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Published in:
Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory

DOI (link to publication from Publisher):
10.1080/1600910X.2021.1885050

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Publication date:
2021

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

Link to publication from Aalborg University

Citation for published version (APA):
Larsen, J. F. (2021). Reinstating and contextualizing religion in the analysis of Islamist radicalization in the West. *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory*, *22*(2), 192-209. https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2021.1885050

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To cite this article: Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen (2021) Reinstating and contextualizing religion in the analysis of Islamist radicalization in the West, Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory, 22:2, 192-209, DOI: 10.1080/1600910X.2021.1885050

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2021.1885050

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory on 25 February 2021, available online: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1600910X.2021.1885050"

Reinstating and contextualizing religion in the analysis of Islamist radicalization in the West

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KEYWORDS
Jihadism; Islamism; radicalization; sociology of religion; sociology of religious emotion; religious emotional regimes; sociology

ABSTRACT
Research on Islamist radicalization has been characterized by different analyses of why some people become radical Islamists. Structures such as social, economic and political marginalization are often understood as root causes of radicalization. In critical theorizations of radicalization, religion is often mentioned as a component; however, its role is often downplayed. This article focuses on the debate surrounding explanations of Islamist radicalization processes and discusses different approaches to reinstating religion in the analysis. The article introduces and develops the sociology of religious emotion (Riis and Woodhead 2010) as a not-yet-employed theoretical perspective in radicalization research. Instead of understanding radicalization as explained primarily either through structural social and political conditions or through specific interpretations of Islam, the tradition would allow us to understand religious emotions as formed within the social context. The article thus accentuates the importance of grasping the interplay between the social and societal context and specific interpretations of Islam. The application of the sociology of religious emotion and its underlying broad conception of religion thus offers a promising theorization of the role of religion in Islamist radicalization in the West that can help broaden the analytical scope.

> I went to the mosque to pray […] I was devastated. An acquaintance of mine […] approaches me […] He asks about how I'm doing. I'm in tears and really angry and fru- strated. I tell him how things are. 'I don't have any school, I have lost my mother' and every- thing about the gymnasium [high school] and the police and all that. He answers, 'Brother, you are not alone, just so you know. It is a battle you can fight together with other people'.I reply, 'Who?' 'A group of people, young men, I would like to introduce you to them'.
>
> […]
>
> I just start telling my story [to the young men], and they are all like … they open their eyes, they are in shock, and they feel sorry for me. It was really a warm welcome and a brother- hood I never felt the Danish society has given me. I felt this was a new foundation I could build upon. Then, one after another, the other guys start telling about the unfortunate situ- ations they have been through. Racism, unemployment even though they were qualified; one

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> had a sister that was spat on because she was wearing a veil. Many frustrations that we shared between us. We understood each other and supported each other.

The citation above is an extract from an interview conducted in fall 2017 with Ali, a young man with an ethnic minority background living in Denmark. Ali was part of a group of five young men, three of whom travelled to Syria. The group adhered to a Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islam and was inspired by preachers such as Anwar al-Awlaki. Prior to joining the group, Ali was accused by his high school classmates of having plans to blow up the school after he defended his religion rigorously in a heated discussion about Islam in class. The principal took the concern to the police. The police interrogated him, and his family's house was searched. Ali was ultimately not prosecuted; however, the situation caused him to miss his final exams, and the school forced him to choose between repeating the entire grade and changing schools. Soon after these events, Ali's mother died of a sudden illness. Ali was filled with hatred towards Danish society. He found that sharing his anger and frustration with the other young men helped him deal with his situation. He began to understand his experience in a religious framework. Ali's experience is related to the broader discursive and political problematisation of Islam in Western countries and is thus an illustrative example of how specific interpret- ations of religion are intrinsically connected to the social and political contexts in which they emerge. This article proposes an analytical framework to understand this connection between social and political conditions and strong religious emotions.

Within radicalization research, social conditions such as unemployment, low educational levels, a lack of social mobility, and discrimination, along with political dissatisfaction and political aspirations, are often understood as explanations for why some people become radical Islamists. Religion or ideology is often mentioned as a component in the radicalization process; however, the role of religion is often downplayed (Dawson 2017, 2018). Generally, there is a common scepticism or discomfort among researchers of Islamist radicalization in regard to ascribing Islam, or specific interpretations of Islam, an explanatory potential in the radicalization process. Such discomfort in dealing with religion could be due to a fear of being labelled as an Islamophobe or as a racist, or it could be due to genuine ethical concern about contributing to giving Muslims a bad name in societies where they are already a minority (Cottee 2014, 2017; Dawson 2017; Hoffman 2017; Wood 2017a, 2015). Alternatively, some researchers might simply not believe that religion plays a role in radicalization processes. These concerns are fully legit- imate; however, they can become obstacles in the analysis of people who interpret their thoughts and actions in a religious context. Importantly, the scepticism is also contradicted by key empirical findings. For instance, Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) found that their 20 foreign fighter-interviewees explained their motivation for actions with religiosity, and Hegghammer found religious practices to be central among jihadists. Reading the Quran and praying even while in the midst of battle is common praxis among jihadists (Hegghammer 2017). For ISIS fighters, this might even include praying before committing rape (Callimachi 2015). Specific interpretations of Islam are thus both the basis of the intentional explanation of actions and thoughts and an inte- gral part of the social and cultural praxis among radical Islamists. Consequently, it is in some sense problematic to disregard or downplay religion in theorizations and analyses of Islamist radicalization processes.

In contrast to the scepticism among radicalization researchers, public and political discourse often identifies Islamist radicalization as being religiously determined (see Kundnani 2012 for a critique of the public discourses of radicalization). The view that religiosity has explanatory potential can also be found in radicalization research, although in a more nuanced version. Some researchers have thus begun to call for a rein- statement of religion in the analysis and understanding of Islamist radicalization (Cottee 2014; Hoffman 2017; Wood 2015; Dawson 2017, 2018; see Larsen 2020a for an overview). Wood (2015) argues that there exists a 'Western bias' and Amarasingam (2018) and Cottee (2014) a 'secular bias'. They thus highlight that religion has been understood as unimportant or has taken a secondary position in the analysis of radical Islamists, and they argue that we must be able to discuss the role of specific interpretations of Islam in radicalization processes. However, they do not offer an adequate theorization of the role of religion.

This article offers such a theorization. It attempts to resolve the question of how we can reinstate religion by introducing and developing the *sociology of religious emotion* (Riis and Woodhead 2010). The application of this theoretical approach enables a synthesis between the opposing positions of explaining Islamist radicalization primarily through structural social and political conditions *versus* primarily through specific interpretations of Islam, which allows for analytical developments on how to understand what drives some people into radical Islamism. Furthermore, understanding the different positions on the role of religion in radicalization processes entails a discussion about different underlying conceptions of religion and what should constitute religiosity, as will be dealt with further below.

Understanding specific interpretations of Islam as being interconnected to the social and political context is important because it allows us, on the one hand, to take religious motivations, intentions and emotions seriously and, on the other hand, to understand these religious motivations, intentions and emotions in the social and political context from which they emerge and in which they develop. The debate about what leads to radicalization also involves different modes of explanation and different underlying understandings of the concept of religion. By introducing and developing the not-yet-employed tradition of the sociology of religious emotion (Riis and Woodhead 2010), I argue that we can gain analytical insight into how social and political conditions can be related to strong religious emotions both collectively and individually. This approach allows us to understand social and political conditions as *co*-producers of specific interpretations of Islam. It implies that specific interpretations of Islam constitute an important part of the motivation for the thoughts and actions of radical Islamists (and thus that religion plays a significant role in radicalization processes) but that these interpretations are shaped within the social and political context. The introduction of the sociology of religious emotion to the field thus enables us to balance different notions of explanation. It is a perspective that offers a way to reinstate and contextualize religion in the analysis of Islamist radicalization processes.

It should be emphasized that reinstating religion in the analysis is not an argument that mainstream Islam is related to radicalism or that mainstream practicing Muslims are potential terrorists. The vast majority of the victims of Islamist terrorism are other Muslims. This fact implies that radical Islamism is based on a specific and unusual interpretation of Islam. The reinstatement and contextualization of religion is thus an

attempt to understand how specific interpretations of Islam such as Salafi-Jihadism are reshaped in contemporary Western societies and how they are connected to social and political conditions connected to specific national and societal contexts.

The article is divided into two main sections. The first section focuses on the debate about explanations of radicalization and underlying understandings of the concept of religion, and it discusses different approaches to reinstating religion in the analysis of Islamist radicalization processes. The second section discusses the sociology of religion with a special focus on how the sociology of religious emotion can provide a fruitful re-theorization of the role of religion in research on radicalization. The conclusion returns to Ali's case (described above) and illustrates how these perspectives provide a new analytical understanding of radicalization, which in this article is understood as the endorsement (or acts) of violence in the name of the perceived true version of Islam.

Modes of explanation

The different positions in the debate about what leads to Islamist radicalization are in part a result of different modes of explanation. Proponents of the argument that radicalization is mainly explained by social and political conditions are likely to argue that structural mechanisms related to class or ethnic position are the root causes of radicalization. Proponents of the argument that specific interpretations of Islam are the driving factors of radicalization will often argue from an intentional explanation. Here, people's actions are understood from their own subjective intention (Ejrnæs and Guldager 2008).

Walklate and Mynthen (2016) argue that the role of religion has been muted by approaches to understanding Islamist radicalization that focus on strain theory and structural issues. One of the main arguments within the field of radicalization research is that Islamist radicalization is linked to structural issues such as class position. Several studies have shown that radical Islamists and foreign fighters from Europe, on average, have a lower level of education and a lower employment rate and are economically deprived. The point is often made that this economic deprivation predisposes individuals to radicalization (see, e.g. Hegghammer 2016; Hecker 2018; Neumann 2016; Cottee 2011; Bakker and Coolsaet 2011). These authors have different understandings of the concept of class; however, in the radicalization research field, there seems to be merit in a Bourdieusian conception of class that relates to both economic and cultural differentiation. This is thus the conception of class that is adopted in this article. The predisposition is also connected to an understanding of ethnicity as a form of social differentiation based on an idea of cultural difference between groups of people (Eriksen 2002; Barth 1969). Experiences linked to the ethnic minority status of young Muslims, such as racism and othering and a lack of social mobility, have been understood as predisposing individuals to radicalization. Social conditions as a driving factors can thus be understood as the collective outcome of what might be called an *ethno-class experience*. Such experience predisposes young people who identify as Muslim to engage with radical Islamist groups as they offer a way to revolt against society and a way to resolve status frustration by instating pride in being Muslim, order in a confusing life, and friendship and social networks (Roy 2017; Cottee 2011; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Neumann 2016; Khosrokhavar 2017). However, a consequence of primarily focusing on social conditions is that the role of religion is often made secondary. A reason for this is the mode of

explanation. This explanation implies that radicals might say that they act and think as they do because of their interpretation of Islam; however, in reality, what made them radicals are underlying social structures such as class and ethnic position, which made them seek radical Islam as an answer to such class and ethnic position. Religion is thus understood as a secondary explanatory factor or an epi-phenomenon.

The experience of hard social conditions has been a central component in the debate about the root causes of what might *push* some people towards Islamist radicalization. Other scholars have focused on what might *pull* people towards radical Islamist groups. One of the main arguments within this debate has been that jihadism, before being a theological or social phenomenon, is first and foremost a political phenomenon and that we must understand jihadists as political actors (Boserup 2016; Crone 2016) and to understand terrorism as a form of political protest (Lindekilde and Olesen 2015). Sheikh (2016) shows, through interviews with several foreign fighters from Denmark, that the primary motivational factor for their going to Syria was the idea of being a part of and helping build an Islamic state, e.g. by helping build schools and a new society in general for the Syrian population (see also Hemmingsen 2014, 42; Crone 2016, 596). Boserup (2016, 53–54) argues that these transnational jihadists have transna- tional political dreams about a political reality that is very different from the European reality in which they live. Therefore, according to Crone (2016), what we must under- stand is that Islamist radicalization is not an individual process driven by religious ideol- ogy but instead is a 'process of politicization'. However, by insisting that radicalization is first and foremost a political phenomenon and that radicalization is a process of politi- cization, there is a risk of decoupling the religious anchoring of political aspirations. The endpoint of the political struggles is religiously defined in the minds of the participants. For instance, ISIS's state-building project is not about building just any state; it is about building an *Islamic* state. Understanding political motivations as driving forces behind Islamist radicalization is indeed important; however, it is important because political aspirations about an Islamic state cannot be separated from religion.

Within radicalization research, social conditions and political dissatisfaction and aspirations are often seen as root causes of Islamist radicalization. In some cases, however, this perspective can mute the role of religion in radicalization processes. The specific interpretations of Islam that are developed within the social and political context are seldom identified as driving factors behind Islamist radicalization. The fol- lowing section will discuss different ways to theorize how religion can be reinstated in the analysis and will thus help resolve the debate over whether specific interpretations of Islam or social and political conditions are the main driving factors of Islamist radicalization in the West.

Reinstating religion

In theorizations on radicalization, at least three arguments for why religion is *not* a main driving factor behind radicalization can be identified (see also Larsen 2020a). One argument is based on the *level of religious knowledge*. It is often argued that radical Islamists have only very shallow knowledge about Islam (see, e.g. Roy 2017 and Crone 2010, 2014) or have no grounding in traditional mainstream Islam (see, e.g. Aly and Streigher 2012; Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010; Patel 2011) and thus that specific interpretations of

Islam are not a cause of Islamist radicalization because the radicals do not know what the religion of Islam is. Another argument is that *religion is used instrumentally*. Central persons, leaders or radicalizers use Islamic texts, verses from the Quran and holy traditions to mobilize and recruit actors for a political struggle, and young radicals can choose to latch onto these symbols to scare other people and rebel and disassociate from the Western society in which they live (Roy 2017; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Badey 2002). A third argument is that *religion is used merely as justification* for militant engagement and other violent behaviour (see, for example, Crone 2010, 2014). This argument resembles that of Roy (2017), which asserts that radicals are rebels who choose radicalism and then fit it into an Islamic paradigm, often late in the radicalization process. These are all arguments that theorize the role of religion in Islamist radicaliza- tion processes as either non-existent or as secondary to other, more profound, explana- tory mechanisms such as social and political factors. However, more often than not, radical Islamists interpret their thoughts and actions as religious (see, e.g. Dawson and Amarasingam 2017). If we understand religion through a broad conception, as will be discussed below, there can be good reasons to take religious motivations seriously and ascribe religion explanatory potential.

Different theoretical understandings of the concept of religion thus seem to underpin the debate about the role of religion in Islamist radicalization processes. When referring to the level of religious knowledge or time spent as a devout Muslim as indicators of whether religion plays a role in such processes, the understanding of the concept of religion relies on a narrow and formalistic conception. Radical Islamists' emotionally invested self-understanding as Muslims is not regarded as an indicator of religiosity in this theoretical conception of religion. Paradoxically, researchers who otherwise emphasize the complexity of social phenomena thus seem to rely on a relatively simplistic theorization of religion that understands religion as generic institutionalized theological practices related to places of worship and religious texts and scriptures (Furseth and Repstad 2007, 45; Beckford 2003, 16). The argument for reinstating religion in the analysis relies on a more broad or social constructivist conception of religion. This approach focuses on the subjective meaning attributed to religion by individuals and groups. Here, religion is understood as 'real' when it has an effect on human lives (Beckford 2003, 24). This theoretical understanding of religion thus includes subjective identity formation and the construction of the sense of self as religious processes (Luckmann 1967; Berger 1973). The subjective aspects of religion could also be emotions, as will be dis- cussed below. Instead of considering religion in a narrow sense as 'church-oriented' (Luckmann 1967) or as formed by external criteria, this approach focuses on the subjec- tive meanings religion provides to individuals and the varying uses of religion (Beckford 2003, 29; Furseth and Repstad 2007, 35; Hamilton 2001, 181–184). A broad conception of religion is perhaps not always fruitful for analyses of social phenomena (for a discussion of potential pitfalls, see, e.g. Furseth and Repstad 2007, 45–47); however, with regard to the analysis of Islamist radicalization processes, such conception allows for a theorization of religion that takes seriously the subjective intentional explanations of radicals regard- less of, e.g. their level of religious knowledge, and thus focuses on the subjective mean- ingfulness provided by religion and the emotions connected to their interpretation of religion.

A starting point of reinstating religion could thus be to recognize that religious knowledge is relative and that low levels of religious knowledge do not necessarily mean that religion plays only a secondary role. Employing a broad conception of religion means that one does not have to be tremendously learned within Islamic scripture to be motivated by religion, to have strong religious emotions or even to self-categorize as Muslim (Neumann 2013; Wood 2017b). As Graeme Wood argues, we would consider a person walking out of Sunday mass in a Catholic church to be Catholic even though that person very likely would not have in-depth knowledge about all Christian scripture (Wood 2017b). The same reasoning should be applied to radical Islamists. Although many of them might not be learned Muslims or might not have been devout Muslims for very long, when we employ a broad conception of religion, this does not mean that their religious emotions are not strong or that their subjective self-understanding as Muslims does not matter (c.f. Marranci 2006). This is thus also a critique of consider- ing time spent as a devout Muslim to be an indicator of whether Islam is merely used as a justification to commit violence. Strong religious emotions are, in a broad conception of religion, not dependent on the duration of devoutness. If strong emotions are constructed as being religious, then, in this conception of religion, they are religious. It is also an argument against the idea that Islam is merely used instrumentally to mobilize political action. Although there is a possibility that some 'radicalizers' do not care about the religious aspect of building an Islamic state, there are strong indicators that most radical Islamists perceive themselves to be religious. This implies that mobilization often cannot be separated from religion. The goal of political action in this context has its roots in what is perceived as religion, and mobilizing people for action requires that they understand themselves as Muslims, which is what is important in a broad conception of religion. The point is thus that regardless of how theologically ill-informed it may be, religiosity – according to the subjective emotional understanding of the radicals themselves – is a main motivation for their thoughts and actions. When employing a broad conception of religion, this self-understanding as religious must be taken seriously. This implies that even though the norms in Sunni Islam today are vastly different from, e.g. ISIS's religiosity, this does not mean that most ISIS supporters do not consider themselves to be highly religious (Hoffman 2017; Wood 2017). According to Hegghammer (2017), many jihadi groups practice the five daily prayers; perform ablution (which involves washing hands and feet with water, if available, or otherwise dusting and cleaning them); recite the Quran on a daily basis; fast; and perform exorcisms to cast out evil spirits. In a broad conception, religion is also understood in terms of the practical actions and daily rituals conducted by individuals that effect their lives. Thus, when radicals perform such rituals, we ought to understand them as religious. In other words, the practices of jihadi groups and the intentional explanations for their thoughts and actions are formed by their specific interpretation of Islam. Radical Islamists can understand themselves as true Muslims regardless of the depth of their religious knowledge or the amount of time they have spent as devout Muslims. By moving away from narrow conceptions of religion towards broader ones, we can understand this construction of a sense of self as a religious process.

Another way to reinstate religion could be to understand Islam as a type of floating signifier (Lévi-Strauss 1950) that can be interpreted and appropriated in many different ways in different contexts. This approach is thus, on the one hand, a critique

of essentialist approaches to Islam that argue that radical Islamists are not Muslims because Islam is a religion of peace and, on the other hand, a critique of proponents who argue that Islam is an inherently violent religion. Both arguments claim that Islam is only one thing (see Marranci 2006, 1–7). Essentialist approaches to religion add a reification of Islam, which is ill considered from the perspective of a broad con- ception of religion. Understanding Islam as a floating signifier recognizes that religion is socially constructed and thus that Islam can and has been interpreted and constructed in many different ways (see Hjärpe 2006). When Mozzafari (2007) points to *Islamism* and Maher (2016) to *Salafi-Jihadism* to understand the religious rationale behind radical Isla- mists' thoughts and (violent) actions, they identify specific interpretations of Islam as being linked to Islamist radicalization. The point is that there are passages in the scripture that can be interpreted in such a way that can justify violence even though mainstream Muslims might contest these passages or interpret them differently. A way to understand the development of such interpretations of Islam, and thus the contemporary solidifica- tion of an otherwise floating signifier, could be to understand the religiosity of radicals as intrinsically connected to the social and political context in which such religiosity devel- ops. Mark Juergensmeyer and Mona Kanwal Sheikh (2013) argue for a *sociotheological* approach to the analysis of religiously motivated violence. This approach involves attempting to understand the worldview of perpetrators based on the notion that to understand this worldview and the rationales behind it, we must take in to account the social context (see also M.K. Sheikh 2015; Juergensmeyer 2018). Williams (2011) argues that we often think of religion as shaping how we think, view the world and act but that we should also consider how place and context affect religious identity and religiosity. A consequence of employing a broad conception of religion is precisely such analytical attention to the meaning attributed to religion in different national and social contexts (Beckford 2003, 20). We would, for example, lack an analytical under- standing of the religious identity and motivation of the perpetrators of the terrorist attacks on Charlie Hebdo in France in 2015 without reference to the perpetrators' upbringing in the economic and socially marginalized suburbs in France and the French law of laïcite, which prohibits religious practices in public places (Walklate and Mynthen 2016; Truong 2018; Kepel 2017). According to Kepel (2017), we can understand these forms of terror attacks as a culmination of a widespread Islamization of young Muslims who have revolted against the social and political conditions in the suburbs and have been influenced by Islamist movements such as Salafism. This understanding assumes that Islam is not simply a convenient identity marker used to rebel against society but that there has been an actual religious radicalization of some young Muslims in France. Kepel argues that specific interpretations promoted by movements such as Salafism can foster a milieu that is favourable to organizations such as ISIS. We can derive both a quantitative and a qualitative understanding of the role of religion from Kepel. He argues that a large number of young Muslims in the suburbs have been Islamized. Whether this quantitative argument is true and whether this is also the case in other Western countries is debatable. However, we do not have to accept the quantitative argument to accept his qualitative argument, which is that Islamist radicalization is (also) a religious phenomenon – those who are radical Islamists are religious, they self-identify as Muslims and they are emotionally invested in this identity. When we employ a broad conception of religion, this phenomenon of emotional identification must be taken

seriously in our analysis and, importantly, in relation to how we can resolve the debate over whether specific interpretations of Islam or social and political conditions lead to radicalization, such religiosity is closely connected to the political and social contexts in which young Muslims find themselves in the West.

The following section will present a perspective on how we can understand this connection.

Sociology of religion – a focus on emotions

This section of the article will introduce an attempt to re-think and re-theorize the role of religion in Islamist radicalization processes. This theorization will take its departure in emotional approaches to religion and especially focus on Riis and Woodhead's (2010) sociology of religious emotion as a new theoretical contribution to the field that relies on a broad conception of religion and as a way to further develop the analytical understanding of how social and political contexts can be connected to religiosity. The focus on emotions is in line with some researchers' call for increased attention to emotions in terrorism research (see, e.g. Rice 2009; Marranci 2006).

Key empirical findings within research on Islamist radicalization and jihadist groups suggest that the expression of strong emotion is an important aspect of cultural and religious practices. Hegghammer (2017), for instance, finds that when reciting the Quran, jihadists are often expected to weep, as weeping is seen as a sign of devoutness. Jihadists also weep when they are unable to go into combat and are thus denied martyrdom or when they hear of other Muslims' suffering. Seierstad (2016) also found that a preacher, who was an inspiration for two sisters of Somali decent from Norway who travelled to Syria, cried passionately in a lecture he held about the life of the prophet Muhammed in front of Muslims from Norway, who were not used to witnessing public emotional outbursts.

These findings are concrete illustrations of the emotional aspect of religion and the importance of emotional practice among radical Islamists. However, an emotional approach to religion has wider relevance as it provides a theorization of the meaning attributed to religion in different contexts, which is the analytical objective in a broad conception of religion. An emotional approach would allow us to understand religion as derived from individuals' emotional states of mind (Hamilton 2001, 55). Emotional approaches understand religion as being rooted in the emotional outcomes of the conditions of everyday life such as uncertainty, contingency and anxiety (see Hamilton 2001, 58–64). Occupying a social and ethnic position that is deemed less attractive than other positions can lead some people to seek religion, as it can offer emotional meaningfulness. Perceived injustices can be understood in a new light, e.g. as something for which individuals will be compensated at some point either in this life or in the after- life (see Davis 1948). From an emotional perspective, religion provides emotional meaningfulness (cf. Durkheim 1915); it can provide a way for people to escape the emotional stress caused by their social and ethnic positions, or it can provide a way for them to accept and live with this kind of suffering by placing the suffering in a meaningful (religious) context (Malinowski 1936; Geertz 1966).

Paying more attention to the emotional dimension of religion thus seems fruitful for the analysis of radical Islamists' practices *and* for a broader understanding of the

connection between social and political conditions and religion. An emotional approach to religion could provide an understanding of how the emotional outcome of hard social conditions in terms of, for example, low levels of education, joblessness, discrimination and othering together with political dissatisfaction can be connected to religion as religion can provide a meaningful understanding of such emotions.

We thus need a theoretical frame that, on the one hand, can increase our attention to the emotional aspects of radicalization processes and, on the other hand, provide us with a way to theorize the role of religion in these processes and that furthermore inscribes itself in a broad conception of religion. This theoretical frame could be the tradition of the sociology of religious emotion (Riis and Woodhead 2010). This tradition would allow us to understand how the practices and thought of radical Islamists are connected to emotions.

The sociology of religious emotions

In *A Sociology of Religious Emotion* (2010), Riis and Woodhead lay out different perspectives on how emotions are an integral part of religion.

One of the main discussions within the research field has been whether Islamist radicalization is in fact a religious phenomenon given that some radicals have only very shallow knowledge about Islam. An important contribution to the research field could thus be the application of sociologists of religion, such as Riis and Woodhead, who argue from the perspective of a broad conception of religion that very few people actually intensively study religion but that this does not mean that they are not religious. Low levels of knowledge about religion and theology are common among religious people. According to Riis and Woodhead, people with little religious schooling and people who are socioeconomically deprived are drawn to religions that speak to their emotions (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 4). Religious emotions are emotions that occur in a religious context and are socially constructed as religious (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 45, 69-70). This is a social constructivist argument, which implies that there are no external criteria that determine what should be deemed religious or which emotions can be understood as religious. The construction of emotions as religious is an active process. Emotions can be transformed or redefined as religious. Theorizing religion through a broad or social constructivist conception of religion, such as that of Riis and Woodhead, thus means that all emotions, such as anger, rage, hatred, love, happiness, or joy, can be religious. Several empirical studies of radical Islamists have shown that before or during their radicalization, young Muslims from the West express dissatisfaction with their lives. Neumann (2016, 89) argues that what jihadists from Europe have in common is a lack of identification with the societies in which they have grown up. Seierstad (2016) shows that two young sisters of Somali descent who travelled to ISIS felt that Norwegian society hated them because they were Muslim, and they hated that society in return. The sisters also expressed anger towards Western military aggressions in Muslim countries. The same lack of identification and hatred and frustration about society and Western foreign policy can be found in Jakob Sheikh's (2015) investigation of radical Islamists from Denmark. Riis and Woodhead's perspective allows us to understand such emotions as religious emotions. This implies that the analytical separation of specific interpretations of religion and social conditions and political dissatisfaction becomes obsolete – re-

theorizing the role of religion in Islamist radicalization processes through the sociology of religious emotion allows us to understand emotions that stem from social and political contexts as religious if they are socially constructed as religious. The feeling of, e.g. frustration from a lack of identification with society due to social, economic and political marginalization can be constructed and interpreted as a religious emotion. The anthropologist of religion, Gabriele Marranci (2006), argues that emotions have been overlooked in studies about Muslims and jihad. In his interviews with ethnic minority Muslim men in Europe who, he argues, have read the same religious sources within Islam but have had different life trajectories, he finds that men who experience social and economic marginalization tend to interpret jihad as a call for a final battle between Muslims and non-Muslims while more successful men tend to interpret jihad as a spiritual fight for a better version of oneself. Social and political conditions thus shape how Islam is interpreted and how emotions are interpreted, thereby overcoming the opposition between structural and subjective intentional explanations for radicalization.

Returning to Riis and Woodhead, this interpretation of emotions as religious occurs in the context of what they call *religious emotional regimes* (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 55). Emotional regimes capture '*the way that emotions are integral to the structured social and material relations that constitute a particular social unit or setting*' (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 10). Emotional regimes thus describe how emotions in a specific social unit, such as a family or, in the context of this article, a radical Islamist group, are structured. This means that emotional regimes, and the religious elites within those regimes, structure what can be felt and the ways in which feelings can be expressed, and failures to comply with such structure are sanctioned (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 10−11). As men- tioned above, weeping is an important part of religious practices among many jihadi groups; re-theorizing such practice through Riis and Woodhead's perspective allows us to understand it as an expression of emotion that is actively constructed as religious and thus as part of the emotional regime within these groups. Emotions are here struc- tured in such a way that allows and values devotional weeping in an otherwise masculine and militaristic setting, and failure to comply with these emotional structures can cause embarrassment and envy of those who can behave as expected (Hegghammer 2017).

As discussed above, research on Islamist radicalization has shown that one of the main drivers of radicalization in the West is underprivileged ethno-class experiences. By re-theorizing this point through Riis and Woodhead's perspective, such experiences can be understood as being connected to or as being able to transform into religious emotions. Social conditions such as low educational levels, marginalization on the employment market, a lack of social mobility, and experiences of racism and othering − in addition to personal grievances and crises such as divorce or the loss of a spouse or family member − can result in a range of different emotions such as hopelessness, despair, frustration, humiliation, shame, anger, and hatred. A central theoretical point that research on radicalization can derive from Riis and Woodhead is that religions or religious groups with strong emotional regimes offer individuals a way to restructure and order their emotional lives. Joining a religious group can be a way to transform per- sonal feelings and experiences into a religious context and into the emotional regime that is present within the religion (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 11). Thus, by developing on and utilizing the sociology of religious emotion in radicalization research, we can understand

the emotional outcome of ethno-class experiences as not necessarily secular emotions, even though they might stem from non-religious social experiences. If they are interpreted and actively constructed as religious emotions within a religious emotional regime, then they are, when employing Riis and Woodhead's broad conception of reli- gion, religious. Understanding emotions in a religious framework thus provides explana- tory potential to religion in radicalization research, as thoughts and actions are interpreted as being anchored in the specific interpretation of religion.

Riis and Woodhead argue that socioeconomically deprived people seek religions that speak to their emotions. Developing on their perspective and applying it to radicalization research, we can argue that people with underprivileged ethno-class experiences seek religions with a strong emotional regime. Many radical Islamists adhere to what Maher (2016) calls Salafi-Jihadism. This interpretation of Islam contains rules on many aspects of life and thus offers a complete order of emotions (Neumann 2016, 112). Salafi-Jihadism also contains elements that promote violence against all who do not follow the same interpretation of Islam (Maher 2016). If we employ a broad con- ception of religion, which focuses on the meaningfulness that religion can provide the individual, we can understand Salafi-Jihadist groups as contexts in which personal emotions such as humiliation, shame, frustration, and anger, which stem from social and ethnic positions in society, can be interpreted in light of a new religious meaning and transformed into strong (and violent) religious emotions. The important sociological implication of joining a religious group is, as Riis and Woodhead point out, that it gives individuals a new way of feeling about themselves and about society. Thus, by utilizing their perspective in radicalization research, we can theorize the process of how previous personal feelings of anger towards society or shame connected to being a Muslim can be transformed into strong religious emotions in a Salafi-Jihadist religious context. These emotions can instate joyfulness, happiness and pride about being Muslim. However, within a Salafi-Jihadist emotional regime, these strong religious emotions can also *initiate* and *amplify* a religiously based motivation or reason to either endorse violence or commit violence in the name of the perceived true understanding of Islam. Riis and Woodhead (2010, 90) argue that perceived incompatible emotional regimes can be hated and attacked if they are perceived as a threat. Developing this perspective and applying it to radicalization research leads to the concept that in a Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islam, incompatible regimes are often composed of non-Muslims and people practicing 'diluted' forms of Islam. Re-theorizing the role of religion in Islamist radicalization through the sociology of religious emotion thus allows us to understand motivations for religiously based violence as initiated and amplified in Salafi-Jihadist emotional regimes. This approach thus holds explanatory potential for religious subjec- tive intentional explanations. The religious emotions formed within a Salafi-Jihadist reli- gious emotional regime are experienced as real by the adherers of this interpretation of Islam. This is the worldview from which radical Islamists act and think and thus the sub- jective intentional explanation for their thoughts and actions. In a broad conception of religion, religion is 'real' when it effects the lives of individuals (Beckford 2003, 24). The self-understanding derived from Salafi-Jihadist emotional regimes is thus a religious process in this conception of religion. However, social and political conditions are *co*- producers of specific interpretations of Islam. Underprivileged ethno-class experiences predispose some people who identify as Muslims to seek interpretations of Islam with

strong emotional regimes such as Salafi-Jihadism. Social and political conditions are thus explanatory structural mechanisms of radicalization, and they are important in the understanding of the formation of specific interpretations of Islam. In other words, thinking through the theoretical framework of the sociology of religious emotion enables us to theorize the importance of religion and balance different notions of expla- nation in its application to Islamist radicalization.

Dawson and Amarasingam's (2017, 206) question of '*why would becoming more religious be a satisfying and convincing compensation for the lack of material prospects in life?*' could thus be answered by employing a broad conception of religion, such as Riis and Woodhead's, which allows theorizations that enable us to understand the emotional outcomes of the ethno-class experiences of Muslim youths in Western societies as religious emotions. This means that we cannot grasp the role of specific interpretations of religion in Islamist radicalization processes without considering the context in which religious emotions are formed. Specific interpretations of religion and the social and political contexts are thus not separate driving factors; instead, they are intrinsically connected.

Making experiences meaningful

As discussed above, religious emotional regimes are a context that can transform the emotional outcome of underprivileged ethno-class experiences into religious emotions that are perceived as real and meaningful. The following section will present ways in which such experiences can be made meaningful.

Riis and Woodhead (2010, 168) argue that religion can provide a way for individuals to empower themselves and the groups to which they belong. An example is migrants who reinterpret old religious symbols and give them a new emotional meaning. In Europe, for example, the Muslim hijab can symbolize religious pride and confidence for young mainstream Muslims (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 170). However, developing on Riis and Woodhead's argument, the process of becoming empowered, and thus of making experiences meaningful, is different for young Muslims who adhere to radical interpretations of Islam. Ethno-class experiences such as discrimination, social marginality and political frustrations can under specific circumstances be converted into a feeling of belonging to a group of a 'chosen few' who possess religious clear-sightedness (see Jensen and Larsen 2019). Adherers of Salafi-Jihadism, for example, seek to live by the practices of the first three generations of Islam (Maher 2016). They thus believe that they follow the only true version of Islam, and they think and act from this worldview. This means that individuals' subjective understanding of themselves and of the group to which they belong – that is, the only righteous people – is a strong form of empowerment for people who live in societies where they are part of a problematized group (c.f. Nanninga 2017). When they consider themselves and their group members to be the only ones who follow God's plan and laws, all others become disbelievers who are less worthy and are destined for Hell. From a non-Islamist point of view, joining a radical Islamist group can be seen as the opposite of self-empowerment in a secular Western societal context, where power is often measured by socioeconomic status; however, from an Isla- mist point of view, it may be argued that it has an empowering effect on a symbolic level, not least because it makes their experiences meaningful – and in a broad conception of religion, their point of view is exactly what should be at the forefront of our analysis.

In addition to understanding radical interpretations of Islam as a form of empowerment, a broad conception of religion would also allow us to understand how marginalized young Muslims may interpret or construct their ethnic and class position as a test from God. When adherers of radical interpretations of Islam believe that their life trajectory is a part of Allah's plan, then they can attribute meaning to being socioeconomically deprived and experiencing anti-Muslim discrimination in Western societies by seeing it as a form of test by God. Their ethno-class experience predisposes young Muslims to radical interpretations of Islam that valorize experiences of suffering caused by class and ethnic position. Emotions connected to Western society, such as humiliation, anger, and hopelessness, become signs of God's test. A broad or social constructivist conception of religion allows us to understand how individuals can transform such emotions into more positive emotions only by devoting themselves to Allah. In a religious context, being tormented and repressed can thus be made meaningful by understanding these experiences as a sign or an omen of being destined for a greater cause or purpose in life.

Understanding radical interpretations of Islam as a form of empowerment through a perceived membership of a group of 'chosen few' and emotional outcomes of ethno-class experiences as a religious omen of a greater purpose in life thus render intelligible why some young Muslims are attracted to radical interpretations of Islam, as they present ways of making underprivileged ethno-class experiences meaningful. It also provides explanatory potential for these interpretations of Islam in the radicalization process. Understanding the variety of ways in which social and political contexts and religious emotions can be connected contributes to the understanding of Islamist radicalization processes.

There are obviously many more people identifying as Muslims who have undergone similar ethno-class experiences who never radicalize than those who do become radical Islamists (and only a small percentage of those decide to act with violence). Determining exactly what causes some people to radicalize while others from the same background do not is immensely difficult and lies beyond the scope of this article. This article has, however, introduced and developed a theoretical framework to understand how the social and political context can be connected to the formation of religious emotions. Thus, while many with underprivileged ethno-class experiences do not radicalize, it does not mean that these experiences are not relevant in the formation of religious emotions for those who *do* become radical Islamists (and for the small percentage who act with violence). This article has introduced and developed a way to theorize this connection (see also Larsen 2020b).

Conclusion

This article has introduced a theoretical framework that offers a way to reinstate religion in the analysis and understanding of Islamist radicalization, which some researchers have begun to call for (Cottee 2014; Hoffman 2017; Wood 2015; Dawson 2017, 2018). By utilizing Riis and Woodhead's (2010) perspective of the sociology of religious emotion, we are able to theorize the role of religion in a way that broadens the analytical scope. The application of this theoretical approach enables a synthesis between explaining Islamist radicalization primarily through structural social and political conditions *versus*

primarily through specific interpretations of Islam. Furthermore, the perspective of the sociology of religious emotion is inscribed in a broad conception of religion. This means that we can understand religion as being connected to identity, subjective emotions, and meaning. This is important as we otherwise risk adopting a formalistic and narrow conception of religion, which will inevitably downplay the role of religion in radicalization research.

The sociology of religious emotion allows us to understand how emotions stemming from context specific national, social, and political conditions can be understood as religious emotions by the individual and how religious emotional regimes in radical Islamist groups can initiate and amplify radicalization, which is understood as the endorsement (or acts) of violence in the name of the perceived true version of Islam. The sociology of religious emotion thus renders the analytical separation of specific interpretations of Islam and social and political conditions obsolete. Instead, it identifies the interconnection among the different explanations of radicalization.

We can now return to Ali, the young person first cited in this article. Ali developed emotions of frustration and hatred towards Danish society following his experiences with his school and the police. All these emotions are part of the outcome of Ali's ethno-class experiences. Ali also lost his mother during this period of his life. In the mosque, he met an acquaintance who introduced him to another religious context. The religious emotional regime within the group valorized Ali's emotions of hatred towards Danish society. These emotions were socially constructed as religious emotions, which gave Ali a new understanding of himself and the surrounding society. Salafi-Jihad- ism was the group's collective politico-religious perspective for thoughts and actions, which in the end motivated some of them to travel to Syria. Ali's radicalization process thus cannot be fully grasped only by viewing social and political conditions as the cause *or* only by viewing his radical interpretation of Islam. Instead, it is necessary to overcome the opposition between these two root causes and the explanations that underlie them. Ali's experiences with his school and the police were a result of structural mechanisms that produced emotions that disposed Ali to seek strong religious emotional regimes; however, it was the group's collective Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islam that initiated and amplified Ali's and the other members' motivation to endorse violence and, for some of them, to travel to Syria to engage in the fight for an Islamic state. We can thus understand structural mechanisms and the emotional outcome herein as co-producers of Ali's specific interpretation of Islam, which formed his thoughts and actions.

Religion has to some extent lived a life in the background in the academic search for what leads to radicalization, in part because of structural modes of explanation and underlying formalistic and narrow conceptions of religion. The sociology of religious emotion employs a broad conception of religion and, if utilized in radicalization research, would offer a way to reinstate and contextualize religion in the analysis of Islamist radicalization processes. Following Borum (2011, 11), we must be able to assess actions and thoughts that are based on what actors themselves believe to be religious beliefs and emotions as indeed religious without fear of being labelled Islamophobes or racists. This does not mean that all Muslims are potential terrorists; as mentioned in the introduction, most victims of Islamist terrorism are other Muslims. However, to understand individuals who, from a religious standpoint, support Islamist terrorism, we must be able to talk about their religious motivation and their specific interpretation of religion. The

point is not to find a winner or a loser in the debate about explanations and the role of religion. The point is to come a step closer to grasping the complex process of radicalization. This includes taking seriously the roles of *both* social and political issues *and* specific interpretations of religion – and how these factors intersect.

Acknowledgement

This article is part of a project on young people and radicalization processes at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University. I would like to thank project leader Sune Qvotrup Jensen for support on this article. I would also like to thank Professor Sveinung Sandberg, Professor Lasse Lindekilde and the research groups CASTOR (Aalborg University) and RURPE (Aarhus University) for comments on this article and criminologist Umair Ahmed for facilitating contact with Ali.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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