"At Least We Belong To Our Religion": Negotiations of Young Muslim Women's Religious Identities in Freiburg, Germany

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Lastly, but most importantly – the heart of this thesis is the group of exceptional young Muslim women in Freiburg who agreed to be my research participants. I thank you with all my heart for your kindness, willingness and enthusiasm. I learned a lot from you and value your stories not only as an aspiring anthropologist but also simply as a friend. At the time of me writing these words, Ramadan has just begun. One of the many things you taught me is that this month is about so much more than just fasting, above all else it is about being kind and spending time with the people we love. This is something I will always keep in mind.

Those who know me are well aware of my endless love for the discipline of anthropology. Margaret Mead once said about Ruth Benedict that for her, anthropology made the first "sense" that any ordered approach to life had ever made. The same is true for me – was when I was a 17-year-old high school student who heard the word "anthropology" for the first time, and is still today, ten years later.

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Glossary

Explanations of commonly used Arabic terms mentioned in the text

Adhan - Islamic call to prayer recited from mosques at prayer times

Hijabi - a way of referring to a Muslim woman who wears the hijab

Inshallah - "God willing"

Niyyah - intention in one's heart to act in accordance with God's will

Shahada - Islamic oath which declares the belief in the oneness of Allah. It is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and by saying the *Shahada* in the company of witnesses, one becomes officially a Muslim

Sharia - body of religious law which is based on sacred scriptures of Islam and which forms part of the Islamic tradition

Sunnah - gathered practices of Prophet Muhammad which constitute a model of behavior for Muslims to follow. Together the Quran and *Sunnah* make up the primary sources of the Islamic belief

Ummah - worldwide Muslim community

Introduction

If there is one thing that all mobile people, regardless of the routes of their journeys or their motivations, have in common, it is the fact that they never travel fully alone – at the minimum they travel with their identities. When arriving at the destination, these identities will then, often automatically, enter negotiation processes with the novel societies that they are placed in. With a new social context come new traditions, values and expectations that will likely start influencing the different identities that compose the self. This thesis takes under examination the notion of religious identities, more specifically the Islamic identities of young Muslim women in the city of Freiburg[1] in Southwest Germany. My study is based on a series of conversations and discussions I had with eight women who identify as Muslim and are currently living in Freiburg. With the exception of one, all other women are first-generation Muslims in Germany. I set out to research the religious part of their identities, more specifically the ways in which they perceive its individual dimensions as well as the possible changes that might have happened to those aspects after their resettlement in Germany. I was interested to find out if and how the novel German social context that now surrounds them has influenced how they think about, practice and express Islam. I spent hours listening to the women's stories, experiences and opinions, and learned about their intrinsic feelings toward their religion as well as some of the challenges their new life in Germany has made them face. In the course of my research I started noticing the factors that, often in a subtle way, have begun to influence the women's Muslim identities in their new country of settlement. These processes, I argue, can be characterized as religious identity negotiations.

Drawing inspiration from previous theories of religious identity deconstruction, I have divided the women's religious identities into three dimensions – religious thought, religious behavior and religious expression. Religious thought encompasses notions like religious sense, relationship with God, as well as overall thoughts on Islam. Religious behavior implies to Islamic practices like praying and fasting as well as community activities and some more everyday ventures. The third aspect of the women's Muslim identities – religious expression – includes more visible facets like the hijab and overall modest dressing. My research question was formed in a similar way following this approach of deconstruction. I set out to find answers to the question of how are young

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[1] The official name of the city is Freiburg im Breisgau (Freiburg i. B. or Freiburg i. Br. for short), however most people refer to the town simply as Freiburg. Here and throughout my work, I have also resorted to the simpler, more common use.

Muslim women in Freiburg perceiving and experiencing transformations in their religious thought, behavior and expression after their resettlement in Germany? First, in this paper, I will explain how the women understand the dynamics of the dimensions of their religious identities themselves and then, through theoretical analysis, I will show how we can see traces of identity negotiation with the German society in each of them. I contend that the more pious women in the research group have been adamant about retaining their Islamic identities also after their resettlement. They maintain a strong sense of religious thought despite the occasional secular temptations, practice their religion still according to Islamic teachings regardless of some of the pragmatic challenges that their new life in Germany has imposed, and continue to visibly express their Muslimness by wearing the headscarf even though the hijab has now acquired new layers of meaning and responsibility.

This thesis starts with a description of my research process in which I detail my chosen methodology, introduce the reader to my research participants and briefly elaborate on research ethics, my positionality and some of the struggles I encountered. Chapter 2 offers an overview of previous studies done on similar topics to mine and an introduction to my theoretical framework. I will position myself in the larger discourse of anthropology of Islam and explain the main theoretical concepts which I used to give sense to my research findings – religious identity, identity negotiation and mobility. The following chapter, Chapter 3, details the main findings from my empirical research with the Muslim women. I will discuss their Islamic identity formation, the three different parts of their religious identities and issues of discrimination and representation. In Chapter 4, the last chapter of the paper, I will bring together theory and my empirical findings, and show how not only can we see traces of religious identity negotiations in almost all aspects of the women's Muslim identities, but furthermore that oftentimes these negotiation processes, similarly to the dimensions of religious identities, are overlapping and intertwined. This study does by no means claim to represent all diasporic Muslim women in the West. Rather I hope that in its own small yet detailed way it allows the opportunity for cross-cultural comparisons within the larger disciplines of anthropology of Islam, and identity and mobility studies.

1. Research methodology and participants

1.1. Chosen methodological approach

The methodological approach for this research project was chosen in order to support the main aim of the paper – to intimately get to know Freiburg's young Muslim women's own perceptions about the different dimensions of their religious identities after their resettlement in Germany. For this reason I decided to undertake a purely qualitative research, which was composed of extensive empirical inquiry and accompanying work with secondary textual sources. One of the main characteristics of qualitative research is that it is based on the participants' meanings (Creswell and Creswell 2018, 291) and since getting to know the Muslim women's own understandings was exactly what I set out to do in my research, a qualitative approach was deemed as the most suitable choice. Considering that my group of research participants was rather small and the topics we discussed quite intimate, I believe that a quantitative approach would have failed to provide nuances which are of utmost importance when writing about religious identities.

My qualitative research took place in the timeframe from November 2021 until March 2022 in Freiburg – a city of approximately 200 000 people in Southwest Germany where I was enrolled in my Master's program and residing at the time. The majority of the empirical data was collected between December and beginning of February, while the end of February and March were dedicated to evaluating and analyzing. The four main methods of my empirical data collection were regular interviews, walking interviews, a group discussion and conversations via text messages on the app "Whatsapp". Participant observation in its traditional sense was not possible, since the women were not necessarily part of one social group and did not share any common activities. In the following sections I will walk the reader through my research procedures step-by-step, first describing the process of data collection and then data analysis.

My research relied on a series of conversations that I had with eight Muslim women in Freiburg at different times and in different settings. The regular interviews were conducted on park benches, at cafes or research participants' homes and less resembled strict formal interviews and more informal discussions or idea exchanges. Our conversations mostly focused on the women's childhoods, upbringing, home countries, careers, relationships, the resettlement to Germany and its accompanying hurdles, their views on Islam, religious practices and ways of expression, as well as simply philosophical ponderings on God, life and afterlife. Some of these talks were recorded (with the women's permission) while

others were not. I did, however, always take research notes, even after the non-recorded discussions, and in addition to the women's stories also noted down my own feelings and emotions. The majority of the conversations took place face-to-face, but a few also digitally over Skype – this in times when a research participant was especially busy or cautious of the Covid-19 situation.

The second method for empirical data gathering that I experimented with was walking interviews, sometimes also called "walk-along interviews" in scholarly literature. This means that together with the research participants we went for walks around Freiburg in order to see what kind of conversations unfold in the fresh air. Kinney (2017, 2-3) explains that walking allows talking to flow naturally because the pressure of a face-to-face interview has been removed. Furthermore, she writes, talking becomes easier when walking and unnatural pauses that occur in a sedentary face-to-face interview can be replaced with natural occurrences on the walking interview. Walking alongside a participant is also, according to her, regarded as an inclusive process compared to the traditional sit down interview, because it is viewed more as a partnership, thus reducing power imbalances. All of this also proved to be true in my experience and I believe that walking interviews helped to reduce the researcher-participant hierarchy in my project. Due to obvious technical hurdles, these conversations were not recorded.

The third method I implemented was a group discussion, at times also referred to as "focus group" in methodological literature. At the end of my research I invited the four women from my "core group" (for an explanation of this category, see next subchapter describing the research participants) together in order to see what topics come up in a group setting and where do their opinions match and where do they differ. Using focus groups as a methodological tool can offer many advantages. Zavella (2014, 293-94) writes that group qualitative interviews allow researchers to understand how subjects conceptualize specific topics and can aid in the development of an appropriate language to describe the participants' experiences or perceptions. Furthermore, she explains, focus groups are not designed to secure the objective truth but rather to provide a rich source of information which should then be systematically analyzed. My decision to organize a group discussion proved to be a right one because surprisingly situationality started to play a bigger role than I had expected. Namely, the women revealed some things in a group setting, surrounded by their peers, that they had not discussed with me during our one-on-one meetings. For example, I learned that most, if not all of them, struggle occasionally with temptations of the Western culture. They admitted that their belief is often tested here

in Germany and that sometimes staying true to their religious convictions is not as easy as it seems when surrounded by a liberal society (group discussion 06.02.22). Therefore, the situationality of the group discussion allowed the women to elaborate on topics they had not elaborated on during our earlier conversations. With the women's permission, the group discussion was recorded.

The fourth and last method of my empirical data collection was conversations on the text message app Whatsapp. I formed a Whatsapp group for myself and the four women among my research participants who I classify as the core group. This was a virtual space where I could ask specifying questions from the women and where we could exchange ideas. This method helped us to keep the conversation going even after our face-to-face meetings were over. Abenante and Cantini (2014, 10) write how "prolonged relationships between researcher and interlocutor allow unraveling the difficulties, stoppages, re-articulations and new beginnings" and based on my experience, I echo their viewpoint. I was adamant to keep a continuous relationship with the women and was happy to have a space where to talk over important matters and ask for clarification about some of my research notes. I keep in touch with the women via Whatsapp to this day.

After collecting my empirical data, I then moved on to the process of data analyzing and evaluation. The recorded talks were manually transcribed and this material, along with research notes from the non-recorded conversations and my self-reflective entries, was then manually coded. The codes that emerged were further divided into categories which informed the bigger sub-topics that the reader will see in Chapter 3 of this paper. Williamson, Given and Scifleet (2017, 456) write that coding as an analyzing tool helps to link different segments or instances within the data to a particular idea or concept. The process of developing codes, they note, also promotes reflection as the researcher interacts with the data. Therefore, according to the authors, coding can be essentially seen as a way of reconceptualizing data and developing a new kind of thinking about it. Coding in my research was invaluable because it helped to draw out the bigger topics that the women tended to mention more often during our conversations, and through that I could get a visual picture of the issues that mattered to them the most.

After the initial interaction with my data through coding and categorizing, I started to critically assess the theoretical concepts that would help me give sense to my research findings. Therefore I engaged in what is referred to as "grounded theory method". Strauss and Corbin (1994, 273) explain that grounded theory is a general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data which is systematically gathered and analyzed.

In this methodology, they say, theory evolves during actual research and does this through continuous interplay between analysis and data collection. If an already existing grounded theory seems appropriate to the area of investigation, the authors note, then it may be elaborated and modified as incoming data is meticulously played against it. Also I did not approach my research in order to prove a fixed theory right or wrong. Rather I let my research and data inform me in this matter. As I will show in Chapter 2 of this paper, my findings led me to the theoretical concepts of religious identity, mobility and identity negotiation. Since quite a bit has already been written on these topics, I took the stances of previous scholars as a guiding point. I did, however, combine and adjust theories in order to assure a logical continuation from my specific data. I do not want to downplay the importance of secondary textual research since it too took up a substantial amount of time in the later part of my research process. Without the engagement with secondary textual sources, this thesis would lack theoretical depth. Previous writings on the topic allowed me to position my work in the larger discourse and essentially make sense of my research findings.

In this section I have described my chosen methodological approach when working with the case study of young Muslim women in Freiburg. The main aim of the research was to get to know the perceptions the women have about the different dimensions of their religious identities after their resettlement in Germany and my chosen research methods helped me to achieve this goal. Gathering information through lengthy conversations with the women in different settings provided me with a rich baggage of data which was then analyzed through coding and categorizing. Grounded theory method and work with secondary textual sources helped me to contextualize my findings. Deciding to undertake a purely qualitative research definitely proved to be the right choice in order to get to know the women's life stories, everyday lives and intimate thoughts about Islam. In what follows, I will introduce the reader to the eight Muslim women who formed my group of research participants.

1.2. Research participants

My research group was composed of all together eight women who all identified as Muslim and were residing in Freiburg. The bigger group was in turn divided into two – the so-called "core group", comprised of four women, and the "additional voices group", formed by the other four. The women in the core group were the ones I spent most time

with and they share many similar characteristics: all of them are students between the ages of 22 and 29 who had moved to Germany from a Muslim-majority country. They all attribute a very high importance to Islam in their lives and they all wear the hijab. The women in the additional voices group all have a structural characteristic or two which sets them apart from others and not all of them are actively practicing Islam anymore. I decided to include their voices in the research nevertheless because I felt like conversations with them offered invaluable insight and helped me understand different aspects of Muslim women's lives in Germany. I will now provide a brief introduction of the women, starting with the core group.

Amira[2] is the youngest – she is 22 and a student of pharmacy at the University of Freiburg. She is originally from Syria and her family moved to Germany about six years ago. I approach her nervously in the library but she agrees to participate in the research without hesitation. Over the next few months, Amira is very busy with exams but nevertheless finds always time to talk to me. Fatima is the quietest of the group and has quite pious Islamic values. She is a 23-year-old Master's student who had come to Freiburg only a few months prior to me reaching out to her. Although born in Egypt, Fatima moved to Dubai with her family when she was four. On our first meeting, she invites me over to her house for tea and Arabic sweets. She emphasizes many times that she is not a very social person, yet it always seemed to me that she enjoyed discussing religious topics. Naila, a 26-year-old Sudanese, is a woman with a contagious smile and enthusiasm. She writes to me after seeing my call for research participants on Facebook. She too moved to Freiburg to pursue her Master's degree and at the time of the research had only been in Germany for a few months. For Naila, Freiburg is small – she is used to the hustle and bustle of millions in her hometown Khartoum. She is very curious about my experiences and during our first two-hour walk together, we cover a range of topics from religion to dating and family pressures. Zahra, a 29-year-old Jordanian PhD student, is in a way the skeptic of the group. She makes no secret about her reservations regarding my possible lack of Islamic knowledge and starts our first meeting off by asking me if I think I have enough sensitivity to understand intimate details about a person's religion. The fact the she always keeps me in check is something I appreciate about Zahra and regardless of the skepticism she warmed up to me quite quickly. After our first meeting, I wrote down in my research notes that besides her extensive Islamic knowledge she also struck me with

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[2] All the names of my research participants have been changed.

her beauty – her stylish blue hijab, golden glasses and red lipstick left an impression. Although from different backgrounds and on different life paths, what the four women have in common is the fact that they are all young pious Muslim women in Germany, negotiating their Islamic identities in a new social context.

As said, the women in the additional voices group all have a structural characteristic or two which set them apart from the core group. Fareen, a 26-year-old radiochemist at the University hospital, was born to Moroccan immigrant parents in Spain. Growing up in a Western country, she acquired most of her Islamic knowledge from her parents and through extensive individual self-study. She is the critical thinker of the group, analyzing all of my questions thoroughly before answering. Out of the additional voices, Fareen is the only *hijabi*[3]. Maryam is a 26-year-old health management student who was born to Palestinian immigrant parents in Germany and therefore she is a second generation German-Muslim. Growing up as a Muslim woman in Germany has provided her with a distinct viewpoint. In Freiburg, she has also been actively involved with some Muslim organizations. Rahima and Aiza, although raised religious, have both decided to stop practicing Islam. Rahima is 27, from Tunisia and currently working as a French teacher and an au pair. She smokes cigarettes, is active on the dating platform Tinder and has chosen to distance herself from the stricter Islamic precepts that surrounded her in her home country. Aiza, a woman with infectious positive energy, was at the time of my research about to become a mother for the first time. Growing up in Iran, she is the only woman in the group with a Shia background. Similarly to Rahima, at times Aiza tends to be critical of Islam. Both women, however, still believe in God and identify as Muslims. The additional voices, thanks to their special characteristics, ensured my more diverse understanding of the different lives of Muslim women in Freiburg.

I established initial contact with the women in various ways. Some of them reached out to me after I had posted calls for research participants on various Facebook groups, one woman I approached in the library, one was a friend of another participant, one I contacted while doing research on Muslim organizations in Freiburg. After recognizing a primary interest, I asked all the women the same set of questions: how old they were, what their occupation was, if they were born in Germany or had moved here at a later point in life, and how important religion was for them in their everyday lives. This abled me to pinpoint them in terms of structural characteristics. In the Appendix of this paper I have attached a

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[3] *Hijabi* is a way of referring to a Muslim woman who wears the hijab.

comparative list of all my research participants which details their respective characteristics, so that the reader can have a better overview.

I believe it is important to briefly discuss the afore-mentioned structural categories related to my research participants, since I am aware that the label "young Muslim woman" could entail many different aspects and be interpreted in various ways. The categorization "young" is my own arbitrary one and in the context of my work refers to women in their twenties. The label "Muslim" can encompass different levels of practicing Islam as well as different Islamic affiliations. In the core group, all the women can be classified as devout or pious believers for whom Islam holds a very high importance, and all of them are Sunni Muslims[4]. I would say all of them are from middle-class backgrounds, however of different ethnicities. The core group women are all first-generation Muslims in Germany, meaning that they were not born in Germany but had moved here at some point during their lives. As mentioned, with this case study I by no means claim representation of all Muslim women in the West or even in Germany. This thesis is merely a discussion about my specific research participants' stories and perceptions.

I decided to take young Muslim women in Freiburg as my sole case study because (1) Germany famously has a large Muslim immigrant community; (2) there are many issues connected to representation and Islamic visibility that only Muslim women can share knowledge on, and therefore I believe that the female perspective regarding this topic adds a valuable contribution to the academic discourse; (3) I reckon that a larger comparative study would have impeded me intimately getting to know the perceptions of my research participants. With limiting the number of interlocutors, I was able to build trusting relationships with the eight women who formed my research group.

1.3. Notes on research ethics, my positionality and encountered struggles

When conducting qualitative ethnographic research which concentrates on personal topics and intimate convictions, research ethics is something to be extremely mindful of. Mannik and McGarry (2017, 53-54) write that in anthropology, the integrity of the discipline is held in high regard, and what upholds that integrity are namely ethical

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[4] Interestingly, when I asked the women in the core group about their Islamic affiliation, they seemed a bit confused. I learned that for them being Muslim is synonymous with being Sunni and therefore, in their minds, an extra label would not even be necessary.

practices. Central in anthropological research, they state, are transparency, fairness and not falsifying any data. The authors caution that anthropologists have to be honest with themselves and the people they are working with, and that they constantly have to follow strong moral principles in every phase of their research. In my research, it was of utmost importance to me to avoid the classical "researcher-participant" hierarchy and any asymmetries of power. I mostly conducted the discussions with research participants in informal settings and more approached them as idea-exchanges where both parties would gain something. My interlocutors were also involved in the research design, for example together we talked through my preliminary Table of Contents and they had the opportunity to advise me on any missing links. Additionally, I always made sure to ask specifying questions about Islam directly from them, instead of relying on books and articles.

I explained the aim of my research project to my interlocutors thoroughly and obtained their informed consent about participating. I recorded conversations only with prior permission from the women. They were never forced to answer any questions they did not want to nor to elaborate on topics they felt uncomfortable with. In which direction they wanted to steer the talks was left for them to decide. I explained how I will store and use the data, and naturally, for the sake of confidentiality, changed their names in the current paper. I also learned a lot about ethical matters concerning Islam from my research participants themselves as I went on with my study. They reminded me of some intricate cultural details that I perhaps had not thought of myself and was therefore extremely happy to be taught.

Another significant thing to be mindful of when conducting qualitative research is the positionality of the researcher. It was useful to repeatedly ask myself the question – how did me being *me* influence the outcome of my research? I acknowledge that the types of stories that I heard from the women were possibly influenced by the fact that I, myself, am a female, white, Western and non-religious researcher, belonging to the same age group as my research participants. Let me illustrate this point with a few snippets from my fieldwork. Rahima takes a break in the middle of our conversation, looks at me and says: "I feel so comfortable by the way. I'm happy to talk. Especially with a girl. If I was talking to a man, I think he wouldn't understand what I really mean" (interview 15.01.22). Seems like my gender, therefore, opened the door for more personal conversations and relatability, and put my research participants at ease.

What was more surprising, however, was the fact that apparently me being a non-Muslim woman also worked in my advantage. Zahra says on our first meeting that initially

she thought I was Egyptian (because of the seemingly Egyptian roots of my name) and asks me right away: "So are you Arab?". I was surprised but she explained that after seeing a photo of me with my hair uncovered, she was reluctant to agree to participate in the research because she thought that I was "another liberal Arab woman who is not proud of her religion" and who is going to write about the perceived oppressiveness of Islam (interview 20.01.22). After finding out that I was not a Muslim, however, she instantly felt more at ease. So not only was my positionality affected by my gender, surprisingly it was also influenced by my (missing) religious affiliation. All in all the women seemed to be happy to talk to me either because they felt like Islam suffers from grave misrepresentation in the West and they saw this opportunity as a way to contribute to a fair discourse, or simply because it was a chance for them to discuss topics they had not been able to for a long time.

Researcher's positionality, as Holmes (2020, 2) writes, is essentially informed by reflexivity. He notes that self-reflection and a reflexive approach are both a necessary prerequisite and an ongoing process for the researcher to be able to identify, construct, critique and articulate their positionality. Remaining reflective throughout the research process for me meant letting go of some of the engraved biases I might have brought with me, acknowledging the importance of paying attention to small cultural details that perhaps were at first foreign to me as a researcher born and raised in Europe, but also simply appreciating the fact that being of the same gender and similar age as my research participants allowed us to discuss topics that maybe otherwise would not have been talked about. The greatest assurance to know that I was doing an adequate job as a researcher was positive feedback from my research participants. Either it was the first smiling "*Inshallah*"[5] that I received after expressing hope to see Fatima again after our first meeting, Zahra's continuous notes on how important she believed my research to be, or Rahima's willingness to discuss topics as intimate as experienced domestic violence because she felt comfortable enough in my company – all of these instances gave me invaluable encouragement.

As a last note in this chapter I would like to briefly discuss some of the struggles I encountered during my research. Firstly, it proved to be harder than expected to find willing research participants. After some potential participants in the early phase lost

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[5] *Inshallah* is the Arabic term meaning "God willing".

interest and the hoped snowball method fell through, I turned my gaze towards Islamic organizations in Freiburg who ended up being of very little help. Thanks to tireless networking on social media I was thankfully, however, finally able to form a good group of interlocutors.

Secondly, I had to deal with some (understandable) initial skepticism from a few of my research participants. They were either slightly reluctant to believe that I possessed sufficient knowledge about Islam in order to conduct discussion or they were unsure about my motives. Even though I managed to dissolve their skepticism quite quickly, it was still a bit discouraging at times.

Thirdly, I must admit that at first I was hoping to escape lengthy discussions on the topic of the hijab in my work simply because of the sheer volume of previous scholarly works that have already been written on the topic. Quite quickly I realized that this was not possible for many reasons: (1) this was a topic that the women themselves wanted to discuss; (2) I understood that a discussion on women's Islamic identities simply cannot neglect the most powerful visible Islamic symbol; (3) I could see that the women were almost expecting me to ask about their hijabs – a fact which speaks for itself. Hence I had to set my own expectations aside and succumb to the actual research experience.

Lastly, it cannot be forgotten that the whole research took place in the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. During this time of crisis, anthropologists especially have been forced to be creative, innovative and rethink many of their research methods (Podjed 2021). Thankfully I was able to redirect my research in a way that did not prevent me from reaching my goals: when a participant felt unsafe, conversations were held via Skype, and when entering cafes was impossible because of complications with the vaccination pass, I replaced sit-down talks with walk-along interviews in the fresh air. Despite these few hurdles, and by always paying attention to research ethics and my positionality, I was able to have an extremely rewarding research process.

Before describing my actual research findings in detail, I will first lay out the theoretical background of my case study. I will offer a literature review on previous topical studies and will then explain the theoretical framework this thesis relies on. I will position my work in the larger discourse of anthropology of Islam and discuss the main theoretical concepts that helped me make sense of my empirical data. It was first, however, important to familiarize the reader with my research methodology and the research participants who form the nucleus of this study.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Literature review

Germany has long been a favored locality for social scientists studying issues related to Muslim mobility. The country has one of the biggest Muslim populations in the European Union and Muslims here are the second largest religious community after Christians (Halm 2013, 458). Germany can be described as a Christian-secular society[6] – a characteristic which helps to bring out contrasts even more sharply in terms of the Islamic presence. German Islam is characterized by its migration history as well as its local dynamics and therefore combines local, transnational and global features (Jouili 2008, 473). These intertwined facets have been appealing to scholars and a few commonalities can be drawn out when discussing the research conducted on Muslims in Germany so far.

Firstly and understandably, as Thielmann (2008, 4) writes, a majority of the research has focused on Muslims from a Turkish background, since Turkish Muslims make up the biggest part of Germany's Muslim immigrant community. This, he explains, has created a situation in the academia where a notable Turkish bias can be detected and where Germany is mostly looked at through Turkish lenses. In addition to these lenses being relatively narrow, the author contends, they have unfortunately also often failed to provide specific information on Muslims' religious ideas and life worlds. Secondly, lot of emphasis in academic literature has been placed on Islamic organizations and their functioning in Germany. As an example, Rosenow-Williams (2012) explores in her detailed qualitative study the motives and challenges of three Islamic umbrella organizations in Germany. She concludes that if the organizations want to secure their legitimacy and efficiency in a constantly changing organizational field, and achieve further official recognition, they have to reconcile their internal and external expectations. Thirdly, many studies done on Muslim women in Germany either focus solely or at least rely heavily on the hijab and the controversies that surround veiling. This research focus is understandable since the hijab is arguably the most visible Islamic symbol and therefore hard to ignore. One of the most notable scholars writing on this issue is Schirin Amir-Moazami (see e.g. 2010, 2011, 2013). For instance, when analyzing the values, norms and interests of the actors involved in the public headscarf debates in Germany, she supposes that the active presence of covered women in public spaces has brought back onto the political agenda a broader discussion about the role of religion in the German public sphere. By concentrating on the

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[6] For an explanation of this characterization, see Chapter 4.

mechanisms of discursive representation, she explains how the headscarf has revealed an unprecedented reflection on the management of Islam in Germany (Amir-Moazami 2005).

Discussions on the hijab, along with those on Turkish Muslims and Islamic organizations, have seemingly been the three recurring themes in previous studies of Muslims in Germany. A lot has also been written about Islamic extremism, the situation of second and third generation Muslims, conversion to Islam, the issue of Islamic instruction in public schools, and integration (Thielmann 2008, 4-5). Research has tended to favor young Muslims and according to Eilers, Seitz and Hirschler (2008, 88) studies of this kind have mostly reflected upon the high variety of forms that the religiousness of young German Muslims has taken, as well as the diverging functions it fulfills and the often contradictory ends to which it is put.

Interestingly, up until the late 1990s, most studies done on German Muslims were of quantitative nature. The shift towards qualitative research was brought about when the modernization of Islam through individualization became a research topic and this, in turn, has now led to a more detailed picture of Muslim life in Germany (Rosenow-Williams 2012, 21). Notably, earlier qualitative works often tended to adopt a slightly patronizing stance in regards to Muslim women in the West. An example of this is Munir D. Ahmed's (1992) case study in Germany in which he details the experiences of four groups of German-Muslim women – immigrant women of the first generation, daughters and grand-daughters of the first generation, converts, and daughters of converts. He indirectly labels Muslims in Germany as a problem in need of solving and among other things calls for the dissolution of Islamic patriarchal hegemony and the emancipation of Muslim women. Since, the patronizing lens has been largely abandoned and more and more attention in research has been given to Muslim women's agency.

That Muslim women's agency should not be overlooked is perhaps most powerfully reminded to us in two classical anthropological works in the Egyptian context – Lila Abu-Lughod's (1986) research on Bedouin oral poetry in the Western Desert and Saba Mahmood's (2005) study of mosque movements in the capital Cairo. Both books, albeit focusing on different social groups, show the power, potential and novel perspective that the study of Muslim women holds. These works caution scholars not to underestimate the importance of the discursive contributions of women in Islam and represent a move away from the patronizing approach which often strikes with its over-emphasizing of Islamic patriarchy. A compelling example of this newer, agency-acknowledging approach is Jouili and Amir-Moazami's (2006) collaborative work. They conducted parallel fieldwork with

young Muslim women in Islamic organizations in France and Germany and found many commonalities between the two contexts. The authors' main aim was to analyze through the lens of the women themselves the ways in which they engage with religious authority. What they found was that because Muslim women have over time been granted equal access to religious instruction, an increase of the their interpretative authority and therefore also a pluralization of knowledge diffusion can now be detected. The authors explain that the women's new role as religiously instructed believers additionally provides them with a novel role inside the Islamic community. Muslim women's engagement in the process of acquiring Islamic knowledge, both in Germany and France as they write, is coupled with an aim to cultivate a pious self as well as a sense of responsibility towards the construction of a virtuous community. This means that not only do Muslim women in Europe have significant agency, but also that this agency is multi-layered.

Similarly Roald (2003) examines Muslim women's role in communal and societal change, albeit in the context of Sweden. She took a critical look at Swedish Muslim women's organizations with the perspective of the pattern of "equal opportunities" as the theoretical framework. What she found was that the equal opportunities policy is particularly obvious in the independent female organizations where women's activities cross the boundaries of ethnic and ideological differences. Furthermore, she writes, thanks to Muslim immigrant women in Sweden, a completely novel Islamic equal opportunities policy has emerged.

While the afore-mentioned studies focus on the point of view of Muslim women themselves, other scholars highlight the ways in which Muslim women in the West are represented by others. Jawad (2003) argues that Muslim women in the West are often perceived as almost invisible with no value to their society and frequently portrayed as passive, submissive and inactive. Muslim women are thereby contrasted to the images of the highly independent and liberated Western women. Additionally, Jawad lists four factors that have influenced this Western view of Muslim women. These, according to her, are (1) a tendency to include all Muslim women in one big homogeneous group, completely leaving aside the different factors that have shaped their lives; (2) old colonial images of Muslims that still linger in the Western societies; (3) the failure or reluctance of secular feminists to include Muslim women in their discourses; (4) the prevailing Western perception of the veil as a symbol of women's suppression. More specifically in the German context, Celik (2012) examines the ways in which the subject of a Muslim woman is represented and culturally produced. She concludes that there is either a tendency to

emphasize difference in a provocative manner or to eliminate difference on the level of subjectivity, thereby smoothing the edges of racism, sexism and discrimination of Muslim women in Germany. Neither of these representations, however, is doing justice to the actual lived experiences of the women.

Studies on the representation of Muslim women in the West reveal a perceived contrast in the Western mindset, one that draws a line between us – the Europeans, and them – the Muslims. Nilüfer Göle (2015) argues in her book "Islam and Secularity: The Future of Europe's Public Sphere" that the "threatening" differences between Islam and the West are manifested most clearly in the public sphere, making it also an interesting point of observance for social scientists. According to her, national public spheres in Europe that were once more or less homogeneous, now include new Muslim visibilities which in many ways have challenged and disrupted national identities. Muslims pose a challenge to the taken-for-granted cultural values of Europe and unsettle the European self-understanding, she explains. In the classical discourse of Western modernity, religion belongs increasingly into the private sphere, however Islam, as Göle shows, has claimed visibility in the public arena, thereby making it an even more controversial phenomenon. In this sense, Muslims in Europe have become the designated "Other" – a social group contrasted to native Westerners.

That Muslims in Europe have been labeled as foreign and dangerous, almost an opposite of Europeans, is something that many previous thematic studies agree on. The Western mindset is afraid of Islam for a variety of reasons, be it its perceived threat to security or simply its assumed conflict with "modern" values. John R. Bowen (2012b) discusses this topic at length and argues that Muslims in the West get continuously blamed for a variety of social ills, more often than not, however, completely unfairly. In his work he points out the moral panic that has started to surround contemporary Islam and shows how misrepresented Muslims are in reality. This unjust situation is also unfortunately the reality in Germany. Dirk Halm (2013) explains further that much of it has to do with the discourse that surrounds the local Muslim community. He argues that Muslims in Germany continue to have very little influence on the discourse on Islam and instead, the widespread understandings and beliefs about the Islamic faith are generated by non-Muslims, politicians or the media – all of whom base their opinions on individual events rather than the actual local reality.

The narrative, however, does not stop at innocent othering – Muslims in Western societies are often passionately resented and discriminated against. Evidences of

Islamophobia, i.e. a strong prejudice against Muslims or Islam, can be found in almost all the countries of the Global North. Dolezal, Helbling and Hutter (2010, 174) demonstrate that as part of this rising Islamophobia, many Europeans no longer even differentiate between Islam, fundamentalism and terrorism. In addition to Muslims being perceived as a security threat in the popular discourse, also Islamic and Western values are often seen as conflicting. Hernández Aguilar (2018, 29) writes that in contemporary Germany, Muslims are accused of living "in a world of their own", i.e. in unruly parallel societies governed less by German law and more by *Sharia*[7]. He explains that Muslims are seen as innately disavowing secularism based on the content of the Quran. This same sentiment of a perceived inherent conflict of values is also being echoed in other studies in different contexts (see e.g. Abushouk 2006, Göle 2015, Nordbruch 2011; for the Dutch context - Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007). Therefore, previous research demonstrates how Muslims in the West are not only labeled as the Other because of their perceived dangerousness, but also due to an opinion that it is hard, if not impossible, for Islamic and Western values to peacefully co-exist.

All in all, Muslim religiousness in the West (and Germany more specifically) has been fairly adequately studied within the social sciences. This literature review has provided an overview of a fracture of these studies, however with much regret it must be noted that the gaining of a full picture was slightly hindered by my inability to speak and read the German language[8]. It is important to point out that previous sociological and anthropological studies done on Muslims in the West (and Europe more specifically) go against the afore-described popular public discourse which tends to fear, blame and condemn Islam. Instead, the social sciences have taken a critical approach towards this view and have for example shed light on the shortcomings of Islamic organizations responsible for protecting the rights of Muslims or simply described the everyday (non-threatening) life worlds of the believers of the Islamic faith, contributing therefore to a counter-discourse. In this sense, this current paper which also takes into consideration everyday religiosity, follows suit. By focusing on the research question of how are young Muslim women in Freiburg perceiving and experiencing transformations in their religious thought, behavior and expression after their resettlement in Germany, I intend on

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[7] *Sharia* is the Arabic term referring to a body of religious law, which is based on sacred scriptures of Islam and which forms part of the Islamic tradition.

[8] Therefore, some of the works of esteemed scholars such as Gritt Klinkhammer, Sigrid Nökel, Thomas Lemmen, Riem Speilhaus or Susanne Schröter remain beyond my reach and comprehension.

contributing to the discourse of German Muslimness from the women's own point of view. I will do that by firstly positioning my work in the larger debate in the anthropology of Islam and secondly by implementing the theoretical concept of religious identity.

2.2. Framework of relevant theories

2.2.1. Anthropology of Islam

This thesis, with its ethnographic outlook, is situated in the larger disciplinary context of anthropology of Islam. While different religions, among them Islam, have been in the orbit of interest of anthropology for a long time, recent developments within the field have brought about changes in ways how anthropologists study Islam as well as in the areas within the belief system that are now being given more attention and contextualization. In order to position my work in the wider field of anthropology of Islam, it is first important to understand the main theoretical debate within the discipline itself. This debate illuminates the two bigger directions into which recent notable works in the subject area of anthropology of Islam can be divided.

The first camp of anthropologists follows the ideas of Talal Asad and his concept of "discursive tradition", first published in his influential article "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" in 1986. Asad was critical of many scholars in the field, e.g. Geertz and Gellner, who in his opinion placed too much emphasis on contexts (or contextual changes) when studying Islam. He took a skeptical look at the state of the art of the discipline in the 1980s and forced the scholar community to pause and ponder on the obvious (albeit at the time forgotten) question of what exactly is this anthropology of Islam that they were writing about. In his view Islam is first and foremost a tradition and should be studied as such by anthropologists, since this line of thinking accords with that of Muslims themselves. A tradition, according to Asad, "consists essentially of discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history" ([1986] 2009, 20). An Islamic discursive tradition, he continues, "is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present" (ibid.). Thereby Asad's theory of discursive tradition connects past and future in the present, and emphasizes above all stability and certainty.

As Abenante and Cantini (2014, 6-7) note, this understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition gained enormous popularity in the academia – Asad's de-essentialization of the

notion of Islam was a novel perspective. Perhaps the most influential approach that grew out of Asad's reconceptualization, the authors continue, is what is labeled as the "piety approach". They explain that studies with this inclination aim at showing modern formations of Muslim subjectivities with a particular attention to contexts inhabited by pious Muslims willing to engage with their discursive tradition. The dimension of individual ethics is reinserted into the understanding of Islamic movements and the notion of a human being is presupposed as a subject to the transcendental will and law of God, meaning that the piety approach develops a subject whose practices and desires can only be understood in relation to the authority of God, Abenante and Cantini (ibid.) conclude.

Further contributing to the Asadian understanding of Islam as a discursive tradition is the work of Saba Mahmood. Mahmood was an interlocutor of Asad and adopted many of his ideas in her own work. Most notably, in her influential study of Cairene women's subtle piety movements in the 1990s (2005), she supposes that the discursive tradition framework is exactly what helps to make sense of it. The reason why Egyptian women voluntarily attended study circles in mosques in order to become more pious comes from the fact that the women themselves saw Islam as a tradition in need of thorough understanding, since it provides the follower with guidelines for achieving a more congenial life in the eyes of God, Mahmood explains. Islam in this sense is less dependent on wider cultural trends and social fluctuations, rather it is seen as a certain, strong-standing entity. Therefore Mahmood, like Asad, reaches the conclusion that Muslims view Islam first and foremost as a tradition, and therefore it should also be studied as such by anthropologists. Even though this influential conceptualization forced scholars to rethink some of their most fundamental beliefs about Islam as an object of study, not everyone agreed with Asad.

The second school of thought in the aforementioned debate questions some of the lines of argumentation of Asad and his interlocutors. Perhaps the most notable criticism comes from Samuli Schielke (2010) who makes a point to acknowledge the potential of the concept of Islam as a discursive tradition, yet argues for a more balanced approach which foregrounds the many concerns and pursuits of Muslims' everyday life. There is too much Islam in the "Asadian" anthropology of Islam, he confidently states. This shows itself in the lack of balance between the emphasis on religious commitment and not always sufficient account of the lives of which it is a part, as well as in the constant preoccupation with trying to define the field of study, i.e. Islam, itself. Schielke argues for an ethnographic approach that accounts for the complexities and ambiguities of Muslims'

everyday lives, lives which are characterized by reflectivity, openness, frustration and tragedy (ibid., 2-3). By emphasizing the concept of "everyday", Schielke together with Debevec (2012) implies that what a religion traditionally teaches is not necessarily the same as the daily lives and experiences of believers. Religion in an individual's life, the authors explain, can assume different importance at different points in time and attempts to live up to religious expectations are not always constant. They continue to say that this approach essentially deems it more important for anthropologists to understand the meanings of being a Muslim than the meaning of Islam. One can differentiate between "grand schemes" of religion and ordinary lives composed of daily practices, yet anthropology of religion does not have to choose between studying one or the other. What is important, Schielke and Debevec conclude, is to look at the ways in which these two categories interact with each other.

When discussing wider trends in the field of anthropology of Islam, it is also necessary to mention the work of American scholar John R. Bowen. In his book "A New Anthropology of Islam" (2012a), Bowen emphasizes the notions of context and hybridity when studying Islam, and writes that religion in academic inquiry should be viewed through a variety of (intertwined) lenses. In a globalized world, he notes, attention must be given to the specific social contexts in which Muslims believe, practice and act. Furthermore, Bowen's approach to anthropology of Islam pays careful attention to interpretations. Be it variations in praying, understanding the Quran or the rules for Islamic dress, Muslims around the world have adopted different ways of going about these aspects. Anthropology, he says, has the power not only to list and describe these interpretations but also to explain their origins and influences, and to make cross-cultural comparisons. Following this line of thinking, long gone are the days when we could speak of one homogeneous Islam. In a world where believers, ideas and teachings are more mobile than ever, it is crucial that we rethink Islam as a static concept and accept a view which above all emphasizes plurality and heterogeneity. This goes to show that even small-scale ethnographic studies of Muslims, like the one this paper discusses, have meaning and importance. Learning first hand about the interpretations and practices of young Muslim women in Germany while taking into consideration the notions of gender, mobility and social context, understandably sheds light on a rather small part of the *ummah*[9], yet has powerful contrastive potential to draw bigger conclusions.

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[9] *Ummah* is the Arabic term for the worldwide Muslim community.

All the above-mentioned theories harness the power to illuminate different aspects of my specific case study of the religious identities of young Muslim women in Freiburg in distinct ways. Therefore, I do not find it useful to strictly choose sides at the debate, rather I position my work somewhere in the middle. As I will elaborate more in Chapter 4, Asad's ([1986] 2009) theory of Islam as a discursive tradition, which emphasizes certainty and stability, helps us understand why the women in my research group feel strongly about maintaining their Muslim identities and why they have decided to adhere to their religion to the best of their abilities also in the new German context. Complementary to that are Mahmood's (2005) observations about the emergence of a new group of religiously conscious ordinary Muslims who have become more educated thanks to the wider availability of Islamic texts. Also my research participants, as I will show, engage in continuous self-study in order to ensure the on-going formation of their religious identities.

Schielke's (2010) theory of the importance of the realm of the everyday comes into play when I discuss the more mundane religious behaviors of the women in my research group. While acknowledging the grand scheme of religious thought as one important facet of the women's religious identities, I also show that Islamic behavior and expression can acquire different meanings namely within the context of the women's everyday lives. Additionally, I subscribe to Bowen's (2012a) argument on the importance of examining the context which surrounds religious belief. The case study that is at the heart of this paper – the one of young Muslim women in Freiburg – would be meaningless if its surrounding social framework was not taken into account. It is exactly the change of societies – from Islamic to European – which allows us to examine the negotiations of the religious identities of these young women from a compelling angle.

2.2.2. Religious identities – negotiated and mobile

Now that I have positioned my work within the discourse of anthropology of Islam, I will move on to introduce the main theoretical concepts through which I will analyze my empirical research findings. I begin by discussing the dynamic nature of the notion of identity more generally and will review the closely related theory of minority identity politics. I will then give an overview of the concepts of religious identity and identity negotiation, and explain the role of mobility in the latter. Since the notion of religious identity holds a central position in my work, I elaborate in more detail on takes on its

deconstruction, formation and importance. Throughout this chapter, the interconnectedness of all of these mentioned concepts will reveal itself in many ways.

Identity as an overarching phenomenon is a notion that is central in our understanding of what it means to be an individual as well as a member of larger society. Identities are not static phenomena – they are continuously constructed, alternated and also negotiated, depending on a variety of factors, be it social contexts or remarkable events. Stuart Hall (1996) famously sees identity as a construct and the process of identification as one that is never completed and always in the process of change and transformation. *How* individuals bond and construct their identities can be through deliberate networks, e.g. at school or in peer groups, however more commonly it is done through "passive networks" – the undeliberate and instantaneous communications among individuals that are established by the tacit recognition of their commonalities (Bayat 2010, 31). The concept of identity and its dynamic nature has been a popular subject of study in the social sciences.

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) make an important distinction between "identity" as a category of analysis and as a category of practice. While the former is an "experience-distant" category mostly used by social analysts, the latter is a category of everyday social experience which is developed and deployed by ordinary social actors. Furthermore, the authors explain, identity as a category of practice is used by these lay actors in everyday settings to make sense of themselves, of their activities, of what they share with, and how they differ from others (ibid., 4). This statement can also be viewed the other way around – that it is often namely through simple everyday practices that actors understand and make sense of their identities. As a result of this kind of sense making, one can also start to notice aspects that unite them with their in-groups and distinguish them from their out-groups. This sequence of thought points us to another relevant concept in the context of my case study, namely that of minority identity politics.

Oftentimes identity and identification for minority groups (like Muslims in Germany) can become even more significant than for majority groups. Duderija (2022) argues that the fact that Western Muslims belong to a new immigrant-based religious minority plays an important role in the emergence of their identity. He explains that a significant factor in understanding the construction of new immigrants' religious identities is namely their transplantation from forming a religious majority to then converting to a religious minority status. It is the change in context – from a more homogeneous majority sociocultural setting of Muslims' home countries to a secular minority one in the West – that has important identity changing implications. Duderija further states that in the majority

context, religious community and society stand in a complementary relationship, while in the minority context they often stand in opposition. Therefore, the author concludes, for many immigrant religious minority groups the religious compartment of their identity in particular can become highly salient. So we see that not only is identification increasingly important for minorities in general, but also that for religious minorities it is particularly religion which can acquire a significant meaning in the process.

At the theoretical core of this paper lies namely the more specific concept of religious identity. This phenomenon is what I set out to study in my fieldwork and what forms a vital part of the framework through which I have given sense to my data. My approach to religious identities is based on the understanding that each individual possesses many different identities within the self. As Hall (1996, 4) argues, identities are never unified, but rather increasingly fragmented and fractured, and never singular, but more so "multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions". The idea that each individual has multiple identities which are assimilated to the "self" is also echoed by other authors (see e.g. Ryan and Deci 2012). Among these multiple identities that make up the self are identities of gender, race, age, occupation and sexual orientation, to name a few. For countless people across the globe, however, a significant part of their larger identities can also be religious identity, i.e. their religious group membership. How and why religious identities tend to assume an especially important place in the hierarchy of identities, I will elaborate more on shortly. As with overarching identities described before, however, also religious identity is not a static phenomenon, rather its formation is a dynamic and ongoing process (Peek 2005, 236). The dynamism of identities leads us to another important theoretical concept in my work, namely that of identity negotiations.

Swann and Bosson (2008), although discussing a more individual psychological level, give an extensive overview of what the phenomenon of identity negotiations entails. They write that the term "identity negotiation" refers to the processes through which people work to obtain nourishment for their identities from others. It is a process which in turn implies to a much broader set of processes through which people strike a balance between achieving their interaction goals and satisfying their identity-related goals. The authors explain that although some changes in identity are triggered by events over which the negotiator has no control, other changes are triggered by changes in the negotiator her- or himself, some of which are intentional. They sketch out some examples of different cases of identity negotiation processes that can lead to identity change and include in the list

situations that deal with e.g. sociocultural contextual changes, developmental growth and role changes, and self-initiated changes. What is most important in relation to my research, however, are environmental changes which according to Swann and Bosson signify possible dramatic identity changes brought about by the shift in social networks, for example when moving to a new country. Such shifts produce identity change for a variety of reasons: new environments inevitably provide people with new expectations; they tend to increase people's self-focused attention which can lead to the application of new self-standards; they may not afford the opportunity structures that once nurtured and sustained said identity (ibid., 463-64). Therefore, if mobility leads to environmental change, an individual is more than likely to consciously or subconsciously engage in identity negotiations with the new social context and the norms and expectations it stipulates. Even though mobility is not a prerequisite for identity negotiations, it can significantly amplify the process.

It is crucial that we do not look at identities as existing in a vacuum – they are always in a way dependent on their environments. Stryker (1980) makes a point to caution that because the self emerges in and is reflective of society, the sociological approach to understanding the self and its identities means that we must also understand the society in which the self is acting. We have to keep in mind, he says, that the self is always acting in a social context in which other selves exist. As I will show, young Muslim women in Freiburg are frequently engaging in identity negotiations with the German society, people around them, as well as different cultural norms and expectations. These negotiations can moreover affect the women's religious identities. The dynamism of identities, religious identities among them, almost inherently implies at least some sort of negotiations. In my case study, the novel religious identity negotiation processes have been brought about because the women have placed themselves into a mobile context. Mobility is what both fosters and clearly exemplifies identity negotiations.

When an identity is moved from one place to another and the social environment around it changes, negotiations are likely to happen. Central in my work is the fact that the young Muslim women in my research group have decided to be mobile and move from their home countries to Germany. Here I believe it is briefly important to clarify what the connection between the categories of "mobility" and "migration" in my work is. The two are undoubtedly closely linked and can at times be seen as almost interchangeable. "After all," de Castro & Dawson (2017, 16) ask, "what does migration entail if not the practical mobility of people along with the symbolic mobility of their beliefs, customs, and

values?". I do find, however, that emphasizing the notion of mobility allows even more room for examining the movement of ideas and beliefs (and religious identities for that matter), and not only that of people. As I will explain, in my work I do borrow from theories of migration, however, I categorize my research participants more as "mobile".

Frederiks (2016) argues that a homogeneous label of "the migrant" does not even technically exist. What she means by that is that because of the sheer number of migrants in the world and their different circumstances, it is impossible to come up with a "one size fits all" definition that would offer coherent characterization. The diversity in migration trajectories and experiences, she writes, results in different assessments as to whether people consider migration as simply an event in their biography or a profound identity-shaping happening. It is exactly this identity-shaping aspect of migration, she explains, that is not, and cannot be captured by definitions based on mere demographic data. I side with Frederiks here and propose a loose approach to categorizing my research participants as strictly "migrants", especially because in many official definitions migrants are expected to stay put in their new countries of settlement for an extended period of time. I more see these young Muslim women as mobile global citizens who have chosen Germany as one stop on their international journey, without having a fixed intention to stay here forever.

Moreover, not all of my research participants see themselves as migrants. While some of them do not like the negative exclusionary connotation of the word "migrant" which draws a line between them and the German society, others simply wish to be categorized as international students. Therefore, I believe it is only fair that I do not force this label upon them. Throughout my work I *will* discuss theoretical approaches to processes of migration, because "migration" is the term that is more commonly used in academia to describe mobility affairs similar to my case study. However, I will remain cautious of strict categorizing of my research participants and tend to use "mobility" when analyzing my own empirical research findings.

Now that we have established the hybrid and dynamic nature of identities, let us return back to the more specific concept of religious identity. As any other (religious) identity, also Muslim identity is composed of different parts which are intertwined and always influencing each other. As a highly dynamic concept, attempts to deconstruct it by scholars have been many. The theory of Muslim identity deconstruction that this current paper mostly borrows from, comes from Jasperse, Ward and Jose (2012) who studied Muslim women's identities in New Zealand. Their approach makes the most sense in terms of my own research findings and therefore the theory serves as a point of inspiration, although

when presenting my data, I have made a few category-related adjustments. The authors divide Muslim identity into three intertwined facets: psychological, behavioral and visible. The psychological part, in their view, includes notions like pride, belongingness and centrality, while the behavioral aspects involve specific religious practices, some of which (e.g. praying and reading the Quran) may occur in private and others (e.g. attending the mosque) in more public arenas. The visible facet of Muslim identity in their work mostly refers to veiling, therefore labeling the hijab as the most visible symbol of Islamic identity and a clear marker of difference. As said, while making sense of my own research findings from fieldwork with young Muslim women in Freiburg, I drew inspiration from this exact approach. As I will elaborate more later on, I divide the women's Islamic identities roughly into three: religious thought, religious behavior and religious expression. Each of these categories corresponds loosely to the afore-described facets of psychological, behavioral and visible identity. This perspective also received the blessing from my research participants, since making sure that different aspects of their religious identities were adequately and fairly covered was and is a key concern for me as a researcher.

As an alternative theory of Muslim identity deconstruction, Ramadan (2004) argues that there are four foundational pillars with specific dimensions to Muslim identity: faith (in the oneness of God); understanding texts and contexts; education and transmission; action and participation. First and foremost he emphasizes the fundamental pillar of faith under which he includes the *Shahada*[10], religious practice and spirituality. According to Ramadan, Muslim identity at its central pivot *is* a faith. The second pillar – "understanding" – means understanding the Quran and the *Sunnah*[11], as well as the contexts in which Muslims live. Muslim identity, Ramadan explains, is based on a constant dialectical movement between the sources and the environment. The education and transmission pillar refers to educating oneself in Islamic matters and passing on that knowledge to future generations. It does not include converting, rather inviting people to a true understanding of God's teachings. Lastly, under the action and participation dimension, Ramadan includes articulation and demonstration of the faith through consistent behavior, i.e. acting according to the teachings of Islam. This approach with its emphasis on texts and education echoes the

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[10] *Shahada* is the Islamic oath which declares the belief in the oneness of Allah. It is one of the Five Pillars of Islam and by saying the *Shahada* in the company of witnesses, one becomes officially a Muslim.

[11] *Sunnah* are the gathered practices of Prophet Muhammad which constitute a model of behavior for Muslims to follow. Together the Quran and *Sunnah* make up the primary sources of the Islamic belief.

Asadian view of religion as a discursive tradition, according to which Muslims themselves perceive of Islam as a tradition composed of discourses in need of thorough study in order to achieve piety.

In order to understand how religious identities function in the present, it is also crucial to comprehend how they are developed or formed. Lori Peek (2005), who conducted extensive fieldwork with Muslims in the United States, proposes a three-stage religious identity development theory. She identifies the three stages as ascribed identity, chosen identity and declared identity. While ascribed religious identity, in her view, is something that comes from the family, childhood, cultural and ethnic background, and is ascribed to one without necessarily asking for their consent, then chosen religious identity is formed through questioning and self-educating at a later age. As believers become older, many of them are not satisfied with blindly trusting their ascribed identities, they want to make sense of religion on their own terms, come to their own conclusions and eventually decide for themselves how big of a part religion will play in their lives. According to Peek, the third stage – declared religious identity – refers to the ways in which believers choose to show their religion to others, i.e. how they wish to be represented. In the specific case of Muslims, she explains, there is a strong desire to show the larger society what "true Islam" really is against a backdrop of often negative assumptions. Muslims, in Peek's experience, feel the need to be equipped with sufficient knowledge about Islam in order to defend it if need be. This is also a characteristic that clearly drew out from my fieldwork, on this I will elaborate more at a later stage of the paper.

As I discussed in the beginning of this subchapter, this paper relies on the understanding that each individual has multiple identities. Out of these multiple identities, religious identity can be one that holds a particularly big significance for a person. Ysseldyk, Matheson and Anisman (2010) argue that religious identity becomes especially important when an individual's sense of safety and security has been undermined. In the case of German Muslims, they show, high levels of religious identification are not surprising, given that Muslims represent a minority religion and are often discriminated against. One of the main tenets in this sort of empowerment of religious identity (compared to other identities) is the steadfast belief that one's own religion is the truth. The authors write: "Religious identification offers a distinctive sacred worldview and eternal group membership, unmatched by identification with other social groups, and hence religiosity might be explained by the immense cognitive and emotional value that religious group membership provides" (ibid., 67). This undeniable importance attributed to religious

identity in the hierarchy of identities by believers is something that is also echoed in other studies.

Verkuyten and Yildiz (2007), who studied Turkish Muslims in Holland, similarly assert that along with ethnicity, religion tends to be the most important marker of group identity. In addition to a feeling of certainty, a sense of belongingness and inclusion, it also provides a cultural worldview as well as meaningfulness in an individual's life. Religious groups, they note, are among the more salient buttresses of identity because the lives of observant believers are largely organized around their religious beliefs and practices (ibid., 1449). So we see that religious identity tends to be held at an extremely high importance by pious believers and out of all the different identities that make up the self, the religious one often seems to serve a higher purpose, offer more meaning and get ascribed more importance by many of those who would categorize themselves as religious. This attests to the potential that religious identity as a theoretical concept holds and hopefully justifies its central placement in the analysis of the case study of young Muslim women in Freiburg that this current paper describes.

As I previously explained, the popular discourse in the West often tends to label Muslims as the dangerous Other. Therefore Muslim migrants' identities in the West are largely dictated or influenced by the opinions and sentiments of the public and the media, triggered by this othering discourse. As Roy (2002) explains, in contrast to a Muslim living within a majority Muslim state, a Muslim migrant is ascribed a distinct Muslim identity. This, according to him, creates a situation where ordinary Muslims feel compelled to explain what it means to be a Muslim to their Western counterparts. Each Muslim is accountable for being a Muslim and to publicly self-identify has become almost a civic duty for the believers of the Islamic faith (as cited in Nash 2012, 18-19). This explanation adds another layer to the identification process of Muslims, one which is highly dependent on the social context. While undoubtedly taking this into consideration, this paper, however, more focuses on the point of view of the young Muslim women themselves, i.e. how they themselves think about their religious identities after their move from a Muslim-majority country to Germany.

To bring this whole theoretical discussion together, I echo Nagy & Frederiks (2016) who write that identity, religion and migration (and therefore mobility) are three increasingly important keywords within the social and human sciences. They discuss the value in studying the interrelatedness of these three concepts and the academic potential these sort of insights hold. Migration dynamics, they write, do not only have social,

political and economic implications, they also bring about changes in the religious landscape, in religious beliefs and practices, and in the way people understand themselves, each other and the world around them. Furthermore, they continue, the complex yet fascinating areas of migration, religion and identity tend to be "only meaningful in their own interrelatedness, spelled out in the everyday life of ordinary people" (ibid., 7). This shows that not only is it useful to study religious identities through the prism of the everyday, but also that the interconnections between those identities and mobility manifest themselves clearly in the daily lives of mobile believers. At the intersection of religion, identity and mobility, or rather the outcome of placing religious identities into a mobile context, is often what Hernández Aguilar (2018, 6) calls "hyphenated identities". Here he implies to terms like "German-Muslim" – a hyphenated identification, half national and half religious. These hyphenated identities come about when a religious identity engages in a negotiation process with the new society that mobility has placed it in. This exact convergence point of religion, identity and mobility is also where the case study of young Muslim women in Freiburg is located.

In conclusion, in this chapter I have discussed previous studies done on Muslims in the West and introduced the reader to the theoretical framework of this thesis. I positioned myself in the larger discourse of anthropology of Islam and explained the main theoretical concepts my discussion is based on, namely those of religious identity, identity negotiation and mobility. In the context of my case study, all three of these concepts and their different facets are closely linked. I have established that religious identities, like all other identities, are highly dynamic phenomena and therefore often engaged in negotiation processes. What amplifies and fosters these negotiations is the mobility of the identity holders. In the following chapters I will move on to discuss the specific case study of the religious identities of young Muslim women in Freiburg. I will show that although their identities are being negotiated in Germany in novel ways, no large-scale transformations can necessarily be detected. Negotiations do not always inherently imply change, in the case of my study they simply suggest a dialogue between the Muslim women and the German society. Even in order to maintain their Islamic identities, they have still had to negotiate. Before moving on to the discussion, I will first set forth the findings of my empirical research. I will, devotedly from the point of view of my research participants, show how the women themselves perceive their Muslim identity and its different dimensions in the new German context.

3. Religious identities of young Muslim women in Freiburg

3.1. Islamic identity formation

When I ask Amira, a 22-year-old pharmacy student, about the brightest religion-related memory from her childhood, she tells me about the first time she ever went to the mosque in her home country Syria. Because her own parents were, according to her, "religious but not strict", her first mosque visit was with a friend and the friend's mother. She recounts the hospitality she encountered at the mosque, the good food and a sense of solidarity with other Muslim girls. This visit left a mark on young Amira and ever since then she started to go regularly to religion classes to learn more about Islam (interview 29.01.22). Amira's and the other women's current religious identities are a blend of an Islamic foundation that was laid in their childhoods in their home countries, and interpretations that they have added later in life. Therefore, in order for us to examine the different parts of the young Muslim women's current identities, it is first important to understand how their early Islamic identities developed. There are three bigger dimensions that shaped the women's Islamic identity formation in different ways – their families, the larger societies that surrounded them and the education they received together with self-study that they undertook.

During our discussions, we talk a lot about the women's families and upbringing. Naila's father died when she was young and she grew up with her mother and two siblings. Her family, according to her, is not "too religious" and she actually considers herself lucky because she thinks that some kids who grow up very religious can "lose their personalities". She tells me that religion for her only started playing a more important role later in life (interview 09.01.22). Fatima, a 23-year-old Egyptian woman, on the other hand, characterizes her family as "quite religious" and values her pious upbringing. She says that equally as much as she learned about Islam from school, she also learned from home. She follows her parents' example in many things, for instance her father taught her about the benefits of fasting at different times of the year and not only during Ramadan. Fatima started doing this as a kid and continues to this day in Germany, simply to make the holy month easier for herself (interview 11.01.22). Fareen, a research participant from the additional voices group who was born to Moroccan immigrant parents in Spain, is slightly critical about the Islamic education she received from home. She realized that her parents were sometimes acting simply according to traditions without fully understanding their deeper meaning and significance. She says:

"My mom, because she was raised in Spain, she didn't know a lot of things about Islam. And I'm a very critical person and I have to do the things when I think it's correct and when I was asking her about the hijab or the way we dress […] she was not really able to answer. Because she also didn't have this knowledge herself. I think she was doing it more as a tradition and for me that's unacceptable." (Interview 16.01.22)

The degree of strictness with which Islam was passed on in the homes of my research participants varies from family to family. While some women value highly the Islamic education they got from home, others were motivated by a lack of answers to engage in further independent self-study. Either way, we cannot dismiss the role families played in the early Islamic identity formation of the women. Oftentimes the first contact they made with Islam was namely at their childhood homes.

The second dimension that shaped the women's Islamic identity formation is connected to the societies that surrounded them when growing up. All the women in the core group – Amira, Fatima, Naila and Zahra – grew up in Muslim-majority countries and in what can be considered as Islamic cultures. The line between the categories of "religious tradition" and "cultural tradition" is hazy and this is something that the women, when reminiscing about their childhoods, also admit themselves. Naila, when talking about what gets regarded as Islamic traditions and values in her home country Sudan, says: "The line is very blurry and people rely on society more than religion sometimes. It's more about how society sees it and less how Muslims see it" (group discussion 06.02.22). Of course the anthropological point of view sees religion as part of culture (see e.g. Geertz 1973), however in the context of this research I believe it is necessary to make some sort of distinction. I would argue that the merging of the two is especially prevalent when discussing Islam. In comparison, many Western countries, although they might be regarded as Christian, keep state and religion separate. This makes the distinction between Christian traditions and nation-state-specific traditions more clear. In countries like Syria, Egypt, Sudan and Jordan, however, Islam is embedded in almost all aspects of public life, over time blurring the lines between culture and religion to almost non-existent. My point here is that when discussing the women's Islamic identity building in their home countries, it is also important to consider the religious-cultural contexts that surrounded them as children and teenagers – simply because there was no escaping from it. In many ways the operations of the state, imposed laws or simply the society's habits have influenced the formation of the women's religious identities. As mentioned, some women like Fareen admitted that they believe their parents were actually more acting according to cultural

traditions which then got labeled as religious practices. This raised questions in the women and motivated them to undertake independent studies in order to find their own answers.

In some of the home countries of my research participants, the influence of Islam is so strong that questioning religion is not even an option. In our group discussion the women also discussed how in their home societies girls generally have added pressure to act "properly" while boys get away with more. In Muslim-majority countries, the women explain to me, girls are under immense pressure to act "culturally suitable". This in turn affects their religiosity, since they are made to believe that many cultural dos and don'ts stem from religion, while in reality, as the women have later discovered, this is not true (group discussion 06.02.22). Instances like this demonstrate the influence of the women's home societies on their early religious identity formation. So when the women refer to their "religious background", what they oftentimes mean is their countries of origin.

The third dimension that has shaped the women's Islamic identity formation is education. Here I refer both to formal schooling they received as kids and to individual self-study they have undertaken as (young) adults. "I had the best childhood," Zahra, a 29-year-old woman from Jordan, says. She continues: "In school they were super super kind. There were many activities, it was really a great school. It was Islamic, but it wasn't super strict. I would say it was the real Islam, we were raised very well. […] As a kid I felt super lucky that I was in that school. They really took care of us and I was having so much fun" (interview 20.01.22). Similarly Amira remembers her religion teacher who was "very kind to her students" and from whom she learned a lot. "Maybe that's why I loved my religion and wanted to learn more about it," she speculates (interview 29.01.22). Those women for whom Islam was delivered in school in a pleasant and understandable way, have taken this knowledge as an educational base on top of which they have started to add their own meanings and interpretations. This web of knowledge shapes how they understand Islam and therefore also the ways in which their Muslim identities are formed.

The wish to self-educate on Islamic topics was something that often came up in the conversations. Consider this following quote by Fareen who regularly attends online Islamic courses in order to better her knowledge on Islam: "If you start believing in a religion, then it has to be the whole thing. Of course you have to start little by little, but you have the responsibility to look for answers. And question yourself like – why am I believing this? Should I be doing this?" (interview 16.01.22). Similarly Fatima likes to habitually watch educational Islamic videos on Youtube (interview 11.01.22) and Zahra admits that she spends a lot of time researching Islam on the internet in order to find

trustworthy sources that would provide her with answers to some of the more puzzling questions about her faith (group discussion 06.02.22). We see then that the women have taken the teachings they have gotten from their families, schools and in some cases mosques with them, but in order to develop their Islamic identities further, are now engaging in self-study. They sense a responsibility to understand Islam as deeply as they can and to come to their own conclusions. This is aided by the fact that (religious) information is now widely available to the generation that my research participants belong to, more so than to generations before.

That the wider availability of Islamic texts leads to a more educated and religiously conscious group of ordinary Muslims, was already noted by Mahmood (2005). Modern Muslim citizens, she writes, have been raised in a culture of mass media and public literacy and are therefore now better versed in doctrinal arguments as well as theological concepts. Before these were more reserved to religious specialists, whereas now Islamic knowledge is available to almost all Muslims (ibid., 79). This sentiment is also echoed by Rinaldo (2014) who notes that there is a noticeable heightened desire to study Islam, also among women, often co-existing with criticism of older generations. These observations, she writes, can be linked to larger themes of the emergence of a new more pious generation of Muslims, as well as Islamic revivalism. Women nowadays are asserting pious agency and there is a renewed emphasis on more public forms of Islamic piety, e.g. religious study, often driven by women themselves (ibid., 824-25). Because the self-educating is not necessarily tied to traditional institutions, it is also not confined within a country's borders. In the context of my case study, this means that the women have continued their personal Islamic educations also in Germany, giving testament to the fact that their Islamic identity formation is an on-going process.

In conclusion, in order for us to move on to examine the different parts of the young Muslim women's current religious identities, it was important to understand how their Islamic identities developed in the first place – especially because the influence of many of these aspects the women can still feel today. As I have described, there have been three main dimensions to the women's Islamic identity formation – their families, their home societies and both formal and independent education. While some women like Fatima emphasize the importance of Islamic education they received from home, others like Zahra value highly the more formal education they received from school. The two types of educations formed a religious base for the women and acted in a complementary way by supplementing each other when necessary. I explained how because Islam and culture are

so intermixed in the Muslim-majority home countries of the women in the core group, the women admit that also their home societies have played a role in shaping their religious identities. To reassert their Muslim identity and to guarantee its on-going formation, the women engage in Islamic self-study, educating themselves on religious topics also after the end of formal schooling. This discussion on the formation of religious identities of the women has now set the stage for us to explore the different dimensions of these same identities in depth.

3.2. Religious thought

"Don't forget religious sense!" Fatima, usually the quiet one of the group, cautions me during our group discussion when we talk about which different dimensions of religious identity I plan to incorporate in my thesis. Although I by no means had forgotten it, I ask her for clarification. "If you don't have this religious sense that God is with you all the time and that you need God every moment of your life, you can lose your path easily. This is very important in our identity," Fatima says. "This is spirituality, this is faith," Zahra adds (group discussion 06.02.22). This example illustrates the importance the women in my research group place on their religious thought – the first of the three intertwined dimensions of their Muslim identities that I will discuss in this chapter. It is the part of the young Muslim women's religious identity that refers to their internal feelings about Islam and the ways in which they think about their faith. Under this category I have, following my research, included topics like their relationship with God, spirituality or religious sense, pondering on religious themes, and overall thoughts on Islam. Religious thought means also at times, as I will explain, looking at Islam through a critical lens. We will see that because of the central positioning of religious thought in the women's Muslim identities, no revolutionary changes have happened to it after their resettlement to Germany. On the contrary, the women emphasize the importance of maintaining this aspect.

All four women in the core group – Amira, Fatima, Naila and Zahra – admit that Islam holds a very important place in their lives and the resettlement to Germany has not diminished that importance. Not only is Islam a way of behaving for them, it is also a way of thinking. The religion sets values and ethical norms, as well as shapes the way the women view the world. The most important aspect of this Islamic way of thinking for the women is undoubtedly what they sometimes call "religious sense" or spirituality – essentially their belief in God, their faith. The women value this above all else. Fatima's

opinion that "you can pray and fast but still be a bad person" (interview 20.01.22) is something that is often echoed in other conversations as well. Maryam, a 26-year-old student from the additional voices group, adds: "Practicing Islam doesn't necessarily mean that you're a good Muslim. […] It is what's in the heart that matters" (interview 07.01.22). Therefore, the women see praying, fasting and veiling as extras, Islam begins for them with their relationship with God. We also talk a lot about Islamic intention, or *niyyah*[12], which refers to the guiding principle behind every action, be it in the women's home countries or now in Germany. If a deed is done with proper Islamic *niyyah*, Maryam notes, the outcome is secondary (interview 07.01.22).

Religious thought has retained its strength also for those women from the additional voices group who otherwise have decided to distance themselves from Islam after they moved away from their home countries. Rahima, a Tunisian au pair who has stopped practicing Islam, states: "I don't know, I still believe in God actually, because I can feel him inside. Whenever I was in trouble and I pray to God or I ask him to save me, he was always there. I think there is a power which is protecting us" (interview 15.01.22). Similarly Aiza, a stay at home mother who does not consider herself a practicing Muslim anymore and who is generally quite critical of Islam, confesses: "I do believe in God, I do believe in some energy" (interview 28.12.21). The more pious women in the core group all spend a lot of time pondering on religious topics and believe strongly in God's guidance. Some, like Naila, have found even more proof of God's deeds now that they have been in Germany and their conviction of destiny has strengthened (interview 09.01.22). Others, like Fatima, even feel sorry for their non-religious German peers who they feel like are lacking spirituality and therefore missing out on something important (interview 11.01.22). Islamic thought strongly guides the women's decision-making and also bigger, more meaningful future decisions are often left to the authority of God.

In our group discussion the women from the core group talk about hypocrisy – how they often witness their fellow Muslims changing their behavior depending on the social context they are in. Naila notes: "There are these kinds of people who practice more under the eyes of family or home society but when they travel or when they come here to Germany, they go crazy" (group discussion 06.02.22). In my research group, this is something that is frowned upon. The relationship with God, the women believe, should stand any test of time and change of society. "You test your faith once you are outside

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[12] *Niyyah* is the Arabic term for the intention in one's heart to act in accordance with God's will.

without your family around you," Zahra contends (group discussion 06.02.22). What helps the women overcome these tests is namely a strong sense of religious thought.

The women do admit, however, that life in liberal German society comes with many temptations, be it eye-catching summer dresses of the Western girls or late night gatherings with course mates. Although at times tempted, the women in the core group see these lures more as religious tests that God has created in order to check the strength of their faith. Zahra confesses: "I was affected a little bit how [Western] girls were wearing dresses and stuff, I thought I don't want to wear my hijab, but then I decided no, I am doing this for God. So you test yourself" (group discussion 06.02.22). Also Fatima who overall has quite a conservative approach to Islam, admits with a nervous laughter: "My university colleagues are having parties, they're going to bars, they're gathering together and I'm just sitting alone in my room doing nothing. I feel bored but I'm not going to go with them, that doesn't fit me, I don't fit there" (group discussion 06.02.22). So we see how the women in the core group have been intentional about maintaining their religious thought in Germany, thereby in a way becoming even more Muslim than they were in their home countries. Although surrounded by secularity and often also temptations, they have made it their priority to keep the Islamic way of thinking in the foreground and not make any compromises.

As a brief deflection, it is important to establish the difference between secular behavior and religious behavior to which I allude in my work. As I will explain in more depth in the coming subchapter, under religious behavior I categorize Islamic practices like praying, fasting and community activities. It can be argued, however, that the women's religious thought has influenced the way they engage in (or abstain from) secular behaviors as described in the previous paragraphs. A strong Islamic sense does in a way affect how the women behave in Germany – they do not want to take part in some secular activities that their Western peers do, simply because it would go against their belief. A strongly maintained Islamic thought also helps them overcome secular temptations – as explained, the women see those lures namely as religious tests which strengthen religious thought. Therefore, the women's secular behavior is very much aligned with their Islamic thought.

The women's religious thinking is a mix of basic knowledge they have received from home and school (discussed in the previous chapter) and their own understandings, thought through at a later point in life. In all the women I see a strong determination to come to their own conclusions about Islam and not simply blindly follow anyone's orders. These crucial personal interpretations manifest themselves in the different roles religious thought

has acquired after resettlement. For instance Naila, who has at times felt lonely in Germany, notes that during and after the move, religion has stayed as a comforting constant in her life that she has been able to rely on no matter what (interview 09.01.22). When everything else around them is changing, Islam will never disappear or lose its meaning. At times, the women also more strongly identify themselves with their Muslimness than other parts of their identity, e.g. ethnicity or nationality. As Zahra promptly puts it:

> "Sometimes even in our own countries we feel like we don't belong there. So we don't belong anywhere. But at least we belong to our religion. For example, if you would ask me – who are you? I would say I am Muslim. That's it, I'm a Muslim woman. I feel like I belong there, I am proud to belong there. At least I feel pride about something in my life. I am proud that I am Muslim, I am proud that I am a Muslim woman." (Interview 20.01.22).

This quote echoes a desire to identify first and foremost as a Muslim, also in a new German living environment, thereby emphasizing the importance of religious thought for the women.

Also Islam's ability to act as a moral compass is held in high regard by my research participants. Consider this following quote from Fareen when talking about the role Islam plays for her:

> "For me it [Islam] is a lifestyle. It's a way of living. […] Before talking or doing anything, we have to think first and we have to remember 'okay, what should I do as a Muslim'. It's a way of acting, a way of interacting with people. We have to be very careful with the way we treat people. […] Every step I take in my life, I have to think about it. So it's a lifestyle." (Interview 16.01.22)

Therefore, in addition to valuing the set out Five Pillars of Islam[13], religion for the women also acts as a more everyday guide when making decisions or interacting with others. The women talk a lot about Islamic values like love, compassion, respect and treating others with kindness – a contrasting picture to the prevailing Western discourse. Above all else they emphasize religious sense and good intentions. Again Fareen notes on this further and explains how she believes that on Judgment Day[14] Muslims will not be judged on trivial errors or forced compromises in their religious behavior (interview 16.01.22). Islamic

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[13] The Five Pillars of Islam are the five fundamental practices in Islam that every Muslim should engage in. These are the *Shahada* (declaration of faith), *salat* (praying), *zakat* (giving alms), *sawm* (fasting during Ramadan) and the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).
[14] Muslims believe in final Judgment Day where Allah will decide how individuals (both Muslim and non-Muslim) will spend their afterlife based on the good and bad deeds they have done during their lifetime.

thought is what matters in the end and must also not be forgotten in the more secular German society.

Being educated about Islam and possessing a strong dimension of religious thought also means critically assessing religion and acknowledging some of the more problematic aspects of the belief system. The women talked quite openly about a number of reservations they had. A problematic aspect that Aiza brought out was the perceived sexism in Islam. She states bluntly: "Islam is more fair to men than women" (interview 28.12.22). For her, the sexism that she felt and witnessed was one of the main reasons for stopping practicing Islam. For Rahima, on the other hand, it was the gender inequality and intense patriarchy she saw and felt when growing up in Tunisia (interview 15.01.22). Additionally, another topic of discussion in our conversations was discrimination within Islam. For instance, Fareen admits that Muslim men "have it super easy" because they can hide their religion when necessary, whereas for hijab-wearing Muslim women this is not an option (interview 16.01.22). On the topic of discrimination I will elaborate more later on in the thesis. The point I wish to get across here is that the dimension of religious thought, albeit strong, is not "blind" for the women. Oftentimes they do not shy away from acknowledging some of the more problematic aspects within the religion.

To sum up, in this section I have discussed points relating to religious thought that were revealed during my conversations with young Muslim women in Freiburg. The women hold religious thought in high regard and continuously emphasize the importance of religious sense to me. Additionally, as shown, Islam for the more pious of the group acts as a lifestyle and a moral compass. There are, however, novel circumstances that the women's religious thought has had to navigate after their resettlement to Germany. Their strong Islamic belief holds them back from giving into some Western temptations, therefore affecting their secular behavior. In this sense it can be said that the Muslimness of the women has even been reinforced now that they have settled in Germany. Because of the central positioning of religious thought in the women's Muslim identities, they are very intentional about retaining it, no matter the social context that surrounds them.

3.3. Religious behavior and everyday religion

The second part of my research participants' religious identity that I will discuss I have termed "religious behavior". This is a facet that refers to a variety of Islamic practices that the women undertake as well as habits and social interactions. Many of these are of course

closely tied to their religious thought. I have included in this category activities like praying, fasting, going to the mosque, community activities, halal eating and dating. I will start by discussing praying and fasting in more detail since they are two of the Five Pillars of Islam and therefore I believe deserve more attention. In general, the women's religious behavior has had to face some novel practical challenges in Germany. Not everything that was possible or convenient in the core group women's Muslim-majority home societies is still feasible. How the women navigate these obstacles, on which I will elaborate shortly, offers interesting insight into the negotiations of their religious identities. Oftentimes, according to my research, the women themselves associate their Muslim identities most closely with exactly the more everyday practices that fall under the category of religious behavior. Perhaps this is because when we think about the concept of our identity, it is easier for us to do that through more quotidian aspects and not so much through the more abstract philosophical matters relating to our beliefs and convictions.

The ritual of praying is one of the main Islamic prescriptions and Muslims are required to pray five times a day according to specific rules and at specific times (Fadil 2013, 730). When I was asking about the importance of Islam in the lives of my research participants, praying was frequently the thing that was mentioned first. For the women it seems to be the most important Islamic practice which gives structure to their days and lives, provides meaning, a good relationship with God and nourishment for the soul. All four women in the core group pray, or try to pray, at least five times a day. For instance Zahra, for whom praying is as important as eating, drinking or working, explains: "I feel like my day is miserable without praying in the morning. I've felt the importance and I've felt how much it affects my life. So whenever I lose it [miss a prayer], I feel like okay, this day is going to be a bad day" (interview 20.01.22). In Islam, it is not customary for women to pray frequently in the mosque, it is a religious practice more reserved for the private sphere. Also most of my research participants prefer to pray at the comfort of their own homes.

When talking about what the women get out of regular praying, they often describe to me how it gives them a sense of peace and creates a feeling of a connection with God. For Naila, it helps her to focus on the bigger picture instead of stressing about small things (interview 09.01.22). Since Islamic prayer has customary rules of conduct in terms of when, where and how to do it, the women have experienced some complications in Germany. Muslims are required to pray in a clean and preferably quiet location which is often hard to come by in a country that does not prioritize making sure that such prayer places exist. The women admit that it can be hard to find a quiet place to concentrate while

at university or work and therefore sometimes prayers have to be skipped or rescheduled. Also Germany's geographical particularities start to play a role, since Islamic prayers are conducted at particular times of day. The first prayer for Muslims is at sunrise and the last at night. The women admit that their new life in Germany has placed stress on their praying schedules. During winter, the prayers are crammed together due to the relatively short days, while in summer the women have found it hard to adjust to getting up to a very early sunrise. While all of them expected these alterations, it has admittedly been hard for them to get used to.

When the women have to skip or postpone prayers, either due to the lack of suitable places or conflicts between their personal commitments and the praying schedule, they often tend to feel guilt. Sticking to the correct prayer times is something that is important for them and aspired towards, although not always possible in Germany. For instance Fareen, who works full-time at the hospital, explains:

> "Usually you have to do it [pray] at specific times. Maybe there are people who say that they can pray in the office while there are other people around, but I cannot do that. I feel like I would need to be concentrated on my prayers. So I prefer to wait until I get home and then do them at home. But that's also bad. I know that as a Muslim I should do it at the [specific] times, even when there's other people around, but I cannot do it." (Interview 16.01.22)

However, the women believe that their intention to do the right thing overweighs a missed prayer or two. In a country with no *adhans*[15], the women have also had to be creative in order to keep track of the right times to pray. Many of them demonstrate to me different apps on their smartphones which are designed for global Muslims and notify the user of the times to pray according to their geographical location. This way, even while in Germany, they can always keep track of the schedule. Similarly the apps provide verses from the Quran when the physical book might not be available and show the user the direction of Mecca in every given point. This is one creative way how the women navigate being a Muslim in the new German context.

Another important Islamic practice that most of my research participants try to observe is fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Fasting, similarly to praying, is also one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Ramadan, Tobin (2016, 49-51) writes, is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which there is a religious command to fast. The larger intent behind observing Ramadan, he says, is to achieve heightened piety and it is considered a time for inner reflection, cultivating one's religious practice and giving to the poor. During

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[15] *Adhan* is the Islamic call to prayer recited from mosques at prayer times.

this time, the author notes, one's mind and body should be focused on Allah. If praying was held in high regard by all of the women in my core group, then the strictness with which they adhere to fasting differs slightly. Some women take the command to fast very seriously and abstain from food and drink during sunlight hours throughout the whole month of Ramadan, others make slight exceptions and configurations. Naila started to try out fasting during Ramadan a few years ago, but it "didn't go very well". Driven to the point of fainting, she decided to break fast prematurely (interview 09.01.22). Therefore, for some of the women Ramadan is something to look forward to and something that they thoroughly enjoy, while others await for its approach with apprehension due to the physical distress it can cause. However, the month of Ramadan is not only about abstaining from food, it is also (or perhaps even more importantly) about spirituality, discipline, empathy for others and being with one's community. The women describe the holy feeling that comes with Ramadan and those who enjoy it cannot help but smile when reminiscing about past holy months. Zahra is one of those women:

> "It's really nice, especially when all your friends and family are fasting. And all this holiness… If you're Muslim, you'll feel the holiness. It really is the best time of the year for me. And when it finishes, I always think that I hope I can live for another Ramadan. It gives me this spiritual connection, I feel like for thirty days we're just really close [with God]." (Interview 20.01.22)

Although mostly an excitedly expected time of the year, Ramadan in Germany comes with its complications. The women tend to miss their Muslim communities back home who offer support with getting through the fast and companionship when celebrating the breaking of it. Furthermore, once again the geographical particularity of Germany plays a role – when Ramadan falls in European summer months, also the length of the daily fast is extended[16]. Many women, among them Fatima and Naila whose home countries are Egypt and Sudan respectively, explain to me that compared to their home countries, the period of time without food and drink can be unusually long (interviews 11.01.22 and 09.01.22). Those women for whom the coming Ramadan will be the first in Europe feel slightly nervous and apprehensive about it. However, all those who are used to strictly following it at home, plan on making no exceptions for themselves in Germany despite the hardships. So we see that the new life in Germany has added some practical challenges to the dimension of religious behavior of my research participants. Although praying and fasting are continuously kept in high regard, the women have had to make adjustments and take

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[16] During Ramadan Muslims fast from dawn until sunset.

into consideration new circumstances.

Not only does religious behavior entail more private practices like praying and fasting, but the women also discuss community activities (or lack thereof) with me. As Fareen aptly says: "Islam is not a one person religion, it is a social religion" (interview 16.01.22). In Freiburg, many Muslim women feel the absence of a strong Muslim community since there are not many Islamic gathering places, events or venues. The distancing from an Islamic community has been especially stark during times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Maryam describes it in the following way: "We didn't have a lot of space as Muslims in Freiburg [before], but right now [during the pandemic] I feel like we have none" (interview 07.01.22). The women who have come to the city recently to pursue their studies tend to feel lonely at times. They miss engaging and doing activities with like-minded people, especially because they often cannot relate to some of the popular Western activities like going to bars and nightclubs, drinking alcohol and attending parties. However, none of the women in my research group are active mosque-goers. Few of them have visited the mosque in Freiburg on occasion (for example for Eid[17] celebrations) and left with very positive emotions. For some reason, however, this has not become a habit and the women in this sense tend to keep their religion in the more private sphere. Praying, fasting and community activities, albeit significant, are only one part of the religious behavior dimension of the women's Islamic identities. A whole other part relates to more quotidian struggles that the women have been faced with.

"Once I drank champagne with alcohol!" Zahra exclaims in our group discussion right when we have settled into our chairs to discuss the changes in the women's religious identities now in Germany. She continues:

> "But I did not know! I drank a little bit with my friends, we thought it's alcohol free so let's drink it, but then I got this feeling inside that it was not alcohol free. So I searched on Google and it was written that in Germany they write on the drink that it is alcohol free if it has less than 0.5 percent! But of course if it's 0.5 or 100 percent, we [Muslims] cannot drink it." (Group discussion 06.02.22)

Naila nods and says: "And even the Black Forest cake[18]! Someone told me that this has alcohol as well. But it's a cake!? So it's really not easy…" (group discussion 06.02.22). Conversations like these, revolving around the more everyday struggles within the domain

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[17] Eid al-Fitr is a celebratory Islamic holiday which marks the end of Ramadan.
[18] Here she refers to the *Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte* – a traditional cake in the Freiburg region that is made with chocolate, cherries, whipped cream and *Kirschwasser* – a type of clear brandy.

of religious behavior, come up first when the women themselves speculate on the question of how their Islamic identities have changed after their resettlement to Germany. This hints towards the fact that often the ways in which they make sense of their own identity and the transformations of its parts, is more closely linked namely with everyday practices. In our conversations we talk about issues with dating, problems with finding halal food in Freiburg and their difficulty with getting used to the dominant "beer culture" of Germany.

Dating is something that the women point out when I ask them to identify possible issues for newly-arriving Muslim women in Germany. Naila explains that Islamic cultures set strict rules for courtship which prohibit marrying outside one's religion. This, she says, is probably much harder to achieve in Germany – a country where Muslims are still clearly a minority. Although she herself is not particularly concerned about finding a boyfriend, she explains that in her home country of Sudan, not only are Muslim girls expected to marry Muslim men, but also differences in ethnicities or even tribal affiliations can become decisive. If it is already hard in Sudan to achieve, she concludes, then Germany in this sense must be a nightmare. This aspect is something she believes that newly-arriving Muslim women should keep in mind (interview 09.01.22). For her it has also been hard to get used to the fact that she cannot go out and choose between a wide variety of halal restaurants with her friends, like she was able to back in Khartoum. She has had to compromise her religious identity, she notes, and says: "Right now we are in a different community so we can't do all the stuff that we used to do freely. Stuff that is a big part of being Muslim in general. I miss going to any kind of restaurant where I can eat anything! I really miss that. That I don't have to search for like half an hour [for a halal restaurant]. So it's not easy" (group discussion 06.02.22). This excerpt shows that for Naila, compromising her identity here in Germany, is connected to novel struggles of everyday life. However, she nor any of the other women in the core group give into the ease of eating non-halal simply because suitable restaurants are hard to find. They stay true to Islamic teachings, yet admit that abiding by them is sometimes complicated in Germany.

Lastly, Germany's infamous beer culture or the emphasis that Westerners put on alcohol in general is oftentimes downright shocking to the women. Fatima is especially critical of this aspect and says that she does not like the drinking and party culture here in Germany. While she tolerates it when her friends have a drink in restaurants and cafes, she generally does not like that kind of atmosphere. She does not really understand the appeal of this kind of lifestyle and finds it hard to relate (interview 11.01.22). Examples like these about dating, food and drinking culture give statement of some of the more everyday issues

the women now have to navigate in their new country of settlement.

In conclusion, in this subchapter it has not been my intention to show that the religious behavior aspect of the women's Muslim identities has transformed drastically. Through various examples I wished to get across the point that even though the women mostly still behave according to Islamic teachings, they admit to some of the added practical struggles that have accompanied their resettlement to Germany. Making compromises in their old habitual ways of conducting religious practices as well as going about everyday life as pious Muslims in new ways, is in their minds already an attestation to transformations in their religious identities. Furthermore, while religious behavior is undoubtedly an important part of the Muslim women's religious identities, they emphasize that in reality, practice means nothing without belief. Belief and intention always come first, practice is almost complimentary. In addition to the two, the third significant facet of the women's religious identities is one that corresponds to the way they express Islam.

3.4. Religious expression

Islamic expression is the third aspect of religious identity which I discuss in this paper. Under this category I mostly include the visible part of the women's Muslimness – the hijab as well as overall modest dressing. Hijab as the arguably most powerful symbol of Islam in the West cannot be overlooked in a discussion about Muslim identities. Also my research participants brought up the topic of the hijab often in our conversations and sometimes already expected me to ask about it without me actually doing so. At times I even came across instances where some women, perhaps subconsciously, felt like they needed to justify the hijab to me as a Western researcher. For instance Fatima stated resolutely: "For me it's not hard to wear the hijab!" (interview 11.01.22) without me implying in any way that I believed that to be the case. All four women in the core group were devout and proud *hijabis*.

The hijab is an unmistakable Islamic symbol that cannot be hidden and that has also become to represent much or the polemics surrounding Islam in the Western discourse. "The act of wearing the hijab or veiling identifies or labels a woman as Muslim to the rest of the world" (Croucher 2008, 201). Therefore a hijab-wearing woman gets relatively quickly, often even automatically, identified by the surrounding society. The problems with representation and discrimination for *hijabis* that come with such quick labeling in the West will be discussed more thoroughly in the upcoming subchapter. However, an

interesting contradiction must be briefly mentioned. While the young Muslim women themselves admit that their hijab is often the last part of their own understanding of their Islamic identities (meaning that religious thought and behavior hold much more importance for them than expression), the outside world's identification of them tends to start namely from the headscarf. Much of this has to do with the infamous debates in the West around the "appropriateness" of wearing the hijab in public and the links with oppression that widely and often unjustifiably get attached to it.

One thing that the women in the core group make very clear for me is the fact that it was completely their own decision to start donning the veil and that by no means did someone force them to do it. Amira's parents were in fact against her decision to start wearing the hijab because as Syrians in Germany, they were afraid of the discrimination she might experience. She was so sure of her wish, however, that she did it even without her parents' blessing (interview 29.01.22). Fatima chose to start wearing a headscarf already when she was 11, even though she, in her own words, "biologically matured" only two years later[19], at 13 (interview 11.01.22). Oftentimes, not all the older women in my research participants' families wear the hijab so this decision cannot be attributed to the family's command or even influence. The women, at times already at a very young age as seen, came to this conclusion themselves.

Furthermore, they have kept wearing the hijab in Germany, away from their families' gaze, which attests moreover that this is truly their own personal choice of Islamic expression. What comes out of the conversation is that the women often equate wearing the hijab with religious strength. They acknowledge some of the hardships that come with donning the veil, however they do not let those influence them in order to not succumb to temporary moments of weakness. Sometimes also other Muslim women who are not *hijabis*, are seen as lacking religious strength. This judgment is not always meant in a necessarily negative way, yet it is mentioned as a point of comparison during our discussions. The women also acknowledge the power of Muslim identity assertion that the hijab possesses. Zahra explains how it is not always a bad thing to be automatically identified as a Muslim woman when wearing a headscarf. She brings examples of men keeping a respectful distance in meetings and not enforcing handshakes, which she appreciates, as well as an ice cream vendor who naturally knew to warn her against flavors

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[19] The exact time when Muslim girls are expected to start wearing the hijab varies from culture to culture. In the home societies of my research participants, it is usually customary to start covering the hair when a girl reaches puberty. In that sense donning the veil can be seen as a rite of passage into adulthood.

that contain alcohol (interview 20.01.22). Although the quick labeling might also bring its fair share of troubles in the West, the women make it a point to acknowledge the good aspects that come with it.

Naturally the first and most important reason why the women decided to start wearing the hijab and continue to so, is because it is an Islamic commandment. The Quran states that all Muslims should dress modestly and sets a special set of rules for women. Muslim women wear the headscarf then in order to follow the command of modesty and please God. As said, they value the hijab as a symbol of religious strength which attests to them as well as to others that they take Islam seriously. Moreover, all of my *hijabi* research participants admit that the headscarf makes them feel more comfortable. The idea of being out in public with their hair uncovered does not give them a sense of liberty, in fact on the contrary. In our group discussion the women explain to me that wearing the hijab allows others to get to know them and judge them based on their personalities and intelligence, not merely looks. "All of us we want to be seen as a brain, something that is capable of doing stuff, and not only as a body. So if we weren't wearing our hijabs, we would feel like people appreciate us because of our body and not because of what we are," the women conclude (group discussion 06.02.22). Therefore the headscarf provides a sense of comfort. The women also bring out the emancipatory power of the hijab – they are empowered by being in control of to whom they show their bodies. "Somehow it gives you this halo," Zahra says implying to a space of respect the headscarf creates around the Muslim woman (interview 20.01.22). Modesty and covering the hair is embraced by the women, even though it perhaps goes against the widespread cultural trends in Germany. They realize that it makes them stand out and they have accepted it, because at the end of the day it is their own personal religious expression which maintains the strength of their faith and relationship with God.

On the other hand, my research participants are not shy to admit some of the hardships or negative aspects that come with being a *hijabi*. Although the instances of direct discrimination that they have experienced are thankfully rare, they are well aware of harsher stories of their peers and perhaps subconsciously ready for the fact that it might also happen to them as headscarf-wearing women in Germany. For example, Zahra tells me a story about a guy in the guesthouse in Freiburg where she was staying who felt uncomfortable sitting next to her because she was visibly Muslim. "I was telling him that I'm putting this [hijab] on my head and not yours, so I don't know why you feel uncomfortable!?" she recounts (interview 20.01.22). The topic of hijab discrimination also

comes up in our group discussion when we discuss the European job market. All of the women in the core group have heard stories that it might be harder for them to get jobs in Europe because they are *hijabis*. While some women, like Zahra, say that they trust in God also regarding their career paths, other acknowledge that the issue might not be so straightforward when one has to think critically about finances and the upkeep of children. When talking about the possible discrimination against *hijabis*, securing a job is definitely the primary aspect that the women mention (group interview 06.02.22).

We also discuss the widespread misconception in Western thought that all women who wear the headscarf are by default oppressed. My research participants openly acknowledge the occasional oppressive situations where hijab-wearing is forced by families or societies, however they themselves cannot relate. Maryam and Fareen shed light on a different side of the issue: since they grew up with mostly non-Muslim friends around them, they admit that it was difficult to be the only *hijabi* in the group (interviews 07.01.22 and 16.01.22). The same can be seen in the case of women whose friends were less religious than them or not convinced of the hijab as early as them. Maryam even lost some friends when she first started "experimenting" with covering her hair but she states that it was for the best and allowed her to see who her real companions were (interview 07.01.22).

In addition to dealing with discrimination and misconceptions, there are also some more everyday struggles that come with wearing the hijab that the women mention. "We do have to sacrifice our beauty," Zahra tells me and continues to describe how often the summer heat can be suffocating and how she at times enviously admires Western women's short stylish dresses. She makes no secret out of the fact that she believes that the headscarf takes away from her stylishness. A fashion lover at heart, she gets jealous that Western women can wear whatever they want. These moments of envy, however, Zahra interprets as tests of her religious strength that simply need to be overcome (interview 20.01.22). This attests that the women are openly ready to admit some of the hardships that accompany their decision to wear the hijab, but this does not mean that they would make any compromises. The powerful Islamic symbol that is the hijab is part of their identity and all of my research participants who wear it, wear it with pride. Therefore, once more we see that the transformations in the religious expression part of the women's Muslim identities reveal themselves in more subtle ways. Although this dimension has remained visibly more or less unchanged, it has definitely acquired a different type of meaning for the women in the West. The hijab is being negotiated with the German society, but there are no signs of making compromises.

Interestingly, the word "hijab" does not only refer to the headscarf but can also mean overall modest dressing. The Quran does not solely state that Muslim women should cover their hair, it talks about how all clothing should be kept loose, unpretentious and not attract unnecessary attention. While the women in the core group would not compromise on their decision to wear the hijab, Islamic modest dressing is more up for their own individual interpretations. While some women, like Zahra, wore less pious outfits in their home countries but now in Germany feel like they need to represent Islam which also means slightly more conservative clothing, others, like Amira, pair the headscarf with more tight jeans and blouses. After telling me a story of getting arrested in her home country of Sudan for wearing jeans on street as a teenager, Naila contends that she is now very happy that she can feel more free and relaxed in Germany (interview 09.01.22). While the headscarf is an everyday staple for the women, how exactly they decide to dress on a given day can also simply depend on their mood. Fareen says: "Maybe one day I wear more modest clothes and no make up, and another day I want to wear another thing… So I just do it!" (interview 16.01.22). The women feel relatively free to play around with different colors and styles of their hijabs and clothing which attests to the fact that the expressive tenet of their religious identities is the one that leaves the most room for interpretation and creativity.

If there is something that all the women agree on, it is the fact that the hijab is what makes them unmistakably Muslim in the eyes of the German society. They understand the power of this Islamic symbol that they wear and the connotations that might come with it. Therefore, the women's perception of their Islamic expression in Germany reveals their realization that the headscarf is not simply a personal expression of their faith anymore. They now have to additionally navigate all the added meanings that the Western context adds to it. Talking to the women about this was the moment for me as a researcher when I truly understood how different my study would have been had I included or focused on Muslim men. Men have the chance to hide their Muslimness much more easily and this, as we shall see in the next section, creates a rather unfair situation in terms of discrimination and brings up issues of representation.

3.5. Issues of discrimination and representation

I have now discussed the three integral parts of the young Muslim women's religious identities and also the ways in which the women themselves perceive those different

dimensions. We have seen that while overall the resettled young Muslim women in Freiburg have maintained their Islamic identities, each described religious identity dimension has entered into a dialogue with the German social context. These processes can be referred to as religious identity negotiations. The women's Islamic identities were formed in their Muslim-majority home countries, but are now being renegotiated in a novel German social context. This is why it is crucial to also devout time to examining which outside forces or larger social phenomena my research participants deem influential and how they perceive the ways these aspects affect them. A discussion on religious identity negotiation would not be complete without taking the effects of the larger society into consideration. In addition to speaking to my research participants about their Islamic identity formation and the different tenets of their current religious identity, we also then spent time discussing them adjusting to their life in Germany. The two main issues that hatched out of our conversations were those of discrimination and representation.

The women in my research group fathom that as Muslim women in Germany, they are an easy target for discrimination. Even though not all of the women have had direct negative experiences of being discriminated against, all of them were either warned by families in home countries or know to tell stories from friends. Interestingly my research participants use the terms Islamophobia and racism interchangeably, from their point of view discrimination against Muslims can be seen as a form of racism. The more widespread understanding would perhaps be to see the two as separate categories – one referring to discrimination based on religion and the other based on race – however, undeniably the two can be connected. In the stories of the women, these distinctions are understandably not given much thought and terms are used more based on their convenience. That Germany, and the West at large, has a history and tendencies of Islamophobia, is acknowledged by all the women. Similarly, they realize that the most frequent victims of discrimination are those Muslim women who wear the most powerful Islamic symbol – the hijab. Boukhars (2009, 311) explains that in Germany, Muslim female headgear is often perceived as an Islamist threat that needs to be combated. He continues:

> "Many Germans view the headscarf as an inflammatory symbol of religious fanaticism that poses a mortal threat to the values of society. Calls are increasingly being made to free headscarf-wearing females from their "oppression" and "manipulation" by the Islamists. Those women who have challenged this perception are ridiculed for their backwardness and submission to the extremists. They are also branded as enemies of the social order who must be banished from civil service and ultimately from public view." (ibid.)

Islamophobic people often make the assumption that the hijab is an unmistakable sign of extremism which arguably places Muslim women in a more fragile position compared to their male counterparts.

As said, all women have either experienced discrimination based on their religion directly in Germany or can tell me a story from a friend or family member. For instance, a friend of Aiza's was forced to dye her hair blond when she could not put up with people's stares on the street anymore (interview 28.12.22) and Maryam knows Muslims who have gotten their hijab pulled off or been restricted of higher education opportunities due to alleged ties with extremist organizations (interview 07.01.22). Maryam also recounts how the *Muslimische Hochschulgruppe Freiburg* – an organization uniting Muslim university students in Freiburg where she was a board member – could hardly focus on its work since it constantly needed to prove its absence of links with extremist Islamic organizations to the authorities. She also tends to avoid the mosque in Freiburg because, much to my surprise, the *Verfassungsschutz*[20] engages in regular and systemic spying there, in the purest sense of the word. This, for Maryam, creates a completely inhospitable atmosphere – the opposite of what she would hope to find in a mosque. All of these instances have left her with a feeling that Germany as a country is not doing much to resolve the problem of Islamophobia. While technically discrimination based on religious beliefs should be illegal, the reality, she contends, is very different. She notes: "As a woman, whenever you do show your religion, you have a problem. As a headscarf-wearing woman, you have a big problem" (interview 07.01.22). Here she refers to the gendered part of Islamophobia – more accurately depicted as "hijabophobia".

The women who have not directly experienced discrimination are still in the back of their minds ready for it to happen and have prepared various strategies for dealing with it. Naila is willing to give people the benefit of the doubt, kindly acknowledging that a single remark does not automatically mean that a person is racist, they could simply, in her words, be having a bad day (interview 09.01.22). Zahra plans on adopting a strategy of ignoring and writing the incident off as the person's own problem and not hers (interview 20.01.22). Either way, the women demonstrate a sort of mental readiness for possible discrimination based on their religion. This sentiment is often based on others' stories or the experiences of their peers. On a few instances during our conversations in public

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[20] The *Verfassungsschutz* is the German internal security agency for the protection of constitutional order.

places, I notice the women subconsciously hushing their voice when speaking Arabic. Be it a phone call that they answer or a segment of Quran that they explain to me, the volume of their voices drops compared to the one they use when speaking English with me. This to me was an eye-opening attestation that the women, perhaps even without knowing, are in a way always prepared for racist comments directed at them even simply on the basis of their native language. It is unlikely that hushing their voice or developing strategies for how to deal with racists would be practices that the women would have to undertake in their Muslim-majority home countries. These tendencies are additional acquired parts to the women's religious identities that they have not had to deal with before. Although the women are certain about retaining their Islamic identities (keeping their religious thought strong, continuing their Islamic practices and Islamic expression), the fear of discrimination in Germany shows how because of these Muslim identities, the women are now placed in a new situation within the society and are impacted by outside forces in novel ways.

Another important issue that relates to Muslimness in the German society and that comes up from the conversations is that of representation. Me and Rahima are having chai lattes on a January afternoon in a city center cafe in Freiburg when she, in her characteristic bubbly way, starts telling me about her family:

> "When I decided to come here [to Germany], they were asking me a lot of questions. They said that I have to represent my religion in a good way and when I asked how exactly, they said 'you don't go out late, you can't have sex, you don't drink alcohol, you cannot eat pork, no men can go in your house because it's not good for the reputation as a girl.' They kept telling me that at my age I'm responsible enough to protect my religion and reputation. They were really concerned about that." (Interview 15.01.22).

This excerpt illustrates well the type of pressure my research participants feel about representing Islam and Muslims in in Germany. In one way or another, the women believe that it is their task to represent the religion in the "right" way in order to counter prevailing negative prejudices and public opinion. In our group discussion, the women note that there are overall two types of people: those genuinely interested in knowing more about Islam, and the provocateurs – those who only want to discuss "hot topics" of Islam and hope to make the Muslim women second guess their religious affiliation. While having a positive attitude towards the first group of people, the women are generally fed up with feeling the need to defend themselves in the eyes of the second group (group discussion 06.02.22).

My research participants acknowledge the grim reputation that Islam in West has and

note that unfortunately people tend to only remember the bad, while quickly forgetting the good. Therefore the women feel a sense of responsibility not only to be positive examples of "good" Muslims in the present but also in a way uproot negative images of the past. They recognize an added pressure to always be on their best behavior in Germany in order to show Europeans how a true Muslim thinks about, practices and expresses her or his religion. Consider for instance Zahra who admits that she feels considerably more responsible for her behavior in Germany than she does in her native country of Jordan. "I realized that it's my responsibility as a Muslim woman to represent Islam in the right way," she says. After a break she continues:

> "I always think that I have to be good in my studies and when I do something good I want to be known as a Muslim woman who did it. I don't care for my name. I want to say that you, Muslim women with hijab, can do whatever you want and you can represent Islam as a good thing. […] So if I do something good, I want it to be said that it's a Muslim woman and a *hijabi* woman [who did it]. It's not like because of our hijabs we cannot do things." (Interview 20.01.22)

So we see that while at times the added pressure of representation is imposed on the women by their families, other times these feelings are more intrinsic.

In the previous excerpt Zahra also touches on another important point. Hijab-wearing Muslim women, as those in my core group, can sense the pressure to represent Islam even more starkly since the outside world can identify them unmistakably. The women know that if they are out in public with their hijabs on, they not only represent themselves but also the Muslim *ummah* and Islam at large. While some see it as an empowering opportunity, others view this type of pressure as an extra source of stress. For instance Maryam, when she was first thinking of starting to cover her hair in Germany, resolutely opted for a turban instead of a hijab because she was afraid that if she made one wrong move out in public with the headscarf on, the society would automatically blame all Muslims (interview 07.01.22). Muslim women (especially *hijabis*) feel a pressure not to contribute to the already negative image that Islam in the West tends to have and are very mindful about the way they conduct themselves out in public.

In conclusion, in this chapter I have discussed the main findings from my empirical research with young Muslim women in Freiburg. The women's perceptions about their religious identities and their experiences in Germany coincide in many ways, however also demonstrate some intriguing differences. I sketched out the women's journeys of Islamic identity formation which, as I explained, is an on-going process and which forms a base for further examination of their current religious understandings. The women took pieces of

knowledge from home and school, and were equally influenced by the societies of their home countries. I have divided the women's religious identity into three: religious thought, behavior and expression, and in this chapter I discussed how the women themselves understand each individual part and the ways in which life in Germany has influenced them. Religious thought, I explained, is the basis for everything else and for the women the most important part of their religion is their connection with God. I explained how Islam for them can be many things – a belief in Allah, a moral compass, a value system, a lifestyle. The more pious women's religious behavior has understandably had to undergo some modifications with the changing of societies. Be it missed prayers due to the lack of worship places, extended times of fasting during Ramadan due to Germany's geographical particularities or the unusual absence of religious activities shared with a Muslim community – the women admit that being a Muslim in Germany is in many ways different from their home countries. These perhaps seemingly insignificant changes can be what the women themselves mostly associate with transformations in their religious identities. The most powerful aspect of the women's religious expression is the hijab – an unmistakable Islamic symbol that provides them with comfort, yet also opens the door for discrimination and adds pressure of representation. These latter two are also topics that the women have been faced with most starkly after the resettlement of their religious identities in Germany.

What this empirical account shows is that overall we cannot speak of large-scale changes in the women's Muslim identities. The pious women in the core group have maintained their religious identities in the ways they think, behave and express, and do not plan on making any compromises. The women overcome secular temptations, continue practicing Islam regularly despite some practical hardships and do not shy way from visibly identifying as Muslim, even though it might bring about discrimination and add a pressure of representation. While the religious identities of the women have retained their strength and form, we cannot dismiss the fact that all of the dimensions of their Muslim identities have entered into a dialogue, a negotiation process, with the German society. Negotiating does not necessarily have to imply giving in, I believe there to be value also in simply examining this process on its own. Religious thought, behavior and expression have to be negotiated in Germany in different ways than they were in the women's home countries, at times complicating being a Muslim. Yet the religious identities of the pious women in the core group stand strong. In the following chapter I will show how existing theories on religious identities can help us make sense of the specific case study of young Muslim women in Freiburg.

4. Discussion: On Muslim identity dimensions, negotiations and their interrelatedness

In the previous chapter I showed in detail how the young Muslim women in Freiburg perceive the different dimensions of their religious identities after their resettlement in Germany. I showed that while generally the women have more or less retained their Islamic identities, each of their identity dimensions has still entered into a dialogue with the new German society. These so-called dialogues can be characterized as processes of identity negotiation between the women and the new society that surrounds them. Identity negotiation theories caution us to firstly keep in mind that identities never exist in a vacuum and that sufficient attention should always be given to the social contexts that surround them, and secondly that oftentimes these negotiations are amplified by mobility. The change of an environment creates suitable conditions for identities to be (re)negotiated and the case of Freiburg's young Muslim women is no exception here. The move of the women in my core research group from their Muslim-majority home countries to Christian-secular Germany has placed their religious identities in an intriguing position where a number of outside forces, be it prevailing discourses or something as seemingly simple as geographical particularities, now directly or indirectly affect parts of those identities in novel ways. The main aim of this thesis has been to firstly understand how the women perceive these processes themselves, and secondly what a wider theoretical analysis of this case study can reveal.

Before continuing, for the sake of clarity, I would like to briefly discuss the characteristics I have attributed throughout my work to the so-called other end of the negotiation spectrum – the German social context. Besides religious identities, Germany is the second party at the negotiation table, therefore featuring as an important actor in my thesis. I feel the need to justify my categorization of Germany as a Christian-secular country against which I have often juxtaposed the Islamic home countries of my research participants. In the first stages of my research I was torn between labeling Germany *either* as a Christian society *or* a secular society, however in the end I settled for a hyphenated identity – Christian-secular. While the lingering of Christian traditions and values is notable in the country, the official position is to keep state and church separate. Hence while formally Germany could be deemed as a secular country, culturally (at least in the traditional sense) it could be argued that it is Christian. This also accounted for one of the reasons of my choosing of Germany as a case study location. I found it fascinating to study

Muslim women's religious identities namely in a Christian-secular country, since oftentimes Western and Islamic values are viewed as contrasting or even conflicting, both by Westerners and Muslims.

Interestingly, one of the giants of sociology – Max Weber, German by nationality, famously argued within his modernization theory that in modernity, religion would decline as a source of personal identity and moral community. According to him, when a culture is "intellectualized", religion is devalued. This, he predicted, would render religion increasingly powerless in the modern world (Seidman 1983, 268-69). While perhaps this trend could be noticed within Christianity, Germany has reached an unexpected situation where Islam has brought religion back into the public sphere and made it visible again. So much so, that a considerable part of the polemics regarding Islam in Germany has revolved around the place and "suitability" of Islamic symbols in the public space. Therefore, Muslims in Germany have opened the door for a reconsideration of the theories of one of the country's most celebrated academics.

Let us now, however, return back to the main actors of this thesis – Muslim identities in Germany. I mentioned in Chapter 2 of this thesis that within the central debate in anthropology of Islam, I place my work somewhere in the middle. This middle positioning means that in order to make sense of my research findings, I have found the arguments of both sides useful in differing ways. All in all, as I have noted, we cannot speak of revolutionary changes in Freiburg's Muslim women's Islamic identities. Regardless of the change of societies, they still possess a strong sense of religious thought, they behave according to Islamic teachings and continue to wear the headscarf. Here, it is Asad's ([1986] 2009) theory of discursive tradition in which he argues that Muslims view Islam first and foremost as a tradition that retains relative stability no matter the social context, that accords with my findings. That the women are so eager to engage in independent Islamic studies in order to maintain and strengthen their religious identities further, is what Asad's interlocutor Mahmood (2005) sets forth in her work. Therefore, in a way, we can see clear traces of the Asadian school of thought also in my case study.

On the other hand, solely stating that for my research participants Islam is a discursive tradition and nothing more, would not do their experiences justice. Viewing religion through the prism of the everyday, as Asad's critic Schielke (2010) encourages, allows us to see that many of the identity negotiation processes that my research findings have revealed manifest most clearly namely in the everyday lives of the women. While the women undoubtedly hold Islamic teachings in high regard, the complexities of their

everyday lives in Germany have created a situation where the attempts to live up to religious expectations are not always smooth and constant. The so-called grand scheme of religious thought is one important facet of the women's religious identities, however their Islamic behavior and expression have acquired new meanings exactly in the realm of the everyday. Furthermore, this is what Frederiks and Nagy (2016) mean when they say that the concepts of mobility, religion and identity are only meaningful when spelled out in the daily lives of ordinary believers, and what Peek (2005) implies on when she argues that the formation of religious identities is an on-going process and not a static occurrence. Additionally, my work also echoes Bowen's (2012a) emphasis on hybridity, context and interpretation when studying Islam and Muslim identities. In my case study, it has been imperative that I take into account the larger social framework that surrounds the Muslim women. Only like this has it been possible to examine the processes of identity negotiation which hold a central place in my work.

I believe that the afore-described hybrid approach gives deserved attention to the Muslim women's own agency – the significance of which has been stressed by the grand old ladies in the discipline of anthropology of Islam Lila Abu-Lughod (1986) and Saba Mahmood (2005) – and which oftentimes gets robbed from the women in the popular Western discourse. I aspire to contribute to a counter-discourse in which our understanding of Islam and the role Muslim women play in it comes directly from the women themselves, by examining their experiences and perceptions. Now that I turn to discussing the different parts of Muslim women's religious identities, I want to stress once more that my deconstruction of said religious identities, although at times seemingly "scientific" and perhaps abstract, did receive the blessing from my research participants. Discussing together with them, we agreed that for the sake of comprehensibility it is useful for me to distinguish between religious thought, religious behavior and religious expression. This formation I have loosely based on Jasperse, Ward and Jose's (2012) work in which they divide Muslim identity into psychological, behavioral and visible facets. The reader can see that my categories are corresponding to each of theirs', yet I have made a few adjustments in order to stay true to my research data.

The first category of the Muslim women's religious identity then – religious thought – accords with Jaseprse, Ward and Jose's (2012) psychological facet. While they classify under this category notions like pride, belonging and centrality, I add to religious thought relationship with God, religious sense and overall thoughts on Islam. The women continuously emphasize that they consider this to be the most important part of their

religious identities, without which their religion would render meaningless. Religious practices and expression in their minds are secondary, Islam starts first and foremost from commitment and religious sense. Because religious thought is the most significant facet for the women, they also have not compromised it in any way after their resettlement in Germany, regardless of occasional temptations or outside pressures. "Spirituality, from an Islamic point of view, is the way in which the believer keeps his (*sic*) faith alive and intensifies and reinforces it", yet this dimension is often forgotten in sociological debates, almost as if it cannot be considered as scientific data (Ramadan 2004, 79). Not only have I not forgotten the Muslim women's spirituality – or religious sense as the women themselves call it – I also tend to mention it first in my analysis of the different parts that constitute a religious identity. Since it is the most significant facet for my research participants, I follow their lead.

As mentioned, the women have not compromised their religious thought in Germany in any way. They admit openly that they are at times faced with temptations of the Western culture, be it fashionable dresses of their European peers or late night gatherings that include alcohol, but instead of caving in, they see these lures as tests of their faith that God has placed on their way. In this way the women's strong religious thought is affecting their secular behavior in Germany. The pious women in the core group see these temptations as something in need of overcoming and as a possibility to strengthen their faith even more. It would be easy to give in, the women note, especially thousands of kilometers away from their Muslim families, but this would be hypocritical. True faith should stand these tests and instead of dwelling on missing out, one should be reminded of what is really important – the commitment to God. The Western temptations from the women's point of view can therefore be seen as a possibility to grow as a Muslim and strengthen a religious connection. The category of religious thought can correspond to what Schielke (2010) coins as the "grand schemes" of religion, i.e. understandings of a normative kind, contrasted to daily practices. Grand schemes constitute a highly important part of the actual lived experiences of believers. Their significance lies precisely in their grandness, "in their being posited above and outside the struggles and manifold paths of daily life" (Schielke and Debevec 2012, 2). While the grand scheme of religious thought would not be sufficient as an alone-standing dimension in order to fully understand the women's Muslim identities, it must also not be neglected entirely. In my work, religious thought stands an important ground and in a way informs the other categories of religious behavior and expression.

I have described in Chapter 3 how the women continue self-educational work in the realm of religious thought also in Germany – done in order to maintain and reinforce their religious sense and connection to God. While Ramadan (2004, 80) states that "to be Muslim is to learn", based on my research the situation is not as simple or straightforward. To be Muslim means many things to my research participants, although self-educating is regarded highly by all of them. The women's wish to be as religiously educated as possible echoes Mahmood's (2005) findings from her fieldwork with Cairene women in the 1990s. She observed an emergence of a new generation of pious Muslim women, eager to conduct independent Islamic studies, facilitated by the larger availability of Islamic texts. These women, Mahmood explained, see Islam as a tradition which needs to be as thoroughly understood as possible in order to conduct a pious life and please God. Therefore, a clear parallel can be drawn between the motivations of Cairene women in the 1990s and mobile Muslim women in Germany in the 2020s.

Furthermore, continuing independent Islamic education can also be seen as corresponding to the "chosen identity" (Peek 2005) of the women – one which is rethought, analyzed and taken on by themselves. The women all got ascribed their Islamic identities in their childhoods by their families, schools and home societies, yet now have *chosen* to continue being Muslims, also after their resettlement to Germany. What complements their religious identities is the "declared" facet (ibid.) which in my work is termed as religious expression. As a concluding note on the dimension of religious thought I wish to state that while the religious thought part of the women's Muslim identities has indeed entered into a form of negotiation with the German social context, the women abstain from compromises in this sense. Moreover, through conquering temptations and continuing their self-education, they work on maintaining if not strengthening this facet.

The second dimension of Freiburg's young Muslim women's religious identity that I have discussed throughout my work is religious behavior. Under this category I have included two of the Five Pillars of Islam – praying and fasting, as well as community activities, dating and more mundane practices like halal eating. The resettlement to Germany of the more pious women in the core group has undoubtedly forced the behavioral aspect of their Muslim identities to undergo some practical changes. For example, they often have to miss prayers when at work or in university due to a lack of quiet places, conflicts in schedules or simply because of Germany's geographical particularities (prayers are crammed together in winter and start very early in summer). Similarly, the women experience novel difficulties with fasting during the holy month of

Ramadan either because of extended fasting times or the absence of support from their Muslim communities. Interestingly, as I have explained in the previous chapter, it is often exactly through religious practices that the women themselves give sense to their Muslim identities.

Religious identity does not necessarily always have to be this big abstract concept that is hard to comprehend. If we follow Muslim women's own agency (as we should), we see that identity in their minds is tightly linked namely to everyday practices. This is what Brubaker and Cooper (2000) mean when they say that not only is identity a category of analysis for researchers, it is also (and perhaps more importantly) a category of practice, i.e. a tool for people to make sense of themselves. From my conversations with Muslim women in Freiburg it appears that they sense transformations in their religious identities when they look at the changes they have had to make in Germany to their eating habits, praying schedules or community activities. This, once more, echoes Schielke's (2010) theory of religion as everyday in which he cautions us that if we want to understand the full complexities of Islam in a changing world, we must examine Muslims' everyday lives which are characterized by ambiguity and complexity. So we see that regarding the religious behavior aspect their Muslim identities in Freiburg, the women still largely act according to Islamic teachings, however, they now have to negotiate with some novel practical struggles, which for them can already be proof of transformations in their religious identities.

Religious expression, i.e. how Muslim women in Freiburg choose to express their religion, is the third facet of religious identity this thesis has explored. This dimension corresponds to Jasperse, Ward and Jose's (2012) "visible" category. Religious expression in my research mostly accords with wearing the hijab as well as overall modest dressing choices. Changes in this aspect (in the form of added meanings) mostly reflect the women's experiences in the larger German sociological context and perhaps not as much their intrinsic perceptions. An interesting contradiction emerges. Namely, for my research participants, the hijab is the least important part of their Muslim identities. They emphasize on several occasions that Islam to them is first and foremost their connection to God, then its importance manifests itself in Islamic practices, and only then it is meaningful to discuss the hijab. Covering the hair for the women is a form of religious expression, in their words – a complementary dimension of piety. On the other hand, for Westerners the hijab is often the first point of identification of someone's Muslim identity – a contradictory notion to the women's own point of view.

The hijab has acquired such a powerful Islamic symbolism in the West that because of covered women in public spaces, the whole topic of religion is now back on the public agenda in many European countries, as for example Amir-Moazami (2005) and Göle (2015) explain. The headscarf is at the heart of many heated discussions and polemics – a true over-emphasizing in the minds of my hijab-wearing research participants. The women acknowledge that in comparison to the image of a liberated smart Western woman, *hijabi* women in the West are often portrayed as oppressed and unintelligent. What in academia is called "othering" (see Bowen 2012b, Halm 2013), the women sense and experience in everyday contexts in the form of misrepresentation and discrimination. Compared to the Muslim-majority home countries of the women in my core research group, hijab in Germany has acquired new meanings for them. The new society has added novel symbolic layers and negative connotations to the headscarf and therefore to the whole expressive aspect of the women's religious identities, be it the (subconscious) fear of discrimination or added pressure in the form of representation.

I have explained how most of my research participants have either experienced religious discrimination in Germany themselves or know stories from other Muslims and are therefore already subconsciously prepared to tackle similar situations. "Women wearing a headscarf suffer from greater exclusion and an increased number of assaults to a larger degree than their male counterparts and when compared to women who do not show any visible traits of their Muslim faith" (Spielhaus 2014, 120). It is precisely because of the expressive part of their religious identity then, i.e. the hijab, that the women either have faced or are prepared to face discrimination. This phenomenon is a gendering discourse hidden within the wider notion of Islamophobia, also known as "hijabophobia". Hijabophobia is an underlying sexist/racist discourse that is complicit in essentializing constructions of Muslim women, mainly those who are visible with the headscarf they are wearing (Hamzeh 2011, 484). Therefore, the Muslim women's religious expression in Germany is negotiated by being forced to acquire a new added layer of meaning – one which marks the women unmistakably as Muslim and therefore opens the door for possible discrimination. Here is also where a clear difference between the situations of Muslim women and men draws out. My research participants often admit that Muslim men in Germany have it easier because if needed, they can always hide their religion. They, as hijab-wearing Muslim women however, do not have this opportunity and furthermore they feel like their holding to higher religious standards than their male counterparts has continued from their home countries now to Germany.

The second added connotation to the women's expressive religious identity that life in Germany has added, is the pressure of representation. My research participants assert that they are well aware of the fact that Westerners tend to make conclusions about Islam based on the behavior and actions of *hijabi* women, and this is a recognition that they carry around with them daily. Damir-Geilsdorf and Shamdin (2021, 49-50) write that the hijab is an unmistakable symbol which allows easy identification and renders Muslim women in Germany "hypervisible". The veil, they continue, forces German *hijabis* indirectly into a representational role and what increases this feeling of being responsible even more is the women's sense of belonging to the *ummah*. Nevertheless, my research participants still see their hijabs as providers of a sense of comfort and are by no means deliberating removing it. Their strong religious sense thereby informs their decisions regarding their religious expression. Some even see this newly added pressure to represent Islam and the whole Muslim community as an empowering opportunity to become more pious.

However, mostly the women express a feeling of added stress that their new role as the "faces of Islam in the West" has brought about. They acknowledge the fact that Muslim women in Europe tend to be represented unfairly (see Jawad 2003, Celik 2012) and that it is largely the West that has constructed the image of an oppressed Muslim woman, and regardless of the stress and pressure are determined to reclaim some of their discursive agency. So we see that the expressive dimension of Freiburg's young Muslim women's religious identity has clearly entered into a negotiation process with the German society, a process where the hijab – previously simply a form of religious expression for the women – has now acquired a considerably different set of meanings and responsibilities, most clearly manifested in the apprehension of discrimination and the added pressure of representation.

I have stressed throughout this thesis that we should not look at the different parts of the Muslim women's religious identities as alone standing and distanced from each other. All three aspects are intertwined, at times overlapping and influencing each other. Similarly all of the negotiation processes that each facet has, due to the women's mobility, entered into, are not exclusively two-way between the German society and that specific identity part. One set of negotiations can easily influence another, thereby shifting the dynamics between individual dimensions of religious identity. Consider the following description of a cascade of negotiations and identity dynamics' change. The research participants in my core group are all devout *hijabis* and because the expressive facet of their Muslim identities includes wearing a headscarf, they also feel a strong sense of responsibility to

represent Islam in the "right" way in the West, and try to distance its current image from deep-rooted negative connotations. The women therefore feel the need to constantly be equipped with answers regarding their Islamic belief, in order to satisfy their Western peers' curiosity or to prove their skeptics wrong. This need to be at all times informed and prepared motivates the women to engage further in Islamic self-education. They spend time studying the Quran, attending online courses, researching on the internet or discussing religious topics with their Muslim friends. This kind of self-study, a crucial aspect of the dimension of religious thought, helps the women to also think through some issues for themselves and find answers to their own puzzling religious queries. A solidified base of Islamic knowledge can then strengthen the women's Muslimness. Zahra explains this in the following way:

> "Here [in Germany] it keeps connecting you to the religion more because you are in a non-Muslim community. So you feel connected more to the religion and you dig deeper because you always have this curiosity and questions, you know. In our countries, because we're all Muslims, we don't face these questions. […] Sometimes I feel like when you come here, when you are away from all the craziness of your neighborhood, family, friends… You come here and you think more clearly about the religion." (Group discussion 06.02.22)

The "self" can then become even more Muslim and Islamic identity can start to acquire even more importance in the overall hierarchy of identities (a tendency noted among others by Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman 2010 as well as Verkuyten and Yildiz 2007).

This negotiation sequence also echoes the idea that minority groups generally tend to care more about identity as a concept than majority groups, since the questioning of their identity by the outside world forces them to ponder on identity related topics more. My research findings correlate here with Duderija (2022) who argues that for Muslims in the West their Islamic identity tends to become especially important namely because their mobility has led them from a position of being a majority to that of being a minority. The previous example demonstrates how not only are the categories of religious expression and religious thought closely connected, but also how the negotiation processes that the women are engaging in because of their hijabs can influence the overall importance of their whole Muslim identities. Therefore, the women's hijab in Germany is no longer simply a form of religious expression, it very much has become to signify matters of their larger identities. It is precisely this sort of interconnections that I wish to emphasize with my case study.

In a similar cascading manner, even though the women admit to added feelings of stress and pressure due to the newly sensed need to represent their religion, they are not fully

daunted by the fact. They dodge temptations and more see this situation as a challenge to test their religious strength and advance in the journey towards piety. By doing so they once more strengthen their religious thought and arguably their whole Islamic identities. Had the women decided not to move to Germany, however, this sort of identity reinforcement would perhaps have not been needed. So yet again we see how the mobility-induced identity negotiations in the spheres of religious expression and religious thought are closely linked. Because the German context puts so much pressure on *hijabi* women's behavior, their religious sense can in turn be reinforced.

To sum up this chapter of discussion, the last of this thesis, which has brought together theoretical concepts and empirical finds from my research, I hope to have shown the reader not only how young Muslim women in Freiburg perceive their religious identity and its dimensions in Germany, but also how a social scientific analysis can reveal the negotiations the different parts are engaged in with the new society. Understandably the women themselves, when thinking about their Muslim identities, do not think in the framework of strict sociological categories like "identity negotiations". What they described to me during my research were simply their own understandings of their religiosity and how it functions in the new German society. In has been my responsibility then as a researcher to connect the stories that I heard with scholarly theories in order to make sense of them. I have argued that although the women's Islamic identities have retained their strength and not many compromises have been made, all of their different religious identity dimensions have still entered into a negotiation process with the German society. Even in order to maintain their Muslim identities, the women have still had to negotiate. My research participants now have to dodge temptations and be prepared to answer provocative questions about Islam, they have to get accustomed to some practical changes in the way they practice their religion, and they have to navigate the new added meanings and responsibilities that wearing a headscarf in Germany brings along. Oftentimes, these negotiation processes are overlapping whereby one set of negotiations influences the other. While the transformations in Freiburg's Muslim women's religious identities have not been groundbreaking, I believe that their subtleness has still deserved this thorough empirical inquiry and holds potential to make larger cross-cultural comparisons.

Concluding thoughts

This thesis has taken under examination the multifaceted and intriguing phenomenon of religious identity. More specifically, I have described and discussed the findings from my research with a group of eight Muslim women of different ethnicities who have resettled in the city of Freiburg in Germany after moving away from their home countries. Before embarking on this, at times admittedly intimidating, research journey, I set as my intention to get to know the women's own perceptions and understandings of their Islamic identities and the ways in which the new Christian-secular society that they have settled into has affected them. A qualitative ethnographic research methodology allowed me to share a series of conversations and discussions with the women during which we discussed their new life in Germany and the different dimensions that compose their Muslim identities. I hope to have conveyed my findings to the reader of this thesis in a way that does justice to the actual lived experiences of my research participants.

I set out to find answers to the research question of how are young Muslim women in Freiburg perceiving and experiencing transformations in their religious thought, behavior and expression after their resettlement in Germany? These three facets, my research participants contended, cover the most important dimensions of their religious identity. The main aim of this thesis has been to firstly shed light on how the Muslim women themselves make sense of their Islamic identities and secondly to show what a social scientific discussion that makes use of various theories and concepts can reveal on the matter. What I found was that my research participants have not noticed any large-scale transformations in their Islamic identities after their resettlement. The pious women in my core group have been very adamant about retaining a strong sense of Muslimness despite the occasional struggles that life in their new society has brought about. What a more in depth analysis revealed, however, was that we can in fact see how each dimension of the women's religious identity has entered into a, at times subtle, negotiation process with the German society. What is important to keep in mind is that negotiation does not inherently have to imply change. It simply refers to a process of dialogue between parties where transformation can, but does not necessarily have to, be one possible outcome.

The negotiation processes reveal themselves in the ways the women overcome secular temptations and engage in continuous self-study on Islamic topics in order to maintain and strengthen their religious thought. They also reveal themselves in the ways the women now navigate some of the complications with their habitual religious practices like praying and

fasting as well as simply everyday life as pious Muslims in Germany. Furthermore, the most important tenet of the women's Islamic expression – the hijab – is negotiated in terms of its meaning. Covering their hair in Germany comes with entirely new types of responsibilities for the women. However, negotiating does not have to mean giving in or making compromises and so for the women their Islamic identities continue to hold a high significance.

While small-scale ethnographic studies like this current one allow the researcher to intimately get to know her or his interlocutors and their intrinsic thoughts and feelings, also the projects' limitations lie namely in their modest scope. This thesis has introduced the stories of eight women in Freiburg, yet there are so many fascinating ones still out there waiting to be studied. I would sincerely encourage future researchers to undertake similar inquiries to mine, albeit in different contexts, examining structurally differently categorized Muslim women and different facets of their life worlds. Be they Sunni or Shia or Sufi, first or second generation, originally from Africa or the Middle East, teenagers or mothers – acknowledging Muslim women's agency in Europe gives hope that perhaps some time soon the prevailing misrepresentation and negative judgment in the public discourse will find its end. The ways in which Muslim women assert their position in the *ummah* take various forms, all deserving of further study. Religious identity and its negotiations are simply one example, yet in my opinion a promising one.

Undeniably what makes the study of Muslim women in Europe especially fascinating is the fact that they are a minority. The women in my research group acknowledge this status and fully realize that their Muslim identities make them distinct in Germany. Even though they do not always feel like they fit in, at least, as they say, they belong to their religion.

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Appendix

Characteristics and structural categories of research participants

Fictional name	Age	Occupation	Generation in Germany	Home country	Importance of Islam	Hijabi	Way of getting in contact
Core group							
Amira	22	BA student	1st	Syria	"Very important"	yes	Approached her in the library
Fatima	23	MA student	1st	Egypt	"Extremely important"	yes	Through Facebook
Naila	26	MA student	1st	Sudan	"Very important"	yes	Through Facebook
Zahra	29	PhD student	1st	Jordan	"Very important"	yes	Through Fatima (snowball effect)
Additional voices							
Maryam	26	Student	2nd	Germany		no	Local Islamic organization
Rahima	27	French teacher/au pair	1st	Tunisia	"Not very religious"	no	Through Facebook
Fareen	26	Radiochemist	1st	Spain	"Important"	yes	Through Facebook
Aiza	34	Stay at home mom	1st	Iran	Not practicing	no	Through Facebook

Confirmation of Authorship

I hereby formally declare that the work submitted is entirely my own and does not involve any additional human assistance. I also confirm that it has not been submitted for credit before, neither as a whole nor in part and neither by myself nor by any other person.

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