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Islam, Education and Muslim Diversity in Finland

Tuomas Martikainen and Arniika Kuusisto

Abstract

This article discusses religious education among Muslims in Finland with some universalizable perspectives and insights for Islam, education and Muslim diversity. It starts with a presentation of religious socialization and education including a migrant generation perspective. Then it presents a brief history of Finnish Muslim population and takes a closer look at Muslim generations based on demographic data. That is followed by an overview of the Finnish national RE system. Then we look at the organization and execution of Islamic education in Finland with special emphasis on the diversity of the Muslim population and migrant generations. Finally, the conclusion examines the complex interplay of Islamic education and growing up as a Muslim child in Finland, highlighting the embeddedness of Finnish Islam in broader societal, migration and transnational contexts.

Keywords

Islam, religious education, minority, diversity, Muslims, generation, Finland.

Introduction

Finland is religiously a Lutheran Christian majority society that has historically had relatively few religious minorities. It is also among the more secularized countries of the world with declining church membership and low levels of religious participation. While religious minorities have been few, there have been some. Orthodox Christians are an old historical minority, but also some Protestant Christian churches, the Catholic Church as well as small Jewish and Muslim communities have had a presence for more than century. In addition to historical legal restrictions, one important reason for low levels of religious diversity is that Finland did not experience major inflows of international migration except for some colonial migration within the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. The times changed in the 1990s, which led to the growth of some of the previous religious minorities and the establishment of new minorities. (Martikainen 2013.)

Religious education is part of the Finnish national curricula throughout its educational system from Early Childhood Education and Care, comprehensive school and the academic track of upper secondary school. The school subject was mainly confessional in nature until 2003, when it was refined as non-confessional religious education in one's own religion. The change was part of the renewal of freedom of religion legislation. (Sakaranho & Salmenkivi 2009.) A noteworthy aspect of Finnish Religious Education is that it has accommodated some needs of religious minorities earlier, in particular regarding the historical Orthodox Christian minority that has constituted 1–2% of population and has had some form of public endorsement of RE education since the 1840s (Aikonen 2015). Members of other religious minorities have been accommodated with varying flexibility, but they mainly had the option of participating in the Lutheran Religious Education or, since 1985, in secular ethics, or being freed altogether from Religious Education. In some cases, the minority communities also organized their own teaching. The major change came, though, first after the implementation of new religious freedom legislation in 2004, when minority religions were granted more equal rights to Religious Education at primary and secondary schools. State has also granted permissions to the operation of and financially supported a small number of religion-based schools, but these are and have been very few in number. (Sakaranaho & Salmenkivi 2009.)

The history of Muslim settlement in Finland dates to the nineteenth century when the Russian Empire annexed the Finnish territory from Sweden. Among the Russian military personnel and civilians were individual Muslims who stayed in the country for different periods of time. A permanent Muslim minority was established in the late nineteenth century as Russian Tatar Muslim traders with their families started to settle in a few locations in Southern Finland. The Tatars remained in Finland after the country's independence in 1917, creating a community of some hundreds. Tatars were the main

group of Muslims until the 1980s, when numbers of other Muslims started to rise. (Halén & Martikainen 2016.) Since the 1990s, Muslim immigration has been continuously growing, so that in the beginning of the 2020s an estimated 120,000-130,000 persons of Muslim background were living in Finland, constituting about 2% of Finnish population (Pauha & Martikainen 2022).

This article discusses religious education among Muslims in Finland, including aspects of both formal and informal religious education carried out in the home, religious community, and the wider society. It starts with a presentation of religious socialization and education including a migrant generation perspective. Then it presents a brief history of Finnish Muslim population and takes a closer look at Muslim generations based on demographic data. That is followed by an overview of the place of Religious Education and Islam in the national educational system in Finland. Furthermore, we look at the organization and execution of Islamic education Finland, with special emphasis on the diversity of the Muslim population and migrant generations. Finally, in the concluding part of the article, we examine the complex interplay of Islamic education and growing up as a Muslim child in Finland, highlighting the embeddedness of Finnish Islam in broader societal, migration and transnational contexts.

Religious socialization from a generational perspective

Socialization as a notion refers to the process through which an individual becomes a member of society and learns its values, norms, and patterns of behaviour. The learning trajectory leads into personal worldview or stance, or, as Klingenberg and Sjö (2019) put it, its a: 'process in which an individual comes to hold preferences in relation to dimensions understood as religious in the surrounding context.' Socialization in childhood is customarily divided into primary and secondary socialization. Primary socialization refers to the role of the (extended) family in the home, as the main context where the child spends most of her time in her formative years. Secondary socialization refers to the role of other institutions that grow in importance as the child grows. These include Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), preschool, school, as well as the other significant institutions that the child is introduced to, such as religious community and hobby groups, as well as friends and peers. While there is a necessary overlap and often mutual support of various socializing agents and actors, the distinction between primary and secondary is generally seen also as a ranking order of importance. Even though socialization happens throughout one's lifespan, as external conditions change, it is usually understood that the formative years until adulthood play a significant role for the entire life of a person. (E.g., Berger & Luckmann 1966; Crisogen 2016.)

However, in contrast to the classic theories on socialization, what is notable in terms of the present-day Western societies such as Finland, the societal or secondary socialization begins in a much earlier age than it used to at the time when these theorizations were conceptualized. Finnish ECEC provision offers a subjective right to early childhood education and care, where the child can be enrolled from age 9 months upwards, even if the compulsory requirement to education begins only at the age of 6 years. At present, children begin Finnish ECEC on average at the age of 1,5-2 years (City of Helsinki InfoFinland 2024). Already the youngest, under two-year-olds, can spent 40-50 hours in ECEC per week during the parents' workdays. This would mean most of these young children's waking hours—highlighting the significance of ECEC as a socialization context, and the role of teachers and peers as socialization agents, alongside family home and parents.

Religion and matters related to religion are not typical topics of discussion in Finnish homes (Spännäri, Kallatsa & Tervo-Niemelä 2022). Lipiäinen, Kuusisto and Kallioniemi (2023) examined upper secondary school students' (16-19 years) worldviews in Finland, finding that the majority (61%) report seldom having had any religion-related upbringing at home, and a mere 8 percent state that religion is often visible in their home. Besides the diminishing religious socialization by the parents, the youth themselves also emphasized that their religion or other worldview is their personal choice (68%), and also that religion or worldview to them is merely a part of the culture and environment in their growing up context. As regards the elements or people influencing the constructing of their personal worldviews, the most effective sources of information were reported to be the Internet (59%), followed by school (57%). Of other sources, there was a gender difference between those identifying as girls emphasizing the significance of family, friends and social media more than their male peers did. (Lipiäinen, Kuusisto & Kallioniemi, 2023.)

With the lessening religious socialization in the homes, and the increasing secularization, pluralization and individualization of the societal worldview landscape, children's and youths' worldviews have been found to be increasingly hybrid in terms of merging both religious and non-religious elements (Helve 2015). Societal influences gain more space as socializing agents, and for instance films such as *Frozen*, or video games like *Minecraft*, have influenced children's perceptions of life after death and their views of enchantment and magic as a part of their personal worldview (Kuusisto, 2021).

Religious socialization in the home is a relatively scarcely studied phenomenon in contrast to Religious Education taking place in the public educational arenas, both in Finland and internationally. Moreover, religious education offered by churches and other religious communities in Finland is also a less researched focus (e.g., Kilpeläinen 2022). As an exception to the latter, the Finnish confirmation

training offered by the Evangelical Lutheran Church has during the recent years been widely and systematically studied (e.g., Tervo-Niemelä & Porkka 2023). Furthermore, what we do know about parental religious socialization in Finland is that its role in families has diminished notably (Tervo-Niemelä 2021), and that parents report preference for their children to choose their individual life view rather than being socialized to a tradition of the previous generations (Kirkon nelivuotiskatsaus 2020). However, these studies target the population as a whole, whereas the parents with a stronger personal religious worldview, including those more active in religious minorities, still typically hold more defined aims for their children's religious socialization (Kuusisto 2013). The discussion of generations provides a further perspective on socialization and religious education. In it we can find at least four different understandings of 'generation'. The first one relates to biological reproduction, where children, parents, grandparents, etc. are the different generations. The second perspective looks not at biological reproduction or parenthood, but at demographic birth cohorts. For example, people born in certain year of decade constitute a generation. The third understanding extends the cohort perspective of young people living at the same time and sharing similar experiences and events in growing up. Thereby it is claimed, for example, that people born at the turn of the 1990s – the so-called Millennials – share common generational experiences that unites them and affects their behavior in various ways. The fourth perspective looks at the experience of international migrants and their relocation, where the first generation are those who have themselves moved to another country and the second generation are their children born in the host country. The basic claim in the study of immigration generations is that there are different experiences of socialization for individuals (even in the same family) based on where they were born and raised. (Rumbaut 2004).

In the study of migrant generations, the basic distinction is made between the first and second generation. The first generation are those who have moved to a new country, usually statistically defined as 'born abroad' or 'foreign born', and the second generation are their children born in the country of destination. In addition to this basic difference, researchers have looked at the significance of age of migration, as it can make an important difference for the person's socialization context and even her subsequent life. Ruben Rumbaut distinguishes three age-based subcategories for children and youth of the first generation: generation 1.75 (0–5 years at the age of migration), generation 1.5 (6–12 years) and generation 1.25 (13–17 years). Based on large demographic data in the United States we see salient differences in integration outcomes on a population level of these age-specific generations, so that those entering at a young age resemble largely the second generation, whereas those entering in their teens lack more in the educational and professional success. This can be understood as an age effect in the ability to learn the host society's language and other skills, in which

formal education plays a central role. In other words, the age of migration may predict certain features on immigrant integration processes on a population level. While the model is not designed for an individual-level approach it nevertheless is a useful remainder of the significance of the age of migration. Sometimes also children, who have both migrant and non-migrant parents are included, and they are technically referred to as generation 2.5. (Rumbaut 2004.)

For those individuals and groups in which religion is an important meaning-making system, religion can also generate cultural and religious resources through resilience and coping (Cetrez & Kaynak 2023). Hence, religion can be a relevant dimension when examining individuals' and groups' intergenerational processes of integration, and this has been confirmed in several studies (e.g., Connor 2014; Kivisto 2014; Jakob 2018). The intergenerational change is naturally embedded in the broader societal setting and thus needs to be understood against the wider cultural context and the role of religion in its worldview landscape. (Cetrez 2011.) Religious minority position may, besides important social capital and other network generated resources, also trigger notable value conflicts and identity negotiations to the younger generations growing up at the intersection of minority and majority memberships. This is, again, in particular so, where the values and religious commitment varies greatly between the individual, family, group and the broader societal setting. (Kuusisto 2011; Jakob 2018.)

So far, the largest empirical study taking account of religious intergenerational transmission among different migrant groups and generations is the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Survey in Four European Countries (CILS4EU). Konstanze Jakob (2018) summarized previous research of CILS4EU and other studies, and points out that while we do have somewhat robust knowledge of the main changes, we are not yet able to identify in detail differences in different integration contexts. Among the regular findings is that despite the general tendency for religion to become less important in West European societies, it remains high in particular among Muslims. Another significant finding is that the parent's motivation for religious transmission is salient. (Jakob 2018.) As can be seen from the above cited research literature, this is major difference in comparison to the mainstream population in countries like Finland.

A brief history of Islam in Finland

To place Finland on the European map of Islam, one quickly realizes that it is a story of two different origins. The first part of the story relates to Napoleonic Wars in the beginning of the nineteenth century and Russian power politics. Most of the territory of the contemporary Republic of Finland was an eastern province of Sweden from the twelfth century until early nineteenth century. During

that time Catholic Christianity was established as the main religion, which changed into Lutheran Christianity as part of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. The neighboring Russia, and its predecessor states, was predominantly Orthodox Christian, but due to historical conflicts and shifting borders between Russia and Sweden both had Lutheran or Orthodox minorities in their midst. In 1808 Russia invaded the Finnish part of Sweden and annexed it as an autonomous Grand Duchy the following year. The war was originally motivated by fear of a French invasion to Russia via Finnish territories, but as the Swedish military was weaker than expected, the whole territory was annexed to protect the capital of Russia at the time, St. Petersburg. (Halén & Martikainen 2016.)

As a result of the annexation soldiers and civilians from the Russian Empire settled around Finland, in garrison towns and areas closer to Russia. Among the army personnel and civilians were Muslims, and we have evidence of military imams serving the local population. The Muslims were mainly Tatars and Bashkirs from the Volga-Ural region. The birth of a permanent Muslim community is related to the settlement of, mainly, Mishar Tatars from a few villages in the Nizhni Novgorod Province from the 1870s onwards. Gradually, their numbers grew and families were formed or came along. The Mishars were farmers during the summertime and engaged in trade during the winter. A stop in between for many was St. Petersburg, which was situated close to the Finnish border. (Elmgren 2021.) After the October Revolution and Finnish independence in December 1917, border crossing to Finland became gradually more difficult and eventually the movement stopped completely as the Soviet Union did not allow its citizens international mobility. Thereafter it took a whole generation before contact with historical home villages could be reinstated. (Martikainen & Halén 2016; Elmgren 2021.) It should also be noted that not all Finnish Muslims at the time were Tatars, but the other Muslims were few and did not organize themselves until the 1980s (Leitzinger 2008).

The Tatars organized themselves formally into mosque communities and various associations during the first part of the twentieth century. The first association was founded in 1916, and later others followed. (Leitziger 2006.) Full religious freedom to Tatars was granted in 1923, when renewed freedom of religion legislation came into force. Prior to that there were severe legal restrictions for other religions than the Lutheran and, to some extent, the Orthodox Churches. (Heikkilä et al. 2005.) The Tatars took care of teaching their children religion, language, and culture through their own associations as well as summer courses (Suomen Islam-seurakunta 1975, 13-16). These subjects have never been taught at public schools except for Tatars' own school – Turkish Primary School – that functioned in Helsinki from 1948 to 1969, but was eventually discontinued (Leitzinger 2006, 229-235). It should be mentioned that the community has used varying identifications of itself over the years, of which 'Tatars' and 'Turks' have been the most common, but neither without controversy

among those identifying themselves with the community. A common thread for these discussions among Tatars has been an identification with language (Tatar), ethnicity (Mishar) and religion (Islam), whereby a distinction is drawn between themselves and others, including Muslims of other backgrounds. (Leitzinger 1996, 206-264.) Today the Tatar Muslim minority creates a historical layer that unites Finland to East European Muslim history (Larsson 2016).

While the Tatars have been successful in keeping their heritage despite being a rather small community, their insistence in using the Tatar or Turkish languages in their religious activities was an impetus for later arrivals to form a new community. Earlier, the Tatar mosque in Helsinki was to a greater extent used by other Muslims, but as their number grew some of the newcomers started to look for other options. This led eventually to the registration of the Islamic Society of Finland in 1987 and their *Rabita* mosque. This was the first mosque community founded by new immigrants, mainly from Arab countries. (Sakaranaho 2006, 255-256.) The *Rabita* mosque was to play a key role in the institutionalization Islamic infrastructure of the newly arrived Muslims in Finland. Later numerous further mosques have followed, often with support from *Rabita*, so that we currently have at least some dozen active mosques communities and more than a hundred Islamic associations around Finland. (Pauha & Nikanne 2022)

This was the beginning of the second story of Islam in Finland, one that is not related to the legacy of the Russian Empire, but rather to post-Cold War international migrations, European unification and American global hegemony. Even if Finland had some Muslims who arrived earlier as international students or spouses, the main change in Muslim migration patterns is directly related to end of the Cold War at the turn of the 1990s. Prior to that and in the aftermath of World War II, Finland was a poor and dominantly rural country that entered a period rapid urbanization and economic turbulence in the 1960s. Simultaneously with high levels of country internal migration up to some hundreds of thousands of Finns emigrated in search for work to mainly Sweden. Many returned, but many stayed. Over the following decades, the country transformed to an urbanized society, and remained an outpost of Western Europe next to the Soviet Union with few opportunities for international migrants. (Martikainen 2013.)

The fall of the Soviet empire changed the situation. Amidst changing geopolitics, Finland became an immigrant receiving society through ethnic return migration from the Soviet Union, growing numbers of asylum seekers and other migration flows. A quick entry process to the European Union with membership in 1995 led to a liberalization on national legislation on entry, citizenship, and minority policies. Moreover, Finns started to move increasingly around the world due to tourism, work and studies, all of which led to return flows including Muslims as spouses. However, the main route for

most new Muslims was through international protection, as UNHCR refugee resettlement through annual quota and independent asylum seekers. Crises in the Middle East, former Yugoslavia, Somalia and Afghanistan, all related with American military interventions, of the past decades have been major root causes for those seeking international in Finland. Beside international protection, other main causes of immigration have been international students and marriage migration, and to a lesser extent work. (Martikainen 2013.)

While exact figures are hard to come by, Pauha and Martikainen (2022, 15) have estimated that the Muslim population in Finland has grown as follows: ca. 3,500 in 1990, ca. 15,000 in 2000, ca. 60,000 in 2010, and ca. 120,000-130,000 in 2019. Most of these individuals, or their parents, have arrived in Finland as either UNHCR resettled refugees or asylum seekers, both including family reunification. We shall later take a closer look at demographic features of this population. In any case, the rapid grown of the Muslim population came forth with an equally strong growth in Islamic institutions around the country. Among Muslims the majority are Sunnis and a minority Shias. They also include adherents of different Islamic movements. Islam and Muslim migrants have been quite extensively debated in Finland, and in particular the rise of nationalist politics and the Finns Party have contributed to the debate since the 2010s. The debates are somewhat like discussions elsewhere in Western Europe. (Martikainen 2013; Pauha & Nikanne 2022.)

This dual Finnish Muslim history of both nineteenth century Russian colonial and post-Cold War international migrations makes Finland different in comparison to many other European countries. The difference to several Western European countries is that there was practically no post-World War II labour migration to Finland that made Islam visible in the Western European region. The situation is also different compared to many Eastern European countries that had autochthonous Muslim populations with origins in the Ottoman and Russian Empires, but few newly arrived Muslims. This dual history translates today so that the Tatar Muslims, who were fairly invisible to Finnish society at large, paved the way for Islamic institutionalization in Finland, so that the organizational processes of Muslim communities have not become a major issue in the last decades, even though Islam and Muslim migrants in many other respects have been a hot topic of discussion.

Muslim demographics and generations in Finland

The Finnish Muslim population is composed of three main categories. The first is the historical Tatar Muslim minority that has lived in the country already for several (biological) generations. In the first generations the Tatars tended to intermarry, but later most of them found partners from the majority

population (Leitzinger 2006, 246-249). If we use the membership statistics of the Tatars as a reference point, we see that their number was about 500 in 2022 (Uskonnot Suomessa 2024). The second group consists of international migrants who have arrived to Finland mainly since the 1990s and their children. Pauha and Martikainen (2022) have estimated that this group includes about 120,000-130,000 individuals with roots across the Muslim world in 2019. It is a heterogeneous group, and the largest national groups originate in order of size from Iraq, Somalia, former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran and Syria (ibid., 15). Many of the post-1990 Muslim migrants are still adults in working and childbearing age. With higher-than-average fertility and high level of religious endogamy the Muslim population grows, which is supplemented by continuing immigration. The third group are Finnish converts to Islam and their children, likely a couple of thousand individuals (Pauha & Nikanne 2022). As the sizes of the Tatars and converts are small in comparison to those of first- or second-generation migration background, we can estimate that there are up to 130,000 Muslims living in Finland.

Based on Pauha and Martikainen's (2022) estimate of the religious backgrounds of international migrants in Finland, we can suggest 91,000-99,00 were first generation migrants and 27,000-31,000 second generation were of Muslim background in 2019 (ibid., 18). To illustrate their generational age structure, figure one is combination of first and second generation migrants from the seven largest origin countries, namely Afghanistan, Bosnia and Hertsegovina, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Turkey in Finland in 2022. The table shows that of the first generation that about 20% are under the age of twenty, two thirds are adults (20-50 years), and a minority older than that. The second generation is quite different, as 80% of them are under the age twenty and the rest mainly under the age of thirty. If we look at the generations together among those under twenty years of age, we see that the second generation constitutes more than half of the total, and the vast majority in the youngest age groups. Together the seven countries represent about three out of four Finnish Muslims. As their age structure is similar of those of other main Muslim immigration countries, we can extrapolate that children and youth of Muslim background are 2,000-2,500 individuals in every age group between 0 and 20 years, which equals to 3-5% in each cohort in 2022.

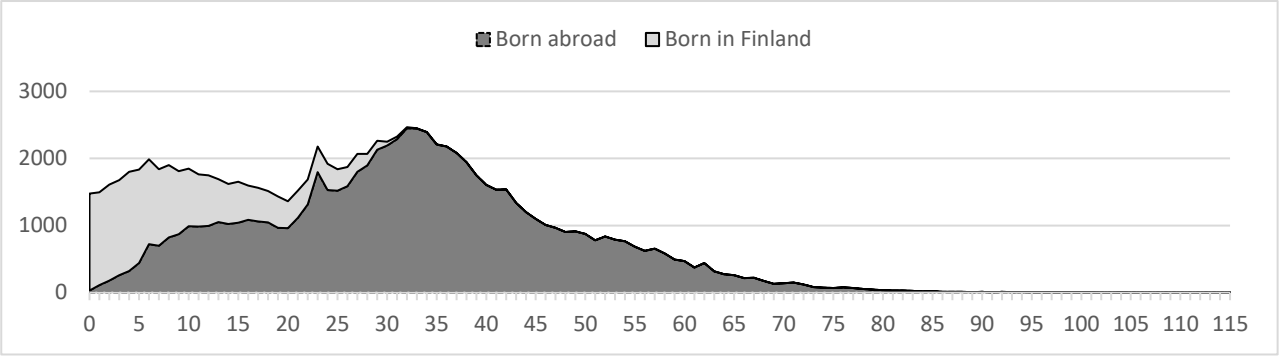

Figure 1. The age structure of people born in the 7 largest Muslim origin countries and their Finland-born children in Finland in 2022. The countries included are Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria and Turkey. Data includes only those individuals whose registered mother tongue is other than Finnish and Swedish. Source: Statistics Finland, Population Structure, 11re -- Population according to age (1-year) and sex by area, 1972-2022.

When we translate these figures into religious socialisation in the families and religious education in educational institutions and religious associations, it becomes clear that as we are talking of up to 45,000 Muslim background children and teenagers in the 2020s, who live in the most diverse settings, and whose skills, for example in the national Finnish and Swedish languages, are likely highly diverse. While we certainly find among this diverse groups also many children and youth in whose families religious socialization is not a priority, we are nevertheless talking about a significant group of young people. They also represent from their family backgrounds many kinds of interpretations of Islam. This creates many pedagogical as well as practical challenges for organizing religious education both in public educational institutions as well as in many religious associations. As the Muslim community grows both due to children born Finland as well as incoming international migration, the educational situation likely continues to be similar for the coming years.

The Muslim population is concentrated in the Helsinki capital region and some other larger metropolitan areas in Finland. As we know from housing migrants' housing studies, people of refugee background live concentrated in certain areas in various metropolitan areas in Finland. (Kauppinen 2019) The geographical segregation of housing areas used to be very low in Finland until the 1990s, after which both the socio-economic and ethnic gaps between neighbourhoods have widened. For example, in Helsinki, the proportion of adults with master's level or higher tertiary education now ranges from 7 to 38 percent between primary school catchment areas, meaning a five-fold difference between schools. (Bernelius & Huila 2021.) In terms of home languages, the neighbouring Vantaa

ECEC provision, offering education and care to 13.000 children between the ages 9 months to 6 years in its 134 municipal ECEC units, has preschools where over 90 percent of children speak other than Finnish or Swedish at home, in contrast to others where the preschool language is also home language to 95% of the children (Mäkelä 2024.) From the perspective of the present article focus, this means that since we know from previous research that Muslims are overrepresented among the lower income and social classes due to their refugee background (Martikainen & Brekke 2022) and language backgrounds, we can expectthat Muslim children and youth constitute a significant proportion of these children. One significant factor in these observations is the migration background of the children and their parents, including the age of migration.

Religious education in Finland

Basic teaching in reading was introduced with the Reformation in Finland. A wider responsibility for the education of its inhabitants emerged only later from the 1860s as part of modernizing processes, including the development of public schooling (Koski & Filander 2012). The educational ethos was distinguished by Christian morality, confessional teaching of Lutheran Christianity, embracing Lutheran faith, and nationalism. The role of religious education at the time was to socialize and nurture citizens, also in their religious life. National unity, community and reconciliation were emphasized in the aftermath of Finland's independence, and children were taught to love and honor their home, religion and 'fatherland'. As Christian moral code was a core purpose of schooling, religious and secular aims were inseparable. (Poulter 2013; Ubani, Poulter & Rissanen 2020.)

In the 1923 Religious Freedom Act, Religious Education was defined as a confessional subject of the majority religion, however allowing exemptions for pupils without religious affiliation or those with other than Lutheran affiliation, as well as arranged teaching of Orthodox Christian Religious Education and a separate subject of Ethics for the non-affiliated pupils (Saine 2000, 107). After World War II, Christian values started becoming less important in society and societal education (Innanen 2006). The societal education was influenced by the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights (1948), with recognition of individual rights and an emphasis on democracy (Kähkönen 1976, 172–173). Religious Education promoted both ethical development and societal membership, not solely Christian dogma any longer. The 1970s marked an ideological shift from the previous: Religious education was still aiming to help children reflect on ethical issues, but now Lutheran ethics were being replaced by liberal ethics emphasizing individual values and personal life questions, and also

other world religions were being introduced in the classroom. (Poulter 2013; Ubani, Poulter & Rissanen 2020.)

In the 1990s with increasing internationalization and influence of neo-liberal politics coinciding with economic recession saw the development of increasingly secularized and pluralized society, calling for individual freedom and self-realization as the ultimate values of education (Launonen, 2000). In societal Religious Education, educational sciences gained space from the prevailing theological basis, leading into a step away from understanding religion as 'religious'. Rather, 'religion' in Religious Education reflected cultural and societal components and aimed for educating children to see their personal responsibility in the world and to support the development of a personal worldview. Religious education emphasized existential life questions, tolerance, and skills for living in a multicultural society. (Poulter, 2013; Ubani, Poulter & Rissanen 2020.)

As the number of immigrants increased in Finland, the religious rights of minorities necessitated a rethink. In national curriculum, arrangements for teaching religious education in several so-called minority religions, including Islam, were established as part of the Religious Education syllabus (Innanen 2006; Saine 2000; Ubani, Poulter & Rissanen 2020). The 2003 Freedom of Religion Act maintained the practical instruction of Religious Education in schools organized according to children's religious affiliation or non-affiliation, though with a terminological shift from 'confession' to 'one's own religion' (Basic Education Act, Amendment 2003/454, 13§), whereas the contents of the subject area were not altered. There was also an increased awareness of the diversity of religions, and an individual was perceived as a learner in the world in flux, the need for understanding and communicating with others in a diversity of worldviews, one's social responsibility and the global ethics. At present, the National Curriculum for Basic Education (2014) still emphasizes the diversity of worldviews, however, shared aims have been prepared for learning across the variety of Religious Education syllabuses for different worldviews, also so to emphasize their mutual contents. An increase of skills-based thinking has been seen as a sign of the instrumentalization of the subject. (Poulter, 2013; Ubani, Poulter & Rissanen 2020.)

Religious Education as a school subject in Finland has throughout its history thus been adapted to the shifting visions of nation-construction (Lappalainen 2006; 2009) and educational success somewhat reactively. With its foundation in unquestioned, however in its present form Secular Lutheranism, the educational system and within it, Religious Education, on one hand, has not been able to seriously challenge its own rationale in the changing world, and, on the other, as a societal hegemony can also become exclusive to other than Secular Lutheran worldviews – even that of the more religiously oriented Lutherans (Riitaoja, Pouter & Kuusisto 2010; Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2017). At present,

the Finnish Religious Education model has been both justified and problematized by the arguments that recognizing the right of minorities and children to their own religion maintains democratic principles and serves as a prime example of the multicultural ideal. This entails also problematics related to Human Rights, for instance in the practicalities of instruction taking place in segregated classes, the varying access to qualified teachers, quality materials, lesson times and venues, minimum group sizes required for organizing the instruction according to a particular religious education curriculum. (Poulter, Kuusisto, Malama & Kallioniemi 2017.)

Islamic religious education in Finland

The role of family and religious organisations as educational actors

The role of the particular ethnic or religious community, where the individuals are affiliated, may play an important role regarding the assigned or identified position that a person has in the wider society. The portrayal of minorities in relation to the national narratives, and the related patterns of inclusion and exclusion, may thus vary in regard to what is seen as 'us' or 'them' in the nation-construction (Kohvakka 2023; Poulter, Riitaoja & Kuusisto 2017; Lappalainen 2009). Furthermore, the role of religious authority in a community, on one hand, and its relationship to the secular authority in society holds relevance when it comes to the attitudes and roles that an individual holds towards for instance public authorities in the society—and to the societal education it provides. Gearon and Kuusisto (2018) have examined the relationship between secular and religious authority and the institutional power of education, noting that it is complex and overlapping in relation to cultural expression. In line with the previous political theologies research examining the ongoing tensions of religious authority with secular political systems, legal frameworks and institutions of educational replication, their data illustrates how education – in the broadest sense, as well as in its formal institutional structures – provided a mediating role for power exchanges between religious and political authority. This was especially evident in the religious leaders' responses to issues of cultural and self-expression. The researchers propose a 'double nexus' for religious authority in education: first, the internal nexus within religious traditions and, second, the external nexus of religious communities with secular, legal and political authority. (Gearon & Kuusisto 2018.) In relation to Finnish Muslims, this has been illustrated for instance in a study of Finnish Early Childhood Education and Care (henceforth: ECEC) provision, where the ECEC staff actively strived towards a reciprocal relationship with the Imam of the local Muslim community, as they had noticed its value in their collaboration with Muslim families with children participating in ECEC (Kuusisto 2010).

While we can certain that the role of families in Islamic religious education in Finland is important, we do not have a large research base on the matter. Religious socialization and education at home is noted in several studies, but not as a primary feature in most of them. We may also expect a considerable bias in these studies, as the more religious can be expected to be overrepresented in them. The knowledge base on Islamic religious institutions is not much better, but it seems safe to estimate that most, if not all, Islamic associations and mosque communities do offer Islamic education for children, and at times for convert adults as well. The teaching seems to consist of teaching of elementary language skills in mainly Arabic as well basic religious education about Islam. These are arranged as separate classes often during the weekends. There are also some occasional teaching sessions during main holiday periods. Naturally, much of the religious education also happens in situ and as informal learning, as children, converts and others participate in religious activities, including self-learning at home or online.

Islamic religious education in the Finnish educational system

Finnish education system includes ECEC for the ages 0-6, including a pre-primary year for six-year-olds, followed by a nine-year comprehensive school divided into a primary school for ages 7-12 and a lower secondary school for ages 13-16. These are followed by the alternative upper secondary school, which is often a more academic track leading to matriculation examination, and its vocational institution alternatives, preparing either to labour market or further studies—often also combined as both vocational and matriculation exam preparing upper secondary track. Matriculation examination qualifies for applying for entry to higher education in universities or universities of applied sciences. Finland applies a liability for gaining compulsory education, beginning at the age of 6 for the pre-primary year, and recently expanded upwards to the age of 18. In contrast to for instance the neighbouring Sweden, though, this liability is for gaining education rather than compulsory attendance in school. However, alternative ways of completing education are marginally utilized.

As for denominational or 'faith' schools, Finland only has very few, about a dozen depending on how these are defined, and all of which are Christian schools (Rinne, Räihä, Kuusisto & Kallioniemi 2023). Some of these have a formal school status and financial support from the government, whereas others utilize the above-mentioned niche of providing education to their pupils without compulsory attendance in municipal schools. New permissions to private schools have been scarcely granted by the Ministry of Education and Culture. There have also been new initiatives for re-founding a Muslim primary school in Finland, however, the application has fallen short due to practicalities such as premises, qualified teachers and financing (Sakaranaho and Rissanen 2021).

Religious education is a part of the Finnish national curriculum throughout the system, and although as also noted by Berglund (in this volume), it is non-confessional throughout, the ways in which it is implemented in different educational levels, varies somewhat. The *National core curriculum for early childhood education and care* (The Finnish National Agency for Education, 2022) and the *National Core Curriculum for Pre-primary Education* (2014) include worldview education, which is taught together to the whole group in the classroom (for more in-depth overview, see Poulter & Kallioniemi in this volume). Worldview education for these age groups is, according to the Finnish National Agency for Education (2024): "a part of general education in ECEC and pre-primary pedagogics", aiming to "promote mutual respect and understanding towards worldviews and to support children's cultural and worldview identity development." ECEC is often the first societal arena for the children to enter, whatever their family background, and "to negotiate their personal values, worldviews, and memberships in relation to the values represented in the surrounding social context" (Kuusisto, Poulter & Harju-Luukkainen 2021). The Nordic countries employ somewhat different policies for dealing with diversity: home languages are often supported, whereas for home cultures and religions or other worldviews, the policies and practices vary notably (ibid.).

In the comprehensive school level (grades 1-9, for ages 7-16), the National Curriculum for Basic Education includes a variety of different religious education alternatives, including Islam religious education. As the Finnish societal education system through its Religious Education curricula aims to both develop pupils' knowledge and skills for dialogue with others and the supporting of their own worldview development, minority Religious Education has sometimes been seen as a key to 'interpret' and exemplify a functional merge between Finnishness and for instance Islam (Ubani, Puolter & Rissanen 2021). Muslim parents and Muslim teachers have been found to mediate negotiations on inclusion in post-secular Finland in the intersections of religion and citizenship in the school every-day. Here, the culture-bound interpretations of religious freedom were seen to engender 'solidarity gaps' between the hegemony of secular normativity (Poulter et al 2017) and those differing from this. Here the Religious Education on Islam makes a significant difference from e.g. the neughbouring Sweden, where the Finnish school system offers more space for negotiating the intersection between religion and citizenship. (Rissanen 2018.) Furthermore, it has seen to involve instrumentalist approaches to Religious Education as a securitisation tool aiming to prevent radicalisation and controlling forms of religion (Berglund 2015; Niemi, Benjamin, Gearon & Kuusisto 2018). Familiarising pupils with the sacred texts and the history of their interpretation has been argued as an important part of Islamic religious education, also with the aim to develop resilience

(Benjamin et al 2021) for Muslim youth from radicalist propaganda grounded in the shallow and fragmented reading of the Qur'an (Rissanen, 2012).

For the upper secondary or vocational education level, targeting ages 16-19, the national educational system varies significantly between its vocational and academic tracks in its approach to the place of religion in education. That is, Religious Education as a school subject is only a part of the curriculum for the academic track of upper secondary schools, not for these youths' peers participating in the vocational track. In a Finnish study on intergroup mindsets of the youth in this age group, it was found that although the majority of the youth held mindsets that are predominantly egalitarian, open-minded, and inclusive, approximately one in ten students (11%) reported anti-egalitarian and pro-dominance mindsets coined with nationalistic, exclusive views (Benjamin et al 2023). Previous research has found Finnish children and youth's openness towards religious diversity to be higher among those reporting female gender and a more ethnically and religiously diverse living area, as well as to increase with age (Kuusisto, Poulter & Kallioniemi 2016).

Later on, at the universities and work life, there may be a lot of variance between institutions and companies in how well particular adjustments, such as dietary or other religion-related lifestyle choices have been accounted for. Furthermore, while the formal discourse related to cultural and linguistic diversity is often positive, the diversity of religions has often been either disregarded or is perceived more as an obstacle or 'difficult' to tackle. This has been found both in the educational practices towards children and in the level of working communities among colleagues. (Kuusisto et al 2014; Lamminmäki-Vartia et al 2020.) This is particularly so for the visual symbols and clothing such as *hijab*. Consequently, Nasir and Al-Amin (2006), looking into identity safety of Muslim students at the college campus, have noted how the "practice of Islam in the college setting is at once intensely personal and painfully public" (ibid., p. 22). Individual negotiations on values, religious identity and belonging intersect between the social contexts of minority and majority in complex ways and are solved in different manners between the individuals—also with varying sense of contentment with the solutions longer term (Kuusisto 2013b). These learning experiences influence personal worldview construction cumulatively along their individual value learning trajectories and socialization paths, both privately and professionally (Lamminmäki-Vartia et al 2020).

Conclusion

Finland's "Muslims" do not in any meaningful sense constitute a single religious community, as they are composed of several ethnic and national groups that not only each hold their unique family and life history and socialization experiences, but also profess a variety of religious orientations and

follow different Islamic movements. This makes also the Muslim interests diverse between individuals and families, and eventually it also more complicated for any interest groups to lobby some particular interests to the Finnish public authorities for many issues, such as the ability to follow a religious diet and religiously sanctioned social norms in the public sphere. Even though the Islamic Council of Finland was founded for that very purpose (Martikainen 2019), it was not able to fulfil it, and was discontinued (Pauha & Nikanne 2022). Hence, the question of public representation of Islam is a major future challenge for Finnish Muslims, if they wish to improve their societal standing—or simply in order to make the daily life in ECEC, school, university, and working life easier for their children and themselves. Negotiating practices and policies in a broader societal level would, after all, simplify many practicalities in order to adhere to religious values in the everyday also at the public societal arenas.

Though the historical Tatar Muslim minority dates back to the nineteenth century, most of the Muslim population have migrated to Finland since the early 1990s. The Muslims are in demographic terms a young population with larger than average families. The Finland-born second generation is gradually reaching adulthood, but most of the Muslim activists are still of the first, migrant generation. The main challenge for the Muslims is their generally poor socio-economic standing, and thereby high dependence of social welfare. The rise of an educationally and professionally better off second generation may in time improve the social standing of Muslims in society, as the Finnish welfare state has many support mechanisms, including free education for all. For any minority to thrive, it needs educated spokespersons as well as financial and other resources to enhance its position.

Religious education is central for any group regarding transmission of its cultural heritage. As the Finnish educational system has for the past two decades facilitated Muslim children and youth religious education from the perspective of Islam as 'their own' religion—although again acknowledging the within-diversity and thus the complexities that brings here—a basic structure for improving the religious knowledge basis of Finnish Muslim children and youth as a part of the societal educational system is already there. While the system faces many challenges, such as group composition, lack of qualified teachers and disputes over the quality and content of teaching, it still provides a further avenue alongside families and religious associations for religious education. The recent migrant background of most of the Finnish Muslim population provides its own challenges. Children with varying capabilities and diverse backgrounds are often in the same classes, in which much of the teaching time may have to devoted to ensuring the transmission of knowledge despite linguistic challenges and age differences. Therefore, we are likely to see many further debates over

Islamic religious education in Finland, while at the same time an increasing number of Muslim youth fluent in Finnish society will enter professional and academic studies as well as working life.

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