

# Rethinking ‘Dutchness’: Learning from the intersections between religion, gender and national identity after conversion to Islam

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## Abstract

This article aims to investigate the relationship between religion and national identity through the experiences of female converts to Islam. Gender is essential in this conjuncture, as many national, religious and secular markers are gendered and, most of the time, specifically focused on women and their bodily practices. Through a literature review and discussion of preliminary interview results, we will investigate how female converts negotiate their multiple belongings, especially regarding the relationship between religion and national identity. The focus is not on self-understanding of converts, but on in/exclusion of Muslims in European nations. The final aim is to explore options for more inclusive interpretations of ‘Dutchness’, in order to counter the idea that Islam and ‘Dutchness’ are not compatible.

## Keywords

conversion, gender, national identity, religion, secularism

## Résumé

Cet article a pour objectif de réfléchir sur la relation entre la religion et l’identité nationale à travers l’expérience de femmes converties à l’Islam. Le genre est essentiel dans ce contexte, comme c’est le cas dans de nombreux contextes nationaux, les marqueurs

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religieux et séculiers sont genrés et, dans la plupart des cas, particulièrement en ce qui concerne les femmes et leurs pratiques corporelles. À travers une revue de la littérature et une analyse des résultats préliminaires des interviews, nous analysons comment les femmes converties négocient leurs multiples appartenances, et ce particulièrement en ce qui concerne la relation entre religion et identité nationale. Le focus ne sera pas porté sur la connaissance qu'elles ont d'elles-mêmes en tant que converties, mais sur l'inclusion/exclusion des musulmans en tant que partie intégrante des nations européennes. L'objectif final est d'explorer les options pour une interprétation plus inclusive de la « néerlanditude » [*Dutchness*], plutôt que de nous baser sur l'idée que l'Islam et la « néerlanditude » ne sont pas compatibles.

### Mots-clés

conversion, genre, identité nationale, religion, sécularisme

## Introduction

Until the 1950s, most migrants in the Netherlands came from Germany, Eastern Europe, Spain and Italy. After WWII, postcolonial migration from Indonesia, Surinam, and the Antilles became a significant phenomenon, combined with labour migration from the South of Europe, Turkey and Morocco. After the 1970s, large groups of refugees from South America, Africa and Asia found their way to the Netherlands. Hence, three groups of migrants are generally recognized as having shaped the current Dutch social formation: postcolonial migrants (Oostindie, 2010), the so-called 'guest workers', and refugees (Hoving et al., 2005). It took the Dutch governments a long time to respond to the growing migrant population in the post-war era. This was mainly due to the generalized assumption, at that time, that people did not come to the Netherlands to permanently settle in the country. When the government realized that most migrants came to stay, integration policies became an issue. However, this did not happen until the 1980s, when many migrants had already lived in the country for several decades. Between the 1980s and 1990s, policy was mostly based on the idea that migrants should integrate into Dutch society while maintaining their own identities (Ghorashi, 2003). During the 1990s, various politicians and opinion makers started to criticize the policies that allowed migrants to integrate while holding on to their ethnic identities (Bolkestein, 1991; Schnabel, 1999; Scheffer, 2000).

When we look at the current Dutch public debates about minorities in general and Muslims specifically, we see that the religion/secularism divide plays an important role, just as gender does. According to Karin van Nieuwkerk, Europe is going through a process of naturalization of cultural attributes with regard to minorities. Cultural differences are essentialized and used to distinguish the civilized self from the cultural Other. In this context, one could argue that 'the national minority issue' has transformed into a 'religious minority issue' (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004). This is in line with the work of Rudolph Peters who argues that discussions about migration and integration in the Netherlands, have increasingly become discussions about Islam (Peters, 2006). He

recognizes two important developments in European debates about migration and multiculturalism in the twenty-first century: (1) a transformation in the discourse about migrants – from guest workers to Muslims; (2) a new (or renewed) definition of national identities, strongly articulated with secularism. Among other things, this means that in many European countries the discussions about cultural diversity, recognition, and integration actually translate into a discussion about Islam (see also Midden, 2016a).

Oskar Verkaaik (2009) describes the importance of cultural citizenship in relation to the construction of Dutch identity. He argues that such an interpretation of citizenship does not just ask citizens to be part of the democratic system, but also requires cultural loyalty and the endorsement of social and cultural practices. He sees the rise of a new nationalism in the Netherlands, which is most of all characterized by a defence of secularism. The desire for freedom and individualism in this context is for a large part presented as anti-religious, and this anti-religious attitude now turns against the religion of migrants. One could say that secularism defines the Dutch self and religious intolerance defines the Muslim Other. This way, secularism not only becomes an ethnic identity marker (of the Dutch self), but also something conservative, that is used to protect the status quo (Verkaaik, 2009). Moreover, the new nationalism, Verkaaik argues, is meant to civilize internal minorities (Verkaaik, 2009: 35). Freedom is no longer described in opposition to bigger political powers such as Germany or France, but as something that should be protected against religion in the public sphere. Debates about Islam for example, are in practice most of all about the extent to which a secular country like the Netherlands, can accept the public presence of religion. According to Verkaaik the fact that these debates are about the limits of tolerance shows that Islam is in fact considered as something not Dutch. Toleration is about what is not wanted, and hence something outside (Verkaaik, 2009: 35). This way, freedom also becomes something that is essential to secular cultures, an unquestioned norm that has already been achieved, but is threatened by a religious other (Verkaaik, 2009: 129).

The harsh debates about the integration of minorities and the so-called incompatibility of Islam and Western values have led to a rather polarized society. In this context, it is remarkable that every year, approximately 500 Dutch men and women (predominantly women), decide to convert to Islam (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). While some may argue that Islam is a threat to Dutch society, these, mainly women, show that one can be both Dutch and Muslim. By discussing the experiences of marginalization of these women, this article aims to reflect on mechanisms of in/exclusion with regard to Islam in Europe. The final aim is to explore options for more inclusive interpretations of ‘Dutchness’, in order to counter the idea that Islam and ‘Dutchness’ are not compatible. The article is a first exploration of this topic, and combines a literature review with examples from preliminary interviews with converts. The article is not meant to make larger claims about the opinions of converts, it rather aims to explore the relationship between Dutchness and Islam and move towards a more inclusive definition of Dutchness, by learning from the experiences of converts. I focus specifically on the experiences of female converts, and the influence of gender on the connection between religion and national identity. Women are not only the majority of converts in Western Europe, but they are also highly visible as such. Especially, since many of the debates about Western values or what it means to be ‘Dutch’ are gendered and/or refer to emancipation related issues.

In the following, I will first discuss some methodological issues. The rest of the article will be divided into 3 main parts: 1) the relationship between conversion to Islam and national identity, 2) the experiences of in/exclusion after conversion to Islam and 3) a rethinking of national identity. In these three parts, the literature on conversion and national identity is combined with interview results in order to present a nuanced picture of the issues at stake. The article will close with a short conclusion.

## Methodological notes: Researching Muslims and Islam in the Netherlands

This article focuses on in/exclusion with regards to Dutch identity and starts with the experiences of Dutch converts to Islam to investigate these mechanisms. As 'outsiders within' (see the last section of the article for a more elaborate reflection on this), they experience and see things about our society that the majority might not. This makes their perspectives highly valuable for a reflection on the relationship between national identity and religion, or in this case Dutch national identity and Islam. However, this also means that converts occupy a special position in this project: on the one hand, they are a central part of the research, on the other hand this article does not aim to *understand* or *represent* their experiences. The interviews with converts function solely as an entrance to investigate different interpretations of (and limits to) Dutch national identity. Hence, it was more important to gain information on (or examples of) in/exclusion concerning 'Dutchness', than to produce a representative image of the opinions and experiences of Dutch converts to Islam. In this context, I want to make a few remarks about the category 'Muslim', my interviewees and my position as a researcher in this project.

Brubaker argues that it is important to recognize that Muslims are not just a category of social, religious and political practice, but also a category of analysis (Brubaker, 2013). We live in a world, he argues, in which 'Islam is a chronic *object* of discussion and debate' (Brubaker, 2013). In this context, 'Muslim' is a category towards which one has to make a stance: one cannot simply inhabit it in an unreflective manner. While some scholars have registered this shift (see also Peters in the beginning of this article), Brubaker argues that others also contribute to this process of producing knowledge and representations of Muslims and hence risk 'methodological Islamism' (Brubaker, 2013: 6). I want to emphasise here that while Islam/Muslims are a central topic in this article; they are not necessarily the *object* of investigation. The aim of this article is to scrutinize Dutch identity and how it is influenced by the religion/secularism divide. I approach this topic through 'outsiders/within' the category of 'Dutchness': Dutch converts to Islam. Hence, the article is not about understanding or explaining Muslim converts, rather it focuses on Dutch national identity and what the category 'Muslim' (specifically converted Muslim) *does* in this context. However, this does not mean that the category 'Muslim' does not also function as a category of analysis in this research, as I look at converts to Islam and interview them about their experiences. By asking women about their experiences and interpretations of their identities as 'Muslim' and as 'Dutch' I aim to critically investigate these categories and thus use them (the 'category Muslim' and the 'category Dutch') as *objects* of analysis, rather than *tools* of analysis, as Brubaker suggests (2013).

The analysis in this article is for a large part based on a literature review, but I have also conducted in-depth interviews with two Dutch converts to Islam, whom I had already known for a longer time. They are both in their twenties, higher educated and have been interested in issues around multiculturalism, integration and discrimination for a long time. I have had several longer interviews with them (more than 1 hour) before and during the summer of 2016. I asked them about the process of conversion and discussed with them how they think about gender, emancipation and Islam. The longest parts of the interviews were about national identity, national belonging and experiences of in/exclusion. I asked my interviewees whether people treat them differently since their conversion and whether they have experienced discrimination after their conversions. We also talked about the relationship between Dutch national identity and Islam, and how they relate to 'Dutchness'. The women wanted to remain anonymous and the names I use here are not their own names.

Finally, I talk about Dutch converts as 'outsiders/within' (with regard to the category of 'Dutchness'), but as a researcher I am also both insider and outsider in this project. As a white Dutch intersectional feminist, I shared certain ideas with my interviewees, for example about the differences between women, multicultural society and the inclusion of minorities. As a non-Muslim however, I also hold an outsider position, and was someone they had to explain their choices and faith to. This insider/outsider position made it possible to discuss certain topics very easily, while others were more difficult (see also Farahani, 2010). For instance, both women felt the need to emphasise to me that Islam inspires them to emancipate, albeit with a focus on sexual difference rather than sameness. We talked a lot about this topic and managed to gain mutual understanding based on a shared starting point. However, it was more difficult to discuss their relationship to born-Muslims or possible doubts about their faith, because with these topics we did not share certain basic assumptions.<sup>1</sup> In this context, it is important to emphasise that the interviews first reflect *my* interests, questions and frameworks. They are not neutral representations of *their* standpoints, but rather conversations between me and them, during which I could learn from their experiences as 'outsiders/within'.

## **Conversion to Islam and national identity**

Conversion has been defined in many different ways. Zebiri emphasises the difference between descriptions of converts themselves and some of the more secular (social) scientific approaches (Zebiri, 2008). Where converts often describe their conversion with reference to the transcendent or as a spiritual awakening, academic literature tends to underestimate these spiritual aspects and search for more secular explanations of the phenomenon (see also Rambo, 1993). Important to note here is that contrary to what many believe, people do not only convert because of a possible partner, but also because an independent search brought them to Islam. One could however argue that the different itineraries to Islam very often coincide in practice. In other words, people are in contact with Muslims, get interested in Islam, and have their own intellectual search for spirituality (see also Vroon-Najem, 2014: 64). Moreover, while it is often thought that changes related to conversion to Islam are radical and instant alterations, most recent scholars refer to conversion as a process, even though there is discussion about how to

understand this process exactly (see for example, Mansson McGinty, 2006; van Nieuwkerk, 2006; Vroon-Najem, 2014). Verkaaik adds to this that we should not see conversion as a 'turning from and to' (as Rambo defines it), as many converts indeed turn to something new, but don't always reject something old (Verkaaik, 2009: 132). Conversion is very often a bricolage, in which old and new practices of faith are brought together. In this context, converts might also be much more flexible than they are often given credit for, and regularly alternate phases of faith with phases of doubt (Verkaaik, 2009: 132).

According to Vroon conversion is both a simple ritual and a complex transformation. On the one hand, people can convert to Islam just by saying the shahada, the declaration of faith, on the other hand, it also means adopting a minority religion that is under intense, often critical or hostile, scrutiny (Vroon-Najem, 2014: 57). These men and women convert to a religion that is thought to be 'foreign', which makes their position in Western societies rather complicated. Moreover, even though in most Western countries it is considered important that people make their own choices; using one's freedom to *choose* Islam is seen as puzzling at best and treason at worst (Vroon-Najem, 2014: 57). As mentioned above, it is often assumed that people make that choice because of a romantic relationship with a Muslim, while most Dutch Muslim converts describe their conversion as an informed and personal choice (Vroon-Najem, 2014: 58).

In her article 'Veils and Wooden clogs don't go together', Karin van Nieuwkerk is interested in Dutch cultural and national identity and what converts can teach us about the construction of the Dutch 'Self' in opposition to the Muslim 'Other' (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004). She concludes that Dutch identity is constructed as modern, tolerant and open; a kind of 'universal non-identity' (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004: 245). It is this 'universal non-identity', consisting of tolerance, freedom and emancipation through which converts are evaluated and considered to fall short because they have converted to Islam. By converting they are now perceived as belonging to the undistinguished category of the Other. Van Nieuwkerk describes this as cultural racism and shows how Dutch female converts to Islam are often considered traitors. You cannot *change* race, she says, but you can *betray* your race. Since Islam is seen as the belief of immigrants, converts become *foreigners* by becoming Muslim. Female converts become especially visible as foreigners (if /when they decide to wear a headscarf), as veiling is often considered to be the most forceful symbol of Islam. (Van Nieuwkerk: 2004: 236–237).

Galonnier confirms this image by arguing that Islam is not only perceived as violent and oppressive, but also as 'Brown', foreign and non-Western (Galonnier, 2015: 571). Hence, one cannot be both 'Muslim' and 'European' (Jensen, 2008: 389). Jensen adds to this that an important aspect of current European nationalist discourses entails the idea that *political* values such as secularisation are essentially *cultural* values (Mouritzen, in Jensen, 2008: 390). In other words, secularity is a European value that Muslims supposedly lack. In this context, she quotes a Danish nationalist politician who argued that when Danes become Muslims, they are no longer Danish: 'They leave their Danish background behind because they abandon central concepts in Danish identity like liberalism, democracy, equality' (Jensen, 2008: 391). This confirms the perspective of Oskar Verkaaik on Dutch nationalism, when he argues that secularism and freedom are considered essential aspects of Dutch identity that need to be protected from external

treats, such as the Muslim faith. It also shows that current nationalist discourses present a complicated and often paradoxical relationship between religion, secularism and national identity. On the one hand, European national identities are associated with various forms of Christianity, sometimes also Judaism (see van den Hemel, 2014), and hence Muslims are excluded from this identity. The argument is that Europe has a Christian/(Judean) heritage, and Islam cannot be part of it. On the other hand, it is also regularly argued that secularism, and thus the separation of religion and politics is an essential aspect of European identities. Showing your religion in public is for that reason seen as a problematic act (Jensen, 2008). One could state that any public display of religion would be condemned in this context, but in practice, Islam is considered the religion that is most visible in the public sphere. Ozyurek adds to this that it is often argued that Islam never went through an Enlightenment and as a result, never learned to be rational and tolerant about the practice of their faith (Ozyurek, 2015: 29). In short, these examples show a perspective on a European Self that is secular with a Christian background, tolerant, free and liberal, and simultaneously an image of the Islam as Other, violent, oppressive and unfree.

It is important to note here that some Muslims also see Islam and European identities as incompatible. Jensen states that in her research, many converts dissociated themselves from what they called ‘Danish culture’:

When speaking about *dansk kultur* and ‘Danishness’, they often mention activities that they can no longer take part in, like eating pork, drinking alcohol, participating in parties and sexual promiscuity. As one rather ‘rule-oriented’ newly converted woman of 18 replied when asked what comes to her mind when mentioning ‘Danish culture’: ‘I think of my past’. (Jensen, 2008: 395)

According to Jensen, converts predominantly talk about Danish culture in two ways: 1) as a nostalgic and essentialized set of customs they no longer take part in, and 2) as a political concept defined by those who claim to have the monopoly in culture. I would add to this that more affirmative approaches, which deliberately bring together European culture and Islam, are also important to consider. Many Muslims (both born and converted) negotiate what it means to be European and Muslim and often refer to Muslim practices to show that they can contribute to society (see for example Mansson McGinty, 2006; Roald, 2006; Midden, 2016b). The women I talked to also emphasized that their identities after conversion changed over time. Where they first focussed on being good Muslims, they felt more space to be both Muslim and Dutch after the first years had passed. Mirjam adds to this that when she became Muslim, she had to construct her identity all over again and think of every part in terms of whether she wanted to keep it or not (Interview 2, min 9).

Converts struggle with the relationship between religion, secularism, culture and national identity in multiple and complex ways and often their cultural and national identities change during and after their conversion (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004). Lisette for example describes that before her conversion she was seen as the Dutch girl who always hung out with the Moroccans (‘Mocro’s’), after her conversion she was more seen as ‘one of them’ (also by her Moroccan friends), and hence as less ‘Dutch’ (Interview 1, min

4). On the other hand, her 'Dutchness' was always there in the background as well, for example when she did not know certain customs, such as how to make Moroccan tea. In this context, she sometimes felt the pressure to conform to certain practices (such as wearing the headscarf) in order to be seen as less Dutch and therefore a better Muslim (Interview 1, min 5).

Jensen argues that converts often describe themselves as 'being squeezed between two sides' or 'split between Danish culture and the culture of Muslims' (Jensen, 2008). They do not feel like they fully belong to the Muslim community, because they are still seen as Dutch or Danish, and they feel like (and are treated as if) they lost their Dutch or Danish identity after conversion to Islam. Lisette for example states that being Dutch is currently so much associated with being tolerant and free that anyone who *chooses* to submit to a God and strict traditions, simply cannot be Dutch anymore (Interview 1, min 38). Her response to this is a question about our definition of freedom:

Which freedom is this then? Because actually this is submission to other structures, which you maybe only start to recognize when you encounter Islam. Because it makes you think: I don't want to be a slave of my own desire for shopping, or what am I looking for when I go party? I want to submit to God, because he knows me best and has my best interest in mind. (Interview 1, min 38).

According to Lisette, secularism is 'sold to us' as an ideology/structure that makes diversity and tolerance possible, but in the meantime, it has also led to discrimination of minorities (see also Mahmood, 2012). She adds to this that it might be very difficult for Muslims in Europe to identify with secularism/secular perspectives, because secularism is so often used in connection to European Christian/Judean heritage (Interview 1, min 41). It is important to note that there is a gendered aspect to this as well, as the 'not being free as a Muslim' is very often associated with women, because they are supposedly oppressed within Islam and cannot be 'free' anymore after their conversion. The headscarf has a central role in this as the most prominent symbol for Islam, it is considered both 'non-Dutch' and a 'sign of oppression' (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004: 235). The importance of secularism in many European discourses about integration and migration makes their position even more complicated. Despite the fact that Muslims can combine their faith with secular perspectives, secularism is in many public debates used to define the European Self in opposition to the Muslim Other (see Verkaaik 2009; Van Nieuwkerk 2004, Peters, 2006). One cannot be Dutch if one is not secular, and one cannot be secular if one is Muslim. However, the converted women I talked to also explained how they found more space to counter these discourses, in the years after their conversion.

## **National identity and religion: Mechanisms of in- and exclusion**

In the above we could see how Muslim converts are excluded from European national identities (such as 'Dutchness') because their new Muslim practices and beliefs do not seem to correspond with the mainstream idea of what it means to be Dutch. This also means that they experience other aspects of 'being a minority', namely discrimination

and marginalization. Often this treatment is not (only) related to how they act or what they believe, but also to how they look. This ‘racialization of religion’ means that racial meaning is assigned to a group that was previously defined as religious (Galonnier, 2015). In other words, a light brown skin is associated with ‘being Muslim’.

Galonnier investigated racialization of religion through the experiences of white converts to Islam in the United States and France (Galonnier, 2015). Race plays a very different role in (public discourses in) these countries, but in both cases race enables and forecloses different religious identities:

White American converts can either portray themselves as ‘race traitors’ because of their connection to the political tradition of African-American Islam, or be racialized as Arabs or South Asians, a racial assignation that associates them either with the figure of the terrorist or with the myth of the model minority. By contrast, French converts have to bear the complex legacy of colonialism or experience a drop in social status since their conversion associates them with lower-class citizens of North African descent. (Galonnier, 2015: 578)

Class is an important signifier in the different racialised experiences of converts in the US and France. Where a woman with a headscarf in the US could raise her social status; in France practicing ones’ religion by wearing a headscarf, led to a drop in social status (Galonnier, 2015). However, in both cases women became more visible as ‘racialised subjects’ because of the headscarf.

The figure of the ‘Muslim terrorist’ is essential in the racialization of Muslim converts (Galonnier, 2015: 576). Think for example of women with headscarves who are asked whether they wear a bomb underneath their clothes. Ozyurek also demonstrates that in Germany, converts to Islam are not just marginalized but also considered traitors to European culture, internal enemies that need to be watched, and potential terrorists (Ozyurek, 2015: 3). She argues that because of this, German converts dissociate themselves from Muslim *migrants*, and deliberately present themselves as *German* Muslims, or even de-nationalized and de-traditionalized Muslims. Ozyurek refers to the work of El-Tayeb in this context and argues that German converts ‘queer ethnicity’ (El-Tayeb, 2011, quoted in Ozyurek, 2015) by building a community based on the shared experience of multiple and contradictory positionalities. One could indeed argue that converts develop new identities, connected to minority standpoints and show that identity is never stable, and always shifting and performative (El-Tayeb, 2011).

It is important to emphasise that the position of converts in Europe is complex: they are often marginalized because of their new status as Muslims, but at the same time also keep certain privileges as white/native ‘Dutch’, ‘Germans’, ‘French’ etc. Firstly because, at least in theory, they can always go back to their privileged position, a choice non-white people do not have. Secondly, most converts still have the advantage of being fluent in the language and understanding cultural codes and jokes. My interviewee Mirjam experiences these different aspects of her identity quite often in her job, for example when she talks to people over the phone and she sees their surprise when they meet her afterwards in real life (and with headscarf) (Interview 2, min 20). On the other hand, when people first see her, they are sometimes surprised by the fluency of her Dutch or they ask her whether she speaks Turkish (Interview 2, min 25). Interviewee Lisette

argues that some converts also use their white privilege to achieve certain things in the Muslim community, for example by stating that, as native Dutch, they would be better at managing a mosque (Interview 1, min 47). Overall, these examples show how various aspects of one's identity play different roles in different situations and create a complicated picture of marginalization and privilege. This picture becomes even more complex when we take into account the marginalized aspects of their identities *before* their conversion, for example class or ethnicity (see also Ozyurek, 2015).

Moreover, in the interview with Mirjam, another issue related to marginalization and privilege comes up: the constant responsibility to represent Islam and Muslims in a positive way. Or as she says it: the responsibility to show that Muslims are good people (Interview 2, min 28). For Mirjam this means that she is always reflecting on how she acts and what people think of her, as she feels a heavy burden to function as a mediator between Muslims and non/Muslims. Gender is an important aspect of this, as both Lisette and Mirjam feel the need to counter the idea that Muslim women are oppressed or not emancipated. According to Lisette, gender is also an important marker in the definition of 'Dutchness'. If you want to be considered Dutch, especially as a Muslim woman, you have to endorse a specific interpretation of gender roles and women's emancipation, she says. Mirjam argues that sometimes she likes to show how important Islam is for her and how she emancipates through Islam, but sometimes she has a bad day and she finds it difficult to feel this responsibility (Interview 2, min 28).

Esra Uzyurek and Nasar Meer refer to W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness to understand the complicated position of Muslims in contemporary Europe. Du Bois writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [ . . . ] He simply wishes to make it possible to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spat upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (Du Bois, quoted in Meer, 2011: 52)

Meer describes Du Bois's work as a valuable asset to the fields of multiculturalism and recognition, because it teaches us much about the dual consequences of unrecognized minorities, but also about their potential for transformation. Thinking specifically about the position of converts to Islam in Europe, it is remarkable to see how they (a hundred years after Du Bois wrote these sentences) are also outcasts and strangers in their own house (Du Bois, in Meer, 2011: 52). Comparing the colour racism in the US in the beginning of the 20th century, with the position of converts in current Europe is not straightforward (Ozyurek, 2015), there is however much to learn from the words of Du Bois. As Mirjam explained the heavy burden of representation, Du Bois talks about the internalization by African Americans of the contempt white Americans have of them (see also Meer, 2011). Moreover, the creation of an additional perspective in the form of 'a gifted second sight', gives them the opportunity to see things that are escaped from the majority, for example between democratic ideals and practice (Meer, 2011). This seems

to be even more true for converts who have experienced privileges before and can notice the differences after a sudden fall in social status (Ozyurek, 2015). My interviewees also refer to such changes after their conversion, when strangers see them as ‘victims of a religion’ or treat them as if they could not speak the language. Lisette argues that in her view, all religious people are looked down on, but because of world politics and terrorism, Muslims are also seen as a threat, and as a convert she felt she was considered to be an even bigger threat (Interview 1, min 35). For Lisette, this treatment by strangers was, among other things, a reason to stop wearing the headscarf for a while; she wanted to be ‘invisible’ again when taking the train or going shopping. Without a headscarf, her Muslim identity became hidden, and hence her choices and conduct were no longer constantly questioned (Interview 1, min 23).

### **Towards a multicultural ‘Dutchness’: Lessons from ‘outsiders within’**

In the previous sections, I have argued that converts to Islam occupy a complicated position in contemporary Europe. They actively chose a religion that is considered contradictory to European/Western values and is more and more discussed as a threat to European/Western life. Converts often experience marginalization and sometimes even a drop in social status (see Galonnier, 2015). In this section, I will reflect on converts’ experiences, ideas and perspectives with regard to national identity: do they still feel Dutch; what does ‘Dutchness’ mean to them; and how can we think about ‘Dutchness’ in a more inclusive way? As mentioned before, it is not my aim to represent how converts in the Netherlands deal with their new religion in relation to national identity. For such an argument, more large scale fieldwork among converts in the Netherlands is necessary. Rather, this part aims to explore what certain examples of experiences of converts with regard to in/exclusion can teach us about the relationship between religion/secularism, gender and national identity and how we can rethink the concept of ‘Dutchness’ from there.

According to Jensen, there are two basic modes of Muslim religiosity among converts:

One tends to be spiritual and emotional, dealing with exploration, emotion, reflection, self-knowledge, the relationship between the interior and the exterior [ . . . ] It cultivates a personal relationship to God [ . . . ] It is a religiosity that is open to and in continuity with the world, taking an active part in the world through voting in elections, volunteering in NGOs, and many other activities. The other mode of religiosity is characterised by a preoccupation with following rules, with what is haram or halal, and is oriented toward truth and proof in a fixed and unquestionable form. It is occupied with rationality in contrast to emotions and with putting Islam on the same footing as science. (Jensen, 2008)

I recognize these different modes of religiosity among the converts that I talked to, although I would argue that we should not approach these modes as exclusive categories. Just as identities are not stable or fixed; approaches to religiosity also change over time. Mirjam for example describes the period right after her conversion as ‘being in love with her new faith’ (Interview 2, min 41). She found much strength in religious practices and wanted to do it all the best way she could (which was sometimes difficult for family

and friends), but later on, she argues, she managed to find more balance in her faith and practices.

No matter what mode of religiosity comes more to the forefront, converts often reflect on different aspects of their identity. For a large part this process is similar to the one born-Muslims (who live in Western Europe) go through (Midden, 2016b). They have to find a way to be religious in a (so-called) secular society and have to position themselves on the intersection of their religious, ethnic and national identities. But for converts to Islam this process is also partly different, not in the least because they were first considered to be part of the (unmarked) majority. The literature shows much diversity in how converts negotiate their religious and national identities. Ozyurek for example describes how the women in her research explicitly present themselves as 'German Muslims' and distinguish themselves from 'ethnic Muslims' (Ozyurek, 2015). Jensen (2008) however shows how her interviewees sometimes associate 'Danishness' with a culture they can no longer take part in (see also earlier in this article). Mansson McGinty (2006) describes that some women in her research claim to be both Swedish and Muslim and call for a wider definition of 'Swedishness', while others air more criticism on their cultural background and for example say that they 'feel a foreigner everywhere'. Overall, one could argue that 'conversion triggers looping effects through which the meaning of national belonging is modified due to the personal meaning given to a Muslim identity' (Mansson McGinty, 2006: 151).

The women in my interviews made several important suggestions with regard to different interpretations of 'Dutchness'. First of all, they both argued that national identity should not be based on 'where you come from' or 'how you look'. Lisette believes that the Dutch are too occupied with descent. This does not mean that questions about national identity are not relevant to her, but rather that Dutch people think about these issues in too static terms: 'people do not say "what a nice man", but rather say "such a nice Moroccan"' (Interview 1, part II, min 7). This way they always emphasize where people come from, rather than what they do or how they define themselves. Moreover, she argued that when you are not white, you are automatically considered as not 'from here' and thus non-Dutch (Interview 1, min 13). This makes it, according to her, also difficult for many migrants to 'feel Dutch'.

Mirjam talks about national identity in the context of how people define themselves. She describes 'being Dutch' as a feeling of belonging:

you can be born here and not feel Dutch and you can be born somewhere else and feel Dutch. And this feeling inside, and the need to be part of something and to contribute that is being Dutch for me. It is something inside and has nothing to do with looks or demands. It is about being engaged. (Interview 2, min 46)

Mirjam links the above specifically to Islam, and argues that her faith also teaches her to feel committed to her environment and to contribute to society. This distinguishes national identity from looks, background and even from certain conduct, and puts the focus much more on connections and contributions that people make. I would argue that Mirjam's definition of national identity as a form of belonging and contributing could be an important starting point for more inclusivity. And interestingly, she mentions how

converts especially can function as mediators and bring people together (Interview 2, min 51). But Lisette adds to this that if we want a more inclusive society, it is important to critically reflect on the dominant position of white/‘autochthonous’ people in the Netherlands as well:

as long as people neglect to do this, it will be impossible to truly accept the other. Because then it remains an integration project, led by the majority. (...) The Dutch can then teach minorities a lot, but what minorities can teach the Dutch always seems to remain un-important. Or people act surprised if they find out they can learn from others. (Interview 1, min 30)

Mirjam connects to that by saying that she noticed how so-called outsiders are not allowed to critique the Netherlands or certain aspects of it. Hence, as soon as one does this (for example a Muslim), the borders of who supposedly belong to the Netherlands and who do not, become painfully clear (Interview 2, min 49).

The issue of Muslims as outsiders in our society, and converted Muslims as ‘outsiders within’ is important to reflect on. Miriam Cooke talks in this context about ‘Muslimwoman’, a ‘singular religious and gendered identification that overlays national, ethnic, cultural, historical, and even philosophical diversity’ (Cooke, 2008: 91). It is almost impossible for Muslim women to escape this identification as essentially different, a discourse that is employed by both neo-orientalists and Islamists. According to Cooke:

‘Muslimwoman’ locates a boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’. As women, Muslim women are outsider/insiders within Muslim communities where, to belong, their identity increasingly is tied to the idea of the veil. As Muslims, they are negotiating cultural outsider/insider roles in Muslim-minority societies (Cooke, 2008: 91).

The logic of the argument is, Cooke says, that women are the potential outside whom insiders must keep pure or purify in order to save the purity of the inside (2008: 92). If we connect this to the position of converted Muslim women in Western Europe, the picture becomes even more complicated. One could argue that these women are crossing borders by actually deconstructing the boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ that Cooke talks about. But, as Mansson McGinty argues, concepts such as the ‘fragmented self’ or ‘border crossing’ in fact imply that these borders actually encompass certain contents or that converts indeed ‘have to cross when shifting from one self to another, and that these selves, and the cultural categories they embrace, are irreconcilable’ (Mansson McGinty, 2006: 139). Hence, it seems more appropriate to emphasise that borders are actually always blurred and shifting, and that axes of identities intersect. Differences across gender, ethnicity, religion, class, age and sexuality influence someone’s position, also as an insider/outsider. We should therefore let go of the insider/outsider as a dichotomy; as people are most of the time positioned ‘in-between’ or ‘on the edge of being both insider/outsider’ (Farahani, 2010). Or as Trinh argues: ‘[t]he moment the insider steps out from the inside she is no longer a mere insider. She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands in that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out’ (Trinh, 1998: 418, quoted in Farahani, 2010). This is how I think we should understand the position of

converts to Islam: not as boundary-crossers, but boundary-critics. They deconstruct fixed ideas about religion, nationality, gender and ethnicity, just by the choices they make and how they live their lives. This is exactly why I would argue that their experiences can teach us so much about the relationship between national identity, religion/secularism and gender.

Cooke talks about cosmopolitan faith-based resistance to counter homogenizing and limiting discourses about 'Muslimwoman' to make space for new imaginaries and self-understandings (2008: 99). I would like to refer to Gilroy's concept of 'conviviality' here as well, to emphasise that such interactions and alternative subjectivities are actually an ordinary feature of postcolonial cities in Europe and that they require a critical stance towards the white norm (Gilroy, 2004). The key for Gilroy lies in the recognition that European culture is not the same as 'white culture'. We need to be able to see, he argues, how migrants and the dynamics of European history have together shaped cultural and political habits and institutions in Europe. Such a counter-history can not only help to produce a new understanding of multicultural Europe, but also help to discover the emancipatory possibilities of convivial culture. Gilroy's arguments are, I believe, very much in line with the statements of the interviewees about defining what it means to be Dutch.

Applying his concept of 'conviviality' to the concept of 'Dutchness' could help to define this construction of the national Self as a practice, rather than an identity. This makes it possible to recognize what 'multiculture' can mean on a daily basis; how people actually deal with difference; what roles migrants have in our societies, and how racism influences all of these. The latter is an especially important aspect of Gilroy's analyses and also mentioned by one of my interviewees: a positive approach to differences is not possible if whiteness (and the secularism connected to it) remain the implicit norm. Alternatively, as Valluvan argues: 'ethnic differences do not require accommodation, remaking or respectful recognition vis-à-vis the white majority, but should simply cease to require scrutiny and evaluation in the first place' (Valluvan, 2016: 207). However, converts to Islam are not ethnic minorities, and were before their conversion often considered part of the (ethnic) majority. Moreover, as I discussed elsewhere, converts to Islam are not only negotiating different ethnic and national identities, but also trying to find a balance in practicing their religion while living in a secular society (see for example Midden, 2016b). Conviviality is interesting in this context because it 'facilitates interactional practices by which racial and ethnic difference is made commonplace, (...) without rehearsing the exclusive and culturally disaggregated picturing of difference unique to a tradition of European modernity' (Valluvan, 2016: 209). Hence, 'conviviality' makes it possible to recognise daily multicultural encounters and to deconstruct the white norm. However, as Valluvan rightly argues, the concept of 'conviviality' also runs the risk of not recognizing racial conflict and of dismissing those who do not fit ideas about hybridity and syncretism and appear as 'traditional' or transparently 'ethnic' (for example, the first-generation 'housewife'). I would argue that here the experiences of converts to Islam are specifically interesting because they blur boundaries so differently, namely within one individual rather than between individuals. One could say that they embody hybridity in such a way, that not only the tensions between and within categories come to the forefront, but also possible alternative imaginaries become visible.

## Conclusions

This article investigated the relationship between religion, secularism and national identity through the experiences of female converts to Islam. It discussed how Dutch converts relate to national identity and reflected on mechanisms of in/exclusion after conversion to Islam. The final part of the article explored options for more inclusive interpretations of 'Dutchness' and countered the idea that Islam and 'Dutchness' are incompatible. I showed how current interpretations of 'Dutchness' generally associate the Dutch Self with secularism, and present religious minorities as a threat to this Self. In this context, converts to Islam are often considered traitors, who no longer belong to the nation. In the second part of the article, I reflected on the fact that converts experience specific forms of exclusion and marginalization because of their changed identity. Even though they can hold on to some of their privileges (based on class or ethnicity), they also often experience a drop in social status after their conversion.

In my view, the specific intersection of national identity, religion and gender in the identities of female converts to Islam, positions them on the edge of being both insider and outsider. This 'in-between' position makes them excellent critics of identity boundaries between 'us' and 'them', or 'Muslim' and 'Dutch'. Not only do they know what it is to be excluded and included in our society, they also have an insightful perspective on the relationship between religion/secularism, national identity and emancipation, as they experienced what happens if you change your identity/practices with regard to one of these. More research is needed on the experiences of converts and more inclusive definitions of national identities, but this article has identified how conversion to Islam and national identity are connected and how the choice for this new faith can lead to specific mechanisms of in/exclusion. It also presented a starting point for rethinking what it means to be 'Dutch' and I would argue that these suggestions can be used to rethink other European national identities as well.

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## Note

1. See also Mansson McGinty (2006) and Roald (2001) for further reflections on the advantages and disadvantages of non-Muslim women doing fieldwork among Muslim women

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