

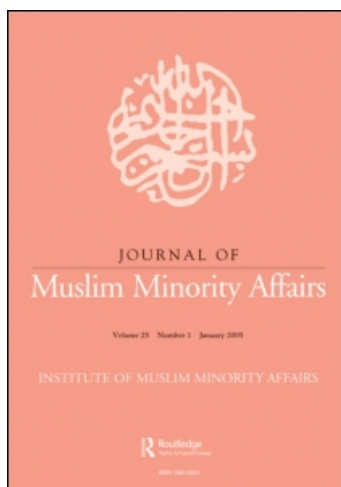
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Islamic Identity Formation among Young Muslims: The Case of Denmark, Sweden and the United States

GARBI SCHMIDT

Abstract

This paper aims to explore aspects of transnational identity formation among young Muslims in three Western countries, Denmark, Sweden and the United States. The thesis is that, on the one hand, such transnational identity formations are indeed taking place, and, on the other, they are continuously effected by aspects of the local and the contextual, and in particular by the conditions and legislation of the host nation-state. The process of transnational identity formation is described according to four overall conditions and themes: (1) visibility and aesthetics; (2) choice; (3) transnationalism; and (4) social ethics. These themes play significant roles on an overall transnational level, but are continuously 'localized', formulated and lived according to the context in which Muslims actually live. In the concluding section, the article discusses the implications of the dynamic field of transnational/national Muslim identity formations for the definition of a Muslim diaspora, and raises the question of whether we can at all talk about religious diasporas, and how we may do so on the basis of myth and politicized identities.

Introduction¹

I cannot be a white Anglo Protestant, but I have to be something. Everyone has an identity. People keep asking: 'what are you?' 'What do you believe?' 'Why does Islam oppress women?' 'Why do you marry four wives?' 'Why does your religion teach violence?' Suddenly, you begin to realize that you do not know what a Muslim is and you begin to search yourself. (Yvonne Y. Haddad²)

Approximately one month after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack, I attended a lecture at the University of Georgetown in Washington, DC. That evening, the local Muslim Students' Association had invited the campus community to explore the subject 'Islam—the source of universal peace'.³ What stands clearest to me from the meeting is the imagery of the woman sitting in front of me. Not because she was dressed 'traditionally' wearing the *hijab*, thereby testifying that she was a practicing Muslim woman. Rather, I remember her because her *hijab* took the form of the American flag, the Stars and Stripes, emphasized by the shining blue garment that she wore under it. This woman sent the signal of being Muslim and American at the same time. Perhaps it could be argued that her statement of identification was a defensive act, fighting the processes of exclusion that increased in the wake of the terrorist attacks. But it could also be argued that her choice was the result of a conscious evaluation of

identity, a token of an Islamic identity integrated and woven into the fabric of American life and public space.

This article focuses on the formation of Muslim, Western identity—or rather, identities—on the basis of four overall aspects. One is visibility. Muslims are frequently visible in Western countries because of their practices that are unfamiliar to the majority population. What implications does this visibility—and perhaps to be more precise, aesthetics—have to the formation of Islamic identities within these contexts? A second aspect covered here is that of individual choice. Why do (young) Muslims stress Islamic practices as consciously and rationally chosen and not simply as aspects of their (ethnic) heritage and their tradition? A third aspect is transnationalism. In what ways do supra-national connections and discourses (ideally) shared by Muslims in different Western countries become both means and motives for certain formations of identity? Finally, the article focuses on the issue of social ethics. Why do concepts of human rights and gender equity, and practices such as social and political activism, become the primary arenas in which Islamic identities in Western countries are formed and exercised?

I present and discuss the implications of these four aspects within one age group of Muslims. I have chosen to focus on young well-educated Muslims of immigrant background between 15 and 30 years of age, either born or raised in the West. My choice is not based on the assumption that the study of other age groups or social classes is irrelevant or less important. But as many studies made in both the United States and Europe indicate,⁴ this is a group that shows strong signs of a re-formation of Islamic identities as well as an intensive and conscious public exposure to Islam and Islamic activism.

Although much of the following description and analysis can be testified as relevant in several Western contexts, my description focuses on three Western nations: Denmark, Sweden and the United States. These are the locations where I have conducted my own research for the present project.⁵ Furthermore, this particular focus is relevant because it illustrates how each nation-state creates particular conditions for Muslims. This may be due to the nation's legislation on immigrants, its stand on religion (for example, the separation of church and state), as well as its dominant ideas about what elements are constitutive for citizenship and a national 'soul'. My focus is transatlantic and therefore includes examples and perspectives from both the United States and the two European countries across the Atlantic. Much research has already been done on the power centers of Europe—Great Britain, France and Germany; less focus has been placed on the implications of Islamic identity formations in the 'periphery' of Europe, in this case the Scandinavian countries Denmark and Sweden. In a transnational perspective such a focus is interesting because it may facilitate an understanding of 'strong' trails of communication and networking vs. the 'weak' ones. As English has become the *lingua franca* of the world today (including that of many Muslims),⁶ and is equally the dominant language on the Internet, defining centers of contemporary Islamic discourses may appear in localities (nations) or contexts where this language is spoken. The question is what 'effect' such centers have, and how noticeable and powerful they are within more remote locations of the world.

Claiming Visibility

Let us, briefly, return to the scenario that I presented in my introduction: the woman radiating a religious and a national identity at one and the same time. The beauty

(or to some, the horror) of her performance was exactly this striking combination of symbols linked to her appearance; a linkage that seemed difficult to separate. The symbols were easily recognizable and easily translatable. Her garment bridged imagined cultural contradictions in a way that was difficult to contest. If one arguably essential element of her attire was removed (the Stars and Stripes as the *hijab*), the integrity of her identity would disintegrate.

The practice of Islam in Western contexts is in many ways a visible and thereby a public affair. Sometimes visibility is wanted and consciously chosen; sometimes it is simply there, caused by difference. Very often the aspects of the chosen and the consequential are blurred. When a Muslim woman chooses to don the *hijab* she knows that her garment sends a strong signal. She visibly interprets faith and religious identity in her personal way, and transmits the signal to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. But in spite of her awareness of how she is seen in the eyes of the human other, her main argument will be that her aspiration is to please Allah.⁷ In that sense visibility both matters and does not matter. As a material artifact with a symbolic value the *hijab* can do little else than add to the symbolic—visible—capital of the human body, even when the intention is to mark the condition of ‘what is hidden in the human heart’.

The relation between merely being visible and becoming a ‘public affair’ is central. We are all visible by our very existence. The question is what transforms us into something public, what places us in the center of public debate. Muslims in the West are undoubtedly visible due to aspects of aesthetics and body politics, for example when practicing Muslim women dress differently than the majority, and when Muslim communities establish houses of prayers with an ‘authentic’ Islamic architecture.⁸ But Muslims are equally publicly visible because of the challenge they represent to the self-perception of Western liberal democracies and the ideas of a secular and essential national identity, representing an alternative to that approach.

An example may enlighten this discussion. In the wake of 11 September 2001, the Danish Prime Minister arranged a meeting with some immigrant organizations, demanding that the participants pledge allegiance to the Danish Constitution and assure him that they would ‘let their women marry who they want, respect the ideals of democracy and not put the Qur’an above the Constitution’.⁹ The wording is both striking and peculiar. To prove themselves to be trustworthy citizens Muslims were demanded to ‘let their women marry who they want’. Why is it that exactly this demand is made, considering that the terrorist attacks did not have anything obvious to do with the relation between men and women, or to traditional marriage customs among Muslims? A transformation of the implication of aggression takes place here. Whereas the hijacked airplanes tore down towers, ripped buildings apart in smoke and fire, the deeply felt threat that arranged marriages represented in the Prime Minister’s talk were the symbolic borders that the presence of Muslims potentially could break down. The public visibility of Muslim women together with the fear of a traditional marriage practice potentially allowed something considered ‘private’—religion—to conquer an inappropriate amount of power within public spaces. Such acts were not innocent on the symbolic level, but were comparable to terrorist aggression, mainly because of the destabilizing effect they posed to the secular self-conception of Danish democracy.

In all societies—to take the words of Talal Asad—‘the so-called private domain is continuously structured and restructured by political, economic and legal practices that supposedly belong to the public domain’.¹⁰ The problem arises when aspects considered private are put forth as having a normatively based right to play a role within the public sphere. This leads to the Prime Minister’s second demand that Muslims

should 'respect the ideals of democracy'. Here, Muslims are considered possibly disloyal to such ideals. First, because many Muslims claim that religion (considered private by the secular nation-state) has a role to play within public life. Second, possible disloyalty is a product of the widely circulated idea among Muslims that a normative understanding of religion ideally must have an equal or higher status than governing secular principles: both God and the Constitution must be taken into consideration. Although Muslims among themselves argue whether democracy is an Islamic principle or not, an often stated argument is that religion (Islam) cannot become subordinate to the secular ideas of Western democracies. Neither should Islamic principles be secondary to secular legislation. This leads to the Prime Minister's last argument that Muslims should 'not put the Qur'an above the Constitution'. Religion is here (arguably) forced on retreat, back into private seclusion. The porous wall between church (or mosque) and state is kept,¹¹ and it is considered disloyal, an implicit testimony of lacking integration and true citizenry, to try to break it down.

The above example shows us how the Danish Prime Minister in one of history's shaky movements tried to fight back the public claims of religion (stated, aggressively, within the global field a few days earlier) within a national context. What was a subtle (probably unintended but nonetheless there) element of his statement was that he, by demanding the visiting Muslims to abide to the Constitution and that more than the Qur'an, told them to abide by a national identity that is still fundamentally Christian. The fourth paragraph of the Danish Constitution states that the Evangelical Lutheran Church is the country's state church. The existence of the paragraph creates a linkage between belonging to a particular religious community and Danish-ness, which makes the inclusion of Muslims and other religious congregations living in that country complicated, in spite of the Constitution's granting of religious freedom.

The example from the Danish context shows us the triangular dilemma between church, state and national identities that Western democracies have to face in one form or another. In this process Muslims have become highly visible actors or symbols of the corroding character or malaise of national souls. No matter what, Muslims have to perceive themselves, their religion and their social activities and identities, within these circumstances. In this process they carve out segregated spaces of safety and at the same time relate to the wider context in which they live. They 'claim America'¹² and 'claim Europe', which actually can be seen as 'contributory to the process of integration'.¹³ Muslims may (and do) equally transcend borders according to ideas and activism that emphasizes societal participation, creating what we may call a transnational Islamic discourse.

Choice and Knowledge

Young Muslims frequently argued that their religious identity is a consequence of individual choice. The woman in the classroom that I referred to above was undoubtedly well aware of the signals that she sent to others. Her garment was chosen carefully for the occasion. The woman wanted to be seen both as an individual and as a symbol. The aspect of individual choice has become a central theme among Muslims in Western countries as well as among their non-Muslim co-citizens. This despite that choices are frequently (and admittedly) affected by their own predetermining conditions. For example, during my fieldwork most of my young informants stressed that Islam was a part of their family heritage. Others stated that their religious practices were a result of a stigmatizing feeling of difference. For a black Somali woman in Sweden

to wear the *hijab*, for instance, was considered not-difficult because no matter what she did she was considered a stranger.¹⁴ But in spite of my informants' diverse social and ethnic backgrounds they described the aspect of choice as central when truthfully stating a Muslim identity. As one young Somali woman told me:

I started to practice Islam at home with my family, and so it was something that I had exposure to from a very young age. But in terms of practicing it, it is a conscious choice. Because you can be Muslim by name, and you can be Muslim by birth, and you can be Muslim from what your parents tell you that you are. But in terms of being a true believer, that is something that you have to consciously choose. And I believe that I consciously chose that [Islam] on my own, otherwise I could go through life with a title but not have anything behind it to back it up.¹⁵

Undoubtedly, the aspect of choice is affected by a contemporary Western discourse, where the processes of human life are significantly individualized. We do not choose our parents, but to the extent that our resources allow us, we choose our career on the labor market, and the woman or man that we marry. We invest in and choose certain styles of consumption, convinced that we fabricate and state our individuality, our true selves, through them.¹⁶ To state oneself by reference to aspects of tradition and collective lifestyles is mostly considered archaic, repressive and even undemocratic. The ideal is global and social mobility and transformation, whether we are dealing with cosmopolitan virtue or the construction of the human self. The ability to choose is considered both a human right and an aspect of high social status on local and global scenes.

In such a context young Muslims must choose and equally stress the significance of their choice. When they state that their practice of Islam is not forced on them by parents and kin, but based on the personal conviction that this religion prescribes guidelines for the most attractive lifestyle, they minimize the risk of critique. Many of them describe intensive periods of studying and pondering before the final decision is made. Islam is presented as a rational choice, not made according to a sudden impulse or due to a life crisis. Hereby, the choice of Islam puts the claims to further significance: the individual was aware of multiple alternatives but still chose Islam.¹⁷

By stressing the aspect of choice young Muslims claim personal autonomy and deep conviction based on intellectual scrutiny. This is not to say that they present their 'reversion'¹⁸ story as unaffected by other actors. Frequently, non-Muslim surroundings are referred to as having initiated the youngsters' study of Islam. Young Muslims relate that their studies began when they realized that they were in need of a firm knowledge of their religion. This need is frequently described as based on a search for defensive arguments and means by which to gain the acceptance of both Muslims and non-Muslims. As a young man who fled to Sweden from Central Asia during his teens told me:

When I came to Sweden I was not particularly religious at first. But when you end up in a foreign country people start asking, 'who are you? Are you a Christian or a Muslim?' And when you answer that 'I am Muslim', and they ask, 'well, so what does a Muslim then do?' your answer is that Muslims do so and so, they pray, they do not eat pork and do not drink alcohol. Then they

tell you ‘so you are not a Muslim then?’ ‘Why not?’ [you ask]. ‘Because you do not do all these things’ [they tell you]. Then you start questioning how much of you is actually Muslim. When people pose more and more questions you cannot simply refer to tradition. You must know what you are talking about.¹⁹

Whenever young Muslims claim their religious identity in a Western context, the proof of a profound knowledge of Islam is described as crucial. Not merely among those who do not share their religious convictions, but equally among those who do. Young Muslims gain knowledge about Islam through reading of books, and equally through downloads from the Internet and membership of Internet based discussion groups.²⁰ Most of these groups are based within one locality or one linguistic area. In the North American context electronic mailing lists are frequently established by local MSA chapters.²¹ In countries as Denmark and Sweden email lists stress a regional affiliation by inviting Swedish or Danish Cyber Muslims to participate,²² although people based in surrounding countries such as Germany and Norway are also found among the members. Although members of both lists predominantly use the language of the nation in which they are based, texts and news written in English are often forwarded as a basis for discussion, claims to authority, and plain provocation. People either download such texts from Internet sites or receive them from lists in other parts of the Western world (primarily Britain and the United States) that they are members of. Such exchanges of material show that the Internet can be an effective tool (besides traveling, mobile phones) in the establishment of a transnational Islamic discourse—a ‘re-imagined *umma[h]*’²³: an ideal that young Western Muslims have stated from the mid 1990s and onward.²⁴ Not only in the sense that Muslims share and discuss similar experiences of, for example, life in Western countries, but also because material from Internet based discussions are frequently used outside the Net, and thus spread to an even larger audience. In young Muslims’ study groups it is not uncommon to see the speaker bring texts downloaded from Internet and use them as either handouts or as a starting point for what he or she has to say.²⁵

Young Muslims’ use of the Internet tells us about new strategies for knowledge formation, new roads to authority, and new ways of establishing and maintaining Islamic networks (not erasing older forms of networks based on direct meetings or ‘paper’ communication,²⁶ but adding new dimensions to them). As frequently stated in research literature on Muslims in the West the establishment of Islamic authority poses an essential challenge for these communities, not at least among the young.²⁷ It is often difficult for *imams* imported from, for example, Turkey, Lebanon or Pakistan to gain the same kind of appreciation from the generation of Muslims born or raised in the West as they receive from the parental generation. Most of the young Muslims that I interviewed during my fieldwork found that the relationship between the message of the *imams* and that of their own generation’s interpretation of Islam was awkward. They criticized the *imams* for lacking knowledge of the country in which they had settled. It was and is obvious that the young Muslims considered an autonomous interpretation and adaptation of Islam to their own lives important. As one young woman, herself deeply involved in a Muslim youth group in Denmark, told me: the members of the group only discussed religious questions with the *imam* of the local mosque when they could not come up with an answer themselves.²⁸ One way that young Muslims often find the answers they seek is to participate in discussion groups (*halaqas*), another way is to use the Internet.

Positions of Authenticity

The ways that young Muslims stress their autonomous choice of religion and religious often put them in a complicated position *vis-à-vis* their parents. Although most of my informants stated that Islam was a part of their upbringing and an integrated part of family life, they just as frequently stated that the Islam that they pursue is a-cultural, pure and progressive; Islam as it truly was and is supposed to be. Parents, on the other hand, were described as practicing an Islam infected by cultural misconceptions and thus stagnated, archaic and 'dead'.²⁹ As one young Muslim woman of Lebanese descent living in Los Angeles expressed it:

I think that a lot of our parents come to the United States with an Islam that is very ritualistic. I am not trying to bash on anybody's *iman* (faith) or belief or anything. But I think that when Islam is something that is passed down from generation to generation to generation, and it is something that you have grown up into as a cultural ideal, there is a lot of things you don't question. You just do them because it is the appropriate thing to do in that country. Because your mom is doing it and because your dad is doing it. But when the same ideas are brought to the United States and people around us are questioning them, I think that we do a little more research on what is actually Islam and what is actually, for example, from Pakistani culture ... I think that we abandon a lot of things that our parents take for granted ...³⁰

Young Muslims argue that the migration process itself had added to the 'purification' of Islam. As Muslims originating from other parts of the world get to know each other, they see what they all have in common. Islam, it is argued, is a means to transcend ethnicity, geography, social class and even time itself. Divine in origin, it can adapt to all human contexts and is accordingly eternally modern. As one young man in Sweden told me:

The traditional form of [ethnic] identity can never fulfill your needs as an individual, because tradition is something limited, it is something you have from your homeland, something that can be discussed, changed, something that *must* change. It is something with a significant meaning within specific localities, places that you come from. But religion is something that cannot be changed. If you believe in the completeness of God ... Islam is the final message that came, perfect in its form. [And] Islam allows comparison, discussion, and can be adapted to development and progress. I think that Churchill once said that a perfect ideology is an ideology that can be adapted to development and to the future ... We as Muslims see Islam as the perfect ideology that works and is adaptable to all times.³¹

Islam in its pure, normative form is seen as unchangeable. However, the constant nature of the divine message does not contradict adaptability, development or discussion. In the same way as the *sahaba* (companions of the Prophet) of the first Muslim community in Medina, according to Islamic traditions, discussed and questioned their faith, so is it the duty of Muslims to do so today. Islam as a mythical landscape can be found, (re)stated and prosper in every human context, at the same time as it has the capacity to transcend them all, including the interpretation of my informants.

Modernity and transcendence are key concepts within this discourse. Young Muslims believe to present an authentic Islam that is perfectly adaptable to and perfectly fulfilling the ideals of Western democracies. They argue that human rights (not least,

those of women), ecology, and democracy itself were parts of Islam from the very beginning. According to these young Muslims, there exists no contradiction between the religious ideals of the Islam that they advocate and the non-Muslim societies they live in.

Islam is used to transcend aspects of identity that otherwise could be problematic. It is possible, through Islam, to identify (although critically) with the cultural heritage of one's parents. It is possible to identify oneself (equally critically) with the context in which one lives. As stated by my Danish informants, you can be both a Pakistani Muslim and a Danish Muslim, and feel at home in both contexts if you follow Islam in its authentic form. Islam to these youngsters is a primary device of identification through which they further their mobility among people who share their faith as well as those who do not. That is, at least, the ideal. Besides the ideal comes the issue of competence—that young Muslims know and may improvise from, in the words of Steven Vertovec and Alisdair Rogers, 'a number of (in some ways discrete, in some ways overlapping) cultural and linguistic systems'.³²

What young Muslims often leave out in their claims to modernity and fulfillment of the prominent ideals of Western democracies are the contributions of the parental generation. Rather do they describe the versions of Islam that parents practice as archaic, static and cultural. I would argue that the critique of parental practices of Islam is not a mere pragmatic reflection of difference, but is also strategic. First, because young Muslims as other teenagers or young adults have a need to position themselves strongly *vis-à-vis* parents in order to define their independent aspirations and expectations for life. Second, because parents become a defining other within a context where Islam and Muslims are constantly under attack. By non-Muslim surroundings Islam is frequently argued contradictory to the very ideals that young Muslims claim this religion to fulfill so perfectly: democracy, human rights, gender equality (equity), science and reason. Here, parents and the countries from which they come become a counter argument in which it is claimed that they (parents) practice Islam in ways blurred with culture and thus imperfect, whereas we, the young, have returned to the essence of Islam, which fulfills the ideals that 'we' share with you. In that sense, the parents are sacrificed in the process of integration.³³

This is a question that needs much more attention. In various fields of the social sciences dealing with immigrants and Muslims in the West, there is an eager tendency to focus on the young. This is mainly because of their enthusiasm, their activism and their visibility; and perhaps because of their eagerness to prove that Islamic and Western ideals are not contradictory; and because the activities of the young are prime examples of Muslim social integration in Western contexts. What frequently (and unfortunately) is left out of focus is the more silent and less visible reformation that takes place within the parental generations. We need more scholarly attention to the dynamic and not necessarily dichotomous relations between young and old and equally more attention to a deconstruction of the arguments of the young.

The Ethics of the Islamic West

A young Muslim woman in Stockholm elaborates:

If I am walking down a stairway it frequently happens that I see an old lady struggling to walk down with crutches. I think that people in Sweden are very self-centered: they are all on their way to the train, on their way to the

job—nobody is on their way to help this little lady who cannot walk down the stairway on her own. I think that it is my duty as a Muslim to show that this human being needs help. I think that it is these small things—it does not have to be something big—that shows who you are ... I try to do my best as a Muslim in this society, I help this little grandmother down the stairs. Perhaps she does not like Muslims, I don't know, but that is not my concern. I simply help her ... I should not think about whether she is Muslim or Swedish or whatever. It is my duty to help those who need help, Muslims as well as non-Muslims.³⁴

Another young Muslim explains:

Islam is the way to peace. Equality and harmony is important. You should fight social inequalities and not live to further your own interests, but take responsibility for your fellow human beings.³⁵

Another factor of Islamic identity formation among young Muslims in Western countries is their formulation of genuine Islamic practice. Observance of rituals such as praying and fasting are still considered central by most, but what appears equally or even more important is that of behaving morally and ethically correct. This is particularly the case among those who are upwardly mobile.³⁶ The trend can be explained in at least three ways. First of all, the blooming of an Islamic ethics in the West can be seen as the result of the daily restraints of life in the West, as stated by the Danish researcher Karen-Lise Johansen.³⁷ It can, for example, be difficult to find a place to pray, and equally to find the time to do so in a society where prayer is not incorporated in the rhythm of the day. Second, an Islamic ethics can be seen as a way for Muslims to stress aspects of loyalty, identical values, and citizenry within a non-Muslim nation-state. And third, there is the impact of 'old' transactional reformist Islamic movements, such as the *Jama'at-i Islami* and the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun*, besides the impulses that the young receive from the Internet.

The youngsters themselves seldom stress the impact of 'old' transnational movements/traditional networks on current processes of Islamic identity formation in the West. One explanation may be that reference to these movements is not needed as a means to authorize one's statement. Rather, what is of importance is to present oneself as independently thinking on the basis of a firm knowledge of Islam's history, jurisprudence and sacred texts, while not submitting oneself to historical precedence. It is crucial to show the adaptability of Islam and of Islamic interpretations to the life of modern Western societies, and less important to show the inspiration coming from parts of the 'old' Muslim world.

However, the inspiration is definitely there. When the Muslim Students' Association of the United States and Canada (the MSA) was founded it had strong and direct ties to the *Jama'at-i Islami* and the *Ikhwan al-Muslimun*.³⁸ In Sweden the same movements and important ideologues representing them (Sayyid Qutb, Muhammad Qutb, Abu A'la al-Mawdudi, Hasan al-Banna, Muhammad al-Ghazzali) have influenced the country's main Islamic journal: *Salaam*.³⁹ This is, however, a field that needs much more attention and much more elaboration, not least in a European and American comparative context.

The ethical imperative that the Islamic movement in the West identifies has two major implications. One is practical: involvement in social activism on various levels, ranging from 'helping old ladies down the stairs' to political activism within well-estab-

lished parties. The second implication is ideological, and deals with formulations of a perceived genuine and non-cultural Islam.

As I have shown, young Muslim in Western countries claim that the Islam that they practice is in absolute accordance with the same ethical ideals that Western liberal democracies appraise. Arguments are frequently made with references to the Qur'an, not least the following three *surahs*: 2:256,⁴⁰ 9:112,⁴¹ and 49:13.⁴² The ideas that 'there is no compulsion in religion', that Muslims must 'enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil', and that mankind is created to know each other and that Allah's favors are on the ones who are most honorable—not those who represent a certain nation or ethnicity—are frequently presented as parts of lectures for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Equally, they are central elements in ongoing internal discussions among Muslims and in the practical, daily life ideals that these communities attempt to pursue. Qur'anic quotations and practice according to these may also be used as a critique of Western countries and policies: Islam, the argument goes, promotes equality among nations, respect for diversity, helping the poor. These are ideals that Western nations claim on ideological level, but do not actually practice. Not because the intention is not there, but because divine guidelines are not there to lead the weak human soul. These guidelines, the young claim, can be found in Islam.

Practical, organized results of this ethics are seen in various contexts. In Chicago we find IMAN (the Inner City Muslim Network), a communal project that offers after school training to Muslim and non-Muslim children in one of the more deprived neighborhoods on the Southside of the city.⁴³ In Los Angeles the MSA has initiated projects such as the University Muslim Medical Association Clinic (UMMA), located on the Southside of the city, offering free medical care for the poor.⁴⁴ In the Scandinavian countries the efforts are less organized around social initiatives, which may be due to the Scandinavian welfare model. In Denmark, for example, initiatives are more frequently made within the political sphere, both because young Muslims have proven quite successful in gaining positions within certain political parties (although just as frequently being targeted by the media and parts of the political establishment for doing so), and also due to the fact that Islam and the integration of Muslims is heavily discussed within political life.⁴⁵ The same discussion, although more calm, can be seen in Sweden.⁴⁶ Political life is the forum where Muslims have to start, if they want to change things. Increasingly, young Muslims have the tools and social position to do so: they are raised in the West, they speak and write one or more of the Western languages fluently, and they are frequently trained within Western universities or schools of higher learning.

What is created in this process is not least a definition of an ideal Islamic citizen in Western liberal democracies and the modern world as such. The ideal citizen helps and respects his and her fellow citizens in the encounter of daily life. The ideal citizen respects and maneuvers within the core values of powerful discourses of today: democracy, modernity, and human equality. The ideal citizen is engaged in the constituting activities of the country in which he or she lives: activism benefiting those in need and political activism furthering a common good are positive values. The ideal citizen is considerate both on a broader social and on an individual level: he is academically and socially ambitious and visible, but not cynical. This ethos is both a basis for Muslim activism in the West and a provocation to some groups of non-Muslim co-citizens. It is thus not surprising that much of the debate on Muslims taking place in, for example, Denmark deals exactly with the question of whether they can or cannot

fulfill the role as ideal and loyal citizens. If the answer is positive, old essentialist ideas of a national identity as based on ethnic and religious homogeneity must resign.

We should, however, not forget that to some groups of (young) Muslims ideal citizenry is not realized by integration within Western societies but rather segregation from them. One example is the *Hizb al-Tahrir*, a movement that has gained followers within both the United States and Scandinavia. The *Hizb* advocates against Muslim participation in any level of the secular political process and against secular democracy as such. Islam is considered a God given ideology, and a social system that must be implemented without any incorporation of elements from man made systems. The *Hizb* is considered both provocative and dangerous by some Western administrations. In Germany the party was banned in January 2003 for spreading anti-Semitic propaganda.⁴⁷ In Denmark a ban of the movement is under state juridical consideration, but a final decision has yet to be made. In the United States, officials have expressed that the *Hizb* causes 'grave concern' to the government, but no official actions against the movement have been made so far.⁴⁸

The Diaspora Spaces of Muslims in the West

Although some researchers contest that we may talk of religious diasporas,⁴⁹ the present article points to the existence of such a 'place of the non-place', as Pnina Werbner recently formulated it, among Muslims.⁵⁰ The idea(l) of the *ummah*, whether imagined or upheld by the speed of Internet communication and travel, is not a materialized homeland that one may look up on a map. Rather, we are dealing with a mythological homeland that is both nowhere and everywhere, hereby offering membership across national borders. On this imaginary level ethnicity and geography does not matter. What matters is religious identity, or rather the thematic framework for identity formation that this transnational space offers, beside the internal solidarity of diaspora members. This is not to say that the process is egalitarian and that power centers of discourse formation are not created, mainly due to the linguistic dominance of English language and the political order of today. But regardless of such centers the notion of a common 'homeland' is commonly shared, irrespective of time and locality.

However the materialization of identity formation, practice is always localized. Comparison between Muslims in different national contexts shows us their commonalities but also their differences. At the same time as Muslims relate to a discourse of the borderless, they equally face the conditions and challenges of the local. To quote Werbner again: 'In existing beyond the nation-state with its fixed boundaries and clearly defined categories of inclusion and exclusion ... diasporas as scattered, uncontained and uncontainable minorities have historically been the target of racialised and xenophobic nationalist imaginings'.⁵¹ It is not the least a result of their diasporic status that Muslims become publicly visible, and on basis hereof that responses are created, focusing extensively on the aspect of identity. In that sense diasporas are spaces of identification and identity: dynamic structures of belonging that on one hand are 'out there', but are simultaneously deeply personalized.

Conclusion

In this article I have introduced what I find to be central aspects of the Muslim youth identity formation in three Western countries. What appears from the description is a map of transnational discursive identity formations; of themes circulated and develop-

ing within what we may call the diaspora spaces of Muslims in the West. The article points to the existence, paradoxes and challenges of transnational Muslim identity formation in the West (Europe and the United States), finally pointing to the significance of the legislative framework of nation-states (for example, constitutions) and the ongoing (complicated) construction of national identities as aspects that Muslims must constantly relate to and which affects the (localized) practice of (boundless) Islam. Such adaptations to the conditions of the present are not least fundamental due to the politicized status of Muslims in Western secular nation-states. This has both to do with the complicated re-entering of religion on the public square that these communities bring with them, and with their status as diasporas. Hereby the article also underlines importance of an increased focus on comparative research between various Muslim minority communities in these regions and beyond. Such approaches allow us to point both to the specificities and commonalities of such communities, to structures of power and networks between them, and to whether or not the nation-state affects their outreach and content. Just as intriguingly, comparative approaches allow us to plunge deeper into what the Muslim diaspora is all about, on both imaginary and practical levels.

NOTES

1. A preliminary version of this article was presented at a planning meeting on 'Islam and Muslims in the United States and Europe: Processes of Mutual Accommodation', hosted by Social Science Research Council and the Russell Sage Foundation in New York, 10–12 April 2003.
2. Quote from Y. Y. Haddad and J. L. Esposito, eds, *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 29.
3. The lecture took place on 25 October 2001.
4. See J. Cesari, 'Islam in France: Social Challenge or Challenge of Secularism?' in eds S. Vertovec and A. Rogers, *Muslim European Youth: Reproducing Ethnicity, Religion, Culture*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998.
5. Fieldwork was carried out in Sweden (the Stockholm area) from September to December 2000, in Los Angeles, CA from January to March 2001, in Washington, DC, in October and November 2001, and in Denmark from November 2001 to the present. Further, the article draws on fieldwork, which I carried out in Chicago between June 1995 and April 1996, and between October 1996 and July 1997. See G. Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004.
6. J. S. Nielsen, 'Transnational Islam and the Integration of Islam in Europe', paper presented at the Second Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting. Florence, 21–25 March 2001, p. 17.
7. K. L. Johansen, *Muslimsk stemmer: Religios forandring blandt unge muslimer i Danmark (Muslim Voices: Religious Changes among Young Muslims in Denmark)*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 2001, p. 115.
8. The aspect of Islamic architecture in the West highlights both an intent to return to 'authentic forms', and the intent to return to forms that, according to the Pakistani-Canadian architect Gulzar Haider, are 'expressive and understandable to all ... To the indigenous Muslims it should represent a linkage with Muslims from other parts of the world and should underscore the universality and unity of Islam. To the new Muslims this architecture should invoke confidence in their new belief. To non-Muslims it should take the form of clearly identifiable buildings which are inviting and open, or at least not secretive, closed or forbidding'. O. Khalidi, 'Approaches to Mosque Design in North America', in *Muslims on the Americanization Path? op. cit.*, 2000, p. 328.
9. H. Groes-Petersen, 'Nyrup kræver troskabsed fra indvandrere' ('Nyrup Demands Oath of Faith from Immigrants'), *Politiken (The Politics)*, 28 September 2001; B. Quraisyh, 'Islam i väterländska massmedier' ('Islam in Western Mass Media'), *I&M (Immigrants and Minorities)*, Vol. 1, 2002, pp. 15–18.
10. T. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, p. 260.

11. K. Ewing, 'Legislating Religious Freedom: Muslim Challenges to the Relationship between Church and State in Germany and France', in eds R. Shweder *et al.*, *Engaging Cultural Differences: The Multicultural Challenge in Liberal Democracies*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002, pp. 63–80.
12. K. I. Leonard, 'Muslims in the US: The State of Research', essay prepared for the Russell Sage Foundation, forthcoming, p. 35.
13. J. Cesari, 'Pluralism in the Context of Globalization: European Muslim Youth', *ISIM*, March 1999, p. 25.
14. Interview with young Muslim woman, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2000; taped.
15. Interview with young Muslim woman, Los Angeles, CA, February 2001; taped.
16. Z. Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1998.
17. Also V. Amireaux, 'Is Islam Soluble into Germany? Sunni Muslims of Turkish Origin', *ISIM*, December 1999, p. 30.
18. The concept of reversion is frequently used by new Muslims who see their embracing of Islam as a return to their true human nature (see e.g. online http://members.tripod.com/oum_abdulaziz/WhyIEmbraced5.htm). However, people who are born of Muslim parents may also use the concept of reversion when describing their choice of Islam, hereby underlining their return to pure and genuine practice of their faith (see. e.g. online <http://members.tripod.com/Islam4Mankind/reversion.html>).
19. Interview with young Muslim man, Uppsala, Sweden, 1 December 2000; taped.
20. Also G. Schmidt, 'The Formation of Transnational Identities among Young Muslims in Denmark', paper prepared for the NOCRIME conference 'European Muslims and the Secular State', Sorbonne, Paris, 30 June–1 July 2003; G. Schmidt, 'Muslimske Ungdomsforeninger i Danmark' ('Muslim Youth Organisations in Denmark'), in eds Inge Liengaard and Lise Galal, *At være muslim i Danmark (To Be Muslim in Denmark)*, Copenhagen: Anis, 2003.
21. During my fieldwork in Chicago, Los Angeles and Washington, DC email lists had been established by most of the MSA chapters that I visited. By the end of January 2003, more than 100 groups affiliated with the MSA were listed at www.yahoo.com, a homepages that allows people to establish email lists free of charge.
22. The name of the Danish list is 'Danmarks Forenede Cybermuslimer', which translates into 'the United Cybermuslims of Denmark' and the name of the Swedish list is 'Sveriges Förenade Cybermuslimer', in English, 'The United Cybermuslims of Sweden' (see also G. Schmidt, 'Sveriges Förenade CyberMuslimer—Blå-gul islam på Internet' ('The United Cyber-Muslims of Sweden—Blue-Yellow Islam in the Internet'), in eds D. Westerlund and I. Svanberg, *Blågul Islam? (Blue-Yellow Islam)*, Nora: Nye Doxa, 1999, pp. 107–122). The impact of the nation-state is interesting and relevant in this context. At the same time as Muslims claim that the Internet can create a basis for a 'transnational *ummah*' movement, there is also the tendency to limit the communication and interest field to the localities in which people live and act, e.g. by encouraging people to write their postings in one particular language. On one hand this tendency can be seen as a means to involve Muslims from different social classes in the particular email community (it should be possible to participate without knowing English). On the other hand the tendency highlights the challenge that the nation-state poses to Muslims in the West, in spite of ideological ambitions such as the unification of the *ummah*.
23. P. Mandaville, 'Digital Islam: Changing the Boundaries of Religious Knowledge?' *ISIM*, March 1999, pp. 1, 23.
24. To give an example, in 1995 a member of the American based MSA-L (Muslim Students' Association email list) submitted an email in which he stated that: 'One frontier that can serve to link up the Ummah is cyberspace, or the Internet. We may ask ourselves if cyberspace is the means by which we can revitalize an Islamic way of life. I firmly believe that the Internet can be used to organize a society based on Qur'anic principles ... This is a prime way to reach out to our brothers and sisters and galvanize us into an active citizenship of the Ummah, thus strengthening us individually and collectively as well as preserving our Islamic heritage and ideals'. F. F. Rabbani, 'Do You Feel Trapped Here?', email posted to *MSA-L*, 20 February 1995. See also G. Schmidt, 'Allah på Internet' (Allah on the Internet), *Chaos: Dansk tidsskrift for religionsvidenskabelige studier (Chaos: Danish Journal on Religious Studies)*, Vol. 26, 1996, pp. 51–74; Schmidt, 'The Formation of Transnational Identities', *op. cit.*
25. One aspect that contributes to the sense of a 'transnational *ummah*' is the impact of traveling, for example, when participating in conferences and workshops organized by Muslims in other

- countries. Among the young Muslims that I have so far spoken with in Scandinavia, some had participated in such activities in neighboring countries, including England, and one or two had even traveled to the United States to participate in training there. None of the Muslims that I spoke with in the United States had traveled to Europe to learn from Muslims there, but a number had either visited the Middle East to study or planned to do so.
26. Taking his examples from the context of Britain, Nielsen describes 'new networks' among Muslims to be 'spurred on by a younger, more Europe-based generation'. Young Muslims have 'strengthened a tendency towards closer, informal cooperation among organisation and movements which, having arisen out of a specific local-national heritage in the country of origin, now beings to identify significant areas of common interests and perspectives'. Nielsen, 'Transnational Islam', *op. cit.*, p. 14.
 27. See, for example, Y. Y. Haddad and A. T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987; Johansen, *Muslimsk stemmer, op. cit.*, pp. 89ff.
 28. Interview with young Muslim woman, Copenhagen, Denmark, 19 December 2001; taped.
 29. See also G. Schmidt, 'Dialectics of Authenticity: Examples of Ethnification of Islam among Young Muslims in the United States and Denmark', *Muslim World*, Spring 2002, pp. 1-18; Johansen, *Muslimsk stemmer, op. cit.*; Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America, op. cit.*
 30. Interview with young Muslim woman, Los Angeles, CA, 2 February 2001; taped.
 31. Interview with young Muslim man, Uppsala, Sweden, 12 December 2000; taped.
 32. S. Vertovec, and A. Rogers, 'Introduction', in eds S. Vertovec and A. Rogers, *Muslim European Youth: Reproducing Ethnicity, Religion, Culture*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998, p. 8.
 33. Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America, op. cit.*
 34. Interview with young Muslim woman, Stockholm, Sweden, October 2000; taped.
 35. Johansen, *Muslimsk stemmer, op. cit.*
 36. Cesari, 'Islam in France', *op. cit.*, p. 31.
 37. Johansen, *Muslimsk stemmer, op. cit.*
 38. Y. Y. Haddad, 'Arab Muslims and the Islamic Institutions in America: Adaptation and Reform', in eds S. Y. Abraham and N. Abraham, *Arabs in the New World*, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983, pp. 65-81, 70; L. Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West: Muslim Missionary Activity and the Dynamics of Conversion to Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 102.
 39. J. Otterbeck, *Global Islam och svensk muslimsk media (Global Islam and Swedish Muslim Media)*, Lund: Teologiska Institutionen, n.d., p. 4.
 40. 'There is no compulsion in religion; truly the right way has become clearly distinct from error; therefore, whoever disbelieves in the Shaitan and believes in Allah he indeed has laid hold on the firmest handle, which shall not break off, and Allah is Hearing, Knowing.' M. H. Shakir, *The Holy Qur'an*, trans. M. H. Shakir, Elmhurst: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, 1983.
 41. 'They who turn (to Allah), who serve (Him), who praise (Him), who fast, who bow down, who prostrate themselves, who enjoy what is good and forbid what is evil, and who keep the limits of Allah; and give good news to the believers.' *Ibid.*
 42. 'O you men! surely We have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other; surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty); surely Allah is Knowing, Aware.' *Ibid.*
 43. Schmidt, *Islam in Urban America, op. cit.*
 44. Schmidt, 'Dialectics of Authenticity', *op. cit.* For further description of the clinic, see also Mary Rourke, 'Caring in the Name of Community: From Ashes of L. A. Riots Emerged a Free Clinic, Run by 4 Muslims', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 1998.
 45. G. Schmidt, 'A Visible Change: Young Muslims in Denmark and the United States after September 11', paper presented at workshop on Muslim minorities after 11 September, Duke University, 22 March 2002; G. Schmidt, 'Certifying Religious Practice: The Production Of Visibility Among Muslim Minorities in Two Western Countries', paper presented at the American Anthropological Association's Annual Meeting, New Orleans, LA, 22 November 2002.
 46. L. Stenberg, 'Islam in Scandinavia: Notes on History, Organization and Present Situation', Lund, n.d., p. 19.
 47. *Die Welt*, 'Schilly verbietet dritte islamitische Organisation' (Schilly Bans Third Islamic Organization), 16 January 2003, available online at: <www.welt.de>.
 48. A. Cohen, 'US Officials Give High Marks to Karimov on Washington Visit', *Eurasia-net*, 18 March 2002, available online at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav031502b.shtml>. The remark was made during Uzbek Prime Minister Islam Karimov's visit to

Washington in March 2002. According to Human Rights Watch, the Uzbek government has targeted the Hizb al-Tahrir by 'peaceful means'. However, the organization refers to estimates saying that up to 4000 people may be imprisoned in the country for participating in activities of the Hizb. *Human Rights News*, 'Press Backgrounder: Human Rights Abuse in Uzbekistan', 26 September 2001, available online at: <<http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/uzbek092501-bck.htm>>. In August 2001 the Human Rights Watch sent a referendum on religious persecution in Uzbekistan to the US government. *Human Rights Watch*, 'Memorandum to the U.S. Government Regarding Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan. August 10, 2001', available online at: <<http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/eca/uzbek-aug/index.htm>>.

49. S. Vertovec, 'Religion and Diaspora', paper presented at the conference on 'New Landscapes of Religion in the West, School of Geography and the Environment', University of Oxford, 27–29 September 2000.
50. P. Werbner, 'The Place Which is Diaspora: Citizenship, Religion and Gender in the Making of Chaordic Transnationalism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 119–133, 119.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

