Widening Our Scope from "Maximalists" to More Ordinary Practitioners?

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In his 2009 article on young Egyptian Muslims and Ramadan Samuli Schielke makes a keen observation that has been one of the inspirations for this chapter. He notes that while most recent studies on Islam have examined highly committed Muslims that "consciously and consistently" strive for perfection in their religious, ethical, and moral practices, not enough has been written about the far greater number of ambivalent and inconsistent Muslims, who for a variety of reasons are less than perfect in their following of the rules, regulations, and prohibitions (Schielke 2009: 24). Schielke's point is that if we are to have a truly comprehensive understanding of real-world Islamic practice we must look not only to the uniquely devout, self-sacrificing, and committed, but also to the ordinary, everyday majority that "share a recognition of the supreme authority of religion but do not practice it as an over-arching teleological project of ethical self-improvement" (Schielke 2009: 36).

In this chapter I want to bring in Schielke's critique and suggestion to the study of religion education (RE). Indeed, as one that has spent years educating Swedish RE teachers, I can say, with a good deal of confidence that focusing on the highly committed minority to the neglect of the less committed majority has skewed our understanding and affected the way that Muslims are portrayed in much of the materials used to teach RE – e.g.

textbooks, films, online aids, and so forth. Also, current research on RE in the Scandinavian context shows that Muslims often are represented in what can be described as a *maximalist* fashion, ignoring Muslim practitioners that are of the averagely or minimally committed variety (Berglund 2019; Otterbeck 2005; Toft 2019). I use maximalist in line with Lincoln (2006) to describe the way religious adherents that are highly committed to the beliefs and practices of their tradition are portrayed in RE.

We need to be aware that there is a significant price to be paid for ignoring the ordinary everyday approach in terms of teaching about Islam in mainstream religion education courses. The tendency to focus on maximalists, of course, can be found in the study and portrayal of religions other than Islam. However, in terms of Islam per se, it must be said that the focus on maximalist representations tends to convey a somewhat severe stereotypical view of Muslims not unlike that which is often found in both the media and society at large (Toft 2019). This chapter argues that if in our teaching of Islam, we balance the scales by including the ways that ordinary, less devout practitioners approach their faith, this will not only provide a more nuanced understanding of Muslim practice, but also reduce the tendency to view Islam in an essentialist fashion (Hylén 2012). To highlight this point, the chapter will look into the area of professional sports, but more specifically the observance of fasting and other requirements during Ramadan among Muslim elite athletes. Nadia Nadim, also known as Denmark's response to Zlatan Ibrahimovic (Hardenberger 2015) will serve as my prime example. But first, a word about the problem of stereotypical representations in school education.

Stereotypical Representations in School Education

There are several problems associated with stereotypical representations of both religious and non-religious worldviews in school education. For one, there is the risk of presenting persons that adhere to "unfamiliar" religions or philosophies of life as

being somehow peculiar, alien or exotic, thus causing students that identify with one or the other of these perspectives to feel as if they cannot recognise themselves in such descriptions. Most adherents are well aware of the variations in belief, practice and devotedness that exist within their own tradition: not all Hindus maintain a monistic view of ultimate reality; not all Jews follow Hasidic orthodoxy; and not all Muslims pray in the Mosque five times a day. Among Christians there are diverse approaches to the observance of Lent and among atheists there are various weak to strong forms of rejection. Despite this fact, when it comes to unfamiliar traditions, the tendency is to overlook all this variety and to generalise or stereotype instead. And in the classroom, as well as in textbooks and educational films, the tendency to stereotype frequently runs in the direction of focusing on the beliefs and observances of the most devout and involved practitioners – the so-called "maximalists".

In the *Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (2011), Eleanor Nesbitt divides teachers of religion into two categories: those that are committed "to particular interpretations of particular faiths"; and those that are "scholars professionally engaged in theology or the social sciences". Nesbitt then proposes that both types of religious teachers can avoid stereotyping and other pitfalls in the teaching of religion by becoming ethnographically aware, meaning to self-reflectively bring one's own view of religion to conscious awareness – a process that entails challenging the taken-for-granted equation of religion with belief and practice. In addition, teacher observations of the expressions of different religious traditions in the local school context are said to carry the potential of enriching their own teaching of RE. Thus, teachers that increase their own ethnographic awareness are better able to increase the cultural literacy and openness of the various types of students in their class (see also Berglund 2014; Nesbitt 2004). Nesbitt concludes:

> An ethnographic approach to the teaching and study of religions reduces the risk of assuming religions to be bounded,

> static, internally homogeneous, depersonalized entities, and of presenting them in this reified and essentialized way. Instead, both teacher and student engage with the dynamics of individuals in their various interpenetrating groupings, and their own self-understanding develops through this engagement. Boundaries between oneself and others are unsettled, and teacher and student progress together along paths of continuing discovery and relearning.

A Few Words About the Observance of Ramadan

According to Islamic history, the first revelation of the Quran to Muhammad occurred during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, long considered a sacred time in which Muslims are called upon to make special sacrifices and observances. This month-long obligation—one of the Five Pillars of Islam—involves abstaining from food, drink, intoxication, and sexual activity on the one hand, and increasing prayer, good deeds, charity, and recitation of the Quran on the other (Fazlhashemi 2009; Schielke 2009). Perhaps most notable among these requirements is the religious duty to fast from food and drink each day from dawn to sunset, making Ramadan a time of unique self-sacrifice and personal restraint. Fasting during Ramadan is said to discipline carnal desire, create feelings of solidarity with the hungry poor, and bring Muslims closer to God. Most centrally, however, fasting is said to heighten the prospect of Paradise since Ramadan is a time in which God generously rewards the faithful and pardons their sins. On the other hand, for adult Muslims that are able but nonetheless choose to neglect this obligatory observance, there is a downside: breaking the Ramadan fast without good cause is considered a highly punishable offence that is difficult to mitigate. In other words, both God's favour and God's wrath are close at hand during Ramadan. Apart from fasting for Ramadan, Muslims also sometimes fast on weekends or other special days, as do the followers of various other religions. Christian Orthodox churches, for example, recommend that in addition to the fasting that occurs before

great religious holidays like Christmas and Easter, one can fast every Wednesday and Friday as well. While this sort of weekly fasting also exists within Islam (on Mondays and Thursdays), it is not mandatory but only recommended because *hadiths* indicate that Muhammad regularly fasted on these days.

Besides the religious benefits of fasting, many Muslims highlight its health advantages as well. In this way of thinking, since God provides us with the human body, it is sacred, and thus should be treated with great care and attention. In Islam, fasting (like *wudu*) is one way by which the body becomes purified (or cleansed). In this connection, it is interesting to note that fasting for health has been a regular part of popular culture for quite some time. Among numerous examples, one can point to so-called intermittent fasting which has been widely discussed and followed by hundreds and thousands of people throughout the world (Clayton 2019; Berglund 2013a).

Among Muslims there are ongoing discussions with regard to the handling of difficult or challenging situations during Ramadan. As mentioned, there is a standard list of legitimate exceptions to the fasting rule, but even these can and have been interpreted in diverse ways. Various questions thus arise: At what age should children begin to fast? What legitimately constitutes travel? How should Muslims that live in the far North (where the summer sun never sets) execute their fast (Brusi & Sorgenfrei 2011)? For these and other such questions there are no clear-cut answers. Different Muslim scholars provide different rulings (*fatawa*) depending on their interpretative tradition. Thus, it falls upon the individual to choose the ruling that is best suited to his or her needs. The reality is that, despite the ideal, various forms of modified practice can be observed: adult Muslims that choose to refrain only from alcohol (a completely forbidden product) as their so-called "fast"; drinking one or two glasses of water during the day for reasons of health (Samadbeighi 2013); Muslim children learning to fast by refraining from candy or fasting for only a few hours each day (Berglund 2009). These are but a few

examples of the many shades of choices made by individual Muslims for various practical and health-related reasons.

Sports as an Example

Sports ethnography, is a well-established field of research where the interest in religious praxis has grown over the past decades (Alpert 2015; Das 2018). Due to its rigours and demands, the area of professional sports provides a rich field of study for those interested in discovering the diversity of approaches taken by Muslim athletes when it comes to fasting and other required observances throughout the year. In this regard, the 2012 summer Olympics serves as a good example because that year the games happened to occur during the month of Ramadan, and the response of the Muslim community to this coincidence made it clear that pragmatic allowances can be made for elite Muslim athletes that wish to observe some semblance of a fast. Indeed, experts in Islamic jurisprudence from several Muslim-majority countries went so far as to issue rulings that allowed such athletes to entirely refrain from fasting during the Olympic games – rulings that were basically extensions of the standard exceptions mentioned above. For instance, Sheikh Abdelmoti Bayumi (affiliated with the Al Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt) argued that because more and more Muslims specialize in elite sports, it is legitimate for them to break their fast when it interferes with or diminishes their "job" performance (Jendoubi 2012). Other Islamic jurists argued that the standard travel exemption could be applied to the Olympic games since most Muslim athletes needed to travel to London in order to participate. These expert opinions notwithstanding, there are many Muslims that would rather rely upon their own judgement in matters of religious practice.

Another example is Nadia Nadim, the daughter of an Afghan general who was executed by the Talibans. She started her football career by playing in the fields beside her refugee camp before becoming a Danish international football professional.

Nadia has taken the decision to fast on training days but not on match days. "I know my body can't handle it," she says, because hydration and nutrition dictate her performance (Ahmed 2017; Virk 2019). Nadim is thus not only a professional football player, she is also a student of medicine. Thus, in her decision on when to fast and not, she brings in both knowledge and experience from football, medicine and Islam. Nadia Nadim serves as our case in point when it comes to the matter of maximalist vs. more ordinary forms of religious expression since she represents the Muslims, who are either average or minimal adherents of Islamic beliefs and practices – i.e., "the ordinary, everyday majority." Her story also points to one of modernity's central features: the prominent place of the individual over and above the group. In our modern societies, it is the individual, rather than the group or the family, that is expected to make decisions about matters large and small. Tordis Borchgrevink argues that the ability to choose is a "fundamental moral category" in Western societies (Borchgrevink 1997: 31). Moreover, several scholars have noted that the way in which young Western Muslims independently construct their approach to being Muslim tends to reflect modern Western civilization's dominant beliefs about the self (Berglund 2013b; Jacobsen 2010). In viewing their Muslim identity as involving personal choice rather than heredity, young Muslims affirm both the power of the individual and the freedom to choose, which are so much a part of the modern project.

Widening Our Focus in the Study of Muslim Practice

In his 2009 article, already referred to above, Samuli Schielke (2009: 37) asks an important question:

> What happens when claims and ideals come to be practiced as guidelines in a life that has other, competing orientations and is characterized not by the primary purpose of perfection but rather by a struggle to find one's place in life?

This question indirectly hints at the fact that much RE-material on Muslims have treated various groups of committed practitioners as if they were "paradigmatic representatives" of Islamic religiosity, thus limiting the scope of religious expression to a striving for the ideal in piety, morality, and self-discipline. The problem with such a representation is that the vast majority of Muslims, like the vast majority of human beings, are sometimes, but not always, pious, sometimes, but not always moral, sometimes, but not always, self-disciplined. They sometimes, but not always, attend the mosque, sometimes, but not always, recite their prayers, sometimes, but not always, observe the holidays, and so on. Often, however, this sort of ambivalence and inconsistency is not reflected in school education.

To counterbalance this situation and broaden the scope of our understanding for students, I suggest that we move outside the standard realm of the dedicated practitioner and examine how Muslims express their faith in the context of everyday social, occupational, and cultural activities – how they relate to phenomena that are not directly associated with their religious tradition (as in the case of professional football). The idea is that by doing so, both teachers and their students can learn something further about the moral and religious universe that most Muslims inhabit, important information that too easily remains obscured when only dominant religious practices are in view.

Keeping in mind these various considerations, what did we learn from Nadia Nadim, our representative of that majority of Muslims for whom Islam is but one important aspect of a multifaceted life? Despite the high value she places on her Muslim identity, Nadim, in the spirit of modernity, has not been one to make personal choices based solely on another's advice, be that person an elder, a coach, a fellow player, or even an Imam. Rather she considers her decisions regarding Ramadan and other aspects of Islamic practice to be her and hers alone. She sees herself as a free and independent actor who takes responsibility for her actions. Perhaps as a result of this approach, she seems quite comfortable with the compromises she

has made to balance being a Muslim with other important aspects of her life. She seems to be at peace with her choices, possibly because her success and fame as a professional footballer has elevated her career to a very high status in terms of her life and self-image—possibly occupying a place equal to that of being a Muslim.

This, of course, cannot be said of all "ordinary" Muslim practitioners, whose biographies, life experiences, and relationships with Islam are as varied as one might expect. A contrasting example would be that of Muslims who, at one point in their lives, had wholly dedicated themselves to one or another strict Islamic tradition, but then, at a later point, left that tradition to live less committed, more compromised religious lives (see for example Tayob 2017). If such persons still consider their previous tradition to represent the truest, most authentic expression of the Islamic faith, they would obviously have a more difficult time reconciling their current with their former lives. Under the circumstances, their experiences of shame, guilt, failure, regret, and fragmentation would be far greater than someone like Nadia Nadim, who had never aspired to such a perfectionist project.

Redressing the Maximalist Approach

The case of Nadia Nadim provides a snapshot of how one Muslim balanced the practice of her faith with obligations and responsibilities that are of a more secular nature. Beyond Nadim, there are literally thousands upon thousands of examples of averagely devoted Muslims in all walks of life that confront, and in their own way resolve, the same sort of issues that Nadim faced – balancing their commitment to Islam with their commitment to studies, football, and the values of their new Western homes. Because most Muslims in the West are of the variety described here, it is extremely important that mainstream RE teachers and the materials they use convey an accurate and balanced picture of real-world Muslim practice that minimizes

the maximalist representations currently found in both the media and society at large.

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