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The Cultural Identity of Finnish Muslim Converts: Challenges and Realities

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Abstract: This study seeks to examine the cultural identity of Finnish Muslim converts, emphasising the challenges and realities faced by them. Its goal is to explore the challenges faced by the Finnish Muslim converts, not only because they need assistance in integrating into the Muslim *ummah*, but also because they are a pivotal bridge between native non-Muslims and the acceptance of Muslims with their Islamic identity as part of Finnish society. The Finnish Muslims are of diversity of ethnicities comprising mostly refugees, asylum-seekers, and their families, who have been throughout the wave of migration to Finland from the late 1980s and have been perceived negatively by the Finnish public. Furthermore, Islam is perceived as an immigrant religion, and as such "Otherisation" is the challenge experienced by Muslims, who are marginalised by the native Finnish community. Such treatment includes the native Finnish Muslims (converts), who have left their previous traditions and culture. This research is literature-based, to which descriptive, historical, and analytical methods are applied. The main challenges faced by Finnish-Muslim converts from the perspective of cultural identity are addressed in this study through a discussion on (1) the arrival of Tatars in Finland, (2) the second wave of Muslims, (3) perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Finland, (4) Lutheranism in Finland, (5) ethnicity within Finnish cultural identity, (6) challenges faced by Finnish Muslim converts, (7) realities, and (8) future outlook. It is concluded by this study that Finnish Muslim converts navigate a complex intersection of religion, culture, and national identity, often facing "Otherisation" and "marginalisation," while striving to integrate Islamic teachings with Finnish values, emphasising the need for better religious understanding and stronger efforts to address Islamophobia, while maintaining their bridge to their Finnish identity. This could, in the future, also pave the way for interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Finnish Muslims, converts, challenges and realities, interreligious dialogue

Introduction

Despite the presence of ethnic minorities such as the Sámi, Roma, and Swedish-speaking people, Finnish society has historically been perceived as ethnically and religiously homogeneous (Martikainen, 2020). As opposed to other European countries, immigration pertaining to refugees and asylum-seekers only began in the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, Finland started to experience more significant ethnic diversity, especially in the 2000s. As most of the refugees came from Muslim countries, Finnish society came to view Islam as a foreign and immigrant religion. However, Muslim origins in Finland can be traced back two centuries ago, to Finland's history with Russia and the resultant Russian-Tatar migration during the 1870s. Though the Tatar community has been recognised by Finland since 1925, they have kept a low profile in Finnish society and aimed to blend in. There is therefore less interaction and consciousness of the Tatar's Muslim identity in Finnish society. The arrival of Muslim refugees and asylum-seekers in the 1980s was a more obvious marker to the general Finnish society of

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the presence of Muslims and Islam, especially since they were more ethnically different and visible in society. The new immigrants were a diverse group of people, from the Middle East, North Africa and other Muslim majority regions, with no single ethnic group dominating them. With this new wave of immigration picking up in the 1990s and 2000s, there was an inadvertent uptick in conversions of Finnish people to Islam. Most of these conversions involved women marrying Muslim men. Another factor influencing conversions was the increase in tourism, particularly to Turkey (Martikainen, 2000). As many converts do not register as Muslim, estimates of their numbers are only available through personal communication with active members in the community, with the most recent estimates being from 2007 at approximately 1,000 (Malmirinta, 2017).

While some studies have been conducted on the impact of conversion on the native Finnish Muslims (Hyokki, 2022; Malmirinta, 2017), these pertain specifically to racism and observations of the general conversion process. Because of practices and a belief system that appears to oppose inherent Finnish values, Finnish society holds largely negative perceptions of Muslims and Islam. A survey by Pew Research in 2018 showed that nearly 62% of Finns believe that Islam is incompatible with the culture and values of Finland, while over a quarter said they would never accept a Muslim as a family member. This percentage is one of the highest in Europe, and underlines the challenge not just for immigrant Muslims, but Finnish Muslim converts as well. Being Muslim is seen as incompatible with being Finnish and thus distanced from Finnish identity. As the majority Muslim population is immigrant, Islam can be sidelined as an “immigrant religion” and Muslims are constructed as “Others” (Hyokki, 2022, pp.61-62). This has an adverse impact on Finnish Muslim converts, who, despite being native, are also “Otherised”, often ousted by their Finnish circles (Hyokki, 2022, pp.78, 81).

With most Muslims in Finland being either refugees or asylum-seekers, the major challenges facing the Muslim community that directly impact Finnish socioeconomics are related to the economic, cultural, and social integration of the Muslim immigrants into mainstream Finnish society. Therefore, research on Muslims in Finland centralises on immigrant issues, and less focus is placed on the challenges facing Finnish Muslim converts. There thus remains a gap in studies on the experiences and issues of the Finnish Muslim converts, which some researchers such as Hyokki (Hyokki, 2023) and Malmirinta (Malmirinta, 2017) have initiated. This paper therefore aims to determine the specific challenges facing Finnish Muslim converts in navigating their new-found Muslim identity and the change in their worldview, while seeking to reintegrate into Finnish society.

To understand these challenges, the main methodologies that are applied to this study are historical, literature-based, and descriptive. Data was first, the context of the problem must be understood, i.e., the development of the Muslim community in Finland and the perceptions of Muslims in Finland. A historical review of their origins, the development of the Muslim communities, and current demographics will first be conducted.

The focus of discussion in this study is, first, on the perceptions of Muslims in Finland, focusing on the factors that contribute to shaping such perceptions. Second, the main characteristics of the Finnish cultural identity relevant to the present study, beginning with a historical study of Lutheranism and how it became integrated within Finnish society, cultural, and institutions. Its subsequent progression through secularisation will be examined and how its current status more as a civil religion still makes it integral to the culture. As such, the place of Lutheranism within the Finnish cultural identity will be studied, and how its status leads to the perception of non-Christian cultures or religions as other. This will be followed by a study of how, through nationalist homogenisation processes, ethnicity or “Whiteness” has also become a key aspect of Finnish cultural identity. The frameworks used in defining the Finnish cultural identity will be the Nationalist and Social Constructionist views. These will be applied by looking into how, under the wave of the European Romanticism, the nationalist Finnish

movement (Fennoman movement) constructed the idea of a unique Finnishness in order to differentiate from the ruling Swedes and Russians. Third, the challenges that Finnish Muslim converts face in Finnish society despite being Finnish, are presented. In this light it can be seen how the main Finnish cultural traits discussed above, along with Finnish perceptions and attitudes towards Muslims contribute to these problems they face, including Otherisation. Finally, to address these issues, the future outlook is discussed, by first reviewing prior government and civic efforts to address issues of integration of Muslims in Finnish society and examining the current state of environment and governance into addressing perceptions of Muslims in Finland.

Tatars in Finland

The first Muslims known to reside in Finland were the Muslim Russian soldiers living in garrisons during the Russian rule of the Grand Duchy of Finland from 1808 to 1917 (Martikainen, 2020). These soldiers were mainly Tatars and Bashkirs from the Volga-Ural region. They had an organised religious practice, and *imams* were also brought into Finland for this purpose. However, it was in the 1870s, with the migration of civilian Tatar Muslims from the Nizhny-Novgorod province of Russia to Finland, that a Muslim community was established there that is of notable presence till today. They were mostly farmers who were also peddlers in Russia but eventually moved into trading and other business upon moving to Finland (Martikainen, 2020). After the independence of Finland from Russia in 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922, the Tatar community in Finland was separated from the Tatars in the new Soviet Union.

The Finnish Tatar community was officially recognised as a religious body in Finland in 1925, forming the Suomen Islam-Seurakunta (The Islamic Congregation of Finland), making Finland one of the first Western European countries to have officially legislated a Muslim body. A second organisation, Tampereen Islamilainen Seurakunta ('The Islamic Congregation of Tampere') was formed in 1943. By the 1930s, there were estimated to be 1,000 registered Tatars in Finland (Martikainen, 2020). However, their numbers stopped increasing with border controls between Finland and the Soviet Union restricting movement and migration. Despite their long-held presence in Finnish society, the Tatars have crafted and maintained a low public profile. This approach could be attributed to racism, prejudice and alienation that the Tatars were first subjected to upon immigration from Russia, not dissimilar to what has been experienced by newer immigrants to Finland (Elmgren, 2021). Nonetheless, the Tatars are often referred to as a success story for integration, having maintained their culture, traditions, language, and religious practice, within the context of identifying as Finns. They associate their culture closely with Turkish culture due to the closeness of their language to Turkish (Martikainen, 2020). Their contributions to Finnish society are noteworthy, integrating into Finnish society through their service in the Finnish army in WWII, and prospering through hardwork on the socioeconomic front. In more recent times, the Finnish government had also turned to the Tatar community to assist in facilitating administration with the new wave of Muslim immigrants. Today, though the numbers of members registered with Tatar associations have dwindled to about 600, they have firmly rooted their presence within Finnish society (Martikainen, 2020).

Second Wave of Muslims

Despite its independence from Russia, there remained little immigration to Finland. Therefore, the Tatar community remained the main Muslim community in Finland for a long time, until

the second wave of immigration began in the 1980s. This immigration, mainly from North Africa and the Middle East, marked the beginnings of the non-Tatar Muslim community in Finland. These new Muslims, while received in religious participation at Tatar mosques, were excluded from the Tatar community. In addition, differences in language and culture prompted them to organise a separate Islamic organisation for non-Tatar Muslims. The Suomen Islamilainen Yhdyskunta (Finnish Islamic Community) was founded in the 1980s to represent the non-Tatar Muslim community and gained official status in 1987 (Martikainen, 2000). Nonetheless, the Muslim population remained small, until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Thereafter, Finland started accepting UNHCR refugees from the Middle East, and from 1995, the induction of Finland to the EU led to a change in its geopolitics. It started conforming to EU legislation, and its borders became more open to various forms of migrants and refugees, invariably leading to a rise in the Muslim population as well. Compared to other Western European countries, which already had labour immigration policies in the 1960s and 1970s, Finland only introduced its immigration policy to address the increasing ageing population and labour shortage in 2006 (Martikainen, 2009). Finland is therefore a relatively newer European country for work and study immigration.

Today, the Muslim population of Finland is a diverse group, consisting of Somalis, Arabs, Turks, Kosovo Albanians, Iranians, Afghans, Bosniaks, and some South Asians (Martikainen, 2020). There is no single dominant ethnic group. Their prominent refugee background sets them at a socio-economic disadvantage in Finnish society. However, the second generation of these immigrants, being educated in public Finnish schools and more integrated into Finnish society, may be able to improve their socio-economic standing. As of 2017, the Pew Research Centre estimated the Muslim population in Finland to be 150,000 or 2.7% of the overall Finnish population, while in 2019, the population of Muslims born outside of Finland was estimated to be 120,000 (Hyokki, 2022). However, this remains an underestimate, as the latter numbers exclude asylum-seekers, individuals born in Finland, as well as Finnish Muslim converts. In addition, the real number of Muslims in Finland remains unknown since official registration of religion is conducted through religious organisations, and many Muslims do not register themselves with any religious organisation.

Perceptions of Islam and Muslims in Finland

Aside from the study by Pew Research Centre in 2018, studies since 1989 have shown a consistently negative public perception of Islam (Martikainen, 2020). Based on the 2011 Gallup Ecclesiastica poll by Kimmo Ketola and Teemu Pauha, 50% of the surveyed population viewed Islam negatively, while only 5% viewed it positively (Pauha & Ketola, 2015). They found that criticism arose from patriotism, a differentiation between ethnicities and right-wing political views. The consistency between the datasets seven years apart reflects the general sentiments within the Finnish society about Islam and Muslims. Overall, there are a few main reasons for the negative perceptions. First, there is a generally political and negative portrayal of Islam that has persisted in the Finnish media. A study by Teemu Taira of the publications in the *Helsingin Sanomat*, the largest subscription newspaper in Finland, between 1946 and 1994 found this to be consistently the case (Taira, 2008). Second, Finnish people have a marked dislike for publicly visible religious practices such as in hijab, dietary restrictions, and fasting. This dislike also extends to Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons for similar reasons (Martikainen, 2020). Third, Islamic practices and values are deemed to be "foreign" and therefore there is a general distaste towards them (Pauha, 2018). In addition, as Islam has been associated with violence, the oppression of women, opposition to democracy, and general backwardness, it is deemed a threat to Finnish culture and its values.

Lutheranism in Finland, Finnish Civil Lutheranism, and Finnish Cultural Identity

Prior to Christianity, the Finnish people, like other Nordics, practiced Paganism. The beginnings of Christianity date back to the 12th century, with increasing Catholic influence from the Swedes in the west, while Orthodox Christianity was spread by Novgorod (Russia) in the east. The spread of Catholicism also led to the advent of Swedish rule, and the Finnish city of Turku became the seat of Catholicism. With the development of the organisation of the Catholic Church also came its influence in the administration of the land, since there was no other civil institution in Finland that was so organised (the Finnish parish system predates the administrative system that Sweden later setup). Eventually, the Church began to wield considerable influence in matters of the state (Balabeykina & Martynov, 2015).

However, with the advent of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, Lutheranism also began to spread in Finland. The primary proponents of Lutheranism in Finland were Petrus Särkilahti, a student of Martin Luther, and Mikael Agricola, who translated the Bible into the Finnish language. Agricola is today considered the founding father of literary Finnish and credited with creating accessibility of the Bible to the Finnish people. Thereafter, Lutheranism became the new state religion of Sweden in 1527 and was thus adopted by Finland as well. The original seat of Catholicism in Turku became the seat of the Lutheran Church, and by the 19th century, there were 503 Lutheran parishes in the country. Religious homogeneity was a pivotal part of Lutheranism, and therefore Finnish statehood and society, and only certain exceptions were made to permit practice of other religions (e.g. foreigners, Orthodox Christians). Only in 1923, five years after independence, was the ‘Freedom of Religion Act’ established in the Constitution, by which the Finnish people were officially given the freedom to practice other religions (Seppo, 1998).

Nonetheless, the Church played a pivotal role in providing inherent moral and religious support, as well as justification to the Finnish people and soldiers during the wars with the Soviet Union (Winter War of 1939-1940 and the Continuation War of World War II). Because Lutheranism was such an inherent part of Finnish wartime culture, the church upheld a united Finnish front and ensured the stability of the country after the defeat of 1944. In addition, since a central aspect of Lutheranism was to educate people about the Bible, religious studies were incorporated into the education system, and education was made accessible to all. Thus, religio-ethnic unity prevailed. The 1960s-1990s marked a change in societal attitudes to the influence of religion in Finnish society. Secularism from other Nordic countries began to spread in Finnish society, and ideologies critical of the close relationship between church and state began to emerge in the public sphere. With the added context of modernisation and urbanisation, the general public began to attribute less importance to the Church in their daily lives, and the Church started to experience a decline in membership (Knuutila, 2019). Reforms were eventually implemented into legislation, and thus began the process of separating the state and the Church.

Today, while most of the Finnish population is non-church-going and 25% are atheist, about 60% are still members of the Evangelical Lutheran Finnish Church (“STT,” 2026). Though active practice of the religion occurs outside of the public eye (i.e., within their homes), Finnish people still facilitate major life events through the Church, i.e., baptism, confirmation, and rites of passage. As a result, Finnish society cannot be deemed either secular or religious, and while the majority do not believe in the Christian God, they do believe that Lutheran traditions are attributes of Finnish national identity (Pauha, 2018).

In its study of the relationship between the Lutheran Church and the Finnish people, the Quadrennial Report of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (2012-2015) found that many of the sub-elements of the Lutheran ethic correlated with the Finnish people (Sinnemäki

et al., 2019). Some of these are egalitarianism, education, a strong work ethic, and honesty (Helkama & Portman, 2019). The Lutheranism constituting the Finnish society and national identity is an 'implicit religion' and calls it 'cultural' or 'secular' Lutheranism. In essence, Lutheran traditions are secularised but instil a sense of belonging to the Finnish people as a form of culture. Indeed, the Lutheran roots of the Finnish culture have been acknowledged in its development and construction by the 19th century Finnish nationalist movement (Klinge, 1993). While the national culture and identity were based chiefly on the uniqueness of the native Finnish language, Lutheranism was also a core component implemented by its founders through their nationalist literary works (Goss, 2012).

This means that cultural identity forms a part of national identity and of what it means to belong. In addition, he also noted that nationalism entails that the nation must be governed by a people of a common historical culture of the homeland. Thus, in this case, since Lutheran traditions are considered a core component of Finnish culture, they are also inherent to Finnish national identity. Thus, this begets the issue of religious diversity within Finnish national identity and explains why differing religious practices are not accepted as "Finnish."

The Finnish national identity is understood with the social constructionist approach, drawing from Billig's concept of banal nationalism and defining the Finnish religious ethos. In their research on young Muslims from an immigrant background, they hypothesised that a major source of their perceived feeling of "Otherness" as the inherent "Finnish Civil Lutheranism" entrenched in Finnish culture. In the case of Finland, due to the historic closeness of the church and state administration, many Lutheran practices have been unwittingly and unnoticeably transferred and imbibed into the civil and social structure of Finland, i.e. they are "banal". Examples of such practices within civil institutions include military oath-taking, parliamentary session openings, and Independence Day celebrations.

Ethnicity Within Finnish Cultural Identity

While it has been established that Lutheran ideals are a core component of Finnish national and cultural identity, another key aspect of Finnish cultural identity is ethnicity. In this case, ethnicity, or "Whiteness", though not explicitly made a part of the original construct, has become established as a "normal state of Finnishness" (Hoegaerts et al., 2022). This is exemplified through the historic recognition of the Swedish-speaking people as a minority group, despite the assimilation and Finnishisation of the Sámi and Roma groups, who have inherently different languages, cultures, and lifestyles from the Finns. It is remarked how the idea of homogeneity on the basis of a superior "Whiteness" in Finnish nationalist and subsequent nation-building projects led to the Othering of these minorities. Keskinen (2019) studies how "Whiteness" became a key construct of "Finnishness" through the 18th century science of racial taxonomies.

Initially, the Finnish people, being Uralic, were classified under the 'Mongol' race, similar to the Tatars, Sámi and Roma (Hoegaerts et al., 2022). They were not perceived to belong to the superior Nordic group, who were classified within the German Indo-European group. They were thus considered lower in hierarchy than the 'Caucasian/Aryan race.' However, 19th century Finnish scholars, in their attempt to prove kinship to the superior Eurocentric races, dispelled this classification by studying the biology of Finnish men and proving their biological relation to the Nordic group. In the same place, studies were also conducted on the Sámi and Roma. As the science of racial categories grew, the East-Baltic race, pertaining to the region, was formed as a sub-classification of the Caucasian race. Finnish ethnicity was thus separated from the Mongol races that were deemed inferior to the Nordic and Baltic races and was constructed as part of the Caucasian race (Keskinen, 2019). This ultimately led to the

historical racial othering and treatment of the minority Sámi and Roma groups during nation-building.

Since the Fennoman movement was largely driven by the excellence of a shared Finnish culture and ethos (Hyokki, 2022), minority cultures, already classified as inferior, were forced to assimilate into the white majority. Being nomadic, the Sámi and Roma people were forced to settle and change their traditional ways of life. To make them meaningful and 'civilised' citizens of Finnish society, the Roma were forcibly converted to Christianity, and their children were educated to inculcate morals and values acceptable to the Finnish value system. Thus, their culture was changed to meet the requirements of the Finnish cultural identity, i.e., ethos. Even today, there remains a lack of trust toward the Roma, due to the historic distrust of them (Hyokki, 2022).

While questions regarding the Whiteness of Finns were previously raised in the case of the Sámi and Roma, and the consequent government actions and policies against them, Keskinen notes how Finnish "white hegemony" and its deep connections with Finnish national identity have been challenged again by the ethnically diverse migrants from the 1990s (Keskinen, 2022). Hyokki has studied how the Otherisation historically applied to the Sámi and Roma is now extended to Finnish Muslims and converts to Islam (Hyokki, 2022). Her study then proceeds to illustrate and explain the experiences of Finnish converts to Islam within the sphere of racism and racialisation of Islam and Muslims in Finland.

In the European context, migrant minorities are generally grouped together under a common umbrella, despite their ethnic diversity. Since a big number of these migrants are Muslims, they are simply identified by their majority group, despite the diversity of culture and practice they bring along with them. Therefore, they are not a singular race, but a "socially-constructed category" (Hyokki, 2022, p.63), and thus racialised. In Finland, Islam is perceived as an immigrant religion and a religion of the 'People of Colour'. Therefore, Muslims are classified as the 'Other'. And so, even though they may be ethnically Finnish, converts are also perceived as part of the "Muslim race" and are no longer considered Finnish. This illustrates how religion (Christianity) and ethnicity are intertwined in the Finnish perception of cultural identity. It has been noted that in some interviews, Finnish Muslim converts are identified as 'Finnish' even though they had left certain cultural festivities and practices (such as Christmas) or adopted others that were seen by their families as a departure from Finnish culture. The interviewees expressed their Finnishness as non-racial. Whether perceived by their ethnicity or religion, the estimates of the Muslim population are still lower than those of other minorities. As of 2020, the Sámi and Swedish speaking populations numbered at around 290,000 in a population of 5.5 million (Martikainen, 2020). Yet the negative sentiments against the Muslim population are significant.

Challenges Faced by Finnish Muslim Converts

In a study on the post-conversion journey of female Finnish Muslim converts, references Anne Sofie Roald's (2006, 2012) model of the conversion process, which was defined in the context of Muslims in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark between 2006 and 2012 (Malmirinta, 2017). Malmirinta interviewed seven Finnish converts on their experiences and journeys of conversion to Islam. Based on their experiences, she proposed an alternative model to Roald's, with only three stages that she identified, namely: "Commitment to Islam, Disappointment with Islam in practice and a Reaction to that disappointment". Her study did not conclude with secularisation as the final stage as did Roald, since her interviewees did not depart from Islam and its practice. Instead, the final stage was identified as one of "enhanced individuality in interpretation" (Malmirinta, 2017, pp.1-69). While Malmirinta's study characterised the journey of female

Finnish Muslim converts through her interviews, it was essentially a characterisation based on the challenges they faced and the realities they formed to counter those challenges. When viewed from this lens, they generally appeared to face three major issues: Otherisation, Alienation, and Self-Doubt.

Otherisation

As noted earlier, while Muslims in general face Otherisation due to being viewed as foreign, the same Otherisation is also applied to Finnish Muslim converts. Therefore, the main challenge that Finnish Muslim converts face is the resulting marginalisation and exclusion from their native Finnish circles due to the adoption of their newfound Muslim identity. A rejection of customs and traditions that are not acceptable practices within their Muslim worldview also serves as a marker of their difference. They are therefore no longer deemed to be following their native culture, and their Finnishness is rejected (Hyokki, 2022). In essence, they are denied their right to their own identity. From the literature (Malmirinta, 2017; Pauha, 2018; Eboreime and Geddi, 2017), this Otherisation can be seen as manifesting in the following forms:

i. Treatment from their family and friends, e.g., dissociating themselves from the new converts.
ii. Treatment by society, e.g., discrimination, racism, and microaggressions in the public sphere.
iii. Treatment by civil institutions at large, e.g., rejection of prayer spaces.

Alienation Due to Differences in Interpretation from Practiced Islam

The second stage of Malmirinta's defined conversion process points to the second significant challenge that converts face, which is disappointment with Islam in practice. This results from differences in interpretation and practice with born Muslims, which may lead to disagreement, disparity and alienation of the converts from the majority Muslim population. Unwittingly, many Muslim practices are intertwined with cultural injunctions. For example, a significant issue for Muslim converts in Nordic countries is that of gender equality, wherein both partners have an equal responsibility in caring and providing for the family. In contrast, many Muslim-majority societies have rigid gender-driven roles, and therefore women are expected to remain at home and not work. Not only is this in significant contrast with the system of gender equality in Nordic countries, but it is also in contrast with the concept of gender equity that has developed in contemporary Islamic societies, in which women are accepted as active members of public society and the workforce (Malmirinta, 2017).

As a result of these different interpretations, Finnish Muslim converts also face challenges when they are perceived by the Muslim community as doing things differently and as not knowing how to practice properly. This could be attributed to the lack of understanding that born Muslims have in applying Islam to different contexts and cultural situations. General discrimination against converts has also been reported, because they are seen as outsiders to the communities and there are doubts about their conviction (Eboreime & Geddi, 2017). Converts are thus treated differently and therefore feel that they are not accepted even by the Muslim community.

Malmirinta also elaborates on the struggles for their new identity formation during this phase, and how, due to cultural practices that may not align with Islamic practice (e.g., gender roles), they feel out of place. Another type of variation in interpretation that converts may not

be prepared for is that of fundamentalist and neo-fundamentalist religio-political movements within the known *madhhabs*. These movements lie outside the cultural sphere and identity of Muslims, calling for a more fundamental and globalised Islam devoid of cultural variations that are deemed un-Islamic (e.g., Salafism). Indeed, Malmirinta notes that most Finnish Islamic organisations (at the time of her work) are representative of these trends. A common feature of these organisations was found to be their multi-ethnic nature, and their ability to unite people despite their ethnic, language, or generational differences. What binds them together is their strong motivation and religious beliefs. On the other hand, new Muslims who realise they do not share the same fundamentalist views, become further alienated from these organisations and active participation in Muslim society and community (Malmirinta, 2017).

Self-Doubt

A less apparent challenge that converts appear to commonly face is the expectation of perfection in practice. Due to the spiritual enthusiasm for, and sense of belonging to, their newfound faith, many converts experience the drive and motivation to adhere strictly to it and to the best possible level of practice. This may eventually tire and wear them out because of the many challenges they face in practice, due to the lack of a conducive environment for it, including the expectations placed on them by Muslim communities to adhere to their understanding of Islam, which is multifaceted in the pluralistic community of Finland. If not sufficiently supported, this could be demotivating and eventually result in converts becoming secular or leaving Islam entirely.

Realities

To manage these challenges, converts may try to create realities in various ways to reconcile their newfound Muslim identity with their prior one (Malmirinta, 2017). To avoid facing the challenge of Otherisation and a lack of acceptance from the community, they may resort to privatising the practice of the religion so that it does not draw attention, and so that family, friends, and society do not learn of their newfound religion and stigmatise them. However, many female Muslim converts wear the *hijab*, so their religion is apparent, but they may become conflicted with it and consider stopping wearing it to avoid garnering attention (Malmirinta, 2017). Privatising practice of religion may also be done to reduce conflict or disagreements with born Muslims in the practice of the religion, where Finnish Muslim converts feel that they are not accepted by the community. This leads to them eventually excluding themselves from the active Muslim community, so that they also become generally inaccessible.

Another consequence of the differences between Finnish-Muslim converts and born-Muslims is to separate culture and Islam, since many practices and interpretations within Muslim communities are cultural and not necessarily Islamic. However, their own culture does in some way enter the process, as they consequently develop their individual and personal interpretations of Islamic teachings, such as in the interpretation of gender roles. In this case, while many convert women in Malmirinta's (2017) study did not conform to the Western notion of gender equality and instead found their comfort in the discourse of gender equity, they noted that gender roles as practiced by Muslim cultures are rigid and do not conform to the notions of equality as taught by Islam (i.e., that women be part of the workforce, that they are not subjugated and reduced to taking care of the home and family alone, etc.) (Malmirinta, 2017, p.49). They thus develop an individual or personal interpretation of issues that may conflict with the understanding or practice of born Muslims. This could either lead to further

individualism or resorting to seeking out other Finnish Muslims who may share the same value system that arises from the same culture.

Future Outlook

It can be said that the main issue faced by Finnish Muslim converts is a lack of acceptance and a sense of belonging to their Finnish identity. This lack of perception is perpetrated by a Finnish society that has highly negative perceptions of Muslims and Islam. To address this, there must be an effort to increase acceptance of Muslims and improve the image of Islam in Finnish society. As this would be done by increasing exposure and awareness of the non-Muslim Finnish public to Islam and Muslims, it is linked to the overall facilitation of the integration of Muslims into society in general. Therefore, this section deals with the outlook for reducing the negative perception of Muslims in Finnish society as well as facilitating their integration into it.

Over time, the Finnish government and the Finnish Muslim community have made multiple efforts to facilitate the governance and integration of Muslims into Finnish society. The Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration is aimed at improving the employability of immigrants in general. The objective of the act is to promote gender equality, non-discrimination and positive interaction between the different groups. In 2025, a substantial reform of the act, aiming to improve and make integration services more accessible to immigrants was enforced ("Reform of the act on the promotion of immigrant integration," n.d.). While not specifically targeted at Muslims, the services are available to them as well. Other initiatives to support the integration of Muslims into Finnish society are state and civil societies that facilitate and support Muslim affairs and are listed in more detail below. However, while Finland consistently ranks highly for integration and multicultural policies on the Migrant Integration Policy index, the reality on the ground is that refugee and immigrant groups face significantly higher unemployment and racism due to their racialisation (Masoud et al., 2023). Finnish people also do not associate the Finnish society or Finnish national identity with multiculturalism, showing a disparity between policy and reality (Saukkonen, 2018). While there are many programmes available for Muslims, there are none perceivable for increasing awareness and aimed at reducing the negative perceptions of the Finnish public at large. Thus, the facilitation of integration is seen to be one-way, directed at Muslims, but not engaging non-Muslim Finnish people. In addition, since the right-wing coalition government came into power in 2023, there has developed a serious and urgent need to address growing anti-Muslim sentiment amongst Finnish people. The government has contributed to a significant rise in anti-Muslim sentiment in the public, facilitators of which include politicians and media, reinforcing and emboldening such sentiments among the general public on social media (Tessieri, 2023). In 2024, a 13% increase in hate crimes was reported to the police compared to 2023, with the majority being those of ethnic or national origin (67.6%). The majority of these were Somalis who are also Muslim. 8.7% of the hate crimes were religiously motivated, of which most were perpetrated against Muslims (Rauta, 2025). Multiple organisations, such as the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions (CORE) of Finland and Suomen Muslimi Foorumi Ry (Finnish Muslim Forum), have raised 'deep concerns' about the rise of Islamophobia in Finland, calling for its eradication ("Religions united," n.d.; Suomen Muslimi Foorumi Ry, April 2026). This appeal was made following the observation of the vote made in Parliament for measures to promote equality, gender equality and non-discrimination in Finnish society. The CORE Forum noted that while measures were initiated due to hate speech and discrimination against Finnish Muslims, no specific measure was put in place to address Islamophobia. Similarly, the Integration Act does not target discriminatory employment practices due to one's race or religion, let alone that against Muslims. Overall, there has to be a more integrative approach in increasing awareness among the Finnish community in accepting Muslims as a part of society.

State and Civil Societies

At the state level, the Ombudsman for Minorities initiated an organisation for Muslim representation to the government, which the government funded. The purpose was to allow the government to engage and collaborate with Muslim communities to provide needed inputs on government policies that would facilitate the integration of Muslims into Finnish society and tackle religious extremism. The organisation, called Suomen Islamilainen Neuvosto (Islamic Council of Finland) or SINE, was formalised in 2006 and aimed to be the government's administrative arm for Muslim concerns. At one point, it was an umbrella organisation for 17 associations. However, due to the diversity of the Muslim community in Finland, it has proven difficult to gain the trust of different Muslim factions in the legitimacy of its leadership, and some members, e.g., the Resalat Islamilainen Yhdyskunta (Resalat Islamic Society), which is a Shia association, have left the organisation. SINE is an example of how issues of representation arise in a diverse community.

Another government organisation set up to promote peaceful interreligious dialogue and wellbeing is the National Forum for Cooperation of Religions in Finland (CORE). The original idea of CORE was the motivation to create a channel for improved inter-religious dialogue for the major religious group in light of terrorist attacks by Islamic groups since the attack of September 11, 2011. However, in their recent appeal for action against Islamophobia, CORE has become a voice for the well-being of the Muslim community aside from working to promote internal relations. The same statement also proposed a legislative and research project aimed at preventing hate crimes against Jews, Muslims, Christians, and other religious groups. The proposed measures focus on criminalising Holocaust denial, commemorating the Holocaust, and banning Nazi symbols. The CORE Forum, representing six religions, provided an opinion to the working group preparing the statement. The opinion emphasised that the Finnish government must protect religious freedom, ensuring everyone's right to practice their religion without discrimination. Voluntary associations form the backbone of Finnish civil society and are considered an essential part of representative democracy (Martikainen, 2007).

The Finnish government stherefore encouraged the organisation of such associations for the Muslim community, so that they may liaise with them and cater to their needs through their representation. In 2015, there were estimated to be about 129 registered Islamic associations (Pauha, 2017). This number came up to 50 in 2019 (Sohlberg & Ketola, 2020). Such associations cater to many diverse functions for the Muslim community, and numbers vary as some are registered for the purpose of conducting a specific project (e.g., construction of a mosque) that, once completed, may cease to function. Other associations may belong to different mosques for different ethnic communities or different regions in the country.

As noted earlier, the oldest Muslim organisations in Finland belong to the Tatars: Suomen Islam-Seurakunta (The Islamic Congregation of Finland), founded in 1925, and Tampereen Islamilainen Seurakunta (The Islamic Congregation of Tampere), founded in 1943. The main body that has aimed to be the overarching representative of providing Islamic activities in Finland has been Suomen Islamilainen Yhdyskunta (Islamic Society of Finland), founded in 1987. However, there is a need for other more specialised services that these associations may facilitate, such as spiritual support, support for women, funeral services, legal facilitation of marriages and divorce, marriage counseling, and activities for children and young people. The Hikmah Siskot and Amal Ry are organisations that work with women's spirituality and welfare respectively and cater support for Finnish Muslim converts. Established in 2020, the Suomen Muslimi Foorumi Ry (Finnish Muslim Forum) has emerged as a voluntary association aimed at bringing together Muslim organisations and individuals, including Finnish Muslim converts, to increase internal dialogue and unity. It also aims to understand

the finer needs of the community and facilitate them by acting as a representative voice to the Finnish authorities, frequently gives statements to the public on Muslim affairs. One of the key concerns highlighted by Finnish Muslim converts is the lack of acceptance from Muslim communities that are largely non-Finnish. The Finnish Muslim Forum aims to tackle this issue by uniting multiple Muslim organisations to mobilise support for the diverse group of Muslims in Finland. In their statement on the rise of Islamophobia, the Finnish Muslim Forum has pressed the government to acknowledge that Islam is not a foreign and immigrant religion, but is also professed by native Finns, alongside other minority religions. Therefore, their action plan should also consider the racialisation of Finns as Muslims, who are subject to Islamophobia as well.

Media Portrayal

Earlier, the media was noted to be a key facilitator of the negative perception of Muslims in Finnish society. In Teemu Taira's (2008) review of the *Helsingin Sanomat* mentioned earlier, coverage of Islam was generally found to be political, while it was perceived as backward. The coverage ranged from the nationalism exhibited during the Algerian War of the 1960s, being caught between the battle of the capitalist and communist powers, followed by its rise to prominence in the Iranian Revolution, which was viewed with disdain. Subsequent discussion turned to the immigration of Muslims to European countries in the 1980s, along with significant discussion surrounding *The Satanic Verses* in the late 1980s onwards (Taira, 2008). Studies by Maasilta, Rahkonen, and Raittila (2008) on media debates about Islam and Muslims from 1987 to 2007 have also yielded the same findings: that Islam is generally politicised rather than viewed, for example, from a cultural perspective (Maasilta et al., 2008). Topics of discussion are problematic, one-sided, and generally pertaining to political violence, terrorism and gender inequality. According to them, Finland does not have a favourable environment for journalism on Islam and Muslims (Maasilta et al., 2008). With the recent increase in Islamophobia, it has become incumbent upon the media to change its discourse on Islam.

The left-leaning media outlet, *Yle*, has been aiming to provide a more balanced discourse on Muslims and Islam. While it does produce programs intended to cater to pre-existing stereotypical biases in Finland (e.g., "Islam and Women"), it also promotes information on Muslims and Islam. One such program is "A Guest of Islam", narrated by Professor Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, which takes viewers through the history of Islam and various Muslim countries around the world including Southeast Asia. It aims to show broaden the viewers view of Muslims by showing cultural variations, as well as societal and historical contributions of Islamic civilisations to the world. Another program "Koraani", is a podcast of the Qur'an in Finnish, featuring comparative collaborative commentary by notable Finnish figures such as Professor Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila and Anas Hajjar. Both of these figures are notable for their work on increasing knowledge and awareness of Islam and Muslims in Finland. Professor Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila, the Iraq Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Edinburgh, is also credited with the Finnish translation of the Qur'ān, while Anas Hajjar was the Imam of the Islamic Society of Finland ("STT," 2026).

Religious Freedom Act and the Helsinki Grand Mosque

The individual's right and freedom to practice religion has been enshrined in the Constitution of Finland since 1923. This right includes the right to practice and profess, as well as to express one's conviction according to the practice of the religion. Thus, an individual has legal rights to profess and express his religion in whatever means he deems, which cannot be prevented.

Consequently, it would be difficult to ban wearing the *ḥijāb*, as has been the case in other European countries. However, in practice and reality, racism and misperceptions exist in society. The establishment of the current right-wing government is an indicator of anti-Muslim sentiment that has also been increasingly politicised since the 2000s, a trend that threatens to continue. This was evident as far back as 2017, when plans to build a “grand mosque” in Helsinki were scrapped due to criticism from politicians and the public. The mosque, intended not only as a place of worship but also a dialogue and cultural centre with other services, carried a hefty cost, amounting to more than 100 million euros. While the source of funding was to be Bahrain, the cost in itself drew astonishment and negative feedback. Another major concern, which proved to be the main factor in the negative decision from the city of Helsinki, was consequently the impact of external influence on the type of Islam practiced there. In another study of the discourse of politicians responding to the planned mosque, is has been found that while respondents acknowledged freedom of religion, concerns were raised on the induction of radical and violent Islam due to the external funding (Pauha & Konttori, 2020). Examples of these concerns were not provided, and answers were vague, indicating sentiments were based more on suspicion and a low level of religious literacy rather than on facts. In addition, there was the sentiment that Finland is still perceived to be a Christian society, while Islam is seen as foreign. In the legal assessment of the issue, another study shows how the securitisation and politicisation of the discussion was Islamophobic, effectively removing the right of Muslims to religious freedom, and resulting in disproportionate treatment compared to other religious groups (Mykkänen, 2025). It can be remarked that while the application for the mosque met all the administrative requirements, the suspicious discourse surrounding it politicised the plan, thus leading to its termination.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Finnish Muslim converts navigate a complex intersection of religion, culture, ethnicity, and national identity within a context where “Finnishness” remains implicitly tied to Lutheran heritage. As Islam continues to be perceived as foreign, converts experience forms of “Otherisation” and “marginalisation” that pose challenges to their sense of belonging, both within Finnish society and, at times, within Finnish Muslim community itself. These challenges, especially alienation and self-doubt, are shaped not only by societal perceptions but also by internal diversity and cultural differences within the Finnish Muslim community, characterised by its ethnic diversity. This study has shown that Finnish Muslim converts actively negotiate their identities by reconciling Islamic teachings with Finnish cultural values paving the way for the establishment of a coherent and integrated identity. Even though existing integration efforts are notable, they remain largely one-sided. To minimise the challenges faced by Finnish Muslims, there is a need of enhancing religious literacy, addressing Islamophobia, and fostering inclusive narratives within public discourse, as well as recognising Islam as a part of Finland’s society instead of an external element. This study has found that there has still been a rise in anti-Muslim sentiment in the public and political sphere, alongside a lack of increasing knowledge and the ‘religious literacy of Islam’ within Finnish society. Media coverage of Muslims, which has been generally political rather than cultural, should be improved. Furthermore, there is a need for the implementation of a non-discrimination action plan that specifically targets Islamophobia. Finally, this study finds it highly significant that the Finnish Muslims should organise themselves into a unified body to advocate for these causes.

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