

## Article

# The Salience of Islam to Muslim Heritage Children's Experiences of Identity, Family, and Well-Being in Foster Care

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**Abstract:** All children need permanent and secure homes in which they can explore their identities and evolve as human beings, citizens, and family members, and within which they can have a sense of security, continuity, stability, and belonging. There are approximately 4500 children of Muslim heritage in the care system in England and Wales, and this number is increasing. Using case studies that emerged from qualitative fieldwork, this article examines the role and impact of religion on children's journeys through the care system, particularly in foster care. This article concludes that irrespective of the level of engagement Muslim heritage children in the care system have with their religious heritage, Islam has an enduring impact on how they perceive their identities. As a result, there is a pressing need for social workers and foster carers who care for these children to gain greater insights into Islam and Muslim culture. Such insights and understandings will help children settle faster and form stronger bonds of attachment with their foster carers, and in the long term, this will enhance life outcomes for these children.

**Keywords:** Islam; Muslims; children in care; looked-after children; adoption; foster care; orphans; faith; Britain; identity



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## 1. Introduction: Hussain's Journey through Care

All children need permanent and secure homes in which they can explore their identities and evolve as human beings, citizens, and family members, and within which they can have a sense of security, continuity, stability, and belonging. This article begins by reflecting on a foster carer's experiences of caring for a young person of Muslim heritage. Iqbal (not his real name) is British-Pakistani Muslim who has been fostering for over a decade. Here, we examine his experiences of caring for Hussain, who was the first foster child Iqbal had cared for and is a young person who is also of British-Pakistani Muslim heritage. This case study provides 'lived experience' insights into the issues that this article aims to examine.

### *Hussain's Journey through Care*

Hussain (not his real name), a British citizen by birth, grew up in Pakistan and the UK. He was 11 when he came into care. His widowed Pakistani mother remarried, and his stepfather regularly physically abused him. His mother had other children with her new husband and did not protect Hussain, or perhaps was unable to do so. Social services found him in a malnourished state and immediately placed him in foster care. In his foster carers' home, Hussain was rude, and both social workers and foster carers described his behaviour as difficult. He refused to eat at a table and used his fingers to eat. He was not engaging with his studies. He ran away regularly. Social workers had to move him to different homes, but he did not settle down in any. Social workers could not understand the reasons for his behaviour, and ultimately they began to see him as difficult to place.

After running away or being moved from multiple foster homes, Hussain was placed with Iqbal. When Iqbal saw Hussain's file, he did not want to bring him into his home as he had only recently qualified as a foster carer, and this would be his first placement. He did not want to care for a child whom he felt would be challenging to manage. However, Hussain had run away again, and the social workers needed to place him somewhere urgently, so Hussain came to Iqbal's home. Iqbal says the first time he and Hussain met, he greeted Hussain with the Islamic greeting "Assalam Alaikum", and Hussain automatically replied "Walaikum Assalam". There was a glint of surprise in Hussain's eyes—was it possible that his foster carer knew his language? Iqbal says that from that moment on, a bond was formed between himself and Hussain. In Hussain's words, his new foster carer 'got' him. In his new foster home, they spoke a similar language, ate food that he could recognise, held similar religious beliefs, and shared cultural identities. In Iqbal's care, Hussain gradually settled down, became respectful towards his carers, formed strong bonds of attachment, and even went to college. He stayed with Iqbal until he was 18, and now five years on, he continues to visit him. Hussain and Iqbal consider each other family.

Prior to Iqbal, all of Hussain's foster carers had been white British families. Although they tried their best, Hussain had not been able to feel settled. One foster family had a pet dog—in Hussain's understanding, a dog was unclean. Having a dog in the home was something that he could not reconcile with, so he ran away. The food had been different, in one foster home there was pork in the fridge, which Hussain considered *haram* or forbidden—he felt unable to eat in that house and so sought food elsewhere.

In settings that were so unfamiliar, Hussain encountered cultural confusion (Pitcher and Jaffar 2018). Hussain did not have a strong sense of 'religiosity' for example, he did not pray or read the Quran regularly. Nevertheless, some Islamic beliefs and aspects of Muslim culture were inculcated within his identity since childhood. For example, Hussain insisted on eating only *halal* or permissible food, and he recognised the Islamic greeting, 'Assalam Alaikum'.

Islam can be theologically understood in relation to its beliefs, scriptures and institutions. However, Hussain identified being Muslim with a set of cultural practices rather than adherence to theology or a core set of religious institutions. His Muslimness was 'lived' rather than religious. For young British born Muslims, in care or not, their identity is often shaped by being children or grandchildren of migrants (Nielsen 2014), and their notions of religious identity syncretically incorporate vestiges of the parents' ethnic, cultural identities and religious values (Akbarzadeh and Roose 2011), as well as a sense of belonging within Britain and/or Europe, and therefore being British or European (Nielsen 2014). As Tariq Modood (2005) notes, Muslim migrants and their progeny are developing a 'new way of living, gradually becoming a part of British society, which had to be ultimately justified in terms of compatibility with the Muslim faith' (p. 31).

Returning to the case of Hussain, what this means for him is that rather than a religious identity, Islam became a cultural identity, emerging from how he had been socialised as a child. The culture that he had lived in prior to coming into care was impacting his life while in care. When he lived in Pakistan, Islam was ubiquitous with his cultural milieu—in the food, in society, in politics and in the languages spoken within and outside his home. Even when he moved to the UK, this milieu continued within the family home. He was not, nor did he want to be a religious Muslim. Yet, his previous life unavoidably made him a cultural Muslim who practised religion, not through conviction, but as a cultural habit (Yilmaz 2014; Akbarzadeh and Roose 2011). His sense of identity, family, and community were steeped in Muslim culture, and possibly, without even realising it, he had religious and cultural needs.

Hussain and Iqbal's story is one in a complex and unwieldy care system, which aims to meet the needs of children from a variety of ethnic and faith backgrounds. In this case, Muslim culture was essential to a child's identity, and therefore his/her understandings of home. Religion and culture formed a bond that led Hussain to feel attached to his carers and establish a sense of belonging (Phoenix 2019; Islam et al. 2018).

Over 3 million people identify as Muslim in the UK according to the Office of National Statistics 2018. As of 31 March 2019, there were 78,150 looked-after children in England, of which recent research suggests that approximately 4500 are of Muslim heritage (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2018). Both numbers—the number of looked-after children and the number of children of Muslim heritage in care—are increasing. Yet research about the experiences of Muslim heritage children in the social care system in Britain is almost non-existent (Miller and Imran 2019). Drawing on original research, this article begins the process of filling this gap by providing and analysing empirical evidence around how children of Muslim heritage experience their faith while in care and considers issues around Islam and Muslim identity in foster care settings. When discussing what we understand as Islam and what it means to be a Muslim in the UK, we are moving away from universal notions of homogeneous religious identities. Working within the lens of sociology of religion (Salvatore 2016), we incorporate into our analysis a range of locally and translocally determined interlinked ways in which it is possible to be Muslim—from devoutly practicing Muslims to those for whom religion is simply a matter of cultural habit (Yilmaz 2014). Our examination of looked after children’s religious identities and needs responds to Dilwar Hussain. Understanding Muslims in Britain requires an interrogation of the connections and disconnections of practices and distinctive shared beliefs that cut across ethnicity, gender, age, class, and sexuality (Hussain 2011).

In our research, we have encountered the stories of children who have only a cultural tie with Islam, children who value religion partly because they have grown up in more religiously practicing homes, and also children of Muslim heritage who eschew or even fear religion. In this article, we reflect on the care experiences of five young Muslim heritage children as case studies from our research (including Hussain’s story) to unravel the complex negotiations around faith, culture, identity, and family that being a Muslim heritage child in care entails. These case studies are not intended to be generalised, but together with our commentary on them, providing detailed, reflective insights to explore how and why faith is important in Muslim heritage children’s journeys through care. By addressing this question, we aim to bring to the fore a more nuanced approach towards providing for the ‘whole needs’ of a child of Muslim heritage in care in the UK. Through thick descriptions (Geertz 1973) of the different ways in which children experience and perceive faith, we aim to provide a more nuanced and complex child-led framing of Islam to social workers, carers, and others who make decisions about these children’s lives.

## 2. Methods: Uncovering How Faith Is ‘Lived’ in Care

In this article, we use ‘lived experience’ as a theoretical framing to explore the faith experiences of Muslim heritage children in care. Standard sociological assumptions that focus on religious organisational participation and affiliation infer that there is a uniformity in practice and beliefs between structures and individuals (McGuire 2008). In contrast, studying religion as lived ‘embodied practices’, the way religious people work, dress, eat, and live, shows the complex, untidy negotiations that take place in a person’s life to construct a religious identity, which may at times differ from official doctrine (Ammerman 2014; Aune 2015; McGuire 2008, p. 6; Harvey 2013; Nyhagen 2017). There has been a critique that studying religion-as-lived, which focuses on individual encounters, lacks the rigor of large data sets and is a less reliable measure of religiosity (Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012). However, looking at Islam through lived religion is a critical framework to understand the complex ways in which Islam manifests in children’s everyday practices. In doing so, rather than examining diverse theologies and texts of Islam, we prioritise everyday actions insofar as they affect the lives of children in care when making sense of their religious and cultural context. Similarly, understanding Islam, and by that, we mean Islam as a series of beliefs, practices and traditions, through lived religion, addresses intersectionality. This allows our exploration of Muslim identity to be informed also by gender, caste, sexuality, race, class, and disability. Understanding how social identities are intersecting provides a greater insight into how religious, cultural, and ethnic norms can

translate into Muslim practices. Therefore, the study of lived religion will not produce extensive generalizable data to understand Islamic practices, but instead offers rich, granular insights to show how Islamic beliefs are meaningful in children's lives.

In this article and the research that underpins it, we use the terms 'children of Muslim heritage' and 'Muslim heritage children' to describe the children whose lives our research addresses. We prefer these terms over the term 'Muslim children'. Our preferred framing allows a theoretical and practical space within which children's identities can be determined irrespective of the socio-religious contexts of their birth family. It also accounts for the significant diversities within British Muslim communities in relation to religiosity and levels of religious practice. So, for example, there may be children who are of Muslim heritage but who may never have encountered religious practices in their everyday lives prior to coming into care; there may be children of Muslim heritage who themselves do not self-identify as Muslim, and there may be children for whom religion as an internal and external expression is a significant aspect of their identity. This term also acknowledges how a Muslim identity is seen in the UK at large as a religious and ethnic identity within a cultural context (Morris 2018) and how that impacts on children of Muslim heritage in care, whether or not they practice their faith.

The case studies are taken from interviews conducted with 41 social workers, adoptive parents, prospective adoptive parents, policy makers, legal practitioners, foster carers, and care leavers over a period of 18 months (2017–2018) (Table 1). Interviews took place in cities in the Midlands of the UK that had large Muslim populations.

**Table 1.** No. of research participants by category.

	Category	Number
1	Adopters	5
2	Foster Carers	10
3	Prospective Adopters	4
4	Social Workers (Independent Agencies)	4
5	Social Workers (Local Authority)	15
6	Care Leavers	3
	TOTAL	41

Three of the cases are taken directly from a young person's narrative. One was shared by a foster carer and the other by a social worker, who were interviewed to understand their perspectives on providing care for Muslim heritage children. The research was undertaken within a sociology of religion framework that has as its subject, the study of religion in its social context (Furseth and Repstad 2006, p. 5). Embedded within our fieldwork is a collaborative approach that is led by the expertise of people already working in this area to provide a research-based evidence-pool to inform policy and practice (Schratz and Walker 1995).

Prior to field research work, the research team secured ethical approval from (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2018) University. In all case studies and quotations used in this paper, identifiable details have been masked or blurred, and pseudonyms are used. Participants in the study were recruited through local authorities and independent fostering agencies who participated in the research. We also ran a national campaign, with adverts placed in fostering agency newsletters and Muslim-facing community publications, to recruit participants who had fostered children of Muslim heritage or were considering doing so. Interviews were audio-recorded after securing written voluntary consent from participants.

### 3. Unpacking Muslim Identity in Relation to Children in Care

Islam is diverse. Alluding to the diverse cultural, social, and geographic configurations that Islam may take, Esposito asserts that there are 'not one but many Islams' (Esposito 1998). 'Muslims' in Britain have a multiplicity of ethnic, cultural, denominational, socio-economic and political affiliations. They also have different ways of believing, whereas

for some Muslims, faith is a central aspect of their lives and identities; for others, religion is on the periphery of their lives, but they retain a connection by claiming Muslimness as a cultural identity. Although Islam is usually positioned as a religious standpoint, for many Muslims, it is a cultural and religious identity, as rarely does identity exist in a silo (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2021). Islam is what Lawrence calls both a global and unbound religion and 'is as much a model of diversity as the guarantor of uniformity' (Lawrence 2014, p. 227). Correspondingly, Muslim identity is not bound to a singular cultural context. Muslim identity is constructed through traversing and transforming race, religion, and dominant cultural boundaries to create multiple forms of Muslim lived expression (Ross-Sheriff 2017). By re-conceptualising Islam as a more dynamic discourse that encompasses varying levels of commitment to beliefs, culture, and practices, child services practitioners will have a better understanding of the practices of children and their families in Britain (Gilligan and Furness 2006).

There are several reasons that cause children of Muslim heritage to enter the care system. According to social workers interviewed for this research, the reasons children of Muslim heritage come into care are similar to those of non-Muslim children in comparable circumstances. Mainly they come into public care due to abuse, neglect, family breakdown, a parent or child's illness or disability, lack of family support, substance misuse, and/or extreme poverty. Research has also shown, although not common, a small number of British-Muslim and Muslim migrant children are removed from the care of their parents by local authorities because of parental inability to communicate with authorities, including navigating socially conservative views held by some sections of the Muslim community (Miller and Imran 2019). Furthermore, as also confirmed in our research, a number of foster care agencies cited the current refugee 'crisis' as reasons for large numbers of children of Muslim heritage entering care (Miller and Imran 2019; Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2018). Based on their country of origin, a significant proportion of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) arriving in the United Kingdom appear to be of Muslim heritage (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2018). As UASCs are one of the most vulnerable groups in the system, religion can be a protective measure and improve human security for these refugee children when adapting to unfamiliar cultural norms in a host country (Whittaker et al. 2005). However, as national figures focus more on documenting a child's ethnicity, the demands placed upon local authorities to accommodate the needs of Muslim UASCs has at times overwhelmed fostering services (Miller and Imran 2019).

Ethnicity serves as a useful but approximate lens through which to understand more about children of Muslim heritage in care. The age at entry into care differs by ethnic group, where mixed ethnicity were the youngest and black children the oldest; there were also differences in the length of time they remained in care and their likelihood of being adopted or returned home (Owen and Statham 2009). Pakistani and Bangladeshi children (who are generally of Muslim heritage) were the least likely to be adopted, which may be partly due to a lack of South Asian Muslims coming forward to adopt (Barn and Kirton 2012). One of the reasons that some minority ethnic children enter care later, may be related to differential social work practice, but there is inconsistent evidential basis for this position (Williams and Soydan 2005; Bernard and Gupta 2006; Masson et al. 2008). For example, (Barn et al. 1997; Hunt et al. 1999) found evidence that minority ethnic children are more likely to come to the attention of child protection services in times of crisis and not to have been supported beforehand.

#### 4. Faith in the Care System

The overarching principle of child protection policy, procedures, adoption, and foster placements in England is for the state to provide 'stable, safe and secure homes which meet the whole needs of the child' (Newbigging and Thomas 2011, p. 376). In taking children into care, the state uses one of its most coercive powers to secure the welfare and well-being of the child, which includes providing foster carers and adopters who can facilitate the child's diverse religious and ethnic identities (Selwyn and Wijedesa 2011). The provision

for religion as a protected characteristic in public services, such as education, health and child welfare, is found in legislation that requires social workers to take into account looked-after children's religious heritage (Children Act 1989; Equality Act 2010). However, whilst local authorities have a duty of care to provide for the religious needs of looked-after children, there is no statutory duty to collect data about a child's religious affiliation when they are admitted into care (Selwyn and Wijedesa 2011). In practice, some practitioners become 'religion blind' and ascribe faith beliefs as less relevant than ethnicity in placements (Chaney and Church 2017; Gilligan and Furness 2006, p. 625). Local government responses to the needs of Muslim heritage children appear to be leaving social workers to develop their own notions of best practice when working with looked-after children (Chaney and Church 2017).

The lack of substantive data on care impacts on the delivery of care is a barrier to the recruitment of foster carers from the Muslim community (Miller and Imran 2019; Owen and Statham 2009; Selwyn et al. 2008; Selwyn and Wijedesa 2011; Wainwright and Ridley 2012). Having greater transparency in the recording of religion not only helps services plan for demand, but also has the potential for child social care professionals to build networks between themselves and Muslim communities to encourage fostering (Miller and Imran 2019; Muslim Fostering Project 2018; Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2018). Indeed, one recommendation from the research underpinning this article is for the UK government to record the religious heritage in its annual census of looked-after children (Cheruvallil-Contractor et al. 2018).

Policy-focused reports, including the Fostering Stocktake of 2018, the Education Select Committee's report into Fostering of 2018, and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), enquire into the role of the social worker in adoption (2016), barely engage with religion, and there is only limited recognition of the salience of faith to the identity of children who come from faith backgrounds. However, in spite of this criticism, all three reports make limited, yet valuable contributions. The fostering stocktake calls for a database of foster carers that, in addition to other characteristics, includes their religion (pp. 102–103). The Education Select Committee includes within its recommendations the establishment of a national recruitment and awareness campaign that will seek to increase the number of carers from ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds, which are currently lacking in representation (p. 38). Finally, the BASW report into adoption includes a quote from a child that asserts the importance of religion to their identity (p. 26).

## 5. Meeting Muslim Heritage Children in Care

For children of Muslim heritage in Britain, their religion remains an important aspect of their identity (Becher and Husain 2003). According to Scourfield et al., this may be because religion is central to children's routines, and they spend their time in Islamic places (including their home). This causes their faith to become intrinsic to their sense of identity and religion becomes part of their lives without them needing to make a conscious choice to embrace it (2010, p. 3). Madge et al. demonstrate that faith and non-faith identities are important to young people who engage in complex negotiations to determine who they are within multi-faith social contexts (Madge et al. 2014). Often as described by Peele-Eady and Tryphenia in relation to Black African children of faith, children's notions of faith are mediated or stewarded by adults and consolidated through children's participation both within religious activities and within multi-faith and secular society (Peele-Eady 2011). As noted above, children reflect a complex continuum of Muslim identities (ethnicity, class, denominational affiliation, etc.). Muslim heritage children in care reflect a similar affinity to their faith identity. In this section, we discuss four case studies to analyse the role of faith in children's identity formation in the context of being looked after. What does it mean to them to have a faith? How does having a faith impact on their sense of family and belonging, their sense of loss, and indeed of hope in their new foster homes? We examine this, first, through Fatima's story, a young care leaver from the Midlands, who shared her experiences of being in foster care for over a year.

### 5.1. Fatima's Resilience in Faith

Fatima and her two younger brothers came into care very suddenly after her parents were arrested for committing a crime (she was too embarrassed to talk about what crime they had committed). She was 17 and her brothers were much younger. They came from a family that practiced its faith. Fatima remembers the day she was taken into care, "we were put into a taxi. I had no idea where we were going. I was anxious, yet at the same time, things were happening so fast I had no time to be anxious. I knew I had to look after my brothers". Social workers placed Fatima and her brothers in respite care in an African-Caribbean Christian home. Fatima describes this carer as "very kind". Yet Fatima was disturbed. The food in the fridge included ham, which she knew was not halal or permissible to eat within Islam. Her foster carer took her to the greengrocers to buy vegetables that she and her brothers could eat. However, while she ensured her brothers ate halal food, she says she "did not eat for three days".

Fatima and her brothers were moved to a South Asian Sikh home. This was a difficult placement. There was no sense of family or normality in this home. There were rules they abided by, and they had access to food and had rooms of their own, but there was no engagement beyond what was necessary with their foster carers. A month after they stayed there, they discovered that, unknown to them, another foster child had been living in that home.

Then Fatima was moved on—she was placed in a South Asian Muslim home. She liked it here, as her foster carers understood her religious and cultural needs. However, she was separated from her brothers, one of whom continued to live in the Sikh home, and another was moved to a South Asian Hindu home. The children hated being separated from each other. Fatima worried about her brothers, particularly in Ramadan (the Islamic month of fasting) when she could fast with her foster family, but her brothers had to fast alone. She spoke sadly about her brothers having to get up on their own at 2 a.m. in the morning to get cold food out of the fridge for their Suhr or pre-sunrise breakfast. At contact meetings, the siblings discussed the possibility of living together in Fatima's foster home. However, when they bought this up with social workers they were told, "All South Asians have similar cultures".

Fatima says that a change in social workers meant that they later had a social worker who understood more about Islam. This social worker considered the possibility of the children living together, but nothing seemed to happen. The children threatened to run away, which seemed to work. It took 6 months and 12 months respectively, but in the end, the siblings are now together in a Muslim home. Fatima is now 18, but she is attached to her foster carer and continues to live with her under staying-put arrangements. She says she is happier now that her brothers are with her, but she still feels uncertain about their future. Nevertheless, she concludes that she trusts in Allah or God Almighty who will lead her out of her uncertainty to happiness and success.

Fatima's narrative indicates the importance she places on her faith identity and faith practices. She is happy in her current home where she shares her beliefs and her culture with her foster family. The ability to pray with her foster family, to perform religious observances with them and to celebrate festivals together, was important to her perceptions of her well-being. She came from a 'practicing' background and regularly prayed and fasted. She felt she had lost her parents and could not afford to lose her faith as it gave her hope and resilience. Living with foster carers who understood the significance of faith to her, and who used faith-based language to reassure her, helped her cope and settle.

As also noted by [Furness and Gilligan \(2010\)](#), foster carers in our research asserted that their faith motivated them to foster. They felt that sharing a faith identity with the children they looked after was important and ensured the best outcomes for the children who fit into the household and wider community context of the family:

"Yes, being Muslim and the child being a Muslim girl played a role in the decision to foster her. We believe in God and have a conviction that we should do good

to humanity. So yes, religious beliefs played a role, especially for a child staying with us for a long time.”

Muslim foster carer, Pakistani-African mixed heritage.

We now move on to a different experience of faith, Sabiha’s story. Described below is the story of a young woman of Muslim heritage who was not sure about Islam and who initially felt uncomfortable living with foster carers who were practicing Muslims.

### 5.2. *Sabiha Finds Home*

Before coming into care, Sabiha had gotten into bad company—she was part of a gang, drank alcohol, and had a boyfriend. She lived with an elderly grandparent who was no longer able to manage her needs. After she ran away a few times, she was taken into care. Social workers placed her in a Muslim family of a similar ethnic heritage to herself. The family practiced their faith, which initially made Sabiha uncomfortable. Would her foster carers impose Islam upon her?

Her foster carers understood her difficult life journey—including her experiences of loss and belonging. They were conscious not to impose Islam on her. They spoke to her about drinking responsibly and invited her boyfriend home so that she could meet with him in a safe environment. She soon formed a bond with her foster carers with whom she shared a similar cultural and religious language. In their home environment, which was characterised by the practice of faith, she says she gradually found a space that was familiar and comfortable. She gradually stopped drinking alcohol, left the gang, and started attending college. She says she feels more settled than ever before. For Sabiha, her faith was not particularly important, yet sharing language, culture, and beliefs helped her trust her foster carers, which enabled her to, in her own words, “get a hold on her life”.

Sabiha had ambiguous relationships with the gang she was part of and with Islam. When we interviewed her, she described Islamic values as an important part of her upbringing when she lived with her parents. She valued her Muslim culture and spoke fondly about her grandmother telling her stories from the Quran. With her grandmother’s deteriorating health, these conversations stopped. While being troubled by social practices within the gang (alcohol, drugs, violence), which she recognised as being at odds with Islamic values, she also valued her social relationships with the gang. In hindsight, she recognised the gang filled an important gap in her life, creating a family or social group that she could be part of in the absence of siblings or parents. When she came to live with her foster carers, she benefitted from having a “new family”. Her foster carers had two older biological sons, who became “her brothers”, who, similar to “her” gang, looked out for her. As she settled in this new family environment, she found she could empathise more with her Islamic values that formed a bridge between her childhood and her contemporary life, helping her settle better in her foster home.

Moving away from children who needed faith (as in Fatima’s case), we consider children who want to exit faith. The case study below is of a Muslim heritage sibling group who came into care after facing significant abuse at the hands of their biological family. These children, like others whose stories we encountered in this research, eschewed faith. In order to meet these children’s needs, a more nuanced approach to the salience of faith is needed.

### 5.3. *Mansur’s Rejection of Faith*

Mansur’s parents had recently turned towards a literal form of Islam that they sought to impose on their children. When the children did not conform to their parent’s newfound religiosity, they faced corporal punishment. Their parents locked them up and did not allow them to meet their friends. They were deprived of food and beaten up. Social workers became involved with the family. When interventions to keep the family together failed, the children were taken into foster care.

As a result of the ill-treatment they had received in their biological home, the children wanted to disaffiliate not just from Islam, but from any religion. They insisted on being



placed in a non-Muslim home where they made it clear they wanted nothing to do with the “the faith of their parents”. An example of the seriousness of their rejection of their religious heritage were their demands to eat ham (as they knew it was not permitted to eat pork or pork products in Islam) and to drink alcohol. This is a complicated case, and although in the short term social workers tried to appease the children (although they emphatically did not give them alcohol) so that they would settle down, there were also social workers’ longer-term concerns around the identity positions of these children. For Muslim heritage children in care, religion, culture, and ethnicity are inter-twined within their identities, so although children seek to exit religion, vestiges of religion remain. Social workers were concerned about how children might navigate this. Furthermore, social workers suggested that from their practice, they had observed that children’s identities are in a state of flux. While they might be rejecting faith at this point in their lives, they might want to re-engage with it later on in life. Social workers were concerned about including faith markers that children could pick up if they wanted to later on in life, without impinging on their current desire to exit Islam.

This case of looked-after children asking to abandon their religious heritage offers an alternative discourse on the salience of children’s faith to their identities and their needs. In this case, the children were placed, as they had requested, in a non-Muslim home. The children had experienced deep physical and emotional abuse, and it was important not to traumatise them any further. Social workers, therefore, took a nuanced approach that recognised the children’s rejection of Islam. Having grown up with the Muslim faith and within Muslim culture, their rejection of Islam was informed by what they knew of Islam and how it was practiced in their lives, which in their case was characterised by violence. They were rejecting the form of faith that their parents had imposed upon the family—parents who had mistreated them to the extent that they were taken into care. In such cases, children’s choices need to be discussed with them carefully and empathetically, including how to exit faith so that both short-term and long-term care goals around security and stability are achieved. Consideration of faith, therefore, is salient to their identities and how care decisions are made for them.

The final case study of a young woman named Zara illustrates that rejection of faith in childhood may not always mean a permanent rejection of faith.

#### *5.4. Zara, Rejecting and then Finding Faith*

Zara is a young Muslim care leaver. According to her, she was disillusioned with some aspects of her faith after what she had experienced in her biological family. When she came into care, she found herself living with foster carers who were not Muslim and who saw no need to include any aspect of Islam in their care for her. In their home Zara perceived disdain towards Islam. Nevertheless, they were good carers whom she learnt to rely on and love.

Zara felt she was no longer in a cultural context where she could easily practice her faith and gradually stop practicing whatever she knew of Islam, including those practices which she had previously enjoyed. She wanted to belong within her foster family and their social networks. When reflecting on her memories of the time, she says wanting to ‘fit in’ with her foster family’s culture made it easier for her to reject her biological culture, which included Islam. Rejecting her faith was an act of loyalty towards her foster carers—by rejecting her faith, she was rejecting what made her different from them.

Years later, when she was much older and had left care, she found herself reflecting more on her identity and who she was. As she reconnected with her cultural identity, she found her faith again and states that she now feels that her “identity was rooted in her faith” and is intrinsic to who she is now.

In cases where children in care reject their biological faith, it is important for social workers and carers to have an understanding of faith to help children navigate their identities to explore how to express their Muslim heritage in a multitude of ways and differing degrees of engagement. Zara’s case demonstrates the need for appropriate

support for Muslim heritage children in care, and adequate training for foster carers and social workers on the pervasiveness of Islam in forming identity (Gilligan and Furness 2006; Modood 2005).

Not all of the Muslim heritage children live in Muslim homes, nor do all Muslim foster carers only care for Muslim heritage children. Indeed, we found evidence of good practice in multi-faith families in which the carers did their best to ensure that the faith needs of the children were met. Yet as Zara's case shows governmental agencies, both national and local, whilst recognising that the importance of religion is at times unable to articulate the complexities of Muslim identity in navigating ethnicity, mainstream culture, and religious piety into policies (Modood 2005, 2010). It can be concluded that practices in the child social care sector are struggling to translate the requirements for religious provision into religious competence adequately (Gilligan and Furness 2006).

## 6. Conclusions: How Is Faith Salient?

In this article, we critically examined five case studies that illustrate Muslim heritage children's differing experiences of religious identity as they journey through care. These case studies were chosen to illustrate that religious identity is by no means uniform. Instead, children's positionalities in relation to religion inhabit a continuum of standpoints. This includes children who rely upon faith and who draw resilience from it. Some children reject faith completely, and others maintain an ambivalent relationship with faith identity, which functions more as a cultural habit rather than stemming from any conviction.

Children who are in foster care will have arrived here due to various marginalities and vulnerabilities. In the words of a foster carer, "they have been let down by society in various ways", be it abuse within their biological families, or in the case of asylum-seeking children, breakdown in civil society due to war. Society therefore has a commitment to support these children to reclaim their lives and their identities 'on children's terms'. This research begins from this standpoint to create a theoretical and practice-focused space from where child-led narratives of identity, including faith-identity, can be explored so that children's 'whole needs are met' and so that their voices are heard.

This article begins a discussion around the role of faith in Muslim heritage children's journeys through care. Whether it is a rejection of faith or a desire to practice it devoutly, our research demonstrates that faith remains salient to children's identities and that sharing faith-identity with their carers helps children settle down faster and enhances their sense of well-being. Social work practice in relation to meeting children's faith needs remains patchy. We have found evidence of social work practice that seeks to understand and provide for children's faith. In other cases, children's views have been disregarded. This is not due to a lack of motivation from social workers. Instead, it is a combination of lack of leadership support, heavy workloads, and limited research in this area, particularly in relation to faith and children in care. This is where this research makes an original contribution by facilitating complex understandings of what the Muslim heritage of Muslim heritage children in care actually means. Rather than homogenous readings of faith as dictated by its texts and institutions, we used 'lived religion' as a theoretical framing to highlight for social work practitioners, the messiness and differences in children's lived realities. These children may be of Muslim heritage and are often labelled as such; the purpose of this paper has been to show how diverse their Muslimness is, while also demonstrating the need on occasion to decouple Muslimness from Islam, especially when working with vulnerable children.

Religion remains complex and subject to multiple interpretations, including those that do not agree with each other. Recent policy-focused reports do not substantially engage with religion, nevertheless, they make recommendations that have the potential to improve outcomes for children who have religious identities. Against this backdrop, this research recommends that social work professionals and policymakers recognise the salience of Islam to Muslim heritage children's identities and journeys through care. Rather than textual or adult-led paradigms, children's professionals must inculcate a curiosity to

understand religion through children's voices, so that their views and needs of faith are included in the decisions that are made about their lives.

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