

Fitting God in: Secular Routines, Prayer, and Deceleration among Young Dutch Muslims and Christians

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[p. 72] “I’m not an exemplary Christian, unfortunately,” Rachel said when we spoke about the place of worship in her daily life. Rachel was a 24-year-old psychology student I had come to know during my fieldwork among young Christians and Muslims in Rotterdam. She had grown up within an orthodox Protestant family and later joined an evangelical student association and a Reformed church. She told me she had recently discussed the issue of making time for worship practices in her peer Bible study “small group” (*kring*) within her student association:

Everyone is simply struggling with this, as in: How do I give it space in my life from day to day? That’s just really *so* difficult. Because you get up, you directly start doing your everyday stuff and, uhm, at night you drop into your bed tiredly. Yes, that’s the reality of each day. And what we came up with in the small group was that it can be very helpful to already pray in the morning, before you start your day, and that you sort of put the day in the hands of God. And I did try that and it is indeed very relaxed to start your day like that. But, when I say that now, I think: oh yeah, that also sort of slips away again.

[p. 73] At all times and places, Christians—and adherents of other religions—have grappled with feelings of imperfection. Indeed, Rachel’s self-diagnosis as “not an exemplary Christian” signals a familiar trope among Christian and other believers. What is striking in her account, however, is the particular problem she addressed of integrating religion into her day-to-day life. Her statement about her morning prayer routine “slipping away” denotes the way her religious practice seemed to be inadvertently pushed to the margins of her everyday life. This struggle to devote as much time and energy on one’s religion as one wanted to was widely shared among the young Christians with whom I worked. It denotes the particular challenge they faced of making and finding time for practices of worship against the backdrop of the rhythms and routines that shaped their everyday lives.

Strikingly, these young Christians shared this quandary with the young Muslims I met during my fieldwork. Consider Ismael, also aged 24, a student in econometrics in Rotterdam who frequently attended Islamic classes and talks organized by mosques or Muslim student associations. When I met him for an interview he had recently

performed the *umra*, the non-compulsory pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. Reflecting on his experience of coming back to the Netherlands afterwards, he told me:

Over there things go nicely, quite peacefully, you're only occupied with worship. ... And then you come here, you have to go to school again, everything goes fast again, and again you have no time, everything goes fast, you are tired. ... Yes, you are actually almost kept busy to put it that way. In that way [my faith] does ebb. At first when you come back you are still pretty much at it [practicing worship], but at a certain point, yeah, then, yeah, you actually sort of re-adapt.

What Ismael felt he “re-adapted” to were the rhythms of everyday life that Rachel also described, rhythms that were less shaped by religious routines than by the routines of school, university, work and the general quick pace of social life. Ismael’s remark about his faith “ebbing” reflects a sense of an unintentional decrease of focus on one’s religion that is similar to what Rachel expressed.

In this chapter, I examine these common struggles among my Christian and Muslim interlocutors with regard to integrating religion in their everyday lives. I take these similar experiences as an invitation to what Olivier Roy (2004: 26–27) described, already some time ago, as a “transversal approach” that looks at the potentially intersecting ways in which different religious groups respond to the challenges of modern society. Aiming to move beyond the dominant frames that keep Muslims and Christians apart within both public discourses and academic studies (Beekers 2014), I approach my Muslim and Christian interlocutors as groups of young Dutch people who are striving to pursue a religiously committed lifestyle within a shared sociohistorical context and who can be analyzed comparatively as such.

Notwithstanding Roy’s earlier plea, qualitative comparative research on Muslims and Christians has remained remarkably scarce. This is particularly [p. 74] the case in the context of Europe, where academic work on Muslims and Christians has been strongly divided between the fields of migration studies and the sociology of religion respectively (Beekers 2014).¹ The development of a self-consciously distinct “anthropology of Islam” and “anthropology of Christianity” has, while enriching the study of religion, further moved the analytical lens away from comparative inquiries across Christianity and Islam (Meyer 2016).

A productive entry point to ethnographic comparison, I argue, is an inquiry into the ways in which the religious pursuits of both Muslims and Christians are shaped by the conditions of a shared sociohistorical context. Such an inquiry can build on recent studies in the anthropology of Islam, which have called renewed attention to the ways religious endeavors are affected by the contingencies of everyday lives in particular local contexts (see e.g., Osella and Soares 2010; Marsden and Retsikas 2013). These

studies examine how “Islamic discourses and practices are entangled in larger social and cultural systems, their contradictions, and the experiences of individuals employing and embodying them” (Simon 2009: 259). Similar concerns have been expressed in the anthropology of Christianity (see e.g., Scott 2005; Cannell 2006; Chua 2012). These contributions entail—at least in part—a critical response to tendencies in anthropological studies of Islam and Christianity toward a “non-reductive” approach to religion in which the emphasis lies with the coherence and singularity of religious pursuits (see Kloos and Beekers, this volume).

In this chapter, I seek to contribute to these contextual approaches to religion in two ways. Firstly, I suggest that such approaches can be further developed by a comparative analysis that focuses on the intersections between different religious groups that coexist in the same sociohistorical space. Secondly, I build on the broader aim of this volume to rethink the analytical separation that emerges in much of the literature between the pursuit of religious coherence on the one hand and the fragmentation of everyday life on the other. I examine in what ways my interlocutors’ struggles with making and finding time for worship can be seen as not just opposed to their religious pursuits but also informing or even reinvigorating these pursuits. Specifically, while I show that these struggles with “fitting God in” can be understood against the background of the acceleration of everyday life under conditions of fast capitalism, I also describe how today’s accelerated culture gives practices of worship a renewed impulse and significance.

Prayer, Faith, and Closeness to God

This chapter is based on fieldwork among young Sunni Muslims and Protestant Christians in the Netherlands, particularly in Ede, Rotterdam and The Hague, conducted between September 2009 and November 2012. The research focused on Muslims of Moroccan descent (but also included Muslims with Turkish and other backgrounds) and Christians of Dutch descent, who can be [p. 75] described as observant believers in the sense that they treated their religion as a moral guideline in their personal lives and sought to consistently practice their religion in their day-to-day lives. My Muslim and Christian interlocutors generally continued to identify themselves with the mainstream orthodox religious milieus in which they had been raised, but they also oriented themselves to revivalist tendencies in contemporary Islam and Christianity, as embodied by Salafi and evangelical movements particularly (even if many of them also took a critical position with regard to these movements). These young, revivalist-oriented Muslims and Christians represent two of the most prominent groups that are giving shape to a renewed religious vitality in the Netherlands (Roeland et al. 2010), a society that has witnessed a sharply declined influence of institutionalized religion on social and public life in the last fifty years or so (Van Rooden 2010). The people with whom I worked were between 18 and 28 years old (all those quoted in this chapter

were between 20 and 24 years old), most were highly educated and all had grown up in the Netherlands.

The autobiographical accounts of my Muslim and Christian interlocutors commonly pointed to experiences of personal religious revitalization at some point in their lives, usually in their late teens, engendering a self-conscious, active and reflexive religious commitment. They aspired to what they described as a strong personal “faith” (while both the Muslims and the Christians used the Dutch term *geloof*, the former also used the Arabic *iman*). For these young believers, having a strong faith meant giving their religion a central place in their everyday lives, leading their lives in proximity to God and committing themselves to religious worship (see also De Koning, this volume, for a discussion of “weak” versus “strong” *iman* among Dutch Salafis).

Prayer played a central role in this regard. My Christian interlocutors commonly set aside specific moments during the day for prayer, often in combination with Bible reading. While their prayers varied in terms of content, they generally followed common styles, utterances and bodily postures. In their prayers, the young Christians sought to petition, “listen” and express their gratitude to God. The young Muslims practiced the *salat*, the prescribed ritual prayer, which ought to be performed five times a day (within set time intervals) and in a state of ritual purity. The *salat* is a structured prayer with a fixed sequence of bodily postures and utterances, but it also leaves room for personal supplication or petitioning (*du‘a*). Both my Muslim and Christian interlocutors regarded prayer as a personal moment of connecting to, or even communicating with, God. They performed their prayers either individually or in a group—with friends, housemates, partners, student groups, or families. For my Muslim interlocutors, the Friday prayer in the mosque (considered to be obligatory for men) was an important communal event, as were the prayers in the Sunday church service and those in the gatherings of student associations or youth clubs for my Christian interlocutors. These communal settings were also significant as recurrent moments in which the young Muslims and Christians were encouraged to give prayer a central place in their lives and were offered formats and techniques to do so.

[p. 76] My interlocutors felt that prayer affected the ways in which they navigated their everyday lives. If practiced systematically, prayers were understood to be constitutive of particular moral dispositions, experiences, and emotions (cf. Asad 1993: 65; Mahmood 2005). For example, some of my Christian interlocutors pointed out that performing prayer in the morning changed the way they experienced the day. They felt that it made them more “aware,” and anchored within them a Christian ethics that motivated them to stay away from sinful behavior. My Muslim interlocutors said that praying regularly, ideally five times a day, helped them to remain focused on God and harness themselves against temptations. Some explained that the *salat* offered moments during the day in which they could pause and reflect on their behavior and ask for forgiveness for what they regarded as wrongful deeds. The young Muslims and

Christians talked in quite similar terms about the ways in which prayer ultimately contributed to an everyday sense of closeness to God. It was, however, understood that this could only be realized by making prayers an integral and habitual part of their daily lives. Prayer “nourishes” faith, my Christian interlocutors used to say. More than the young Muslims, they talked about their bond with God in terms of a personal relationship that needed to be “sustained,” just like any other relationship. Some of the Muslims and Christians noted that when they did not give enough attention to prayer, they experienced a sense of “emptiness,” or of “something missing.”

For both my Muslim and Christian interlocutors, performing prayer was also an expression of—and a means of cultivating—a sense of being fundamentally dependent on God. Through their regular prayers, experienced as moments of return to—and reconciliation with—God, they could put their worries into perspective and become aware that their lives were guided by a supreme Being. The notion of dependence on God was also informed by their view of themselves as necessarily imperfect beings: the young Christians treated prayers as pedagogic practices by which they learned to build up a personal relationship with Christ, which was understood as the only path to redemption and deliverance from their sinful nature. For the young Muslims, prayer was a crucial part of a learning process of obeying and submitting themselves to God—correcting and disciplining the (carnal) self (*nafs*), so as to move it closer to God and to salvation. For both groups, then, performing prayer was part and parcel of ongoing moral and spiritual work on the self, aimed at becoming closer to God.

While anthropologists have carefully examined how Muslims and Christians cultivate prayer as a technique of moral and spiritual self-fashioning (see e.g., Henkel 2005; Mahmood 2005; Luhrmann 2012; Reinhardt 2017), less attention has been paid to those moments and contexts in which people fail to practice prayer in ways they deem to be consistent or adequate (but see Simon 2009; Jouili 2015; Kloos, this volume). In the next section, I show that my Muslim and Christian interlocutors struggled precisely with making prayers an integral and habitual part of their everyday lives.

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Struggling to Make Time for Worship

The Muslims with whom I worked regarded it as each individual’s own responsibility to meet the requirements of prayer. As Farida, a pedagogical consultant, told me, it is one’s own responsibility to keep one’s “five appointments with God” during the day. “We attach a lot of value to appointments at work, with friends, with other people,” she said, “but there isn’t anything better than keeping to these five appointments and also really taking time for them.” Farida’s words put the emphasis squarely on the temporal component of the Islamic prayer. Yet, it was exactly this, taking time for prayers, that my Muslim interlocutors found difficult to accomplish in their everyday lives. This

struggle was expressed especially clearly by Naima, a student in law whom I met in the context of a Muslim student association in Rotterdam.

Naima had “started to practice,” as it was commonly put by my Muslim interlocutors, when she was around sixteen, particularly by trying to consistently observe the daily prayers. Yet, at the time of our interview, when she was 24, she had come to find it difficult to fit the prayers into her busy schedule. Next to pursuing a Master’s degree in law, Naima had a job with the city council in Rotterdam for 24 hours a week. There, she lacked both an adequate place and the time to perform the ablutions and prayer, given that she needed at least half an hour to “do the whole process correctly.” Describing the work pace at her job, she noted: “you are really doing so many things, and also meetings, and people coming in asking things, phone calls and that kind of stuff. ... Sometimes I’m really very busy and then I also really have my sandwich behind my ... PC at work.”

On her workdays, Naima would “catch up” all the prayers she missed after she got home (a practice that some of my interlocutors mockingly called the “marathon prayer”). This made her feel dissatisfied with herself, as she was not “really doing it as it ought to be done.” Apart from not following the Islamic prescription to pray on time, she disliked having to catch up her prayers in the evening, because “after a whole day at work” she would feel tired and her concentration would have dropped, diminishing the emotional engagement she would feel during her prayers. She explained that she tried to strengthen her emotional experience of prayer by cultivating, in her words, “awareness” and “conviction”, trying to realize “what I’m actually saying” (when reciting a *sura*, or chapter, from the Qur’an during prayer), “to whom I’m actually praying” and “why I’m actually praying.”

For Naima, this was a long-term, cumulative process. The emotional experience to which she aspired during prayer was *ihsan*, which, she said, meant “perfection,” the “finest” (*uitmuntende*) form of worship and being “really very close to God.”² Conversely, Naima pointed out, the result of not consistently performing one’s prayers on time was that “you also come to have that feeling [of being close to God] less and less. Thus, you miss that feeling, and to get that going again [*weer op te krikken*], yes, you then have to, that doesn’t come easily. You really have to strengthen yourself in that.” Sometimes she [p. 78] was afraid of losing that feeling altogether, “because of all the other things, activities here in the world, that *that* will finally dominate and push the practice of your religion, like, to the background.”

It is notable that Naima presented the impediments to prayer due to her work almost as an inescapable reality. She did not seem to seriously consider the option of privileging the religiously prescribed prayers over her obligations at work. “You have to of course live here in this, this world,” she said. “So you simply have to work, you have to participate in society.” The value she attached to her work reflected her professional ambitions. Naima aspired to a job in a government institution and told me, in an email

correspondence, that her main motivation to do this work was to “acquire experience in a municipal work environment.” Thus, her work was a relevant asset to her CV that could help her forward in her career.

Many of my other Muslim interlocutors, often as highly educated and ambitious as Naima, similarly seemed to accept as a fact the restrictions on religious practice resulting from their jobs and studies, even if they were—like Naima—dissatisfied with having to miss prayers. Most of them, indeed, struggled with performing their prayers on time, because of their obligations of study and work, the absence of adequate facilities at their workplaces, and a general sense of hurriedness and lack of time. At home, many of my interlocutors were especially struggling to observe *fajr*, the early morning prayer that takes place before sunrise. They often did not manage to get up in time, particularly when they had stayed up late; for example because they had been studying for exams. In the evenings they often felt tired after a whole day of work, study or other activities, which, they felt, decreased their concentration during prayers.³

More generally, several of my Muslim interlocutors pointed out that the rhythms and routines of everyday life in today’s Dutch society were unfavorable to consistently practicing their prayers. Some drew a contrast with Muslim societies in this regard, occasionally with Mecca and Medina (as Ismael did in the statement quoted at the beginning of this chapter), but more often with Morocco or Turkey, the countries in which their parents were born and which they occasionally visited themselves. The rhythms of Islamic prayer are part of social life in these countries, especially because of the publicly audible *adhan*, the call to prayer, which many respond to. By contrast, in the Netherlands one had to, as Idris, a student in Islamic spiritual care in Amsterdam, put it, “keep track of the time” oneself (my interlocutors often used technological devices like *adhan* apps in this regard) and to “activate” oneself much more to go and pray.

The struggles of these young Muslims with performing their prayers on time, then, were strongly related to the routines and the structuring of time in their everyday lives. Some also noted that they ran up against restrictions and hostile attitudes when it came to performing their prayers within the public domain (cf. Fadil 2013: 740–41; Jouili 2015: 155–61). Others may experience embarrassment to do so—especially, perhaps, when it comes to performing the ablutions (cf. Jouili 2015: 159–60). Yet, the major constraint [p. 79] my interlocutors referred to in this regard was a “daily rhythm” of life that “had nothing to do with Islam”— as Hasan, a student in political science in Leiden, put it. This conflict between religious and secular rhythms was clearly pronounced for my Muslim interlocutors, due to the relatively strict daily program of the *salat*. Yet, we should not be too quick in framing conflicts like this as particular to Muslims in—and as opposed to—a secular Europe, as some academic work tends to do (on this point, see also Schielke 2010: 5–9). To move beyond conceptions of Islam “as a unique or exceptional object of analysis” (Marsden and Retsikas 2013: 12), I have followed a comparative approach that places Islam alongside Christianity in Europe.

This makes it possible to see that my Muslim interlocutors' struggles with secular rhythms overlap in significant ways with those of the young Christians with whom I worked.

Like the young Muslims, my Christian interlocutors often expressed their dissatisfaction with the extent to which they managed to set aside moments for practices of worship during the day. This was commonly discussed as a problem of "being busy". Echoing Rachel's words about her worship practices "slipping away" in her day-to-day life, Robert, a student in economy and a member of an evangelical student association in Rotterdam, told me that he often "forgot about" his faith as a result of the routines of his everyday life. On an average day when he had to work and hurry up in the morning, it would happen that he would take a moment for prayer before having lunch, or even only before having dinner, and realize that he had not yet "thought about God at all" that day. He felt that the practice of his religion often moved to the background of his everyday life, due to the "busyness of the world, in the sense that everything simply keeps on moving." Johan, a member of the same student association, told me that he did not manage to keep up with the Bible reading schedule that had been set within his Bible study group. He said he often "simply forgot it," because "it's sort of not part of your rhythm."

Many of my Christian interlocutors told me about similar experiences, some speaking specifically about their struggles to "fit God" into their day-to-day schedules. Paul, a Christian student in medicine, said: "[serving God] does not come by itself, you really have to choose for it, otherwise you indeed have no time left in your agenda, or you rather go and watch a movie, or there are all kinds of other things that come first." Charlotte, who had just finished her studies in social work in the town of Ede, similarly noted that "you have to do an effort for" prayer and reading the Bible, which demanded "some discipline and personal will." Isabel, a business consultant who had converted to Christianity a couple of years before I met her, talked to me about "things that keep one away from God":

I think that for me the most important now is, uhm, time. That sounds a bit, well, stupid, but because I make such a full planning, God simply slides off constantly—to put it that way [laughs]—in my schedule. ... Also with colleagues, spending one Friday night going out, or doing something else. Your week is full before you know it and, as I said, when you are also away twelve [p. 80] hours [a day; because of work] and you sleep seven hours, well, see how much there's left. And you have to do your housekeeping and you have to eat.

When she did find "time for God," as she put it, Isabel felt that such time was often "lousy" (she used the English term), as she would already be tired because of everything

she had done that day. The consequence of having too little (quality) time with God, Isabel said, was that God felt “further away.” Many of my other Christian interlocutors similarly felt that the busyness of their everyday lives temporally constrained their religious practices, reduced the intensity of their religious engagement and drew them away from God. These experiences are strikingly similar to the ways in which my Muslim interlocutors felt challenged by the busyness of their everyday lives.

A notable difference between my Muslim and Christian interlocutors, however, was that the former had to relate themselves to the prescription to pray on set times during the day while the Christians did not. Hence, these young Muslims faced the particular problem of integrating the prayers in their daily occupations, more specifically at their workplaces or universities, and they were confronted with feelings of inadequacy when they missed prayers. Young Christians enjoyed more flexibility with regard to setting their own moments for prayer and religious contemplation. Yet, this also meant that they could rely less than the young Muslims on a prescribed temporal structure for daily worship practices. Possibly even more than the Muslims, my Christian interlocutors had to rely on self-discipline when it came to “making time for God” and fitting practices of worship into their busy daily schedules. Arguably, the risk of falling into line with the prevalent secular rhythms of everyday life was even greater for them than for the Muslims.

Nonetheless, my Muslim and Christian interlocutors shared the sense that their lives were so “packed” with activities and events rapidly succeeding one another, that there was often little time left to practice their faith. Even more, they often felt that worship practices were unwittingly pushed to the margins of their everyday lives or, as Isabel put it, that God constantly “slid off.” While they aspired to consistently perform prayer as a means of getting “closer to God,” they found it hard to realize this in their busy everyday lives.

The Acceleration of Everyday Life

Feelings of falling short, sinfulness or imperfection are part and parcel of religious lives. They are prompted by individual concerns over one’s salvation, often invoked by religious authorities and deliberately cultivated within religious contexts (see the contribution by Robbins and Williams Green, and that by De Koning, in this volume). Yet, such senses of failure are also shaped in substantial ways by particular social conditions. The struggles of my Muslim and Christian interlocutors with making time for prayer resulted from the combination of their strong religious ambitions and a social context in which religious practices tended to be constantly pushed to the background [p. 81] of their everyday lives. In their hurried and packed lives, falling short of their religious aspirations was a basic condition of their religious lives. For these young believers, experiences of failure were continuously recurring, rather than sporadic and singular moments of “moral breakdown” (Zigon 2007).

Two issues stand out in the accounts of felt busyness of both my Muslim and Christian interlocutors: the time and energy taken up by their studies and jobs, and the more general sense of hurriedness and a quick pace of everyday life. These experiences correspond to wider social patterns. Studies in the Netherlands have pointed to increasingly widespread feelings of hurriedness among the population (Cloin 2013: 161), a quickened pace of work and social life (Breedveld and Van den Broek 2002), and a heightened encroachment of work on everyday life, whereby work has become more and more characterized by flexibility, multitasking and round-the-clock availability (Haegens 2012). Similar patterns have been extensively described in the international sociological literature, particularly in studies set in the Western world. These studies point to a restructuring of time that is related to two key socioeconomic developments: first, the onset of a new phase in capitalism that has been described as post-Fordism, characterized by the acceleration and increased flexibility of modes of production, consumption, and accumulation (Harvey 1989; Sennett 1998; Bauman 2000) and, secondly, the rise of “information society” since the 1990s (Castells 2000; cf. Eriksen 2001; Agger 2004).

Flexible accumulation, the 24/7 economy and the “digital revolution” have instigated a quickening of the pace of everyday life in recent decades and an increased fragmentation of everyday life (Sennett 1998). As Thomas Hylland Eriksen has pointed out in this context, “more and more information, consumption, movement and activity is being pushed into the available time” (2001: 101). Such acceleration under conditions of “fast capitalism” (Agger 2004) is not restricted to the economic domain, but spills over into other domains of life. Thus, David Harvey (1989: 291) argues that “[e]verything, from novel writing and philosophizing to the experience of laboring or making a home, has to face the challenge of accelerating turnover time” This accelerated culture has been strongly reinforced by the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s and the continuous introduction of new digital media and technologies since then (Coleman 2010). It has been suggested that this kind of accelerated culture affects young adults in particular, as the demands and activities of their everyday lives—in the context of their studies, emergent careers, strong involvement in consumer and popular cultures, and experienced use of new communication technologies—can “feel all-consuming” to them (Smith and Snell 2009: 77). In their study of religion among young adults in the United States, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell observe that these people “would have a hard time imagining—if they thought about it—squeezing the demands of a committed religious life into their hectic and unpredictable schedules” (ibid.).

As young people living in an urban environment, studying, working, consuming and extensively using (new) media, my Muslim and Christian [p. 82] interlocutors, too, found themselves in the midst of today’s accelerated culture.⁴ They were receptive to the continuous influences of modern media, entertainment, and consumer culture (indeed, television, email and social media were often mentioned as things that kept

them “busy”). And as I already pointed out for the young Muslims, both groups seemed to take the primacy of academic and professional pursuits in their lives for granted, negotiating moments of prayer and religious contemplation around them. Even though many of them criticized the excessive materialism and undue focus on “making a career” that they regarded as characteristic of contemporary Western society, most also pursued the modern ideals of a good life measured by material prosperity and professional success (Hage 2003: 13). They worked hard to obtain good university degrees and to set off on promising careers. The social conditions of contemporary fast capitalist society posed such strong challenges to my interlocutors’ religious pursuits precisely because these conditions also entailed a realm of practice and aspiration in which they were themselves strongly embedded.⁵ These conditions marked their daily routines and rhythms, their feelings of hurriedness, and their concomitant struggles to “fit God in.”

Worship as Deceleration

The young Muslims and Christians with whom I worked, however, were not merely positioned ambivalently between the conflicting aspirations of religion and capitalism. As David Kloos and I argue in the introduction to this volume, recent studies that focus on the everyday contingency of religious pursuits have tended to disregard the ways in which such contingency can be found to affect and reinvigorate attempts at reaching religious coherence. It is this kind of dialectics that I observed among my Muslim and Christian interlocutors. I came to see that, in similar ways for both groups, the conditions of acceleration did not only constrain their practices of worship, but also endowed these with a renewed significance.

When my Muslim interlocutors talked about prayer, they typically put a strong emphasis on the Dutch term *rust*, which carries such connotations as tranquility, quietness, rest, peace, or peace of mind. They generally noted that the salat allowed them to temporarily let go of their worries, forget about the concerns of—what they described as—“this life” or “this world,” and to connect with God. Asked why they desired such peace of mind, they pointed to the stress, demands or “chaos” of their everyday lives, to work and to personal problems. Fouad, a student in Islamic theology from Rotterdam, told me that his prayers gave him repose from the “hectic” character of his daily life and from his “busy agenda.” During prayer, he said, “it’s God’s turn,” you “close yourself off.” Idris, whom I introduced above, noted with respect to prayer:

You know that, that in any circumstance, however bad things are going, whatever stress you’re experiencing, whatever deadline you need to meet, Allah sees [p. 83] you, Allah knows that you’re in that situation. ... So you know that you, that Allah is continuously with you. And prayer confirms that all the time. And that’s a, yes, comforting thought.

Fatima, a psychology student in Rotterdam, told me that she would sometimes actually “spend more time” on her prayers when she was very busy with school, as this would give her a feeling of peace (*rust*), and she hoped she would also be rewarded for it in her studies.

The embodied practice of the ablutions preceding prayer and the physical movements during prayer may be seen as both expressing and enabling the acts of letting go of “worldly” concerns and finding tranquility through worshipping God. Ahmet, a nineteen-year-old student in public administration who volunteered for a Turkish-Islamic association in Rotterdam, remarked:

Because when you do this, right [raises his hands up to his ears], you say ‘Allah is great’ and you start the prayer. This has a symbolic expression as in: I leave *everything* behind that happens here in the world. And then I enter into communication with God, [recites:] *Allahu Akbar*. Then everything is gone. ... Just like a soccer player who says, like, that he forgets everything when he is on the field, well, it’s something like that that you should feel.

In relation to this, some of my Muslim interlocutors described prayer as an extraordinary moment, temporarily taking them beyond the here and now. Mustafa, a student in law who had come to the Netherlands as a refugee from Azerbaijan at the age of twelve, said: “It’s a feeling that you can only describe when you, uhm, do it yourself. ... We are now in a time and space, but prayer takes you above these, above time and above space. Really a, yes, traveling toward God.”

The young Christians I met also regularly talked about prayer and other worship practices as activities that brought them peace, tranquility, or quietness. They also used the Dutch term “rust” in this regard, but did not emphasize it as strongly as the Muslims did. Many of my Christian interlocutors described prayer and reading the Bible as providing moments of tranquility (*rustmomenten*) in their otherwise busy and chaotic everyday lives. An important concept for these young Christians in this regard was “quiet time” (*stille tijd*), a term they—like many other Christians (see e.g., McGrath 1996)—generally used to describe the moments of prayer, Bible-reading and contemplation that they set aside during the day, typically in the mornings and/or evenings, and that were directed at cultivating personal intimacy with God (cf. Lührmann 2012). Quiet time entailed moments in which one became literally quiet, by sitting still and retreating from the buzz of everyday life. For my Christian interlocutors this often meant retreating to a private space, like one’s bedroom, and “closing oneself off” from external, distractive influences as much as possible. Thus, Adam, a student in pastoral theology in Ede, told me that he deliberately created such moments a couple of

times a week, switching off his computer and television and making everything “quiet” (*rustig*):

[p. 84] Sometimes I also simply switch off the light in my room, then I only see the light entering from outside. Simply uhm praying in a delightfully peaceful [*rustige*] way and reflecting [*stilstaan*, lit. ‘standing still’] about what is important in life, instead of going along with all that busyness and being confronted with your limits one day [*jezelf op een dag tegenkomen*].

My Christian interlocutors commonly pointed out that taking such a moment for prayer and reading the Bible in the morning—a moment of “focusing my thoughts on God,” as Robert put it—brought them peace during the day. Similarly to Fatima, some of them noted that such practices of worship were particularly important in busy times. Charlotte, the student from Ede to whom I referred above, said: “I notice that especially when I’m very busy, I should actually take time for it [prayer and Bible-reading], because it makes me more peaceful [*rustiger*] and you can get the bigger picture again, so that you can continue again.” In relation to this, prayer and reading the Bible were understood to help one to put things into perspective. Thus, Rachel, introduced at the beginning of this chapter, noted that these practices allowed her to “activate” feelings of peace and trust, which put all of her “daily worries,” about her exams or her internship, for example, into “a bigger picture”—the “perspective of eternity”—that made such worries seem irrelevant.

These young Christians also found repose from their hurried lives by observing a “day of rest” on Sundays. They commonly sought to spend their Sundays differently from other days, by going to church, reading the Bible or other “edifying” (*opbouwende*) literature, and refraining as much as possible from work, study and shopping. Some, like Charlotte, also kept their televisions and computers switched off on Sundays, because these, she said, “can also very much hurry [*opjagen*] you.” She told me that she experienced the Sunday differently from other days, particularly because of its “slower pace” (*trager tempo*).

Strikingly, then, both my Muslim and Christian interlocutors emphasized the ways in which prayer and other practices of worship provided them with tranquility, rest, or peace. That is, worship offered them precisely that experience they missed in their everyday lives in today’s accelerated, fast-paced culture. It has been proposed in the literature that religion can provide an alternative to, or means to cope with, the speeded-up culture of contemporary capitalism (Van Harskamp 2008: 16–17; Gauthier, Martikainen, and Woodhead 2011: 295). Building on that suggestion, I argue that for the young Muslims and Christians with whom I worked, worship gained a renewed significance in the context of today’s fast capitalist culture. Apart from constituting an expression of their devotion to God and of their adherence to religious prescriptions or

conventions, worship was felt to provide repose from—and indeed a slowing down of—the quick pace of life. Worship did not only require making time, but also entailed creating and allowing for a particular quality of time, characterized by deceleration and contemplation, inner peace, and, in Mustafa’s words, a “traveling toward God.” It was experienced as a time-out from the continuous flow of events, influences and incentives in everyday life. What gave this a tragic touch, of course, was that the very “busyness” that made these young believers long for worship, also [p. 85] made it difficult for them to integrate worship into their daily lives.

Conclusion

The young Muslims and Christians with whom I worked aspired to a strong personal faith, which to them required giving religion a central place in their everyday lives and committing themselves to prayer and other practices of worship. Yet, today’s fast-paced culture, combined with the lack of generally shared religious rhythms in contemporary Dutch society, made it practically difficult to “fit God” into their daily schedules. For them, leading busy, hurried and accelerated lives seemed to be an inevitable condition of modern life. At the same time, the busyness they experienced also resulted from the kind of lives they themselves chose to lead, particularly when it came to the primacy they gave to their work and studies. Indeed, alongside their aspirations to religious commitment, they pursued aspirations to professional success, well-being, and the fulfillment of one’s potential through one’s career. That is, they gave shape to both a religious and a capitalist (work) ethic. In this sense, my interlocutors’ lives were characterized by a moral ambivalence (cf. Schielke 2015) that manifested itself in their everyday lives through conflicting rhythms, routines and structures of time.

Yet, there is more to the relation between these—religious and capitalist—aspirations and rhythms than ambivalent coexistence. Accelerated culture also stimulated my Muslim and Christian interlocutors to invest in prayer and other forms of worship, which gained a renewed value for them as practices providing tranquility, peace and stillness in the context of their busy everyday lives. Thus, the social conditions of fast capitalism did not only constrain but also gave a new impetus to their religious engagement. Religious and capitalist aspirations and rhythms were not merely opposed, but rather dialectically related and productive of a particular kind of religious engagement in which the tranquility offered by worship was emphasized. This dynamic played out in similar ways for the young Muslims and Christians, who faced the common challenge of putting their ambitions of religious commitment to practice in a fast capitalist context.

I would like to end with a brief reflection on my interlocutors’ approach to worship in terms of tranquility. To an extent, the value given to worship as a means of deceleration could be interpreted as a kind of secularization of religious practice. These young believers’ search for tranquility through prayer resonates with desires for

“slowing down life” (or what is called *onthaasten* in Dutch) that are more widely shared in society, particularly among the (upper) middle classes—captured by such concepts as “slow food” (Petrini 2003) and “slow tourism” (Fullagar, Markwell, and Wilson 2012). In this regard, the role that prayer played for them seems to resemble the role that yoga, mindfulness exercises or wellness retreats play for others. Moreover, if interpreted skeptically, their worship practices could be seen to provide only snippets of [p. 86] release from the quick pace of life, while these practices are subsumed in the fast capitalist economy as yet another activity that needs to be “squeezed in.” In this reading, religion becomes incorporated in a temporality of “accelerating turnover time” (Harvey 1989: 291).

While I do see striking parallels between these young believers’ approach to worship as a means of deceleration and other techniques of slowing down time, I would argue that my interlocutors’ practices of worship also entailed a religious ethics that went beyond the conditions of fast capitalism. As I pointed out, for both the Muslims and the Christians, prayer played a crucial role in the ways they cultivated a sense of closeness to—and dependence on—God. It provided an occasion to repent for their felt wrongdoings and ask for guidance in leading a good life. Moreover, as Mustafa’s notion of “traveling toward God” suggests, prayer for these young Muslims—as well as Christians—involved attempts at moving beyond the very organization of space and time that dominate their everyday lives in today’s capitalist society.

Yet, it was understood that these ethical and spiritual effects could only be realized if prayer became an integral and habitual part of everyday life. It was here that my interlocutors often found themselves falling short. Time and again, the practice of worship appeared to be “slipping away” in their day-to-day lives. This made them aware that their religious endeavors were perpetually incomplete projects that required ongoing work and investment. Their practices of worship were part and parcel of such ongoing— forever imperfect—moral and spiritual work on the self, aimed at becoming closer to God. In that way, prayers themselves constituted attempts at coming to terms with self-perceived imperfections and inadequacies, without ever fully solving them.

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Notes

- ¹ Most of the few existing qualitative comparative studies on Muslims and Christians in Europe are less concerned with contextualized comparison as such than with a cross-religious investigation into particular theoretical concerns, such as female religious agency (e.g., Bracke 2004). A recent ethnography that is explicitly comparative is Daniel DeHanas’ (2016) study of civic engagement among young Muslims of Bangladeshi descent and young Christians of Jamaican descent in London. Other studies are co-authored publications in which scholars working on either Christians or Muslims have paired their observations (e.g., Roeland et al. 2010). In the context of Africa, anthropologists have begun to advocate approaches that “locate Muslims and Christians within a common analytical frame” (Soares 2006, 13; cf. Janson and Meyer 2016; Peel 2016).
- ² In Islamic doctrine, *ihsan* denotes perfection in faith and particularly “worship[ping] Allah as if you are seeing Him ...” See Sahih Muslim, “The Book of Faith.” Accessed 12 July 2016 from <http://sunnah.com/muslim/1>
- ³ Jeanette Jouili (2015: 58–64) has similarly described the struggles with implementing prayer in everyday life among Muslim women in France and Germany.
- ⁴ In her contribution to this volume, Linda van de Kamp makes a comparable point with regard to her Pentecostal interlocutors in Mozambique. She writes: “They are not looking for a safe shelter from which to judge the influences of the market economy; they are part of it” (p. 55).
- ⁵ While constructing a different kind of argument, Samuli Schielke (2015, ch. 5) has similarly pointed out that the Egyptians with whom he worked pursued both religious and capitalist aspirations. He contends that revivalist Islam and consumer-oriented capitalism share a strong sense of “perpetually underfulfilled aspiration” (ibid.: 125).

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