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

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Summary

In this thesis, I address women's conversion to Islam in the Netherlands, through a case study of converted women who participated in five Muslim women's groups in Amsterdam-West. The research took place between 2006 and 2011. These groups were founded by converted women, but attracted a diverse audience, including born Muslim women from different ethnic backgrounds. The volunteers and attendants of these groups, organized a wide range of lectures, workshops, and events, and were also active online. In the course of my research, I participated in two hundred offline meetings, extensively interviewed forty-seven converted women, and was granted access to participants' online activities as well. In addition to the analysis of women's individual conversion trajectories, I also looked at the local, national, transnational, and global context of these activities.

To address these different contexts, in this thesis I have opted to focus on converts' ethnic, national, and religious belonging, as the concept of belonging has the advantage over the concept of identity in that it designates a dynamic process. Attention for the agency of my interlocutors has also been a vital part of unpacking stereotyped notions of their conversion. In this thesis, I have foreground their voices to address the following question:

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

In the course of my research, I found that the women involved constantly need to reflect on, and negotiate their position as converts to Islam in the Netherlands. As the ethnographic material indicates, they negotiated with non-Muslims, with born Muslims, and even with God. To elaborate on these negotiations, in this thesis, I focus on, 1) women's individual conversion trajectories and the changes in daily life that precede, accompany, or follow from conversion, 2) the ways in which they engaged in *community* formation and their use of the concept of Islamic sisterhood, and 3) converts' aspirations and ambiguities, and their attempts to separate the *culture* of Muslims from Islam as a *religion*.

In regard to the first focus of this thesis, I found women's conversion to Islam to be processual form of change. Tensions in regard to changes in daily life that occurred in the context of conversion to Islam, for a large part, depended on the visibility of these choices. Women's changes in dress or diet, or refraining from socializing in the context of alcohol or with the opposite sex, often were a surprisingly short route to becoming perceived as a foreigner. This circumstance fuels, I argue, popular and scholarly perceptions of conversion to Islam as a radical change and a break with the past. However, my observations of conversion unsettles this type of conceptualization as I found that conversion was often a slow process, and a distinctly ambiguous ritual in regard to the exact moment. Although, as a result of conversion, the daily life practices of my interlocutors in some ways diverged from the customs of the majority population, many ethnic Dutch converts in my research emphasized that they still *felt* Dutch, and expressed this in myriad ways. This dynamic was somewhat different for converts with other ethnic backgrounds.

A second line of argumentation in this thesis revolves around the social and communal aspects of conversion to Islam. Importantly, participants not only engaged in a personal transformation process, they also became connected to the *ummah*, the world *community* of Muslims, often conceptualized as a symbolic family of brothers and sisters. Participants' employment of this Islamic concept of sisterhood was, I argue, a means to take part in and shape their (feelings of) belonging to the *ummah*. Instead of unreflectively adopting practices of Islam brought to the Netherlands by immigrant *communities*, my interlocutors formed and participated in multi-ethnic, women-only, social networks, online and offline, emanating from the work of a number of volunteers. Although the latter did not position themselves as scholars of Islam, through their status as "knowledgeable women," they mediated many of the tensions converts wrestled with in the form of personal advice, in lectures, workshops and other events, or online through forums, blogs, or Facebook.

The third focus of this thesis centers on how the women concerned address questions of religious positioning. The central theme that emerged here was their emphasis on the need to distinguish between *culture* and *religion*. Which practices to adopt, which books to read, which scholars to follow, which lectures to attend, were all personal decisions. However, looking for guidance, participants often turned to the volunteers of the women's groups, to Islamic scriptural sources, or to the Internet. It was evident that the ways in which many participants in my research discussed and tried to implement Islamic tenets in their daily lives, was influenced by the Islamic Revival with its calls for a return to the high ethical values of the first generations of Muslims. This included

an emphasis on Muslim women's rights, be it within a more conservative-literalist framework or encompassing what some researchers call an Islamic feminist re-interpretation of the Qur'an and *hadith*.

Ethnic Dutch converts belong to the ethnic majority population but their choice for a conspicuous, minority religion tends to push them outside the national fold. When ethnic differences among converts are taken into account, the narrowness of the Dutch national fold becomes even more exposed, as women who were already considered "allochthones" before conversion are less often noticed as converts and more often othered based on their skin color and ethnic background. What all participants shared was the need to be flexible: in regard to their non-Muslim families, in regard to the specific challenges of the non-Muslim society within which they live, and in finding their way as converts when learning how to incorporate Islamic precepts into their daily lives. The same is true for born Muslims, as new media technologies and migration influence their practice of Islam as well. These continual interactions between global trends, transnational influences, and local translations, are a promising field for further research on contemporary conversion to Islam.