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

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## Chapter 5

### Aspirations and Ambiguities

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Throughout this thesis, I have emphasized the importance of positive social contacts with other Muslims as an inspiration for potential converts to consider becoming Muslim themselves. Usually, the example of born Muslims sparked an initial curiosity to learn more about the substance of Islam. Socializing with converted Muslimas helped prospective converts to gain confidence that possible obstacles in the process of becoming Muslim, such as having a non-Muslim family, or opposition from one's non-Muslim social circle to the decision to convert, could be addressed and, to some degree, managed. Nevertheless, to find their way among the diverse practices of Islam among Muslims world-wide was, by all accounts, a challenge. In the process of learning how to apply Islamic precepts to one's daily life and to be able to explain or defend one's choices to family and friends, the acquiring of "reliable knowledge" (*betrouwbare kennis*) was of paramount importance to most of the converts I met.

As explained in chapter two, there is a bias in my research in that all participants, although to considerably varying degrees, attended lectures and other types of women's gatherings that were primarily dedicated to the sharing and acquiring of knowledge about (practicing) Islam. However, judging from the variety of women attending these events, extrapolating from their presence in other settings (e.g., Internet forums) and existing research about conversion, it seems that most converts are engaged in a personal search of how to best practice their new religion rather than blindly emulating the example of the born Muslim(s) who initially stimulated their interest.

Over time, born Muslims were often increasingly viewed by the converts in my research to adhere to specific, regional versions of Islam. These versions require critical engagement, the women believe, in order to avoid duplicating and perpetuating practices that cannot be verified by authoritative scriptural sources such as the Qur'an and the *hadith* (cf. Bourque, 2006). Rather than adhering to "Turkish" or "Moroccan" Islam, often named since these two groups comprise the largest number of Muslims in the Netherlands, most converts in my research tended to look for a "pure" Islam, as they, gradually, learned to distinguish between

various Muslim practices, and learned to label some of these practices “cultural.” They shared this aspiration with the born Muslimas visiting the women’s groups. Born in the Netherlands where the practice of Islam varies among Muslims of different backgrounds, in many regards, they considered themselves to be in the same predicament, vis-à-vis their families as converted Muslimas when they decided to practice their religion differently from the tradition of their parents (cf. De Koning, 2008; Mandaville, 2001).

To capture the diversity of participants and to outline the problems converts and born Muslimas encountered when aspiring towards a “culture-free” Islam, Baumann’s observations in Southall, London (1996) are, again, useful. As a multicultural neighborhood, Baumann explains, Southall was home to various Muslim *communities*. This heterogeneity of the Southall Muslim *community*, he argues, “is in ethnological terms, just a reflection of the fact that Islam...has expanded to the most diverse parts of the globe. Its spread has established a global *community* of believers that is held by no common bond save its internally all but uniform religious observances” (ibid, 122-23). He goes on to argue that,

Muslim Southallians are thus members of a global *community*, but that *community* is one of faith, and its bounds far exceed the horizons of any one *culture* or any one person’s cross-cultural competence. By the same token, they are members of a local Muslim *community*, which again is not co-extensive with their own ethnic or reified *culture*. In regional cases such as these, it is easy to see that Muslims...are members of religiously defined *communities*, yet that much of the social life by which they perform and re-create their culture relies upon the mutual independent cleavages of language, regional background, national loyalties, class, and other factors that cut across boundaries of all *communities* as the dominant discourse would have them defined. (ibid, 125-26)

In short, as Baumann puts forward, for Muslims in a multi-cultural environment, in the case of my research in Amsterdam-West, the disengagement of the equations between *culture* and *community* proceeds in two ways. “One results from the vast cultural variety within this local *community*, the other from the global spread of the multicultural *community* or ‘*umma* of Muslim believers” (ibid, 126). Between this local and global dimension of Muslimness, the women in my research also experienced a transnational dimension, especially the women who were married, as the married converts’ husbands or in-laws came from a wide variety of Muslim majority countries. In order to elaborate on these local,

transnational, and global influences on learning how to practice Islam, I will address the ways in which the converts in my research dealt with the paradox that Islam represents a single religion while Muslims interpret and practice Islam differently.<sup>149</sup> This circumstance inevitably raised questions about authority and from whom to accept knowledge. Furthermore, for any practice of Islamic precepts to be considered authentic and, hence, religiously valid, the practice, it was said again and again at the various meetings I attended, had to be performed with the “right intention,” that is, it had to be for God and not for anyone or anything else. This circumstance led to highly personal ways of practicing Islam within the boundaries of the possibilities in each woman’s everyday life. The interplay between the abstraction “Islam,” women’s ideals about the practice of their new religion, and the struggles in their everyday lives to live up to these ideals, will be addressed in this chapter, too, as well as women’s quest for a “deculturalized” practice of Islam.

## 5.1 Globalization, Translocality, and the Local Practice of Islam

In the previous chapter, I touched on the oscillation between unifying tendencies, exemplified in the concept of Islamic sisterhood, and fragmenting tendencies such as thick notions of ethnic difference, that characterized the local women’s groups. In addition, there were also differences between groups, and between individual participants within these groups, about the question of how to best practice Islam. This circumstance was amplified by a societal context in which Muslims are a minority. In the Netherlands, there is no prevalent Islamic school of law, there are no state-sanctioned rules Muslims are obliged to follow, Islamic holidays are private events, and the multi-ethnic background of the Muslim population means that various forms of practicing Islam exist side by side. A convert’s defense of their new practices to non-Muslim relatives or others, especially when women adopted practices that are controversial in the Dutch context such as wearing long headscarves, face veils, or refraining from shaking hands with the opposite sex, was often complicated by this diversity. As one participant commented:

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<sup>149</sup> Citing Bryan S. Turner, Eickelman (1981, 204) states that the lack of a common core of Islamic dogma can possibly be addressed by differentiating between “*orthopraxy*, the ‘commonality of practice and ritual,’ rather than *orthodoxy*, the ‘commonality of belief.’” However, he recognizes that this formula, too, has its limitations.

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

Islam is a world religion and its adherents consider themselves to belong to the world *community* of Muslims, the *ummah*. As Anderson argues, long before the Internet emerged as a means to communicate and interact globally, Muslims participated in this global *community*, which was "imaginable largely through the medium of a sacred language and written script" (1991, 13).<sup>150</sup> Nevertheless, there is a difference between the abstract, unified global *ummah*, and local understandings of the *ummah* as there is much variation among Muslims world-wide. As Schmidt, in regard to her research among young Muslims in the US, Sweden, and Denmark, argues,

The *ummah* is, above all, an idea or vision: The conviction to take part in a border-crossing community that includes believers worldwide and raises ambitions for what believers *ought* to be – unified, innately connected, characterized by profound mutual loyalty and the practice of high moral standards. (2005, 577)

This gap between the vision of unity and division in practice did not go unnoticed by research participants and the idea of unity of the Muslim *ummah* should not be confused with uniformity (Kalin, 2011). In fact, for some participants, divisions within the *ummah* led to disillusionment in the ideals of sisterhood. When I asked the volunteer of group two, who persistently advocated sisterhood in her lectures, what "being sisters in Islam" meant to her, she answered,

I'm thinking of what the *hadiths* say [the example of the prophet Mohammed], that's one thing. I'm also thinking of my experiences, that's another thing. The *hadiths* clearly say: sisterhood and brotherhood is the same thing. Muslims should be like a single body, or like the stones of a structure, supporting each other. But people are quick to judge. Simple *hadiths* such as, "Among the best of you are those who give food" or "Among the best of you are those who give the *salaam*" [i.e., greet each other]. People don't practice that anymore. ... I became

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<sup>150</sup> Exemplified, for instance, in the greeting *as-salamu aleikum*, prayer, or the Qur'an.

a Muslim twenty-three years ago and then it was never asked, “What is your doctrine? In what mosque do you pray? Which scholars do you follow?” It was all about coming together.

This variation within the *ummah* while Islam represents for Muslims a single religion, can be addressed, as Mandaville suggests, by viewing Islam as a *master signifier*.<sup>151</sup> He explains, “I take this to mean that Islam does not refer to a specific set of beliefs or practices, but rather that it functions as a totalising abstraction through which meaning and discourse can be organized” (2001, 55). I agree that this approach is more appropriate to address variation among Muslims than to view variation as “multiple Islams.” As Mandaville argues, “[t]o speak of ‘Islams’ is to be haunted by a sense of boundaries; it gives the impression that there is some point where one Islam leaves off and another picks up. I prefer to think of Islam as something far more fluid” (ibid, 56). Following Edward Said (1984, 226), instead of addressing variation by the pluralization “Islams,” Mandaville puts forward to regard Islam as a “traveling theory.” The motion captured by this conceptualization is particularly suited to address the interplay between the reified images of Muslimness and Dutchness among Muslims and non-Muslims in the Netherlands, and the hybrid conditions characterizing the everyday lives of participants. As Mandaville puts it, it allows for thinking about the politics of translocal space where “meanings are transplanted and rearticulated from one context to another” (ibid, 90).<sup>152</sup>

Mandaville goes on to explain that Said identifies four stages common to traveling theories: there is a point of origin, the act of traveling, encounter, and transformation. The origin is a starting point “where a set of ideas are first elaborated or enter discourse.” In the case of Islam this can refer to both the sociocultural contexts of the countries from which diasporic Muslims originate as well as “the mythical period of early Medina.” This point is particularly salient in respect to the converted Muslimas I met in the course of my research. Since they were not diasporic Muslims but converted to Islam in the Netherlands, they did not take the particular regional practice of Islam of born Muslim immigrants

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<sup>151</sup> Mandaville follows here Bobby Sayyid’s suggestion to view Islam as a *master signifier*: “The master signifier functions as the most abstract principle by which any discursive space is totalized. In other words, it is not that a discursive horizon is established by a coalition of nodal points [e.g. ‘Islamic’ practices], but rather by the use of a signifier that represents the totality of that structure” (1997,47).

<sup>152</sup> Mandaville understands the concept of translocality primarily as “the ways in which people flow *through* space rather than about how they exist *in* space. It is therefore a quality characterized by *movement*” (ibid, 6). “That which ‘is’ in one place elsewhere becomes undone, translated, reinscribed; this is the nature of translocality: a cultural politics of *becoming*” (ibid, 84). He also cites Appadurai’s conception of the translocal (1996) as “the space that bridges *place*, a ‘dwelling-in-traveling’” (ibid, 98).

as their model. Often, they tapped into the Islamic Revival narrative of the “true” practice of Islam based in the time of the prophet Mohammed and his companions, without necessarily realizing the politics of this phrasing, that is, using the vernacular of so called “Salafists.”

For converted Muslimas, it is an appealing narrative. The first Muslim convert was a woman, *Khadidja*, the first wife of the prophet Mohammed and the early Muslims faced much opposition, also within their own families, and had to make sacrifices, for instance, reduced possibilities for economic prosperity. This imagery strongly resonated with the experiences of many converts in my research and provided a framework for coping with the problems they faced as a result of their conversion. The sociocultural context of their spouses, of course, did influence their practice of Islam, too, but not to the extent that women would adopt practices they deemed to be un-Islamic. Those practices were called “cultural Islam.” For instance, many women in my research had adopted the opinion that the Qur’an verse that calls for women to cover their “beauty” means that covering one’s hair is mandatory for a Muslima.<sup>153</sup> The same Qur’an verse, however, also lists a series of exemptions from this rule, among them one’s father-in-law. One participant, therefore, refused to follow the custom of her female in-laws to cover themselves when in the presence of even close relatives. When she was on holiday in Morocco, the following incident happened:

My brother-in-law came home late and had forgotten his key. He rang the bell and we had to go get the key from my father-in-law, who was already sleeping. I went without a headscarf because my father-in-law is like my father. The wife of the locked out brother-in-law was with me, we were both without headscarves. We knocked on the door [of the bedroom] together but when the door was opened, she ran away. I looked around to see where she had gone. There I was, alone, trying in broken language to explain. Luckily he understood what I was trying to say and got the key. I was really angry at her so I asked why she had just left me there while I can’t speak the language. She lives there! She replied that it was because she wasn’t wearing a headscarf. Say what?! Doesn’t she know that you don’t have to wear a headscarf in front of your father-in-law? Big discussion, you know. She argued against it, that it wasn’t allowed. Well, that’s culture.

She continued,

We were sitting in the living room one day when my father-in-law came in, everyone put on their headscarves. I didn’t. Period. I follow Islam and

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<sup>153</sup> See sura An-Nur 24: 31.

this is Islam. Period. I'm not following your culture. That won't help me on the Day of Judgment. My father-in-law said I was right. That I was right, you know. He knows it, and even if he would think it's weird, I would still leave my headscarf off because otherwise I would do it for him. That doesn't make sense. That is not what Islam is about.

The second stage is the act of traveling itself, as Mandaville explains in the context of Islam, through "migrant communities, exiled intellectuals, transnational publishing houses or electronic media" (ibid, 85). This adequately describes the increased opportunities in the Netherlands to become acquainted with Islam and Muslims I observed in my research. Since positive social contacts with born Muslims, in most instances, sparked the first interest in Islam, and women subsequently went to bookstores and libraries, and were offered books by Muslims, too, transnational publishing houses certainly helped prospective converts to get a grasp on what being Muslim could be about. During the past decades, electronic media, too, particularly the Internet, played an extensive role in their explorations and became a means for converts to become organized, ask questions, share stories, and bridge distances.

The third phase of a traveling theory consists of encountering "a set of conditions which mediates its acceptance, rejection or modification in a new time and place" (ibid). This not only refers to encounters with the European and North-American societies in which Muslims settled, but also to the encounters with the "Muslim other," and with competing interpretations of Islam. This circumstance was clearly recognizable in my research, for instance in participants' quest for "reliable knowledge." Language barriers, common experiences such as having adopted Islam later in life, or having a non-Muslim family, inspired the volunteers of the women's groups to organize activities for converts. Although there were many similarities with the born Muslimas frequenting these activities, their circumstance of being converted Muslimas meant that they shared questions, obstacles, and trajectories and they were highly interested in hearing each other's stories. Recommendations they gave to each other reflected common Dutch pedagogic styles: open communication with your parents, involving them in your life, explaining the transformation as best as possible.

The fourth and final stage is transformation, as Mandaville argues, into "a 'new Islam', often invested with a greater critical capacity and a sense of its own contingency" (ibid, 85).<sup>154</sup> In the context of my research, transformation took place within the women's groups as they taught each other and learned from each other. Often, new converts had similar

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<sup>154</sup> For instance, sparked by intergenerational conflict or Muslims' minority status.

questions: How to tell one's parents? How to learn how to pray? How to introduce wearing a headscarf? These questions and other issues concerning the "basics of conversion" were addressed, rehearsed, explained, and shared, over and over again. Women who had not converted yet or women who had recently converted, socialized with women who had converted sometimes decades ago, as well as with born Muslimas. As a consequence, attendants' knowledge and understanding of the precepts of Islam differed widely. Although some women told me that after they had learned the basics themselves, they were slightly bored to hear them over and over again, at the same time, they felt it was a good thing to keep rehearsing them. Since the precepts were not ingrained in the converts from an early age, it was easy to forget what one had learned. As one participant explained:

[Shortly after her conversion] I had a need for asking questions, endlessly asking questions, and for getting answers. First in regard to the rituals, "How do you do this?" And, with everything, "Why do you need to do it like this?" You need to know the [scriptural] sources and the explanation. I soon realized that my in-laws had [added] a big cultural aspect to it [Islam]. I could ask them questions but the answer was that "They had always done it like that" or "That's how I learned it" or "I don't exactly know." I'm a very curious person, an intellectual, rational. I don't take people's word for it. Proof please! If they explained things to me, I would look for proof, "Where does it say so? And, "Where does it say so in Arabic?" so I can show it to them [her in-laws were Arabic-speaking]. I wanted to show them when they were wrong. Like, "Hey guys, that's not how it's done, you're making a mistake."

Coming back later in the interview to the subject of acquiring knowledge and passing it on to one's children, she explained how she avoided taking customs for granted as "Islam" by going back to the basics every now and then.

I realize how important it is that I not only go after new knowledge but that I bring myself back to the basics over and over again, taking a step back. The base is there so now I more often look for the details. But regularly, I have to go back to the very first basics [I learned and ask myself], "I know it has to be done like this, but why?"

These four stages Mandaville identified as characteristic of "traveling Islam" are not meant to be applied as a linear model. The "point of origin," for example, remains flexible as converts married other converts, born Muslim husbands who were born and raised in the Netherlands, first generation immigrants, as well as "import grooms"

whom they had met online or on holiday in a Muslim majority country. The stage of “traveling” is an ongoing phenomenon, too. The publishing of books about Islam in English and Dutch has enormously proliferated during the past decade and the Internet has become an ever greater source of influence. For instance, over the course of my research, Facebook gradually became an important medium to communicate offline activities. It also became a means of forming transnational communities of women who immigrated to Muslim majority countries or to advertise women’s businesses. It is safe to say that the “encountering” phase has not transpired either, as the Dutch “Islam debate” continues. For instance, when I started my research, several participants wore the *nikaab* (face veil). At the end of my research, none of them did. As the conditions which mediated the acceptance or rejection of wearing a *nikaab*, in the context of a contentious political debate, shifted towards an extreme public aggression towards women wearing the garment (Moors, 2009a), they had either shifted to another type of veil or they had left the Netherlands. The “transformation” of Islam as encompassing all the variations of Muslim life existing in the Netherlands cannot be considered a finished project either. However, as Mandaville puts forward, there is another reason the model is not linear and rather resembles a circle: reformulated interpretations of religion can travel back to their points of origin (ibid, 85-86).

The circular nature of the processes of travel, encounter, and transformation were clearly visible when participants traveled to the Muslim majority countries of which their husbands or in-laws came from. This went beyond refusing to follow customs or traditions deemed by converts to be un-Islamic, converts also actively influenced the born Muslims they encountered, in the Netherlands as well as abroad. For instance, some of the participants believed it to be mandatory to wear socks during prayer, leaving only the hands and face uncovered. One of them told me she had convinced her mother-in law to change her habit of praying with bare feet,

In Morocco, I asked [my mother-in-law] “Do you have socks?” She didn’t understand. “Socks? It’s such hot weather! Why do you want socks?” I told her I wanted to pray wearing socks. She didn’t understand so I explained to her where it is said that feet should be covered. I told her what I had read, and now my mother-in-law, too, wears socks while praying.

Although the question of how to approach different practices of Islam among in-laws varied, the influence of converts’ book-knowledge was detectable in many stories. Compare the story of this participant with the

story above. Although the particular practice of wearing socks during prayer was unimportant to her, her book-knowledge of prayer became influential among her in-laws. She explained during our interview that she had learned the Islamic prayers from a book by the converted Dutch Muslim Abdulwahid van Bommel. Subsequently, she became the “expert” within her husband’s family.

Real Islam, let’s say “from-the-books-Islam,” I don’t have much of that [with the in-laws]. Funny enough, my personal process of becoming conscious of Islam has been spreading around. All Glory to Allah, not to me, but the stimulus came from me. Eventually, my husband began to practice [Islam]. Not right away, about two years after I had started with [the book of] Van Bommel. My mother-in-law always did the prayers but the children and grandchildren largely didn’t. Now it has become common in the family to pray. Most of my husband’s brothers and sisters pray, their spouses, the younger generation of nieces and nephews. That’s very nice. Many nieces who are now in their twenties, have learned how to pray from me. Very funny! For instance, they came to me during Ramadan for extra prayers. Since I had Van Bommel and his book also contains special prayers, we did those. That was very nice. I could transmit my knowledge, that was very special and it reinforced my own faith.

She then mentioned her mother-in-law and explained why she did not comment on what were commonly perceived as mistakes during her mother-in-law’s prayers:

My mother-in-law always wears short sleeves during prayer. Thousands of times people have commented on that. It wasn’t a problem in the past. No one was bothered, these were her daily clothes and she prayed in them. So what. But people are now more involved in Islam, they read books and say, “Granny, you should cover your arms,” while granny is like, “Pfff, I’ve always done it like that, what a hassle,” and I agree. Let the woman pray with short sleeves. I really don’t think Allah will not accept her prayer because of that. Let’s focus on what’s important: the woman still prays even though she’s in her eighties. She does the *wu’du* [ritual washing]. [Yet] she does not recite *al-Fatiha* [the opening verse of the Qur’an] without mistakes either. Maybe she doesn’t know anymore, maybe she never knew, she has not been to school you know, but I think, “It’s about her intention” and her intention is so beautiful and so pure. Even though she is very ill, she does her prayers.

When we discussed the renewed interest in the practice of Islam among her in-laws some more, she continued,

I think the satellite dishes were an enormous impetus because of all these channels with preaching going on. I think that played a big role in people's consciousness. In Tunisia, prayer used to be something for older people, for when you're over forty and have raised a family. Or for when you had been on *hadj* [pilgrimage to Mecca], then you prayed. Now, you see that it is alive among the youth as well. Gaining knowledge became more important, also in that regard. That's usually not book-knowledge but TV-knowledge, that's really different. And of course the Internet. But even then, you see the increase is in a search for YouTube videos, storytelling, not that much reading. Perhaps that's also traditionally the culture, storytelling, not so much reading. Also, until recently, there weren't that many religious books in Tunisia. So the fact that I have a book, they think, "Okay, that's the way to do it and what granny does that's questionable if she can't even recite *Al-Fatiha*." I think that's the crux: it's in a book so that means they know how it should be done, that's a learned person. That's nice, our Abdulwahid!<sup>155</sup>

She did not teach anyone to cover their feet for prayer. When I asked her about it, she replied,

That means nothing to me. I find that nonsense. Look, there are different schools of law and they are all good. I don't follow a school of law, I follow my heart. That simple. I find it all nitpicking. Five pillars [of Islam] that's important. If you follow that, you can't go wrong. That's my view. Whether you pray with socks, or, like my mother-in-law, without them... I do think it makes a difference when I, with the knowledge I have, fully knowing, would pray with bare arms, I think that would diminish my prayer. But my mother-in-law? Give me a break. She doesn't know, and you can say it to her a hundred times, but I don't want to do that. I don't like wagging my finger: this is how it should be done. Perhaps that [wagging the finger] is typically Dutch, I don't know if you've heard that before, but I don't like it at all.

With this selection of participants' stories about their encounters with their in-laws' practice of Islam and, often, critical stance towards practices they could not verify with scriptural sources, I aim to show that becoming Muslim, in many ways, involved a highly personal search of how Islam should be practiced. As this search took place within an

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<sup>155</sup> The book by Van Bommel was rejected by some of the other participants in my research who claimed it contained errors.

environment that is highly diverse in terms of practices Muslims name “Islam,” converts as well as young born Muslims in the Netherlands need to make choices about what they accept as authoritative while constantly checking their motives to be sure they meet the demand to practice “with the right intention” (i.e., for God and from the heart). In the next section, I will take a closer look at how the search for “reliable knowledge,” as learning about Islam was often phrased, was pursued by individual participants and within the local women’s meetings in Amsterdam.

## **5.2 Authority and Authenticity: the Search for *Reliable Knowledge***

All women’s groups in my research shared certain characteristics. Attendants were from multi-ethnic backgrounds, participants and the volunteers organizing the meetings did not follow or advocate a particular Islamic school of law, they were suspicious of culturally colored Islamic practices, all groups conducted their activities in Dutch and all volunteers believed it was important that Muslim women, born and converted, became more knowledgeable about their religion. But there were differences as well. The volunteers of four of the five groups advocated to practice Islam strictly within established Islamic jurisprudence and were against any “new additions” to practicing Islam, called *bid’a*.<sup>156</sup> As Jouili *et al* (2006) found in Germany and France,

For these women both a reflexive *and* also an affirmative engagement with religious authorities constitutes a necessary condition for the acquisition and circulation of religious knowledge and for processes of incorporating piety, which the women deem central for their self-understanding as Muslims. (ibid, 619, italics in the original)

Similar to my research, they found that the women they interviewed, while being sensitive to their own empowerment, did not necessarily want to “renew” Islam but rather preferred to stay inside the consensus of established orthodoxy (ibid, 632). Women affiliated with group three, on the other hand, explicitly endorsed diversity and individuality, avoiding any prescriptive approach to the practice of Islam. In this respect they differed from the other groups.

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<sup>156</sup> “Bid’a is a term in Islamic doctrine that refers to unwarranted innovations, beliefs, or practices for which there was no precedent at the time of the Prophet, and which are therefore best avoided” (Mahmood, ibid, 87).

In the early 1990's, group one became the first local alternative for some converts frequenting meetings of group three. Until then, group three was one of few, perhaps the only, local Dutch language women's group. Group one attracted participants seeking a stricter and more unified interpretation of Islam. To elaborate on this split-up, and participants' opinions about the differences between the approaches of these women's groups, here are three stories about groups one and three. The first story is by a participant who frequented meetings of group three and also visited some of the meetings of group one. The second participant started at group three but then switched to group one. The third story was told by a participant attending meetings of both groups at the time of our interview.

I asked my husband about things but he said "I don't know, you should find out for yourself." I didn't understand why he acted like that. In hindsight, I think it was a strategy. He thought I should find out for myself. Also, at the time, he didn't practice Islam so maybe he really didn't know, or forgot about it, I don't know, but I really went my own way. ... I liked the meetings [of group three] very much and looked forward to them. I counted the days till their journal would arrive. If it was late, I felt like an addict: going up and down the stairs to see if it was delivered yet. It was that important to me. At first, I was a visitor but after a while I wanted to make sure that I could always go [to their meetings]. At the time, I had not come out of the closet as a Muslim to my family. When there was a birthday or something I couldn't say, "I have to go to a meeting." So then I became a volunteer. That was easier to explain to others. ... I also went to [a meeting of group one]. I wanted to put my image of them to the test. Have an informed opinion. So I went a few times but I felt suffocated, out of place. I really didn't like it. This was forbidden and that was forbidden. It was much too formal for my taste. They made me feel I had to do it their way in order to belong. With [group three], I have always felt I can be who I am, I can do it the way I want to, I can question what I want, I can say whatever I want. I liked the diversity, there were all kinds of women. I still feel very connected to them, I think that's for life.

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I started at [group three]. However, and I told them honestly, I felt they repeated themselves. I didn't feel like I progressed so I told them, "I quit and this is the reason why." Perhaps it was also because of my age [she became Muslim at 45], it was too modern for my taste. Then I went to [a mosque] for a number of years. That was really nice, I liked it there. However, disputes broke out, board members came and went, there was always some trouble. My husband suggested [group one], it was closer

to home and it appealed to me. Everyone should decide for themselves but I wanted to know more, I still strongly feel that way [at age 63]: I don't need to be the best but I want to make the best of it for myself. When I stand before God, should I say "Sorry, I didn't know?" I don't want that to happen.

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He [her Muslim boyfriend she met at school] fasted [during the month of Ramadan] but when I asked him why, he didn't know. Questions about fasting, other questions, he didn't know. He gave me information from [group three]. When I read it, I thought it was really interesting. There was a phone number so I called them and went to a meeting. I didn't know what I was doing there. I had questions but I didn't know what kind of questions. But there were books and women I could talk to. I really liked that. ... [After she said the *shahada*,] I kept going there and last year, during Ramadan, I also went to [group one]. In the beginning [1980's], the sisters from [group one] were together with [group three]. Later they split up. But I come for the lectures, I greet the sisters, I talk to everyone. I feel at home everywhere. If I have a day off, I look at what's going on and if I can make it, I'll go.

These three excerpts are good examples of what I generally found in my research: some of the women were mostly committed to one of the five groups, there were women who, along their trajectories as new Muslims, switched from one group to another, and there was a large group of women who mostly based their choices on what was available, what suited their agendas, or lecture topics that were of interest to them. However, my research confirmed the findings of Jouili *et al* that Muslimas who critically engage with the sacred texts and claim the right to re-interpret these sources, as can be found among the women participating in group three, are a minority. They found that,

The majority of individual Muslim women or women's associations opt for a much more accommodative stand towards mainstream Islam and its established authorities. While their effort to instruct more and more Muslim women in Islamic knowledge is also obviously a struggle for female empowerment, within these organizations, the women quite consistently insist on the necessity of leaving the right of interpreting the texts to the '*ulama*' [religious scholars]. (ibid, 632)

However, this observation does not address different interpretations between various scholars, further complicating converts' search for "reliable knowledge." As the differences between (Sunni) scholars are

often about the details of Islamic practice, it took time before converts were able to recognize these differences.

[As a new convert] I began attending the lectures of [group one]. In those days, the lectures were really black and white: this is the right way to practice. I needed that. I wanted certainty, the straight path. That really appealed to me. Later on, over the years, I found out there are different opinions among different scholars. At first, I was shocked. I really thought, “Oh my God, there goes my certainty! What is this?” Eventually, you learn how to deal with it, and I understand it, but I was very glad that, at first, I was offered certainty. I really needed that.

When I asked a current volunteer of group one, who helped women with learning how to pray and addressed questions from women with an interest in Islam, converts, and born Muslimas, how she had learned how to do that, she replied,

In a way it comes quite natural. In a way that’s the reason we’re all birds of a feather here. Why are the majority [of women] here Dutch Muslimas? By “birds of a feather” I mean that you seek recognition. Everyone has her unique story but there are things everyone recognizes. If you have experienced it yourself, it’s quite natural to support someone else. You recognize it and you can see, well, these steps are still in front of you. It’s grateful work but it also comes natural to help because you recognize yourself in certain situations. I always like that.

When I asked her how she explained the different interpretations among scholars, the different ways in which Muslims practice, and what she based her answers on, she replied,

The Qur’an and *Sunna* [the transmitted example of the prophet Mohammed] are the base. About schools of law, if people have questions about that, I can say that in principle, you know, there are four schools of law and we accept all four. The founders [of the law schools], the four great imams, what they put together was all good. In that regard, in its inception, we accept all of it. You can also say, “I follow this school, I choose this way above another,” that’s possible. However, over time, some followers have been too fanatic about the law schools. So fanatic that they excluded others. Like, “Oh you’re a *Maliki* [one of the law schools is named after imam *Malik*] so you can’t marry a *Hanafi* [a follower of the law school named after imam *Abu Hanifa*].” It goes that far. That’s not good, of course, and that has not been the objective of the founders. Generally, that’s the explanation.

The four law schools mainly differ in the details of practice, for instance in regard to prayer. When I told her I had observed small differences, as in whether or not to raise your hands at certain moments during the prayer, or where to put your hands, she continued,

Yes. Often, when you study it, for instance the book by sheikh Albani is a good one because he puts all these nuances next to each other, it turns out that there are different possibilities. That is often the case with details, raising your hands here or there, or not. People make it too difficult, they make an issue about a detail. For instance, the *adhaan* [call to prayer] can be done three different ways. Almost nobody knows that. If you would hear it done differently [than you are used to], you would immediately think “That is wrong.” While if you have the proper knowledge, you would know, this is correct, too. That’s allowed, too. That is a danger and also a complaint of the great scholars of our time. They say, “Many youngsters read one book and they think they know everything. Then they immediately start criticizing everyone else if they hear something unfamiliar.” That’s a huge negative. Then you take the law into your own hands and that creates confusion.

Writing about globalization and the politics of religious knowledge, Mandaville offers a useful reminder in light of the varied sources (e.g., born Muslims, books, the Internet, the volunteers of the women’s groups, etc.) that converts turn to in their search for how to best practice Islam.

...globalization does not in and of itself instantiate a pluralization of Islamic authority insofar as there has never existed a situated, singular source of authentic Muslim knowledge. Rather, globalization can be seen to represent a further shift in the extent and intensity of debate about the meaning and nature of the authoritative in Islam. (2007, 102)

In his article *Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge*, Mandaville discusses three current forms of pluralization of Islamic authority. First, a functional pluralization, changes in terms of how individual Muslims understand the social purpose and ends of knowledge seeking. Second, a spatial pluralization, changes in terms of how far away and in what kinds of spaces Muslims seek authority or authorization. Third, there is an increasingly pluralistic mediatization of Islamic authority, which changes the terms of the textual forms and personified figures through which Muslims seek authority (ibid, 103). In congruence with the findings of Jouili *et al* in Germany and France, and my observations in the Netherlands, Mandaville warns that,

It is important not to equate the spatial pluralization of authority with resistance to traditional authority per se. While the spatial boundaries of authoritative discourse may, to some extent, find themselves disrupted by the technologies of globalization, such re-spatialized normativities do not in and of themselves always constitute a critical orientation towards knowledge. Rather, they simply render more complex and diffuse the relationship between proximity and authority – providing opportunities and openings for intervention by a diverse and geographically disparate range of interlocutors (some pursuing ‘progressive’ agendas, others seeking to re-establish a conservative, literal normativity). (ibid, 110)

This circumstance might explain why researchers of conversion to Islam often find that European converts seem unaware of the different currents within Islam or make unusual combinations. Jensen, for example, writes about a women’s group comprised of converted Danes and mentions that the existence of diverse Muslim orientations was seldom discussed (2006, 651). She goes on to state that when she observed the classes on Islam that converts attended,

It became apparent to me that many people went in and out and between classes offered by opposed Muslim institutions. ... Often, the participant was not even aware of what kind of Islam was being represented. Besides reflecting ignorance about the various Muslim orientations, this might also indicate indifference to questions of belonging to particular Muslim groupings and orientations, which many felt was secondary to an individual and autonomous dealing with Muslim religiosity. (652)

In regard to Scandinavian converts to Islam, Roald, too, mentions that,

One encounters a major problem when trying to define the various trends. Most trends overlap with each other and a Muslim affiliated to one trend might easily share ideas and methodologies with Muslims in other trends. For instance, Jesber, a leading Scandinavian convert, considers himself a ‘*Salafi-Sufi*’, thus indicating the vague borders between various Islamic trends. Although Muslims in general cannot be exclusively cultivated in a single direction, Jesber’s mixed approach seems to typify that of new Muslims in particular, reflecting a lack of socialization into traditional Muslim knowledge. (2004, 114)

While the explanation differs, Jensen suggests ignorance or indifference to questions of belonging and Roald suggests a lack of socialization into traditional Muslim knowledge, both observed the same diversity in converts’ approaches as I encountered in my research. In a more general sense, Volpi and Turner come to a similar assessment,

Today, there clearly remains authority in the religious world, but this authority is to an ever-increasing extent purposefully mediated by the individual, who becomes as much the final assessor of religiosity as his/her practice of individuated religion allows. (2007, 13)

In light of what I observed during my research, Volpi *et al* make an important observation. As put forward in chapter three, there is no necessary convergence between the individualization and the privatization of religion:

On the contrary, the ‘personalization’ of religiosity can be and often is highly public. It may be ‘my religiosity’ but I want to show and enact my faith to the rest of the world, to all those individuals who define (or could potentially define) their religiosity in a similar fashion. (ibid, 4)

In my research, this individualization was mediated by the often highly valued advice given by the volunteers of the women’s groups. Although none of them had any formal training in Islamic studies, and none of them claimed formal authority, their command of the Arabic language, knowledge of the Qur’an and *Sunna*, general knowledge of Islamic precepts from Islamic literature and therefore knowledge of opinions by authoritative scholars of Islam, their connections, online and offline, enabling them to pose questions when they were uncertain themselves, all this enhanced their status among converts as being knowledgeable women. Often, questions posed were related to circumstances that came up in the wake of becoming Muslim, for instance, the proper way forward after conversion when living with a partner without being married.

We aren’t married [in accordance with Dutch law]. It was not obligatory [in order for her partner to be eligible for a Dutch residence permit] and it was difficult to obtain the paperwork from Algeria. We both agreed that we don’t have to marry [before the Dutch law]. We know we can depend on each other. However, when I became Muslim, I asked [a volunteer of group one], “What does Islam advise in such a circumstance?” She said that we needed a period of separation. Not as a penance but that way you can be certain in case children are born [who the father is]. Then you are clean when you marry. I liked that very much. I stayed at my mother’s for two and a half months, that’s what we did, and then we got married at the mosque. [So,] he is my husband, you know, and if we ever get the paperwork in order, then we will marry here [according to Dutch law] too.

However, in the absence of such guidance, participants often found out about such precepts after the fact. In a similar situation, another participant was unaware of this rule of separating for a few months before proceeding with the marriage:

It took a long time to get his birth certificate from Morocco and therefore we first married at the mosque. It was because I insisted. I was like “Come on, it’s still not *halal*,” we are married before the Dutch law but that’s not before the *shari’a*, we should go to a mosque.” My husband was like, “No, no.” Moroccan[-Dutch] don’t marry at the mosque but at the consulate, then it’s *halal*. So my husband was like, “Let’s wait for the birth certificate,” and I was like, “No, come on, it’ll only take a minute and then, at least, it’s *halal*.” So, eventually, we went to the mosque. It was much more formal than I expected. We had to bring paperwork and that showed us living at the same address. The imam asked, “How can that be, are you already living together?” So I said, “No, no he is registered at my place because we are married in accordance with the Dutch law, he lives somewhere else.” I was totally embarrassed. Suddenly, the imam looked very angry, like, “Hey, what’s this? Does he live with you? How can this be? You are getting married but you are already living together?” So I said, “No, no.” *AstaghfirAllah* [God forgive me], I just lied, “He still lives with his mother, he still sleeps at his mother’s, but he’s registered with me.” ... Really, I did it [marrying at the mosque] for my peace of mind but later, [a volunteer from group four] looked it up and it turned out you need to separate first. First you need to show remorse and that you have the intention to do it right. You can’t, just like that, make it *halal*. Well, *insha Allah*, Allah will forgive us, because we didn’t know. Many people think, we did too, that it [the relationship] needs to become *halal* so we will just marry. We didn’t know that you first need to separate, show remorse, and then, as two purified people, get married. We didn’t know so I was happy [when I married at the mosque]. I thought *alhamdulillah* [thank God], even if it takes another year for the birth certificate to arrive, at least it’s *halal* with Allah.

Even though it varied among participants what they knew about Islam and how they acted upon this knowledge, communally engaging with Islam and teaching each other about the content and precepts of Islam was considered a major virtue by a majority of women in my research. As Jouili *et al* found among the women in their research too, this perception of the virtue of knowledge is connected to the scriptural sources of Islam, where acquiring knowledge is connected to the growth of faith (*imaan*): “Faith emerges and can grow through knowledge” (ibid, 621). Attending

women's meetings and communally learning about Islam, indeed, was often claimed to give an *imaan boost*.

The dissemination of knowledge was called *da'wa* by most participants, except by the women of group three. Largely, they avoided such a vocabulary which is associated with a particular practice of Islam, originating from the Reformist Salafi thinkers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While avoiding the label "Salafism" in her research among pious women in Cairo, Mahmood explains,

Da'wa literally means "call, invitation, appeal, or summons". ... While da'wa may also be directed toward non-Muslims, the contemporary piety movement in Egypt primarily understands it to be a religious duty that requires all adult members of the Islamic community to urge fellow Muslims to greater piety, and to teach one another correct Islamic conduct. (2005, 57)

Mahmood calls this movement aimed at fashioning a more pious self, either the "mosque-movement" or the "piety movement." It is described by her as an international movement criticizing how the understanding and performance of acts of worship (*ibadat*) have been transformed in the modern period.

Movement participants argue that ritual acts of worship in the popular imagination have increasingly acquired the status of customs or conventions, a kind of "Muslim Folklore" undertaken as a form of entertainment or as a means to display a religio-cultural identity. (ibid, 48)<sup>157</sup>

She found that part of the aim of the piety movement is to restore the understanding of these ritual acts of worship, for instance prayer, by teaching women the requisite skills involved in its practice (ibid).

In the European context, Jouili and Amir-Moazimi found a similar emphasis among pious Muslim women in Germany and France. They remark that although they did their fieldwork in different settings, independently from each other, they gathered "quite similar data, and

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<sup>157</sup> This type of critique is not limited to Muslim communities. For instance, in her study of Argentine-Jewish women of Syrian descent who had abandoned their self-described traditional form of Jewish practice and had embraced Jewish ultra-orthodoxy [*haredim*], Jacobson came across similar views: "Haredim opine that the tradicionalistas keep kosher because it is what they have always done, that they celebrate the holidays and Sabbath because it is enjoyable, and that they teach their ways to their children out of a desire to maintain the traditions of their forebears. In contrast, haredim argue that their own observance of Judaism is motivated uniquely by the conscious decision to submit themselves to the demands God has placed on the Jewish people" (Jacobson, 2006, 336-337).

arrived at similar conclusions” (2006, 619). They continue to say that this does not mean that there is just one “type” of Muslimness or only one single relationship of female Muslims to knowledge and authority, but that, despite internal variation, there definitely is a certain trend among institutionally organized committed Muslim women (ibid). Similar to Mahmood, they do not label this trend “Salafi” but rather focus on the women’s aim of cultivating a pious self. However, they recognize the historical roots of contemporary piety movements in the ideas of the Reformist thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>158</sup> They suggest that

In order to better understand the contemporary dynamics of *da’wa*, one has to look back at how the Reformist Salafi thinkers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century significantly shifted the sense of the concept. While *da’wa* was traditionally understood as an activity to be conducted under the aegis of the clerics, Reformist thinkers claimed it to be the duty of every Muslim, thereby opening the path for laypersons to be involved in it. This “democratization” of *da’wa* turned out to be particularly beneficial for women since they were now included in the *da’wa* duties and activities. (ibid, 624)

As Mahmood argues, too, the now prevalent interpretation of *da’wa* holds that those who are familiar with, and observant of, Islamic rules of conduct are qualified to engage in *da’wa*. Therefore, *da’wa* has come to depend less on doctrinal expertise but rather on “moral uprightness and practical knowledge” (ibid, 65).

In Arabic, a Muslima engaged in *da’wa* is called a *da’iya*. As Mahmood observed in Egypt, “*da’iya* literally means “one who practices *da’wa*” – it is used to designate the teachers in the women’s mosque movement” (ibid, 57). In the context of my research, the lecturers of groups one and two affirmed they could be called *da’iya*. Other participants, similarly engaged in organizing meetings to communally learn about Islam and emulating a good example as a form of *da’wa*, would reserve the term *da’iya* for lecturers and not apply it to themselves.

Although, as Mahmood argues, the emergence of *da’wa* as a duty for all Muslims is mostly connected to one’s moral uprightness and practical knowledge, participants in my research reported that teaching without having a formal education in Islam could raise eyebrows. A born Muslima, proficient in teaching women how to wash the dead according to Islamic rule, a very popular topic among the women’s groups in my research, explained:

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<sup>158</sup> See also Mahmood, 2005, 61-64.

There was a bit of a fuss, I don't know where it came from, that a sister [she] in [a mosque] was teaching how to wash the dead. It was asked: "Where has she studied? Who are the scholars she's following?" Oh my God! That really makes no sense! It's mandatory for everyone [to teach one another], do you understand? It's mandatory. Everyone should know how to wash the dead. It's like prayer. If I teach you how to pray, it's a practice, it's not knowledge in the sense that I explain it in my own words, my own practice, my own context. If you want to do that, you should have studied [formal Islamic studies] somewhere. But prayer is a practice that I learned from books and I just pass on that knowledge. In books, you can find the same thing. ... These are people who don't understand. When someone is in front of a class, or a group of people, she gets the label *da'iya*. Then they say, "She must have studied somewhere, otherwise she is not allowed that position," or, "She should not talk." Period. That's not allowed according to a lot of people. But that's wrong. In the Qur'an it is clearly stated that we need to help each other with that which is good, and help each other to avoid that which is bad. It literally states "help each other." Well, how would you do that?

Acknowledgement of the permissibility of lecturing based on content found in books, magazines, or on websites that were deemed reliable, was widespread among participants. When I asked if women could lecture without any formal education in Islamic studies, this participant, who had lectured herself in the past and still helped prospective and converted Muslimas in their trajectories to and within Islam, answered:

Yes, I believe people can do that. I think it's important for that to happen or we'll keep waiting for absent scholars. People want information. Sometimes I don't know the answer, then it's good to say, "I don't know," but many books give correct information. If you read from a book how to do the *wu'du* [the ritual ablution before prayer], and you tell at a meeting, "How should we do the *wu'du*?", that's useful. I'm not afraid of doing that. I rather take action. I could say something wrong, that's possible. On the other hand, there are many people who like these meetings, look forward to them, depend on them, persevere because of them, especially new Muslims. They look forward to them, learn from them, ask for lecture topics themselves, "Can we talk about marriage," or other subjects. ... Of course it's also nice if men lecture, they often have had a good education, that's also important. But for now that's less the case with women, while women want more, are more interested, work harder at it than men. ... I can tell from [personal] experience, that's very important. Girls need that. At my age [47], I can ease their worries. They often tell me, "It was really nice talking to you." I tell them not to worry, or advise them, when they worry, the best way to proceed, when

they have questions, “Shall I do it or not?” Often it’s something I already went through and then I say, “Go ahead, do it, you shall see it’ll work out, you can do it,” and then they do it. That sort of thing.

This approach was common among participants. Teaching each other the basic tenets of Islam, how to approach life-cycle events such as births, marriages, and death, how to fulfill obligations such as fasting and prayer, or to tell each other about exemplary historic Muslim(a)s, was considered a Muslim’s obligation. One often used pedagogic style to rehearse this type of content was with a quiz, where, invariably, prizes were offered to women with the most correct answers. Since recently converted Muslimas, and born Muslimas with limited knowledge of their religion, often dreaded to have to publicly demonstrate their ignorance by not knowing the answers, sometimes groups were formed who could communally discuss the answers or there were different quizzes for basic and advanced knowledge of a certain topic. However, although all groups endorsed similar pedagogic styles, that was not true of the content, as it varied among the volunteers of the different groups, as well as among participants in general, which books, magazines, websites, publishing houses, or scholars were considered to offer *reliable* knowledge. The resulting fragmentation severely disappointed some participants, for instance, reflected in this comment by a young, recently converted Muslima:

People continually fighting each other, it drives me crazy. This mosque is right, that mosque is wrong, that lecture is right and that lecturer is wrong, that book is wrong but you really should read this book, which is then contradicted by someone else. I don’t listen to people anymore. If I don’t feel comfortable somewhere, I leave. Do I notice something that I feel is not correct, or if I’m approached in a way I don’t like, I leave. If I read something that doesn’t sit well with what I think is Islam, I leave. All that matters is that I have the right intention. Not that I listen to other people without checking it out for myself.

Again, this points to an individualization of issues of authority. It is the individual who makes the final assessment of what is right and what is wrong, who to follow or not to follow, and whether something is done with the right intention in light of the individual judgment of each person by God. This varied from one participant to another and, with time, participants also changed aspects of the way they practiced Islam. For instance, in regard to the question of whether or not wearing socks at all times is an obligation for a Muslima, one participant told me during our first interview that one of the things she had heard at the women’s

gatherings of group four was that covering one's feet at all times was mandatory for Muslim women. At the time, she had recently decided to comply with this rule, although she also conveyed doubts about how to combine dressing Islamically with having a career:

This summer I started wearing socks [at all times]. A few times I took them off, when it didn't feel right, but I tried to wear them as much as possible, also in hot weather. ... I feel good when I cover my feet but I find it hard to combine them with the kind of clothing I like. Then I think, give me a *jilbab* [overcoat], that's easy. I don't know. Often, I want to do the right thing but I find it difficult to really do it because I also want to work, to contribute to society. That's very difficult [to combine with an aspiring pious life-style in the Dutch context].

When I interviewed her again, five years later, she had abandoned wearing socks at all times although she still considered it to be mandatory:

I don't wear socks [all the time] anymore but I still think it's better to wear socks [all the time]. I know I don't do everything right. I won't say that what I'm doing is right. [However], it's a pity you're sometimes judged [because of that] by others but it's important to remember for whom you're doing it. Do I do it in order to belong or do I do it for Allah? At a certain point you find your own way. ... Most sisters reacted positively [to her abandonment of wearing socks in summer]. They do try to say, "Sister, do you know your feet need to be covered, too?" Then I reply, "Yes, I know." What I find difficult though is that, for instance, when I'm visiting a sister with a teenage daughter and she's making her choices in [light of] puberty. Such a girl is thinking about wearing a headscarf and her mom says, "Good idea." The mother tries to stimulate her daughter. Well, that girl chooses a headscarf, really goes for it, and says "No bare feet either." Then I'm visiting, as a friend of her mom, and the girl says "Look mom, she's wearing slippers." I find that difficult. A child sees you as an example but you do things differently than you're supposed to do. But other than that, I really like wearing slippers. I think we look too much at appearance. I really don't like that. There are many women who don't wear a headscarf or wear a headscarf, let's say, in a "modern way," but their heart is so good, you know. Or their deeds are good. It's a pity [so many people judge the outside], I really find that a pity.

These constant tensions between conflicting demands, choices, and ambitions were common among many of the converts (and born Muslimas) I met. Although the prescriptive outlook on Islam of groups one, two, four, and five left little room for putting forward alternative

views, individual converts made their own choices in regard to how to live a Muslim life in the Netherlands. Acknowledging the rule but not practicing it, like in the example of wearing socks, is an often employed strategy to deal with ambivalences about dress, listening to music, being around alcohol, celebrating non-Islamic feasts, attending non-Muslim funerals, etc.<sup>159</sup> Conveying her choices in regard to a number of these topics, this participant told me:

André Hazes [a popular Dutch singer] was my idol so I went to his last concert with my brother. We were raised with his music. I can't let go of these things. I slept at my mom's last night, during dinner she played his music. There was no alcohol and only *halal* food, my mom really tries to accommodate me. Should I say to her, "No mom, let's not do that?" I can't. I have Dutch friends for 20-25 years and when I'm visiting them I can't say, "There can be no wine at the table or I won't come." If they come to my house, it's not there, but I also want to go to them. I want to see them and they want to see me. I want their friendship, I need it. Some people say, "You don't need that, you need Allah." But I'm not ready to let go. I don't want to let go. Eventually, I'll probably think, "They're having a party, or whatever, there will be alcohol so I'll go the following day." Or in the afternoon, with the kids. Or, if I come in the evening, I ask if they could skip the wine for once. Something like that. I know most of them would do that for me, one evening without wine, but they won't throw a party without any alcohol just for me. So, I think that's how I need to solve this. ... I arranged my grandfather's funeral, I also selected the songs. That's being part of my family. I can't imagine, on Judgment Day, Allah will be angry about that. Of course, it will be said, "You should not have done that." But I think it will also be mentioned, "Girl, it's good that you've done that for your grandmother, and for your family, that you supported them, helped your grandmother choose the clothes for your grandfather." Do you understand? Everyone has a different opinion and there will be many people who'll say, "You don't believe enough." Well, I don't know what people will say, never mind, but I don't think that I really did something wrong, I also did something good. That's with most things, even Christmas. Last Christmas, I went to my mom. Everything was *halal*, there was no alcohol, no music, no Christmas tree, just a few candles. I will not take that [spending Christmas together] away from her. I can't.

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<sup>159</sup> Another way to accommodate ambivalences was on the one hand emphasizing the normative rules, however these were interpreted, and on the other hand, how even small acts of kindness could grant access to Paradise.

These ambivalences can extend to beliefs about the afterlife as well. Many converts struggled with the idea that their non-Muslim relatives would not be allowed entrance to Paradise. For one participant, this was a reason to postpone conversion:

I hesitated to become Muslim for a long time. Mostly because some Muslims believe that non-Muslims will go to hell. I had difficulties accepting that since both my parents were deceased. It felt that if I would say "I'm Muslim" I would condemn them to hell with the same breath. I couldn't, that was impossible.

Then she found out that there are different schools of thought within Islam on this subject.

[Which school of thought is right] we'll find out when we die but this explanation [that it is dependent on a person's deeds during life whether someone will go to heaven or hell] appealed to me. I thought, "Yes, I can live with that. Now I can be a Muslim."

To return to the subject of *da'wa*, this was considered very important among women from four of the five groups in my research. As Jouili *et al* found, too, contrary to popular translations of the concept as a missionary activity, *da'wa* in the European context is mostly connected to education and representation. One of the aims of doing *da'wa*, they explain, is related to the need of the women in their study to transmit their Islamic knowledge to future generations in order to encourage them to lead pious lives in an environment that they qualify as being predominantly non-religious. The rectification of negative representations of Islam within European public spheres is another aim (*ibid*, 625). Emulating a good example, especially when visibly Muslim, was considered of great importance for most of the converts in my research, too. As one participant remarked:

Recently, I was almost run over while riding my bike. I had right of way but a van-driver quickly went before me and almost hit me. I cursed at the driver, it just came out. Then I thought to myself, "That's no way to do *da'wa*." People see [someone in] an Islamic garment riding a bike and then that's what comes out? That's something I need to be more attentive to. If someone angers me, I always have to say something back. People need to know that I'm not a doormat, I'm not the kind of Muslima that can be pushed over, but it doesn't need to be rude.

Another participant, sixteen years old when I interviewed her, explained,

*Da'wa* is not just inviting people to the mosque. *Da'wa* is [for instance] also smiling to people, to women I mean, not to men of course. If you smile to people, they might think, "Oh they [Muslims] are not all as bad as on TV, bomb here, bomb there, they can be nice too."

Both forms of *da'wa*, teaching one another knowledge of Islamic precepts and conduct and emulating a good example, surfaced also in lectures, for instance in a lecture by group one. The lecture was atypical in that it addressed a societal issue instead of a strictly religious subject but the way in which it was conducted and the following discussion was similar to other lectures. It was titled "Some misconceptions about Islam repudiated" and was written by one of the lecturers in reaction to an article on Islam in a well-known Dutch magazine.<sup>160</sup> The announcement for the lecture read:

How often do we hear and read that Islam is a backward religion? What do we have to say to that? Do we have answers? Become informed about how to repudiate often heard misconceptions.

One of the topics that were addressed in the lecture was the amputation of a thief's hand as an Islamic punishment for stealing. The lecturer told the audience of twelve women, eight converts and four born Muslimas, that the often heard reaction is,

...that this punishment is not of this day and age but rather belongs to the Middle Ages, and, therefore, the whole religion of Islam is Medieval. Non-Muslims are put off by this verse from the Qur'an [mentioning amputation] and Muslims, too, are startled by it. Therefore, some of them want to change or reinterpret the Qur'an. No! You need to explain it.

She then offered several ways to counter the idea that the punishment would be out of date such as comparing it with the alternative of sending people to prison, and underscoring the very specific circumstances of its execution such as the crime needing four witnesses, and that poverty or hunger were reasons for suspending the application of the punishment. She added that it could only be executed in an Islamic country with the *shari'a* as its law. As usually happened during these lectures, the audience reflected on aspects of the information that was offered, in this instance on

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<sup>160</sup> Elsevier.

the subject of stealing. One of the women told that in the Dutch village where she grew up, a con man had swindled many people out of money. She asked whether the punishment would apply to such a case as well. The lecturer answered, “Yes, fraud is stealing too.” Another woman brought up traveling by tram without buying a ticket, and another one recounted seeing Muslim mothers encouraging their child to take candy at the drugstore without paying for it. The lecturer then reminded the audience that “it is everyone’s duty to approach one another [in such a situation] and tell that this is stealing, too.” Another woman mentioned leaving work early as an example of stealing time, or keeping quiet in case of a cashier’s mistake. That last example reminded one of the women that, recently, a cashier at IKEA had forgotten to register one of her items. She had returned to the store to pay for it “as a form of *da’wa*” even though the store was far away and she did not feel like going back. She told that the cashier had been so pleasantly surprised by her honesty that she had given her a store gift-certificate as a sign of appreciation. Then this part of the discussion ended.

A combination of the educational and representational aspects of *da’wa* in the European context mentioned by Jouili *et al*, is that, in particular for women, it is a means,

...to do instructional work in the sense of attempting to work against the widespread assumption that Islam inherently produces gender inequality. ... Thus, the women attempt to replace the stereotype of their mere passivity through the counter-image of an educated and Islamically committed woman. (ibid)

To accommodate this aspect of *da’wa*, some participants in my research changed their way of dress, such as the volunteer of the second group who found that wearing a face-veil conflicted with the practice of *da’wa*:

I wore a face-veil because I wanted to perfect my practice. But I took it off because, living in the Netherlands, I realized that many people thought it was offensive. I noticed that women wearing a face-veil scare the general public. I don’t think that’s a good thing. You can wear a face-veil at places where it is common and nobody takes offense but if it stands between you and the other, I don’t want it. I’m taking every chance to explain Islam to people, especially the Dutch, they are after all my people, I come from them. I’d rather have a chance to talk to someone at the bus stop than generate even more prejudice. I believe communication is important, so that’s my choice.

It should be noted that women affiliated with group three were similarly engaged in emulating a good example and rectifying negative representations of Islam, without calling this *da'wa*. Reflecting on the moment she started wearing a headscarf, one of the participants from group three told me,

When I told my parents that I had done the *shahada*, I told them, “Don’t worry, I’m a Muslim now but I won’t wear a headscarf.” I was totally convinced that I wouldn’t. But one day, I did. In fact it was because of a colleague, a Dutch guy, who did the public relations at the place where I worked. It was Ramadan and he said “It’s so interesting that you fast. You’re a Muslim but you don’t look Islamic. Why don’t you wear a headscarf? It’s a pity because you would be good PR for Islam.” I thought he had a point. I was thinking about it anyway. When I was on sick leave I had worn one and it felt good. But I wanted to do it so that it wouldn’t confirm prejudices, it had to look good. I choose an Indonesian style with skirts and tunics from the same fabric as the headscarf. ... So I went to my supervisor and said, “Listen, I have given it a lot of thought and I would like to wear a headscarf, is that okay?” He said it was okay. I worked at the back-office anyway. In the morning, I went to work and wrote an e-mail to all my colleagues, “Guys, don’t be scared, nothing went wrong at the hair salon, my hair is not red, it is covered. Because of my Islamic convictions, from now on I have decided to wear a headscarf and if you want to see what it looks like, you’re welcome to stop by.” Some of them really came over to have a look at me. It went very well.

Although the practice of *da'wa* was meant to help one another, and it was often emphasized that advice should be disseminated in a friendly manner and preferably in private, in reality, not all women were happy about the way they were advised by others (see also Roex, 2013, 166-178). Explaining why she felt increasingly uncomfortable at gatherings of group five, during our interview, a participant recalled a meeting that had taken place the day before, where she had worn turquoise colored clothes. At one point during the meeting, clothing colors became a topic of talk and one of the women present had loudly declared that as a Muslim, wearing only dark colors was permitted.

Yesterday, [at the meeting] they said that bright colors aren’t good while I was sitting there in turquoise. That made me feel uncomfortable. It’s a pity, sisters so harshly criticizing each other. We are all Islamic, we are all Muslimas, we are each other’s sisters. One does not need to push the other in a certain direction. I let them talk, “You can’t do this, you can’t do that, you can’t call attention to yourself,” but I thought, “Why would I live like that? That’s not why I became Muslim.” I want to be a joyful

Muslima. I do want to continue to learn, that is why I go to lectures, to hear things that I don't know, but yesterday, I really felt criticized. Next time I won't go there anymore.

Other participants voiced similar objections or tried to avoid tensions by ignoring the advice:

There are sisters who are more similar to you than others. That's how it is. There are differences in levels of practice, differences in thinking. You choose your sisters, so to speak. When I talk to someone who is constantly pointing out what I'm doing wrong, at some point, I think, "Sorry sister, with all due respect, we can't go on like this." We all make choices, we need to keep each other on the straight path, advise each other, that's our duty in Islam, but at one point, the advice-giving sister needs to think, "I have done my duty and I will let it go, it's her responsibility." It creates a bit of tension and causes feelings of insecurity. On the other hand I think, "Hello! What insecurity?" You are not my god to whom I'm answerable. We both have Allah, I must answer to Him. Then I think, "Whatever!" You know what I mean? Then I think, "This is my choice, period."

While gaining knowledge was often characterized as an accumulative process, some of the women were satisfied with their level of knowledge, at least for a while:

I lost my appetite for knowledge. Not because I think I know everything, more like "I know enough, I'm content." In a way, knowledge can become a burden. It can have a paralyzing effect because every little rule you learn, you feel you should practice. For me, religion is of the heart, not so much of the head. If you feel doubtful or anxious, about something, then it's not good for you and you shouldn't do it. That's how I live my life now and that feels good. I don't feel the need to have that confirmed in lessons anymore. I feel happy in the Islamic flow, to put it that way, and that's enough.

### **5.3 Abstractions, Ideals, and Everyday Life**

As I have argued throughout this thesis, generally, becoming Muslim was usually envisioned by women as a life-long learning experience, not a clear cut path with a beginning, a middle, and an end. In other words, *being* Muslim meant committing to an ongoing process of *becoming* Muslim. Furthermore, there often seemed to be a gap between how converts ideally would like to practice Islam and their possibilities in

everyday life. For instance, when converts still lived at home, some parents prohibited performing the Islamic prayer, did not want to accommodate *halal* food, or mocked fasting during Ramadan. Many non-Muslim parents, children, or other relatives (at first) did not want to be seen in public with the convert if she wore a headscarf. Some of the participants preferred wearing a face-veil but, confronted with too much aggression in public space, were not able to commit to this practice. Jobs were often incompatible with the desire to wear a headscarf, for instance when wearing a uniform, in light of representing the corporate image, or because participants feared the reactions of colleagues. In this regard, Badran makes an important observation:

New Muslimas may *learn* about the religion as an abstraction and *think* of it in idealized terms, but they *live* it (or strive to live up to it or live it to its fullest potential) in concrete, everyday ways. (2006, 206)

These three modalities continuously interact with each other. For instance, women might adopt the opinion that covering their hair is a divine command, aspiring to take up the practice themselves, but find it difficult because it changes how they are perceived by non-Muslim Dutch. An example of the ambivalence between ideal and practice was told by one of the participants, a woman in her forties, who converted to Islam three years before our interview.

I wanted to wear a headscarf, not at first, I didn't at first, but after a while I thought it would be better. I felt it was somewhat hypocritical to put it on only at the mosque so I tried wearing it from home. I tried it several times but it never felt good. I feared my neighbors would see me and would think, "What's with her?" I was a bit afraid of what others would think, even though I normally don't care. You are often mistaken for a Turk or a Moroccan and I'm not. I'm me. You're viewed differently, pushed into a stereotype. So I thought, "Wearing a headscarf is not the main thing, there are so many other things you need to do as a Muslim. This is not for me, yet."

These fears were addressed and accommodated at women's meetings where it was told over and over again that becoming Muslim is a path that should be walked "step by step." This seems to be the case outside the Netherlands, too. In remarkably similar wording as participants in my research, Lechkar (2012), for instance, quotes Lamia, a Belgium convert who said to a girl who had just done her *shahada* at the Central Mosque in Brussels:

“Don’t worry; just take it one step at the time. If you think you have to fulfill all these criteria [knowledge about and practice of Islam] before the *shahada*, one would never take the step. It is the *shahada* that gives you the strength to deal with everything and learn all these things.” (ibid, 129)

In my experience, too, it was advocated to start with the basics such as fasting and prayer, gradually adding practices, not overdoing it. Often, a steep learning curve and adopting too many practices at once is unattainable. That does not mean one cannot look ahead as in the example above: wearing a headscarf is not *yet* a practice this participant was able to adopt.

Although my research indicates that the practice of Islam often predated the *shahada*, and all volunteers helping women with performing the *shahada* made certain that the prospective convert was aware of the five pillars of Islam and the six pillars of *imaan*, the vision of being Muslim by becoming Muslim through an increasingly higher level of practicing Islam (i.e., incorporating piety into one’s daily life), was common among participants in my research. For instance, a woman in her early twenties whom I interviewed shortly after she had said the *shahada*, told me that she had decided to postpone getting married. First, she told me, she wanted to become more proficient in the practice of Islam and then she would look for a husband to match that proficiency. The (born) Muslims she had met, had prompted her to adopt this standpoint. When I reminded her that she had once told me that, at first, she had been very impressed by the born Muslims she had become acquainted with, she confirmed,

Yes, at that time I thought, “I want to become like them.” That was my goal. Now, although it’s really not my place to say, I think there is room for improvement. They do things that aren’t allowed. Things that I didn’t recognize at the time. I was at a lower level, so to speak, in terms of faith and faith-related things. Now I aspire to progress. I’m thinking, “They’re in their thirties now, they have been on this level for the past ten years and they probably will remain on this level.” I’m new, and I want more than that, so to speak. That’s something that I wrestle with: at first I regarded them like they were perfect people. Figuratively, if someone were to have asked me to marry him back then, I would have said, “Yes” without hesitation. But now that I’m thinking about it [I changed my mind]. For instance, I listen to music but I aspire to change that. They don’t have similar aspirations. I’m ambitious; I want to maximize my efforts and keep seeking knowledge. If I find someone now, and he’s on a certain level [of practicing Islam] and I think, “I want to marry him,” perhaps in a year or so I’ll think, “You think differently than I do” or

“You’re not as ambitious as I thought.” I think I can better first attain the level [of practice] I want and then look for someone with the same outlook.

When I asked her what that outlook would be, she answered,

Well, I want it to be normal to do the prayers, also at work, and that the people around me know that I pray [five times a day]. That I can wear a headscarf and change my clothes the way I want to. I’m not sure yet how I’ll fashion myself but that everyone is at peace with that, and then I’ll look for someone compatible. Also, I want to finish my education first. But I do want to get married so I’ll keep working on myself.

The groups that participated in my research did not enforce any dress code. The phrase “come as you are” was included in flyers and Internet announcements and love, acceptance, and sisterhood were consistently promoted as virtues at lectures and other gatherings. During all my years of fieldwork, I was lectured only once about the way I was dressed. Although atypical, the story is worth recounting here because it is a good example of the hierarchy between what women deemed to be divine commands and the need for an act to be authentic. Following the Qur’an and *Sunna*, however these were interpreted, evidently was important to the women but the question of intention superseded conformity. Veiling, for instance, was not to be taken up out of conformity but out of obedience to Allah, being recognizably Muslim a secondary side-effect. An aspect of Muslimness that frequently surfaced during lectures and other meetings was that outward signs of being Muslim, such as wearing a headscarf, were considered less important than good behavior. The following incident happened at the beginning of my fieldwork, when I was still in the process of discovering the workings of the different groups and what was important to the women attending.

It was a hot August day when I went to [a mosque] on a Sunday morning. Women [from group one] would meet there to practice reciting the Qur’an in Arabic. I came in early and one by one the women entered, all of them ethnic Dutch. Eventually, there were six women, another three arrived later. I was wearing a djellaba [a Moroccan full-length dress], a small headscarf, and panty socks. It was the first time I publicly wore a djellaba in Amsterdam but I figured it was an easy way to be fully covered. The headscarf I had put on in anticipation of prayer. The panty socks were a first too. Before this fieldwork, it had never occurred to me to cover my feet in summer but since the women in this group were keen on women covering their feet during prayer, I had put them on in advance. Never before had I been so dressed-up on a summer’s day so

I was very surprised when one of the women took offense with my socks. It was an older woman, a convert, whom I had not met before [and did not meet again]. She loudly told me I was wearing “socks of the shaitan.” They were too thin: you could still see my feet. I listened politely while she assured me that “although it would be my own choice, it would be far better to wear thicker socks.” She then continued her inspection. My headscarf covered my neck and ears, that was good. “It was somewhat small”, she commented, “but since I did not have big breasts, it was sufficient.” She lectured me some more about a woman’s *aura*, “her body should be covered at all times.” She recommended the *khimaar* [long headscarf] which would always provide the right cover. After she was done commenting on my clothes, she moved on to the importance of reading the Qur’an every day, “even one page, one aya [verse], or one letter.” When pressed for time, she suggested to do so while drinking coffee after dinner. “If there was time to drink coffee and relax, why not read a little Qur’an at the same time?” Perhaps to soften her critical comments, she then made a rhetorical move I had heard before [and would often hear again during lectures and gatherings]. She said that all things considered, “not gossiping was more important than wearing the right attire.” Not that refraining from gossip would relieve one of the duty of wearing the proper covering, but it was more important not to gossip.

Indeed, a frequently chosen lecture topic during my research time was “gossip and slander.” Much effort was put into conveying to attendants that gossip and slander were completely unacceptable in Islam. It was often said that gossiping while wearing *hijab* was such a contradiction, that one nullified the virtue of the other. A good character, for instance the volunteer of group two would often repeat, was more important than anything else: more important than prayer, more important than proper dress. If one would pray five times a day but gossip about others, she told an audience of sixty girls during one afternoon lecture, “Paradise would be denied.” However, she continued, “if one would be a prostitute but gave water to a thirsty dog, that act alone would grant access to Paradise.”<sup>161</sup> Reasons for gossip, it was told by a group one’s volunteer at yet another lecture, “were anger, group pressure, wanting to be part of something, wanting to be accepted, wanting to elevate one’s position, teasing, joking to please others, or to make them laugh.” Ways of curing gossiping were fearing the wrath of Allah and, as a punishment, the rewards (*hasanaat*) you earned for your good deeds would be transferred

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<sup>161</sup> Based on a *hadith* from the collection by Muslim, transmitted by Abu Hurayra. This *hadith* about attaining Paradise by giving water to a thirsty dog was also told at a gathering about charity by group three.

to the subject of gossip. “Muslims should lead by example,” it was told at another one of their lectures. Not that you should be silent when you were called names in public space because of your appearance, but one should engage the name-caller in a calm and patient manner, for instance by saying, “Thank you for having an interest.” Indeed, participants tried to respond in this way, such as this twenty-one year old woman, who had converted two years prior to our interview:

The other day, I was at the [bank] and I had put my bag on the table. A woman, also a customer, I think she thought I was Moroccan, said in a loud voice, “Did no one teach you not to put your bag on the table? Dutch customs, norms and values, you don’t know them, do you? It’s always the same with those headscarves.” She was yelling at me. There were many people who had put their bags on the table but they didn’t have a headscarf, and I did. So, in a calm voice I replied, “Well, if it wasn’t allowed, wouldn’t a bank employee tell me?” I was like, “Who are you to tell me what to do?” She kept screaming, “Get the bag off the table,” but I ignored her. When I had my money and walked past her to the exit, I said, “Madam, good bye, have a nice day.” She looked shocked but said, “You too.” She had expected a different reaction but in such cases, I stay calm on purpose. Not in the beginning [shortly after her conversion] but now, if someone is staring at me on the bus, I say “Good afternoon.” I talk to them. If someone comes up to me and says, “Can I ask a question?” I always reply, “You can ask me anything, it’s much better if you come to me than to talk about me behind my back.”

The emphasis on the authentic practice of Islam, (i.e., with the right intention, solely for the sake of Allah), meant that hypocrisy was also a frequently mentioned topic, in particular at lectures of group two, but group four dedicated an evening to discussing the matter as well. A lecture on the subject was made available by the volunteers and was jointly read, each woman a page so we would all share in earning the divine reward for sharing knowledge. When the lecture was read, the women discussed the content. There were eight converted Muslimas, six born Muslimas, and one non-Muslim woman with an interest in Islam. The discussion opened with some of the women reflecting on who could be called a hypocrite and whether they were hypocrites themselves. The consensus was that committing an act of hypocrisy, by itself, did not make one a hypocrite. They also agreed it was always better to check oneself than to accuse others of hypocrisy. Only Allah had knowledge of who were the true hypocrites. Then the discussion turned more personal. A convert with a Jewish background mentioned that while she was in Israel, she had participated in Jewish rituals. To reveal to her relatives that she had converted to Islam was impossible, she feared they would disown her.

She asked the other women whether her participation in these rituals while she had converted to Islam, could be considered an act of hypocrisy.

At first, most attendants argued that her participation should not be considered an act of hypocrisy. After all, she genuinely feared her family's rejection. It was understandable to remain silent in such a circumstance; Allah would forgive her. The two volunteers, however, disagreed. Such an argument, they said, was only valid if one's life was at stake. Difficulties with one's family were to be considered a personal burden that Muslims of all times had faced. They argued it was not so much a question of whether or not it was allowed but whether it was understandable. They thought it was understandable. Another convert offered an analogy about coloring eggs for Easter. Coloring eggs as a cultural custom was one thing, she argued, but as a Muslim you could not profess that Jesus is the son of God. Saying that it was all about intention, she continued, would be to put it overly simple. The subject of coloring eggs reminded another convert of how annoyed she felt when headscarf-wearing mothers colored eggs with their children. She felt it was sending a mixed message, especially if a mother wanted to teach her own children *not* to color eggs. One of the born Muslimas of Moroccan descent added that "Moroccans apply Islam according to their own liking." For instance, she said, "Men have many duties towards women, but if you put that forward, it is said that you don't understand." "Putting culture first," she continued, "is hypocritical. It means you do it for the *community* and not for Allah."<sup>162</sup>

In the analysis of these after-lecture conversations, the conceptualization of Islam as a traveling theory is helpful to grasp the work they do. In many instances, women would recall the time of the first Muslim *community* who also encountered familial problems as a result of conversion. The born Muslimas represented another point of origin, the native countries of Muslim immigrant *communities*. The fact that they or their parents had immigrated to the Netherlands, obviously, had enhanced the opportunity for social contacts with non-Muslim Dutch, which, as I have argued, was for many participants the moment they began thinking

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<sup>162</sup> As Rozaria argues, "...modernist Islamic piety is not infrequently directed by young people against their parents, as a mode of resistance to parental authority" (2011, 285). Relating this circumstance to Bengali-British young Muslims, she continues: "They also saw their parents as engaged in all sorts of Bengali 'cultural' rituals that were questionably Islamic, such as the *gae holud* (turmeric ceremony), other wedding and birthing rituals, healing practices, pir-cults, music and dance. They were dismissive too of their parents' obsession with status, reputation, class and ethnic divisions. Women in particular were critical of their parents' traditional ideas about gender roles and values. Parents' concerns with status and reputation led them to arrange elaborate and expensive weddings, with heavy expenditure on wedding dresses, gold, *gae holud* feasts and rituals. For young people, all this conspicuous consumption and competitive display was thoroughly un-Islamic" (289).

about Islam.<sup>163</sup> Increasingly, the Islamic infrastructure these *communities* have developed, is now also used by converts. As converts need Islam to be mediated in Dutch, they began to organize a variety of lectures, workshops, events, etc. which attracted born Muslims who by now have Dutch as their first language, too. The content of these lectures often differed from the (oral) tradition of their parents, which points at the circular nature of the travel process, as changed interpretations reached attendants' parents, siblings, and extended families.

Two currents were most influential among participants in the way they discussed and tried to implement Islamic tenets in their daily lives. These were the Islamic Revival with its calls for a return to the high moral values of the first Muslim *community* and an emphasis on Muslim women's rights. The latter encompasses what some researchers call an Islamic-Feminists turn (cf. Badran): women who engage in re-interpretations of the Qur'an and *hadith* (cf. Mernissi, 1991; Wadud, 1999; Barlas, 2002). In the language of both currents, however, women regularly taught and discussed the various women's rights in Islam. The topic of Islamic marriage, for instance, was often discussed, and it was usually emphasized that it is a man's duty to be the family provider. The husband needs to take care of food, clothing and shelter, and all other things his wife and children, reasonably, need for their daily life. It was often said, at all five women's groups, that a Muslim woman has the right to work but she does not *need* to work. In case she choose to work, her income was hers alone. Of course, she could spend it on her family but, Islamically speaking, she was not obliged to. In a similar vein, women who emphasizes the importance of honoring one's parents or husband, would always add that this, of course, did not apply to anything that would go against the teachings of Islam. For instance, the right to education, to work, to choose or refuse a marriage partner, could never be denied, as these were women's rights secured through Islam.

This challenge of the dominant discourse about Muslim women's lack of autonomy quite similarly exists in Germany and France. As Jouili found, women related to the discourse of the Islamic Revival, rejected the dominant narrative of "a linear temporarily of European progress with the liberation of women at its end" and favored another narrative, "an Islamic temporality where ultimate progress is epitomized within the first Islamic state in Medina, during the lifetime of the Prophet" (2011, 51). One of the arguments that was frequently advanced by her respondents, was that in France, it was only in 1965 that women gained the right to dispose of their own goods without the authorization of their husbands, while Muslim

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<sup>163</sup> During the past decade, the enormous media attention about Islam and Islam-related subjects has somewhat changed this dynamic.

women held that right for fourteen centuries, since the beginning of Islam. As I also found, the notion that “the religious sources provide complete gender justice and female dignity, plus all of the rights necessary for self-realization,” is prevalent in the Revival discourse (ibid).

That these rights often went unrealized, was acknowledged as well. For instance, most married participants who were professionally employed were obliged to work, for various reasons. Nevertheless, the Moroccan-Dutch woman cited above as putting forward that “men have many duties towards women,” was probably thinking of these elements of *shari’a* law that women tried to implement in their daily lives. Generational clashes of opinion about the proper content of the religion were spurred and fueled by the transformation of Islam that took place through lectures and through the ensuing conversations. These conversations seemed not aimed toward definitive answers but functioned as a means to work at being Muslim and living an Islamically inspired life in the context of the Netherlands. At the same time, the existence of convert Muslim women’s groups transcends the local, national, or even the European context. For instance, Attiya Ahmad’s research on conversion to Islam among domestic workers in Kuwait (2010), reveals that women coming together to communally work at being a converted Muslima, also exist in a Muslim majority country. Despite stark differences in structural position, there are also striking similarities between her interlocutors in Kuwait and the women in my research in Amsterdam.

Over the past decades, Ahmad found, tens of thousands of domestic workers from Asian countries, working in Kuwait, have converted to Islam. This occurred not because of their employers’ wishes or desire but because of the development of an interest in Islam through social interaction with Muslims. At meetings of local women’s groups about the practice of Islam, comprised of domestic workers, conducted in their native languages, women addressed the same tensions as the women in my research discussed with each other. One of the women in Ahmad’s research, for instance, shared a story that could have as easily been told within one of the women’s groups in my research.

The woman in question shared with the others that she had called her parents in India and told them about her developing interest in Islam. Their response had been quite negative and at one point in the conversation, they had threatened to cut off all ties. She concluded her story to the other women by saying that although she did read the Qur’an, and fasted during the month of Ramadan, she did not dare take the *shahada* as she feared it would alienate her parents. Ahmad recounts how in the ensuing discussion, several suggestions were offered regarding how to deal with this predicament. These suggestions were identical to the

advices my interlocutors would offer in such a circumstance. For instance, one of the women in Ahmad's study stated that parents often talk bigger than they are prepared to act, another one suggested to take the *shahada* without telling her parents, and a third woman advised her to be patient, wait awhile, and then broach the subject again (ibid, 303). These similarities between women in different positions but with comparable solutions to personal dilemmas arising in the context of conversion to Islam, should not go unnoticed as they point to interesting convergences between women converting to Islam in different parts of the world.

## 5.4 The Quest for a Deculturalized Islam

Tensions between participants' perception of Islam as a perfect religion and the significant problems of Muslims world-wide were often a subject of conversation among the women in my research. Most participants reasoned that since Islam is a perfect religion, obviously, Muslims must be to blame. In this respect, in her research among German converts to Islam, Özyürek came across an apparent paradox that I noticed, too. All the converts she talked to, as well as the convert narratives she read online, expressed that conversion to Islam took place in a context of positive social contacts with born Muslims. However, at the same time, a substantial number of her participants were discontent with born Muslims, particularly with Muslims of immigrant backgrounds (2010, 172). Similar to my experience, many of the converts in her research underlined that Muslims and Islam are two different things.

Like non-converted, non-Muslim German intellectuals, many converts believe that immigrant Muslims need to be educated, integrated, and transformed. But for them, this transformation should happen not through leaving Islamic practices behind, as atheist left-wing Germans would suggest, nor through reforming Islam, as center-right-wing Christian-Democrats would support, but, on the contrary, by making immigrant Muslims leave their Middle-Eastern or African cultures and traditions behind and persuading them to apply fundamental Islamic teachings in their everyday lives. In other words, the German converts argue, it is Muslims who need to change, not Islam. (ibid, 174)

Indeed, at many gatherings of the women's groups I attended, the 'deplorable state of the *ummah*' was lamented, as well as born Muslims' "ignorance." The importance of learning to distinguish between "culture" and "religion" was stressed over and over again, no matter what type of Islamic practice women adopted. In these views, the "real" content of

Islam was to be found in books, foremost in the founding texts of the Qur'an and *Sunna*. Since these scriptural sources are interpreted by Islamic scholars, after this initial consensus, participants' opinions and practices diverged, and could change over time. Nevertheless, book-knowledge, in particular from books that also provided the source references for its content, was implicitly considered superior to the traditions of many of the immigrant Muslims in the Netherlands.

Participants were also critical of information offered by other converts. For instance, when just converted, a participant had received an uninvited comment from a visitor of group one, in all probability the same woman who had criticized my panty-socks. When she recounted the incident, she used the common narrative that to learn about Islam it is better to turn to books than to Muslims, and even then, a critical eye remained important.

At the time of [the previous volunteers], there were a couple of sisters, how shall I put it, whom I didn't appreciate, to say it politely. Usually, I wear socks that are slightly see-through. One of these women, nowadays I don't see her anymore, came up to me and [said] in a thundering voice, "You should wear thick socks! Cause God said so!" At the time, I didn't even wear a headscarf. I thought, "This is not the way to correct someone, or to point out the good." Later I told my husband [about it] and he said, "Didn't you ask her to show you where it says so?" Because, of course, there are different opinions [on the subject of wearing socks]. ... Often, I discuss this with my husband: it's always [imperfect] people who practice [Islam], you know. You should not look at people who are Muslim, you should look at Islam. Like in books, books and the explanation, and remain critical of the explanation, too. If in my perception it's not right, I'll keep searching in other books.

Born Muslimas who frequented the women's group meetings, used a similar vocabulary. When not proficient in the doctrines or practice of Islam, when introducing themselves, they would say they were "cultural Muslims." Often, they compared their predicament to that of converts to explain that although they came from Muslim families, this did not mean they knew much about their religion, or, for instance, had not learned how to pray. In particular through their contacts with non-Muslim Dutch, and their questions about (the practice of) Islam, the limits of their knowledge were revealed.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> A similar argument is made by Martijn de Koning (2008) about the perceived need among young Muslims to learn more about the substance of Islam because of being constantly addressed as "Muslim."

Critique of the practices of born Muslims on a wide array of topics could often be heard at meetings of the women's groups. Marriage, for instance, was a popular topic and women's rights were always emphasized. Perhaps this emphasis was related to Özyürek's observation of the societal position of converts to Islam.

New German Muslims must repeatedly discuss heavily criticized practices associated with Muslims, including forced marriage, honor killing, and domestic violence. They adopt a strategy of defining these practices as immigrant cultural traditions that are not properly Islamic. (ibid, 175)

In the context of my research, I would add that this was similarly the case for born Muslimas frequenting women's meetings. For instance, at the lectures about marriage that I attended, it was stressed that marriage could never be forced; a woman always had the right to refuse. Physical attraction between prospective partners was considered a necessary precondition, which should then be followed by several in-depth conversations. These should take place in the company of a chaperone or in public space to secure that the prospective couple would not be alone together. During these talks, a wide range of topics should be discussed to determine whether there was sufficient common ground, similar ambitions, and compatible characters. Preferably, one should first meet his relatives before deciding on the marriage and conduct a general background check to find out what is said by others about the prospective husband. Questions about the conduct and character of a prospective groom was considered a legitimate exception to the prohibition of gossip. It should be stressed, however, that this was considered the *ideal* trajectory towards marriage. In practice, few converted women in my research were able to follow these precepts. They either had already met their spouse or boyfriend before conversion, or they lacked sufficient knowledge, support, or aptitude to carry out background checks. In regard to violence, it was often repeated that the prophet Mohammed never beat his wives and the *hadith* that states, "the best men are those who are the best to their women" was often recounted.<sup>165</sup>

In Spain, Rogozen-Soltar, found a similar strategy among converts of separating Islam from Muslims. Focusing on differences in representation of Islam in Spain between converts and Moroccan immigrants, she argues that since Muslim immigrants and converts in Spain have different access to social and political resources, they are

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<sup>165</sup> The most perfect of believers in belief is the best of them in character. The best of you are those who are the best to their women. At-Tirmidhi, transmitted by Abu Huraryā.

incorporated differently as minority subjects (2012, 616). This, she continues, is most powerfully expressed in the ways convert and migrant Muslims disassociate from one another.

Converts often claim to practice a “culture-free” Islam, which they contrast to Moroccans’ “traditions”, using a discourse that cloaks convert religiosity within an unmarked category of “European” and marks migrant Muslims as outsiders. Migrants, on the other hand, largely accuse converts of exclusionary social practices, and both groups worry about the other’s potential contribution to public perceptions of Muslim extremism. (ibid)

Although I agree with this observation, I found that in Amsterdam, the divide was rather between women in search of a scripture-based “true Islam” whether through an Islamic feminist discourse or an Islamic Revival discourse, and the practices of Islam by immigrant *communities*. Rogozen-Soltar, too, acknowledges that,

The discursive sifting of “true” or “pure” Islamic beliefs and practices from culturally based “traditions” is not unique to Granada’s converts. Similar distinctions are common to much of the heterogeneous yet globally reaching Islamic Revival, in which Muslims involved in piety and reformist movements increasingly participate in the active study of Islamic texts and theological debates, often in search of the “truest” forms of Islam. (ibid, 619)

This is an important observation because the women’s groups in my research welcomed converts and born Muslimas, as well as non-Muslim women. Ethnically, the groups were diverse, comprised of women from different ethnic backgrounds. The search for the “truest” or “purest” Islam, therefore, affected them all. In comparison with the research in Germany and Spain that I cited above, the biggest difference with my research seems to be the many opportunities for pious sociality between converts and born Muslims in the Netherlands. For instance, one of the participants in my research was born and raised in Germany, and during our interview she reflected on the differences between Hamburg and Amsterdam. In light of her experiences in Hamburg, she did not share the complaints about the lack of sisterhood that we were often lectured about by the volunteer of group two.

Yes [the volunteer of group two] always says during her lessons, “What kind of *ummah* is this, we don’t have any sisterhood.” Then I say, “Come on, it’s so nice here. Look at Germany.” Last time she said, “We don’t do anything.” Come on! In Hamburg you have one lesson on

Sunday, and Hamburg is big. Arabic language classes, you don't really have those. Here, you go to the mosque, you have something here, you have something there. In [my neighborhood], there are three mosques. In Hamburg, there are only mosques in the city center. You complain, "Oh it's so difficult with Wilders and whatever." Come on! Here in Amsterdam, if I look outside, I see sisters walking together, shopping together, going out for dinner together. The sisters here will come to the mosque for a lecture, and even though there are "only fifty" [the lecturer of group two had complained the Sunday before the interview that there were just fifty attendants], they do come to the mosque. Or in [another mosque] on a Friday afternoon, some of the women cleaned the mosque. I thought, "*Masha Allah*. Really?" They are together, they are in touch with each other, they do something, they go to lectures. Here it's like, Islam is active here.

Of course, it is impossible to generalize from one account. However, I observed that the quest for a deculturalized Islam attracted a very diverse group of converts and an equally diverse group of born Muslim women and girls. Native Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch women and girls formed the majority of attendants but women from all kinds of backgrounds came together during lectures and meetings. Different from the account of Rogozen-Soltar in Spain, this allowed for friendships across divides of ethnicity and class, within a pious sociality where connecting with each other through Islam could take place. As one participant commented,

The funny thing is that before I was Muslim, I didn't feel connected to Dutch people at all. [Ethnically,] I'm half Dutch but, I don't know, we just didn't have anything in common. I had no [white] Dutch friends at all. But since I'm Muslim, I have many [white] Dutch friends. ... Since I'm Muslim, I have friends from many nationalities, I like that. I didn't have that before.

When I asked participants about *Dutch culture*, often, they struggled to find an answer. Perhaps because of the culturalist turn in the Netherlands mentioned in chapter one, usually, at first, the concept of *culture* reminded them of norms and values. However, perhaps as a remnant of the Dutch history of pillarization, norms and values participants retained after conversion were mostly attributed to their upbringing, without necessarily considering these (part of) Dutch *culture*. As one participants phrased it,

I very much respect the way my parents brought me up. They taught me respect for other people, that's something I see reflected [in Islam]. But

you don't see that [respect for other people] with all the Dutch so I can't say that I got that from the Dutch.

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

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

Another participant tried to carve out what she liked about Dutch *culture* when she described to me that she still felt Dutch, while also comparing her behavior to other Muslims' *cultures* and reviewing both in light of Islam.

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

about age, or men-women, or saying things in an indirect fashion, no. I'm really blunt. I call a horse a horse.

In general, Dutch cultural traits that had an equivalent in Islam were valued, while cultural tenets that did not fit Islamic doctrine as women understood it, produced tensions.

An example of born Muslim's practice of Islam being influenced by aspects of Dutch *culture* came from the story of a participant with young children. Participants with small children, often choose an Islamic primary school for them to attend. These schools all have teachers of Islam and one afternoon, such a teacher lectured attending parents about the way the Dutch deal with time, as a means to encourage the Muslim parents, of various ethnic backgrounds, to follow their example. She recalled that the teacher had told the parents that the Dutch are always on time:

Yesterday, there was a lecture about that at [her children's Islamic primary] school, called, "Time is *hasanaat*" [divine blessings; a reward for good deeds]. The religion teacher said, "We Muslims are always late." The lecture started fifteen minutes late because people were still arriving, so he said, "See? With the Dutch... [they would have been on time]." He gave an example: "A brother [in Islam] went to see a non-Muslim man. He was late so the non-Muslim said to him, 'have you been on *hadj*?' The man answers, 'Yes.' So the other man says, 'Did you do the Friday prayer on time?' and the man answered, 'Yes.' 'Do you pray five times a day when it's time for prayer?' 'Yes.' And then he [the non-Muslim man] said, 'But it seems you have not understood your religion.' So the brother was very upset, he felt like he was called a *kafir*, as a matter of speech. But he was late and the man wanted to make him feel that it was wrong not to keep an appointment." So the religion teacher said, "If you make an appointment with someone Dutch at five o'clock, he'll be at your door at five o'clock. Not at a quarter past five, five o'clock he's there. We Muslims, we are always late." The lecture was about the fact that our children see that behavior, too. That we... one day the children are in bed at seven, then at eight, then at nine. Then you eat at six, then at five. He said, "There is no regularity." He said, "You don't take time seriously." That was what the lecture was about. The Dutch are really good with their time, "time is money" is a well-known expression, that's how he got the title, "time is *hasanaat*."

In the course of my research, it became clear that that when participants tried to distinguish between *culture* and *religion*, most of the time, they meant born Muslims' *cultures*. As they struggled to come up with any definition of Dutch *culture*, it was largely listed what aspects

they thought went well with Islam, and which did not. Aspects of culture that could be combined with Islam, could be retained. As one participant explained:

Okay, [when you think of] religion, you think of the Qur'an and *Sunna*. Almost all of that is fixed. Of course, there are different opinions on some subjects and there are also things that are, let's say in Saudi-Arabia, are somewhat different from the Netherlands, for instance wearing a *nikaab*. Culture is, let's say, how people perceive the Qur'an and *Sunna*, how they live with that. And then there is that what is not from the Qur'an and *Sunna*. I think there are small areas where pieces of culture can fit in with Islam very well. It doesn't have to be a battle between the two, there is room for that in Islamic scholarship, like, people know that the people in Pakistan are like this and the people in Algeria are like that. With certain things, you can accommodate that [difference] and still be a good Muslim. That is something that I also learned from my husband. For instance, I know that when the Arabs went to Indonesia, they adopted Indonesian clothes. You know that Indonesians have become Muslim. They [Arabs] behaved in a certain way so it was easy for the people to make contact, and the result is a large Muslim country. So, yes, everything that is culture doesn't have to be bad. Of course, there are things that are culture that are not Islamic at all, and, because of that, Islam becomes watered-down and people lose their way. Going to graves to ask for help, feasting there, that sort of thing, then you stray from the path.

The same approach was echoed by a volunteer of group one:

The *Sunna* of the *rasul* [the prophet Mohammed] is his behavior, you understand? That's clear. Of course that's not culture. That behavior is *the* shining example for us, and also what he didn't do. So what he did but also what he didn't do, what he said but also what he didn't say. For us, that's all *Sunna*, the example we want to follow, yes, all of that is pure religion. You understand? But, for instance, the fact that he rode on a white camel, that, of course, is tied to time, tied to culture, tied to place, and it doesn't mean that we all need to ride on a white camel. There you have a little thing from his life, from his example, which is not of the religion but that he did do. That's a concrete example and there are other examples. For instance, certain clothing, or slippers. At a certain time, he wore slippers made of Yemeni leather, those were comfortable, or he liked those, [but] that doesn't mean that we all should wear those slippers. There are more examples like that. That's culture, that doesn't belong to the *Sunna*. [Laughing,] fortunately we don't have to follow him there because that would be very impractical.

I had noticed that participants had mistaken religious precepts for *culture* and vice versa. When I further inquired how to distinguish between the two, she replied:

Hopefully, sooner or later, you just find out. It's a development that everybody goes through. Depending on the information, the people around you, your own curiosity, you develop yourself and acquire your own knowledge. If people [women] come here for a lecture, they primarily come for the knowledge and then you can help each other with that. You answer questions. But you can't, and I will address that [in the lecture] today, you can't expect, immediately, that someone [a new convert] has, crystal clear, figured all of that out yet, or aspires all of it. [For example,] someone is still figuring out "What is *tawheed* [the unity of God]?" So you work on that first. That's the base, that's the core. And all the other things around it, hopefully, over the years, someone just grows into it. We all have had these things, sometimes funny things. I heard from [the other volunteer] that at first, the rule that you're not allowed to fast when you have your period, she did not believe that was of Islam. But it [fasting while menstruating] made her very sick so then she thought, "Wait a minute, perhaps there is truth in that." Then you search and discover: it really is something of Islam, a gift, a dispensation that is given to you. Everyone has such things, sometimes it takes years to discover, "Hey, that's culture," or not, it can go both ways. Hopefully, it quickly becomes clear, in particular the important things, like the *salaat* [prayer]. Of course it is important that it becomes clear how it is supposed to be and what is expected of you. I just always say, "In general, it's important that you try your best to make it clear, and whether that's successful, you hope it'll be along the way."

In sum, in this chapter I have focused on some of the aspirations and ambiguities converts in my research wrestled with, before and after conversion. Ideals and practices in regard to their new religion differed from person to person and often changed over time. Born Dutch Muslims' display of various ways of practicing Islam, prompted many converts, as well as young born Muslims, to decide that none of these could be considered "real" Islam. Which practices to adopt, which books to read, which scholars to follow, which lectures to attend, and so on, these were all personal decisions. Nevertheless, looking for guidance and advice, participants turned to the volunteers of the women's group to ask questions, used scriptural sources, or the Internet to look for answers online. Therefore, authority seemed fragmented. However, I agree with the assessment of Volpi *et al* that religious authority remains but that it is increasingly mediated by the individual (2007, 13). While this is in

congruence with my observations, at the same time, it is important to relate this individuality to restrictions that arise from the social context.

The meaning women attributed to their choices, from the choice for the conversion itself to the changes in daily life that resulted from it, often, greatly differed from how these were perceived by their non-Muslim environment. Whereas women were usually pleased with the emphasis on women's rights in Islam, they were perceived as taking a step back from the accomplishments of women's emancipation in the wake of the 1960's. Whereas participants claimed to follow Islam, and not Muslims, a strong influence of a (presumed) husband was assumed. In contrast, I found that distinguishing between the "culture" of Muslims and the "religion" of Islam was of the utmost importance for participants. However, I agree with Özyürek and Rogozen-Soltar that the claim of European converts to have adopted a "culture-free" Islam can be a means to distance oneself from notions of "Muslim backwardness" that are pervasive in the Netherlands and in other European countries as well.<sup>166</sup> In doing so, they risk confirming a harsh, stigmatizing discourse. Nevertheless, they are not alone in their quest for a "deculturalized" Islam and find allies in the new generation of born Muslims and their suspicion of the "traditions" of their parents.

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<sup>166</sup> Of course, there were also the continual influences of habitual practices acquired before conversion, for instance the way in which participants created a festive environment as described in chapter four that cannot be separated from *culture*.