



‘Tiptoeing around Religion’ in Adult Migrants’ Education: Culturalized Lutheranism, Whiteness, and the Labour Market Logic of the Finnish Lens on Religion

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Abstract

In this article we examine accounts in interviews with Finnish educators of adult migrants in relation to religion. We argue that a historically constructed normative and affective Finnish lens on religion that is closely tied to notions of whiteness and racialization shapes these accounts. Rooted in the intertwined history of Lutheranism and secularism, this lens favours private, personal, and low-key expressions of religion, forms that are seen as more compatible with Finnish societal norms. While culturalized aspects of Lutheranism such as holidays and traditions are accepted as educational content, educators are concerned about whether the practice of Islam and its approach to time are compatible with Finnish working life. This concern reveals that the model for understanding religion is both normative and affective. As divergent forms of religion are subdued in the public sphere, religious minorities therefore negotiate their positions within unequal power dynamics. Our findings suggest that the interviewed educators’ prevailing understanding of religion is aligned with the racializing structures of migrant integration. They privilege forms of religion that benefit the assumed white, Lutheran, and secular majority, and (Muslim) migrants are accordingly viewed primarily as the future workforce.

Keywords: affects, culturalized Lutheranism, Islam, migrant education, whiteness

Various disciplines have studied international migration in Finland since the 1990s. Research has typically focused on newcomers and increased migration. Their cultures, including religion, have often been studied as something apart from 'us'. Less attention has been paid to the receiving society's understanding of culture and religion, including the views of civil servants. Religion has become newly visible because of globalized economies, increased migration, and the development of both mobility and communications (Bäckström 2014). To understand religion in today's societies, scholars of religion therefore also need to pay attention to areas that have not been their traditional field (Martikainen 2013a, 141). In this paper we consider the conception of religion and the models of religious practice which professionals working in education for adult migrants aspire to cultivate in their students.

We focus on the education that is usually offered in the early stage of migrants' residence. This education is part of the Finnish integration system, which, as the Integration Act (681/2023) states, involves migrants who have received a valid residence permit in Finland, a registered right of residence, or a residence card in accordance with the Aliens Act (301/2004).¹ Migrants can begin suitable education based on their language skills and educational background after the required reception measures municipalities provide (see Table 1). While Finnish teachers and their relationship with diversity, religion, worldviews, and migrants have frequently been studied (e.g. Lipiäinen and Poulter 2022; Niemi et al. 2020; Ubani 2018), educators working in the integration of migrants beyond compulsory school age remain understudied.

Education for adult migrants shares the Finnish education system's basic values, which are founded on democracy, human rights, and equality (Kekki et al. 2023, 91). The national core curriculum (Finnish National Agency for Education [EDUFI] 2022) refers somewhat vaguely to religion: it mentions non-discrimination based on religion, and that teaching is not based on any specific religion. The 2012 core curriculum for integration training included 'religions and religious freedom in Finland' as a content for instruction (EDUFI 2012, 39), yet the definition of religion remained open. The core curriculum for basic adult education mentions the coexistence of different convictions, or 'cultural diversity as a richness', as exemplifying another basic value (EDUFI 2017a, 18).

In this article we ask how adult migrants' educators reflect on and interpret religion. Our analysis focuses on three main themes in interviews with them:

¹ Integration Act (681/2023); for the integration system see Masoud et al. 2021.

- 1) a general understanding of religion in Finland;
- 2) culturalized Lutheranism in Finland;
- 3) accounts of migrant students' practice of religion.

Migration, religion, and attitudes in Finland

Unlike its Nordic neighbours, Finland was a country of emigration until the 1990s (Turtiainen et al. 2020). In recent decades urban areas in Finland especially have rapidly diversified because of international migration. This has also affected religious landscapes and interreligious relations. Finland's Muslim population started to grow gradually in the 1980s as more Muslims, especially from the Middle East, migrated as quota refugees (Martikainen 2013b, 111). The arrival of larger numbers of Somali asylum seekers, with their explicitly Muslim identity, in the 1990s made Islam visible to the Finnish public for the first time. Migratory patterns have diversified since the 1990s, but most Muslims in the country share a background of forced migration or family reunification (*ibid.*).

In the broader European context the Finnish public shows extensive anti-Muslim bias against asylum seekers, for example. Islam has been widely seen as a threat to national cultures in Scandinavian surveys (Bansak et al. 2016; Lundby et al. 2017). Furthermore, Finland scores particularly highly in anti-Muslim attitudes, with 62 per cent agreeing that 'Islam is fundamentally incompatible with the [national] culture and values' (Pew Research Centre 2018, 66).

Based on international data on religions in countries of origin and the number of their nationalities in Finland, Teemu Pauha and Tuomas Martikainen (2022) have estimated the religious distribution in the migrant population in Finland. They estimate that the three largest groups are Christians (40%), Muslims (25–27%), and nonreligious (20%). However, Christian and nonreligious students are scarcely discussed in the educators' accounts of religion in this study, probably because they are more invisible and contrast less with assumed Finnish customs than Muslim students.²

² The interviews this paper analyses were conducted before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, so Ukrainian refugees did not participate in the aforementioned education. The impact of Orthodox Christianity on the data acquired since the invasion may therefore be greater.

Theoretical framework: ‘Finnish lens’, affect and whiteness

Our theoretical departure is the concept of *intersectionality*, which in gender studies marks the point where categories of difference such as gender, race, education, (dis)ability, and class meet. Religion has often been omitted from these categories, however (e.g. Castelli 2001; Vuola 2017). In this article we zoom in on religion as a category and its formation in the intersection of educators’ cultural, institutional, and affective positions. Based on interviews, we argue that educators’ accounts of religion come to be understood in terms of a special historically constructed Finnish ‘lens’ on religion, their affective engagement, and at the systemic level of whiteness/racialization.

In this article we examine the Finnish lens as a form of culturalized religion: instead of the more traditional understanding of religion as personal belief or dogma, we emphasize religion primarily as a cultural factor that can be embedded in social structures (Astor and Mayrl 2020, 209). Finland has a long history of Lutheranism as the majority religion: 60 per cent of the population are still members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland (ELCF), though membership has been declining steadily in the twenty-first century, and many Finns are merely nominal members. The Nordic countries have never disowned their Lutheran heritage but have integrated religion and secular society: the ‘traditional Lutheranism’ of previous centuries has given way to a new form of ‘secular Lutheranism’, and much of this heritage takes the form of ‘unconscious Lutheranism’ (Sinnemäki et al. 2019). Finnish Lutheranism thus shares some characteristics with the other Nordic Lutheran countries (see e.g. Bäckström 2014; Thurffjell and Willander 2021). One characteristic recognized in both previous research and our material is religion as a private matter: religiosity is seen as belonging to the private sphere of life: it is uncommon to discuss religion in general or one’s own religiosity in public (e.g. Tiaynen-Qadir et al. 2021).

The educators’ interviews reflect the complex position and significance of religion in Finnish society today, which we theorize as a Lutheran and largely secularized Finnish lens of religion; their accounts of religion reflect the understanding typical of Finnish culture and society, in which an individual’s religion is understood largely in terms of internalized belief, experience, and worldview rather than visible practice, ritual, and doing religion through engaging in particular religious practices (Van Laer and Essers 2024, 1008). This partly normative and affective model works as a lens that guides their understanding and evaluation of religion in both the interview situation and in interaction with their students. This lens is a product of society’s intersecting power dynamics, reflecting its bearer’s

position within these systems (Collins 2015, 14). In terms of intersectionality the educators' accounts of religion are not separate from their positionings with other axes of inequality (i.e. race, class, education, gender), including institutional affiliations.

The lens also displays affective engagements with religion: educators commit to this way of thinking, though their relationship with it may be ambivalent. The first author has previously argued that educators' labour is affective, as they are positioned between cultural/institutional structures of integration and daily interactions with their students (Järvinen and Suopajärvi 2025). Sara Ahmed sees emotion and affect as belonging to the same phenomenon and circulating in interactions in the classroom or in the interview, and different actors leave impressions on each other. Cultural practices like the relationship with religion are formulated and conveyed in such an affective movement (Ahmed 2014, 44–45). Furthermore, affect is a cultural concept, enabling an examination and explanation of social structures related to gender or race, for example (Ahmed 2014). In the article the contribution of affect theory stems from a recognition of the dynamics between individuals, cultural norms, and social structures (Ylijoki et al. 2024, 20).

Educators' classroom roles include the implementation of official policy, and its structures should therefore be recognized in research: structural inequalities such as racism affect migrants' experiences, access to the labour market, education, and opportunities (Masoud et al. 2023, 12). With its intersectional focus on educators our interpretation draws on Critical Whiteness Studies. 'Whiteness' is both a social structure and an embodied position, and treating it as a universalizing and unmarked 'default' reproduces racializing divisions (Seikkula 2019, 1004–5). Racialization is a social process in which the ideas of race³ and the hierarchies it entails become part of social reality and thus produce an unequal distribution of power (Keskinen et al. 2021, 51–52).

We interpret private and restrained accounts of religion as expressions of whiteness norms, 'patterns of behaviors that systematically benefit White people' (Chandler and Wiborg 2020, 714). They contrast different religious expressions, especially Islam, with the basic assumptions of the Nordic welfare states (Nelson 2017, 284). For example, racialization occurs in policies or discourses that place some groups outside the ruling majority (Korteweg

³ In Critical Race Studies 'race' is not understood as a biological characteristic but as a social qualification system that is based on physical appearance or cultural matters (Keskinen et al. 2021, 51).

2017, 432). However, such racialization originates more from structures and less from individual actions ‘smuggled into the conceptions of integration’ (Favell 2022, 6). Our argument is not that educators racialize migrants/Muslims, but that their accounts of religion are intertwined with integration as a whole, whose racializing policies and structures (e.g. Karimi 2024; Kurki 2019; Masoud et al. 2023) are the foundation on which society is built, and which may be invisible to them as white Finnish nationals.

Methodology, interlocutors, and ethics

In 2021 the first author-conducted 16 qualitative interviews with educators working within integration training, basic education for adults, and literacy training provided by liberal adult education were conducted. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic the interviews were conducted remotely. Later, two focus groups consisting of two and three participants from the previous interviews were assembled to provide the interactional element that was missing from the material after the pandemic resulted in the cancellation of ethnographic participation in the institutions. Eventually, this was used as supplementary material in the analysis. The language in all the interviews was Finnish, the native language of both the educators and the researcher.

The thematic interview was elaborated using the prompt method: prompts, or elicitation techniques, are visual, verbal, or written stimuli that encourage interviewees to share their ideas (Barton 2015). Quotations from the educational settings’ core curricula were presented to the participants, who were then asked to comment on, explain, and/or reflect on them. The quotations had an associative function, and they also served as an introduction to the interview’s main themes: personal role(s); labour market position; in/exclusion; and cultural diversity. As a form of social or group identity (cf. Ramsey 2000, 172), religion was included under the fourth theme. This was also the context where it mostly occurred in the core curricula.

Most educators⁴ in our study worked in integration training and liberal adult education, and were trained as mother-tongue and literature subject teachers, which also qualifies one to teach Finnish or Swedish as a second language (see Table 1 for the education included in this study). The other interlocutors were from basic education for adults and were mainly class teachers (grades 1 to 6). The names of the educational institutions and other identifiers were faded out of the transcriptions. The text’s interview extracts

⁴ We use the term ‘educators’ instead of ‘teachers’ because not all the interlocutors had the official teacher qualification.

are labelled P (for participant), referring to individual interviews, and G (for group), referring to focus groups. The average interview duration was two hours. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. Educational institutions included in the study.

Educational institution	Students	Content
Basic education for adults	basic education not completed	literacy training, Finnish, the basic education syllabus
Integration training	sufficient basic education and literacy in the Latin alphabet	language training in Finnish or Swedish, introduction to Finnish society
Literacy training in liberal adult education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - basic education not completed - need flexibility/part-time study opportunities (i.e. stay-at-home parents) - benefit from activity-oriented learning 	literacy training, Finnish, civic studies

Ethical matters were considered throughout the research process in compliance with the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2023). This means participants were informed about the research before consenting to be interviewed. To protect the privacy of educators, sensitive data such as gender identity, sexual orientation, and religious and political affiliation were not sought. Although these identifications may have served as background information (e.g. Lønsmann 2023, 682), our primary interest was in how the accounts were made in their position as integration professionals, not as teachers responsible for upbringing. However, different identifications were allowed to emerge if the educator wished. All were white university-educated Finnish nationals, and with one exception they self-identified as or were assumed to be women.⁵

The transcribed interviews were categorized, with intersectionality steering the focus on sociocultural categories. The categories should however be analysed as overlapping and relational, not in isolation (Collins

⁵ This reflects the gender segregation of teachers at all levels of education in Finland: 77.7 per cent of teachers in basic education were women, and 100 per cent of those teaching migrants were female, in 2019. The proportions are similar in liberal adult education (EDUFI 2020a; 2020b; 2020c).

2015, 14). This means that religion is analysed in this article in relation to Finnishness, labour market position, and race, for example. The emerging categories required further thematization. The definition of religion remained open: what would count as religion in the interviews? Policy documents such as core curricula did not define it: for example, the 2012 national core curriculum for integration training included 'religions and religious freedom in Finland' (EDUFI 2012, 39), and basic education for adults mentioned the coexistence of different convictions as an example of a basic value, that is, 'cultural diversity as a richness' (EDUFI 2017a, 18). Thematizing the category of religion produced nine subthemes: Lutheranism and Finnish holidays; proneness to conflict; nonreligiosity; oneself/others; prayer and holidays; private/public; religionizing; religion in general; religion/culture.

As professionals, interviewees' accounts were informed both by their experience of working in diverse environments and their lived experience of Finnishness. Because of her similar educational background and socioeconomic standing as a middle-class white women, the first author was often treated as a peer during the interviews; many characterizations of Finnish culture and society were conveyed in a shared understanding. The discussion of Finland and Finnishness therefore reflected what was said about 'the other'. Here, we apply the *inverted approach* (Hjelm 2021, 272), focusing on the discourse about the 'other' to understand what it reveals about the 'self'.

The inverted approach directs our attention less to the expression of migrant religions and more to the somewhat covert Finnish attitudes towards religion in general. These attitudes are conveyed in how migrants' religions are discussed; a concerned undertone, especially regarding Islam, illustrates this. In addition to categorizations and subthemes we incorporated the understanding of *emotional hotspots* in our analysis. According to Maggie MacLure hotspots mark moments of disconcertion that demand attention in data analysis but simultaneously 'resist translation into codes and significations' (MacLure 2013, 173). Religion works as a kind of hotspot in the material, drawing attention to itself not only discursively but also emotionally. Theoretically, this means educators' affective engagement with religion becomes visible in those spots where the interview's atmosphere changes because of specific tones of voice or physical reactions, for example. These may result in a sense of joy, unease, or caution, all of which are entwined in, yet somewhat beyond, verbal expressions.

Concerning religion

Freedom, secularity, and privacy

In this section we formulate the educators' general understanding of religion in Finland. In the interviews they were asked how they addressed religion in Finland. Religious freedom as a principle of Finnish society, and reflected through the Finnish lens described above, was more entangled with the ideas of secularity and privacy than freedom of expression, for example.

One educator states: 'And in Finland, for example, we don't interfere with other people's religion, and we have religious freedom – it's stated in the law, and so on (P2)'. 'We' here may refer to Finland as the receiving society, but it may also include the students, the individual speaker, and educators in general as a larger social collective that should comply with the principles of religious freedom. The 'don't interfere' interpretation of religious freedom is also present when discussing how and when some background information about students transpires: 'They come up if they happen to because I don't really bother to question them either – I mean, then again, freedom of religion and so on, what does it matter, anyway?' (P12).

This approach, verging on indifference to religion, coheres with educators' idea of the typical Finnish stance. Indeed, 'religion in Finland' often becomes a negation of the subject in the interviews: rather than discussing religiosity among Finns, more attention is paid to their irreligiosity (cf. Taira et al. 2023, 8–9), which is interpreted as a cause of amazement for students:

P2: And then maybe it's a bit of a surprise, especially for people from countries that are quite religious, how many irreligious people there are – how secular this [country] is.

Educators acknowledge the possible differences between Finland and their students' countries of origin. They observe that the ELCF's enormous membership is not a reflection of personal religiosity but of Finns' cultural commitment. Nevertheless, the ELCF has maintained its role as an established agent in Finnish society, including its prominent visibility in people's lives:

P12: Finns only go to church when there's a wedding or funeral. And people don't pray that much in Finland, so maybe there are some believers or churchgoers. [...] So religion isn't that important. [...] Maybe I can try to talk about it in a way that everything is allowed.

Alongside secularity, the idea of Finland as a culturally Christian country, which we address in the next section, is widely accepted in the interviews, and it also has personal relevance for some educators. However, most speak about the privacy of religion in Finland as a given. When asked about encounters with their students' religions, many find it best not to discuss religions 'too much'. Students are typically the ones who 'bring it up'; this is both to avoid potential conflicts between students and because educators wish to protect their students' privacy:

P8: Perhaps, perhaps religion is the kind of thing that you tiptoe around quietly. Perhaps it's the Finnish way of dealing with religion. [...] Like, for us – people from Finnish culture – it's perhaps more of their own business. [...] The biggest or most important thing that everyone should learn and remember is that we have freedom of religion, [...] and if it doesn't break the law, you have the right to believe what you believe. What you want for yourself, you give to others.

Two expressions catch the attention in this extract on the Finnish relationship with religion that illustrate our theoretical argument: the reference to the Golden Rule as a form of culturalized Lutheranism (see below); and the affectivity of the Finnish lens as a form of embodied caution. Finns want to be left alone with their religiosity to the extent of tiptoeing around it, and they reciprocate by treating others in the same way. Religious freedom seems to be condensed into a right to believe and practise religion in private or not to believe at all, instead of freedom of expression. The caution extends to where and when it is suitable to discuss religion:

P10: Many [Finnish] people do [believe], but they don't always want to talk about it. So don't go to the workplace and start asking if people believe in God. That might not be the best way to start a conversation.

This warning against bringing up religion in the workplace recurs in the interviews, though not everyone agrees here. Consenting to this idea works as a process of othering religion, which assumes intense and engaging religion in others, not the national 'us' (Thurfjell and Willander 2021, 314). One educator illustrates the biased nature of this way of thinking by discussing students who have found the Finnish reluctance to discuss religion 'uncivilized'. Moreover, this reluctance calls the implications for those for whom religion matters a great deal in everyday life into question.

Culturalized religion and the virtue of a nominal Lutheran citizen

In this section we focus more directly on the cultural significance of Evangelical Lutheranism as reflected in the interviews. One educator pinpoints the roots of the caution around religion in Lutheran norms:

P13: It's just this kind of Lutheran, somehow, Protestant way that you don't have to display your religion. [...] And perhaps this is related to the kind of restrained Finn, as a cultural difference: Finns appreciate the restrained, at least that's how I feel. Do you agree that it's a virtue, a kind of virtue?

This reflection is affective, as the educator explicitly expresses *feeling* and even engages the researcher in this opinion. Indeed, it is congruent with the moderate Finnish self-image which favours restraint in religious expression. In a 2011 study most Finns found themselves to be neither strongly religious nor nonreligious (Ketola 2011a, 23). The study also showed that strong expressions and the visibility of both religion and atheism were more shunned in Finland than in other countries (Ketola 2011b, 67, 76). The reflections also include the idea that Lutheranism has shaped how Finnish people understand religion in general, which indicates internalized, or unconscious, Lutheranism: the core values of society, including those taken as secular, are firmly rooted in Lutheran customs and traditions (Sinnemäki et al. 2019, 14). The affectivity of the lens is present in how the norm is embodied in desirable restrained behaviour.

The educators refer to Finland more often as a Christian than a Lutheran country, albeit describing the latter primarily as a constituent of their representation of Finnish culture. Many find Lutheran Christianity key to understanding the organization of the calendar, festivities, Finnish cuisine, and even essential institutions such as the school system. We call this outlook *culturalized Lutheranism*.⁶ The culturalization of religion is seen as a process in which society's central structures with their religious presuppositions are cast as cultural aspects of life (Astor and Mayrl 2020, 221).

6 For example, culturalization extends to the persisting church-school relationship (ELCF: Parish agreements <https://evl.fi/plus/hallinto-ja-talous/seurakuntahallinto/seurakuntien-sopimukset/>).

The privileged status of the ELCF and the Finnish Orthodox Church includes the right to levy taxes (Ministry of Education and Culture: Financing: religious affairs <<https://okm.fi/en/financing-religious-affairs>>). For the culturalization of Lutheranism in Finland see Taira and Beaman 2022.

The educators' accounts reflect this idea and religion as representative of the wider 'culture'. Some address religion only when teaching about Finnish public holidays, most of which have Christian backgrounds; culturalized Lutheranism is present as a kind of 'calendric religion'.

P1: I don't want to push Finland or this culture too much. But so that they know that we celebrate Christmas, because it's the celebration of Jesus's birth, that Finland is a Christian country. And we've been to church with the students, for example, and they found it very interesting.

Lutheranism's cultural relevance is conveyed by recognizing the Christian bearing and symbolic meaning of holidays. Christianity underlies Finnish culture, and culturalized Lutheranism binds the ideas of nationality, values, and identity (Sinnemäki et al. 2019, 23; Lundmark and Mauritsen 2022). Another educator says: 'I always tell them why a holiday is celebrated if it has a Christian background. Because it's our culture' (P6).

Christianity is explicitly defined here as a culture, in contrast with the earlier account of the privacy of religion. Similarly, in Sweden participation in the Lutheran tradition is no longer experienced as religious (Thurnfjell and Willander 2021). Understanding the religious background of holidays becomes part of understanding Finnish culture, even if some students find it difficult to learn about them:

P13: [J]ust before Easter, a Muslim said 'I'm a Muslim, I don't eat mämmi.' [...] [A]nd that's the challenge: what is Christian life and what is social culture? [...] Of course, mämmi isn't a religious food, but it's eaten at Easter, and there are historical reasons people eat such foods at Easter, but then we also need to bring out what Easter is about, why people celebrate it, and what those days are about. All of it, the history, the festive decorations and delicacies, is separate from religion, which we also emphasize.

The educator separates the delicacy from the religious holiday. This presentation of the holiday celebrations takes 'the religion out of the holidays' (Rich 2021, 32). However, to understand the concept of Easter and separate it from secular holidays, its religious background must be clarified. Learning about different religions seems mainly to cover the Lutheran majority, as the interviewee continues by talking about taking their students on church visits: '[B]ut then again, [...] integration training is about bringing out Finland and Finnishness, so we haven't been to a mosque or synagogue, or even a Catholic church' (P13).

The educator claims church visits, presumably to the ELCF, can add to the understanding of Finnishness and thus promote integration. To that end, there is no reason to visit other denominations or places of worship, as they are viewed as external to Finnishness. In the same way Jenny Berglund discusses the 'Lutheran marinade' of Swedish religious education: although the confessional material has been 'wiped off' the neutral and objective subject, the taste of Lutheranism still sticks (Berglund 2023). In a Danish religious education context Christianity is depicted in terms of Danishness, and furthermore, 'universal human conditions' (Buchardt 2014, 119, 139). In our study the idea of Lutheranism as a religion that has become culture, or even a constituent of Finnish culture, is a justified part of public institutions, including education.

Concern about Islam, and the labour market logic of integration

Successful migrant integration is often measured by labour market participation (Kekki et al. 2023, 94). Alongside integration services education has wider objectives, including mutual interaction and preserving one's culture (cf. Integration Act 681/2023). However, while acknowledging the significance of these objectives, the educators emphasize their obligation to promote their students' labour market integration and thus accustom them to the principles of Finnish working life. Here, we observe a concern connected with problem solving: educators aspire to accommodate religion, as 'too much' of it *may* cause problems. In the final section of the analysis we focus on this concern.

A recurring example of the concern is an assumed clash between working life and Muslim students' religious practice. There are no top-down regulations for education about when and where adult students are allowed to pray. Directions for the celebration of religious holidays also seem to vary. These issues often depend on the institution, or even the individual educator. Discussions can result in disagreement in the school environment, as well as in broader conversations about the conventions of Finnish working life:

P10: Islam as a religion often causes the students to feel discriminated against because they aren't allowed to take prayer breaks. But we've also discussed that the employer is allowed to determine working time in Finland. And, well, you can pray at home in the afternoon when you're off work. But it's a bit divisive. Some [students] understand and say, 'Ok, it's fine with me, I'll

do that', but some don't. So that makes working really difficult. You can't work as a bus driver or in many other jobs, so you can't work if you're such a nitpicker. We've confirmed with the Imams that it's not compulsory to pray according to the clock.

The educator says that their institution has attempted to settle the prayer issue by contacting religious experts, but some students disagree with those experts' interpretation. This raises the question of who if anyone is qualified to mediate the needs of a religious or any minority and the expectations of working life. The interviewee continues: 'I don't know how any work can be done in Finland. You'd have to have a job where you could sort of pace the working day yourself. There's very little of the kind of manual labour that allows such an approach.' The excerpt demonstrates religion's intersection with categories of race, class, and education. The structures of integration, based on the demand on the labour market and expectations of people with different migratory statuses, steer migrants towards certain low-wage fields like care work, producing a new racialized underclass (cf. Kurki 2019; Ndomo 2024).

The question was not usually about whether to ban prayer completely when it would be suitable: many educators think that following the *salah* rhythm strictly could prove problematic later and therefore state that 'in practice, [education] works like working life' (P11). In the institution in question this principle is enacted with an even stronger restriction:

P5: So of course we have the obligation to follow the curriculum, and we have the obligation to follow certain principles of integration, which include that we should consciously reduce the Islamic prayer rhythm [...].

[After classes] they can go to some classrooms, but we're responsible for making sure they don't pray in the corridors. It's kind of an instruction given to us. It has nothing to do with how I personally see it, but it's the instruction.

Although none of the national core curricula (EDUFI 2012; 2017a; 2017b) specify any regulations on prayer, the interpretation of the local curriculum is that a prayer rhythm, or praying publicly in common areas, conflicts with the principles of integration. The educator clarifies that this is not her personal opinion, but an obligation. Elsewhere, there seems room for interpretation:

P6: [S]ome educators [...] believe that we're giving a false signal about society, and I'm always silent when this is discussed at meetings. Because I think that really, if a person [...] asks if they can go and pray, it's so deeply rooted in that person that I wouldn't want to take away its meaning [...] if they come and go quietly and do their work, and it doesn't interfere with their schoolwork.

The lack of official guidelines means the question of prayer can also be divisive within a single institution: allowing free prayer times sends the wrong signal about society for some because of the assumption that such conduct will not be allowed outside education. Others feel uneasy about interfering with someone else's religious practice. Nevertheless, there is conditionality: *if the salah is performed correctly, discreetly, quietly, and without interfering with schoolwork, then it can be allowed.* The ambivalence concerning whether this can be done in working life remains.

The outlook concerning students' religious holidays is somewhat stricter. A few educators allude to a policy of one religious day off per semester, but the officialness of this policy is also unclear to them. Some educators have granted a day off but have asked for a presentation about the holiday for the whole class as compensation, thus making the current holidays part of instruction. Others grant even more recognition to the most visible holidays like *Id al-Fitr*, especially if the majority of students – and two billion people globally – celebrate them. Holidays and time and its use are represented as non-negotiable when it comes to Muslims, but the Lutheran calendar's place is self-evident.

Educators are concerned that Muslim students' insistence on their preferred religious practice has potential to cause problems. They may be aware of anti-Muslim attitudes in Finland and smooth their students' path into working life by encouraging accommodation. Yet the whiteness norm can be so thoroughly internalized that in their view religion, not just Islam, should be excluded from workplaces. These accounts contradict the principle of 'not interfering with other people's religion'. The guidelines for reducing the prayer rhythm, denying prayers in public spaces without offering an alternative space, or dismissing religious holidays can be understood as *de facto* interfering with religious freedom.

In comparison, apart from a few examples of negotiating permission for a student to wear a scarf during an internship, headscarves as visibly religious expressions are not generally an issue. Unlike the recurrent concern about time and its use, the bodily expression of religion has become somewhat

mainstream; some educators even compliment employers for providing the *hijab* as part of the work uniform and paying attention to employees' other religious needs (cf. Karhunen 2024).

G4: But to my delight I've noticed while supervising internship periods that some employers already have set practices, which is nice. For example, they have brand scarves for Muslim women with company logos and other things that are part of the uniform. And they've taken prayer breaks at work into account, and they have mats ready and stuff like that [...]. It's nice to see such things being so well thought through already.

MJ: Yes. So working life isn't completely out of touch with these things, either.

G5: No, definitely not. [...] And it's not a big deal. It's nothing new.

This exchange in a group interview indicates grounds for other kinds of narratives of religious encounter in the form of *deep equality*, which shifts the focus from larger structures such as law, state, and institutions to the micro-processes of daily interaction (Beaman 2017, 23–24). There were examples in the interviews of various measures that had been taken to acknowledge students' religions: in many places prayer rooms had been established on either the students' or institution's initiative, or certain restrooms had been reserved for *wudu* cleansing.

Concluding discussion

In this article we have demonstrated how 'the Finnish lens' on religion functions in interviews with adult migrants' educators. We argue that this lens is formed in educators' intersecting and affective position between structures of integration and their students, as well as the long and entangled history of Lutheranism and secularism. This has led to a special form of culturalized Lutheranism that prefers private and modest, or more precisely, 'restrained', forms of religiosity. The lens is also affective, as the educators are simultaneously ambivalent about and committed to it. We observe the virtue of 'restrained Lutheranism' as the whiteness norm, which has been incorporated to promote the (labour market) goals of integration. Diverging from the norm causes concern, and this is cautioned against. Restricting various religious expressions like Islamic prayer in working life follows a logic that views migrants as potential members of the workforce, and educators wish to ensure their employability (e.g. Ndomo 2024). We end our article by offering some reflections on the implications of this normative and affective lens.

The interview accounts leave a concerned impression; they 'tiptoe', proceeding carefully around religion. Ahmed writes about anxiety, the cause of which is not usually present, but which intensifies as thoughts move between different objects (Ahmed 2014, 66). Although 'concern' has a less intense connotation than 'anxiety', a similar movement is present in the interviews. It is not necessarily directed at religion per se but at the anticipated clashes that may occur, particularly in workplaces, between migrant religions (i.e. Islam) and the Finnish conception of religion. In the accounts there is a concern that religious expression, if insufficiently adapted in accordance with Finnish standards, may hamper integration, the primary goal of the educators' work. Their concern extends to migrants' future employability in the Finnish labour market, which they wish to ensure.

The educators posit the labour market as an incontestable entity to which other aspects are subordinate, including the understanding of time and its use sanctifying working times. The private sphere is thus not only spatial but temporal. This accommodation of Islam to being labour-market-compatible is a process of becoming integratable (Masoud et al. 2021). It occurs within unequal power structures, and if unsuccessful, may increase stress and other psychosocial consequences for migrant students (Masoud et al. 2023, 10; Masoud 2024, 90). A study of Muslim young people's prayer ritual indicates that prayer stays in students' minds whether it is allowed or not, which may in turn affect schoolwork (Vähärautio-Halonen 2021). Despite their challenges, young people face, solutions seem more accessible for young people, possibly because of what feels like the permanence of school in their lives. In contrast, adult education, especially integration training, is seen mainly as a steppingstone to the labour market.

The restrained Lutheran Finn stands as the virtue of a religious subject, and the secularized Lutheran is the ideal Finnish working citizen. The expectation of newcomers' religious adaptation emphasizes their obligation to integrate, whereas the obligations of the majority remain vague (Zapata-Barrero and Gropas 2022, 195; Masoud et al. 2021, 54). In her critique of multicultural nations Ahmed defines such integration as *conditional hospitality* (Ahmed 2012, 43): those who are positioned outside the norm of (white) citizenship need to construct themselves as deserving of this hospitality (Karimi 2024, 52; Berg and Peltola 2015).

Although some educators separate their personal views from authoritative roles, they claim to adhere to the latter in their conduct. The recurrent concern about Muslim students' prayer times may be a by-product of the market-oriented goals of integration (Kurki et al. 2018, 239), which repre-

sents their position in structures with racializing tendencies. Educators may therefore aspire to improve Muslim students' employability and reduce the risk of discrimination in working life by guiding them to more moderate religiosity and becoming more like the white majority. The current mentality in Finnish working life is that an employee's religion should not be considered except in cases of direct discrimination (Bergbom et al. 2020). According to the International Labour Organization (2016), however, religion and belief are among the four most common reasons internationally for workers to request reasonable accommodation in the working environment, a policy which the ILO advocates.

Previous studies have demonstrated cases where Muslimness and Finnishness have not been seen to cohere. In Karhunen's study (2024, 165) Finnish-born Muslim women found that visible religious expression caused their Finnishness to be questioned. Furthermore, Hyökki (2022, 65) describes how Finnish Muslim converts described their social experience as 'losing one's whiteness'. These experiences depict the racialization of Islam, a process in which 'Muslims are homogenized and degraded by Islamophobic discourse and practices' (Garner and Selod 2015, 17). Together, these results, as well as widespread anti-Muslim attitudes recorded in Finland (e.g. Pew Research Center 2018), hint at the systemic racialization of Muslims.

Negotiations of religion never happen within equal power dynamics: for Finnish educators these discussions may be merely practical; for many of their students they are a lived reality (Rich 2021, 84; Leonardo and Porter 2010, 149–50). For example, the private/public division may work as a means of exclusion and regulation of the 'different' (Moosa-Mitha 2005, 377), and the demand for secular public space places the religious in a disadvantaged position (Sears and Herriot 2016, 293). Macro-dynamics that produce power differences such as market-driven integration systems therefore cannot be dismissed in these analyses. Our analysis shows that negotiations of religion cannot be separated from societal structures such as the legal system, general codes of custom, and educators' personal views. The interviews depict religious freedom for migrants as the right to practise their religion if it does not coincide with the public sphere, particularly working life. In the educators' accounts the labour market constitutes an entity with which everyone must unquestioningly comply. This ethos illustrates the educators' position between the structures of integration and their students (cf. Järvinen and Suopajarvi 2025).

As argued elsewhere, antiracist pedagogy that encourages the learning of educators, self-reflection, and confronting old understandings should be

brought to the centre of all levels of education and as a basis of the curriculum (Alemanji 2016, 58–59; Järvinen and Suopajarvi 2025). The current curricular requirement of a critical examination of one's own perceptions in the name of two-way integration seems to be directed more at migrants than education providers (Kekki et al. 2023). We concur with previous researchers who have stressed that racializing integration policies and structures must be critically examined, as they can also result in the othering of migrant religions.

Policy-level reforms take time to be realized, which can cause apathy among those working at street level. Meanwhile, there are ways forward in the classrooms, for example. Religious identity is one of many identities, and it represents itself in complex ways (Beaman 2017, 4). These matters are already considered in the immediate educational environment and workplaces as some interviewees described with examples of *wudu* restrooms and prayer spaces. Educators' affective position can make them receptive to change. They also have the authority to decide how to implement policies at street level (Lønsmann 2023, 688), and they are often required to do so independently, as instructions are inadequate and inconsistent. As predecessors of workplaces, educational communities should therefore seek daily actions that work not only for the customs of the majority: the issue of prayer times, for example, should be resolved with Muslim students, using available protocols such as ILO 2016's *Model Policy for Reasonable Accommodations*.

Zeinab Karimi calls *selective secularism* the double standard of Muslims' obligation to constantly explain their religiosity as opposed to the taken-for-granted position of the majority religion (Karimi 2024, 54). Although educators may be able to train their students to comply with the standards of Finnish working life, they cannot protect them from discriminatory recruiting processes. Although it has decreased in larger cities, discrimination based on ethnic and cultural background, religion, and gender still happens in the Finnish labour market (Bergbom et al. 2020; Ahmad 2025). Finnish working life generally still looks largely white, secular, and Lutheran, and inflexible and unwelcoming for those who diverge.

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Interviews

All research material is in the first author's possession. In the future the anonymized transcriptions will be archived in the Archives of the School of History, Culture and Arts Studies at the University of Turku.

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