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*Published in:*  
Critical Studies on Terrorism

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1080/17539153.2020.1761119](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2020.1761119)

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*Publication date:*  
2020

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Larsen, J. F. (2020). The role of religion in Islamist radicalisation processes. *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 13(3), 396-417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2020.1761119>

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# **The Role of Religion in Islamist Radicalisation Processes**

**Jeppe Fuglsang Larsen**

## **Abstract**

This article attempts to bridge the gap between social and religious explanations for Islamist radicalisation in the West by understanding the role of religion through the underutilised perspective of sociology of religious emotions (Riis and Woodhead 2010) and Wiktorowicz's (2005) concept of cognitive openness. The article draws on interviews with 23 different actors with first-hand knowledge of Islamist radicalisation, and analyses five in-depth interviews with former so-called radicals, four of whom were converts to Islam. The analysis thus has a special focus on the narratives and experiences of converts to radical Islamist worldviews. The radicalisation process of the formers was characterised by an interplay between context specific experiences and individual religiosity. There are social causes for seeking religion as it can provide an emotional meaningfulness in a state of cognitive openness connected to personal family social background, which can stretch over a long period. However, the interviews also show that religiosity affects the social – the religious emotions within radical Islamist groups create a tight-knit community of self-perceived righteous believers, tied to an emotional experience of empowerment that amplifies their radicalisation. The article concludes that the primary role of religion is to structure and direct the emotions from which so-called radical Islamists think and act within religious frameworks.

## **Keywords**

Radicalisation, religion, emotions, Islamism, Jihadism, Salafism

## **Introduction**

[...] three otherwise very different actors all agreed on at least one thing: Even though the terrorist actions in Copenhagen were performed by a Muslim, who believed that he was on a holy mission to revenge those that, according to him and his likeminded, had derided Islam, it was particularly important for all actors to make it clear that his actions had nothing to do with his religion [my translation] (Dyrberg and Necef 2016, 19).

In February 2015, Omar el-Hussein, 22 years old and born in Denmark with a Palestinian background, attacked an event about Islam and freedom of speech in Copenhagen attended by different critics of Islam, and a synagogue where a Jewish bar mitzvah was taking place. He shot and wounded police officers, and shot and killed the Danish film director Finn Nørgaard and the synagogue guard Dan Uzan, who tried to stop the attacks. After a manhunt that lasted more than 12 hours, Omar el-Hussein was killed in a shootout with the police (see Albæk, Dalsgaard, and Mikkelsen 2019). Since then, there has been a debate about what caused Omar el-Hussein to carry out these attacks. One of the main questions has been what role, if any, Islam played in his radicalisation. The citation above stems from Dyrberg and Necef's discussion about the Danish reactions to the terror attack. According to Dyrberg and Necef (2016, 19–23), the political establishment painted a picture of Omar el-Hussein as a criminal lone madman who had “raped” one of the world's biggest religions. Two other actors in the debate, who Dyrberg and Necef refer to as the political liberal opinion makers and Muslim organisations, pointed towards right-wing discrimination of Muslims and Danish participation in wars against Muslim countries as the main explanations for his radicalisation. Three different actors all argued that religion, or Islam, had nothing to do with Omar el-Hussein's terror attacks (see Back [2007] for a similar account of the British debate after the “7/7” terror attacks in 2005 in London).

The role of religion has been debated in many cases of attacks carried out by people who call themselves Islamists, and in radicalisation processes in general, both in public and political discourse and in academic research. Two opposing positions have often characterised the debate: one that argues that Islam is an inherently aggressive religion that leads its followers to terror attacks; and another that argues that Islam and religion have nothing to do with it –it is, instead, society's fault, or is caused by confused madmen (see also Dalgaard-Nielsen and Lund [2019, 114]; and Gunning and Jackson [2011] for a critical assessment of academic scholarship on “religious terrorism”). This article argues that an attempt to grasp processes of radicalisation could sprout from an analytical view that tries to understand how variations of the two positions can be connected. Understanding Islam as an inherently violent religion is mere nonsense since only a very small minority of Muslims endorse or commit violence in the name of Islam – and the vast majority of victims of Islamist terror attacks are other Muslims. However, it also seems analytically and empirically ill informed to disregard religion altogether in the analysis of Islamist radicalisation. The article thus inscribes itself in a small but growing body of literature focusing on reinstating religion in the analysis of Islamist radicalisation processes (see Dawson [2017]; Dawson and Amarasingam 2017; Wood 2015; Cottee 2014; Hellyer and Grossman 2019) for example by attempting to bridge the gap between social and religious

explanations for Islamist radicalisation processes (see Juergensmeyer and Sheikh [2013]). In other words, the article investigates how certain context specific experiences can be connected to specific interpretations of Islam that can initiate and amplify radicalisation – rendering the *interplay* between social explanations *and* specific religious interpretations analytically important.

The focus of this article is thus on the role of religion in Islamist radicalisation processes. These are understood as processes that lead individuals into groups or organisations that through a *specific* and *unusual* interpretation of Islam legitimise violence and/or the establishment of a caliphate build on antidemocratic values. The article draws on 23 interviews with different actors with first-hand knowledge of Islamist radicalisation, and analyses five in-depth interviews with former so-called radical Islamists, also known as “formers” (for lack of better terminology, I will use the term “formers” when referring to the five interviewees and “so-called radical Islamists” when referring to a plurality of people with these beliefs). Four of the five formers were converts to Islam. The analysis thus has a special focus on the narratives and experiences of converts to radical Islamist worldviews. The article seeks to answer two questions: *Why did they become religious? And what characterised the processes of radicalisation in the radical Islamist groups they became part of?* The link between the two questions could be understood as an argument for a relationship between becoming religious and becoming radicalised. This is in no way my point of view. Instead, the two questions function as an analytical tool that enables an understanding and analysis of connections and contrasts between emotional states when becoming religious, and emotional states when entering radical Islamist groups. The questions are thus understood through the lens of sociology of religious emotions.

The article will first present existing research and the theoretical approaches. Secondly, the methods and empirical data are presented. Thirdly, the analysis of the interviews will follow, and fourthly, the concluding part will attempt to answer the two questions.

### **Existing Research, Principal Debates, and Theoretical Approach**

Within research on Islamist radicalisation, there are different positions on the role of religion. One position understands young Muslims drawn to organisations such as ISIS as people who are already radicals, and who merely choose Islam as a marker of identity and revolt (see Roy [2017]). Other positions emphasise the role of religion and argue that there has been a widespread Islamisation of some young Muslims by Islamist movements such as Salafism (see Kepel [2017]). In line with the latter reasoning, this article argues that we need to take the role of religion more seriously and that a way to do that is to link religiosity to context specific experiences. These experiences can, as will be

discussed below, be interpreted or constructed as religious experiences and emotions. The article thus agrees with academic currents critical of research on Islamist radicalisation that has to a large extent been characterised by a downplaying of the role of religion (see Larsen [forthcoming] for a more in-depth discussion of the debate about the role of religion in radicalisation research). Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) found that among their 20 foreign fighter interviewees, none of them pointed towards socioeconomic marginalisation as a motivation to become a foreign fighter. Instead, they all became foreign fighters out of religious motivations. Dawson (2017) discusses the paradox that we on the one hand have radical Islamists who say that they travel to join ISIS out of religious motivations, and, on the other hand, we have researchers who tend to downplay the relevance of this religious motivation (see also Hellyer and Grossman [2019]). This also seems to be the case in relation to studies on processes of radicalisation for converts to Islam. Empirical findings indicate that converts are overrepresented in Islamist terrorist activities, especially in the case of foreign fighters (Schoorman, Grol and Flower 2016). Their radicalisation is, however, mainly understood as linked to individual level factors such as a problematic background and identity confusion, since conversion to (radical) Islam offers a sense of belonging, self-worth and a consolidation of identity (Kleinmann 2012; Schoorman, Grol and Flower 2016; Karagiannis (2012); Francis and Knott 2017). Without discarding these factors (indeed, the analysis shows the importance of them), there seems to be a lack of understanding of or emphasis on the role of religion for converts (as well as non-converts). Thus, Dawson identifies three different ways of downplaying the role of religion in radicalisation research. One way is that religious motivations are categorised as mere propaganda. Another way is that religious motivations are often merely treated as a superficial manifestation of deeper irrational impulses. A third way is that social, economic and political grievances are seen as more plausible explanations for radicalisation. A thorough understanding of the personal background and social context is obviously important both for converts and non-converts (see Bull and Rane [2019]; Truong 2018; Mattson 2018; Kepel 2017; Roy 2017; Juergensmeyer and Sheikh 2013). Walklate and Mythen (2016) have, for example, argued that the three perpetrators of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris had all experienced economic deprivation and social marginalisation. The cumulative effect of these experiences, Walklate and Mythen argue, is that the perpetrators lived *fractured lives*, and felt like strangers within their own country. These emotions were thus important in understanding why they became so-called radical Islamists. However, Dawson's point is that secular Western researchers tend *first and foremost* to understand radicalisation through non-religious explanations and thus overlook

the role of religion. This tendency has been criticised by some researchers as a “Western bias” (Amarasingam 2018) and a “secular bias” (Cottee 2014) (see also Hoffman [2017]; Wood 2015).

Another common argument for downplaying the role of religion for both non-converts and converts has been that so-called radical Islamists in general only have a shallow level of knowledge about Islam (see Roy [2017]; Crone 2010, 2014; Aly and Striegher 2012; Gitzhens-Mazer and Lambert 2010; Patel 2011; Uhlmann 2007; Ahmed 2016; Krishna 2015). Referring to a leaked document of ISIS sign-in sheets, Dalgaard-Nielsen and Lund (2019, 115) ask the question: “[...] *if it really is Islam’s fault [...] why do a large majority of the foreign fighters that joined the Islamic State in the years 2014–2016 note that they only have a basic knowledge of Islam?*” [my translation]. The underlying notion seems to be that “truly” religiously motivated actions can only be undertaken by people who have a high level of knowledge about theology. This is problematic from a sociological point of view, which will be discussed below.

### ***Sociology of Religion – Context and Emotions***

The present analysis takes its point of departure in central ideas of sociology of religion. One of these is that sociology brackets the “question of truth”. This means that a sociological approach to religion should not concern itself with questions over whether or not a specific interpretation of religion is “true” according to the scriptures. It may, of course, be relevant to note when an interpretation of a religion is followed only by a small minority, as is the case with radical Islamist interpretations of Islam. However, what is of importance in a sociological, or social constructivist, approach to religion is that individual interpretations of religion are seen as results of human and social dimensions (see Furseth and Repstad [2007, 324]; Beckford 2003). In other words, religiosity and specific interpretations of religion are linked to social background and personal experiences. The point is thus that religion is “real” when experiences and worldviews are socially constructed as religious by individuals (or groups) (Beckford 2003, 24).

Juergensmeyer and Sheikh (2013) have argued for a *sociotheological* approach to the study of religion. In order to understand why people become religious, we need to understand their social context and worldview. This approach resembles Weber’s notion of *Verstehen* – that in order to understand why people act as they do, we have to understand the motives behind the actions. One of the classic explanations of why people become religious is that they seek meaning in their lives and a sense of belonging. Weber argued that the need for meaning becomes especially prominent when people experience suffering and different forms of crises (Furseth and Repstad 2007, 200). In his

work on Muslim extremism, Wiktorowicz (2005) developed the concept of *cognitive opening*. By this, he meant that people who have experienced a crisis that shakes their previously held understanding of the world and themselves (such as loss of job, discrimination, death of family member etc.), experience a period of cognitive openness where they are susceptible to alternative worldviews such as radical Islamism. This article draws on Weber's classic approach to religious behaviour as founded in the subjective motives and meanings behind the actions and Wiktorowicz's idea of cognitive openness. However, in order to further understand how and why religion provides meaning for individuals, and how experiences of suffering, discrimination, alienation etc. can be connected to a strengthened sense of religiosity, these perspectives are combined with an emotionalist approach to religion.

An emotional approach understands religious beliefs as derived from emotional or affective states of mind (Hamilton 1995, 55). It relies on the notion that people become religious because society is uncertain, stressful, and creates tensions. Religion provides a sense of emotional meaningfulness for the individual. It is a way to make sense of emotions derived from the social context, and to understand these emotions in a new light (Hamilton 1995; Malinowski 1936; Geertz 1966).

I draw on Riis and Woodhead's (2010) perspective of sociology of religious emotions, which has hitherto been underutilised in the research field on Islamist radicalisation. Riis and Woodhead (2010, 45) argue that all emotions can be religious emotions if they are socially constructed as religious and occur within a religious context. This religious context is of essence in this article. Riis and Woodhead argue that religious groups consist of a *religious emotional regime*. This concept captures the way emotions are important in the structure of religious groups. The regime and the religious elites within them organise what adherents are able to feel and the ways in which they can express their emotions. The emotional regime thus also affects the actions available to the individuals in the group. Riis and Woodhead argue that groups with strong religious regimes offer structure to the individual – the adherents are given a repertoire of emotions that guides how they feel about themselves and society. They are thus given an opportunity to understand themselves, their own situation, and the societal context in a new light (Riis and Woodhead 2010, 10–11).

According to Riis and Woodhead (2010, 4), people who have experienced material hardship are especially drawn to religions that speak to the emotions. We can add to this that people who are emotionally troubled are also inclined to seek religions that offer a way to order emotions and offer a new way of understanding oneself and the societal context. Riis and Woodhead thus provide us with

an understanding of religion that relies on socially constructed religious emotions. This means that e.g. level of theological knowledge does not determine whether or not a person is religious. This, instead, is dependent on whether or not the person *feels* religious and understands emotions as religious (see also Marranci [2006]). Furthermore, Riis and Woodhead's perspective allows us to understand these religious emotions as linked to social context and life situations. It is thus a perspective that can help bridge the gap between the two opposing positions in the debate about explanations for Islamist radicalisation by understanding specific radical interpretations of Islam and social conditions as linked, instead of separate and mutually exclusive explanations. The perspective of sociology of religious emotions will thus help us understand the second research question of what characterised the processes of radicalisation in the radical Islamist groups that the formers became part of.

### **Methods and Empirical Material**

The article draws on 23 in-depth interviews with a range of different actors with first-hand knowledge of the issue of Islamist radicalisation. These were professionals working with the prevention of radicalisation, journalists, different actors with personal knowledge of radicals, representatives from mosques, and five interviews with former so-called radical Islamists, which constitute the main part of the analysis. The interviewees were found through personal contacts and through snowballing. The interviews lasted 90 minutes on average. Two of the interviews were in English; otherwise, all interview citations in this article have been translated from Danish to English by me. The interviews were conducted in Denmark and took place between 2017–2019.

All interviews had a special focus on the role of religion in Islamist radicalisation processes. The concept of radicalisation has been criticised for being politicised and ethnicised. A prominent critique has been that it renders the entire Muslim community in the West as being suspected of radicalisation and, in the end, of terrorism (see Cassam 2018; Githens-Mazer and Lambert 2010; Kundnani 2012; Malthaner 2017; Silva 2018). Interviewing for example professionals working with the prevention of radicalisation in the Danish context revealed a similar critique of the understanding of radicalisation. Many of these interviewees expressed an ambivalent view on the causes of radicalisation. On the one hand they issued a critique of the concept of radicalisation as putting too much focus on Islam and Muslims, and on the other hand, their experiences with so-called radical Islamists were that they saw themselves as indeed very Islamic (Larsen 2020). This will be elaborated in the analysis below.



The five formers, who constitute the main part of the analysis, were asked questions about their background, how and why they became religious, and which role (if any) religion played in their radicalisation processes and the Islamist groups they became part of. However, the questions were broad and designed to bring out the interviewees' own stories about their lives in an attempt to take their own motives and narratives seriously (Chase 1995). Inspired by narrative criminology (Presser and Sandberg 2015), the analysis thus builds on the interviewees' own descriptions of their radicalisation processes. This involves a risk of memory bias as the interviewees talk about radical milieus they are no longer a part of, no longer agree with, and have an interest in distancing themselves from. Their retrospective accounts could, for example, thus be understood as a form of legitimisation of life choices that they now regret (cf. Sykes and Matza [1957]). There is thus a risk that their investment in turning their back on their past might lead to exaggeration or an overselling of their previous experiences (Tapley and Clubb 2019). However, others have argued that interviewing formers is a valuable resource (Horgan 2012), and often one of the only accessible ways of obtaining knowledge about radicalisation processes from people who have experienced such processes themselves in this hard-to-reach research field.

Their former affiliations cannot be disclosed here due to anonymity and security issues, but they all belonged to groups that either endorsed violence and/or the establishment of a worldwide caliphate. One of the formers was convicted of participating in planning a terror attack in Denmark; the others have not been convicted of any crime related to terrorism. They have, however, been part of groups where some members have planned terror attacks, or know of others who have, and where some have travelled as foreign fighters.

Four of the interviews with formers were with converts to Islam – two ethnic Danish men and two ethnic Swedish women. One interview was with an ethnic minority man from Denmark with a Muslim background. The composition of the sample naturally influences the analysis of why the formers became religious. This process is different for converts who are religious seekers than for people who come from a Muslim background (see Kleinmann [2012]), even though they also can, as is the case with Ali in this article, experience a form of religious awakening. The analysis thus reflects a special focus on radicalisation processes for converts to Islam. It should, however, be noted that converts and women are not a rarity among so-called radical Islamists (see van San [2015]; Barrett 2014; Shuurman, Grol and Flower 2016), even though the majority are males and Muslim by birth. The analysis of the interviews is therefore relevant in understanding *some* processes of Islamist radicalisation in the West and the role of religion, even though this cannot paint the whole picture.

## Why Did the Formers Become Religious?

The empirical material shows that there is no single answer to this question. There are, however, some similarities across some of the interviews. One of these is that becoming religious can be understood as providing an emotional meaningfulness in a state of cognitive openness.

Existing research has shown the importance of social background when it comes to explaining why radical Islamism can be attractive for some individuals. The interviews with the formers in this article show that social background and life situations are also of essence in understanding the process behind why they became religious and why they became so-called radical Islamists. However, social background should be understood here as a *personal family social background*, such as family life, upbringing and personal experiences, as opposed to structurally defined life situations. Kleinmann (2012) found that “individual-level” factors such as these especially affect the radicalisation of converts. My interviews with converts support this finding, but also shows that personal experiences play a role in the radicalisation of non-converts, although in a somewhat different manner. The formers all come from very different backgrounds than, for example, the Charlie Hebdo attackers, who Walklate and Mythen (2016) focus on, but in their own way they can also be understood as having lived fractured lives and having felt they were a form of stranger within their own country and community. A common theme among the formers is that they were all interested in religion in different ways when young and that they later sought religion, or at least were seeking answers to existential questions in life. This seeking was connected to their life situation and their personal family social background.

For three of the converts – the two ethnic Swedish women and one of the ethnic Danish men – religion provided an emotional meaningfulness. Gittan, one of the ethnic Swedish women, describes her social background as Swedish middle class with a “normal” family life in which both parents worked. However, she felt a deep dissatisfaction with the middle-class way of life in Sweden. In her own words, she felt disconnected to her surroundings. She felt that the people around her were superficial and living a mundane day-to-day life with no interest in deeper questions: “*I wanted answers to existential questions. I felt very confused. What is the right way to live? What is a good way to be? What is my role as a woman? Womanhood was very confusing for me*”. Gender is thus an identity issue for Gittan. It caused an emotion of confusion. Researchers on gender and radicalisation have argued that the strict gender division and clear-cut gender roles within radical Islamism for some women can be experienced as empowering as it allows “men to be real men and women to be real

women” (Necef 2016; Pearson and Winterbotham 2017; Jensen 2019). Radical Islamism thus eliminates any gender confusion. This could thus be one reason for Gittan’s attraction to radical Islamism. In Wiktorowicz’s terminology, she was in a state of cognitive openness and susceptible to new ways of understanding herself and society, and for her that also related to issues of gender. However, this state was not prompted by a concrete experience – for example, discrimination – leading to an acute crisis. Instead, we can understand it as a more permanent cognitive opening based on existential questions about life. She was interested in philosophy and religion and began to study religion at university:

*I really admired, when I was studying Islam at the university, I admired the way that it was very strict. They had all the answers. They had a book that was straight from God. I remember that I was thinking “wow, it must be fantastic to have a book that has the whole lot and it’s directly from God.”*

Gittan was an atheist and part of a left-wing cultural milieu when she started studying religion at university, but began to see Islam as an answer to some of the existential questions she felt was missing from her life. She saw Islam as an answer to the emotional experience of confusion. After meeting a Muslim man, she converted to Islam. She can thus be described as a form of ideological drifter in search of meaning.

This search for meaning and answers was also found in the interviews with professionals involved in the prevention of radicalisation who have had personal contact with many so-called radical Islamists in Denmark. An illustrative example is a social worker who explains that so-called radicals feel that they have found the right path in life and that their interpretation of Islam gives them a complete “*package of what is up and what is down*”. In other words, they are given a set of rules to live by and a worldview to understand themselves and society which, in his words, gives them a sense of peace and reassurance.

Emelie describes some of the same emotional dissatisfactions with her life as an adult single mother. However, Emelie had a more troublesome family background than Gittan. Her father had left the family when she was six years old and her mother did not, in Emelie’s words, take care of the emotional needs of the children. In her youth, Emelie became part of the Pentecostal church and she connects her religiosity to the loss of her father: “*I think that I had God instead of my father. I had to fill some emptiness within myself.*” The church thus provided an answer to her emotional experience of emptiness and loneliness. In other words, it provided emotional meaningfulness, peace and reassurance for her in the period of cognitive openness she experienced after her father left the family.

However, she later turned away from the church because she found the members to be narrow-minded and reproachful of other people instead of following Christian ideals of inclusion and forgiveness. Later, as a single mother, she did not have many friends or family and describes herself as bored with her life. She still believed in a God and still found religion interesting. Much like Gittan, Emelie was now seeking an alternative to a mundane life – in other words, she was still in a state of cognitive opening. It was her interest in other religions and cultures that made her reach out and contact some of her Muslim neighbours. They would later introduce her to the man that became her husband. They first got married for practical reasons so he could obtain a residence permit in Sweden, but she stayed with him because she wanted someone to share her life with, and she later converted to Islam. This decision was thus also connected to her emotional experience of emptiness and loneliness.

Emelie and Gittan's way into religion thus resembles the position of an existential stranger within – they did not feel they were a part of the community they lived in, and they were cognitively open. This was a more permanent state of cognitive openness based on existential questions that stretched over a long period of their life. It was not caused by a single event or experienced crisis. For Emelie, first Christianity and later Islam, for Gittan, Islam from the start, became answers to their existential questions. Bartoszewicz (2013) argued that converts' radicalisation processes are often linked to the individual's pre-existing image of self and society. We can thus say that religion provided Emelie and Gittan with an emotional meaningfulness, which contrasted their uncertainties about identity and the social context they were part of. In other words, religion provided them with a new way of understanding themselves and society.

Religion also provided emotional meaningfulness for Jens, an ethnic Danish male convert. He had a childhood that was influenced by a father who, in Jens's words, was almost psychotic in his behaviour towards Jens. He would lock Jens in a room without lights, would destroy the relationship Jens had with his friends, and pull him out of leisure activities that Jens enjoyed. His relationship with his father thus left Jens in a state of cognitive openness. He felt he lacked a sense of belonging and meaning. Kleinmann (2012) has described sense of belonging as one of the key factors of converts' attraction to (radical) Islam. This was thus also the case for Jens. He had always found religion interesting, and especially Islam. When he grew older, he made friends with some Muslim men, became more and more interested in Islam, and later converted. He explains that the community he found in the Muslim milieu – a community he lacked elsewhere, in part because of his father's behaviour that left Jens with mental scars – attracted him to the religion: *"When I became Muslim, I*

*thought everything was good, and nice and calm.*” Like the two ethnic Swedish women, Islam thus provided Jens with meaning. He found a sense of community and inner peace.

The empirical material shows that emotional meaningfulness and periods of cognitive openness can be reasons for becoming religious. Emotional meaningfulness can, however, also be connected to personal relations. One reason for becoming religious that is present in the empirical material is love. Karagiannis (2012) argued that “the power of love” is often an important factor for converts to (radical) Islam. Svend, an ethnic Danish man from a middle-class family background, fell in love with a Muslim girl when he was 16 years old. He found her religion interesting and converted two years after meeting her. He thus became religious because of emotional meaningfulness connected to personal relations and connections.

As noted above, there is no single answer as to why the formers became religious. The emotional meaningfulness of religion for the three converts – Gittan, Emilie, and Jens – mentioned above is one answer, but even within this answer there are distinctions. They all found meaning in religion because of a long-lasting state of cognitive openness connected to their personal family social background, resulting in existential questions in life, lack of structure in life, lack of sense of belonging, lack of community, and emotional distress. Research on converts to (radical) Islam has described such “individual” or “identity” factors as key reasons for why people convert to Islam (Bartoszewicz 2013; Kleinmann 2012; Shuurman, Grol and Flower 2016) and has also argued that emotions such as love can be a reason to convert (Karagiannis 2012) – as was the case with Svend, while Gittan and Emilie were also drawn to (radical) Islam due to emotional relationships with Muslim men. These findings in research on converts to Islam thus resonate with the experiences of the converts in this article.

Research comparing the radicalisation of converts and non-converts suggests that non-converts are more likely to be radicalised through external social forces on a group level and external forces on a societal level, such as real or perceived experiences of discrimination and racism (Kleinmann 2012). Ali, an ethnic minority man from Denmark, who is the only former from a Muslim background, experienced factors similar to these in his “re-finding” of religion. He was invited on a pilgrimage to Mecca by his parents and explains that he from that point on identified as religious; he had previously not done so. Even though Ali came from a Muslim background, much like the converts, he thus also experienced a form of religious awakening and emotional meaningfulness. After the pilgrimage, he was accused by his high school classmates of being a radical Muslim because he defended Islam in a rigorous way in a heated debate about Islam in class and wore traditional

Muslim clothing to school. The principal called the police because he was worried Ali posed a security threat. Ali was interrogated by the police and his family's house was searched. Ali was angry and humiliated as he felt he had done nothing wrong. During this time, his mother died of a sudden illness. Ali was devastated by the police's and his school's behaviour and the loss of his mother. These experiences were thus a crisis that left him cognitively open and susceptible to alternative worldviews. He went to a mosque where he met an acquaintance who introduced him to a group of Muslim men that shared similar experiences of discrimination. Ali explains that he in this group found a sense of belonging: *"It was [...] a brotherhood I felt that the Danish society had never given me."* The group adhered to a Salafi-Jihadist interpretation of Islam, which also became Ali's new way of understanding himself and society. A recurring theme in the interviews with professionals involved in the prevention of radicalisation was that religion constitutes the thoughts, ideas, and motives of so-called radicals. A former professional working with prevention of radicalisation explains religion as the *"underlying bass"* in all thoughts and actions of the so-called radicals he worked with. In Ali's case, this new way of understanding himself and society gave him an emotional meaningfulness and a sense of closure to a state of cognitive openness. Ali's re-finding of religion was thus affected by social factors since the social connection to the groups of co-adherents played an important role, and societal factors such as his perceived experiences of injustice and discrimination. In this way, Ali's personal experiences had a different character than the converts' personal experiences. Ali's experiences were related to "external" imposed experiences of other people's discrimination, while the converts' experiences pertained more to "internal" identity frustration and confusion.

The formers thus differ in their reasons or explanations for becoming religious. Common for most of them is, nonetheless, that becoming religious was linked to personal family social background and life situation. Some of them describe in different ways their route into religion as something that provided a sense of emotional meaningfulness for them. They felt emotions of confusion, anger, loneliness etc. because of doubt about existential questions, lack of a sense of belonging, experiences of troublesome family backgrounds and discrimination – in other words, they were cognitively open to new understandings of themselves and society. This state of cognitive openness applied to both the converts and Ali. Common for all was, furthermore, that emotional meaningfulness could be tied to personal relations and connections. This was the case for Svend, but also for the other interviewees. Jens found a sense of community among other Muslims; Emelie sought the companionship of her Muslim neighbours; Gittan married a Muslim man and found friends among other Muslims; and Ali found a brotherhood he had never experienced before. The emotional meaningfulness provided by

religion can thus be understood as being tied to the emotional meaningfulness provided by social connections among co-adherents.

## **Radicalisation Processes**

The aim of this section is to come closer to an understanding of what occupied the groups and how this lead to an initiation and amplification of radicalisation among the formers.

### ***Religious Emotional Regimes: Hatred, Anger, and Frustration***

A common theme in all the interviews with the formers is that they became part of groups where emotions of hatred, anger, and frustration dominated the ideas, thoughts, and actions of the members. In Riis and Woodhead's terminology, these were the main emotions that composed the emotional regimes of the different groups. Common to all the formers was that they were cognitively open to these ideas and emotions. The empirical material thus shows that a cognitive opening is not necessarily limited to a rather short period after experiencing a form of crisis. The interviewees were open when they sought religion, but this state of cognitive openness was still present when they entered the radical groups and while they were part of them.

One example is Ali. He became part of a group of five young Muslim men who all had experienced what they perceived to be discrimination in Danish society. Ali had himself experienced discrimination and othering from his school and the police, and felt that he was unwanted in Danish society. These experiences left him frustrated and angry, in other words cognitive open to new understandings of himself and society. Ali explains how the group shared experiences and emotions of frustration between them:

*[...] one after another, the other guys started talking about unfortunate situations they have been through. Racism, unemployment even though they were qualified, one 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.*

Frustrations over both their experiences in Danish society and Western aggressions in Muslim countries occupied the group's discussions and the way they perceived the world. Ali's radicalisation experience was thus characterised by competing emotions. The group on the one hand provided Ali with emotions of comfort and unity, and on the other, emotions of hatred and frustration. The group was inspired by the leading al-Qaeda figure Anwar al-Awlaki's online speeches on how Western Muslims should act upon discrimination in a violent manner. Ali was thus part of a group in which

each other's emotions of frustration and anger stemming from experiences in the Danish society were shared and understood. For Ali, this meant that he began to understand the emotional outcome of his experiences with his school and the police as religious emotions. However, the discussions in the group also generated new, further emotions of frustration and anger interpreted in a religious framework composed by an understanding of Islam inspired by al-Awlaki. The group thus produced strong religious emotions within itself, and Ali was cognitively open to these emotions and the specific interpretation of Islam, which led to the initiation and amplification of Ali's radicalisation. In the end, three of the five group members travelled to Syria and joined groups that would later become part of ISIS.

The broader empirical material shows that emotions of anger, hatred, and frustration apply to more so-called radical Islamists than the five formers interviewed in this article. A typical account can be found with a prison priest working on prevention of radicalisation both in and outside the prison system who says: *"they have anger inside them [...] Almost all of them have that"*. She explains that this anger is directed towards Danish society and the political discourse on immigration and Islam: *"they feel they have to defend Islam."* A common theme in the broader empirical material is that so-called radical Islamists have experienced different forms of discrimination and that they perceive Danish society and political debate as hostile towards Muslims. They are also angry about Western military involvement in Muslim countries. They understand these emotions as religious emotions – as a war against Islam and Muslims. An illustrative example is a social worker who says that many of the so-called radical Islamists with whom he has spoken feel that there is a war against Muslims and that this emotion legitimates the thoughts they have of, for example, wanting to participate in the war in Syria.

Jens's description of himself and the radical milieu he became part of is similar to Ali's story and the themes in the broader empirical material. Even though Jens is a convert and thus has not experienced the same form of ethnic and religious discrimination as Ali, he explains that he felt angry and had a sense of injustice, mainly because of the Danish involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Karagiannis (2012, 107) argued that converts often see themselves as part of a broader Muslim community (the Ummah) and tend to minimise differences between different interpretations of Islam. According to him, they feel a divine duty to fight against what they perceive as injustices against other Muslims. While this of course also can apply to non-converts, Jens wrote several opinion articles to newspapers expressing his anger. When Jens converted, he was a "spiritual" or "moderate" Muslim and he described emotions of calmness and inner peace. This was thus the first "answer" to



his cognitive opening. But, as was the case with Ali, Jens's radicalisation experience was filled with competing and conflicting emotions. Thus, in his own words, he became more and more radical in his way of arguing, and he began to read literature from what he now describes as "street Islamists" but at the time saw as legitimate and validated religious authorities. Jens became part of a group that adhered to a Salafi-Jihadi interpretation of Islam. Three of them, including Jens, were convicted of planning terror attacks in Denmark. When he was released from prison, he, in his own words, was welcomed as a hero in the radical Islamist milieu in Denmark and became a part of the "inner circle." He describes the emotional regime in this milieu as composed of the emotion of hatred:

*Hatred from start to finish. You can stand there and have fun and eat your pizza or cake, and everything is silly and cosy, but when that [pizza and cake] is swallowed, then it is just about hatred. Hatred towards everything Western, hatred towards politicians, hatred towards the cartoons [the Jyllandsposten drawings of the prophet Muhammad].*

Jens also attended parties where some people from the milieu celebrated Osama bin Laden and the 9/11 attacks with cakes formed as the two twin towers with a plastic model plane flying into them. Jens thus explains an emotional regime where hatred towards the West and Denmark is valued as an important religious emotion – a contrast to the emotions he felt when he converted to Islam. This emotion structured what they talked about. Jens describes that they followed Danish media intensely and talked about the way Danish politicians discussed Islam and Muslims in Denmark. This was a way for them to confirm their hatred and create new emotions of anger towards Danish society and thus reinforce their religious emotions. These emotions were all interpreted in a Salafi-Jihadi religious framework, which was understood as the only true form of Islam, and thus they were understood as genuine religious emotions. Jens's state of cognitive openness thus stretched over a long period. He was cognitively open to a "spiritual" interpretation of Islam and embraced the emotions of calmness and inner peace, but also cognitively open to the radical interpretations of Islam that he later on adhered to, and the emotion of hatred. This cognitive openness thus enabled a constant amplification of his radicalisation through the emotional regime within the radical milieu he became part of.

Svend describes a similar emotional regime in the Islamist group he became a part of. When Svend converted, he, in his own words, followed a spiritual branch of a mixture between Sufi and Sunni Islam. However, after three to four years, he attended Quran reading sessions with another man who introduced him to a group of Muslims who had a very conservative and political understanding of Islam. This was a group that wanted to establish a caliphate built on the laws of Sharia but without the use of violence. He, however, describes a similar view of the relationship between Muslims and

Danish society as the violence-endorsing groups Ali and Jens were part of. Muslims in Svend's group were told that a true Muslim was opposed to everything in Danish society, such as democracy, gender equality and freedom of speech. What characterised the processes of radicalisation within Svend's group was thus an emotional regime based on a specific interpretation of Islam that expected its adherents to act against the norms of Danish society and express emotions of hatred and rejection towards it.

Gittan and Emelie both married Muslim men who adhered to radical and very conservative interpretations of Islam. As converts, they thus felt the "power of love" (Karagiannis 2012) or at least emotional relationships as a mechanism in their radicalisation. Gittan was married to a man who, in her words, was a jihadist. She was attracted to Islamist men, who were both knowledgeable in Islamic scriptures and who did not just talk about jihad, but acted upon it. She was thus attracted to the masculinity of jihadists, whom she saw as "real men" (Necef 2016). Her husband was involved in several jihadist activities around the world and was a part of a group that planned a terror attack in France. Gittan herself was also trained to use a gun. Emelie was married to a man who had ties to a group that sympathised with Osama bin Laden and were planning a terror attack against a Danish newspaper. Emelie and Gittan both retrospectively explain that their husbands and the groups they were part of hated Western culture, Sweden, democracy, and equality between men and women. Just as with the other interviewees, this was what occupied the groups' discussions and what composed the emotional regimes. The states of cognitive openness for both Gittan and Emelie were thus of long duration. Emelie was cognitively open and sought religion early in her youth as a way to find meaning and fulfil the emotion of emptiness she felt after her father had left the family, but she was still cognitively open later in her life when she entered the radical Islamist milieu. Here, she found her husband, someone to share her life with and answer her emotions of emptiness and loneliness. These were thus important emotions in her radicalisation experience. The same applies to Gittan, who was cognitively open and seeking answers to existential questions in life. She felt emotions of confusion and later found that radical Islam gave her answers. The emotional regimes based on radical interpretations of Islam within the radical groups they became part of amplified Gittan and Emelie's radicalisation and had consequences for their understanding of themselves and society. Gittan explains that she began to hate her own country and to see Swedes as a "dirty" people with no morals. For Emelie, her husband's hatred towards Swedish society and his conservative interpretation of Islam and gender roles herein had great consequences for her everyday life. At times her husband

refused to allow her to go outside or permit her to talk to her family and friends, and he made her have an abortion because he did not want to have his child born in a *kaffir* country such as Sweden.<sup>1</sup>

The radical Islamist groups that the interviewees were part of all discussed issues regarding Muslims in the West and Western aggression in Muslim countries. From the point of view of Riis and Woodhead and their concept of religious emotional regimes, we can thus argue that the groups' emotional regimes initiated and amplified religiously based emotions of hatred and anger towards all who did not follow the same (one true) interpretation of Islam. The broader empirical material illustrates that emotional states such as these apply to other so-called radical Islamists in Denmark as well. In other words, religious emotional regimes within radical Islamist groups can thus amplify and initiate radicalisation (see Larsen [forthcoming]; Jensen and Larsen 2019). The interviews furthermore indicate that a state of cognitive openness makes the individual more formable and susceptible to these processes of radicalisation. For all formers, although in different ways for the converts and for Ali as described above, this state was connected to life situation and personal family social background. As was also a common theme in the broader empirical material, the emotional regimes based on specific interpretations of Islam give individuals a new way of understanding themselves and society, rendering the interplay between social explanations and specific religious interpretations analytically and empirically important in the understanding of Islamist radicalisation processes – for both converts and non-converts.

### ***Structure and Empowerment***

A second common theme in the interviews with the formers is that the interpretation of Islam within their groups provided structure for the individuals, and that this structure and the new understanding of oneself and society also provided a form of empowerment for the interviewees.

According to Riis and Woodhead (2010, 10–11), groups with strong religious emotional regimes offer structure through a repertoire of emotions. These emotions structure the social life within the groups and the life of the individuals. Developing on this, we can say that in radical Islamist religious frameworks, emotions are organised in ways that are meaningful and purposive within this specific religious context. As already described, most of the interviewees felt that religion offered them an emotional meaningfulness. Gittan and Emelie both describe that they found a community with the women in the radical Islamist milieu. This community taught them the “right” way to be Muslim women. There was a regulation of both the kinds and degree of emotions that were allowed. Control of emotions was an important aspect, as Gittan explains: “*So you had to learn to, in my case*

*I had to stop making [faces/facial expressions], stop singing, stop laughing, stop looking people in the eyes, don't have any big emotional outlets, you had to be very controlled.*" Gittan and Emelie both explain that they enjoyed the regulation and direction of emotions, and the strict rules and clear-cut relationship between man and woman in which men made all the decisions. We can thus understand their appreciation of the community of women and the regulation of emotions and demeanour as answers to the initial emotions of confusion and emptiness that they felt before converting to Islam. This underlines the importance of these emotional states in their radicalisation experience, even though they are less related to violent behaviour or thought than, for example, emotions of frustration and hatred are.

Svend was also seeking answers and structure. He explains that he in his early twenties had no career and had just started a family and that this left him in need of direction in life. Ali describes a loss of structure when his mother died and he was expelled from school. Jens was dealing with the psychological scars of a father who had treated him very badly. What is common among the interviewees is that they ultimately became so-called radical Islamists. Radical Islamist interpretations of Islam contain rules on most aspects of life (Maher 2016; Neumann 2016).

The formers, both the converts and Ali, all explain that becoming part of radical Islamist groups gave them a feeling of having control over their life, a sense of being on the right track – in contrast to their state of cognitive openness before entering the groups. We can thus understand their entrance to radical Islamism as having an empowering effect on them. So, even though research has mentioned that converts are especially attracted by the individual gains of joining radical Islamist groups such as “consolidation of identity” (Kleinmann 2012), this sense of self applied to all formers interviewed in this article. In addition, the broader empirical material also showed that the so-called radicals with whom the professionals working within the prevention of radicalisation have been in contact understand themselves as righteous believers of what they perceive to be the only true understanding of Islam – and that this understanding can result in a feeling of empowerment. This emotional experience of empowerment can, on the one hand, be understood from the perspective of members of radical Islamist groups as *a better version of oneself*. This means that radical Islamist groups offer a way for adherents to understand themselves in a new light and act according to what is perceived as the righteous way of living. On the other hand, adhering to radical Islamist interpretations of Islam and being member of a radical group can also be an empowering emotion of feeling *better than all others*. Svend describes this emotion:

*[...] you felt completely high because of it. Because “wow” we were special and we were really going to accomplish something good in the world [...] we thought that we had found the solution to all these problems [...] in the world order, right? Now we were going to stop colonisation and imperialism, and we were going to put an end to the capitalist system’s exploitation [...].*

This idea of being the only ones following the right path of God, and of having answers to all questions in life and ways of living, was evident in all the interviews. The formers all felt that they were better than anybody else who did not follow the same interpretation of Islam. This can be understood as a feeling connected to a “masculine” notion of being “righteous big men”, but the women also felt that they were “righteous women” and morally superior. Many of the formers publicly confronted the values of the country they lived in. Svend held public speeches about establishing a caliphate instead of democracy. Jens yelled “To hell with Denmark” and “To hell with democracy” in front of rolling TV cameras. And, as mentioned, Gittan felt that Swedes were dirty because of lack of morals.

Being part of radical Islamist groups thus gave the cognitively open formers a new understanding of themselves and society. A range of contrasting and competing emotions from “inner peace” to “hatred” characterised their radicalisation experiences. The emotional regimes within the groups that they were part of allowed them to understand their existential troubles, lack of direction in life, bad experiences in their personal background, and experiences with discrimination and othering in a religious context. In this context, the emotional outcome of these experiences was legitimised. They were able to reinterpret the emotions connected to these experiences as religious emotions, and thus apply meaning to the emotions and structure to their lives. The processes of radicalisation within the groups can thus also be understood through the sense of structure the emotional regimes connected to the specific interpretation of Islam within the groups gave them, and the emotional experience of empowerment it bestowed upon them. This emotion reinforced their self-image as righteous and thus amplified their radicalisation, which stresses the importance of understanding the interplay between social explanations and specific religious interpretations in Islamist radicalisation processes.

## **Discussion**

The article has argued that emotional states stemming from non-religious (personal background) experiences can be re-interpreted as religious in the context of the religious emotional regimes of

radical Islamist groups. Here, emotions of anger and hatred have been initiated and amplified. The article has thus argued for the need for analytical attention to the interplay between social and religious explanations for Islamist radicalisation. A way to understand the specific ways *radical Islamist* groups manage and direct emotion, and thus how religious emotions are connected to social experiences, can be that they make them meaningful in a larger context as part of something “bigger”. Juergensmeyer (2003) argued that Islam contains theological concepts of a “cosmic war” between Muslims and non-believers and that this enables the occurrence of religious violence in the name of Islam. His point is that the initial problems are often social or economic tensions, but these tensions are seen through religious images (Juergensmeyer 2017: 19). This religious interpretation transforms the (initially economic and social) problem to an even bigger (religious) problem, since it is perceived as a “cosmic war” against Islam. The way in which radical Islamist groups manage and direct emotion is thus related to social experiences, as experiences of for example discrimination or Islamophobia or perceived unjust aggressions against Muslims in other countries are interpreted and understood as connected to a larger war against Islam.

A central point thus seems to be that so-called radical Islamists understand themselves as Muslims, or in other words, they *feel* Muslim (see also Marranci [2006]). In one of the interviews, a leading figure in one of the mosques in Denmark with which many foreign fighters were affiliated said that those who travel to Syria to fight might not know very much about the scriptures of Islam and might have “un-Islamic” lifestyles, but they carry Islam in their hearts. When, in their perception, Islam is under attack, they react because being Muslim is an engrained emotional part of who they are. This emotion could also be described as *pan-Islamic solidarity*. It is an emotional investment in the worldwide community of Muslims, also known as the *Ummah*. Even though, as stated in the analysis, research on convert radicalisation processes has described this as typical of converts, it obviously also applies to non-converts. Jens, Svend, Ali, Gittan and Emelie thus all describe this feeling of solidarity towards other Muslims as central to their groups. This understanding could perhaps also help shed light on the religious motivation behind Omar el-Hussein’s terror attack discussed in the introduction. By understanding the religiosity of radical Islamists as based on emotions instead of level of knowledge or correct Islamic lifestyle, it allows us to take the religious motivations, thoughts and actions of so-called radicals more seriously and to understand them as connected to social conditions. In a broad, or social constructivist, conception of religion, religion is “real” when it affects the lives of individuals (Beckford 2003, 24). The role of religion is thus anchored to emotions as it is this feeling of being Muslim that radical Islamists act from. This social

constructivist argument implies that there are no external criteria that determine what should be deemed religious or which emotions can be understood as religious. And, importantly, as this article has demonstrated, in order to understand *how* religion affects the lives of individuals, we are forced to apply analytical significance to the interplay between religion and social explanations in the study of Islamist radicalisation processes.

There are obviously many more people identifying as Muslims and who experience social and economic marginalisation and confusion in personal background and identity, yet never radicalise, than those who do become so-called radical Islamists. It is thus immensely difficult to point out exactly what causes some people to move towards the acceptance of violence and anti-democratic worldviews in the name of Islam, while others from the same background do not. It lies beyond the scope of this article to deliver an exact answer to this question. Analytical attention to the interplay between social experiences and the formation of religious emotions, however, allows us to understand how so-called radicals have connected personal background and social experiences to a feeling of being righteous. Further cases of such qualitative analysis could be a way forward in answering the question. In all circumstances, even though many from socially marginalised backgrounds and many with different forms of identity frustrations do not radicalise, it does not mean that these experiences do not matter in the radicalisation process for those who do become so-called radical Islamists. To understand how they matter, this article has argued for the employment of sociology of religious emotions.

Another analytical and empirical point we can derive from the analysis above pertains to Wiktorowicz's concept of cognitive opening. This concept has often led to a description of how concrete personal events and experiences of crises can cause a relatively limited period of cognitive openness in which the individual is susceptible to a radical Islamist worldview. Wiktorowicz (2005) has a broad definition of what these crises can consist of and does not explicitly state how long a state of cognitive openness can last. The analysis of the formers, however, shows that on the one hand being cognitively open does not necessarily have to be connected to a specific personal experience of crisis, but instead can be a more permanent state of mind; on the other hand, it shows that the state of cognitive openness can be stretched over a long period. This thus seems to be a central analytical and empirical point for future research.

## **Conclusion**

This article has contributed to empirical knowledge about the role of religion in Islamist radicalisation processes in the West by inscribing itself in the small but growing debate on the connection between social and religious explanations for radicalisation. Through an analysis of interviews with five former so-called radical Islamists, the article has had an ambition of understanding the questions *why did they become religious?* And *what characterised the processes of radicalisation in the radical Islamist groups they became part of?* The empirical material showed that there were multiple reasons for becoming religious, and that these differed across the converts and the non-convert. One reason, however, applied to several of the interviewees – they became religious because religion provided them with an emotional meaningfulness that they found rewarding due to experiences connected to personal family social background and life situation that left them cognitively open to new understandings of themselves and society. The analysis also showed the importance of personal connections and social networks, and that these can also provide emotional meaningfulness. The answer to the second question was that the emotional regimes within the radical Islamist groups, they became part of, were based on specific interpretations of Islam that reinforced emotions of hatred and anger towards society and disbelievers. These emotions were constructed and experienced as religious emotions, which the formers were cognitive open to. The emotional regimes and the specific interpretations of Islam also provided structure and a new self-understanding for the formers that created emotional experiences of empowerment, which amplified their radicalisation.

Riis and Woodhead thus provide us with an hitherto underutilised heuristic tool to bridge the gap between the two opposing positions in the debate about the role of religion in Islamist radicalisation: The article thus concludes that Islamist radicalisation is neither caused solely by society – by the social context – nor by the religion of Islam as such when only a very small minority of Muslims are violent or endorse violence in the name of Islam. Instead, the article shows how emotions such as frustration, anger and hatred that stem from experiences within the social context can be re-interpreted as religious emotions, which, in specific interpretations of Islam, can initiate and amplify radicalisation. The interplay between social explanations and the specific radical interpretation of Islam is valuable in the understanding of why the formers in this article became so-called radical Islamists. The empirical material shows that we can understand this interplay both as context-specific experiences affecting individual religiosity – that there are social causes for seeking religion, but also as religiosity affecting the social – the religious emotions within the groups create a tight-knit community of adherents who understand themselves as (the only true) righteous believers. The article concludes that the radicalisation process of the formers was characterised by this interplay.



In all circumstances, a perceived true understanding of Islam was the motivation for thoughts and actions by all the formers. Emotions derived from social experiences were understood as religious emotions. In a broad, social constructivist conception of religion, such as that of Riis and Woodhead, it is this *understanding* of experiences as religious that matters. Paraphrasing Dawson (2018: 149), we can say that the perpetrator's conception is the only relevant issue. In other words, the primary role of religion is to structure and direct the emotions from which so-called radical Islamists think and act within religious frameworks.

The empirical material analysed in this article shows that we need to take the role of religion into account in the understanding of Islamist radicalisation processes, and that one way to do this is by attempting to grasp the complex and multifaceted interplay between religion and social explanations through the notion of religious emotions.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article is part of a project on young people and radicalisation processes at the Department of Sociology and Social Work, Aalborg University, funded by Aalborg University's Talent Management Programme. I would like to thank project leader Sune Qvotrup Jensen for comments on earlier drafts of the article.

**Disclosure statement:** The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Abortion is widely understood as *haram* by Muslims. Her husband's demand for abortion is thus paradoxical to say the least.