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Sisters in Islam. Women's conversion and the politics of belonging: A Dutch case study

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Chapter 1
The Politics of Belonging

In May 2006, during one of the first weeks of fieldwork, I was hanging out with some Muslim girls. A couple of afternoons a week, they gathered at a location in Amsterdam-West to drink tea, talk with each other, pray together, or to have a private conversation with one of the volunteers. They were mostly teenagers and women in their early twenties, from different backgrounds, with Moroccan-Dutch girls and converts to Islam as the two largest groups. Although I was in my mid-thirties at the time, I was welcomed by the group and my research was met with curiosity and approval.

As a consequence of the demographic of the group, many visitors were students and one of them asked if I could help her with a study assignment and answer a few questions. She had chosen the topic "living between two cultures." Usually, this phrase refers to having an immigrant background representing one ethnic-national *culture*, and Dutch *culture* as the second.[1] I explained to her that I was not an immigrant, nor were my parents, and that I might not meet her sample criteria. "No problem," the girl answered, "You are a convert to Islam, right? Then you are in between cultures, too." Where I had assumed she was referring to possible tensions between national *culture* and ethnic background, she changed the register and remade the dichotomy into a national/ethnic Dutch *culture* on the one hand and the *culture* of Islam on the other.

It was quite understandable that the girl rephrased the dichotomy she was exploring in light of her studies to include possible tensions between being Dutch and being Muslim. In popular discourse in the Netherlands, national belonging and Muslims' religious belongings are often pitted against each other. For instance, during the past few decades, politicians from several political parties have voiced their doubt about the

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[1] Following Baumann (1996), in this thesis, *culture* is written in italics as its meaning is distinctly situational and depending on context. From an anthropological point of view, I agree with Baumann that culture exists insofar as it is performed (ibid, 11).

feasibility of being Muslim-Dutch.[2] This is the case in other European countries, too, and converts to Islam are therefore a topic of popular and academic interest, as their life-stories provide an opportunity to gain an understanding of how these two seemingly mutually exclusive forms of belonging are combined within one subject (cf. Van Nieuwkerk, 2004; Zebiri, 2008; Jensen, 2008). As, for instance Kate Zebiri, who researched conversion to Islam in Great-Britain, 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. (2008, 1)

Zebiri's reduction of converts to "indigenous people" does, however, not quite capture the whole range of backgrounds of converts to Islam in the Netherlands, nor in other European countries. For instance in the British case, in a report issued by Cambridge University, Yasir Suleiman remarks that non-Western converts to Islam are a neglected subject (2013, 4).[3] This is a salient point as non-Muslim immigrants and/or their children convert to Islam, too. Although Zebiri questions the dichotomy itself, indirectly, the image of "indigenous people" embracing a "foreign Islam" is reproduced.

In the Netherlands too, Islam is often characterized in popular discourse as a foreign religion but contemporary conversion in the Netherlands has a historic precedent. Benjamin Kaplan's research revealed that there was a Muslim presence in Amsterdam as early as the 17th century. During this time, in the context of religious wars between Catholic Spain and the Protestant Dutch, common interests such as the Ottomans' assistance in the Dutch revolt against Spain, helped establish trade agreements.[4] Ships from the "Barbary Coast" had the right to use Dutch ports, such as Amsterdam, and some of the corsairs,

> …were actually Dutchmen who had, as the saying went, "turned Turk", that is, settled in Muslim lands and converted to Islam. Known in Europe

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[2] In the Netherlands this line of questioning can be traced back to Frits Bolkestein (VVD), who was among the first to question the possibility of the hyphenated identity Muslim-Dutch (Rath, Sunier, Meyer 1997, 392). Pim Fortuyn (LPF) and Geert Wilders (PVV) are also well-known for picturing Muslimness and Dutchness as two irreconcilably different *identities*.

[3]   http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/reports/post/203-narratives-of-conversion-to-islam-in-britain-female-perspectives, last accessed on December 3rd 2013.

[4] The Dutch saying "*Liever Turk dan Paap*" ("Rather Turk than Papist") seems to originate in this era. Of course, in colonial times, populations of the Dutch East Indies were largely Muslim.

as "renegades", such converts were no small group: by some accounts half or more of all Barbary corsairs in the early seventeenth century (fewer later) were renegades from one part of Europe or another. (Kaplan, 2006, 23)

Despite the relative freedom of conscience prevalent in the Dutch republic in those days, converts to Islam were treated rather harshly. "Threatened with execution, Dutch converts to Islam provoked a reaction that foreign-born Muslims never did" (ibid, 25). Kaplan suggests two reasons for this. First, he argues, religious conversion was an emotional issue, perceived as a betrayal of "God, truth, church, friends, and family." Second, he found that people of different faiths were treated differently depending on whether they were foreigners or natives. Foreign Muslims, in the 17th century, were treated better than native ones (ibid, 26).

Historic comparisons are difficult but conversion to Islam is still an emotional issue and ethnic Dutch Muslim women today, are still more often confronted with hostility than Muslimas[5] with an immigrant background. As, Van Nieuwkerk, based on her research about women's conversion to Islam in the Netherlands, similarly argues:

> Whereas veiled converts experience forms of discrimination non-converted Muslimas are also faced with, the way they are perceived is not identical. 'Being a foreigner' or choosing to 'become a foreigner' have different repercussions. The latter often evokes greater contempt and hostility by Dutch people. (2004, 245)

However, instead of a betrayal of "God, truth and church," nowadays, conversion to Islam is more often regarded as a betrayal of the accomplishments in the fields of women's liberation and emancipation, which occurred in the wake of processes of secularization. Tensions arise, for instance, when converted women adopt the headscarf. Several dichotomies are at the heart of the production of these tensions: conceptions of freedom versus oppression, choice versus force, and emancipation versus backwardness. As Van Nieuwkerk argues, in the dominant Dutch discourse:

> [Muslim women are perceived to be]…forced to accept veiling but Dutch women are [perceived to be] emancipated and free to choose.

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[5] I am aware that the word 'Muslim', in English, is gender neutral. However, in line with Dutch custom (among Dutch Muslims, Dutch scholars, and the wider Dutch public), in this thesis, I will sometimes use the Arabic loanword 'Muslima' to refer to female Muslims, at once marking gender and religion.

> Being Dutch and veiling is thus totally incomprehensible and
> reprehensible. It is a choice to become like a foreigner. (2004, 235)

While I agree with her findings, Van Nieuwkerk retains the dichotomy problematized earlier in this chapter. She concludes her article *Veils and Wooden Clogs don't go Together* by describing converts as "an intriguing group *betwixt and between two cultures*" (ibid, italics added) and her analysis stops short of problematizing the categories "Muslim" and "Dutch."

In his book *Contesting Culture*, based on his research in Great-Britain, Baumann raises important questions about 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?* Was there a
> homogeneous British culture on the one hand, perhaps regardless of
> class or region, and on the other hand some other culture, perhaps one
> which was shared with their parents? If so, how were these parental
> cultures defined: was it on the basis of regional origin or religion, caste
> or language, migratory path or nationality? (1996, 1-2, italics added)

In my research it also became increasingly clear that dichotomies do not provide the most helpful framework for addressing the possible tensions converts in the Netherlands encounter when choosing Islam as their religion. For instance, in the Netherlands, ethnicity is often conflated with nationality, and in the case of Muslims, increasingly with religion. This is related to the rise of the modern nation-state where the boundaries of ethnicity had to be overcome by turning the nation into a superethnos. As Baumann argues, the nation is both postethnic in that it denies ethnic distinctions and portrays these as a distant, pre-state past, and superethnic in that it portrays the nation as a new and bigger kind of ethnos (1999, 31). This image of the nation as postethnic as well as superethnic, however, is largely an ideal rather than a reality. As for instance Ghorashi found when researching 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" (2003, 68).

In regard to the conflation of nationality and ethnicity with religion, Dutch Muslims are increasingly lumped together without regard for national-ethnic backgrounds, as if they were one ethnicity with a

distinct Islamic *culture*.[6] Religious belonging, in particular to a world-religion as Islam, indeed, can be perceived to supersede national-ethnic belonging. However, as I will argue in this thesis, converts continue to draw from the cultural repertoires they acquired through their upbringing, as do born Muslims.[7] Furthermore, although Dutch Muslims, indeed, are often addressed as if they are one group, and my interlocutors argued that there is only one Islam, Muslims' practices differ. Converts need to find their way among these different practices Muslims name 'Islam' and make choices in light of how to practice their new religion. Choices in these matters influence women's sense of religious belonging.

　　For these reasons, following Baumann (1999), in this thesis, I will move beyond the dichotomy of Dutchness versus Muslimness and, instead, critically investigate the triangle of ethnicity, nationality, and religion. Baumann poses that the "riddle in the middle" of this triangle is the concept of *culture*. As I will argue in this thesis, indeed, dominant and demotic discourses about *culture* in the context of conversion to Islam, are informed or influenced by the triad ethnicity- nationality-religion. Baumann's choice of the metaphor of the riddle, "a paradox that can be solved by rethinking the terms in which it is posed" (1999, vii), resonates well with women's conversion to Islam, a phenomenon that is puzzling to most non-Muslim Dutch. This results in the following question, central to this thesis:

How do women in the Netherlands who convert to Islam, deal with possible tensions between ethnic, national, and religious belonging?

To answer this question, I will argue women's conversion to Islam to be a process instead of a (radical) change from one 'cultural identity' to another. To emphasize this conception of conversion as a process of becoming, in this thesis I will focus on the concept of belonging (Kannabiran et al, 2006, 190) rather than on identity, as belonging is always a dynamic process (Yuval-Davis, 2006, 199). When focusing on conversion as a process, a processual conception of *culture* is most helpful because then culture exists in the act of being performed (Baumann, 1999,

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[6] As Baumann phrases it, "In the Netherlands, the native Dutch first perceived an influx of national minorities such as Turks and Moroccans, yet they proceeded to translate this national minority problem into a religious minority problem concerned with Muslims and Islam" (ibid, 23).

[7] Reffering to Connerton (1989), and reflecting on Bourdieu and the subject of embodiment, Roodenburg (2004, 217), for instance, puts forward that "in the humanities, the body is often interpreted as a 'text' or a 'sign', as the passive bearer of a range of gender, social and political meanings, but the body may also be construed as an agent, an active keeper of the past." In this perspective, "the body is seen as socially constituted in the sense of it being culturally shaped in its performances, in its actual practices and behaviour" (ibid, 218).

26). After the methodological chapter, in chapter three, I will address the conversion processes of the women involved in my research through a review of the role of significant others, and changes in daily life that precede, accompany, or follow from the conversion. As conversion is usually not a solitary endeavor, in chapter four, I will address converted women's sociality and communality, and elaborate on how the concept of Islamic sisterhood informs processes of *community* formation. In chapter five, I focus on women's aspirations and ambiguities arising in the context of conversion, for instance, questions of authority, and how converts work at separating Muslim's *culture* from Islam as a *religion*. To elaborate on the Dutch context in regard to conversion to Islam, in the remainder of this first chapter, I will have a closer look at the politics of categorization.

1.1 Categorizing Citizens

In the late 1970's, early 1980's, it became apparent that guest workers, who arrived in the Netherlands a decade earlier, would not return to their native countries and a process began in which their families came to the Netherlands as well. As a consequence, guest-workers became permanent residents during the 1980's. By then, it was clear that a return to their countries of origin was not a viable option. Economics being one reason, also, they had been away for too long and their children had become rooted in Dutch society. Many of these immigrant families came from Turkey and Morocco. In Amsterdam, they mostly settled in the working class neighborhoods surrounding the city center and in the Western suburbs of the city. When they began to grow in number, a process of 'white flight'[8] among the ethnic Dutch population changed these neighborhoods, until in some areas immigrant families became the majority population.

 The label "white," however, is not particularly popular among the Dutch. In their article, *'Who wants to feel white?' Race, Dutch culture and contested identities*, Essed and Trienekens describe how Dutch students, when asked to write an essay about the meaning of whiteness in their life histories, avoided mentioning skin color. Instead, they verbalized inequalities in terms of ethnicity, citizenship, national identity or western superiority and civilization (2008, 52). As Essed *et al* conclude from the experience, in the Netherlands:

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[8] This term originates in the United States to describe migration of white Americans from ethically mixed urban areas to more ethnically homogenous suburbs.

> Public discourse is mostly about 'ethnicity', about 'national identity', or about (post)modern cultures in conflict with 'traditional' immigrant cultures, most notably concerning the religious difference of the Muslim faith. In this discourse, references to race are more implicit and often intertwined with notions of culture and ethnicity (ibid, 55).

This does not mean that the opposite, black, is similarly avoided. Neighborhoods immigrants settled in, soon became known as "black neighborhoods" and the schools their children attended were subsequently labeled "black schools." To illustrate the conceptual oddness of this strategy: Turks and Moroccans were the largest groups designated by the label "black." However, generally, the Dutch avoid mentioning skin color as much as possible and rather refer to themselves as *autochthones*.

Autochthony is not a new term but, as Peter Geschiere argues in his book *The Perils of Belonging*, since the 1980s, it has undergone a powerful renaissance and became increasingly popular in such different countries as Cameroon and the Netherlands (2009, 16). The use of the term in various national settings, however, differs. In Canada, for instance, it is used to designate *indigenous* people, "people in minority positions whose way of life is threatened by dominant groups" (ibid, 19). In the Netherlands, on the contrary, the concept is mostly used to designate people in a majority position, who feel their way of life is threatened by minority groups such as immigrants, in particular Muslims.

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 *allochthony* as well. The label was introduced in the Netherlands in the 1970's in a collection of articles edited by Verwey-Jonker (ibid, 148). Borrowed from the Greek to designate that someone is "of a different soil," it was meant as a solution for the semantic problem that despite the influx of immigrants such as guest laborers, 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 notion *allochthony* gained great currency in the Netherlands.

Despite the fact that in its inception, *allochthone* was meant to be a neutral, non-offensive term, since it is mostly used as a euphemism for immigrant, foreigner, or guest laborer, currently the label carries a considerable stigma.[9] It designates someone who does not quite belong

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[9] As *allochthone* is often used in a pejorative and stigmatizing way, as of February 2013, the city of Amsterdam has banned *allochthone* and *autochtone* from all city documents and communication. Explicitly referencing to the model of the United States, citizens of Amsterdam,

within the national fold. For instance, 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 was increasingly restricted to the groups that were formerly known as guest workers, the Moroccans and the Turks, who were also the two main Muslim groups (ibid, 150). As Arjun Appadurai argues in *Fear of Small Numbers*, "minorities do not come preformed. They are produced in the specific circumstances of every nation and every nationalism" (2006, 42).

How to count *allochthones* in the Netherlands depends on the definition. In 1999, the Central Bureau for Statistics (CBS) fixed the definition of *allochthony* to explicitly include the provision that one is also an *allochthone* if only one parent is born abroad. Until then there were two definitions: 1) a narrow definition, where to qualify as *allochthone* one should have two foreign-born parents *and* have been born abroad oneself, and 2) a broad definition, where one only needs to have one foreign-born parent *or* be born abroad oneself. The two definitions rendered very different results. According to the broad definition, on January 1ˢᵗ 1999, there were a million more *allochthones* in the Netherlands compared to the narrow definition.[10] To synchronize counting, the broad definition was chosen as the official one. With a few other adjustments in categorization, according to the new definition, in 1999, there were 2.7 million *allochthones,* 17% of the population. According to the old, broad definition, this meant a reduction of 124,000 people, but according to the old, narrow definition, 815,000 more people would then be classified as *allochthonous.*[11]

According to this new definition, of the forty-seven converts I interviewed in the course of my research, twenty-nine were *autochthonous*, and eighteen were *allochthonous*. As the CBS definition further distinguishes between Western and non-Western *allochthones*, five of them classified as Western *allochthones* and thirteen as non-Western *allochthones*. However, only seven of them had two foreign born parents and only four were born abroad themselves. The other eleven *allochthonous* participants had only one foreign born parent, usually their father, and they were all born in the Netherlands. Many of them told stories about being addressed outside the national fold, in particular those who were classified as non-Western *allochthones*. For instance, one of the participants had a Turkish father but he had not been part of her

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Amsterdammers, should from then on be addressed in a hyphenated fashion as Surinamese-*Amsterdammers*, Moroccan-*Amsterdammers*, Polish-*Amsterdammers*, etc.

[10] CBS, Index, No.10 november/december 2000

[11] The choice for the broad definition, had the odd effect that mixed marriages, rather than being a possible sign of integration, increase rather then decrease the number of *allochthones* (Geschiere, ibid, 151).

upbringing in any way. Nevertheless, it meant she had a darker complexion than the average white Dutch, 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, I asked why 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, well, then I say, "But I don't look Dutch." People will think, "Where does the dark part come from?" So then 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 Dutch really well" and I replied, "Yes, I'm Dutch." So he said, "Yes, sure you're Dutch." You know, like, in other words, gloss over it, like, 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 [last] name [her mother's maiden name which she retained after marriage], I still have my name!

In this participant's 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.[12] Although she felt "Dutch," and, arguably, had no means to identify with another national or ethnic background, the way she felt about her ethnic and national belonging and the way she was perceived by white, non-Muslim Dutch, differed. While she felt obliged to explain her complexion by offering the explanation of being "half-Turkish," the headscarf added a second layer as a result of its association in the Dutch context with oppression and backwardness. This image has become so ingrained that Muslim women are currently the exclusive target group for Dutch emancipation policies, a development

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[12] As Khosravi argues, "Names carry strong ethnic and religious connotations and reveal an individual's affiliation to a specific group. When a religious or ethnic group is stigmatised, the relationship between names and social stigma becomes explicit. For Muslims, names and veils are the two most conspicuous signifiers of their stigmatised identity" (2012, 65). Although roughly half of the participants choose a new first name after conversion, for the most part, they retained their last name.

Ghorashi coined "the culturalization of emancipation" (2010, 12).[13] In the next section, I will address this 'culturalist turn' in more detail.

1.2 The Culturalist Turn

A remarkable similarity between Kaplan's research of 17th century conversion to Islam and current research on this topic is that conversion to Islam today is still conceptualized by many non-Muslim Dutch as "turning" Turk or Moroccan. In the daily lives of converts, the achieved identity 'Muslim' is often conflated with an ascribed new ethnic identity. This is related to the conceptualization by most non-Muslim Dutch of women's conversion as an outgrowth of marriage to a Muslim man.[14] In the Netherlands, Turkish- and Moroccan-Dutch are the two largest groups of Muslims, hence the often posed question to converts if they "have now also become Turk or Moroccan."

However, at the same time, a shift occurred in the categorization of Muslim immigrants. First, guest workers became *ethnic minorities* during the 1970s and 1980s. But from the 1990s on, in the case of Muslims, ethnic identity became increasingly conflated with religious identity. Buitelaar, for instance, notes that regardless of country of origin, Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, and other Muslims are supposed to share one *culture*. The religious component of their background is singled out and made into an independent Islamic *culture* (2006a, 11). In this process, the emphasis is increasingly on Islam as a problem and Muslims as a problematic group (Moors, 2007). Among others, Shadid (2005) and Allievi (2006a) have called attention to this shift, which occurred when immigrants with a Muslim background in fact became less "foreign" as their children and grandchildren were born in the Netherlands. While this shift occurred in the 1990's, the discourse itself is much older, as Baumann puts forward,

> That Muslims should form a cohesive community defined by a reified culture has for long been a commonplace *in the Western search for an Other* (Said 1978). One could say, in fact, that Orientalism as directed at Muslims was the prototype of any dominant discourse which attempts to square putatively ethnic distinctions with stylisations of culture. (1996, 82, italics added)

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[13] As Van den Berg and Schinkel, argue, the culturalization of emancipation, contrary to its objectives, has the effect of discursively counteracting the emancipation of Muslim women by ignoring their agency (2009).

[14] In reality, many participants were single at the time of conversion. This will be addressed in chapter three.

This search for an Other, as for instance Appadurai (ibid, 50) argues, is related to a process of we-making, of creating collective selves, that can become predatory identities by "mobilizing an understanding of itself as a threatened majority" (51). Relating this conceptualization to the Dutch case, Geschiere agrees that the strong political emphasis on immigrants' cultural integration rather than on socioeconomic integration, indeed can be considered "predatory" (ibid, 106). *Allochthones* can become citizens, he argues, but only on the condition that they "culturally integrate," whatever that may entail.[15]

When *visibly* converting to Islam, ethnic Dutch women experience the opposite: they "disintegrate" as they are pushed out of the national ethnos and equaled with *allochthones*. In Denmark, Jensen observed a similar trend:

> Fear of immigration threatening Danish 'national culture' has increased since the 1990s…. This fear is partly aimed at religion, mainly Islam, represented by the presence of immigrants with a Muslim background. In current debates, the issue of religion is addressed in various and contradictory ways. First and foremost, Muslim values are contrasted against the notion of the so-called particularity of Danish values that are drawn on Lutheran Protestantism…. From this perspective, people of other religious backgrounds are likely to be seen as 'not Danish'. Second, due to a prevalent discourse on secularism separating religion from politics, it is considered 'un-Danish' to mark one's religiosity in public, as in the case of Muslim women wearing *hijab* (veil), praying at work, etc. … Due to the polarisation between 'Danes' and 'Muslims', Danes who convert to Islam are seen as people who have become 'the other', and thus are considered members of the immigrant minority population in Denmark. (2008, 390)

In the Netherlands, the public visibility of (aspects of practicing) Islam is contentious too, in particular when the boundaries between personal piety and public space are perceived to be blurred. When reviewing the recent success of the populist message of "defending hard-won Dutch freedoms against the backwardness of Islam," Van der Veer, for instance, takes a closer look at "the production of certain cultural politics in the Netherlands after the decline of religion" (2006, 115). Historically, the Dutch social-political system is commonly described as "pillarized" (i.e., the organization of Dutch social-political-religious life through belonging to distinct ideological or religious "pillars", each with its own schools,

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[15] As Geschiere points out, one might wonder whether integration is at all possible with such an approach (167).

media, political parties, et cetera).[16] This system changed through the youth-revolution of the 1960's, subsequent rapid deconfessionalization, and the rise of the welfare state. This transformation, Van der Veer argues, culminated in a vision of society "where consumption and especially the public performance of sexual identity have become so important, the strict clothing habits of observant Muslims are an eyesore." Similar to Van Nieuwkerk's point about the mechanisms through which Dutch converts to Islam are pushed outside the national fold, he notes that in particular the wearing of headscarves by Muslim girls "is regarded as a total rejection of the Dutch way of life" (ibid, 120).

In her study of the attempts to ban the face-veil in the Netherlands, Moors (2009c) also points at a culturalization of citizenship. In light of the social-political transformations cited above, she describes the contemporary Dutch context as one in which,

> Revealing women's bodies has come to be seen as an important marker of women's liberation and gender equality. Starting with the sexual revolution of the 1960's, the link between emancipation and the public visibility of women's sexuality has become firmly established in the majority discourse (ibid, 402-3, see also 2011, 149).

Mepschen *et al*, frame this majority discourse as a form of "sexual politics." They note that in a similar vein, representations of gay emancipation and sexuality are presented by anti-Islam politicians as exemplary of Dutch tolerance. These representations are "mobilized to shape narratives in which Muslims are framed as non-modern subjects," a development, they argue, "that can best be understood in relation to the 'culturalization of citizenship' and the rise of Islamophobia" (2010, 962).[17] In the context of women's conversion to Islam, Van Nieuwkerk makes a similar observation:

> The most important construction of Dutch national and cultural identity vis-à-vis converts is related to sex and gender. Particularly with regard to

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[16] The most important pillars were Protestantism, Catholicism, Socialism and Liberalism. See also Geschiere (2009, 142-168) and Lijphart (1968) for a more comprehensive overview of the Dutch history of pillarization

[17] As convert to Islam Saskia Wieringa argues, "Ironically, the conservative citizens who were originally our most bitter enemies now use the liberal Dutch laws concerning homosexuality to wage a cultural assault on Islam. It is interesting to realize that all of a sudden homosexual rights are included among the cherished modern Dutch values...; that modernity is defined in sexual terms; and that the struggle for sexual rights is portrayed in a glowing, positive, even nationalistic light" (2011, 788). In a similar vein, Wim Lunsing puts forward that as a gay anthropologist with close ties to Muslim circles, he experiences a personal disquiet at how ... the status of homosexuality and the position of women in society have become markers of difference between 'Dutch values' and Islam (2003, 19).

the status of women, Dutch society's superiority as free and emancipated is taken for granted. These values are not particularly claimed as Dutch but as self-evident and universal. (ibid, 245)

Another example of tensions in regard to Muslims' visibility are the contentious debates about mosques, taking place in various European countries (Cesari, 2006). Calling attention to the transition of Muslims "from the status of invisible migrant-worker to that of visible Muslim citizenship" (2011, 383), Göle, too, argues that visibility

> …signifies a process of spatial transgression of Muslims and their religious difference, disobedience to secular and cultural norms, and dissonance against tacit consensus that underpins European publicness. (387)

Questions of citizenship, she argues, are always political as politics deals with difference and conflict: as one makes oneself publicly visible, one also marks the transgression of boundaries and the disruption of the established frame (ibid, 390; see also Amir-Moazimi, 2005).

In short, as Muslim immigrants have become less foreign because their children and subsequent generations are born in the Netherlands, because of broadening the definition of *allochthony*, they, largely, remain outside the national fold. And if, by now, they are of the third generation and classify as *autochthonous*, their Muslim *culture* has been increasingly problematized as clashing with Dutchness. As Gorashi summarizes the culturalist turn,

> This essentialist notion of culture takes for granted that cultures are static, homogenous, and most importantly, closed entities. It further assumes that what is true of a culture is also true for all individual members of that culture, thus reducing individuals to their culture's perceived attributes and leaving little space for personal agency. (2010, 12)

On the contrary, in this thesis I will argue that converts display a great deal of agency in their trajectory to and within Islam. Furthermore, they do not convert to a monolithic faith but show variety in their practices. In opposition to the culturalist discourse, they claim to have adopted a new religion, not a new *culture*. Contrary to the racializing of religious markers, they continue to consider themselves Dutch.[18] These points will be argued in this thesis, but first, in the next section, I will have a closer

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[18] Arguably, this is more the case for ethnic Dutch Muslimas than for converts with other ethnic backgrounds.

look at categorizing Muslims.

1.3 Categorizing Muslims

The supposed incompatibility of European values with Islamic values is central to the rise of European Islamophobia during the past few decades (Taras, 2013, 419). As defined by the Runnymede Trust (1997), Islamophobia is a means of stereotyping Islam as monolithic and static, as separate and "other," as irrational, primitive, and inferior to "the West," as violent and aggressive, as a political and military ideology, as intolerant and without critical capacity, as deserving of discriminatory practices toward Muslims, and as normalizing anti-Muslim hostility (ibid, 418). Islamophobia draws on the neoconservative 'clash of civilization theory' put forward by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. This imagery, however, reflects a much older discourse. For instance, in his famous book *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues that,

> European interest in Islam derived not from curiosity but from fear of a monotheistic, culturally and militarily formidable competitor to Christianity. In one way or another that combination of fear and hostility has persisted to the present day, both in scholarly and non-scholarly attention to an Islam which is viewed as belonging to a part of the world – the Orient – counterposed imaginatively, geographically, and historically against Europe and the West. (2003, 344)

This conceptualization of Islam as the Other is supplemented with another discourse about the threat of Islam, what Kundnani calls the "new liberal" discourse (2008). He draws attention to the distinction between the two discourses. This second discourse, he argues, focuses less on Islam and more on "Islamism" as a modern political movement, sometimes equated with fascism, (i.e. "Islamofascism"), in opposition to "traditional Islam":

> Whereas the neoconservatives see Muslims *en masse* as inherently anti-modern, the new liberals see individual Muslims as choosing the wrong kind of modern politics. Whereas the former talk of a clash of civilisations, the latter talk of a clash within civilisations between extremists and moderates, enlisting Muslims or ex-Muslims … in support of their agenda. Whereas the neoconservatives emphasise Judaeo Christianity as the basis of western identity, the new liberals emphasise the Enlightenment and its legacy of secular liberalism, and have their

political roots in the post-1968 Left as much as in the neo-Reaganite Right (ibid, 43).[19]

Currently most popular Dutch anti-Islam politician Geert Wilders is an example of the conflation of the two discourses. In light of the virulent anti-Semitism that, for centuries, characterized Christian Europe, the hyphen "Judeo-Christian," arguably, is an a-historical construct.[20] Wilders, however, goes one step further in adding the enlightenment perspective. In this imagery, a Dutch "Judeo-Christian-Humanist civilization" is pitted against a "backward, barbaric ideology called Islam."[21] His Party for Freedom's (PVV) political program reflect his talking points: "more freedom" equals "less Islam". The denial of a permanent Muslim presence in the Netherlands is reflected in discussing anti-Islam measures under 'immigration', as well as in the suggestion that those in favor of visible displays of Islam, should 'go back.'[22] Under the header "integration," provocative policies such as a ban on mosques, the Qur'an, or the *niqaab* (the face-veil, or 'boerka' as it is usually phrased in Dutch public discourse) are proposed, as well as the suggestion to institute a 'head-rag tax' for women wearing headscarves.[23] Although these measures sound far-fetched and clash with the Dutch constitution, the PVV and its leader are not a marginal phenomenon. Supporting partner in the coalition government between 2010-2012, the PVV has become a normalized feature of the Dutch political landscape.

This negative public discourse, however, does not go unchallenged. As, for instance, Buitelaar shows in her article *I Am the Ultimate Challenge* (2006), Muslim-Dutch women work hard at having their religious, political, and female voices heard. The increasing number of self-identified Muslim-Dutch politicians, comedians, and TV personalities, has helped to "normalize" the hyphenated identity Muslim-Dutch. However, this is more the case with the so called 'liberal Muslim' than with their more 'orthodox' brothers and sisters. In the edited volume *Islamophobia/Islamophilia. Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, anthropologist Shryock warns for the danger of pitting the 'good' Muslim, against the 'bad' Muslim:

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[19] See also Roy (2007).
[20] These discourses rest on an essentialized notion of 'The West' and of 'Islam,' ignoring the different trajectories of processes of secularization in Protestant and Catholic Western societies (Roy, 2007, vii-viii).
[21] For instance, when presenting his book "Marked for Death" (Metro, *Wilders wil moslims bekeren*, 30-04-13).
[22] PVV program 2012-2017 *Hún Brussel, óns Nederland*, p. 26.
[23] Ibid, p. 37.

> The "good Muslim", as a stereotype, has common features: he tends to
> be a Sufi (ideally, one who reads Rumi); he is peaceful (and assures us
> that jihad is an inner, spiritual contest, not a struggle to "enjoin the good
> and forbid the wrong" through force of arms); he treats women as
> equals, and is committed to choice in matters of hijab wearing (and
> never advocates the covering of a woman's face); if he is a she, then she
> is highly educated, works outside the home, is her husband's only wife,
> chose her husband freely, and wears hijab (if at all) only because she
> wants to. The good Muslim is also a pluralist (recalls fondly the
> ecumenical virtues of medieval Andalusia and is a champion of interfaith
> activism); he is politically moderate (an advocate of democracy, human
> rights, and religious freedom, an opponent of armed conflict against the
> U.S. and Israel); finally, he is likely to be an African, a South Asian, or,
> more likely still, an Indonesian or Malaysian; he is less likely to be an
> Arab, but, as friends of the "good Muslim" will point out, only a small
> proportion of Muslims are Arab anyway. (2010, 10)[24]

This dichotomy of the moderate, liberal Muslim versus the radical,
fundamentalist Muslim, even if meant to counter the monolithic views of
cultural racism, can have counterproductive effects. As Shryock
continues: "In our rush to identify Muslim friends who think and act like
'us', we turn those who think and act differently into potential enemies"
(ibid[25]).

In addition to this danger, the binary of the "moderate, liberal
Muslim" versus the "radical, fundamentalist Muslim" does not do justice
to the complex and individual trajectories of the Muslim women
participating in my research, even if the binary is amended with a hybrid
middle category. This can be illustrated with the research by Van
Nieuwkerk. When examining how converted Dutch Muslimas reconcile
being Dutch with being Muslim, she distinguishes three categories which
are characterized as follows (2003, 11-13):

- Muslimas who keep their Dutch name, who do not wear a
  headscarf, or only to places where they meet other Muslimas, and
  who experience their faith as a private affair. These women
  consider their Islamic identity as an addition to their Dutch
  identity, not as a replacement, and they continue their
  relationships with non-Muslim Dutch.
- Muslimas who make a radical change, they change their name,
  their appearance and their life-style. Their contacts with non-
  Muslim Dutch are scarce or difficult. For these women, their

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[24] See also Cesari, 2013, 86, 110, 141.
[25] See also Lambert, 2008.

national identity has become less important than their religious identity.

- The third, and largest, group takes up the middle position of establishing all kinds of hybrid, multi-cultural solutions. These women identify themselves as Dutch Muslimas with a double loyalty and a double identity.

A problem with this categorization is that it is based on appearance (no veil, long veil/face-veil, small veil)[26] and whether women had kept their birth name and/or retained Dutch customs such as drinking/serving alcohol, or celebrating birthdays. However, since it is not mandatory, not in the strictest practice of Islam, to change one's name after conversion, some participants in my research kept their names, despite great changes in their appearance. Celebrating birthdays and serving alcohol, indeed, are customs shared by many Dutch,[27] but to take these as a *measurement* of Dutchness amounts to the culturalization of citizenship.

Furthermore, if converted women's contacts with non-Muslim Dutch became scarce or difficult as a result of the way they practiced Islam, the question remains whether this occurs because they want this to happen, or as an unintended side-effect. My research indicates the latter. As Yuval-Davis argues, much of the current debates on the politics of belonging revolve around the question of the minimum common grounds – in terms of origin, culture and normative behaviour – that is required to signify belonging (2011, 29). In this respect, for non-Muslim Dutch, wearing a long veil/face-veil does not signify personal piety but is interpreted as a rejection of national identity (Moors, 2009c).

Verkaaik, too, argues that as a result of the culturalist turn, Dutch citizenship is no longer merely a legal status that enables political and economic participation but has become related to acceptance of "Dutch norms and values" and integration into "Dutch culture" (2010, 69). Based on his research about the Dutch naturalization ceremony, he describes that when the ceremony was introduced in 2006, local bureaucrats struggled to conceptualize Dutchness. At first, he found, they reacted with irony:

> Sometimes the irony could not be missed. In a town in the southern province of Brabant, the mayor asserted, "A Dutchman is always on time, eats his potatoes at six in the evening, and never comes unannounced." (ibid, 74)

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[26] See Tarlo & Moors (2013, 2) for a critical review of simply reading from appearances.
[27] There are however Dutch people who do not drink alcohol and there are also Dutch people who do not celebrate their birthday. As I will argue in more detail in chapter three, only if refraining from these customs occurs in the context of becoming *Muslim*, it is considered by non-Muslim Dutch to signal a *radical* change.

Although ironic, there is a kernel of truth in these three examples of stereotypical Dutchness. Participants married to foreign-born Muslims, for instance, when confronted with differences in cultural traditions, were certainly aware that they were ethnic Dutch and their spouses were not, regardless of piety or the amount of changes in their daily lives as a result of conversion. For instance, one participant wore a long headscarf and had changed her first name 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 is the Dutch tradition. His ideas of the content of a meal and the time it should be eaten, differed significantly. Reflecting upon this, she remarked, "These differences in eating habits, I now realize these habits are such an intrinsic part of your upbringing, of the way you are raised. No, I can't get used to that."

In this respect, I would like to stress here the importance of not overlooking the fact that although Islam became an important guideline in the lives of participants, this circumstance did not necessarily negate inter-ethnic tensions in regard to social-cultural habitual practices (Bourdieu, 1990). Social-cultural differences with Muslim in-laws, for instance, could produce tensions not directly tied to Islam but rather to differences in social mores. In many instances, cultural cleavages with immigrant *communities* remained, despite sharing the same faith. To elaborate on another example of Dutchness from the Mayor cited by Verkaaik above, indeed, as a rule and as a practice, the Dutch rarely visit each other unannounced, even among close relatives. One of the participants in my research who had immigrated to Egypt remarked on 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 everyone [converts from the Netherlands who immigrate to Egypt] crazy at first.

Most participants who immigrated to Muslim majority countries experienced great difficulties adjusting in this regard, but emigration from the Netherlands was not a necessary condition to encounter that type of tensions. This woman's converted friend concurred that coming unannounced was a continual cause of tension with her 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. The meter guy calls if he needs to come by. [She reasons,] "My house is your house." For both sides, it took years before it was accepted [that each had their own way].

Another problem with Van Nieuwkerk's categorization is that some participants had (partly) non-Dutch backgrounds and, as mentioned before, they were already experienced in being addressed outside the national fold. For instance, similar to the experience of many headscarf-wearing converts, when having a darker complexion, they were complimented with their command of the Dutch language. During one of our interviews, one of them recalled an incident from the time she was in college, studying to become a Human Resource manager. When she held a presentation and other students gave feedback, instead of addressing the content, she received the comment that "her Dutch was very good." Converts who were born in non-Western families but were adopted by Dutch parents, too, were regularly addressed as outsiders before their conversion, because of their different complexions.[28] Being addressed as foreigners was a new experience for ethnic Dutch converts and could impact their sense of belonging. One of the participants made a point that in the current public debate between "us" and "them" (i.e. Dutch versus non-Dutch), she increasingly felt belonging to "them." This occurred not because she felt less Dutch as a result of her conversion, but because her son was excluded by his classmates because of his mother wearing a headscarf.

      In sum, as I will argue in this thesis, conversion does not take place in a vacuum but is processual and relational. When Dutch women visibly convert to Islam, often, they are no longer recognized as Dutch by

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[28] See also Lechkar's Ph.D. thesis on conversion to Islam in Flanders (2012). She introduces Salima, a participant who recounts similar experiences as a non-white adoptee.

their fellow citizens. They, or their children, can become the object of hostility. Therefore, I argue to include this dynamic, especially when discussing politicized topics such as national identity or loyalty. If measuring Dutch and Islamic identity is replaced by examining the dynamics of belonging, analytical space opens up to address the complex interplay between ethnicity, nationality, and religion, in a globalized world.

1.4 The Islamic Revival

When 'categorizing Muslims,' immigration and processes of globalization need to be taken into account as well. Muslims from different ethnic/national backgrounds meet each other in the Netherlands and influence each other's practices. Despite the monolithic representations of Islam prevalent in the clash of civilization thesis, and the cultural racism of new liberals, Muslims differ in several areas. There are, for instance, religio-political differences on the question of Muslim leadership after the death of the prophet Mohammad, differences in schools of law, theological differences, differences in emphasis on spirituality, or on the rational aspects of Islam (Saeed, 2007, 396).

All participants in my research were *Sunni* Muslims. In regard to differences between Islamic Schools of Law, generally, participants believed that following the Qur'an and *Sunna*[29] sufficed. Usually, they avoided theological debates about differences between various strands and sects and either followed the opinion of a few leading Muslim scholars, read books, asked the advice of women they trusted, often the volunteers of the women's groups in my research, or relied on their common sense. Nevertheless, to find their way among Muslims' multiple interpretations of Islam was by all accounts a challenge.

In her study of Scandinavian converts to Islam, Roald observed a phenomenon I noticed as well in regard to the challenges converts are faced with when confronted with a multiplicity of Muslim views:

> New Muslims who encounter these manifold views and trends tend to be confused. 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'. … Moreover, many new Muslims rejected the Law-School system, saying that they would follow only the Koran and Sunna. (2004, 113)

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[29] The example of the prophet Mohammed.

She attributes this common stance among converts to their 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 than by born Muslims, due to differences in their outlook. On the contrary, I found that since converts and born Muslim(a)s socialize with each other, they influence each other's practice of Islam and both aimed for a "pure" Islam.[30]

Although the search for a "pure" Islam, a rejection of the Law School system, and a "return to the Qur'an and *Sunna*" as a means to "deculturalize" Muslims' practice of Islam, are often associated with the Islamic movement *Salafism*,[31] Roald argues that most converts are attracted to a "moderate middle trend," which she calls "the rational approach" (ibid, 114). She connects this trend to the modern *da'wa* movement[32] which emerged in Europe during the 1970s. This movement, she argues, disseminated apologetic literature about Islam as a logical and rational religion based on reason and intellect. She argues that many of these books were written either by members or sympathizers with the Muslim Brotherhood, or reveal close ties to Saudi Arabia, indicating an orientation towards "*Salafi* ideology" (ibid, 120). She does not, however, equate this trend with *Salafism*, which she classifies as an "extreme movement trend." While I agree with Roald's distinction between the attractiveness of interpretations of Islam associated with *Salafism* and transnational political movements, as she points out, the trends are not clear cut and "a Muslim affiliated to one trend might easily share ideas and methodologies with Muslims in other trends" (ibid, 114). Therefore, in the last section of this chapter I will elaborate on some of the problems with labeling inter-Muslim differences, in particular the use of the label *Salafism*.

In her seminal book *The Politics of Piety*, Saba Mahmood locates the subject of her research, the women's mosque movement in Egypt, within a larger Islamic Revival "that has swept the Muslim world since the 1970s." Importantly, she argues, the term Islamic Revival refers "not only to the activities of state-oriented political groups but more broadly to a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies" (2005, 3). Evident from my research and that of many others, the Islamic Revival has reached Europe, too. Through transnational and global interaction, the basic tenets of this revival as described by Mahmood, (i.e., the training and realization of a pious self), were important to many of the women in my research as well. The

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[30] See chapter five.
[31] The word *Salafi* derives from the Arabic *al-Salaf al-Salih* referring to the Muslims living at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and the first Caliphs.
[32] See chapter five.

language used by these converts to teach each other, and learn from each other, is often associated by researchers with *Salafi* Muslims (cf. Roex *et al* 2010, 2013; De Koning, 2013; Becker, 2013). However, I argue this label to be too imprecise to have sufficient descriptive value in this thesis.

The first problem is that *Salafism* does not represent a single, identifiable movement and researchers tend to differ in their definitions. Its origins are located in the Islamic Revival of the late 19th century, but shaped by local and contemporary events, the meaning of the term has become fragmented and contested (Meijer, 2009; Hamid, 2009; Heykel, 2009). Indeed, in my research, I noticed fragmenting and exclusionist tendencies among participants in light of their aims to practice a "pure" Islam. For instance, a webmaster of a women-only forum for (converted) Muslimas told me how she had to close her forum and start anew because forum participants argued too much among each other. However, on the other hand, participants also made extensive use of the unifying concept of Islamic sisterhood[33] and that discourse, too, was brought by her to the front, when she recalled to me what had happened to her forum:

> There are many groups in the Netherlands and they clash. It also happens in mosques. There are different groups, with different thoughts on issues. On my forum, there were certain topics that were thought of very differently. Some sisters really felt excluded.[34] Some sisters were greeted and taken seriously, while others were not because they held different opinions. These differences of opinion were about really small things, mostly about reliability [of religious knowledge]. That was put first. And if certain sisters were less strict, they were literally boycotted, like, "You listen to unreliable people, so you are unreliable, so I rather not talk to you." That is harsh. As the leader of a forum, to a certain extent, you can try to control this kind of behavior. You can try to guide people, you can post messages about how you want it, but in the end, sisters will follow their own path in these matters. Of course, they take your advice to heart but sisters can be very harsh [to one another]. That really bothers me. It really upsets me. Despite differences of opinion, even if it is about government leaders, even if it is about mistakes during prayer, advise each other in a civilized manner. We are still each other's sisters. Everyone is ignorant on one thing or another. No one possesses the most knowledge. We need to advise each other in everything, love each other for the sake of Allah. We are, we remain, sisters. We all believe in the same God, we all follow the path of our prophet, peace be upon him, and

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[33] See chapter four.
[34] For many participants, "sister" was a common way of denoting a fellow Muslima, see also chapter four.

for that reason, and for the sake of Allah, I think we should not exclude each other.

When labeling all of these women *Salafis*, these nuances and processes of fission and fusion run the risk of being sidelined or ignored, in particular in light of the second problem.

A second problem with coupling converts search for a "pure" Islam and their turn to the Qur'an and *Sunna* with *Salafism*, is that among my research participants, the label was not used as a means of self-definition.[35] Therefore, it is difficult to ascertain to what extend attendants of the lectures of some of the women's groups in my research were aware that the content might be considered to reflect *Salafi* thought. Jensen made a similar observation in Denmark. She notes that born and converted Muslims attended Islam classes in a variety of settings that Muslim experts and researchers would consider mutually antagonistic:

> Indeed, both converts and young Muslims often knew neither the names of the different Muslim branches whose classes they were taking nor their different self-representations or stances towards each other - even though these participants had moved in these different milieus for months or even for years. The informants' reflections on their experiences within the different Muslim branches thus greatly contrast with the general categorizations of experts and researchers. (2011, 1159)

A third problem is that *Salafism*, in particular in the mainstream media, is regularly equated with radicalism, extremism, fundamentalism, and these three labels with terrorism. As introduced earlier, in the Scandinavian context, Roald (2004) distinguishes three converts' trends: a cultural Muslims trend, a rational Muslims trend, and an extreme movement trend under which the *Salafis* are categorized.[36] *Salafism*, she puts forward, might be equated with fundamentalism because of its literalist reading of Islamic sources (159). Fundamentalist, however, is not a neutral description, nor is *extreme movement*. One of my interlocutors, for instance, contributed to another Ph.D. study as well, and was subsequently portrayed as an 'orthodox fundamentalist' in the dissertation (Geelhoed, 2012). When I asked her how she felt about the label she replied:

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[35] None of the Muslim women's groups involved in my research used the word *Salafi* in their announcements, nor on their websites or forums. This is similar to what Ineke Roex (2010) found in her study of *Salafis* in the Netherlands. The Muslims she interviewed were averse to being called *Salafi*, orthodox, or (neo-)radical.

[36] Together with the Habashi movement and *Hizb al-tahrir*.

> Well, at least I'm not labeled an extremist. I'm happy about that. Being called "orthodox" or "fundamentalist," I don't mind it too much. However, "fundamentalist" is a charged word, people already have all kinds of ideas when they hear this word. It's often used in the media and not in a positive way.

Furthermore, regardless of how scripture is interpreted, "fundamentalism" *was* a means of self-description for the U.S. Protestants, who coined the term in the 1920s, while the label is not similarly used as a self-reference among Muslims.

Difficulties in regard to the various strands of reformist Islam contained within the category *Salafism*, and the stigma of extremism the label carries, were recognized by some participants as well. When I asked the lecturer of one of the women's groups participating in my research if she could identify with *Salafism*, she reacted cautiously:

> Yes, I recognize myself 100% but I wouldn't use this word because it's important that people don't think, "that's a sect, that's a group." People calling themselves *Salafi*, I have seen it work counterproductive. This word [*Salafism*] is a negative word among non-Muslims anyway, it is used in very negative ways, for instance in the media. For Muslims it has a negative connotation too. *Salafism*, the name *Salaf* or *Salafi*, is very positive but people using this name do bad things.

When I asked what she meant by "bad things", she reflected on divisions among *Salafis*:

> For example, they say, "Where do you pray? How do you practice?" "Oh you pray there, you practice like that," and then they turn their backs on you. So a brother turns his back on a brother. Then what happens? That is the end of brotherhood and because of these things there is division, maybe even hate. It touches on hate, which is not allowed in Islam, and yet it happened.

In short, many participants expressed discomfort and distaste for the sometimes bitter divisions between various Muslim factions. Furthermore, within the local context, different strands of reformist Islam were much more dynamic than fixed categories suggest. In regard to the micropractices and local experiences of participants, broad categorizations such as the label *Salafi* do not do justice to the complex issues of authority

converts faced when they began to practice Islam.[37] Although many of the women in my research felt attracted to reformist interpretations of Islam, in this thesis, I will refrain from labeling them *Salafi*. Instead, I will opt for Mahmood's focus on women's efforts to achieving piety, as a less politicized way of analyzing participants' pious aims and their employment of religious knowledge to organize their daily lives.

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[37] As Baumann warns, by stereotyping informants as "belonging to" or "speaking for" a pre-defined "community," one runs the risk of tribalizing people, and researcher might end up studying communities of their own making (1996, 8).