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### A place for religion

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# Chapter 3

## ‘You can’t just be a Muslim in outer space’: young people making sense of religion at local places in the city

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## **Abstract**

This chapter demonstrates how young people make sense of religion through local places in the urban context while moving from youth to young adulthood. We draw on in-depth interviews – including a mental map-making exercise – with twenty-four young Muslims (18–30) from a wide range of cultural backgrounds living in Metro Vancouver (Canada). Their narratives reveal that young people ‘live’ religion in various local places and show how spatialities of lived religion change over time. We highlight how making sense of religion is reflected in the changing meaning of the mosque and relates to the increased salience of places shared with young Muslims in which our participants negotiate religion in the context of their everyday lives in the city. While many studies on Muslim identities have established the complexities and dynamics of negotiating religion at specific local places, we argue for a focus on relations between lived religion at various local places over time. These spatiotemporal complexities are able to capture how making sense of religion is spatially and fluidly manifested in the urban context of Metro Vancouver.

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter discusses how young people make sense of religion while moving from youth to young adulthood in relation to experiences in local urban places. It draws on in-depth interviews – including a mental map-making exercise – with twenty-four young Muslims (18–30) from a wide range of cultural backgrounds living in Metro Vancouver (Canada). The interviews produced narratives mainly reflecting their experiences in various places in the city and the changing meaning of religion during the participants' teenage years. In the analysis, we focus on the spatiotemporal complexities in their narratives. The findings show how participants make and unmake places while navigating and negotiating religion in the context of their

everyday lives. In the narratives we assembled, we foreground experiences in the mosque in particular, and how various places by and for young Muslim in the urban context of Metro Vancouver are given shape as a result of past and present experiences elsewhere in the city.

To enrich understandings of young people's lives and non-linear transitions to adulthood, scholars in youth studies have recently advocated for complementing a temporal perspective with a spatial lens (Farrugia and Wood 2017; Wood 2017). We engage with this call by providing an empirical case showing how analytical attention to place and time contributes to understanding religion during this period of the life course. After almost three decades of social science research, the field concerned with youth and religion remains fragmented (Hemming and Madge 2011). Studies prioritised either time or place in understanding young people's religious identities. The long-prioritised focus on time comes to the fore in a review by Hardy and King (2019) as part of a special issue on religion published by the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. They emphasise that temporal approaches in many studies verify that religion is vital for various youth (health) outcomes such as wellbeing. Yet, they also observe that 'how' and 'why' questions are not fully understood and suggest research opportunities lie especially in qualitative idiographic approaches that are able to capture the dynamics and complexities of religion in relation to other aspects of young people's everyday life (Hadad and Schachter 2011; Schachter and Ben Hur 2019).

Nevertheless, a rich body of qualitative literature has emerged and is especially concerned with Muslims living in so-called western and supposedly secular societies (e.g. Dwyer 1999; Hopkins 2011; Ryan 2014). Those studies generally *do* centralise place and underline the variety and complexities of young Muslim identities (e.g. Ryan 2014; Eidoo 2018; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). Some places are well-researched (Hemming and Madge 2011, see also Ryan 2012), but

most studies focus on a single or a few predefined places (Hopkins 2011; Harris and Roose 2014; Eidoo 2018; Laksana and Wood 2019; Salnikova and D’Arcus 2019). There is not much empirical work on how young people navigate their religious ideas and understandings through these different places as they become young adults. As set out by Valentine and Sadgrove (2012), a focus on the spatial as well as the temporal can enhance our understandings of how people shape their ideas and perspectives over time. We contribute to the existing body of literature by analysing participants’ narratives and experiences with explicit attention to the spatiotemporal complexities of making sense of religion in relation to their everyday lives in the urban context of Metro Vancouver.

Before discussing our findings (section 3.4), we briefly position our study by conceptualising religion, contextualising experiences in local places, and discussing research on *where* young Muslims experience religion in their everyday lives (section 3.2). Thereafter, we outline the research methodology and highlight the value of map-making as a method (section 3.3).

## **3.2. Where do young Muslims live religion?**

### **3.2.1. Lived religion and making sense of religion**

While the meaning of religion changes during the entire life course, it is established that between the late-teens and early twenties, a phase of profound identity construction, young people explore and negotiate their religious beliefs (McNamara Barry et al. 2010; Chan, Tsai and Fuligni 2015). During the past twenty years, religion seems to become increasingly central in developing youth identities, sometimes even more than ethnicity (Ryan 2014). The academic focus on Muslim youth derives from concerns about exclusionary effects of anti-Islamic sentiments and Islamophobia, but also relates to concerns about radicalisation, participation and integration of Muslim youth in non-

Muslim majority societies. Recently, however, several studies move away from labelling Muslim youth as problematic or potentially dangerous subjects since it enforces stereotypes and exclusion, and they underline the need for insight into ‘ordinary’ young Muslims and their personal and everyday experiences (e.g. Harris and Roose 2014; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). Based on Ulrich Beck's accounts of reflexive modernity, youth scholars also advocate for a focus on everyday life perspectives and experiences regarding religion in light of the individualised ways of practising religion in contemporary globalised western societies (Hemming and Madge 2011; see also Speck 2012).

Following scholars such as McGuire (2008), Ammerman (2014), and Knibbe and Kupari (2020), we conceptualise religion as ‘lived religion’. Lived religion expounds personal ‘ordinary’ perspectives on religion in the everyday context. This does not necessarily align with how religion is understood in religious institutions or by other authorities, but provides space for various ways of understanding, experiencing, and practising which may differ in various environments of the everyday life (see also Hadad and Schachter 2011). Drawing on Woods (2012), we approach ‘making sense of religion’ as a process of self-exploration and construction – oriented in the past, present and future – and negotiated in relation to a religious schema, the divine, and various religious and non-religious others. As Hemming and Madge (2011) recognise, ‘religious identity does not exist in a vacuum but rather takes shape within and across a range of social spaces and contexts’ (p.42; see also Ryan 2012). Thus, processes of making sense religion seem to be based on experiences of *lived* religion at various places in the everyday context.

### 3.2.2. Situating experiences in the context of Metro Vancouver

To understand young people's experiences of lived religion at local places in Metro Vancouver, we follow well-known geographers, such as Massey (2005), in conceptualising place as fluid and dynamic, as non-fixed and unbound entities imbued with processes of power. Time is inherently connected to places, which are always in a process of becoming and continuously re-constructed through interactions (see also Lefebvre 1991; Cresswell 2009; Dwyer, Gilbert and Shah 2013). The continuously making of local places is always related to (processes in) other places on various scales. Gareau, Bullivant and Beyer (2019) state that 'the global critically informs the local social context, in which people, including young people, form their religious and broader identities' (p.2). Youth identities cannot be fully understood without positioning them in a global and transnational context, and can relate to online and virtual spaces as well. For many young people in the west, contemporary society is characterised by globalisation and individualisation which provides more opportunities in defining who they are and want to become (Harris and Roose 2014). Youth, therefore, can experience a burden of the responsibility to construct their own identity (Ryan 2014), as well as having more freedom to formulate individualised forms of religiosity (Hemming and Madge 2011; Speck 2012). Several studies show evidence of relatively new and often non-institutionalised identity labels created by young Muslims themselves, such as 'religious-lite' (Hadad and Schachter 2011), 'revivalist Islam' or 'true Islam' of which the latter indicates belongingness to a global Ummah (Kibria 2008; Ryan 2014). While constructed in relation to transnational or global communities, the local context remains crucial in negotiating these youth identities. In the edited volume 'Muslim citizens in the West', Yasmeen and Marković (2014) address the impact of negative anti-Islamic discourses depends on contextual differences, for instance:

(religious) histories, attitudes in mainstream media, processes of (de)secularisation, sacralisation or diversification of religious beliefs, and political debates on immigration. Furthermore, in constructing and negotiating their ‘Muslimness’, young people are dealing with direct and indirect experiences of exclusion in their everyday context (Yasmeen and Marković 2014; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). Thus, while Islamic identities might be seen as ‘de-territorialised’, they are highly connected to societal structures and processes in specific geographical contexts (Ryan 2012, 2014).

With regard to the context of our study, the Canadian model of multiculturalism is generally perceived as highly inclusive compared to many European countries. Diversity seems to be celebrated and is seen as part of ‘being Canadian’ (Beyer 2014; Delic 2014). Having said this, it is important to note that there are sustained and serious issues and critiques, for example regarding recognising and implementing indigenous rights within the Canadian model. However, in relation to religious diversity, Delic (2014) argues that the Canadian context could be seen as exemplary, allowing for different ways of ‘being Muslim’. He found that a strong sense of one’s Muslim identity contributes to stronger national identifications and feelings of ‘being Canadian’. Yet, in Canada, too, negative and oversimplified stereotypes regarding Muslims or Islam affect young Muslims in exploring who they are. Bullock (2014) observes that at least some young Canadian Muslims feel that cultural diversity is appreciated more than religious diversity.

The Muslim population of Metro Vancouver is culturally diverse and makes up 3.2% of the total population (2.5 million) (Statistics Canada 2013). Regarding the heterogeneity of Muslims, and in acknowledging the many varieties of ‘being Muslim’, it is important to emphasise that Muslims in Metro Vancouver or any other context cannot be regarded as one Islamic ‘community’ (e.g. Dwyer 1999; Ryan 2014). Negotiating ones ‘Muslimness’ is impacted by

intracommunity dynamics as well (Bullock 2014), such as generational differences. Those intracommunity dynamics emerge when focusing on experiences in everyday local places in the urban context. While experiences of young Muslims are situated in a broader urban, societal and global context, geographers have convincingly argued that the everyday and local remains crucial in negotiating, defending and challenging one's sense of 'being Muslim' in relation to various Muslim and non-Muslim others (Hopkins 2011; Ryan 2012, 2014; Kapinga and Van Hoven 2021).

### **3.2.3. Local experiences of lived religion**

There are many ways in which everyday spaces can be implicated in religious meaning-making, legitimating, maintaining, and enhancing, but also challenging religious life, beliefs, practices and identities (Kong 2010, 757).

Being religious or identifying as Muslim can shape experiences at local places in the city (Kapinga and Bock 2021). Ryan (2014) notes that 'the ability to enact certain identities is contingent upon the power dynamics within particular social places' (p.454). The normativities of places can influence how young people experience their 'Muslimness' depending, for instance, on other people present, the function of a place and who decides what is 'normal' at a specific site (Kapinga and Bock 2021). Some everyday places in the city are planned or designed – often by (local) authorities or entrepreneurs – for certain (youth) groups or cultures to consume (Valentine 2003). For example, bars or nightclubs tend to attract other groups of young people than halal restaurants. Places can also be claimed by certain (sub)groups, such as young people. The normativities young people encounter in various everyday places may differ greatly at, for instance, school, home, the mosque, public places, and sports clubs, especially concerning attitudes towards Islam. Through experiences at those places, young

people negotiate and navigate their sense of ‘being Muslim’ (Hemming and Madge 2011; Ryan 2012). Therefore, we discuss the locations of lived religion in the urban context.

In addition to places that have generally been marked as religious – such as institutionalised religious places, Ammerman (2014) explains religion can be lived at various other places and in many ways. Scholars in the field of urban religion move away from traditional dichotomies between ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’ places and have argued that religion is embedded in the city in fixed and flexible structures which can be visible and invisible, material and immaterial (Knott 2008; Kong 2010; Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Elwert 2016; Finlayson 2017; Burchardt and Westendorp 2018; Della Dora 2018). Della Dora (2018) refers to the location of religion as an interstitial space. She highlights the multi-layeredness and fluidity of religious urban landscapes co-existing with other forms of belief and non-belief. Finlayson (2017) explains that ‘spaces beyond our usual definition of ‘sacred’ can be made sacred by believers and can, in unexpected ways reflect religious belief’ (320). With regard to Muslim identities, some places where religion is subtly and implicitly present indeed seem important for making sense of religion. Salnikova and D’Arcus (2019), show that besides the mosque, the halal meat shop is a vital site ‘to maintain and modify some aspects of their religious and cultural identities’. (108). Eidoo (2018) found that places where young Muslims meet also play a role in negotiating religion in relation to notions of citizenship. Other scholars suggest higher education institutions being salient for young Muslims to construct their identities and explore who they are and want to become (Hopkins 2011; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018).

Acknowledging the diversity among young Muslims also means that not all local places will be experienced in similar ways, nor will places be equally important for making sense of religion. Experiences of lived religion seem intimately connected to – combinations of – other aspects of everyday life and identity, such as race, gender and

class (Valentine 2003; Hemming and Madge 2011; Ryan 2012; Eidoo 2018). Eidoo's (2018) research on Somali Muslim girls in Canada shows the importance of their shared places for dealing with both Islamophobia and patriarchal community structures. In the same vein, Ryan (2012) elaborates on young Muslims' embodied and gendered experiences at particular places as becomes evident as well in the work by Dwyer (e.g. 1999) on Muslim women and Hopkins' (e.g. 2006) work on youthful Muslim masculinities. While especially gender seems well-researched, Salnikova and D'Arcus (2019) suggest that generational differences between Muslim migrants matter since they deal differently with religion as part of their identity and are, as a consequence, not similarly attached to local places in their living environment. Despite these differences, for both generations, the mosque remains salient in negotiating religion (Salnikova and D'Arcus 2019). Nevertheless, Ahmad (2012) notes mosques in Britain struggle to attract younger generations. However, this might change in a later stage of their lives (Ryan 2014).

The meaning of places with regard to religion can change over time. Valentine's (2003) work demonstrates that as they get older, young people often obtain more freedom to decide where to go, what places they enjoy to visit or prefer to avoid, and how to behave in specific settings. In addition, everyday geographies change because of entries into the labour market, leaving or changing education, shifting social responsibilities and relationships, increased independence and changing consumption patterns. Places can be associated with certain age groups and activities and change in meaning as young people move to adulthood. For example, the meaning of a high school is likely to change after graduation. Thompson and Pihlaja (2018) also refer to the temporality of place by discussing how Muslims express their uncertain futures realising that universities are unique places where (religious) diversity is more tolerated in comparison to possible future everyday places.

In relation to the focus of this chapter, it is important to emphasise that young people's religious ideas and understandings are not passively shaped by places (Dwyer, Gilbert and Shah 2013). Indeed, Valentine (2003) notes, 'young people's lives are constrained by space but they also actively produce their own space'. (39). Youth reasserts, appropriates and transforms religion; they demonstrate agency in shaping their own religious ideas (Hemming and Madge 2011; Gareau, Bullivant and Beyer 2019). Places are continuously constructed and become meaningful in terms of religion because people attribute certain values to them (Dwyer, Gilbert, and Shah 2013; Ryan 2014; Burchardt and Westendorp 2018). While many scholars on Muslim identities acknowledge the notion of time being inherent to place, there has been little empirical research that has integrated a more explicit temporal perspective. We are interested in the interrelations between the changing religious urban landscape and how young people make sense of religion while moving from youth to young adulthood (see also Burchardt and Becci 2013). In doing so, we need more insight into how and why experiences of lived religion at local places change over time.

### **3.3. Research methodology**

In July and August 2018, data collection took place in Metro Vancouver. Laura conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with twenty-four young adults (nine females and fifteen males), all but two aged between 18 and 30<sup>3</sup>, and from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. All participants lived in Metro Vancouver, nine of them were born in Canada, but some had lived for a period abroad as well. The countries where participants – or their (grand)parents – came

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<sup>3</sup> Two participants over the age of 30 were interviewed because of their expertise and experience with the young Muslim community in this particular context.

from, where they had lived, and sometimes were born, include Afghanistan, China, Egypt, Eritrea, India, Iran, Japan, Yemen, Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, South-Africa, Saudi-Arabia, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates. The participants differed in religious views, understandings and practices. At the moment of the interview, the participants were in a phase in their lives in which they studied or started their careers and did not have their own families.

Most participants were recruited through Facebook posts calling for research volunteers on pages aimed to reach a Muslim audience living in Metro Vancouver. A few additional people were recruited through snowball sampling. We conducted individual interviews with most participants, but three suggested to bring a friend resulting in two duo-interviews and one group interview including six interviewees. The participants had the option to propose the interview location, which varied from coffee shops, their workplace, public libraries, university buildings, parks, office spaces, mosques, community centres, and youth organisations.

The interviews lasted between one and three hours. Once we scheduled a follow-up interview because of the duration. The interview themes included views on inclusivity, opinions on Metro Vancouver, everyday places, experiences of inclusion and exclusion, and changing religious practices and understandings. Participants were encouraged to introduce any theme or experience they considered to be important to the research. In discussing interview themes, we focused on changes over time resulting in narratives reflecting on the period from their mid-teens until the time of the interview. As Burchardt and Westendorp (2018) note, ‘narratives based on place allow us to trace the ways in which people attach meaning to their movements through urban space, the religious inspirations that animate them and the urban aspirations towards which they are directed’ (p. 172). The interview guide was designed to highlight participants’ narratives around places, therefore we asked

them to draw a mental map showing their meaningful everyday places and how they changed over time. Sixteen participants made such a map (see for example 3 and 4 on the next page), while others preferred to just talk. The map-making generally started after the introductory questions. The maps visualise diversity in the amount of detail, style and use of colours. Some maps mainly consist of words (Figure 3) while other participants worked with little drawings (Figure 4).

The mental maps proved to be a valuable tool during the interviews for three reasons. First, they gave insight into the multi-local belongings of the participants (Jung 2014). Many participants added places outside of Metro Vancouver or Canada as well. Second, the process of mapping created an interview setting in which some power was transferred to the interviewee (Jung 2014). Third, in comparison with oral interviews, mental mapping as a visual method allowed for more freedom in creativity and a different way to share personal experiences (Trell and Van Hoven 2010). During the interviews, as well as other phases of the research, we were aware of the importance of reflecting on Laura's (who carried out the interviews) positionality as a non-Muslim, Dutch, white, young, female researcher (see Kapinga, Huizinga and Shaker 2021 for a critical reflection). In relation to the maps for example, the relationship between researcher and researched might have influenced the map-making process (Jung 2014). Nabila kept adjusting her map until the end of the interview and visualised almost all conversation topics (figure 3). Her map can be seen as a co-production between researcher and interviewee to a greater extent than Sofia's, who did not add anything while discussing what she drew in first instance (figure 4).





The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. NVivo was used for thematic coding using deductive (such as making, unmaking, remaking places) and inductive codes (such as religion as a lifestyle, Deen and Dunya). Several themes emerged from the rich narratives of the participants, such as transnational relations, and several types of places, such as young Muslim places. In the interpretation of the analysis, we paid explicit attention to the participants' narratives to capture how the meaning of places and their views on religion changed over time.

### **3.4. Making sense of religion in the everyday urban context**

The analysis of the participants' narratives and maps reveals a spatial manifestation of making sense of religion in Metro Vancouver which is changing as participants move to adulthood. We found that lived religion in a particular place is established through experiences in other places in both the past and present and relates to young adults' (religious) ambitions as well.

In line with Ammerman's (2014) account on where religion is lived, participants in our study reflected on various everyday places to share how their religious understandings and practices had developed over time. Their narratives include mosques, as well as seemingly 'secular' places in which religion is contingently and implicitly present as suggested by scholars on urban religion (such as Knott 2008; Kong 2010; Cloke and Beaumont 2013; Elwert 2016; Burchardt and Westendorp 2018; Della Dora 2018). Examples of the latter are (high) schools, home, workplaces, university, a friend's house, and the beach. In discussing our findings, we do not intend to provide a typology of those local places. Instead, this section focuses on a few places to highlight a spatiotemporal pattern prominent in participants' narratives and maps. In doing so, we elaborate on why the meaning of

the mosque changes (section 3.4.1), and on a spatial pattern of making sense of religion which is shifting over time while participants move to young adulthood (section 3.4.2). Thereafter, we zoom in on the increased salience of places shared with Muslims peers and demonstrate how shaping such places is related to past and present experiences of lived religion elsewhere in the city (section 3.4.3).

### **3.4.1. The changing meaning of place: experiences at the mosque**

According to the vast majority of participants, the mosque was a central place in developing their religious ideas until their early teenage years. Maryam was actively involved in the youth activities organised by one of the mosques in Metro Vancouver.

**Maryam (mid-twenties, female, group interview):** I used to be very involved with a mosque youth group when I was in high school. I used to go there three days a week. One day was like youth group meetings, another day a Halaqa, a knowledge circle, and then Quran class on a Saturday. We would have Quran class in the morning and then in the evening part we had open gym times and a youth knowledge circle. So I was like ... that was a very big part of my youth.

While participants were not associated to the same mosque, they described ‘their’ mosque – often beside the home – as a place part of the family routine, where they generally went with their parents or attended youth groups. Regarding making sense of religion, participants describe and appreciate their mosque as a place to learn about the basic principles, values, practices and routines of Islam.

While moving to adulthood, these institutionalised religious places become less salient for making sense of religion. At the moment of the interview most participants still regularly visit a mosque for religious practices, networking, helping others, or connecting to their community. Muhammed (mid-twenties, male, individual interview)

strongly describes his mosque as ‘the heart of the community and that’s where my heart is’. This corresponds with other studies pointing towards the importance of mosques’ social and community functions (Cesari 2005; Salnikova and D’Arcus 2019). While for most participants this place indeed fulfils some of these other roles, they all agree that young people, from their mid-teens onwards, are largely absent from the mosques in Metro Vancouver. For themselves, the meaning of the mosque had changed as well. This change is associated with the process of exploring what religion means to them personally.

As established by others (McNamara Barry et al. 2010; Chan, Tsai, and Fuligni 2015), the participants’ narratives clearly indicate that their religious ideas and views developed over time. Adam’s quote on ‘becoming an adult’ illustrates this:

**Adam (26, male, duo-interview):** Like she [Nora] said, the way you incorporate it [religion] into your life will change. I’m sure it will change as I grow and develop, but I think there’s a core level right, because once you’re an adult you have this core identity of who you are. [...]. But the most crucial aspect is becoming an adult, that’s when you start to kind of hold on to ... kind of pick up the values you are going to take on for the future. I think that’s my experience. [...] So for me, what does religion mean to me [now]? [...] It’s a way of life, it’s a lifestyle more than anything.

Similar to Adam, other participants formulate their understanding of religion as something that developed towards a lifestyle. This resonates with Ryan (2014) and Hadad and Schachter (2011) who show religious youth can create common denominators – such as ‘true Islam’, ‘revivalist Islam’ or ‘religious-lite’ – to navigate and reformulate their belongingness and differentiation to others. Similar to those studies, what identifying with such a ‘label’ entails varies greatly among the participants in terms of (religious) views, practices, understandings,

and beliefs, while it at the same time underlines some commonalities. The term ‘lifestyle’ is generally used by participants to refer to religion as a ‘guiding’ and overarching dimension inseparable from other aspects of their identities and everyday lives. When moving to young adulthood, mosques do not seem to cater to participants’ needs of exploring and negotiating religion in the context of their everyday lives as young people in Metro Vancouver. To substantiate this, two experiences of lived religion are discussed below.

### **‘You can’t just be a Muslim in outer space’ (Nora)**

Participants reflect on religion in their teenage years as a period in which they started to question and doubt what they learned so far. This process of negotiating and reformulating is a way in which young people enact religious agency (Hemming and Madge 2011). Despite differences among mosques in Metro Vancouver, participants generally began to experience a ‘judgemental atmosphere’ at their mosques while emphasising as well what Khan explains: ‘mosques, or any religious place, are supposed to be very inclusive open and welcoming’. He continues as follows:

**Khan (24, male, individual interview):** When you get older and you start becoming more ... you’re questioning things more ... the mosques may not be as friendly as they supposed to be [...] I think as you get older and you make a mistake, let's say you start smoking weed or drink some alcohol or you have a girlfriend, if you go to the mosque you feel like, ‘you know what, no one here is going to understand me’. Or if you have a tattoo or coloured hair, when you walk in you will be judged right away.

This quote is indicative of participants starting to develop other interests and encountering new situations or challenges in their everyday lives as young people (see also Valentine 2003). Since they feel this does not always align with the normativities at the mosque, their experiences of lived religion change as well. Similar to Nabila, the difference between the ‘older generation’ and ‘their generation’ is often stressed when explaining why the mosque is not as important to them anymore.

**Nabila (23, female, individual interview):** As a second-generation Canadian, it is difficult because there are preconceived notions of what you need to be in this society [...] by the people who travelled here and the ones who are running the community. So it is hard for someone like me to experience a non-judgmental atmosphere within a cultural or religious community centre.

Feeling uncomfortable discussing ‘taboo topics’, like drinking alcohol or romantic relationships, is emphasised by many participants. Sofia (22, female, group interview) shares her fear of being judged because she might not be seen as ‘Muslim enough’ by the older generation who run the mosque. Some participants mention other topics of concern for Muslim youth as problematic to discuss in their communities, such as, mental health problems, addictions, and challenging gender relations. As Nora explains ‘you can’t just be a Muslim in outer space’, in other words they wish to explore religion in relation to issues young people are dealing with in their everyday life.

**Nora (20, female, duo-interview):** I would say my biggest issue with the mosque and something I would like to change is that I feel they look at religion as if it exists in a vacuum. Like as if it's just ... you're just a Muslim, right? And that's it. Whereas they really ignore the fact that it comes with so many other things. Like you've got culture, you've got society, you've got like your own personal struggles and problems, and identity, and like mental health. Like all these different things that all sort of factor into you being a Muslim. So you can't just be a Muslim in like outer space, in a complete vacuum. You can't. And so when I go to the mosque I really want to feel like when I leave I'm not only benefiting as a Muslim but I'm also benefiting as a person, like mentally, spiritually, emotionally, everything, in every way. And that is how the mosque is supposed to be.

This quote summarises our participants' experiences at mosques of religion being approached as a separate and demarcated dimension existing 'in a complete vacuum'. Similar to other studies, we found that those experiences contain many nuances and specificities based on other parts of their identities, such as gender, race or family status (Ryan 2012; Eidoo 2018). Nora's quote above thus signifies an overarching experience of discomfort when participants started to religiously reposition themselves in relation to their everyday lives and other parts of their identities.

**'There is no opportunity to actually do stuff at the mosque' (Azra)**

According to our participants, mosques are generally not places where participants could initiate change or integrate new ideas. Experiences of being constrained to explore religion are complemented by the feeling of not being able to change existing norms. This contributes to mosques becoming less appealing to young people as Azra's quote illustrates:

**Azra (20, female, individual interview):** Quite frankly, I think the topics [discussed at the mosque] are not interesting enough, they're quite boring. And there is not enough ways for young people to get involved. There is no opportunity to actually do stuff at the mosque. You just sit there. If it would be more a place with engagement, yeah I think then it would change. There aren't a lot of young people ... like there are fifty-year-olds and there are like ... more fifty-year-olds. Yeah, young people are not going to be attracted by anything fifty years olds' organise.

Unless, as Khan explains, 'you fit their bowl', most participants do not feel they could partake in the organisational structure or change existing power structures at the mosque run by the older generations. This generational gap echoes the work of Ahmad (2012) who notes one of the key challenges of British mosques is to shift power away from 'older men' and involve women and young people as well. However, in accordance with Salnikova and D'Arcus (2019), we showed at the beginning of this section that mosques are valuable for making sense of religion, yet our findings emphasise this role changes over time (see also Ryan 2014). These institutionalised religious places become less important while the participants explore and formulate what religion means to them personally. This can be interpreted in light of Becks notion of reflexive modernity and more individualised (religious) youth identities (see Speck 2012 for a discussion). Yet, young people do not necessarily reject all institutionalised forms of religion when negotiating individualised 'lifestyle' forms of religion. Our participants would prefer to change the normativities at mosques rather than avoid an institutionalised form of Islam altogether. Focusing on both time and place, which is reflecting in the changing meaning of the mosque, reveals the complexities of religion in young people's lives by demonstrating the temporality of lived religion.

### 3.4.2. A spatiotemporal pattern: from mosques to places shared with Muslims peers

As Valentine (2003, 39) explains, ‘Young people are constrained by places’ but, as became evident in the narrative of our participants as well, also ‘actively produce their own spaces’ to shape their own cultures and identities (see also Valentine and Sadgrove 2012). Making sense of religion is not only reflected in the changing meaning of the mosque but also in the production of other places.

Participants seem to experience an increase in independence, mobility and freedom with less parental authority while moving to young adulthood (see also Valentine 2003). For example, Youssef (early twenties, male) explains many young people were expected by their parents or communities to attend activities at the mosque, but generally, from their mid-teenage years onwards, they started to gain more freedom and make their own decisions. The changing meaning of the mosque in combination with more independence and opportunities to be empowered elsewhere contributed to producing ‘alternative’ places to explore religion. Khan explains:

**Khan (24, male, individual interview):** A lot of young people are becoming empowered. Starting to realise: ‘you know what, maybe I don't need to go to a mosque to also be empowered’. I can rent out [one of the university's] room for free, we can use social media to get people out there for free, I can use my network, and I can use my recourses.

The spatiality of making sense of religion has a temporal dimension. A spatiotemporal pattern prominent in the participants’ narratives is visible in Nora’s mental map (see Figure 5). On the left side, she drew two mosques. The one in Dubai underlines the notion of local experiences being connected to places on various scales, such as the transnational and global (Massey 2005; Ryan 2012; Gareau, Bullivant,

and Beyer 2019, see also chapter 2 of this thesis). The other narratives also contain references to where they previously lived or where their (grand)parents are from. Continuing with the local scale, during Nora's early teenage years, her parents encouraged her to join group discussion circles at the Muslim Association of Canada which functions as a mosque. In line with the above (section 3.4.1), she explains that those places were important to her in terms of education and learning about Islam, but did not contribute to exploring what religion means to her later on. Instead, places shared with Muslim peers, on the right side of her map where she notes 'gave a platform to rediscover my identity', became increasingly important over time. In the next section, we elaborate on those places created by and for young Muslims.

### **3.4.3. Making sense of lived religion at places for young Muslim peers**

In the context of Metro Vancouver, various initiatives organised by young Muslims cater to the (religious) needs and ambitions of a diverse group of their Muslim peers. The participants mention numerous examples, including Muslim Student Associations (MSAs), associated with the universities, and initiatives which derive from MSAs, for example, Chat and Chai, Sister Speak and knowledge circles. Confirming other studies, higher education institutions seem important sites for students to negotiate religion (Hopkins 2011; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). The analysis also reveals various initiatives for young Muslims not related to universities, such as Voices of Muslim Women, Vancouver Madinah, The Breathing Room, and storytelling programmes. Many of those use online spaces as well, such as social media accounts or websites (see also Harris and Roose 2014), but those online platforms are used to communicate about meetups in real life or provide a platform to 'voice' young Muslims communities, yet do not replace interactions with Muslims peers at

Nora, 20

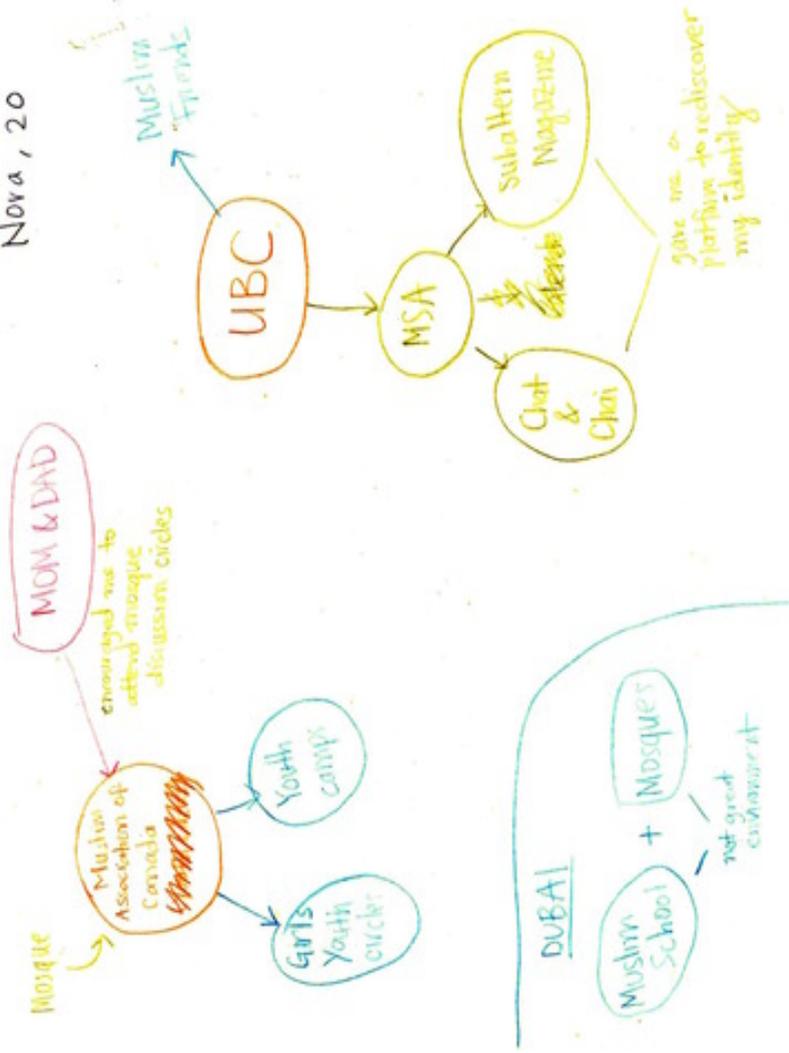


Figure 5: Nora's (20) map

local places in the city. Most participants also use online sources to gain Islamic knowledge, but preferred to discuss what they found in ‘offline’ interaction with peers. Sophia (22, female, group interview) stresses that online platforms cannot replace human connections at local places in the city with an example on her online search for information when doubting about wearing a hijab: ‘It took me meeting people who were like me to kind of get there. The Internet didn’t really help me with that’. Also, Ali (mid-twenties, male, duo-interview) explains: ‘having like a physical location that you could always go to, where you’ll find people you could talk to, made a huge difference’. With few exceptions, most young Muslim initiatives do not have their own building or room. Meetings take place at, for instance, higher education institutions, public libraries, parks, or – as Ali continues below – the beach.

**Ali (mid-twenties, male, duo-interview):** During Ramadan [...] we’re literally were going to Spanish banks [a beach in Metro Vancouver] like at 2:00 in the morning. Getting like 40 people there with carpool lane. All young university-aged people creating a bonfire, praying together by the water and then sharing food. [...] Sitting in a circle, talking about things, and we would do that every week.

As literature on urban religion suggests, this excerpt is indicative of people attributing religion to the cityscape in subtle and contingent ways (Knott 2008; Burchardt and Becci 2013; Elwert 2016; Finlayson 2017; Burchardt and Westendorp 2018; Della Dora 2018). Young people demonstrate agency in processes of making sense of religion by attributing religion to places in the urban context. This is reflected in ‘unmaking’ the mosque as important to them for exploring religion, but also in ‘making’ places, such as the beach, in which religion seems to be fluidly and rather invisibly embedded.

Related to experiences of discomfort at the mosque, places shared with Muslim peers are often shaped to discuss and negotiate religious beliefs in relation to other aspects of everyday life. The participants mention, for example, that they explore the balance between ‘Deen’ and ‘Dunya’, translated by Nayantara as ‘religion’ and ‘world’. Some participants referred to exploring differences between religion and culture which is also reflected in other studies suggesting that Muslim youth negotiates the cultural traditions of their parents to formulate their Islamic identities (e.g. Kibria 2008; Ryan 2014).

**Kabir (20, male, individual interview):** When we grow up we associated religion with culture. We associated religion with race. You know, Afghan Muslims or Fijian Muslims or Arab Muslims you know. So when you bring all the youth together it breaks that non-existent barrier that we put there - that culture and religion are the same. Whereas you know religion is it's own. And culture is something we sprinkled on top of it. So when you bring all these kids together we can grow, we can break that barrier.

In our study, participants did not reject their cultural background as part of reformulating religion, but since places for young Muslims are, unlike most mosques, rarely organised along ethnic lines and bring together Muslims from diverse backgrounds, it seems to provide new insight on how to make sense of religion and culture. These places allow to reformulate, explore, and negotiate what they learned so far and provide a place where – in contrast to experiences of lived religion in the mosque – participants generally feel comfortable to explore religion in their everyday lives when moving to adulthood. Ali explains:

**Ali (mid-twenties, male, duo-interview):** Chat and Chai, the main goal of it was to say ‘hey you have a space you can come here and discuss all of the issues that are directly relevant to you’. Issues that you might not feel comfortable or you might not be able to talk with your family, at a mosque, in school, with your colleagues, friends, co-workers whatever, like this is a space where you want to talk about identity, you want to talk about gender, you want to talk about issues you have in faith or with interacting with people XYZ like this is a space that will welcome you and that will not judge you for whatever you say or do.

As Ali’s quote reiterates, shaping normativities at places shared with Muslim peers relate to past experiences at mosques, but are also related to lived religion at other places in Metro Vancouver (see also Hemming and Madge 2011; Ryan 2012). Prominent in the participants’ narratives were experiences in everyday places where being Muslim is not the norm. Adam (26, male, duo-interview), for instance, states: ‘It’s at work where you negotiate your Muslimness’ since for him it was challenging to formulate his ‘Muslimness’ in interaction with his non-Muslim colleagues. Few participants mention incidents of racism or harassment in public places, but many share that, as Muslim, they feel ‘gazed at’ or ‘stand out’ at some everyday places in Metro Vancouver. Azra refers to experiences at beaches and bars.

**Azra (20, female, individual interview):** The difficulties are being always the odd one out or like sticking out like a sore thumb. Maybe not like a sore thumb, but like sticking out. Especially for Muslim girls. [...] Definitely the fact that we look more Muslim is 100% a challenge. Like even if we don’t wear this [pointing to her hijab]. My friend, she doesn’t, but she goes to the beach and she still covers, like she dresses fully. And her brothers they go and nobody can tell they are

Muslim, but she has to live with that even if she doesn't wear hijab.

[...]

And then it is difficult in the sense that you can't drink and you can't eat a lot of things. And like a lot of socialising contexts are about drinking and going to restaurants. And you can't go to certain restaurants and you can't go to certain places because you have those restrictions. So socialising is definitely a challenge. Stuff like that.

In line with Kapinga and Bock (2021), those subtle exclusionary experiences engender feelings of being 'out of place' among participants. Not aligning with 'the norm' contributes to the making of places for young Muslim peers. In this vein, Mohammed (early twenties, male, group interview) notes 'I think it's important for like young Muslims to know other Muslims who accept them for who they are'. While other participants also stress the importance of interacting with Muslim peers, they do not all attend the same initiatives, nor do they experience those places in the same way (see also Hemming and Madge 2011; Ryan 2012). For instance, Azra's quote above highlights gendered and embodied experiences at the beach. Experiences of lived religion are shaped by other identities as well and this seems to be reflected in the variety of events and initiatives for young Muslims in the city. We found, for example, talks on 'being black and Muslim' or career events for 'sisters only' to cater to the need of a specific group of young Muslims. Consider the following quotes:

**Mohammed (early twenties, male, group interview):** Like there is already so much stuff. Honestly, we're not the only one doing this stuff. There are so many organisations doing it. But our main goal is not to compete but to complete each other.

**Ali and Salman (both mid-twenties, males, duo interview):** *Salman:* Some (initiatives) cater to different people because ... like, it won't be like there's only one template of how to do things and everybody has to fit the mould. It's more like there's different kinds of events for different templates of people.

*Ali:* And creating spaces for all of them. You don't try to have this template where everybody fits ...

*Salman:* yeah [...] where everybody has to fit into a certain kind of a Muslim ideal. Everybody's is Muslim in their own way and there's different kinds of events that cater to all these different kinds.

Our participants do not attend just one initiative, nor do they join all event. They pick, choose or become involved in what they like, need, or where they feel comfortable. Other studies focusing on predefined places also show how places can cater to needs of – a particular group of – Muslim youth. Harris and Roose (2014) discuss how young Muslims' share particular places to negotiate the self and produce their own cultures (see also Ryan 2012) and Eidoo (2018), found young Muslim women create places to take refuge from Islamophobia and the patriarchal system in their particular communities. Our findings complement those studies by highlighting the spatiotemporal complexities of how and why various places for Muslim peers are made in relation to experiences of lived religion at other local places in Metro Vancouver.

### **3.5. Conclusion**

This chapter engaged with a rich body of literature on young Muslims' identities by demonstrating the value of focusing on spatiotemporal complexities to understand how young Muslims' make sense of religion while moving from youth to young adulthood. We analysed in-depth interviews and mental maps produced with twenty-four

young Muslims (18–30) from a wide range of cultural backgrounds living in Metro Vancouver (Canada). The findings reveal the changing spatialities of lived religion and highlight how the meaning of the mosque changes and relates to the increased salience of places shared with Muslim peers. As reflected in other studies, this chapter emphasises local places being crucial in shaping young Muslims' religious identities in the context of their everyday lives (i.e. Ryan 2012, 2014; Harris and Roose 2014; Eido 2018; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). We contribute by adding a temporal perspective which can capture the relations between past and present experiences of lived religion in particular places. We found that processes of making sense of religion are spatially and fluidly manifested in Metro Vancouver by young people making and unmaking places while exploring what religion means to them in the context of their everyday lives.

Generalisations to other (urban) contexts would not do justice to, for example, the various ways in which mosques operate and develop, or the extent to which young adults are able and empowered to make and unmake places to express religious identities (see also Beyer and Ramji 2013; Beyer 2014). Contextual variations – such as the (historical) religious landscape in the city, social characteristics of Muslim communities, or sociopolitical debates around Islam – can shape how religion or 'being Muslim' is experienced and negotiated locally (e.g. Yasmeen and Marković 2014; Thompson and Pihlaja 2018). Further work is required to establish what and how contextual variables influence the spatiotemporal patterns of making sense of religion.

In line with Ryan (2014) and Hadad and Schachter (2011), our findings raise further interest in longitudinal qualitative studies to understand lived religion in other phases of the life course as well. After all, this chapter focuses on young people, but making sense of religion is an ongoing process which continues to shape and be shaped by past and present experiences in everyday urban context. In further

research, we advocate for approaching lived religion with explicit attention to spatiotemporal complexities and as imbued in the city in various and fluid ways.

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