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# Growing up female and Muslim in the UK: an empirical enquiry into the distinctive religious and social values of young Muslims

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## ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be a Muslim young woman in Britain today and with which religious and social values do these young women identify? This paper tests the thesis that Muslim identity predicts distinctive values of public and social significance among female adolescents (13- to 15- years of age) who participated in a survey conducted across the four nations of the United Kingdom. From the 11,809 participants in the survey, the present analyses compares the responses of 177 female students who self-identified as Muslim with the responses of 1183 female students who self-identified as religiously unaffiliated. Comparisons are drawn across two domains defined as religiosity and as social values. The data demonstrated that for these female adolescents self-identification as Muslim encased a distinctive profile in terms both of religiosity and social values.

## KEYWORDS

Religious identity; Muslim identity; religiosity; social values

## Introduction

According to Janmohamed (2016, 7) the Muslim population is young and growing with 'more than a third of today's Muslims being under 15 and nearly two thirds under 30'. In her recent book, *Generation M: Young Muslims changing the world*, she writes about what it means to be young and Muslim in the world of today. For Janmohamed (2016) these young Muslims, whom she terms 'Generation M', are fully immersed in modern life. Their faith affects absolutely everything they do, and they believe that their immersion in modern life not only can make modernity better but also can improve their own faith. These young women within Generation M, she asserts, hold strongly the right to equal participation, equal respect and a full role in society, but increasingly they demand this participation on their own terms as Muslims rather than through acceptance of the goals of feminism rooted in the Western tradition (Janmohamed 2016, 23).

What it means to be a Muslim in Britain has been put under renewed scrutiny in the light of national and international events, for example, 11 September 2001 in the USA and 7 July 2005 in London, together with the recent Manchester Arena bombing (May 2017), the Westminster (March 2017) and London bridge (June 2017) attacks. How closely do the motivations and worldview of the Muslims that Janmohamed describes mirror reality and what are the particular issues facing Muslim young women? There are a number of qualitative studies that give a voice to Muslim girls and women exploring the complexity surrounding their identity, in many cases as a minority group with a religious identity and

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for some with a visible dress code that distinguishes them from non-Muslims (Basit 1997; Haw 2009, 2010; Poynting 2009; Wagner et al. 2012). These studies also detail the changes that have taken place in how Muslim young women interact with the world and how the world responds to them in the light of events since 11 September 2001, and which has seen a growth in Muslim young women asserting their identity through their religion.

### *A changing identity*

In pre-millennium studies, for example that by Basit (1997), parents were found to be encouraging their daughters to construct a British Muslim identity. They wanted their daughters to become effective members of British society, albeit without losing their Islamic religion. In contrast, while boys in the study by Archer (2003, 48) primarily identified themselves in terms of their Muslim identities, none of them referred to themselves as 'British'. In this respect they differed sharply from the Muslim girls who described themselves as 'British Muslim' and 'English Muslim'. However, by 2010, Haw noted that the young women in her 2008–2010 study identified themselves as British citizens but perceived that others in society did not yet fully accept this and, hence, identity and citizenship were not synonymous for them. For some of the young women:

the issues and the contradictions they present are just too complicated. In a bid to reconcile these tensions the answer is to 'distil' their choices to an essence: 'I would just say I was Muslim I wouldn't even say I was a Pakistani Muslim or a Kashmiri Muslim or a British Muslim. It's too complicated' (Female postgraduate student). (cited in Haw 2010, 355–356)

Thus, increasingly Muslims have been found to define themselves through their religion rather than their country of origin or nationality. While this is not a new phenomenon, having also been found in studies by Shaw (1994), Modood (1997) and Alexander (2000), it is Haw (2010, 359) who points out that, in a world of growing hostility towards them, there has been recourse to a 'heightened Muslim and Islamic identity'. Moreover, the:

'return' to religion is a partial resolution of an internally 'felt' paradox of both 'being' British and the externally imposed 'threat' to be British. (Haw 2009, 374)

In being challenged to question their identity some young Muslims, and in particular young women, are choosing to revisit their own culture and religion, and to practise more openly with growing awareness and confidence. Haw defines such Muslim young women as the 'in-between' generation. Specifically, they:

visibly mark a moment within British multicultural society in terms of being British, being Muslim and being British Muslims. They are an 'in-between' generation in the sense that their identity is in part defined by their active re-construction and re-evaluation of the relationship between the traditions they inherited from their parents, the role of religion within that and the relationship of those traditions and religious beliefs with British culture and identity. (Haw 2010, 358)

In a similar way, it is argued by Poynting (2009, 373) that Muslim young women 'are constructing "blended identities" which they reflect on consciously, under circumstances of everyday racism to which they respond strategically'. In Poynting's study, conducted in 2003, the young women recounted how the events of 11 September 2001 and the constant representation of Muslims in the media as violent perpetrators of terrorism had contributed to the shaping of their identities. All the Muslim young women interviewed after 2001 expressed their identity as Muslim in the first instance and they had begun taking more interest in their religion, with a number choosing to adopt the hijab despite the problems this brought for them in terms of prejudice and discrimination.

Recent evidence shows there has been an increase in fear and perceived vulnerability in public space, felt mainly by Muslim women, particularly those wearing traditional Islamic clothing. Perry (2014) provides many examples of the particular vulnerability of women and girls to violence motivated by their status as Muslims, but especially as Muslim women. Anti-Muslim attacks in London following the Charlie Hebdo incident in Paris 2015 grew by 70% in the year up to July 2015, with Muslim women suffering the greater share of attacks (Sherwood and Nardelli 2015). Likewise, Jeory (2016) cites the

anti-Muslim hate monitoring group Tell MAMA who found British Muslims were suffering an 'explosion' in faith-based hatred with many Muslim women afraid to conduct their daily lives.

Such victimisation is not new, though previous evidence reports mainly on discrimination and stereotyping in education and within the workplace rather than the anti-Muslim hate crime of recent years. Hence, Hopkins and Patel (2006) found that women who were visibly Muslim were more likely to report discrimination in the labour market than those who adopted a more Western appearance when they were in public spaces. Similarly, in a study by Anwar (2005, 33) half of the respondents mentioned some aspects of the education system that went beyond a failure to meet the needs of Muslims, being more actively hostile to Islam, Muslim pupils and their parents. In particular, Muslim girls have not only been excluded from schools because they wanted to wear headscarves (Anwar and Shah 2000 cited in Anwar 2005, 33), but have been victims of stereotyping, including an expectation of underachievement. For example, Basit (1997, 425) found stereotypical notions held by some teachers that Muslim girls have low self-esteem and their parents have low expectations of them. These were apparently based on assumptions regarding the lives of British Muslim girls and interpretations which had little resemblance to the reality of their lives as revealed by the girls themselves. Some 15 years later, in a study by Bowlby and Lloyd-Evans (2012, 48) there was still a consensus among the young Muslims that some teachers had a stereotypical image of 'young Muslim women' as submissive, uninterested in work and prevented by family or community pressures from pursuing a career.

### *Choosing to wear the veil*

It is clear that for Muslim young women there are heightened sensitivities around dress and appearance underpinned by misconceptions and stereotypes around their decision to wear traditional Islamic clothing. Often wearing a veil, as pointed out by Perry (2014, 86), is narrowly seen as a symbol of their 'oppression' or according to Poynting (2009, 384) as a symbol of supposed 'non-integration'. Such women have been seen as voiceless, submissive and passive. Moreover, according to Archer (2012, 74), since 2006 there have been fierce debates in which Muslim women have been impelled to explain and situate themselves and their religious identities and practices through a simplistic, narrow dichotomy: wearing the veil vs. not wearing it. Likewise, the Muslim young women spoken to by Janmohamed (2016) are frustrated that their status is defined as silent obedience and opposition to the West and that they are being defined, judged and treated by what they wear and how they look. For Perry (2014) it is important that Muslim women's voices are heard on this issue. To that end, Haw (2009, 2010), Poynting (2009), Wagner et al. (2012) and Janmohamed (2016) report first-hand accounts from Muslim young women reflecting on the level of choice and reasons behind their decision whether to wear, or refrain from wearing, the veil.

Janmohamed (2016, 221–223) cites many examples of women who see themselves as not oppressed by their veil but liberated by it. Likewise, Haw (2009, 2010) and Poynting (2009) all quote the decision-making of Muslim young women who are choosing to wear the hijab as a symbol of independence, assertiveness or defiance. Haw (2010) found that, between her first study in the early 1990s and her follow-up study in 2008–2010, increasingly the young women had taken to adopting the hijab:

This increasing confidence as they question who they are, and where they belong, in a society that is socially constructing them as becoming 'more Muslim' can mean the 'felt' need to be visibly identified: 'I'm just quite confident with myself because of my religion and the way I dress. I just love to be seen as a Muslim by others' (Female solicitor). (cited in Haw 2010, 358)

Likewise, for Wagner et al. (2012, 522) the 'veiled woman' is beginning to resist the imposition of 'liberation' and 'equality' as defined by the West. Instead, the veil is being used to present a different way of asserting identity and as a form of resistance to challenge society's stereotypical images and assumptions. The Muslim Indian women in their study are asserting an identity of difference:

We young people now want to openly say we are not like what you describe us as ... so people are now consciously showing their identity ... yes I am a Muslim! (cited in Wagner et al. 2012, 530)

From an alternative perspective, Janmohamed (2016) identifies a growing movement of Muslim women under 30 who are choosing to wear the hijab and are using Islamic fashion as an expression of faith. These Muslim young women have a similar outlook to the young Indonesian Muslim women in the study by Wagner et al. (2012) and who justified (using writings from the Hadith to support their views) their veiling as following the current fashion, and the localised dress code of their community and fashion industry:

This industry was successful in marketing products that united the cultural-religious requirement of covering the body and women's desire to be seen as objects of beauty. Such veils are colourful, considered trendy and associated with an up-market life style ... For Indonesian interviewees ... becoming global in terms of fashion is an expression of Islamic modernization. (Wagner et al. 2012, 532)

Both Janmohamed (2016) and Wagner et al. (2012) acknowledge, however, that there are concerns about whether such fashion really adheres to the modest and humble aspects of Islamic dress. As Janmohamed (2016, 159) asks 'Does it lead Muslims into the same consumerist and image-conscious domain that women globally are increasingly fighting, and which modest dress is supposed to combat?'

On the one hand, Janmohamed (2016), Poynting (2009), Haw (2010) and Wagner et al. (2012) also found young women who had chosen to wear the veil despite opposition from their own families and communities. Hence, Janmohamed (2016, 250) writes of the 'growing phenomenon' of young women wearing the hijab and niqab in contravention of their parents' wishes. Likewise, Haw (2010, 354) found some young women coming under pressure from their elders who still clung to notions of 'fitting in' to British society, despite feeling increasingly marginalised by it. On the other hand, some Muslim women consciously chose not to wear a veil or hijab. Many Muslim women, as Janmohamed (2016) asserts, do not wear a veil of any sort, whether to cover their face or their hair. As illustrated in the study by Wagner et al. (2012, 536), there were some respondents who stated they would never wear the veil preferring to be judged by their achievements and competence instead of by their dress and religious belonging:

Their justification for not wearing the veil is linked to stressing individualist values where true religion is above hijab, physical existence and prejudice. These women appear to be idealists in believing that their good deeds will serve as principal testimony to their religion. The veil, as a symbol, cannot therefore be seen as being in any way a reliable barometer of religiosity. (Wagner et al. 2012, 536)

In light of the different choices made by Muslim women, Wagner et al. (2012, 523) argues for a 'shift to a more nuanced and multifaceted analysis, which takes as a starting point that the veil is a lived, situated, social experience and can be a means of asserting identity and even resistance'. Reflecting this position Haw (2010, 353) found one participant who wore the veil intermittently over a number of years. Her reflections on this choice involved complex interactions between her working, social and personal lives with her choice at any point in time being linked to her career, fashion or religious practice. In the years prior to 2001, Noble, Poynting, and Tabar (1999) analysed this everyday life as characterised by 'strategic hybridity':

This is almost the opposite of being trapped between cultures; it involves appropriating elements of parents' homeland culture and the 'dominant culture' in creative and quite fluid ways, shifting according to circumstances. (Noble, Poynting & Tabar 1999) (cited in Poynting 2009, 375)

Post 2001, according to Haw (2009, 376), those growing up Muslim in Britain are in a process of becoming 'more Muslim'. They are questioning their identities, both as a reaction to how they are being socially constructed by others and through challenging and questioning the traditions they have inherited from their parents and communities. Like Generation M, described by Janmohamed (2016), the Muslim young women interviewed in qualitative studies especially those from 2005 onwards (Haw 2009, 2010; Poynting 2009; Wagner et al. 2012) 'are not requesting religious segregation, they seek the opposite, to be included in society. They wish to uphold their cultural heritage, but this is not how they wish to be defined in their entirety' (Janmohamed 2016, 82). While Muslim young women are not a homogeneous group, a collective Muslim identity transcends the differences between them.

## Research aims

Building on the studies published by Francis (2001a, 2001b), Francis and Robbins (2014) and Francis and McKenna (2017) the present study draws on the quantitative strand of the Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity Project conducted within the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (see Francis et al. 2012; Arweck 2017). This project gathered data from nearly 12,000 students between the ages of 13 and 15 across the four nations of the UK. Drawing on these data the present paper selects areas from the extensive survey that reflect issues of relevance to the religious and social profile of female Muslim students and compares the responses of female Muslim students with the responses of female religiously unaffiliated students. The selected data address three specific research aims. The first research aim focuses on the demographic profile of young female Muslims to examine both the diversity within their backgrounds and the extent to which their religious identity is important to them. The second research aim focuses on the religious profile of young female Muslims, and does so by exploring the following eight themes: religious identity, religious importance, religious self-assessment, religious conversation, religious influences, studying religion at school, religious beliefs and God images. This aim tests how rooted religification is within the lives and experience of young Muslims. The third research aim focuses on the social values profile of young female Muslims, and does so by exploring the following six themes: personal well-being, social well-being, attitude towards religious plurality, living with religious plurality, living with cultural diversity and living with religious difference. As yet no study within the quantitative tradition has focused specifically on the profile of young Muslim females.

## Method

### Procedure

As part of a large multi-method project on religious diversity designed to examine the experiences and attitudes of young people living in the multi-cultural and multi-faith context of the UK, classes of year-nine and year-ten students in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and in London (13- to 15-years of age) were invited to complete a questionnaire survey during 2011 and 2012. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity, and were given the choice not to take part in the survey. The level of interest shown in the project meant that very few students decided not to participate. The sampling frame set out to capture data from at least 2000 students in each of the five areas, with half attending schools with a religious character within the state-maintained sector and half attending schools without a religious foundation within the state-maintained sector. The schools accessed a representative sample of young people from across the UK.

### Instrument

The *Religious Diversity and Young People* survey was designed for self-completion, using mainly multiple-choice questions and Likert scaling on five points: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly (see further Francis et al. 2012). In the present analysis three groups of items were identified from the instrument to map the following areas: the demographic profile of the students, their religiosity and their social values.

### Participants

All told across the five areas (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and London) 11,809 students submitted thoroughly completed questionnaires. At least one student self-identifying as Muslim was present in 11 of the 12 schools in England, 9 of the 11 schools in London, 10 of the 13 schools in Wales, 9 of the 16 schools in Scotland, and 3 of the 13 schools in Northern Ireland. The following analyses draws on the responses of the 177 female students who self-identified as Muslim and the responses of the 1183 female students who self-identified as religiously unaffiliated.

## Analysis

The data were analysed by means of SPSS, employing chi square  $4 \times 2$  contingency tables, combining the agree strongly and agree responses into one category, and the disagree strongly, disagree, and not certain responses into the second category. Only differences between groups that reach statistical significance are noted in the following text.

## Results and discussion

### Theme 1: demographic profile

In terms of their residency in the UK, 82% of the 177 female Muslim students had lived in the UK all their life, and a further 8% had lived in the UK for at least ten years; 6% had lived in the UK for between five and nine years, and 5% had lived in the UK for less than five years.

In terms of their ethnic background, 63% of the 177 female Muslim students self-identified as Asian: Pakistani (27%), Bangladeshi (26%), Indian (1%) and Other (9%). A further 11% self-identified as Black African, 2% as White, and 1% as Chinese; 11% self-identified as of mixed ethnicity, and 12% selected the 'Other' category.

In terms of their linguistic background, 61% of the 177 female Muslim students reported that they spoke English as their main language at home.

In terms of personal identity, the participants were asked, 'What would you say is the *most* important to your identity?' and given a check list including the following: Being Christian, Being Hindu, Being Muslim, Being Buddhist, Being Jewish, Being British, Being Welsh, Being Irish, Being Scottish, Being English. The majority (88%) of the 177 female Muslim students chose 'Being Muslim'.

In terms of family life, the majority of the 177 female Muslim students identified their parents' religion as also being Muslim: mother (91%) and father (96%).

In terms of attendance at the Mosque, one in five of the 177 female Muslim students claimed never to attend (19%) and one in ten claimed that their father never attended (10%); 22% claimed at least weekly attendance for themselves and 46% for their father.

In terms of personal religious practices, 53% of the 177 female Muslim students claimed to pray every day and a further 5% at least once a week; 23% of the 177 female Muslim students claimed to read holy scripture (e.g. Qur'an) every day and a further 24% at least once a week.

In terms of receiving instruction in their faith, 66% of the 177 female Muslim students claimed to have attended religious classes outside school (e.g. Madrasah).

### Theme 2: religious profile

The survey contained a range of attitudinal items, rated on a five-point scale that accessed eight themes relevant to illustrating the student's religious profile. These eight themes have been styled as follows: religious identity, religious importance, religious self-assessment, religious conversation, religious influence, studying religion at school, religious beliefs and God images. Each of these eight themes will be examined in turn.

#### Religious identity

The set of items concerned with religious identity explored the students' perceptions of the importance of religious identity to themselves, to their fathers and to their mothers. The data highlighted the centrality of their religious identity to Muslim students. Almost nine out of every ten Muslim students agreed that their religious identity was important to them (84%), and also agreed that their mother's religious identity was important to her (92%) and that their father's religious identity was important to him (81%). There is little surprise that only around one in ten of the religiously unaffiliated students agreed that their religious identity was important to them (7%), that their father's religious identity was important to him (9%) and that their mother's religious identity was important to her (12%). These

**Table 1.** Religious identity.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
My religious identity is important to me	7	84	833.2	.001
My father's religious identity is important to him	9	81	639.1	.001
My mother's religious identity is important to her	12	92	658.1	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

data support the distinctive importance of religious identity in the lives and in the homes of female Muslim students (see Table 1).

### Religious importance

The set of items concerned with religious importance explored the students' perceptions of the importance of religion in the lives of those closest to them in terms of family (parents and grandparents) and in terms of friends. The data highlighted the importance of religion in the lives of those closest to Muslim students. Thus, 91% thought that religion was important to their parents, 87% that religion was important to their grandparents, and 54% that their religion was important to most of their friends. Again there is little surprise that only a minority of the religiously unaffiliated students felt that they were surrounded by religiously motivated people. Thus, 11% thought that religion was important to most of their friends, and 9% thought that religion was important to their parents. The proportion rose to 26% who thought that religion was important to their grandparents. These data support the view that female Muslim students tend to be surrounded by family and friends who think religion to be important (see Table 2).

### Religious self-assessment

The set of items concerned with religious self-assessment covered two themes: assessment of the self as religious and as spiritual and assessment of the connection between religion and life. In terms of the first theme, nearly three quarters of the Muslim students regarded themselves as a religious person (71%) and one quarter of the Muslim students regarded themselves as a spiritual person (26%). In terms of the second theme, between two thirds and three quarters of the Muslim students felt the importance of religion in their daily lives. Thus, 70% agreed that religion played a major role when making important decisions in their lives and 69% agreed that their life had been shaped by their religious faith. Yet again there is little surprise that very few of the religiously unaffiliated students regarded themselves as a religious person (3%), although the proportion rose to 17% who regarded themselves as a spiritual person. Very few of the religiously unaffiliated students felt that their lives had been shaped by religious faith (6%) or that religion played a major role in making important decisions in their lives (6%). The difference in the worldview of female Muslim students and the religiously unaffiliated students around them is quite sharp (see Table 3).

**Table 2.** Religious importance.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
Most of my friends think religion is important	11	54	229.9	.001
My parents think religion is important	9	91	812.9	.001
My grandparents think religion is important	26	87	266.8	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 3.** Religious self-assessment.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
I am a religious person	3	71	864.7	.001
I am a spiritual person	17	26	8.6	.01
My life has been shaped by my religious faith	6	69	628.1	.001
When making important decisions in my life, my religion plays a major role	6	70	668.7	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 4.** Religious conversation.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
I often talk about religion with my mother	14	66	295.0	.001
I often talk about religion with my father	14	49	135.0	.001
I often talk about religion with my grandparents	12	43	124.0	.001
I often talk about religion with my friends	15	44	94.9	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

### *Religious conversation*

The set of items concerned with religious conversation explored the extent to which students talked about religion with those closest to them (mother, father, grandparents and friends). The data demonstrated that religious conversation played a central part in the lives of Muslim students. At least three in every five Muslim students often talked about religion with their mother (66%) and slightly less frequently with their father (49%). Almost as many Muslim students often talked about religion with their friends (44%) and with their grandparents (43%). The situation is quite different among religiously unaffiliated students. Among religiously unaffiliated students around one in seven often talked about religion with their mother (14%), with their father (14%), with their grandparents (12%) and with their friends (15%). Female Muslim students are sustained by an environment in which it is natural and normal to engage in conversation about religion (see Table 4).

### *Religious influence*

The set of items concerned with religious influence explored the students' perceptions of the extent to which their views about religion have been influenced by their parents and by their friends. Among Muslim students the influence of parents was strong, with over two thirds saying that their mother had influenced their views about religion (71%) or that their father had influenced their views about religion (67%). Among Muslim students the influence of friends was less strong than the influence of parents, but nonetheless far from unimportant, with almost two fifths saying that their friends had influenced their views on religion (36%). Among the religiously unaffiliated students around a quarter agreed that their views on religion have been influenced by mother (27%) and by father (25%); the proportion reduced to 15% who agreed that their views on religion had been influenced by friends. These data suggest that female Muslim students are conscious of the influence of family and friends on their religious development (see Table 5).

### *Studying religion at school*

The set of items concerned with studying religion at school explored the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of religious education. The responses of the religiously unaffiliated students indicated a high level of appreciation for religious education, with around three quarters agreeing that studying religion at school had helped them to understand people from other religions (77%) and to understand people from different racial backgrounds (72%). Around half of religiously unaffiliated students agreed that studying religion at school had shaped their views on religion (54%). A lower proportion of the religiously unaffiliated students agreed that learning about different religions at school was interesting (43%). The Muslim students were significantly more positive than the religiously unaffiliated students in their responses to each of these questions. Among Muslim students studying religion at school had

**Table 5.** Religious influence.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
My mother has influenced my views about religion	27	71	141.0	.001
My father has influenced my views about religion	25	67	133.4	.001
My friends have influenced my views about religion	16	36	40.0	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 6.** Studying religion at school.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
Studying religion at school has shaped my views about religion	54	68	12.0	.001
Studying religion at school has helped me understand people from other religions	77	90	13.4	.001
Studying religion at school has helped me understand people from different racial backgrounds	72	81	6.4	.05
Learning about different religions in school is interesting	43	78	82.8	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

helped 90% to understand people from other religions and 81% to understand people from different racial backgrounds. At the same time, 78% of Muslim students found learning about different religions in school interesting, and 68% found studying religion at school had shaped their views about religion. These data demonstrate that female Muslim students are supportive of religious education in school (see Table 6).

### Religious beliefs

The set of items concerned with religious beliefs explored the students' beliefs in God, in heaven, and in hell. The majority of Muslim students signed up to all three core beliefs, with 89% affirming that they believed in God, 94% affirming that they believed in heaven, and 89% affirming that they believed in hell. Unsurprisingly a very different picture ascertained among the religiously unaffiliated students, with 13% affirming that they believed in God, 33% affirming that they believed in heaven, and 13% affirming that they believed in hell. These data demonstrate that female Muslim students have maintained a high level of religious belief (see Table 7).

### God images

The set of items concerned with God images explored the students' perceptions of God as loving and forgiving or as strict and disapproving. The majority of Muslim students signed up to the positive God images as loving (86%) and as forgiving (86%), with 48% also seeing God as strict and 22% seeing God as disapproving. For the majority of the religiously unaffiliated students these categories seemed largely irrelevant. These data demonstrate that female Muslim students conceive of God as forgiving, but for many God is also conceived of as strict (see Table 8).

### Theme 3: social values profile

The survey contained a range of attitudinal items, rated on a five-point scale that accessed six themes relevant to illustrating the students' profile of social values. The six themes have been styled as follows:

**Table 7.** Religious beliefs.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
I believe in God	13	89	590.7	.001
I believe in heaven	33	94	256.5	.001
I believe in hell	25	89	311.3	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 8.** God images.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
I think of God as strict	9	48	213.4	.001
I think of God as loving	13	86	591.5	.001
I think of God as disapproving	6	22	55.3	.001
I think of God as forgiving	15	86	499.7	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

personal well-being, social well-being, attitudes towards religious plurality, living with religious plurality, living with cultural diversity and living with religious difference.

### *Personal well-being*

The set of items concerned with personal well-being explored the two themes of positive affect and negative affect. The data demonstrated that, compared with the religiously unaffiliated students, Muslim students displayed a slightly higher level of positive affect. While 62% of the religiously unaffiliated students found life really worth living, the proportion rose to 69% among Muslim students. More starkly, while 42% of the religiously unaffiliated students felt that life has a sense of purpose, the proportion rose to 75% among Muslim students. The same sharp contrast did not, however, emerge between the two groups in terms of negative affect. Thus, 33% of the religiously unaffiliated students often felt depressed and so did 26% of Muslim students; 20% of the religiously unaffiliated students had sometimes considered taking their own lives, and so had 22% of Muslim students. These data suggest that religious faith may be more effective in promoting positive affect than in suppressing negative affect among female Muslim students (see Table 9).

### *Social well-being*

The set of items concerned with social well-being explored the extent to which students experienced victimisation as a consequence of their distinctive religious, racial, linguistic or cultural background. A very small proportion of the religiously unaffiliated students reported being bullied because of their religion (2%), language (3%), race and colour (4%) or their country of origin (4%). The proportions, however, were significantly higher among Muslim students. Among Muslim students around one in four reported being bullied because of their religion (27%) or because of their race or colour (23%); 16% reported being bullied because of their country of origin and 7% reported being bullied because of their language. These data suggest that female Muslim students experience a higher level of vulnerability (see Table 10).

### *Attitudes towards religious plurality*

The set of items concerned with attitudes towards religious plurality explored two themes: views on religious equality and views on religious conflict. The data demonstrated that the majority of Muslim students supported the views that we must respect all religions (94%) and that all religious groups in Britain should have equal rights (90%). The religiously unaffiliated students took a less generous view on both issues (71 and 67% respectively). At the same time, a number of Muslim students showed awareness of the problems that religions may bring to the world: 38% agreed that religion brought more conflict than peace, and 23% agreed that religious people were often intolerant of others. The religiously

**Table 9** Personal well-being.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
I feel my life has a sense of purpose	42	75	71.5	.001
I find life really worth living	62	69	2.9	NS
I often feel depressed	33	26	3.8	.05
I have sometimes considered taking my own life	20	22	0.5	NS

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 10.** Social well-being.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
I am bullied because of my religion	2	27	219.5	.001
I am bullied because of my race or colour	4	23	121.3	.001
I am bullied because of my language	3	7	7.3	.01
I am bullied because my family comes from another country	4	16	48.5	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 11.** Attitudes towards religions plurality.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
We must respect all religions	71	94	44.3	.001
All religious groups in Britain should have equal rights	67	90	38.8	.001
Religion brings more conflict than peace	46	38	4.7	.05
Religious people are often intolerant of others	28	23	1.9	NS

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

unaffiliated students took a less generous view on both issues (46 and 28%, respectively). These data suggest that female Muslim students hold a tolerant attitude towards religious plurality (see Table 11).

### *Living with religious plurality*

The set of items concerned with living with religious plurality explored the experience of living in multi-ethnic and multi-faith communities. The data demonstrated that Muslim students have much more positive experience than the religiously unaffiliated students of living with plurality. Thus, 71% of Muslim students felt that where they live people who come from different countries get on well together, compared with 51% of the religiously unaffiliated students; 71% of Muslim students felt that where they live people from different religious backgrounds get on well together, compared with 47% of the religiously unaffiliated students; 61% of Muslim students felt that where they live people respect religious difference, compared with 42% of the religiously unaffiliated students. These data suggest that female Muslim students have, overall, a positive experience of religious plurality (see Table 12).

### *Living with cultural diversity*

The set of items concerned with living with cultural diversity explored the students' attitudes towards diversity (rather than experience of diversity). The data demonstrated that Muslim students have a much more positive attitude than the religiously unaffiliated students towards cultural diversity. Thus, 82% of Muslim students agreed that having people from different religious backgrounds made their school an interesting place, compared with 52% of the religiously unaffiliated students; 75% of Muslim students agreed that people who come from different countries made their school an interesting place, compared with 46% of the religiously unaffiliated students; 67% of Muslim students agreed that people from different religious backgrounds made where they live an interesting place, compared with 38% of the religiously unaffiliated students; and 69% of Muslim students agreed that people who come from different countries made where they live an interesting place, compared with 42% of the religiously unaffiliated students. These data suggest that female Muslim students have, overall a positive attitude towards cultural diversity (see Table 13).

**Table 12.** Living with religious plurality.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
Where I live, people who come from different countries get on well together	51	71	24.2	.001
Where I live, people from different religious backgrounds get on well together	47	71	36.1	.001
Where I live, people respect religious differences	42	61	22.5	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 13.** Living with cultural diversity.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$	$p <$
Having people from different religious backgrounds makes my school/college an interesting place	52	82	57.4	.001
People who come from different countries make my school/college an interesting place	46	75	54.0	.001
People from different religious backgrounds make where I live an interesting place.	38	67	59.5	.001
People who come from different countries make where I live an interesting place	42	69	47.9	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

**Table 14.** Living with religious differences.

	None %	Musl %	$\chi^2$ %	$p <$ %
Christians should be allowed to wear crosses in school	62	80	21.5	.001
Hindus should be allowed to wear the Bindi in school	60	81	28.3	.001
Jews should be allowed to wear the Kippah/Yamulke in school	57	76	24.0	.001
Muslims should be allowed to wear the headscarf in school	62	91	59.6	.001
Sikhs should be allowed to wear the Turban in school	60	86	48.0	.001

Note: None = religiously unaffiliated female students; Musl = Muslim female students.

### *Living with religious differences*

The set of items concerned with living with religious differences explored the students' attitudes towards wearing distinctive religious clothing or symbols in school. Across the symbols from five religious traditions included in the survey, Muslim students showed a higher level of acceptance than shown by the religiously unaffiliated students. These traditions are presented in alphabetical order: Christian crosses (80 and 62%), Hindu Bindi (81 and 60%), Jewish Kippah/Yamulke (76 and 57%), Muslim headscarf (91 and 62%) and Sikh Turban (86 and 60%). These data suggest that female Muslim students have a broad acceptance of the public display of religious difference (see Table 14).

### **Conclusion**

This study employed data generated by the Young People's Attitude to Religious Diversity project to address three specific research aims regarding the nature of religious identity and the religious and social correlates of Muslim identity among 13- to 15-year-old female Muslims in the UK.<sup>1</sup> These three research questions were addressed by examining the profile and responses of the 177 female Muslim participants in the project and by giving their responses perspective alongside the responses of the 1183 female participants in the project who self-identified as religiously unaffiliated.

The first research aim focused on the demographic profile of young female Muslims to examine both the diversity within their backgrounds and the extent to which their religious identity is important to them. The data have highlighted diversity in terms of ethnic origin and in terms of length of residency within the UK. Yet within this diversity, the majority have spent their whole lives within the UK (82%) and have grown up with English as the main language spoken at home (61%). The majority of them, however, do not see being British as their main identity, but rather their identity is defined as being Muslim (88%). The majority are living in homes with Muslim mothers (91%) and Muslim fathers (96%) and have received religious instruction through the Madrasah (66%). Their religion is part of the fabric of their lives with 53% praying every day and 48% reading the Qur'an at least once a week; 22% claimed at least weekly attendance at the Mosque for themselves and 46% for their father. According to these data, for young female Muslims, to be Muslim is also to be religious.

The second research aim focused on the religious profile of young female Muslims and did so by exploring eight themes: religious identity, religious importance, religious self-assessment, religious conversation, religious influence, studying religion at school, religious beliefs and God images. The data supported the importance of religious identity in the lives and in the homes of at least 84% of young female Muslims. Many female Muslim students were surrounded by people for whom religion is important, including parents (91%), grandparents (87%) and friends (54%). Most female Muslim students see themselves as religious people (71%) whose life has been shaped by their religious faith (69%). At least 49% of female Muslim students are supported by conversations about religion at home though with more of such conversation taking place with mothers than fathers, 66 and 49% respectively. At least 67% of female Muslim students felt that their parents had influenced their views about religion. Around 90% of female Muslim students have found studying religion at school has helped them to understand people from other religions. Around 89% of female Muslim students believe in God and for most of these the God in whom they believe is both loving (86%) and forgiving (86%). According to these data, for young female Muslims, to be Muslim is to be living in a world that takes religion seriously.

The third research aim focused on the social values profile of young female Muslims, and did so by exploring the following six themes: personal well-being, social well-being, attitudes towards religious plurality, living with religious plurality, living with cultural diversity and living with religious difference. The data supported the view that Muslim identity is associated with higher levels of positive well-being (75% felt their life had a sense of purpose), but also with lower levels of social well-being (27% were bullied because of their religion). Muslim students have a high regard for religious plurality (94% agreed that we must respect all religions), have a positive experience of living in a multi-faith environment (71% felt that where they live people from different religious backgrounds get on well together), endorse the value of living in a multi-faith environment (82% agreed that having people from different religious backgrounds made their school an interesting place), and support the rights of students from other religious traditions to wear distinctive clothing in schools (86% agreed that Sikhs should be allowed to wear the Turban in school).

The findings of this study are also of educational significance within the context of religious education programmes that are concerned to explore the public and social significance of religious diversity within contemporary societies. Listening to the voices of young Muslim women in this way highlights the extent to which their religious affiliation may shape not only their distinctive religious profile but also the distinctive profile of their social values.

The strengths of drawing data from the Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project is that it drew together a large sample of 13- to 15-year-old students attending state-maintained schools (both with a religious character and without a religious foundation) from across the four nations of the UK and from London, and that it included a good range of items relating to aspects of religious diversity. In some ways, however, these strengths are also weaknesses in terms of generating a thorough account of the religious and social correlates of Muslim identity. Further research is now needed to build on the present analysis in three ways. First, a survey instrument is required that includes a wider and richer range of personal and social values in order to provide a fuller account of the personal and social correlates of Muslim identity. Second, the sampling of students undertaken by the present study needs to be enriched in two ways: by identifying schools within the state-maintained sector with high proportions of Muslim students and by including independent Islamic schools. Third, the survey needs to include questions about wearing the veil, or the hijab to distinguish different expressions of Muslim identity among young women, and a question concerning Muslim denominations in order to explore internal diversity among young Muslims.

## Notes of contributors

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## Note

1. Young People's Attitudes to Religious Diversity Project (AHRC Reference: AH/G014035/1) was a large-scale mixed methods research project investigating the attitudes of 13- to 16-year-old students across the United Kingdom. Students from a variety of socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds from different parts of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, with the addition of London as a special case, took part in the study. Professor Robert Jackson was principal investigator and Professor Leslie J. Francis was co-investigator. Together they led a team of qualitative and quantitative researchers based in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit, within the Centre for Education Studies at the University of Warwick. The project was part of the AHRC/ESRC Religion and Society Programme and ran from 2009–2012.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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