*Article*

# The Agency in Islam or (and) Human Rights? The Case of Pious Baltic Muslim Women

Morta Vidūnaitė

Department of Sociology, Vytautas Magnus University, LT-44248 Kaunas, Lithuania; morta.vidunaite@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This article focuses on the variety of ways pious Muslim women exercise their agency to navigate between religion, gender, and human rights in the dynamic post-Soviet Baltic societies. It shows that these women primarily find agency not in human rights but in Islam as a religion that provides instruction on aspects of life related to human rights. They are empowered as individuals by Islam as the religion of their deliberate choice, which gives them meaning and guidance in life. They also find agency in their roles as wives and mothers as well as in the sisterhood of the Muslim community, while a career serves more as an area of personal autonomy and self-realization. This research is based on the analysis of qualitative data from semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021–2022. Baltic women's narratives on human rights (and in the case of this research, specifically regarding gender and sexuality) and the role of Islam in their lives contributes to the redefinition of religious and secular concepts within a post-communist context and contributes to the wider scholarly debate on pious Muslim women living in non-Muslim democratic societies.

**Keywords:** Islam; human rights; gender; agency; pious women; secular; religious; Baltic countries

## 1. Introduction

Since the third wave of feminism, scholars have worked to restore the agency of religious women, rejecting the idea that religion only oppresses women and pious women have a false consciousness and instead arguing that the complex interaction between gender and religion has long been overlooked (Furseth and Repstad 2006; Hawthorne 2011; Llewellyn 2015; Mahmood 2005; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016). Nevertheless, religious women, especially from minority religions, still face challenges generated by narratives that they need to be liberated from restrictive religious practices or their own conservative beliefs, including those towards human rights, mostly regarding gender and sexuality. They search for ways to cope with the conflicting demands of their society and their religion; some struggle to reconcile more conservative religious beliefs with their more liberal personal attitudes, while others find contentment in more feminist interpretations and living practices of religion.

These struggles are particularly characteristic of Muslim women living in non-Muslim democratic societies, when their agency, identities, and sense of belonging are challenged (Abu-Lughod 2013; Fadil 2011; Hass 2021; Knibbe and Bartelink 2019; Moors and Salih 2009; van den Bogert 2020; Van den Brandt 2022; Van Nieuwkerk 2006, 2014; Vroon 2014). These women are often held accountable by their non-Muslim society for religious traditions that are considered oppressive towards women and LGBT+ individuals. They experience harassment, discrimination, state regulation of dress, and even violence in societies that otherwise emphasize tolerance and human rights (Hass 2021, p. 17; Knibbe and Bartelink 2019, p. 132).

In Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as in many post-communist countries, Muslim women do not face entirely the same dilemmas as in the more liberal, multicultural, and post-colonial Western Europe. Under Soviet communism, Baltic states did not experience the second wave of feminism; women were employed in "two shifts" at home and work

despite the Soviet myth of female emancipation (Alisauskiene and Maslauskaite 2021). In these societies that were historically white with Christianity as a default religion, the idea of human rights was almost as new as the increased visibility of Islam after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Today, as consolidated democracies of the European Union, Baltic societies are expected to follow gender equality. However, they characterized by a "patriarchal renaissance" (Ališauskienė 2021). According to the "Eurobarometer" survey (EC 2019) and "Pew Research Center" (Pew Research Center 2018), in the Baltic countries, the attitudes towards gender, sexuality, and race remain more conservative than in Western countries. The attitudes towards Muslims are more discriminatory in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe (Bell et al. 2021). The analysis of media discourse and political statements in Lithuania, for example, reveal that Muslims are considered a threat to national security and European culture (Frėjutė-Rakauskienė 2020).

There is still little research on the intersectionality of religion, gender, and human rights in Baltic countries (Ališauskienė 2021; Balode 2003; Karčiauskaitė 2007), especially Islam (Lepa 2020; Račius 2012, 2022; Shisheliakina 2022a, 2022b). The goal of this article is to examine how pious Baltic Muslim women, in a variety of ways, exercise their agency to navigate between religion, gender, and human rights. It explores, first, a theoretical understanding of agency as regards gender, religion and human rights; second, how Baltic Muslim women see human rights, namely those related to gender and sexuality, through the lens of Islam; third, how Islam as a religion of their choice and a provider of meaning and guidance in life provides them with agency; fourth, how women use their agency in navigating marriage, career, and the Muslim female community; fifth, how their expression of agency is comparable with pious Muslim women in Western societies; and, finally, how the narratives of Baltic Muslim women, particularly when understood within the broader context of the narratives of Muslim women living in non-Muslim societies, signify a redefining of the limits of a division between "secular" and "religious".

The analysis in this article reveals that pious Baltic Muslim women do not primarily find their agency in human rights or female emancipation. Rather, in the dynamic post-Soviet Baltic societies they live in, they find agency in the instruction Islam gives them on the aspects of life related to human rights. They hold agency in the meaning their religion provides them as individuals, especially those women who converted to Islam during the difficult political and economic post-communist transition and entirely changed their own lives. Baltic Muslim women are also empowered through their roles as wives and mothers, as well as in the sisterhood of the Muslim female community. For them, a career serves more as an area of personal autonomy and self-realization. This article represents the attempts to analyze the agency of pious women from the non-Christian minority religion outside the realm of secular liberal thinking, so conventional in democratic non-Muslim societies.

## 2. Muslims in the Baltic Religious Context

The Baltic States are historically Christian. According to the 2021 population census (Valstybès Duomenų Agentūra 2021), 74.2% of Lithuanians self-identified as Catholic, 2.1% as Evangelical Lutheran, 3.8% as Orthodox, and 6.1% as non-religious. According to the Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities for 2018, in Latvia, the largest religious groups are Lutheran (36%), Roman Catholic (17%), and Latvian Orthodox Christian (9%), the latter being predominantly native Russian speakers; 35% of the population is unaffiliated with any religious group. According to the 2021 population census (Statistics Estonia 2022), only 29% of Estonians are estimated to be affiliated with a religion; the proportion of people who do not feel an affiliation to any religion has increased from 54% in 2011 to 58% in 2021. Of those who feel an affiliation to a religion, 93% are now Christians, mostly Orthodox Christians (16%) and Lutherans (8%).

Muslims have always been one of the smallest religious communities in the three countries. The ethnic Muslim Tatar community has existed in small numbers in Lithuania since the 14th century (Račius 2023), and in Estonia and Latvia for around 200 years (Gurbo 2022;

Ringvee 2022). According to the 2021 population census, there were 2165 Sunni Muslim residents in Lithuania (less than 0.1% of the population) and "a few Shi'is" (Račius 2023). Among Sunni Muslims, there were 1128 (52.1%) Tatars and 451 (21%) ethnic Lithuanians (chiefly converts and their progeny) (Račius 2023). The share of Lithuanian Muslims has been increasing: 185 (6.5%) in 2001, 374 (13.7%) in 2011, and 451 (21%) in 2021. No official data on the number of Muslims, including converts, are available in Latvia (Račius 2023). According to the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs, estimates, based on data about ethnic background suggest that there are approximately more than 8000 Muslims (0.5% of the population) in Latvia (Račius 2023). According to the National Encyclopedia of Latvia (2023), there are also suggestions that the "real number of Muslims in Latvia today could be less than 1000, the number of practicing Muslims—about 10–20%" (Račius 2023). The Annual Report of Religious Organizations and their Activities for 2020 (Tieslietu Ministrijā 2020) lists just 176 Muslims, belonging to 8 registered Muslim congregations in Latvia (Račius 2023). However, the same Annual Report in 2019 (Tieslietu Ministrijā 2019) lists only 58 members (a decrease from 134) in 2018 (Gurbo 2022). According to the 2021 population census, the number of Muslims in Estonia has increased from 1508 (0.1% of the population) in 2011 to 5800 (0.5%) in 2021. Among them, 430 were ethnic Estonians (7.4% of the Muslim population) and 100 were ethnic Russians (1.72%). From 2011 to 2021, the number of Muslims who are ethnic Estonians has increased, but their share among Muslims has decreased. According to the 2011 census data, among Muslims, 604 were Tatars (40% of the Muslim population), 148 were Estonians (9.8%) and 107 were Russians (7.1%) in Estonia.

According to the Pew Research Center (2017), Muslims are the world's fastest-growing religious group, which should reflect the developments in the Baltic States, mostly due to migration. However, the slow increase in the number of Muslim migrants in the Baltic countries still seem to make them an exception to the rule. The anti-migration atmosphere also remains strong in the post-communist countries (Bell et al. 2021). The media monitoring analysis (Media4Change 2021) in Lithuania revealed that Muslims are stigmatized, demonized, and dehumanized. The effective Lithuanian and Latvian anti-asylum and "pushback" policy against Asian and African migrants, presumed to be mostly Muslims, at the border with Belarus also strongly contributes to few Muslims staying there (Račius 2023). In 2022, the European Union and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Sanderson 2022) and the Amnesty International (2022a, 2022b) criticized Latvia and Lithuania for this cruel and violent "pushback" policy.

## 3. Materials and Methods

This article is based on the analysis of semi-structured qualitative interview data (2021–2022) on the Baltic Muslim women's attitudes towards gender equality. As gender equality issues cover human rights related to gender and sexuality, the responses of the interviewed participants also reflect their attitudes towards human rights, analyzed in this article. Originally, the Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Muslim, and Pagan Baltic women were interviewed. For this article, only the Muslim women were chosen to reveal the social life and attitudes towards human rights of this non-Christian minority religious community.

Based on convenience, snowball, and purposeful sampling, 18 Baltic Muslim women (10 Lithuanians, 5 Latvians, and 3 Estonians) were interviewed. Women were reached through the scholars, who had previously conducted research on Baltic Muslims, the leaders of Muslim communities, Muslim women, people who have contacts with local Muslims, etc. Interviews were carried out by scientists and volunteers. The author of this article participated in searching for participants and conducted two interviews.

Among the 18 interviewed women, 1 woman conceded being a Muslim believer but was "not very religious or practicing", 1 woman explained that she was an apostate and former pious convert, and 1 woman identified as a non-practicing half-Tatar Muslim. For

this article, 15 pious (i.e., self-identifying as practicing or observing their religion) Muslim women (7 Lithuanians, 5 Latvians, and 3 Estonians) were selected.

This qualitative research is not representative of the Baltic Muslim community and is rather an exploration of Muslim female attitudes, experiences, and social processes related to gender equality and human rights in three Baltic countries. The available research shows that in the Baltic countries, the majority of Baltic Muslims are Tatars, and the number of converts is increasing (Gurbo 2022; Ringvee 2022; Račius 2023). Most pious Baltic Muslim women (11 out of 15), chosen for this research, were converts, which should represent the growing Baltic Muslim community of converts. Among the remaining women, two women grew up pious in the biracial, religious practicing Muslim families; one was half-Latvian, half-Pakistani, and the other was half-Estonian, half-Nigerian. The other two women were from the traditional Lithuanian Tatar Muslim ethnic minority, which, according to one of these two Tatar Muslim women, "passes tradition, but not religion", and began observing Islam when they were adults. At the time of the interviews, the women had been religious from 3 to around 30 years. Average religiosity was around 15 years, and some converted during emigration, while some emigrated because of conversion.

There were too few Latvian and especially Estonian women interviewed. The Estonian and Latvian Tatar Muslims were also absent in the research. The whole sample was not representative as regards the age of the Baltic Muslim women selected. At the time of the interviews, they were aged from 18 to 53, and the average age was around 37.5 years old. The research best represents the life of Muslim women in their 30s. Among the 15 women, 2 women were below 30 years old, 9 women were between 34 and 38, 2 women were in their forties, and 2 women were in their 50s. It was a challenge to find the older women for the research: there was a lack of them among the converts; the older Tatar women, who would represent a cultural lifestyle of the historical Tatar ethnic community, were reluctant to participate in interviews. Most women had a university education, one had a basic education, and one was a university student.

In the interviews, women were asked about their religious identity, individual gender equality experiences in their religious tradition, family, and professional life, their relationship with other religious organizations, as well as about their personal attitudes and the attitudes of their religious tradition to such issues as virginity, divorce, contraception, artificial insemination, abortion, violence against women, and the Council of Europe (Istanbul) Convention against gender-based violence, sexual education, LGBT+ rights and gender equality. For this article, the interviews were analyzed in light of female attitudes towards human rights related to gender and sexuality, framed as the freedom of individual choice (in the case of virginity and divorce), female reproductive rights (contraception, abortion, and artificial insemination), protection against gender-based violence, and LGBT+ rights. A few women were specifically asked about the change in their attitudes towards some of the issues, related to human rights upon their conversion. Therefore, any conclusions regarding such a change can only be presumptive.

The analysis in this article investigated the role of human rights and religion in the Baltic Muslim women lives. Their narratives were analyzed through examining the various benefits of being religious, as identified by these women. Female answers to the questions related to the issues of human rights, religious identity, family, and professional life reflected their stories of conversion, their choice of Islam, and finding meaning and guidance in their religion as regards small and big life decisions. Women were not specifically asked about their experiences in the Muslim female community, but they all talked about them, and their answers were exploited for the analysis.

## 4. Agency in Gender, Religion and Human Rights

There has long been a perception in social sciences that secular people have the most agency and religious women have the least (Burke 2012; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005). The notion of false consciousness has been used to describe religious women (Furseth and Repstad 2006, pp. 179, 192; Mahmood 2005, pp. 2, 6). According to Bracke (2008, p. 61), this

is "an exhausted mode of thinking about agency", and yet, this notion is still resurrected in relation to pious, and especially Muslim, women. From a traditional secular liberal point of view, agency is considered an autonomous, conscious, deliberate action (Giddens 1976, 1984) and human rights as a universal and ultimate expression of human agency, as it lies in individual autonomy, essential for human freedom or liberty (Gewirth 1982, 1996; Griffin 2008; Mahmood 2005). In more recent scholarship, scholars of religion have dug deeper into the essence of agency, recognizing its modality and different forms (Avishai 2008; Burke 2012; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005), which go beyond the conventional secular understanding.

The "secular" and "religious" concepts of agency reflect a dichotomy between the secular and the religious as influenced by classical secularization theory, centered on Europe, Christianity, modernization, and male religiosity (Beckford 2003; Berger 1999; Davie 2002; Martin 2005; Woodhead 2003, 2008). The secular is often presented as rational, progressive, and associated with the public and male sphere, while the religious is seen as irrational, backward, and associated with the private and female sphere. According to Asad (2003, pp. 22, 186) even in the anthropological debates, "religion", whose object is the sacred, stands in the domain of the nonrational", faith and passion, and "rational argument and interest-guided action can have no place in it". Beckford (2003, p. 48) argued that "the secularising effects of rationalisation depends heavily on the assumption that rational and religious ways of thinking are mutually exclusive". Accordingly, Knibbe and Bartelink (2019, pp. 129, 137) refer to "a false opposition between religion as patriarchal and secularism as progressive in terms of women's rights" and claim that the religious–secular divide is bound up with the public–private divide in secular modernity. Referring to Mahmood, they emphasize the gendered division between public and private, "linked to the association of the private domain with women and women's reproductive labour and the public domain with men, and secular 'neutrality'" (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019, pp. 128–29).

Nevertheless, Asad (2003, p. 25) emphasizes both the secular and religious not as two fixed categories, with simple definitions or histories, but as dependent on each other, when the secular "is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin), nor is it a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)". Neither secularism nor religion are uniformly progressive or backward (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019, p. 127). Beckford's reformulation (2003, pp. 4, 198) illustrates the relationship between the religious and non-religious as a boundary zone that is heavily contested and that debates about secularization center on these contested boundaries.

From the Western secular liberal perspective, the ideal of democracy with human rights as one of its core elements (Dahl 1971, p. 3; 1998, p. 90; Lipset 1994, p. 4) stands at the center of the secular. According to Asad (2003, pp. 2, 5), in the modern imagination of the West, the democratic state is associated with secularism as its lowest common denominator. Secularism requires the separation of religion (the church) from secular political institutions, at least formally or rhetorically, although history and reality are far more complicated (Asad 2009, pp. 21–22). Religious freedom is a human right, as established in the secular international human rights conventions, and, therefore, belongs to secular domain. Asad (2003, p. 23) points to the opposition of the "sacred" and "profane" as well as other binaries, such as belief and knowledge, imagination and reason, and supernatural and natural, "that pervade modern secular discourse". Mahmood (2009, p. 64) wrote about writers and scholars positing "an incommensurable divide between strong religious beliefs and secular values".

Human rights are imagined as rational, objective, progressive, and universal vis-à-vis religion with its emotional (passionate), subjective nature and traditional moral norms. Nevertheless, Asad (2009, pp. 23, 39) through the analysis of the Muhammad cartoon crisis in 2005 in Denmark, demonstrates how the freedom of speech and freedom in general, "guaranteed by democratic principles and by the pursuit of reason so central to Western

culture", can be ambivalent in religious context and hurtful for pious individuals. He also explicitly shows that human rights are a contested concept, and there are opportunities for manipulation by secular democratic governments, which might be violent or affected by religious arguments (Asad 2003, pp. 127–58). The content, history, and working of human rights are more complicated than just "moral norms, that bind humans universally", "intrinsic to all persons irrespective of their "cultural" make up" (Asad 2003, p. 129). Asad (2000, p. 1) also criticizes Western hypocrisy, when "far more attention is given to human rights violations in the non-Western world than in Euro-America".

Still, according to this secular liberal outlook, the secular, with its ideals of democracy and human rights, is often traced back to Christianity as its predecessor and as a religion of supposedly higher moral quality relative to others, such as Islam or other minority religions, which might be seen as irrational, backward, and even violent. Asad (2009, p. 22) claims that, according to the Euro-American story, "Christianity is the seed that flowers into secular humanism, destroying in the process its own transcendental orientation", while Muslim societies "remain mired in religion". Mimicking the sacred Christian narrative of Jesus' divine incarnation, "Western Christianity" metamorphized into modernity and embodied itself in secularity (Asad 2009, p. 23). Asad (2003, pp. 21–22) further elaborates on the binary of Christianity and Islam: "it is often claimed that democracy is rooted in Christianity and is therefore alien to Islam"; political equality is claimed to be a unique value of Western civilization; "the West and Islam, each championing opposing values: democracy, secularism, liberty and reason on one side, and on the other the many opposites—tyranny, religion authority and violence". According to the Euro-American story, "Christianity, alone of all "religions", gives birth to a plural, democratic world; alone of all "religions", it begets unfettered human agency" (Asad 2009, p. 23). Asad (2009, p. 52) also refers to the Regensburg lecture by Pope Benedict XVI (2006), according to whom, "Islamic theology separates the concept of God from reason (making God utterly unpredictable, therefore irrational), whereas Christianity maintains their inseparability in its harmonization of Hellenic rationality with the status of the divine".

Similarly, Mahmood (2005, p. 189) argued that the events of September 11, 2001, had "only served to strengthen the sense of secular-liberal inquisition" in Western scholarship against Islam, as potentially dangerous and divergent "from the perceived norms of secular-liberal polity". As regards female human rights, Mahmood (2005, pp. 189, 190) sought to question "the reductive character of framing" Islam as merely patriarchal and misogynist, as the "Women Question" had been the center of the Western critique of Islam. Knibbe and Bartelink (2019, p. 126) noted that in the European context, religion is usually problematized in relation to gender and sexuality in association with minority religious groups.

Furthermore, according to the secular liberal view, agency lies in the secular, including human rights as one of the major characteristics of liberal democracy (Dahl 1971, p. 3; 1998, p. 90; Lipset 1994, p. 4). Correspondingly, the "secular" notion of agency is about autonomous, conscious individual action and the ability to deliberately change one's place in the social structure (Giddens 1976, 1984). This view of agency is also associated with human rights. The UNHCR (2019) and The European Union (2019) also emphasize the promotion and protection of human rights as empowering people to stand up for themselves and each other. James Griffin (2008) binds human agency to human rights. According to him, human rights protect normative agency, which he specifies through autonomy (choosing for oneself), liberty (acting on one's choices), and welfare (the material and social conditions necessary to autonomy and liberty).

Such an understanding of agency is conventional to secular liberal thinking, but it is restricted by the notion of individual autonomy, which does not allow for the subtle nuances related to the experiences and agency of pious women. According to Mahmood (2005, pp. 10–11), freedom "is normative to feminism, as it is to liberalism", and the concept of individual autonomy here is central to the notion of freedom. She criticized "the notion of human agency most often invoked by feminist scholars—one that locates agency in the political and moral autonomy of the subject" and suggested "alternative ways of thinking

about agency" in the research of pious women (Mahmood 2005, pp. 7, 153). Mahmood (2005, pp. 13–14, 153) also suggested detaching the notion of agency from "the goals of progressive politics and "the politically prescriptive project of feminism". She questioned the conceptualization of agency in the binary model of subordination and subversion, repression, and resistance to social norms, which dominated post-structuralist feminist scholarship (Mahmood 2005, p. 14, 153). The "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resists norms", but also in "the variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, or reached for, and consummated" (Mahmood 2005, pp. 15, 22, 23). Bracke (2008, p. 61) argues that the notions of agency are profoundly gendered and ethnicized through the classical Eurocentric subject's dominant subject position.

In their attempts to understand the religious female's mind, feminist scholars ultimately realized what has been evident to many pious individuals for ages, i.e., that religion can empower women in different ways. Mahmood (2005) suggested looking at religion wider than through the lens of secular liberal thinking, including feminism. She criticized the latter for putting too much weight on agency as related to acts of resistance, liberation, or other goals of emancipation. Mahmood's analysis of what is experienced by pious women daily concluded that religion, no matter how patriarchal, can provide women with agency. Many scholars have followed this more nuanced position towards pious women (Ališauskienė 2021; Ammerman 2007, 2013, 2016; Avishai 2008, 2010; Day 2017; Hawthorne 2011; Knibbe and Kupari 2020; Mack 2003, 2008; McGuire 2008, 2016; Ozorak 1996; Orsi 1997, 2003; Woodhead 2002, 2003). Through these works, scholars have acknowledged that pious women might have goals other than feminist ones, such as piety, morality, the observance of their religion, care for others, fulfilling relationships, etc., and their agency can exist even in their subordination to patriarchy (Avishai 2008; Mack 2003; Mahmood 2005; Ozorak 1996). This kind of research has revealed that, for pious women, the benefits of religious involvement exceed the negatives, such as gender inequality (Davidman and Greil 1994; Martin 2001).

Scholars frame pious female agency in various ways. Mahmood's work (2005, p. 14) separates individual autonomy from self-realization and underlines the importance of ethical norms and moral principles as well as docility and piety. Mack (2003) criticizes the liberal concept of agency as the free exercise of self-willed behavior; she diminishes individual autonomy compared to religious women's obedience to God or the decision to do what is right (according to God). Orsi (1997), through the study of lived religion, elucidates that self-negation and self-repudiation are forms of religious actions related to agency. Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016), among other scholars, believe that religious women's agency lies in faith-related aspects of relationships, such as caring, love, tolerance, and respect in their own families, neighborhood, and religious communities (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019; McGuire 2008; Ozorak 1996; Woodhead 2003), a feeling of belonging provided by religion, and the importance of family values (Davidman and Greil 1994), as well as in the more respectful place for women at home and positive changes in their husbands' behavior (Mahmood 2005; Martin 2001). Woodhead (2008) believes that religion can provide women with the "third space" to help them to cope with daily life difficulties.

Based on existing research, Avishai (2008) classifies the concept of pious female agency into a few categories. The first is experiencing religion both as restrictive as well as empowering and liberating. The next is subverting or resisting religious prescriptions through partial compliance and individual interpretation. Finally, there is strategizing and appropriating religion to further extra-religious ends. Avishai reacts to Mahmood's claim that agency can lie in docility, referring to research demonstrating that docility also functions as a technology of power. Avishai defines agency as 'doing religion', i.e., observing religious rituals and norms as a way of preserving a certain religious identity. Burke (2012) distinguishes between "resistance, empowerment, instrumental, and compliant" approaches to agency. Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016, p. 51) warn that agency should not be idealized and that scholars should not overlook forms of structural discrimination and subordination.

In this article, an open concept of agency is employed. Agency is understood as related to the various benefits of being religious, i.e., how women build on, expand, and transform the benefits of being religious. This conceptualization covers attitudes, choices, and behaviors, which encompass different modal self-realization experiences. Agency, in this sense, can be based on both religious goals of piety, moral norms, observance, etc., as well as secular, liberal, and feminist ambitions, as well as human rights.

## 5. Islam as Providing Instruction on Human Rights?

The Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian Muslim women, whose interviews were analyzed for this research, presented similar attitudes towards human rights related to the freedom of individual choice (in the case of virginity and divorce), female reproductive rights (contraception, abortion, and artificial insemination), protection against gender-based violence, and LGBT+ rights. They referred to the Quran, the Prophet, or Islam more broadly when talking about the aspects of life related to these human rights. Some underlined that, historically, Islam improved the situation of women, established their rights, and began protecting them from domestic abuse. These women did not see their agency via human rights but, rather, in the way they understand that Islam addresses and instructs them on those rights.

Among the 15 women, 4 of them had previously been divorced from their non-Muslim husbands and married Muslims, and one of them had divorced her Muslim husband. According to these women, in Islam, divorce is allowed (even more than once), but it is not desirable. Although the women explained that getting divorced as a woman is more difficult than it would be as a man, divorce still provides them with opportunities to find familial happiness. In Baltic societies, women above 30 years old visibly outnumber men, divorced women rarely re-marry, and single mothers suffer material deprivation (Maslauskaitė 2013, 2015). When listing the grounds for divorce, the women provided a wide range of criteria for their rational choice: violence, dependency, unhappiness, absence of sex or love on one side, unsatisfactory sex life, irreconcilable differences, improper observance of Islam by one of the spouses, and others. For example, Erika (Lithuanian, 38 years old) was divorced twice, once from a non-Muslim and once from a Muslim husband. She divorced the latter because she "lost herself" in trying to please him. Baiba (Latvian, 53) thought that a woman can divorce a man if he cannot accept her career aspirations. All 15 women disavowed sexual freedom before marriage, both for women and men, viewing virginity as a demand and encouraging early marriage. They explained that they saw premarital sexual freedom as an act of disobedience to God, using phrases, such as "not allowed", "prohibited, it's a big sin, but God forgives, if one repents", "strictly prohibited", and "categorically no". Sarune (Lithuanian, 38), a divorcée, would not have married her Muslim husband if he was not a virgin.

All of the women indicated that contraception is generally allowed in Islam. One group believed in a personal female choice or the mutual responsibility of spouses, while another group underlined female familial obligations in Islam. Array (Estonian, 36) has used contraception for a long time, although this use of long-term contraception is not recommended according to some of the other women. Therefore, Islam provides women with agency by instructing them to take responsibility for their health and to make corresponding choices on contraception. Some believed that in deciding on the number of children, women have a right also to consider their psychological health.

All of the women argued that, in Islam, abortion is prohibited unless it is a threat to a woman's life or health; some women indicated 12 weeks as the threshold for abortion. Baiba claimed that rape cannot justify abortion, as the child becomes a benefit for the woman. Erika and Liis (Estonian, 26) had heard many different opinions on abortion among their Muslim sisters. Liis explained that there are different situations in life, such as sexual abuse, and that if a child is unwanted, abortion may be better. She said that she prefers to leave the decision on abortion to herself because it is her body. Some argued that one cannot choose to stop procreating because of socio-economic reasons, as maintenance comes from

God. However, Array mentioned socio-economic hardships in Nigeria as a possible reason for abortion.

Many of the women were ignorant regarding artificial insemination. Some claimed that Muslims cannot use donor sperm or eggs, one thought that freezing or destroying embryos is not allowed in Islam, while another thought it permissible, but said that artificial insemination should be the last option to have children.

All but one of the women argued that violence against women is not allowed or justified in Islam. Only Erika, who said that her now former Muslim husband initially demonstrated aggression in their marriage, claimed that is absolutely allowed, without specifying her opinion. Many of the women argued that the Quranic passage that supposedly allows a husband to hit his wife should be interpreted in the right way. These interpretations included: as a historically gradual ban on hitting women; not as a permit, but a prohibition from beating women; as a way of unmasking those who abuse their wives because, as Sarune pointed out, the Quran requires the husband "to be good and just to your wife"; as a symbolic gesture using a toothbrush, called a *miswak*; as a third step during conflict or when a husband is discontent with his wife, after the first step of talking and the second step of separating beds; and as a prohibition against using strong physical violence. Some women mentioned that the Prophet never hit a woman.

All of the 15 women selected for this research explained that LGBT+ people can be Muslims, but they cannot practice intimate homosexual relationships. They called homosexuality a sin, weakness, desire, unnatural, a deviation, a disability or challenge, or an illness that should be treated by reading Islam, obtaining psychological help, taking hormones, fasting, and undertaking physical exercise. They compared LGBT+ relations with drinking alcohol and argued that only a man and a woman can procreate. One woman admitted that with the conversion to Islam, she started viewing LGBT+ relationships as a sin. Some had unique perspectives, such as Aina (Latvian, 35), who said she believes that some people are born bisexual. Liis said she thinks Estonia is more traditional than Belgium, where she knows of a separate mosque for LGBT+ people. When asked about sexual education and the Istanbul Convention, many of the women seemed to have reserved attitudes towards the variety of genders and sexual identities. Some explicitly mentioned their dissatisfaction with the aspect of gender and sexual identities of the Convention. Almost all of the women suggested that sexual education at schools should not cover sexual identity or orientation. One exception was Sarune, who said she believes this kind of education is necessary for children in the modern world.

These Baltic Muslim women, with some exceptions, seemed to follow what they understand to be their religion's instructions on the aspects of life related to human rights. Their explanations show that these women rarely question this understanding, which may suggest that their docility is empowering for them. The attitudes they expressed towards human rights are not entirely conservative, but are rational regarding divorce or contraception, and are mostly progressive regarding gender-based violence. It could be assumed that both their religion and the conservatism of Baltic societies influence their conservative attitudes, especially towards LGBT+ people. As many women were not specifically asked about the change in their attitudes on the issues related to human rights upon their conversion to Islam, it can only be presumed that their previous values were similar to those prevalent in the societies they live.

## 6. Islam as a Rational Choice, Providing Meaning and Guidance

The interviewed pious Baltic Muslim women's biographies and narratives are reflective of post-communist experiences with religion as a search for meaning and guidance in life in the context of dynamic Baltic societies that are still experiencing constant political, economic, and cultural change after the collapse of Soviet communism in 1990. The empowerment through meaning-finding is especially valid for the converts (and, to a lesser extent to the Tatar women, who began observing religion as adults), as they found the essence in Islam and, accordingly, changed their lives entirely.

Many women in this research spoke about their ultimate choice of Islam as a gradual, deliberate, and rational process based on interest rather than a quick emotional choice. Their biographies reflect a search for meaning, sometimes first through Christianity and sometimes straight to Islam. Sarune took an active interest in Islam a year before her conversion, during her internship as a social worker in a Red Cross refugee center and later during her exchange studies in Spain. According to Ilze (Latvian, 51), it "was more like an emotional decision that I accepted Christianity. < . . . > But Islam < . . . > was a more rational decision because I just sat down and really looked at what I believed and what I didn't believe. And based on that, I made that decision". Many of the women negotiated with Christianity as a default religion, finding the idea of the Trinity confusing. They explained their choice of Islam as the only right religion, an explanation that could be influenced by the dominance of monotheist Christianity and the Soviet experience or historical memory of "the only objective communist ideological truth", which could make Islam even more empowering in a post-Soviet context. The women said that conversion to Islam gave them peace, calm, or harmony, that it "opened their eyes", "put everything into place", "answered all questions", "changed everything", and that they had "a life before and after" with themselves as two different persons then and now, which also indicate some changes in values. They had stories about creating their Muslim identity. Sarune seemed conflicted, believing there is no religion favorable to women and wishing Islam would be stricter than the Istanbul Convention. She saw emigration from Lithuania as necessary for her observance of Islam, finding a Muslim husband, and building her Muslim way of life.

All 15 women whose interviews were analyzed identified themselves as practicing believers, and some indicated enjoying their observance. Only Erika conceded practicing Islam more selectively, as she finds it hard. The women mostly pray five times a day, wear Muslim clothing (e.g., a hijab, headscarf, and modest fashion), eat *halal* meat, do not drink alcohol, go to the mosque during Muslim holidays, celebrate Ramadan, etc. Their narratives reveal that they see the observance of Islam as an obligation, i.e., what they do as Muslims, which serves as an expression of docility and lived religion but might also be related to the conformity learned during the Soviet occupation or from their birth families. Female agency in wearing Muslim dress was expressed through the degree of choice or the choice-in-progress as they decide if or what to wear depending on their life situation (e.g., to avoid harassment in the street), which preserves their autonomous decision-making. Dilija (Lithuanian, 36) said that she sees wearing a hijab as a challenge, which she began striving to achieve around a year ago at her work in a school. Julija (Lithuanian, 37), a civil servant, explained that she gives TV interviews for her work without a hijab and that she was considering wearing a scarf instead. She spoke about Muslim dress and her own behavior as being representative of Islam in public.

These pious Baltic women understand Islam as a religion that provides clear and rational instruction, which gives them a code of conduct and moral norms for daily life and, thus, profoundly affects their lifestyle. In their lives, all of the 15 women referred to the Quran, Islamic teachings, or the Prophet's example when talking about various aspects of life or decision-making. According to Valda (Latvian, 38), "if you live according to those guidelines, then your whole life is arranged. For every situation, you have a way to act. From the moment you get up in the morning to the moment you go to bed". All of the women indicated that they continuously study Islam and see being a Muslim as something that they will spend their whole life learning.

For the women, Islam seemed to provide them with advantages for their emotional well-being and personal character. Many elucidated how they see the benefits of Islam as giving them peace, clearness, harmony, direction in life, and a feeling of being safe and more respected as women. Some women described Islam as a solace in a time of trouble. It helped Aina to survive the sudden death of her 1-year-old daughter. Despite her difficult life, Amina (Estonian, 41), a widow who has been unhappily married three times, believes in Islam as right and good. All of the women experienced improvements in personal

character with their conversion to or observance of Islam: they became happier, calmer, friendlier, more mature, humbler, and more modest.

## 7. Navigating between Marriage, Career, and Female Community

Marriage is of great importance to Baltic Muslim women. Among the 15 women, 12 are married to Muslims, and 14 have children. Contrary to what media-based stereotypes might suggest, most of the women converted to Islam before meeting their future Muslim husbands. In the interview, the women denied the existing stereotype that Islam oppresses women and argued that it is the opposite, as women are free and respected in Islam. They based these claims on their personal experiences, especially in a familial context, as central to their lives. A marriage-based family allows women to exercise their agency by considering marriage as a rational and deliberate choice and traditionally gendered family roles assigned by Islam as beneficial to both men and women. Overall, the women seemed down-to-earth about the real-life challenges of marriage.

Many of the women employed their agency in getting married, i.e., deliberately looking for a good Muslim husband who satisfies certain criteria of character, moral norms, observance of Islam, financial situation, etc. For them, this choice is not based on a romantic notion of love of secular popular culture. Liis said she believes that a woman should take responsibility for her choice of a husband. Baiba mentioned that Muslim men find it more difficult to find Muslim wives, as women have become more educated and pickier.

Marriage and having children remain important among Baltic women in general. According to "Eurostat" (Eurostat 2020a, 2020b), Baltic women on average marry and have their first child earlier than women in Western Europe. However, despite the high divorce and low fertility rates (Eurostat 2021a, 2021b), the female search for familial happiness is often ridiculed within Baltic societies. Furthermore, women are the losers in marriage because they adopt additional responsibilities, such as caring for the house, their husbands, and their children (Maslauskaitė and Baublytė 2012). Therefore, the deliberate attempts of these Muslim women to find a trustworthy husband make a lot of sense in this Baltic social context. Especially for the Muslim female converts, marriage can give a certain comparative advantage and a feeling of empowerment vis-à-vis secular women, who might struggle to find suitable husbands in a society where marriage remains important.

The women in this research seemed to find agency in the clearly prescribed roles and obligations of the obedient wife, pious mother, and caretaker of the home. They explained why the "Muslim nuclear family" is good for them: they must be respected and loved by their husbands, who must provide for their family as the Prophet did, help their wives around the house and with the children, not burden them with extra housework, and consult with them. At the same time, they said women can work, keep their salary, and have a lot of opportunities, but this depends on prior agreement with their husbands. Many women said that they think that in Islam, men have more responsibilities than women. The women's stories reveal that if they succeed in finding good and responsible Muslim husbands, they can count on both a strong marriage and not being overstressed, unlike many non-Muslim Baltic women.

Nevertheless, Baltic Muslim women do not have illusions about marriage life. They acknowledge its challenges and the specific restrictions imposed by Islam and cultural practices. Valda became "bored and tired" after seven years at home with children and found a job. Aina began working again, as she wanted to be financially independent in case of divorce, as "you never know what will happen in life". Baiba said that she believes "problems arise when women care more about responsibilities than about rights and men the other way around". Sarune thinks that female agency in Muslim marriage is very much defined by the husband's character: if a woman succeeds in marrying a man who is not prone to control, then she has wide decision-making powers. The women in this research conceded that violence against women exists among Muslims and that the women in their communities avoid or are scared to talk about it (and may hide or lie about bruises) because of potential condemnation, such as being accused of being bad wives, which echoes the

larger situation in all three Baltic societies. They suggested solutions, such as encouraging women to socialize and become financially independent from their husbands. This kind of attitude is exemplary because domestic violence is often denied in non-Muslim Baltic societies, where it is imagined as solely belonging to lower social classes.

Many of the women remarked that they see careers as secondary, subordinated to the priorities of their families. They added that they must consult or inform their (future) husbands about their intentions to work, but when doing so, they offered an example of the Prophet, who allowed his wives to work. Most of these women are highly educated, had, have built, are building, or plan to build, a career, and some have had more than one profession or career. At the time of the interview, of the 15 women, 8 were working, 5 were homemakers, among whom 2 were looking for a job, and 1 was a volunteer. Some described how, when working, it is an advantage that they can keep their salary to themselves, which gives them more financial freedom. A couple of the women acknowledged the existing gender gap and expressed that they would prefer more gender equality in wages.

One of the consistent things that the women selected for this research would explain was that it is often a deliberate choice to maintain job restrictions, to stay at home, or to restrict their professional aspirations until their children are older. Some of these women seemed to be content with the work they do, while others seemed more ambitious, aiming for careers in academia, diplomacy, social work, or design. Those who were homemakers at the time of the interview depicted how they enjoy volunteering and other creative activities as well as participating in both secular and religious education (e.g., by studying or teaching Islam to others). These women's stories suggest that having a professional life or undertaking volunteer/creative activities might provide (some) space for personal autonomy and self-realization. Like many Baltic women, these Muslim women conceded that there is a need to balance a life between work and home, including having more career opportunities when children grow older. For post-Soviet women who inherited working two shifts from their mothers and grandmothers, a full-time job or high career aspirations is seen as an important and somewhat natural part of their identity and agency, quite independent of their religious beliefs. Baltic Muslim women, especially converts, apparently negotiate between the secular value of working full-time, learned in their birth family and native society, and the perceived Muslim female obligation to prioritize family and children over a career.

Participation in a pious female community is a powerful source of agency for these Baltic Muslim women. All of the 15 women underlined the importance of the Muslim female community in their lives. They regularly met together with their children in the mosque, Islamic center, or online during the COVID-19 lockdown. As they explained, when they are together, they do things, such as pray or study and teach Islam to other women or children. This points to the religious content of Islam (faith in God, prayers, moral norms, or theological studies) being at the core of this pious sisterhood. Considering their high level of education, one can expect there to be highly intellectual deliberation among them on various aspects of Islam. Sarune portrayed the sometimes-harsh discussions she has had with different women (some more liberal, some more conservative) on topics including the female position in Islam. Other women described how their communities are a space for them to talk about family, marriage, or children, to support each other emotionally, and to help each other to look for a job or when they are in trouble. Julija called this "sisterhood as an insurance". However, many of the women conceded that traditional female roles involving housework and having small children, as well as the pandemic lockdown and the emigration of sisters, were all impediments to their regular meetings and studies.

## 8. Baltic Muslim Women Looking for Their Voice, Identity, Place, and Rights?

This section situates where religious Baltic Muslim women stand on human rights and with regard to their agency among other Muslim women in non-Muslim democratic societies, within the wider scholarly debate, and considering different historical, political, and cultural contexts. After the collapse of Soviet communism, despite democratic consol-

idation, post-communist societies and, even more so, their religious organizations, have largely remained relatively conservative. Because they never had the experience of the second feminist wave, gender inequality is often considered a non-issue by Baltic women themselves, and feminism is caricatured as an excessive caprice of some crazy women. Meanwhile, these same Baltic women continue to work two shifts. The "patriarchal renaissance" is manifested at an official level in Latvia and Lithuania through the repeated attempts to control female reproductive rights, the persistent refusal to ratify the Istanbul Convention or recognize LGBT+ rights, and the continued political influence of traditional religious organizations. Only Estonia has recognized same-sex partnerships (in 2016) and ratified the Istanbul Convention (in 2017).

Baltic countries have historically had the periods of tolerance towards and persecutions of religious minorities since the Middle Ages (Ališauskienė and Glodenis 2013). The public opinion survey reveals that 45% of Lithuanians do not want Muslims as neighbors, and 59.1% concede that their attitudes towards Muslims have worsened in the last five years (LSMC 2021). The Dutch are historically proud of tolerance but lack tolerance towards Muslims (Hass 2021). In the Baltic context, this lack of tolerance has been demonstrated by the "pushback" policy and societal attitudes towards the arrival of migrants from crisis-torn countries in Africa and Asia (who are described as being pushed into Lithuania and Latvia from authoritarian Belarus). In countries called Western, Muslims or Muslim migrants are often seen as a threat to the secular values of liberal democracy, human rights, or the Western way of life (Hass 2021). In the post-communist societies, Muslims are perceived as a threat to Christian values and culture (Bell et al. 2021). Ironically, more "conservative" circles use the same rationale against feminists and LGBT+ individuals (Tereškinas and Vidūnaitė 2024). The women's responses in this research revealed that, as in other societies, Muslim women are more vulnerable than men because their dress makes them a target of unwanted attention and harassment.

This article has outlined the complicated and intertwined relationship between the "secular" and "religious", and has, accordingly, employed an open concept of agency, as in the various subjective benefits of religion, both purely religious and more secular. The analysis of the interviewed pious Baltic Muslim women's attitudes towards human rights and the role of Islam in their lives revealed that they are not primarily empowered by the goals related to female emancipation or human rights but by the instruction Islam provides them on the aspects of life related to human rights, in the case of this research, mostly regarding gender and sexuality. The attitudes of the women in this research varied from conservative to rational to progressive, reflecting broader trends among European Muslims and other minority religions. As Knibbe and Bartelink (2019, p. 127) observed in their research, these attitudes do not map easily onto a progressive–conservative axis, especially when it comes to gender, while secular arrangements are not always as progressive or homogenous as they pretend to be. Similarly, European Muslim women are not a homogenous group (Hass and Lutek 2018). The quest of liberal societies or governments to "save" women or LGBT+ individuals from Islam or other minority religions they consider "conservative" is a quest to minimize the agency of these individuals (Abu-Lughod 2013; Bracke 2012; Knibbe and Bartelink 2019).

Nevertheless, as regards the issues related to LGBT+ rights, Baltic Muslim women are different from the Western Muslim female converts, who might tend to replace their liberal values with the more traditional ones upon conversion. The Baltic female converts presumably have never departed from their conservative pre-Muslim attitudes in the relatively conservative post-communist societies, which have been historically late in establishing LGBT+ rights. Therefore, Islam maintains a certain value framework to which most Baltic Muslim women subscribe, and which is not so different from the prevalent societal values, at least as regards LGBT+ rights.

In this research, the women expressed their agency by rationally and deliberately choosing Islam as their religion in Baltic societies where the default religion is Christianity. Their whole lives are affected by this, from giving them meaning and guidance for life

to instructing them on daily life situations, or when living in or choosing to emigrate out of non-Muslim post-Soviet societies. The choice of Islam is also agentive among other European Muslim women, as well as building their hybrid identity, which is (n)either Dutch (n)or Muslim but is "pushing the limits" (Hass and Lutek 2018). Baltic women's stories of conversion are similar to those of Dutch women, which refer to having "always felt a Muslim", being a "white Muslima", "coming home", "finding peace", "finding one's own true self", and "the past and present and different selves" (Buitelaar 2014; Hass 2021; Moors 2009; Van den Brandt 2022; Van Nieuwkerk 2014; Vroon 2014). Women from countries in Western Europe who do not share the post-Soviet experience of drastic social changes in their lifetime choose Islam for a variety of reasons. These include its high regard for family and community, strict moral and ethical standards, and the rationality and spirituality of its theology, as well as a broader disillusionment with Christianity and with the unrestrained sexuality in Western culture (Van Nieuwkerk 2006). These reasons are also attractive to Baltic women. Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016) have shown that for pious women in Western Europe, religion is also about meaning-making, providing a foothold or foundation, and, as such, it permeates all aspects of life.

According to their stories, these Baltic Muslim women see their observation of Islam as an obligation, which is an expression of both docility and conformity, and which was learned during the Soviet occupation and authoritarian regime or passed through birth family. Their conformity to societal norms can be found in their hesitation to wear Muslim dress, which, however, is also reflective of decision-making autonomy. For Western Muslims, observance is more about a deliberate choice, piety, and devotional practices (Hass 2020; Hass and Lutek 2018; Jouili 2009; Moors 2009). Their active choice to wear Muslim clothing is about expressing modesty, freedom of choice, constructing their identity, and criticizing the non-Muslim society they live in (Hass 2020; Hass and Lutek 2018; Moors 2009), as in, within the context of complicated secular public spheres becoming entangled in (re-)signification processes (Jouili 2009). These post-Soviet Baltic women did not raise fundamental questions about observance, nor did they discuss it as a way of emancipation or liberation from secular norms, which is more characteristic of Western Muslims (Hass 2021).

The Baltic female biographies and narratives presented here reveal that Islam empowers them as a clear and rational system of beliefs and instructions on life decisions (big and small), including choosing a husband, gender roles in marriage, and bringing up children. These traditional gender roles are also liberating in the Dutch context (Hass 2021). The top priorities of these Baltic women lie not in female emancipation but familial happiness. They are also affected by the fact that women tend to marry and have their first child considerably younger than in Western Europe. However, both post-communist and Western Muslim women seem to have acquired a disenchantment with romantic love from Islam and instead opt for a down-to-earth attitude towards marriage, which can protect them from unhealthy relationships and abusive husbands. Knibbe and Bartelink (2019) argue that the privatization of religion should not diminish it, as the private domain, with all its reproductive and caring work, should not be seen as unimportant because the work is mostly carried out by women. Therefore, women acting in the private domain should not be seen as unable to make their own choices or to build their own agency. Furthermore, in their work on the Dutch Pentecostal context, Knibbe and Bartelink (2019) demonstrated that strict gender roles can increase the agency of both men and women in romantic, domestic, and religious matters.

Despite some restrictions, the Baltic women in this research expressed that they feel empowered by having a choice to work or to stay at home. Some of them said they believe Islam encourages women to have a career. For most, professional life provides a space for personal autonomy and self-realization, which is in line with their experience growing up in (post-)Soviet countries where women work two shifts. Through the self-imposed restrictions on careers or the deliberate choice to stay at home and be housewives, these women exercise their agency in different ways through their range of choices. Islam gives

them solace and space to improve themselves religiously, emotionally, and otherwise, which is similar to Dutch Muslim women's search for personal spiritual development (Hass and Lutek 2018). The connection between choice and agency is even more significant in light of the fact that many Muslim women are highly educated across Europe (Hass and Lutek 2018; Knibbe and Bartelink 2019).

Finally, for these pious Baltic Muslim women, especially converts, participation in a female community serves as a source of religious empowerment, female bonding, and solidarity, which, in the post-Soviet context of Baltic society, are generally lacking, as these countries did not experience the second wave of feminism. These islands of pious female community in the Baltic are reflective of such communities around the world (Hass 2021; Mahmood 2005; Vroon 2014). The women's stories reflect the spirit of pious female community and devotion to Islam described by Saba Mahmood in the "Politics of Piety" (Mahmood 2005). Pious female communities with a high level of reciprocal trust are an important source of empowerment for their members. They can connect, deepen their knowledge of Islam, and/or overcome every day and larger life challenges. These healthy female friendships become an important safety net, especially when dealing with rights infringement, discrimination, non-belonging, or potential social isolation in their families, communities, and non-Muslim societies (Hass 2021; Vroon 2014).

## 9. Conclusions: Redefining Religious and Secular

This research suggests that Islam is a religion that empowers some Baltic women in the context of their (post-)communist experience. Many of the women found Islam as a meaning and guidance provider when they were younger, have participated in a Muslim marriage, and, for the most part, were looking forward to careers in the future when their children are older. With a few exceptions, these women identify the benefits of religion but seldom question conservative religious beliefs, offer more liberal interpretations, or bring in notions of feminism, human rights, and female emancipation. This, however, reflects wider societal trends in Baltic countries, where feminism is often viewed negatively, there are much fewer openly feminist women, and where women's or LGBT+ rights are diminished while compliance with the majority holding power, i.e., men, is much higher.

As Islam is still relatively new compared to societies further west, Baltic Muslim converts generally have not yet accumulated experience to better articulate their needs related to Islam or found their voice yet. Their narratives of agency may not be as sophisticated or emancipated as Western Muslims, but they represent the aspiration for a good and meaningful life within or outside of historically complicated and change-driven Baltic societies. For most of the women in this context it is important to find religion as a provider of meaning or a way of life that feels just right for them, offers them opportunities for personal happiness in a marriage, and puts them in a trustworthy friendship network in a strong female community.

The narratives of pious Baltic Muslim women analyzed for this research showed that they found their "secular" agency in their autonomous, rational, and deliberate choices of Islam as a religion, observing it and complying with its instruction in their lives as well as choosing husbands, following the clearly prescribed roles and obligations in a family, or making decisions on balancing family and professional life. They derived their "religious" agency from the meaning, peace, calm, or harmony, provided by Islam, as well as their own piety and docility. Nevertheless, the stories of these Muslim women only confirm that agency can be related to the various attitudes, choices, and behaviors, which encompass different modal self-realization experiences, as well as the various benefits of being religious, which challenge the conventional understanding of the borderline between the secular and religious.

More recent research on the agency of pious Muslim women focuses on ambivalences, tensions, and conflicts religious women experience as well as the religious and secular elements (sources) informing their agency, identity, and belonging in non-Muslim Western Europe (Abu-Lughod 2013; Bracke 2008, 2012; Fadil 2011; Hass 2021; Hass and Lutek 2018;

Moors and Salih 2009; Rana 2022; van den Bogert 2020; Van den Brandt 2022; Van Nieuwkerk 2006, 2014; Vroon 2014). The tensions between gender and religion are particularly obvious, as feminism or female emancipation is a strong part of societies, such as the Dutch (Bracke 2012; Hass 2021). Vroon (2014) reveals the complexity of situations where Dutch Muslim women should employ their agency in living their chosen Muslim way of life, such as by being flexible among their non-Muslim families, non-Muslim society, and daily Muslim lifestyle. van den Bogert (2020) interprets Dutch Muslim girls playing football as a contest with the normative constructions of the Dutch public space as masculine, white, and secular. Similarly, Rana (2022) sees young Muslim women who kickbox establish agentive selves by playing with gender norms, challenging expectations, and living out their religious subjectivities in the Netherlands.

The scholarship on the unique and complicated lives of Muslim women illustrates the diverse entanglements within the spectrum of the religious and secular, on which these women build their agency and reinterpret their religiosity in the secular and democratic non-Muslim societies. La Fornara (2018) analyses the dress code restrictions on traditional 'Islamic' coverings in France, exceptionally preoccupied with secularism and privatization of religion. According to her, Muslim dress is designed to allow Muslim women to fully participate in Western culture, and the ban of the hijab limits Muslim women's choice to represent their culture and practice religion. Crosby (2014) also reveals how France's veil ban denies female agency that can exist in a variety of forms. Korteweg and Yurdakul (2020), in the analysis of headscarf debates in France, Germany, and the Netherlands, point to the decolonial potential of headscarf wearing Muslim women not as victims but as agents of gender equality in the postcolonial context. Salih's (2009) work finds that young Muslim women are contributing to the expansion and redefinition of secularism and liberalism in Italy. She shows how young Muslim women in Italy live their pious and religious identity through a rather liberal approach. For example, they participate in Islamic organizations, local politics, or describe themselves as being involved with human rights from an Islamic perspective. Krayem and Carland (2021, pp. 1–2) interrogate how Muslim women understand, experience, and fight for agency in the Australian context, and how some of these women see the 'social constraints' against Muslim women as a Western neoliberal cage. Jacobsen (2011) shows how Norwegian Muslim women's modes of agency are shaped by the configurations of personhood, ethics, and self-realization from both Islamic and liberal–secular discursive formations. However, Piela and Krotofil (2022) explore the manifestations of post-communist racism among the Polish white Muslim women, a part of whom draw clear racial boundaries between women who have agency and those who do not in the Polish society where whiteness is normative.

Therefore, examining the narratives of Muslim women living in non-Muslim societies is ultimately about redefining the religious and secular. Knibbe and Bartelink (2019) argue that the opposition between religion-as-patriarchal and secularism-as-progressive does not do justice to the complex gendered power relations that women navigate in practice, nor the agency and leadership they develop. Both Bracke (2008) and Vroon (2014) suggest a post-secular approach as it also speaks to global trends, transnational influences, and local translations. Baltic or Dutch Muslim women tend to migrate between Muslim and non-Muslim societies, and their communities and experiences are connected and shared via media and social networks. This case study of Baltic Muslim women helps us redefine the classical limits of the secular and religious, especially within a post-communist context, by giving a strong positive value to the traditionally private and female sphere through their non-uniform relationship with human rights, as well as going through their complex post-Soviet experience with their choice of Islam.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** The research design and interview guidelines were approved by the Vytautas Magnus University Faculty of Social Sciences Sociology Evaluation Committee of Research Conformity with the Fundamental Principles of Research Professionalism and Ethics on 25 June 2021.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Written or oral informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** This publication was produced as part of the project Religion and Gender Equality: Baltic and Nordic Developments (ReliGen). The data of the project are preserved at the Social Research Centre, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania. They cannot be used until the project is finished at the end of 2023. For data availability, Milda Ališauskienė, the head of the project, can be contacted by email at Milda.Alisauskiene@vdu.lt.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; or in the decision to publish the results.

## References

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2013. *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Alisauskiene, Milda, and Ausra Maslauskaite. 2021. Religious Identity and Family Practises in a Post-Communist Society: The Case of Division of Labor in Childcare. *Religions* 12: 1040. [CrossRef]

Ališauskienė, Milda. 2021. Women's Leadership in New Religions and the Question of Gender Equality in Post-Communist Lithuania. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 24: 84–103. [CrossRef]

Ališauskienė, Milda, and Donatas Glodenis. 2013. *Iššūkiai religinei įvairovei Lietuvoje: Religinių mažumų perspektyva*. Vilnius: Vytautas Magnus University, Naujųjų Religijų Tyrimų ir Informacijos Centras. Available online: https://portalcris.vdu.lt/server/api/core/bitstreams/6c8a39bd-5ee4-4c20-aaa6-cad958a93ce4/content (accessed on 13 January 2023).

Ammerman, Nancy T. 2007. *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ammerman, Nancy T. 2013. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ammerman, Nancy T. 2016. Lived Religion as an Emerging Field: An Assessment of its Contours and Frontiers. *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 29: 83–99. [CrossRef]

Amnesty International. 2022a. Latvia: Return Home or Never Leave the Woods. Refugees and Migrants Arbitrarily Detained, Beaten and Coerced into "Voluntary" Returns. Available online: https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EUR5259132022ENGLISH.pdf (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Amnesty International. 2022b. Lithuania: Forced out or Locked up. Refugees and Migrants Abused and Abandoned. Available online: https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/EUR5357352022ENGLISH.pdf (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Asad, Talal. 2000. What Do Human Rights Do? An Anthropological Enquiry. *Theory & Event*, 4. Available online: https://muse.jhu.edu/article/32601 (accessed on 13 January 2023).

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Asad, Talal. 2009. Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism. In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Edited by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood. Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, pp. 20–63.

Avishai, Orit. 2008. 'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency. *Gender and Society* 22: 409–33. [CrossRef]

Avishai, Orit. 2010. Women of God. *Contexts, American Sociological Association* 9: 46–51. [CrossRef]

Balode, Dace. 2003. Eine neue Identität für Frauen in der Kirche Lettlands. *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research* 11: 71–84. [CrossRef]

Beckford, James A. 2003. *Social Theory and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bell, David A., Marko Valenta, and Zan Strabac. 2021. A Comparative Analysis of Changes in Anti-Immigrant and Anti-Muslim Attitudes in Europe: 1990–2017. *Comparative Migration Studies* 9: 57. Available online: https://comparativemigrationstudies.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40878-021-00266-w (accessed on 4 April 2023). [CrossRef]

Berger, Peter L. 1999. *The Desecularization of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

Bracke, Sarah. 2008. Conjugating the Modern/Religious, Conceptualizing Female Religious Agency: Contours of a 'Post-secular' Conjuncture. *Theory, Culture and Society* 25: 51–67. [CrossRef]

Bracke, Sarah. 2012. From 'Saving Women' to 'Saving Gays': Rescue Narratives and their Dis/continuities. *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19: 237–52. [CrossRef]

Buitelaar, Marjo. 2014. 'Discovering a Different Me': Discursive Positioning in Life Story Telling Over Time. *Women's Studies International Forum* 43: 30–37. [CrossRef]

Burke, Kelsy C. 2012. Women's Agency in Gender-Traditional Religions: A Review of Four Approaches. *Sociology Compass* 6: 122–33. [CrossRef]

Crosby, Emily. 2014. Faux Feminism: France's Veil Ban as Orientalism. *Journal of International Women's Studies* 15: 46–60. Available online: https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol15/iss2/4/ (accessed on 4 April 2023).

Dahl, Robert A. 1971. *Polyarchy—Participation and Observation*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Dahl, Robert A. 1998. *On Democracy*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Davidman, Lynn, and Arthur L. Greil. 1994. Gender and the Experience of Conversion: The Case of 'Returnees' to Modern Orthodox Judaism. In *Gender and Religion*. Edited by William H. Swatos Jr. New Brunswick and London: Transaction, pp. 95–112.

Davie, Grace. 2002. *Europe: The Exceptional Case. Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

Day, Abby. 2017. *The Religious Lives of Older Laywomen. The Last Active Anglican Generation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

European Commission. 2019. Special Eurobarometer 493. Perceptions of Minorities in the EU: LGBTI People. Available online: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-10/infographics_2019_lgbti_final.pdf (accessed on 13 April 2023).

Eurostat. 2020a. Mean Age at First Marriage by Sex. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00014/default/table?lang=en (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Eurostat. 2020b. Mean Age of women at Childbirth and at Birth of First Child. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00017/default/table?lang=en (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Eurostat. 2021a. Marriage and Divorce Statistics. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Marriage_and_divorce_statistics (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Eurostat. 2021b. Total Fertility Rate. Available online: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00199/default/table?lang=en (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Fadil, Nadia. 2011. Not-/unveiling as an Ethical Practice. *Feminist Review* 98: 83–109. [CrossRef]

Frėjutė-Rakauskienė, Monika. 2020. Reali ar sukurta?: "Pabėgėlių krizės" vaizdavimas Lietuvos spaudos diskurse 2015–2017 metais. *Informacijos mokslai* 88: 29–45. Available online: https://www.journals.vu.lt/IM/article/view/15082/16631 (accessed on 4 April 2023).

Furseth, Inger, and Pål Repstad. 2006. *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion. Classical and Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Gewirth, Alan. 1982. *Human Rights*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gewirth, Alan. 1996. *The Community of Rights*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1976. *New Rules of Sociological Method: A Positive Critique of Interpretative Sociologies*. Berkeley: California University Press.

Giddens, Anthony. 1984. *Constitution of Society. Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Griffin, James. 2008. *On Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Gurbo, Simona. 2022. Latvia. In *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe. Volume 14*. Edited by Stephanie Muessig, Egdūnas Račius, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen and Oliver Scharbrodt. Leiden: Brill, pp. 382–87.

Hass, Bat Sheva. 2020. The Burka Ban: Islamic Dress, Freedom and Choice in the Netherlands in Light of the 2019 Burka Ban Law. *Religions* 11: 93. [CrossRef]

Hass, Bat Sheva. 2021. The Hybrid Researcher: Entering the Field, Ethnography and Research among Dutch Muslim Women from 2009 to 2019. *Religions* 12: 278. [CrossRef]

Hass, Bat Sheva, and Hayden Lutek. 2018. The Dutch Inside the 'Moslima' and the 'Moslima' Inside the Dutch: Processing the Religious Experience of Muslim Women in The Netherlands. *Societies* 8: 123. [CrossRef]

Hawthorne, Sian. 2011. Religion and Gender. In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*. Edited by Peter B. Clarke. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jacobsen, Christine M. 2011. Troublesome Threesome: Feminism, Anthropology and Muslim Women's Piety. *Feminist Review* 98: 65–82. [CrossRef]

Jouili, Jeanette. 2009. Negotiating Secular Boundaries: Pious Micro-Practices of Muslim Women in French and German Public spheres. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17: 455–70. [CrossRef]

Karčiauskaitė, Indrė. 2007. *Katalikiškoji moterų judėjimo srovė Lietuvoje (1907–1940). Daktaro disertacija*. Kaunas: VDU.

Knibbe, Kim, and Brenda Bartelink. 2019. Gender. Religion, Secularism, and Women's Empowerment. In *Religion and European Society: A Primer*. Edited by Benjamin Schewel and Erin K. Wilson. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons Ltd., pp. 125–41.

Knibbe, Kim, and Helena Kupari. 2020. Theorising Lived Religion. *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35: 157–76. [CrossRef]

Korteweg, Anne C., and Gökçe Yurdakul. 2020. Liberal Feminism and Postcolonial Difference: Debating Headscarves in France, the Netherlands, and Germany. *Social Compass* 68: 410–29. [CrossRef]

Krayem, Ghena, and Susan Carland. 2021. *Muslim Women and Agency: An Australian Context*. Muslim Minorities. Leiden: Brill, vol. 38.

La Fornara, Lisa M. 2018. Islam's (In)compatibility with the West?: Dress Code Restrictions in the Age of Feminism. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 25: 463–94. [CrossRef]

Lepa, Ege. 2020. The 'Tatar Way' of Understanding and Practicing Islam in Estonia. *Studia Orientalia Electronica* 8: 70–81. [CrossRef]

Lipset, Seymour M. 1994. The Social Requisites of Democracy Revisited: 1993 Presidential Address. *American Sociological Review* 59: 1–22. [CrossRef]

Llewellyn, Dawn. 2015. *Reading, Feminism, and Spirituality. Troubling the Waves*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lietuvos Socialinių Mokslų Centro (LSMC). 2021. Sociologijos instituto Etninių tyrimų skyrius ir VšĮ "Diversity Development Group". Lietuvos socialinių mokslų centro Sociologijos instituto Etninių tyrimų skyriaus ir VšĮ "Diversity Development Group" užsakymu atliktos visuomenės nuostatų apklausos 2021 m. rezultatai. Available online: http://www.ces.lt/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Visuomenės-nuostatų-apklausos-rezultatai-2021.pdf (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Mack, Phyllis. 2003. Religion, Feminism, and the Problem of Agency: Reflections on Eighteenth-Century Quakerism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29: 149–177. [CrossRef]

Mack, Phyllis. 2008. *Heart Religion in the British Enlightenment. Gender and Emotion in Early Methodism.* Newark: Rutgers University.

Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and The Feminist Subject.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Mahmood, Saba. 2009. Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide? In *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech.* Edited by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler and Saba Mahmood. Berkeley: Townsend Center for the Humanities, University of California, pp. 64–100.

Martin, Bernice. 2001. The Pentecostal Gender Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for the Sociology of Religion. In *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion.* Edited by Richard K. Fenn. Maldon: Blackwell.

Martin, David. 2005. *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory.* Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge.

Maslauskaitė, Aušra. 2013. Partnerystės atkūrimas po skyrybų: Tendencijos ir socialinė diferencija. *Kultūra ir Visuomenė* 4: 103–17. Available online: http://culturesociety.vdu.lt/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/6.Maslauskaite_Partnerystes_atkurimas_po-_skyrybu.pdf (accessed on 13 April 2023).

Maslauskaitė, Aušra. 2015. Vienišos motinos, materialinė deprivacija ir gyvenimo kokybė. In *Socialinė atskirtis ir geras gyvenimas Lietuvoje.* Edited by Artūras Tereškinas and Jurga Bučaitė-Vilkė. Kaunas: Versus Aureus, pp. 73–121.

Maslauskaitė, Aušra, and Marė Baublytė. 2012. Skyrybų visuomenė: Ištuokų raida, veiksniai, pasekmės. *Gyventojų studijos 4*; Vilnius: Socialinių tyrimų centras, Demografinių tyrimų institutas, p. 129. Available online: https://www.lstc.lt/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Skyrybu_visuomene_visas.pdf (accessed on 13 February 2023).

McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McGuire, Meredith B. 2016. Individual Sensory Experiences, Socialized Senses, and Everyday Lived Religion in Practice. *Social Compass* 63: 152–62. [CrossRef]

Media4Change. 2021. Migrantų vaizdavimo žiniasklaidoje krizė. Available online: https://manoteises.lt/straipsnis/migrantu-vaizdavimo-ziniasklaidoje-krize/ (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Moors, Annelies. 2009. The Dutch and the Face-veil: The Politics of Discomfort. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17: 393–408. [CrossRef]

Moors, Annelies, and Ruba Salih. 2009. Muslim Women in Europe: Secular normativities, Bodily Performances and Multiple Publics. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17: 375–78. [CrossRef]

Nacionālā Enciklopēdija. 2023. Musulmaņi Latvijā (National Encyclopedia of Latvia. 2023. Latvian Muslims). Available online: https://enciklopedija.lv/skirklis/22174 (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Nyhagen, Line, and Beatrice Halsaa. 2016. *Religion, Gender and Citizenship. Women of Faith, Gender Equality and Feminism.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Orsi, Robert A. 1997. Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion. In *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice.* Edited by David D. Hall. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 4–21.

Orsi, Robert A. 2003. Is the Study of Lived Religion Irrelevant to the World We Live in? Special Presidential Plenary Address, Salt Lake City, November 2, 2002. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42: 169–74. [CrossRef]

Ozorak, Elizabeth W. 1996. The Power, but not the Glory: How Women Empower Themselves Through Religion. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35: 17–29. [CrossRef]

Pew Research Center. 2017. The Changing Global Religious Landscape. Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/04/05/the-changing-global-religious-landscape/ (accessed on 14 February 2023).

Pew Research Center. 2018. Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues. Available online: https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/ (accessed on 14 February 2023).

Piela, Anna, and Joanna Krotofil. 2022. White Habitus Among Polish White Female Converts to Islam. *Sociology of Religion* srac021. Available online: https://academic.oup.com/socrel/advance-article/doi/10.1093/socrel/srac021/6649559?login=false (accessed on 4 April 2023).

Račius, Egdūnas. 2012. Muslims in Catholic Lithuania: Divergent Strategies in Dealing with the Marginality Status. In *Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Society: Ethnographies of Catholic Hegemony and the New Pluralism in Lithuania.* Edited by Milda Ališauskienė and Ingo W. Schröder. Ashgate: Surrey, pp. 169–88.

Račius, Egdūnas. 2022. Islam and Human Rights in Lithuania: A Case of Successful Politics of Inclusion and Belonging. In *Islam and Human Rights in the European Union, Proceedings of the XXXIIth Annual Conference, Thessaloniki, 23–25 September 2021.* Edited by Lina Papadopoulou. Granada: Comares, pp. 293–308.

Račius, Egdūnas. 2023. Lithuania. In *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe. Volume 15.* Edited by Stephanie Muessig, Egdūnas Račius, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen and Oliver Scharbrodt. Leiden: Brill.

Rana, Jasmijn. 2022. Secular-Religious Self-Improvement. Muslim Women's Kickboxing in the Netherlands. *American Ethnologist. Journal of American Ethological Society* 49: 191–203. [CrossRef]

Ringvee, Ringvo. 2022. Estonia. In *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe. Volume 14*. Edited by Stephanie Muessig, Egdūnas Račius, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, Jørgen S. Nielsen and Oliver Scharbrodt. Leiden: Brill, pp. 207–17.

Salih, Ruba. 2009. Muslim Women, Fragmented Secularism and the Construction of Interconnected 'Publics' in Italy. *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 17: 409–23. [CrossRef]

Sanderson, Sarten. 2022. EU and UNHCR raise alarm over pushback methods in Poland, Latvia and Lithuania. *InfoMigrants*. January 14. Available online: https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/37885/eu-and-unhcr-raise-alarm-over-pushback-methods-in-poland-latvia-and-lithuania (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Shisheliakina, Alena. 2022a. Being a Woman and Being Tatar: Intersectional Perspectives on Identity and Tradition in the Post-Soviet Context. Doctoral dissertation, University of Tartu Press, Estonia, Tartu.

Shisheliakina, Alena. 2022b. Muslim Women's Narratives of Veiling and Negotiating Identity in the Post-Soviet Context. *Journal of Religion in Europe* 15: 187–212. [CrossRef]

Statistics Estonia. 2022. Population Census. The Proportion of People with a Religious Affiliation Remains Stable, Orthodox Christianity Is Still the Most Widespread. Available online: https://www.stat.ee/en/news/population-census-proportion-people-religious-affiliation-remains-stable-orthodox-christianity-still-most-widespread (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Tereškinas, Artūras, and Morta Vidūnaitė. 2024. From Demonisation of LGBTQ+ to Privatisation of Intimate Citizenship in the Lithuanian Catholic Church. In *Religion and Gender Equality: Baltic and Nordic Developments*. Edited by Milda Ališauskienė, Marianne Bjelland Kartzow and Eglė Aleknaitė. London: Routledge, *in press*.

The European Union. 2019. EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024. Available online: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Tieslietu Ministrijā. 2019. Tieslietu Ministrijā Iesniegto Reliģisko Organizāciju Darbības Pārskats 2019. gadā (Annual Report of Religious Organisations as Submitted to the Ministry of Justice for 2019). Available online: www.tm.gov.lv/lv/2019-gada-publiskie-parskati (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Tieslietu Ministrijā. 2020. Tieslietu ministrijā iesniegto reliģisko organizāciju darbības pārskats 2020. gadā (Annual Report of Religious Organisations as Submitted to the Ministry of Justice for 2020). Available online: https://www.tm.gov.lv/lv/2020-gada-publiskie-parskati (accessed on 5 February 2023).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). 2019. Empowerment, Inclusion, Equality: Accelerating Sustainable Development with Human Rights. Available online: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/MDGs/Post2015/EIEPamphlet.pdf (accessed on 5 February 2023).

Valstybės Duomenų Agentūra. 2021. Lietuvos Gyventojų Surašymas 2021. Gyventojai Pagal Religinę Bendruomenę 2021 (State Data Agency of Lithuania. 2021. Lithuanian Population Census 2021. Population according to Religious Community 2021). Available online: https://osp.stat.gov.lt/documents/10180/9601028/Gyventojai_pagal_religine_bendruomene_0321.xlsx (accessed on 5 February 2023).

van den Bogert, Kathrine. 2020. Spatial Performances of Gender, Islam and the "Secular": Muslim Girls' Playing Football in Dutch Public Playgrounds. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. 44: 1844–63. [CrossRef]

Van den Brandt, Nella. 2022. Negotiating Difference and Transformation: Women's Stories of Conversion to Judaism and Islam. In *Transforming Bodies and Religions: Powers and Agencies in Europe*. Edited by Mariecke van den Berg, Lieke Schrijvers JelleWiering and Anne-Marie Korte. London: Routledge, pp. 81–101.

Van Nieuwkerk, Karin. 2006. *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Van Nieuwkerk, Karin. 2014. 'Conversion' to Islam and the Construction of a Pious Self. In *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*. Edited by Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 667–87.

Vroon, Vanessa E. 2014. Sisters in Islam. Women's Conversion and the Politics of Belonging: A Dutch Case Study. Doctoral dissertation, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

Woodhead, Linda. 2002. Women and Religion. In *Religions in the Modern World*. Edited by Linda Woodhead. London: Routledge, pp. 332–56.

Woodhead, Linda. 2003. Feminism and the Sociology of Religion: From Gender-blindness to Gendered Difference. In *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*. Edited by Richard K. Fenn. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 67–84.

Woodhead, Linda. 2008. 'Because I'm Worth It': Religion and Women's Changing Lives in the West. In *Women and Religion in the West. Challenging Secularization*. Edited by Kristin Aune, Sonya Sharma and Giselle Vincett. Aldershot: Ashgate e-Book, pp. 147–64.