

Disentangling Religious, Ethnic and Gendered Contents in Boundary Work: How Young Adults Create the Figure of 'The Oppressed Muslim Woman'

Janine Dahinden, Kerstin Duemmler & Joëlle Moret

The binary opposition between 'equal European women' and 'oppressed Muslim women' has become a powerful representation in Switzerland and throughout Europe. Yet little is empirically known about the mechanisms through which actors in their everyday lives (re)produce this prominent construction. In this mixed-method study with young adults in a French-speaking Swiss Canton, we explore how and on behalf of which markers they construct such a bright boundary against 'the oppressed Muslim woman'. We argue that the Swiss tradition of ethicising and culturalising migrant issues is relevant for the construction of the boundary against Muslims in a way that renders ethnicity salient. However, when it comes to the concrete markers of the boundary – the 'cultural stuff' mobilised by the young people to mark the boundary – the local highly secular context has the paradoxical effect that religious contents become more salient than ethnicity. Normative ideas about 'gender equality', in contrast, cross both ethnic and religious markers in the same way. We argue that although ethnicity, religion and gender have commonalities in terms of categories of identification and exclusion, they should be treated as different elements when it comes to the social organisation of difference because each of them displays a specific logic.

Keywords: Boundary Work; Religion; Ethnicity; Gender; Gender Equality; Secularisation; Muslims; Switzerland; Multiculturalism; Transnationalism

Speaking about religious issues with regard to her future children, a student from an upper secondary school in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, stated in an interview:

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I would like my children to be a bit Catholic, like me, or another similar religion, but not Muslim [...] I am not at all Muslim, and then, they would be proud of wearing the headscarf. I see this as a negative aspect for women because they are completely oppressed.

Another pupil stated:

I spent two weeks with Muslims and I saw that the girls spent time together during classes but they had no other activities. They never went, for instance, to the swimming pool. And then, they cannot do any sports, no fun activities, parties and so on; they do nothing like this. So, yes, I think this is very different. I see this related to the culture of Muslims.

The idea expressed in these quotations, which constructs gender subordination as integral to Islam and relates it to 'culture', has become a commonly accepted and powerful public and political narrative in recent years, and it has far-reaching consequences not only in Switzerland (among others Baghdadi 2010) but also in most European countries (i.e. for Norway: Razack 2004; for the Netherlands: Roggeband and Verloo 2007; and for the UK: Dustin and Phillips 2008). Governments, right-wing politicians, and some feminists have alleged a clash between accomplished 'European gender equality' and 'Islamic backwardness or patriarchy' provoked by immigrants or ethnic minorities. Unequal gender relations among migrant groups, and particularly among Muslims, are identified as the core problem of diversified societies. This binary construction between 'us' (Western champions of freedom and equality) and 'them' (Muslim Others as opponents to women's rights) has put some feminists at the forefront of debates postulating an insurmountable tension between feminist values and multicultural ideas (most prominent is Moller Okin 1999).

These representations are a fundamental element of current efforts in various European countries to abandon multiculturalism as a policy goal, and they serve to introduce neo-assimilationist policies demanding individual integration efforts and an embrace of 'national values', i.e. gender equality (Kofman 2005). In the face of the power developed by these dichotomous figures, a vivid debate has evolved within academia, and feminist scholars have exhibited critical responses (Shachar 2007; Kiliç *et al.* 2008; Phillips 2010; Bilge and Scheibelhofer 2012). These scholars have demonstrated that the debates are stamped by over-simplified and essentialised conceptions of culture and religion: such perceptions hide non-cultural/religious and structural factors of gendered violence and inequalities, mask internal heterogeneity and dynamics as well as women's agency, and presume that migrant/Muslim women are defined by a group-culture-based determinism.

How did this dichotomy come to be so powerful, and how is it socially (re)produced in everyday life? In spite of various efforts to analyse these debates critically, we still have almost no empirical studies that depict these processes in detail. This article thus explores the mechanisms through which young non-Muslim adults living in a French-speaking Swiss Canton create and nourish the image of the 'imperiled Muslim women' legitimising the boundary against Muslims in general.

Our article aims to contribute to two academic debates. First, we aim to respond with a specific case study to the discussion that is scrutinising these powerful representations. We argue that although the main narratives might be similar in most European countries, we can only understand the ‘rationale’ behind them by taking into account the specific national and local contexts in which they occur and embedding them historically and politically. Thus, we first examine how the general Swiss context and the local context of Neuchâtel created historically boundaries towards migrants, how those find concrete expression in policies towards migrants and how in this environment young people create and mark the boundary against the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’.

Second, we contribute to the emerging body of work attempting at disentangling ethnic and religious contents in boundary work. The idea of boundary work has come to play a key role in important lines of scholarship throughout the social sciences, and it opens new theoretical insights into the organisation and production of social differences (Pachucki *et al.* 2007). Social differences and corresponding boundary processes emerge historically and are variable, thereby involving a broad range of actors (i.e. the nation-state, media, individuals, etc.). Much work has been done specifically on *ethnic* boundary work (i.e. Barth 1969; Jenkins 1997; Lamont and Molnar 2002), particularly in the context of migration (i.e. Bauböck 1998; Alba 2005; Bail 2008; Wimmer 2008, 2009). Characteristically, these studies operate with an inclusive concept of ethnicity: religious issues are included in the overarching category of ethnicity; or when ethnicity and religion are co-present, the specificity of religious elements is ignored. Hence, theoretically and empirically, the question of the relation between ethnicity and religion for boundary work has only marginally attracted the attention of scholars (exception i.e. Mitchell 2006) and should, as we argue in line with Ruane and Todd (2010: 4–5), be further investigated. On a general level, ethnicity and religion are both modes of social organisation because they are common ways, in the terms of Brubaker (2012: 4), of identifying oneself and others, of constructing sameness and difference and situating and placing oneself in relation to others. There are, however, good reasons to separate the ethnic and religious contents of boundary work. An indiscriminate approach to ethnicity causes scholars to focus on the boundaries themselves rather than on the meaning and organisation of the boundaries or on the content of the ‘cultural stuff’ (Barth 1969: 15) used to mark boundaries. An inclusive concept of ethnicity cannot explain why ethnic markers are mobilised in some circumstances, while religious markers are mobilised in others, how they might be nested or why one or the other is prioritised. That is why we propose to focus on the content of the ‘cultural stuff’ that is mobilised for the closure of group boundaries to operate. Additionally, while the literature on boundary work has marginally taken into account the intersectional nature of boundary work, we suggest that there is a need to scrutinise the role of gender representations in boundary processes.

The first section outlines the methodology followed in the study. Afterwards, we investigate the context of Switzerland and Neuchâtel and identify the ‘main

narratives' with regard to boundary making towards migrants and Muslims. Through the case study, we then show how these dominant discourses are appropriated and interpreted by young people in Neuchâtel and how arguments related to ethnicity, religious practices and gender are used to mark the boundary against Muslims. In conclusion, we argue that the Swiss tradition of ethnicising and culturalising migrant issues is relevant to the construction of the boundary against Muslims in a way that renders ethnicity salient. However, when it comes to the concrete content of the boundary – the 'cultural stuff' mobilised by the young people to draw the boundary – the locally highly secular context has the paradoxical effect that religion becomes more salient than ethnicity. The normative idea of 'gender equality', in contrast, crosses both ethnic and religious markers in the same way.

Methodology

We did not choose a specific religious or ethnic 'community' as the starting point for the enquiry, but selected instead a specific geographic locality – young people living in a Swiss Canton – in order to examine which 'cultural stuff' with corresponding boundaries is brought up by a variety of respondents. The canton of Neuchâtel has roughly 172,000 inhabitants and a long immigration history. For this reason Neuchâtel has today a highly diversified population: 23 per cent of the residents are foreigners representing 145 nationalities. Immigration has not only altered the ethno-national composition of the population but also led to religious diversity. Historically, Neuchâtel was Protestant, but immigrants arriving after the Second World War from southern Europe (Italy, Portugal and Spain) were mostly Catholic, unskilled workers engaged in the local watch industry, while those who immigrated after 1990 also included Muslims. In 2009, Catholics (36.7 per cent) outnumbered Protestants (36.6 per cent), while only a small part of the residents (3.7 per cent) was Muslim.¹ The Muslims living in Neuchâtel come mainly from Kosovo, Bosnia and Turkey, while a smaller number comes from Tunisia or Algeria.

The research followed a mixed-methods approach (Creswell 2003). First, a telephone survey was conducted to detect the relevant categories of difference operating in boundary work. With this aim, we included questions measuring the social distance towards others, which we operationalised through items regarding marriage and partnership. Four hundred and four young adults between the ages of 16 and 19 (out of 6,095 young people currently living in Neuchâtel) were surveyed.² In order to be representative, a random sample of addresses was drawn from the Resident's Registration Office, where all residents are registered. We then sought the corresponding telephone numbers in electronic directories. Our sample can be considered as good, since 79 per cent of the young adults were reached by telephone. The response rate was 63 per cent, which is high in comparison to other Swiss surveys (Cattacin *et al.* 2006).³ Data were analysed using SPSS. As we aim at measuring social distance from the eyes of the 'majority' youth, we concentrate

here on the non-Muslim youth of the survey (379 out of 404 surveyed persons, see Table 1). They were mostly born in Switzerland (83 per cent), and a large share had Swiss citizenship (91 per cent; but there were also Italians, French, Portuguese and others). Those who had experienced immigration (17 per cent) were mainly members of the second generation (only 0.8 per cent were first-generation migrants).⁴

Second, we conducted ethnographic research over four months in four different classes with youngsters of the same age but with different ethnic and religious origins.⁵ Interestingly, while in daily interactions, ethnic categories like ‘foreigner’, ‘migrant’, or gender (‘women and men’) appeared very often and were performatively used in order to challenge each other (Duemmler *et al.* 2010), religion as such was rarely discussed. Nonetheless, preliminary analysis of the quantitative survey pointed to the fact that religion was a relevant category for boundary work in spite of its absence in classrooms and in discussions during breaks or lunch time. Hence, we felt the need to understand this paradox in greater depth and to investigate this topic actively. That is why we conducted biographic and semi-structured interviews (36) with pupils and a focus group in each class (using some results of the quantitative survey as input) concentrating on religious and ethnic issues. The questions in the interviews aimed at understanding the role of religion and ethnicity in the daily life of the young people (family, friends, etc.), in their biographic experience, but also when it comes to the selection of love partners and the education of (future) children. In the focus groups, we specifically concentrated on the role of religion. Interviewees were chosen by balancing career path, age, ethnic background and peer-group belonging as well as according to their propensity to take part in the research. For the focus groups, all the students in each class were involved. Finally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with schoolteachers and principals.

For analysis, we first applied an open coding (with the help of Atlas.ti) of the transcribed interviews and focus groups with the aim of identifying the most important categories of difference. Although other categories of difference were brought up by the young people (above all gender categories and ‘Swiss’ versus ‘foreigners’), the category ‘Muslim’ emerged as the strongest one, regularly opposed to an ‘us’, in the survey as well as in the interviews and the focus groups. Two distinct groups appeared out of the data, separated by a strong boundary, so that we can speak *about majority* and *minority* youth. The *majority group* consists of all non-Muslim young people, including Swiss nationals as well as first and second generation migrants. The *minority group* concerns in this logic the Muslims, whatever their nationality (Swiss or not) and place of birth.

During the subsequent axial and selective coding, we analysed the data in greater depth in order to understand how the content of this boundary was marked by the majority youth. The analysis presented below mirrors these results, and the quotations used in the text are illustrative of the central codes.

Table 1 Sample.

Sample quantitative survey (<i>n</i> = 379)		
	Non-Muslim youth (majority youth)	
	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Religion</i>		
Protestant	42.2	160
Catholic	32.5	123
No religion	19.8	75
Other religion	4.2	16
No answer	1.3	5
Total	100.0	379
<i>Nationality</i>		
Swiss	90.5	343
Italian	9.2	35
French	6.6	25
Portuguese	5.8	22
Other EU-25/EFTA	2.6	10
Spain	1.8	7
Other former YU, SU and Europe	0.8	3
Latin America	1.6	6
Africa	0.5	2
Macedonia	0.3	1
Other	1.9	7
Total*	121.6	461
<i>Nationality II</i>		
Swiss by birth	83.1	315
Naturalised Swiss	7.1	27
Other nationality, born in Switzerland	6.1	23
Other nationality, born abroad	3.7	14
Total	100.0	379
<i>Immigration</i>		
No immigration	82.6	313
First generation	0.8	3
Second generation	16.6	63
Total	100.0	379
<i>Self-rated religiosity</i>		
1 – not at all religious	40.6	154
2	23.5	89
3	19.5	74
4	9.0	34
5 – very religious	7.4	28
Total	100.0	379
Sample (ethnographic study)		
	Interviews	Focus groups
Upper secondary school	7	1
Commercial apprenticeship	16	1
Apprenticeship: telematicians and tinplates	9	1
Elementary vocational training	4	1
Total	36	4

*Double nationalities included.

Ethnic and Religious Boundaries in a Specific Transnational, National and Local Environment

Boundary work with regard to migration issues does not float in free space but is embedded in political traditions and public narratives. Under conditions of both the transnationalisation of social realities and the internal diversity and federalism of Switzerland, the issue becomes complex: transnational, national and local-regional public representations compose a potential pool from which the young can select in order to draw the boundaries that lead to a specific construction of social reality. Hence, it is necessary to sketch the main lines of these environments.

Switzerland stands internationally for a successful model of multiculturalism, at least when it comes to the cohabitation and political representation in the federal institutions of the four language groups – French, German, Italian and Retho-Roman speakers. Indeed, linguistic and religious pluralism is *the* pillar of the self-image of Switzerland, a democratic and federal state (Helbling and Stojanovic 2011). Yet the development of a common and cohesive Helvetic identity, one that was able to embrace linguistic-local belonging and diversity, has had its price: as the formation of a ‘we’ always works by foreclosing alterities, exclusionary boundaries towards diverse ‘others’ – notably migrants called ‘foreigners’ – were drawn based on essentialised and homogenised ideas of culture and ethnicity (Dahinden 2011). Historically, the myth of a small country that has to fight against ‘over-foreignisation’ (*Überfremdung*) was especially relevant. This threat has accompanied most political debates and right-wing popular initiatives with regard to immigration and integration since the nineteenth century (Kury 2003; Niederberger 2004; Wicker 2009). The fuzziness of the term – it concerns the number of foreigners living in Switzerland but also the resulting ‘cultural and spiritual danger’ for Swiss identity (Arlettaz and Arlettaz 2004) – has rendered it adaptive and transferrable to different social groups. The ‘cultural others’ were first Jews or communists, after the Second World War Italian and Spanish labour migrants, since the 1980s labour migrants and asylum seekers from the former Yugoslavia and Turkey, and recently Muslims. The alleged danger of ‘over-foreignisation’ became a main instrument in federal migrant-admission policies. The idea of the ‘cultural incompatibilities’ of certain migrants resulted in a kind of national-cultural sorting-out of who had the right to immigrate into Switzerland and who did not – thus establishing strong boundaries.⁶ At the same time, however, cultural assimilation was seen as the solution to the danger of ‘over-foreignisation’ once migrants were living in Switzerland – an idea that remains influential to this day. Although multiculturalism as a policy goal regarding migrants – in terms of group rights – could never find fertile ground in Switzerland, the transnational circulation of multicultural ideas during the 1990s had an impact on Switzerland, which led to the political acceptance of the idea of enrichment through ethno-cultural differences and the right of migrants to live ‘their culture’ (in private).

The new transnational category of difference – ‘the culturally other Muslim’ – could easily be adapted and included in these hegemonic public and political

representations. Mainly since 9/11, Muslims – Switzerland being no exception – are perceived as a threat because of their ‘cultural difference’, and a stereotyping of Muslim actors can be observed, as can a ‘Muslimisation’ of immigrants (Behloul 2005; Allenbach and Sökefeld 2010). ‘Muslims’ stand in this sustainable logic of boundary work along (negatively perceived) cultural lines for a new form of ‘over-foreignisation’. It is now not only the ‘compatibility of the cultures’ of some migrant groups that is a stake, but additionally the compatibility of ‘cultural Islam’ (as is evident in the opening quotations). Swiss voters’ ban on the building of minarets in 2009 is a prominent example of this discourse. Furthermore, unequal gender relations became the signifier for the new figure of ‘culturally different Muslims’. During the campaign for the above-mentioned vote, right-wing parties, but also centrist parties, defended the need for the emancipation of Muslim women – while normally opposing the feminist claims of Swiss women – and urged women, on these grounds, to accept the vote (Ettinger and Imhof 2011).

Yet Switzerland’s internal heterogeneity and federalism give nuances to these narratives circulating in the national space. With regard to the Canton of Neuchâtel, two issues are relevant. First, following Brubaker’s (1992) distinction between ethnic and civic citizenship models, it is arguable that in this French-speaking canton we find a *civic idea* of citizenship – in contrast to the ethno-cultural discourse of ‘over-foreignisation’ and the ethnic citizenship model on the national level – which leads to an interesting mixture of ethnic and civic ideas in cantonal migration policies. Second, Neuchâtel has a *secular* state-religion model, which complicates the question of religious issues, notably when it comes to Islam.⁷

The first article of the Constitution of Neuchâtel⁸ (of 24 September 2000) states that ‘The Canton of Neuchâtel is a democratic, secular and social republic and guarantees fundamental rights’. The *Charte de la citoyenneté* (2009)⁹, a document summarising the underlying principles of the Republic of Neuchâtel, which is sent to all newcomers in the canton, states:

This means that the Canton of Neuchâtel is a State that guarantees its citizens fundamental freedoms and rights (a liberal State), [...] a State in which there is no official religion but where religious freedom is the rule (a secular State). [...] Foreign residents in Switzerland are subject to the same legal framework as Swiss citizens. However, if they come from other cultures, they have no legal obligation to adapt to the Swiss lifestyle [...]. [O]nly tolerance and open-mindedness can ensure the balance within mixed communities.

This quotation demonstrates Neuchâtel’s *civic* attitude towards citizenship. This civic orientation is further emphasised by the fact that Neuchâtel gives foreigners, as only 5 of Switzerland’s 26 cantons do, the right to vote and to be elected at the communal and cantonal levels (which is not possible on the national level, where the ethno-national *ius sanguinis* model holds sway). Despite this civic orientation, ‘culture’ remains important, as can be seen in the constitutional text as well as in the *Charte de la citoyenneté*: it is essentialised, but positively loaded; a tolerance towards the ‘culturally other’ is demanded. Still, this idea of ‘culture’ represents a weak form of

multiculturalism, as it addresses only lifestyle and not group rights. In other words, this articulation of ethno-cultural and civic ideas results in the demand for an open-mindedness towards (essentialised) cultural differences, which is combined with the civic and universal idea that all human beings have the same rights and duties (like political participation).

Additionally, Neuchâtel is a *secular* republic and one of only two cantons in Switzerland with a strict separation of state and church. This *laïcité* means religious freedom, but it also leaves no space for the recognition of religious communities: religion has to be private, and it must be lived outside the public sphere. In this model, religious freedom is more important than in the French version of *laïcité*, where the state aims to ban religion from the public sphere. By virtue of this liberty, a commune in Neuchâtel cannot forbid Muslim pupils from wearing headscarves in class. But it can forbid teachers from doing so, because teachers' display of religious markers contradicts the principle of non-denomination in public schools (see *Charte de la citoyenneté*). The *secular* orientation is of high relevance for public institutions like schools, as they are legally bound to be religiously blind, an ideology that is taken very seriously, as the interviews with school teachers and principals reveal. To the question of whether religious diversity was an informally discussed topic at school among the teachers, the principal of a vocational school answered:

We had three or four requests from believing and active Muslims who asked to be excused from school to celebrate the end of Ramadan. We accorded them this leave, but not on religious grounds. We allowed them to participate in a cultural activity. We wanted to avoid putting our fingers in something – like religion – that we will not be able to control in the long run. That's why we asked these persons to re-write their request and to argue for the leave with a cultural issue instead of a religious one.

'Culture' is tolerated as an argument in schools for special treatment, while religion has to be strictly excluded from this public institution. In other terms, exercising religious freedom is possible in this secular environment, but only if disguised as 'cultural activity' and not labelled as religious.

Hence, the question arises as to whether and how, in this context, ethno-cultural and religious ideas underlie these young people's boundary work, that builds on this idea of the 'oppressed Muslim women'.

The Young People's Boundary Work

'Positive Culture' versus 'Negative Religion' as an Engine for Boundary Work

An important result from the interviews is that the young adults living in Neuchâtel have imbibed the dominant local discourse of open-mindedness towards (essentialised) ethno-cultural difference – but in a selective way. At first glance, many interview partners not only harboured a strong tolerance towards ethno-cultural diversity, which they considered enriching, but also forcefully condemned and opposed racist discourse and actions by mobilising civic ideas. This student's

quotation is demonstrative of the statements made by many interview partners: 'I think you will not go very far if you are closed-minded and if you are not open towards other cultures. I think other cultures are very enriching' (woman, Swiss, Catholic, commercial apprentice). Nonetheless, the young people, participants of this study, hold this positive view of cultural difference only in regards to *certain* nationalities, and as soon as *religious differences* are at stake, this discursive open-mindedness is weakened.

In the quantitative survey, the relative importance of religion as a boundary marker compared to ethnic and racial criteria can be seen (Figure 1). Young people were asked how important it is for them that their spouse be of the same skin colour, ethnic origin and religion. The response had to be on a scale of 1 (unimportant) to 5 (very important). The following graph shows the mean values of the majority youth ($n = 379$) and the (positive) standard deviations. It makes clear that although none of the three criteria are of extreme importance to the majority youth, religion is significantly more salient (mean = 2.0) than ethnic origin (mean = 1.7) and skin colour (mean = 1.6; both t test < 0.001). The means are distinguished further between the various religious affiliations of the majority youth but the statistical analysis (ordinal regression) shows no significant difference in this specific pattern. The higher the young people rate their own religiosity, however, the more important is it for them that their future partners have the same ethnicity and the same religion ($\chi^2 < 0.001$, Pearson 0.218 resp. 0.431). With regard to sex, age, education, nationality or geographical origin within the canton, the young people surveyed do not significantly differ in this judgement.

Data from the qualitative interviews allow us to better grasp the processes through which Muslims become the negative 'others' for the youths in the schools under study. The following quotation is representative of this tendency. During the

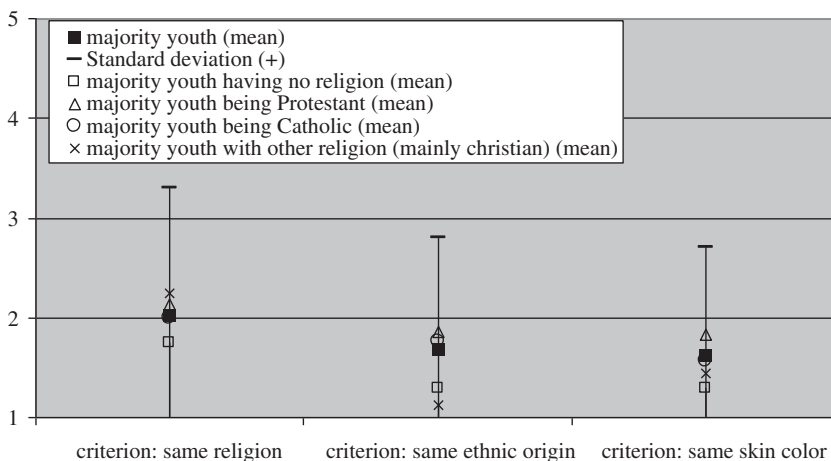


Figure 1 Boundary work through partnership selection: significance of religion, ethnic origin and skin colour (1 'unimportant' to 5 'very important').

interview, the respondent (male, Swiss and French, non-believing Protestant and tinplate apprentice) first reproduced positive evaluations of ethno-cultural differences. The interviewer further asked: 'Is it important for you that your girlfriend is of the same nationality as you?' The young man answered: 'No, because for me, my girlfriend could be of any nationality, she could be Japanese, Chinese, Congolese or American; it does not matter at all as long as I have a good feeling and I really love her'. Later on, as religion became the topic under discussion, the young man mentioned the possibility that his future wife could be Muslim. The interviewer asked: 'Let's imagine that your wife was Muslim and that this would be important for her. Could you imagine your children being Muslim?' The young man replied:

Them being Muslim, yes, but them practicing, certainly not. They could be baptized as Muslim, so that when they communicate their religion, they would say, 'I am Muslim'. But I do not think that I could accept it if they practiced [their religion], because really, Muslims are quite extreme. That's what I see, what I hear and what I know from people I meet. This religion is very extreme. There is no pork, there are no birthdays, and all this is really just too extreme for me.

This quotation illuminates the ambivalent ideas towards difference that shape youths' discourses. While cultural difference ('being' Muslim) is not a problem in this young man's account, the practice of this 'extreme' religion and the constraints it imposes becomes insurmountable obstacles.

Moreover, the data from the quantitative survey give more evidence that it is, above all, Islam that young people find problematic and which they cannot relate to cultural enrichment. We asked the young people in the survey what they think about their brother or sister getting married to different types of persons (a Swiss, foreigner, Italian, Black, Jew, Tamil, Turk, Kosovar, or Muslim). The following graph illustrates the nature of the responses (Figure 2): a clear social hierarchy of Swiss people on the top, followed by Italians, foreigners in general and blacks. Muslims, in contrast, are the least favoured in that they appear at the bottom of this hierarchy (all t test < 0.001 compared to the other types of persons). They are the *out-group par excellence* and excluded from potential familial linkage. It is not surprising that nationalities connected mainly to Islam are also positioned at the bottom (Turks, Kosovars). Interestingly, those without a religion are significantly more likely to approve of marriage with a Muslim, whereas young Protestants disapprove of such a marriage the most [mean values (SD) 2.4 (0.82) vs. 2.7 (0.60), ANOVA < 0.001 , $\eta = 0.221$]. The influence of religious affiliation among the majority youth remained significant even when controlled for self-declared religiosity, which was overall not significant here.¹⁰

In sum, religion plays a more important role than ethnicity or race as a boundary marker in terms of partnership relations, and it is also a category that brings the positive open-mindedness of these young people towards 'cultural others' to an end when the religion in question is Islam. The young people replicate the locally anchored idea of 'positive cultural difference' when it comes to immigrants without Muslim backgrounds – but they apply the problematic aspects of cultural difference,

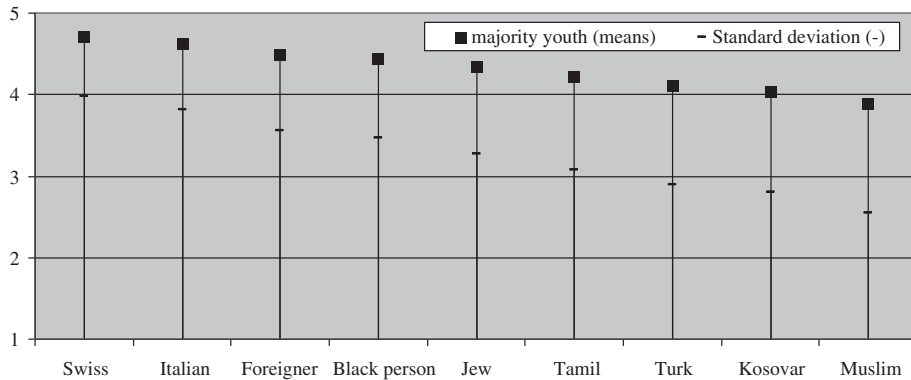


Figure 2 Boundary work as social distance: attitudes towards sisters' or brothers' marriage (1 'I do not agree' to 5 'I do agree').

in the tradition of 'over-foreignisation', to Muslims. This also makes it clear that in a secular environment, religious issues are not 'out-dated'. On the contrary, aligning religion morally to the private realm has the effect of developing it into a category of exclusion, as will be shown next.

Three-pronged Religiously Coloured 'Cultural Stuff': Marking the Boundary

From the present analysis of the qualitative interview data, one finds that the boundary against Muslims is marked along three axes. These axes are linked to ideas about religious practices, and they are intertwined with normative ideas about a 'good' religion. The representation of gender equality/inequality is articulated with these religious arguments and crosses the three axes – pointing to the intersectional (Crenshaw 1994; Anthias 2002) and simultaneous construction of the boundary through gendered and religious 'cultural stuff'. By loading the social categorisation with moral connotations, these young people position the two constructed groups in a hierarchy: the in-group is considered morally superior, and the 'others' are morally devalued. The degree to which most of the young people of the majority participated in constructing this bright boundary was surprising. There were some exceptions, concretely some attempts to blur the boundary (i.e. through universalising strategies like 'gender inequality' as a human rights issue). Such counter-discourses were, however, rare, and we will focus our analysis on the mechanisms (re)producing this bright boundary.

The first normative idea used to create the boundary is *autonomy* and *freedom* with regard to religious issues. In the young people's view, religious convictions must be voluntary, optional and subject to personal choice, and it must be possible to live those convictions in an individualised manner. Christianity, according to the interviewees, guarantees these choices; Islam, in contrast, is linked to constraints and limitations of personal freedom, and one has to follow the strict rules of the

Koran without being able to individualise the practices. These young people thus place Muslims on the ‘wrong’ side of the boundary, presuming that strict rules and constraints are responsible for their submission, in particular when it comes to women. The personal sacrifices associated with Islam are connected most notably to the question of the headscarf or in general to the inferior position of women. The following student’s reaction to this issue during an interview is representative for many youngsters: ‘For example, consider those women who have to wear a headscarf. I can tell that they do so only to please somebody. In Christianity, nobody is obliged to do something they do not want to do’ (woman, Swiss and French, Protestant, commercial apprentice). Particularly interesting here is the normative idea of the individualisation of religious practices. Social scientists observe that religious practice in Western societies has undergone a fundamental transformation insofar as it is no longer the consequence of prescription, but of choice and ‘bricolage’ (Dobbelaere 1999; Stolz and Baumann 2007). Such forms of religiosity are, as the interviews demonstrate, quite typical for these young people. What is surprising, however, is that they do not only live this kind of individualised religion, but that beyond that, they develop a moral idea that only such kind of religious behaviour is, normatively speaking, ‘good’. In this way, they place Muslims once more on the other side of the boundary, presuming that strict rules and constraints are against this norm.

Something similar occurs with regard to the second set of ‘cultural stuff’ used as a boundary marker, which we label *secularisation* in terms of a diminishment of the societal and institutional significance of religion and its privatisation (Luckmann 1976; for a critics on secularisation theory see Casanova 1994; Berger 1999). Secularisation is not only established as an important value in Neuchâtel and notably in its schools, but also *positively* valued by the young adults who do not deny that religion might be important in the personal sphere. Secularisation thus gains the status of a ‘moral trust’ in the eyes of these young people. Religion should be lived outside the public realm, not be linked to public institutions and not be spoken about or publicly shown. Many students mentioned that they found it strange to speak in public about this issue in a focus group, given that religion must remain in the private realm. One student mentioned during the interview that speaking about her religious beliefs in school was a kind of ‘coming out’. Hence, all possible ways of living one’s religion that are not invisible in the public sphere are morally depreciated. Minarets, for instance, are for these young people public markers of deference, and the headscarf in particular is interpreted as a visible and public sign of religion, violating this imperative of secularisation. One quotation illustrates this point quite well: ‘I think that Catholics and Protestants [practice] a religion that is not very demonstrative; for instance, we do not have a headscarf, or other things, and this is different from other religions’ (woman, Swiss and French, Protestant, commercial apprentice). It is obvious here that these young people have incorporated the local ideology of *laïcité*.

The third normative idea mobilised for boundary work is related to the dichotomisation between what the young adults call ‘*moderate*’ and ‘*extreme*’

practices. The latter are in the first place attributed to Islam, but also in general to all persons who live their religiosity 'extremely'. One apprentice, when asked whether he could live with somebody for whom religion is important, replied: 'Yes, but not in excess: this means when it comes to banning certain things. If it does not disturb, then it is OK' (man, Swiss, Protestant and telematics apprentice). As the earlier quotation about Muslims' 'extreme' character supposedly prohibiting pork and birthdays made clear, the arguments are anchored in a discourse that relates Islam to fundamentalism. Further, in the interviews, Islam is also related to constraint and loss of autonomy, as well as religious wars and religiously motivated conflicts. And again, this extremism is articulated by projecting the position of Muslim women as oppressed (see the quotation at the beginning of the article).

This three-pronged 'cultural stuff' that is mobilised by these young people leads to a 'bright' boundary (Alba 2005) between established 'egalitarian' Christians and outsider 'unequal' Muslims, and it has important consequences.

First, when it comes to the intersection of religious and gendered boundary markers, a construction of the 'non-egalitarian other' occurs. Furthermore, the majority youth perform a communalisation by mobilising the idea that their 'own' women – in the Christian tradition – can live religion the way they wish, in freedom, privately, in an individualised manner, and while enjoying equality with men. What is striking with regard to these normative assumptions is that they do not necessarily reflect the 'real' behaviour of the members of the *in-group* or of the *out-group*, and that the young people mobilise the idea of 'group-determinism' homogenising hereby the two 'groups'. Gender equality in Switzerland is far from being a fact. Actual data concerning the differences in salaries and occupations between Swiss men and women give a clear message.¹¹ And vice versa, obviously, gender inequality is not valid for all Muslims living in Switzerland, and the Muslims have the same diversified attitude towards religion as other people (Schneuwly Purdie *et al.* 2009).

Second, these boundary markers are linked to the established political tradition of 'over-foreignisation' with its idea of 'culture-led group determinism' and to assimilationist pressure as a means of fighting 'cultural differences'. Hence, 'culture' and Islam are fused together, and on this ground, strong assimilationist demands are formulated. This statement by a commercial apprentice (woman, Swiss, Protestant) highlights this tendency well:

I think everybody has a culture, people have a way of living that comes from their culture. When they come to live here I can understand that they want to maintain this memory. But I think they should do it at home, pray around their tables in their own languages, OK. [...] And the fact that they now want to build minarets is in my eyes out of question because these are things that are not in our culture. And I think it is important that they integrate [...]. They should be grateful that we accept them, and then they just continue to behave as if they were in their home country. For instance, when a woman wears a headscarf [...] they come here and then the woman continues to be oppressed and to wear the headscarf.

However – and this is the third point – the importance of the local context is revealed, in that the narratives are often more nuanced and (partially unconsciously) differentiated. In particular, religious individuals are not seen as problematic as long as they conform to the normative ideas described above, even when they are Muslim. Thus, these young people are not ‘against’ religion as such, but they construct an ideal of a ‘good religion’ – mostly incorporated in Christianity – for which they show tolerance. The following quotation illustrates this point well. A student stated in her interview that for her, the headscarf symbolised the oppression of women, but she continued:

This doesn't mean that I will not speak to women wearing a headscarf. Last year, there was this girl who was thinking about starting to wear the headscarf but she hesitated, and I found her quite nice. So, if she had put it on, I would not have said: ‘Oh, she is even more oppressed than I thought, but simply... she is proud to wear it’. So, if you're not obliged to put on a headscarf, it does not annoy me. But if you are forced, then I am annoyed... If it is a personal choice, I can understand it, because it is a religion and in fact I understand that a person is proud of her religion. (Woman, Swiss, Catholic, upper secondary school student)

Here again, next to the transnational discourse on the ‘oppressed Muslim women’, the locally anchored ideas of religious freedom and civic attitude of openness towards difference appear, as long as practices do not fail to comply with normative ideas about what a ‘good religion’ is.

Conclusion

The idea of ‘non-egalitarian Muslims’ as it is discursively constructed by the young people can be understood according to the historical local, national and transnational context and is explained by different intertwined mechanisms, each displaying its own logic. Ethnic as well as religious and gendered elements are salient for the construction of the boundary, and it is now possible to disentangle the different dimensions.

First, the ethnic contents in this ‘bright’ boundary are visible and linked to the long-lasting Swiss political tradition of fighting against ‘over-foreignisation’. The ethnically coloured representation of an assumed danger of ‘essentially culturally different foreigners’ could easily be transferred to Islam once this new category of difference was transnationalised. Hence, an originally ethnic element was transferred to and imposed upon a religious category, once this category was circulating in transnational space. Islam is here, in this ethnic logic, fused with the idea of a ‘culture-led group determinism’ and ‘cultural incompatibility’. But ethnicity is also salient in another way: these young people replicate the idea of enrichment through cultural diversity, but they do so selectively, and more rarely and with more ambiguity when it comes to immigrants with a Muslim background. Finally, the established idea of ‘over-foreignisation’ has important consequences, as it simultaneously leads to strong cultural assimilationist pressures on migrants and, once the ethnic content transferred on the category of Islam, also on Muslims.

Second, religious contents in boundary making are related to the specific secular context of Neuchâtel. Autonomy, privacy, individualisation, secularisation and moderate practice are the ‘cultural stuff’ with which boundaries are marked, and these elements are morally loaded, leading to the construction of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ religion. Hence, secularisation does not, as one would expect, attenuate religious issues, but brings them to the forefront of symbolic boundary work and the construction of the ‘non-egalitarian Muslim other’. These young people have not only incorporated the idea of *laïcité* into their own lives but also they use it as an indicator for positively valued behaviour. Secularised young people use specific religious markers in order to create a ‘bright’ boundary against other groups, identifying them in religious categories. This practice explains why, in this specific context, religion is more salient than ethnicity, as shown by the quantitative data.

Third, gender representations are mobilised to categorise these Muslim ‘others’, in a similar way as in other European countries. The ‘oppression of Muslim women’ is a topic that crosses the three axes, and the boundary between ‘Christians’ and ‘Muslims’ is drawn specifically from the viewpoint of gender equality. A normative hierarchy is thus constructed between the supposedly egalitarian gender relations of the dominant population and the non-egalitarian gender relations of Muslims.

In sum, we might conclude that the figure of the ‘non-egalitarian Muslims’ is the result of the mobilisation of three nested categories of difference. First, when it comes to ideas of groups, these young people rely on ethnicity in the sense of ‘culture-led group determinism’ and assimilationist ideas – in the tradition of ‘over-foreignization’. Second, the ‘cultural stuff’ with which they mark the boundary has a religious content. And third, gender equality/inequality is intersectionally added to mark the ethnic and religious contents of the boundary.

This example shows that it is important to treat ethnicity, religion and gender – although they have commonalities in terms of categories of identification and exclusion – as different elements in boundary work, each one with its specific logic, and each one nourished from different historically established public local, national or transnationalised narratives. Religion is not just an element of ethnicity: It develops its own logic, arguments and boundary contents. To bundle ethnicity and religion together is to fail to recognise the distinct character each brings to symbolic distinction and to processes of exclusion and inclusion.

The example discussed here points to another specificity: it seems striking that in Switzerland apparently a specific form of anti-Islamism developed, one which is nourished by ethnic, religious and gender elements and which has a specific logic. When it comes to the social organisation of difference as performed by the young people, ‘traditional racism’ did not play a role, as, maybe surprisingly, race was definitely not a category mobilised by the young people when it came to boundary work nor was it was a category relevant for social distance. This result, valid for our sample, deserves without doubt further investigation in the future.

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Notes

- [1] Population census 2009, Federal Statistical Office. Available from: <http://www.ne.ch/neat/site/jsp/rubrique/rubrique.jsp?StyleType=bleu&DocId=33063>
- [2] This is an appropriate sample size if we accept a confidence interval of 95 per cent.
- [3] Since there was no sample bias with regard to geographical spread within the canton, sex and age of the respondents, we did not weight the data.
- [4] Following the official Swiss statistics classification, we define second generation migrants as persons who have spent more than 5 years in Swiss schools (born in Switzerland or born abroad).
- [5] Switzerland has a dual-track educational system, and our work spanned both tracks. It is a specificity of the Swiss educational system that only 20 per cent of young people are enrolled in upper secondary school – in Neuchâtel, 26 per cent of young people were enrolled in 2010 – meaning that most young people do an apprenticeship instead.
- [6] In 1914, 'over-foreignisation' was for the first time mentioned in an official document. In the Federal Law on Residence and Establishment of Foreigners, in force between 1931 and 2004, the authorities had to consider in their decisions the country's moral and economic interests and the degree of 'over-foreignisation' (ANAG, Art. 16/Linea 1). In 1991, the concept was translated into Swiss admission policy as 'cultural distance' in the so-called three-circle model. Persons from the first and the second circles – EU/EFTA and USA/Canada – were seen as culturally similar and as able to assimilate, while those from the third circle ('third-country-nationals') were seen as 'culturally too distant' and hence could no longer be admitted for work in Switzerland. In the current federal law regarding foreigners, dating from 2005, two circles remained: free circulation with the EU and no immigration from other countries, with exception of highly qualified persons (Niederberger 2004).
- [7] Because Switzerland is a federation composed of 26 cantons, the relationship between state and religion is institutionalised in 26 different ways.
- [8] Constitution de la République et Canton de Neuchâtel, available from: <http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/1/131.233.fr.pdf>
- [9] <http://www.ne.ch/neat/site/jsp/rubrique/rubrique.jsp?StyleType=bleu&DocId=29625>
- [10] Other variables (age, education, nationality and geographical origin within the canton) showed no significant influence in an ordinal regression with the dependent variable 'sister/brother marries a Muslim'.
- [11] For actual data about differences in salaries and occupations, see Federal Office for Gender Equality (FOGE), available from: <http://www.ebg.admin.ch/themen/00008/index.html?lang=en> (accessed 28 March 2014).

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