Critical
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Contesting religious boundaries at school: A case from Norway

Elise Margrethe Vike Johannessen [ORCID]
Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

Abstract
This article examines the experiences of Norwegian high school girls with Muslim backgrounds in learning about Islam in religious education (RE). The empirical material consists of observations from a high school class in Norway and interviews with girls in the class. The findings support previous reports that Islam as a topic may be challenging for students with Muslim backgrounds. They also suggest that the RE classroom is a space where religious boundaries can go from blurred to bright as a result of students' reactions to educational content and its foci on Islam. As many teachers find the topic of Islam potentially controversial and thus challenging to teach, this article offers insights that may help teachers to understand and deal with students' reactions in the classroom context.

Keywords
Religious education, Islam, boundaries, representation, responsibility, high school

Introduction

> I know that there's a shitload of people abusing Islam. Islamists… And they have done a lot of horrible things. But… It's a little, in a way, horrible to sit and watch [a documentary about the Muslim Brotherhood]… Because… On the one hand, it is really about *your own* religion. But what is shown [in the video], *that* is not my religion. (Farah)

Over the past decades, a vast body of scholarly literature has paid attention to the lived experiences of people with Muslim or other ethnic or religious minority backgrounds in Western liberal societies. These contributions are largely concerned with minorities' everyday experiences with various forms of racism, discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping in the labor market, school, and public and social services. They also examine issues pertaining to identity work and

Corresponding author:
Elise Margrethe Vike Johannessen, Faculty of Teacher Education and International Studies, Department of International Studies and Interpreting, Oslo Metropolitan University, Postboks 4, St Olavs Plass, Oslo 0130, Norway.
Email: elisemar@oslomet.no

identity management (e.g., Midtbøen 2018; Nadim 2017; Reisel et al. 2019; Svendsen 2014; Vassenden and Andersson 2011). This article is positioned within this strand of literature, applying the theoretical concepts of bright and blurred boundaries (Alba 2005), ascribed representation (Midtbøen 2018; Nadim 2017), and burden of responsibility (Zine 2017) to the field of classroom research.

In Norwegian high schools, the curricular topic of Islam is placed within the subject religion and ethics (RE). RE is taken in the last year of the program "specialization for general studies." Researchers in Norway have found that research on topics related to RE in Norwegian high schools is limited (Husebø et al. 2019). This is somewhat of a paradox, as the high school years may be seen as especially formative for religious and worldview identity (Husebø et al. 2019). Additionally, research has shown that Islam is a topic that teachers find challenging to teach, as it can involve aspects that *may* be considered as controversial, and conversely, prompt discussions and disagreements where some students feel violated or disrespected (e.g., Anker and von der Lippe 2019; Flensner and von der Lippe 2019; Røthing 2017).

The initial quote from the interview with Farah illustrates just how students' subjective views and understandings of, and experiences with, Islam might be in contrast to other representations of Islam. She refers to a series of lessons in RE where the Islam presented in class did not correlate with *her* Islam. The quote is her answer to my general question about whether she had experienced or seen situations at school that she found uncomfortable or difficult to deal with. As the quote shows, she tied this question directly to learning about Islam. The mandate of the Norwegian public school is to promote equality and provide students with equal opportunities, and to reduce the significance of backgrounds and identity categories (Eriksen 2017). This indicates that Norwegian schools are intended to be sites for dismantling boundaries. Contrary to this intention, this article shows how the RE classroom can be an arena where religious boundaries within the classroom may become (temporarily) bright through students' active contestation of how Islam is portrayed and taught in class. A bright religious boundary entails that it is clear and unambiguous regarding a person's or group's membership, either as "religiously 'other'" or as a member of the "mainstream" (Alba, 2005, 32).

This article draws on a larger body of empirical data collected through fieldwork at three Norwegian high schools, for the purpose of a doctoral dissertation. The dissertation examines stereotypes and prejudice in school from a student perspective. (Johannessen 2021). This article builds on observation and interview data from one of the three schools. By focusing empirically on girls with Muslim backgrounds contesting how Islam is portrayed and taught in RE, the article adds to our understanding of classroom dynamics and Muslim girls' agency in matters that can be considered, or experienced as, controversial and challenging for both students and teachers. The overarching question guiding the article's presentation and analysis is as follows: How can we understand the negative experiences, perceptions, and actions of the girls with Muslim backgrounds in learning about Islam in RE through the theoretical concepts of boundaries, representation, and responsibility?

Theoretical concepts: Boundaries, representation, and responsibility

In recent years, the concept of boundaries has been widely used in research across the social sciences in order to study relational processes and dynamics (Lamont and Molnár 2002). Alba (2005) expands theorizations on the shifting potential of ethnic and religious boundaries by elaborating on a distinction between "bright" and "blurred" boundaries. According to Alba, the distinction between bright and blurred boundaries has to do with how clear or set a boundary is. A bright boundary

implies that there is no doubt as to where an individual is placed with respect to the boundary. In contrast, a blurred boundary can be ambiguous or vague and involves "zones of self-presentation and social representation that allow for ambiguous locations with respect to the boundary" (22). Yet the nature of a boundary is highly context-dependent; it can manifest itself in distinct ways in different spheres so that a boundary that is bright in one context might be blurred in another. For example, the institutionalized religious mainstream in many European societies constitutes a bright boundary identifying Muslims as "religiously 'other'" (Alba 2005, 32).

Studies show that being part of an ethnic or religious minority can affect the conditions for participation in various institutions. In her research on ethnic and religious minorities in the mediated public sphere in Norway, Nadim (2017) reports that identity ascription based on specific identity traits is common for minorities in the public eye. Identity ascription can limit one who gets to be in the public sphere, and many people experience being reduced, locked to a minority trait, and lumped into a minority category (Midtbøen 2018; Nadim 2017). Similar findings have been reported from the school context, where students experience having to act as "experts" or "spokespeople" for "their" group, or opinions, behaviors, and attitudes are ascribed to them based on their background (e.g., Røthing 2017; Toft 2017).

Minorities often risk ascription to positions as representatives of "their" group. This is usually referred to as *group representation*, which has the potential to reinforce categorical essentializations and identifications (Nadim 2017). It can also entail ascription into collectivities based on an assumed cultural and experiential sameness tied to a distinctive status (Andersson 2005). Nadim (2017) found that for the participants in her study, ethnicity—and particularly religion—constitute bright boundaries in contemporary Norway. Similarly, Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen (2016) claim that minorities experience what they refer to as the "curse of representation" (*representasjonens forbannelse*) (25) when participating in the mediated public sphere. The curse of representation concerns minority individuals' lack of opportunity to define what role to take in the public eye. The expectations minorities face can "force" them into a minority role, where they have to represent "their" group or specific views and attitudes.

Where the curse of representation has to do with being locked into a certain minority role, Zine (2017) coins the term "burden of responsibility" to explain the ways in which Muslims may act to counter or counteract experiences of misrepresentation and essentialization. Zine claims that the burden of representation and responsibility are interlinked. She conceptualizes the burden of responsibility based on Muslim adolescents growing up after the 9/11 terror attacks and their experiences with having to serve as correctives and be good representatives of Islam. She claims that the burden of responsibility can be a result of both ascription and external pressure as well as an internal sense of duty. According to Zine (2017), young Muslims fulfill this responsibility as a means of promoting positive perceptions and to counteract negative and essentializing discourses tied to Muslims and Islam.

Boundaries, representation, and responsibility in the school context

Lied and Toft (2018) found that media materials (i.e., news coverage and documentaries) are increasingly being used as pedagogical artifacts in schools. This means that some elements of society can become especially salient or get a disproportionate share of attention inside the classroom. Religion is such an element, and it has increasingly become subject to public concern and controversies in Scandinavian countries (Lövheim and Lied 2018). Despite constituting a small majority in contemporary Scandinavia, widespread negative discourses and issues concerning the

Muslim population, and more generally Islam, have increasingly become the cause of public and political tension (Lundby and Repstad 2018).

Studies show that teachers often use stereotype portrayals in instruction on Islam, and that lessons often focus on negative and sensational aspects of Islam (i.e., terrorism and the oppression of women), adding to the stigma of being Muslim (Andresen 2020; Røthing 2017; Toft 2017, 2018, 2019). Toft (2017) found that the Muslim girls in his study (more so than the boys) experienced the educational content on Islam in RE in stark contrast to how *they* knew Islam. Several Norwegian studies have examined aspects connected to religion, ethnicity, and identity and how these aspects relate to each other (e.g., Prieur 2004; Vassenden and Andersson 2011). Most of these have focused on the interrelatedness and complexity of ethnicity and religious backgrounds in matters of identity work. Other studies have addressed these issues in the context of schooling (e.g., Eriksen 2017; Svendsen 2014). Here, some studies have a particular focus on the matter of RE with respect to stereotypes and marginalization, inclusion, or teaching practices, whereas others focus on instructional topics, materials, and curriculum (e.g., Anker and von der Lippe 2019; Toft 2017, 2018, 2019; von der Lippe 2019). This article contributes to the latter strand of research by focusing specifically on the experiences of Muslim girls in learning about Islam in RE. It accomplishes this by using a theoretical toolkit consisting of the concepts bright and blurred boundaries, representation, and responsibility.

Like in the wider society, Norwegian schools are increasingly diverse, making it more necessary than ever to expand our understandings of what challenges can arise within diverse classrooms and how these challenges can be met and managed. As previous research has shown, wider societal discourses have long found their way into RE classrooms, affecting how a topic is taught and *what* is taught. The classroom, which is usually regarded as a small, protected bubble, has become even more connected to what goes on in the outside world through students' increased exposure and awareness of political and public negative discourses and through the use of media materials in teaching. Boundaries, representation, and responsibility are concepts that can be—and have been—used to shed light on social processes and dynamics in the public sphere and society in general. Schools are social spaces that mirror and are interlinked with their social surroundings while also being separate entities that can illuminate, diminish, reflect, or change social processes and dynamics belonging to the wider society (Johannessen 2021, 5). As such, this article uses the aforementioned theoretical concepts to unpack and discuss how the girls' actions, and how the girls explain their negative reactions and actions in class, can be understood in the light of previous research findings on minorities' experiences from the mediated public sphere (and more generally on social dynamics in the larger society). And further, how their contestations seem to affect the religious boundaries in class.

Methods

At each of the three schools where I did my fieldwork, I followed one graduating class for 3 weeks, conducting participant observation and individual semi-structured interviews with students in the classes under study (in total, 12 boys and 16 girls were interviewed). I observed all common core subjects[1] and "hung around" with the students during their breaks, creating opportunities for more informal conversations with them.

I selected schools in different geographical locations: western Norway, northern Norway, and eastern Norway. This deliberate choice increases the possibility of capturing variation and complexity (Johannessen 2021, 5). Two of the schools were ethnically and religiously homogenous, dominated by white pupils of majority background. One is located in a rural area and the other one in

a small city (5). Whereas the third school was in a big city and consisted of a large heterogeneous student population both in terms of ethnic background and religion. The students in this class had backgrounds from Scandinavian, Middle Eastern, African, and Asian countries (5). The schools were sampled randomly, with two specific criteria. First, the schools had to be located in different parts of the country. Second, the schools had to offer the study program "specialization for general studies." This provided schools that were located in areas ranging from rural to urban, and further, schools that had differing student populations in terms of size, and ethnic and religious backgrounds among students—but still somewhat comparable because the study was carried out within the same educational program. Both the geographical variation and variations within the student population provided data that showed complexity and variation in a multitude of ways.

During the first week at each school, I only did participant observations—interviews were conducted in the last 2 weeks. The data collection process used semi-structured interviews with some planned topics and questions (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). These topics included family, upbringing, interests, and school- and education-specific questions. The school-related questions focused on the students' feelings of safety and well-being in school and their relationships with teachers and peers. The aim of the interviews was to gain insight into stereotypes and prejudice tied to minority groups and identities in school from a student perspective (Johannessen 2021). All the interviews lasted for 1–1.5 hours on average and were audio-recorded; they were then transcribed verbatim.

This article is based on data from the big city school and uses two of the girls from the class as examples. Excerpts from the interviews with Derya and Farah are used to illustrate broader findings from the fieldwork in this class. Derya and Farah were the only girls from the big city class with Muslim backgrounds that I interviewed. However, what they articulated in interviews was similar to what other girls with Muslim backgrounds in this class articulated during informal conversations with me and in line with what I observed in class. How Derya and Farah acted and behaved in class was also how several of the other girls acted and behaved, although Derya and Farah were the most vocal.

The data were coded and analyzed using HyperRESEARCH. The data were analyzed thematically (Charmaz 2006; Strauss and Corbin 1990) in two phases—an initial phase and a focused phase (Charmaz 2006). In the initial phase, I thoroughly read and reread the transcripts while coding smaller pieces of data to find the main themes (Johannessen 2021, 6). In the focused phase, broader and more general themes were identified based on the recurrent codes and themes from the initial phase (6). Themes relating to RE and Islam was discerned from the main themes, such as "social distance or difference" and "discomfort." The fieldnotes from the big city school total roughly 17,000 words and the transcribed interviews with Derya and Farah amount to approximately 36,000 words.

All of the participants received full information about the study and research ethics both in writing and verbally, and gave their consent in writing. For those interviewed, information regarding the study was again conveyed verbally, and their consent was audio-recorded. Fictitious names have been assigned to the research participants to ensure anonymity.

Analysis and discussion

One topic that stood out through observations was how girls with Muslim backgrounds at the big city school reacted to learning about Islam in RE. Initially, I had no specific expectation of Islam as a topic of instruction becoming an important topic in the study. However, through observations and interviews at the big city school, issues pertaining to instruction on Islam in RE appeared salient,

indicating it was important to explore the topic further. At the other two schools, the topic of Islam did not stand out like it did at the big city school. That said, the schools and classes were very different from one other, especially in terms of student composition. In the class under study at the big city school, learning about Islam in RE class caused tension, heated discussions, and seemed to leave some students feeling frustrated or angry. As such, the case of contesting religion at the big city school stood out in the comparative data. In the following, this article analyzes and discusses how we can understand the girls' negative experiences, perceptions, and actions through the theoretical concepts of boundaries, representation, and responsibility.

Speaking up, standing out

Negative emotions such as frustration, resignation, anger, and fear, as well as an understanding of Islam as a difficult topic of classroom instruction, were common among the girls with Muslim backgrounds in the big city class. In lessons with Islam on the agenda, several students argued and protested loudly against the educational content or about what was said. However, why did they argue and protest? The following excerpt shows how the issue resonated with Farah when it came up during the interview:

> I wish that they kind of showed the positive sides *too*… It's not nice just to show the negative sides. For example, in Buddhism… We've learned about Buddhism for a very long time, and I haven't heard *one* thing that was negative. It was only positive: "You're supposed to be a good person, you're not supposed to take a life, you shouldn't…" *Yes, fine!* But why aren't you mentioning that about Islam, then?… *And*, in Islam, it's completely forbidden to harm people, to kill people… But those extremists [in the documentary] that's *exactly* what they do, and *that* is what is being shown in class. *If* you are going to show us that, you need to say that "In Islam, it is forbidden to harm people. It's forbidden to kill people. Have that in the back of your minds, this is not applicable to all Muslims, and we show it to you because there's a lot of misuse of religion. You see? That's why!" They need to *say* that. Not just show [the video].

Farah's frustration is abundantly clear, and several of the girls with Muslim backgrounds in the class told me that they shared this frustration. The girls claimed that portrayals of Islam are unfair compared to other religions—positive aspects of other religions are accentuated, whereas positive aspects of Islam remain inconspicuous. Their views on this were made explicitly clear through their behaviors and actions in the classroom. On several occasions, the girls interrupted their peers' presentations, shouting "That is *not* correct!" and "Why do we keep on using this textbook when everything it says about Islam is wrong?" Also, after watching a documentary on the Muslim Brotherhood, several of the girls expressed frustration regarding stereotyping of Muslims and the link between Islam and terrorism with comments like "Just like July 22nd! At first everyone thought it was a Muslim [who carried out the terror attacks]."[2] The controversial and the extreme is, according to several of the girls, something that is in fact real and something they need to learn about. However, they see instruction about "ordinary Muslims" and the versions of Islam that they relate to as either absent or under-communicated. They clearly regard the focus as dominated by negative and sensational aspects related to Islam, which sparks negative feelings where an effect, or a strategy to counter it, is to contest it. From talking with the girls, they seem to understand contesting as something they *have* to do—that the content and its foci "forces" them to contest what is said. This can be read as *them* giving religious boundaries significance through contestation (Alba 2005).

Whether their inner feelings cause their (re)actions, or whether the educational content actually *is* incorrect, stereotypical, or prejudiced of Muslims and thus warrants their (re)actions, is of course debatable. In the specific case of the lesson where they watched the documentary mentioned, both the documentary shown and the tasks given to the students were not, in my understanding, used as a means to focus on something extreme and sensational. The teacher thoroughly introduced the topics at hand, which were ethics in Islam, Sharia, and Islamism. The topics were clearly connected to both the documentary and the tasks. The girls, however, were adamant in claiming that the content of this specific lesson, and also other lessons on Islam, was incorrect, stereotypical, and prejudicial.

Derya, who was a frequent figure in contesting the portrayals of Islam and Muslims, explains that, despite often feeling frustrated and defeated by what she claims to be an overly negative focus on aspects of Islam, there are also other reasons why she reacts to the content on Islam:

> It becomes very personal, and that's why it's also so vulnerable. Because it's so personal. So… really, like… I like religion as a subject, but at the same time not because your private life or your personal opinions come out very fast. And… I feel that all it really does is create more misunderstandings, to be honest.

Derya continues to talk about how she is often met with responses like "Yeah, well … you are Muslim" if she states her opinion on something related to Islam. That way, she claims, the focus is turned to her and the fact that she is Muslim, rather than the topic at hand. She continues:

> That's not what it's about [her being Muslim]. You would have to understand each other, you would have to actually listen, and… You shouldn't have to yell, or explain, or correct someone, like "that's how it is", "because I believe in this or that." So, really, I mostly get annoyed because I have to put it [her personal belief and opinions] forth. So, really, I get a bit irritated too, because I have to put myself out there. And as I said, I don't like having to bring up my personal opinions, or faith… Because it's private, and it's so vulnerable.

The abovementioned quotes suggests that Derya regards faith as a private matter that should be kept out of classroom discussions. This can be seen as an expression of secularizing tendencies, where faith is individualized and privatized. Her opinion is that what and how she believes should not be necessary to bring forth in class. She is not required to speak up, but the fact that she does not recognize or relate to the content being taught triggers her to do it. By speaking up, she can potentially offer her fellow students perspectives that are not covered in class, however, at personal a cost; not only does she regard it as a private matter, but as something *vulnerable*. There can be multiple reasons as to why she regards it as a vulnerable topic. One possible interpretation is that she, by sharing her opinions and beliefs, has to speak on matters she is not comfortable speaking about or sharing with others, *because* she thinks of it as a private matter, or maybe because she is not sure about how to talk about it. Another possibility is that, by speaking up and making herself visible as Muslim in class, she risks ascription as well as a curse of representation (Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen 2016; Nadim 2017), where her individuality can become inconspicuous, and the risk of being reduced to a minority stereotype is greater. Additionally, the issue of group representation is pertinent, as she might be expected by peers and teachers to know everything there is about Islam. Or the opposite; that *not* knowing everything can potentially decrease the impact and credibility of her contestations. Derya continues to explain why she reacts to some of the content on Islam in class:

I feel like it kind of also contributes to, not labelling, but to kind of… "Oh, but she's probably just answering because she's Muslim", right? It's very much like that. I wish it wasn't. […] But… I still get eager [despite a negative focus on Islam] and think it's interesting to learn about *everything*. Because there's so much I don't know. There's so much I don't know about my own faith, even. So… That's why I react like that too, because things I haven't even heard about are suddenly supposed to… Well, yeah.… When we learn about things that are incorrect… I feel like people become more prejudiced. Like, I get really upset, you know, and I feel like I need to express *myself*—that I have to explain that "that isn't true"… Then I'm not listened to, or, like, I'm accused of being quarrelsome. And that's also kind of why I react.

The quote suggests that Derya also contests when the content *surprises* her. It seems that when she encounters new information about Islam, she may have trouble believing or fully accepting it, and her instinct is to contest it. Why Derya reacts in such a manner in encountering "new" information can be multifaceted: One interpretation might be that, to her, any facts or information about Islam that can be regarded as *negative* warrant dispute based solely on this fact—that Derya feels a need to refute or contest any portrayal that might reflect badly on Islam and Muslims. It can also indicate a general distrust toward both textbooks and teachers' knowledge when it comes to Islam. Another possible interpretation might be that Derya sees the lessons as opportunities to present and represent Islam based on her experiences with Islam. That she, who identifies as Muslim, has more credibility than the teacher and the sources used in class. This can be an example of a curse of representation (Midtbøen 2018; Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen 2016), where Derya takes on a role that might be *expected* of her. At the same time, however, it can also be the opposite, an example of a situation where Derya has the opportunity to represent Islam on her own terms. Simultaneously in this, a burden of responsibility (Zine 2017) remains relevant, as Derya might not have taken on the role of speaking out if the content and foci of the class had offered a broader set of perspectives, or more positive portrayals of Islam.

From blurred to bright boundaries

Some of the girls contested or challenged aspects of Islam they had not heard about before or lacked in-depth knowledge about. This could be a result of previous experiences with (mis)representations and essentialization from society in general. If something that portrays Islam or Muslims in a negative light in some way is presented, a burden of responsibility (Zine 2017) may kick in. Either as a result of inner feelings and convictions about what is (ethically) right and wrong, or possibly because they are on edge; so primed by widespread negative discourses on Islam and Muslims on the macro-level, that anything that can be interpreted as negative in the classroom triggers them to respond. As such, defending or correcting may have become a natural response. In contesting portrayals of Islam, the girls "choose" Islam over the mainstream (Alba 2005); they are separated from the rest of the class, the "majority," in contesting how Islam is portrayed. Thus, their efforts contribute to creating a distinction between an "us" and a "them" in the classroom, making the religious boundaries in the classroom clearer: Through contesting how Islam is portrayed and taught in class, the girls are positioned distinctly and unambiguously with respect to religious boundaries, and as such, religious boundaries go from blurred to bright in the RE classroom (Alba 2005).

When taking on an active role in defending, correcting, and countering things that are said or done in class, the curse of representation and being beholden to certain attitudes is likely (Midtbøen and Steen-Johnsen 2016; Nadim 2017). As such, the girls' religious backgrounds may become less private, accentuating the difference that their religious backgrounds represent. By contesting

religion, religious boundaries that outside of RE seem blurred or non-existent in the class become temporarily bright; this illustrates the context-dependent nature of religious boundaries (Alba 2005). One implication of contesting religion is that the girls become clearly visible as "religiously 'other'" (Alba 2005, 32) in the classroom. A central question regarding the brightening of religious boundaries in the classroom then becomes who or what causes it to happen? Is it the teacher, the peers, the educational content, or the girls themselves? Derya states that speaking up in class can lead to an "us" and "them" dichotomy:

> It quickly turns into them and us [in the classroom]. If you speak out, then you take kind of a… Well, a risk. You get a comment back, or… it very quickly turns into… it's them and it's us.

The "us" and "them" dichotomy Derya refers to indicates that the group dynamic in the classroom changes as a result of her contestations. Through her actions, she runs the risk of being excluded from the greater class "we." Toft (2017) argues that essentialized representations and a focus on controversial and sensational aspects related to Islam creates a distinction in which Muslims are set apart from the imagined "us" constructed by the educational content and foci. In Toft's study, what creates a distinction between "us" and "them" is tied to the content and foci on Islam. In the present study, the "us" and "them" dichotomy seems to be made clearer through *how* the girls themselves contest the lesson content and foci—somewhat aggressively and without necessarily providing alternative explanations. Like Toft's students, the girls in this study often talked about how their school environment was open and inclusive, and much like a secular space—religion and religious backgrounds hardly ever affected their days at school. This was also my impression after having observed the class for 3 weeks.

Sometimes the girls provided the class with arguments that reflected positively on Islam. More often, they simply claimed something was untrue or incorrect without providing alternative explanations. Most of the girls indicated that they did not actively practice their faith, other than celebrating Eid al-Fitr. Farah wore a headscarf, but she stated that she did not really pray much, and that she found it more important to be a good person than to pray five times a day. Still, Farah was adamant in that there has to be some kind of regulation of what is taught and how it is taught:

> Am I just supposed to sit there and see people babble about my religion? To *me*, religion is something really important. I'm not saying that I'm that damned religious, but it's kind of part of my identity, you see? And it's something… valuable, and… It's kind of… it's not something you can talk about *just* how you'd like. It has to have a certain frame, if you see what I mean…

Like Farah, Derya emphasized that her religion was important to her while also adding, "I'm not exactly the most religious person you could find." As such, the data suggest that when Islam is the topic of instruction, the girls with Muslim backgrounds are put in, or maybe more accurately put *themselves* in, minority positions as bearers of a burden of responsibility (Zine 2017)—to counter negative portrayals and to correct what they view as essentializations, misconceptions, and untruths about Islam and Muslims, or in attempts to regulate the way the topic is taught and discussed.

Concluding remarks

Through analysis and discussions of the empirical material, this study has shown how contesting religion causes religious boundaries that generally appear as blurred or non-existent at school to become bright in RE class (Alba 2005). This is based on how some girls actively take on, or are

implicitly given, roles as representatives for Islam and the Muslim community, which entails a burden of responsibility (Zine 2017). This responsibility means that the students, through contestations, try to promote discourses that counter widespread negative discourses that have a strong foothold in the wider society, and that have permeated the school context. Furthermore, as widespread negative discourses and representations of Muslims often depicts Muslims as a collective body (Shryock 2010), this study proposes that it is plausible that the girls contests were not as a means of protecting or defending *themselves* but also on behalf of a wider community of Muslims. Lastly, it is not unlikely that there is in fact no identifiable "culprit" in terms of what or who causes the brightening of boundaries—it does not need to be the girls' "fault," nor does it need to be the topic's or the teacher's fault. Maybe it is merely what can happen when dominant discourses from the outside world permeate the classroom, especially in classrooms that are considerably diverse in ethnic and religious backgrounds.

All the students in the big city class stated that, in general, ethnic and religious backgrounds did not matter in terms of how they got along with or interacted with one other. They understood the classroom to be a neutral and secular space despite the students' various religious backgrounds—overall, ethnic and religious boundaries were blurred. Contrary to this, the present study revealed how Muslim backgrounds, and thus religious boundaries, become salient when Islam is the topic in RE. In these lessons, in a class where religious boundaries otherwise seem blurred, these boundaries become (temporarily) bright. The lessons cause instances of de-blurring of boundaries, where Muslim backgrounds are highlighted. This might be the result of an experienced burden of responsibility stemming from external and internal pressures and demands (Zine 2017). However, it might be more so a result of the girls' awareness of widespread discourses—because of this, they are triggered to contest any form of focus on Islam and Muslims that can be read as negative, regardless of whether it is correct.

This article has focused on the experiences of girls with Muslim backgrounds from a single school. It is based on a small part of a larger qualitative empirical material and is as such not generalizable. One should be careful in speculating, however, the fieldwork at this school revealed striking and observable differences in how girls and boys with Muslim backgrounds responded to and acted when learning about Islam in RE. The girls frequently initiated and engaged in arguments or discussions, whereas the boys, if they did something in particular, was to provoke the girls or make jokes (which could also be the boys' way of handling potential unease or discomfort without outwardly signaling any such emotions). This is an interesting pattern, worthy of reflection and discussion. Public, political, and mediatized debates about Islam are usually based on hegemonic liberal values, and stereotypes and prejudice tied to Islam and Muslims are often gender-specific. Where labels such as authoritative, aggressive, and controlling are tied to Muslim males (Gresaker 2017), Muslim females are described as oppressed, passive, and subdued (van Es 2019). Could such gendered stereotypes affect individuals' motivation to contest religion in class—could it offer ways of understanding how and why students are put in, or put *themselves* in, positions where they contribute to the brightening of religious boundaries? Further investigations on the school experiences of male and female Muslim adolescents using an intersectional approach could provide insights to how both micro- and macro-structures of power and complex identities may affect adolescents. This article can be seen as a starting point for further investigations into how and what types of categories and structures may come into play and how dominant discourses on gender (equality), religion, and ethnicity affect the subject positions and everyday lives of minority students in- and outside of school. This article has illustrated how school spaces, specifically the RE classroom, may enhance certain boundaries the mandate of the Norwegian school sets out to neutralize. Even if the girls can be regarded as (partly) responsible for brightening religious

boundaries in the RE classroom, one could ask whether classrooms *without* students who speak out against content they do not agree with or see as incorrect or unacceptable allow certain portrayals and perspectives to circulate freely, thus missing opportunities to critically discuss differences in opinions and views.

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ORCID iD

Elise Margrethe Vike Johannessen 🅘 https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5246-6580

Notes

1. Norwegian, history, RE, and physical education.
2. On 22 July 2011, Anders Behring Breivik, an ethnic Norwegian right-wing extremist, carried out terror attacks in Oslo and on the island of Utøya. 77 people were killed, and most of the victims were adolescents attending a political (the Norwegian Labor party) summer camp at Utøya.

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Author biography

Elise Margrethe Vike Johannessen is a PhD candidate at the Faculty of Education and International Studies, Department of International Studies and Interpreting, at Oslo Metropolitan University. Her doctoral research investigates high school students' experiences with and perceptions of stereotypes and negative attitudes tied to minority groups and identities in school. Johannessen holds a bachelor's degree in Teacher Education and a master's degree in Multicultural and International Education from Oslo Metropolitan University.