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To cite this article: Corinne Torrekens, Nawal Bensaïd & Dimokritos Kavadias (2021): Young Belgian Muslims: between religious reactivity and individualization, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: [10.1080/01419870.2021.1995017](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1995017)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1995017>



Published online: 04 Nov 2021.



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# Young Belgian Muslims: between religious reactivity and individualization

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## ABSTRACT

In Belgium, since the first instances of girls wearing headscarves in schools in 1989, the public discussion on the place of Islam and Muslims in Belgian society has been almost constant. That debate has become more polarized in the wake of the attacks of 22 March 2016. The results presented in this paper are drawn from sixteen group discussions and twenty individual semi-structured interviews. We investigate the weight of discrimination processes on identity formation in the light of both reactive religiosity and individualization and secularization theoretical frameworks. Our data show that strongly identifying as Muslim is not experienced as being exclusive of other types of identifications claimed simultaneously. Then, we illustrate the processes of reflexivity, appropriation, and individualization of belief, as well as the negotiation or even circumvention of certain religious norms that are ongoing among Brussels' Muslim youth.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 19 April 2021; Accepted 30 September 2021

**KEYWORDS** Islam; Muslims; youth; secularization; individualization; religious practices

## Introduction

In Belgium, since the first instances of girls wearing headscarves in schools in 1989, the public discussion on the place of Islam and Muslims in Belgian society has been almost constant. That debate has become more polarized in the wake of the attacks of 22 March 2016. In a survey published in 2017, 60 per cent of respondents felt that the presence of Muslim communities in Belgium posed a threat to Belgian identity.<sup>1</sup> However, that debate is often carried out among experts, with the target audience, namely Muslims, having relatively little input and rarely voicing their opinions. When they do speak out, it is often through the medium of representatives of institutional structures whose numbers remain relatively small. The same observation can be made – even more strikingly – for young Muslims. Indeed, they have two major handicaps in terms of (under)representation in the media, namely their youth<sup>2</sup> and the

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perception of them as being of foreign descent.<sup>3</sup> Their invisibility in the media as protagonists of the representations that are attributed to them is paradoxically counterbalanced by their over-visibility as a group whose identity is problematized in the public space. Most of these public debates on the place of Islam and Muslims in Belgian society are centred around religious practices that are seen as being barriers to integration, constituting a clear boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims, and disturbing the so-called neutrality of public space. Two decades of Islamist terrorism in the West, in which the 15–25-year-old age group is most at risk of violent radicalization (Lynch 2013), have only reinforced this enduring image of “enemies from within” (Cesari 2001). However, several Muslim organizations publicly challenge the terms of these debates, especially what they perceive to be religiously oriented discrimination within several public policies and practices. On the 5th of July 2020, in the middle of the Covid19 pandemic, the hashtag *hijabisfightback* and organizers from different platforms of Muslim women (most of them veiled) defining themselves as radical inclusive feminists gathered hundreds of (masked) persons in front of the Palais de Justice in Brussels. This demonstration, held in a very symbolic place in the heart of Brussels, called out the discriminations faced by headscarf-wearing Muslim women particularly in the job market and in education where the veil is mostly banned in secondary schools and even in some higher education institutions. In this context, focusing on the religious practices of the younger generations of Muslims is of special interest as Brussels has some key characteristics relating to them. On the first of January 2020, there were 186,953 young people between the ages of 12 and 24 in Brussels, i.e. 15.3 per cent of the population.<sup>4</sup> Many of those are of foreign descent: in 2020, over a third of Brussels’ population held a foreign nationality. Several studies confirm a particularly favourable age structure for young people in the immigrant and Muslim population groups (Schoonvaere 2014; Sacco et al. 2016). Moreover, if the variable of origin is considered, rather than merely nationality, the number of people of foreign origin – either born with a foreign nationality or with a parent who was born with a foreign nationality – represents three quarters of the total population of the region (see note 4). The aim of this paper is therefore to contribute to the research on the mechanisms of identity construction of young Muslims socialized in Europe in general and, in particular, to the work on the role of religious practices which either highlight the emergence of a reactive religiosity or, on the contrary, reveal processes of individualization and secularization. We will demonstrate that these two dynamics are not necessarily opposed in our data.

### **The theory of reactive religiosity**

A much-discussed hypothesis in academic literature is the existence of a reactive religiosity. This suggests that, in a context of very tense public debate on

issues related to the incorporation of Islam into Western societies, the religiosity of Muslims tends to increase, both in identification and in the level of religious practice. The community of Muslims is thus thought to provide a space of identification beyond national affiliations, a dematerialized homeland (Schmidt 2004). The theory of reactive religiosity is an extension of the theory of reactive ethnicity. The latter emerged in the early 1990s in the United States when the classical theory of the Chicago School argued that “assimilation” and the consequent erasure of cultural differences was the ultimate stage of immigration and inter-ethnic relations. And yet, studies, notably those of Glazer and Moynihan (1992), demonstrated that bonds of ethnic solidarity had been maintained, and even revived, among immigrant populations, particularly those of European descent. Authors such as Portes and Ruben (2001) and Zhou (1997) demonstrated the existence of a reactive ethnicity among second-generation immigrants in urban contexts combining mechanisms of hostility, poor social mobility, and segregation. However, attachment to the ethnic group is not “merely ‘maintained’, it is strategically mobilized in inter-group relations with the majority society in order to protect minority group interests or values that are denied or rejected by the powerful majority” (Maliepaard, Gijsberts, and Phalet 2015, 2637). In a multi-country study in Europe, Van Heelsum and Koomen (2015) show how disconcerting it is for second-generation individuals to be assigned ethnic characteristics that are typically those of their parents, especially when these stereotypes are combined with a negative public discourse on immigration. The theory of reactive religiosity has taken on board some of the findings of the reactive ethnic identity thesis (Voas and Fleischmann 2012). Indeed, according to this school of research, the religious practice and identity of Muslims are reinforced in a hostile environment and form a distinct identity in response to social exclusion and experiences of discrimination. For example, Connor (2010) shows that the religiosity of Muslim populations is greater in societal contexts that are less welcoming to immigrants. Similarly, Immerzeel and Van Tubergen (2013) find that insecurity (whether individual, economic or contextual) is positively correlated with religiosity. Ozyurt (2013) points out that in a situation combining a population that is under-qualified to begin with and a context that is rather hostile towards immigration in general and Islam in particular (that of the Netherlands), her Muslim interviewees are more likely to develop a discourse about the incompatibility of their dual identities than those interviewed in the United States, where Muslim immigration has greater social capital from the outset and where religion is not as much of a problem in the public debate. Regarding the Netherlands, a study has shown that perceived discrimination is positively related to mosque attendance and higher levels of religious identification (Maliepaard, Gijsberts, and Phalet 2015). In a paper based on the theory of social identity threat, meaning the psychological response experienced by individuals who feel

misrepresented, discriminated against and depreciated because of their membership in a particular group, Pasek and Cook (2019) show that religiosity can be a source of threat because (more than group membership), it can expose people to bias in secular contexts. Drawing on a panel of 1,000 participants they also revealed that religious threat is highest among religious Muslim and Jewish minority groups in the United States (Pasek and Cook 2019). A research based on several exercises of the Social Science Survey found evidence of reactive religiosity: first-generation migrants who feel discriminated against also self-report as more religious and second-generation ones who assess disadvantage also attend religious gatherings more often (Guveli 2015). Another study, recently conducted in Spain but based on very limited qualitative data, identifies a “religious stigma” scenario that occurs for the majority of young Muslims who were interviewed, across many aspects of their lives (Collet-Sabé 2020). Finally, in the specific case of Belgium, Ouali (2000) has also stressed the fact that Muslims’ expression of their identity is still not welcomed because of its illegitimacy in a society where Islam is frequently associated with negative stereotypes and a discredited image. She points out that while the first generations of migrants who settled in Belgium showed little inclination to make political claims, the following generations are developing a very different approach particularly due to the loss of effectiveness of the traditional economic and social vectors of integration. However, this hypothesis of a direct link between a strained political context and an increase in Muslim religiosity has been nuanced by a study based on quantitative data collected in six European countries, including Belgium, and focusing specifically on the discursive climate and institutional context surrounding the integration of Islam (Torrekens and Jacobs 2016).

### **Individualization and secularization**

Contrary to the United States, where the average religiosity of migrants and non-migrants are more similar (Cadge and Ecklund 2007), in Europe Islam and immigration tend to go hand in hand. Moreover, in highly secularized societies (Norris and Inglehart 2012), the higher levels of religiosity of Muslims compared to natives, combined with terrorist attacks rooted in a political interpretation of dogma, religion can create a clear boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims (Alba and Foner 2015). Consequently, a substantial number of studies have attempted to identify trends of secularization and individualization of religious beliefs as the major development in Europe’s Muslim communities (Peter 2006). Indeed, “classical theories of immigrant secularization and assimilation lead us to expect a post-migratory decline in religiosity, as immigrants and their children acculturate to more secular host societies” (Friberg and Braanen Sterri 2021, 2). In this framework, the

secularizing context of immigration societies would positively impact the religious practices of migrants, particularly second and third generations. For example, Van Tubergen and Sindradóttir (2011) have shown that the religiosity of natives positively affects immigrants' religiosity. In Germany, Diehl and Koenig (2013) have measured a decrease in religious practices that is more pronounced among Muslim of Turkish descent than Catholic Poles and more specific to worship attendance than prayer. For Turks, however, their study shows that the initial decrease in religiosity is followed by a process of religious reorganization, independent of social assimilation (Diehl and Koenig 2013). Guveli (2015) demonstrated that the assimilation hypothesis was at least partially verified in the case of individual religiosity since first and second generations of Turkish origin respondents that have settled in Europe pray less frequently than non-migrants. Other scholars have suggested that religion may change not just in salience, but also in its social form (Friberg and Braanen Sterri 2021). This individualization hypothesis focuses on the idea that the believer autonomously decides which elements of Islam (s)he considers to be binding or not (Peter 2006). In this framework, traditional and institutionalized forms of religiosity may come to be replaced by more subjective and individually oriented ones (Friberg and Braanen Sterri 2021). Scholars have thus insisted on the contemporary evolution of European Muslims marked by the willingness to historicize the normative weight of particular religious interpretations (Peter 2006). And while religious individualization is sometimes seen as an alternative theoretical frame to secularization, other scholars argue that it is in fact a sub-component of the secularization process (Friberg and Braanen Sterri 2021).

## Methods and data

The results presented in this paper are drawn from sixteen group discussions and twenty individual semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a two-year research project. By the end of the project, 124 young people had actively taken part in the study. The focus groups were not intended to be statistically representative, nor to have the "saturation" effect of individual interviews (O'Reilly and Parker 2013). Our aim was rather to uncover collective dynamics of construction and sharing of meaning (Farnsworth and Boon 2010). Nevertheless, we were careful to ensure a certain degree of representativeness among our participants. First of all, the age range was between 16 and 25, with the majority of young people aged between 16 and 19. This offers a great diversity of profiles depending on whether the participants are still in high school, enrolled in higher education or at the beginning of their working life. Secondly, we ensured that, both in the various group interviews and in individual interviews, there was a relatively equal representation of both sexes in order to determine whether gender influenced the answers

to some of our questions. Lastly, we expanded the type of venues in which we conducted interviews from youth centres, schools, tutoring-oriented structures, more “community-based” organizations (in the sense that they are more directly linked to a particular ethnic-religious movement) to mosques and more informal places of conversation. All interviews and group discussions were transcribed and coded for analysis purposes. Firstly, twenty-two thematic topics were identified through the corpus of the transcripts and have, in a second time, been compiled in more conceptual categories such as 1. religious belonging and practices; 2. discrimination experiences; 3. attachment towards the neighbourhood; 4. relationship towards the host and (parents and grandparents) culture and countries and 5. conception about marriage and (homo)sexuality. For the purpose of this article, we have chosen to focus on the results of the two first categories.

However, despite this diversification effort in the collection of data, a significant number of the young people we met share certain characteristics. Firstly, most of those who participated in our survey are of Moroccan descent. This reflects not only historical but also demographic considerations. Indeed, as a result of the bilateral agreements signed in the 1960s between Belgium, on the one hand, and Turkey and Morocco, on the other, migrants or children of migrants from these two countries represent the largest groups of foreigners and Belgians of foreign origin in Brussels. Moreover, the Moroccan population (34,597 people) is much larger than the Turkish one (8,585 people).<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the Moroccan-born population (148,940 people) is significantly higher than the Turkish-born one (33,291 people). Secondly, the vast majority of our respondents are second and third generation. In fact, an overwhelming share of them has dual citizenship. Finally, the bulk of the young people we met live in neighbourhoods in the so-called “poor crescent of Brussels”, an area which is itself located in the heart of the city. These neighbourhoods are socially degraded urban spaces that concentrate various forms of precarity (Rea and Tripier 2003; Van Hamme, Grippa, and Van Crielingen 2016). They bear witness to the weight of Brussels’ spatial division between “high” and “low” neighbourhoods alongside an immigration that was conceived above all as a contribution to the labour force. Despite our efforts, some young people remained out of reach. For example, those who do not attend community structures, who left school early or Muslims from countries with a much smaller population in Brussels (such as Algerians, Pakistanis or Syrians) and whose community fabric is de facto very limited. This also applies to youths who attend religious structures that are more closed and difficult to access. Indeed, the time necessary to contact them would have exceeded the duration of this research project. Despite these unavoidable biases, we believe that we can provide an accurate and nuanced portrait of a significant part of Brussels’ Muslim youth. Indeed, group interviews provide the benefit of collecting a large amount of accurate information on a targeted topic (Wilkinson 1998). The empirical material has

been collected by two researchers having a foreign background and a Muslim education for one of them. Some collective discussions have also been done with the help of a non-racialized and non-Muslim researcher. We have been very careful about how the identity of the researchers could have impacted the different narratives collected. And despite one collective discussion that has been partially more focused on the essentialized differences between “White” and “Autochthonous” Belgian people and the young being present, we have not noticed any major difference in the way the discussions have been framed. After all, group interviews offer the advantage to allow for a variety of opinions on a given topic to be recorded and differences in perspective between different types of participants to be highlighted. Finally, when they involve respondents with different profiles, they also provide an opportunity to objectify the factors related to the opinions and practices of various groups. The individual counterpoints expressed in the semi-structured interviews shed more light on the practices and representations that were highlighted in the group sessions.

## Results

### *Discrimination: no fatalism but realism*

From the 1960s onwards, in Belgium, like in the Netherlands, “migration from Muslim majority countries consisted mainly of Turkish and Moroccan ‘guest workers’, followed by continuing waves of immigrants who came through family reunification and family formation” (Maliëpaard, Gijsberts, and Phalet 2015, 2639). Turkish and Moroccan Muslims face frequent discriminations in Belgian society: “the socioeconomic disadvantage of the first generation persists into the second generation as evident from low educational attainment levels, high unemployment rates, and high degrees of urban concentration and residential segregation” (Güngör, Fleischmann, and Phalet 2011, 1358). However, on the whole, the young people we met did not report any large-scale discriminatory experience and did not indulge in self-victimization at all. On the contrary, some testified to exactly the opposite:

- Safae: I personally have never, never, never experienced it. I’ve been living in Brussels for 18 years and nothing has ever happened to me [...] pure and simple discrimination, I’ve never experienced it.
- Samira: I personally do not feel that I am a victim of stigmatisation or discrimination. No, not at all. I feel both affected and unaffected. I don’t know how to explain it.

Nevertheless, during the course of our discussions, many of them expressed the idea that discrimination might be in their future, as a hypothesis or one of the possible ways in which they might live. For example, when asked whether it is difficult to be a young Muslim in Brussels, Yassine replied:



Personally no, but in other contexts there can be difficulties. For example, in the context of work, of looking for a job. When you have a CV that has, let's say, Ahmed or any other Arab name on it (...) I know it's typical, it's a cliché, but you can see that Ahmed is very qualified. He is more qualified than Michel. But the employer is going to be more tempted by Michel than Ahmed because he has an Arab first name (...) There are also open-minded employers too.

Yassine is not caught up in a discourse of victimhood, he readily acknowledges that the example he gives is partly based on a cliché. However, his statement does not refer to what he sees as his fate, but rather to what he fears, to a risk, an eventuality for which one must be prepared. He reinforces the idea that the formal equality acquired with Belgian nationality and citizenship does not necessarily go hand in hand with genuine equality. The results of the latest Socio-Economic Monitoring carried out by the Interfederal Centre for Equal Opportunities and the Ministry of Employment show that people with a foreign background are still less likely to find employment than Belgo-Belgians, despite having the same qualifications, which points to a structural discrimination against job-seekers of foreign descent on the labour market.<sup>6</sup> Young people are also affected, since, once again according to the Socio-Economic Monitoring, it takes them up to three times longer to find work than their Belgian fellow countrymen. Finally, the type of employment is also a source of discrimination, as people of foreign origin are more often employed in poorly paid, precarious, and/or physically demanding jobs. These discriminations come on top of those encountered in the housing market<sup>7</sup> and in the recreation sector.<sup>8</sup> A survey of pupils in twenty-four high schools in the Brussels Region revealed that significantly more of those who identified as Muslims reported perceptions of discrimination in different areas of community life (schools, transportation, recreational activities, etc.) (Mansoury Babhoutak, Kavadias, and Vicente 2020).

Moreover, many of the young people we met also mentioned instances of discrimination which had happened to them personally or to someone close to them and which seemed to be an almost routine part of their daily lives:

- Abdel: I went to visit houses in Flanders, it was crazy, I was not welcomed like a human being at all.<sup>9</sup>
- Samira: There was a teacher, she hated me. She hated me like crazy. Because how can I put it? She made racist insinuations towards me.
- Wassim: I never think about racism or discrimination. I've never really experienced any. Except maybe when I get stopped for nothing. Like one time I was sitting with a friend in a park and I see a police car coming and they come towards me, not my friend who is from Belgium. She was just asked for her name, but I had to show my papers and they asked me questions like "what are you doing here", "do your parents know (you are here)", etc.

Wassim's comments are indicative of all the statements we collected: after claiming that he does not think too much about discrimination and therefore is not particularly concerned about it, he describes the anecdote of the police check almost as if it were harmless and part of the "ordinary life of the neighbourhoods" (Body-Gendrot 2010), whereas for many others it could be perceived as being quite traumatic. These findings are similar to Berglund's (2013) research on young Swedish Muslims: although the majority of them do not report any experience of discrimination, a careful analysis of their life trajectory demonstrates that it is indeed an important part of their daily lives. Two aspects seem important in relation to these experiences of discrimination. The first one is the international context and the identification with events and/or people that are external to the young people we interviewed but with whom they relate. In this regard, the deterioration of the French public debate and the many moments of Islamophobia widely reported by mainstream as well as community media seem to play a particular role:

Samira: It bothers me what's going on but I don't know what to do to change it so I think, well, with time, maybe it'll pass and I see it's getting worse. And I say to myself, nobody is doing anything. I also tell myself that I'm not doing anything either. So I'm a bit stuck, you could say. It's like the mother with her child in France, but it's in France, I tell myself that it's not going to happen in Belgium. Even if everything that France does, Belgium copies.

With these words, Samira reminds us that young people evolve in a space of communication that is largely transnational (Kibria 2008). The second aspect raised in the interviews that address the issue of discrimination is the security context of the fight against Islamist terrorism and the Islamophobia that pervades certain collective representations and whose expressions can be particularly brutal:

Inès: I came back from holiday one day and I had a tan. I went to pick up a Turkish parcel with a symbol of Islam on it. And when I was walking someone saw me and shouted "terrorist" in front of everyone.

Najoua: One day my sister wanted to cross on the pedestrian crosswalk and a car sped up to her, and the person driving shouted "dirty Muslim".

In fact, Inès' and Najoua's statements reveal that although the majority of the young people we met identify with Islam (this will be discussed later), this is also a process that occurs from the outside, through the eyes of the Other and based on various more or less visible factors (a phenotype, an appearance, a symbol, a name, an accent, etc.). In this way, identity is revealed to be a complex game of (self-)affirmations and (exo-)assignments. It is therefore inevitable that the troubled climate around the issue of Islam's integration into Belgian society, currently marked by violent radicalization and terrorism, will in turn shape their experiences of discrimination. These elements and

their potential impact on the identification processes of young Muslims have long been pointed out in other European contexts (Hamid 2011).

### ***A special case that is not so special: the veil***

Another topic related to this matter of discrimination was also extensively mentioned by participants, namely the issue of the veil. This question was raised by both male and female respondents. Among the latter, those who wore the headscarf mentioned the stigmatization they suffered. Others, who are considering wearing it one day, anticipate the difficulties they will face, particularly at work. Those who did not seem to be thinking of wearing it expressed a strong sense of solidarity with those who did and were joined in this by the young men, who also shared the difficulties faced by their mothers, sisters, and friends. This is indeed a social fact that mobilizes the discourse of the vast majority of the young people we met. This is all the more striking, given that we never spontaneously directed the discussions towards this specific question during the interviews but it systematically came up as a point they wanted to raise.

Safae: Working is complicated because of this. I've already seen girls being refused internships, jobs, not because of their skills but because apparently the veil blocks our brain. I think it's a shame because there is a lot of talent in the world. Everyone has something to contribute and I think it's a shame to reduce someone to just their beliefs and what's on their head. I personally see myself wearing the veil one day too. I wouldn't like to be reduced to just that.

Kamal: Indirectly it affects me, even if I'm not the one who wears it. I'm not the one who is discriminated against, but when I see someone in my community who is discriminated against, it affects me. When I see a woman who has studied and can't fulfil her dream, I think it's unfair.

In Belgium, as elsewhere in Europe, the headscarf is one of the main stumbling blocks in the public debate around the inclusion of Islam and its visible symbols. Young people emphasize the extent to which society reflects to women who wear the headscarf the image of a space in which they are excluded and their identity denied. The statements we collected on this topic bear witness to the different rationales behind the wearing of the headscarf, ranging from a family heritage, an act of faith, a sign of differentiation, a distinction from other believers in one's own religious community, or even from one's parents, or on the contrary, a sign of community loyalty in a non-Muslim society, a passport to a wider social life because it is a sign of rigour and piety, and a symbol of purity (Schmidt 2004; Siraj 2011), as many complexities that the current debate negates. In our interviews, the prescriptive horizon of the headscarf as a self-imposed religious norm (Eid

2015) was present. We were struck by the emphasis placed on discrimination against women who wear the headscarf in the discourse of our female participants, even those who do not wear it, for whom the veil is often an issue or even a more or less distant horizon, due to its status as a “religious obligation” (Amiriaux 2016) in prominent Islamic books (Zwilling 2020) and imam’s discourses embodied in religious institutions.<sup>10</sup> This is also true of the male participants and confirms its place in the construction of the prevailing orthodoxy understood as a claim to determine correct beliefs and practices amid a landscape of alternative religious narratives (Di Puppo 2019). In our view, this is part of a double dynamic. First, there is a process of collective identification with what has become for many Muslims the archetypal infringement of their fundamental rights (Edmunds 2012) in several European countries including Belgium. Bayat and Herrera (2010) use the notion of Muslim youth as a category to define a shared habitus and common historical consciousness. This almost incessant debate on the place of Islam, symbolized by over three decades of controversy around the headscarf, combined with the moral shocks triggered by the terrorist attacks and other processes of public deliberation experienced as targeting Muslims in particular, if not solely, such as the banning of the full veil or ritual slaughter.<sup>11</sup> Second, there is no denying that some young men have an interest in maintaining ethnic and religious boundaries in gender relations (Dwyer 2000). This process includes the control of Muslim identities and of the expression of women’s bodies (Archer 2001) in a context of a “crisis of masculinity” (Hopkins 2009), as was evident in some interactions, albeit in a very small minority of them:

Amin: The veil is a way of knowing if the girls are Muslim. Because you can’t see the prayer, but you can see the veil.

The young women in the groups – and some of them wearing the veil – we met were not fooled, and many of them not only challenged the traditional gender relations that were sometimes experienced in their families but also reminded their male counterparts that the religious norm of modesty and purity also applies to them:

Karima: I insist a lot on the fact that we tend to focus the question of virginity on women, but it also concerns men because men and women are equal.

Saliha: The boy is less closely supervised by his family, if he decides to go out because he wants to go out, it’s easier to say yes to a boy than to a girl, I think that’s unfair. My little brother has the same rights as me, and I have the same rights as him. That is to say, if he goes out to play sports, I go out to play sports.

These two examples of discourse are quite symptomatic of broader but recent developments within Belgian “Muslim communities”, namely the

self-organization of young Muslim women in various autonomous collectives. While these young women challenge the headscarf ban in schools and particularly in the workplace and criticize the blind spots of “white feminism”, they also fight the manifestations of patriarchy within the community. In fact, they reject these different systems of oppression equally. These developments shed light on the transformation that is underway for part of the younger Muslim generation. On the issue of the veil in particular, unlike their first-generation parents whose attitude was reserved towards the majority group, these young people are increasingly positioning themselves in the register of what Abdelmalek Sayad described as the transition from “politeness” to “politics”, with the adoption of more contentious positions and a stronger self-assertion in the public space

### **Muslims above all**

In all the interviews with these young people, they were asked how they defined themselves. There were no prescriptive suggestions as to what type of identification they might have, i.e. they worked out their own definition of themselves. Many of them identified themselves as being from Brussels, as Belgians or as having an attachment to their neighbourhood. Yet, the vast majority of them also asserted their identity as Muslims, and for some of them, this was the only identity they could identify with:

- Mehdi: I feel Muslim, Moroccan and from Tetouan.  
 Ibtissame: I first identify as Muslim, but not Turkish.  
 Farida: I am proud to be who I am. I am proud to be Muslim. I am not afraid, I am not ashamed to say that I am a Muslim. I have convictions. And I am happy I have these convictions ... To succeed thanks to everything I have learned, to be able to speak up and make people understand that no matter how much you try to spit on us, I will answer you.

During the entire fieldwork, our research was introduced to the participant as a research focussed on young Brussels Muslims. This was for us the most ethical way to proceed in order to gain and respect their trust (instead of pretending we were doing a research on the Brussels young in general, for example) but it gave them also the possibility to discuss the legitimacy and intents of such a research. If we acknowledge this could have influenced at least partially the way they have framed their self-presentation as primarily Muslims, we have to insist on the fact that this was sometimes challenged by other participants who identify themselves differently. Moreover, some collective discussions organized in schools or youth clubs have also gathered some non-Muslim young offering the opportunity to discuss why and how this part of the identity of their comrades was important for them. Finally, these results are in line with the findings of Torrekens (2021), which

demonstrated that, using quantitative data, when asserted, allegiance to Islam among ethnic minorities is a proud identity for the vast majority of those who self-identify as Muslims. While this study only focused on adults, it also found that the 18–25-year-olds were no less religious than previous generations. The Muslim community might therefore offer a space of identification beyond national affiliations, a kind of dematerialized “homeland” (Schmidt 2004). Indeed, “through similarity (e.g. religious dress codes) and synchronicity (e.g. daily prayer or breaking the fast), religion powerfully shapes shared social realities within religious communities” (Güngör, Fleischmann, and Phalet 2011, 1357). But it is important to emphasize that this identity as a strong, important and proud Muslim is in no way framed as being in opposition to or in conflict with that of others, nor is it exclusive of other simultaneously claimed identities, as was shown in previous research on Belgium (Torrekens 2021). Moreover, young people are not passive in their relationship to religious knowledge. They develop a curiosity about the major issues raised by their religious affiliation along with a genuine desire to take ownership of their faith. This process appears to combine the knowledge acquired through primary socialization, mainly within the family (Minganti 2008; Güngör, Fleischmann, and Phalet 2011), with information gathered through a multitude of secondary socializations, such as religious instruction, speeches given by imams, discussions with their peers, and personal research in books or on the internet:

- Wassim: I mean, before, like a year and a half ago, I was fifteen, sixteen years old. Well, from the age of eleven to sixteen, I practised like crazy. I went to the mosque with my stepfather every Friday (...) I prayed all the time, I did my ablutions, I fasted. But for the past year, year and a half, I've been praying but not all the time. Sometimes I don't even think about it, I don't know how to say it (...)
- Alia: Frankly, I think that finding time for myself is great and if I can pray, even if it's cool at the mosque, it's even better at home because I'm all alone and I can really focus on myself and on my connection with God. And that's what I think is beautiful about religion, is that it's between you and God and no one else ... you make your own choices.
- Abdel: A true Muslim must have a critical mind because in order to keep the faith, one must also doubt that faith. You also have to turn this faith around in ... Imagine that faith is a cube, you have to turn around to see all the sides of the cube and analyse the structure, the structure of this faith, why it existed, how, how it happened. There are some answers. Sometimes, we try to discuss with others who have other points of view, who see the cube from another angle.

These interview abstracts corroborate Hafez's (2017) assessment that young Muslims who were born in Europe, as they discover Islam, challenge the vision of their parents who for the most part have developed what they

framed as a cultural Islam. Indeed, young people seek a more universalist vision of religion, a “pure” and “true” version of Islam (Schmidt 2004). Muslim identity can then facilitate a critical distance from both the society of insertion and the cultural and ethnic practices of their parents (Ryan 2014). In this way, young people develop a reflexivity regarding their religious practices and representations, which in turn gives rise to processes of hybridization and individualization that reflect dynamics of assimilation into the norms of European societies where the “self” is more acquired and constructed than inherited (Ozyurt 2013). Indeed, one of the most immediate and obvious effects of the insertion of Islam in Europe is the increase in the level of pluralization of the religious and cultural offer which has enhanced the cultural and religious choice available to each individual (Allievi 2012). We see this as more than a simple strategy of self-presentation to minimize the risk of criticism, with religion being described as a choice rather than being imposed by the parents (Schmidt 2004). These reflexive attitudes can lead the young people we met to question the religious norms and injunctions that have been passed on to them:

Abdel: When I went to the mosque, well, it’s no use talking to me about hell, punishment, whatever, it doesn’t work. You can’t reach me like that, with a dialogue like that. Why not? Because I like speeches where there’s mercy, forgiveness or a second chance... You can’t show people a face where God is hard, mean (...) He’s not a vengeful God like that (...) You do things out of obligation, you know. And I don’t like that. I like to do something when it makes sense, you know? For example, drawing is forbidden (...) But if I can do it, there’s a reason. In the sense that if I can draw, it’s not everyone who can draw like that. It’s God who gave me this gift. Why would he give it to me and then tell me it’s forbidden? It’s not logical.

Léa: I don’t go to the mosque. I have often asked myself questions about religion from a feminist perspective. And so quite often when someone comes to me and says something religious that is quite sexist, I explain to them that there is a story behind it, so you have to look up the history, and that there is nothing at all written in the Koran about this issue (...) I don’t pray and I stopped fasting for medical reasons. I feel Muslim but not a practising one.

As we can see, this reflective re-examination of their faith is not necessarily synonymous with a lessening of their faith, nor does it automatically result in an end to or even a rejection of their religious practice. Individualization should be understood primarily as a re-appropriation of a direct and personal relationship with God and a quest for meaning that differs from the “mechanical” practice that simply mimics that of parents and/or peer groups. However, we should take on board Altglas (2014) observations that, on the one hand, bricolage and hybridization do not work together in just any way and that not everything is appropriated or “hybridizable”. We should

also consider Pędziwiatr's (2011) conclusions that not all religious norms are negotiated in the same way and to the same extent and that some of them are neither questioned nor rejected in some cases. For instance, more normative discourses rejecting these processes of bricolage also occurred, even if they were in the minority in the interviews as a whole:

Farhad: For me religion is about believing, about believing in it. And a religion in fact, there are rules. And yes, the rules, they are not there for nothing.

## Discussion

In this paper, we have tried to draw a complex and nuanced picture of Muslim youth in Brussels, considering their aspirations and the way they identify themselves in a society that often sees them as a potential problem rather than a resource. Although our data do not allow us to settle unequivocally the scientific debate on the existence or not of a reactive religiosity, our results do indicate that discrimination is part of the mental map of the young people we interviewed, whether because of personal or family experiences or as a result of identifying with a group whose fundamental freedoms are perceived to be violated, in particular the free public exercise of their religion. Our data also show that strongly identifying as Muslim is not experienced as being in conflict with or breaking away from the rest of society nor is it exclusive of other types of identifications claimed simultaneously such as being Belgian or from Brussels, for example. Lastly, we have illustrated the processes of reflexivity, appropriation, and individualization of belief, as well as the negotiation or even circumvention of certain religious norms that are ongoing among Brussels' Muslim youth. This reflexivity is part of the quest for an authentic Islam, sometimes free of cultural superstitions, other times free of patriarchal interpretations, and compatible with the Western lifestyle of these young people. We also add two important outputs relating to religious reactivity theory. Firstly, religious salience can be strong for young Muslim people and can be determined by ordinary and daily experiences of discrimination, a polarized public debate on integration but also by identifying with a larger group perceived as being persecuted. This collective identification process is as crucial as individual discrimination. Indeed, most research focussing on reactive religiosity used quantitative data exploring individual levels of religious identification and self-reporting practices and feelings of discrimination but tend to ignore collective identification processes. Secondly, we have shown that religious salience and religious pride can be, at least partially, dislocated from religious practices and normativity. Indeed, we have also highlighted the existence of individualization and reflexive processes towards religious practices and norms among our young



Muslim respondents who still strongly identify with Islam. This is important since religious reactivity and individualization/secularization theoretical frameworks can be seen as the two opposite and conflicting fates of Islam and Muslims in Europe: the radicalization of conviction on one hand and the loss of religious salience and practice on the other. However, we have highlighted that strong religious identification and religious practice is not necessarily in opposition with individualization and reflexivity of religious norms. Of course, when studying individualization and the bricolage of beliefs, as the prominent French sociologist of religion Hervieu-Léger stated, “one needs to be attentive to the fact that individuals have differing competences/capacities – according to class, gender, generation or, more generally, their socialization – to engage in the eclectic construction of ‘their’ belief” (cited in Peter 2006, 110). Moreover, such changes are not necessarily intentional but may be the unintended result of sociocultural assimilation through exposure within the country’s general education system (Friberg and Braanen Sterri 2021). These different processes of identification and individuation are not without their tensions and contradictions, calling for further reflection on the strategies of presentation and negotiation of the “self”, which must continuously consider the complex and constant intersection of the weight of family legacies, group injunctions, wider societal dynamics, the effects of public debate, and the individual’s own capacities of appropriation (Franceschelli and O’Brien 2015). In any case, this serves as a reminder that it is imperative, as Villechaise and Bucaille (2020) argue, not to freeze individuals in their allegiances, overlooking their ambivalence and volatility.

## Notes

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7. Baromètre de la diversité Logement, *Centre interfédéral pour l'égalité des chances*, 2014. Accessed February 23, 2021. [https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties\\_docs/barometre\\_de\\_la\\_diversite\\_logement.pdf](https://www.unia.be/files/Documenten/Publicaties_docs/barometre_de_la_diversite_logement.pdf).
  8. « Bruxelles: La discrimination en boîte de nuit dans le viseur », *DH.net*, 26 novembre 2016. Accessed February 23, 2021. <https://www.dhnet.be/regions/bruxelles/bruxelles-la-discrimination-en-boite-de-nuit-dans-le-viseur-5838c210cd70a4454c05681f>.
  9. In the aftermath of the last federal elections of 2019, the far-right party Vlaams Belang (which translates as 'Flemish Interest') became the second-largest party in Belgium's most populous region: 18.5% of the vote (+12.6) and an almost fourfold increase in representation (23 seats in the Flemish Parliament, +17). In particular, the party seems to have attracted voters disappointed by the then ruling Flemish nationalist party.
  10. For example, in its 34th fatwa available on its website, the European Council For Fatwa and Research considers that "a woman, in front of strangers, must cover her entire body with the exception of her face and hands according to the majority of the ulamas", our translation, <https://www.e-cfr.org/les-fatwas-conseil-francais/> (Accessed September 7, 2021). The same organization, which pretends to be the highest religious authority for European Muslims, published a press release after the general ban of the veil in French public schools stating that "wearing a veil is an act of adoration and a divine prescription, it is not a simple religious or political symbol", our translation, [https://www.saphirnews.com/Conseil-europeen-de-la-fatwa-et-de-la-recherche-sur-la-question-du-foulard-islamique-en-France\\_a669.html](https://www.saphirnews.com/Conseil-europeen-de-la-fatwa-et-de-la-recherche-sur-la-question-du-foulard-islamique-en-France_a669.html) (Accessed September 7, 2021).
  11. In 2017, two of the three regions of Belgium, namely Flanders and Wallonia, revoked the previous exemptions for ritual slaughter without prior stunning.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research was supported by the program "Anticipate" of Innoviris, the Brussels public regional institute for research and innovation <https://innoviris.brussels/mission-vision>

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