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Muslim Converts in the Netherlands and the Quest for a “Culture-Free” Islam

Les musulmans convertis aux Pays-Bas et la quête d'un islam « aculturel »

Los musulmanes conversos en los Países Bajos y la búsqueda de un islam culture-free

Vanessa Vroon-Najem



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Vanessa Vroon-Najem

Muslim Converts in the Netherlands and the Quest for a “Culture-Free” Islam

Introduction

In the Netherlands, conversion to Islam is a growing phenomenon¹. While statistics are absent, circumstantial evidence, for instance organizations started by, or aimed at, converts, and Facebook pages, blogs, websites, etc., suggest that the number of converts is increasing. As elsewhere, becoming Muslim is usually a processual change rather than a sudden event (Mossière, 2016; Uhlman, 2015; Vroon-Najem, 2014; McGinty 2006; Jensen, 2006), a slow transformation, characterized by positive social contacts with Muslims, a subsequent period of exploration and orientation, resulting in the experimental practice of Islamic tenets preceding the decision to convert. This process can be so gradual, that some participants in my research were unable to pinpoint the exact moment they became Muslim, and many of them experienced multiple “*shahada*-moments,” for instance, both when alone, and in a communal setting such as a mosque.

Saying the *shahada*, the testimony of faith, marks the entrance into the *umma*, the world-community of Muslims, conceptualized as becoming a “brother or sister in Islam.” Most often, the pious sociality and ethical communality I found to be common within (informal) convert congregations, was organized around this notion of Islamic brother- and sisterhood. From the 1980s on, with a sharp increase when the Internet became available on a large scale, converts from different ethnic and social backgrounds have organized themselves online through informal initiatives, and, increasingly, through more formal organizations such as Nisa for Nisa, Solace Nederland, or Discover Islam (Ontdek Islam). Offering Dutch language opportunities to learn about Islam, both formal and informal support groups, invariably attracts young “born” Muslims too, resulting in multi-ethnic social networks,

1. The author would like to thank Juliette Galonnier and Amélie Puzenat, and the anonymous reviewers, for their helpful comments.

online and offline. These networks, within the framework of brother- and sisterhood, I argue, function as a means to neutralize social, ethnic, and religious differences, allowing converts and other Muslims to meet each other in the context of a creative process of becoming/being Muslim in the Netherlands.

Within these grassroots networks of formal and informal convert organizations, there is often an emphasis on the conceptualization of and the need to distinguish between the *culture* of Muslims² and the *religion* of Islam – a trend that has been well documented in the Muslim world, in general, (Ewing, 2015; Jouili, 2015; Grewal, 2014; Roy, 2010; Hermansen, 2009; Mahmood, 2005; Göle, 1996) and which has similarly been observed among Muslim converts in Germany (Özyürek, 2010, 2015), Spain (Rogozen-Soltar, 2012), and Scandinavia (Roald, 2004). In this article, I address this theme by examining how participants dealt with immigrant Muslims’ habitual practice of Islam, which they labeled “cultural”, in relation to their own reflexive search for a “pure” Islam.

Methods

This article is based on anthropological research among converts to Islam in the Netherlands. In the context of my doctoral dissertation, I conducted fieldwork among five Dutch-language³ Muslim women’s groups in the Amsterdam metropolitan area (2006-2011). This research focused on changes in daily life when becoming Muslim, how converts form and become part of (new) communities, and how they try to differentiate between *culture* and *religion*. Between 2014-2019, I continued this research, focused on how Muslim converts find a partner and conclude their marriages. In the course of my research, I participated in hundreds of offline meetings, lectures, social and religious events, and had access to participants’ online activities as well. In addition to countless informal conversations, I interviewed more than eighty women, many of them multiple times, and a dozen men. With few exceptions, they were all converts to Islam. Muslim converts in the Netherlands⁴ are a very diverse group. There are white Dutch converts, converts who are Dutch citizens from former colonies such as Suriname and the Antilles, and converts who are naturalized migrants, from Europe and other parts of the world, too. Some converts were born and raised in villages, others in multi-cultural city neighborhoods. There is variety as well as far as educational levels are concerned. Some participants obtained

2. In this article, to highlight the different uses of the concept of *culture* by interlocutors, and its problems in anthropological writing (Abu-Lughod, 1991), I followed Baumann’s strategy (1996) of writing it in italics.

3. All quotes from interviews with interlocutors are translated from Dutch to English by the author.

4. Different from English-speaking nations, where many prefer the term “revert,” the word “convert” (*bekeerling*) is widely used in the Netherlands as a means of self-description.

only a high-school diploma, others pursued a Ph.D., and many had varying levels of formal education in-between. Converts can be found in every social class. Indeed, there are many converted men, but in terms of gender diversity, women seem to make up the largest segment, although reliable figures are lacking. Other variations include different outlooks on how to best practice Islam, age and religious background. Some people convert as teenagers, others later in life. Some come from Jewish, Protestant, or Catholic families; others were without a religion before becoming Muslim. Despite this variety in interlocutors, those contributing to my research cannot be considered representative of all converts to Islam in the Netherlands. Since there are no records, aiming for a representative cross-section of Dutch converts to Islam would be questionable in any event, due to the absence of an overall picture.⁵

In order to share my findings with a broad audience, I curated several exhibitions, among them “Converted, Becoming Muslim – Being Muslim” at the Amsterdam Museum (2014)⁶, and “Marrying Before Allah – Personal Stories of Converts” (2017), consisting of eight video-portraits of converts, as well as a long documentary.⁷ These projects have enabled me to receive feedback on matters of representation by participants, and helped establish an ongoing dialogue with them about their choices in the context of their conversion to Islam.

Converting to Islam in the Netherlands

In the Netherlands, as in other European countries, national belonging and Muslims’ religious belongings are often pitted against each other. The life stories of converts, therefore, provide ample opportunity to gain an understanding of how these two allegedly mutually exclusive forms of belonging are combined within one subject (Galonnier, 2015; Zebiri, 2008; Jensen, 2008; Van Nieuwkerk, 2004). Zebiri (2008: 1), who researched conversion to Islam in Great Britain, for instance, remarks:

Western converts to Islam transcend the often invoked Islam-and-the-West dichotomy simply by virtue of who they are. It is becoming increasingly difficult for non-Muslims living in Western Europe and North America to maintain the image of Islam as “foreign” and “other” in the face of the growing number of indigenous people who choose to embrace this religion.

5. The Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) calculated in 2007 that there are 12,000 *autochthonous* Dutch Muslims, including converts to Islam. However, this includes children of second generation *allochthones* who are not converts but born Muslims. In addition, conversion by women who classify as *allochthones* cannot be accounted for in this classification because it is implied that converts to Islam are always *autochthones*.

6. With photographer Saskia Aukema.

7. Together with visual anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Wendy van Wilgenburg.

Describing converts as “indigenous people,” however, does not capture the whole range of backgrounds of converts to Islam in the Netherlands, nor in other Western countries. In the British case, for instance, Suleiman (2013: 4) remarks that non-Western converts to Islam are a neglected subject. This is a salient point, as non-Muslim immigrants, and/or their descendants, convert to Islam as well.⁸ More important here, while Zebiri questions the dichotomy itself, indirectly, the image of “indigenous people” embracing a “foreign Islam” is reproduced. In her article about Dutch converts, “Veils and Wooden Clogs Don’t Go Together,” Van Nieuwkerk (2004: 235), too, describes the positionality of converts in terms of being “betwixt and between two cultures.”

Writing about multiculturalism in Southall, London, Gerd Baumann (1996: 1-2) questions this conceptualization of being “between cultures:” “I could not work out why they [immigrants’ children] should be suspended between, rather than be seen to reach across, two cultures. *More importantly, which two cultures were involved?*” (italics added). What Baumann addresses here, is that in today’s globalized world, people experience multiple identifications and belongings.⁹ Following his example (1999), in this article, I shift the focus to the triangle of converts’ ethnic, national, and religious belonging. Starting with ethnic belonging, Baumann (1996: 188) argues that there is a discourse “that has come to dominate the representation, descriptive as well as political, of people singled out as ethnic minorities.”¹⁰ In this discourse, ethnic categories are equated with social groups under the header *community*, and each *community* is identified with a reified *culture* (*ibid.*). Baumann referred to what he found in Great Britain, but this discourse is equally dominant in the Dutch context.¹¹ Dutch converts, for instance, are often mistaken for Turks or Moroccans, the two largest groups of Muslims in the Netherlands, or asked if they have *also* become Turkish or Moroccan.

As the dominant discourse represents a hegemonic language within which people must explain themselves, it was as prevalent among my interlocutors as it is among the general Dutch public. Participants, too, routinely equated ethnicity with nationality, “real” Dutchness with whiteness, and talked about immigrant *communities* as bounded entities with distinct *cultures*. They narrowly defined “Dutch converts” to mean only white Dutch and labeled

8. Guest laborers in Muslim majority countries convert to Islam, too, see for instance Attiya Ahmad’s (2010) research on conversion to Islam among domestic workers in Kuwait.

9. Mossière (2016: 104) also proposes nuancing this binary approach. In her research about Quebecois and French females who are new Muslims, she argues that converts’ “adherence to and interpretation of Islam reflect their wish to reconcile two antagonistic discourses, and reframe them around a third alternative, one that recycles and re-organizes existing components, such as global solidarity, egalitarianism, and mutual tolerance.”

10. Although this can certainly be argued for the Netherlands, the UK, or the US, in France the dominant discourse may be different. As Tiberj and Michon (2013: 580) argue, French politicians and the public usually consider “that there are no such things as ethnic minorities in France, and therefore no particular ‘ethnic minority’ interests.”

11. Although, nowadays, it is not only about ethnic minorities as such. Discourses also draw on the ethnification (Allievi, 2006) and racialization of Muslims (Moosavi, 2015; Selod, 2015).

converts with other backgrounds based on their parents' or dual nationalities, even when they were born and raised in the Netherlands. The same applied to born Muslims who were addressed, and also identified themselves, as Moroccans, Turks, etc., even though these were mostly young men and women who possess Dutch nationality from birth.

The Autochthone-Allochthone Binary

This dominant discourse in the Netherlands can be illustrated with the *autochthone-allochthone* binary.¹² *Autochthone*, meaning “of this soil,” is not a new term but, as Geschiere (2009: 16) argues in his book *The Perils of Belonging*, it has undergone a renaissance since the 1980s and become increasingly popular, although the use of the term differs across national settings. In Canada, for instance, it is used to refer to indigenous people, *i.e.* “people in minority positions whose way of life is threatened by dominant groups” (*ibid.*: 19). In the Netherlands, on the contrary, the concept is used to designate people in a majority position.

If the meaning of *autochthony* is difficult to capture, as Geschiere comprehensively argues in his book, its opposite, *allochthony*, is equally ambiguous and there are different definitions of it as well. In the Netherlands, it was used as a solution to the semantic problem that, despite the influx of immigrants, in official political discourse the Netherlands was not to be considered an “immigration country.” Therefore, the word “immigrant” had to be avoided. Although it took some time to take root – during the 1970s and 1980s “ethnic minorities” was the preferred label for immigrant groups (*ibid.*: 149) – from the 1990s on, the use of the word *allochthone* gained great currency in the Netherlands. Although in its inception in this context, *allochthone* was meant to be a neutral, non-offensive term, the label currently carries a considerable stigma since it is mostly used as a euphemism for immigrant, foreigner, or guest laborer. It designates someone who does not quite belong within the national fold. One of the unexpected effects of the label was that although it was originally meant as an umbrella word to designate all groups who had recently immigrated to the Netherlands, it has become increasingly restricted to the groups that were formerly known as guest workers, the Moroccans and Turks, who also happen to be the two main Muslim groups (*ibid.*: 150).¹³

The number of “allochthones” living in the Netherlands thus varies, depending on the definition. In 1999, the Central Bureau for Statistics fixed the definition to include the provision that one is an allochthone even if only one parent is born abroad. This extensive perception means that if a native Dutch

12. As of November 1st 2016, the Dutch government decided to stop using this terminology in its statistics, because of its impreciseness, and stigmatizing effects. Subsequent discussions in various Dutch media outlets, however, suggest it will take time before its use fades out in practice.

13. As Arjun Appadurai (2006: 42) argues in *Fear of Small Numbers*, “minorities do not come preformed. They are produced in the specific circumstances of every nation and every nationalism.”

marries a foreign-born partner, their children are considered “allochthones.” The binary therefore marks a sharp distinction between who does and who does not count as “real Dutch,” which is also related to skin color. For instance, one of my interlocutors had a Turkish father but he had not been part of her upbringing. She was raised by her white Dutch mother and had converted to Islam in her early twenties. Because of her mixed background, she had a darker complexion and brown eyes. As I knew from a previous interview that she had no contact with her father or his relatives, during my second interview with her, I mentioned that I had noticed that she always introduced herself as half-Turkish, half-Dutch. She explained:

Yes [I do], but in fact I have nothing to do with being Turkish. I don't speak Turkish, and I don't really feel Turkish. My husband always says, “You should say you're Dutch.” But then I say, “I don't look Dutch.” People will think, “Where does the dark part come from?” So I just say, “I'm half-Turkish” to explain that. But I don't feel Turkish. I feel Dutch. That's odd, because people don't see you as Dutch. That's very weird, in particular when I started wearing a headscarf. I felt Dutch, but in school I was addressed like a little child. That's a confrontation. I'm not retarded! Or, for instance, in our previous apartment, a contractor came by to fix the shower and I told him exactly how I wanted it done. He said, “Wow, you speak excellent Dutch” and I replied, “Yes, I'm Dutch.” So he said, “Yes, sure you're Dutch.” You know, like, gloss over it, “Moroccans are Dutch, too,” like that. So I said, “No, you don't understand. My mom is as Dutch as you are. She is blond, too.” So he was really like [confused]. But you know? Like that. You are not seen as Dutch. [Laughing,] that's why I'm so happy with my Dutch name [her mother's maiden name which she retained after marriage], I still have my name!

In her story, several mechanisms of “othering” are simultaneously at work: one on the basis of skin color, one based on the image of the Muslim headscarf, and one she manages to avoid: othering based on having a stigmatized name. Although she feels “Dutch,” and arguably, has no means to identify with another ethnic or national background, the way she feels about her ethnic-national belonging and the way she is perceived by white, non-Muslim Dutch, differ. While she feels obliged to explain her complexion by offering the explanation of being “half-Turkish,” the headscarf adds a second layer of otherness as a result of its association in the Dutch context with foreignness, oppression and backwardness.¹⁴

“Dutchness”

In the Netherlands, ethnic background is often conflated with nationality, and in the case of Muslims, increasingly with religion. This can be related to the formation of modern nation-states where boundaries of ethnicity were overcome

14. Her story is exemplary of the stories of converts with dark(er) complexions, who are already addressed as allochthones before becoming Muslim.

by turning the nation into a super-ethnos. As Baumann (1999: 31) puts forward, the concept of the nation is both post-ethnic, in that it denies ethnic distinctions and portrays these as belonging to a distant, pre-state past, and super-ethnic, in that it portrays the nation as a new, larger and more encompassing kind of ethnos. This image of the nation, however, is largely an ideal rather than a reality: “Most nation-states [...] have failed to complete this project in that they included some ethnic groups and excluded others, or privileged some and marginalized others” (*ibid.*). This is true for the Netherlands as well. As Ghorashi (2003: 68) points out in her study on the narratives of Iranian women exiles living in the Netherlands, Dutch notions of national identity are exclusive and “thick,” and reflect “a common understanding of Dutchness based on color, ‘roots,’ and certain codes of behavior that exclude difference.”

The Dutch naturalization ceremony is an interesting ritual with regard to the intricacies of these “codes of behavior.” Verkaaik (2010: 74) describes how, when the ceremony was first introduced in 2006, bureaucrats struggled to conceptualize “Dutchness.” He recounts witnessing a mayor telling his audience, “A Dutchman is always on time, eats his potatoes at six in the evening, and never comes unannounced.” Verkaaik stresses the mayor was being ironic, but my Dutch interviewees would probably have found a kernel of truth in these examples of stereotypical Dutchness. Participants married to foreign-born Muslims, when confronted with differences in socio-cultural habits, were certainly aware that they were Dutch-born while their spouses were not, regardless of their level of piety or the amount of changes they implemented in their daily lives as a result of conversion. For instance, one participant who wore a long headscarf, had changed her first name, and aspired to a pious life-style, but still had to work out a compromise with her Egyptian-born husband. Her idea of breakfast or lunch was a cheese sandwich and dinnertime had to be at six, as in the Dutch tradition. His ideas on the contents and time of a meal differed significantly. Consequently, they ate most meals alone. In this respect, I would like to stress the importance of not overlooking the fact that although Islam became an important guideline in the lives of participants, religious convergence did not necessarily overcome interethnic tensions regarding socio-cultural habitual practices (Bourdieu, 1990).

Differences with Muslim in-laws can, for example, produce tensions not directly tied to Islam but rather to social mores. This can be illustrated with the second example of “stereotypical Dutchness” cited by the mayor in Verkaaik’s study. Indeed, as a rule and as a practice, Dutch people rarely visit each other unannounced, even among close relatives. One of the participants in my research, a woman in her sixties who had converted later in life, and had subsequently partly moved to Egypt, remarked how difficult it was to deal with people not sharing that convention:

People invading your kitchen, it takes a long time to get used to that. After a while, you have to, you need to let go. But at a certain point I think, “Hello! What about me?” There are phones, why not call and ask, “Is it okay if I come over?” Yes,

I understand, it is your brother or your sister, but so what? That's what's driving [converts from the Netherlands who immigrate to Egypt] crazy at first.

Participants who immigrated to Muslim majority countries¹⁵ experienced difficulties adjusting in this regard, but emigration was not a necessary condition for this type of conflict to arise. This woman's converted friend concurred that coming unannounced was a continual cause of tension with her Somalian in-laws, who, in her case, lived in the Netherlands. Conversely, the fact that she *did* call was considered a grave transgression:

My mother-in-law became unbelievably angry, really, really angry, when I called her before a visit. Of course, I know I'm always welcome there, but that's the way I am. They are also always welcome at my home but I really appreciate it if I know, ten minutes in advance, [that they are coming]. Even if it's only to allow me to put away the laundry and put the dishes in the dish washer, if only for that. So I call in advance, "I'm putting the kids in the car now, is it okay if I'm there in fifteen minutes?" Then she becomes mad.

When I asked what her mother-in-law thought was particularly offensive about calling to announce a visit, she recalled her words:

"How can you telephone, you are family!" "You are my daughter!" "Strangers call, do you consider yourself a stranger?" They never said it like that but that was behind it. ... [She reasons,] "My house is your house." For both sides, it took years before it was accepted [that each had their own way].

Becoming a Brother/Sister in Islam

In regard to participants' religious belonging, it was evident that the ways in which many converts in my research discussed and tried to implement Islamic tenets in their daily lives was influenced by the global Islamic Revival, with its calls for a return to the high ethical values of the first generations of Muslims. This focus on the first generations of Muslims, particularly within a conservative-literalist framework, is often associated with Salafism. However, few converts in my research self-identified as Salafi, and this label proved too limited to capture the variety of converts attracted to the example of the first Muslim communities, who also included, for instance, converts engaged in an Islamic feminist (re)interpretation of the Qur'an and *hadith*.

"Going back to the origin of Islam" was an appealing narrative for participants. Women were pleased with the fact that the first Muslim convert was a woman,¹⁶ and the early Muslims faced much opposition, also within their families, and had to make sacrifices, for instance, reduced possibilities for economic prosperity. This imagery strongly resonated with the experiences

15. Also known as "*hijra*."

16. *Khadidja*, the first wife of the prophet Mohammed.

of many converts in my research and provided a framework for coping with the problems they faced as a result of their conversion. The sociocultural context of their spouses, of course, did influence their practice of Islam too, but not to the extent that they would adopt practices deemed to be un-Islamic. They called those practices “cultural Islam.” For instance, many converts had adopted the opinion that the Qur’an verse that enjoins women “to cover their beauty” means that for women, covering one’s hair when in presence of other men is mandatory.¹⁷ The same Qur’an verse, however, also lists a series of exemptions from this rule, among them one’s father-in-law. One participant, therefore, refused to follow the custom of her female in-laws, who covered themselves even when in the presence of close relatives. When she was on holiday in Morocco, the following incident happened:

We were sitting in the living room one day when my father-in-law came in, everyone put on their headscarves. I didn’t. Period. I follow Islam and this is Islam. Period. I’m not following your culture. That won’t help me on the Day of Judgment. My father-in-law said I was right. That I was right, you know. He knows it, and even if he would think it’s weird, I would still leave my headscarf off because otherwise I would do it for him. That doesn’t make sense. That is not what Islam is about.

Brother/Sisterhood as a Demotic Discourse

One of the ways through which converts seek to counter the dominant discourse is by separating *culture* from *community*. Discourses that disengage from the dominant equation are what Baumann (1996) calls “demotic discourses.” In this alternative type of discourse, *culture* is not so much a possession as it is a creative project, a process of “making *culture*.” As Muslims from different backgrounds meet each other in the Netherlands and influence each other’s practices (Mandaville, 2001), I found that the concept of Islamic brother- and sisterhood can be considered such a demotic discourse.

If converts said the *shahada* at the mosque, or at a meeting of one of the women’s groups in my research, the notion that conversion meant becoming a “brother or sister in Islam” was usually expressed. Converts who converted alone, by contrast, often learned about such specific aspects of conversion only after the fact. If they started attending lectures or meetings after they had already become Muslim, the notion of brother/sisterhood became implicitly clear when addressing one another as *brother* or *sister* face to face, or when used on flyers, or online. The title brother/sister is used in e-mails, chats, websites, blogs, and forums, and (lack of) brother/sisterhood was frequently mentioned in lectures. Although it should be noted that the concept of brother/sisterhood was not embraced by all participants in my research, the majority always used this vocabulary. The following duties towards fellow Muslims

17. See Sura An-Nur 24: 31.

were often mentioned within the Muslim women's groups and in interviews: when you meet a Muslim, you greet him/her with the words *as-salâmu 'alaikum* (peace be upon you); when you are invited, you accept; when someone seeks your advice, you give advice; when someone is ill, you pay a visit; and when someone dies, you go to the funeral prayer.

Brother/sisterhood, and its rights and duties, can be captured by what Abby Day (2010: 28) terms “performative belief.” Emphasizing the social and relational location of belief, Day stresses the combined effect of language and embodiment. She argues that the use of language and specific tangible acts not only express beliefs but also help to actively claim and shape beliefs to produce socially specific identities (*ibid.*: 18). This can be illustrated by the importance participants place on giving and receiving the *salâm*, the Islamic greeting. Perhaps because of the circumstance of being a minority within a minority, after the *shahada*, giving and receiving the *salâm* is felt to be a threshold moment by new converts. It signals that now they are Muslims too. Giving each other the *salâm* as a form of pious sociality can be considered a performance that informs and shapes becoming part of the *umma*. It is a form of worship because the intention should be to do it “for the sake of Allah,” as it is phrased. It is also a ritual, as well as a form of transaction and exchange, producing a non-secular sociality and belonging (Anderson, 2011).

As religious belonging has to be actively pursued by converts, new patterns of practice emerge as a result. The ideal of all Muslims belonging to one *umma* and the duty to greet other Muslims, regardless of their ethnic background, meant establishing new forms of ethical communality. Greeting any Muslim in public space is uncommon among immigrants who were already Muslims when they came to the Netherlands. Persistent greeting however, often resulted in eventually being greeted back, as in the story of this participant:

According to the *hadith*, smiling or greeting is a form of *sadaqa* [charity]. I think that's beautiful. What's easier than smiling? Or wishing someone the *salâm*? Why pass on that chance? [...] I got really annoyed by a few Turkish[-Dutch] women. During Ramadan, I often eat at my sister-in-law's. By the time we go home, *salat at-tarâwîh* [Ramadan prayers] is over and large numbers of Turkish[-Dutch] women [also] go home. I greeted them and no one greeted me back. While they just came from the mosque! That is a matter of culture, I suppose. For me, it's second nature. I greet everyone. If I see a headscarf, I just greet. I have a Turkish[-Dutch] neighbor and now she greets me back.

Despite the unifying concept of brother/sisterhood, and the inclusive practice of greeting every fellow Muslim, participants often wrestled with differences, conflicts and cleavages among Muslims. Their strategy: turning to books.

“Muslims are different, Islam is one”

Participants in my research were Sunni Muslims who generally believed that following the Qur'an and Sunna sufficed. Usually, they avoided theological

debates about differences between various strands, sects and schools of law. Instead, they followed the opinion of leading Muslim scholars, read books, asked the advice of other (converted) Muslims they trusted, or relied on their common sense. Nevertheless, to find their way among Muslims' multiple interpretations of Islam was by all accounts a challenge, as expressed by a convert in her early thirties, a pious mother of five. She echoed an often-heard sentiment: "If you want to understand Islam, don't look at Muslims."

Muslims should be a unity. If that happened, all would be clear in the Netherlands. Everyone would know exactly how to deal with Muslims. Currently, one [Muslim] woman doesn't mind going to a male doctor and has a thorough examination while the next [Muslim] woman says: "Sorry, I can't shake hands." What should they [non-Muslims] do? No wonder they don't understand. If you want to understand Islam, don't look at Muslims. Muslims are different. Islam is one.

In her study of Scandinavian converts to Islam, Roald observed a phenomenon I noticed, too, in regard to the challenges converts face when confronted with a multiplicity of Muslim views: a search for a "pure" Islam. She argues that converts tend to be confused when they encounter multiple views and trends among Muslims. "In search of the 'truth,' they tend to look for the 'pure sources' instead of settling for one of the many cultural expressions born Muslims term 'Islam.'" (Roald, 2004: 113). Moreover, she argues, many new Muslims reject the "Law School" system, saying that they would follow only the Qur'an and Sunna. She attributes this common stance to converts' predicament of being faced with a multitude of Islamic expressions and argues that this methodology of returning to the Qur'an and Sunna is therefore used differently by converts as compared to born Muslims, due to differences in their outlook. On the contrary, I found that because converts and born Muslims socialize with each other, they influence each other's practice and both aim for a "pure" Islam, thereby subverting the taken-for-granted dichotomy between "convert" and "born" Muslims.¹⁸

The Quest for a "Culture-Free" Islam

Tensions between participants' perception of Islam as a perfect religion and the significant problems of Muslims worldwide were often a subject of conversation within the Muslim women's groups in my research. Most converts reasoned that since Islam is a perfect religion, Muslims must be to blame. In her research among German converts to Islam, Özyürek (2010: 172) came across an apparent paradox, which I noticed too. All the converts she talked to, as well as the convert narratives she read online, expressed that conversion to Islam took place in a context of positive social contacts with born Muslims.

18. Similar to converts (young) born Muslims have a need for Dutch language activities, too, and – in part because their Muslim faith is so often questioned in the Netherlands – they also feel a need to learn more about the content of their religion.

However, at the same time, a substantial number of participants were discontent with other Muslims, particularly those of immigrant backgrounds. Similar to my experience, many of her interlocutors underscored that Muslims and Islam are two different things. She writes: “Like non-converted, non-Muslim German intellectuals, many converts believe that immigrant Muslims need to be educated, integrated, and transformed.” This could be accomplished, it was believed, by “making immigrant Muslims leave their Middle-Eastern or African cultures and traditions behind and persuading them to apply fundamental Islamic teachings in their everyday lives. In other words, the German converts argue, it is Muslims who need to change, not Islam” (*ibid.*: 174).

I found the same approach in the Netherlands. Indeed, at many gatherings of the women’s groups I attended, the “deplorable state of the *umma*” was lamented, as well as born Muslims’ “ignorance.” The importance of learning to distinguish between *culture* and *religion* was stressed over and over again, no matter what type of Islamic practice women adopted. In these views, the “real” content of Islam was to be found in books, foremost in the founding texts of the Qur’an and Sunna. Since these scriptural sources are interpreted by various Islamic scholars, after this initial consensus, participants’ opinions and practices diverged and could change over time. Nevertheless, book knowledge, in particular from texts that also provided the source references, was implicitly or explicitly considered superior to the traditions of immigrant Muslims in the Netherlands.

Converts were also critical of information offered by other converts. For instance, soon after her conversion, a participant received an uninvited comment from another convert. When recounting the incident, she used the common narrative that, in order to learn about Islam, it is better to turn to books, and even then, a critical eye remains important.

Usually, I wear socks that are slightly see-through. A woman [at a women’s group], came up to me and [said] in a thundering voice, “You should wear thick socks! ‘Cause God said so!” At the time, I didn’t even wear a headscarf! I thought, “This is not the way to correct someone, or to point out the good.” Later I told my husband [about it] and he said, “Didn’t you ask her to show you where it says so?” Because, of course, there are different opinions [on the subject of wearing socks]. [...] Often, I discuss this with my husband: it’s always [imperfect] people who practice [Islam], you know. You should not look at people who are Muslim, you should look at Islam. Like in books, books and the explanation, and remain critical of the explanation, too. If in my perception it’s not right, I’ll keep searching in other books.

In contrast to Özyürek’s findings in Germany, the women’s groups in my research were inclusive and welcomed anyone, born/converted/non-Muslims alike. The young, “born” Muslim women, often with a Moroccan-Dutch background, who frequented meetings, used vocabulary similar to that of converts. When not proficient in the doctrines or practice of Islam, they would say when introducing themselves that they were “cultural Muslims.” Often, they compared their predicament to that of converts in explaining that although they

came from Muslim families, this did not mean they knew much about their religion. Once among likeminded women, critiques of the practices of “born” Muslims on a wide array of topics, were often voiced by “cultural Muslims” too.

In Spain, Rogozen-Soltar (2012: 616) found a similar strategy of separating Islam from Muslims among converts. Focusing on differences in the representation of Islam between converts and Moroccan immigrants, she argues that since Muslim immigrants and converts in Spain have different access to social and political resources, they are incorporated differently as minority subjects. This, she continues, is most powerfully expressed in the ways convert and immigrant Muslims disassociate from one another: “Converts often claim to practice a ‘culture-free’ Islam, which they contrast to Moroccans’ ‘traditions,’ using a discourse that cloaks convert religiosity within an unmarked category of ‘European’ and marks migrant Muslims as outsiders. Migrants, on the other hand, largely accuse converts of exclusionary social practices, and both groups worry about the other’s potential contribution to public perceptions of Muslim extremism” (*ibid.*).

In the Netherlands, I found the divide to be situated between women in search of a scripture-based “true Islam” (whether through an Islamic feminist discourse or an Islamic revival discourse) and some immigrant Muslims’ habitual practice of Islam. Rogozen-Soltar also acknowledges that “the discursive sifting of ‘true’ or ‘pure’ Islamic beliefs and practices from culturally based ‘traditions’ is not unique to Granada’s converts.” She adds that “similar distinctions are common to much of the heterogeneous yet globally reaching Islamic revival, in which Muslims involved in piety and reformist movements increasingly participate in the active study of Islamic texts and theological debates, often in search of the ‘truest’ forms of Islam” (*ibid.*: 619). This is an important observation because the women’s groups in my research welcomed converts, “born” Muslims, as well as non-Muslim women. Ethnically, the groups were diverse, comprised of women from different backgrounds. The search for the “truest” or “purest” Islam, therefore, affected them all.

Defining “Dutch Culture”

Contrary to the perception of converts as having embraced not only a new religion, but also another ethnic-national background, the vast majority of Dutch converts claim that they still feel Dutch. When I asked participants how they would describe “Dutch culture,” however, they often struggled to articulate an answer. Usually, the concept of *culture* reminded them of norms and values. The norms and values they retained after conversion, however, were mostly attributed to their upbringing, without necessarily considering these (part of) Dutch *culture*. As a young convert, a student in her early twenties phrased it,

I very much respect the way my parents brought me up. They taught me respect for other people, that’s something I see reflected [in Islam]. But you don’t see that [respect for other people] with all the Dutch, so I can’t say that I got that from the Dutch.

Alternatively, “Dutch culture” was contextually defined, in opposition to other cultures.

What makes me Dutch? That’s a difficult question. Well, I think, perhaps, my Dutch culture. But what is Dutch culture? Look, there are things that are typically Moroccan culture, right? For instance pride, pride towards each other, I don’t have that. When you go to a wedding, they are all wearing gold, they all look at each other, and you come without [wearing] gold. Then I feel really Dutch. Then I think, I’m happy to be Dutch and I don’t care how much gold you have. Perhaps with such issues, at such a moment, but [to define being Dutch] towards someone Dutch... well, that’s difficult.

Another participant, a teacher at an Islamic primary school, divorced, with grown-up children when she decided to become Muslim, tried to carve out what she liked about Dutch *culture* when she described to me that she still felt Dutch, while also comparing her behavior to other Muslims’ *cultures* and reviewing both in light of Islam.

My first reaction is: Islam and Dutchness go well together. I know there are things that do not fit: drinking culture, acting crazy during soccer tournaments, I know many more things from Dutch culture that I don’t like, but other than that, I always say, “I’m still all Dutch.” I am very Dutch, even when I wear a *djellaba*. Well, that’s not really Dutch culture but I think that, without them realizing it, Muslims and strict Protestants have very much in common. Hospitality is not Dutch, so that doesn’t fit well with Islam, and people wearing shoes inside the house, I cannot imagine doing that anymore, so that doesn’t fit either. So, well, haha, why do I still feel completely Dutch? I feel Dutch because of things that have nothing to do with Islam. Music from the *Jordaan* [an Amsterdam neighborhood] can make me very happy, Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*, wind mills, green meadows, a line of trees in the distance with a church tower. But that’s not culture and it has nothing to do with Islam. I do not live like someone Dutch, I feel Dutch, but why? I don’t do anything Dutch anymore. I don’t celebrate my birthday, I don’t like Dutch food, I don’t drink anymore. Pfff... I cycle! Ha! But what does that have to do with Islam? Nothing. I don’t know. But it is very Dutch that I cycle. And that I earn my own money, that is very compatible with Islam, but to say that it’s a similarity [between Islam and Dutchness], no. Well, at staff meetings [with other Muslims], I’m not shy to open my mouth. I just voice my opinion, I don’t care about cultural agreements about age, or men-women, or saying things in an indirect fashion, no. I’m really blunt. I call a horse a horse.

An example of how multi-ethnic Muslims’ practice of Islam in the Netherlands is being influenced by aspects of “Dutch culture” came from the story of a converted woman in her late twenties, whose young children attended an Islamic primary school.¹⁹ These schools have teachers of Islam and one afternoon, the teacher lectured the attending parents. The topic touched upon

19. There are around fifty Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands.

the third “Dutch custom” that the mayor, mentioned above, had put forward at the naturalization ceremony: how Dutch people deal with time. The objective of the teacher was to encourage parents, of various backgrounds, to follow the Dutch example. He framed his advice in a moral story, in a lecture titled: “Time is *hasanât*” (blessings, a reward for good deeds). She recounted:

The religion teacher said, “We Muslims are always late.” The lecture started fifteen minutes late because people were still arriving, so he said, “See? With the Dutch... [they would have been on time],” He gave an example: “A brother [in Islam] went to see a non-Muslim man. He was late so the non-Muslim said to him, ‘have you been on *hadj*?’ The man answers, ‘Yes.’ So the other man says, ‘Did you do the Friday prayer on time?’ and the man answered, ‘Yes.’ ‘Do you pray five times a day when it’s time for prayer?’ ‘Yes.’ And then he [the non-Muslim man] said, ‘But it seems you have not understood your religion.’ So the brother was very upset, he felt like he was being called a *kafir* [a non-believer], as a matter of speech. But he was late and the man wanted to make him feel that it was wrong not to keep an appointment.” So the religion teacher said, “If you make an appointment with someone Dutch at five o’clock, he’ll be at your door at five o’clock. We Muslims, we are always late.” The lecture was about the fact that our children see that behavior, too. He said, “You don’t take time seriously.” That was what the lecture was about. The Dutch are really good with their time, “time is money” is a well-known expression, that’s how he got the title, “time is *hasanât*.”

This example is quite different from Özyürek and Rogozen-Soltar’s findings. The teacher, a Turkish-Dutch Muslim, invokes the image of a non-Muslim berating a Muslim for being late, accusing him of not understanding his religion, as a lesson for Muslim parents of various backgrounds to convey that they should follow the Dutch example of taking time seriously. In regard to the prevalence of the dominant discourse though, he also reinforced the binary “We Muslims” versus “The Dutch,” while converted mothers also send their children to Islamic primary schools, and the vast majority of his audience possessed Dutch nationality.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed conversion to Islam within the specific context of the Netherlands, and participants’ struggle to find their place among other Muslims, in particular, their realization that although they believe in the unity of Islam, in practice, Muslims differ. In order to deal with these differences, I argue, converts tend to emphasize the importance of differentiating between *culture* and *religion*, which I term a quest for a “culture-free” Islam. They often idealize the first Muslims, conceptualized as a multi-ethnic group of converts, whose struggles somewhat resemble their own predicament, unified within a framework of Islamic brother/sisterhood. I argue that this framework functions as a counter discourse to the conflation of *culture* and *community* that converts often encounter.

Becoming Muslim marks one's entrance into the *umma*, expressed as becoming a "brother or sister in Islam." Islamic brother- and sisterhood potentially functioned as an overarching principle, minimizing differences, although in practice, divides between different ideas about how to best practice Islam remained. Following Baumann (1996: 195), I have termed this a "demotic discourse." A demotic discourse, however, is not "an autonomous opposite, or an independent alternative, to the dominant one." It is used to undermine the dominant discourse when judged useful. The dominant discourse, as was evident in my research, cannot completely be switched off, or it would not be dominant after all. This is most apparent in the fact that when participants distinguished between *culture* and *religion*, they meant "born" Muslims' *cultures*.

While this is similar to accounts made by other scholars in Germany, Denmark and Spain *inter alia*, in my research in the Netherlands, I found in comparison that there are many opportunities for interaction between converts and "born" Muslims. White-Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch women and girls formed the majority of attendants in the women's groups that I followed, but a variety of women, from all kinds of backgrounds, came together during lectures and other events, and the same is true for men. This allowed for friendships across divides of ethnicity and class, within a pious sociality where connecting with each other through Islam could take place. These continual interactions between Muslims from different backgrounds, reflecting global trends, transnational influences, and local translations, are a promising field for further research on contemporary Islam.

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Muslim Converts in the Netherlands and the Quest for a “Culture-Free” Islam

Through a focus on questions of ethnic, national, and religious belonging among converts to Islam in the Netherlands, this article addresses the interplay between “born” Muslims and converts in their quest for a “culture-free” Islam. Converts are often critical of Muslims’ habitual practice of Islam, which they term “cultural Islam.” This trend has been observed by several scholars on conversion across Europe. Different from these studies, in the Netherlands, this quest seems to be a joint effort of converts and young “born” Muslims alike. Using a discourse of Islamic brother/sisterhood, Muslims from a variety of backgrounds come together, in search of “true Islam.”

Keywords: conversion, Islam, belonging, Dutchness, brother/sisterhood.

Les musulmans convertis aux Pays-Bas et la quête d'un islam « aculturel »

Cet article traite de l'interaction entre les musulmans « nés » et les convertis, dans leur quête d'un islam « aculturel », en s'appuyant sur les questions d'appartenance ethnique, nationale et religieuse parmi les convertis à l'islam aux Pays-Bas. Les convertis sont souvent critiques à l'égard de la pratique habituelle de l'islam par les musulmans, qu'ils appellent « islam culturel ». En Europe, cette tendance a été observée par plusieurs spécialistes de la conversion. Contrairement à ces études, aux Pays-Bas, cette quête semble être un effort commun aux convertis et aux jeunes « nés » musulmans. Par le truchement d'un discours faisant référence à la fraternité/sororité islamique, des musulmans d'origines diverses s'unissent à la recherche du « véritable islam ».

Mots-clés : conversion, Islam, appartenance, culture des Pays-Bas, fraternité/sororité.

Los musulmanes conversos en los Países Bajos y la búsqueda de un islam culture-free

Este artículo aborda la interacción entre los “nacidos” musulmanes y los conversos en su búsqueda de un islam culture-free, centrándose en criterios de pertenencia étnicos, nacionales y religiosos. Los conversos a menudo critican la práctica habitual del islam llevada a cabo por los musulmanes, a la cual denominan “islam cultural”. Esta tendencia ha sido observada por los especialistas en materia de conversión en toda Europa. A diferencia de estos estudios, en los Países Bajos, esta búsqueda parece provenir de un esfuerzo conjunto de los conversos y los jóvenes “nacidos” musulmanes, por igual. Sirviéndose de un discurso de hermandad/fraternidad islámica, los musulmanes provenientes de diversos contextos se reúnen en la búsqueda del “verdadero islam”.

Palabras clave: conversión, Islam, pertenencia, neerlandés, fraternidad/sorodidad.