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Role of Islam in Practical Life amongst Some Young Swiss Muslim Adults: A Focused Ethnographic Analysis

Akbar Nour[*]

Abstract

Contemporary secular Switzerland has been polarised by more than two decades of anti-Muslim sentiments. Indeed, some Swiss politicians and the media have conveyed misrepresentative narratives stigmatising Islam and Muslim-related issues. This conflicting environment has produced ambivalent impacts on the personal development of Swiss-born Muslims Consequently, I suggest that they live in an ambivalent position, where their status as Muslim is not fully acknowledged and their belonging to Switzerland still questioned. Indeed, this article will explore the following research question: How do some young Swiss-born Muslim adults construct their subjectivities and experiences linked to Islam in their daily lives in contemporary Switzerland? The research methodology of this focused ethnography draws on various semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with several young Swiss Muslim men and women. The paper focuses on (a) Switzerland's socio-cultural and political context and (b) the various ways this study's research partners construct their ambivalent subjectivities through the analysis of their individual trajectories and narratives. It concludes that young Swiss Muslim adults formulate and produce alternative narratives, in order to make sense of their lives and accommodate various layers of identification in contemporary Switzerland. Eventually some recommendations for further research are formulated.

Keywords: Ambivalent Subjectivities; Individual Religiosity; Young Swiss-born Muslim Adults; Switzerland; Anthropology of European Muslims.

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Introduction

"Islam is part of my life. It has a normal role, without having the main one." [1] That is what Shah Rick, a young Swiss Muslim adult of mixed Pakistani-Belgian origin, told me in one of our various conversations. Another of my research partners, Ibrāhīm, also noticed: "There are a lot of people who love Islam, because they find this brotherly relationship in prayers. But in my case, it was an individual effort, even selfish."

These two opinions relativise the central role of religion and the will for young Western Muslim adults[2] to have a piety-driven life as well as they emphasise their "subjectivities and life worlds."[3]

For more than two decades, Switzerland's public discourses held by some Swiss politicians and media on Islam have regularly expressed anti-Muslim sentiments, misrepresenting these issues.[4] This polarised environment has caused ambivalent impacts on Swiss-born Muslims Regarding the 2009 popular vote to ban minarets that was accepted by a small majority of the Swiss population, one of my research partners, Ibrāhīm held the following opinion:

> It was a shock, not because of the minarets, but the symbol in the background
> was discriminatory for Muslims. OK, you cope with it over the years. But there
> is always some kind of bitterness. Indeed, I was born in this country and I
> served in the Swiss army. It is disturbing, but it won't hinder me in my daily
> life.

Consequently, young Swiss Muslims live in an ambivalent position, where their status as Muslim is still not fully acknowledged and their belonging to Switzerland questioned.

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[1] The research partners' quotations have been translated from French to English by this author. Indeed the research partners in this study are all French-speaking Swiss citizens.

[2] By 'young adults', I mean a segment of population between the ages of 18 and 34. I also the notion of 'emerging adults' to talk about them.

[3] Paola Abenante and Daniele Cantini, "Introduction. Life-worlds and Religious Committment: Ethnographic Perspectives on Subjectivity and Islam," *La Ricerca Folklorica*, no. 69 (2014): 3-19.

[4] Darius Farmān and Enzo Nussio, "Views on Islam in Times of Terrorism," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, no. 226 (2018): 1-4.

Literature Review

The studies of Muslim practices by the anthropologists Ṭalāl Asad, Sabā Maḥmood and Charles Hirschkind have been of critical importance to the so-called 'ethical turn' in the anthropology of Islam. However, Norwegian anthropologist Sindre Bangstad, while recognizing the key role of Asad in the anthropology of Islam, argues that "some of the silences and inconsistencies in Asad's work on secularism relate to the status of binaries such as 'non-Western' and 'Western', and to the absence of ethnography[5] in Asad's oeuvre". [6] A group of younger anthropologists initiated some criticisms of this line of studies. Probably the fiercest critique of these scholars has been Finnish anthropologist Samuli Schielke. He perceives three "pitfalls" in Saba Mahmood's arguments in her famous book *Politics of Piety.*[7]

He disagrees with her regarding "committed religious activists as paradigmatic representatives of religiosity"; Mahmood's focus on "the attempt to realise a docile, God-fearing ideal which leaves the actual consequences of that attempt" and thirdly her "hermetic approach to 'culture' and 'tradition' ".[8] Schielke was not on his own in formulating these criticisms of "too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam".[9] Scholars such as Lisa Debevec, Amira Mittermaier, Magnus Marsden,[10] to quote a few of them,

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[5] By 'focused ethnography', I refer to "a useful tool in gaining a better understanding of the experiences of specific aspects of people's way of life and being''. See, Edward Cruz and Gina Higginbottom, "The Use of Focused Ethnography," *Nursing Research* 20, no. 4 (2013)..

[6] Sindre Bangstadt, "'Contesting secularism/s: Secularism and Islam in the Work of Ṭalāl Asad," *Anthropological Theory* 9(2009): 189.

[7] , Ṣabāh Maḥmood, *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Maḥmood's writings have greatly renewed gender studies through a critical approach of liberal feminism and its reading of Islam-related issues. See also: Ṣabāh Maḥmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (2001): 202-36; Ṣabāh Maḥmood, "Ethical Formation and Politics of Individual Autonomy in Contemporary Egypt," *Social Research* 70, no. 3 (2003): 1501-30.

[8] Samuli Schielke, "Being good in Ramadan: Ambivalence, fragmentation and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, no. 1 (2009): 36.

[9] Samuli Schielke, "Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or how to make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life," *ZMO Working Papers* 2(2010): 2.

[10] Samuli Schielke and Debevec Lisa, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), 247-65; Magnus Marsden, "Love and Elopement in Northern Pakistan," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13, no. 1

have taken a phenomenological approach to Islam, with the aim to come up with a more fine-grained understanding of the everyday religious practices of Muslims, as they are critically involved in debates on the shape of Islam.

Indeed this article will follow this line of studies through an analysis of the ambivalent subjectivities and "little practices" of some Swiss-born male and female emerging adults, encapsulating their "actual lived experiences and the existential significance they give to these little practices".[11]

Research Methodology

The research methodology of this article draws on various semi-structured interviews and informal conversation with several Swiss-born men and women. This study explores how they construct their ambivalent subjectivities in contemporary Switzerland, based on "their concerns, practice and experience of everyday life in its various moments and directions".[12]

The concept of 'ambivalence' is therefore interesting to consider, because there is a diversity of individual experiences linked to Islam in the daily and ordinary lives of the several Swiss Muslim adults, who are part of this study's target group. Most of the experiences I refer to help to grasp how my research partners "deal with and stand toward myriad ambiguities (situations) and contradictions (embedded in a wider social arrangement and on an individual level)".[13] Furthermore, studying their singular subjectivities may also help to approach "their relationships with their emotional environment"[14] and the various ways of "feeling to be Muslim".[15]

(2007): 91-108; Amira Mittermaier, "Dreams from Elsewhere: Muslim Subjectivities beyond the Trope of Self-Cultivation," ibid.18, no. 2 (2012).

[11] Schielke and Lisa, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, 2.

[12] Schielke, "Second Thoughts about the Anthropology of Islam, or how to make Sense of Grand Schemes in Everyday Life," 1.

[13] Deana Jovanovic, "Ambivalence and the Study of Contradictions," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6, no. 3 (2016): 4.

[14] Gabriele Marranci, *The Anthropology of Islam* (London: Berg, 2008), 100. See also Gabriele Marranci, "Studying Muslims of Europe - A Critical Discussion," in *'Blackwell Companion to the Anthropology of Europe*, ed. Máiréad Nic Craith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 294-309.

[15] Marranci, "Studying Muslims of Europe - A Critical Discussion," 146.

Contextualising Young Swiss Muslim Adults

In contemporary Switzerland, as in most European countries, the presence of Muslim populations with various socio-cultural origins and backgrounds has become a permanent feature since the end of the 20th century. In addition to the first wave of Muslim immigrants, who came to Switzerland in search for a better material life in the 1960s and 1970s, their Swiss-born descendants have settled there and most of them have become Swiss citizens. According to the 2018 Swiss official statistics, out of a general population of around 400,000 Muslims in Switzerland, there are around 120,000 young Swiss Muslims (Swiss-born Muslims, converts to Islam, naturalised, dual citizenship). Even among Swiss Muslims, there is a great heterogeneity in terms of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds and in terms of religious belongings, representations and practices.

Since the early 2000s, a new socio-religious and political debate has emerged within the Swiss public sphere, regarding the establishment and increasing visibility of Swiss-born Muslims. This feature is part of a broader trend among European Muslims, showing that "they have put down roots in Europe and that the visibility of their religious practice is above all a consequence of these roots".[16] However, the 9/11 events, various terror attacks and the issue of radicalisation of some young European Muslims *inter alia* have produced a distorted conception of Islam and Muslim-related issues in various European countries' public sphere.

The deep ambivalence in Islam's new visibility in Europe (as a sign for social inclusion and potential threat) has also generated waves of normative discourse, stances and tensed controversies of various kinds:

Regarding security, Muslims are subject to suspicion as 'potential terrorists'. Concerning culture, Islam is often presented as a 'cultural monolith' opposed to Western 'secular and democratic' values. This ambivalent combination has produced a ''Muslim

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[16] Olivier Roy, "Afterword Islam in Europe: An Ordinary Religion Like Any Other," in *The Swiss Minaret Ban: Islam in Question*, ed. Patrick Haenni and Stéphane Lathion (Fribourg: Religioscope Institute, 2011), 90-95.

question'' and the Muslim as a ''controversial'' figure to various degrees throughout Europe. [17]

Constructing Ambivalent Subjectivities amongst Some Young Western Swiss Muslim Adults

Departing from their parents' lived Islam

Regarding the way Islam is lived and felt in everyday life, the intergenerational shift between the first generation of Muslim immigrants who settled in Switzerland and their Swiss-born children has produced the construction of ambivalent subjectivities among these latter. Indeed, the younger generations do not automatically replicate their parents' religiosity; they rather reshape it, following mainly individual and subjective patterns.

For my research partners, their religiosity and religious practices clearly depart from their parents. Ibrāhīm, a Swiss Muslim 23 year-old law student of Indian origin, attempts to follow a pattern of religious piety. He even claims to be more "religious" than his father:

> I know that if I had grown in India or in a Muslim country, my relation to Islam would have been quite different from my current relation to Islam in Switzerland. My solid faith, I owe it to my presence in Switzerland. I see the difference between my father, who is a devout Muslim, and me. I think that I know more than my father in terms of religion.

Claiming to be more "religious" than his father and despite his attempt to have a life "guided by religion", Ibrāhīm, however, needs to adapt his religious practices to the Swiss secular environment. For instance, regarding prayers, he indicates:

> It is true that it is more difficult to integrate them in daily life. However, Islam is flexible. When I am at University, it is not possible for me to do all of them, so what I do is to regroup them or if I can, I will pray in the hallway or any other free place.

One of my other research partners, Mohamed, an observing Muslim such as Ibrāhīm , is also critical of his parents' religious practices:

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[17] Gianni Matteo, "Muslims' Integration as a way to Defuse the 'Muslim Question': insights from the Swiss Case," *Critical Research on Religion* 4, no. 1 (2016): 21-36.

> Islam was transmitted by my parents. However, for me, as I became a teenager,
> I started to ask myself questions and draw comparisons. But as I thought about
> it in depth, I told myself that Islam was the best way for me.

Even though embedded in the secular context of contemporary Switzerland, both Ibrāhīm and Mohamed feel to be more "religious" than their parents. Indeed, they construct their subjectivities, where their lived Islam is shaped in a different perspective than their parents, mainly resting on an individualized and subjective approach, entangling religious ideals and "little practices".[18]

Entangling religious ideals and ordinary practices

As already indicated, my research partners' narratives express their individual autonomy and how they shape their subjectivities. In his various writings, Samuli Schielke has highlighted the ambivalences, tensions and difficulties of moral pursuit in everyday life. [19] When it comes to the construction of their religiosity, my research partners also have to consider "ambivalent commitments" in the way they fashion their ethical self and religiosity-linked concerns.[20]

Regarding my research partners' religious development and knowledge, most of them have followed patterns of re-reading their parents' practices in terms of religiosity and have ascribed to Islam a key role in defining a subjective and personal experience of 'being and feeling' Muslim in contemporary Switzerland.

Shah Rick: "*I would not talk of religion, rather of spirituality.*"

For instance, when it comes to describe his 'feeling to be Muslim', Shah Rick declares:

> In my case, I would not talk of religion, rather of spirituality. For instance,
> before I meet a person and according to the context in which I find myself, I
> would tell myself '*Bismillah'* (In the name of God'), so that I put good fortune
> on my side. Spirituality also gives me self-confidence and quietness. I am
> persuaded that many things take place on a spiritual level. (…) Sometimes I
> admire people who are faithless and confronted to life's challenges. I tell

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[18] Schielke and Lisa, *Ordinary Lives and Grand Schemes: An Anthropology of Everyday Religion*, 2.

[19] Samuli Schielke, "Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 39, no. 2 (2009): 158-85.

[20] Ibid., 158.

> myself that they are strong, because in my case, I am pleased to have a religion to which I can relate myself. I admire them, because I do not know how they manage it. In my case, I could not live without believing.

This personalised expression and feeling of 'Muslimness' reflects Shah Rick's specific life experience and life-world, as a Swiss Muslim emerging adult of mixed Pakistani-Belgian origin raised in Geneva's cosmopolitan environment.

> Here in Geneva, people don't care about your nationality. (…) When you take the bus, you will hear a diversity of foreign languages, which you do not hear in Lyon, Paris or Brussels. (…) Here in Geneva social integration is more successful; people mingle easily with each other.

Shah Rick, who has an academic background in education, psychology and business management, works as a public secondary teacher in Geneva. Since his childhood, he has also been very active in rap music, having released several albums. He uses rap as a means to assert his hybrid identity of Swiss Muslim, holding a 'post-immigration' discourse:

> We are not in the same cultural context as in France. Here in Switzerland there are no issues with Islam, because the history is different, and I don't want that to change. In Switzerland there was no Algerian war, no issues related to colonies, no people coming here and saying that they are the descendants of X or Y. It is more relevant to talk about misunderstandings between the Swiss French and Swiss German populations.

Regarding his 'Muslimness', Shah Rick also asserts his personal path to faith, with lyrics infused with Islam-related terms and an acknowledgement of being Muslim. For instance in his track 'Game Over Mix Tape #2',[21] the lyrics express this 'feeling to be Muslim':

> I don't drink alcohol and I don't smoke drugs, because it is against my principles and values. And if you take me for a bad guy, you will be confronted with unfortunate events. (...). I have tried to have faith in human beings and like them, but I have faith in God and that is already very good. The world is harsh; you have to be tough. My values are not theirs; I swim against the tide. (…) Learn to get involved for the public good.

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[21] https://myspace.com/shahrick/music/albums accessed on January 7, 2020.

Shah Rick's narrative illustrates his personal reformulation of Islam as a tool to forge and maintain a coherent sense of self, by overcoming the tensions and complexities inherent to Switzerland's secular environment.

Ibrāhīm: "*It is through our exemplary behavior as persons and citizens that we can move forward further to our Prophet's teachings.*"

Even though Ibrāhīm intends to achieve 'religious piety' in his life and have his life 'guided by religion', he needs to accommodate his religious practice to the contingencies of daily life as a Swiss citizen, who legally needs to perform his compulsory military service:

> Regarding Ramadan, I fast whatever the circumstances. I did it in the Swiss army during the officers' training school. It was not obvious. It has been one of my main challenges in my life so far. But I achieved it. So it is one of the signs, a proof that Islam is not incompatible with the Swiss society.

Muslims being stigmatised in the Swiss public sphere's discourse, Ibrāhīm feels the need to behave as an 'exemplary citizen', combining his various layers of identification ('Muslimness' and 'Swissness') representing an ideal ethical self:

> When I was younger, Islam was regarded as something unknown, without any positive or negative image. But more recently, the image has turned negative. So it is up to us to explain our religion and act as examples. It is through our exemplary behavior as persons and citizens that we can move forward further to our Prophet's teachings.

Ibrāhīm elaborates here a counter-narrative to the dominant Swiss public sphere discourse misrepresenting Islam and Muslim-related issues, by leaning on an ambivalent position where Islam is used as a cultural resource to foster Swiss Muslims' active participation and civic engagement in their home society. By taking the Prophet Muhammad as a role model of ''exemplary'' participation in society, Ibrāhīm intends to construct an ethical self and behave as an ''active citizen''.[22]

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[22] Peucker and Akbarzadeh use the term of ''active citizenship'' in their work on Australian Muslims and highlight the various ways in which they interpret and experience their religious belonging as a catalyst for their citizenship. They also regard Muslims as 'ordinary' citizens, performing their ''active citizenship'' as an inherent part of an ethnically,

Indeed, he intends to translate his faith to favor social inclusion of Muslims and deconstruct the 'otherising'[23] of Muslims as 'incompatible with democratic values' and forge a representation of Muslims as 'ordinary' citizens in contemporary Switzerland. Comparing the times of the Prophet Muhammad and the current context of contemporary Switzerland is for Ibrāhīm a way to fashion an ambivalent subjectivity and relate emotionally to the Swiss context, where Swiss Muslims still have to face various challenges in their daily life.

Nidā: "*I like to say that 'Nidonite' is a virtual, a fictional identity of Nidā, it's me but I will draw fictive or exaggerated things of reality, to convey specific messages.*"

Nidā is a 23-year old veiled Swiss Muslim student in sociology and communication, as well a cartoonist and writer; she has also been active in volunteering in various civil society associations and eventually was the vice-president of Frislam, an association of Swiss-born Muslims based in the canton of Fribourg.[24] Furthermore, she is a digital activist and has created herself a virtual identity, 'Nidonite', the 'Weapon of Mass Construction', as she coined herself. Her digital practices on various social media sites (Facebook, Instagram, Youtube) [25] are platforms where she shares with her audience cartoons, videos, thoughts and opinions on various everyday life topics and activities that appeal to her such as prejudice against Islam and Muslims, gender issues, sports, literature, writing, etc.

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linguistically and culturally diverse polity and civil society. See Mario Peucker, *Shahram Akbarzadeh. Muslim Active Cititzenship in the West* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-226.

[23] 'Otherising' is a way or process in which one ascribes his identity often through the negative attribution of characteristics to the others. (author may confirm) Creutz-Kämppi. argues that ''otherness describes the distribution of power, the differences between known and unknown are not mediated equally or neutrally, othering always refers to the other party in a relation'' (Karin Creutz-Kämppi. ''The Othering of Islam in a European Context'', *Nordicom Review* 29 (2008): 297). In the West Islam and Muslim-related, issues are still often regarded as ''something distant and ascribed in the role of the Other'' (Karin Creutz-Kämppi., 2008:295).

[24] For more on details on the association Frislam, see their website: www.frislam.ch

[25] Nidā's various digital tools appear on her website: https://nidonite.ch, accessed on June 23, 2019.

Nidā has reached some regional and international fame, as she has around 45,000 followers on her Instagram account. Being active both in digital and public spheres, she has shaped real and online subjectivities, which are intertwined and form an expansion of her real identity:

> I like to say that 'Nidonite' is a virtual, a fictional identity of Nidā, it's me but I will draw fictive or exaggerated things of reality, to convey specific messages. So it's me, but you should not forget that the cartoon is fictive. It is a way to convey messages with humor.

I will analyse an example of Nidā's expression of her ambivalent subjectivity through the following cartoon: *'Cinq raisons de rester célibataire' ('5 reasons to remain single')*.[26]

Figure 1: '5 Reasons to Remain Single', cartoon and credit: Nidā

On the above-mentioned cartoon, Nidā explores the issue of relationships between adolescent boys and girls in a Western secular environment. She mocks the dominant and normative discourses of first-generation Muslim parents to their daughters.

Such narratives intend to 'protect' them from meeting with boys, regarding it as *'ḥarām'* (forbidden). Furthermore, they reflect their perceptions of Muslim immigrants on a Western country regarding issues related to gender relations and sexuality.

On the left of the cartoon, there is a boy holding an ice cream cone looking at Nidonite and telling himself: "She looks sexy" ("Elle a l'air bonne"). 'Nidonite' does not

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[26] https://nidonite.ch/2017/07/31/5-raisons-de-rester-celibataire, accessed on March 15, 2020.

even look at him, as she focuses on her tasty ice-cream cone, telling herself: "It looks tasty". ("Elle a l'air bonne"). This cartoon can be described as caustic, because of the clash of thoughts between the 'predator' and 'Nidonite', both holding an ice-cream cone but with different perceptions. The title of the cartoon is in French: "Tu peux accepter des rencards pour la bouffe", which can be translated as "You can accept dates for food". It is interesting to note that the author uses two slang words in French ("rencards" (dates) and "bouffe" (food)). Indeed this cartoon clearly targets a young audience. The author also highlights one of her favourite topics of discussion on her various blogs: food and eating. Furthermore, the text in brown indicates: "And eventually the evening will be over with 'it does not match with you, but it is not your fault; I am not ready''.

Indeed, the visual and textual contents constitute a counter-narrative versus the dominant discourse related to gender relations and exposure to the public sphere.

Consequently, through her online virtual identity 'Nidonite', the author is able to explore and express her subjectivity as an individual autonomous in her choices regarding gender relationships and sexuality. Moreover, she also criticises both Western stereotypes (of oppression and submission of young Muslim veiled women) and Muslim ones ('protection' against the external seen as 'haram' ('forbidden').

Conclusion

The research's findings have highlighted how some young Swiss Muslim adults reformulate themselves Islam to accommodate multiple identities that are often regarded in 'normative' discourses in the Swiss public sphere through 'security' and 'cultural' lenses. Indeed, they forge ambivalent subjectivities, by having a reflexive sense of their selves. Their ethical self is not necessarily lined up with their religion, but rather with their own opinions of what is appropriate or not through the way they set up their moral selves and lives.

Furthermore, the findings have highlighted how some Swiss-born Muslim adults relativise the pivotal role of religion in their particular life trajectories and experiences, religion appearing to form a specific tool to investigate their contradictory concerns, feelings and practices.

Being and feeling Muslim in a Muslim minority country and secular environment such as Switzerland, where Islam is most of the time 'otherised' within the Swiss public sphere is not always obvious to deal with for Swiss Muslims.

In fact, my research partners need to have ambivalent subjectivities, oscillating simultaneously between negative and positive valuations of contemporary Switzerland's sociocultural and regional diversity.

Therefore, this new generation of Swiss citizens formulates and produces alternative narratives that may blur contemporary Switzerland's social, cultural and physical borders. Indeed, they regard themselves as 'ordinary' citizens and intend to be considered by the Swiss public sphere as such. Eventually in this quest for 'ordinariness' Islam's role should be relativised and viewed as a socio-cultural resource embedded in their subjectivities and social words.

Recommendations

1. Academic research on young Swiss Muslims is still in its infancy. More social science research i need to be conducted on their everyday life, their life-worlds, their religiosity, their socio-cultural practices, their feelings and emotions, etc.

2. Academic research on these issues should inform more federal (Swiss) and cantonal (cantons) policy-makers in the process of improving the social inclusion of Swiss-born Muslims and breaking the vicious circle of stereotypes regarding Muslims as 'potential terrorists' and 'alien' and Islam 'as a religion of violence' and 'incompatible with democratic values'.

3. Swiss-born Muslims need also to act on both individual and collective levels to explain and promote Islam as a religion of peace and tolerance, as well as favour a sense of togetherness, social cooperation, cohesion and diversity in contemporary Switzerland.

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