Religion and Youth

EDITED BY
Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion

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For a variety of reasons we need to know more about the religious lives of young people. This book tells us why, in addition to supplying – in abundance – facts, figures, examples and explanations about a complex but fascinating subject. I recommend it very warmly.
Grace Davie, University of Exeter, UK

What is the future of religion given the responses of young people?
What impact do existing religious forms have on youth?
What kind of spirituality and religion are young people creating for themselves?

Written by leading scholars in the field, Religion and Youth presents an accessible, yet cutting edge, guide to the key issues in the study of youth and religion, including methodological perspectives. It provides a key teaching text in these areas for undergraduates, and a book of rigorous scholarship for postgraduates, academics and practitioners.

Offering the first comprehensive international perspective on the sociology of youth and religion, this book reveals key geographical and organisational variables as well as the complexities of the engagement between youth and religion. The book is divided into six parts organised around central themes: Generation X and their legacy; The Big Picture – surveys of belief and practice in the USA, UK and Australia; Expression – how young people construct and live out their religion and spirituality; Identity – the role of religion in shaping young people’s sense of self and social belonging; Transmission – passing on the faith (or not); Researching Youth Religion – debates, issues and techniques in researching young people’s religion and spirituality. James A. Beckford writes the Foreword and Linda Woodhead the Epilogue.


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Religion and Sociology

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Chapter 14
Islamic Revival and Young Women’s Negotiations on Gender and Racism
Pia Karlsson Minganti

In today’s Sweden with 9 million inhabitants there live an estimated 300,000 Muslims. Some perceive themselves as religious, some do not. This chapter focuses on young devout women engaged in Sunni Muslim youth associations in Sweden.

It illuminates the women’s construction of an ‘Islamic’ identity, and further, its possibly beneficial implications for their agency, primarily in challenging racist and sexist oppression. I do so by highlighting a key scenario in the women’s narratives about their development as Muslims, containing the following three aspects (1) being born in a Muslim family with Islam as the tacit ‘common sense’; (2) going through a teenage crisis when growing up and meeting with the world outside the home sphere; (3) being religiously awakened when enrolling in Muslim youth associations and, consequently, in the global Islamic revival. I claim that this key scenario reflects points of conflict for the women, in the intersection between gender, religion, ‘race’/ethnicity and generation. I also claim that such a scenario indicates a distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘cultural traditions’, which is commonly used among adherents of the contemporary Islamic revival all over the world – a distinction which allows for some reinterpretation and change. Thus this chapter shows how the position as an awakened, ‘practising’ Muslim carries with it promises of empowerment for the women, making it more understandable why they would choose to engage in a seemingly gender-conservative religious movement.

Method and theoretical frame

This chapter draws on material collected during an extensive fieldwork among members in the Sunni-dominated national organisation Sveriges Unga Muslimer

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1 My application of the term ‘racism’ includes different processes of othering and domination, that is, one based on the notion of ‘race’ as a biological fact, but also, for instance, those labelled as ‘cultural racism’ and Islamophobia (Runnymede Trust 1997; Larsson 2006). For ‘sexism’ I refer to processes of domination based on the notion of gender difference.
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[SUM, i.e. Sweden's Young Muslims] and some of its local youth associations between 1998 and 2002 (Karlsson Minganti 2007, 2008). The method used was qualitative with participant observations and spontaneous talk (resulting in fieldnotes), along with in-depth interviews with nine women (resulting in audio recordings and printed transcriptions). When I first met the women, they were between 18 and 25 years old, still unmarried. Some were upper secondary school students, others had begun higher education or employment. They were born in West Asia, North and East Africa, to parents who, one way or another, defined themselves as Muslims, and they had all come to Sweden during childhood (at 4–11 years of age). This chapter focuses on their construction of a common Islamic subject position in Sweden, across the diverse backgrounds of their families.

A theoretical point of departure is that of the subject as a site of intersecting identifications and power orders, resulting in different experiences and interests, sometimes coherent and sometimes in conflict (see, for instance, Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992). This chapter deals primarily with intersections between gender, 'race'/ethnicity, religion and generation. Another basic premise is that subjects, identities and power orders are socially and culturally constructed, and, thus, sites of contestation. To underscore this power perspective, I work with the concept of negotiation, that is, processes that lead to social or cultural reproduction or change. People struggle to have their actions (verbal and non-verbal) appear meaningful—a struggle for precedence of interpretation and, thus, agency (Thuren 1998; Khan 2002). Similarly religion is, in this context, understood as contested knowledge, providing people with frames of reference and means to deal with everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1991; Mahmood 2005).

Experiences of sexism and racism

Regardless of the women's families' diverse backgrounds and degree of religiosity, they all transmitted to their daughters a firm belief in God and the basic pillars of Islam. For this the young women expressed gratitude. However, in their transformation into 'practising' Muslims they took a critical stance to the tacit character of this knowledge and strived for a conscious and reflexive faith as represented by their new Islamic community.

The women's growing up and shaping individual selves coincided with their encounter with non-Muslims in Swedish society and with Muslims of varying backgrounds and religious practices. Following this complexity, all the women's narratives contain descriptions of teenage crises that threatened their bonds to both family and religion. Besides all the possible conflicts that young people might endure, these women's narratives highlight problematic relations in association with gender and 'race'/ethnicity. As put by a woman whom I call Noor:
It's not easy to be young. And especially not a young woman. I mean, boys were allowed to do everything they wanted. But demands were on girls. For instance, that they weren't allowed to go out, that they shouldn't do this and that, that they shouldn't go to school parties. Just a thing like that, you were not allowed to go to school parties! And my brother, he never had to do the dishes at home. These are all just small matters, but they meant so much back then.

One does not know who one is, or where one should turn oneself. I mean, I already had a hard time getting into that ... what should I say, Swedishness. And then I discovered that: 'Nope, I cannot become Swedish either'. Or rather, I am not allowed to be. Just when the family noticed that: 'Okay, that's it, now she is becoming Swedish' ... then they put up even more severe demands and boundaries.2

The women were clearly critical of gender issues in their families, especially what they rated as unjust division of labour, and as unwanted control over their bodily behaviours, such as dress code and movements outside the home. Control over their female chastity seemed to increase as they entered puberty and as they came to live in a society dominated by the absence of what was perceived as Muslim morality. This role of women as symbolic bearers of community identity and purity is well researched and proven not to be Muslim-specific, but to increase in diasporas (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Sered 2000). The young women were certainly interested in guarding their modesty; yet meeting with the world outside the home they were alerted to criticisms against sexism and began to question the gender relations of their families and ethnic networks.

Confusingly enough for the young women, the hostility towards them as Muslims often drew on discourses that were critical to oppression of Muslim women. Amal reported explicit verbal abuse from peers in school: ‘When I used the headscarf I got to hear: “Okay, you are oppressed now!!” Or: “God, it smells like shit in here!” I got to hear such things when they passed by me. And... I thought it was horrible.’ The young women suffered from different kinds of oppression under both patriarchal and racist power orders, and consequently they had a hard time making their own voices heard – as individuals, as women and as members of minority groups.

When the women were asked to speak, they found themselves pushed into the position of being representatives of ‘the Muslims’ and Islam. With Islam under attack, this position often turned into a defensive stance, as non-Muslims demanded elaborated statements about ‘what Islam says’ and ‘what Muslims do’. Rather than giving an account of anything but the simplest elements in childhood faith they

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2 In this chapter, the interviews have been translated from Swedish into English by the author.
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were urged to give theological explanations about social and political events in countries that they had never visited. Muslims, such as family or congregation members, on the other hand, often claimed to have the right answers and demanded from the young women that they represent collective truth and respectability.

To sum up, the women expressed the dilemma of living under pressures from different power orders, and – from a marginalised position – having to deal with the mismatches that sometimes occur and with the silencing of their subjective voices. They testified about how these experiences led to a youth crisis that made up a significant risk of splitting from their families and their faith. In the end these nine women did not make such a break, but chose to challenge prevailing norms from within, that is, by enrolling in the Islamic movement.

Becoming a ‘practising’ Muslim

The women described the way out of their youth crises in terms of religious awakening. Through Koran schools, siblings, or peers, they came in contact with the first and still largest national organisation for Muslim youth in Sweden – Sveriges Unga Muslimer (SUM), i.e. Sweden’s Young Muslims. It was founded in 1991 and claims to have an estimated 5,000 members all over the country.3 With the headquarters in Stockholm it also links several local youth associations in different towns – the main arenas for the activism of the young women in my study.

Latifa was enthusiastic when she described the friendly atmosphere in her local association. ‘You must come and see for yourself!’ The invitation was followed by a performance showing me how the girls run to greet and hug each other, and how the young ones call themselves ‘sisters and brothers in Islam’. I deem her performance to express an important motive for the youth’s engagement in the Islamic movement, namely the desire for identification and alliance. According to the cultural theorist Lawrence Grossberg, it is not necessarily rational and initiated consideration that guides the youth, but feelings of attraction or repulsion, likes and dislikes (1997, 13–14). The women’s Islamic engagement coincided with their emerging self-definitions in wider societal contexts, and the questioning of their parents’ norms. Similar to the narratives of other teenagers, this process was imbued with distinctions between I/Us and the Other(s). What makes me similar to others? What makes me different? Who am I and who will I become? Thus, in a situation which for the teenage women mostly appeared as ‘chaotic’, it seems they were not only motivated by Islamic doctrine, but also by finding a sufficient platform for identity construction. From this perspective, the young Muslims’ achievement of religious ideology and community could be understood in terms of


The women explained the way out of their youth crises in terms of a religious awakening or ‘return to Islam’, and this, according to my interpretation, involves the dimensions of affective empowerment and cultural contestation described above, but certainly also a dimension of religious conviction. When ‘returning to Islam’, they joined Muslims worldwide, following the call of the Islamic revival movement: ‘Back to Islam!’ With the Islamic revival I refer ‘not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies’ (Mahmood 2005, 3).

The revival movement’s call for a return to Islam entails two aspects. Firstly, Muslims are urged to turn to Islam as the main guide for the individual and society, refraining from other interests and ideologies, including unrestrained ‘Westernisation’. Secondly, Muslims are urged to turn back to the Koran and Sunna in search of the ‘authentic’ message free from human delusions. In the young women’s everyday life, this call was expressed in their comprehensive practising of Islam, and their ensuring that these practices were performed in accordance with the ‘true’ Islam. They applied the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘cultural traditions’ and perceived themselves to be detecting the ‘true’ message of Islam and discarding ‘cultural misunderstandings’. As one possible strategy, their dismissal of certain *hadiifs* (narrations about the exemplary sayings and conducts of Prophet Muhammed) as being ‘false’ and androcentric, could be mentioned. Also their highlighting of such *hadiifs* that bring to the fore women’s interests.

In fact, within the frame of their Islamic movement the young women received recognition as pious subjects, personally responsible before God. This means that they also were ascribed the right and duty to look for religious knowledge and support for strengthening their piety. In turn, this means that the young women found some space for themselves in the mosque and in other knowledge-producing arenas – spaces that are not always assured for women, either in Sweden or in Muslim societies.

**Managing racism and sexism**

To conclude this chapter, I discuss some empowering aspects that the women perceived by becoming ‘practising Muslims’ of the ‘true’ Islam. I begin by commenting on their dilemmas in connection with racialised power orders. When enrolling in Muslim youth associations, influenced by the Islamic revival, the young women were offered consolation by the notion of Islam as a religion that counteracts racism, both such racism that is ascribed to Muslims by ‘outsiders’ and the one operating ‘inside’ Muslim communities:
Latifa: Islam gets rid of all that racism, skin colour, or that cultural stuff. All are equal before God.

Pia: Aha. And that feels good?

Latifa: Indeed it does! Every time I look at my friends I feel so happy. It’s us, the coming generation, we, the Muslim youth in Sweden, raised in Sweden, sort of... We are the ones who are going to eliminate racist thinking, because we do not care about where people are coming from. We do not think like that.

Latifa and the other young women adopted the idea about Islam as an anti-racist religion, and perceived themselves as embodying this progress as ‘the new generation’ Muslims. As such they were supposedly less biased and more enlightened than the parental generation, thanks to their increased knowledge about ‘true’ Islam and its message about unification in piety.

As to external racialisation, the women expressed feelings of alienation from non-Muslim Swedes, who constantly positioned them as the Other, while demanding answers about ‘what Islam says’ and ‘what Muslims do’. The women’s Islamic community, nonetheless, offered them a positive understanding of this representational burden. They were enlightened about the concept of dawā, that is, a religious duty to inform about Islam, which would reward them with dignity and religious merits. Furthermore, the women fostered a notion about dawā as a possible means for preventing non-Muslims’ racialising practices. If only people could get information about the ‘true’ Islam and disregard ‘cultural misconceptions’, Muslims would gain respect and recognition. As exemplified by Latifa:

In a way, I can understand the Swedes. I mean, they get these images from the mass media showing Islam as something horrible. In fact, I was thinking in the same way for a while: ‘We Muslims are truly insane!’ You know, I was so young when I came to Sweden and I got such a negative image of Islam when I watched TV. That men beat their wives. Abuse them. Islam, Islam, Islam. But this is, in fact, a matter of the so-called Muslims doing stupid things, and then the Swedes cannot understand that this is actually not Islam. But I think that the only thing one has to do is to change this negative image.

Latifa hopes to put an end to racism and Islamophobia through information. The task of providing information is understood in terms of dawā, and based on the distinction between ‘true religion’ and ‘cultural misconceptions’, ‘real’ and ‘so-called’ Muslims. As indicated in the quotation, this distinction also has extraordinary implications for gender relations and women’s rights. In line with Latifa’s rejection of physical abuse, all women in my study firmly stated that ‘honour killings’ and ‘female genital cutting’ are inconsistent with Islam. Out of the same rationale they took part in deciding the ways in which Islam should be
applied in their everyday life – here and now. Indeed, it would be appropriate for them to work outside the home, study at the university and drive a car. The women admitted to adhering to several religious leaders simultaneously and to taking independent decisions on whose teachings to rely on. This is, undeniably, a break with the tradition to hold on to one single Islamic law school given to any individual Muslim by birth into a certain family and nationality. And this, again, is a sign of religious revival: the sidestepping of traditional authorities (religious, parental) and the participation of ‘laymen’; women and youth in the reading of the sacred scriptures (Roy 2004).

In other words, the young women were recognised as religious subjects, allowed to enter mosques and to participate in pious activism and learning. They were reflecting on their religion and questioning their parents, but did not break with these crucial points of reference. While their parents could still be proud of their daughters growing up and maturing as Muslims, their religious transformation could also be read as a way of making independent selves, with an alternative ‘Islamic’ community outside families and ethnic networks.

This reading coincides with the young women’s narratives, and makes up a basic argument in their counteracting of the stereotypical description of ‘the Muslim woman’ as a passive victim to multiple oppressions. Thus, I would suggest that the recognition of the women as religious subjects could lead to a general recognition of them as capable persons with voices of their own. And this in turn allows for an understanding of the Islamic revival and Muslim youth associations as a way out of sexist and racist oppression.

This kind of ‘success story’ is an important one to be told. I would, however, like to refer to a parallel story of the women’s enrolment in the Islamic movement as a way into the reproduction of male dominance, honour ethics, exclusion and hindrance for women’s agency. The complexity of the Islamic revival can only be partially represented in the parameters of this chapter, but is a crucial point in my overall analysis of the young women’s everyday negotiations on gender and agency.

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