

Muslim Women at UIO

*A Debate between the Personal, the Feminist and the
Political*

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Abstract

Over the last two decades, the increasing multiculturalism and religious pluralism in the progressively secular Europe has generated concerns and debates, among not only politicians but also academics and the general public, about the appropriate role of religion, especially Islam. This research is accordingly based on interdisciplinary perspectives that exchange concepts and methodologies for the purpose of exploring the relationship(s) Muslim women have to religion in a secular setting like Norway. More specifically, this research presents a dialogue between “the personal”, “the feminist” and “the political” with the aim first to understand the role religion plays in the daily lives of Muslim female students at UIO in addition to reconsidering the theoretical constructs about appropriate accommodation of religious diversity and particularly the concerns and interest of Muslim women in Norway and Europe in general. Significantly, this research introduces a guide to any future attempt to redefine issues as diverse as secularism, religious freedom, religious diversity and women’s rights in contexts of renewed or persistent presence of religion in the public sphere.

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1 Introduction

This research is mainly directed towards rethinking the intersection of religion, feminism and politics; in particular the issue of “Muslim women” within the European debate and namely Norway. As a general overview, the increasing visibility of Muslims in the European public, either through performing their difference or through claiming religious rights, has generated concerns about how to deal with Islam and its adherents in the progressively secular Europe. “Obviously, the intersections between Europe and Islam are not a new phenomenon; a long and deep history of exchanges, wars, colonization, and waves of immigration has profoundly shaped the relations between Muslims and Europeans” (Göle, 2006a, p. 260). However, as Muslims start forcing “their entry into spaces that were reserved to Europe’s “white” citizens, (...) they become “visible” and disturbing to the public eye” (ibid., p. 261). Notably, in the aftermath of 9/11 attacks and similar incidents that were carried out in the name of religion, a series of questions have been raised interrogating the presence of the Muslim community and its influence on secularism, the traditions of European societies, Christian heritage and the security and stability of Europe¹. More specifically, Islam has become a national security issue and a source of public and political controversy resulting in conflicting attitudes towards religious tolerance and freedom in parts of Europe. The most frequently cited example in this regard is France:

The French model of Republicanism promises equality of universal rights for individual citizens; but the voluntary secular “blindness” to religious difference and the fear of communitarian twists (seen as an Anglo-Saxon and American model to be avoided) risk leading to a politics of denial, where ethnic, cultural, and religious differences disappear, or where authoritarian attitudes towards Muslims manifest themselves (Göle, 2012, p.142).

¹Among the factors that have contributed to the growing visibility of Islam are summarised as follows:

(...) increases in the European Muslim population in contrast to decrease in the population of “Western” Europeans; terrorism—surely mistakenly and wrongly—but defiantly committed in the name of Islam; calls for the application of elements of Islamic law in traditionally majority Christian nations; Europe’s economic dependence on Middle Eastern oil; traditional differences in dress (...) political upheavals in the Middle East (...); nuclear tensions with Iran; and war in Afghanistan and Iraq. (Durham & Kirkham, 2013, p. 3)

As a matter of fact, the focus has shifted towards reconsidering models of integration as well as the ways in which religious diversity is accommodated. To clarify, the growing entry of Islam into the public sphere has urged European societies to consider new political strategies that would result in the successful integration of Muslim citizens; especially women.

Regarding the European debate in general, one may argue that while some discourses draw on the Orientalist conceptions of the “Other” (Said, 1978), viewing Muslim women as victims of Islam and its patriarchal oppressive norms (Ahmed, 1992; El Saadawi 1999), Others stress the contemporary conceptions of the terrorist and the extremist “outsider within” (Collins, 1986), presenting Muslim women as “active” threats to the so called democratic “secular” societies (Salih, 2009). Based on such a discourse, some feminists as well as politicians either call for the protection of Muslim women from their oppressive Islamic cultures or from the implementation of various restrictions on their religiosity (Okin, 1999). A second position is adopted by those researchers and politicians who choose to emphasise the importance of an inclusive, plural and multi-religious public sphere (Modood and Kastoryano, 2006). Nevertheless, one may also argue that the debate on “Muslim women” is recurrently expressed in a certain prejudice against Islam as either a threat or as an antifeminist religion. The logic of this argument, according to Lazreg (1988), lies on the belief that “religion must be abandoned if Middle Eastern women are to be like Western women” and that “there can be no change without reference to an external standard deemed to be perfect” (p. 85). Then again such an Othering discourse on Muslim women undermines the interconnected components of this debate; namely religion, feminism and politics. That is to say, it pays little attention *to the individual freedom of religion* and it ignores what *perceptions* these women *appropriate to liberation*. As a result, the same dichotomy of the civilized “West” versus the lagging behind “Rest” is reproduced projecting the fact that the *justified* and *normalised rights* are still defined by those in *power*; which means the persistence of hierarchy and inequality.

As far as the Norwegian context is concerned, Jacobsen (2009) argues that research about Muslims and Islam in Norway has mainly focused on issues related to inter-religious-dialogue, patterns of social and economic inequalities, and ethnic and cultural difference (p. 19). On the other hand, she maintains that in the last decade the increasing interest in investigating the religious aspects of Muslim immigrants has become more difficult given the growing politicization of the research field. In other words, she clarifies that “the analytical categories used by researchers to distinguish between different Islamic tendencies have thus

become increasingly politicized as they are mapped onto the dichotomization of “good” versus “bad” Islam” (ibid. p. 20). With regard to Muslim women in particular, Langvasbråten (2008) indicates that addressing specific problems facing minority women is often a source of generalization or stigmatization to certain groups (p. 47). To illustrate, issues such as violence, force marriages and female genital mutilation are presented as the only “gendered multicultural problems” (ibid. p. 44), and they are most of the time equated to Islam and its patriarchal norms. In this respect, Halsaa *et al* (2010) acknowledge that “if gender equality is constructed as a particularly ‘Norwegian’ value, as something constitutive of ‘Norwegian-ness’, it contributes to a problematic ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide” (p. 9). As a result, though feminist as well as politicians continue their attempts to expand gender balance policies, this “has not been combined with similarly eager efforts to include minority based location, voices and points of views in core decision making bodies” (Siim and Skjeie, 2008, p. 339). More important, in the case of Muslim women, religion or spirituality remains among the frequently neglected aspects of diversity. In fact, both within feminism as well as in politics the focus has been exclusively on ethnicity, race and social class. Another salient point in this respect is related to questions such as: Who should have the right to represent whom, and in which way; taking into consideration the growing global and diverse Norwegian environment where women’s interests and needs are changing constantly? in fact, which tendency will have the upper hand in the future, according to Leirvik (2014) “depends both on structural questions of social cohesion (which include the integrating function of welfare society values) and of the agency of dialogue activists who are committed to making a difference by doing what does not come by itself” (p.158-9). In this case, a central feature underlying Leirvik’s argument is his support for a joint effort between the state’s integration policies and the dialogue activists representing the Muslim communities in Norway. Nevertheless, I would argue that such a proposal would still pay little attention to the inclusion of Muslim women’s voices. For this reason, my research aims at reversing the debate through allowing Muslim women (female students at UIO) first voice their relationship(s) to religion, express their standpoints vis-à-vis feminist as well as political representation(s) of their concerns and interests, and finally engage them in suggesting appropriate strategies to accommodate religious diversity within contemporary Norway. Indeed, developing appropriate feminist representations and policy strategies that would be in women(s) best interests become an area that needs more focus if we are to recognize diversity “within”.

Objectives and motivations

Bearing in mind the previous discussion, my research is mainly concerned with introducing a multidimensional dialogue between the *personal* (Muslim women and their relationship(s) to religion), the *feminist* (discourses on Islam and Muslim women) and the *political* (discourses on Islam, Muslim women, religious diversity and secularism) with the purpose of developing a narrative that will reveal more accurate perceptions on Muslim women's concerns and particularities. Significantly, it will help as a guide to any future attempt to redefine issues as diverse as secularism, religious freedom, religious diversity and women's rights in contexts of renewed or persistent presence of religion in the public sphere.

Main question

- Is there a growing identification with Islam among young Muslim women in (secular) Europe? If so, what are the appropriate strategies and approaches to represent/accommodate such religiosity within feminist and political debates, especially in relation to Muslim women's concerns and particularities?

Supporting Questions

- Which relationship(s) do Muslim female students at UIO have to religion? And how does religion (Islam) shape their perceptions on life, freedom and women's liberation? (5.2)
- What are the standpoints of these young women vis-à-vis feminist (5.3) as well as political (5.4) representation(s) of their concerns and particularities? Do they reinforce, reject, or challenge the ways they have been talked about?

Methodology

On the one hand, I reviewed theoretical perspectives drawing upon relevant literature within the feminist and political discourses on Islam and "Muslim women" in Europe and Norway in particular. On the other hand, empirical data was derived from my data collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews. Notably, a total of ten Muslim female students at the University of Oslo were given the opportunity to articulate their relationship to religion, their perceptions of life, freedom, women's liberation, the secular state, and how they

conceive the prevailing political as well as feminist views on issues related to Muslim women.

Theoretical background and delimitations

This research accounted for the standpoints of Muslim female students at UIO regarding both “secular” political views that advocate, most of the time, for the *privatization* of religion as well as feminist discourses that either reject religion or call for its reinterpretation. For this purpose, I drew on a variety of interpretations from various disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. This includes the different definitions associated with the principle of *secularism* and *multiculturalism* drawing on examples from debates and policies developed in a range of European countries. Moreover, the “multiculturalism versus feminism” debate, initiated by the liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin, was reviewed as a background to the discussions linked with Muslim women in Europe. Besides, feminists’ approaches to Islam and Muslim women were evoked; including specifically *secular feminism*² and *Islamic feminist*. With the purpose of producing a feminist account that takes into consideration issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to all forms of oppression and a commitment to social justice, I conducted my research based on the standpoint feminist theory and the post-colonial feminist theory.

Structure

In this chapter (1), I intended to provide the broad as well as the specific contextual background of my research indicating the relevance of my contribution to the debate. More details about the context and background will be presented in chapter (2). In chapter (3), relevant literature will be reviewed to present a theoretical framework for interpreting my data gathered and answering my research questions. In chapter (4), the research design and methodology applied will be traced and reflected upon. Subsequently in chapter (5), my findings will be presented and discussed thematically; including the *personal*, the *feminist* and the *political*. Finally in chapter (6), I will attempt to answer my main research question and reflect on the limitations encountered while conducting the research. Besides, suggestions for possible further research will be suggested.

² Secular feminism is discussed in the theoretical chapter, see p. 37.

2 Context and Background

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the background related to debates about Islam and Muslim community first within the general context of contemporary Europe. In the second part, a more detailed overview about the Norwegian debate will be introduced; including the implications appropriated to secular Norway and its integration policies. Finally, the focus will be on presenting the way(s) Islam and Muslim women are perceived within discourses on Women's oppression and radicalism.

2.2 Islam in Contemporary Europe

According to estimates from 2010³, Muslims makes up approximately 6 percent of Europe's total population, and Islam is becoming its second largest religion. As a result, the growth of Islamic culture in public space poses new issues that, for some European countries, conflict with the liberal values of secular Europe. Under those circumstances, Muslims' negative influence on society has been emphasised drawing on contemporary conceptions of the terrorist and extremist "Other within". A tendency that justifies the considerable circulating accounts about "extremism", "radicalism" and "Islamic revivalism". As an illustration, the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci (2006) warns against the "Islamization" project claiming that "Europe becomes more and more a province of Islam, a colony of Islam. In each of our cities lies a second city: a Muslim city, a city run by the Koran. A stage in the Islamic expansionism"(p.35). Important to realise in this regard, the European historical experience of religion as a source of irrationality and conflict has played a salient role in strengthening the view that the presence of Muslims should create anxiety and fear. Based on such logic, Islam turns "to be a formless, stateless, borderless enemy motivated solely by an extremist (Islamic) desire to destroy western values and modes of life" (Jamal, 2013, p. 35).

Significantly, a campaign against Islam and its adherents has never been that heavily intense as it is now in Europe. Consequently, Muslims have been subject to discrimination, stereotyping, and hostility in mainstream Western discourses— not just in the form of

³ (Globalreligiousfutures.org, 2010)

electronic and print media, but also within politics. Equally important, Muslims have become the victims of what Stanley Cohen has diagnosed as “moral panic”⁴. To demonstrate, some European countries have chosen to adopt “politics of fear”⁵ through for example using the issue of terrorism in the policy debate “to justify tougher controls of migration in general” (Triandafyllidou and Modood, 2012, p. 13), to exert restrictions on the constructions of minarets, the call for prayers, religious education and the public display of religious symbols. This adopted approach is used often under the pretext of encouraging the integration of Muslims into society. Another point is that Islam tends to be equated with fundamentalism⁶ in general; a claim that is often evoked whenever a terrorist attack takes place:

This means that instead of presenting these events as the result of the actions of single individual human beings acting out of a more or less complex series of motivations, both US and European media largely presented them as a clash between civilisations. The result is that the idea of a clash between Islam and the West has become one of the most powerful political myths of our time (Bottici and Challand, 2012, p.118).

Similar political debates are raged across Europe presenting Islam as inherently incompatible with the liberal secular democracy. This discourse has consequently contributed to the shaping of European public opinion about Islam, and thus it turns to be “a relic from the past deemed to disappear with progress” (Triandafyllidou and Modood, 2012, p. 20). Based on these circulating claims, Muslim actors’ capability to practice agency and be part of modernity is simply denied.

On the other hand, some European countries have sought to compensate for the alienation of Muslims through establishing a formal bridge between the state and Islam. For instance, Islam was publically recognised as the second largest religion in France, and thus a council for the Muslim population (Conseil Français du Culte Musulman) was established in 2003 as a step toward creating “French Islam” (Göleb, 2006, p.145). As a matter of fact, allowing an Islamic representation in the public sphere is connected to the states’ efforts to transform the “Muslims in Europe” into “European Muslims”. To clarify, Muslims are

⁴ Moral panic obtains when opportunistic political agents manage to stigmatize a targeted group in such a way that the group’s purported moral deviance becomes convincingly portrayed as an existential threat to the society as a whole. Furthermore, moral panic is all the likelier in the “risk society” of late modernity where persons become more preoccupied with potential than with actual dangers. (O’Brien, 2013, p.13)

⁵ I will be using this expression to refer restrictive immigration policies.

⁶ Fundamentalism in this sense refers to those who read the *Quran* and *Sunnah* literally and out of context justifying the legitimacy of their practices in the name of Islam.

expected to adopt a form of religion compatible with liberal democracy, individual human rights, and the demands of a civil society. To put it differently, some European politicians officially encourage “a Europeanized Islam, that is, an Islam that has been subjected to similar self-scrutiny and self-reform as the Christian denominations are alleged to have undergone in the modern age” (O’Brien, 2013, p. 6) This approach to the presence of Muslims in Europe is supported by Bassam Tibi (2008) who coined the term “Euro-Islam” advocating the development of “a European Islam based on the values of civil society, to be shared by all who want to live in Europe as citizens of an open society” (2008, p. xiv). Above all, European states adopt such an approach in an effort to reduce the potential for Islamic radicalism or extremism. For the better understanding of the position(s) of Islam within European states the next chapter will outline the different implications of secularism, multiculturalism and feminism in relation to religion.

2.3 Norway and Muslim Women: a Debate between Theories of Secularism, Multiculturalism and Feminism

2.3.1 Introduction

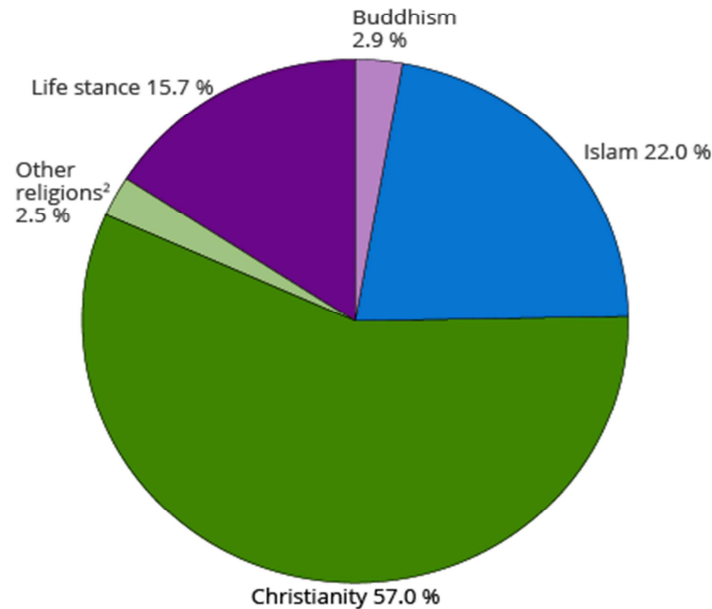
Norway has a total population of 5.1⁷ and it is growing more culturally and religiously diverse⁸ (Figure 1) the same way as most of the European countries that has been affected by the ongoing asylum and migration flows. Equally, dealing with such a plurality has increasingly become a topic of its own in recent years, especially that “in the current context one of the greatest challenges to the general public as well as to academics is the inclusion of Islam into the Nordic national identities, as one among several other religions pertaining to the Nordic peoples ” (Mårtensson, 2014, p.5) .The aim of this chapter accordingly is to

⁷ Ssb.no, (2014). *Population and population changes - SSB*. [online] Available at: <http://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/statistikker/folkendrkv/kvartal> [Accessed 6 Nov. 2014].

⁸Members of religious and life stance communities *outside the church of Norway*, by religion/life stance: As of 1 January 2013, 549 400 persons in Norway were members of religious and life stance communities; an increase of 39 000 compared with the previous year. More than half of the members, 313 000, were members of Christian communities. A total of 86 000 were members of life stance communities and accounted for approximately 16 per cent of all members of communities. Furthermore, various Islamic communities (120 882 inhabitants) accounted for around 22 per cent of the members, while the members of Buddhist, Hindu and Sikh communities accounted for 3 per cent, 1.2 per cent and 0.6 per cent of the members respectively. Source: (Religious communities and life stance communities, 2013)

provide insights on the particularity of the Norwegian case in relation to its secular nature, multicultural environment and the Muslim community, namely women.

Figure 1. Members¹ of religious and life stance communities outside the Church of Norway, by religion/life stance. 1 January 2013



¹ Including only members for whom government subsidy is received.

² Including Bahàì, Judaism, Sikhism and other religious communities.

Source: Statistics Norway.

2.3.2 Norway and Secularism

Norway's approach to secularism remains to some extent different from the other European countries. In fact, until recently Norway had Christianity as its "official religion" and in particular a State Church connected to the monarchy. Nevertheless, in an attempt to accommodate the increasing plurality and multi-religious reality of Norway, this "state religion" system has been in a process of regulation. Through the implementation of a number of reforms, Christianity was gradually excluded from decision-making and the privilege to determine public morality regarding issues such as divorce, abortion, birth control and same sex-unions. A recent example is the May 2012 constitutional amendment that granted the Church of Norway autonomy and separation from the state interference (Mårtensson, 2014, p.10). As a consequence, The Church of Norway is now perceived to be a faith community on an equal basis with other faith communities. In this regard, the Norwegian government though no longer appoints bishops and necessitates that half the cabinet ministers are church members, continues supporting financially the national church and minority faith-based

institutions with an equal funding according to memberships. Moreover, all registered faith-communities are entitled to certify marriages, and they are also given exemption rights protected by a Norwegian anti-discrimination legislation (Siim and Skjeie, 2008, pp. 328-9). Given Norway's increasing efforts and adjustments to accommodate diversity, it could be associated with the category of secularism as statecraft⁹ with regard to the two principles of non-establishment and the freedom of religion. In contrast to the *neutrality* model of secularism¹⁰, "Norwegian public authorities have pushed an active policy of accommodation of religious dress, and mainly regarded this as a question of non-discrimination between religions"(Siim and Skjeie, 2008, p. 331). However, in some domains religion continues to be intertwined with the secular providing the Church of Norway with "powers, privileges, and advantages which no other religious organization has been granted" (Furseth, 2014, p. 152-4). This includes the armed forces and the prisons, where the Church of Norway administers religious life (ibid.). On the basis of this model of state-religion separation, the Norwegian experience seems different from other secularized European countries such as France and Nederland.

The Norwegian's relation to religion can be also understood in association with the principle of secularization that refers mainly to the decline of religious beliefs and practices (Casanova, 1994). To put it differently, the Norwegian population is known of being among the most secularized and least religious in the world. This entails that the majority Norwegians are increasingly becoming less religious and more supportive of "an idealized secular public sphere free of religious influence and intervention" (Bangstad, 2013, p. 359). In fact, this emancipation from religion is rapidly emerging as a significant aspect of the Norwegian national identity. This argument is exemplified by the decreasing percentage of churchgoers in the Scandinavian countries including Norway. They rather belong to religious communities (mainly Christianity) without actually practicing a religious faith. In this respect Davie (2000) points out that "On a superficial level, the Scandinavians appear to reverse the British idea: they belong without believing" (p. 3). Obviously, Norway's values, norms and structures have been influenced first by Christianity and then by secularism both as a philosophical ideology and a statecraft.

Regardless its increasingly secular orientation, the Norwegian State is supposed to treat all religions equally without privileging one over another. The controversy of the subject

⁹ Casanova's definition of secularism as "statecraft" will be discussed in the theory chapter, see p. 11.

¹⁰ Secularism as "neutrality" be discussed later, see p. 23.

of religious education is a relevant example in this regard. As the UN Human Rights Commission in 2004 and the European Court of Human Rights in 2007 approved the religious minorities and the secular humanists complaint about the indoctrinating nature of the subject KRL (Christianity, Religion and Ethics), Norway was compelled to reconsider the name of the subject and its content. As a consequence, this subject was replaced with RLE (Religion, Philosophies of Life and Ethics) in 2008. Though there is still some dissatisfaction with the subject, “there are many indications that it has now become more acceptable to the minorities—so that it may function according to the intention of providing an arena for interreligious learning and dialogue training” (Leirvik, 2014, p.158). Nevertheless, a point worth mentioning here is that this secular principle of equal worth and pluralism conflicts with the popular political discourses that point often in a different direction “revealing an increasing tendency to reaffirm the so-called Christian cultural heritage as the uniting bond of the Norwegian nation” (Leirvik, 2005, p. 1). This is clearly demonstrated in the recent Norwegian government’s¹¹ continuous efforts to resist religious diversity within society through policy proposals, rhetoric and provocations. For example, they declare openly their rejection to the *niqab* as well as their attempt to go back to the old version of the religious subject RLE¹² demanding a minimum of 55 % teachings of Christianity. Briefly, it can be said that though Norwegian secularity has proven to be plural in its manifestation, this might not be always the case when it comes to accommodating religious diversity. Besides, this might result at a gradual erosion in the protection of freedom of religion and belief, and thus a more conflicting atmosphere; incompatible with the increasing religious plurality in Norway. In other words, it seems that there is a tendency towards moving from secularism as “pluralism” to secularism as “neutrality”¹³ and at the same time privileging the Christian heritage.

2.3.3 Norway and Multiculturalism

According to Stokke (2012), Norway’s approach towards diversity can be situated somewhere in the middle of the “civic nation” model in France and “ethnic nation” model in Germany sharing some characteristics of both (Figure 2) (p. 8). In particular, “while official Norwegian integration policy and citizenship law today is closer to the civic nation model,

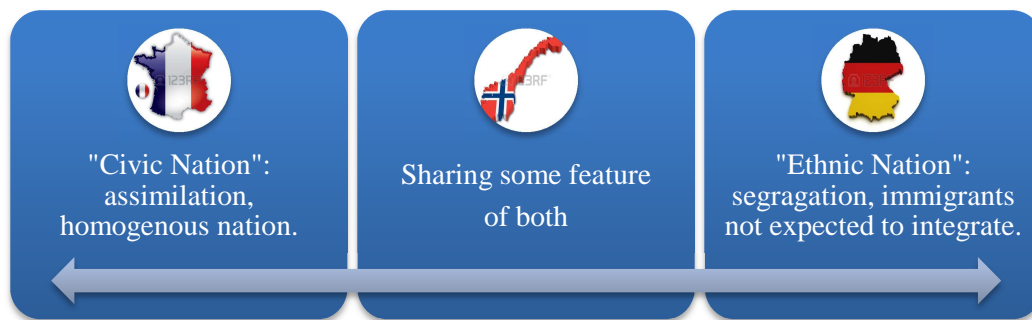
¹¹ The right-wing party was elected in 2013, and the anti-immigration Progress Party (PP) is into government for the first time.

¹² The government has decided lately to give the RE the name KRLE, an abbreviation for Christianity, Religion, World Views and Ethics.

¹³ Both models of secularism are discussed in the theory chapter, see pp. 21-23.

popular conceptions of Norwegian national identity tend to emphasize ethnicity” (ibid.). In other words, Norway has emphasised traditionally its hegemonic national identity (Furseth, 2014, p. 154) through various forms of assimilation, and at the same time it has encouraged immigrants to preserve their own languages and cultures.

Figure 2: Integration policy in Norway



Source¹⁴: Stokke, C. (2012). *A Multicultural Society. How Norwegian Muslims Challenge a White Nation*. Ph. D. Trondheim: NTNU.

Norway’s approach to diversity is also described in terms of rights hierarchy with immigrants and other minority groups in the bottom “granted some poly-ethnic rights, but are ultimately expected to adapt to the majority culture” (Brochmann, 2002, p. 44-46). This entails the necessity on each individual to take part in society and comply with the state’s basic norms and principles including democracy, gender equality and children rights. To illustrate, the *Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion* manages “campaigns and education to prevent the early and sometimes forced marriages of young boys and girls; campaigns against female genital mutilation; more substantial ‘introductory learning packages’ about Norwegian language and society for new immigrants (...)” (Mårtensson, 2014, p.17). Another aspect of the Norwegian policies towards minorities is “defined not as a form of ‘multiculturalism’, but as in line with a ‘diversity policy’ that has developed in several other European countries” (Stokke, 2012, p. 49). Accordingly, the focus is directed more towards balancing between the shared values as well as diversity within society as a setting where “complex identities” and “multiple ways of being Norwegian” are all acknowledged (ibid.). In the same way, Norway aims at fostering “a ‘tolerant, multicultural society’ through equal rights and duties for individuals regardless of ethnic/religious background, and uses ‘dialogue’ with minority organizations as an instrument to manage diversity” (Stokke, 2012, p. 252). To put it simply,

¹⁴ This diagram presents my understanding to Stokke’s (2012) description of Norway’s integration policy.

“integration” remains a salient objective associated with the minority-oriented policies in Norway.

In spite of Norway’s efforts to accommodate diversity, its general political approach remains problematic due to a number of reasons. As an indirect assimilation and “politics of fear”, Norway is “resorting to patriotic testing and scrutiny of applicants for residency and citizenship and demanding (often ridiculously contrived) demonstrations of national allegiance or cultural appropriateness from immigrants.” (Morgan and Poynting, 2012, p. 9) . The proposed “twenty one years of age rule”¹⁵ for family reunification is another example in this respect. Nevertheless, though such efforts may be perceived as equalizing means, they, for others, represent a mere reproduction of the Orientalist model of the “West” verses the “uncivilised rest”. Such a tendency is more manifested in the recent government that has already started to suggest tougher visa regulations and faster return of persons without legal residence, as well as a number of asylum seekers. In the same direction, radical right-wing party reinforces this tendency through warning against the threat of immigrant to the Norwegian Christian and secular culture. In fact, Norway as other Nordic nations is often identified “with ‘Christian culture’ in ethno-nationalist ways that exclude all immigrants and particularly Muslims” (Mårtensson, 2014, p.18). Furthermore, it can be assumed that the failure of multiculturalism(s) in Norway and in most European countries is connected relatively to gender concerns and religious demands, especially those associated with Islam and Muslim women. In other words, the visibility of minority religious practices in the public sphere challenges the state’s approach to citizenship, laws on gender equality and international conventions on human rights. This point is more illustrated in the coming sections.

2.3.4 Has Norway failed Minority women?

Important to realize, gender equality in the Scandinavian context presents a central part of social democratic policies and welfare state arrangements. This includes predominantly a focus on women’s participation in labour market, access to public childcare and political participation and representation. Norway in particular has gained “a strong national and international reputation of advocating women-friendly policies as both a legal

¹⁵ Due to huge protest from non-governmental organizations, including ethnic minority and humanitarian organizations, and anti-discrimination institutions, the government gave up this proposition (Siim and Skjeie, 2008, p. 336)

requirement and a substantive aim” (Halsaa *et al*, 2010, p. 7). In fact, Norway is often referred to as “a champion of gender equality” (Logna, 2003, p. 156); nevertheless in the case of minority women the debate becomes more complex.

The relationship between feminism and multiculturalism in the Norwegian context is thus shaped by ongoing debates on issues related to women in minority cultures within both politics and in academia. This includes two dimensions namely “when it comes to recognizing cultural diversity in general, and to accepting different models of gender equality and the family in particular” (Siim and Skjeie, 2008, p. 338-9). To put it differently, the increasing diversity of women’s interests and views is either perceived as challenging to the Norwegian gender equality agenda and thus should be restricted, or as a fact that should be accommodated. On the one hand, scholars such as Nyhagen Predelli (2010) are sceptical to the state’s tolerance and accommodation of practices that discriminate against women through financial support; in particular religious organisations whose practices contradict gender equality laws (p. 15). Religious schools, mosques and youth organizations are some examples in this respect. On the other hand, state feminism is charged of being blind to diversities resulting in homogenized conceptions of women’s interests. Notably, although state feminism has been a salient feature of Norwegian politics during the last decades, an equal degree of cultural recognition has been ignored along the way (Logna, 2003, p. 164). In this respect, the Other’s voices have been silenced when it comes to the framing of the gender equality agenda and decision-making, whereas the radical right’s views on minority groups remain the most influential (Siim and Skjeie, 2008, p. 338). To put it differently, “in the Norwegian case, a continued political ambition to expand gender balance politics has not been combined with similarly eager efforts to include minority based location, voices and points of views in core decision making bodies” (ibid. p. 339). Based on this claim, it can be assumed that the different models of gender equality emerging in the multicultural Norwegian society are not all voiced within politics. As a result, the supposedly women-friendly policies may reflect a mere preferential agenda that is not in the favour of all women and all men¹⁶. To clarify Stokke (2012) criticises the way political hegemony sometimes excludes the “Other within” as follows:

Turning universal values into symbols of political loyalty to Norway, the government suggests that immigrants lack knowledge of and need to be educated about human

¹⁶ This may be exemplified by the controversial debates about the parental leave policy and the cash-for-care benefit.

rights, while Norwegian citizens are constructed as carriers of universal values. Thus, while emphasizing that universal values are open to interpretation, there is a tendency towards a Norwegian monologue where goals are defined in advance by the majority. (p. 253)

A similar criticism is expressed by Halsaa *et al* (2010) who indicate that “if gender equality is constructed as a particularly ‘Norwegian’ value, as something constitutive of ‘Norwegianness’, it contributes to a problematic ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide” (p. 9). Such a duality is even more challenging in the growing global and diverse Norwegian environment where women’s interests and needs are changing. For this reason, it seems that developing appropriate social and gender equality policies that would be in women(s) best interests become an area that needs more focus if we are to recognize diversity “within”. Another important point stressed by Langvasbråten (2008) is that addressing the specific problems facing minority women, should not be a source of generalization or stigmatization to certain groups (p. 47). For example, dealing with violence, or force marriages should not be associated with specific nationalities or religions, but rather addressed separately. Equally important, minority group related gender equality agenda is mainly directed towards “forms of violence like force marriages and female genital mutilation as the only gendered “multicultural problems” (ibid. p. 44). Indeed, dealing with issues related to minority women should not be limited to a certain negative practices, but it should also incorporate the accommodation of their particularities.

2.3.5 Norway, Islam and Muslim women

Islam and the radicalization discourse

According to estimates from 2013, Norway has about 120 882 inhabitants of a Muslim background, which means that, outside the Norwegian Church, the Muslims make up around 22.0 % of the population and Islam has one of the highest number of adherents of faith communities outside the Lutheran church in Norway (Figure 1). As it is the case in most European countries, this population growth has generated public debates and anxieties over the presence of Islam and Muslim in Norway. The populist Progress Party *Fremskrittspartiet*, for instance, “has increasingly singled out ‘Islam’ as an enemy to Norwegian society and to Christianity” (Leirvik, 2014, p.151; Mårtensson, 2014). Based on Islamophobic discourses, the rhetoric of the fear from the “Other within” is articulated in many occasions. To

demonstrate, Islam is not only perceived as a threat against the security of the state, but it is also considered as a major challenge to the future of Norway as an egalitarian society with an advanced welfare state and relative gender equality.

Among the anti-Islamic agents is the Norwegian far-right blogger, Jens Anfindsen (2007) who criticises the state's tolerance towards Islam and its financial support to religious associations and mosques. On the other hand, he advocates openly the implementation of restrictive immigration laws as well as the preservation of the Christian cultural heritage and the values and norms shaped by the humanist enlightenment project as a means to combat against the Islamization of Norway. The following extract demonstrates clearly his perspective on "the Muslims within":

We have the means of tackling the budding islamization of our nation at our disposal. First and foremost, we can simply restrict our immigration laws. An essential step in that regard would be to follow in the footsteps of Denmark and tighten the conditions for family reunifications. This is something my organization, **Human Rights Service (HRS)**, actively works to promote. Secondly, we can stop government support of organizations that support Islamic terror. Thirdly, we can abandon the ridiculous idea that all religions are equal, and, consequently, the principle that all religions should be treated equal. We can face up to it that we are a country with a specific cultural heritage, that our values and the norms we want to uphold in our society are shaped by Christianity and by humanist enlightenment, and we can acknowledge that this is an heritage we want to preserve. We can, democratically, demand that those values and those norms, not those of Medina, be preserved as the foundations for our society. It shouldn't really be that hard to do. So it will be my conclusion that, at present, **the greatest threats concerning the islamization of Norway do stem from the Islamists themselves, but from relativism, multiculturalism and political correctness within our own ranks.** (Anfindsen, 2007, p. 3-4)

Advocating the development of such "politics of fear", Anfindsen reveals also his scepticism to the cultural relativism of multiculturalism for empowering the legitimate argument of respect and recognition of diverse identities in Norway (Islam in this case). In detail, he

criticises the political implication of cultural relativism with respect to religion, and thus the establishment of religious tolerance and the encouragement of multiculturalism. Another point worth mentioning here is the immediate association of Muslims with any violence incidents as a result of growing anti-Muslim sentiments among the larger population. In fact, the controversial media coverage of the terrorist attacks of 22 July 2011 remains a relevant example in this regard because “before it became clear that the perpetrator was a white ethnic majority Norwegian and a self-declared “cultural Christian”, the general tendency was to assume that radical Islamists were behind the violent attacks” (Jacobsen and Leirvik, 2013, p. 499). Moreover, the increasing concern about “radical Islam” and the “radicalization” of Muslim youth is a recurrent issue in public debates especially after the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)¹⁷. To counter radicalism, training programmes for *imams* as well as a programme for higher Islamic studies at UIO have been established subsequently (Mårtensson, 2014, p. 23). With the same purpose the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security issued recently an action plan against radicalization and violent extremism with the purpose of improving its preventative efforts¹⁸. Although these might be good measures to some extent; nevertheless, Bangstad’s (2014a) book *Anders Breivik and The Rise of Islamophobia* draws attention to the tendency of the Norwegian politicians as well as researchers to treat Islam and terrorism as an exclusively ideological phenomenon, whereas right-wing terrorism is primarily perceived as a social psychological phenomenon. To clarify, Bangstad claims that the Norwegian public debates on the 22 July terror attacks, literature as well as politics have ignored the ideology adopted by Breivik, and rather focused on his troubled psychology. Additionally, the Norwegian government continues to support the HRS through a budget increase of 80% in the last state budget precisely for their long-standing anti-Muslim advocacy¹⁹.

On the other hand, “interreligious dialogue” remains well-established in Norway with the aim of achieving mutual respect between different faiths and life stances and cooperatively addressing social and ethical issues of common concern; including the position

¹⁷ This refers to young people being radicalised and going to fight in the current war in Iraq and Syria. (2014)

¹⁸ The Norwegian government wants to improve the preventative efforts against radicalisation and violent extremism based on the fact that:

There is a need for more information, more cooperation and better coordination of the efforts in this area within Norway. The efforts must be improved in different professional areas and sectors of society. The goal is to reach persons who are at risk as early as possible and encounter them with measures that work. This action plan provides a framework for a targeted, strategic effort in this field within Norway. (Counterextremism.org, 2014)

¹⁹ Bangstad, S. (2014b). - *Yes, Aftenposten: In an unprecedented... / Facebook*. [online] Facebook.com. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/sindre.bangstad/posts/269335573257225> [Accessed 8 Nov. 2014].

of women in the religious communities, the issue of homosexuality, and the question of conversion (Jacobsen and leirvik, 2013; Mårtensson, 2014; Siim and Skjeie, 2008). As a matter of fact, in cultural and political debates, Christian leaders have in general defended Muslim minority rights and supported their integrity against populist assaults produced by “the influential right wing/populist party *Fremskrittspartiet*” (Leirvik, 2005, p. 7).

Islam and women’s oppression

Perceived as inherently oppressive to women, Muslim cultures and Islam are often associated with patriarchal and even harmful practices in Norway as well. In particular, discriminatory practices against minority women are considered as a “threat” to the gains of Norwegian gender equality system. For this reason granting recognition to a traditional culture or religion is seen as having the potential for engendering harm to women within their groups. With regard to such an understanding about the status of Muslim women, the co-founder and information director of HRS and journalist Hege Storhaug advocates occasionally an increase surveillance of Muslim communities for the purpose of protecting Norway’s most vulnerable females. She draws her arguments most of the time on individual experiences; including that of Kadra, Nadia and Saynab²⁰. Nevertheless, for many researchers Storhaug’s position remains a mere reproduction of the Orientalist Othering of Muslim women’s lives; especially that Islam bears no responsibility for customs such as arranged or forced marriages, honour killing and female genital mutilation. In the same fashion, the Norwegian media coverage of issues related to Muslims and Islam is also perceived as biased and controversial focusing mainly on similar issues (Jacobsen and Leirvik, 2013, p. 498). Notably, voicing mainly the negative stories about being “a victim of one’s own group” reflects the existence of a hierarchy of preference among some Norwegian media editors. To put it differently, whereas certain voices remain effectively ignored, and even rendered silent, the voices of individuals of Muslim background involved in critique of Islam are privileged in the mediated public spheres in Norway. A report by the Norwegian Directorate for Integration and Plurality (IMDi 2009) revealed accordingly that “matters related to Islam and Muslims are given disproportionately large media attention” and that “Muslims are overwhelmingly negatively represented” framing the overall discourse on Muslim community (Mårtensson, 2014, p. 22).

²⁰ These are three Muslim young women, from different backgrounds, who had shared publically their personal stories about forced marriage and genital mutilation with the support of Hege Storhaug.

Regarding the *hijab* controversy in Norway, the *hijab* has been dealt with both as an issue of individual gender equality rights and in relation to religious plurality policies. For Siim and Skjeie (2008), it is also important that “no divisive public conflict has appeared between feminist voices and voices from the mosque” (p. 334). To clarify, though some activists view the *hijab* as a symbol of female oppression, and thus incompatible with Norwegian values; attempts to ban its visibility in the public sphere were considered ultimately a violation against the freedom of choice as well as religion among minority women. To illustrate, few individual cases of prohibition in the work place were rather deemed as discriminatory under the Gender Equality Act and the new Act against Ethnic and Religious discrimination from 2005 (Skjeie and Siim, 2008, p. 332). Under those circumstances, the *hijab* has been accommodated with uniforms in the army, the health care system, and customs, and there is also a *hijab* version of uniform in a few work places for instance in IKEA, and the Ullevål University Hospital in Oslo (Jacobsen and Leirvik, 2013, p. 494-5). In fact, with reference to human rights principles and matters of individual choice, the state is supposed to recognize, respect and make public space for all women. With the purpose of understanding the way the Muslim community has been dealt with in Europe generally and in Norway particularly, the chapter to come will be mainly about outlining the key debates associated with secularism, multiculturalism and feminism.

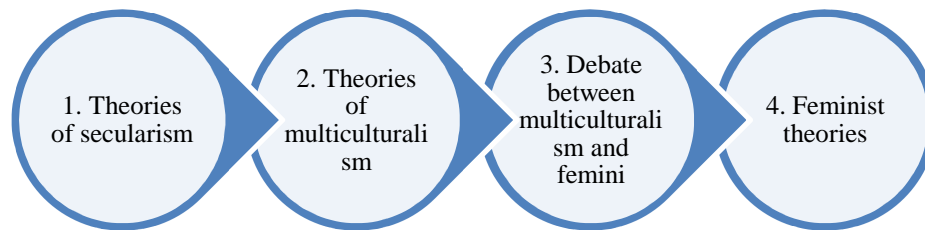
3 Theoretical Background

3.1 Introduction

Over the last twenty years, religion has been widely debated in Europe. Indeed, it has become a central issue in a variety of policy debates in areas as diverse as citizenship, security, employment, education, healthcare, justice and human rights. Basically, this unprecedented public presence of religion has compelled European states to revisit their approaches not only on secularism and multiculturalism, but also on feminism. As a result, heated debates have given rise on the scope of freedom of religion, its bases and justifications, and the relationship between the secular nature of the state, democracy and women's rights. Grounded on the fact that Muslim women in the European setting are affected in a way or another by these debates, the chapter aims at presenting a frame of reference for understanding and interpreting the standpoints of my interviewees. It provides an overview of the different theories that help address religion in relation to women's issues within the secular and multicultural state.

This chapter consists of four main parts. At first, different implications and tensions associated with the principle of secularism and multiculturalism will be traced drawing on examples from debates and policies developed in a range of European countries. Then, the "multiculturalism versus feminism" debate initiated by the liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin will be reviewed as a background to the discussions linked with Muslim women in Europe. Moreover, feminists' approaches to Islam and Muslim women will be emphasised including secular feminism and Islamic feminism. Finally, I will address the main issues and elements of the postcolonial feminist theory and the standpoint feminist theory as an introducing section to move to the research design and the methodology chapter.

Figure 3: Theoretical background



3.2 Theories of Secularism

Secularism as a contemporary social and political issue has been given different forms and implications. In general, secularism refers to “different normative-ideological state projects, as well as to different legal-constitutional frameworks of separation of state and religion and to different models of differentiation of religion, ethics, morality, and law” (Casanova, 2011, p. 66). This implies that defining a “secular state” varies from one country to another depending on the significance a state chooses to appropriate to the principle of secularism. As a form of statecraft, separation between religious and political authority is adopted “either for the sake of neutrality of the state vis-à-vis all religions, or for the sake of protecting the freedom of conscious of each individual, or for the sake of facilitating the equal access of all citizens, religious as well as nonreligious, to democratic participation” (ibid.).

3.2.1 Secularism as “pluralism”

To begin with, one form of secularism refers uniquely to a separation that aims at favouring religious pluralism in a society where everyone is equally respected. For the purpose of protecting the free exercise of religion, this tendency regards the external manifestation of one’s religious or non-religious conviction as a ‘secular’ practice, which means that the state should not interfere in religious matters. This entails also that no limitations on one’s freedom of religion and belief are to be imposed. “Indeed, “free exercise” stands out as a normative democratic principle in itself.” (Casanova, 2011, p. 72) Grounded on this view, many European countries have chosen to invest in the development of a

pluralistic and multi-religious space exerting no constraints on the legitimacy to express one's religious affiliation in secular institutions such as school, work and media. This particular approach to religious plurality could be related in some degree to the UK and German models. Secularism, in this sense, supports freedom *of* and *from* religion. Thus, a secular state has the responsibility for ensuring, neutrally and impartially, the equal exercise of various religions, faiths and beliefs. Obviously under this principle, identifying a state with one privileged religion in the increasingly pluralistic environment of Europe is unacceptable. In this case, secularism remains advantageous for the believers whose religion plays a salient role in their daily lives. At the same time, it is directed towards challenging religious privilege and discrimination against persons of a minority faith tradition or of no faith. In fact, "it was not meant to deny the public character of religion, but to deny the identification of the state with any one religion" (Modood, 1998, p. 394). Secularism in this sense is rather about creating an environment of justice and mutual consideration; a state of many faiths and none.

3.2.2 Secularism as "neutrality"

Secularism as *neutrality*, on the other hand, refers namely to every effort made by the state to empty its public scene from any reference to God (Taylor, 2007). The focus here is on the *neutrality* of the secular public spheres and their separation from religious institutions and norms (Casanova, 1994). To help maintain such neutrality, some politicians advocate the privatization of religion. Thus in many occasions the secular nature of a state is stressed as an argument to reject any demands or recognition of minority rights. This **exclusionary** version of secularism justifies significantly the exertion of restrictions on religious freedom, and, thus, the complete relegation of religion to privatised spheres (Casanova, 1994). This perceptive accordingly explains the fierce debates on issues related to the visibility of religious symbols in the European public space. As an illustration, the Islamic veil, *hijab*, is regarded as a threat to the core of the French republic since it challenges its public order and democracy. Another example is that of Italy and Switzerland. Both states have implemented legal actions rejecting the presence of crucifixes in schools, courtrooms and other public buildings. Notably, the presence of a sign associated with a given religion is perceived as an indoctrinating factor, and therefore it conflicts with the expected secular nature of the state. To demonstrate, an educational environment should function in a way that would not challenge the parents' right to have their children educated in accordance with their

own philosophical convictions. This entails accordingly that the presence of the crucifix, for example, can breach the pupils' right to freedom of conscience. The same argument is adopted by Switzerland to ban the construction of minarets.

3.2.3 Secularism as “non-religious”

Different from the previous models, a radical approach to secularism regards all religions as unenlightened, anti-egalitarian and even dangerous for democratic politics. It is a belief that has its roots in Karl Marx's famous statement that “religion is the opium of the masses” and Nietzsche's claim that “God is dead”. In this respect, the principle of *neutrality* is evoked mainly to argue that religion should be ignored and even abolished from ‘the public’ given its irrationality and potential to create conflicts. This widespread view has been emphasised by the radical right-wing parties, especially after the last terrorist attacks in Europe. Consequently, an expanding literature has interpreted political secularism “to mean that religious beliefs and discourse should be excluded from the public sphere and/or politics and certainly from activities endorsed or funded by the state” (Triandafyllidou and Modood, 2012, p. 10). Secularism, in this sense, is understood as synonymous to modernity, freedom, tolerance and peace as it projects:

The perception of the progressive achievement of Western secular modernity, offering a self-validating justification of the secular separation of religion and politics as the condition for modern liberal democratic politics, for global peace, and for the protection of individual privatized religious freedom. (Casanova, 2011, p. 70)

Grounded on this view, radical secular political arrangements seem to “suit and favour the private kind of religions, but not those that require public action” (Modood, 1998, p. 393). Nevertheless, liberal states adopting such a discourse (for example through rejecting religious education being destructive and irrational)²¹ are challenged by the tensions related to their advocacy for freedom, equality and human rights, and secularism.

3.2.4 The Secularization thesis

²¹ Zembeta (2008)

In the sociology of religion, the *secularization* thesis is presented by Steve Bruce in *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (2002) as “a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and other aspects of their lives in manner informed by such beliefs” (p. 3). Secularization in this sense refers to the process whereby “the sacred” has no longer its significant neither in society nor among the population. In fact, “the decline in the societal power and significance of religious institutions, and the decline of religious beliefs and practices among individuals” are perceived as “structurally related components of general processes of modernization” (Casanova, 2006, p.8). Consequently, people give the priority to the material over the spiritual and the profane over the sacred in their lives; “based on a rigid dichotomous contraposition of sacred tradition and secular modernity, assuming that the more of one, the less of the other” (ibid. p.14). Especially with the scientific and technological advancement, the belief in God, as the knower, came to be seen as backward and anti-modern. On the other hand, “the secularist genealogy of modernity was constructed as a triumphant emancipation of reason, freedom, and worldly pursuits from the constraints of religion” (ibid. p.11). As a result, there has been an increasing interest in alternative spiritualities; perceived as more modern, and thus become the fastest growing religious forms in Europe. A similar view is held by Taylor (2007) who claims that secularization is accompanied “by a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life. This new placement is now the occasion for re-compositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God” (p. 437). To illustrate, Turner (2014) points out that “the new generations of seekers find their inspiration in JRR Tolkien’s²² mythological world, from science fiction and Star Wars. They are also drawn to Satanism, witchcraft and neo-paganism.” (p. 781). Namely, the emergence of individualised forms and conditions of existence reflects an emphasised concern with *spirituality* as a means for seeking meaning and happiness rather than traditional or institutionalized religions. Under those circumstances, the meaning of “*spirituality*” has moved from “the shadowy realms of theology to become a 'fashionable' sociological concept” (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007, p.162). In this sense, the concept of spirituality focuses the relationship with the sacred “no longer from the point of view of obedience to external authority but instead centralising the freedom of the individual” (ibid. p. 170).

²² “J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) gained a reputation during the 1960s and 1970s as a cult figure among youths disillusioned with war and the technological age; his continuing popularity evidences his ability to evoke the oppressive realities of modern life while drawing audiences into a fantasy world” (J. R. R. Tolkien, 2004).

Different from the previous point, this changing nature of European religion (or spirituality) is explained differently by Grace Davie (2000). To explain, based on historical factors, and data collection of church attendance and participation to religious activities, Davie suggests that there is rather a tendency of “*believing without belonging*”. The same assumption is supported by Roy (2007) who claims that in the increasingly secularised Europe “society has gradually emancipated itself from religion without necessarily denying it” (p 15). To put it another way, most European population believe in faith traditions without actually belonging to any religious communities. “In this sense, individualization means the variation and differentiation of lifestyles and forms of life, opposing the thinking behind the traditional categories of large-group societies—which is to say, classes, estates, and social stratification” (Beck, 1992, p.88). This accordingly explains the corresponding rise in, for example, the “do-it-yourself” or “individualized” religiosity, seen as the result of a reflexive process of identity construction. Notably, the idea of self-identity and the reflective construction of the *self* is developed by Giddens (1991) who argues that in the context of the post-traditional order of late-modern societies “the altered self has to be explored and constructed as part of a reflexive process of connecting personal and social change” (p. 33). This continuous re-definition of the *self* in response to social dynamics is referred to by Beck (1992) as a “reflexive biography” that is personally rather than socially constructed (p. 135). Nevertheless, while Giddens (1991) takes the stance that religion is incompatible in (post)modern social life (p. 109), Beck (2010) asserts recently that religion is an important aspect of contemporary world where religiosity “is based increasingly on individualization” (p. 29). To recapitulate, while the power of institutional religion has declined, the interest in individualized spirituality has increased.

Different from the previous views on the secularization thesis, many scholars including Jürgen Habermas (2006) emphasise that Europe experiences a religious return into its secularised societies, or “post-secular society” as he calls it. Accordingly, Habermas draws attention to “the fact that religion continues to assert itself in an increasingly secular environment and that society, for the time being, reckons with the continued existence of religious communities” (ibid. p. 258). A point worth mentioning here is that post-secularism, as described by Habermas, and the increasing identification with religion have no connection with neo-fundamentalism²³ in contrast to Roy (2007) who tends to combine the two

²³ For Roy (2007) neo-fundamentalism is a product of contemporary globalization. It refers also to the global aspect of Islam. It is not about identifying with one nation-state, but rather with the global Muslim community.

phenomena. This assumption is supported by Turner in his article “Religion and Contemporary Sociological Theories” (2014) where he confirms that “there is ample evidence of robust religious vitality, especially among youth” (p. 783). A similar view is held by Casanova (2006) who focuses the influence of Globalization, presented as the incorporation of “inter-civilizational encounters, cultural imitations and borrowings, diasporic diffusions, hybridity, creolization, and transcultural hyphenations” on world religions that do not only draw upon their own traditions but also increasingly upon one another (p.17). This means that people in their attempt to find meaning in various and diverse traditions and beliefs, they negotiate the sacred in newly manners with the absence of territorial constraints. In fact, in the contemporary context, the understanding of the religious viewpoints in the democratic public sphere is important as religion began to compete with what was believed to be a “process of secularization” (Habermas, 2006). In other words, the increasing visibility of religion in the public sphere challenges the secularization thesis projecting a considerable change not only inside secular states, but also in terms of the consciousness of people. Then again, most researches and debates have emphasised the rigid conceptual dualities between religious and secular groups and practices resulting in the failure to capture the empirical diversity within these categories (Turner, 2014, p. 772). In this regard, avoiding the polarization between the sacred and the secular remains a salient aspect that has to be taken into consideration. In what follows, a key element in the discussion of religion in secular Europe is to be explored; namely multiculturalism.

3.3 Theories of Multiculturalism

Both within academia and in politics, *multiculturalism* is a ‘polysemic’ concept that reflects different implications, in different contexts and at different times (Triandaffyllidou, Modood and Meer, 2012, p.4). At the descriptive level, multiculturalism refers to the presence of plurality in a given society, the belief that cultures and communities can coexist equitably within a single country, or the various ways in which the state could recognise and support this diversity (ibid.) In terms of political and legal rights, the very forms Multiculturalism take vary significantly across different European regimes; as they relate to integration in different ways (Modood, 2011, p. 3)²⁴. A central discussion underlying this political philosophy is

²⁴ Modood (2011) categorises Multiculturalism into various modes of integration including; assimilation, individual integration, cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism.

mainly concerned with the group rights versus individual rights. Basically, the appropriate way to act towards cultural and religious diversity within a given state includes on the one hand “individuals who are granted exemptions from generally applicable laws in virtue of their religious beliefs or individuals who seek language accommodations in schools or in voting”. On the other hand, this includes group rights “as in the case of indigenous groups and minority nations, who claim the right of self-determination” (Song, 2014, n.p.). Important to realize, multiculturalism remains a complex, contextual and situated concept that is continuously criticized and much questioned across Europe. In this section, I will outline some of the forms and manifestations of multiculturalism, namely as “assimilation” and “inclusion”, discussing subsequently the “multiculturalism versus feminism” debate initiated by the liberal feminist Susan Moller Okin.

3.3.1 Multiculturalism as “assimilation”

Though multiculturalism, as a policy, was initially introduced for the purpose of integrating the claim that different groups can make legitimate demands for public accommodation of their particularities within a given society, it was however adopted as an assimilative strategy by some European countries. In this respect, multiculturalism refers to the political discourse that is in support for the unity and shared identity of the nation. This includes the common culture, and core values and norms within a society. The focus in this sense is more on finding similarities than on allowing for differences. This means that minorities should assimilate to the dominant culture if they are to be accepted in the public sphere. Thus, individuals and groups distinguished by “difference” can be discriminated against, and given the label of outsider or “other within”. This model of multiculturalism can be illustrated by the state’s “official promotion of a national identity, official national values, compulsory language courses, clothing prohibitions, test of migrants” (Triandafyllidou and Modood, 2012, p.3). Countries such as France, Netherland and Denmark are examples in this regard. A point worth mentioning here is that these countries chose to claim democracy and equality through invisibility and sameness in opposition to the view that support a politics of difference to achieve equality. To clarify, the politics of integration supposes a predetermined frame of social institutions and public values to which the newcomers are expected to conform and assimilate. In the same way, the argument of terrorism is frequently evoked by political parties to encourage assimilationist approaches to what they perceive as a failure of

the former multicultural policies. Avoiding the politically damaged connotation of the term “assimilation”, some politicians “have preferred to use terms such as ‘cohesion’, ‘integration’ and national identity while giving them an assimilative interpretation” (Meer and Modood, 2013, p. 5).

3.3.2 Multiculturalism as “Inclusion”

Multiculturalism as “inclusion” emphasises mainly “pluralism” and “the politics of recognition” (Taylor, 1994). As a policy for promoting integration, Multiculturalism is associated with the political efforts to provide space for racial, ethnic, cultural, or religious minorities. It aims at fostering a diverse environment through implementing policies that respect the diversity and multicultural nature of its population. This inclusive approach is described by Modood as “creating a new, ongoing ‘We’ out of all the little, medium-sized and large platoons that make up the country” (2012, p. 3). Given that every citizen is owed equal respect and concern, the state is supposed to guarantee public and legal recognition of all forms of self-assertion. Hence, categories of difference such as ethnicity, or religion are not to affect the individual’s rights and opportunities in participating and accessing the various sectors of society; “not just in law, but in representation in the offices of the state, public committees, consultative exercises and access to public forums” (Triandafyllidou and Modood, 2012, p 4). This entails that multiculturalism as a public policy is more about inclusion and fluidity than about domination or uniformity. In fact, “it is a critique of the cultural assimilation traditionally demanded by nation states of migrants and minorities, as well as liberal individualism that has no space for groups” (Modood, 2013, p.122). In this sense, the demand for the accommodation of group differences are the basis for multicultural politics that are supposed to take into consideration the “the equal dignity of all citizens” as well as “the distinctive identity of every single group” (Taylor, 1994, p 82)²⁵. Equally important, the argument for inclusion is aimed at “keeping open the possibility of dialogue and mutual influence” (Modood, 1998, p. 396). According to Taylor, equal opportunity should be accompanied by negotiation, infusion and interaction; meaning that the majority should be open to be influenced by other cultures, and vice versa (Ibid.). Such an intercultural dialogue is meant to develop individual identities that are “personal amalgams of bits from various groups and heritages and there is no one dominant social identity to which all must

²⁵ While Charles Taylor (1994), Bhikhu Parekh (2000) and Will Kymlicka (1995) emphasised the inclusion of *race* and *ethnicity*, Modood (1998) extends the argument to *religion*, and in particular Muslims.

conform” (Modood, 2011, p. 7). In this way, integration would be directed towards bringing new communities into relations of equal respect. In addition, Modood (1998) stresses that “the goal of democratic multiculturalism cannot and should not be cultural neutrality but, rather, the inclusion of marginal and disadvantaged groups, including religious communities in public life” (p. 396). It is a type of political separation where the state does not identify with or privilege a particular religious tradition, but rather protects the religious freedom of all citizens²⁶. In this regard, “equality” is not about “sameness”, but rather about “difference” and “social justice”. A key aspect in this debate is the connection between multiculturalism and the nuanced and dynamic understandings associated with concepts such as culture, religion and secularism. This depends on for example the context of a debate, the particularity of a given group/individual’s demand, and the state’s integration policy.

3.3.3 Has Multiculturalism failed Europe?

Multiculturalism is one of the conflicting policies that European societies had to reconsider after the 9/11 events, the London and Madrid bombings, and their aftermath. As a result, an expanding literature, both in academia and in the public media, has focused mainly on examining the factors that have contributed to what they would refer to as “the crisis of multiculturalism” or “the failure of multiculturalism”. The key points of this criticism are identified differently by the defenders of multiculturalism, and those who regard the implementation of multiculturalism as the main cause for European states’ failure to deal with their increasingly diversified societies.

According to Gøle (2012), the failure of multiculturalism is primarily linked to the absence of a common frame of dialogue and interaction (p.142). She maintains that achieving inclusion is not just about cultural pluralism and the politics of difference (ibid.). In like manner, Meer and Modood (2013) view dialogue as a centrality that is “missing in liberal nationalist or human rights or class-based approaches” (p. 2). Grounded on this claim, most trends of multiculturalism and integration policies are accused of entrenching resentment, fragmentation and disunity (ibid. p.1). This is illustrated by their overemphasis on the minorities’ duty to adapt and be part of the wider community while neglecting the importance of “mutual integration” and an “intercultural” approach to plurality (ibid. p. 3). Another relevant argument in this respect is associated with the states’ failure to recognize and respect

²⁶ Compatible with the definition of secularism as “pluralism” mentioned in the previous section, see p. 21.

the particular cultural identities of all citizens. As a consequence, a new intolerance towards the categories perceived as the “other within” emerges. This intolerance is demonstrated in the state’s exertion of resistance against the non-confirming “Other”; especially in religious matters including the *hijab* and *niqab* controversies. At the same time, the states’ focus on citizenship, visibility and identity issues “has displaced attention from socio-economic disparities” (ibid., p. 1). A similar criticism is related to the politicians’ “politics of fear” and the growing resentment against migrants; especially those perceived as suspiciously as real or potential threats to the wellbeing of European societies. This includes groups such as fundamentalists, jihadists, or terrorists. Reinforcing such a rhetoric, and thus generating panic and tensions among the people made multiculturalism accused even of “international terrorism” (ibid., p. 1).

Whereas some have chosen to emphasise the shortcomings of the various models of multiculturalism, others have even declared its inutility as a political policy within the European contexts of post-migration diversity. They view the recognition of difference and plurality rather as an irresponsible and naive tolerance toward minorities. For instance, the state’s accommodation of group rights may allow “members of minority groups vulnerable to serve injustice within the group, and may, in effect, work to reinforce some of the most hierarchical elements of a culture” (Shachar, 2001, p. 2-3) As a result, the European states’ efforts towards more egalitarian environments will be weakened. Another key point in this discussion is the tensions between multiculturalism and the feminism project; a debate that was initiated by Susan Moller Okin (1999). In particular, women interests’ are seen as underrepresented in traditional cultures, and thus any policy of accommodation of group rights may cause these women harm and restriction. To put it another way, giving cultural groups the legitimacy to decide over their members undermines the differences and plurality within these groups, and hence encourages internal inequalities; especially between men and women (ibid.). To understand this conflicting relationship between multiculturalism and feminism, the next section outlines the main aspects of the debate.

3.4 Accommodating Diversity: a Debate between Multiculturalism and Feminism

Recent minority groups' demands for recognition and the accommodation of their cultural difference in the public sphere have generated considerable tensions between feminism as and multiculturalism. These tensions were initially highlighted by many feminist critics who view some group norms and practices as oppressive especially with respect to issues of gender and sexuality. To clarify, the problem with multiculturalism, as "inclusion"²⁷, lies in the fact that it may conflict with one of the important feminist gains; namely the principle of gender equality. To put it differently:

Extending special protections and accommodations to patriarchal cultural communities may help reinforce gender inequality within these communities. Examples include conflicts over polygamy, arranged marriage, the ban on headscarves in France, "cultural defenses" in criminal law, accommodating religious law or customary law within the dominant legal system, and self-government rights for indigenous communities that deny equality to women in certain respects (Deveaux 2006, Phillips 2007, Shachar 2001, Song 2007) (Song, 2014, n.p.).

Mainly, as some cultural practices have conflicted with the European states' commitment to gender equality and women's human rights on the one hand, and the necessity to respect and accommodate diversity on the other. Even though both approaches struggle initially for equality and the protection of women's as well as minority rights, "their different particular concerns put them at odds" (Kukathas, 2001, p. 86). Especially with the discourse of feminism versus multiculturalism, each term is supposed to exclude the values of the other. With this in mind, feminism is "presumed not to value the rights of minority cultures" in contrast to multiculturalism that is "presumed not to value the rights of women" (Volpp, 2001, p. 1203). In other words, the conflict is between feminism's concern to liberate women from culture and multiculturalism's support and protection of cultural pluralism.

²⁷ It refers to a model of multiculturalism that emphasises the accommodation of group-differentiated rights for minority groups.

3.4.1 Has Multiculturalism as “inclusion” Failed Minority Women?

Generally speaking, the feminist objection to most trends of multiculturalism is grounded on the assumption that most cultures perpetuate patterns of oppressive treatment and control over women. For this reason, the incorporation of minority rights and politics of recognition into the public is conceived as likely harmful to vulnerable individuals within minority communities, specifically women. The key aspect of this argument is that:

In many cultural communities women are denied the same access to education as men, are subject to forcible genital mutilation in girlhood, or are given no say in the choice of marriage partner or in the question of whether to marry at all. Moreover, in many traditions, the recognized power of husband over wife leaves married women without relief from abuse within the home²⁸(Kukathas, 2001, p. 87).

Such attitudes and practices are regarded as patriarchal and discriminatory to women’s equality and freedom. For this reason, minority cultures are not to be tolerated (Okin, 1999). In this regard, the focus on the feminists’ commitment to reduce differentials of power between men and women are more important than their advocacy for identity politics²⁹; namely the individuality of each woman. A central argument underlying this criticism is that though multiculturalism gives minorities an unprecedented opportunity to live as equal citizens in liberal democracies, it however serves to legitimize norms and values that are in many cases hostile towards women. Another key point is connected to the misuse of the principle of religious freedom to perpetuate the subordination of women; a practice that has been allowed for by multicultural policies as Jeffreys (2012,) points out:

In recent decades multiculturalism has morphed into multifaithism. Culture and religion are being confused or understood as one and the same, and governments in

28 Other examples include the covering of women, polygamy and honour killing.

29 Definition of identity politics:

The laden phrase “identity politics” has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination.

Heyes ,Cressida, 2012, “Identity Politics”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, access: 27 July 2014
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/identity-politics/#toc>

states such as Australia and the UK are increasingly exercising ‘multicultural’ policies through religion or ‘faiths’ with particularly harmful consequences for women (p. 77).

For Jeffreys, accommodating cultural diversity is used as a pretext to introduce religious claims that threaten to infringe women’s rights. As an alternative, feminists, sharing the views of Okin, suggest that it is unnecessary to implement a policy targeting minority patriarchy. Instead, they maintain that such a liberating process can be incorporated under a feminist policy conceived from a more liberal and universal perspective. In fact, feminism is regarded as more compatible with liberalism than multiculturalism assuming that it advocates liberty, autonomy, and equality.

3.4.2 Multiculturalism and Feminism: An Incompatible Relation

Correspondingly, the “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women”³⁰ debate highlights these tensions between group rights and women’s rights more clearly. As brought forth by the political scientist Okin (1999), feminism and multiculturalism are incompatible given the potentially harmful influence the state’s support for minority cultures may have on women; especially that “many of the cultural minorities that claim group rights are more patriarchal than their surrounding cultures” (ibid., p. 17). Moreover, she draws attention to the inequalities³¹ associated with the cultures that multiculturalism tolerates serving to reinforce structural gender biases; a project which she views as running counter to that of feminism (ibid.). That is to say, the accommodation of traditional racial, cultural or religious practices would function as a legitimacy to oppress minority women. An alternative solution to demands from minority groups is suggested by Okin (ibid., p. 22) as follows:

In the case of a more patriarchal culture in the context of a less patriarchal culture, no argument can be made on the basis of self-respect or freedom that female members of the culture have a clear interest in its preservation. Indeed they might be much better off if the culture into which they were born were either to become extinct or preferably, to be encouraged to alter itself so as to reinforce the equality of women.

This approach suggests openly that liberal states should acculturate members of minority groups preferably by education, but by punishment when necessary (Okin, 1998, p. 676).

³⁰ A debate initiated by Susan Moller Okin’s article “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women”.

³¹ She mentions polygamy as an example.

Then again, Okin (2005) clarifies that she should not be misunderstood, and she rather advocates the importance of engaging minority women in any negotiations about group rights, taking into account the plurality of their interests and concerns. This would consequently allow minority women to give up the cultural pressure not to speak out for their rights, and hence not to be forced to choose between their culture and their rights.

3.4.3 Multiculturalism and Feminism: A Common Concern

Different from the previous insights, multiculturalism and feminism are interpreted as having a common concern provided that both struggle for equality and recognition, and are against subordination. Accordingly, Kukathas (2001) suggests that “minority cultures should be able to resist the encroachment upon their traditions, including those that confine women, by the dominant culture seeking to impose its allegedly universal values upon all groups” (p. 87). This is also supported by the view that cultural diversity and difference are to be dealt with not through assimilation but rather by toleration and respect. On this regard, women would not be required to follow a particular way of life given that “many explicitly reject liberalism as incapable of doing justice to their moral concerns” (Kukathas, 2001, p. 85). To clarify, multiculturalism is conceived as compatible with liberalism especially as it focuses on toleration and the need to support freedom of choice, individual autonomy and the state’s neutrality. A similar view is developed by Parekh (1999) who argues that “far from being the enemy of women, it (multiculturalism) gives them unique historical opportunity to pluralize and transform radically the universally hegemonic and boringly homogenous patriarchal culture that damages both woman and men alike” (p. 75). This contrasts with Okin’s account that was criticised heavily (Al-Hibri, 1999; Benhabib, 1999; Honig, 1999; Parekh, 1999). To point out some, Okin is accused of being judgmental and one-sided as she focuses only on minority cultures ignoring inequalities within Western liberal societies. To illustrate, she reinforces the claim that *emancipation* is a “white Western” model that should be followed if we are to achieve women’s well-being. In addition, such reductionist liberal feminist thinking depicts minority women as passive victims of their oppressive cultures, and hence in need to be rescued by Western women. Besides, Okin is regarded as an Orientalist, imperialist and ethnocentric. This criticism is also stressed by the feminist Judith Butler (2000) who declares that “feminism works in full complicity with US colonial aims in imposing its norms of civility through an effacement and a decimation of local Second and Third world cultures” (p.

35). Similarly, this fierce debate voiced in opposition to Okin is also understood as “a common fate met by outsiders who dare to criticize” (Kukathas, 2001, p. 88).

On the other hand, a commitment to equality in a setting of multiple differences and power hierarchies is assumed to be achieved through creating a balance between feminism and multiculturalism. The possibility of integrating both discourses is described by Mookherjee (2009) as the development of “a multicultural form of feminism and a feminist form of multiculturalism” (p. x). Emphasising claims for equal rights, equal respect and equal worth for all individuals and social groups, she acknowledges that “the meaning of feminist justice, of multiculturalism and, indeed, of rights can only be articulated by paying attention to the interplay between the universality and cultural particularity of human interests” (ibid.). This idea is taken further by Kukathas (2001) as he argues that since feminism and multiculturalism stem from common concerns about equal freedom of men and women, and of people of different cultures or religious traditions, both theories³² should support “the value of individual freedom, the importance of human dignity, and the need for toleration rather than the suppression of difference or disagreement” (p. 85). A similar view is strengthened by post-colonial feminists and defenders of multiculturalism who reject all approaches that homogenize women as a universal category. Equally important, they maintain that “the assumption that women are by definition oppressed in minority cultures can be traced to several theoretical bases: the history of colonialism, depictions of the feminist subject, the limits of liberalism, and the use of binary logic” (Volpp, 2001, p. 1195). This tendency is more elaborated in the next section about feminism and the different ways Islam and Muslim women-related issues have been approached.

3.4.4 Feminism, Islam and Muslim Women

Religion has become a potent dimension of a number of women’s lives in contemporary Europe generating also concerns within feminist discourse, and as a result challenging its conceptualisations and grasp of issues such as agency, freedom and emancipation. Especially with the visibility of Muslim women in its secular public sphere, concerns to reconsider feminism’s historical rejection of religion were conceived as intrinsically androcentric and oppressive (Stanton, 1885; Okin, 1999). In other words, religion has become to an increasing extent an issue of interest within feminist scholarship as many

³² Multiculturalism and feminism as both concerned with a struggle for equality and the protection of women’s as well as minority rights.

Muslim women are rebelliously challenging western liberal notions about social development and secular modernity. To emphasize the complexity of this debate, I will present an overview about two different feminist perspectives on Islam and Muslim women; namely secular feminism and Islamic feminism.

Secular Feminism

Some secular feminists³³ tend to theorize religion as totally repressive and self-alienating to women. As Stanton (1885) pointed out earlier “History shows that the moral degradation of woman is due more to theological superstitions than to all other influences together” (p. 389). Such an approach accordingly indicates a dichotomy between *religion* as being pre-modern, irrational and outdated, and *feminism* as equated with civilization, modernity and liberation. Interpreted simply in negative terms, religion is perceived only as a constraint ideologically and institutionally, and even the embrace of religious affiliations or allegiances is viewed as a sign of false consciousness (Castelli, 2001, p. 5). More specifically, “this negative rendering of ‘religion’ is in many respects an ironic handover from Feminism’s own Enlightenment inheritance” (ibid.). To demonstrate, Okin (1999) views Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as myths that namely attempt to justify the control and subordination of women. She also argues that they encompass “a combination of denials of women’s role in reproduction; (...) characterizations of women as overly emotional, untrustworthy, evil, or sexually dangerous; and refusals to acknowledge mothers’ rights over disposition of their children” (p. 13). In the light of such an approach to religion, Islam is also regarded as a key factor in the subordination of women, and hence cannot be compatible with the principles of equality and human dignity. Moreover, Reilly (2011) draws attention to the assumption that “regressive, gendered religious practices are really only a problem for women in societies that are ‘not modern’ (i.e. in or from the global South) who, within this logic, are generally construed as ‘victims’ of ‘religiousness as difference’ or ‘religion as culture’” (p. 20). In this case, Islam is accused of promoting patriarchy, gender inequality, violence, and even extremism. Such a depiction remains influential and even intensified as Muslim women (those visibly religious) continue to be associated with passivity or vulnerability especially if they insist firmly on belonging to their Muslim community.

³³ I refer here to secular feminists who adopt a non-religious approach and not those feminist who view secularism as impartiality towards all religions.

Regarding some secular feminists, the *hijab* is a means to control Muslim women's sexuality who are actually socialised to values of female restriction, modesty and seclusion. The same view is sustained by Hirsi Ali³⁴ (2010) who indicates that "such is the tragedy of girls and women who by the strictures of their upbringing and culture cannot own up to their body's desires, even to themselves" (p.77). To put it differently, she argues that though most of Muslim women might appear to make choices and decisions autonomously, they are not actually autonomous. Besides, Muslim women are often seen as complicit in supporting patriarchy (Badran, 2008, p. 26). The same mode of thinking simultaneously associates religious visibility with political Islam, turning veiled women from unconscious and submissive agents into dangerous agents that threaten the security of democratic societies. This point is also stressed by Hirsi Ali (2007) who criticising Islam argues that "wishful thinking about the peaceful tolerance of Islam cannot interpret away this reality: hands are still cut off, women still stoned and enslaved, just as the Prophet Muhammad decided centuries ago" (p. 347). As a matter of fact, this "submission versus threat" frame becomes typical of most discourses on Muslim women. To clarify, Reilly (2011) states that

Undoubtedly, much feminist scholarship at the intersection of religion and politics has roots in a liberal Enlightenment tradition epitomized by a commitment to women's equality and human rights. However, despite 'freedom of religion' also being a cornerstone of this tradition, because religion is frequently implicated in endorsing subordinate roles for women relative to men and/or harmful cultural practices, equality and rights feminism tends to view religion primarily as a threat. (p. 21)

Given these points, Western feminism, in general, is accused of its failure to produce appropriate frameworks for thinking through Islamic difference, the fact that justifies the continuous "Othering" and denial of Muslim women's demands and concerns.

³⁴ Ayan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born writer and former Dutch parliamentarian. She is known for her hostile criticism to Islam. For instance, she states that:

Many well-meaning Dutch people have told me in all earnestness that nothing in Islamic culture incites abuse of women, that this is just a terrible misunderstanding. Men all over the world beat their women, I am constantly informed. In reality, these Westerners are the ones who misunderstand Islam. The Quran mandates these punishments. It gives a legitimate basis for abuse, so that the perpetrators feel no shame and are not hounded by their conscience of their community. I wanted my art exhibit to make it difficult for people to look away from this problem. I wanted secular, non-Muslim people to stop kidding themselves that "Islam is peace and tolerance" (Hirsi Ali, 2007, p. 307).

Islam Feminism

Different from the previous feminist accounts, Islamic feminism emerged in 1990s as a new form of feminism that is occupied with Muslim women's concerns in different parts of the world. As stated by Badran (2002) "Islamic feminism has a role to play as it transcends and destroys old binaries that have been constructed. These included polarities between religious and secular and between 'East' and 'West' "(p. 3). In other words, Islamic feminism was concerned at first with deconstructing orientalism and contextualizing Arab women's lived experiences. Besides, Muslim women intellectuals and activists start challenging the hegemony of patriarchal interpretations of the *Qur'an* and the *Hadith* assuming that the appropriation of religion by men is the reason behind its oppression to women. Grounded in re-readings of the Islamic traditions, Islamic feminists were able to distinguish between the texts themselves, and the interpretations that have perpetuated patriarchal traditions. To illustrate, Barlas (2005) reveals that "the Qur'an repeatedly warns against "following the ways of the father," which can be read literally or metaphorically as cautioning against adherence to patriarchal tradition, rule by the father, or both" (p.99). She also stresses the importance of reclaiming "the Qur'an's integrity by detaching God from sexual oppression" if we are to challenge "culturally androcentric" and patriarchal traditions in Muslim communities (ibid. p. 100). As a criticism to patriarchy within Islamic societies Mernissi (1991) argues that "If women's rights are a problem for some modern Muslim men, it is neither because of the Koran nor the Prophet, nor the Islamic tradition, but simply because those rights conflict with the interests of a male elite" (p. ix). Equally important, this view suggests that the discriminatory practices of some Muslims against women have no inherent link to religion, but rather lie in culture and socially constructed constraints. As a result, interpretations from a woman's perspective were carried with the aim of advocating freedom, equality and social justice from within Islam (Badran, 2008, p. 29). Specifically, feminists "used Islamic modernist arguments in tandem with secular nationalist and humanist arguments during the 20th century to successfully promote rights to education and work and a variety of other women's rights" (ibid). By so doing, they aim at introducing an egalitarian version of Islam that would empower women.

Debates concerning religion and its connection to feminism continue to raise enormous concerns about the appropriate strategies to address women's issues from within Islamic framework. Other Islamic feminists on the other hand have chosen to evoke secular, socio-economic and political arguments in an attempt to reform Islam for the favour of

Muslim women (Moghadam, 2002). In this respect, they believe that the Quran should be adapted for the purpose of accommodating a more egalitarian setting where “women would have full access to economy, intellectual, and political participation, and men would value and therefore participate fully in home and child care for a more balanced and fair society” (Wadud, 1999, p. 103). In this respect, Wadud’s leading one-off prayer event that was attended by both women and men is an example of feminist’s challenge to patriarchy within Islam. Equally, this reformist position was contested by feminists like Moghissi (1999) who conceives Islam as incompatible with the struggle for women’s equality given its misogynistic orientation. Nawal Al-Saadawi³⁵ holds the same idea emphasizing the inutility of engaging religion in the feminist struggle for women's rights. In the same way, the Egyptian American journalist Mona Al Tahawi argues that all religions are intrinsically patriarchal and inimical to women. She even disapproves Muslim women’s use of feminism believing that the kind of “respect the choice regardless” argument would result in the eradication and marginalization of women’s agency. Similarly, Ahmed (1992) is even sceptical to the contemporary “re-veiling movement” as a counter response to modernity. On the whole, advocates for this reform-oriented feminist trend maintain that Islam can and must be reformed and stripped of its patriarchal elements in order to guarantee equality for women and men. In what follows I will address the main issues and elements of postcolonial feminist theory and standpoint feminist theory as an introducing section to move to the research design and the methodology chapter.

3.5 Feminist Theories

3.5.1 Postcolonial Feminist Theory

Postmodern scholars in general are concerned with including the views and norms of the “Other” into research. Postcolonial feminists in particular aim at “de-colonizing the Other from the social and political forces that colonize, subjugate, disempower, and even enslave those deemed Other in a global context” (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser 2004, p.19). This approach to reality and knowledge production in fact stresses Harding’s (2004) emphasis on the involvement of the neglected and frequently silenced voices in the development of feminist scholarship, reconciling between theory and practice. That is to say, the normative

³⁵She is an Egyptian novelist, doctor, and militant writer of Arab women's struggles.

liberal accounts of human agency and the notion of a singular model of woman informing most feminist and political interpretations are to be challenged if we are to make room for other forms that have been frequently ignored or miss-understood. Opposed to the notions of the universal category of 'Woman' and the Western claim of modernity, such approach to research challenges also the singular model of the autonomous citizen that silences the Other being different. Besides, the fact that the nature of knowledge and truth "is partial, situated, subjective, power imbued and relational" urges the reconceptualization of the taken-for-granted norms in the increasingly diversified, secular and multicultural Europe (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser 2004, pp. 12-13). The principle of "difference" in this regard is important given that it provides "feminist research with a densely complex view of the world and the shifting environments that can be seen from within the research process" (Hesse-Biber and Leckenby, 2004, p. 214). Grounded on this claim, the model(s) of female subjectivity among Muslim women can be investigated exploring their particular understanding(s) of agency and liberation. This involves an attempt to develop an account that integrates the recognition and the validity of the Other's viewpoints regardless of what is dominantly accepted. Indeed, a research informed by a post-colonial critique of knowledge production would be "attentive to issues of difference, the questioning of social power, resistance to scientific oppression, and a commitment to political activism and social justice" (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser, 2004, p. 3). Post-colonial feminist theory in this sense remains a means to rethink the hegemonic, universal and liberal models informing most feminist and political accounts.

3.5.2 Standpoint Feminist Theory

The feminist standpoint theory is an approach that stresses the situated knowledge of the marginalised or neglected women, whose experiences have been silenced under the hegemonic social, economic and political discourses (Harding, 2004). It aims at giving voice to those women who have been talked *about* from privileged positions. Simply put, a standpoint feminist perspective is meant to produce an objective feminist scholarship that is opposed to the "(...) adding 'Otherness' to mainstream culture and the resulting desires and fantasies about the "Other"" (Hesse-Biber, and Yaiser, 2004, p. 106). This suggests that starting research from the lives of those directly connected with a given problematic, will maximise the objectivity of the results. Harding (2004) maintains in this respect that the marginalised women's position has given them the skills and the tools necessary to detect

social inequality and bias, and therefore they represent 'fertile grounds' for knowledge production. This entails that the social location of the subject and the social construction of knowledge are salient elements for the defining of the individual's perceptions and viewpoints. In other words, the feminist *intersectional* approach is significant for the challenging of the *universal* models of *womanhood* that present "Women" as "coherent, homogeneous group in which everyone has identical interests and desires" (Hesse-Biber, and Yaiser, 2004, pp. 103-4). Intersectionality in this respect refers to the interrelationships between gender and the various aspects of our identities including religion. Such a tendency facilitates the better understanding of the uniqueness and singularity of the individual. In fact, more importantly, the questioning of the taken for granted value-systems prevalent within the feminist and political accounts are to be achieved by the use of the standpoint theory elucidated by Harding (1987) as follows:

If one begins inquiry with what appears problematic from the perspective of women's experiences, one is led to design research for women (...) That is, the goal of this inquiry is to provide for women explanations of social phenomena that they want and need, rather than providing for welfare departments, manufacturers, advertisers, psychiatrists, the medical establishment or the judicial system answers to questions that they have. The questions about women that *men* have wanted answered, all too often, arisen from desires to pacify, control, exploit or manipulate women. (p.8)

To put it differently, privileging the situated knowledge of marginalised social agents would challenge the presumed normativity of equality, human rights and women's freedom. Based on this theoretical framework, women are given the opportunity to express their version of emancipation and negotiate their uniqueness in relation to other women, feminists and prevalent political views challenging as a result the "added in" research strategy (Hesse-Biber, Leavy, and Yaiser, 2004, p. 11). Moreover, the aim is to use the social "situatedness" of the subjects of knowledge as a source for maximizing objectivity and help "to gain value-neutrality in the results of research" (2004, pp. 54-58). Such a research tendency attempts to produce an epistemological informed perspective resulting from struggle *by* women who have been dominated, ignored or misrepresented.

3.6 Summary

In this chapter, I intended to introduce the theoretical background that framed my research and approach to the various issues related to the current debates about the presence and visibility of Muslim women in European public sphere, and in Norway particularly. This includes the different implications and tensions associated with forms of secularism and multiculturalism. Additionally, the relationship(s) between multiculturalism and feminism were outlined moving to the feminist discourse on Islam and Muslim women; namely secular feminism and Islamic feminism. Finally, I reviewed the main issues and elements of postcolonial feminist theory and standpoint feminist theory as an introducing section to move to the research design and the methodology chapter.

4 Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines in detail the research strategies, methods and procedures followed in this study. With the purpose of justifying the appropriateness of the particular approaches I selected to address my research questions, this chapter attempts to allow the reader better understanding of my findings and conclusions. At first, I will present a comprehensive overview of my research design including my choice of research topic, the appropriateness of the methodology as well as the method used for data collection. In the following parts, I will elaborate further on the sampling procedures, how the data have been recorded and managed, the strategies adopted for data analysis, as well as issues related to the ethical considerations applied in this research. As for the ethical and methodological challenges I encountered carrying out my research, I will be reflecting on them throughout the chapter; reflexively projecting my perspective(s) and my relationship to the subject of study.

4.2 Research Design Overview

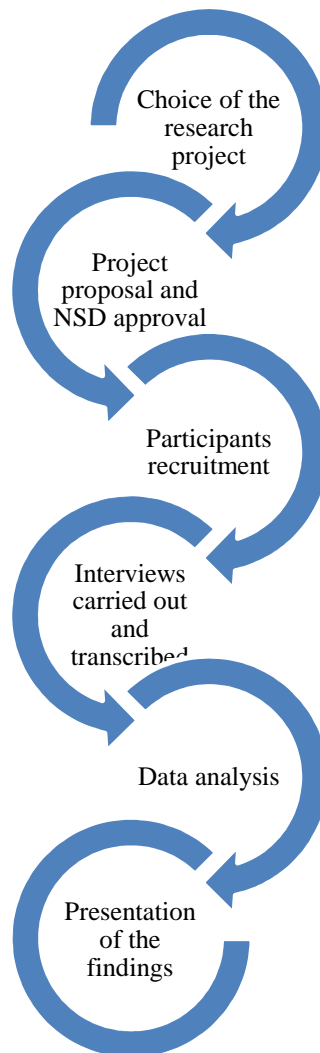
Below is a list tracing the progress of my research project (illustrated in Figure 3), and followed by an in-depth discussion of the overall process:

1. Preceding the choice of this particular research project, a review of the literature was carried out to gain an overview of the debate on “Muslim women” within the broad areas of feminism, secularism, multiculturalism and integration policies in Europe and particularly in Norway.
2. Subsequent to the proposal defence, I acquired approval from the NSD³⁶ to proceed with the research. The NSD approval process involved filling in an online application to confirm adherence to criteria put forth for the collection of personal information. The interview protocol and the informed consent (Appendix B) were uploaded as well.

³⁶ NSD refers to the Norwegian Social Science Data Services which is “one of the largest archives for research data of its kind and provides data to researchers and students in Norway and abroad. Additionally, NSD is a resource centre, which assists researchers with regard to data gathering, data analysis, and issues of methodology, privacy and research ethics” (Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), n.d.)

3. Potential research participants were contacted through Facebook, and those who showed interest to participate were sent a copy of the informed consent in a private message. Subsequently, participants were contacted by telephone to decide on a date and time for the interview.
4. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten Muslim female students at UIO.
5. Interview data responses were transcribed and analysed.
6. The presentation of the findings.

Figure 4: The sequence of research process



4.2.1 Choice of Research Topic

As a starting point, I conducted a review of literature in order to narrow down my research topic and acquire the theoretical and methodological framework to guide the development of my research proposal. More specifically, the focus of the review was to gain a better understanding about a debate that has gained significant attention both within feminist scholarship and European politics, namely the various discourses on Muslim women and the issues related to their religious visibility in the public space. With this intention, I realised that exploring the relationship(s) Muslim women (precisely female students at UIO) have to religion in contemporary Norway would result in more accurate perceptions on their concerns and particularities. As a result, I decided to develop a reflexive dialogue between Muslim women (*by themselves*) and some of those who have spoken on their behalf within feminism and politics. Adopting a pluralistic, eclectic and non-essentialist tendency to research, I examined and problematized various positions in the debate about secularism, multiculturalism and feminism with the purpose of developing new understandings about Muslim women's relationship(s) to religion as well as suggesting appropriate ways to accommodate their concerns and particularities. All in all, this research introduces a discourse that is barely represented given the growingly secular orientations of the European societies that regard religion as either violent or misogynist, namely the position of the "believer" Muslim woman. With the intention of giving voice to those women who have been most of the time talked *about* from privileged positions, this research drew on a feminist qualitative methodology.

4.2.2 Appropriateness of Feminist Qualitative Research

Driven by the concern to explore the voice(s) of the "Othered" (Spivak, 1994), specifically Muslim women, who are most of the time talked *about* from privileged positions, I have embarked on a feminist qualitative research. One reason for this choice is related to the multidisciplinary nature of feminist scholarship that makes it a source of a variety of methodologies as well as theories, the fact that provided me with the tools necessary to conduct a research *for* and *with* women. A point worth mentioning here is that I do not identify specifically with a particular feminist school; nevertheless, I draw on different

interpretations depending on the emerging themes and issues associated with the debate on “Muslim women”. More importantly, I view my research as a contribution to the development of feminism as it aims to challenge the already existing feminist writings on this particular issue. To begin with, feminism informed my research in various ways: including my choice of the topic, my focus on women’s experiences and the kind of research questions and objectives I set out to explore, my emphasis on reflexivity and concern with power relationships throughout all the research phases, and my attempt to produce an account that would generate positive social change. This demonstrates Hesse-Biber and Leckenby’s (2004) claim that “the theoretical perspectives, methodological commitments, and method process all engage cyclically with one another during feminist research” (p. 210). These points are to be explained in detail subsequently.

Equally important, reflexivity remains a salient feminist concern, and therefore I am aware of my position as “an insider” researcher who shares with her respondents the status of belonging to a religious minority. In other words, reflecting on my relationship to the subject of my research, I admit that my interest in this particular issue is not merely academic; it is also emotional. Moreover, the kind of feminist understandings, perspectives and theories with which I identify are obviously influenced by the fact that I am a Muslim, a Gender Studies student, immigrant, heterosexual and married woman. As a strategy to remain reflexive I take into consideration Harding’s claim that the researcher should not appear “as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests” (Harding, 1987, p.9). This subjectivity, a distinctive issue in feminist research, is illustrated in my choice of the topic, my literature review, the selection of a particular sample and my overall approach to the research. Nevertheless, my personal views, beliefs and convictions have been under constant scrutiny along the continuum of the research process. This reflexivity is considered throughout the paper.

Qualitative research, on the other hand, is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (p.17). Given the kind of objectives, research questions and the narrative I sought to introduce within the feminist scholarship, I found this methodology an appropriate one. It guided the research process in all its phases; including my selection of the subject of research, the method of data collection, and my interpretive practice. This is what Hesse-Biber and Leckenby (2004) underline arguing that “Epistemology, methodology

and methods are not de-linked from each other but interact in dynamic ways to produce new knowledge and this openness itself is also characteristic of how feminist researchers approach their work” (p. 210). In this sense, conducting an exploratory research through a qualitative methodological lens enabled me to document my participants’ perspectives through influencing the type of data I needed to collect, how I went by collecting it and the way I performed my analysis. As I will elucidate in what follows, this approach helped me reach an in-depth understanding of my participants’ insights through the qualitative interviewing of a number of Muslim female students at UIO.

To point out another key strength, this method of data-collection and analysis allowed me to capture the participants’ singularity, personal experience and thoughts as they were given the chance to present their background, and give their *own* definitions of terms such as freedom, emancipation and secularism. More significantly, they had the opportunity to express their position(s) regarding the general debate on Islam and Muslim women within the European as well as Norwegian setting. Indeed, the appropriateness of this approach lies in the fact that it provided the tools to gain access into data and voices that have been traditionally silenced within the feminist as well as the political discourses. As Silverman (2006) put it, “one of the strengths of qualitative research is its ability to access directly what happens in the world” (p. 113). In fact, by emphasising the “participants’ perspective”, this tendency helped me “make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln 2005:3). Moreover, it helps “understand the particular *context* within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their action” (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17). For these reasons, a qualitative approach to the issue of Muslim women provided the ability to raise new questions resulting in new understandings.

4.2.3 Appropriateness of Semi-structured Interviews

Qualitative research can be conducted through a variety of data collection techniques. In this regard, Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest that the data collection methods can be classified into four types: (a) participation in the setting, (b) direct observation, (c) in-depth interviews, and (d) document analysis. Nevertheless, the choice of the appropriate method(s) in research is primarily determined by the researcher’s epistemological and methodological perspective. As far as my research is concerned, I reviewed theoretical perspectives drawing upon relevant literature within the feminist and political discourses on Islam and “Muslim

women” in Europe and Norway in particular. On the other hand, empirical data was derived from the participants’ perceptions of life, freedom, women’s liberation, the secular state, and how they conceive the prevailing political as well as feminist views on Muslim women. To put it differently, in addition to the literature review, that played an important role in framing my research, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews for my data collection.

Qualitative interviewing as a method of data collection allowed me to explore the participants’ awareness of the mainstream political debates and the growingly feminist academic literature *about* Muslim women, and at the same time examine their position(s) vis-à-vis those who have chosen to talk on their behalf. This particular choice is based on the assumption that “Qualitative interviewing has been particularly attractive to researchers who want to explore voices and experiences which they believe have been ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past” (Byrne, 2004, p. 182 cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 114). Using interviews as a research instrument offered a number of Muslim female students at UIO the opportunity to voice their standpoints on this ongoing debate; through first presenting themselves, the role(s) religion plays in their lives, and the way they choose to define terms such as freedom, women’s liberation, feminism and secularism. On the other hand, participants were introduced to the different “secular” political as well as feminist views on Muslim women, and were at the same time given the chance to express their standpoints regarding those who continue representing them and their concerns. I intended at first to use a combination of methods of data collection given that this strategy helps to balance the limitations of each one. Additionally, I selected the interview as the primary method for data collection in this research for its potential to capture a person’s perspective of an event or experience, as maintained by Denzin and Lincoln (2003). Furthermore, it offers the researcher the possibility to reformulate questions, clarify statements and even ask for additional information.

Basically, for the purpose of answering my research questions, I utilized interviews as my primary method for gathering data. Another reason behind this choice lied in the fact that it provided the possibility to obtain an in-depth understanding of my respondents’ attitudes and perspectives on different matters associated with Muslim women. Indeed, “qualitative interviewing when done well is able to achieve a level of depth and complexity that is not available to other, particularly survey- based approaches” (Byrne, 2004, p. 182 cited in Silverman, 2006, p. 114). For instance, this particular method provided a direct, face-to-face interaction with the interviewee; the fact that gave me the possibility to exchange views and

perspectives and ask follow up questions to get a better understanding of complex issues emerging under the interview. To illustrate, when one of my interviewees answered one question saying “I try to be a good Muslim”, I had the chance to ask her more precisely: “What do you mean by a good Muslim?” In the same way, I managed to get her personal insight on “being a good Muslim”. In fact, qualitative interviewing reduces the possibility of misunderstanding or ambiguity. It is precisely for this reason that conducting interviews allowed me to better explore my participants’ own words vis-à-vis the on-going debates on Muslim women within feminism and politics.

Conducting interviews as a primarily method for collecting data in my research was also associated with my concern about exploring individual’s self-definition, singularity and personal viewpoints. On this point, Kvale (1996) describes the qualitative research interview as an “attempt to understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of peoples' experiences, to uncover their lived world (...)” (p. 1). Correspondingly, this technique is compatible with my effort to break out the perpetuating muteness of Muslim women’s voices given that it facilitated the capturing of their perspectives in their own words. Besides, interviews remain “special forms of conversation” that enable both the researcher and the researched to engage in an ‘interactional, interpretive activity’ where “meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning, nor simply transported through respondents replies” (Silverman, 2004, pp. 140-42). On the contrary, both the interviewer and the respondents are active participants and contributors to the production of the interview data. The assumption behind this view is expressed by Silverman (2004) as follows:

Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is actively constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not so much a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but rather a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge (p. 141).

Moreover, my choice of interviewing allowed me not only to listen to the voices of my participants, but also to see what might be hidden and silenced through other means of data collection. This entails that “listening empowers the participant and engages the researcher to be present” (Hesse-Biber and Leckenby, 2004, p. 216) resulting in a better understanding of how the participants make sense of themselves, their patterns, and their actions. In other words, listening also involves observing the ways in which the participant’s words are said, her hesitations, periods of silence, and even her voice volume.

Qualitative interviewing can be time-consuming in general, and therefore needs a well-structured plan. Important to realize, there is potential for bias in qualitative interviews and so is the data analysis. To clarify, not all people are equally cooperative and articulate, and some may falsify their claims either to project the version of the person they wish to be, or simply to please the interviewer. Even the researcher may fall into bias through projecting his/her personal views on the respondents; for example, I sometimes found myself directing my interviewees to identify with the my personal beliefs and claims. More importantly, it is a method that requires a well-qualified, highly trained interviewer. Besides, I was aware of the fact that “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods” (Maxwell, 1996, p.715) would maximise the chance of developing a more complete and accurate account. Nevertheless, neither constrains of time nor space (80-120 pages) would have permitted such a research procedure. In the following sections, I will reflect more on my sampling procedures and data collection method.

4.3 Sampling Procedures

4.3.1 The Sampling Strategy

Carrying on an exploratory qualitative research, I went for a purposive sampling strategy that demands the selection of participants according to predetermined criteria. This refers to the strategy in which “particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (Maxwell, 1996, p.70). In my case, the focus was on exploring standpoints of participants belonging to a defined community in a specific context. In view of that, the criteria for inclusion included (a) age range fall between 18 and 25 years, (b) being female student at UIO, (c) living in Norway, and (d) identifying with Islam. The logic behind this specific selection was associated with the fact that all the participants belong to the Norwegian Muslim young generation; a commonality that I regarded as an important feature for the development of a narrative about Muslim women in the contemporary Europe. However, the aim of this choice is not linked to the belief that their situated position has given them the skills and the tools necessary to detect social inequality and biases, and therefore are the “fertile grounds” for knowledge production (Harding, 2004). In fact, I was concerned with Maxwell’s claim that “selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide you

with the information that you need in order to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative sampling decisions” (1996, p.70). In the same way, my research questions and objectives were answered through allowing appropriate participants, “women from within”, to personally express their version(s) of emancipation and negotiate their uniqueness and position(s) in relation to religion, feminists and the prevalent political views. This appropriateness lies in their possession of knowledge and experience my research required, and had the time and willingness to participate.

4.3.2 The Recruitment Process

A total of 10 Muslim female students, aged 18-23, and from different bachelor and master programs at UIO, were recruited mainly through a social media channel. However, my two first participants were friends that I knew from my personal involvement at the mosque and youth organizations. As for the recruitment through social media, a *Facebook* page titled “*Sisters in University of Oslo UIO*” has facilitated the task. Immediately after posting a note on the page introducing my research and my need for participants, many students showed their interest to participate. While some contented with pressing the “like” button, or commenting the post, others afforded to take part in the research with pleasure and commitment. The direct encounter with participants was preceded by private message exchanges via *Facebook*. To demonstrate, I sent individual messages to potential participants providing them with more information about the purpose of the research, and thus a meeting place, time, and date was established for the convenience of the researcher and participant. Under these conditions, the recruitment process went smoothly and I faced no difficulties throughout the way. In fact, individual interviews were conducted and all the participants were given a gift in an effort to thank them for their help. This gift was in the form of a cup valued fifteen to twenty NOK.

4.3.3 Reflections on Sampling

Believing that *reflexivity* should be “deeply involved in the writing of the research text and the writing of oneself” (Hesse-Biber and Leckenby, 2004, p. 220), I must admit that I felt a sense of belonging and identification with my research sample and therefore it was necessary to reflect on my position as a researcher. Being *an insider researcher*, a Muslim female student myself, can result in the emergence of several biases, including the recruitment

of the informants that I think would share my views on life, support and strongly identify with what I have already in the mind. To minimize the impact of my insider position, I took into consideration other measures for recruitment. This can be illustrated by the fact that though I have many friends that can be potential participants in my research; I opted for recruiting people I met for the first time. Moreover, I formulated a semi-structured interview that incorporated open questions (...); a strategy that allowed me to examine and understand the informants' viewpoints and the distinctiveness of their choices, as well as to reflect on my insights and personal experience. Provided that "being an "insider"_ whatever it actually means_ is not a straightforward route to knowing" (Doucet and Mauthner, 2006, p. 40), I continuously negotiated and shifted my *positionality* throughout the research process. To put it differently, I conducted my research as an ongoing and dynamic conversation between my position as a researcher, my theoretical perspectives and the data collected. Indeed, what made my relationship with participants less problematic was their awareness of the different positions of the debate on Muslim women and their ability to speak for themselves assertively. Nevertheless, important to realize the possibility of emerging blind spots remains inevitable, and can influence their insights in a way or in another.

A further point is that most of the participants expressed their appreciation to the objectives of the project, which they found novel and needed, and they saw in their participation an opportunity to express their standpoints regarding the way(s) Islam and its conception on women are represented. Important to question here is the participants' great interest in my research. This can be explained by the fact that I made use of a web page that is assigned just for Muslim female students at UIO which means it is a group that puts its affiliation to a given religion in the centre, and therefore it is logical that its members would identify with the objectives of my research dealing with issues related to the presence of "Muslim women" in Norway. However, the interesting part is that almost all the interviewees had different ethnic backgrounds, and enrolled in different fields of study; most of them were born in Norway, while some came at an early age. Having provided a description of the sampling procedures utilized in the research, I will provide a detailed description of the data collection and analysis process that facilitated the qualitative exploration of this research topic.

4.4 Data Collection Method(s)

4.4.1 The Interviews Process

The interview questions were developed based on previous literature on the issue of Muslim women within feminism and politics. With guidance from my advisor, the questions were discussed, revised and modified until an interview guide was developed (Appendix A). This included a specific set of questions in a particular order to explore the participants' self-definition, version(s) of emancipation and their distinctiveness in relation to other women, feminists and the prevalent political views held on Muslim women. As a first attempt, I interviewed a friend of mine (a test interview) to examine my interviewing skills and the coherence of my questions. Prior to all the interviews, each interviewee was asked to review and sign the informed consent required for participation in this research (Appendix B). Accordingly, all the interviewees were promised anonymity³⁷ and thus accepted to be tape-recorded. At this instant, I conducted semi-structured person to person conversations in English; the fact that allowed me to take notes, guide the sequence of events and stress the themes that appeared significant to my research questions. Most of the interviews took place at UIO lasting from half to two hours. This depended on the participant's time and willingness to cooperate. Immediately after the first interview, the audio tape was transcribed word for word and reviewed to consider what main themes emerged and what needed to be improved for the next interview. In fact, this was an on-going practice throughout the data gathering process. Hence, this strategy allowed the flexibility needed to pursue new topics for exploration as they appeared in the course of the interview. To ensure confidentiality, I gave each participant a pseudo-name on the transcript as well as in my written account. Once data was collected through individual interviews, audiotapes were transcribed, methodological notes were written and then I conducted a detailed content analysis in order to develop a coding technique of the pre-set as well as emerging themes and categories.

4.4.2 Reflections on the Data Collection Process

³⁷ All of the interviewees were given pseudo-names.

As I mentioned earlier, reflexivity in the research process remains a salient practice that should inform continuously the constitutive stages of the research process including data collection and analysis. Namely, DeVault and Gross (2006) maintain that:

In the conduct of any interview research, feminists must maintain a reflexive awareness that research relations are never simple encounters, innocent of identities and lines of power, but, rather, are always embedded in and shaped by cultural constructions of similarity, difference, and significance (p. 181).

Grounded on this assumption, it had to be aware of the power dynamics in research, and therefore adopted a reflexive interviewing strategy establishing a non-hierarchical relationship with my informants. This was achieved through conducting active interviews where “the respondent’s (...), in collaboration with the interviewer, activates communicative resources as an integral part of exchanging questions and answers” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004, p. 154). For instance, my interview guide was organized in a way that would generate collaborative back-and-forth discussions. In other words, I intended to start with general and then more specific questions as a means to encourage the participants to reflect and negotiate their ideas and understandings about different issues. To demonstrate, we discussed first the meaning(s) of ‘the secular state’ before moving to talk about the secular Norway and the position of women in such a state. The same strategy was applied dealing with the different feminist approaches to Muslim women; I referred first to western feminism and then Islamic feminism, and finally participants were asked to reconsider their understanding of feminism and which version they would support.

A further point is that I was positioned “in-between” with respect to the specific points discussed, a fact that influenced every aspect of my interview practice. Accordingly, my personal background and feminist knowledge were obviously embedded in the type of questions addressed under the interviews. Besides, my insider status sharing some identity components, beliefs, and commitments with my informants affected my capacity to engage and communicate easily with them. This stand served as a means by which I managed to establish a certain degree of closeness to participants and thus gained access to their viewpoints. The most important is that ease and comfort was observed among interviewees as they actively communicated their personal opinions and experiences. Nevertheless, my dual role of interviewer and friend with two of my participants whom I have known through my involvement with Muslim youth activities in Oslo, required some distance and control over

my thoughts, feelings and involvement in the discussion. My initial intention behind this selection had nothing to do with emphasizing the lives of those women who I believe would support my personal insights. Basically, I went for this choice believing that the interview would not interrogate intimate details about the interviewees' lives, and that this unique experience would allow us to be self-reflexive challenging our taken-for-granted thoughts as friends who share various things in common.

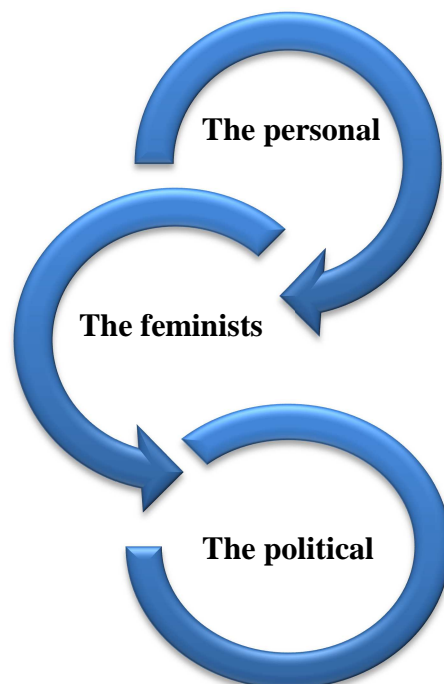
Being aware of the risk of reproducing the dominant perspectives on Muslim women, I was shifting positions dealing with a research sample that has been raised and socialized in Norway, unlike myself. This specificity made me aware of the importance of being more attentive to their unfamiliar experiences and perspectives regardless of what I wanted or expected to hear. For this reason, active listening remains a salient element of interview research to obtain the information needed. Interested in an inclusivity that recognizes and values *difference*, I sought to provide participants with “pertinent ways of conceptualizing issues and making connections” (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997, p. 125). I felt sometimes that I was exerting a kind of control over my interviewees either by directing the discussion in a specific pattern or by emphasizing the details important to me. Nevertheless, to minimize power differentials in this regard participants were actively implicated in producing knowledge based on the claim that “all interviews are unavoidably active meaning-making ventures” (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004, p. 157). In the next section, the focus will be on introducing the procedures followed in the data analysis process as well as a reflection on the whole process.

4.5 Data Analysis

Conducting a feminist qualitative research, I undertook a thematised analysis of my data involving examining, comparing, conceptualizing and organizing the participants' interview transcripts into interpretive categories. I used coding to identify recurring themes, key concepts, connections and contradictions in the data gathered. To illustrate, after looking at the similarities and differences between participants' perspectives, I first grouped text segments with similar content into separate categories, and then managed to classify them into major domains through a process of interpretation and continuous reflexivity capturing the distinctive features of each domain. Important to realize, though I was guided by my research questions and implicit thoughts, I remained open to new ideas emerging from the data with

the purpose of gaining a deep and nuanced understanding of the groups' standpoints and insights. As a result and grounded on my reviewed literature on the various issues linked to "Muslim women" within feminist scholarship, in debates about multiculturalism and secularism in Europe, and within the Norwegian context, I decided to divide my analysis patterns into three dimensions: including *the personal*, *the feminist* and *the political*. This framework allowed me subsequently to first account for (5.2) the relationship(s) the participants' have with religion and how their perceptions on life are influenced by such a relation. Secondly (5.3), I was able to capture the different positions these young women have regarding "feminism" in general, and the ways "Muslim women" have been depicted within feminist scholarship in particular. In the political part (5.4), the interviewees were given the opportunity to express openly their views on the ways their concerns have been represented within politics, their perspectives on the secular state, and more precisely their insights with respect to the accommodation of religious diversity in Norway³⁸. Indeed, my engagement with the literature as well as the new emergent ideas has shaped my interpretations resulting in a continual interplay between the data gathered, my existing theoretical knowledge and the analysis. I accordingly hope that the logic of my analysis will become more intelligible in the following chapters.

Figure 5: The sequence of my data analysis



³⁸ The diagram above illustrates the pattern followed in Data Analysis.

Reflecting on the data analysis process, I was aware that carrying out a feminist research should be “driven by, and aimed toward, a desire to challenge multiple hierarchies of inequalities within social life” (Doucet and Mauthner 2006, p.42). With this in mind, I managed not just in the data analysis phase but also throughout the whole research process to challenge power imbalances basically through doing justice to my participants’ insights and concerns. In fact, conducting a feminist research is mainly about treating other women, though in the “researched” position, as equal and not as subordinated. In this respect, I attempted to introduce an account that would “carry messages of empowerment that challenge the encircling of knowledge claims by those who occupy privileged positions” (Hesse-Biber, 2012, p.3); particularly politicians and feminists. The point I am putting forward here is in agreement with what Harding (1984) regards as “a more complete and less distorting kind of social experience” (p. 184) given that I am concerned with the standpoints of individual female voices speaking about themselves. However, my research neither stresses the validity of the “marginalised” and “oppressed” women’s accounts as Harding claims, nor does it privilege the viewpoints of a specific category of women. The emphasis is rather on capturing the personal perspectives of these young women through giving them the opportunity to comment on what have been written or thought about them. In other words, the purpose is “to see what is there, not what we’ve been taught is there” (Du Bois, 1983, p. 109). This tendency will be clearly illustrated in the data analysis chapter.

4.6 Summary

In this chapter, I endeavoured to provide a reflexive account of the research process with the purpose of justifying my choice of design and research method to address my research question(s). Describing the rationale behind my choice of the topic, my methodological approach, sampling procedures, the method used for data collection and my analysis strategy provides aims at providing a ground for the better understanding of my findings. I have also discussed some of the ethical considerations and issues encountered during the research process. In the next three chapters, I will introduce my findings in three parts; including the interviewees’ relationship(s) and viewpoints on religion (5.2), and various issues within feminism (5.3) and in politics (5.4).

5 Data Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses in the first place the relationship(s) Muslim women have to religion in addition to the various factors behind their identification with Islam in contemporary Norway. The second part introduces accordingly a dialogue between the Muslim women, feminists³⁹ and Islam. This includes their perceptions on “liberation” and “feminism” as well as their viewpoints regarding the ways their concerns and interests have been represented within both secular and Islamic feminism. The final section explores subsequently the ways Muslim women’s issues are talked about within politics as well as their insights on the position of religion within secular Europe.

5.2 The Personal: Situating Religion in the Life of the *Muslimah*

5.2.1 A journey towards truth and Inner Peace

Various factors behind the increasing identification of Muslim youth with Islam were determined, exploring my interviewees’ relationship(s) to religion in secular⁴⁰ Norway. One of these factors was mainly their quest for meaning and inner peace in today’s world of individuality, consumerism and materialism; or what may be referred to as “late modernity”. Simply put, my interviewees suggested that the profound understanding of the purpose of human existence, through faith, allows a person to position him/herself within a variety of different realities, and as a result find a state of balance and inner peace. Grounded on such a claim religious belief or faith can be understood as source of strength and at the same time gives meaning and purpose to the life of these young women. This *faith* referred to in this

³⁹ This includes secular and Islamic feminists as well as the perceptions my interviewees appropriated to “feminism”.

⁴⁰ I refer here to the meaning of the term “secularization” as religious decline, see p. 24.

context relates to what Ramadan (2010) identifies as the state of confidence, peace and balance and being at ease with oneself.

To begin with, Sarah⁴¹, questioning her position in relation to the prevailing “global models of social behaviour and consumption”⁴², expressed her scepticism to the mainstream beauty standards that continue to define and validate a singular version of being “a woman” as follows:

When you have a society with so much focus on things like appearance and how women have to look good all the time: women’s beauty is almost abused. It is almost vulgarized. It is used for commercials. (...) and over the years western society has become more liberal in that sense. Today, it is normal to see women wearing bikinis. So that has been a development of liberation of women even if that is not my definition of liberation, but that is the way it has been. And I think with that development it would make sense if at the same time you also have the development of a resistance towards that (Sarah).

This statement can be accordingly interpreted as a postmodern critique towards the grand narratives attributed to the liberating project exemplified in this case by the beauty standards. To clarify, Sarah’s position reflects a kind of rejection to the commercialized model of how a woman should be like, or what liberation stands for. In particular, she manifests a counter-reaction to a lifestyle where the focus on women’s body and beauty standards are exaggerated. Another point worth mentioning, in this regard, is Sarah’s critical thinking towards the taken-for-granted preoccupation with blindly following the fashion trend; especially as she distances herself from those who may associate “liberation” with being a “sex object”. This position may be also in agreement with what Giddens (1991) refers to as “reflexivity” being a defining characteristic of all human action in late modern society; Sarah’s selective attitude towards the various models of being a woman around her. To reflect more on this journey towards building one’s *self* in today’s world, Giddens stresses also the

⁴¹ All my interviewees are given anonymous names.

⁴² For Zembeta (2008), Globalization is seen by those calling for cultural diversity as a homogenising force that leads to “the formation of global models of social behaviour and consumption”, and therefore it presents an obstacle to plurality and it marginalises the nonconforming Other (p. 301). Different from this definition Casanova (2006) presents Globalization as the incorporation of “inter-civilizational encounters, cultural imitations and borrowings, diasporic diffusions, hybridity, creolization, and transcultural hyphenations” (p.17). See p.

fact that people no longer rely on local knowledge, traditions, religious guidelines, conducts or observation of others' practices to manage their everyday lives. However, he adds that this process is neither straightforward nor certain, and this is because choices must be made between a range of options and possibilities (ibid. p. 3). Moving to a similar claim, Linda argued that "Muslim women are definitely fed up with fashion, and they are trying to be more Islamic appropriate, and they know that the material world is not really something that can give them happiness, freedom, or anything in that way".

On the negative side, such an emphasis on faith as an alternative to achieving happiness over other material pursuits may be interpreted as a mere reproduction of what was transmitted to these young women by their parents, or limited to the range of options available to them. Nevertheless, the scepticism expressed by Sarah and Linda towards the worldly and material elements within society, and their selective approach to the realities around them illustrate rather a reflexive as well as rationalized perspective on life (Giddens, 1991). Likewise, these young women demonstrate a liberating position resisting sexism within society. Linda clarified additionally that "we live in a consumerist society, so you just buy things to make yourself happy, or just make you satisfied internally with products and materials. (...) you get tired of this routine because it doesn't give a purpose". Under such circumstances, these young women choose to return to religion for self-identification and in a quest for developing new adapted versions of "being women" in contemporary Norway. Underlining the importance of internal satisfaction, self-confidence and pride, Sarah stated that "I think I need an internal liberation; that I learn to acknowledge my self's worth and understand and have self-esteem". Important to realize is that this emphasis on "internal liberation" is thus a kind of struggle that young women are enduring throughout their journey to reconcile between their desires, belief in Allah "the Creator", and their internalized values and norms within Norwegian society. Giddens (1991) maintains in the same way that the *self* is "a reflexive project" that has to "be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (pp. 32, 52); and mainly in response to the social dynamics, and the transformation of the structures and meanings of life is a continuous process.

Equally important, the aspect of *context* seems to play also a significant role in young women's identification with Islam. Likewise, one interviewee indicated the influence of moving from a majority Muslim country to the multi-religious Norway on her growing interest in exploring Islam. She narrated accordingly that:

Well, I think before when I lived in (B.)⁴³ We were never raised very strictly Muslims because in B., you know, like 90% down there are Muslims and they are not very strict. You know they fast in Ramadan, they celebrate the Aid and stuff like that ... they don't necessary pray every day. So, it is like I learnt about Islam little bit in school. But other than that, it wasn't, you know, such a present part of my life as it has become later when I moved to Norway. So, I think after I moved to Norway, I was 10. I think I became more aware (...) You know, because when you come to a new culture, a new place and your original identity is maybe threatened because you come to a new society where people think very differently .I think that when it became more and more important, and, like, I start becoming more religious, like, my brother and my mother as well. And since then it has increased and played a part in my life (Sarah).

This comment illustrates exactly how the setting aspect influences the person's identity formation. It entails that moving to a host country engenders the need for reaffirming and preserving the most vulnerable and endangered elements of one's identity; which is religion in this case. Another important point in this regard is the fact that in Oslo (a European setting) religion has moved from being just about the performance of worship to a more individualized reflection upon the self in its relation to God and its creation. As pointed out earlier, spirituality in this context is more about the relationship one has with the sacred "no longer from the point of view of obedience to external authority but instead centralising the freedom of the individual" (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007, p. 170). In other words, young women are more concerned about "the believing" than about "the belonging" if we are to use Davie's (2000)⁴⁴ terms describing religiosity among the youth in Europe. Nevertheless, concepts such as "do-it-yourself religiosity" or "individualized" religiosity are incompatible in this context given that these young women are not creating alternative or individualistic forms of religion, but they are rather engaging in learning about Islam in an attempt to assess what have been transmitted to them by their parents, and better understand what they have chosen to believe in. The same view is sustained by a research on Muslim women where the findings reveal that "In fact, the quest to display 'authentic' or 'real' Islam encourages them out of the private family to practice their religion through study groups, academic reading and internet forums in the more public arena" (Vincett *et al*, 2008, p. 9).

⁴³ The country's name is anonymous for privacy reasons.

⁴⁴ Davie's claim of "belonging without believing" was discussed under "the secularization" section, see p. 26.

Much more interesting, reversing the position of faith from a majority religious environment to secular Europe exemplifies what Göle, (2012) describes in her article “Decentering Europe, Recentering Islam” as new dynamics of encounter between Europe and Islam. This contiguous contact and confrontation between Europe and Islam is interpreted as follows:

The location of this encounter, namely old Europe, is becoming a site of novel experiences, where we can no longer speak of two distinct civilizations separated by time and space. The discourse of civilizational difference does not, in spite of its popularity, capture social realities and social imaginaries that are shaped by transgressions of geographic frontiers, by cultural borrowings and hybridity (p. 668).

When Göle’s argument is looked at closely, it is important to point out that she advocates a new understanding of the presence of Muslims and the visibility of Islam in Europe, one that transcends the reductionist dichotomy of the “West versus the Rest”. This may be understood accordingly as a reference to the fact that Islam has moved from being a mere “immigrant” or a “cultural diversity” related issue, to rather a new relationship that young women (including the born Muslims, the new converts, and those who were not observant Muslims before) are developing to religion.

5.2.2 Forming the Self through Religion

As demonstrated previously, the greater number of interviewees asserted their resort to Islam in an attempt to understand and reform the *self*; an empowering experience that provides meaning to one’s positionality in relation to the different elements present in their lives; involving for example the parental expectations and the lifestyle structures. In this case, developing the *self* in late modernity is created through choice, individuality and reflexive thinking (Beck, 1992). With regard to my interviewees, several examples were narrated reflecting different motives behind their conscious return to Islam; as they prefer to call it. Notably, these young women have chosen to embark personally into a journey towards the *self*, setting aside assertiveness for reflection and investigation as human beings not as Arabs, Westerners, or Sudanese. On that account, one interviewee articulated her self-discovery of Islam as follows:

I came from a home that has a high level of education; like my father is also a doctor; my mother has been educated in economy and such things. So, we have always been like: “you need to find things on your own” (...) so, for me, it has always been: “Read about it. Find out why. Be sure about it” So, when someone asks you about it, especially here in Norway. You have to be able to answer and not only say because my Dad's Mum said so and my grandfather said so (Aisha).

With regard to this comment, one can interpret that investigating the correctness of some practises linked to religion, culture or tradition serves as a source through which these young women shape continuously their *self*. One may associate Aisha's independent thought with the fact of belonging to a middle class family. To clarify, raised up by a well-educated parents may be the reason behind Aisha's rational approach to life. Nevertheless, this assumption is limited since the same view is stressed by all my interviewees who maintained that learning about Islam have been part of their quest for identity and personality formation. Undoubtedly, living within a society with a plurality of beliefs and multiple realities, engenders a set of questions related to the different influential elements in one's life; including agents of socialization namely media, school, friends, the parents' background, and the virtual world as well. In an effort to balance and reflect upon all these conflicting elements, these young women found in their consciously chosen religion a perfectly flexible as well as adaptable way of life. In fact, “Against local customs, ancestral traditions, despotic patriarchy and daily alienation, they are convinced that more Islam means more rights and more freedom” (Ramadan, 2001, p. 58). To illustrate, this independent quest for knowledge about Islam was expressed by an interviewee who mentioned that:

So, you need to know where the red line goes about like boys and girls interaction. So, that is why we have to go back and read the Quran, read the hadith and all that. That is why I think this generation that has been raised up in the West, is different from other generations (Aisha).

Maturity plays also a significant role in this respect given the fact that the more grown-up one becomes the more responsible and serious he/she is about the future and life in general. “A lot of people ask questions about: “what is life? What is the purpose of life?” (...) and this results in that you go back to religion because you feel more confident in that religion” (Nora). One outcome of Nora's claim is the interconnection between understanding the purpose of life, feeling confident and religion. A point evoked earlier, this accentuated

approach to life, among most interviewees, may be understood as their internalization to those virtues associated with feminine passivity, obedience and submissiveness, which, from a secular feminist⁴⁵ point of view relate to gender-based restrictions within religion. With this in mind, Muslim women are perceived as complicit in supporting patriarchy. Another feminist insight I interpret women's religious compliance as their false understanding of their own interests, and therefore consciousness-raising⁴⁶ is a key element in this regard. Nevertheless, one of the main arguments against this assumption is the interviewees' emphasis on their conscious choice and autonomy as indicated by Yasmin who stated that "the more mature one gets, the more he/she learns and studies about Islam. So, one understands much more by himself. We are in a way born into Islam but, we cannot that much about it until we can actually understand it by ourselves" The same point was also identified by Jacobsen (2011) grounded on her research on young Muslims in Norway. She maintains that:

The young Muslims repeatedly stated that they followed Islam as the result of a personal choice, this ideally having been made on rational grounds, because Islam had proven, after close scrutiny, to be the one true religion. (...) the ideal way of being Muslim was thus one that realized individual freedom; Islam should be followed not out of tradition but because of an individual and free choice based *iman*⁴⁷. That individuality and free choice were guaranteed by Islam was something frequently expressed by young Muslims who, to make their point, would invoke the Koranic saying: 'There is no compulsion in the religion' (p. 373).

Indeed, these are students that have received their education within the Norwegian public-school system the same way as the majority population. In that case, liberalism and individual autonomy are key aspects behind their own conception of the "good life", and the decision they declared is based on their selective revision to the different options in their lives (Kymlicka, 1995). Besides, Most of the interviewees stressed accordingly how acquiring knowledge about religion helped them understand the purpose of life. "They are seeking knowledge about their religion and finding the truth and the purpose in their lives and then identifying with the Islamic view of freedom" (Linda). The development toward freedom in

⁴⁵ I refer here to some "secular feminists" who regard religion as incompatible with feminism being discriminatory against women, see p. 37.

⁴⁶ "A tactic usually associated with the U.S. Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) and other feminist-activist groupings born in the late 1960s. (...) Grounded in practical action rather than theory, consciousness raising aimed to promote awareness of the repressed and marginal status of women" (Consciousness Raising Groups, 2000)

⁴⁷ *Iman* is an Arabic word meaning belief or faith.

this respect is associated with one's relationship with *Allah*, the creator, as well as finding one's assigned place in the world (Abouleish, 2014). This explains somehow why most of the interviewees have chosen to define themselves in exclusively religious terms with a little emphasis on their Pakistani or Algerian backgrounds; a point that was already highlighted by a number of scholars. Ramadan (2004) for example clarifies that:

Above and beyond the diversity of their national cultures, the essence of their faith, their identity, their being in the world, is the same; they define themselves on the basis of points of reference that explain their sense of belonging to the same community of faith and at the same time, more profoundly, root them in the universe of Islam (p.9).

Equally important, globalization as well as technology has made it easier for the youth to access information and learn about everything; including Islam. The same research evoked earlier affirms that “their religiosity is constructed, even enhanced, through technology, especially the internet, and the educational opportunities available to them in an individualistic liberal democracy” (Vincett *et al*, 2008, p. 8). To illustrate, one interviewee claimed the following: “I feel that the old generation for example, that of my father and my mother had the religion but they haven't been given that knowledge to ask more, find out sources. So, I think that we are learning much more” (Yasmin). To put it differently, Islamic scholarship is much more accessible to this younger generation owing to advancements in technology and communication. This includes the use of the internet as a source of information about Islam and as a global network where contact with other Muslims is much easier. Moreover, the presence of Islamic Scholars in Europe who are consulted for opinions on the most diverse subjects as well as the arrangement of workshops, social activities and conferences related to Muslims in Europe plays a salient role in this regard. As one interviewee claimed “access to information is very easy, and there are many people with knowledge that come here and live here, and they speak English. You know, it is easier to get the knowledge” (Laila). “Yes, here in Europe, I feel that young people are more gathered, they have conferences and events about Islam. It is more about knowledge” (Yasmin). Based on the statements of both Laila and Yasmin, one can identify a “new form of belonging” among the youth; a belonging that provides a source of community and support in a secular context. Contrary to the idea of an increasing “individualized” religiosity and knowledge acquisition, and the progressive detachment from religious authorities (Imams and scholars), these young women seek collectively to become knowledgeable and educated believers.

Through their involvement in activities and gatherings, they learn, share and negotiate insights about what is “Islamically” appropriate behaviour in the environment they belong to. To recapitulate, through a journey towards the self and truth, these young women found empowerment and freedom in Islam, and thus gained more confidence and control over their future. In opposition to the Occident conceptualisation of freedom that went hand in hand with secularization and liberation from religion, freedom within Islam is only realized when human beings are neither “imprisoned in themselves”, nor “are a slave of nature”. In other words, the believer’s freedom is attained through experiencing “oneself as a spiritual being and knows oneself in harmony with the divine spirit in the world” (Abouleish, 2014, part 4). Furthermore, these young students perceived the acquisition of religious knowledge as a prerequisite for adopting a lifestyle that goes hand in hand with their deliberately chosen belief and at the same time with their aspirations in today’s world.

5.2.3 An “*intellectual jihad*” towards authenticity

Acquiring a proper Islamic knowledge was regarded as necessity to obtain freedom not only from the materialistic aspects of life, but also from the crisis Muslims are experiencing worldwide. Under these circumstances, Muslim youth have chosen to embark in an “*intellectual jihad*”⁴⁸ for the purpose of reconceptualising the true meaning of Islam, detached from what is presented in mainstream media. Linda, for instance, explained that “because, I feel that many Muslim women in Norway do not have a lot of knowledge about Islam and it is very important to know what you believe is the right thing. Islam is the purpose of your life, so it is very important to have knowledge about it, and act upon it”. In this sense, knowledge is also understood to be in a *sine qua non* relationship with faith, spirituality and the well-being of these young women. In fact, knowledge is a fundamental principle within Islam as exemplified in the Prophet’s saying: “seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave”⁴⁹. This focused importance of acquiring knowledge is maintained by one interviewee as follows: “But, I feel that this generation is like more curious about learning about Islam and knowing the rules, and why are the rules like this? They want to know everything in Islam” (Rima). Grounded on this belief, these young women have committed themselves to

⁴⁸ The true meaning of *jihad* in the Islamic tradition is “managing our natural, individual and/or collective contradictions, and seeking peace”(Ramadan, 2010, n.p.)

⁴⁹ Hadith (a saying) from the Prophet Muhammad; translated from Arabic: (Nahj al-Fasahah, Tradition 327) Payande, Abulqasim (1337), *Nahj al-Fasahah*. Tehran: al-Islamiyya Publication.

the study of their religion as a basic means of rationalizing their conviction as well as effectively transforming their lives.

Another point worth mentioning, for most of my interviewees, knowledge acquisition goes often side by side with their assessment of their parents' presumed religious practices. Simply put, they are seeking an authentic Islam purged from ethnic and cultural practices emphasizing a commitment to find their own answers to religious questions.

I think because a lot of parents follow culture. For example, one from Pakistan cannot marry a girl from Iraq because of the parents. But, in Islam it is correct (permissible). You can marry as long as he is Muslim, and also I think the younger generation explores these things to show their parents: "see you are not following Islam! You are following culture and it is wrong" (Rima).

This quote accordingly indicates that the youth adopts a religiosity that is more moderate and universal, in the sense of being detached from biased traditional practices such as same-ethnicity marriage, or exaggerated dowry. As revealed by Jacobsen (2011) "they orient their religious practices in terms of what is perceived as *halal* and *haram*⁵⁰, rather than in terms of their parents' religious practice" (p. 371). To clarify, Laila underlined that:

It is like our parents have much more culture than we have, I think, because we have more the culture from here (Norway), because we are raised here. So, our parents have much more culture that is like mixed with religion. While we have culture and we have religion as two different things (Laila).

In fact, Laila draws a clear distinction between culture and religion; a distinction that is often difficult to grasp especially for an "outsider". A clear example in this respect would be the distinction between the Moroccan cultural tradition of eating *couscous* every Friday and the obligatory "Friday prayer" that men are supposed to do in the mosque. With this in mind, preparing the *couscous* on Fridays can be dropped, or even replaced by the Norwegian typical Saturday lunch *risgrøt*. However, the "Friday prayer" remains a central practice in Islam that is not to be negotiated under the umbrella of "cultural diversity", but rather in relation to the principle of "religious freedom"⁵¹. Important to realize is that these young women manifest a selective and critical attitude towards the prevailing views about the notion of the *good*

⁵⁰ *Halal* and *haram* are Arabic words for what is legitimate or permitted and what is not in Islam.

⁵¹ This point will be elaborated upon in the conclusion chapter.

Muslim within their (cultural) communities. Again, this standpoint can be understood in the light of Beck's (1992) theory on *individualization* where he states that:

Each person's biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent on decisions. The proportion of life opportunities which are fundamentally closed to decision-making is decreasing and the proportion of the biography which is open and must be constructed personally is increasing (p.135).

Self-reflexivity in this respect becomes a continuous practice through which these young women individually investigate the various norms and ways towards emancipation forming at the same time their own singularity, distinctiveness and originality. On that account, Aisha mentioned that "we are always adopting something that is good in western countries: which is finding out things and, like, taking scientific and historical perspectives to see things, learn how to know what is the right source and not the right one". Moreover, these young women are perceived as "modern" because they use all type of modern techniques of communication and they are exposed to certain models of the self and technologies of individualization (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 368). Under those circumstances, spirituality and the quest for freedom are searched for through religion, namely "authentic" Islam.

Equally important, this association between (late) modernity⁵², globalization, emancipation and the resort to Islam was also related to the situation in the Middle East⁵³: "Education has of course a big role. So, I think in the Middle East, for example, and what we see today is because they know what is acceptable and not acceptable. That is why we see these revolutions⁵⁴ now" (Aisha). This liberating aspect of Islam is similar to Ramadan's (2012) argument when he pointed out that "In this sense, Islam as a religion was called upon to play a key role in the liberation and the political, cultural, and economic future of the Muslim majority countries" (p. 70). Additionally, this tendency among the youth may be understood as a new-born postcolonial reaction towards the discourse of the West, as the best exemplar of modern civilization, especially in a time where "social realities and social imaginaries are shaped by transgressions of geographic frontiers, by cultural borrowings and

⁵² Modernity and late modernity are used interchangeably.

⁵³ It refers to the Arab Spring: a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests that took place in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt and other Arab countries. (This began on 18 December 2010).

⁵⁴ It refers to the Arab Spring as well.

hybridity” (Göle, 2012, p. 668)⁵⁵. To recapitulate, these young women negotiate the diversity within their lives reflexively and from an in-between position constructing who they are and what they stand for.

5.3 The Feminist: An Ongoing Debate

5.3.1 Liberation “*within and by Islam*”

As mentioned earlier, the importance attributed to religion is also stressed in the interviewees’ perceptions about freedom, autonomy and women’s liberation. The key aspect of this argument is the association made between *Allah*, the creator, and his knowledge about what is best for humanity and women in particular. One interviewee made the following comment: “when Islam plays an important role in your life, many of your opinions obviously cohere with your religion. Also, I think Islam has given me an increased understanding of women's position and women's role” (Sarah). This accordingly suggests that for these young students living as women in secular Norway is defined predominantly by religion. The same view is articulated by Kenza when she stated that “women have, I would say, a very specific role in Islam and it does affect me and what I do as a Muslim, I guess”. Similarly, Laila claimed that “you know when you become more religious, you see that, as a woman, you have a special role you should play, but it is not like everyone should be the same”. Again these statements reveal the importance of acquiring religious knowledge as a means for seeking liberation from the worldly shackles that may confine or restrict their freedom.

Equally important, some of the interviewees pointed out that living Islam is an internal and a personal matter, and thus it cannot be judged by how one looks or dresses. As one prophetic saying indicates “God does not look at your appearance or your possessions, but He looks at your heart and your deeds” (*Nahj al-Fasahah*, Tradition 719). This entails to some extent that wearing the *hijab* for instance does not mean essentially being more pious, or more religious than others. Farah formulated this point comprehensibly when she expressed her viewpoint about the non-Muslims, or the non-observant Muslims:

⁵⁵ A quote evoked earlier, see p. 65.

So, I do it for myself and if somebody maybe is a Muslim, but don't follow this I don't want to judge them because I don't know their struggle. Or, maybe if they are not Muslims, and they go against these things, I cannot think badly about them. I am liberated, but I don't look down on women who are Western liberated. I become irritated when people judge based on the appearance (Farah).

An interesting point in Farah's comment is her emphasis on respecting difference and diversity within her Muslim community as well as within the whole Norwegian society. Her concern with living life in compliance with Islam does not make her better than other women who live differently. Another assumption of this view is that neither "Muslim women" should be treated as a monolithic category, nor should feminists remain "blind" of the importance religion plays in their lives. To clarify, while the donning of the *hijab* may be for some non-Muslim women, or some feminists⁵⁶ equated with oppression, control and restriction, for these young women it presents a tool to communicate their femininity, to take control of their lives independently and to reject a world where women have to endure categorization as sex objects. In this case, the *hijab* becomes rather synonymous with empowerment and emancipation from the oppressive forces of consumerism and materialism⁵⁷. On that account, Yasmin Mogahed (2012), an international lecturer and writer, argues in her book *Reclaim Your Heart* that:

As Muslim women, we have been liberated from this silent bondage. We don't need society's standard of beauty or fashion, to define our worth. We don't need to become just like men to be honored, and we don't need to wait for a prince to save or complete us. Our worth, our honor, our salvation, and our completion lie not in the slave, but in the Lord of the slave (p. 123).

This tendency can be viewed correspondingly in connection with the core feminist values since it compasses models of female subjectivity and freedom of choice. In particular, postcolonial feminism stresses the recognition and the legitimacy of the different models of "being a woman" regardless of what is dominantly prevalent, and thus becomes a means to "de-colonizing the Other from the social and political forces that colonize, subjugate, disempower, and enslave those deemed Other in a global context" (Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser 2004, p.19). Linda for example explained that "I would say that I found freedom in

⁵⁶ Such as Nawal Al-Saadawi, see p.40 in the theory chapter.

⁵⁷ A point discussed earlier, see p. 61.

my religion. (...) I see freedom as what the Creator says my freedom is .That is my freedom, and that is how I felt my freedom was”. With this emphasis on the Creator, these young women support the role and status the Quran and Islamic teachings prescribe for them. Different from the majority women within the Norwegian society, their quest for liberation is rather “*within and by Islam*” living up to its ethics and values as they are understood to embody freedom and equality between women and men. As put forward by Sarah:

Liberation, in my context, is having the opportunity to be the person you want to be, the way you want to be, not feeling disrespected because of the person you are, or the person you want to be, or what you want to express. In my context, yes, it definitely means being able to be who you want to be and be respected for that (Sarah).

Based on a postcolonial feminist theorising of freedom, autonomy and the human subject, deviating from the Western hegemonic notions of being a woman does not make it any less valid or less recognizable. Nevertheless, some countries such as France adopt certain regulations that “denies veiled women’s agency by seeking to impose a hegemonic Universalist model appropriated by secular feminist” (Gole and Billaud, 2011, p. 125). This reflects accordingly a reductionist focus on one model of autonomous citizen, while other differences are silenced or even suppressed. Conversely, a common aspect in all feminism(s) emphasises singularity as well as the importance of equality as a universal value and a crucial argument for advocating women’s rights. This means that a female emancipation that is opposed to the prevailing right to not be covered and rather be differently liberated is to be respected equally. Farah argued accordingly that “Liberation means that a woman can do what she wants and not be judged”. Resorting to religion in this sense can be interpreted as an act of feminist resistance and a liberating struggle that aims at eradicating domination in all its forms. Basically, this liberating process encompasses a deep knowledge about one’s worth as a woman within Islam, and at the same time one’s position among the non-religious majority.

5.3.2 Islam and the wisdom of restrictions

Regarding my interviewees’ insights on the restrictive aspect of religion, and its influence on their daily lives, most of them maintained that it is just normal to live in accordance with what Allah assigned for them as women. To illustrate, Linda argued that:

The restrictions are actually good for you because they are set by the divine, by the Creator. So, they are actually good for you. Maybe you do not know why the restrictions are good for you, or the wisdom behind it. So, I would not even call it a restriction. I just will call it the right way of living (Linda).

The same view is stressed in Esposito and Mogahed (2007) book *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*⁵⁸ arguing that “Muslim women do not regard Islam as an obstacle to their progress; indeed, many may see it as a crucial component of that progress” (p. 114). This is elaborated by Nora who claimed that “I actually feel that what is not good for me is always prohibited in Islam. It is actually a good thing for me because it allows me to think about myself and to have limits for myself”. Again, this submission and trust in Allah’s will is voiced with confidence and pride which demonstrates a strong belief on one’s choice and conviction. In fact, believing that there is always wisdom behind all the restrictions within Islam, these young women have chosen to comply with Allah’s “commands and to seek knowledge and wisdom that He has revealed and bestowed unto His prophet” (Anfindsen, 2008, p. 442). The interviewees narrated accordingly several examples, where their claims stressed human being’s need for control over one’s self and desires. For Aisha:

There are a lot of things that you need to control. Yes, of course sometimes Islam restricts some of these desires, and I don't think that it is a bad thing. It is a good thing because sometimes it is not always a good thing to follow your desires. It can be everything from like eating chocolate to different things. Like, sometimes I have this idea of health and Islam. For me, your body is like a gift from God and you have to take care of it. You will be asked about it. “Why did you hurt yourself by eating a lot of chocolate?” (...) In Islam, it is not that you can't do it. But, you have a different way to do it. Of course you can have a party, but it is a different way with your

⁵⁸ This book is the product of the Gallup World Poll's massive, multiyear research study. As part of this groundbreaking project, Gallup conducted tens of thousands of interviews with residents of more than 35 nations that are predominantly Muslim or have significant Muslim populations. Between 2001 and 2007, they explored the voices of Muslims globally on critical issues.

Gallup, I. (2008). *Home page for Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*. [online] Gallup.com. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/press/104209/who-speaks-islam-what-billion-muslims-really-think.aspx> [Accessed 9 Oct. 2014].

friends, with girls, or maybe only with your family. There is a different way. It doesn't mean that the other way is wrong, or something” (Aisha).

In this sense, living in compliance with Islamic teachings becomes a “disciplinary practice” that influences all the aspects of life; ranging from health care, nutrition and manners to sexuality.

Such an emphasis on self-improvement and refashioning is often interpreted as submission, obedience and passivity within feminist scholarship. As a result, Muslim women are accused of subverting the achievements of the feminist movement by submitting to “the demands of religious institutions and religious authorities” (Souaiaia, 2008, p. 91). Additionally, “by accepting the framing of women’s struggle within the Islamic discourse, Muslim women are legalizing the limitations and restrictions imposed on them in the name of religion” (ibid.). The point presented here demonstrates the complexity of theorizing “difference” within feminist scholarship. Indeed, academic feminists’ frequent failure to incorporate “Muslim” women’s difference is explained by Lazreg (1990) as the result of reducing “Islam to one or two *sura*⁵⁹, or injunctions, such as those related to gender hierarchy and the punishment meted out to adulterous women (which is also applied to men)” (p. 330). To put it differently, Lazreg points out to the literary approach some feminists adopt in their understanding of issues related to Islam, resulting consequently in misquotations and misinterpretations of both the Qur'an and Prophet Mohammad's Hadith. This significantly illustrates the clash between a support for a commitment to autonomy and a resistance to woman’s insistence on adhering to a particular religion grounded on the belief that this may cause her a substantial harm⁶⁰. In other words, equating cultural discriminatory practices such as the extreme cases of female circumcision, honour killing and forced marriages with Islam presents a major obstacle to the understanding of the factual experiences of Muslim women. As a matter of fact, the liberal definitions of terms such as freedom and autonomy are not always able to encompass the experience of the believer whose final authority of truth is Allah. In other words, this aspired self-reform through obedience and submission to “God’s will” should be interpreted with more understanding if we are to speak in the name of Muslim women.

⁵⁹ *Sura* is the Arabic word for the verse from the Qur'an

⁶⁰ Okin (1999), see p. 33.

Another point in Aisha's statement is the fact that Islam provides *Halal*⁶¹ alternatives for enjoying life without being compelled to follow the mainstream, which according to her is not necessarily wrong, but just different, and thus should be respected. Another important point here is the individual's responsibility to care and balance between the needs of his or her own *body, mind* and *soul*, and this is actually through moderation. Some examples from the *Qur'an* are as follows:

{ . . . Eat and drink: but waste not by excess, for Allah loves not the wasters.} (Qur'an 7:31)

{ . . . But say, 'O my Rabb⁶² Advance me in knowledge.'} (Qur'an 20:114)

{And keep your soul content with those who call on their Rabb morning and evening, seeking His Face; and let not your eyes pass beyond them, seeking the pomp and glitter of this Life; nor obey any whose heart We have permitted to neglect the remembrance of Us, one who follows his own desires, whose case has gone beyond all bounds.} (Qur'an 18:28)

The three verses demonstrate subsequently the individual's duty to be moderate in one's intake of food and drink, to enlighten one's mind through seeking knowledge, and finally to take care for one's soul through various kind of worship and through striving to live in accordance with Allah's commands. Nevertheless, these remain ultimate goals for Muslim women who also mentioned those moments of weakness and struggle. In fact one of the interviewees commented that

But then again, I can say that I have had those thoughts before and maybe I have them again, you know. Where I feel like: "Ah, I would like to do this, but I can't because I have to do this and this instead, because I am a Muslim, or I want to do something but because I am constricted..." I have thought that way before, but when I look back on it, it is more that my way of thinking that was wrong, and that my perspective was limited. I was actually limited" (Sarah).

In addition to this continuous struggle for self-discipline, there is an emphatic focus on the cognitive limitations human beings have. To put it differently, it is sometimes difficult to comprehend the wisdom behind some restrictions such as the Islamic approach to the law of

⁶² *Rabb* is an Arabic synonym of *Allah*; meaning God.

inheritance⁶³ that seems challenging to the values of democratic societies when perceived from a non-Islamic perspectives; whereas, for Muslims it presents a reasonable system.

Even though conforming oneself to the Islamic norms and ethics in the Norwegian secular context remain an everyday challenge, most of my interviewees interpreted these constraints as logical since they are set by God, the Knower. Again, Jannah argued that “No, I don't feel that Islam is an obstacle for me. I feel that it rather helps me. I believe that what I have learned about being a women and the respect I have for myself as woman, I actually learn it from Islam”. Based on a postcolonial feminist approach to knowledge production, this personal choice, though taken on religious grounds, remains legitimate, and therefore should be respected. Such an approach stresses the equal recognition of diversity of paths, and rejects “the one size fits all” notion of womanhood⁶⁴. Another important point is that while almost all my interviewees were aware of the fact that other women do suffer from all kinds of social and cultural restrictions that have no religious justification, they indicated that they had never experienced any form of discrimination. Bearing in mind the previous arguments, one can assume that postcolonial feminism provides the possibility for any effort to deal with the claims of Muslim women. It accordingly challenges the normative narratives about the “Other” as well as it rejects the single story about the subject “woman” providing room for alternative definitions and ways of being.

5.3.3 Transcending Boundaries: A believer’s perception on “feminism”

When asked about their understanding of the word “feminism”, most of my interviewees argued that it refers to “advocating for women's rights and women's equal worth in society” (Sarah). At the same way, feminism was associated with every woman that “fights for her rights, and who doesn't accept being oppressed by a man” (Nora). In other words, “feminism means that women have the equal rights and the opportunities in comparison with men” (Linda). These arguments accordingly reveal that these young students possess an

⁶³ In Islam, a man inherits twice as much as a woman (in some cases). This seems discriminatory against woman, and therefore it needs to be understood from within the Islam.

NB: the law of inheritance was just given as an example of how difficult it is, especially for an outsider or even a Muslim, to understand the wisdom behind norms and regulations within Islam. For more information about this subject see: *Chaudhry, Z. (1997) The Myth of Misogyny: A Reanalysis of Women's Inheritance in Islamic Law. Albany Law Review. 61 pp. 511-555.*

⁶⁴ For more information about postcolonial feminist theory, [see p. 40](#).

awareness of the main concerns of feminism; including women's subordinate position and gender as a problematic category within society. Even though most of the interviewees demonstrated a well-informed interest in feminism, two of them avoided the label while the others were critical to the fact that *feminism* has been concerned with an advocacy for an essential sameness between men and women. To clarify, Linda commented: “For me, it means that women are trying to be equal to a man. Not equal in the sense that they have the same worth, but they are trying to be equal in a way that they are trying to be as men and not embracing the feminism”. Similarly, all my interviewees rejected assertively the idea of “being like or stronger than man” articulating other ways of thinking about *difference and sameness* and its relation to equality. As an illustration, Aisha equated feminism with the “woman who does everything not to be a woman; to do everything to be like the strongest thing ever, sometimes even stronger than a man, and not equal”. Being sceptical to such an approach, most of my interviewees acknowledged that women and men are equal before God but different, and thus reject to view man as “the standard”. Such a position can be accordingly connected to Okin’s (1999) view on *feminism* being “the belief that women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognized as having human dignity equal to that of men , and that they should have the opportunity to live as fulfilling and as freely chosen lives as men can” (p.10). Likewise, Linda was rather supportive of human dignity, equal opportunity and freedom claiming that “I don’t need to be like a man, to behave like a man. I am different and I am happy with that”. In this sense, the viewpoints of these young Muslim women reflect a deep awareness of the feminist tendency that aims at deconstructing the social dualities that tend to privilege one particular sex over the other⁶⁵. At the same time, they believe, from an Islamic perspective, that the principle of complementarity is at the centre of the conception of gender roles; a common principle within the different feminist trends.

Another controversial point was maintained by two interviewees who viewed *feminism* as synonymous with the Western lifestyle; the fact of undressing women and encouraging dating and drinking. This attributed bad reputation to feminism was articulated as follows:

“(…) I think that the West is like “we need to free the woman and like undress her”
(Laila).

⁶⁵ A central assumption within feminist scholarship.

“Often when you hear about feminism and all that, it is more about being free, and they often mean that you are free if you dress in a certain way. You are, I would say, a kind of light-clothed” (Kenza).

In the light of these viewpoints, it seems that there is often a link between feminism and liberation in sexual behaviours on the one hand, and between religion and piety on the other. In the European context, such a perceived binary division between the sacred and the secular within feminism may be understood in relation with the secularization process. To explain:

When representations of personal identity shifted away from Christianity from 1960s, secularization advanced. The liberalization in sexual attitudes and behaviour and the advent of feminism issues major blows to Christian religiosity. In the industrial period women had been identified as the main carriers and supporters of religiosity, so when women accepted feminism and sexual liberalism as alternative resources for identity construction, this was a significant setback for the church. Church attendance declined sharply, and femininity ceased to be associated with piety (Vincett *et al*, 2008, p. 4).

In contrast, these young students manifest a different relationship to religion blurring the boundaries between what have been assumed as fixed categories (public/private and religious/secular). As highlighted through the analysis, they are living out their religiosity not just in private, but also in public, and thus emphasizing their agency in that choice. Indeed, “the non-separation of the body, the spatial, the social and the religious is a major theme in women’s spirituality” (ibid. p. 12). Correspondently, some interviewees indicated that within feminism women’s interests and concerns have always been defined from a mere Western and singular perspective that does not take into consideration diversity and difference among women. In other words, feminism is seen as a mere projection of the lives and the experiences of *white middle class Western* women. To illustrate, “what is typical with Western feminism is that you are just like each other and nothing is different. Yes, just like that” (Aisha). Notwithstanding, nearly all the interviewees expressed a relativist postcolonial perspective to feminism arguing for the accommodation of the needs and concerns of all women regardless of their ethnic, racial or religious differences. With this intention, they called for mutual respect and recognition of plurality within the category “Woman”. In fact, they believe that the voice of Muslim women is to be heard in all its diversity. Then again replacing *equality* with recognition of *difference* as a central concern of feminism is often criticised. For instance, Jeffreys (2012) explains that “the difference approach had made it very difficult for

feminist theorists to question culture or religion without implications of racism being directed to them” (p.86). This claim reflects accordingly an implicit scepticism to cultural as well as religious diversity within feminism.

Most important, other interviewees were in favour of a commitment to social justice in the hope to eliminate the social structures that continue perpetuating injustices against not only women, but also men, children and the non-confirming Other within. Rima argued accordingly that:

(...) If I see a man being oppressed, I would do the same for him as I would do for a woman or a child. It is more about justice; that you have to do the right thing and try to help people without thinking “Is it a woman? Is it a Muslim? Is it a man? Is it a Christian?” So, I don’t have a definition on feminism, seriously (Rima).

This standpoint is defined by Barlas (2005) as “an egalitarian sexual praxis that will also allow Muslim women (and men) to experience the divine as a liberatory force in their lives” (p. 101) ensuring that no one is to endure injustice or discrimination because of his or her difference. To put it another way, the inability to fit comfortably into the majority category because of one’s race, culture, religion or class should not be an excuse to exclude or marginalise certain women or men. Furthermore, the common issue of the continuous struggle against women’s oppression and inequality was also raised by most of the interviewees. They maintained consequently that though living in a democratic country, there is still much to be done in term of equalising women’s position within society. As stated by Smith (2008) “women still face occupational segregation in the workplace, a gendered wage, ‘glass ceilings’, overrepresentation among part-time and low wage workers, the double burden of unpaid care work and wage earning” (p. 131). A similar view was held by one interviewee who stressed the significance of feminism in contemporary world:

Feminism is very important for me because although we call ourselves modern and we have got our rights as women, yet there many oppressive practices that we should fight against such as sexual harassment and the fact that women are helpless and they cannot defend themselves (...) It is important for me to work on equality because though women have similar education and work, they are still paid less than men. Society has accepted that it is just like that, but not me. I am with equality both in

work places, schools and in public. The world is not as it should be when it comes to women” (Jannah).

Another key point in this discussion in this respect is the emphasised compatibility of Islam with modernity, democracy, social justice and human rights expressed by a number of interviewees. Barlas (2005) declares openly that “in my own case, for instance, I came to the realization that women and men are equal as a result not of reading feminist texts, but of reading the Qur’an. In fact, it wasn’t until much later in my life that I even encountered feminist texts”(p.11). Similarly, these young women underline the role Islam plays in empowerment and social change. With this in mind, they are more concerned about reformulating concepts such as *liberation* and *equality* based on Islam, and not the opposite. In fact, they identify growingly with Islam rejecting the mainstream standards that expect women’s agency to take a certain shape in the public. One can accordingly interpret the failure of some feminists as well as politics to understand and interpret Muslim women’s “journey” given either their marginalization of the centrality religion plays in their lives, or their inability to distinguish between faith and cultural traditions when dealing with Islam.

5.3.4 Muslim and feminist: a compatible combination

Realizing⁶⁶ that advocating feminism encompasses a variety of ideas and perspectives, the great majority of my interviewees chose to appropriate the term to their commitment to religion. Being a feminist and Muslim in this regard was described as an advantageous combination that would allow one to work for the cause of Muslim women’s rights. Grounded on an Islamic perspective to feminism, they suggested various ways of adopting feminism. In other words, the statements of most of my interviewees suggest that they are for feminism on the condition that they define its content and goals. For Sarah, challenging the cultural practices that discriminate against women is important in this respect. She additionally mentioned the possibility of reinterpreting some Islamic texts if needed depending on the correctness of such an approach to religion. In particular, she maintained that:

As a Muslim feminist, I would work to free society from the cultural norms that oppress women and that have nothing to do with Islam. That should be one of the goals at least. And then secondly if it is so that we believe that some interpretations

⁶⁶ During the interviews, we discussed different feminist positions regarding Muslim women.

might be oppressive to women, I would want to change that. Now, I don't know if that is right because I don't know a lot about that (Sarah).

This includes the patriarchal traditions that are often legitimated in the family milieu with reference to Islam. For example, in some Arab cultures husband and wife are not supposed to have prior contact before the wedding ceremony; however, in Islam sexual intercourse is immediately justified through the marriage contract. An even more extreme example would be that of the bride's virginity⁶⁷ proof on the wedding day. This Moroccan tradition is described by Crapanzano (1985) as follows: "The bride's mother or mother-in-law rushes in as soon as possible to inspect the wedding cloth for blood and then dances out to the guests, bearing it on a tea tray on her head" (p. 31). Such unjustified practices have no support from religion, but are rather condemned within Islam. For this reason, Nora argued that:

They have to separate culture and religion. Many Muslim women need a voice (...) I am not oppressed, but there are many women in the Arab worlds or Pakistan that are also oppressed. It is a problem and they are Muslims. It is not because of Islam, but they are Muslim woman that are oppressed, and men who are misusing the word of Islam. That is why we need women who fight for their rights (Nora).

In like manner, Farah suggested that as, an active Muslim feminist, she would work with Muslim women, especially in Muslim countries, with the aim of making them aware of their honoured position and the rights they have within Islam. This claim is in agreement with Robert's (2005) explanation: "It is not Islam that oppresses Muslim women; it is the lack of knowledge or the lack of application of that knowledge that oppresses" (p. 248). To clarify, Rima pointed out that "In Islam a woman is really put up because it is said that paradise is beneath your mother's feet and not your father. So, I see a lady without thinking that she is wearing a miniskirt or a hijab. I have a lot of respect for woman, and that is because of Islam". Similarly, several examples of this kind were narrated by other interviewees, where the claim reaffirms a collective struggle for empowering Muslim women as well as demystifying the prevailing fallacies about Islam. Yasmin for example argued that "I could speak for Muslim women. I don't call myself a feminist, but maybe I am". By the same token, Nora conveyed the fact that "It is actually possible for a Muslim woman to be a feminist because you know your rights" Similarly, Rima stressed that "I don't think that it is a problem to be a Muslim feminist. I would think that it is an advantage".

⁶⁷ A tradition still used in some Moroccan rural areas; a practice forbidden in Islam.

Grounded on these comments, one can deduce that the main concern of these young women is to communicate that knowledge acquisition about “the true Islam” is the means with which to liberate women even in Western contexts. “You can definitely be a feminist and a Muslim because it is like you can just show how many rights we have in Islam and how a woman is so much appreciated and honoured. It is like we had the rights a long before the West. We just have to show how beautiful a Muslim woman is in the religion” (Laila). In fact, they affirmed that Islam itself pioneered women’s rights, an advocacy to freedom and justice. A similar view is expressed by Mernissi (1991) who argues that “we Muslim women can walk into the modern world with pride, knowing that the quest for dignity, democracy, and human rights, for full participation in the political and social affairs of our country, stems from no imported Western values, but is a true part of the Muslim tradition” (p. viii). According to Yasmin, “when one speaks within the European and academic sphere I think that Muslim women should stand forth because the notions of democracy and equality are not synonymous for justice. Democracy does not give a high status to a woman”. In view of such a criticism to the current position of women within democratic societies, one can identify two points. This may include the double burden⁶⁸ that some women are subject to as a consequence of the modernization project that expects the individual to be independent and self-sufficient no matter his or her capacities. Another point may be the fact that some democratic countries, as France for example, still discriminate against the non-confirming Other. Under those circumstances, Islam is presented as the best model to follow especially with respect to women as Nora put it: “I think that if you learn about Islam, you will find that women have so many rights that have not been shown in media (...). Since I learnt a lot about my religion and women in my religion, I have learnt that women have many rights than it seems to be” (Nora). Notably, some even went into justifying Islam as a feminist religion citing teachings from the Qur’an, and thus did not see any problem with being both religious and hold feminist attitudes. To illustrate, Jannah maintained that “I feel that Muslim women can actually define themselves as feminists more than other women who are not so religious because they have a deeper understanding of what it is to be a women and what it is to be a Muslim”. In this case, one can claim these young Muslim women are “modern” without being

⁶⁸ Refers to “the dual oppression experienced by women who are both paid workers and unpaid homemakers, wives and mothers in the household” (Prentice, 2000, p. 145).

“Western” (Ramadan and Amghar, 2001, p. 57). Modern in the sense of being critical to both the popular Western mainstream trends as well as their parental cultural practices.

Exploring the interviewees’ standpoints on the Islamic feminists’ advocacy for the re-reading of the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* from a woman’s perspective believing that the patriarchal interpretation of religion is the reason behind the oppressive practices against Muslim women, nuanced views were encountered. While some of the interviewees were sceptical to the idea, others appreciated it, and thought that reinterpreting some issues in Islam by women can be an interesting project. A central feature underlying this argument is that though embracing Islam as a belief and a lifestyle means living up to its foundations; however, many issues remain open to reconsideration and *Ijtihad*⁶⁹. This is exemplified in Aisha’s scepticism to the limitation or prohibition against *women's travelling alone*⁷⁰. Describing her attempt to persuade her mother, she stated:

(...)But, for me when I want to travel, it is always for a seminar, or for a work, or something like that. She doesn't like it at all. In Islam, I know, there are examples. I know, I am like reinterpreting... like if a woman travels alone, a lot of Muslims say: No, it is haram and it is not allowed and all that. It is not really that because if you go back in Islam there is a woman who came to the prophet PBH and said to him: “I don't have any family and I want to go to Hajj” for example. And then he told her that: “every Muslim is a brother and sister” So, that is an example. .. In that time, it is understood that a woman couldn't travel alone because just traveling from one city to another was one of the hardest things, and even here in Norway, like 200 years ago, it is not really the safest thing. I think it is more about safety that woman shouldn't travel alone. But I can't find something that is concrete about that woman can't travel alone or live alone if she is safe. I think this part is something that needs to be worked on. I don't think that it is bad that woman can travel if it is safe, of course, especially if it has something to do with work, education and such things. So, this is something I would like that someone that is well-respected to re-interpret it (Aisha).

⁶⁹*Ijtihad* refers to “a creative and comprehensive intellectual effort by qualified individuals and groups to derive juridical ruling of given issues from the sources of Shari’ a in the context of the prevailing circumstances of Muslim society” (Kamali, 2008, 165).

⁷⁰ Such a prohibition is not mentioned in the Qur’an, but it has been an issue of debate among scholars.

This statement accordingly reflects Aisha's reflexive capacity to question her mother's restrictive ideas based on her personal knowledge and research about the subject within Islamic scholarship. It also reflects the openness of Islam to new interpretations suitable to the demands and needs of individuals with respect to their particular context and circumstances. In fact, "the issue of reform and renewal and the debate about what constitutes reform are nothing new and date to Islam's early history" (Hunter, 2009, p. 4). This means that though the Qur'an cannot be modified, re-interpretation within Islam has always been possible in response to the changing of priorities and understandings of *fatwa(s)*⁷¹ within context. Equally important, some interviewees argued that it does not matter if it is a man or a woman understanding of the *Quran* and the *Sunnah*, because having the appropriate knowledge and qualification for interpretation is more salient in this regard. They maintained furthermore that this area of specialization is the work of the Muslim *Ulama* and the experts in the field, and not feminists. Linda for instance argued that:

They can be female Muslim scholars who can reinterpret the Quran. I do not believe that they should make it a woman's perspective or a man's perspective. Either way, it should be what the Quran says and what the Sunnah says. So it doesn't matter if you are a woman or a man as long as you are giving the correct information and the correct interpretation. Islam is not about man or woman, it is about what is right (Linda).

This means that being a woman would not affect the meaning, and thus it should not be a problem that the transmitters of Islam have been mainly men. A point often overlooked in this regard, is the role Muslim female scholars have played in the transmission of religion: "Yes, I think there have been Muslim women, I guess, from when Islam began until now" (Kenza). All in all, when referring to feminism and Islam one should be aware of the difference between some Muslim feminists (secularists) who have appropriated western values and other Muslim women who have rather produced a literature demonstrating the fact that Islam itself pioneered freedom, equality and social justice.

⁷¹ *Fatwa* refers to a clarification of an ambiguous judicial point or an opinion by a jurist trained in Islamic law, in response to a query posed by a judge or a private inquirer (Shehabuddin, p. 171).

5.4 The Political: A Religious Perspective on Secularism

5.4.1 A discourse of denial: “the personal is not always the political”⁷²

Discussing the various ways issues related to Muslim women have been approached within politics, feminist scholarship, and in media, all my interviewees disapproved the simple misrepresentations of women as “the passive victims” of Islam and its patriarchal oppressive norms; a discourse they considered inaccurate and misleading. They demonstrated accordingly a detachment from those who have situated themselves as the voices struggling on their behalf; namely some public figures⁷³. In other words, they indicated that Muslim women’s issues are mainly voiced, or confined to the outsiders’ distorted discourse on Islam. As an illumination, they pointed out some reasons behind the circulation of such a narrowly construed image of Muslim women as secluded and silenced victims of a misogynist Islamic culture. On the other hand, the interviewees narrated several examples where the claim reaffirms the opposite emphasizing freedom and agency in various ways.

The tendency to exaggerate the negative aspects of gender relations within Islam, and to present Muslim women mainly as victims was perceived as a result of ignorance and even misrepresentation of their concerns in academic, policy, and media discussions. Based on a set of prejudices and Orientalist understandings, media tends to depict Muslim women as oppressed or mute victims, but hardly as agents with diverse realities. The same assumption is highlighted by Jacobsen (2011) who clarifies that “gendered ethnic and religious stereotypes are central to making off Us from Them and assumptions about the traditional and oppressive gender systems of the Others have contributed to making gender questions the most contested area of Muslim Otherness in Contemporary Norway” (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 172). In particular, the descriptions most interviewees provided to express their viewpoints about the mainstream media and its depiction of Muslims suggests that there is a lack of correct knowledge about Islam. Jannah for instance put it as follows: “I feel that people have just prejudices and they

⁷² I reversed the expression “the personal is political” to convey the meaning that my interviewees felt somehow unrepresented in the political sector.

⁷³ As Hege Sorhaug for example, see p.19.

speak just out of what they have seen in TV. But, they haven't gone directly to a person and asked: "why do you have it like that? How are you doing? Are you abused home? Were you forced to marriage?" So that one can get rid of the prejudices" Farah similarly stressed that "I don't think the politicians actually know who Muslim women are. They just paint the picture and then say: "Yes, they are oppressed", and they just stick to it. Yes, maybe some are oppressed, but we are different like any other group in the world". Apparently, ignorance, prejudices and misunderstanding appeared as explanations for the reason behind misrepresenting Islam that, for them, needs to be approached as a whole. To illustrate, Aisha maintained that "in Islam, it is like a puzzle. If you remove something, it just doesn't make sense. But if you look at every part of it together, it makes sense". For the purpose of giving a concrete example, she explained that "Yes, I think the moment you start to look at only what the women have to do according to Islam, of course you will look at them as passive victims. But, the moment you also look at what men have to do, you will think they are also passive victims actually" (Aisha).

A further point is that when the interviewees were asked to express their viewpoints about the representations Ayan Hisi Ali⁷⁴ and others Norwegian public figures, all of them rejected the picture they managed to draw about Muslim women and their oppression under Islam. The need and aspiration to occupy the public scene and gain popularity was mentioned as explanations for such a position. In particular Aisha conveyed that "If you understand how they get famous, you will clearly understand what they are talking about. (...) I can say that all the famous women here in Norway⁷⁵ talk negatively about Islam and that are Muslims also. Often, they talk about the cultural part, but they are very bad at saying that it is culture not Islam". For Farah, voices such as Ayan Hirsi are the most heard in media; however, one should take into account her personal background "because we must not forget that some Muslims are maybe following cultural things, or maybe taking Islam too extreme. So, they have like given her a bad view of Islam, and this is the only Islam she knows". Seemingly, this entails that Hirsi Ali resorts to her experience instead of a well-established knowledge about Islam, and thus ends up mixing the way she was raised up, her childhood, family and Somali cultural practices with religion. Ramadan and Amghar (2001) point out that "the worst enemy of the rights of women is not Islam but ignorance and illiteracy, to which we may add the determining role of traditional prejudices." (p. 54). As an outcome, such women either

⁷⁵ Here she is mainly referring to Muslim women such as Kadra, Nadia and Saynab, see p.19.

continue to endure injustice, or embrace blindly the first alternative they come across. According to Linda “the arguments that they are using are not Islamic correct. They are Muslims that practice honor killings or forced marriage, but that is not part of Islam” (Linda). Moreover, suggesting that liberation is only possible through apostasy, Hirsi Ali alienated herself from many of the Muslim women for whom she claimed to speak on their behalf. Speaking about them without accountability, Hirsi Ali (2007) portrayed Muslim women as passive followers of a static religion. She maintains correspondingly that “By declaring our Prophet infallible and not permitting ourselves to question him, we Muslims had set up a static tyranny. The Prophet Muhammad attempted to legislate every aspect of life” (ibid. p. 272). As a reaction to Hirsi Ali’s fierce attack on Islam, the following series of quotes highlight the interviewees’ sense of dissatisfaction with the media emphasis on propagating generalizations about Muslims and encouraging Islamophobia through such a reductionist discourse:

“I think this is a way to be famous in media. Because they speak about the negative issues that people like to hear and know about” (Yasmin).

“They are given an opportunity to speak to the masses about how they think Islam is wrong, but they never give the opportunity to Muslims to tell how they think Islam is the right. They get this power and fame since they are ex-Muslim” (Linda).

“You know, you have Muslim women that are making the complete opposite argument. Why aren't we paying them more attention? And, that people get a balanced view” (Sarah).

Like if I go out to media and say that I have been beaten by my father or my husband, and this is life as a Muslim, I will get much more attention than if I go and say I am fine as a Muslim, I have a father or a husband who loves me. There are millions of Muslims in the world and two people can't talk for such a large group. I got to have a problem to gain attention in media (Jannah).

Giving voice to one specific opinion at the expense of others tends to legitimate state intervention, reinforce the stereotypical views about Islam as inherently intolerant, and thus gain prominence in public just for adhering to the discourse of power (Gole and Billaud, 2011, p. 133). Furthermore, challenging Islam publically, being the source of her oppression,

Hirsi Ali (2007) clarifies that “Islam was like a mental cage. At first, when you open the door, the caged bird stays inside: it is frightened. It has internalized its imprisonment. It takes time for bird to escape, even after someone has opened the doors to its cage”(pp. 285-6). She maintains additionally that “It takes a long time to dissolve the bars of a mental cage” (ibid. p. 309). But again this cage remains a mere representation of Hirsi Ali’s family, culture and the way she views life, and therefore it has no room for the free and already liberated “other within⁷⁶” women. One interviewee explained that “they have experienced something in a Muslim community and that is their opinion. I don’t say that they are wrong in their opinion or their experiences but I can’t relate to that at all. I can’t say that I am oppressed, or I live in a patriarchal society. In my home, my mother and my father decide everything together (...)” (Rima). However, for Jacobsen (2011) in contemporary political discourse Muslim women are categorised along the duality of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” forms of Islam in order to “police the border between religion and politics, the religious and the secular” (p. 385). In the whole, the majority of the interviewees argued that women who get their voices out loudest are the ones who speak for the larger Muslim community presenting a mere prejudiced and a partial depiction, and therefore should be considered as legitimate sources of knowledge.

Equally important, the issue of some politicians and feminists’ failure to recognise *difference* among women was emphasised often grounded on the long-lasting “tradition versus modernity” dichotomy as an argument to justify the West’s duty to liberate and civilize the “Other”. In the Norwegian context, practices such as forced marriages and female genital mutilation⁷⁷, thought to secure the oppression of Muslim women, have been in the agenda of state policies. With this in mind, all the interviewees highlighted the fact that Muslim women’s concerns are often oversimplified being mainly equated with some customs that most of the time remain irrelevant. Farah for example put it this way: “I have to disagree with them because I feel like if they are so feminists, wouldn’t they know that every woman is different. I know that there are Muslim women who are oppressed, but we can’t say that everybody is oppressed”. This mean accordingly that using the label “Muslim women” to initiate debates about issues that are most of the time purely cultural, and are thus not practiced in all Muslim countries misrepresent women who choose to be differentiated by their religious affiliation, namely Islam. Important to mention is that “in line with the (neo-)

⁷⁶ I refer here to Muslim women who do not share the same views as her.

⁷⁷ A point discussed earlier in the background and context chapter, see p. 13.

liberal paradigm that constructs individual rights and the free choice of individuals as in opposition to, and threatened by, group identities and cultures, Muslim women are thus often constructed as passive victims in need of ‘help’ in order to proceed toward greater autonomy” (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 172). This claim consequently explains their scepticism towards Islam and the cultural traditions that have been practiced in its name. Notably, Okin (1999) claims further that “discrimination against and control of the freedom of females are practiced, to a greater or lesser extent, by virtually all cultures, past and present, but especially by religious ones and those that look to the past—to ancient texts or revered traditions—for guidelines or rules about how to live in the contemporary world” (p. 21). Among the issues that receive coverage or generate concern are those used to demonstrate the alien and bizarre oppression of women; including *sati*⁷⁸, dowry death, female genital surgeries, female infanticide, marriage by capture, *purdah*⁷⁹, foot binding and arranged marriages (Volpp, 2001, p. 1208). On the other hand, all my interviewees considered such practices as discriminatory and unjustifiable. Equally important to realize is “The idea that 'other' women are subjected to extreme patriarchy is developed in relation to the vision of Western women as secular, liberated, and in total control of their lives” (Volpp, 2001, p. 1198). With this in mind, these young students urged whoever wants to struggle for women in general to be aware of the danger of theorizing universal claims and conclusions just based on personal experiences or viewpoints. For instance, Yasmin argued that “women who struggle for other women should know what we, as Muslims women, stand for actually. They talk about us, but they don’t know about us” Moreover, these young women stress the centrality Islam plays in their life, and therefore they are against the idea of challenging, or abandoning religion to become free. As a matter of fact, “the Otherness of Muslims and Islam is constructed both as representing a spatial and temporal difference to Us, Islam and Muslims are seen as ‘foreign’ to Norwegian society, as belonging somewhere else” (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 173). Different for such a duality, historical and social contexts remain salient for women’s self-definition, their feelings and their choices especially if we are to respect the diversity of women's concerns and interpretations of worth, agency and freedom.

⁷⁸ It refers to “the act of a Hindu widow willingly cremating herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband” (WordWeb, 2009)

⁷⁹ It refers to “a screen used in India to separate women from men or strangers” (WordWeb, 2009)

5.4.2 Religion between “centrality” and decline in “secular” Norway

The presumed progressive decline of religious beliefs and practices, as a European aspect of secular modernity, is actually challenged with reference to the standpoints of my interviewees; Muslim female students at the UIO. As mentioned earlier in the literature review, the traditional explanations of European secularization⁸⁰ refer either to “increasing institutional differentiation, increasing rationality, or increasing individualism” failing to capture the fact that “the religious and the secular are inextricably bound together and mutually condition each other” (Casanova, 2006, pp.10-4). Exploring how young women relate and negotiate their relationship to religion in an “assumed” increasingly secular setting (Oslo), I realised that faith and spirituality present a powerful and a motivating force in their lives. This means that the assumption that religion is rapidly declining, as a related element of the modernization project, is evidently irrelevant in this context. In the same way, the theories that have equated religion with irrationality and backwardness⁸¹ remain a mere myth that has been perpetuated without serious scrutiny or investigation. The limitations associated with the secularization thesis are indicated by Casanova (ibid.) as follows:

Indeed, the most interesting issue sociologically is not the fact of progressive religious decline among the European population since the 1950s, but the fact that this decline is interpreted through the lenses of the secularization paradigm and is therefore accompanied by a “secularist” self-understanding that interprets the decline as “normal” and “progressive”—that is, as a quasi-normative consequence of being a “modern” and “enlightened” European (p.15).

Exploring my interviewees’ insights regarding the assumption that “there is an observed increasing identification with Islam within the secular environment of Europe”, eight out of ten confirmed assertively the claim, while one was not sure and the other maintained that this is not a new phenomenon. Some of the apparent manifestations of this growing religiosity can be exemplified in the great number of women donning the *hijab*⁸² in the public sphere as well as the increasing interest in debating the presence of Muslims and Islam in media, in politics and within academia. As a confirmation to the reliability of this claim, all my interviewees stressed the central role religion plays in their daily lives, not just

⁸⁰ The secularization thesis is explained in details in the theory chapter.

⁸¹ Zembeta (2008), for example, claims that religion challenges the foundation stones of enlightenment. (p. 297). He also adds that “religion is one of the agencies of irrationalism within education” (p. 298).

⁸² Seen as a social phenomenon related to religious affiliation

in terms of spirituality, or rituals but also as a way of life. A point worth mentioning here is that although not all my interviewees were *hijabi* women⁸³, they manifested relatively the same centrality of religion in their lives. This reveals accordingly that “living Islam” is not necessary just about appearances or belonging to a specific community, but mainly about believing in the teachings of Allah. Notably, Islam was identified as a salient component of their identity. To illustrate, this significance was described by expressions such as “a huge role”, “important part”, “the main focus” and “the first priority”. One of the interviewees even maintained that her life is “dedicated to religion”, and that religion continues to shape the person she is: “everything I do is about Islam. Yes, I do it for Islam: the way I talk, the way I dress, the way I think. Everything is shaped by Islam” (Jannah) For these young students living as “good” and “righteous” Muslims, striving to behave in accordance with Islam and its teachings remains a lifelong struggle. This struggle is known by the term *jihad* or *mujahid* within the Islamic scholarship and it refers in this context to “a lifelong struggle to realize or actualize God’s will in personal life and in society” (Esposito and Voll, 2001, p. 29) In addition to the worship practices of praying and fasting, religion influences their lifestyle, manners and behaviours, and even the decisions they make. One interviewee made the following comment: “Every time I face a decision or something, not only big decisions, but also small decisions, I always have in my mind the question like: what Islam says about it ? , what God would like me to do? What satisfies Him? ...such things” (Aisha) This accentuated increasing centrality of Islam in these young women’s daily lives is described by Ramadan (2009) as follows:

Women are establishing a new relationship to religion: the issue matters to them; they feel they have the right to study it and ask questions, and they offer new proposals while striving to remain faithful to Islamic teachings, to the higher objectives of the message, without agreeing to remain confined to traditional, literalist, or cultural masculine readings (p. 231).

This quote accordingly outlines some of the aspects of Muslim women’s relationship to Islam; including self-exploration, *Ijtihad* and the challenge of literalist and traditional interpretations of Islamic teachings.

⁸³ Wearing the hijab does not mean that one is more pious, or observant than the other. Though the hijab remains a religious obligation ordained by Allah (a principle confirmed by all Islamic scholars, but not by all feminists) for some women it represents a fashion statement, or a mere transmitted tradition.

A conclusion of all these insights is that there is a revitalized religiosity among young women; a religiosity that is pursued through the acquisition of Islamic knowledge in quest of meaning, inner peace, and the forming the self. The same finding is exemplified in the *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, where a number of in-depth qualitative studies illustrate the different meanings and (re)formations of women's individual and collective spirituality as well as religiosity. This contribution accordingly indicates that women's responses to secularization vary; including those who abandon the traditional church; others who join alternative spiritual communities and those women who choose to reclaim and/or renegotiate the traditional religions (Vincett, *et al.* 2008, p. 7). Regarding Muslim women in particular:

Bracke's research indicates that in western countries where religion was forcibly separated from the state, high levels of religiosity amongst young Muslim women signify an assertion of an identity distinct from the dominant order, and a contemporary and progressive version of the religion of their grandmothers (*ibid.*, p. 8).

Accordingly, this indicates a different truth about secularization in contemporary Europe. Indeed, associating secularization with the modernization theory is simplistic and unconvincing as religion (Islam in this case) continues to play a major role in people's lives. This contradicts, in like manner, with the scholars who equated secularity and modernity with the death of God (Bruce, 2002), or with the emergence of non-religious spiritual alternatives (Taylor, 2007). Although this may be true, but in the case of these young students they are actually manifesting; what may be described as a post-secular or re-sacralised phenomena. For Habermas (2006), Europe is experiencing a religious return into its secularised societies, or "post-secular society". In the next section, the focus will be more on exploring the interviewees' understandings and views on "secularism" and the way a "secular state" would operate in relation to religious diversity.

5.4.3 A believer's perception on "Secularism"

Exploring the interviewees understanding(s) of "secularism", the overwhelming majority associated the principle mainly with the state's non-interference in systems of belief and worship, and thus the right of citizens to religious freedom. For example Rima's

statement reflected a deep awareness about secularism as “pluralism” indicating the following:

It is like if your state is a secular state that means that you don't have religion in the state. Like Norway has just removed the Christianity as a state religion. But, of course the individuals have their own religions, like different religions, and you have freedom of religion despite the fact that the state is secular. So, I think that wearing a cross or wearing a hijab or a turban is a sign of a secular state, because then you can see the diversity of religions and not one religion; because if the state has the one religion, you have one main religion (Rima).

Taking the case of Norway as an illustration, Rima managed to mention the main characteristics appropriated to such a tendency; including Norway's first step towards disestablishment, the respect of religious diversity and its manifestation in the public sphere. To emphasise, one interviewee articulated her view specifying that “For me, freedom is to believe on what I want and to practice my religion with no social constrains. To have the freedom to work, study and do what I wish; within a certain limits of course” (Yasmin). In other words, she stresses everyone's right to frame their lives in compliance with their (religious and non-religious) belief systems, on the condition that it does not trespass the basic rights and freedom of others. Accordingly, the interviewees' position regarding secularism can be interpreted in the light of the compatibility of Islam with a secular legal framework where no particular religion is to be taken as the normative basis of its political order involving the implications of concepts such as citizenship, human rights and freedom of religion. Significantly, Mårtensson (2014) mentions that according to the FIOE⁸⁴, put forward as mediator and ‘translator’ between Muslim communities and the general public, the European Enlightenment itself has Islamic roots, and therefore “Islam is the *source* of modern *secular* European polities” (p.40). In other words, while freedom of religion remains a secular principle, religion itself encompasses secular meanings as well.

The neutrality of the state vis-à-vis all religions was also interpreted as a means to protect the freedom of conscious of all citizens regardless of the belief systems they hold (either religious or non-religious). In fact, for these young students a secular public sphere is one that favours religious plurality, allows the visibility of difference, and respects people

⁸⁴ The Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE) is “a cultural organization, with hundreds of member organizations spread across 28 European States, all subscribing to a common belief in a methodology based on moderation and balance, which represents the tolerance of Islam” (Fioe.org, 2014)

equally. “For example, even if I am asked to be neutral and not show any political or religious symbol, I think that it won't work because I can't live without showing Islam; my religion and my ethnicity that are big parts of me” (Jannah) This means that confining secularism with the neutrality of the public space is discriminatory against the majority population for whom religion plays a vital role in their daily lives. To illustrate, Sarah expressed her relationship to religion as follows:

I think that the neutrality that the others supports is a kind of against human nature in some ways. Because I think faith and religious belief is part of human nature. So, I think promoting that kind of secularism that doesn't go with my views because for me it is going against human nature basically. (Sarah)

In particular, the focus here is on the individual's right to live his or her belief openly, and with no constraints that may go against her freedom, or self-identification. Although all the interviewees supported the separation of the state and religion, they found the state efforts to empty the public arena from any reference to God as illogical and even against human nature. This is also Jannah' viewpoint:

“I don't think that the state being neutral means that it will try to limit the population to become neutral. (...) No, I don't think that it is right because they are restricting our identity and our religion. In this way, they are making up new rules within the religion. And religion is as it is and one cannot make any changes in it. (...) And here I feel like they are taking away some of this identity” (Jannah).

Based on such an argument, these young women viewed any limitation on the manifestation of religious affiliation as wrong; especially that any many case this may restrict women from accessing education, or the work market. Besides, such restriction is rather discriminatory to the individual as it violates his or her right to choose and live in compliance with one's beliefs and convictions. The view stressed here is largely in agreement with that of Ramadan (2009) arguing that

(...) secularism has never meant removing the moral reference from the public sphere, but instead distinguishing between different spheres of authority. It means opposing the dogmatic imposition, from above and for everyone, of moral and behavioral (and, more broadly, religious) norms, but it does not imply the disappearance of the collective ethics elaborated and negotiated by society's members (p. 34-5).

Indeed, secularism in this sense refers also to the state's non-interference in the individual's freedom of belief. Moreover, as equal citizens with acknowledged political rights these young women emphasised their right to decide for themselves and be respected for who they are. This point accordingly refers to an understanding of *inclusion* that it is not only confined with enjoying equal opportunities, but it also includes measures of adaptation and adjustment. In view of the youth's increasing identification with Islam, Norway's move towards secularism and the privatization of religion is somehow challenged. This entails that even with the process of secularization religion still has an important position in European public space (Schlesinger and Foret, 2006).

The understanding of secularism supported by most of the interviewees is not always taken into consideration in practice as indicated by Casanova (2001) who argues that "European states are far from being secular or neutral" (p.70). To clarify, it is believed that there is rather an emergence of a new, sometimes politically assertive, identification with Christianity (Triandafyllidou & Modood, 2012, p. 9). In that case, "The suggestion is that secularists and Christians in Europe have more in common with each other than they do with Muslims" for example (ibid.). Such a one-sided interpretation of secularism and state neutrality, exemplified in the emphasis of "the Christian heritage" of Europe, is therefore understood as a pretext that is often used to create boundaries between those who belong, and those who do not. In the Nordic context, secularism is simultaneously "either associated with Lutheran Christianity as the foundation of national identities, or replacing it, depending on the proponent" (Mårtensson, 2014, p.41). The point being assumed here refers to a democratic paradox exemplified in the state failure to integrate all religious groups and encourage their participation in public discourse. To clarify, Mårtensson (2014) points out to the fact that

As soon as Muslims publicly make claims related to Islam they are liable to be accused of 'Islamism' which is depicted as a mixing of religion and politics that is incompatible with Nordic secularism. The charge 'Islamist' has been directed against Muslim party politicians by their own party fellows as well as by rival parties and is highly discrediting. Muslim politicians who wish to deliberate 'Muslim issues' publicly thus put their careers at risk, which is a serious democratic problem (p.26-7).

In Norway, the case of the former Muslim minister Hadia Tajik⁸⁵ exemplified Mårtensson's view. Namely, whenever Hadia engages in issues related to the Muslim community promoting the protection of minority rights and opportunities, though based on liberal democracy and human rights, she is automatically equated with an attempt to support the "Islamization" project in Norway. Nevertheless such a reductionist approach to religious diversity within secular Norway remains voiced by few politicians. A more nuanced interpretation of secularism is introduced by O'Brien (2013) who emphasises the fact that "in reality, most European governments do not practice secularism, rather secularisms – a complex, dynamic intermingling and over-layering of policies whose intent and consequences often run deeply at odds with one another" (p. 24). Having presented the centrality religion plays in the lives of these young women as well as their perceptions on secularism, the next chapter will be more about suggesting appropriate ways to represent and accommodate such emphasised identification with Islam both within feminist and political debates in secular Europe; including Norway.

⁸⁵ Hadia Tajik is for the moment a Member of Parliament for the *Norwegian Labour Party* and Chair of the Standing Committee on Justice.

6 Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of the present research was to explore the relationship(s) Muslim female students at UIO have to religion, and as a result engage these young women in suggesting appropriate strategies and approaches to represent/accommodate such religiosity within feminist and political debates. This research confirms previous findings about Muslim youth and contributes to the understanding of Muslim women's interests and concerns. In general, therefore, it provides a guide for any further attempt to rethink issues as diverse as secularism, multiculturalism, religious diversity and women's liberation; especially in contexts of renewed interest in religion.

To demonstrate, the results are significant in three respects: first, they indicate a growing identification with Islam among young Muslim women in (secular) Norway. Second, they suggest that for feminists to represent Muslim women they need to be more attentive to their "difference" considering the importance Islam plays in their lives. Third, the findings emphasise the fact that "the political" should be more attentive to *difference* within the category "Muslim women" to be able to capture the variety and nuances in their experiences, beliefs and interests.

6.2 Understanding the "*Personal*" in Secular Europe

The new relationship young women are developing to religion requires a new understanding to the presence of Islam and Muslims within Europe in general and Norway in particular. Indeed, for these young Norwegian students Islam becomes increasingly a significant frame of reference in their daily lives. Among the reasons evoked behind such a spiritual awakening is their quest for meaning, balance and inner peace in a world loaded with global models of social behaviour and consumption. In this sense, the choice to resort to religion for self-identification is associated with a desire to understand the purpose of life, gain confidence and consequently achieve inner satisfaction. Another factor lies in their

attempt to position the *self* in relation to the plurality of beliefs and multiplicity of realities present within Norwegian society. To clarify, living in a setting with a variety of alternatives and options of what “*the good life*” might be, provides these young women with the opportunity to reflect on their interests, beliefs and desires; all of which are open to reconsideration and change (Kymlicka, 1995, p.81). Hence, Islam perceived as an essential guiding force that encompasses all aspects of human life, was chosen deliberately to shape their conception(s) of the *good life*. Then again if we are to problematize this choice: what are the grounds for this shared perception about the “*good life*”? And why did all my participants associate themselves with religion and not with other spiritual or secular alternatives? One possible answer would be linked to my selective recruitment of *Muslim female students at the UIO* as a sample. This explains their identification with Islam, their shared interests in voicing their viewpoints regarding the way Islam and Muslims have been represented, and the centrality religion plays in their lives. Although this may be true, but similar findings are also supported by previously conducted studies on Muslim youth in Europe (Jacobsen, 2011, Göle, 2012; Ramadan, 2004; Roy, 2004; Vincett *et al*, 2008). Though all young women face almost similar challenges and share common experiences of late modernity Norway, they may take different directions when it comes to belief and lifestyle. As a result, young women apprehend their environment differently. In the case of my interviewees, religion was emphasised as a means to negotiate their belonging to a “third space”⁸⁶; a position that encompasses the amalgamation of living in compliance with one’s belief and, at the same time, reconciling between the different components of one’s personality. Another reason behind their increasing interest in Islam is associated with their critical stance towards their parent’s cultural practices and a commitment to find their own answers to religious questions. Such a position therefore reflects their critical thinking, selectivity, reflexivity and freedom of choice; all of which are characteristics of all human practice in late modernity (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). To elaborate, these young Muslim women are concerned mainly about “the believing” than “the belonging” when it comes to their reflected and conscious choice to believe in Islam. But then again, they also develop a new form of “belonging” either through social media, or through their participation in study groups, social activities and conferences seeking; a source of community and support in secular Norway. Therefore, the idea of an increasing “individualized” religiosity and the progressive detachment from religious

⁸⁶ A concept developed by Homi Bhabha (1994) to describe an “*in-between*” place beyond duality where other positions can emerge deconstructing and reconstructing the dominant definitions of belonging and power relations.

authorities is not the case here. As a matter of fact, “instead of simply believing and practising Islam as everyone else does, modern individuals have made Islam an object of reflection, asking what Islam means *for them*” (Mårtensson, 2014, p.35). Moreover, the secularization myth that associates religion with irrationality and backwardness is also challenged in this respect provided that these young women are also presented as modern, knowledgeable and free. Grounded on these findings, I agree with Göle’s (2012) claim when she maintained that the presence of Islam and Muslims within Europe requires a new understanding that transcends Orientalist dichotomies; such as “the irreconcilable relationship between Islam and Europe based on the opposition between a Universe of submission and another holding the promise of freedom and modernity” (Ramadan, 2008, p. 208). To clarify, I suggest that given this increasing interest in religion and spirituality among Muslim youth (not just an issue related to immigration), the state as well as its Muslim community should work together to deal with such a revival properly. Especially if we take into consideration how beneficial a believer can be to his/her society. In other words, Modood (1998) maintains that religion can be “a source of renewal of community to overcome social divisions and can provide an underpinning of compassion, fairness, justice and public morality” (p. 397). However, the challenge posed in this regard is the risk that these young women (with minimum knowledge about Islam) may deviate from the right path in their attempt to seek “authentic” knowledge about Islam. For this reason, I propose that this return to religion should be accommodated properly in order to help them develop a more balanced and informed understanding of *Islam*. To emphasise the important role of religion in late modern society, one can argue that these young Muslim women are not just *different*, but their presence can also make a *difference*. For this reason, they “need a new, more coherent balance, as well as new, more stimulating energy, to enable them to contribute and propose their answers in today’s and tomorrow’s world”(Ramadan, 2008, p. 38).

6.3 Accommodating the “*Personal*” within Feminism

Grounded on my interviewees standpoints on feminism in general and the various ways the issue of “Muslim women” have been presented within secular feminism and Islamic feminism in particular, I came to the conclusion that for an *outsider* to understand or talk on behalf of Muslim women, he or she needs to take into consideration the fact that the “issue of

women” is part of a bigger picture that should be explored from *within* and *by* Islam as a whole. In fact, Esposito and Mogahed (2007) maintain the same conclusion arguing that “the first step in helping Muslim women improve their situation is to question the assumption that religious teachings are the root cause of women's societal struggles. We do so by understanding the tradition of gender justice in Islam and gaining an appreciation for the nuances of Islamic law and the diversity of internal debates within Islam” (p. 131). Again, understanding the preference(s) of Muslim women in this context is grounded on the fact that, as they enter modernity, these women “are no longer, or only to a limited extent, restrained by tradition as they now ‘choose,’ for example, to be Muslims, follow Islam and wear the hijab” (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 385). A point often overlooked in this regard is that while the female emancipation has taken the direction of the right to uncover in response to the expectations imposed on women historically regarding dress and societal roles, other women have adopted different models of liberation and resistance to oppression.

A point repetitively underlined by the interviewees is the fact that while culture remains fluid and changing, the basics of Islam are stable, and therefore are not subject to reinterpretation. This explains accordingly the salience of some religious practices to Muslim men and women that are often restrained in view of the neutrality of the public sphere. A more relevant example is that of the hijab: when approached from a feminist as Okin it is regarded as a discriminatory cultural practice that should be rejected, whereas for those Muslim women who wear the hijab deliberately, it is a religious commitment that cannot be negotiated. To put it differently, the young women’s rejection of the isolation or complete assimilation that their parents often desired, in favour of a more balanced position, is often misunderstood; especially when viewed from an outsider’s position. For instance, Roy presents “Islamic radicalisation” as “an endeavour to reconstruct a “pure” religion outside traditional or Western cultures, outside the very concept of culture itself” (Roy, 2005, p.6). Again, this statement remains simplistic and perplexing at the same time. To clarify, it entails that a person’s life can be devoid of culture (which culture he talks about?), it also justifies the potential threat of Muslims to the stability of Europe, and thus presenting them as “the other within”. Indeed, it is certain that some youth may fall into the trap of radicalisation as suggested by Roy; however, in the case of my interviewees this assumption is somewhat inappropriate. On the other hand, Jacobsen (2011) in her book *Islamic traditions and Muslim youth in Norway*, maintains a different view: “Through appropriating Islamic traditions in their everyday practice, I argue, young Muslims also develop new modes for engaging with

and participating in Norwegian society, as well as new modes of transnational belonging to the global Islamic *umma* (community)” (p. 11). Belonging to a global *umma* is developed in parallel of an identity that is adaptable to the society they live in. To put it differently, they are articulating their Islamic identity with pride and confidence, and at the same time they participate in all kinds of secular activities. This statement is highlighted also by Jacobsen (2011) who based on her research concluded that young Muslims’ perspectives on life and religion are “‘modern’ in the sense of being conditioned by the modern national state”, including secularism, respect of citizenship and nationhood (p. 368). In fact, seeking inner balance through spirituality, or even living in compliance with norms of Islamic devoutness does not make a person less autonomous or a second-class citizen.

6.4 Accommodating the “*Personal*” within “*the Political*”

All in all, one may argue that the same patterns of cultural devaluation of “Others” are still present in the current political discussions about minority religions and integration both in Norway and in Europe generally. For the purpose of developing an approach that would incorporate inclusion and the recognition of difference, I suggest that “the political” should be more attentive to *difference* within the category “Muslim women” if they are to capture the variety and nuances in their experiences, beliefs and interests. In fact, even though these young women emphasize a shared relationship to religion, they cannot be perceived as a “coherent, homogeneous, group in which everyone has identical interests and desires” (Hesse-Biber, and Yaiser, 2004, pp. 103-4). That is to say generalizations and conclusions about Muslim women cannot be drawn based on personal experiences or viewpoints when suggesting different framings of integration policies and gender equality agendas. To illustrate, most of my interviewees maintained that state’s efforts to combat forced marriages or female genital mutilation, represent the Othering misconceptions of the past and as a result pave the way to a conflictual future. As an illustration, O’Brien (2013) points out: “the preoccupation with Muslims may have contributed to the free reign exploited by “Christian” terrorists such as Norway’s Anders Behring Breivik or Germany’s National Socialist Underground Zwickau Cell (p.9). The same assumption is emphasised by Bangstad’s (2014a) who criticises the Norwegian politicians as well as researchers’ tendency to represent Islam and terrorism as an exclusively ideological phenomenon, whereas right-wing terrorism is

primarily perceived as a social psychological phenomenon. This entails also that the conflicting cultural, social and political circumstances of some European states are often blamed on religion and its adherents, namely Islam and Muslims. A more general example is that of Roy's (2007) account on the revival of Islam among Muslim youth in Europe identifying the need to recover a more correct Islamic practice as "neo-fundamentalism" arguing that young European Muslims are distancing themselves from "any cultural, social, or anthropological reference and hence, of course, from any national reference", which consequently results in their isolation from their social surroundings, and eventually their radicalization (p. 73-4). Different from such a reductionist view on the "religion of the born-again", as Roy defines it, most of my interviewees claimed that their rejection to some of the cultural norms, both parental as well as Norwegian, is limited to the inappropriate or discriminatory practices that has no connection with Islam. Similarly, Jacobsen (2011) indicates that "the need to recover a more authentic and correct Islamic practice was often put forward as a criticism of 'cultural practices' of the parental generation that the young associated with 'oppression' and 'backwardness'" (p. 366). Additionally, Modood (2012) argues that such exaggerated fear of Muslims is promoting intolerant as well as exclusionary politics across Europe. He adds that adopting "an ideology to oppose Islam and its public recognition is a challenge both to pluralism and equality, and thus to some of the bases of contemporary democracy" (p. 54). This is more compelling as the challenging traditional categories of race and ethnicity have extended to religion and some of its cultural manifestations pressing Europe to reconsider its liberal principles including state neutrality, gender equality, religious freedom and multicultural accommodation. Under those circumstances, the alleged normative liberal discourses, the ideal one-model of autonomous citizen, as well as the historical marginalization of minority values are to be challenged. Especially in a world with such an increasing "diversity and instability, the accommodation of difference requires not only a toleration of disagreement but also a structure which does not privilege particular groups or traditions" (Kukathas, 2001, p. 92). Furthermore, to transcend the addictive inclusion and narrow interpretations of Muslim women's concerns, politicians have to be more attentive to the believer's perspectives; a consciously and a willingly chosen empowerment through religion and not culture. Moreover, debates about the neutrality of public space on terms of religion remain "oversimplified and misleading, because such mythical neutrality simply does not exist, and in fact obfuscates another real issue that is thus avoided, which in equal rights" (Ramadan Tariq, 2009, p. 268). Taken into consideration the

fact that these young students are presented as actors in their own lives, and therefore they cannot be equated with most secular feminist assumptions⁸⁷ (external relations of power) about freedom and individual autonomy that have been “naturalized and imposed in understanding Muslim women” (Jacobsen, 2011, p. 384). For this reason, the better understanding of the choices, experiences and perspectives of these emerging voices necessitates the transgression of the frequently evoked dichotomy between Islam and secularism; especially if we are to take into consideration the fact that religion is increasingly moving from the private towards the public sphere. In fact, protecting minority women’s rights ought to be constructed based on the multiplicity of voices. Moreover, accommodating Muslim women’s interests and concerns should be based upon an inclusive dialogue that bridges the gap between these women and those who representing them (e.g. organizations as Mira...). An in all, religion requires greater attention than it has received; including its relation to the individual as well as its role in society.

6.5 Limitations and further research

This research however was limited in several ways. For instance, adhering to the same religious belief as my interviewees, we shared almost the same understandings of matters such as agency, autonomy and emancipation. As a result, I was compelled to adopt a “strong reflexivity” during the whole research process; reflecting constantly on my social background, positionality, and assumptions that might affect the practice of research (Hesse-Biber, and Yaiser, 2004, p. 115). Another limitation was the fact that I could not go “beyond the veil” as the focus on the *hijab* was unavoidable under most of the conversations. It remains challenging not to fall in the same dichotomous tendency of the ‘Self’ versus the ‘Other’ given that the project is directed towards a category of women that are ‘resorting’ to Islam as a means to articulate their definitions of liberation and freedom in an increasingly secular European context. This may result in the exclusion of other Muslim women that have chosen another position negotiating the growingly secular environment they live in.

⁸⁷ Secular feminism is discussed in the theoretical chapter, see p. 37.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

The Interviewee Background

1. What is your age and ethnic background?
2. What is your level of education and field of study?
3. What is your dream job?
4. If I ask you about the elements that have shaped you personality and the woman you are now? What would you say?
5. If we talk about Islam, what role it plays in your daily life?
6. Does your Muslim identity affect your understanding (perception) about women's 'liberation'? If so, in which way?

Transitional questions

- In your opinion, who speaks for Muslim women in the contemporary Europe?
- Can you name some Muslim women's related issues that have been debated by the feminists or the politicians?

On the political level

1. How do you identify with the international events associated with Muslims nowadays?
2. What would you say about the new wave of regulations/ legislations in a number of European countries preventing Muslim women from covering their head?
3. The principle of *secularism* has been interpreted in different ways. If you were asked to choose between the two following claims, which one would you support?
 - a. Secularism as the state's neutrality; which means that the suppression of God from the public sphere, and thus a reason to exert restrictions on religious freedom.

- b. Secularism as the state's non-interference in systems of belief and worship, and thus the right of citizens to religious freedom with no restraints.
4. How would you explain the connection between the *secular* nature of a given state and its prohibition against the external manifestation/visibility of the individual's religious conviction in public?
 5. What would you say about the political argument that associates extremism with the veil regarding *hijabi* women as active threats to the security of democratic liberal west?
 6. What is your opinion about the way Norway is dealing with its multi-religious society? (Legally) does your difference is publically recognised? At school, media, work..?
 7. Do you think that your difference as, a female Muslim citizen, is recognised socially within the Norwegian society?
 - a. Do you feel with pride or shame when you are confronted with issues related to your religion?
 8. Have you ever felt a sense of marginalization or deprivation related to employment opportunities just because of being Muslim?
 9. Do you have any doubt that Norway may adopt the same political approach to freedom of religion as that of France, for example? Or, in other words, does the European debate influence Norway?
 10. If you were to be given the chance to do something for Muslim women in Norway, What would you do? How would you participate to the universal dialogue of human rights?
 11. In your opinion, what is the best way, for politicians and those concerned with Human Rights, to engage in the issues of Muslim women?

On the feminist level

1. What does feminism mean to you?
2. How would you define terms *liberation*, *freedom*, *autonomy* and *emancipation* in the increasingly body-oriented European space?
3. I will give you some concepts and you tell me in few words how do you relate yourself to them, (consumerism, capitalism, individualism and materialism)?

4. What do you think about the claim that Muslim women in the last decades are ‘resorting’ to (learn more about) Islam as a means to claim their definitions of liberation and freedom in the European context?
5. What do you think about the feminists that view Muslim women as ‘passive’ victims of Islam and its patriarchal oppressive norms?
 - a. How do you feel when you hear such claims and how do you react? (Under conversations with friends, from a teacher, a TV program...)
6. What would you say about public figures as Nawal Saadawi and Ayaan Hirsi Ali who view Islam as a patriarchal and misogynist religion?
7. What do you think about the feminists who advocate for the re-reading and the re-interpretation of the Quran and *Sunnah* from a woman’s perspective believing that the patriarchal interpretation of religion is the reason behind the oppressive practices against Muslim women?
8. Does Islam contradict with what you desire as a woman?
9. Do you feel the need to be liberated? If so, for what and to what?
10. In your opinion, what is the best way for feminists to engage in the issues of Muslim women?
11. Is it possible to be a Muslim and a feminist?
12. Do you consider yourself a feminist? If yes, how? If not, Why?
13. What do you really want as a Muslim Norwegian female citizen?
14. Can you mention any role model?

Appendix B: Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

Muslim Women in UIO: A Faith-Based Agency

A Debate between the Political, the Feminist and the Personal

I am a Gender Studies master student at UIO conducting a research on the issue of Muslim Women. The purpose of this project is to develop an account that integrates the standpoints of Muslim female students at UIO regarding both the European political views that advocate, most of the time, for the privatization of religion as well as the feminist discourses that either reject religion or call for its reinterpretation.

You were selected as a possible participant in this project because, as a female Muslim student, I believe that your views and position in relation to the claims of those, who have engaged in the issue of Muslim women, is important for the development of a reliable narrative about Muslim women in the contemporary Europe.

You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

Your participation in this study will consist of an interview with an estimated length of one hour. You will be asked a series of questions about your standpoints regarding political as well as feminist views on Muslim women. Our discussion will be audio taped to help me accurately document your insights in your own words.

The tapes will only be heard by me and my supervisor for the purpose of this study. Your responses will remain confidential and will be used for reference while proceeding with this project. Though direct quotes from you may be used in the paper, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous. All interview recordings will be stored in a secure work space until July 2014. The tapes will then be destroyed.

This interview is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw your consent as long as the project is in progress, and to stop the interview at any time or for any reason.

If you have any questions or concern, please contact me at any time at the e-mail address ilham_skah18@hotmail.com or telephone number +47-99851153.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Student Adviser Granum Helle Pedersen at telephone number +47-22858937 or my supervisor Dr. Cecilie Thun at telephone number +47-22858973.

The project has been reported to the Data Protection Official for Research at the Norwegian Social Science Data Services.

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEW

By signing below I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Signature _____ *Date* _____