

# Sharing and Caring

## Muslim Women Teaching Islam in Denmark

**Keywords:** Islamic education; motherhood; care; piety; Islam in Denmark

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**English abstract** Muslim women dedicate themselves to Islamic educational activities as an important aspect of their religious engagement, and pious Muslim Danish women are no exception. One important element of this engagement appears to be the sharing of the knowledge gained with younger generations. In this paper, I scrutinize this aspect of contemporary Danish Muslim piety, asking how and why Danish Muslim women ‘pass on’ knowledge to children. I show that this transmission should be seen as a way of caring for the children as part of the Muslim community, and that this way of caring appears especially important in a setting where Islam is practiced as a minority religion. At the same time, the sharing of knowledge should be perceived as a virtuous practice, given that it is an aspect of the women’s own efforts to live virtuous lives.

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<sup>1</sup> The Qur’an is recited as an Arabic text on a large number of occasions, and the recitation forms an important part of pious Muslim everyday and ritual life (see e.g. Nelson 1985; Gade 2004; 2021). For example, smaller parts of the Arabic Qur’an are recited during the *salat* prayers that observing Muslims commonly perform five times daily. To recite the Qur’an, one needs, first of all, to be able to pronounce the classical Arabic of the text. Furthermore, the recitation follows distinct rules, a kind of grammar. Muslims worldwide learn Qur’anic recitation in their homes, but it also forms a core in formalized Islamic education (Leemhuis 2006).

‘As a parent, you are obliged to pass on what you know. But it is also your duty to learn more to be able to teach more.’ These words were uttered by Wafiqqa, a 23-year-old university student and student of Qur’anic recitation in a Copenhagen mosque, when I interviewed her in the spring of 2019.<sup>1</sup> As the quote shows, for Wafiqqa learning was intertwined with teaching or sharing knowledge, and, while she was not yet a mother herself, she clearly had specific anticipations about her own motherhood and ideas about childrearing. Most of the women I talked to during my exploration of Danish Muslim women’s engagement in Islamic educational activities made this same link between learning and sharing knowledge, especially highlighting the aspect of being a parent as a key motivation for their own search for knowledge on Islam, and as part of their engagement with Islamic knowledge.

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In this article, I address the role that educating children in Islamic subjects and ethics plays for Danish Muslim women who are actively involved as students and voluntary teachers in Islamic education. Education is central to religious communities but, as has been noted, the religious education of future generations might be especially important to religious minority communities like that of Muslims in Denmark (Levitt, Barnett, and Khalil 2011; Pedersen 2014). This article scrutinizes how pious Muslim women reflect on this situation and their own roles as ‘transmitters’ of Islamic knowledge. Departing from the link between the search *for* knowledge and the sharing *of* knowledge that was exemplified in Wafiqā’s words, the article asks how and why the upbringing of future generations of Muslims motivates women to educate themselves in Islamic subjects, ethics, and a Muslim way of life; what it means for the women as pious Muslims to share knowledge with future generations; and how this sharing takes place.

Throughout the article, I describe the women among whom I carried out research as being ‘pious’, thereby emphasizing that these women described Islam as a framework for their lives and noted that they strove to retain Islam, and ultimately God, as a guiding factor or horizon (Mittermaier 2021) in their lives. Importantly, I do not perceive piety as a state but rather as an ongoing orientation towards a religious realm that processually forms the women as subjects (see also Lyngsøe and Stjernholm 2022). In her influential research on women engaged in the Egyptian mosque movement, this understanding of piety as a processual orientation of everyday life rather than a fixed state has also been promoted by Saba Mahmood (2012 [2005]). Here, Mahmood has shown that Muslim women endeavour to form themselves as pious subjects through ‘disciplinary techniques’ of bodily *self*-cultivation, a notion that has proven very useful to studies on Muslim women’s religiosity. Mahmood’s work has been a key inspiration for literature on Muslim women, and piety has been an important analytical term within this literature (e.g. Minganti 2007; Jacobsen 2011b; Hocke 2014; Jouili 2015; Groeninck 2017), one that emphasizes how women engage in ‘practices of self-cultivation’ (Jouili 2015, 15) to live pious lives.

The Islamic knowledge engagement of women practicing a pious lifestyle is often highlighted by this literature, and the link between piety and educational efforts forms an important strand in a number of studies (e.g. Mahmood 2012; Jouili 2008; Inge

2017; Giulia Liberatore 2017; Groeninck 2017; Noor 2017; Bano 2017; Mateo 2019). In such works, it is generally acknowledged that Islamic education is an important aspect of modern Muslim women's striving for and practice of piety, and it appears that Muslim women seek Islamic education to find relevant answers to questions arising in their everyday lives in the Scandinavian context as well (Minganti 2007, e.g.; Lyngsøe 2018; Liebmann and Galal 2020; Eriksen 2020), as is the case for the Danish Muslim women in this study.

My description of the women in this article as pious relates to and relies on the literature mentioned. While my understanding of piety as a continuous and processual formation of the self through an orientation towards Islam takes great inspiration from this literature, I also wish to add to this line of research by placing greater emphasis on the relational aspects of piety formation. Thus, I argue that by not only examining the knowledge search of individuals but also the sharing of knowledge, it becomes evident that piety is also formed through and influenced by the various relational bonds of individuals, and that piety, then, in a sense, is also formed collectively.

I build this argument throughout the article. After introducing the methods and materials used, I describe the analytical framework of the study and its argument. I then move on to highlight specific women from my sample to analyse their perceptions and practices of knowledge sharing, both in domestic and institutional settings. Finally, the significance of the Danish context is considered before I finish with concluding remarks.

## Methods and Materials

To answer the questions above, I rely on material collected via fieldwork conducted between April 2019 and July 2021 among Danish Muslim women engaged in Islamic educational activities. This consisted, firstly, of participant observation of a variety of Islamic educational activities in Greater Copenhagen, secondly, of interviews with twenty-five women engaged in Islamic educational activities as students or teachers, and thirdly, of analysis of logbooks kept by four such women.

The activities in which I conducted participant observation ranged from highly structured weekly Qur'an recitation classes,

across occasional thematic seminars, to private study groups, both in online as well as in-person meetings. ‘Observation’, says Tim Ingold, ‘is a way of participating attentively’ (2017, 23), and there is no contradiction between observing and participating; there are, however, different ways of engaging, and in my fieldwork I made the effort to walk what Jessica Moberg calls ‘the tightrope’ between the two (2013, 64). I always considered the specific context and made sure to remain authentic and clear about my purpose and intentions when participating, while at the same time remaining respectful to teachers and participants by keeping a low profile and, for example, not intervening with questions. Most of the activities in which I participated took place in two specific mosque communities which were selected for further scrutiny, both representing Sunni Islam and both with a well-developed milieu for educational activities in a Danish context.<sup>2</sup> These were also the places where I met the majority of my interlocutors, through whom I became involved in activities outside of the two mosques, both in other institutions and in private settings.

I also conducted interviews with twenty-five women whom I met during participant observation or were introduced to by other women. As such, a ‘snowball approach’ guided my selection of interlocutors and secured a ‘bottom-up approach’ to the field. Interviews were structured around prepared questions, but my aim was always to remain open to my interlocutors and to ‘question beyond the immediate concerns of the research questions’ (Forsey 2010, 567–68). This meant that the women’s own narratives and reflections also guided the flow and themes of our conversations.

Of the women I interviewed, the youngest was twenty-two and the oldest sixty-seven at the time of our interview, and all were involved in Islamic educational activities as teachers or students or both. As such, these women were all dedicated to Islam in a specific way that does not reflect the practice and dedication of Muslims at large or of Muslim women in Denmark. Their practices do, however, represent a tendency found both in Europe and in Muslim-majority countries among dedicated Muslim women to prioritize intellectual engagements with Islam (see e.g. Jouili 2008; Bano 2017; Guilia Liberatore 2017; Eriksen 2020) – a tendency that my research suggests is also influential in Denmark (Lyngsøe 2022; see also Jensen 2022). The amount of time that the women dedicated to Islamic educational

<sup>2</sup> In Denmark, no official Islamic education exists, and Islamic educational offerings are run by local associations or groups such as mosques without state funding (Simonsen and Daun 2018, 846; Kühle and Larsen 2019, 99–100; Mikkelsen 2019, 174).

activities and the kind of activities in which they were involved differed among them. Some spent more than ten hours weekly studying, while others found the time to study once a week. Their national backgrounds differed as well. Most were children of immigrant parents who came to Denmark from Muslim-majority countries as immigrants or refugees, and these women were therefore raised in Muslim families, although the prominence of the role Islam and education in Islam had played during their childhood years varied. In my sample, I also have a few representatives of first-generation immigrants to Denmark who grew up as Muslim in Muslim majority-societies but migrated to Denmark as adults. Finally, a few of my interlocutors were converts to Islam and consequently grew up in non-Muslim families (though not necessarily non-religious).

Guiding my selection of interlocutors was that educational activities in different ways were central to their religious engagements and their wishes to live pious lives. However, the women's different backgrounds do appear to influence practices quite strongly and are highlighted when relevant to the analysis. This is also valid with regard to what we may call the secular educational background of the women, that is, their education in public, civic institutions, as well as their relation to the Danish labour market. Here, as well, the women differed; while the formal education of some of the first-generation immigrants among my interlocutors had been brief, most were well-educated women with college or university degrees from Danish public educational institutions and were, for example, teachers, social workers, or medical doctors.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to interviews and observation, my research relies on logbooks that four women kept for two separate weeks separated by around a month in which I requested them to note all their Islamic educational activities. While the interviews worked to give me an impression of the life stories of the women, with special attention to their involvement in Islam and Islamic education, the logbooks ensured that I got a more detailed picture of the women's daily activities connected with studying and disseminating Islamic knowledge. As a method that can follow the women more closely in their everyday life, logbooks were very useful for getting an insight into the little everyday practices of the women (Ammerman 2013, 17; Page and Yip 2017, 8). Together, the three main methods employed – participant observation, interviews, and logbooks – provided me with

3 What I refer to here as 'college degrees' are what in Danish terminology would be called '*mellemlang videregående uddannelse*'. What I refer to as 'university degrees' are in Danish terminology called '*lang videregående uddannelse*'.

broadly based material for understanding how and why Danish Muslim women engage in Islamic education, including what it means for them to share knowledge.

While conducting fieldwork, I decided to keep the identity of all interlocutors confidential, and to ensure this, I had also to anonymize institutions such as mosques. Consequently, the names of all interlocutors and institutions in this article are pseudonyms. I made the choice of confidentiality to secure my interlocutors' safety and their sense of being able to talk and act freely. In addition, it made it easier to gain access to both places and people's narratives. Informed consent was retrieved from all interviewees, and in the case of observation of classes, the teachers consented to my participation as a researcher on behalf of the students. In addition, I always presented myself to students in classes, and maintaining clarity about my intentions and purpose guided my participation.

## Analytical Framework

As noted above, a number of studies have pointed out the centrality of engagement with Islamic knowledge for Muslim women who wish to cultivate their piety. In this study, I am interested in investigating the 'intrinsic link between knowledge and faith' (Jouili 2015, 41) by highlighting the pious efforts of the women. Piety formation is key to my analytical approach and, as noted, I wish to highlight the relational aspects of this formation. I do so by looking specifically at the intergenerational knowledge-sharing practices of my interlocutors, and motherhood thus becomes a key theme.

Motherhood forms an important part of the religious identity and social role of Muslim women around the globe, and Muslim mothers are responsible for multiple facets of education in the lives of their children, including 'educating their children in the extensive knowledge and religious practice that form part of Muslim identity' (Pappano and Olwan 2016, 5, 8). Despite its evident importance, the role of motherhood has seldom been investigated in the scholarship on Islamic knowledge dissemination or Muslim women's teaching. Since research on teaching and education tends to focus on institutional settings, the everyday practice of bringing up children is generally overlooked, although it is touched upon briefly in a few studies

addressing Muslim women's search for knowledge. For example, Sahar Noor (2017, 180) notes that one important reason why the Dutch Muslim women in her study increased their knowledge of Islam was their wish 'to raise their children in an Islamic fashion' and thus contribute to the cultivation of 'a new generation of pious Muslims imbued with Islamic knowledge' (see also Amir-Moazami and Salvatore 2003, 64–66; Jouili and Amir-Moazami 2006, 622–23). Jeanette Jouili (2015, 129) concludes that generally '[t]he link between education and maternity is an important trope in contemporary Islamic discourse' (see also Jacobsen 2016; Liberatore 2019). Jouili links this tendency to 'the Islamic reform movement of the turn of the twentieth century' (2015, 129), which emphasizes the 'pivotal and "sacred" role of the educated woman in society' (2015, 130). Based on research from Britain, Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor (2016, 26) likewise argues that that '[m]otherhood has become one of the many fronts on which young Muslim women are reclaiming their faith' in contemporary Europe. Research on Muslim motherhood in a Danish setting is scarce, but Marianne Holm Pedersen's studies (2009, 2013, 2014) show that Islamic rituals, knowledge, and ethics play important roles in domestic life, including childrearing practices, among Muslims of Iraqi background in Denmark. And in Sara Jul Jakobsen's research on notions of women in Danish online jihadi Salafism, she also finds that motherhood forms a fundamental trope.<sup>4</sup>

The role of motherhood in the knowledge and education practices of Danish or, more broadly, Scandinavian Muslim women has, however, not been addressed in the literature. By linking the aspect of searching for knowledge with that of sharing it for the benefit of future generations, this article provides new insights into the field of Scandinavian Muslim women's engagement in Islamic education and the role of religious education more broadly. While this is not a study of religious childhood experiences, it touches upon what a religious childhood is or might look like, although it does so through the lenses of mothers who reflect on their experiences and choices concerning this. Consequently, we might call this study an 'anthropology of parenthood,' as Pedersen has suggested (2009, 165),<sup>5</sup> as it looks 'beyond official religious teaching to the everyday...practices' of teaching religion (Strhan, Parker, and Redgely 2017, 3). However, as we will see, the upbringing and teaching of children is not a de-institutionalized practice; I

4 In a recent study, Jeppe Schmidt Grüner (2020, 244) has demonstrated how Danish Muslim men conceptualize and practice fatherhood as part of their religious aspiration, meaning that caring for children becomes a kind of work that connects fathers not only to their children but also to the divine (see also Lyngsøe 2022, Chap. 6).

5 In her study, Pedersen focuses on the transmission and production of religious knowledge in Muslim families of immigrant background in Denmark, but does not look at these practices as an aspect of pious women's engagement with knowledge.

argue that there is a need to centre the work that women do in *multiple* settings and spheres in bringing up future generations to understand what it means to be a pious Muslim woman in Denmark, and what it means to engage in Islamic education as part of this work. As Muslim mothers are rarely portrayed, and even more rarely allotted speaking roles in dominant media representations (they are perhaps more noticeable by their absence than by their presence [Pappano and Olwan 2016]), such attention appears all the more important.

In anthropological studies on family relations, including those on parenting or mothering, care is often highlighted as a key term. I have also found the notion of care to be interesting when investigating the meaning of the work undertaken by the women in this study in the course of educating children in an Islamic fashion, and the ways they think about and conceptualize this work. Approaching an understanding of care, I take inspiration from Sara Ruddick's (1999) reflections on the virtue of care as something relational. Ruddick builds these reflections and her conceptualization upon research of aging and what it means to be elderly, finding that an 'individualistic account of virtue seems conceptually inadequate to represent the moral efforts of elderly people' (1999, 51). Instead, she argues that 'virtue is in the first instance created between and among people; that it is, therefore, inseparable from relationships' (1999, 53). In the context of European Muslim piety, this might reflect what Jeannette Jouili suggests terming an 'ethics of intersubjectivity', where the 'ethical work is made out of feelings of responsibility, obligation, and care for others' (2015, 18).<sup>6</sup> While this might be true more generally, I find, like Ruddick, that it is especially relevant when considering inter-generational relations in the form of child rearing and the education of children. Based on Ruddick's reflections, it becomes possible to see women's engagement in such work as a form of care, but also as virtuous or pious activity that forms part of their own religiosity. In the women's reflections, the work of educating is related to that of care, but is further understood within the realm of the religious or what we might call the virtuous. In a similar vein, Maria Louw (2022, 74) has argued in her study of women in Kyrgyzstan who grow old in the absence of children with whom to form relations of care, that care is virtuous, and that caring allows one to be a more virtuous version of oneself. I found that this understanding sheds light on the material with which I am engaging as well.

6 Formulating this idea about ethics, Jouili relies on and refers to Aristotle's notion of *phronesis*, which she defines as doing the right thing in the right place, time, and way, so that it is 'right' not only for the individual but also for 'human flourishing' (Jouili 2015, 18).



Such an understanding of virtue as relationally built pushes further than Mahmood's Foucauldian notion of being virtuous, which, as previously noted, shows how Muslim women build themselves as pious subjects through bodily acts of self-cultivation. While this notion has proven very useful, it has also been criticised for establishing the individual as the central or even sole agent in ethical, including religious, work (e.g. Rozario 2011, 286; Mittermaier 2012, 251–52; Rytter 2016; Louw 2022, 64) it is not unusual in the contemporary Islamic world, both in Muslim-majority countries and in the diaspora, for young people to be much more 'Islamic' in behaviour, dress and lifestyle than their parents. As this may suggest, modernist Islamic piety is not infrequently directed by young people against their parents, as a mode of resistance to parental authority. However, wearing the hijab, becoming a follower of a Sufi shaykh, or marrying a 'good' Muslim spouse from another ethnic group to one's own, are different kinds of resistance from, for example, joining an inner-city youth gang, or rejecting one's parents' Asian cultural background for a more globalised identity. I discuss some of the ways in which Islamic piety can be deployed in resistance to parental authority through case studies from my Economic and Social Research Council-funded field research in Bangladesh and the UK, and consider in what ways these forms of behaviour resemble, and differ from, more familiar forms of resistance. Drawing on dream stories from a Sufi community in Egypt, this article probes the limits of the paradigm of self-cultivation which has come to be widely employed in the anthropology of Islam. While the concept of self-cultivation has complicated the equation of agency and resistance, its emphasis on intentionality and deliberate action obscures other modes of religiosity that centre neither on acting within nor on acting against but on being acted upon. Far from reaffirming a self-cultivating subject, narratives of visitational and divinely inspired dreams are profound reminders of the unpredictability of divine interventions and the contingency of life itself. Through an analysis of Egyptian dream narratives and in conversation with anthropological literatures on an ethics of passion, this article traces a relational understanding of subjectivity which poses an even more radical challenge to the liberal model of the autonomous self than do practices of self-cultivation. This article discusses the significance of growing large beards among the young Danish Pakistani members of a newly established

Naqshbandi Sufi order in Copenhagen, where the beard is not simply an imitation but a reflection of the Prophet Muhammad. Exploring emic understandings of emulation and embodiment, the article suggests that a conceptual displacement from imitation to reflection enables our analytical framework to move beyond the 'self-cultivation paradigm' that has dominated recent writings in the anthropology of Islam, so that it can accommodate the numerous ways in which devoted Sufis are being acted upon; a change from 'technology of self' to 'technology of Other' enables connections between this world and Elsewhere to be included in the analytical framework. The article further discusses how the beard is significant in the brotherhood's attempts at sacralization and world transformation based on nur (light, and a framework for religious virtue that moves beyond the common frame of self-cultivation has been called for.

Furthermore, the understanding of care as virtuous needs to be linked to and understood in relation to the specific context that the women inhabit and the position from which they seek and pass on Islamic knowledge. Their religious and national as well as educational backgrounds influence their positions, possibilities, and choices and are considered in this study. Here, the minority positionality of the Muslim women is inevitable, and in a Danish setting, being Muslim is also a matter of living with structural and discursive othering and discourses of suspicion about Islam more broadly (e.g. Khawaja 2011; Rytter and Pedersen 2013; Rytter 2019). Given the contextual setting of the women's daily practice as Muslims, it is relevant to investigate the role taken by the education of children as Muslims and how education as an act of care is made meaningful in this setting in particular.

## Danish Muslim Women as Educators

Most of the women whom I talked to during my research explained that they shared their knowledge of Islam with others in some way or the other, and around half of them did explicit voluntary work as teachers, most commonly in mosques. A common motivation for the women to pass on their knowledge was what can be described as a care for one's community, whether this was understood as the nuclear family or the broader Muslim community in Greater Copenhagen or beyond. As educational

activities are important pillars in Islamic communities, including mosque communities, the teaching work that these women carry out as they introduce basic Islamic history to converts or teach the *fiqh* of fasting (*sawm*) practices – to give some examples from my sample –educating not only children but also other adult women, makes them important figures in local Danish Muslim communities. They formulate knowledge and carry out tasks that shape the paths of numerous other Muslim women and children, and without doubt should be described as important figures of authority in the Muslim communities that I have investigated. This is an important conclusion, and it relates to an often articulated interest in authority positions within the study of Islam, and among Muslim women especially (see e.g. Jonker 2003; Bano and Kalmbach 2012; Spielhaus and Hammer 2013; Ali 2021).

Without de-emphasizing the importance of this conclusion, I leave the discussion here in order to scrutinize the role of care in the teaching work more closely. The teaching of both adults and children was talked about and understood within the framework of care, although the vulnerability that childhood represents did appear to distinguish children's education. In this article, therefore, I focus on more specifically on the teaching practices that form part of the upbringing of children.

Approximately half my interlocutors were already mothers; some had recently had their first baby, while others had older or even adult children. Other women did not have children but imagined themselves as future mothers and had clear ideals of motherhood, as was the case for Wafiqah. Generally, the women were conscious of their role as (future) wives and mothers. Family values appeared important to most, and being a mother seemed to be closely linked to most women's notions of gender and womanhood, regardless of their national background. Gendered divisions of labour also influenced how the women saw themselves and performed in families as mothers. Almost all of them mentioned or hinted that child rearing and caring was a job for mothers and fathers equally, but even so, it also appeared from my conversations with the women that, in many ways, they took on the larger amount of this work, especially with smaller children. Furthermore, reflecting on their roles as (future) mothers, the women clearly found it to encompass the obligation to pass on Islamic knowledge and values, as Wafiqah observed by way of introduction. Many integrated Islamic values and practices into the rearing of their children from an early age

and had done so quite consciously. Among the women who were mothers, Islam played an important role in their reflections on motherhood and the way they educated their children. Thus, motherhood and the domestic sphere of family life is also an arena for Islamic education (see Pedersen 2017), and in this sphere as well, women play central roles in shaping the paths of others.

### Motherhood as Virtuous Work: Building Islamic Foundations

The women with children generally explained that they wanted to give their children a basic introduction to Islam in regard to both what Mark Sedgwick (2014, 5) calls its more ‘habitual’ aspects – that is, Islamic practices such as prayer and fasting – and its more ‘doctrinal’ aspects, such as knowledge about God, the Prophet Muhammad, or ethics, although any sharp distinction between the two would be an error (Scourfield et al. 2017, 125). This found expression among the women across a range of different social and national backgrounds. However, as noted, most women were secularly well-educated with diplomas from or enrolment in Danish universities and colleges, and if they were not currently students, most were well-established in the labour market. This background appeared to shape their ideas and ideals of what good parenting and proper religious upbringing included. First of all, they expressed that they were generally inclined towards intellectual engagements with the world, and they wished to teach and pass on to their children this aspect of knowing and reflecting critically on matters. Second, with this educational background and cultural habitus, most women in my study were of ‘middle class identity formation’ (Liebmann and Galal 2020). It thus appears that the educational background of the women, as well as their connection to the labour market and their upbringing in Danish institutions, influenced their choices to invest energy in their children’s Islamic education. Some women explained that their inclination towards academic approaches to Islam was influenced by their secular academic training at, for example, university, a link between educational background and academized approaches to one’s religion pointed out in a number of studies (Bano 2017; Groeninck 2020; see also Gilliam 2022).

One of the highly educated women I encountered was the

29-year-old aspiring medical doctor, Samira, whom I came to know as a vivid and smiling teacher of a class for women converts. At our first interview, Samira was also the mother of a one-year-old, and she was one of the women with whom I discussed the Islamic upbringing of children. With such a small child, parenting life was still new to Samira and her husband, but when she and I talked about the role of Islam in their family life, it was very clear that they were ‘intensively’ engaged – to borrow from Gilliam (2022); they had reflected deeply on their daughter’s education and discussed the role of religion in the upbringing of their baby girl extensively. As Samira said, ‘[My husband and I] definitely agree that she should have a Muslim upbringing. She should learn the religion, we will talk about God and the beliefs and the prophets and all those kinds of things. It’s part of her heritage, and she should be taught that’ (Interview, February 2020).

For women like Samira, this teaching would often be smoothly integrated into daily life and the general educating tasks of parenting. Samira explained further:

Already at this age [of our baby daughter], we are, for example, uttering the specific phrase of ‘*alhamdulillah*’ when someone sneezes; we teach her that naturally. And we read the Qur’an to her when she falls asleep and wakes up.<sup>7</sup> And when we perform the [*salat*] prayer, we will hug her afterwards to make sure that she thinks of praying in positive terms instead of, like, ‘if you don’t pray you go to Hell’ or something like that. We want her to have a close connection to [Islam] but it should come naturally. (Interview, February 2020).

The rest of the mothers among my interlocutors offered similar descriptions of their parenting work and the role Islam played in that. Islam was described as a special kind of ‘foundation’, as one woman expressed it, on which they build their own lives, and they also wanted their children to rely on and be familiar with it.

As parents, they had a special responsibility to teach their children to navigate life as a Muslim, the women explained quite unanimously. Therefore, motherhood was also in part motivating the women’s own search for adequate and authentic knowledge. One of the women, who linked her own need for knowledge to the raising of children in an Islamic fashion, was Yasmin, a forty-five-year-old woman born in Denmark of Muslim parents of immigrant background who grew up in a religiously observant home. I got to know Yasmin when I was learning more about the

<sup>7</sup> ‘Read’ should here be understood as ‘recite’.

educational activities for children in one of the mosques. Yasmin taught weekend classes, in which children were introduced to the Arabic language as well as to Islamic doctrines, to use Sedgwick's (2014) terminology, such as basic faith articles and Islamic ethics. Yasmin was also a professionally trained teacher, and when I participated in her classes, she came across as a skilful woman with a natural authority over the children and a dedication to their education. She was enthusiastic and positive when she taught, and she also expressed in our conversations that this voluntary teaching work, in which she had been active for thirteen years, was important to her and her religious engagement.

Yasmin was the mother of five children aged eight to 25, and obviously their Islamic education was important to her. The upbringing of children was therefore also a salient topic during my interview with her. She explained that she had prioritized what she called 'their heritage' in the education of her own children, which included their religion (Interview, January 2020). She had ensured that her children obtained Arabic skills, both through the teaching they received at mosques and at school, and by practicing at home where Yasmin and her husband insisted on Arabic as the common language. Yasmin told me that she had also taught her children about 'the prophets and read stories' as well as 'aqida and sunna' (Interview, January 2020).<sup>8</sup>

Women like Yasmin and Samira said that they felt obligated to build an Islamic foundation for their children, and that, therefore, they had to be knowledgeable about Islamic practices, doctrines, and ethics themselves. Thus, their own striving for knowledge was a way to ensure both their children's religious path and also to build themselves as good mothers who included Islamic education in their caring relations with their children. This relation between the women and their children clearly influenced their ideas about what it means to be a pious Muslim, and the kind of efforts and practice required. This is what makes Ruddick's suggestion that virtue is relationally built so interesting. The reflections of women like Yasmin show that notions about being a good Muslim and living up to the ideals of Islamic life do not centre only on the individual. Rather, they also develop out of an embeddedness in social relationality with other Muslims to whom one shows signs of care, for example, by passing on knowledge. These caring efforts that 'make life easier'

8 'Aqīda can be translated as 'creed' and 'refers both to the fundamental doctrines of Islam and to texts specifying these doctrines' (Hoover 2014). Apart from *shahāda*, the confession of faith, there is no one commonly accepted creed. The Qur'an and hadiths form the basic framework for the formulation of such visions, even if neither contain any formal creed (Hoover 2014).

for other people, as one woman formulated it, were integral to what the women thought of as Muslim life, and they were especially articulated and practiced in intergenerational relations with younger Muslims such as one's children.

Clearly, for women like Yasmin and Samira, this way of caring for their children was also an aspect of their own virtuous lifestyle, or their efforts to live a life with an Islamic horizon. Consequently, I would argue that the mothering practices were part of their individual pious efforts. In Louw's investigations of aging in Kyrgyzstan in the absence of children (mentioned above), she likewise emphasizes virtues that 'are relationally constituted through acts of care which bring together persons in moral worlds' (2022, 75). And care, she thus proposes, 'always comes with a "world"; a world which is a moral world in the sense that it comes with a larger context or horizon of meaning' (Louw 2022, 68; see also Robbins 2013). I suggest that the work that Danish Muslim women do when they share knowledge, often in intergenerational relations, can be perceived along the lines that Louw describes. The caring efforts of sharing knowledge that women like Yasmin highlighted, especially in relation to their own children, were built into or formed part of an ethical horizon with specific meaning, a moral world. In this moral world, the women appeared to find themselves embedded in a relationality with the future generation of Muslims for whose religiosity they were responsible. Taking on this responsibility was at the same time part of their own building of themselves as virtuous subjects.

### Building Islamic Foundations in the Danish Context

In a country like Denmark where Islam is practiced as a minority religion, 'religious socialization takes place either in isolation from the broader society or even in contradiction to it' (Sedgwick 2014, 7). When Yasmin told me about her wish to educate her children in an Islamic way she emphasized the significance of the Danish context and the children's need for Islamic knowledge. She told me that she had experienced that life in an otherwise Christian society made it especially important that Islam was given space in the domestic setting, and that she was able to answer the questions concerning religion and heritage that her children raised.<sup>9</sup> Similar notions were commonly articulated by my interlocutors who felt that the minority position made the

9 The vast majority, 74%, of the Danish population, are members of the Danish National Church (*Folkekirken*). The church is integrated constitutionally with the state and more broadly in societal structures (Christoffersen 2012; Poulsen et al. 2021, 23). The Lutheran Christianity that the church represents is influential on most levels of Danish society and the lives of people living here.

Islamic foundation even more important to emphasize as part of the upbringing (see also Haga 2014).

The women in my sample generally explained that in their own lives they had been confronted with a lot of questioning concerning their Muslim identity. This could sometimes be in the form of curious questions about, for example, specific visible practices such as veiling and fasting, but most interlocutors also had experiences of being met with negative prejudice concerning their religiosity, either in their immediate relations with people around them, or from public discourses and media coverage of Islam and Muslim life. This reflects the findings in numerous studies on Islam, both in Denmark and Europe, which conclude that public debates commonly frame Muslims within a discourse of securitization and othering (e.g. Rytter and Pedersen 2011; Jouili 2015; Guilia Liberatore 2017; Rytter 2019; Trulsson 2020). To these women, practicing as a Muslim in a context of certain 'constraints' (Jouili 2015) made the Islamic foundation especially important, which is one reason why they emphasized it in the upbringing of their children, often asserting that Islam is a universal religion which may be practiced meaningfully anywhere and at any time, including in a Danish context. At the same time, they experienced that bringing up children in Denmark did make the domestic education and a general emphasis on Islam especially important (see also Pedersen 2017, 132; Scourfield et al. 2017, 126–27). This is not to imply that they were disseminating an unchangeable religious identity or beliefs; as Pedersen notes, 'the transmission of religion' also shows us 'how religious practice and interpretation necessarily undergo change over time' (2017, 132). Obviously, this would also be the case in the contexts I describe and, interestingly, the women themselves stressed the importance of staying open to society and of being knowledgeable about the Danish context when it came to teaching Islam to children and rearing them in an Islamic fashion.

One interlocutor who was extensively invested in the Islamic education of children was the sixty-seven-year-old Zainab. Warm and smiling and with a noticeable calmness in her attitude, Zainab was engaged in a number of teaching activities in the same mosque as Yasmin, and here she also took part in the development of children's educational activities. Privately, Zainab was the mother of six now grown-up children, in whose Islamic



education she had been intensely involved. Furthermore, Zainab was an often-used informal counsellor for families experiencing issues of some kind, including issues with their children, and youngsters. Based on her long and extensive engagement in the education of children, Zainab had given the subject a lot of consideration. In general, she said that she found that teaching Islam to others was her call in life – she used the Arabic term *da'wa* – an obligation based on her own extensive knowledge of Islam. In talking about this obligation, she was highlighting the relational aspect of Muslim life, the intrinsic link between a religious orientation, being virtuous, and engagement in the religious path and growth of others (cf. Ruddick 1999; Louw 2022). From her narrative, as well as her practical engagement, it appeared that Zainab found the Islamic education of Muslim children in Denmark especially vital, while emphasizing the importance of staying open to the surrounding society and not being afraid of meeting prejudice or being an outsider. But she also noted that for her, being knowledgeable and thus secure in Islam was a precondition for such openness. In our interview, she explained it as follows:

I discovered, *subhanallah*, that when people don't have knowledge, especially about Islam, they are very scared to get lost in society. ... My children are brought up here, and they are good Muslims, they live normal lives, and they know how to deal with Danish society. ... So I mean, all my children *alhamdulillah*, they [participate] in society like normal people. But they have happiness here because they know that this inside [*putting her hand to her heart*], the real happiness, is for us to really know God: who is he, what does he want from us. Those who complain to me that they are afraid their children will be lost, I say the more we don't have a good understanding of our religion, the more easily we can be afraid to lose our identity. ... So that's why I say when I am Muslim, I know how not to be afraid, to use it to protect myself, but at the same time I am open. (Interview, January 2020).

As Zainab expressed it, Muslim children needed the 'security' of the Islamic foundation to navigate life in a Danish context, and this security was based on the knowledge that the older generation, such as mothers, could and should provide. Taking care of the Islamic education of one's children – and perhaps also the children of the broader community – was thus presented as a key element in nurturing the children's capacity to thrive

and feel confident in themselves. In that way, the caring aspect of children's education extends what we could call the religious sphere to concern their well-being as such, and this becomes accentuated in a minority context like Denmark (see also Pedersen 2014).

Zainab's reflections further suggest that it is not adequate to conclude that the minority positionality of the women in terms of religious identification will always hamper or disrupt ethical or religious life. While the 'complicated and restrictive settings produce experiences of ambiguity, suffering, and injustice', they also create 'conditions for the intensification of ethical labour' (Jouili 2015, 4), such as the teaching work carried out by Zainab. This intensification appears to make the women understand their own religious engagement in specific terms, giving significance to their search for knowledge because this search is linked to the sharing of knowledge and, therefore, the caring for their communities. This clearly indicates the need to allow virtue to be considered in terms of relationality, as Ruddick suggests. Indeed, Zainab understood her own commitment to a virtuous life as playing out in and affecting her relationality to people around her. She was committed to the teaching of many of these, including both her own children and those of the Muslim community to which she belonged. Zainab's example makes it clear that women engage in the work of bringing up children in an Islamic fashion across a variety of settings, and that such work is also a virtuous act through which they build themselves as pious Muslims. 'Paying Islam forward' in this way was described by Zainab as well as most other women I talked to as core to Islamic doctrines, and an integral part of Muslim life. Across generational and other differences, almost all my interlocutors conveyed that knowledge of Islam is meant to be shared for the benefit of others, and this basic understanding shaped their educational approaches and engagements.

## Conclusions

Muslim women seek knowledge in order to get answers to the questions that arise in their everyday lives and to strengthen their relations to Islam, to God, and to fellow Muslims. This is also the case for Danish Muslim women who seek to live pious lives. In this study, I have shown that one of the things motivating

such women to become knowledgeable about their religion is their wish to educate future generations and, most importantly, their own children, in an Islamic fashion. They express a sense of obligation with regard to this task because they themselves have the resources to obtain knowledge, and because they perceive themselves as embedded in a broader moral community wherein virtue is also built through acts of care and commitment to others. Thus, the sharing of knowledge both builds the foundation for future Muslims and comprises part of the foundation of their own piety. The sharing of knowledge with future generations takes place in domestic settings where women share Islam with their children as a natural part of their more general education. But the care for future generations is also performed in more institutionalized settings, such as mosque educational offerings, where women take care of the Islamic schooling of children from the broader community. In both the domestic and institutionalized settings, the women underline the importance of the Danish context in which Islam is practiced as a minority religion. This, they claim, makes it especially important to imbue Muslim children with an Islamic foundation.

To understand what seeking and having knowledge means to Danish Muslim women, I have argued that we should move beyond thinking about the educational engagement as a merely individualized practice that builds selves. By looking into the ways in which the women think about knowledge as something that they pass on to future generations, I have shown that knowledge engagement is a practice that also builds communities, as well as selves as *part of* communities. This adds new dimensions to the anthropological study of Islam, which has been dominated by the framework of pious *self* cultivation and a focus on interiority, an approach introduced by Mahmood in particular (2012; also see e.g. Hirschkind 2006; Hocke 2014). With inspiration from Ruddick's (1999) notion of care as relational, this article has addressed a growing wish within the scholarship on Islam to broaden the scope from piety as something that individuals cultivate to something that is (also) nurtured along relational lines (Mittermaier 2019; Alkorani 2021; Louw 2022). Looking at my interlocutors' work through the lens of an ethics of care, the importance of trans-generational relations became apparent, and virtue could be seen as relationally embedded. Moreover, the significance of these relations does not only have to do with matters of discontinuity, which has been broadly

highlighted in literature on Muslim youth (e.g. Jacobsen 2011a; Giulia Liberatore 2016; Eriksen 2020); rather, the aspect of passing on, of maintaining a foundation for life and certain values in life was emphasized by women who were mothers or expected to become mothers, as well as those who taught children in more formal settings. This work of ‘passing on’ knowledge, including religious skills such as language, appeared an important way for the women themselves to stay virtuous. Through an understanding of care as virtue, I have presented a perspective on contemporary Muslim life that views individual Muslims and Muslim piety as relationally embedded.

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