwise misguided concerning "pure" Islamic views on gender equality, modesty, and norms of honor. Notably, it is the older generation within the women's networks – whether it is individuals within their own families, communities, or living spaces or sometimes a combination thereof – who embody low-class Islam through being "cultural Muslims." In contrast, those non-culturalized, and thus authenticated, young Muslims, who acknowledge that Islam constitutes a discursive terrain through which Muslim women may access a number of options and spaces for action, represent "pure" Islam. As the differentiation between different "kinds" of Islam entails an order, a subtle hierarchy, it is unsurprising that these women position their own beliefs, practices, and customs – and thereby themselves and their likeminded peers – among the realm associated with an authenticated, "pure" Islam. They know the Islamic literature, source material, and tradition, *fiqh*, they are able to read it critically, reflect upon it, and, as discursive agents, use it in

their everyday negotiations as they master *ijtihad* and *tafsir*. To this end, Jouilli (2015: 126) understands young pious Muslim women's appreciation of the importance of various forms of both religious and secular education as connected to the inherent "intellectualist character" of certain strands of contemporary Islamic revival discourses in Europe. Without going into a chicken or egg debate over the issue, we in contrast emphasize how different ideas, discourses, and practices circulating in society – in, and across, various social movements – are, inevitably, part of identity formations; class and gender identities included. In other words, we argue that the women's discursive, intellectualist dispositions are intrinsic to their social mobility and class journeys and thus embedded in the state of affairs of second- and third-generation young, female Muslims who project a post-migrant Islam.[14]

Research on activist – and organized – Muslim youth (e.g., Jacobsen, 2011; Jouili, 2015; Minganti, 2015; van Es, 2016) find that dominant representations of Muslims cast them as, in essence, problematic subjects. This type of framing influences the ways European Muslims react to being classified, and how counter tactics, such as the subversion of stereotypes, emerge. As the studies illustrate how Muslim youths *respond* to negative stereotypes by adopting religious identities signaling difference from all the less well-regarded, first-generation Muslim migrants, they indirectly highlight how their religious identities are significantly shaped around notions of class and social status. Thus, as young female Muslims in Europe, our interviewees construct identifications in which Islam is posited as the determining marker of difference, both internally, in relation to representations of "low-class Islam," and externally, in relation to majority discourses linking Muslims to misogynistic practices. In so doing, the young female Muslims come to represent themselves as proper, moral subjects with reference to Islam, thus emphasizing their similarity to respectable, middle-class people – as Danish citizens *and* as Muslim women. Importantly, as the dichotomy is also invoked internally – although, it seems, not necessarily always verbally or explicitly – the women self-ascribe authority and a sense of moral and intellectual superiority, thus implicitly justifying all young Muslim women's capability – and right – to transcend the designated gender boundaries set up by representatives of the older generations and other conventional (older and male) authorities. In contesting some of the conventional status hierarchies in which they are embedded, these women look to a transnational, horizontal Muslim community (Rinaldo, 2008: 29; Göle, 2015: xviii) for affirmation. The way they embrace Islam represents a break with certain ethnic minority practices yet constitutes a continuation of what they

see as constitutive elements of an "authentic," gender-progressive Islam and modern Muslim lives: generational and gendered mobility, education, urbanity, intellectualism, and professionalism.

While there are undoubtedly a number of instances in which religious discourses and practices – Islamic included – suppress, limit, and curtail women, our interview material reveals several ways in which the women, backed by their middle-class identity formations, turn the discursive terrain of Islam into a resource in their intergenerational discussions. While our interlocutors selectively adopt, challenge, or seek to broaden discourses and practices that define standards of "being a good Muslim" as predefined by the older generations, they support and increase their own agency and the social agency of other young, female Muslims in Europe (Pauha, 2015: 92).[15] Access to education, the acquisition of professional skills, and engagement in associative life all provide young Muslim women in migrant communities with upward social mobility and contribute to the formation of Muslim middle classes (Göle, 2015: xix). These class formations, in turn, provide the potential for embracing Islam as an ethos, point of reference, and resource in everyday negotiations.

Conclusion

Based on a small-scale, qualitative study, this article has explored intergenerational negotiations of gender, Islam, and social mobility among ethnic minority citizens in Denmark. Through fifteen qualitative interviews with relatively young Muslim women, we have illustrated how Islamic discourses and practices do not necessarily have a negative effect on these women's space for action in relation to their families and communities – in contrast to common assumptions in public discourses. Rather, we have found that contemporary actors of Islam "turn the religion of the migrant subaltern into a tool for asserting personal identity and collective power" (Göle, 2015: xxiv). Across our interview material, we see a tendency for young Muslim women to use Islam as a discursive terrain and thereby generate leverage for their beliefs and practices in instances where these differ from those of their parental generation. Importantly, middle-class formations support the women's way of understanding, embracing, and applying Islam as a discursive terrain in these negotiations of gender boundaries.

Recognizing Islam as an ethos and a frame of reference, the women often self-present as, simply, mediums of the holy scriptures, implicitly authorizing their views and legitimizing their actions. When qualifying certain actions by referring to specific *suras* in the Quran or specific parts of the Hadith in order to claim mythological precedence, they are at the same time successfully

blurring their own interventions – and agency – yet ascribing themselves with the necessary religious authority to challenge – and often broaden – any given status quo.

Identifying Islam as a set of everyday guidelines, the women distinguish between a "true," authentic Islam and mistaken, ethno-cultural traditions. As previous studies have pointed out, this dichotomy between "good," pure Islam and "bad," misguided culture provide the women an opportunity to question, challenge, and negotiate an array of hitherto corroborated beliefs and practices, primarily in relation to gender boundaries. These boundaries range from marriage initiation to volunteer and paid work, partaking in certain physical activities, relocation to an area away from the family, or simply to move about unchaperoned, in relation to which most of our interlocutors found certain standards to be "un-Islamic." In common with their parental generation, these women believe that being Muslim implies certain gender boundaries, but the meaning of those boundaries are reinterpreted and often located differently. By making the religio-cultural distinctions, our interlocutors justify the legitimacy of their own religious convictions, even as ─ or perhaps because of─ how their views diverge from those of their parental generation. As post-migrant Muslims, the women both construct and cross ethnic, classed, gendered, and religious restrictions in their approximation to majoritarian middle-class practices and ideals, which – ironically – may be seen as a continuation of their parents' mobility project (cf. Nadim, 2014: 508). Moreover, the discursive dichotomies allow these women to combine a sense of piety with participation in the affairs of secular, Danish society. As previous studies have pointed out (e.g. Pauha, 2015: 89), the discursive formation of a "good Muslim" may promote agency in religious and civic contexts as well as the formation of a subjectivity that entails both religious and civic virtues. Our study adds to the existing literature on diasporic, revivalist and feminist Islam, and concurrent gender formations within it, by emphasizing the hitherto unnoticed aspect of social class.

As an identity marker, social class is significant in identifying whose religion we are exploring in the first place. Nevertheless, within religious studies, class has primarily been considered irrelevant or approached as something secondary. Even in the broader research literature, social class is rarely applied analytically with reference to Muslims in the European diaspora but, rather, in research literature on (im)migrants. As a result, immigrants are taken to belong to various social classes and to display different class dispositions, but religious agents are not and, in effect, class is cast as something that belongs to the socio-economic domain – not the religious or cultural one. Yet, religious individuals are never class-less but may be class-invisible and primarily hyper-visible as religious agents (e.g. Jeldtoft, 2013). In other words, the women's

religious identities come to obfuscate their class – and other – identities, even as the latter shape their subjectivities, including their religiosities, in significant ways. As illustrated throughout our study, social class is closely connected to identity formations such as gender, ethno-religious belonging, and mobility. Incorporating class aspects into the equation is therefore crucial when analyzing Muslim women's negotiations of gender boundaries and family relations.

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[1] We take inspiration from Asad's (1986) and Bowen's (1993) seminal studies on the discursive texture of Islamic practice, commentary, and debate.

[2] As noted by Jouili (2015), a significant secular understanding, or bias, often lies beneath scientific explorations and discussions in Europe concerning Muslim women's rights and an ensuing critique of their supposed lack of "freedom."

[3] Even more could be made of their class position from a cultural sociology perspective in terms of analyzing their consumption patterns, etc.

[4] As there are no IRB protocols in Denmark, we have worked with the journal editor to ensure ethical research procedures were met.

[5] On endurance, cf. Hocke (2014).

[6] When the interlocutors talk about "culture," they are generally referring to an ethnic minority culture, relating it to the ethnic community of which they consider themselves part.

[7] Their essentialist way of speaking about Islam may in part be a result of revivalist influences, but it is also clearly a response to the growing European trend towards presenting Islam as inherently violent and oppressive towards women. Such essentialist representations push these women into a defensive mode where little room is left for nuances (van Es, 2016: 129).

[8] In his work on second-generation British Bengali young adults, DeHanas (2013: 76) equally finds that the ways in which a deculturated Islam is used tactically tend to differ among young women and young men. Many of the young women in his study find a purified Islam to be an empowering resource when they face their parents, especially on the issue of arranged marriages.

[9] In her use of the concept, Gullestad is primarily referring to the cultural encounters that take place in relation to upward social mobility *within* a nation-state (2002: 73).

[10] For instance, when Holm Pedersen's interlocutors left Iraq, being middle-class was associated, among other things, with place of living and level of education, which was, in turn, expressed in their eloquence in Standard Arabic or familiarity with Arab literary history. These are forms of social and cultural capital that are not ascribed value within the secular, Danish sphere. In fact, for many first-generation migrants to Europe, including Iraqi refugees in Denmark, the class journey is thus primarily experienced as downward social mobility (Holm Pedersen, 2012: 1103).

[11] Bowen equally calls attention to what he refers to as an Islam "beyond migration" (2004: 891), thus emphasizing the various educational centers in Europe engaged in transcending cleavages of ethnicity (and, to a lesser extent, those of particular religious affiliations or lineages).

[12] Early studies in the United States on class and migration assumed that immigration would automatically imply upward social mobility when migrants seized the opportunity to establish themselves in an affluent society (Heisler, 2008: 85).

[13] The women are often able to read (and interpret) Islamic source material in Standard Arabic, which reflects how many of them have undergone some form of Islamic and/or Arabic schooling in addition to their primary education.

[14] We distinguish social mobility from class journeys in the sense that social mobility constitutes a minor component within class journeys. Thus, social mobility captures a movement and flexibility that *may* result in an alteration of class status, i.e. a class journey.

[15] DeHanas refers to how young, second-generation Bengalis in the East End of London often take an approach to self-identification of "elastic orthodoxy" (2013: 77). He describes how they accept the local social consensus on what it is to be a Muslim ("orthodoxy") and then work tactically within this framework, extending it to apply to new contexts and situations ("elastic") (2013: 77).

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