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and Late Modern Dilemmas

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# INTRODUCING “FOURTH SPACE”

## Young Muslims Negotiating Marriage in Europe

*Pia Karlsson Minganti, Stockholm University*

Based on interviews with young persons in two national Muslim youth organizations in Europe, this article examines how young Muslims negotiate between the cultural customs of their societies of origin, their everyday experiences in Europe, and the global Muslim public sphere. In seeking a universal “true” core of Islam, these young persons create their own version of Islam, a “fourth space” in which they reinterpret the authoritative source texts of Islam in light of personal diasporic experiences in Europe. This reinterpretation becomes particularly pertinent in the context of planning for future marriage, where they jointly construct new understandings of Islam to argue for inter-ethnic marriages and later age at marriage, to argue against coercion in arranged marriages, to oppose polygyny and to portray the stigmatization of divorce as counter to the true spirit of Islam.

*Keywords:* Sweden, Italy, marriage, youth, Islamic revival

### Defining the Category of “Muslim”

As a core contract involving individuals, groups and society, marriage has long been an obvious object of study within European ethnology. In Sweden, studies dealing with marriage among persons of Muslim background have concluded that moral values and intimacies undergo various transformations due to their complex and hybrid experiences within the culture(s) in which they live (Berg 1994; Farahani 2007; Gerholm 2006).

My empirical point of departure in this paper is young Muslims active in organizations in which they consciously advocate their religious identity.<sup>1</sup> As sociologist Rogers Brubaker (2012: 2) has clarified,

the category “Muslim” is both a category of analysis and a category of social, political and religious

practice; and the heavy traffic between the two, in both directions, means that we risk using pre-constructed categories of journalistic, political and religious common sense as our categories of analysis.

As a category of practice, that is, a category of “everyday social experience, developed and deployed by ordinary social actors” (Brubaker & Cooper 2000: 4), the term “Muslim” is used both individually and collectively in a way that includes speaking not just *of* but also *for* others. Muslims have sought recognition *as Muslims*, while challenging racializing appellations such as “immigrants,” “blacks” or “terrorists.” Such a shift can be understood as a reaction to stigmatization, but also as a position in which people who identify as Muslims are held accountable in



public debate and everyday interaction for what others say or do as Muslims (Brubaker 2012: 3).

Thus, the category “Muslim” is not only a social, political and religious category of practice, it is also – taking into account its constructed nature – a category of analysis. Islam has been subjected to a reflexive process of “objectification” in the wake of migration, globalization, and changes in social and family structures as well as in literacy and new modes of communication (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 37–45). Therefore, “Muslim” is today an identity category under heavy scrutiny not only by researchers but also by Muslims themselves. Relevant actors involved in the process may be parents, peers and leaders in local youth associations and mosques. They may also be distant transnational families or participants in what has been defined as the “global Muslim public sphere” (Mandaville 2014: 487). Examples of actors in such a global sphere are members of religious organizations and Internet communities, prestigious religious scholars based in other countries, television preachers or so-called Internet imams giving instruction and advice.

Scholars making use of the category “Muslim” are also involved in the production of public representations and knowledge about Muslims. The explicit choice of focusing on “Muslims,” and even more so on “organized Muslims” (Jeldtoft & Nielsen 2012), as objects of analysis runs the risk of overstating difference while under-communicating other relevant frames of reference. However, this focus can be seen as taking place parallel to the broader renegotiation of these categories by those who self-identify as Muslims. In other words, scholars are not the only ones objectifying and analyzing “Muslim” as a category and they should not refrain from analytical involvement with a category just because it is heavily loaded (Brubaker 2012: 6). That having been said, a critical and self-reflective approach to this analytic endeavor is essential.

### **Muslim Youth Organizations as a Context for Negotiating Islamic Values**

In this article I ask: How do young, organized Muslims in Italy and Sweden negotiate understandings

of marriage in the context of identities defined as Muslim and European? Italy and Sweden are countries located at the opposite ends of Europe and both have accepted significant numbers of migrants, including migrants who self-identify as Muslim. I selected the two states, which constitute examples of two different migration, welfare and gender regimes,<sup>2</sup> in order to see if these and other differences related to national culture, religion (Catholicism versus Lutheranism) or understandings of secularism produce contrasting attitudes in interviewees from the two countries from the perspective of my research question. No significant differences were found. In other words, different economic and social contexts did not give rise to significantly different understandings of marriage practices and their relationship to identity.

To answer the research question, I draw upon material collected during fieldwork carried out among young people involved in two youth organizations. Both of these organizations are based on the idea of an identity that combines a common Muslim identity with the national identities of the European countries in which the participants have come to live: Sveriges Unga Muslimer (Sweden’s Young Muslims, SUM) and *Giovani Musulmani d’Italia* (Italy’s Young Muslims, GMI).<sup>3</sup> SUM was established in 1991 and today claims 2,800 members and 42 local associations in various towns across Sweden. GMI was established in 2001 and demonstrates a similar structure with local sections across Italy (Frisina 2007, 2010; Karlsson Minganti [2007]2014, 2012). Young people who participate in these organizations tend to be between 13 and 25 years of age, but there are also slightly older adults who sympathize with the activities and join in as participants and leaders. Hence, the organizations consist of students at the levels of lower and higher secondary school and university, but also of members who are both employed and unemployed. Some are married, but the majority are still planning for marriage in the future.

In analyzing how informants negotiate Islamic values surrounding marriage in the context of these Muslim youth organizations, I draw upon Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) concept of a “third space” as a

sphere of negotiation within and between perceived homogeneous groups, from which new perspectives and positions can emerge. In this case, however, the space that informants bring forth and engage in as they seek to reform Islamic doctrine on marriage in Europe is a “fourth space” located between and across specific national, transnational and global spheres.

SUM and GMI offer pedagogical settings such as conferences, classes, and chats during intervals between or after classes, where members are encouraged to personally engage in interpreting authoritative texts and speeches. Practicing, organized Muslims are motivated to engage in such courses and discussions because they are accustomed to being seen by others as spokespersons for Islam and are often asked by non-Muslims to explain the reasoning behind Islamic doctrine. In addition, they themselves embrace a trend of reflexivity within contemporary Islam, which has brought heterogeneity to the fore and resulted in a “‘heightened self-consciousness’ of Islam as a religious system” (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996: 39). Many of these young Muslims draw inspiration from parents and family as well as local leaders at their mosques and organizations, but a prime source for constructing their visions of Islam is the direct personal study of authoritative textual sources, especially the Quran and the Sunnah,<sup>4</sup> and also secondary literature (often found on the Internet) that they judge to be reliable. Like many other Muslims today, the participants I interviewed tended to “trust in the ability of each Muslim to have direct access to what is true in Islam and what therefore is not part of Islam” (Beyer 2009: 15). From the researcher’s perspective, it is therefore not meaningful to talk about a singular universal Islam, but rather about a core structure which gains authority through “the agreement among [...] a large number of Muslims that authority lies in the basic sources and that these basic sources will themselves be effective in preventing the dissipation of Islam into myriad local and personal directions” (Beyer 2009: 18).

On the collective occasions organized by GMI or SUM, participants sift through the multiple voices on Islamic knowledge with which they are con-

fronted in everyday life. One example is the weekly class of a local SUM section held on the premises of a three-room apartment that functioned as a mosque. The class was organized in two gender-separate rooms, with a male and a female lecturer respectively. In the women’s class, the female lecturer opened the floor to questions, such as whether a Muslim woman needs to pay tax (*zakat*) on her bride gift (*mahr*) or not. The question led into a discussion on the current widespread practice of increasing the sum of *mahr*, which leads to difficulties for men to afford marriage. In a similar meeting of a local GMI-section, a woman brought with her a printout from a Muslim Internet site in English to discuss in a mixed gender classroom. The paper was entitled “100 Questions to Ask Before Marriage” and contained queries on matters such as the prospective spouse’s position on household finances, childrearing, women’s rights and anger management.<sup>5</sup>

Common to both GMI and SUM is their structure as national umbrella organizations for local sections in various towns, and further their status as members of the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO), which has links to, among others, the institutions of the European Union.<sup>6</sup> Yet the conditions under which they work differ. In Italy, Islamic communities do not have access to direct financial support from the state (Coglievina 2013: 353). Hence, GMI is dependent on occasional project funding, the lending of premises from more established religious and cultural organizations and political parties, and above all the voluntary efforts of its members. SUM is also largely based on voluntary work, but in line with the publicly funded civil society model of Sweden, it receives public funding from the Commission for Government Support to Faith Communities as well as the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (Cato & Otterbeck 2014; Larsson 2013).

Both Sweden and Italy have received Muslim immigrants from a wide variety of countries, and GMI and SUM are not dominated by any particular ethnic group (although the majority of members identify with Sunni Islam, the branch of Islam to which up to 90 percent of all Muslims in the world belong).

Members of GMI and SUM represent a significant ethnic heterogeneity with backgrounds ranging from Bangladesh and Turkey to Morocco, Senegal and Bosnia, and including local converts. At the time of writing, the presidents of GMI and SUM are of Palestinian and Somali backgrounds respectively. Women are well-represented as activists and on all levels as board and committee members (although not yet as a national president of GMI). Female members bring together various struggles over identity that relate not only to being Muslim but also to being “immigrant,” “female” or “women of color” (Frisina 2007, 2010; Karlsson Minganti [2007]2014, 2012). The members of SUM and GMI also exhibit significant heterogeneity in their level of education and whether their family background is urban or rural.

Taken together, such heterogeneity has actually paved the way for the construction of a “Muslim-first” identification among many participants of SUM and GMI. In order to overcome the diverse interpretations and practices of Islam that they encounter within the youth organizations, they tend to strive for common-sense agreements around an authentic “core” of Islam (Beyer 2009) and a universal religious ethos influenced by the global Islamic revival movement, which has swept the world since at least the 1970s. This revival movement has called for a “return to Islam,” meaning that Muslims are encouraged to draw upon “authentic” sources in order to find the “true” message of Islam, free from the corruption of local “cultural habits” (Mahmood 2005: 3–4).

At the same time, both SUM and GMI state as a crucial aim the creation of a Swedish/Italian/European Muslim subject position, one that combines religious faith with full citizenship and civic engagement. Thus, for example on its homepage, GMI calls for members who “besides their Muslim faith feel 100% citizens of Italy,”<sup>7</sup> and on the homepage of SUM it is declared that:

We strive to maintain the heritage of Islam and humanity even as we remain open to the possibilities and challenges of the present time. As our

members are a natural part of Sweden, we promote their positive participation, responsibility and engagement in society on local, national and international levels. It is important that our members feel safe in their Swedish Muslim identity.<sup>8</sup>

SUM and GMI function as a base for their members to become involved in Swedish and Italian civic traditions and to enter various new movements. SUM activists have, for instance, become active in the traditional Swedish temperance movement, but have also engaged with more recent organizations such as the Sisters’ Shelter Somaya and the Swedish Muslims for Peace and Justice (Karlsson Minganti 2014, 2015). In Italy, many of the young members of GMI are engaged in the network for second-generation immigrants, Rete G2, that works toward improved citizenship legislation. This issue is for many GMI members personally relevant, since they were born in Italy but are not entitled formal citizenship (Riccio & Russo 2011; Zinn 2011). Many of the members of SUM and GMI have pursued a higher education and some have become high-ranking politicians.

SUM and GMI are, like other Muslim organizations, regularly accused by various Muslim and non-Muslim actors of putting either too little or too much emphasis on Islam and/or political ideologies. Like any association, they are sites of contestation surrounding meanings, practices and agendas (Allievi 2009; Cato & Otterbeck 2014; Vidino 2008). Their situation is complicated by radical polarization and anti-Muslim prejudice (Helbling 2012). Young European Muslims are growing up in a world in which Islam is an object of continuous debate and, thus, their organizations and even families become “sites of chronic struggle over what it means to be a good Muslim” (Brubaker 2012: 4, see also Grillo 2008).

Many informants expressed concerns about the way in which heated debates on forced marriages have stigmatized Islam and Muslims. While the free and self-determining individual is associated with a homogenized Swedish/Italian/European “us,” the likewise homogenized Muslim “them” is associated with religious restrictions and power abuse. This imaginary of difference is further intertwined with



a gendered dichotomy, which represents Muslim women as victimized and Muslim men as victimizers (Bracke & Fadil 2012; Karlsson Minganti 2015; Keskinen 2012; Salih 2009). In resisting such negative interpretations, informants have striven to establish SUM and GMI as platforms of identity politics for the introduction of a new Swedish/Italian/European Muslim subject position, which is characterized by what they perceive as “correct” interpretations of Islam, compatible with modern democracy. It is in the context of such resistance and reform that negotiations by the youth over marriage ideals take place.

### Marriage – A Beneficial Duty

In my study, “talking marriage” with young people – both men and women – resulted in a vast documentation of expressions of *longing* – for sex, love and intimate attachment. What the various narratives have in common is that they evoke marriage as the only legitimate context for such longing. Therefore, their yearning is expressed in a modus of *longing* and *planning* for the future. Such expressions were communicated to me during participant observation, as during a shopping spree with Riem, a 16-year-old high-school student of Palestinian background who lives with her parents in Sweden.<sup>9</sup> Riem picked up a piece of lingerie and declared that she “longed for a husband, to have someone to dress up for.” Such expressions arose during interviews as well. Tarek, a 24-year-old university student of Turkish background who lives with his parents in Sweden, told me about his wish to travel to Paris, “the city of love.” He explained, “I still haven’t been there, but I plan to go there with my future wife.”

Marriage was talked about by my interviewees in terms of crucial attachment and joy. Amina, a 22-year-old woman of Syrian background who studies at university and lives with her parents in Italy, told me that she longed for “real love, to be loved for who I am with all my defects included.” Yousef defined a family and children of his own as “the meaning of life.” When we first met, he was 26 years old, pursuing university studies and living in Sweden with his father of Moroccan background and

his mother of Swedish background who had converted to Islam. Such expressions regarding marriage do not much differ from those of many other young people I have met in Sweden and Italy. What distinguish them are repeated references to Islamic sources. Frequently quoted is a *hadith*<sup>10</sup> stating that “marriage is half of religion.” The establishment and the maintenance of a lifelong marriage are believed to be a way of obeying the will of God. Another commonly mentioned *hadith* declares that marriage is an act of Sunnah (hence strongly recommended) for any healthy adult who can afford it. The overall impression received by my informants from the authoritative Islamic sources is that marriage should be regarded a religious duty.

Informants often agreed about the idea that marriage represents God’s care for humankind. An important shared point of departure for these interviewees was that marriage guides people toward joy and fulfilment, but also protects them from danger. Importantly, pre- and extra-marital sexual relations are understood as potentially harmful and indeed a sin before God. Precisely because sexual desire is described using words like “innate,” “human” or “natural,” religious regulations are seen as crucial for the welfare of individuals, family and society at large. As Huda, a 22-year-old woman of Eritrean background who studies at university and lives with her parents in Sweden explained,

Islam is a very realistic religion, so to speak. It knows that human beings have feelings, you know, desires. And that’s why there are like stops on the way. So these desires won’t hurt the family, which is so holy, or you know, important.

30-year-old Nasim, a man of Moroccan background who works as an export manager and lives alone in a rented apartment in Italy, explained for his part that by facilitating humans’ earthly lives, marriage is also believed to ultimately bring them closer to God. He described marriage as a joint “life project” between two spouses who are ideally supporting each other’s aspirations toward piety:

When two get married they must map out a route and define the goals. And these are not, for instance, to buy a house, but to make a project. And this project is to help each other to Paradise. That's the most important thing, to help each other to overcome the obstacles and stay on the straight path of Islam.

Also female informants expressed piety as a motivation to get married. Sofia, a 25-year-old university student of Moroccan background who lives with her parents in Italy, explained as follows:

My way of figuring marriage is that I will marry a man who will surely be a person whom I love and who loves me. And we will have the overall idea of sending each other to Heaven. We will share faith and life.

This view on marriage – as a way to increase piety – is discernible in various statements made by religious authorities who have influenced the youths' narratives. For instance, at the national SUM conference in 2012, American guest speaker Yasmine Mogahed emphasized: "like everything in this *dunya* [= earthly life], marriage is only a means – a means to reach Allah."<sup>11</sup>

Although these references to Islamic authoritative sources give the impression that the understanding of marriage among the young Muslims in my study is singular and fixed, their belief-based expressions in fact represent ongoing negotiations. The young Muslims I spoke with shared the idea of lifelong monogamous marriage as a religious obligation. But when they discussed the practical realities of marriage, opinions varied, including divergences from dominant Islamic teachings. In the following sections, I discuss these divergences and their connection to local European contexts, transnational families and a global Muslim public sphere.

### The Timing of Marriage

As can be seen from the foregoing examples, many of my informants longed to enter the emotional and formal bonds of matrimony. While emphasizing

that persons should marry at an early age to prevent pre-marital sexual activity they did, however, also present various reasons for *postponing* the event. For instance, Yousef stressed the importance of spouses getting to know each other before marriage:

I believe it's important to communicate things in time. Otherwise it can go very wrong. Like for some of my childhood friends who aren't Muslims. They go out partying and meet someone. In the beginning it's just supposed to be fun, but after a while they may end up in a relationship. And then all these things come up because they've never discussed them. Like, I see the world in one way and she in another. I don't like this and she doesn't like that. So it's better if we start with discussing important things and go on until we reach each other. Before marriage. Before there are children and a lot of other things. You know, it's one thing to choose the wrong wallpaper. These you can always redo [laughs]. It's pretty different from choosing the wrong partner.

Like Yousef, other informants felt it was important to "get to know each other" before marriage and emphasized that this is linked to "responsibility." However, Yousef made it clear that this "getting to know each other" did not involve entering into a sexual relationship. Two women I interviewed, by contrast, expressed a different view:

If it were more accepted among us Muslims, I would prefer to cohabit for a while before marriage, because it's only in everyday life that you really get to know each other. (Fatima, 26-year-old woman of Moroccan background who studies at university and lives with her parents in Italy)

I have chosen to touch him before we marry. Because I really want to feel if there's attraction. It's important to have a good sex life. [...] The first time, I went down to the parking lot and stood behind a gate, and we just saw each other from a distance. And it felt right. Then I did another thing, he came to live with me and my mother. Accord-

ing to tradition, this is not right. But I wanted to see him in everyday life: when he wakes up, eats... how he *is*. (Rasha, 32-year old woman of Palestinian background who studies at university and lives with her divorced mother in Sweden)

The concept of love, frequently mentioned, was variously defined. Some informants explained that feelings of love were a precondition for marriage, whereas others saw it as something that would come after the wedding and grow in time. For instance 23-year-old Hibo, a woman of Somali background who studies at university and lives with her parents in Sweden, asserted: "For me, love is stronger than partnership, because I won't be able to have a partner if I'm not in love with him." By contrast, Yousef played down the role of "love" at the beginning of marriage:

Of course love is important in marriage, to keep a tight bond between the spouses. They're not supposed to just barely stand each other until they die. But love isn't that central when we Muslims talk about marriage. Because it has destroyed so much of the other meanings of marriage: the responsibility, creating a family, the spouses' different roles in raising the children. There's a *hadith* that says that the best thing a man can have in life is a good wife. But what does that mean? To me it implies that they have a fantastic relationship, that is, that they are in love. But right now we prefer to focus on realistic, practical things and then love and emotions come along somehow.

Whereas Yousef tended to speak on behalf of "we Muslims" in this quotation, many interviewees' statements were more characterized by ambivalence, as in the following dialogue between Ghada of Iraqi background and Nadera of Afghan background, both 17-year-old students in higher secondary school who live with their parents in Sweden:

The marriage doesn't get very far if you're not in love with him. (Ghada)

Well... in some way yes, you *can* get pretty far. My parents hadn't even seen each other before they married. And now they still love each other super much. (Nadera)

Yeah, it's the same with my parents. (Ghada)

The conversation above highlights the fact that many of the narrators' parents married under conditions that differ from ideals of "romantic love" as a precondition for marriage, which are prevalent in their European home countries. There are stories about ongoing pressure from relatives to adhere to the ideal of marrying at an early age, without much time for prior contact between the couple. There are also stories that demonstrate that the youths I interviewed see love as a basic ingredient for a good marriage, but not all agree that love, in the sense of romantic feelings and sexual attraction, needs to be present in the relationship from the very start. However, all of my informants emphasized that they themselves would prefer to know their future spouse before the wedding. In fact, they all felt that this was a strong argument for not rushing into marriage.

Another argument for postponing marriage involved prevailing socio-economic conditions in Italy and Sweden: scarcity of employment for young persons, the need for higher education, and the difficulties of affording a home of one's own.<sup>12</sup> Yasin is a 20-year-old university student who lives in Italy with his father of Moroccan background and his mother of Italian background who has converted to Islam. Yasin explains:

It's difficult to marry today. For instance here in Italy they say that the average age for leaving the parents' home is 35. And if we are two persons... well, we move out at 70 then! [laughs].

Yasin jokes, but quickly becomes serious again. His concerns are similar to those of his Italian peers, but such concerns are increasing in Sweden as well. Fatima's account provides a female perspective on the issue of postponing marriage due to economic life conditions:

Here in Italy I am studying for years and then it takes at least five years to find decently permanent employment. Some marry during this time and live with their parents. But it usually doesn't work out well because of the elders' mentality. For instance, they might say that the woman needs to stay home with children and household work before becoming a student. Like that it's impossible to have a harmonious marriage. So many choose to wait and wait. Housing and privacy is not a trifle. It is above all this economic aspect that imposes limits on us here in Italy.

Further gender differences were discernible on the topic of postponing marriage. Whereas women were concerned with the effects of age on their chances in the "marriage market" (Fatima, for instance, spoke of her "terror" of missing a good marriage opportunity), men did not express any fear that postponing marriage would hurt their chances of finding the ideal spouse. Huda told me about her respect for her fiancé's plan to finish his studies before marriage, but feared that the engagement might be broken off, which would result in a "valuable time loss" for her: "My aunt has always waited for the right one to appear, but look now, when she finally marries it is to an old guy with adolescent kids." The father of Alina, a 22-year-old woman of Bosnian descent studying at university and living with her parents in Sweden, insisted that his daughter should finish her university studies before marrying, while she chose a shorter course of study than initially planned in order to marry her fiancé sooner.

While women admitted concerns over the fact that they may not be viewed as "marriageable" at an older age, they also presented arguments for marrying later: to allow spouses to get to know each other, and to enable them to obtain an education, employment and housing. In sum, the young male and female Muslims in my study offered a number of reasons for marrying at an early age: to forestall pre-marital sexual relations, to satisfy the longing for emotional bonding, and to fulfil a religious duty. Simultaneously, whether living in Sweden or Italy, they shared the view that due to the complex and contradictory

present-day demands placed on spouses, making a personal decision on the timing of marriage is fully in accordance with Islamic precepts.

### **Personal Choice in Marriage and the Marriage Contract**

According to the young persons with whom I spoke, Islam accepts older ages at marriage, and my informants phrased this notion as existing in opposition to local Muslim "cultural traditions" which are instead assumed to idealize early marriage. These cultural traditions are above all associated with Muslims in the countries from which the young persons' families originated, and at times also with an older generation now living in Europe. Heba, a 24-year-old university student whose mother of Swedish origin had converted to Islam, now lives with her father from Lebanon after her parents' divorce. She explained:

It's very important for me to feel safe with a person before I would even consider marrying him. My father has been very serious about this: "Be yourself. Don't hide things just to make a good impression. Be genuine. Take your time to get to know this person, because you're going to spend the rest of your life with him." He even says that I can change my mind on the very day of the wedding. So my father doesn't push me. But instead my grandmother does. She belongs to that generation that thinks: "A girl in her twenties is already too old."

Some of my informants described pressures to marry early from members of their transnational families, even going so far as to use the expression "forced marriage." Fatima talked to me about the situation within her extended family and society of origin:

I can tell you about Morocco, because that's where I have seen these things concretely. Even within my distant family. They would say that girls are not obliged to marry any man who asks for her hand. But then many parents put psychological pressure until the girls say "okay." In this way, many marry off their daughters without their

consent. However, such marriage is invalid according to Islam. In fact, it's forbidden in the eyes of God as well as the Moroccan national law. Both spouses have to be of age and present to sign the contract. But it's easy to corrupt lawyers and these absurd things keep happening. It's still very common in Morocco. It's tradition. Of course people are quick to say "it's our religion." But I just say: "Go and take a look and you'll find that in this behavior religion plays no part!"

"Go and take a look," says Fatima, meaning that the Islamic sources are there to be read and understood in the "true" sense. In both GMI and SUM, young women and men are presented with the opportunity to re-read Islamic texts and choose reflexively which interpretations to follow or dismiss. The organizations offer courses in religious reasoning and are influenced by revivalist movements that benefit from improved communication technologies and the increased desire for debates among peers. In the process, conventional authorities (e.g., theological scholars, men, parents) are potentially sidestepped, while interpretative authority increases among lay persons, young people and women (Bano & Kalmbach 2012; Jonker & Amiraux 2006; Karlsson Minganti 2012).

Tempting as it may be to consider the informants' emphasis on reflexivity and choice to be the outcome of their growing up in a secular-liberal European context that fosters the value of individual autonomy, it is also important to acknowledge that their attitudes are linked to ongoing transformations and reforms within the global Islamic revival movement, transformations which affect elder generations of immigrants as well as people in Muslim countries and which draw on historical reformist Muslim tradition (Amir-Moazami & Salvatore 2003). The informants do not express any wish to "break" with religion, but instead to take part in a struggle for precedence of interpretation. According to anthropologist Christine Jacobsen, this can be described as

a paradoxical development in which Islam is both increasingly "individualized" and "normativ-

ized" as it enters debates and social confrontations about the nature of "true Islam." (Jacobsen 2011: 293)

According to Fatima and many other young Muslims I interviewed, the true message of Islam is that marriage must follow a personal decision after serious consideration. Although they express appreciation for family members' consultative roles in assisting with spousal choice, they strongly emphasize that if the decision is not ultimately made independently of others' pressures, it fails to be morally valid. The young persons with whom I spoke asserted that each individual is personally responsible before God. In doing so, they transfer decision-making power away from "traditional" authorities such as parents and kin. One way of gaining authority in such negotiations is to claim deeper piety and superior knowledge of Islamic reasoning. Such claims are formulated through a distinction between "cultural traditions" (in the sense of habits not reflected upon) and "true Islam" (in the sense of conscious intention, *niya*) (Mahmood 2005; Karlsson Minganti [2007]2014: 65–66). Yasin and Fatima illustrate the usefulness of this interpretative framing to combat "forced marriage":

There's very clear evidence to find in the Sunnah against this custom of forced marriage. For instance, a young woman went to the Prophet [Muhammad] and told him: "My father has forced me to marry a man and I don't want to." And he said: "Return to your father and tell him that the marriage is not valid." You see, consent in marriage is not a rule that was invented by Europeans in recent times, but it was there since the beginning of Islam. And when people get to hear this, they accept it. (Yasin)

It's written in Islam that the marriage isn't valid without the consent of both spouses. But many Muslims take Islam a little bit as they want. I think that happens within all religions, that people take it as they want. But no, if people marry off a girl against her will, it's not a valid marriage on a religious level. Quite simply! In GMI we are all

against forced marriages. Both women and men. I've never met a guy who would like to marry a girl who was forced to. So we educate our parents to understand that this practice is not right. (Fatima)

Young Muslims in Italy and Sweden also find religiously authorized support outside of Islamic texts for the notion of personal choice in marriage. One of these authorities is Geneva-born professor of theology at Oxford University, Tariq Ramadan, whose works have been translated into both Italian and Swedish. He declares Islam to be universal and adaptable to any context, and encourages Muslims to participate at all levels of European society. As the leader of the pan-European campaign "Joining Hands against Forced Marriages," Ramadan has collaborated in writing a book with one of the leading figures of Italian Islam, Patrizia Khadidja Dal Monte (SPIOR 2007). This book, which made an impression on my young Italian informants, states that "arranged marriages" may become "forced marriages" through coercion and violence, and suggests that the confusion between "cultural traditions" and "religion" is an important reason behind such miscarriage of justice.

In traditional Islamic law (*sharia*), a marriage (*nikah*) is constituted when two spouses, in the presence of witnesses, sign their intention in the so-called marriage contract. Today in most countries with a Muslim majority population, this contract must be registered by the local authorities in order to be valid. This is also the case in Sweden and Italy. In Sweden, some Muslim congregations have been given the legal right to marry couples so that couples do not need to visit two institutions in the process of registration. Although the marriage act is circumscribed by religious rules and regulations, that it is a contract between two persons and can be dissolved.

My young informants perceive the marriage contract to be a non-negotiable part of marriage as practiced within Islam, and also argue that it should be written in accordance with the national legislation of Italy and Sweden in order to be religiously

valid. In other words, they interpret this legislation as being in accordance with their religion. However, particularly female interviewees argued for the possibility to add clauses that explicitly strengthen their rights in relation to contexts outside Europe. For instance, they emphasized the possibility to stipulate their right to reject polygyny, that is, the husband taking further wives. In doing so, they adhere to the prevailing consensus among their peers in GMI and SUM that this practice is not encouraged in Islam but should rather be seen as a cultural custom. As Nora pointed out:

If you read closely, what does the Quran say? That a man can only take another wife if he can treat them both absolutely equally. Not only economically, but also emotionally. And it goes without saying that this is impossible and, hence, it's forbidden for normal men.

Many informants also favored the stipulation of the right to divorce. Again, they relied on a jointly constructed understanding held by some participants of GMI and SUM that divorce is an acceptable practice within Islam as a last resort:

Divorce is the one permissible action that God hates the most. It's a method to be used only at the point when the negative consequences of a marriage are greater than the positive. (Yasin)

In Muslim countries, divorce is really taboo. People whisper behind the divorcees' backs. But Islam it's not really like that, which is a positive thing for us Muslims here in Europe who try to live according to Islam. Our best example is the Prophet Muhammad, and his wives had actually all been married before, except for Aisha. (Marouane, a 26-year-old man originally from Morocco who lives alone and pursues academic studies in Italy)

Fatima clarified that the marriage contract is not only negotiable with regard to such important issues as polygyny and divorce, but also with regard to any conditions upon which the spouses might agree:



Normally people use preprinted contracts, but women should know that they have a lot of rights and that they can write them down in the marriage contract and later go to a lawyer if these rights are not respected. This practice is still not very widely known. But if I were to write a contract, my two principal conditions would be: I want to study and work. For sure!

Along with the contract, the “bride gift” (*mahr*) from the husband to the wife (but not to her family) is perceived by both young men and women to be a non-negotiable core element of Islamic marriage. However, like the contract, it is seen to be open to modification. For instance, some of the women I interviewed wanted to lower the amount of *mahr*. In doing so, they evoked modesty as an Islamic virtue and argued that this helps to make marriage possible for less affluent couples. They and their male peers gave cautionary examples from countries where men cannot afford to marry because the financial demands of women and their families are too high. This scenario also appeared to be valid among the young European Muslims I interviewed, who are facing increasing difficulties in labor and housing markets.<sup>13</sup>

### Spousal Choice

When my informants spoke of their choice of future spouse, a fundamental criterion was that he or she would be Muslim. They described this choice as a religiously established norm, referring to the authoritative sources of Islam.<sup>14</sup> They also rationalized it by appealing to everyday life experience. Yasin, for example, explained: “I want my children to be educated as Muslims of course. For me Islam is the truth in all aspects of my deeds. So a non-Muslim wife would be impossible.” However, being simply a Muslim was not enough. Most young persons specified that their future spouse needed to be a consciously “practicing” Muslim. As Nora pointed out:

My only requirement is that he’s Muslim, and that he’s a good practicing Muslim. Then he will have the Prophet Muhammad as role model and that’s the best person who ever lived.

Encouraging married men to be religious can be used as a strategy to foster more caring attention toward wives and children. Among my informants, “practicing” Muslim men are thought to be more trustworthy as providers and protectors, since they are assumed to refrain from alcohol, drugs, gambling, physical abuse and extra-marital relations. Evoking the Prophet Muhammad and his companions as role models is a crucial element in what has been referred to as Islamic feminisms and has influenced many of my informants’ Islamic narratives and practices. The term Islamic feminism is highly contested (Bahi 2011), but broadly refers to a discourse on women’s rights that is constructed within an Islamic paradigm (Badran 2002). Many of my informants, both male and female, critically considered the possibility that some interpretations of Islam result from androcentric readings, and challenged such bias by circulating references that instead reflect women’s interests. Likewise, many expressed their trust that a wife who is a practicing Muslim would be dedicated to the good of the family:

If it’s a practicing Muslim you usually don’t have to worry, you know it’s a serious boy or girl who wants to do things the right way. (Yasin)

The pious ambition that is assumed to produce positive characteristics in a spouse is firmly associated with the conscious struggle to understand and practice the “true” essence of Islam. The possibility to attain this goal is thought to be greater for Muslims living in the diaspora in Europe, who have easy access to Islamic authoritative sources and multiple interpretations, and who are located at a distance from the local cultural customs believed to be corrupting in former home countries. For this reason, geographic residence becomes a second important attribute of the ideal spouse in addition to his or her being a “practicing” Muslim. All the young Muslims I spoke with specified that a future spouse should preferably be raised in Europe, if not specifically in Sweden or Italy. Fatima hints at the specific gendered aspect of this preference:

I would like a man who practice Islam and grew up here in Italy, or elsewhere in Europe. He would follow Islam and not any cultural tradition. Of course, there are men who grew up here who still think that a wife should live with her husband's parents, and that she should be a housewife and nothing more. But those who actually study Islam, like many guys here in GMI, they know better.

Along with the conscious effort to distance themselves from the cultural habits of potential spouses outside Europe, my informants' preference for a "European Muslim" spouse can also be explained as the outcome of a deeply felt rootedness to European contexts where they live and plan their futures. As Yasin told me:

I have lived here all my life. I will never return to a country which is not my original one. Not even if both my parents came from there. It doesn't make sense to create your life and family in a place where you didn't grow up. You're a stranger there.

Yet another explanation for the preference for a "European Muslim" spouse is the socio-economic conditions in informants' former home countries, which are assumed to include problems ranging from a lack of opportunities for young people to a concrete lack of basic things like valid travel documents. Regardless of gender or whether they lived in Sweden or Italy, when considering foreign spouses, all of the young persons I spoke with were worried about "fake" marriages, that is, marriage arrangements in which the foreign spouse's stated or unstated intention was to acquire a residence permit in Europe. Many informants recalled being asked to enter such arrangements, even by relatives who pushed for the possibility for a family member to enter Europe. Nora, for example, laughingly described a scenario in which young Italian Muslims arrive for a vacation in their country of origin and step down from the airplane: "There's already a long line of candidates who have never seen our faces but are so 'in love' with us." Although cognizant of the underlying conditions that give rise to these "fake" marriages, Marouane explained that the

practice should be interpreted as a sin against Islam, particularly if a European partner is unaware that the foreign spouse's primary motive for marriage is to gain entrance to Europe:

Most of the people who do like this are looking for work, hard work. I understand it, but it's actually a great sin against God. Marriage is a lifelong commitment. It's not valid if you promise it for a certain period, because that would mean sexual acts on the wrong terms. And it's really morally wrong to marry for documents without telling the partner about it. These people commit a great sin, because they give Islam a bad name.

Other informants similarly stated their personal desire to avoid such scenarios by looking for European Muslim spouses. Thus, it may appear that the notion of a global Muslim community (*ummah*) and an "ummatic" identity and solidarity (Schmidt 2005) is not reflected in my informants' focus on European spouses. However, this is not the whole story, as is evidenced by their openness to so-called mixed marriages, which exist across perceived boundaries of ethnicity and, importantly, are widely viewed to be in accordance with Islam:

We grow up together here: Moroccans, Syrians, Italians. So mixed marriage has been much discussed in GMI in recent years and everyone seems to have understood that it's totally okay to marry across the boundaries. Some parents will still object, but they'll just have to get used to it! Because the kids marry anyway [laughs]! And these parents don't have any real arguments, they're just afraid to involve even more countries and see their children and grandchildren move away. But most of the kids I know really want to continue to live in Italy. We have to convince the parents about that. Strategically we should argue that it's for our happiness. But also religiously, we need to emphasize that all these kids are in fact Muslims. Really, at the time of the Prophet Muhammad this was not a problem, he and his followers married across ethnicities. (Sofia)

This quotation reflects the tensions between generations, and provides an example of how parents' preference for endogamous marriage can be dismissed as not a real argument, in contrast to younger Muslims' valid arguments grounded in "real" Islam. With reference to this universal truth, my young informants conveyed the idea that mixed marriage couples represent an Islamic ideal of cross-boundary unity. Spouses from different countries or ethnicities are seen to embody cosmopolitan possibilities that closely approximate the "true" universal Islam. This category of spouses also includes converts, who are assumed to be positioned even further from the corrupting forces of local Muslim traditions than second-generation immigrants: "They are often more religiously committed since they have searched for the truth and studied on their own," says Fatima, evoking the aforementioned distinction between conscious piety and cultural habits.

The struggle to resist traditional spousal preferences along ethno-national lines is not only expressed as a struggle against an older generation tainted by local cultures. It is also presented as an anti-racist endeavor (cf. Grewal 2009). Drawing on their conceptions of Islam, the young persons with whom I spoke sought to oppose ideologies of racial and ethnic discrimination within and beyond their Muslim communities. The following verse from the Quran is frequently cited in order to emphasize the anti-racist character of Islam:

O mankind! We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Surely, the most honorable among you in the sight of God is the most pious of you. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. (chapter 49, verse 13)

This verse was interpreted by my interviewees as meaning that according to Islam individuals are to be valued for their faith and righteousness. The interviewees drew upon the strong image of devout Muslims praying shoulder to shoulder, globally united in their orientation toward Mecca like spokes around a hub. They also evoked images from the

pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca, where followers of Islam come together dressed in white with no visible indications of nationality or social rank. In diaspora, some interviewees now find that they can use the concept of "mixed marriage" to embody this limitless unity of Islam. They identify GMI and SUM as good contexts for meeting potential marriage partners and present the global Muslim community (*ummah*) as a "family" in which marriages can be arranged across man-made boundaries. A clear indication of this attitude was the congress arranged by SUM in 2013 called *Muslimska familjedagarna* (The Muslim Family Days). The title was explained in the following paragraph, ending with the above mentioned "anti-racist" Quranic verse:

The Muslim Family Days is a meeting place for every individual in the family. The family is the prime pillar of society. Whether you are a child, adolescent or adult you are part of a family. Also as a single person you are part of the Muslim family. As Muslims we are brothers and sisters and together we constitute a great family that needs us to meet and get to know each other. Allah, may he be glorified and exalted, says in chapter Al-Hudjurat, verse 13...<sup>15</sup>

In this and other texts, SUM and GMI evoke a global Muslim familial community linked to the notion of a universal Islam. Below, Yasin reflects on spousal choice using similar notions:

When I'm looking for a wife, I do not care much about her beauty or social position. Nor about her nationality, because the concept of nation is a human convention. God did not create such borders. I am a world citizen. Yes, there might be cultural issues, but these are not really an obstacle in a marriage. Marriage is like a joint project that can be successful if the spouses share the basic faith in Islam. The Prophet once said: "Among the characters you look for in a spouse, faith is the number one."

In this quotation, Yasin self-defines as a "world citizen," one who follows global Islam. Drawing on this

idea, he and other young informants articulate the legitimacy of inter-ethnic marriages. At the same time, however, they frequently define themselves as “Italian,” “Swedish” and “European” citizens who follow a particular strand of “European Islam.” Drawing on the idea of a European Islam, which is believed to be closer to the “pure” essence of the religion as opposed to local cultures in historically Muslim countries, they legitimize the distance they take from potential partners who live beyond Europe’s borders.

### **European Islam as “Fourth Space”**

In consulting the core of authoritative sources of Islam, the young persons studied here are involved in a struggle over precedence of interpretation for their versions of Islam. This struggle is held in reference to a global Muslim public sphere rather than being dependent on centralized or local authority structures in historically Muslim countries. From my informants’ perspective, Islamic doctrine allows its followers to interpret religion in a way that better fits their everyday lives in European countries. At the same time, these young Muslims feel that their goal should be to do this by adhering to the global authentic message of Islam as closely as possible. Rather than leading to fixity, such a global “core structure” of Islam allows these young persons to be part of a process in which they (re)construct Islam from the vantage point of their own European localities.

In their construction of Islamic views on marriage, the young persons studied here distinguish a context or space in which Muslims are perceived as mere carriers of cultural customs. This includes both inhabitants in Muslim countries and some first-generation Muslim immigrants in Europe, who are perceived as likely to take their religious cues from leaders and institutions in their home localities. By contrast, as young persons growing up in Europe, my informants are no longer as dependent on geographic location in their quest for religious authenticity. Instead, they practice Islam in yet a second and third space: the specific European society in which they live, and the global Muslim public sphere comprised of access to interlinked discursive

contexts such as the Internet, social media and satellite television. In other words, these young Muslims strive to create their own interpretations of Islam within the social, cultural and legislative conditions of three conceptual spaces: first their transnational families and societies of origin, second their Swedish and Italian societies, and third a global Muslim sphere, which circulates ongoing reforms and revitalization of Islamic traditions. It is from this multi-contextual vantage point that they find inspiration, and engage in debate with their faith across ethnonational boundaries and theological orientations, while weaving a compromise between the perceived stances represented by some or all of these contexts. We can understand the resulting negotiated versions of Islam in terms of a *fourth* space, which enables new positions to emerge (cf. Bhabha 1994; see also Karlsson Minganti 2014; King & Kilinc 2014). I have adapted this concept from Homi K. Bhabha, who suggests that every person is a hybrid of his or her unique set of identity factors, and that the most creative aspects of cultural identity are born at the boundaries, intersections and overlaps of separate contexts of social interaction and categories of identity difference. Some young persons with whom I spoke expressed their awareness of this process:

The way we live Islam here in Europe, in terms of religious practice, mental categories and language, it’s not the same as in Egypt or other places. European Muslims in general have their peculiarities because Islam is a religion that lasts forever and has no nation, no national identity. That is, Islam is not Arabic, but rather *fiqh*, jurisprudence, which is adapted to the historical and cultural context where people live. Different ways in different places. So I want a man who already lives here and understands Islam here. (Sofia)

Although Sofia’s statement does not articulate the “European” way of living Islam as superior, she and the other informants frequently referred to it as a mode that is closer to the “true” Islam than the “cultural customs” of Muslims beyond the confines of Europe. As Sofia’s last sentence indicates, this

preferred “European” mode has an important implication for my informants’ future marriage plans.

### Concluding Remarks

Despite differences in the scale of difficulties for informants in Italy and Sweden to obtain formal citizenship and welfare, my findings point to interesting similarities in their approaches in interpreting Islamic doctrine on marriage. To summarize, the young organized Muslims presented here distinguish between a universal Islamic core of principles for marriage on the one hand, and local “cultural” traditions on the other. More specifically, my interviewees distinguish three spaces within which they practice Islam. The first is the particular European cultural and legislative context in which these young people live. The second is the sphere of local cultural traditions maintained by Muslims in historically Muslim-majority countries as well as by some first-generation immigrants to Europe. The third is what is perceived to be the universal “true” core of Islam – transmitted through the global Muslim public sphere. Young people’s own version of Islam draws upon all of these within a “fourth space” developed in the practical context of their everyday lives. From the perspective of my interviewees, this fourth space is closer to the true authentic Islam than the culturally tainted traditions of their countries of origin, and at the same time, it provides the possibility for young Muslims to reinterpret the authoritative source texts of Islam in the light of their personal diasporic experiences in Europe.

Caught in the complex and often discriminatory production of public representations of the “Muslim” as a category of both analysis and practice, the young interviewees examined here have decided to mobilize Islam as a form of “identity politics” in order to claim recognition for their own identities and interpretations. They do so within the framework of Italian, Swedish or European identity, which is not necessarily seen to stand in opposition to the Islamic world. But as the concept of a “fourth space” implies, while the informants’ reinterpretation of Islam is embedded in European nation states, it also builds on a continuous dialect with countries of origin,

with transnational families and with global Islam.

Reinterpretations of Islam become particularly pertinent in the context of planning for future marriage, a life event of major importance to all my interviewees. Young Muslim women and men have turned to their own, jointly-constructed understandings of Islam to argue for inter-ethnic marriages and later age at marriage as responsible acts in the eyes of God, to argue against coercion in arranged marriages, to oppose polygyny and to portray the stigmatization of divorce as counter to the true spirit of Islam. The fact that young organized Muslims are engaged in an active process of negotiation to discern the “true” meanings of Islamic messages regarding marriage highlights the fact that recent global Islamic revival movements such as the organizations studied here are not necessarily conservative movements but can also be highly creative and adaptive.

### Notes

- 1 I thank the Swedish Research Council for funding this study [grant number 2009-867 and 2009-1345]. My gratitude also goes to Maria Ekholm and Zineb Naini for assistance with initial interviews and transcriptions.
- 2 Lister et al. (2007); Sainsbury (1999).
- 3 The empirical material for this study comes from observations and informal conversations during activities arranged by SUM and GMI between 2009 and 2015. The study also draws on interviews (some repeated) with 20 subjects in Sweden (5 men, 15 women) and 20 subjects in Italy (5 men, 15 women) conducted mainly between 2011 and 2012. The higher number of women is due to some of them wishing to hold the initial interviews in couples or groups. At the start of the study, the subjects were all between 16 and 32 years of age, and they were all involved in the two national Muslim youth organizations studied here. Some held leadership positions within the organizations, while some participated in the organizations’ activities more or less frequently. Some were born abroad, but all have been raised in Sweden or Italy respectively. Their ethno-national self-definitions reflect the heterogeneity of the members of SUM and GMI, and include some sons and daughters of inter-ethnic couples and converts. During the process, some members became engaged, married or divorced.

- 4 The *Sunnah* is the traditional portion of Islamic law based on the words and acts of the Prophet Muhammad.
- 5 Lists with similar titles and questions are continuously distributed online, see for instance: <http://www.islamicity.org/8450/questions-to-ask-a-prospective-spouse/>, accessed November 2, 2015.
- 6 FEMYSO was established after a first meeting between European Muslim youth organizations that took place in Sweden in 1995 in connection with an international conference entitled “Islam in Europe,” which was organized in cooperation between SUM and the Foreign Ministry of Sweden, <http://www.femyso.org/about/history>, accessed November 2, 2015.
- 7 <http://www.giovanimusulmani.it/GMI/chi-siamo>, accessed November 2, 2015. All translations from Italian and Swedish into English in this article have been made by the author.
- 8 <http://ungamuslimer.se/om-oss/>, accessed November 2, 2015.
- 9 None of the informants’ positions within SUM and GMI are revealed out of respect for their anonymity. For the same reason, their names have been changed into pseudonyms.
- 10 A *hadith* is a written record of the oral tradition about the words and deeds (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad.
- 11 Fieldnotes from the presentation by Yasmin Mogahed at the SUM national conference 2012; post on Mogahed’s blog on May 11, 2010, <http://www.yasminmogahed.com/2010/05/11/why-arent-my-prayers-adeyah-being-answered>, accessed November 2, 2015. Mogahed has gained a worldwide audience as speaker, author and blogger.
- 12 For more on the difficulties of young Muslims in Italy and Sweden to find stable income and housing, see Ahmed, Andersson & Hammarstedt (2010); Cancellieri & Longo (2012); Carlsson (2010); Salih & Riccio (2011).
- 13 For more reading on the complexity of *mahr* in transnational contexts, see for instance Mehdi & Nielsen (2011) and Sayed (2016).
- 14 The informants in this study share the common belief that Muslim men can marry Jewish and Christian women since they belong to the “people of the book” (‘Ahl al-Kitāb). This option does not exist for Muslim women. For more reading on debates within contemporary Islam from the perspective of gender and heteronormativity, see for instance Safi (2003) and Kugle (2013).
- 15 <http://muslimskafamiljedagarna.se/2013/varfor-mfd/>, accessed November 2, 2015.

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