CHAPTER SEVEN

THE MEANINGS OF AND INCENTIVES FOR A RELIGIOUS IDENTIFICATION

To be radical, an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the relations that connect experiences must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as “real” as anything else in the system.

–William James 1996 [1912], 42

At 5 PM, as I enter the weekly MJD meeting in Kreuzberg, there is no one in the front room, which is filled with baby strollers. In the inner room, I greet all 19 girls and women with “Salam Aleikum,” to which some of them respond “Aleikum Salam.” Current female participants and older ex-participants (who have children or are older than 30, and several of whom have brought their young children) are seated on the floor in the small room, which has a window to an inner courtyard. It is the annual membership meeting for all female members of MJD in Berlin. When I enter, the discussion concerns the decline in participation over the past weeks. One of the older participants asks, “why do the younger members not come any more?” Some suggest that there is no new generation of “MJD-ers.” Now that the first MJD generation has grown up, no recruitment drives have been held to attract younger members. Fatima (31) adds, “maybe we are so used to MJ that we are not doing enough to promote it to others anymore. That we forget about it?” She asks the younger participants, “what would you miss if MJ wasn’t there? Why is MJ important?” Before anyone can answer, one of the founders of the organization, Lana (35), argues that the problem is that MJD has not evolved. When she thinks back to how MJD was ten years ago, she thinks it looked the same as today. Lana continues, “but the youth today have changed. Look at my nine-year-old sister—she doesn’t think the same way as me. We must ask them, why they do not come, or what they want. When we started, it was so new. (...) Today there are more things, like Finnnowstrasse does a lot, and Al Nur, and they are very well attended! That is good, of course, but we have to think about our concept, our target group and what we want.” Fatima interjects that “it is important for young people today to develop their Muslim identity.” Lana persists, saying that “MJ was thought of as being for the young, and by the young.” She feels that the older members should retire from the organization. Somaya (17), one of the young, currently active members, brings up the weekly meetings: “It is always the same people who do the presentations and that is not fair for them [i.e. they do all the work]!” She
The MJD Berlin group went to Paris in fall 2005. Each year, MJD arranges a trip abroad, for example to Istanbul, Paris or Spain. On these trips, they visit mosques and make use of contacts with Muslim organizations in the respective countries. A woman in her late 20s (married, with two children) says, “for me, when I started here [six years ago] it was important, ‘cause it was the first place where I could find Muslim friends! I was at a school with only Germans and I was the only one at school with a headscarf. For me, it was very important to come here and develop friendships. It was important to be able to be in a place where the other women were Muslim, to be able to develop friendships with Muslims, others who think like me.” Another former member adds that “it is like a second family.” Aishegül (31) agrees, “that is also what it should be. The knowledge isn’t the most important aspect, but that a sisterly feeling develops. Like a second family! The community [Gemeinschaft] feeling. Knowledge could develop somewhere else. It is more important that we do things together, social events like the movies and such.” Jenny (26) adds, “and then we have children and they get to know each other and perhaps even go to same kindergarten and school!” Somaya suggests that “maybe the themes should be more contemporary? Not so much about what the Prophet did and such, but more about themes like, for example, how to deal with questions we are asked about the headscarf.”

After some discussion, Fatima inserts, “it is about learning to live as a young Muslim in this society, without making it so hard for ourselves. We should not pretend to be something we aren’t [being cool], but also not less than we are.” Lana refers to the beginning of MJD, when it was first established in Berlin: “There weren’t that many of us, and so we did a lot together and like that you really came to know each other. It doesn’t mean that you get along with everyone. That is not possible. But we developed a sisterly feeling.” Jenny says that “it has made me everything I am today! When I first started, I didn’t have a headscarf, and I didn’t know anything. I learned everything here!”

Turning the discussion towards the young current participants, Latifa (17) says that she started in MJD in January, and subsequently donned the veil. She admits that she sometimes skips the meetings, but that the Paris trip was important to her. There, she started to get to know the others more and she realized it is important that they experienced this together. Other adolescents agree, adding that the Paris trip was important for developing sisterly feelings or a feeling of community; they think it is important to have fun together. Lana asks Latifa: “Is it like a family to you?” Latifa is hesitant—she would not really define it like that, she says. Fatima says, “when I moved to Berlin [from Frankfurt] I didn’t know anyone, I only knew that there was an MJ here too! So, when people move from one place to another it is also a contact network since MJ exists in different regions.”

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This discussion reflects the overall development of religious organizations in Germany since the 1990s. When first established in 1994, MJD filled a gap for the young generation in terms of available religious spaces. In recent years, youth have been given more space within several mosques and organizations (Spielhaus and Färber 2006). Some religious organizations and movements today target Muslim youth specifically, which illustrates the development of a diverse religious market, as discussed in chapter 2. Although many MJD participants emphasized that this is a positive development, there was a certain level of rivalry between the organizations over membership and attendance in the different spaces in the diverse religious urban sphere.

In the above discussion, one of the older members felt that MJD was no longer meeting the needs of the current Muslim generation. Lana suggested that it was important for religious organizations to not be static, as this would affect the (lack of) membership. Rather, religious organizations like MJD should evolve in response to each new young generation, and each new generation should partly define and form the space. MJD is unique in that all members are between 15 and 30 years old, and there are no imams. Just as the religious authorities and knowledge accepted as relevant are not static, the space, members, and content of the organization also changes. This internal discussion also highlights the heterogeneity within the religious group. There are both intra- and inter-generational differences in what MJD represents and means for individual members. For some (and in particular for German converts), the focus on knowledge was most important, whereas others emphasized the feeling of community or family within the organization.

In this chapter, I focus on the different incentives and motivations to take up a religious subject position, and to identify with Islam in general and with a Muslim faith community in particular. What are the politics that bring together a group of youth within an organization that advocates piety? What are the experiences that motivate these youth to participate

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2 One of the opportunities provided by a more plural market in the urban sphere is the possibility of switching between communities or changing one’s allegiance to a particular community if one does not want to associate with their cause or method.

3 Some saw the MJD group in Berlin as more of a family organization at the beginning, because of the active involvement of a whole family. The impression that participation in MJD Berlin was more intense when it first started can also be understood within the framework of the formative stage of social movements, which Alberoni (1984) discusses. Alberoni views social organizations as going through different stages where one of the most fundamental characteristics of the first stage is the solidarity of the new group.
in such a religious organization? Put differently: which socio-historical structures contribute to creating and forming this local religious youth culture?

Research on Muslim youths’ turn to Islam has generally pointed to external social forces, such as economic poverty, lack of social capital in the non-Muslim society, political Othering of their social identity, and the contradictory expectations from their parents on the one hand and teachers and school peers on the other. Although a combination of these explanations may help us understand why youth identify with MJD, I find them dissatisfactory as they ignore the meanings the youth ascribe to what they are doing. Instead, any effort to comprehend their turn to Islam must include both an examination of the broader context and an explanation of the meanings the youth, as social actors, ascribe to their own participation in the organization. It is necessary to look at the set of circumstances in which the young women are situated and which form the arena in which the analysis of their behavior must take place. It is also necessary to recognize the set of meanings the young women attach to their behavior. It is critical that scholars provide an understanding of the turn to Islam as it is expressed both within the particular setting and using the young women’s cognitive definition of the situation.

I will first briefly discuss the “why” question by examining the normative standpoint from which this question is posed. Second, I argue that identification with this faith community should be understood within the socio-cultural, economic, and migratory context in which the youth grow up. Third, I show that their turn to Islam can only be understood if we also take seriously the set of meanings that they attach to their Muslim identity. Limiting our understanding of youths’ religious identification to the external socio-cultural context is not satisfactory, as it ignores how religiousness and desires play a significant factor in the youth's identification processes and how a religious group may actively seek to attract new participants.

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4 In Mitchell's words: “The setting and situations, therefore, stand in a reflexive relationship to one another. I mean by this that an analyst wishing to interpret a specified type of behavior in a town needs to work with two different referents simultaneously. The first of these is an appreciation of the set of circumstances in which the actors are placed and which determine the arena within which the analyst postulates the behavior must take place. The second is an appreciation of the set of meanings the actors themselves attribute to the behavior. The analysis then consists of an interpretation in general theoretical terms of the behavior as articulated both with the setting and with the actors’ cognitive definition of the situation” (Mitchell 1987, 17). Thus, there is no universally specific set of contextual parameters that the researcher must include in any research, nor a list of factors which must be spelled out in each situation.
members. Overall, this chapter draws attention to the complexity of individual identifications with Islam, where global, national, local, and personal factors must be considered, and specific characteristics of religious experiences must be embraced.

**Why Are we Asking Why?**

The normative question of why women embrace religious norms and religious communities has been central in studies about Muslim women since the 1990s, and has been addressed in different ways (Bracke 2003).\(^5\) Scholars have found it curious that women embrace, seek comfort in, and even find a sense of empowerment in Islam and religious (fundamentalist) organizations that many, including the scholars themselves, regard as subjecting female bodies to patriarchal gender structures. Several scholars (and self-described feminist scholars in particular) have seen women’s participation in such organizations as either a paradox or as a perplexing question.\(^6\) Some scholars tend to consider women who actively participate in religious organizations to be victims of false consciousness and to be disciplined by fundamentalist and repressive formations.\(^7\)

In debating multiculturalism, Susan Okin (1999), a liberal feminist philosopher, claims that there is an inescapable tension between gender equality ideals (or feminism) and cultural recognition of groups (or multiculturalism). She argues that individual rights, and particularly women’s rights, risk being inadequately protected if group rights are privileged over individual rights, since culturally defined groups are led by men. In this vein, some researchers (e.g. Badinter 1989) make arguments based on a “universal” feminism. These scholars posit that even though Muslim girls seem to choose to wear the headscarf, this does not mean that they are autonomous, as the headscarf is a symbol of subordination. In this view, because the content of the women’s cultural norms, such as modesty, self-discipline, and gender segregation, is in opposition to personal autonomy, the women risk being subordinated by adhering to their faith.

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\(^{5}\) There is also a long scholarly debate on why Christian women seem to be more religious than Christian men. For a short overview of this discussion and one way to explain Christian women’s religiosity, see Walter and Davie (1998).

\(^{6}\) This includes Hardacre (1993), Moghadam (1994), and Yuval-Davis and Sahgal (1992).

\(^{7}\) For example, Grewal and Kaplan (1994). For a critique of this view, see Bracke (2003) and Dwyer (1998). Bracke (2003, 337) reflects upon how the idea of “false consciousness” is gendered and ethnicized.
To a large extent, these arguments follow a conventional explanation of the appeal of religion within sociological scholarship on religion, namely that people become religious in times of economic hardship, loss or grief, physical suffering, poor health or loneliness (see Berger 1967; Glock and Stark 1965). Sociologists of religion tend to investigate the problems of the social order more than the individual’s psychological responses.

Western-oriented scholars seem to be focused on the question of why women are turning to what is considered an oppressive religion, thus starting from the assumption that the women’s religiosity is irrational or an abnormal decision in need of explanation. This starting point takes for granted that it is the situation where youth are religiously active or virtuous that needs to be explained, whereas having a distant relationship to religion is normalized. Secularization and secular individuals become the neutral starting point, which ignores how the secular body is also constituted by discursive powers (see Asad 2003). Although I recognize the subjective starting point of my inquiry, I nevertheless discuss why young women turn to Islam and identify with a faith community. Such discussions contribute to our understanding of the social contexts and spheres of power in which the crafting of a religious Self is situated.

The Question of Why: External Social and Cultural Context

How have social scientists explained the turn to Islam among young migrants in European cities? In the early 1990s, scholars (and particularly French scholars) thought that youth turned to Islam as the only option available, due to the conflicting demands of the majority society and their ethnic group (Sahgal 1992). The new Islamic revival observed among second generation migrants in French cities was explained as a response to external forces like discrimination (Cesari 2002, 2003), daily racism, and a way out for youth who were more or less excluded or rejected from society and who were searching for a sense of direction (Khosrokhavar 1997). In “Islam of the youth” (L’islam des jeunes), Khosrokhavar (1997) distinguishes between the Islam of the excluded (l’islam des exclus) and Islam as a source of integration (l’islam de l’intégration). He defines the Islam of the excluded as a neo-communitarian construction where Muslim youth try to give meaning to their lives in a society where they feel left out and

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As noted, Khosrokhavar argues—erroneously, in my opinion—that there is not one Islam in France, but several, that each are subject to their own dynamics and only vaguely influenced by the others. Consequently, Khosrokhavar deals with the Islam of the excluded and Islam as a source of integration as relatively independent types and approaches by different categories of people who hold different social positions in French society. As discussed in the introduction, I view Islam as a discursive tradition (Asad 1986) that recognizes that various strategies of responding to Islam and even performing Islam do not lead to the fragmentation of Islam that Khosrokhavar suggests, or to different types of Islam. Rather, they represent different strategies by which people can orient their practices within the Islamic discourse.

Khosrokhavar (1997) argues that for unemployed youth in the suburbs, religiosity represents an alternative “work’ on the self and on others.” Likewise, in the United Kingdom, Jacobson (1998, 116) sees the turn to Islam as an alternative to unemployment prospects and as a quest for certainty, as the youth are “prone to feelings of uncertainty and general ambivalence over questions of identity, in the face of problems perceived to arise from racism, family conflict, life in the secular and immoral ‘West’, culture clash, or any combination of these and other factors.” Rogers and Vertovec (1998, 15) regard the identities of Muslim youth in Europe as “often forged in reaction to negative and essentialist representations of both Islam and migrants,” whereas Amiraux (2003, 246) argues that “Islam furnishes the tools for ‘identity management’ of migrants’ exclusion to attain a measure of autonomy and enhance the possibility for ‘integration without assimilation’”. It is also viewed as a way for youth to liberate themselves from their family without damaging the family relationship (Salih 2003). Others argue that French Muslims who affirm their Muslim identity are “social actors who, deprived of other legitimate means of asserting their collective presence, have recourse to the means of expression that are closest to them at their cultural level” (Leveau 1988, 107). More broadly, in relation to the emergence of Islamist Movements globally Moghadam (1994, 11) argues that “Islam provides a stable identity in a rapidly changing society.”

These explanations indirectly suggest a strategic-instrumental reason for embracing Islam. Women may engage in religious practices as a form of refuge. Islam and the expression of Islam become one of many without a social space. However, he also shows that Islam can be a source of integration: young Muslims use Islam in order to create a social position within France.9

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10 Author’s translation from the French original: “travail’ sur soi et sur les autres.”

11 Not specifically targeting Islam, but all religion, Yuval-Davis and Sahgal argue that “religion provides a compass and an anchor; it gives people a sense of stability and meaning, as well as coherent identity (Yuval-Davis and Sahgal 1992, 6).”
strategies used in order to overcome the precarious social situation in which the youth find themselves. Islam becomes an instrument with which to construct an intact subjectivity. This understanding of the turn to Islam focuses on Islam presenting youth with tools with which to operate in society. How does this resonate with the youth in Berlin and with their identification with Islam in general and MJD in particular? To what extent does the socio-cultural context and economic conditions motivate the youth in this study to turn to Islam?

Being with Others like Themselves: Socio-Cultural Background

There is no doubt that the social, cultural, and economic situation of the Muslim youth with whom I have been working has real consequences for their identifications and their experiences of growing up in Germany. The social area in which they live forms young people’s lifestyles and experiences (Jenkins 1983). Youth with a migrant background generally live in neighborhoods with social problems, such as high unemployment, social stigmatization, and general cultural and social deprivation. The youth in Berlin are no exception; most of them grew up in Kreuzberg, Wedding, and Neukölln, which are poor neighborhoods with high unemployment rates.

The youth who decide to come to MJD have often already visited different mosques and youth groups. The majority of the young female participants were not sent by their parents, but learned about it from friends, schoolmates, or from fliers at various Islamic events. When I asked (whether explicitly or indirectly) why they participated in MJD, the youth frequently emphasized the need to “be with others like themselves.” To some extent, this expression calls attention to the socio-cultural similarities among the MJD participants, since coming from a migrant family means that they have different life-narratives or biography formations than their ethnic German peers. However, being with “others like them” also refers to others with a similar lifestyle orientation, forms of religiosity, and a shared experience of self-transcendence. I discuss the latter topics in greater detail below.

These (mostly) second-generation youths articulated certain shared horizons of experience that were significant to their lives, including

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12 At the same time, there are also internal differences, as some youth were from Turkish families, others were from Arab families, and yet others were from mixed marriages where one parent was German. However, there seemed to be a common experience of being different from ethnic Germans and of belonging to the migrant population in Germany.

13 The term “horizon” has long been used within German philosophy. Gadamer uses it to refer to “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular..."
experiences of migration, social stigmatization, economic situations, and family structure. Further, the youth negotiated between at least two different societal systems as a consequence of the choices their parents made. The confrontation with so-called cultural differences between their parents and German society structured the youths’ experiences and shaped inter-generational relations. The youths’ shared horizons of experience also included transnational links with majority-Muslim countries through vacations, extended family, and consumption of media.

Through my fieldwork, I realized that the youths’ mode of identification with Islam must be viewed in light of their experiences as migrants or Others, and of the stereotyped categorizations they are subject to in German society (see chapter 3). Charles Taylor (1994) reminds us that any identity (be it individual, political, communal, ethnic, or national) is shaped by recognition, non-recognition or mis-recognition of others. Identification with Islam in general and with a religious organization in particular, is one way for youth in Berlin to deal with an otherwise marginalized position. Enforcing a religious identity and attempting to modify the negative content of the Muslim category can offer these youth meaning, positive self-perception, and a feeling of control. Moreover, it is one form of identification that was readily available to them. Trying to be identified as a German was frequently impossible, as they were not accepted as such by anyone.

Embracing Islam can be a search for a collective identity. Today, many Muslim youth search for a public articulation of authenticity. This often takes place through symbols that represent their religious identity, and is a way to claim recognition from the larger society. In Berlin, the turn to a Muslim identity among youth can be understood as expressing difference and demanding public recognition of that difference, a process often described as identity politics. Here, I follow Calhoun’s suggestion that we should see identity politics as “collective and public struggles that involve both ‘claiming’ certain identities, on the one hand, and questioning and

vantage point” (Gadamer 1989 [1975], 302). It has been used in similar ways by Husserl and Heidegger. The sociologist Karl Mannheim, as well as the philosopher of science Karl Popper, used it with “expectations,” as “horizon of expectations.” In this book, my use of the term “horizon of experience” encompasses subjective experiences and visions, as understood by subjects situated within a specific socio-economic context.

In this framework, the return to Islam observed among many Muslim youth in Europe is considered part of identity politics (Cesari 2003; Khosrokhavar 1997) or a form of “politics from below” (Leveau 1988). This is seen a modern phenomenon, with similarities to social movements (Göle 2003, 812).
refusing imposed or prescribed identities, on the other hand” (Calhoun 1994, 21). Identity politics as performed by these youth can be viewed as an effort to define and (re)interpret the concepts, practices, and experiences that categorize Islam and Muslims by trying to define, change, or control what being Muslim signifies. Insofar as the youth participated in a Muslim organization and identified with Islam because they sought to change the erroneous conception of Islam and Muslims in German society, I understand their participation as a form of identity politics.

The continuous focus on Muslim women in the German media and public sphere, as well as the daily experiences of Othering gazes, made the youth conscious of their differences. Many of the youth were constantly categorized and defined as Muslim, and felt that their cultural or family background was continuously stigmatized through references to Islam as an oppressive religion. This experience seemed to induce many of them to seek more knowledge of Islam either as a means to answer their interlocutors better, or to make up their own mind as to whether Islam is as bad as the media depicts. Others felt obliged to improve their answers to questions posed by non-Muslims, and to be more conscious of how they behaved in a context in which they had become the “Muslimwoman” (Cooke 2007); a term used to describe how, post-9/11, women of Muslim origin are constructed as a “Muslim woman,” which is made a primary identity whether chosen or not. Being constructed as a “Muslimwoman” may lead to a process whereby some women increasingly identify with Islam. Islam may thus eventually also become a central element in defining both the individual Self and the group with which they identify.

Membership in a religious group can play a supportive role in how individuals experience coming of age. The weekly meetings were not only a space for religious knowledge and performance, but were also a space where the girls could exchange, discuss, and laugh about everyday life experiences. Before and after the official weekly program, the youth discussed doubts they felt in their religious beliefs, but also problems that

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15 I am aware of the extensive discussion of the use of “identity politics” and its consequences. A further discussion of this topic is outside the scope of this book. See the edited volume “Identity Politics Reconsidered” (2006) by Alcoff, Hames-Garcia, Mohanty and Moya for an overview of this debate.

16 In his sociology of symbolic power, Bourdieu suggests that the fundamental dimension of all social life is the struggle for social recognition. In this process, Bourdieu (1984) contends, cultural symbols and activities, including taste, style of dress, eating habits, and language, represent interests and function in a way that develops or increases social distinctions.
arose at school after they started to veil, discrimination they experienced in the street or when applying for jobs, and problems related to their parents.

Moreover, being familiar with the reactions and worries that were common among the parents, MJD leaders usually offered to talk with the parents so that the youth might be able to participate in events. Declining to participate in social events organized by their school could also be a question of finances, though non-participation in extra-curricular activities was often understood by their teachers (and the media) as a cultural rather than an economic issue. MJD organizers were familiar with this issue and could sometimes resolve the situation. “If it is a question of money,” the leader usually said when someone explained that they could not take part, “then let me know, and we can arrange something.” At the same time, parents were more likely to accept their daughters’ participation in a Muslim event with overnight lodging rather than a school camp, because the parents had greater confidence that the Muslim event would follow certain customary and appreciated rules and norms.

The Question of Difference: Three Sisters with Different Desires

Seeing an individual’s participation in a religious youth organization or identification with Islam merely as a form of identity politics and as a response to a difficult social situation, reduces the identification process to a rational choice based on the socio-cultural, political, and material context. Young people who grow up in Berlin have different spheres of possibilities to choose from when constructing and directing their lives. The following narrative of a family with three siblings illustrates that external factors, including experiences of discrimination or racism, are insufficient explanations for why someone turns to Islam as a focal point of identification whereas others did not:

The three sisters (26, 28, and 31) grew up in a working class family in the neighborhood of Neukölln. Their Turkish parents arrived as guest workers in Germany at the end of the 1960s, and, like many other guest worker families, remained in Berlin. When I got to know them, two of the sisters were married and had left the family apartment. The oldest sister, Aishegül, was unmarried and living at home while finishing her university degree. Aishegül was the only one who veiled, a practice that her mother, who wore what the youth consider to be a traditional headscarf (not completely covering her hair, and in unfashionable colors), had begged her to put off, “at least until she had married.” For a number of years, Aishegül had been actively involved in MJD and in inter-religious activities. She was highly respected by her local religious community as a knowledgeable, religiously active, and...
virtuous individual—character traits that she continuously strove to improve. Aishegül considered herself as having “always been a Muslim, but not so active,” a mode that changed in her mid-twenties. She found it difficult to find a husband, because while she was indifferent to a potential spouse’s ethnic background, she was adamant that he had to be religiously active. Aishegül had few Turkish friends, and she considered her Turkish language proficiency to be low. During a religious event, this caused an uncomfortable situation after a Turkish man complained about her inadequate translation from German to Turkish. She recalled that the older man told her that “if you forget your language you forget your religion,” to which Aishegül had responded, “why, I can learn Islam in German!”

In contrast, her two younger sisters were both married to men with a Turkish background. Neither of them veiled, and Aishegül expressed regret that neither of them actively practiced the religion or attended religious events. Instead, they preferred clubs and Turkish pop concerts, and their friendship circles were almost exclusively composed of young people with Turkish backgrounds. Nuriye (26), the youngest sister, explained that “it’s ‘cause we have the same backgrounds: [for all of us], when we were younger we weren’t allowed to go swimming, to clubs, or to have boyfriends.” I met Nuriye accidentally on a few occasions, and I conducted an interview with her in their family apartment. Nuriye said, “until I was in eighth grade, I only had German friends. Then we reached puberty, and they wanted to go to clubs, and started to have boyfriends and such, and I could not talk with them about that. And they did not understand why I could not go with them, because they were allowed to do everything. They didn't understand when I said that I was not allowed to go with them. It was like a division came between us.” In eighth grade, she got to know a lot of Turkish youth, to whom she didn't have to explain as much. “Everything was different, we understood each other much better. And there was much more hospitality,” Nuriye noted. She felt that there was a lack of hospitality among Germans. She found that ethnic German youth could not invite people spontaneously and that everything needed to be well planned with notification in advance. Nuriye added that, “with the Turks, it is not like that. Then my Turkish improved. Before that, it was catastrophic!” She said, “as a Muslim and as a woman I feel better in neighborhoods with a high percentage of foreigners than in neighborhoods with only Germans. Like, you don't always have to explain yourself when something is happening, and people help you immediately. I know I can always ask a Turk for help if there is something, and that I will get help! There, I feel safe!”

I asked her if she would feel safer with or without a headscarf. Nuriye considered this carefully. Then she concluded, “no, it’s not safer with a headscarf. ‘Cause then there is even more feelings of hate towards foreigners. But you should not forget that even if I’m going to clubs and such [and am not wearing a headscarf], I will never be completely integrated. Assimilation will never be possible, because I have black hair, my parents come from Turkey and I am a Muslim. (...) Regardless of whether I wear a headscarf or not, or how much I try to integrate, it is not possible.” She said that when entering
Berlin clubs, she and her friends often encountered discriminatory comments and were sometimes denied access “because we are Turks. We will not be accepted, with or without headscarves.” She claimed that the doormen would say that the club was full or that it was a closed party, even if they could see others entering. Even so, she did not “feel ready to wear the headscarf,” and was not religiously active—much to her older sister’s dismay. Nuriye worked in the retail sector and believed that she would lose her job immediately if she started to veil. She noted, that “it’s also difficult to find work. You need a strong personality to carry all the problems.” In further explaining why she did not veil, she concluded, “so, because of problems, but also because I do not feel ready for it. But I find it a pity that women like my sister cannot wear it [without facing problems].”

Nuriye liked the fact that her sister actively practiced Islam, because her sister could teach her a lot. Nuriye continued, “if I had more practicing Muslim friends, I would go more to the mosque and such. That makes a big difference.” Furthermore, she wishes that her parents had not forced her to go to Koran school when she was younger, “then I would have been able to read the Koran today.” Instead, for her learning the Koran had become tied up with negative obligations and feelings. Nuriye believed that this was because her parents did not understand pedagogy. She changed the topic slightly and argued that “when the Germans say integration, they mean: learn German, no headscarf, don’t be a Muslim. (...) But even if it is not clear that I am a Muslim, it is not written on my forehead, they do not let me integrate!”

Nuriye’s teacher had told her that she should read the latest book by Seyran Ates. Nuriye had responded, “no, I don’t think so, ‘cause I don’t agree with what that woman is saying. She is not a Muslim! Why is she presenting herself as a Muslim?” Nuriye did not understand why Seyran needed to label herself in this way. Nuriye inserted that she could not imagine living anywhere but in Berlin. She was born there and considered it her home. She emphasized that it is “multicultural, as nowhere else in Germany!” She added, “I love Germany because it is a country with social welfare, and the German constitution is one of the best in the world. The Human Rights! The Germans are just not friendly, that is the only thing. I love the German constitution.” I asked, “do you consider Germany your home?” Nuriye’s response was clear: “No, Berlin is my home.”

These sisters illustrate that heterogeneous identity processes take place within the same family. The different paths the sisters in this family follow

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17 The lawyer Seyran Ates, a Kurdish woman from Turkey, published the book “The Multicultural Fallacy. How we can live better together in Germany” (“Der Multikulti-Irrtum - Wie wir in Deutschland besser zusammenleben können”) in 2007. In this book, she argues against the multi-cultural ideology and its focus on tolerance. According to Ates, it has established different and secluded communities where intolerant and archaic patriarchs rule and where young women are forced to marry by their fathers, and men dispose of women as property. In order for integration policies to succeed, she suggests (among other things) that the only religious education allowed in schools should be a general religious education about all world religions.
exemplify that turning to Islam as a prime identity or a main point of reference cannot be reduced to feelings of discrimination, social deprivation, or Othering processes. Moreover, it is not merely a direct consequence of socialization and parental expectations, or feelings of being different from their German peers. Two sisters turned to an ethnic, non-religiously active youth group, whereas Aishegul sought a religiously oriented group. Siblings within the same local environment and with similar socio-economic and cultural experiences can have very different ways to express themselves and have very different interests. The sisters are only a few years apart, grew up in the same neighborhood, attended the same school and two of them later went to the same university. Both Aishegul and Nuriye talked about not feeling accepted by German society and about discriminatory events throughout their lives. While the older sister defined herself foremost as a Muslim, and had few Turkish friends, her two younger sisters had mostly Turkish friends who were not practicing Muslims. The two non-practicing younger sisters spoke Turkish much better than the older and much more religious sister. Identifying with Islam had not brought Aishegul closer to the ethnic social field of her parents. On the contrary, her identification with a pure Islam had strengthened her religious identification, and not only weakened her Turkish language ability, but also her identification with her parents’ ethnic group. Nuriye, in contrast, identified more strongly with her parents’ ethnic social field through her Turkish friendship group, and throughout the conversation she referred to herself and her friends as Turks, which seemed to be both self-ascribed and a category imposed by German society. While this had not necessarily weakened her religious identification, it had not strengthened her religious practice either. Notably, though she did not veil, actively pray, or visit mosques, Nuriye considered herself a Muslim. It was not her main focus in life, but was nevertheless a part of how she was perceived by others and herself. Her critique of Ates must be understood in this context. Nuriye also believed that if she had more religiously active friends, she would probably also practice her religion more actively, thus recognizing the importance of peer groups on lifestyles and life choices.

Nuriye’s experience is illustrative of the studies that argue that at one point in their youth, many migrant youth start to feel different from their classmates. Often, the initial feeling of otherness or difference starts in

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18 Similar tendencies among youth with migrant backgrounds have been demonstrated in France (Amir-Moazami 2007), the UK (Jacobson 1998) and Norway (Jacobsen 2011). For Germany, see e.g. Nökel (2001, 2002).
puberty and is described as partly caused by the different expectations from the woman's family compared to ethnic German families. As Nuriye mentions, at a certain age many youth with migrant backgrounds feel that they do not fit in among German youth, in part as a consequence of the Othering processes, but also due to different expectations from their families.

Growing up in Germany with migrant parents can create certain moments of tensions vis-à-vis parents, teachers, and peers. The youths' parents, afraid that their daughters become too German (i.e. do not follow the same value system as the parents), often imposed different rules and expectations on their daughters than ethnic German parents. This may contribute to many young women feeling different compared to the other girls in their age group. In contrast, I noticed that in MJD, the youth openly asked whether anyone was not allowed to participate in events, and affirmative answers rarely led to feelings of shame or embarrassment. Ethnic (Turkish) homogenous friendship groups negotiate parental controls in similar ways, as Nuryie indicated. In both Turkish and Islamic-oriented friendship groups, the youths' respect for their parents' decisions seemed to be understood in terms of custom or religion. In these spaces, the youth did not feel different because of the restrictions their families impose on their activities. In consequence, many youth sought out other youth who live within a similar socio-cultural framework. The initial feeling of being different may at a later stage of adolescence be extended to feelings of discrimination from the broader German society. This is illustrated by Nuriye's account of events that she and her Turkish friends encountered, for instance in clubs.

In coming of age, both Muslims and non-Muslims struggle to find meaning in their existence. Youth are undergoing a period of transformation where the demands to adapt are more onerous than in other periods of life (Krange and Øia 2005, 20), and many experience alienation (Epstein 1998). The search for meaning and the search to identify with others are factors that encourage the creation of youth subcultures. The pathway a young person takes through adolescence is shaped by a combination of personal characteristics (such as temperament, intelligence, coping style, and social skills) and the nature of the environment in which they live (such as family, school, peer groups, and neighborhood) (Crockett and Crouter 1995). Additionally, youth actively seek others with similar

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19 When young, people make decisions that may shape their future developmental paths, including peer selection, career choices, and future partner. New major decisions
values, morals, interests, and ethnic orientation; in short, a similar orientation as the lifestyle they seek for themselves. Shared experiences include being Othered, discrimination, negative stereotypes of Islam, and belonging to a socio-economically disadvantaged part of the German population. Furthermore, youth share religious beliefs and values as well as desires to improve a religious Self and to share feelings of self-transcendence. I turn to these next.

The Question of Why: Incorporating Religious Experiences

Analyses of youth culture need to include those of the youths’ experiences that are not embraced by utilitarian models. Analyses of identity politics recognize that people’s social experiences can lead to struggles for political representation and efforts to challenge hegemonic discourses. They affirm that the body is structured by social and political forces, and that social spaces are formed through ideology and subjugation. Experiences that mark young people as migrants, Muslims, and as potentially socio-economically disadvantaged may well lead some towards identifying with Islam.

However, the analysis of religious identification as something that is ultimately a rational decision made in terms of the socio-economic situation, sidesteps both specific features involved in the attraction to Islam—such as emotional experiences—and the effort to attract new members that religious organizations actively pursue. The explanations fail to capture the participants’ own understandings of or the sets of meanings...
they attach to their Muslim identity. The explanations do not account for adolescence being a time and space where a variety of lifestyles are discovered and experimented with. These arguments also ignore certain phenomenological characteristics of religiosity and religious experiences that lead to a sense of a greater knowledge of one's identity or an understanding of the Self. Youth cultures and identifications are more than retorts or ways out of ethnic or class inequalities. Thus, an analysis of the youths' religious orientation and their participation in what might be considered a religious youth culture needs a more dynamic analysis that not only includes their everyday life experiences, but the set of meanings that they attach to their turn to Islam. In the following I suggest that the expression “being with others like me” has a variety of meanings, including a lifestyle orientation, a form of religiosity, and a need to share experiences of self-transcendence.

**Being with Others like Themselves: Lifestyle Orientation**

Although it may seem banal, research often fails to consider how the nature of the youths’ attraction to Islam is also informed, structured, or shaped by their search for religious experiences. A particular religiosity can be a motivation for participating in MJD and for crafting the Self in relation to certain techniques, practices, and performances. To meet or spend time with others who are like them is not only about socio-cultural similarities, but also a matter of spending time with people who want to spend their leisure time in similar ways.21

As discussed in this book, youth who attended MJD meetings frequently struggled to fulfill a desire to be or become Good Muslims or to be with people who espouse similar values. Spending time with people who share a similar outlook can be a means to not feeling alone and to feel normal. Several MJD members said that they search for other religiously active youth in an effort to improve themselves as religious subjects, and that
they seek motivation and inspiration. For example, during a discussion at MJD, a young woman noted that “living in this society, there are distractions everywhere. It's more difficult to be motivated to keep all the (religious rules) and religious requirements.” Two other discussions further illustrate this:

During a discussion at a weekly MJD meeting, the young women all agreed that it was important to be aware of who they spend time with. Somaya (17) noted that “when you spend a lot of time with others who, when you say that it’s time for prayer, say that they can’t be bothered, then after a while you also become influenced."

In the course of another MJD discussion on whether certain kinds of music are religiously correct or not, Leila (21) added, “we are not living in a Muslim society: there is music everywhere, we don't even think about it anymore, when in the shop or in the car. And it's often easier to forget. (...) It makes us concentrate less on the important things.”

The emphasis here is on the fact that they are living in a non-Muslim society that makes it more difficult to follow what they consider to be their religious rules, values, and obligations. Living in Germany can make it harder to remember their religious moral obligations and value orientation. If a young person feels that her lifestyle is threatened by negative influences from a non-religious or non-practicing Muslim environment, she can decide to counteract the secular forces by participating in a religious space where she is called on to craft a religious Self. Becoming or being religiously virtuous is not a natural state but a constant struggle with oneself, where individual techniques of body management need to be (re) learned and repeated (see chapter 4). A faith community in which one spends time with others who share similar values, difficulties, and desires, provides strength to continue improving on a religious lifestyle and religious Self. For example, during a wedding, Fatima (31) noted:

It is so easy to be influenced by this society. It is difficult to be religious in this society, ‘cause you have to excuse yourself and explain why you do this and that. You really have to believe strongly in order to carry it out. That is also why the community [Gemeinschaft] is so important. I don't know if I could do it without the community. (...) Just that you know that there are other sisters in the same situation (...).

At another MJD event, Fatima said that she felt that they (Muslims living in Germany) have to justify and think about what they do much more than the rest of the German population. She said, “that is why we need to meet and to be in such a community. They [the German non-Muslim
population] find that dangerous. They feel threatened by that, I don’t really understand why.’ Several of the youth reflected upon the difficulties of being religious in German society. This must be understood not only in relation to the negative view of Islam in Germany, but also in relation to the position of religion in Berlin in general. The young women daily encountered various non-religious temptations and expectations from peers and family and in urban spaces, and these may draw their focus away from religious obligations and values. Fatima’s comments reflect how important she thought it was to have a community in order to continue practicing Islam and to not feel alone. She situated this importance in terms of the constant pressure to explain and legitimate herself as a practicing Muslim. She felt in the minority, both as a religious individual in general and as a Muslim in particular, and noted how difficult it was to not compromise her beliefs in her daily life in Berlin. This increased Fatima’s need for social spaces where her religious beliefs could be freely expressed and practiced.

Not all youth who identify with Islam and as Muslim seek to belong to or even participate in a religious organization. Some Muslim youth I met preferred to not be part of a faith community though they had religious friends. In contrast, the youth in MJD expressed a need for a religious community in order to create a universe of meaning where “what makes sense to you also makes sense to me” (Hervieu-Léger 2001, 167). As Hervieu-Léger argues, “religious identity depends on shared experiences for its reinforcement” (ibid.). For several of the young Muslims in MJD it was particularly important to receive confirmation of the meanings they created to make sense of their daily life. Fatima’s emphasis on her need for a religious community and a space where religious values and norms take precedence (as a counter to the daily non-religious stimulus) must be understood in this context.

Further, by spending time with others who adhere to similar values, MJD participants did not need to feel embarrassment about the fact that they felt required to perform certain religious duties. For example, at one MJD meeting:

The young women discussed the shame many young people feel when they want to pray at work or at school, because it is difficult to speak up about wanting to pray. One of the young women responded, “if one is really devoted to Allah then it does not matter what the others think of you. You are only (accountable) to Allah.” She believed that only their relationship with Him should matter. Leila added that “if they really are good friends, then why should you be ashamed to say that you are praying? What if you tell them...
that in your religion you have to pray five times a day, but they start thinking, ‘well, we never saw you praying’?" Another youth commented that some Muslims are “afraid of being looked upon as fundamentalists" and thus do not want to talk openly about where and when they need to pray.

The discussion refers to the fact that being young and religiously active is considered non-normative and that it can be difficult or even embarrassing to admit to religious practice. It demonstrates that youth may experience non-religious friends and peers, both cultural Muslims and non-Muslims, to be distractions or impediments to the performance of their religious practices.

Several participants highlighted that MJD was a space where youth could get to know other practicing Muslims with whom they shared religious goals and who they also met outside of MJD meetings:

Somaya (17) asked the other attendees, “why do we come here [to MJD]? Think about it.” She encouraged them to also meet outside MJD in order to do something for Allah. Somaya said that “it is also good to decide to do something together to improve ourselves. It makes it easier. For example, to fast together, like you all probably have to catch up on the fasting days, no?” One of the girls said that she had been talking with three other Muslim girls at her school about working together to catch up on their fasting. Ismail interjected that she used to do this with her sister, but after a while they stopped, because they put the goals [of what religious practices to perform] too high. She stressed that fasting together the whole day and then eating well together is enjoyable.

The struggle to become a Good Muslim was framed as a wish to please God and ultimately reach their goal of entering Paradise. The willingness or wish to acquire a particular kind of self-realization was a desire that shaped their experiences and the actions they chose. These goals were pursued through learning more about Islam and improving their comportment and character, and this pursuit was guided by a particular religious discourse. In addition to providing religious knowledge, the religious organization represents emotional support in the endeavor to craft a religious Self.

**Being with Others like Themselves: Forms of Religiosity**

To some extent, MJD actively seeks out a particular target audience among Muslim youth in Germany. These are the youth who seek an educational...
approach to Islam that is not based on ethnic structures, and who position themselves socially in relation to German society. In Germany, the relatively recent establishment of such organizations can partly be seen as a generational change; youth born in Germany have had access to higher educational levels than most of their parents’ generation and many seek religious spaces that can provide them with answers about how to live a correct life in Germany. MJD participants often mentioned that they considered the organization a space where they could find answers, authorities, or learn who they should consider authoritative. The following situation illustrates this:

When a young girl asked Selma (18) why she decided to join MJD, she answered, “I started to go there ‘cause I wanted to improve myself (…) and to meet more correct people, you know.” Other youth confirmed that this also accounts for their decision to join MJD. During another a weekly introduction, Janna (19) declared, “I am 19, Palestinian, and I lack information.” This caused laughter from some of the girls before Janna impatiently explained, “I feel that I need to gain more knowledge, there is a lot of information that I do not have.”

Frequently the women felt that their parents or guardians did not provide them with reliable knowledge about Islam during their childhood. This could be either because their parents were not religiously active Muslims or were not Muslims at all. Their parents’ religious knowledge may also be based on ethnic and traditional beliefs that the young woman at one point started to consider inaccurate. Several complained about their parents’ lax religious performance, or that they did not understand the reasons behind certain religious obligations, or that they mixed religion with tradition and culture. Seeking an Islam that is detached from traditional ideas makes it imperative to gain more knowledge and information about how best to live as a correct Muslim. The content of the local events and workshops must be seen in this light: the weekly meetings concentrated on the need to be critical and reflexive in regard to religious knowledge, and on how the youth could continuously improve themselves as pious Muslims while living in Germany (see chapter 4). The fact that MJD promoted this cerebral and self-critical approach attracted youth with a high level of educational achievement and ambition and who might otherwise leave religious organizational structures altogether.

Research has indicated that class background shapes the relationship individuals have to religious knowledge and authority (Ismail 2004). In particular, an individual’s educational level defines how they relate to Islamic discourse (Salih 2003) and, I would add, which spaces they decide...
to participate actively in. The emphasis in MJD on the attainment of knowledge as the only way to live Islam correctly appears to attract youth who belong to an upwardly mobile part of the migrant population due to their parents’ or their own educational success. The fact that this organization is composed primarily of upwardly mobile youth also suggests that the turn to Islam is not a mere question of oppression, poverty or exclusion. MJD’s organizational structure can partly explain its popularity among educated youth; participants were expected to contribute religious presentations and participate in discussions about their understanding of religious topics. While visiting other Muslim youth groups based in mosques, I noticed a difference in how the meetings were structured (see chapter 2). In MJD, even the youngest participants were expected to present on religious topics, while women in other Muslim youth meetings were more passive listeners and less involved in the organization of knowledge.

Furthermore, youth who do well in the German educational system may start to feel a distance to their ethnic group, the majority of whom the youth consider uneducated and traditional. For example, as we walk down a crowded shopping street in Wedding, Rüya (21) said:

There are so many Turks here [in Berlin], but there are only a very few whom you would want to talk to. Look at them, completely empty-headed. After such a long time without really having any people I am interested in spending time with, [for me] it is so good to have found MJ, like, people you can really talk to.

Rüya was not referring to anyone in particular, but she made a clear distinction between other Turks—with whom she did not identify—and the people who participate in her religious community. Her identification with the religious social field is clear. It is expressed through a contrast to a lack of identification with her parents’ ethnic group: the Turks in an economically and socially deprived neighborhood (Wedding) where she had lived for the past five years. Her comment that the Turks are empty-headed can be considered a speech act in which she distances herself from the category “Turk.” Through this speech act, she establishes a critical dissociation between herself and those who are generally considered working class, uneducated Turks. Like most MJD members, Rüya had attained more education than the majority of youth with a Turkish background. This and similar statements are framed within a perception that their parents’ ethnic social group is uneducated. It illustrates the relevance of class or education in the marking of distinctions within the Muslim population. Religious identification may not only be a way out of their parents’ ethnic
community, but also (although possibly as an unintended consequence), a way out of a disadvantageous social category. To perform a pure Islam detached from cultural or ethnic features requires the development of advanced knowledge.\(^{23}\) Identifying with an Islam that attaches importance to knowledge and skills can contribute to class travel, in that the youth simultaneously identify with the Islam of an educated middle class and disassociate their Muslim identity from the traditional and uneducated guest worker. MJD represents a space in which such religious class travel can be developed and pursued.

Incentives to practice Islam within a faith community can also be found within Islamic theology. Even if the individual has to answer for their actions, morality, and character on the Day of Judgment (when one dies and the afterlife, *akhira* begins), it is considered better to practice Islam within a group. Whether or not an individual enters the garden-like Paradise is based on the choices and actions made by the individual. However, being part of a religious community is perceived to make it easier to strengthen faith (*iman*), and to provide more opportunities to improve and be a Good Muslim. When talking about the community, Fatima (31) exclaimed:

> It is so important! The Koran talks about the importance of the community (*Gemeinschaft*), of belonging to one. And that is also why it is a duty to perform the Friday prayer together, so that at least once a week people come together and pray.

To perform the Friday prayer within a religious community is not considered obligatory for women. Still, praying in a group is considered a better religious practice, and spending the night in a mosque where they read the Koran together provides participants with important good points that increase their chances of entering Paradise. So does setting shared goals for improving comportment, as Somaya suggested above, such as in regard to dress comportment or doing five good deeds a week.

*Being with Others like Themselves: Sharing Experiences of Self-Transcendence*

Scholars often overlook how the decision to participate in a religious organization can be shaped by religious or spiritual desires and experiences.

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\(^{23}\) This is a global phenomenon: Bayat (2000, 2007) has pointed out that Islamic movements in Cairo and Teheran tend to attract the educated middle-class, and not the poor (see also Sanktanber 2002 for Muslim youth in Istanbul).
Rambo (1999, 264) argues that “religion and spirituality, like aesthetics, should be considered a domain of life and experience that has its own validity.” There are, he continues, “experiences, both cognitive and affective, that are distinctive to religion and spirituality” (ibid.). The experiences of religiosity can produce knowledge and play a part in identity formation. Still, social scientists generally neglect, trivialize, or reject the role of spirituality or religiosity when writing about the religious activities of or religious revival among youth with migrant backgrounds living in Europe. However, I argue that certain aspects of religiosity, such as feelings of transcendence, are relevant to our understanding of the identification process among youth.

Many religious people feel a need to articulate their faith or their experience of transcendence, and this is often difficult to achieve (Joas 2006). There is no agreement on how religious people should think, feel, and act, as people are religious in different ways. Religious experiences happen to individuals and are felt or apprehended rather than cognitively recognized. Although this contributes to making the experiences real, they make them real only for those who experience them (James [1902] 1961). For the young women in MJD, the weekly and monthly meetings represented spaces in which they could share these feelings and experiences with others who acknowledge them, although in different ways.

Spending time with other religious youth makes it possible to talk about the existence of angels, the devil, un-earthly creatures, such as *djinn* (a supernatural fiery creature with free will) and demon-possessions, without risking being considered irrational or traditional. Once I had spent some time with the youth, I started overhearing discussions of other-worldly encounters, some of which the youth had personally experienced.

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24 Weller proposes that “aesthetic or religious ‘experiences’ are not shapeless or amorphous; rather, they are sui generis and radically different from theoretical ones. It is up to the researcher to reflect upon the real content of these forms, upon what they inform, without violating their individual character, but rather to translate them into the theory, or yet to encompass them by means of logical forms. This is the purpose of theoretical research, a reality-seizing process that signals back towards the initial pre-theoretical stages, towards the level of quotidian experience” (Weller et al., 2002, quoted in Weller 2006, 5).

25 The phenomenologist William James defined religion as the “feeling, acts, and experiences of individual men [and women] in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (James [1902] 1961, 42). I include this definition of religion here, as it emphasizes the experience and feelings involved in a religious identity.

26 *Djinn* (or *genie*) are mentioned in the Koran, and a whole *sura* is named after them (*Al-Jinn*).
Within the friendship groups, the youth freely shared episodes of meeting otherworldly creatures and discussed the relevance of their dreams when making important decisions. Prayer was incorporated in social activities in that the youth prayed when they faced specific issues, such as whether they should accept a suitor or not, when waiting for answers from educational institutions or jobs, when sitting an examination, or when experiencing an illness in the family. Individuals could involve the group by, for example, asking, “please can you do a lot of du’a for me so that I get my driving license.” Some would send group emails with requests such as, “please do du’a for the exams I take next week,” or to make du’a for an MJD participant’s ill daughter or relative. This exemplifies not only the relevance of God in their daily life and in relation to decisions they have to make, but also the role of the faith community in these important life events.

The need or desire to be with other youth with a religious lifestyle, to gain knowledge about how to live correctly according to Islam, and to share experiences of self-transcendence is not a unidirectional path. On the contrary, in the following I show that some of the Muslim youth in MJD turned to Islam at a specific moment of their life. Simultaneously, I suggest that the young Muslims’ turn to Islam is not a unidirectional process of identification where they become increasingly religious. Rather, the crafting of a religious Self is a process that takes various paths and directions in which youth may be more focused on religion in some periods of their life than in others. Why youth turn to Islam or turn away from Islam is thus a complex ongoing dynamic that can take new and unexpected turns.

Variations in Religious Careers

Narratives about the decision to veil or to join a religious organization, such as MJD often involved dreams and religious experiences, which the individuals related to their (previous) lax religious praxis, visions, or particular emotional experiences. The content of narratives about religious experiences that MJD participants shared with their peers often involved processes of discovering parts or qualities about themselves, or focused on how they arrived at a new or expanded recognition of the importance of their values. For example, Dunya (25), who grow up in Switzerland, talked about an event in Turkey that boosted her religiosity:

During the summer holidays in Istanbul, Dunya visited a small historical mosque. As she stood alone in the courtyard, the light hit an old well in the
Dunya was not particularly religiously active before this episode, which occurred when she was 18 years old, and in this period she had been contemplating taking off her headscarf. After coming to Berlin on a university exchange, she enthusiastically sought a religious space in which she could feel that she belonged. Initially, she told me, she had been looking forward to coming to Berlin as she was certain that she would find a religious group among all the religious offers available. However, after her one-year exchange, Dunya left Berlin without having found any spaces that she felt were appropriate for her, though she had visited several religious organizations and groups.

The desire to improve their religious selves—to have a pious career—is not a unidirectional process, and can grow both stronger and weaker. Over time, the religiousness of MJD participants varies as they gain more knowledge of Islam, experience changes in their social status, and spend more time with other religious people. Such changes can increase awareness of the current stigmatized group image and the young women may consequently adopt an identity politics in which efforts to change the negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims in Germany become a major factor in their Islamic identity formation. How they engage in religious movements can also depend on their childhood experiences, as Ines's (20) story suggests:

Ines had been a member of MJD for nearly two years when I first met her. She was active both in MJD and DMK, did voluntary work in Green Palace (the bookshop affiliated with MJD), and also volunteered elsewhere. During one of our conversations she told me that the DMK “is like my home, it's like my family.” Her father had arrived in Germany forty years previously to work in a factory. Her mother followed him nineteen years later, one year before Ines was born. Due to his work with lasers in the factory, her father gradually went blind. When Ines was 15 years old, she and her mother would spend the days between their home and the supermarket, because her father did not want them to go out. This period of her life was a turbulent time at home. Ines would listen to loud music in her room and not communicate with her parents. The situation escalated when her mother threw their television out of the window. Ines said, “I think she was ill, mentally I mean. She didn’t know what she was doing anymore.” After this, Ines stayed in a community children's home with several other teenagers, mostly ethnic Germans. At the children's home, they were given a lot of freedom. In describing this time, she said, “when I was 15, I went to a children's home where I lived for one and
a half years. There, I had so much freedom that I did not need. I could stay out until midnight, go to bars and clubs. It was always, 'come on Ines, let's go to the bar' (...). I have been to bars and clubs, it doesn't interest me. Once I was even forced (by the youth workers) to go to the club 'cause I was the only one who did not want to go and then someone would have to be left behind, since you could not be there [in the children's home] alone. So I came with them, and I was sitting like that [lips sulking] the whole time, and they asked me to come and dance, and I did not want to dance (...). Then once I went to a church, because one of the girls was having a - what is it called again, when you are 14 years old ...c....?" “A confirmation?” I suggested. She said, “yes, she was getting confirmed. And I was in the church, and it was so beautiful and I started to cry, and I asked myself ‘where is my religion?’ And then when we moved here [to Berlin], it was ...the summer 2002, I saw foreigners, I was shocked. It was a different mentality. I saw people go to the mosque and pray there. It was a whole new world for me here. And I started to learn more about my religion, and the more I read, the greater was my (desire) to wear the headscarf. Here they think that you are ‘easy,’ the Turkish men also think that. I wanted to show that I am a Muslim. To limit [abgrenzen], not like limit so that I don't belong here, but to show that I am a Muslim. When I told my employer [she worked in a bakery after school at that time] that I would like to wear the headscarf, she said ‘that is such a shame, you have such a nice hair, don't cover it up’—so typical. (...) Then when I stopped work ... it was the 17th of June... I started wearing it the day after, so strong was the need for me to wear the headscarf, I could not wait! You see, it does not have to do with oppression, but with wanting to wear it. Then from one day to the other, I was worthless. The teachers started to ignore me at school... It could have been different, easier. But it is not impossible here [to wear the headscarf], (...) there are many here who wear the headscarf, and the worst is that many women wear headscarves and are not living like Muslims. Instead, there should be less headscarves and more Muslims who live right."

Ines’s story illustrates one path of a young woman living in Germany who saw Islam as a point of identification in her daily life. Despite having been brought up in a Muslim family, Ines was first personally drawn to Islam during a turbulent youth by being exposed to a Christian ritual. She told me that while she was growing up, her parents made her feel that Islam was only about rules and restrictions. Moving to Berlin became a turning point for Ines in that she met practicing Muslims and she started to learn more about Islam. Exposed to a variety of lifestyles through her experiences in the children's home, she dismissed the freedom that she was given as superfluous, and not what she needed. Additionally, Ines felt that in Berlin, people may believe that she was “easy,” a stigma she believed that the headscarf would offset. This suggests how the headscarf can mark a boundary, not vis-à-vis German society, but in the sense
That Ines pointed to the fact that even though many women veil they are not necessarily behaving as Good Muslims, further reflects the idea that the headscarf should produce certain bodily comportments.27

After a few months, Ines stopped participating in MJD due to a lack of time and, I believe, because she never developed strong friendships with any of the other participants. She continued visiting other Islamic organizations such as DMK and Al Nur, and continued to craft herself as a religious subject in the sense that she focused on knowledge, prayer, and doing good deeds. Islam continued to provide an important direction in her life. She energetically performed *du'a* while waiting to hear whether she had been admitted to the Evangelical Church School. She volunteered, was generally rigorous in performing her religious obligations such as praying, and whenever I spent the night at her place she read from the Koran before falling asleep. Her religious crafting of the Self may well have changed, but did not appear to come to a halt after she stopped attending MJD.

Ines’s story suggests that her move to Berlin had an effect on her identification with Islam. The turn to Islam has been considered an urban phenomenon, also taking place for example in Cairo (Ismail 2006) and Istanbul (Sanktanber 2002). A city offers a variety of religious spaces representing different religious orientations and congregations and providing particular “infrastructures of action” (Ismail 2006, 12). Ines pointed out that her turn to Islam in the urban space related to seeing others practicing Islam in a different way than what she was used to. Consequently, a turn to religion in the urban setting is not simply a consequence of alienation in the urban anonymity and the weakening of community structures when moving from the rural to the urban. Rather, how religious organizations situate their message within the social antagonisms and positions that have historically always been a part of the urban landscape (Ismail 2006) are more important. In fact, the variety of religious spaces in urban Berlin makes it possible for youth to choose between various spaces (see chapter 2), or leave a space if they choose to do so.

Not all Muslim youth prefer to participate in religious organizations or mosques. Some develop their religious identity through independent study, by using the Internet, or in private religious groups based in homes. Additionally, not all MJD participants were equally religiously active in their everyday life. Samira (18) exemplifies this:

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27 That Ines pointed to the fact that even though many women veil they are not necessarily behaving as Good Muslims, further reflects the idea that the headscarf should produce certain bodily comportments.
When Samira returned after some months away from the MJD meetings, we walked together to the subway after the meeting. I asked why she decided to come back to MJD. Samira said that she was not managing to do her prayers every day, and that this year she had not even been able to motivate herself to fast during Ramadan. But she was trying to be a better person and to pay Zakat (Alms, one of the five pillars). “That is also being a Muslim,” she added. She explained that by going to MJD meetings, she focused on her faith at least once a week.

Samira is obviously discontented with her failure to perform what she considered to be her religious obligations. Her story shows that MJD provides a space to spend time with religiously oriented people, and that participants hope to be inspired to become more religiously active, at least once a week. During the time I was in the organization, Samira (like Ines) was never really included in any of the friendship cliques that developed among the attendees. She dressed differently from the others (headscarf with jeans and a sweater which ended at her waist, though never in a sexualized way), she was not studying for an Abitur, and she was also active in cultural activities arranged by multicultural Berliner initiatives.

When I met former MJD participants by chance (often in mosques) I sometimes asked why they were no longer attending MJD meetings. I noticed that a few participants left the organization when they felt that they had gained enough knowledge, or felt that they were not learning anything new by participating. Others continued, even though they considered their level of knowledge to be higher than the one taught at MJD, either because of friendships or in order to be in a religious atmosphere. This suggests that participating in a group such as MJD is also about developing and nurturing friendships with people of similar taste and leisure interests. I noticed that some youths stopped coming if they did not like the program, or if they found the leaders or members too strict. Most of the time this explanation was combined with a statement about how they felt (dissatisfied) with the other participants and that MJD was not a place they found friends (sometimes due to age differences). Similarly, I also talked to youth who had heard about MJD, but who did not want to attend because they “prefer to learn about Islam alone” and, they often added, did not need the social space because they “have friends already.”

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28 Many of the youth who left MJD continued to build their religious knowledge and craft a religious Self in another space or in private.
Taking Religiosity Seriously

The status of belonging to a religious minority and still being viewed as migrants (although as second or third generation migrants) shape how the youth identify with Islam. Explanations of youths’ turn to Islam as a consequence of their experiences of how the nation state, politicians, and media treat them, acknowledge that the women act as rational socio-political agents. Participating in a religious organization can be a form of identity politics, as taking up a Muslim identity can be a strategy to deal with not feeling accepted as German or as an effort to change the negative categorizations of Islam in Germany. These external factors, which constitute the set of circumstances in which the youth were located, may be considered push factors for some youth who start developing an Islamic identity.

The descriptions of young people’s actions that reduce identification with Islam and a religious youth organization to “a vector for collective action and protest” as Cesari (2003, 146) does, or that simplify them as merely a reaction to Othering or discrimination as Khosrokhavar (1997) tends to do, or to an “available feminist strategy” (Salih 2003), at best ignores and at worst belittles the young women’s religious experiences and desires. In this framework, identity is diminished to a question of rational strategies, made up of political or social projects. In part, these explanations reduce the agency of Muslim youth, and define them through external social orders and rational choice. Identity politics constructs the Muslim agent as part of a universal modern actor. Although this partly avoids Othering Muslim youth, it tends to allow subjects to be actors only insofar as they react to their social environment. As this perspective does not recognize the desires that motivate the youths’ actions, their agency is understood as solely a response to social collective constraints. The youth are considered agentive only insofar as they struggle against oppression or discrimination. This constrains our understanding of the individual choices taken, desires, identifications sought, and the process of crafting the Self as a religious subject.

Educated young Muslims may be attracted by (or pulled to) MJD due to its focus on knowledge and self-development and because it is an autonomous organization. MJD advertises itself and its events and meetings, by fliers and seminars with catchy slogans and titles. Their events that combine religious messages with popular, well-known artists are particularly appealing to youth. Thus, religious organizations can actively attract youth
by establishing a specific profile in terms of their attendees, religious orientation, and events.

Moreover, the set of meanings that the actors ascribe to their behavior and actions must be included in the analysis of youths' identification with Islam and with a faith community. As this chapter has illustrated, youth participate in MJD specifically to be with others like them, which includes people with similar religious orientations, lifestyles, and socio-economic backgrounds. They want to feel normal in being young and religiously active individuals, and to share experiences of self-transcendence. These factors can impel youth to identify with this particular faith community, where their Muslim identity is further crafted. According to Islamic tradition, they also gain more points by performing religious rituals together. Consequently, participating in a Muslim community may even become a rational choice from a religious point of view.

Reflections on the turn to Islam and the individual's motivation to craft herself as a female Muslim subject must be understood in relation to the individual's values, morals, and desires. What image does she seek to convey to socially relevant others, and to the social fields within which she acts? The effort to gain knowledge, improve one's religious performance, and to be(come) a virtuous subject can be a vehicle for action and for identifying as a Muslim. Likewise, the desire to be(come) a virtuous subject or a better Muslim may be the main reason to join MJD, although for some this desire may gradually become an aspiration only while participating in the group.

Nevertheless, most of the youth have some sense of attraction or curiosity towards Islam before their initial visit to MJD. This initial attraction may be a consequence of the negative image of Islam in Germany and less a matter of more internal religious emotions. Searching for better answers to provide non-Muslims was mentioned as a reason for visiting MJD. Later, participation in a group where the center of attention is on becoming better Muslims can reinforce participants' willingness to follow certain religious duties and can form and strengthen a desire to become pious. Indeed, the reasons for remaining in MJD may well be different than the initial reasons for approaching this faith community. For example, the group's focus on religious subjectification could eventually alienate people who do not have a more personal desire to become a religious subject.

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29 An individual's motivation for improving her religious comportment can also be structured or informed by her family, friends, and social field.
As MJD meetings focus on crafting the Self as a religious subject, it is likely that some will leave the organization quite soon if they do not feel compelled, or desire, to become Good Muslims.

A more multifaceted understanding of women’s religious identity and how they orient their actions must take seriously their aspirations to become Good Muslims, to come closer to God, and to reach Paradise.\(^{30}\) Aspirations, morals, and values must be taken seriously when analyzing why an individual turn to a specific node of identification. Yet this is not sufficient. An analysis of these young women’s turn to Islam needs to include both the set of circumstances in which they are located and the set of meanings that they attribute to their behavior. By ignoring the former, the analysis risks becoming ahistorical. Desires and motivations are formed in contexts defined by time and space. Ignoring the larger social, political, economic, and cultural milieu risks also ignoring why and how specific desires and subjectivities are formed in a particular context.\(^{31}\) Such an analysis cannot illuminate how religious organizations seek to attract particular individuals. The particular place and political discourse must be included when accounting for the life of pious young Muslim women in Europe. In order to present a deeper analysis of the youths’ identification with Islam, we must therefore consider the complex interaction of factors at the global level (the “war against terror” in which Islam is constructed as the enemy, and the revival of Islam as a social force), the national level (migration processes, and the specifically German Othering processes in the media and policies), the local level (the urban context, experiences of discrimination, religious community structures, family structures, as well as the socio-economic material conditions of migrant families) and the personal level (horizons of experience, goals, desires, and interests), in addition to the specific characteristics of religiosity (the need to share transcendental experiences and practice rituals and beliefs in a group).

\(^{30}\) The variety of ways in which these desires or motivations are brought to life is another question which needs to be asked, but which is outside the scope of this book.

\(^{31}\) For example, Mahmood (2005) does not consider which opportunities are available to the women she works with in the Egyptian mosque movements. This is a problem when she insists on using the term “agency” about the women’s devotion to a particular religious life. It should be noted that she is not referring explicitly to questions of identity or identification, but rather talking about agency, autonomy, freedom and choice.