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

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Chapter 3

Trajectories to Islam

In this chapter, I will focus on the individual conversion experiences and the changes in daily life that precede, accompany, and follow conversion. On the one hand, conversion to Islam is easy. It does not involve an elaborate ritual nor extensive studies. It only entails saying the *shahada*, the declaration of faith.⁶⁴ When said with sincerity, pronouncing the *shahada* is considered by Muslims to grant access to Paradise and the convert should now be recognized by other Muslims as a brother or sister in Islam (Dutton, 1999, 154). By stating the *shahada*, the person doing so indicates to be prepared to live by what Allah has decreed for mankind in the Qur'an, the divine revelation as transmitted by the Prophet Mohammed, and the *Sunna*, the normative practice, of the Prophet (ibid).⁶⁵

When the *shahada* was said by a new convert at one of the women's groups in my research, it was usually mentioned that becoming Muslim involves acting upon the five pillars of Islam. Besides the *shahada*, these pillars are the five daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, the giving of alms, and a (once in a lifetime) pilgrimage to Mecca. There are also six pillars of faith (*imaan*). These are belief in God, the angels, the prophets,⁶⁶ the divinely revealed books,⁶⁷ Judgment Day, and the concept of Fate (ibid).⁶⁸ These pillars of faith, too, were usually mentioned as central to being Muslim.

As conversion to Islam is so simple, many of the women in my research took the step to do so alone, by themselves.⁶⁹ However, at the

⁶⁴ The *shahada* is a two-fold creed. In the first part, the central notion of the oneness of God is emphasized, "I testify that there is no God but God" and, in the second part it is acknowledged that the prophet Mohammed is His messenger, "and I testify that Mohammed is God's messenger."

⁶⁵ This is the *Sunni* Muslim perspective as all participants in my research were *Sunni* Muslims. To live by these decrees is a personal responsibility, both in theory, as Dutton argues by citing the Qur'an verse "Have fear of Allah, as far as you are able" (64:16), and in practice, as personal responsibility was a common understanding among the women's groups in my research.

⁶⁶ The prophets mentioned in the Old and New Testament and the Prophet Mohammed.

⁶⁷ These are the Torah, the Psalms of David, the Gospels, and the Qur'an.

⁶⁸ See also Baker (2011, 70).

⁶⁹ In most scholarly accounts of conversion to Islam it is stated that two witnesses need to be present (see for instance, Dutton, 1999, 153; Allievi 2006). The women involved my research,

same time, conversion is also quite complex. In the Netherlands, it means adopting a minority religion that is under intense, often critical or hostile, scrutiny.⁷⁰ This is amplified when gender is taken into account as the “position of women in Islam” is a focal point of the critical stance of Europeans towards Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2002). While the *option* to convert can be considered a consequence of the pluralism and individualization of the Dutch religious landscape, a woman’s choice for Islam is usually not seen as personal agency. Despite the fact that “being yourself” and “finding your own path” has become the prevalent social-spiritual frame in the Netherlands (e.g. Houtman, 2008; Aupers *et al*, 2010), women choosing Islam are suspected to follow their husbands. Although in the Netherlands, in general, decisions in regard to one’s religious status and affiliation are considered optional (see also Luckmann, 1999, 251- 253), to use this freedom to choose *Islam*, particularly for women, is considered puzzling at best and treason at worst.

This puzzlement is reflected in the near universal assumption of non-Muslim Dutch that conversion to Islam is not so much a personal, “authentic” choice, but occurs because of a romantic relationship. It seems that only then conversion to Islam becomes imaginable and acceptable. However, as became clear in the course of my research, marrying a Muslim does not play the pivotal role in women’s conversion as many Dutch assume. On the contrary, the women I met regarded their conversion as a personal, informed choice, whether they were married or not, and a considerable number of converts were single at the time of their conversion. This points to a significant divergence in perception regarding the choice for Islam between converts and their non-Muslim Dutch environment.

In this chapter, I will take a closer look at this paradox of a simple ritual with complex social consequences. I will argue that conventional conversion theories and models are not the most helpful analytical tools when examining this process and address why these models have insufficient explanatory power (see also Lechkar, 2012). Alternatively, I will regard the choice to convert to Islam as a process of “existential reorientation.” A helpful starting point for envisioning this process is to consider a null hypothesis of randomness (Becker, 1998, 24). Women

on the other hand, believed that the act of conversion is between the convert and God and no witnesses are required.

⁷⁰ This can be argued for other European countries as well. Özyürek, who did research on conversion to Islam in Germany, for instance, comes to a similar assessment. Germans who converted to Islam, she argues, “choose to embrace a minority religion in contexts where Islam and Muslims are feared, hated, discriminated against, marginalized, and forced to assimilate” (2010, 173).

could have chosen any religion, it just happened to be Islam. To elaborate on why they choose Islam, I will focus on their social contacts with Muslims. A complementary starting point is to consider conversion to Islam as “crazy behavior” (ibid). This is not far-fetched as there is a pervasive sense in the Netherlands that Islam is difficult to reconcile with being Dutch (e.g. Van Nieuwkerk, 2004).

Changes in daily life connected to Islam are often considered “radical alterations” by scholars and the converts’ social environment alike. Other scholars dispute such accounts, for instance Mansson McGinty who describes becoming Muslim as neither final nor predictable, without sudden breaks or absolute changes, and as gradual without any fixed points: “One day is like the other, but still not” (2006, 179).⁷¹ In a similar vein, Becker describes change as processual. He illustrates this with the example of someone having a sex-change (ibid, 26). If we would ask, he argues, “what would lead a seemingly normal American man to have his penis and testicles amputated?” that question would make the act completely unintelligible. Men do not suddenly decide to have such surgery,

That final decision is the end of a long line of prior decisions, each of which – and that is the key point – did not seem so bizarre in itself. At each of these points, our mythical young man finds himself doing some things he had at some earlier time never heard of and, having heard of them, had not imagined he might do so. The steps he does take are never so very radical. Each one is simply another small step on a road from which he might at any minute turn to some other of the many roads available. (ibid, 27)

This line of reasoning can be applied to women’s trajectories to Islam and the decision to convert as well.⁷² A vital step in the trajectory to Islam, I found, is the occurrence of positive social contacts with Muslims. All participants but one, engaged in positive social contacts with Muslims prior to their conversion. These contacts varied in nature: boyfriends and husbands, but also girlfriends, neighbors, colleagues, class mates, or travel companions. These different routes to Islam will be addressed in this chapter, as well as some of the changes in daily life that accompanied the conversion process. All participants also formed or became visitors of Muslim women’s groups. These experiences, too, informed and shaped their conversion, as women could ask questions and learn from the

⁷¹ Mansson McGinty did her research among women converts to Islam in Sweden and the United States

⁷² To think of conversion as a series of steps is not to imply a linear model, but converts, too, often imply conversion is a process, as opposed to a sudden, or radical, change.

experience of others (see also Bourque, 2006). This will be addressed in chapter four.

3.1 Theorizing Conversion

According to Rambo, a leading scholar in the field of religious conversion, conversion can entail 1) conversion from one religious tradition to another, 2) a change from one group to another within a particular tradition, or 3) the intensifying of religious beliefs and practices within a tradition (1999, 23). Although the third description resonates with the efforts of some of the born Muslims in the Netherlands to engage more deeply with Islam (Vroon-Najem, 2007; De Koning, 2008; Harmsen, 2008; Geelhoed, 2011; Roex, 2010, 2013), the first description does not adequately capture the conversion process within the secularized Dutch context. Evident from my research and Van Nieuwkerk's research, too (2003, 2004, 2006), few Dutch converts to Islam are practicing Christians (or Jews) at the time of conversion. Therefore, rather than as a moment of religious change, I will regard conversion as a project of existential reorientation as this conceptualization allows for a broader point of departure. In congruence with the experience of contemporary Dutch converts, it includes the possibility of engaging in the conversion process from a non-religious starting point. Nevertheless, I will retain the term *convert*, in line with the self-description of participants.⁷³

Rambo's conceptualization of religious conversion is problematic in another sense as well. In the field of theorizing conversion it is common to use stage models to address the processes of change, a practice Rambo also employs. Although he acknowledges that conversion is "an ongoing process" with dimensions that are "multiple, interactive and cumulative" (ibid, 24) he, nevertheless, proposes a stage-model that is problematic in regard to conversion to Islam. This model depicts conversion as a series of stages and as a consequence induces depicting conversion as a linear process.⁷⁴ Conversion to Islam, however, does not appear to be a process in which converts always move from a fixed point A to a fixed point B (cf. Lechkar, 2012). On the contrary, as for instance is put forward in

⁷³ Another descriptive possibility is 'revert.' This concept is connected to the Islamic notion that all humans are born Muslim. In this perspective, becoming Muslim is a return to, and an acknowledgement of, an already existing condition. Another often-used description in academic literature is "new Muslim." In the Netherlands, the term "convert" is most commonly used by converts as well as academics.

⁷⁴ In a preliminary comment, Rambo nuances his model and argues that it must not be seen as unilinear or as universal. The problem remains that the idea of a stage model induces a linear conceptualization of conversion. The seven stages in his model are: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences.

Geelhoed's research among Dutch converts to Islam, too, "Characteristic to the conversion process is its variability, continuity, and lack of linearity" (2011, 101).

Another problem with stage models in conventional conversion theories is that the onset of the conversion process is thought to be a crisis-experience. In this conceptualization the crisis becomes "solved" by the conversion (Gooren, 2007).⁷⁵ According to Rambo, crises are "disordering or disrupting experiences that call into question a person's or group's taken-for-granted world" (ibid, 25). What Rambo calls "the internal catalysts" for conversion such as the death of a loved one or an illness, indeed, did play a part in the conversion process of some research participants:

[Without being Muslim] I started practicing prayer. I knew there is one God and Mohammed is His messenger but other than that I didn't know much. I did the prayers but I didn't feel anything doing it. Then my boyfriend needed surgery on his arm. It was nothing serious but I felt I had to ask for help, that everything would go right. I turned to Allah and I felt He really was there for me. I wasn't officially Muslim, I had not said the *shahada*, but I felt that I was.

However, as I will argue in this thesis, this example also shows that the *practice* of Islam often predates the threshold moment of conversion. At the moment of conversion, the convert not only utters the words of the *shahada*, which are also part of the Islamic prayer that this woman had already said numerous times, but utters them with the intention to convert. In Rambo's stage model, on the other hand, the crises stage is first followed by a stage of "quest" and then by the stage of "interaction" where "new identities" are formed (ibid, 29). In the example cited above, however, the stage of interaction came first, enabling this woman to interpret the crisis experience in terms of the need to ask for divine help. Although not with the intention to convert, she had already said the *shahada* many times during prayer and "felt Muslim" without "officially being Muslim." Therefore, stage models are not the best conceptual tool for analyzing the conversion process in the context of Islam.⁷⁶

When a stage model is designed to specifically address the conversion process of converts to Islam, instead of conversion in general,

⁷⁵ Gooren has criticized conventional approaches to conversion in a Christian context, in particular "biases and emphasis on the crisis factor" (2007, 337).

⁷⁶ Religious market theory and rational choice theory (Stark & Finke, 2000), too, have been critically reviewed in light of their usefulness for explaining conversion to Islam. Again, these theories seem too limited in respect to addressing the variety in conversion trajectories (Van Nieuwkerk 2008; Gooren 2006).

still, the overall explanatory power remains limited. Roald (2006), for instance has conducted research about conversion to Islam in Scandinavia. Based on this research, she developed a model consisting of three stages: 1) being in love, 2) disappointment, and 3) maturity. In the initial phase of being in love, she argues, converts tend to aim for practicing every little detail of what they learn about the precepts of Islam. This is followed by disappointment, as the convert becomes aware of the discrepancy between the Islamic ideal and Muslim reality. This phase is resolved through a new understanding of Islam within the cultural and social context of converts' lives. This resolution is classified by her as reaching "maturity" (ibid, 48).

While elements of Roald's model were recognizable in the stories and biographies of participants in my research, their individual trajectories showed far too much variation to fit this model.⁷⁷ Roald mentions two exceptions: 1) converts with an orthodox, literalist practice of Islam whom she claims remain "behind" in the first stage, and 2) Scandinavians who converted in the 1990's and socialized into an immigrant Muslim context rather than into a "convert community." These exceptions, however, do not make the model more applicable. On the contrary, her suggestion that converts preferring an orthodox, literalist interpretation of Islam are "stuck" in a beginners' phase is unhelpful for understanding the pious lifestyles of some of my interlocutors. To deny them "maturity" contradicts the status and importance of some of these women within the women's groups in my research. In regard to the second exception, there are currently increased opportunities for socializing within local Muslim women's groups, indeed much more than twenty years ago. Many of these groups are founded by converts but to call these groups "convert communities" would be to miss the broader point of the extensive interaction between Muslimas from different backgrounds that characterize these groups. Perhaps this is different in the Scandinavian context, but in the Netherlands, these groups are always ethnically mixed and comprised of born *and* converted Muslimas. Women attending these groups usually marry born Muslim men so there is no strong division between converts and born Muslims in that respect either. This was similarly the case with online socializing. While the converts in my research sought the company of other converts because of their unique circumstances, in particular having a non-Muslim family, there was no exclusivity.

In her 2012 article *The conversion process in stages: new Muslims in the twenty-first century*, Roald added a fourth stage, "secularization,"

⁷⁷ The linear conception of conversion that stage models imply, which I mentioned in regard to other stage models, also remains problematic.

and renamed the first three stages. These were now named “zealotry,” “disappointment,” and “acceptance”. She explains to have renamed the first phase “zealotry” in light of the current, polarized era of the “war on terror.” She describes this phase as follows,

This convert stage of ‘zealotry’ is marked by the new convert distancing herself or himself from old peer groups and becoming totally absorbed into a new worldview, the convert making a total shift from one cultural sphere to another. In the Islamic context, this shift in intellectual outlook and social loyalty is mainly due to the pervasive Islamist conception of ‘Islam as a way of life’. ... This first stage, of total acceptance of and engagement in a new religious and cultural context, would in most cases automatically involve a rejection of the socio-cultural sphere in which the convert is born and bred. (ibid, 349)

This conception of conversion to Islam as a radical break with the past is found in many analyses. Wohlrab-Sahr, for instance, based on her research of conversion to Islam in Germany, argues in a similar vein that conversion to Islam is *always* a means of articulating problems of disintegration in one’s own social context (1999, 352, italics added). This analysis is dependent on her definition of conversion as a “radical change in world views and identities” whereas cases in which “the old and the new” are combined, are labeled by her as “alternation” (ibid, 353). This notion of “conversion as a radical change” is also explored by Allievi (2006).

He argues that conversion to Islam “presupposes strong moments that symbolically sanction the conversion itself and reinforce its significance as a radical change and clean break with the past” (124). In applying this model, he argues that the “first and principal rite is obviously the *shahada*, the public declaration of faith,” followed by, and of equal importance, the choice of a new Islamic name (ibid).⁷⁸ Besides the ‘Pauline’ bias⁷⁹ in his argument, my research, on the contrary, revealed that the exact moment of conversion is often ambiguous. Furthermore, since according to my interlocutors, a *shahada* does not need to be publicly declared, thirty-one of the forty-seven converts I interviewed said the *shahada* in a private setting: alone, or with their spouse, friends, or neighbors. Only sixteen choose a mosque or one of the women’s groups. In respect to marking the conversion with a new name, twenty-two

⁷⁸ Although he acknowledges that changing one’s name is not an obligation when converting to Islam.

⁷⁹ An expression to define a sudden experience of “seeing the light” such as Saint Paul on the road to Damascus, after which his name changed from Saul to Paul (Acts: 9-13).

participants kept using their birth name, twenty-one used a new Islamic name exclusively,⁸⁰ and four women used both.

Allievi's sharp distinction between "relational conversion," conversion as an outgrowth of social relations with a Muslim such as marriage, and "rational conversion," conversion as a result of reading the Qur'an or other books (ibid, 122-123), is also not supported by my research or the research of others.⁸¹ Positive social contacts with Muslims are important in developing a curiosity for Islam, and in creating opportunities for asking questions, but all the women in my research also read books on Islam, including the Qur'an, in the initial phase of orientation and beyond.

The main problem with the analyses by Roald, Wohlrab-Sahr, and Allievi is the generalization of their findings without accounting for the considerable variation among converts and their conversion trajectories. Furthermore, the converts in my research often experienced continuity between their pre-conversion and post-conversion life, also in the early stage of post-conversion. Volunteers of the women's groups and attendants alike, often warned new converts to start with the basics of prayer and fasting and not bite off more than they could chew. For instance, it was often said that it was better to do something small and be consistent, than to engage in many new practices at once, only to have to abandon them because it was too much, too soon. Furthermore, in the early days of post-conversion, many participants were rather restricted in their practice. For instance, they still lived at home with their non-Muslim parents, tried to accommodate their non-Muslim children, or did not dare to tell about their conversion at work. They hesitated to become visibly Muslim, a process that often took years. Therefore, I will now turn to the more promising framework of human agency.

3.2 Women and Conservative Religions

Women's investment in conservative religions can be mystifying. As Avishai puts forward in the context of her study of orthodox Jewish-Israeli women, the social scientific analysis of religious women's agency is often centered on the question of why educated women are drawn to conservative forms of religions. "A tacit assumption underlies these questions: Religious women are oppressed or are operating with a false

⁸⁰ It was common for converts who choose a new name to make an exception for their parents.

⁸¹ For instance Badran, researching conversion to Islam in South-Africa, Britain and the Netherlands, mentions that in the cases of the women converts she spoke with, "the relational and the rational path converge" (2006, 206).

consciousness” (2008, 411). She argues that scholars offer three responses to such claims.

One response is “that while women may experience conservative religions as restricting... they are also empowered and liberated by their religion” (ibid). An example of such a response from the academic literature on women’s conversion to Islam in Europe is McGinty’s account of Islamic feminism among Muslim converts in Sweden. She argues that “for female converts, as for Muslim women in the West in general, the resistance and struggle is twofold, against cultural racism and ethnic stereotyping, on the one hand, and patriarchal and traditional attitudes and practice on the other” (2007, 475). To deal with this struggle, she continues, “drawing on both Western and Islamic ideas, the converts produce a feminist commentary, criticizing both Western ideals of femininity and traditional, patriarchal readings of and practices within ‘Islam’” (ibid). It is through this Islamic-feminist discourse, she argues, that “Muslim women make a claim to their own agency and voice” (483). While this account resonates with some of my findings, this approach fails to acknowledge the agentic power of women choosing to practice Islam within an orthodox, literalist framework. The latter’s view, McGinty argues, rests on religious conservatism, and an essentialist and traditional view of gender roles, *defying women’s rights* (483, emphasis added). In my research experience, this view is too limited. Women’s rights in Islam were as much a topic within the more orthodox-conservative approaches of some of the converted women I met, although not framed within an Islamic-feminist discourse but within a framework of God given women’s rights within Islam.

The second response is to associate agency with subversion. This line of reasoning in the context of conversion to Islam, for instance, can be seen in the account of the life stories of British, Dutch, and South-African women converts by Badran (2006). While Avishai addresses that many studies demonstrate that religious women do not blindly adhere to religious prescriptions, for Badran the act of conversion can be seen as subversive in itself, and related to the concept of agency:

In converting, women exercise agency, bravely and decisively, in going against the grain of their background, family, and culture and in opting for something strange and new. If the degree of agency is measured by resolve in the face of family and societal reactions to conversion, this agency is more intensified among the women in Europe. (ibid, 202)

However, she continues, after this initial display of agency, in most cases, “the agency or free will of the female convert is reduced, muted, subdued or managed” (ibid, 203). She does not make the source of this process

explicit, but it seems that the primary locus is the Muslim patriarchal family. As converts over time become more knowledgeable, they become able to stand up against patriarchal insertions into Islam and “move toward a more gender-just and socially just interpretation of Islam that is the project of Islamic feminism” (ibid, 206). Crucial in this move, she argues, is distinguishing between culture and religion in order “to unravel the patriarchal threads entangled in the stories they have been told about Islam...” (ibid, 226). Indeed, I observed this line of reasoning among some of the women in my research. However, I found that the project of distinguishing between *culture* and *religion* was of equal importance for the more conservative women contributing to this thesis.

The third and most common response Avishai found to the question of why women would voluntarily choose a religion or religious practices considered conservative is aimed at deflecting the assumption of religious women as “passive targets of religious discourses” and “posits that religious women strategize and appropriate religion to further extra-religious ends...” (411). In the literature on conversion to Islam, this line of reasoning is adopted, for instance, by Wohlrab-Sahr (2006) who argues that conversion to Islam can be understood for its functionality in solving three sets of (distinct) problems within the convert’s biography: sexuality and gender relations, social mobility, and nationality and ethnicity (80).⁸²

Although Wohlrab-Sahr is most outspoken in this functionalistic approach, similar lines of reasoning can be seen with other researchers of conversion to Islam and in the “relational conversion” defined by Allievi which occurs for the sake of marriage to a Muslim without a spiritual or intellectual engagement with Islam. The main problems with this third response, Avishai argues, are, first, that it does not acknowledge that women may participate in conservative religion “in a quest for *religious* ends or that their ‘compliance’ is not strategic at all, but rather a mode of conduct and being.” Second, she argues that “the focus on religious actors ignores the structural and cultural contexts that organize observance” (412).

How to avoid these pitfalls? Expanding on Butler’s notion of “doing gender” (1990), Avishai’s focus is on the construction of religiosity by means of conceptualizing the agency of the women involved in her research as “doing religion.” That is, a performance of identity, and, in so far as this performativity can be viewed as a strategic undertaking, possibly done in the pursuit of religious goals (413).⁸³ This

⁸² The functions associated with these problems are 1) implementation of honor, 2) methodization of life conduct, and 3) symbolic emigration and symbolic battle (2006, 80-81).

⁸³ Christine Jacobsen, too, puts forward that a secularist bias can prevent understanding of what Muslim women seek to realize through their religious engagement. She emphasizes “the need to understand the subjectivities and practices of young Muslims also in terms of the visions of self,

conceptualization of agency also draws on the work of Mahmood (2005), who addresses the same dilemma in regard to women's participation in Egypt's piety movement:

Even those analysts who are skeptical of the false-consciousness thesis ... nonetheless continue to frame the issue in terms of a fundamental contradiction: why would such a large number of women across the Muslim world actively support a movement that seems inimical to their "own interests and agendas." (2)

This question can easily be translated into the broader issue of women's conversion to Islam: Why do women choose a religion that is currently under so much scrutiny, portrayed as regressive, both politically and philosophically, especially concerning women's rights? Mahmood argues that this dilemma can be addressed by conceptualizing agency beyond the common binary of oppression-resistance. Instead, she posits that,

...if the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific ... then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility and effectivity. (14-15)

Agency, in this respect, is not "a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but ... a capacity for action that historically specific relations of *subordination* enable and create" (ibid, 120). In conceptualizing agency beyond the binary framework of enacting or subverting norms, Mahmood makes use of Foucault's analysis of ethical formation. Ethics in this respect refers to "those practices, techniques, and discourses through which a subject transforms herself in order to achieve a particular state of being, happiness, or truth" (2005, 28).⁸⁴ As conversion can be considered a transformative project, this conceptualization of agency is most useful in the analysis of women's conversion to Islam.

social relations and society that was offered to them by the Islamic discursive tradition (Asad, 1986, 1993) as mediated in religious lectures, Islamic literature, audio-visual edification material, and by parents, friends and religious leaders" (2011, 67-68).

⁸⁴ See also Ortner's conceptualization of agency, which emphasizes "how actors formulate needs and desires, plans and schemes, modes of working in and on the world" (ibid, 158). In this definition, agency is that dimension of power that is located in the actor's subjective sense of authorization, control, and effectiveness in the world (1997, 146).

3.3 Conversion as a Process

As argued earlier in this chapter, becoming Muslim is a simple, short ritual. All it takes is a sincere declaration of faith, the *shahada*, followed by a ritual washing called *ghusl*, in the Netherlands usually performed by means of taking a shower.⁸⁵ However, for the women in my research, to arrive at that point often took years of investigation and deliberation. In this thesis, I regard this process as a project of existential reorientation. The outcome of this reorientation can have the appearance of a counterculture (Zebiri, 2008, 248). Over time, converts tend to distance themselves from some of the common aspects of Western society such as freely mingling with the opposite sex or drinking alcohol. Conversion can impact the choice of marriage partner, friendships, leisure activities, and sometimes one's education or occupation. The selective rejection of certain aspects of Western life such as drinking culture or sexual morality is not exclusive to Muslims but part of many conservative religions. The often employed dichotomy between 'Islam and the West' seems to be the main reference point for the idea of conversion to Islam as a radical break with the past.

Why Islam became the preferred choice for some and not for others is difficult to answer. Push and pull factors are reviewed by several authors and can be clustered around a few themes. One such theme is a dissatisfaction with secular ideologies and/or feelings of emptiness because of the oversecularization of society (Bahrami, 1999; Köse 1996, 1999). Another often mentioned theme in academic literature is Western converts' appreciation of Islam over Christianity as a more "rational" religion. The difficult to explain the concept of the Holy Trinity is absent in Islam as well as the doctrine of original sin. Instead, the emphasis is on personal responsibility (e.g. Roald, 2004). Another theme is a focus on converts' criticism of Western society, for instance citing pornography as humiliating to women (Sultán, 1999). Others focus on women's appreciation of Islam's clear guidelines for gender relations, contributing to clarity and stability in familial and marital life (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006) or mention of the daily discipline and specific requirements of Islam as appealing (Haddad, 2006).

Some of these themes surfaced in my research, mostly regarding living life in a secularized society and the clear role of Islam in structuring

⁸⁵ *Ghusl* refers to the full ablution (ritual washing) required in Islam after having sexual intercourse, any sexual discharge, completion of the menstrual cycle, giving birth, and death. Other occasions are before the Friday and Eid prayers, in preparation for hajj, after having lost consciousness, and after formally converting to Islam. *Ghusl* involves washing the entire body.

daily life. For instance, reflecting on her conversion, one participant mentioned,

I feel more peaceful now. Before, I was very wild. I now feel inner peace because I know that we live, we die, and then there's the afterlife. You don't have to stuff everything into this life. Many people do and I did too. I want. I must. I want a big house and a nice car, but how do I get these before I die? I often thought, "I have to enjoy myself, I have to enjoy myself. What if I suddenly die?" I still enjoy myself but my mind is more at ease.

For young converts, questions concerning life and death were frequently a starting point for exploring Islam. As teenagers, they asked the big existential questions: Who am I? What is the meaning of life? What is death? They often started with a broad search among several world religions. They read, used the Internet, and asked their friends about their religion. Often, Muslim friends were the only ones to come up with answers or to provide a doctrine.

[At the age of 19] I started to ask myself certain questions. Is living the only thing we do and then we die? Is that all there is? Where do we come from? I started studying all beliefs, Christianity, Judaism, you name it. I found that my Christian and Jewish girlfriends all seemed to be forced by their families to go to church and that sort of thing. They didn't enjoy it. The Muslimas loved their faith. They always told me "We are going to the mosque to hear a lecture, we are going to learn something." They were always reading books. I also got more answers from them than from the Christian and Jewish girls. They were really vague, saying they would investigate for me and that was it.

Problems with Christian theology, too, were sometimes mentioned:

As a child, I didn't understand the Trinity. When I asked my mother she said: "Ask your father. I don't know. That's just the way it is." My father said: "Ask the church." The church said: "It's symbolic." It's symbolic! What kind of an answer is that to a child?

Criticism of Western society was not prevalent in the conversion stories of participants. Gender relations were also not mentioned as an impetus to convert but gradually became more appreciated in the course of conversion. Instead of clear-cut reasons to explain why conversion happened, I found that the formation of new Muslim subjects, foremost, stemmed from the experimental practice of Islam. Considering becoming Muslim and the experimental practice of (some of) Islam's precepts

proved difficult to untangle. For many participants, it was the practice of Islam that motivated them to consider becoming Muslim themselves, making it problematic to pinpoint the exact moment of their conversion.

The experimental practice of Islam, of course, can occur without knowing any Muslims, but this is rare. In fact, only one participant in my research decided to convert without previous social contacts with Muslims. She conducted all of her research on Islam through books and the Internet, and said the *shahada* alone. Far more common, experimenting with practicing Islam occurred because of the example of other Muslims through social relationships.

In all research of conversion to Islam in Europe, the pivotal role of positive social contacts with Muslims in regard to considering becoming Muslim oneself is acknowledged. Through these contacts, curiosity can develop, questions can be asked, stereotypes can be countered, books on Islam or a Qur'an can be provided, and company to go to lectures, meetings, or a mosque can be secured. Through this process, the plausibility of Islam being "the truth" can be contemplated, usually by trying it out through the experimental practice of Islamic precepts. Fasting, but also prayer, switching to *halal* meat, or the abandonment of pork or alcohol, often preceded the conversion. The experimental practice of Islam occurred for several reasons, for instance curiosity or solidarity (in the case of fasting), but also because converts wanted to be certain that (practicing) Islam suited them, and that it could be a choice for life.

Spiritually, conversion to Islam is considered to be a new beginning. It is believed that all prior transgressions are forgiven by God; the slate is wiped clean. As was often mentioned in the women's groups after a convert recited the *shahada*, she is now as free of sin as a new-born baby. In order to make full use of this extraordinary metaphysical purification, women sometimes held back on their conversion until they were certain they could pray five times a day, or comply with other prescriptions. However, these experimental practices often included saying the *shahada*, for instance during prayer, and, therefore, obscured the exact moment of conversion. Some converts I talked to, could not exactly remember when they converted. At least six of them said the *shahada* more than once (in the context of conversion), for instance once while alone and once at a mosque, the consulate, their friends' or Muslim spouse's country of origin, or at one of the Muslim women's groups. When contemplating conversion, the idea of one's deeds being judged by God gained meaning, as did the belief in the existence of an afterlife, to be spend in heaven or hell depending on the divine judgment.

As I mentioned before, there is no need to be able to practice Islam in order to convert. It suffices to start by saying the *shahada*,

gradually adopting other aspects of being a Muslim along the way. However, not all participants knew this, as in the account of one of them:

I postponed becoming a Muslim for a while. I thought that if you become Muslim, you should be able to fast during Ramadan, you should know how to pray, you should know how to do everything. Only then you can say the *shahada*. But a woman [at one of the Muslim women's groups] explained to me that it works the other way around. First, you say the *shahada*, and then you learn everything. So then the puzzle was solved and I said the *shahada*.

In the absence of such guidance, especially young women often postponed their *shahada*. They adopted many or most Islamic practices before declaring themselves Muslim. Sometimes, they only realized they had converted after the fact:

I was 19, studying in another city, and a Turkish[-Dutch] guy was in the same class with me. At the train station, he suddenly asked me, "Are you a Muslim?" I answered, "Yes." Then I thought, "What did I just say?" I just said it. I surprised myself. On the train I wondered, "Am I really a Muslim?" I believe I already said the *shahada* one time, alone, in my room. So yes, then I said, "Okay [I am a Muslim]." It was really the first time anybody asked.

Converts and born Muslims sometimes warn hesitating, prospective converts that in the event of one's death, it is much better to have said the *shahada* first and then learn how to practice, then the other way around, to practice Islam without converting. The account of a student I interviewed is a good example of how such a warning can tip the balance and set the actual conversion in motion. She was twenty years old at the time of our interview and seventeen at the time of her conversion. When we met, she was living in Amsterdam but she grew up in the north of the Netherlands. She came from a Roman-Catholic background but religion had not been a big part of her upbringing as her parents hardly mentioned religion at all. She went to Christian schools and was familiar with the Biblical stories but did not feel connected to Christianity. In high school, she began to mostly socialize with Muslim girls with Moroccan, Turkish, or Iraqi backgrounds. She told me that this was not a deliberate choice.

There were all kinds of cliques: the Antilleans, the gangsters, the quiet people, the Dutch people, and by chance, I socialized with the Muslims. They weren't into boys, going out, smoking, make-up, wearing short skirts. I didn't understand why, but when I asked, they explained. I felt respect for them. At their homes I saw [fasting during] Ramadan, prayer,

things like religious texts on the wall. I asked about it, just out of curiosity. They couldn't answer all my questions, so I searched myself and read books. It was just out of curiosity, I never thought it would go that far [as her conversion]. I searched the Internet, I read the Qur'an online and I was deeply moved. Something I had not experienced before.

Through an online announcement, she found a Moroccan-Dutch woman to help her further develop her interest in Islam. This woman frequently reminded her that the "angel of death" could strike at any moment and without the *shahada*, she would not die a Muslim. Since she indeed wanted to convert, she agreed to meet her to go to a mosque to say the *shahada*.

The Imam explained what Islam is about, the five pillars [the *shahada*, the five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, alms giving, pilgrimage to Mecca]. He also explained how we think of Isa [Jesus], that he is a prophet. That's important if you go from Christianity to Islam. The Imam then said I could repeat after him and I would then be a Muslim. It was a beautiful experience, the most beautiful day of my life. You are as free of sin as a newborn baby. You feel like you can take on the whole world. I would love to do it again.

In a similar case, also a young student, twenty-three when I interviewed her, twenty at the time of her conversion, the process was much more ambiguous. Born in the south of the Netherlands, she had moved to Amsterdam when she was fifteen. At school, she had to make new friends, among them a few Muslim girls. She was surprised that, at age fifteen-sixteen, these girls had never had a boyfriend.

I heard that they had never had a boyfriend. I thought, "Huh? You look so modern." I had a hard time understanding. A lot of questions came to mind. How can that be, and why? So they told me why. That's how Islam entered the picture for me.

She decided to try fasting during the month of Ramadan. Since she was still living at home and her mother objected, she did so in secret.

The first days were difficult. I was hungry. I wondered, "How do Muslims cope?" I found out that they eat before sunrise. My mom didn't want me to fast so I made sandwiches the night before. In the morning, I ate them secretly in my room. I didn't fast during the whole month, that was years later. At the time it was kind of a hobby, an experiment.

Her second step was buying a Qur'an. She also increasingly socialized with her Muslim classmates. During breaks, Islam was often the topic of discussion and gradually she learned the difference between *halal* and *haram*.⁸⁶ The next step was attending lectures given by a converted Muslima at a local mosque. She came from a Catholic family and after a while she decided to get rid of her Christian statues, images, and paintings. She then learned how to perform the Islamic prayer by means of the Internet. When she mastered prayer, she joined the communal prayers at the mosque. Soon after, she decided to wear a headscarf from home instead of putting it on at the mosque and then took up the habit of wearing it full-time. Meanwhile, she practiced saying the *shahada* with friends but still felt she was not fully Muslim because it was not said in public.

By that time, I wore my headscarf and I prayed. I felt, I am a Muslim now. All my doubts, all the things I still needed to know, it was gone or answered. But it felt incomplete because I had not said the *shahada* [publicly]. So I went to the lecturer at the mosque and said, "I want to say the *shahada*." She replied, "The *shahada*? But aren't you already Muslim?" So I said, "Yes, I pray, I wear a headscarf, and I have said the *shahada*, but not publicly." She told me there is no need to say it publicly, it's something between you and God. As soon as you believe in the unity of God and in [the message of] the prophet Mohammed, then you are a Muslim. I thought, "Okay, than I'm a Muslim."

Yet another young student, age twenty-four when I interviewed her, twenty-two when she converted, found out she had already converted a few years ago. At meetings of one of the Muslim women's groups in my research, it was customary to begin with an introduction round, involving the mentioning of age, ethnic background, marital status/children, being a born Muslim or a convert, and if a convert, for how many years. When interviewing her, I asked about such a meeting the Sunday before. During the introduction round, to everyone's surprise, she had said that she has been converted for two years. Until that moment, attending women who knew her were under the impression that she was still in the process of deliberating whether or not to convert. When I asked her about it, she explained to me,

A few years ago, my boyfriend gave me a book about Islam. I read that if you believe in Allah, the prophet Mohammed, the Angels, the Books, Judgment Day, and Fate, you are a Muslim. If you believe all that, you

⁸⁶ Permissible and prohibited.

say the *shahada*, which I did. But I didn't realize that was all. [Coming from a Jewish background] I thought, "Becoming Jewish takes years." This is like, "Okay, I believe in it. I'm convinced. It's a good thing to say." At the time, I didn't realize that was it. [Years later], I went to a meeting about conversion to Islam and there I realized, "I already said the *shahada* so I'm already converted!" That was a big relief. I didn't have to wonder anymore, "When will it be? How will I do it? Should I go to a mosque?" That was already behind me, without me realizing it. However, as a Muslim you're obliged to pray, so I thought, "Oh, I should start praying now, the count [of my deeds] has already started!" So I quickly started practicing prayer and now I do it five times a day. That's the main difference.

This ambivalence in regard to the exact moment of conversion was detectable in many of the conversion stories I was told in the course of my research. This can be further illustrated with the role of significant others such as friends, neighbors, classmates, colleagues, or husbands.

3.4 Significant Others

The experimental practice of Islam usually occurred because of positive social contacts with Muslims. In some cases, the contact that sparked this interest was a neighbor. For instance, one of the participant in my research was born Jewish but had never practiced Judaism. In her twenties, she had investigated several Christian denominations but eventually she had abandoned her search. By the time she was sixty, she became friends with her Moroccan-Dutch neighbor and was impressed by her hospitality. Soon she came by every day.

I kept asking if that was okay. You know how it is with Dutch people, if you come twice in a row, "Oh it's you again." My own children, figuratively speaking, would say that. But she said it was okay. So I asked, "Doesn't your husband resent that I'm here every day?" I said, "Please be honest, I won't be offended. I can imagine, [he would object to] a strange woman in your house, every day." But no. So I began thinking about their faith. What does it mean? It never occurred to me to investigate it. What I couldn't accept in Christianity was different in this faith, that was that Jesus was the son of God and the Holy Trinity. I couldn't accept that.

Colleagues, too, can cause curiosity. For example, one of the students contributing to my research, had Muslim colleagues and their fasting during Ramadan caught her interest.

I wanted to know more about it and started fasting with them. I did it for myself, to see if I could do it, not for religious reasons. I socialized a lot with them, asking questions. People heard that I had an interest and gave me books about Islam.

What she read made sense to her and slowly she began to contemplate conversion. Without converting, she kept up fasting during Ramadan for three consecutive years.

I was at a point that I thought, “I participate, I know why I do it, but I don’t really profit from it. Because I’m not a Muslim I won’t get the reward for it [from God]. I miss out on that because I don’t dare to convert.” I was wondering, “Why don’t I do it” and on the other hand [I thought,] “Why should I?”

Since she no longer worked at the place where she initially met Muslims, it became an increasingly lonely experience.

I didn’t know any Muslims at the time, it was really my own thing but I didn’t know what to do with it. ... I thought, if I’m Muslim, then my bad deeds will really count. If I don’t pray now, while not Muslim yet, that’s permissible. If I convert, I should go for it and not mess up. There were a few things I wanted to improve about myself before taking the step [to convert]. Perhaps I postponed it because of that, I wanted to do it right.

She decided to first learn how to pray and already made changes to her wardrobe as a means of preparation. She also reconnected with Muslimas through kick-boxing. A girl she met there took her to meetings of several Muslim women’s groups and these experiences motivated her to take the step to actually convert.

The fact that many people there thought just like me, that I could exchange thoughts, that we were on the same level, that they experienced the same things as I did in terms of conversion and being Dutch. Yes, that really won me over and made me decide I wanted to do it.

She did not like to be at the center of attention so she ruled out saying the *shahada* at a mosque or at a women’s group, and decided to do it at home.

It’s about my word, that I mean it, that I have the right intention. So I invited a couple of girlfriends, Muslimas, to my home, about six or

seven. I picked a date, sent an e-mail to tell them they were welcome to join.

Another trajectory to Islam is through Muslim friends. For most young converts, existential questions about the purpose of life were a catalyst for considering conversion, as in the story of this participant, who was in her late twenties when I interviewed her:

When I was about thirteen-fourteen, my best girlfriend was half Dutch, half Moroccan. She fasted during Ramadan. That was the first time I experienced that and I liked it. I started fasting too, every other day. It was fun to break the fast with her family and I loved the special Ramadan cookies. That's where my interest in Islam started. Not that I thought I would become a Muslim myself, but I liked to join fasting in Ramadan. I also had a Moroccan[-Dutch] boyfriend at the time. His dad explained things to me. I was still very young but I liked talking [about Islam] with him. Still, I didn't think of becoming Muslim myself, I just thought it was interesting. Also with other Moroccan [-Dutch] friends, I asked why they didn't eat pork, or why they fasted during Ramadan. Later on, I started exploring religion on my own. At first Christianity. I come from a Christian family and I decided to start with our own religion and bought a Bible. But the Bible didn't appeal to me. I was looking for guidance. How are we supposed to live? What is a good life? When I laid in bed at night, I was wondering about the purpose of life. What is expected of you, by your parents and society, is that you grow up, score as high as possible at school so that you can find a job, that's the goal, finding a job, so that you can pay your bills and that's the circle of life. You go to school, you go to work so you can make a living until you retire and die. That's it. But I wondered: then what? When have you found happiness and when not, what about people who cannot study, or have problems? What is the purpose of life? What is the goal? Or, when I looked at the stars at night: What is beyond the universe? What is it made of? Is there anything else? I thought it would be pretty meaningless if life is all about working, paying the bills, having children who then need to do the same, and then they will have children who do the same. My friend had a book about Islam so I read that and thought, "What if it is real?"

Many converts in my research studied several religions before converting to Islam. For instance, one participant grew up in a small community without any Muslims, went to a predominantly white high school without Muslim students, but traveled to school by train with teenagers from another school. Mostly, these kids came from immigrant backgrounds and

religion was a feature of their daily life, while she came from an atheist family.

It made me wonder, “Hey, why don’t we have that? Why don’t we have a religion? How come I don’t believe?” So, I studied what they believed and what faith means. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, I started to study them all. I didn’t study these beliefs with the intention to become religious, not at all. I just wanted to know why these people believed in God and I didn’t. ... At one point, now I say because of Allah but at the time I didn’t know why, Islam appealed the most to me. Although I still did not intent to convert, I started studying the life of the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him. I had stopped reading the Qur’an because I didn’t understand it but I read other books, and children’s books, and that really clicked. I began to follow [some of the precepts] but still not with the intention to convert. Someone else had to point that out to me. When I was twenty years old, a Moroccan[-Dutch] girlfriend said to me “You’re already a Muslim.” I thought about her comment really hard and then I thought, “I can deny it but it’s true, I do believe in God. Period. I belief in Allah, and in the stories about the prophets and the angels.” So, suddenly I thought, “Oh... okay, I’m Muslim!”

Besides classmates, colleagues, neighbors, friends, or travel companions the first positive social contact with a Muslim can also be through a romantic relationship. In this review of the impact of positive social contacts on the desire to convert, the role of having a Muslim boyfriend or spouse deserves a closer examination. There is a strong assumption in the Netherlands, as well as in other Western countries, that conversion takes place because of a (future) Muslim husband’s wish or demand. While some researchers such as Allievi, make a distinction between conversion for relational reasons and conversion because of rational reasons, most of the research on women converting to Islam, does not support the hypothesis that conversion takes place because of marriage (see Badran, 2006; Haddad, 2006; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006).⁸⁷ The husband as the assumed reason for conversion rather reflects how difficult it is for many Dutch to imagine that a woman would choose, on her own, to become part of what is commonly considered a religion that is hostile to women.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Muslim men are not religiously obliged to marry Muslim women but can also marry Christian or Jewish women. However, since Muslim women can only marry Muslim men, it seems that marriage plays a bigger role for men contemplating conversion. Since most studies about conversion to Islam have been conducted among women, more research on this topic would be useful.

⁸⁸ The Dutch proverb “When two religions share a pillow, the Devil sleeps in between” [twee geloven op een kussen, daar slaapt de duivel tussen] might echo the Dutch image of conversion

Since this is also true for other Western countries, this probably also more generally explains this assumption.

My research, too, shows that many women were already married when they became curious about Islam, while others were already Muslim when they got married. Conversion as a condition for marriage surfaced in one participant's story and conversion as a condition for having children in another participant's story but even in these cases, developing an interest in Islam was up to the women themselves. Raising their children within a Muslim household was important to these husbands but the conversion still had to be out of personal conviction. This was also more generally the position of husbands. Another participant told me,

[When our relationship became serious] I told him honestly that I didn't like that he was a Muslim; I've been honest about that from day one. [Jokingly] but I saw pass it because he is a very handsome man and I'm glad I did. I'm happy that I'm now a Muslim too. He didn't say, "Do this, do that." He said, "There's no compulsion in Islam." That's the right approach. You and I wouldn't be talking right now if he would have tried to force me.

Muslim husbands or boyfriends, were often not particularly keen on the conversion of their girlfriend or spouse, as many of them were only marginally practicing Muslims at the time they got engaged in the relationship. For instance, as they learned more about Islam, young converts often felt that having a boyfriend without being married was a problem (see also Moors, 2009a). The following account of a convert in her twenties, provides a common description of this dilemma:

He [her Moroccan-Dutch boyfriend] liked that I studied Islam. He considered me a Muslim since I believed in God and His prophets. He also liked that I wanted to practice. However, when I reached his level of practice, and especially when I went beyond his level, he [probably] thought, okay, okay [take it easy]. We shared a bed and at a certain point I didn't want that anymore, I couldn't, it was something I really didn't want anymore. I made up excuses to sleep on the sofa but it just didn't work out anymore. For my sake, and also for his sake, I told him to pack his belongings and move back to his parents. We should keep a distance from each other. [I told him], if you want to continue our relationship, we need to marry.

as well. This proverb used to address inter-Christian differences and, indeed, some parents or grandparents of participants converted because of marriage, from Catholicism to Protestantism, or vice-versa.

This line of reasoning was employed by many other participants. To give another example:

I was eighteen, we were living together, and during that year I became officially Muslim and I said the *shahada*. I said [to her boyfriend], “We live together while unmarried, that’s not allowed [in Islam], I want us to get married.” He was like, “Take it easy” but I didn’t want to continue like that. I felt very guilty so I pulled him in the right direction and he said, “You’re right.” Then we got married.⁸⁹

Another example is the account of a woman who eventually converted in her thirties but already developed an interest in Islam during her late teens. As a teenager, she had a Moroccan-Dutch boyfriend, socialized with his family, and had many, non-practicing, Muslim girlfriends. She wondered about the afterlife and started to read books on Islam.

I was always told [by her family] that when you die, you’re dead. There’s nothing, it’s done, you’re gone. I always wondered, “How can that be?” It didn’t make sense.

She began attending lectures of two Muslim women’s groups, both led by convert volunteers. These lectures, and the converts she met there, appealed to her and even though she did not convert herself, she came to consider it a good idea if her boyfriend would start to pray.

I came home from a lecture and told him it would be a good idea if from now on he would do his prayers, starting tomorrow. He told me he didn’t know how to pray. I told him that I wanted him to pray and said he should look on the Internet to learn how to do it. It really didn’t make any sense but I thought that if he would do it, I could do it too. I had not even said the *shahada* yet. It was really dumb of me, he wasn’t prepared for that.

She kept up the experimental practice of Islam, even started wearing a headscarf for a while, but without converting.

⁸⁹ Marriage when girls are still in school or studying is usually, though not always, an Islamic marriage, meaning that the couple take their vows in an Islamic context, for example at a mosque, and not at city hall. In the Netherlands, these marriages have no legal consequence but do provide a sense of existential security since the couple is now in compliance with the scriptural rule that sex should not take place outside of marriage. The fact that the marriage has no legal standing, however, can also cause problems, for instance in case of a divorce.

I thought about it a lot but something was holding me back, the idea that I couldn't undo it. That I would cross a line from which there is no return. That I would have to devote myself to it. I talked to converted Dutch Muslimas and they had changed so much: their appearance, their speech. My family thought I was crazy, and my husband [she married her boyfriend eventually] was like "What are you doing? I want to go to the coffee shop!" So, yes I wanted to learn everything, know everything, but not to say the *shahada*. I didn't dare to do it.

She never got around to saying the *shahada* and eventually abandoned wearing a headscarf. She did, however, continue to fast during Ramadan. She also continued to learn more about Islam through books and television programs but also divorced her husband and resumed clubbing. Only when she remarried and became a mother, she again contemplated conversion. Her new husband was also Moroccan-Dutch but, again, a non-practicing Muslim. He stalled the conversion by insisting it should be done in front of his family, while failing to organize it.

I discussed this situation with a converted Muslim friend. She reminded me something could happen to me and then what? That's what I told him at home, "What if I fall under a bus tomorrow? Then what? That [dying without being Muslim] would be your fault, right?" That day I decided I didn't want to wait anymore. I came home and told him that I had said the *shahada*. At first I wanted to keep it a secret but I blurted it out. I didn't care anymore if he would be angry. He wasn't angry though, he didn't like it but he wasn't angry.

Even if husbands were practicing Muslims and did not fear the implications of their spouses new convictions, still, many of them had reservations about the prospect, in particular because it should be a personal and informed choice in order for it to have religious value.

My husband didn't encourage that I visit a mosque or read books about Islam. I thought, "Shouldn't you be explaining things to me?" But he feared I would convert for him. So, I studied on my own and attended lectures at the mosque for about a year. I said the *shahada* at that mosque and then the women sung for me. [At home] I said, "I have become a Muslim." Even then he wasn't enthusiastic. He didn't say, "That's beautiful" or "That's nice." But I don't mind. It's a good thing to find your own way.

Another participant told me,

Before I was officially a Muslim, I joined my future husband in fasting during Ramadan, for reasons of solidarity. When we got married the next year, I wanted to become Muslim but he was against it. He said, “I love that you would become Muslim one day, but it’s too soon. You don’t know anything yet.” I thought that was reasonable. He said, “You might do it now because you love me, and we are married now, and you think I would like that you’d become Muslim but that’s the wrong reason. You need to do it because you want it. Suppose we would separate, God willing we won’t, but suppose we would, then what? Would you abandon Islam too? I would feel terrible!” He said, “I’d probably be more upset if you would leave Islam than if you would leave me.” So, I spent two years learning, reading, asking questions, looking around, becoming informed, and then I said the *shahada*.

To be certain it is their own choice, many converts keep contemplating conversion a secret from their husbands. For example, this participant, who eventually said the *shahada* in her thirties, alone, after waking up at night, did not tell her husband immediately but kept it to herself until she asked him to instruct her how to pray.

The final question before I did the *shahada* was “If my husband leaves me tomorrow, or does something weird that makes me want to leave him, would I still be a Muslim? Would I still be doing the things I should as a Muslim? Would I seek another Muslim husband? Would I be consistent?” And then I knew the answer was “Yes.” That was very important. I told him that, too, “If you leave me tomorrow, I will still remain a Muslim.” Of course he had watched me grow into it but, mostly, I had kept it to myself.

When women choose a meeting of a Muslim women’s group to say the *shahada*, often, this question of whether or not they would remain Muslim if the relationship broke up was asked as well. It was emphasized that conversion should be an act of personal conviction and not be done for the sake of a relationship.

No matter what their trajectory was, conversion to Islam was not taken lightly by the participants in my research.⁹⁰ To analyze their conversion stories, I choose the framework of agency, to avoid the determinism of conversion models and make room for elaborating on the dynamics of the choice for Islam for religious reasons, as a project of

⁹⁰ It may be that there is a bias in my sample since I met all of them through their participation in Muslim women’s group. Possibly, their engagement with Islam was more substantive than that of women who did not join such groups, with different trajectories, who might have been, inadvertently, excluded from my sample.

existential reorientation. Changes do not occur as the result of unreflective conformity to a husband's wish or desire, but are set in motion by embracing new concepts that arise in the context of the experimental practice of Islam. To further illustrate this process, I will now turn in more detail to some of the changes in daily life that preceded, accompanied, or followed from the conversion.

3.5 Dilemmas of Dress

All women in my research made changes in their wardrobe ahead of, or as a consequence of, their conversion. The nature of these changes varied, as there are different opinions among Muslim women considering what entails Islamic dress. There are Muslimas who do not find it necessary to wear a headscarf and are therefore not easily recognizable as Muslims. Others consider modest styles of dressing the body, including covering their hair, a religious obligation, which they themselves may or may not practice (Moors, 2009b, 181). Wearing modest, covering dress is called wearing *hijab*. Similar to the conversion, wearing *hijab* should be based on personal conviction and understanding. If not, it lacks religious value because the intention of an act is crucially important in relation to its religious value (see also Shadid *et al*, 2005, 37; Moors, 2009b, 191). Therefore, from an Islamic, normative, perspective the main function of *hijab* is not that of a symbol expressing the religious affiliation of the person wearing it. Still, this was an important side-effect of wearing a headscarf for many of the converts in my research.⁹¹

There are three categories of Muslim opinions concerning Muslim women's modest dress. The largest group favors full covering of the female body with the exception of the face and hands, the second, much smaller group, favors also covering the hands and face, and a third group rejects the prescriptions concerning veiling altogether (Shadid *et al*, 2005, 35).⁹² Among the women in my research, all three positions were found, although the first opinion, as a rule and as a practice, was dominant. Most women favoring the third position considered covering their hair not an obligation. However, these women as well, usually, did wear loose-fitting clothes, which are deemed modest, and many donned their headscarves full-time, such as this participant,

⁹¹ See also chapter four.

⁹² As Ali explains (2005, 517), this third group insists that since "...veiling is mentioned neither in the Qur'an nor hadith, it is a custom and not scripturally sanctioned."

For a long time, I said I would never wear a headscarf. Not because I was against it, I just didn't feel it would suit me. In my opinion it is not an obligation, just an advice, I still think that. There are many Muslims who regard it as an obligation but I disagree. So, I felt wearing a headscarf wasn't me. But one morning during Ramadan, it was my birthday [she turned 48], I woke up and I decided I would wear a headscarf. I don't know why. I got up in the morning to go to work and thought "I'm going to wear a headscarf." I told no-one, not even my husband. I think it took him a couple of days to realize it. I didn't feel like talking about it, I just felt I wanted it. I surprised myself. I always said I wouldn't do it but I did. ... My husband would rather see that I don't wear a headscarf. He doesn't like that people think that he makes me wear it while he has nothing to do with it. It's my choice. It's enough that I know it's not because of him. If it was up to him I would take it off but I don't care. People will have opinions about you in any event. Let them think whatever they want. That will not influence my decision.

The popular perception that wearing a headscarf is connected to the wish or demand from a Muslim husband, similar to the perception of women's decision to convert, points to a striking absence of Muslim women's agency in the eyes of non-Muslim Dutch. Some participants suspected that wearing a headscarf because of a husband's demand would make covering more palatable to non-Muslims than considering it a woman's personal, informed choice. Reflecting on her hesitations to wear a headscarf in public, fearing her family's reaction and the consequences it might have for her professional life, an unmarried participant remarked,

I think it would be more acceptable if I would be married to a Muslim and then would decide to wear a headscarf. If people would know that I was married, they would say, "It is because of her marriage, it is because of her husband."

As Tarlo, in her book about the implications of being visibly Muslim in Britain, points out too, the subject of women's choice is of crucial importance. If veiled, "women are perceived to be submissive or dangerous, deluded or transgressive, oppressed or threatening, depending on whether their covering is thought to have been forced or chosen" (2010, 4).

Looking at the dichotomies that are at the heart of the Western perception of the headscarf as a sign of extremism or fanaticism or, alternatively, signaling oppression, Franks touches upon the topic of underlying feelings of superiority in the rejection of the headscarf. Based on her research on conversion in Great Britain, she argues,

Many non-Muslims appear to believe that a white Muslim woman cannot have made a dynamic choice for Islam and that they therefore match the ‘subdued and oppressed’ model. The veil hides their femininity and they are regarded as a traitor to their race because it is deemed that they have denied their ‘superiority.’ (2000, 924)

Franks calls this “racism by proxy” (923); “by proxy” because the racism is primarily addressing the groups of immigrant Muslimas with whom the converted Muslima is identified. In the report *Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives*, Suleiman makes a similar point:

In Western societies where it may be easier for women to wear less than wear more, the *hijab* may look anachronistic in the extreme. On wearing the *hijab* as a convert, a White woman loses the prestige her ‘Whiteness’ bestows on her, becoming symbolically Black and culturally ‘other’. And if she is of a British background, she is made to feel ‘non-British’. A middle-class British woman who converts to Islam may, additionally, risk losing her social class, dropping down a notch or two on the social scale, regardless of whether she wears the *hijab* or not. A White female convert may even lose her career, especially if she is in work that puts her in the public eye, as in fact happened to some members of the [new Muslim research] project. This is why conversion to Islam by White women takes great courage to effect and to display in the public sphere: the loss of social status and/or class can have an enormous cost for the convert and her family. From a different angle, this observation about social prestige may help explain why the conversion of Asian and Black women to Islam, while still equally courageous for other potent reasons, goes unnoticed among the non-Muslim White majority: Black converts lack the social prestige White female converts have, and they are already culturally ‘other.’ (2013, 4)

Being visibly Muslim, indeed, was a different experience for the white women in my research than for women with other complexions. One participant, at the time of our interview a professional in her late twenties, when I asked her if she felt the general image in the Netherlands of the “oppressed Muslim woman” was projected onto her because of her headscarf, answered,

In the beginning, I was very insecure. Like, gee, I go outside wearing a headscarf, and that sort of thing. I was a 100% behind [the decision to wear] it but it was also scary and people gave me funny looks. One time, an old lady pinched my cheek while she said [in a tone of voice like talking to a baby], “What a nice headscarf you’re wearing.” People see you with very different eyes. When I talk to born Muslimas, they say it’s

not so bad. But I'm used to being treated very differently. I have long blond hair, I very much recognize the difference. Being Turkish[-] or Moroccan[-Dutch], perhaps you can't imagine being treated so differently with long blond hair. Just having black hair and brown eyes sets you apart from the average Dutch.

Özyürek conducted research on conversion to Islam in Germany and was told similar stories.

The discrimination to which converts are subject often comes as a surprise to them. One German Muslim woman who converted to Islam in her early twenties and donned the Islamic headscarf described how shocking this process has been for her: "I didn't expect so many negative reactions. Before people used to call me 'sunshine' because my hair is really blond. Especially men used to always compliment me for my hair. Now when people look at me they only see an oppressed woman. Maybe someone with dark skin knows better how to deal with this feeling. But I really didn't expect things to change so fast and so dramatically." (2010, 173-4)

These converts' suspicion that women with darker skin had different experiences or, perhaps, were more proficient in dealing with being 'othered,' was confirmed by another convert. Her father was born in Suriname. As explained earlier, this meant she was an *allochthone*, despite the fact that she was born in the Netherlands, possessed no other nationality, had lived in the Netherlands all of her life, and had a native Dutch mother. Having a brown complexion, she confirmed the different perception of non-white women when visibly Muslim, while also confirming the majority discourse that "real" Dutch means being white. When discussing reactions to changes in dress by unknown people, she told me,

I haven't received negative reactions but my Dutch [Muslim] friends, real Dutch, white, they get comments like "Go back to your own country" or "You look ugly." I don't stand out. My friend, she has piercing blue eyes, she's white. [Being visibly Muslim,] that attracts a lot of attention.

A consistent theme in the literature on conversion to Islam is that the converts' family often feels the headscarf is a betrayal of "values and culture."⁹³ Similarities between women's experiences in different Western

⁹³ In the US, some families see conversion to Islam as a sign for support of terrorism. This, generally, does not seem to be the case in Europe.

countries are striking (cf. Mossière, 2012). This quote from Haddad's study in the United States, for instance, can easily be applied to the Netherlands:

Consistently the *hijab* seemed to be a bigger issue for families and friends than the conversion itself. This visible display of Islam was seen as too radical. Family members were often concerned about what neighbors and other people would think about the change in wardrobe. (2006, 31)

This exact sentiment was echoed by many participants in my research.

When I told them of my conversion to Islam my family reacted somewhat indifferent, like, "Okay, that's your own choice." I thought, "That went well!" But the next time, I came wearing my headscarf. That made it more difficult. Now it was visible and everyone could see.

After adopting the headscarf, some participants were shunned by their neighbors, cursed while walking the street, spat at riding the bus, harassed at the supermarket, or their non-Muslim parents or children refused to be seen in public with them. Girls still living with their parents often kept the wearing of a headscarf a secret out of fear of rejection. If not, it often became a subject of tension.

The entire neighborhood talked about me when I started wearing a headscarf. After I began wearing a headscarf, everybody knew [that I'm a Muslim]. That's what bothers my mom the most. Nobody asks me, everyone asks my mother.

The profound tensions arising from the desire to comply with religious rules concerning modesty in dress, including a headscarf, and the publicness of this act within a society generally frowning upon public expressions of religion, in particular Islam, surfaced in many interviews. Anxieties related to the perceived obligation of wearing a headscarf after conversion could be so overwhelming that some converts decoupled their aspiration to convert from the notion that being a Muslima automatically means wearing a veil. As this young professional told me,

There were many things I liked about Islam but I held myself back. It's one thing to believe in Allah but practicing that belief is something else. I was particularly worried about wearing a headscarf. I thought, "If I convert, I have to wear a headscarf, and I don't want that." It's a distorted image. When you see a woman with a headscarf you know she's Muslim, and when she doesn't, you don't know. So then I

consciously decoupled the decision of wearing a headscarf from the decision to convert. I didn't want to write off an entire religion because I didn't want to wear a headscarf. That was right before I decided I wanted to convert.

Another participant, at first, kept being Muslim a secret at the Islamic school where she was teaching because Muslim teachers were obliged to wear a headscarf. When her fasting during the month of Ramadan became difficult to explain, she came clean towards the head of the school, asking him to give her time to adjust to the habit of veiling, which he granted.

Wearing a headscarf has many social consequences. All converts reported that when wearing a headscarf they were frequently assumed to struggle with the Dutch language. One participant recalled,

I had an intake appointment at the hospital and, of course, I went wearing my headscarf. The intaker wrote on the form "patient is fluent in Dutch."

Participants in Van Nieuwkerk's research, too, told that employees in hospitals and teachers started to speak slowly, articulating every word when confronted with a headscarf. "Other converts provoke stunned reactions about their excellent mastery of the Dutch language" (2004, 236). Most participants in my research became used to this confusion and many viewed these awkward situations as opportunities to engage in a conversation about Islam.

Recently, I was in a waiting room at the hospital and I got called [by my Dutch last name]. They are always surprised when I get up. I like that because it's an opportunity to explain, "Yes, I'm Dutch and I have become Muslim." It's an opportunity for answering questions, for explaining, I like that very much.⁹⁴

However, some participants took offense:

I'm Dutch too, you know. I mean, why can't people act normal? I went to school, I studied, I'm not crazy, and I'm not retarded. I thoroughly dislike this negative view [of the headscarf]. If you would ask someone [Dutch], "Who is smarter, the woman with a headscarf or the woman without a headscarf?" I think they would all say, "The one without a headscarf."

⁹⁴ In Britain, Tarlo, too, found that wearing *hijab* could be an opportunity for proselyzing (2010, 56).

Here we see the power of ethnic stereotyping. In Eriksen's definition, stereotyping refers to the creation and consistent application of standardized notions of the cultural distinctiveness of a group (2002, 23-24). These stereotypes do not need to be true, as in the examples above, but they enable dividing the social world into different kinds of people, and they provide simple criteria for such classifications (ibid, 25). Stereotypes "serve to order the social world and to create standardized cognitive maps over categories of relevant others" (ibid, 61). In this respect, converted Muslimas disrupt the order in the social universe. This is closely linked to the headscarf as the ultimate opposite of Dutchness. As Van Nieuwkerk found, too, "the self-image of the Dutch is that the Dutch, in contrast to Muslims, are very liberal and emancipated. The Dutch narratives on nationality or ethnicity are thus very much linked to the gender discourse" (2006, 106). In this discourse, a Dutch woman wearing a headscarf commits a grave transgression.

Although a few women experimented with wearing headscarves ahead of their conversion, most participants did not immediately start wearing one full-time. This was often connected to fear of disapproval by parents, relatives, colleagues, neighbors, or even strangers. Many of them started to wear a headscarf part-time to mosques or to Muslim women's groups. In this initial phase, putting it on and off, as Jouilli (2009) mentions, too, is often related to constraints, in particular in regard to women's professional lives, and not to a lack of desire for wearing *hijab*. For some participants, managing their visibility as Muslims resembled leading a double life. For instance, a participant who could not wear her headscarf at work, would put it on and take it off on her way to and from work.

After six months, I realized I didn't want this anymore. I was sitting in the train one morning, just getting ready to take off my headscarf, when I saw my neighbor, a Moroccan[-Dutch] man. He was looking at me like, "What are you doing?" I felt so ashamed and I thought, "What am I doing?" Then I decided, this'll be the last month that I'll be working there.

Participants often developed all kinds of strategies to keep the wearing of a headscarf a secret, carefully introducing their new appearance to relatives or others. If possible, many choose a new job, a new school, or the beginning of a new school year, as the starting point of wearing a headscarf fulltime. If this was impossible, they usually asked their supervisors' permission or introduced their choice in such a way that colleagues would feel free to ask questions, such as this participant, a student, working part-time at a bank.

When I decided I wanted to wear a headscarf, I thought it would be a good idea to send an e-mail to my colleagues to inform them. If they had any questions, they could ask. Many people appreciated this e-mail. They speculated that my husband forced me to wear it, so I made clear this was not the case. They were relieved [to hear that]; they seriously thought I was forced. When they knew it [wearing a headscarf] was my own choice, they said it was courageous of me and that it looked pretty. But [since the headscarf] my colleagues behave differently. I'm an outcast now. No one includes me in anything. It feels bad. If I didn't need the money, I'd quit. [With a headscarf] people look at you and think you're dumb, that you have no brain, that you can't be entertaining or fun. It's weird that a piece of cloth around your head can change people so much.

Dreading a confrontation, some participants preemptively ended their careers in certain fields, for instance this participant who held a training position in communication:

Prayer was easy to fit in. Prayer can be done at any place, at my hotel room, at the parking lot, but I really wanted to wear a headscarf. I was wearing long skirts already but that was fashionable at the time so it didn't reveal my choice [for Islam] to the outside world. I dreaded that confrontation. I didn't feel like pioneering, so I left this career.

Girls who are still studying sometimes change their school careers, anticipating difficulties.

I'm studying to become a teacher. I already have a diploma as an executive secretary but that's of little use while wearing a headscarf.

A few participants wore face-veils. They were homemakers or did volunteer work within an Islamic context, as working with a face-veil is difficult in the Netherlands. Over the course of my fieldwork, they either changed their face-veil for another form of *hijab* leaving the face visible, or they moved to Muslim majority countries where the wearing of a face-veil does not provoke the kind of hostility it does in the Netherlands (Vroon-Najem, 2007; Moors, 2009a).⁹⁵

⁹⁵ Some women choose immigration to Great-Britain where wearing face-veils seems to be less controversial.

3.6 Choices & Consequences

Another area of changes in daily life when converting to Islam is food and drink. Although changes in diet are more private than changes in dress, since eating and drinking are also social activities, adhering to Islamic restrictions in regard to alcohol and switching to the consumption of *halal* meat can cause tensions as well. The publicness of new rules and restrictions, again, was most problematic. On a personal level, their new, *halal* diet was usually considered healthier and many participants were charmed by the emphasis in Islam on caring for one's body. In this respect, changes in diet were often part of a larger reevaluation of cleanliness and attitudes toward responsibility for one's health. For many participants, no more alcohol was one of their first steps on the path to Islam. Some abode by the strict rule that Muslims should not be present at a place where alcohol is sold or served; others just refrained from drinking it themselves. As with changes in dress, most participants slowly introduced new rules to their families, especially when living with their unconverted parents and siblings. Honoring one's parents is an important Islamic precept and participants engaged in complex balancing acts when presented with instances of conflicting norms.

I'm not telling my mom that I won't share the table with her if she drinks wine. If I do that, I'll push her away. I did ask her if she'd agree that if we have guests, she pours the wine and I serve the soft drinks.

Some apply the same strategy with colleagues. At many places of work, every now and then, colleagues hang out together.

We buy each other drinks but if I think alcohol is bad for me, I won't buy it for you either. So I do the coffee and if they want a coke I'll buy them one but not if they drink alcohol.

Each convert in my research struck her own balance between the accommodation of the non-Muslim family, friends, and colleagues, and their aspirations to follow Islamic rules as they understood them. These new rules, especially if they were strictly enforced, could be difficult to accept for non-Muslim relatives:

It's difficult at the beginning. You come home wearing a headscarf, that's difficult. It needs time. They drink alcohol so I said, "I'm sorry, if you want to drink alcohol, that's your choice but I can't be present." Step by step [I introduced new practices]. [I told them,] "Family gatherings, sorry, I can't come, these are mixed, men and women mingling, I can't

do that anymore.” Every time I added a step. That’s very difficult but eventually they accepted it. We argued about it but I told my parents, “Look, here we are, talking about the same issues again, there’s no point. If this is how it is, it’s better if you go your way and I go mine.” They didn’t want that so at that point they had to accept it.

For most participants it took a while to make their diet completely *halal*. Girls still living with their parents sometimes struggled with the diet rules depending on whether they had told their parents about their conversion. Often, they developed strategies such as cooking different meals, offering to get the groceries, or eating vegetarian. However, if women were married or already lived on their own it could also be difficult to introduce new rules to family and friends.

The first few months [after conversion] I told them [family and friends] it had to be beef while actually it really should be *halal* beef, it’s not the same. I remember, I was eating at a friend’s house and she was serving meat loaf, it was half beef, half pork. That was a difficult situation. You have to tell your friends and family that it has to be *halal*. That’s something you have to go through. You have to tell people that if they want you to eat with them, it has to be *halal*. That’s difficult, for them as well.

Bourque found similar tensions among Scottish converts to Islam. “Scottish people who convert to Islam are placed in a problematic position. To some extent, they have “turned their back” on practices that are seen as typically Scottish/British, such as going to the pub after work and having bacon rolls for breakfast” (2006, 245). This was a common theme among participants in my research, too. They all lived in the Amsterdam metropolitan area and getting *halal* groceries was easy and there is much choice. In this respect, participants reported few difficulties adjusting to their new diet. Dutch food items, for instance the *kroket* or the *rookworst*, or bread toppings that are typically Dutch, continued to be appreciated in a *halal* variety. However, as shown in the examples above, it is far more difficult to change social conventions. Much effort went into strategizing how to retain flexibility in regard to sociality with non-Muslims while avoiding transgressing religious normativities.

Another point of tension was that those who practiced according to strictly interpreted Islamic norms ceased to celebrate their birthday. Participants choosing a strict interpretation of Islamic precepts, argued that celebrating birthdays is *haram*. They lived by the rule that Muslims should only celebrate two holidays: *Eid al-Fitr*, to celebrate the end of the month of Ramadan and *Eid al-Adha*, the remembrance of Abraham’s

obedience to God.⁹⁶ They did not attend other people's birthdays either, although family ties could trump this prohibition. For instance, a participant's mother was turning seventy and the family was throwing her a party:

My mom called and asked, "Are you coming?" I said, "No mom, we won't." She was so sad on the phone. When I hung up, I felt very bad. My sister said, "Why don't you come just this once?" So I thought, "Okay, we'll go." It's for her, to make her happy. She was very happy but I'm not looking forward to it. I'd rather not go but I'll do it to make her happy.

Faced with the exact same situation, another participant made the opposite decision.

There have been a few moments in my life when it [not celebrating birthdays] was difficult. For instance, when my mom turned seventy. It was a big party and I wasn't there. My mom was very upset and I was too, being the cause of her sadness was bad, but so be it. I explained to her, "Mom, for me, every day is your birthday."

Not celebrating birthdays and not being around alcohol are separate precepts but given that in the Netherlands, on most occasions, a party means serving alcohol, they often collide.

My mother always gives a birthday party and I'm like, I'm Dutch, so I won't say I won't come because you're serving alcohol. I find that very difficult as a Dutch Muslim. Family is very important but they have different norms and values. I always have to make a choice.

As an adult, not celebrating your birthday is not uncommon in the Netherlands. Throwing a party and entertaining guests is usually considered a personal choice. However, tensions arise when not celebrating becomes related to being Muslim.

What's funny about it is that my parents used to think birthdays aren't important. However, since I'm a Muslim and I don't celebrate because of my religion, now it's a big issue and they are very upset that I don't celebrate.

⁹⁶ Asked by God to sacrifice his son but then given a sheep instead.

This is also true for Christian holidays. Practicing Christians are a minority in the Netherlands and most Dutch do not celebrate Christmas or Easter religiously. However, if converts are no longer celebrating these days because of their conversion, many families express feelings of loss, even if this used to be acceptable.

My parents find it somewhat difficult that I don't celebrate the holidays. I used to work so I wasn't with them in any event. Not from a religious point of view; I couldn't because I was working. So I wonder, why all of a sudden is this a problem? Because now I do it consciously? It used to be because I was working. Now it's a conscious choice and they find that difficult. What's the difference? Now I do it for God, maybe that's what's bothering them.

In regard to her research among face-veiling women in the Netherlands, Moors raises the same question. What seems to be the focus in discussions surrounding the face-veil, she argues, is that *Muslim* women engage in this practice (2009c, 406, italics added). The rules of the game seem to change when Muslims are involved,

Whereas authenticity and 'being yourself' has become increasingly valued in mainstream culture they are expected to assimilate. While freedom of expression, both in its discursive and non-discursive forms is emphasized as a central Dutch value, this has to remain within the boundaries set by the majority society. (ibid, 407)

In regard to conversion to Islam, this often translates into suggestions that converts choosing a strict interpretation of Islamic precepts are suffering from "convertites," and are behaving "More Royal than the King" (Roald, 2004, 160, 233, 252, 283-284; 2012, 347, or in Dutch, *roomser dan de paus*).⁹⁷ Towards their families, choosing strict interpretations of Islamic norms, for instance in regard to participating in non-Islamic festivities, is difficult to defend for converts, in particular in light of an increasing number of born Muslims adopting Dutch customs such as celebrating birthdays or decorating a Christmas tree.

Unlike dress, food, drink, and festivities, which, at least partly, take place in the public or social sphere, converts could express their new identity at home in an un-compromised fashion. This, however, was more true for women running their own household than for girls still living with their parents, or for women with husbands who did not share all of their new convictions. Converted girls, while living under their parents' roof,

⁹⁷ I have never heard a participant use the term *convertites* but I have observed converts use it online.

were often restrained in their practice, in particular when they kept their conversion a secret. Even when parents did know, if they did not approve, practicing Islam at home was often difficult. For these women, having their own place was a big step in practicing Islam according to their own convictions. As one of them recalled,

[Getting my own place] it was wonderful! Playing Qur'an [by laptop] really loud, being able to put my Qur'an everywhere, not having to hide it so nobody would see, cooking my own food, it was wonderful, I was really happy.

Some changes at home were made by everyone, most notably those connected to cleanliness. Not wearing shoes inside the house or washing up more often, were frequently mentioned. Many participants decorated their homes with visible signs of being a Muslim, such as framed Qur'an verses or self-made murals, special clocks displaying the proper prayer times, and small tables designed to hold a Qur'an. Behavior in respect to handling the Qur'an changed after conversion. Usually, participants had already bought a Qur'an, or borrowed one from the library, before conversion. Consequently, they treated it as any other book, reading it in bed or at the beach while on holiday. After becoming Muslim, this attitude changed. They would place the book in a safe place and perform a washing before touching it.⁹⁸

For some participants, a considerable change connected to conversion was the notion that listening to music, or playing musical instruments, is considered *haram*, forbidden, in Islam. Women who adopted this opinion, stopped listening to music, with the exception of one type of drum.⁹⁹ Other participants did not entertain such a general prohibition. They sometimes acknowledged that music could divert attention or could be seductive but they did not apply a blanket prohibition, such as this participant:

I don't know if musical instruments are haram or not. I think it's about losing yourself, if it's an obsession that's wrong. I think Islam promotes mediocrity, in the good sense of the word. I suppose that if a woman plays an instrument for others, it could be haram. You try to entertain so seduction is possible. But I'm not saying "you shouldn't play at all" if it brings you joy. But you shouldn't do it to entertain others, it should be

⁹⁸ This washing, which is also conducted before each of the five daily prayers, is called *wu'du*. *Wu'du* involves washing one's feet, hands and underarms, face, mouth, nose, ears, and stroking the hair with wet hands.

⁹⁹ Involuntary listening to music, such as intros of TV shows, in elevators, or stores, is not considered *haram*. For a discussion about the range of viewpoints, see Ottenbeck (2008).

for yourself.

This quote contains all the elements women who considered music *haram* would list when they explained why: listening to music is a way of losing yourself, it can produce feelings that are not necessarily religious in nature, it can be seductive, and diverting attention from worshipping Allah. Islamic songs, *anasheed*, are permitted and some participants were quick to point out that these are a good alternative, as is listening to Qur'an recitation. Some participants married Muslim men sharing this conviction, while others did not.

My husband listened to music so I would turn off the radio. I just turned it off and told him that he couldn't listen to music anymore. It's forbidden, you know. He didn't like that. He told me, "Listen, I didn't force you to wear a headscarf, you shouldn't be forcing me not to listen to music. You don't want to listen but I do. You need to compromise, we can't only do what you want." I said, "But you know it's forbidden by Allah?" So he said, "Just take it easy. Of course, Islam says this and Islam says that, it is forbidden, I know, but you can't do everything right all at once, you need to do it step by step."

Other participants considered listening to or playing music allowed in Islam, provided that it did not transgress other norms, such as decency. Some participants were strict in avoiding listening to music, some were more flexible and noted flexibility in others as well.

Sometimes you are stricter than at other times. I have friends who said, "No music," and a few months later I sat in their car and they turned on the radio. They were in a different flow then and made different choices. I have always listened to music. My children are at an age now that they bring music home. I don't object to it but I do find it important what they're listening to. That they understand what they are hearing. That's where I draw the line: raunchy texts like "sex on the beach," I don't tolerate that kind of lyrics.

The same kind of divisions and ambivalences existed in respect to displaying photographs.¹⁰⁰

Pictures aren't allowed, you know, but when I had my first child, a sister called me and asked how we felt about pictures on baby clothes. I said, "I don't think we are against that." So I got a shirt with a picture of a bear. My husband said, "Of course that's okay", but others think that it's

¹⁰⁰ For a discussion of Islam and visual culture, see Barry Flood (2007).

not right [to have pictures] on baby clothes either. You can take it to great lengths, I'm still finding my way.

Some participants completely abandoned displaying photographs while others did not. The latter reasoned that since pictures are not worshipped they are not *haram* because the prohibition is against the worship of anything other than Allah. As one participant argued,

I recently read that having pictures in the house is forbidden. It would lead to hell. Something like that. Well, that remains to be seen. I don't know. I have a hard time [believing] that. They say that if you have pictures, the angels won't enter your house. Something like that. But I'm not worshipping any photographs. When I pray, I don't see any photos. If that happens, something is wrong with your prayer.

The changes in daily life as a result of the decision to convert as described in this chapter, convey that conversion is not solely a spiritual or intellectual endeavor, but is also embodied as it involves prayer and fasting, changes in dress, diet and drinking habits, and in attitudes regarding cleanliness, joining festivities, interior decoration, and leisure activities. Usually slowly, the women in my research adopted new notions in these areas, pondering and strategizing how to introduce these changes to their non-Muslim social environment, and they showed variation in regard to the interpretation and application of Islamic precepts.

As Tarlo argues about being visibly Muslim in Britain, too, many of the difficulties converts in the Netherlands experience lie in a mismatch between the message they want to convey and the interpretations of their actions by non-Muslim Dutch (ibid, 66, also Moors, 2009a). Largely, participants made the changes as described in this chapter for religious reasons.¹⁰¹ As Zebiri found in the British context, too, when she asked converts about their purpose in life, "the vast majority answered along the lines of: 'To worship God to the best of my ability'" (ibid, 249). However, given the contentious nature in Europe of the practice of veiling, non-Muslims hold different views of this practice, for instance, regarding it as oppressive, unnecessary, and a retreat from women's liberation. This image is so strong that converts often no longer register as Dutch. Unconverted parents, siblings, or children can feel embarrassed when seen with the convert in public.¹⁰² Being visibly Muslim can provoke violence and verbal abuse in the public domain, or it can hinder having a career.

¹⁰¹ Conveying their Islamic identity was also frequently mentioned as a reason for being visibly Muslim.

¹⁰² In most instances, they get used to it after a while and resume public appearances with the convert.

However, in line with my appreciation of conversion as a project of existential reorientation, when Islam became the focal point in the lives of the converts in my research, following Divine rule, even if it caused conflict,¹⁰³ was often deemed most important, also in light of securing a favorable position in the afterlife.

During lectures, the afterlife, *al-akhira*, was often discussed and *taqwa*, awe or fear for Allah, was promoted as a virtue. Good deeds, attendants were told, result in *hasanaat*, divine blessings, that weigh positively in regard to spending the afterlife in heaven, or not.¹⁰⁴ Another key concept in Islam, *sabr* (patience), helped participants to endure negative behavior and most believed they would be rewarded for their patience in life on judgment day, resulting in a better chance to enjoy the afterlife in paradise. This religious discourse was often complimented with a human rights discourse. For instance, women argued that since they did not impede on other people's freedoms, than why would their right to dress as they wished be denied to them? Or with the emancipatory discourse of a "woman's right to choose."¹⁰⁵ In light of the personal yet also public nature of women's struggles to practice Islam according to their convictions, I conclude this chapter with a short review of some of the shortcomings of the privatization of religion thesis.

There does not seem to be a convergence between the individualization of religion, reflected in the choices and strategies of the converts in my research, and the privatization of religion thesis as there is a highly contested publicness embedded in these choices. Thomas Luckmann is a well-known proponent of the privatization of religion thesis. His contribution to a 1998 conference on conversion to Islam¹⁰⁶ describes the religious situation in Europe as "marked by privatization, marginalization of the traditional Christian form of religion, and structural cementing of increased options for individual bricolage" (1999, 251). He argues that "in modern, pluralistic societies, contacts between groups are not formally limited by law, *nor effectively restrained by social norms and custom,*" as there is a pervasive sense that most decisions, even those

¹⁰³ With others, such as family or friends, not with the law. Muslims, I was told during several lectures, are obliged to follow the law of the land in which they are living. If practicing Islam is restricted or impossible, emigration should be considered. The Netherlands, a country in which the right to practice Islam is secured by law, is generally viewed as having favorable conditions for being a Muslim minority.

¹⁰⁴ It was believed that if someone committed a bad deed toward you, it would add to your *hasanaat* and would take away from that person's *hasanaat*. If that person would not have any *hasanaat* left, their bad deed towards you takes away some of your bad deeds that are now upon their conscience and part of the judgment against them.

¹⁰⁵ For instance (converted) Muslim women who thought headscarves were not mandatory, nevertheless, supported the fight against the so called "burqa-ban" which would have made wearing a face-veil illegal.

¹⁰⁶ Held at the Catholic University in Louvain-la-Neuve (1998).

concerning one's religious status and affiliation, are optional (1999, 253, italics added). Indeed, there is no Dutch law prohibiting conversion but when conversion to Islam becomes visible by way of dress, both converts and their non-Muslim families do worry about the social implications and fear the reactions and opinions of their social circles.

Many converts I met in the course of my research struggled with the relationships with their parents precisely because they felt restraints in the realm of social norms and customs. They feared the rejection of the choices they made in the context of conversion and dreaded disappointing their loved ones. For instance, one of the prospective converts I met, explained to me that she hesitated to take the step of saying the *shahada*. She already practiced several Islamic precepts but had not converted. When I asked what exactly was holding her back, she explained that her parents owned a butcher shop. She had assisted them since her high school years and could not find it in her heart to tell them that she could no longer eat their meat because it was not *halal*. Parents also did not feel their daughters conversion to be particularly private as they often struggled to accept the public declaration of Muslimness represented by their daughter's headscarf.

In light of this publicness and women's commitment to incorporate Islamic practices in their daily lives, I agree with Roeland *et al*'s questioning of Luckmann's privatization of religion thesis. Drawing attention to an emphasis on purity they found among young Dutch New Agers, Evangelicals, and Muslim alike,¹⁰⁷ they argue that,

It is clear that these religious purification processes do not entail the strictly personal, ephemeral, uncommitted, and superficial religiosities emphasized in the Luckmann legacy. They do, after all, not so much entail moves *away* from established religious traditions and institutions to *less* committing positions, but rather moves *beyond* these to *more* committing ones. (2010, 297)

In her research among young Muslim women in Norway, Jacobson comes to a similar assessment.

The commitment to an ethics of personal authenticity and autonomy was evident not least from the way they spoke about their individual 'religious careers'. The young women conceived of themselves as in a position of choice vis-à-vis the Islamic tradition. In their narratives of how they had come to practice Islam, they insisted on the fact that they themselves had desired and chosen to know more about the religious

¹⁰⁷ In this thesis, this emphasis on purity will be addressed in more detail in chapter 6.

tradition, to wear or not to wear the hijab, to pray five times a day, and so forth. ... To have made a 'choice' was seen to secure the legitimacy of religious practice as a true sign of obedience to Allah, to be distinguished from obedience that emerged rather from social conformity or pressure, unreflexive traditional practice and acceptance of the authority of parents or imams. 'Choice' was thus constructed as intrinsic to their moral agency as Muslims; 'obeying Allah' was an act of faithfulness and worship only to the extent that it was 'willed'. But choice was also constructed as necessary for the individual to stay 'truthful to themselves'. For instance, the hijab, while acknowledged to be a practice geared at shaping a self that is 'working for God', was also assessed in terms of an ethics of personal authenticity and autonomy, as an expression of 'who I am', and 'who I choose to be.' (2011, 76)

Autonomy and authenticity were similarly emphasized among my interlocutors and women detested the suggestion that they had converted or wore *hijab* because of their husband.¹⁰⁸ However, expressions of "who I am" and "who I choose to be" are not forged in isolation but also take shape through social interaction. As Roeland *et al* argue as well, in the Netherlands, religion is not so much withered away but transformed in its organizational forms, online and offline (ibid, 298-299). Therefore, attention for pious sociality, such as I found within the Muslim women's groups in my research, is an indispensable addition when discussing contemporary conversion to Islam. In his discussion of the non-secular sociality produced by the Egyptian piety movement as described by Mahmood (2005) and Hirschkind (2006), Anderson, too, argues that a sole focus on ethical selfhood shifts theoretical emphasis away from the production of ethical communality (2011, 7). For my interlocutors, the formation of, and participation in Muslim women's groups produced such an ethical communality. This will be examined in more detail in the next chapter.

¹⁰⁸ See also Tarlo and Moors (2013, 8-9).