

Whiteness and Anti-Muslim Racism in Finland: The Racialisation of Finnish Muslim Converts

Linda Hyökki

Abstract

This article argues that the anti-Muslim experiences of Finnish converts should be analysed as *racial*, and that they have not emerged from a historical vacuum, but are rather embedded in a trajectory of racism in Finland. The article demonstrates this through the racialisation of the country's national minorities, the Sámi and Roma peoples. Drawing on this, the article explains how the Finnish convert experience can be understood as a continuum of the racialisation of minorities in Finland, within the more extensive construction of Whiteness and normative Finnishness.

Key words: Anti-Muslim racism, Finland, Muslim converts, racialisation, Whiteness

1. Introduction

In Finland, like in many other European countries, Islam is primarily considered an “immigrant religion”, and is associated mainly with People of Color (PoC), such as Arabs and Somalis. Surprisingly to many, even though Finland's Muslim community is relatively young, the presence of settled Muslims in the country goes back over two centuries. This might be because Finland's “first Muslims”, the Tatars, had a long-standing tendency to “blend in” to Finnish society, so as not to draw attention to their religious background. Jouni Suistola argues that this tendency affected Finnish

people’s limited interaction with Islam, especially during the 19th century, when the Tatars were the country’s only Muslim community.¹ For the broader Finnish public, who have had little contact with Muslims, it is still a challenge to see Muslims as non-immigrants, non-foreigners, and phenotypically white.² The Being Christian in Western Europe report, published by the Pew Research Center in 2018, revealed the diverse attitudes of Europeans towards religious minorities. After almost two centuries of globalisation, international immigration, and the rise of multiculturalism, only roughly a third of Finns (see Fig.1) have had personal contact with a Muslim.³

Majorities in nearly every country say they personally know atheists and Muslims, but fewer know Jews

% who say that they personally know someone who is ...

	Atheist	Muslim	Jewish
Austria	71%	62%	42%
Belgium	63	73	30
Denmark	57	68	33
Finland	63	35	19
France	81	79	55
Germany	74	67	39
Ireland	63	59	44
Italy	66	52	41
Netherlands	58	72	40
Norway	70	69	31
Portugal	52	31	18
Spain	73	60	18
Sweden	73	71	39
Switzerland	77	66	50
United Kingdom	76	71	55
MEDIAN	70	67	39

Fig. 1 (Source: PEW 2018)

Since most Muslims in Finland have a migratory background, Islam has long been perceived as an “immigrant religion”. It can be argued that this lack of contact – possibly due to the small size of the Muslim population – is responsible for the broader public’s perception of Muslims as non-White. This miscognition of the racial/ethnic heterogeneity of Muslims living in Finland is embedded in the bias about normative Finnishness and Whiteness, which has been socially constructed in national narratives for centuries. Racialised minorities have paid the price, being systematically Otherised, racialised, and forced to assimilate for the sake of building a homogenous Finnish nation.

1 Jouni Suistola, “Peripheric Attitudes: The Picture of Islam in Finland in the Nineteenth Century”, *History of European Ideas*, 20:4-6 (1995), p. 731.
2 The phenotype here is different to White as a socially constructed category.
3 PEW 2018, “Being Christian in Western Europe”, <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/05/29/being-christian-in-western-europe>, accessed 15 December 2021.

Today, Muslims in Finland are among the groups most targeted for hostility related to racial Othering. To describe this phenomenon, both *Islamophobia* and *anti-Muslim racism* are widely used in academia. Farid Hafez categorises Islamophobia studies into three theoretical approaches, according to their foci: prejudice-guided; post-colonial; and decolonial. The latter two use anti-Muslim racism as their term of choice, while the former prefers Islamophobia,⁴ which is defined as a manifestation of both religious and racial prejudice.⁵ For those who use anti-Muslim racism, the process of racialisation plays a role in producing and reproducing racial categories of the post-colonial era, and in maintaining its power structures.⁶

In the study of converts, the concept of racialisation explains why we can call out anti-Muslim sentiments as racism, even though *Muslim* is not a race but a socially constructed category, to which particular content is assigned by categorising individuals in their everyday interactions:

Importantly, because race is neither an extant biological reality nor a static ideological configuration, the process of racialization reflects the legitimation, rationalization, and justification for racism or the systematic, hierarchical, and unequal distribution of resources and unequal treatment of people once racialized.⁷

Converts in Finland can be considered phenotypically identical to the majority non-Muslim population. Their situation is comparable to that of Bosnian Muslims, who were “identified as a ‘racial’ group by people who were phenotypically, linguistically and culturally the same”.⁸ Experiences similar to those of Finnish Muslim converts as a result of anti-Muslim racist thinking and behaviour have been reported in research into converts from other Western contexts. This is described as “losing one’s Whiteness”, translated in the Finnish context as “losing one’s Finnishness”. Despite the fact that anti-Muslim racism focuses semantically on individuals, manifestations of the phenomenon can be observed as acts of animosity towards both the religion and its people. For the latter, it is sufficient that an individual is merely *perceived* as Muslim.⁹

4 Farid Hafez, “Schools of Thought in Islamophobia Studies: Prejudice, Racism, and Decoloniality”, *Islamophobia Studies Journal*, 4:2 (2018), pp. 210-225.

5 Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia and Antisemitism in Global Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

6 See Minna Seikkula & Suvi Keskinen, “Johdanto: Muuntautuva rasismi ja moninainen antirasismi”, in *Rasismi, valta ja vastarinta. Rodullistaminen, valkoisuus ja koloniaalisuus Suomessa*, Suvi Keskinen, Minna Seikkula, & Faith Mkwesha (eds.) (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2021), pp. 9-21; and Iskander Abbasi, “Islam, Muslims, and the Coloniality of Being: Reframing the Debate on Race and Religion in Modernity”, *Journal for the Study of Religion*, 33: 2 (2020), pp. 1-31.

7 Devon R. Goss, & Matthew Hughey, “Racialization” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, Bryan S. Turner et al. (ed.) (Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), p. 1. DOI: 10.1002/9781118430873.est0302

8 Nasar Meer & Tariq Modood, “The Racialization of Muslims”, in *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*, Salman Sayyid & Abdoolkarim Vakili (eds.) (London: Hurst & Company, 2010), p. 77.

9 See Jagbir Jhutti-Johal & Hardeep Singh, *Racialization, Islamophobia and Mistaken Identity: The Sikh Experience* (London & New York: Routledge, 2019); Fred Halliday, “Islamophobia Reconsidered”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22:5 (1999), pp. 892-902.

Hatred towards religion can be observed in political debates on the construction of mosques in European cities, such as Cologne, in Germany, where the construction of the “Ehrenfeld mosque” drew objections on issues that included the height of its minaret, which would be considered a threat were it to rise above the city’s Church spires.¹⁰ Calls for restrictions of the Muslim women’s swimsuit, the burqini, are another example of how religious hatred has entered public debate. In southern France, the burqini was banned on public beaches, partly because it was considered a symbol of Islam, and according to the concept of *laïcité* (secularism), religious symbols did not belong in French public spaces.¹¹ Yet, especially in the case of the burqini, these discriminatory practices target and affect individual Muslim women. By wearing the burqini, a woman is considered the embodiment of racist assumptions about her religion and its values.¹² This overlapping of the perception of Muslim bodies with what they are assumed to symbolise constitutes what Meer and Modood call the “racialization of Muslims.”¹³

This article argues that white Finnish Muslim converts’ experiences of hostility and discrimination in the form of anti-Muslim racism should be analysed as *racial*, and it will demonstrate that these experiences have not occurred in a vacuum. Instead, they are embedded in the trajectory of racialization and systemic racist discrimination that has long targeted minorities in Finland. To explain this, I will first briefly review Finland’s historical discrimination and racism towards the Sámi and Roma peoples as a foundation for constructing Whiteness and normative Finnishness. I will then introduce the history and demographics of the Muslim population in Finland, before arguing that the experience of Finnish Muslim converts is a continuum of the racialisation of minorities in Finland. This will be illustrated with examples from data I obtained during my Ph.D. fieldwork in 2017.

2. The historical construction of “Finnishness” as White, and cultural racism towards ethnic minorities

The formation of scientific race thinking, and the categorisation of the “white race” at the top of the biological hierarchy is associated with Swedish botanist and zoologist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778). Starting with Linnaeus’ taxonomy of races, the 18th

10 David Christopher Stoop, “Agenda-Setting von rechts? Der Kölner Moscheebau im Fokus der Zeitungsberichterstattung und rechter Propaganda”, in *Jahrbuch für Islamophobieforschung 2014*, Farid Hafez (ed.) (Vienna: new academic press, 2014), pp. 107-124.

11 Samuel P. Nielson, “Beaches and Muslim Belonging in France: Liberty, Equality, but not the Burqini!”, *Cultural Geographies* (2020), pp. 1-16.

12 See Shabana Mir, “French Muslim Women’s Clothes: The Secular State’s Religious War against Racialised Women”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Gender*, Justine Howe (ed.) (London & New York: Routledge, 2020), pp. 435-446.

13 Meer & Modood, “The Racialization of Muslims”, pp. 69-84.

century was a transformative time, in which peoples were categorised into racial hierarchies. This in turn shaped the way world was understood in the following centuries. Within this hierarchy, Mongols were a lower race than the “Caucasian, Aryan” peoples: i.e., the European race. Finns, being a Uralic people, were placed in the Mongol category, according to arguments that included physical features. Linguistically, Finns were already located in Asia, because Finnish is a Finno-Ugric language of the Uralic language family, unrelated to the Indo-European languages. This racial hierarchy meant that Finns were now also “located in Asia” by their physical characteristics.¹⁴ Linnaeus did not include the Finns in the “Nordic group” (who linguistically belonged to the Germanic branch of Indo-Europe) of his racial hierarchy, but considered them similar to Tatars, Sámi and Roma: inferior. Likened to Mongolians, Finns were hence classified as non-White i.e., of the “Yellow/Asian” race.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, in protest to this classification, Finnish scholars produced counterarguments to show that Finns were not racially Mongolian, by conducting scientific measurements of over 100,000 Finnish men.¹⁵ As the taxonomies evolved over these centuries, Finns gradually “became White”, as non-Finnish scientists came to consider them part of a new category: the East Baltic race.¹⁶ Even if the focus of the Finnish scientists was always on criticising, especially the Mongol theory, the counterarguments and scientific empiric studies in their support always attempted to “whitewash” the Finnish race, and included efforts to prove the superiority of Finns over the Sámi peoples.¹⁷ In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, developments in linguistic knowledge about the Sámi language brought forth the realisation that Finnish and Sámi were related: both were Uralic languages with origins in Asia. Biological race was now the only way to differentiate the races, and push the acceptance of Finns as White. As the racially lower category, the Sámi were classified as a threat to the majority society and its development. In the 20th century, this resulted in educational institutions intervening in the diets of Sámi pupils and their families, and the development of physical exercises for the Sámi “to develop in the direction deemed favourable according to Finnish healthcare and anthropological knowledge”.¹⁸

14 Petri Ruuska, *Kuviteltu Suomi: Globalisaation, nationalismin ja suomalaisuuden punos julkisissa sanoissa 1980-90-luvuilla* (Acta Electronica Universitatis Tampensis; No. 156), p. 67.

15 Ruuska, *Kuviteltu Suomi: Globalisaation, nationalismin ja suomalaisuuden punos julkisissa sanoissa 1980-90-luvuilla*, pp. 61-71.

16 Similarly, reactions were seen in the cultural area with the creation of the “Maiden of Finland” as the ultimate symbol of Finnish Whiteness/white Finnish femininity. This was a response to the categorisation of Finns as Mongols, while white blonde women were seen to represent the Scandinavian and Germanic races. See Miia Rantala, “Maiden of Finland in Finnish Cosmetic TV Adverts”, in *Unsettling Whiteness*, Lucy Michael & Samantha Schulz (eds.) (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2014), pp. 71-80.

17 Suvi Keskinen, “Intra-Nordic Differences, Colonial/Racial Histories, and National Narratives: Rewriting Finnish History”, *Scandinavian Studies* 91, 1-2 (2019), pp. 171-174.

18 Miikka Pyykkönen, “Ethically Ethnic: The Ethno-Culturalization of the Moral Conduct of the Sámi and the Roma in the Governance in Finland Between the 1850s and 1930s”, *Journal of Political Power*, 8:1 (2015), pp. 51-52.

This construction of Finnishness, with its racial components and its struggle to be included in the white-coded map of Europe, included a cultural aspect wherein Sámi and Roma peoples were placed in the margins of society. Although they had been living for centuries in what was geographically understood as “Finland”, they were not considered “Finnish”. While the Sámi were the “lower race” in the racial construction of Finnishness (against which the Finns depicted themselves as White Europeans), in the 19th and 20th centuries they and the Roma were also problematised in cultural, economic, security and social aspects, because the understanding of race was tied to what Pyykkönen (2015) calls “ethno-culturalisation”. The racism and discrimination faced by Sámi and Roma peoples is part of the forming of the cultural-racial category “Finn” as White/Christian. Because of this, along with “ethno-culturalisation” the Sámi and the Roma were the main targets of what Meer and Modood call cultural racism:

While biological racism is the antipathy, exclusion, and unequal treatment of people on the basis of their physical appearance or other imputed physical differences [...] cultural racism builds on biological racism a further discourse which evokes cultural differences from [...] a “civilized” norm to vilify, marginalize or demand cultural assimilation from [Otherised] groups.¹⁹

The intellectually inspired “Fennoman” movement in the 19th century was one of the main drivers of the “making of” the Finnish nation, in which the idea of an *ethnos*, instead of a *demos*, was prevalent. Like many other nationalist movements across Europe, Fennoman aimed to promote the historicity and excellence of the Finnish national culture, which was constructed as “normal” and “original Finnish” in comparison with other cultures that were hierarchically inferior and abnormal.²⁰ For the Fennomans, a shared heritage was the necessary basis of a nation.²¹ The Fennoman narrative favoured the white Christian majority as culturally superior to other groups, and this was strongly reflected in minority governance measures, whose objective was to assimilate the racialised minorities and culturally “normalise” them.²² Notions of race and culture were intertwined, and the Sámi and Roma became the targets of cultural racism, so that their cultural practices – heavily essentialised through culture talk – were seen as inherent group traits. For the Sámi population this meant, for instance, government-forced settlement practices that went hand in hand with colonisation of their land. These measures resulted in restrictions to traditional livelihoods, i.e., reindeer

19 Meer & Modood, “The Racialization of Muslims”, p. 78.

20 Pyykkönen, “Ethically Ethnic”, p. 43.

21 Vesa Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2011), p. 69.

22 Pyykkönen, “Ethically Ethnic”, p. 44.

herding and fishing, which had been largely connected to the Sámi nomadic life-style.²³ Today, the Finnish Sámi population is still fighting for its linguistic and cultural rights, despite agreements being made between the Finnish Government and the Sámi Parliament.²⁴ Finland has yet to ratify the Indigenous and Tribal People convention ILO 169, which would hold the government accountable for Sámi rights in Finland.²⁵

Essentialisation and culture talk regarding the Roma population also produced negative stereotypes that were a basis for its stigmatisation, and for repressive policy measures. Policy recommendations on forced settlement and forced Christianisation were implemented, with the justification that the Roma could be turned into “useful workers, docile and virtuous members of the society”.²⁶ The Roma, being a non-Christian community, were considered a religious problem, and forced to convert to Christianity. They were also considered as an economic problem, and, like the Sámi, forcibly settled. Because of the ethno-cultural turn in minority governance, the Roma were finally considered a cultural problem, which resulted in the forced education of Roma children “for their own sake”, to such an extent that they were alienated from their native cultural practices.²⁷ The need for an institution within this “civilizing mission” led to the establishment of the Gypsy Committee at the end of the 19th century. The committee justified governance policies as protective measures that shielded the non-Roma population from the perils Roma culture allegedly posed, which might corrupt and endanger the former. The committee produced policy recommendations based on racist cultural descriptions:

The lust for thieving is inborn, which exists already in the Gypsy child as a disposition. One can hardly say that Gypsies have become thieves through the force of conditions, temptation, or example. This characteristic is very much deeper in them; it has run in them from generation to generation and developed further. This lust can be controlled and removed through strict education, but it can hardly ever be eradicated completely.²⁸

23 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, pp. 111–119; Suvi Keskinen “Kolonialismin ja rasismin historiaa Suomesta käsin”, in *Rasismi, valta ja vastarinta. Rodullistaminen, valkoisuus ja kolonialisuus Suomessa*, Suvi Keskinen, Minna Seikkula, & Faith Mkwesha (eds.) (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2021), p. 80; Veli-Pekka Lehtola, “Sámi Histories, Colonialism, and Finland”, *Arctic Anthropology*, 52:2 (2015), p. 25.

24 Ajatushautomo Magma 1/2017

25 <https://www.saamicouncil.net/news-archive/finland-must-repair-the-human-rights-violations-and-ratify-ilo-169-convention?rq=Finland> (last accessed 13.12.2021)

26 Pyykkönen, “Ethically Ethnic”, p. 43.

27 Pyykkönen, “Ethically Ethnic”, pp. 46–47.

28 Komiteamietintö, 1900:3. Maamme mustalaiskysymyksen tutkimusta varten asetettu komitea KD 10/375. As cited in Pyykkönen, “Ethically Ethnic”, p. 48

The legacy of this historical racialisation has manifested in deep-rooted stereotypes and anti-Gypsy sentiments that still exist today in the minds of the majority society. Finnish Roma entrepreneurs, for instance, face discrimination and prejudice, based on allegedly not being trustworthy as business partners, customer service providers, or even when securing bank loans.²⁹ Even after the Second World War, the Roma population was subjected to oppressive policies, including the forcible placement of minors in children's homes, and the controlling of Roma families' lives by social services.³⁰

Christian heritage is, alongside the aspect of Whiteness, deeply embedded in the collective memory of the Finns, and these two identity markers have always been tightly intertwined. According to Razak, Christianity gives content to Whiteness, and is central to how Europeans came to understand themselves.³¹ The foundations of the White (superior) race and Black/Other (inferior) race dichotomy date back to the dawn of Christianity. As Rose Arjana argues: "Christian identity was based on what was perceived the norm, i.e., white skin, while the black skin was associated with sin and evil"; Whiteness became normative and preferred, to the extent that converts to Christianity were described as having changed their skin colour from dark to white.³² In the history of Christianity there were also instances when its fundamental scripture, the Bible, was misused to justify significant historical forms of oppression. Among them was the transatlantic slave trade, which was justified by Biblical references to Ham's curse (Gen 9:18–29), and the subsequent racialisation of the Prophet Noah/Nuh's first son Ham as Black/inferior, and his third son Japheth's parallel construction as a racially superior image of Whiteness.³³

The collective memory of the Finns was largely shaped by Finnish writer Zacharias Topelius, who is still considered a significant contributor to the formation of Finnish culture. In 1875, Topelius published the original Swedish version of his book *The Book of our Land*, with its Finnish translation appearing only a year later, intended as a textbook for schools. The book includes writings about the Finnish culture, history, and practices, as well as "ethnographic" accounts of the country's different population groups:

This country is my homeland. [...] All its sons and daughters form *a people*, whatever language they speak. [...] They have the same Christian faith, the

29 Ritva Anttonen, "Trust Formation and Experiences of Prejudice and Discrimination of Roma Entrepreneurs in Finland", *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Places in the Global Economy*, 2:2 (2008), pp. 124-139.

30 Keskinen, "Kolonialismin ja rasismien historiaa Suomesta käsin", p. 82

31 Sherene Razack, "Whiteness, Christianity, and Anti-Muslim Racism", In *Routledge Handbook of Critical Studies in Whiteness* (London & New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 44.

32 Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 28-29.

33 See Wongi Park, "The Blessing of Whiteness in the Curse of Ham: Reading Gen 9:18–29 in the Antebellum South", *Religions*, 12: 928 (2021). DOI: 10.3390/rel12110928.

same teaching, the same rights, same obligations, same benefit, same harm, the same freedom, the same love and the same hope. [...] All great and mighty nations have in this way been raised by several peoples, who from the beginning were strangers to each other. The common homeland and the common destinies of long times have made them one.³⁴

Like the Fennomans, Topelius constructs an *ethnos* that is not only Christian, but also contains commonalities that leave little space for minority identities that are based on alternative worldviews and epistemologies, and in this way creates the image of a homespun “Finnishness”. In the spirit of his time, Topelius co-produces the marginalisation of the Sámi, and describes them as one of the Finns’ kindred nations, alongside other lesser peoples who live “poor and half-wild” on the territory of the Russian Empire. This follows the Hegelian nationalist understanding of historic and non-historic people, with only the former capable of forming a nation. Hence the Sámi, who lived at Finland’s northern periphery, were also left on the periphery of nation-building,³⁵ and consequently when Topelius describes the population groups that constitute “Finns”, neither Sámi nor Roma are mentioned:

Karelians live in Karelia, Savo, and in the northern and northeastern part of Ostrobothnia. [...] Häme tribes live in Häme, Satakunta, Southwest Finland, and in the northern part of Uusimaa and the southeastern part of Ostrobothnia. In the southern part of Uusimaa, on the southern shore of Ostrobothnia and in the Åland archipelago, there are people of Swedish descent.³⁶

There is still much work to do regarding how the broader public recognises the ethnic diversity of Finnish society today. Young Finnish PoC (e.g., children from bi-racial parents or adoptees from abroad) face everyday microaggressions, including doubts about their “Finnishness”.³⁷ There is a perpetual understanding of Whiteness as a fixed factor in what makes a Finn in the minds of the wider public. Considering the history of how Whiteness has been constructed in Finland during the last three centuries, with scientific campaigns, and racial and cultural Otherisation of ethnic minorities, meanings of Whiteness can be seen to vary according to the national, racial and ethnic context. Frankenberg considers Whiteness a process that emerges in connection with the socioeconomic and sociocultural relations in a society.³⁸ Whiteness can therefore change its meaning, to reflect current societal

34 Zacharias Topelius, *Maamme kirja*. 7. *Digitaalinen editio*, online accessible at <https://maammekirja.fi/index.php?p=texts&bookId=28>

35 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*, p. 126.

36 Zacharias Topelius, *Maamme kirja*. 70. *Digitaalinen editio*, online accessible at <https://maammekirja.fi/index.php?p=texts&bookId=28>

37 See Anna Rastas, “Racializing Categorization among Young People in Finland”, *Young* 13:2 (2005), pp. 147-166.

38 Ruth Frankenberg, “Introduction: Local Whitenesses, Localizing Whiteness” in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Ruth Frankenberg (ed.) (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 1-34.

relations. This means that in Finland, the meaning of Whiteness in the 19th century was not marked by the same exclusionary characteristics as it is today. The Whiteness of Finns in the past, juxtaposed with the racialised non-Whiteness of the Sámi and Roma, is different from the Whiteness of Finns today, which is juxtaposed with Finnish PoC and Muslim bodies, and what they signify in the racialised discourse. Racialised identity is not only defined by skin colour or phenotype; racialisation is a process that takes place in time and space, and “race” is an effect of this process, rather than its origin or cause.³⁹ Connecting this understanding of race and racialisation to Frankenberg’s argument about the different constructions of Whiteness over time, we can see how for the purpose of this study and beyond, Muslim (convert) subjects can and should be seen as the racial, non-White Other. Consequently, if Whiteness is understood as a racial construct, in this context its construction works by barring Muslim bodies.

3. The history of Muslims in Finland

The first Muslims to settle in Finland were Tatars and Bashkirs, who immigrated to the country throughout the 19th century as soldiers, after Finland was made Grand Duchy to the Russian Empire in 1809.⁴⁰ From the 1870s onwards, Tatar peddlers, mostly Mishars, came from different villages of the Volga River area in Nizhny Novgorod Province.⁴¹ Finland gained its independence in December 1917, following the fall of the Russian Empire, and the Tatars who had settled in the country were allowed to stay.⁴² This political change proved beneficial for the Tatars: the annexed Grand Duchy had only accepted Christians as citizens, but from the 1920s onwards, independent Finland started to grant citizenship to the Muslim Tatars too. In 1923, a year after the Law on Freedom of Religion was implemented, Muslims were recognised as an official religious community. In 1925, the Tatars established the first Islamic congregation in Helsinki, and today they are an established cultural and religious minority, with congregations of approximately 550 members in total, in Helsinki, Järvenpää, and Tampere.⁴³

39 Sara Ahmed, “Racialized Bodies”, in *Real Bodies: A Sociological Introduction*, Mary Evans & Ellie Lee (eds.) (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 46.

40 Harry Halén & Tuomas Martikainen, “Finland”, in *Muslim Tatar Minorities in the Baltic Sea Region*, Svanberg Ingvar & Westerlund David (eds.) (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), p. 86.

41 Halén & Martikainen, “Finland”, p. 90.

42 See Tuomas Martikainen, “Muslimit suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa”, in *Islam Suomessa. Muslimit arjessa, mediassa ja yhteiskunnassa*, Tuomas Martikainen, Tuula Sakaranaho & Marko Juntunen (eds.) (Helsinki: SKS, 2008), pp. 62-84.

43 Johanna Konttori & Teemu Pauha, “Finland”, in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe Vol. 12*, Egdūnas Račius, Stephanie Müssig, Samim Akgönül, et al. (eds.) (Leiden: Brill, 2021), p. 238.

The Tatar community had long been the only ethnic Muslim minority in the country, but the number of Muslims immigrating to Finland on work, study, and family grounds started to increase in the second half of the 20th century. This happened within the broader context of Finland opening its borders to international migration after the Cold War.⁴⁴ In the 1990s, Finland started to welcome refugees according to UNHCR quotas, but its history of immigration from Muslim majority countries is notably different from that of many other European countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Great Britain. There was no systematic work-based immigration of “guest workers” to Finland post-World War II, and the country did not have a significant colonial history in the Muslim world, which might have influenced immigration patterns in the post-colonial era.⁴⁵

Today, the ethnic Muslim communities in Finland are diverse, and primarily consist of Somalis, Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Kosovo Albanians, Iranians, Afghans, and Bosniaks.⁴⁶ But defining the demographic profile of Finland’s Muslim community in numbers is not a clear-cut task, due to statistical, sociological and religious factors. Figures describing the size of the Muslim community are always rough estimates, and factual data is challenging to obtain. The religious affiliation of many Muslim residents remains underrepresented in the national statistics, which are based on registrations in official religious communities or congregations. This is for two main reasons: first, Muslims rarely undertake such registrations;⁴⁷ and second, persons residing in the country as asylum seekers are not considered in the population registry.⁴⁸

At the end of 2020, Finland reported 19,347 individuals registered in Islamic religious communities. It can be assumed that most of these live in the Helsinki metropolitan area, which is indicated by the number of associations and religious communities there with “Islam” or “Muslim” in their name.⁴⁹ It is possible, though, that the unofficial figures are up to ten times higher than the official ones.⁵⁰ In calculations based on country of birth, in 2019 researchers estimated the actual number of Muslims living in Finland to be around 110,000-

44 Tuomas Martikainen, “Finnish Muslims’ Journey from an Invisible Minority to Public Partnerships”, *Temenos* 56:1 (2020), p. 34.

45 To clarify: the Finnish state was without doubt part of the global colonial enterprise, as in the case of the Sámi People. In this context, however, domestic colonialism is viewed differently to international colonialism.

46 Konttori & Pauha, “Finland”, p. 248.

47 Tuula Sakaranaho, *Religious Freedom, Multiculturalism, Islam: Cross-Reading Finland and Ireland* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), p. 31.

48 Martikainen, “Finnish Muslims’ Journey from an Invisible Minority to Public Partnerships”, p. 39.

49 Finnish Patent and Registration Office, “Advanced Association Search”, www.yhdistysrekisteri.prh.fi (last accessed 8.12.2021)

50 Sakaranaho, *Religious Freedom, Multiculturalism, Islam: Cross-Reading Finland and Ireland*, p. 31.

120,000, i.e., ca. 2 percent of the total population.⁵¹ Such calculations, however, do not account for all Muslim children born in Finland, nor Muslim converts, as only individuals whose parents are born in a country other than Finland are considered. In any case, a steady rise even in the numbers of registered Muslims can be observed, as shown in Figure 1. According to the Pew Research Center, Finland’s Muslim population could reach 4.2-15 percent by 2050, under three different migration scenarios.⁵² While the lower estimate reflects the “zero migration scenario,” these projections indicate that immigration will continue to mark the demographics of the Finnish Muslim community. It remains to be seen how the discourse surrounding Islam and Muslims in Finland will respond in the coming decades to the fact that Muslims – including “foreign Muslims” – will be a significant demographic.

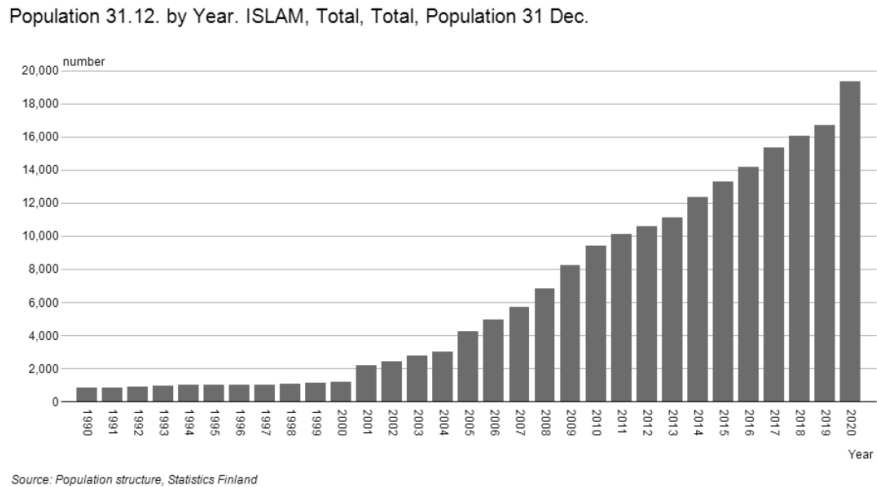


Fig. 2 (Source: Statistica Finland)

As we attempt to map out the profile of any Muslim community anywhere in the world, it is essential to pause and consider what is meant by “Muslim” in each respective context, and reflect critically on our assumptions of “Muslimness”. Some individuals might self-identify as Muslim, but not refer to their religiosity in terms of beliefs and practice, but rather as a sense of ethnic or cultural

51 Konttori & Pauha, “Finland”, p. 238.
52 PEW 2017, “Europe’s Growing Muslim Population”, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/> (accessed 15 December 2021).

belonging.⁵³ Others emphasise their religious identity independently of their national belonging, as is shown later in this article in interview data from Finnish Muslim converts. These shifting points of identification can be used interchangeably, depending on the individual's current self-perception (i.e., the meaningfulness of religion or other identity markers at a given moment), and on the social setting in which the individual finds him/herself. This can be seen in the example of the Tatars, and the diverse stages of identity negotiation they have undergone in the past. Researchers have identified different identity orientation strategies for at least four generations of Tatars living in Finland, including those guided by "Muslimness", "Turkishness", "Tatar identity", and, finally, "Finnishness."⁵⁴ Categorisations based on religiosity/religious practice carry the risk of producing political meanings and labels such as a "good," i.e., "non-practicing and thus secularised and integrated/merged", and "bad," i.e., "practicing and thus fundamentalist" Muslims.⁵⁵ These political meanings are used in global discourses surrounding the "War on Terror". They are based mainly on racist anti-Muslim assumptions of Islam as a threat to Western values, and often lead to the stigmatisation of practicing Muslims as carriers of that threat.⁵⁶

Despite the Muslim demographic profile's mainly immigrant origin, it would be too short-sighted to start an inquiry on past and present perceptions of Muslims and Islam in Finland from the gradual arrival of the "newer" ethnic Muslim population in the 1990s.⁵⁷ Going beyond such trajectories is necessary because the convert experience must consider concepts of "Finnishness" and race from another perspective. Even though experiences of anti-Muslim racism can overlap with those of, for instance, Muslims of Somali descent, Othering and other processes connected to anti-Muslim racism gain new dimensions in the everyday lives of converts. After their conversion, these Muslims are often forced to negotiate their own and others' ideas of Finnishness, an identity marker with which they were born as members of the "white Finnish" community. Research into

53 For information about Muslim immigrants from Albania in Finland, see Minna Säävälä, "Islam Kosovosta Suomeen muuttaneiden naisten elämässä", in *Islam Suomessa. Muslimit arjessa, mediassa ja yhteiskunnassa*, Tuomas Martikainen, Tuula Sakaranaho & Marko Juntunen (eds.) (Helsinki: SKS, 2008), pp. 111-131.

54 Antero Leitzinger "Tataarit Suomessa", in *Muslimit Suomessa*, Tuula Sakaranaho & Heikki Pesonen (eds.) (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1999), pp. 25-58; see also Halén & Martikainen, "Finland".

55 Samim Akgönül, "Onko Euroopassa muslimivähemmistö?" in *Mitä muslimit tarkoittavat? Keskustelua islamilaisista virtauksista Suomessa ja Euroopassa*, Tuomas Martikainen & Tuula Sakaranaho (eds.) (Turku: Savukeidas Kustannus, 2011), p. 36.

56 See Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004); and Joseph Downing, "Blurring European and Islamic Values or Brightening the Good-Bad Muslim Dichotomy? A Critical Analysis of French Muslim Victims of Jihadi Terror Online on Twitter and in *Le Monde* Newspaper", *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2019). DOI: 10.1080/17539153.2019.1573038.

57 See Göran Larsson & Egdūnas Raciū, "A Different Approach to the History of Islam and Muslims in Europe: A North-Eastern Angle, or the Need to Reconsider the Research Field", *Journal of Religion in Europe*, 3:3 (2010), pp. 350-373.

Finnish convert Muslims and their experiences of anti-Muslim racism should be situated in the larger context of the histories of other minorities in the country. The experiences of converts reflect the historical continuities of Otherisation and racial hierarchy in Finland, to which minorities such as the Sámi and Roma have been subjugated. As previously discussed, for the past two centuries the majority society has contested race and Whiteness, and how ethnic minorities are positioned within the societal structure. To date, no academic publications (beyond unpublished Master's theses) discuss the convert experience in Finland. Addressing these experiences in the larger context is necessary, and will contribute to the broader understanding of Islam and Muslim life in Europe.⁵⁸

4. Anti-Muslim racism and the racialisation of Finnish Muslim converts

While the different Sámi peoples living in Finland are culturally and linguistically kindred, and the Finnish Roma are ethnically homogenous, the Finnish Muslim community is ethnically, linguistically, religiously, and politically heterogeneous. Nevertheless, anti-Muslim racism places all Muslims, regardless of their ethnic/racial background, into the racial category of "Muslim". As Nasar Meer explains, signs of race, culture and belonging are amalgamated, so that religion is given "a new sociological relevance because of how it is tied up with issues of community identity, stereotyping, socio-economic location, political conflict and so forth".⁵⁹ In the Finnish context, normative Whiteness and normative Finnishness go hand in hand, yet are modified in their conceptualisation according to the socio-political circumstances of society. Both concepts are constructed by specific cultural – including religious – characteristics.

The converts I interviewed for my Ph.D. research⁶⁰ found that the people in their social environment (family, friends and even strangers) defined their conversion to Islam as a step away from their culture, if not a complete rejection of Finnishness. Even though Finnish converts are natives of the country and Finnish culture, their "Finnishness" is questioned and contested. Previous studies on

58 See Göran Larsson, & Egdūnas Račius, "A Different Approach to the History of Islam and Muslims in Europe: A North-Eastern Angle, or The Need to Reconsider the Research Field", pp. 350-373.

59 Nasar Meer, *Citizenship, Identity and the Politics of Multiculturalism: The Rise of Muslim Consciousness* (New York & Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 104.

60 All the names in the following quotes have been anonymized for this article

experiences of converts in Europe,⁶¹ the USA,⁶² and Australia⁶³ report how their change of religion affected society's perception of them. After their conversion, they experienced rejection within the national-cultural community of "Us", and were even labelled "cultural traitors".⁶⁴ Upon Hanna's conversion, her grandmother asked her:

Why do you have to leave your own culture? (Hanna)

Hanna explained to me that although she had abandoned festivities (such as Christmas) that were connected to her former lifestyle, which was marked by Christianity and its traditions, she did not feel like anything had changed in her identity. Hanna reflected on the meaning of such events to Finns, and noted that there was no longer much religious content in those festivities. Despite this, her grandmother's question denotes a strong connection between the Christian identity and Finnishness as a cultural identity. As religion-based practices such as celebrating Christmas have, according to Hanna, become cultural, she thinks this is what her grandmother meant by "leaving the culture." Hanna explained that changing her religion had not changed the way she perceived herself as part of society, and that she still felt very connected to her country and its lifestyle:

I am a very Finnish Muslim [...] I am a very patriotic person. I do feel that I belong here in Finland. (Hanna)

61 See Leon Moosavi, "The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experience of Islamophobia", *Critical Sociology*, 41:1 (2015), pp. 41-56; Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim. Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016); Juliette Galonnier, "The Racialization of Muslims in France and the United States: Some Insights from White Converts to Islam", *Social Compass*, 62:4 (2015), pp. 570-583; and Tina Gudrun Jensen, "To be 'Danish', Becoming 'Muslim': Contestations of National Identity?", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 34:3 (2008), pp. 389-409.

62 See Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's Conversions to Islam* (New York & Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

63 See Oishee Alam, "Islam is a Blackfella Religion, Whatchya Trying to Prove?": Race in the Lives of White Muslim converts in Australia", *The La Trobe Journal* 89 (2012), pp. 124-139.

64 The "cultural traitor" concept is, in the extreme and far-right nationalist ideology, strongly connected to the preservation of the White race. The Christchurch massacre (New Zealand, 2019) shooter wrote a manifesto titled "The Great Replacement", which referenced Replacement Theory, a conspiracy theory adopted largely by the Identitarian Movement and the alt-right across Europe. The theory claims that the indigenous peoples in Europe are being demographically and culturally replaced by non-Western peoples, for which Muslim immigrants are currently singled out as the biggest scapegoat. Several right-wing parties in Europe have adopted ideas related to the Great Replacement, and the "white genocide" ideology that scapegoats immigrants and Muslims has become mainstream, even in some respects normalised and politically acceptable. Examples of a "replacement rhetoric" can be observed in several campaign posters for German right-wing party AfD. For the Christchurch shooter, both immigrant Muslims and Muslim converts were targets. He was especially contemptuous of the latter: "The only Muslim I truly hate is the convert, those from our own people that turn their backs on their heritage, turn their backs on their cultures, turn their back on their traditions and became blood traitors to their own race. These I hate."

Hanna identifies as Finnish and Muslim, with the former identity marker specifying the latter. Esra Özyürek has similarly argued that German converts put a conscious effort into developing a German Muslim identity, separate from that of Arab or Turkish Muslims, in their social environment and beyond.⁶⁵ Özyürek, however, does not discuss to what extent these German converts associate such hyphenated identities with their feelings of belonging to society – as in a civic identity – or whether they are more concerned with how Islam is practiced in the German context. Tariq Ramadan discusses this sense of belonging and identity of Muslims in Europe, and poses relatively central questions, such as those relating to the primary group identity of European Muslims: is their identity religious or cultural, or do they feel connected to a European nation-state through their citizenship?⁶⁶ While Ramadan's book is addressed to European Muslims as a critical self-reflection, similar questions are frequently posed by non-Muslims, especially in an anti-Muslim racist frame. Political scientist Ibrahim Kalin argues, as part of a monolithic discourse on Islam, that Muslims in the West are accused of adhering to their origin countries, having multiple loyalties, and not complying with their societies' values.⁶⁷ These "wrong" loyalties are – particularly in a political atmosphere marked by the War on Terror – then translated into potential security threats.

Although both Ramadan and Kalin concentrate their argumentation on Muslims with a migratory background, Muslim converts face similar accusations of having "wrong loyalties", and the heavy Otherisation of their religious identity is perceived to supersede their cultural/national one. Converts are thereby out-grouped as strangers, a consequence they have borne since Islam's early times, when they were made "cultural outcasts" by their cultural-ethnic communities. Shaban points out that for converts to the Early Muslim Community (7th century CE), accepting Islam meant the loss or repudiation of their social identities, and its consequence was:

... cutting oneself off from the other activities of the community. Quraysh described such action as *saba'*, to change from one religion to another, implying that such a person had set himself up as an enemy of his people ...⁶⁸

65 Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*, p. 29.

66 See Tariq Ramadan, *To be a European Muslim* (Leicester: Kube Publishing Ltd, 2013).

67 See Ibrahim Kalin, "Islamophobia and the Limits of Multiculturalism", in *Islamophobia: The Challenge of Pluralism in the 21st Century*, in Ibrahim Kalin & John L. Esposito (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3-20.

68 Muhammad Shaban, "Conversion to Early Islam" in *Conversion to Islam*, Levztzion Nehemia (ed.) (New York: Holms & Meiers, 1979), p. 24.

One of my interviewees, Mira, reported that her mother was distraught when she learned of her daughter's conversion to Islam. Surprisingly, she tried to convince Mira to join the Pentecostal Church as an alternative. This shows that the real issue was not that Mira had become religious, but that she had chosen Islam. Mira reflected upon this, and confirmed that it would probably have been "less embarrassing" to her mother if she had at least chosen a sect of Christianity instead. After Mira's conversion, her mother was initially ashamed to be seen in public with her:

Once I was on my way home from school, in the subway, when my friend said 'Hey, your mom is over there,' and I was just like 'Yeah, let's keep a low profile now,' and she gave me that warning look like 'I dare you to come over here ...' (Mira)

One of the themes that emerged from the narratives of my interviewees was the weighing of their Islamic identity as the primary, purely religious one – i.e., not conflated with the culture of any specific country or nation – and the Finnish cultural identity as subordinate. The latter would, however, still be strongly emphasised to juxtapose themselves with other Muslims such as Arabs and Turks.

It does not, however, mean that we would be giving up on our language or our culture. Yeah, alright, for me also, the Islamic identity comes first; I am always a Muslim in the first place, and only secondarily Finnish, a mother, and so on. [...] My first culture is Islam, but a good second place is given to Finnishness, that is, I am not an Arab [...] I am still Finnish. That does not disappear. So, I am insulted when I am told that Muslims do not belong in Finland. (Mira)

Conversion has thus carried another dimension of social identity throughout the centuries; the early Muslims came from a socio-cultural background bound by tribalism, and European Muslims in the 21st century must negotiate their respective national identities with their religious ones. The construction of an individual Muslim's identity shifted in the early Muslim communities from strict and exclusive tribal bonds to the universal bond of the Islamic faith. After the Hijra (resettlement) of the community from Mecca to Medina, a new concept of belonging, that of the ummah, emerged.⁶⁹ This same transit to a new in-group takes place for converts today. As Tariq Ramadan points out, by declaring his faith in God and his last Messenger, a person saying the shahada enters a community of believers that essentially agrees on their shared identity based on this single utterance.⁷⁰

69 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Volume 1: The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 173.

70 Tariq Ramadan, *To be a European Muslim*, p. 153.

Mira, however, reacts strongly to arguments about Muslims not fitting into Finnish society, and notes the contradictions in the anti-Muslim racist discourse: Muslims like herself are rejected and Otherised both culturally and racially, but while she is actively living and balancing both her identities, she is stripped of her self-determination and voice, by accusations of having abandoned her Finnishness.

This is my home country, this is my only home country, I do not have anywhere else to go when they tell me to go back where I came from [...] I am very much insulted by the fact that they are trying to take Finland and Finnishness away from me, even though the allegation always is that I have abandoned them [Finland and Finnishness], and that is not the case. (Mira)

To emphasise again: the meanings ascribed to “Finnishness” are, in this context, connected mainly to the idea of Whiteness, and subsequently to the racialisation of Muslims as non-White, i.e., non-Finnish. But the converts I interviewed contested this racialisation, and described Finnishness as precisely non-racial. Several of my interviewees associated Finnishness with specific values, such as respect and love for nature. A common narrative among Western converts is a convergence of Islamic values with their respective local/national cultures. For many women, this especially includes family values, such as the idea of traditional gender roles and more focus on community life rather than individualism. American convert women have stated that those Islamic values overlap with “traditional American values.”⁷¹ This is in stark contrast to research findings on young Muslims with a migratory background, for whom, for instance, heavy drinking of alcohol is dominantly representative of the Finnish culture, so much so that if their peers adopt these habits, they are considered to be “converting to a Finn.”⁷²

My interviewees also reported being misrecognised as non-Finnish by strangers, in encounters that ranged from veiled remarks to explicit slurs. Generally, Muslim women whose religious identity is visible by their dress can easily become victims of hate incidents.⁷³ Susanna, for example, told me how she had been the target of hate speech several times:

F*ing Somali [...] go back to where you came from. (Susanna)

71 Carol L. Anway, “American Women Choosing Islam”, in *Muslims on the Americanization path?*, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad & John L. Esposito (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 151.

72 See Teemu Pauha & Inga Jasinskaja-Lahti, “Don’t ever convert to a Finn’ Young Muslims writing about Finnishness”, *Diaconia* 4:2 (2013), pp. 172-193.

73 See Irene Zempi & Neil Chakraborti, *Islamophobia, Victimisation and the Veil* (New York & Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

Susanna added that such comments had generally been made by drunks. During an incident in the subway when a drunk man started aiming slurs at her, she could not define whether the insults were directed towards her as a person, or whether it was just “drunk talk”. Nevertheless, she experienced the situation as threatening because she was with a non-Muslim friend who had a baby, and she felt that her hijab had provoked the aggressor. How the racial category “Muslim” is associated with a specific ethnicity differs from country to country, and it is safe to argue that this is affected by the demographic profile of each respective Muslim community. In Finland from the 1990s onwards, the community has been dominantly represented by refugees from Somalia, and their descendants.

In the UK, which has a large Muslim population with a South-Asian background, converts are associated with Pakistanis, and sometimes called by the extremely derogatory term “Pakis”.⁷⁴ In Germany, where the Muslim population is typically marked by its history of Turkish guest workers, German female converts are frequently misrecognised as Turkish women.⁷⁵ If Susanna were a person of Somali origin and visibly a person of colour, the slur she received would be identified as xenophobic. Indeed, Somalis were the main target of Finland’s skinhead movement in the past.⁷⁶ The intersection of religion and race/ethnicity is, however, important, because in its context the slur is a manifestation of anti-Muslim racism. Even though we cannot determine whether the aggressor recognised Susanna’s ethnic background, when the racial category of “Muslim” is associated with a Somali background, the moment of racialisation is defined. Susanna was attacked because she was *visibly* Muslim, and the message was loud and clear: You do not belong in this country.

Racialisation can also manifest in everyday interactions and comments that only insinuate misrecognition of the convert’s identity as a native Finn. Noora, for instance, told me about an incident that occurred at her home. She and her husband, an Arab, had her husband’s football teammate and his wife over as guests. The teammate was a native Finnish man who had been in the same class as Noora at school. But, to Noora’s surprise, her old school friend recognised neither her face nor her name, and asked her, “Where are you from?” For Noora, this was the first time she felt that her Finnishness was not recognised, and she felt that her hijab had influenced the situation considerably. Hanna also reported an unconscious microaggression that misrecognized her as “foreign”. She told me about the first time she tutored a little girl, in the girl’s home. She was wearing the hijab but the girl’s parents did not explicitly confront her about her religion, so she could not determine whether they had recognised her as a Finnish convert. But the grandmother, whom Hanna had considered sympathetic, asked her:

74 Moosavi, “The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experience of Islamophobia”, pp. 41–56.

75 Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim. Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*.

76 Puuronen, *Rasistinen Suomi*.

Have you been here in Finland for a long time already, so that you have gotten used to this weather? (Hanna)

Mira, a nurse, has experienced racialisation at work. Her patients have made comments that she feels are closely connected to their misrecognising her as foreign, and questioning her professional qualifications. Such situations exemplify that social status can also intersect with anti-Muslim racism:

There are these [patients], who say that they want a Finnish nurse, or they ask me which language they should speak to me. (Mira)

Mira's patients have also asked her how long she has been in Finland. She told me a story that is a glaring example of how anti-Muslim racism not only racialises individuals, but also gives racial meaning to professionalism. A patient's mother told Mira that she would not be allowed to take the child's blood sample because "you are not Finnish". Mira received support from her colleagues: even though the mother asked for another nurse to take the blood sample, they did not bend to her wishes. The mother, who was Russian, escalated the situation and made a complaint about Mira, accusing her of racism towards herself and her child, and of physically assaulting the child. Because Mira's colleagues had witnessed the whole incident, they confirmed the accusations were false. Mira finds situations like these emotionally exhausting, and she is sure that she is targeted merely because she is visibly recognisable as a Muslim.

Conclusion

Muslim converts often face hostility based merely on their religiosity as Muslims, which manifests in a denial of their "native" cultural identity; in the anti-Muslim racist discourse, the two identities are seen as exclusive. Although it is impossible to generalise, throughout my Ph.D. work I have observed some commonalities. In the anti-Muslim racist discourse, converts are viewed by those who already have anti-Muslim sentiments as foreign once they embrace Islam, especially if they start adhering to certain religious dress practices, like the hijab. This is because anti-Muslim racism and the racialisation of Muslims is connected to the understanding that Muslims are inherently different from non-Muslims. Even convert Muslims are racialised; they are categorised in the same way as Muslims

of colour, as the Other, and attributed similar characteristics that are used to depict them as inferior compared to their non-Muslim fellow citizens. While it can be argued that this means they are “losing their Whiteness”, Muslim converts are discursively excluded from the imagination of “Us” in the Finnish national and cultural context, and they become victims of more racially motivated hate incidents and discrimination than other Muslims.

When analysing the situation of various Muslim communities in Finnish society, the social status of Muslim converts requires attention concerning Whiteness, especially when their Otherness is noticeable. Scholarship on race and racism is relatively new in Finland, and in the last two decades it has focused mainly on the Sámi and Roma ethnic minorities, anti-Black racism, Russophobia, and xenophobia towards immigrants from Muslim majority countries. Even the very recent and seminal work on Whiteness in Finland, “Race, Power and Resistance”, does not include the racial category “Muslim”, or discuss the Muslim experience on racialisation in Finland; Muslims are largely ignored in Finnish critical scholarship on race.⁷⁷

This article has shown how ethnic minorities in Finland have been targeted by cultural racism and racialisation. By drawing an analogy with historical racism, it also showed how the conceptual tool of racialisation can be used to analyse Finnish converts’ experiences of anti-Muslim racism in today’s context. The identification of racialisation and the understanding of Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism in the study of Finnish convert Muslims’ experiences creates a space where conversations about “race” can move beyond the Black/White paradigm. Although this article only partly covered the fieldwork that I have undertaken for my Ph.D. research, the examples within pinpoint the porous boundaries of Finnishness and Whiteness, produced and reproduced in narratives on “Us” and “Them” for centuries, and expanding the target of racial Othering, from the Sámi and the Roma to the Muslims. As Berger notes,⁷⁸ historical narratives have their meanings anchored in certain epochs, and the audiences of the time they were produced. Consequently, I argue that these narratives can be brought up to date, re-written, and revised, considering all the marginal voices that have until now been ignored. As a scholar-activist, I hope our generation can produce a new collective memory, as a result of growing awareness about the white-washing of Finland’s history. This new, decolonised collective memory would recognise minorities, and give them their due value as makers of the past and present-day societies in Europe. This article is a small part of such an endeavour, and it brings forth for the first time a critical perspective from within the Muslim experience on race, Whiteness, and normative Finnishness.

77 See Suvi Keskinen, Minna Seikkula & Faith Mkwesha (eds.), *Rasismi, valta ja vastarinta. Rodullistaminen, valkoisuus ja koloniaalisuus Suomessa* (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2021)

78 Maurits S. Berger, *A Brief History of Islam in Europe: Thirteen Centuries of Creed, Conflict and Coexistence* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2014), p. 16.

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Bijelost i antimuslimanski rasizam u Finskoj: rasizacija finških muslimana obraćenika

Sažetak

Ovaj rad zastupa tvrdnju da antimuslimanska iskustva finških preobraćenika treba analizirati kao *rasna* te da ona nisu nastala iz povijesnog vakuuma nego zapravo su neodvojivi dio razvojnog puta rasizma u Finskoj. Rad svoju tvrdnju pokazuje kroz rasizaciju nacionalnih manjina u zemlji, naroda Samija i Roma. Oslanjajući se na to, članak objašnjava kako se iskustvo finškog preobraćenja može shvatiti kao kontinuitet rasizacije manjina u Finskoj, unutar opsežnije konstrukcije bjeline i normativnog finškog. Na osnovu toga rad objašnjava kako se iskustvo finških preobraćenika može shvatiti kao kontinuum rasizacije manjina u Finskoj unutar jedne šire konstrukcije bijelosti i normativnog finškog.

Ključne riječi: antimuslimanski rasizam, Finska, muslimani obraćenici, rasizacija, bijelost