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'Unaccompanied minors' in Sweden reflecting on religious faith and practice

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we listen to young people having arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors, in relation to how they talk about and relate to religion, belief and practice. There is still a lack of research focusing on these young people's own narratives and experiences in their everyday life. This is particularly noteworthy since this category of young people, and especially those with a 'Muslim heritage', have received increased attention both in research and in public discourse. For two years, we have ethnographically followed 20 young people with asylum status in Sweden, who all arrived as unaccompanied minors and all came from areas of the world where Islam is the dominant religion. The conclusions are that these young people both need to navigate and are affected by the current political and social context questioning Muslim people, and that this is the case regardless of their own personal relationship to Islam. Further, religious faith needs to be related to its social and emotional embodiments, since it is here religious belief, shifts, changes and resistance, take place. Finally, we discuss how physical, temporal and social distance makes it possible to create other identities, and other ways of being religious or not.

> I'm thinking about my sister, she's wearing a hijab, she's going to work, and they'll tell her: 'you can't work as long as you wear a hijab'. I get so angry. – Adar.

There is an anti-Muslim wave sweeping through Europe (Yilmaz 2012). It is, as Sara Farris (2017) puts it, the dominant 'anti-other' rhetoric at present, and as such it sometimes intersects with a more general anti-immigration rhetoric. This anti-other discourse specifically tends to put immigrants from parts of the world where Islam is the dominant religion (regardless of orientation and actual belief) into focus in the media, politics and the public (Alexander 2000; Archer 2003; Shain 2011). Inscribed in this anti-other discourse is the idea of an 'assumed social separateness, cultural fixity and boundedness of religious […] difference' (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2015, 98).

One specific category of people that has received increased attention both in the research and in the public discourse is 'unaccompanied' or 'separated' children and

youth, especially those with a 'Muslim heritage'. These young people have in common that they have fled prosecution, war and poverty without being accompanied by a legal guardian (Halvorsen 2005). Adar is one of these young people. In the quote above, he is talking about his sister's future opportunities, recalling a French election campaign where the appropriateness of wearing a hijab became the focus of great political interest.

Over two years, we have ethnographically – using interviews and observations – followed 20 young people with asylum status in Sweden, all of whom arrived in the country as unaccompanied minors. Common to all the participants is also that they come from parts of the world where Islam is the dominant religion, placing them right in the middle of today's dominant 'anti-other' discourse.

Important to note is that they received permanent permission to stay in Sweden before the Swedish government, after 2015, implemented border controls and stricter asylum policies. These stricter policies meant that 'residence permits given to asylum seekers are temporary and the possibility for family reunion is severely restricted' (Nordling 2017, 46; cf. Djampour 2018). Previously, Sweden was considered one of the more generous European nations in terms of granting asylum. The tougher approach has also meant an increased emphasis on religion, especially when people claim to have converted or belong to a religious minority. The Swedish Migration Agency uses questionnaires (involving questions such as: 'What is the difference between the Orthodox and the Protestant church?' and 'Which are the sacraments?') to evaluate whether a person is telling the truth about converting (Wernersson 2017). This is quite a dualistic way of viewing religion, implying that one is either or, with no room for human complexity and ambivalence. It further focuses on theological and historical knowledge rather than on the emotional and everyday dimensions of religion.

Research on unaccompanied minors as well as on the Muslim population in Europe seems to have mainly focused on the category itself or on its supposedly homogeneous characteristics. Research on unaccompanied minors has mainly focused on reception (Herz and Lalander 2017, 2018; Stretmo 2014; Wernesjö 2011), and on their human rights or grounds for asylum (Lundberg 2011). Psychosocial health among unaccompanied minors has also received substantial attention in the research (Groark, Sclare, and Raval 2011). There is some research related to the role of religion in the lives of unaccompanied young people; however, it has mainly focused on religious belief or practice as a form of resilience or as a coping strategy (Ní Raghallaigh and Gilligan 2010; Ní Raghallaigh 2011; Carlson, Cacciatore, and Klimek 2012; Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh 2015). Furthermore, a discussion about research on Muslim migrants has taken place, claiming that there is a tendency to focus on, for instance, the Muslim man as a patriarch or perpetrator and the Muslim woman as a victim (Lutz 2010; Farris 2017). As Lutz (2010) discusses, this conceals other social practices among Muslims. Instead, they become homogenized (Charsley and Liversage 2015). This tendency is also related to, and further reproduced by, how gender issues have lately gained attention among the far-right movements in Europe. Gender equality, women's rights and sometimes gay rights are used rhetorically to strengthen an anti-Islam agenda (Akkerman 2015; Farris 2017).

The lack of research on the everyday and emotional aspects of religion, especially among unaccompanied young people in a Swedish context, can be related to how religion is perceived in Sweden. Sweden is often described as being the most secular country in the world. Religion seems to have been pushed aside within politics, in society and in

people's everyday life (Holmqvist Lidh 2016). However, this is a rather simplified picture. The separation of church and state occurred late in 2000 (Bergdahl 2010), and people seem to have a more complex relationship with religion and faith than what is often claimed (Holmqvist Lidh 2016). Lately, a post-secular turn has been discussed, the claim being that religion never disappeared, but that its presence in people's lives and the religious scenery in society have experienced changes (Sigurdson 2009). Without a state church, more alternatives are provided, and Islam, for instance, is the second-largest religion in Sweden at present (Sigurdson 2009). Another change is that religious belief and expressions seem to have become more politicized (Bäckström 2014), which may partly explain the current anti-Muslim wave in Europe.

Previous research still lacks a long-term ethnographic focus on the everyday lives of unaccompanied minors and on how everyday life and identity construction may be linked to religion. Our aim is therefore to capture how the young 'unaccompanied' persons talk about, reflect upon and engage in or disengage from religious practice and belief. Through this effort, we wish to contribute to the academic discussion in the areas of migration, religion and complex and composite identity construction in contemporary global society.

A subjective perspective on religion

In the present article, we listen to young people who have arrived in Sweden as unaccompanied minors, with a special focus on how they talk about and relate to religion, belief and practice. As such, our theoretical focus is on *the subjective everyday-life* aspects of religion and faith. The public and political view of unaccompanied Muslim youth can be interpreted as a 'containing category', not offering any nuances or agency (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2015). The previously mentioned anti-other discourses can be interpreted as one aspect of such containing categories. Although embedded within this current and historical process of containment and anti-other discourses, these young people's religious identity is also ongoing, fluid, ambivalent and changeable, in that they are active participants in a continuous process of internalization and change (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991). Their identity construction, as Hall (1997) suggests, consists both of an axis of being and of an axis of becoming, that is, of both stability and change.

Religion is typically defined as a 'belief in supernatural beings', as Sigurdson (2012, 123) puts it – that is, belief in an existence beyond the visible universe and a notion of what happens after death. Our point of departure, however, is how the young people themselves define and relate to religion and religious practices in connection with the tension that exists between their own experiences and how they are perceived by others. We, therefore, proceed from a subjective perspective on religion (if and how they define themselves as religious or as believers) as belief and as practice – as something subjective and emotional, something that people truly believe and incorporate, and as something socially constructed, including traditions, habits and rituals might fill the participants with strong feelings of solidarity and exhilaration (Berger and Luckmann 1996/1991; Durkheim 1912/1971). These emotions and participation in social rituals with others can thus be interpreted as providing a certain energy that creates bonds between people (Collins 2004).

The theoretical framework presented above captures the subjective and emotional experiences of either being or being considered a young Muslim in Sweden. As such,

we are able to capture both their own agency and emotions and how they are embedded in – and in possible opposition to – current and historical processes of containment and anti-other discourses.

Method

The participants' background varies regarding their gender, nationality, age, class, living conditions and current situation. However, as a group, they correspond to general patterns of migration to Sweden (Migrationsverket 2015). In total, we followed 20 young people over the course of two years. People originating from Afghanistan (10 participants) and Somalia (4) were nationally overrepresented at the time. Thus, they are also overrepresented in this study, although some participants originate from Ethiopia (1), Pakistan (2), Iran (1) and Syria (2). The participants are between 15 and 22 years of age and have been in Sweden between 1 and 5 years. Regarding their current situation, some participants live with foster parents (2) or in residential care homes (RCHs) (3), while others live by themselves (11) or have reunited with their biological families (4). However, they all have experiences of living in an RCH. Some of them are studying (16), while others are working (4), two of them combine work and school. In terms of gender, our study population represents the proportion of girls arriving as 'unaccompanied' in Sweden at the time our project started; approximately one in ten was a girl. In the present study, only one girl participated during the whole period; another two were recruited later in the process to compensate for the lack of girls. We have approached our participants using different sources and strategies to be able to capture a variety of experiences. The participants have been recruited through their schools, RCHs, non-governmental organizations, associations, social workers and previous contacts.

Ethical issues have been a concern during the entire process. Being an 'unaccompanied minor' often means living an 'exposed' everyday life, highly affected and supervised by others, including social workers, RCH staff, teachers or legal guardians. We have put considerable effort into not breaching the trust granted to us by these young people. Because of their age and possible language difficulties, we thoroughly explained and discussed the conditions for their participation. Because many of the participants have experiences of being documented and screened by the authorities, we have chosen to work with iterative consent. Iterative consent means that researchers and participants work together through continuous dialogue to negotiate the conditions of participation in the project and the roles of all involved parties, rather than signing documents of agreement (Mackenzie et al. 2007). The study has been approved by the ethical review board in Lund (reg. no. 2014/482). The project group, consisting of four researchers (including the authors), has met at least once a month to share experiences and discuss ethical dilemmas.

Our methodological approach has been inspired by 'long-term ethnography', where the participants are seen as teachers providing knowledge about their dynamic, changing and multi-layered lives and about their interconnectedness with social structures that penetrate their everyday and emotional life (and thus agency) (Bourgois 1995/2003). Such follow-up designs are rare in research on unaccompanied young people. Interview studies frequently include only one interview with each participant (often without forming a relationship before the interview and sometimes requiring a translator 'filtering' the conversation), and the interviews are often conducted in an institutional

setting (Stretmo 2014; Wernesjö 2011). Our research design includes regular follow-up interviews and meetings, at different times and often at different places, thereby giving us the opportunity to analyse the social and emotional complexity of the informants' lives over time. This approach is suitable for studying how people's beliefs, interpretations of the world, and identities may change.

Most interviews and observations have been recorded and transcribed in detail by the authors. Some observations and informal conversations have been captured in observation notes. All names and places have been anonymized. We have read all the material, taken notes, and extracted themes that have emerged in the material.

When we reflected on all of the material, we found that conversations about religion mostly took place after having met with the participants on many occasions over a period of time. Our ambition was to talk about everyday life in an inductive way, from the participants' points of view, where the young people were relatively free to choose topics to talk about. At first, religious themes were not mentioned, neither by them nor by us. We believe that the initial absence of the topic of religion can be explained in two ways. First, the young people are used to being labelled as unaccompanied minors, and as Muslims. Not talking about religion after knowing us for a brief time could be a consequence of such labelling, and a fear that we would develop a poor and homogenizing impression of them. We believe this because, later in our project, some of them talked about how having been labelled as 'Muslims' several times, in a negative and homogenizing way. Second, our silence about religion may reflect the research team's prejudices, in that we worried about asking them to tell us about their religious beliefs, seeing it as something important and valuable to them and thus sensitive. Instead it took time before we all felt comfortable enough with each other to talk about the issues presented in the current article.

Entangled in an anti-other discourse and resistance

> Well, they don't have any business with [people's] religion or a veil. Women or men have the right to wear whatever they want.

Adar is from Syria. He is now 20 years old and lives at a boarding school, pursuing his upper secondary school degree. His parents still reside in Syria, but his siblings, among them his sister, now live scattered across southern Sweden. Adar is interested in talking politics and is a practising Muslim. The recent political and public events aimed at Muslims in Europe have caused him to think a great deal about his own and his siblings' position in Europe. He especially thinks about his sister, because of her visibility as a Muslim when wearing a hijab.

> Marcus: Do you and your sister talk about this?

> Adar: No, I don't want her to feel nervous about it. She's so good at school. I think about this: she studies for years, for her life, and then she can't have that job. I think that's such bullshit.

Adar cares about his sister. He is afraid that all the effort and time she puts into school may be for nothing if she is not able to get a job because of her religious beliefs. Sometimes it seems as if an earlier image of a democratic Europe is being challenged by the anti-other rhetoric.

Marcus: How do you feel about your own position?

Adar: I'm so mad. It's not democracy. When I'm at a party or on Facebook, they say: 'Go to Saudi Arabia'. But I live here.

The recent debate in politics and in the media on Muslims in Europe encourages Adar to reflect on his religion and his position as an 'unaccompanied minor'. It makes him angry because he feels the anti-other discourse does not apply to him (Farris 2017). However, sometimes he can push the narrative away from himself, because he is not the Muslim they (e.g. the society, politicians, racists) are talking about.

Adar: They talk all the time about religion and terrorism, and they talk about the risk that people will connect this to Islam. You know how many Muslims live on the earth? One billion, two hundred million. I mean, if everyone's a terrorist, why do I sit here with you? [Laughs]

It is obvious to us when talking to Adar that the discourse framing Muslims as a threat to Western society, and the political and public actions that result from such a discourse, is something that preoccupies Adar. He tries, however, to deal with it in different ways. He worries about his sister's future, about her not being able to get a job. He gets angry with society and with people for having prejudices, and he tries to distance himself from the caricature of the Muslim terrorist.

But being a Muslim is not always about handling and reflecting on stigmatization, it can also provide a sense of pride, meaning and belonging. Adar builds his everyday life around his religious beliefs, which gives him a 'goal in life, to do no harm'. He was brought up to be a good Muslim by his parents, prays accordingly and visits the mosque regularly. For Adar, the mosque and the other practising Muslims provide him with a context and a sense of security, or as he himself puts it: 'a little group unity'. Following Durkheim (1912/1971), religion is more than a relation between persons and a God; it also promotes strong relationships and feelings of solidarity between people who participate in the rituals. It keeps people together.

Yussuf is another example of a person for whom religion plays an important role in everyday life, although he is a bit ambivalent. On the one hand, he says he is not religious; on the other, he believes in life after death and in the importance of being a good Muslim. Part of his ambivalence seems to be related to how Muslims are perceived in Sweden.

Yussuf: If you're really religious, people will believe you're kind of extremist […] I've grown up with people who fast, trying to pray, so it has become a habit, that I kind of, when I die I know that what I do today in life I'll be rewarded for in the afterlife. I think of life after death, that's what's making me try to be as good as possible […] and by following Muslim rules, you become a good Muslim.

Paula: You want to be a good Muslim.

Yussuf: Yes, not in Sweden, it's not possible here.

Yussuf seems to see the practice of fasting as a habit from his childhood. He relates it to being a good Muslim in life, for which he will be rewarded in the afterlife. However, he does not think it is possible to be a good Muslim in Sweden, because people will believe you are an extremist. This might be an effect of the increasing politization of religion in Sweden and Europe (Bäckström 2014), and the anti-Muslim discourse currently

dominating Europe (Farris 2017). Yussuf needs to adapt and reflect on what positions are possible to take, and as a result he *tones down* Muslim practices and identity in order to fit in. Yussuf can, however, more easily tone down his Muslim identity than, for instance, Adar's sister can. The veil she carries symbolizes a gendered difference between who can tone down and who cannot, where this would require a much greater effort from Adar's sister than from Yussuf.

Toning down is not the only strategy, others use creativity. Maganga, another participant, is part of a rap group. In his case, the importance of religion becomes visible through his music, as does the effect of current political and social discourses about Muslims and Islam.

> Maganga: We rap about several things. For example, we made a song […] to Al-Shabaab, the Islamic group.
>
> Paula: That exists in Somalia?
>
> Maganga: [T]hey say they do the right thing. But I, we, don't agree. They kill people without reason and the reason they give is that religion says it [is right]. That's bullshit.

Like Adar and Yussuf, Maganga connects his beliefs to social and political discourses, whether it is the anti-other discourse in Europe, the risk of being considered an extremist, or Al-Shabaab and its use of Islam in Somalia. We can also interpret the use of Al-Shabaab in the group's lyrics as agency through creativity or as a type of resistance, similar to other youth subcultures using certain concepts to provoke. This is the case within, for instance, the Taqwacore subgenre concerning its use of the concept of the terrorist (see Aidi 2014). Using Al-Shabaab, like using the terrorist in Taqwacore, can serve as a provocation of both a 'Muslim community' and a 'Western community'. Thus, the lyrics may represent a *double resistance* through which identity is carved out.

The young people we have met in this section all consider themselves active religious practitioners in everyday life. Their religion has great meaning to them; it provides them with feelings of pride, security and some 'group unity'. However, it is evident that these practices are also very much entangled in and affected by current political and social issues related to Islam, Muslims and 'immigrants' in Europe, like the anti-other discourse. As such, it is not possible to fully understand these young people's relationship to their religious beliefs and practices without putting it into context – the context of how Muslims are depicted and described in the public debate. The young people in this section all consider themselves believers, this is however not the case for everyone we have met. For some, what they themselves consider part of their identity or part of their history might be interpreted as religious faith by others. This will be discussed in the next section.

Not religious despite our preconceptions

In this section, we will look closer at one specific case: Bella. She exemplifies both how religion and tradition can be used to create meaning and how we, in this case as researchers, can interpret situations as religious based solely on our own prejudices (as discussed in the method section). Bella was born in Somalia and fled after her mother was incarcerated. She fled prosecution together with a younger cousin. At one point, Dawan (one of the

researchers) and Bella discuss the celebration of holidays, causing Bella to bring up religion.

> Dawan: Why is it important to celebrate [Christmas]?
>
> Bella: Because, ehh … it has something to do with religion. My mother said, she's not Christian or, she's not part of a religion, but it was something she did because it was fun, and she said I have no God, but I'll do it because it's fun. I think nothing else.
>
> Dawan: Is it the same for you? That you celebrate for fun?
>
> Bella: Yes, nothing, I think nothing, it's only fun to do it.

Religion, or religious belief, is not a major part of Bella's life; however, she sometimes uses it to make sense of what is happening in and around her life. For her, Christmas and other holidays are not related to religious belief but used as familiar concepts to approach everyday life (cf. Donaldson and Howson 2009).

Today, Bella lives alone after a severe conflict with a family she previously lived with. When this conflict was at its height, Bella suddenly started wearing a veil. Because she had told Dawan she was not religious, this was somewhat confusing. During this period, Bella was prevented from keeping in touch with her cousin, who was still living with the family. She reached out to Dawan, who agreed to accompany her to the social services to discuss the issue. On the morning of the meeting, Bella wore a veil for the first time.

> [Bella] arrives five minutes prior to the meeting. What strikes me at this point is that she's wearing a veil. It surprises me; I never thought she would wear a veil. Until recently, I didn't understand she even was a Muslim, I thought she was Christian. I tell her: 'What's this? You wearing a veil? That's nice, it suits you'. However, in my head I'm thinking: 'Why is she wearing it? What's happened? Identity crisis? Revelation? Resistance? A need for divine intervention to fix the chaos in her life?' (Observation note)

Bella's decision to suddenly wear a veil stirs up questions within Dawan about their relationship, regarding what Bella has previously told him her beliefs and identity. Rather quickly, his interpretation turns to faith and Muslim identity. A couple of weeks later, Dawan decides to ask her about her decision to wear a veil:

> Bella: Remember I told you I lose a lot of hair?
>
> Dawan: Yes
>
> Bella: Well, I was at the doctor's, and she told me the problem was that I was cold on the top of my head and that I needed some ointment on my head, and to keep my head warm. So, I thought, then I put my veil back on again. (Observation note)

Bella's decision to wear a veil has nothing to do with a sudden religious awakening or with her faith; rather, it is a piece of clothing she feels comfortable with and that she starts wearing to keep her head warm. What is interesting about this example is, first, that Bella can use clothing, concepts or language she is used to in managing her everyday life. As such, wearing the veil can be interpreted as something from her past being attributed new meaning; her everyday life contains both processes of being – using veil because she is used to wearing it – and processes of becoming – giving the veil a new meaning (Hall 1997). Second, it is also interesting how the veil can be interpreted as something

completely different based on perception and, to some degree, even prejudices. Including our own prejudices, as researchers.

This section thus problematizes a taken-for-granted link between religious symbols and habits, on the one hand, and religious belief, on the other. It also puts into focus the way we, as observers looking in from the outside, risk ascribing to these young people certain versions of Islam and overemphasizing certain symbols in our interpretations. Rather than being static over time, artefacts, traditions and symbols can be used in new ways in new contexts. In the next section, we will turn to those young people who no longer consider themselves part of an organized religion.

Developing a distance from previous faith

> In Iran, almost everyone's Muslim. […] What should I say? They'll probably ask: 'How are you in Sweden? Do you worship Allah?' And what should my answer be? It's tough.

Saleh was born in Afghanistan but lived with his parents in Iran before he fled to Sweden. After meeting his foster family in Sweden, he started reading a lot about religion and science, and eventually changed his mind regarding his religious belief and belonging. He feels that what he had been taught for a long time was a lie. This meant a huge shift in belief, from his Muslim upbringing to becoming an atheist.

Saleh talks about his family with love. As a child he used to attend the mosque with his mother, who was the most religious person in the family. His father was typically at work when the rest of the family went to the mosque. His mother taught him the importance of prayers and how they would help him. Religion used to be, as Saleh puts it, 'the most important thing' in his life, but all this changed after he had lived in Sweden for a while. For Saleh, his religion was being challenged by new experiences, new knowledge and new people. After an overwhelmingly difficult period, he decided to stop calling himself a Muslim.

> Saleh: I […] felt my body shake. I was nervous, I was afraid. I just thought, it was terrible.

> Marcus: But you never hesitated?

> Saleh: No, never, because what's said, was true, it was facts. But the thing is I was very affected by religion and I'd been for many, many years, of course it becomes part of [you], and it's hard to just 'boom' stop. Especially when they tell you, if you ever hesitate if it's true or not, then you'll be [punished] by God. Of course, it'll make you scared. I had that feeling, but it passed.

The conflict between his upbringing and his life with his family in Sweden caused him to confront his religious beliefs. Although initially feeling scared, he eventually moved further and further away from his previous religious beliefs. Later, this process made itself felt again, when Saleh was about to travel back to Iran to visit family and friends. He felt nervous and unsure about how to tell his parents and friends, or how to act if somebody asked him.

> Saleh: My family, my relatives, my friends [are Muslim]. It'll be hard to tell them. Should I lie to them or, should I tell them the truth? If I tell them the truth, they'll be sad. I don't know, it'll be hard.

> Marcus: But is it possible to talk to them?

> Saleh: I'll probably talk to them, but I feel the need to be sensitive. I'm not going straight at it: 'you're wrong, it's not right', like that. That would probably make them react strongly. But, yes, it's possible to talk to them. They have a brain, they can think: 'Am I right or am I wrong?'.

Saleh seems ambivalent about telling his parents. He believes he can discuss the matter with them, but he also feels uncertain about how they will react, and he does not want to hurt them or disparage their beliefs, because his parents mean so much to him. After Saleh got back from his trip, we met again. He had not talked to his parents about it; instead, he chose not to participate in prayer. He felt he did not want to question his family's faith, as it is such an important part of their life. 'It can be hard to have your faith questioned', he says.

Some of the other young people, like Saleh, have lost their faith. They no longer participate in religious activities. For them, faith is part of their past and upbringing, but not their present. Chuhan is another example; he no longer participates in fasting. When asked by Paula (one of the researchers) why, he says, 'I believe in nothing. That's good. It feels good'. Chuhan explains that he now considers himself an atheist.

What Chuhan and Saleh exemplify is that a religious upbringing does not by definition mean a person will remain religious. Having new experiences, meeting new people, and getting into new situations are all things that cause some of the participants to question what they used to believe in. For others, it may mean that they still consider themselves faithful Muslims, but that they begin questioning certain interpretations of their faith from their upbringing. Andy, 17 years old, is one example. He returned to Afghanistan for a visit after having lived in Sweden for three years.

Andy walked around in the local area where he grew up and met some same-age friends from the past. They asked him if he, like them, had got married yet. He told them that he had not, that he would wait until he finished university, until he had a steady job. It was as if the three years that had passed had somehow transformed him into a stranger, a visitor with another way of thinking than his friends from the past. During his visit, he went with his family members to a prayer. Philip asked him how it felt, and he answered:

> There's no good or bad feeling, it's just a cool feeling or what I can say. It's awesome because […] I believe in God, and I'm not a very strong Muslim, but I'm Muslim anyway. But I thought it was awesome just getting back to it, the routine you once had. You're supposed to pray together, the whole area, every Friday, and I did that with people I hadn't met for almost three years. They just said: 'Wasn't it you that … ? Aren't you [his] son?'. So that's another way, you know, people in society, it's a communication site, or what should I say.

His words seem to be those of a person coming from the outside, but who once experienced the ritual taking place as natural. Moreover, what he describes is a highly social setting, with 300 people turning their bodies in the same direction, towards Mecca, like other Muslims all over the world do. But he was also critical of what was going on, especially of the religious leader, the imam:

> He gives himself the right to say what's right or wrong, I thought that's a bit strange. He's got the power somehow. I asked him some things and he got a bit aggressive [laughs]. I asked him about women and their rights, that I think is wrong. He said: 'No, you can't say things like that.'

This section problematizes the assumption that is sometimes made in the public debate, namely, that a homogeneous Muslim culture poses a threat to an equally homogeneous 'Western' way of life (see Farris 2017; Yilmaz 2012). Chuhan, Saleh and others have lost

their faith. Andy's narrative about his 'homecoming' to Afghanistan shows how he applies a critical perspective to the interpretations made by the imam, but it also shows how the prayer provided him with a sense of routine and unity. Together, their narratives point to the complexity of Muslim life in a world of migration. In line with Stuart Hall (1997), cultural identity consists of an axis of being – for instance, the importance of being able to keep social contacts intact and sharing social moments through religious practice – and of an axis of becoming. This is not the same as these practices being statically diffused over time and place, rather they are customized and modified to fit the young people's everyday life. This will be further elaborated in the next section.

Considering hope to be your god

> Cruze: When I was in Afghanistan, I didn't know that much about religion, I just did it, sort of. I had to do it for the family. So, I didn't know that much about religion, everything was different. I prayed to Allah, but I didn't do it five times a day. Yes, I prayed, but not all the time. […] It was a rule, daily routines […].

Cruze thinks about practising faith, not as an essence, but rather as a tradition handed down from one generation to another, and as something that is construed and reconstructed by means of routines and rituals (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991; Durkheim 1912/1971). Cruze explains that his parents would not punish him if he occasionally did not pray, but that people in his local community would see it as strange if he did not participate in Muslim celebration ceremonies. That is, there was a local social pressure to participate and to be a member of the community. This resembles Durkheim's (1912/1971) view on religion, according to which a certain collective focus on a sacred object creates feelings of solidarity. People should participate in the rituals to keep the community intact. As a little boy, Cruze participated in these rituals, because they were given central importance in the local community and seen as something one just does, as an *institutionalized* way of living (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991). As the interview with Cruze proceeds, Philip asks him if he, as a boy, was a 'true believer', and Cruze answers:

> Yes, you could say that, that I was a believer. And it's not that I'm not a believer now, I'm still a believer, it's just that I don't pray. To me what's most important is that you have a good heart, that you help people who need help, that you're kind to other people, that we support each other, that you show respect for others, that you respect children, that you're helpful to children, that you're kind to children, that's the most important to me. So, to me it's more important with a good heart than praying five times a day. And that's my personal description of what it means to be a believer.

We interpret Cruze's words to mean that he does not care about what God is called, but rather how one treats other people. Cruze's religion is about solidarity here on earth.

For two years, Cruze lived as an irregular migrant in a Swedish city. During this period of his life, he had to hide from the Swedish authorities. During that hard time, he met people from a voluntary organization that helped young refugees. This organization took him to the Swedish Church, where he was given the opportunity to do voluntary work with children. This increased his feelings of hope for the future:

> I was given food and some money. That's not what interested me, but I wanted to be there. I wanted to learn, I really wanted to know more. What interested me was this benevolence, this kindness. That people who have no idea who I am still let me stay there. I got help. I suddenly

got a lot of friends. [Before that] loneliness was about to destroy me, I didn't dare to go outside. It became my security to be there.

After some time, Cruze became a member of the Church of Sweden. We interpret his willingness to stay with the community of the Church of Sweden as being in line with Durkheim's (1912/1971) theory on religious life, that is, as something social, a need to be cared for by other people, rather than moving from one god to another. Participating in social rituals with other people may create feelings of solidarity, giving rise to strong bonds between people and a certain kind of energy (Collins 2004).

The ritual of becoming an active member of the Church of Sweden made him feel he was part of the family that the community of the Church now represents to him. But, even after the ritual, he did not want to label himself as either Christian or Muslim:

I'm not trying to label myself as a Muslim or Christian, I'm trying to be a human being who believes. There is God, but I don't see that God is a man, I only see that God is a greater force. And for me personally, God means hope. I just have hope, I have hope in the future. The word hope is my God, I can say that.

It is not easy to place Cruze in a religious category; his views on himself and religion transcend such classifications, even though he believes in a supernatural being (Sigurdson 2012). Neither the God of Christianity nor Allah was his God. Hope was the 'greater force'.

Linking back to the beginning of our text on Cruze, we can conclude that he saw Islam as practices of being good to other people. We believe that religious belief and practice are recreated and transformed in social encounters and everyday situations in life. Cruze's life has changed a great deal since he was a child, living in Afghanistan. Leaving the local area where he grew up and the social relations in which he was embedded, he could participate in other social environments, which provided new ideas that were of importance in transforming his identity.

Discussion and conclusion

Young people in Sweden with a background in countries where Islam is the dominant religion must deal with the fact that they are interpreted through an anti-other discourse that constructs Islam as threatening and strange. None of the participants seem to be able to escape the assumption that they could be related to Islamic fanaticism and terrorism. This current anti- Muslim rhetoric contains some common assumptions. These are an 'assumed social separateness, cultural fixity and boundedness of religious […] difference' (Mac an Ghaill and Haywood 2015, 98). What becomes clear when listening to the young people in our study is that there is no *single* narrative about religious faith, as is presupposed by these assumptions. The young people's stories are much more complex than that, providing many possible identities in relation to religion. First, social separateness is not a valid point, as exemplified by Saleh. It is through new and old social relationships, with other Muslims as well as with non-believers, that his relationship to his previous religious beliefs is developed. It is, thus, through social encounters that faith, relationships and bonds are created, upheld and challenged. Second, cultural fixity is equally invalid; the variation observed in the young people's relationship to their faith, religion and background, as presented here, rather points to cultural fluidity. Third, the presumed boundedness to Islam

rather contains different approaches, influences and forms of agency. Instead of arguing for a homogeneous approach to religious belief, the young people all have their own take on religious or non-religious belonging connected to the construction of identity.

For some, like Adar and Maganga, religion is part of their everyday life, and they identify themselves as practising Muslims. For others, like Saleh and Chuhan, their path has led them away from religion. For others, things are even more complex. Bella's use of clothing, which we as researchers initially interpreted as religious, was instead solely connected to mundane, everyday habits and feeling comfortable. Cruze left Islam and became a member in the Church of Sweden after meeting and interacting with Christians. Such narratives and experiences show the huge diversity in what it means to be a refugee from a country where Islam is the dominant religion. However, there are still some common experiences observable in this material.

First, these young people both need to navigate and are affected by *the current political and social context* of questioning Muslim people, and this is the case regardless of their own personal relationship to Islam (Farris 2017). It is of course possible to claim that the young people who themselves actively adhere to a Muslim faith are more exposed, but as Bella's case shows us, this is not necessarily the case. As a non-Muslim, using a veil puts her automatically in a position where she is questioned, in this case by us researchers. Her and Adar's sister's experiences points to a gendered aspect of the anti-Muslim rhetoric that seems to especially put them in the line of fire, not least because of their visibility as potential Muslims (Akkerman 2015; Farris 2017).

Second, religious faith needs to be related to its *social and emotional embodiments*. Getting a little group unity, as Adel puts it, or praying together with a large group of people, like Andy, creates an emotional force that can be valued regardless of your own personal faith. In Adel's case, religion can be interpreted as something that provides him with relationships where they can all share their faith; in Andy's case, it is more relatable to a social setting (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991; Durkheim 1912/1971). Regardless of possible differences, religion and belief are to a certain extent relational, and it is through social and emotional embodiment that religious belief – as well as possible shifts, changes and resistance related to religious belief – takes place.

Finally, for these young people, fleeing from their original contexts to Sweden, a post-secular country without a state church, can mean more possible alternatives to exercising faith (Sigurdson 2009). This, in turn, can initiate reflections on previous everyday practices, such as praying or listening to the imam. Everyday life is often institutionalized and perceived as 'natural' (Berger and Luckmann 1966/1991). Breaking away from those contexts may create possibilities to change what one is and how one is regarded by other people. That is, physical, temporal and social distances make it possible to create other identities, other ways of being or not being religious. Thus, regardless of religiosity, the young people all navigate, reflect and draw conclusions as *active and social human beings*. They are, as Stuart Hall (1997) suggests, entangled in an axis of being and an axis of becoming, affected both by what has been and by what is now. They are not simply religious or non-religious, and they are not simply Muslim or non-Muslim; they are active and reflective human beings who will continue to develop their identity in relation to what happens around them, both on a political and on a more social level.

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