Transforming bodies and religions

Powers and agencies in Europe

Mariecke van den Berg, Lieke L. Schrijvers, and Jelle O. Wiering

Over the past decade, a variety of political, social, and economic transformations have significantly influenced the perception of religion in Europe. A growing popularity of populist and nationalist political ideologies draw on a renewed interest in the relation between religion, nation states, and the strengthening of national identities. These modes of thinking emphasise the symbolic meaning of what they promulgate as 'Judeo-Christian' roots and values, which are – rather paradoxically – frequently understood as the grounds for progressive, and eventually irreligious, sexual ethics, and in other contexts as an incentive for the stressing of 'traditional family values'. The (re)construction of a culturally and historically Christian Europe, moreover, is believed to be threatened by Islam as its religious, cultural, and racialised Other.

This increasingly politicised view on religion is to a large extent played out on the body. Debates such as that over what has come to be known as the 'burkini ban' in France in 2016 show that the lines of proper citizenship and acceptable personhood are drawn through debates on religious dress, practices, and embodied presence in the public space. The increasing flow of discourse on 'gender ideology' from the Vatican is yet another example that accentuates that the body, gender, and sexuality are often at the core of debates over matters of belonging. This overwhelming focus on bodies ties in with more general trends which centralise the emotions and affects of some but neglect, misrepresent, or ridicule those of others, as can be observed in many discussions over blasphemous cartoons (Mahmood 2009).

With this book, we aim to contribute to the understandings of these societal transformations by presenting a collection of chapters written from the perspective of a group of relatively young scholars. Our volume originates from a long-term seminar dedicated to the study of religion and 'the challenge of difference', which focused on religion in the context of societal transformations in Europe such as the ones outlined earlier. Two years ago, this group of interdisciplinary scholars embarked on a new project and began to meet each month to discuss a contributor's chapter that addressed transforming religious or irreligious bodies from this contributor's (academic) perspective and background. These chapters have been put together

in this book and constitute an interdisciplinary collection that explores religion and its relations with the body in Europe. The book thus studies 'transforming bodies': bodies that find themselves in the middle of European debates, social changes, and political forces, specified to the context of religion.

We understand 'transforming bodies' in two – related – ways, depending on whether 'transforming' is taken to be an adjective or an infinitive. First, as an adjective, 'transforming' emphasises bodies themselves, pointing to the many ways in which bodies are subject to transformation. Although bodies may seem dependable and stable unities, they are, in fact, always changing and renewing. As Shahzad Bashir (2011) argues, the body we were born with is not the same body as the one we have later in life. Yet, Bashir continues, the illusion of a stable body that remains the same throughout life is a useful one, since it suggests coherent subjectivities (2011, 4). In our volume we maintain a suspicious attitude towards the assertion that bodies are whole, natural, and self-evident, as such an understanding often is deployed to corroborate notions of identity as equally fixed and evident. Rather, we bear in mind that bodies, like identities, are always messy (Boisvert and Daniel-Hughes 2017, 13), defying any definitive meaning. At the same time, we notice that in Europe today, some bodily transformations are scrutinised more closely – and contested more fiercely – than others. In our volume we examine some of these bodies-in-transformation that are subject to public scrutiny. The contributors, for example, discuss reproductive bodies (van Raemdonck), bodies from the Iranian diaspora in the Netherlands that are moving in and out of race categories (Roodsaz), bodies that become sick or pass away (Milota), bodies that move in or out of religion (Van den Brandt, Vliek), bodies involved in cross-dressing or in a gender transition (Korte, Van den Berg), bodies that negotiate particular religious practices (Schrijvers), and bodies from religious minority groups that need to negotiate their traditions in different ways, based on different forms of racialisation (Mustafa and Westerduin). This varied selection of cases already shows some of the layers of the body in transformation: that of gender and sexuality, religion, race, ageing, health, and migration.

This brings us to the second meaning of the term 'transforming bodies', in which 'transforming' is taken to be an infinitive, and where the emphasis is more on the relation between transformation and power. The volume departs from the postulate that bodily transformations are almost always subject to the influence of empowered actors and discourses. We therefore need to pay heed to the ways in which some transformations are cheered, encouraged, or even imposed, while others are rejected, contested, disciplined, or even criminalised or met with violence. At the same time, we want to emphasise that bodies are not simply 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1975) on which ideologies are played out. Rather, bodies have 'corporeal agency' (Krause 2011), sometimes talking back to the norms and conventions of society and perhaps even those of the individual to

which they belong. In this volume we therefore investigate 'transforming bodies' as bodies that are subject to, contribute to, or aim to resist social transformations.

In a similar vein, we consider religion to have multiple layers and a multidirectional relation to power. Seen from the so-called constructivist approach to religion, religion is as a discursive and abstract notion that is constantly subject to powers that aim to shape, regulate, or stigmatise it. Religion thus frequently finds itself at the crossroad of different powers that seek to transform it for one reason or another. From another angle, though, 'religion' refers to a set of daily practices and rituals, often grounded in particular spaces and communities, which leads to the use of the pluralist notion of 'religions' or 'religiosities'. In other words, religions are practised in everyday lives and given meaning through the day-to-day negotiations and experiences by both laypeople and clergy. This second approach is best captured by 'the turn toward lived religion' (e.g. McCarthy Brown 1991; Orsi 1985). The two approaches are of course not unrelated: daily life religion is influenced by broader power relations and public discourses, although it is not limited to this. In this volume, we aim to combine the different approaches to religion: like the body, religion can be subject to transformation, as well as a transformative phenomenon itself.

The book provides various accounts that explore the relations between transforming bodies and religion from an amalgamation of theoretical perspectives. Some chapters draw on the conceptual insights provided by secular studies, others from those from gender-critical theory, and yet others from those proposed by race and postcolonial studies. Following, we outline how these various approaches inform the research presented in this volume, but we first want to emphasise that, although the chapters tend to embrace one of these perspectives more than others, the book does depart from important theoretical postulate: all authors are committed to an intersectional approach. We thus acknowledge that bodies can never be reduced to gender, race, sexuality, or age. Rather, the interplay of these categories on the body necessitates more complex analyses of their various transformations.

Before we move to an outline of the different contributions applied in this volume, however, we wish to explicate one aspect of the title of this volume, which suggests that the contributions all relate in one way or another to Europe. Already from the table of contents it will become clear that this is not always the case. Although most authors address a European context, several authors make comparisons to a non-European context (Milota, Van Raemdonck), relate primarily to the Western but non-European context of the United States (Van den Berg), or critically reflect on the notion of 'Europe' in the first place (Mustafa and Westerduin). As editors we have considered, therefore, to not specify any location in the title of this volume. However, we feel that the effect of such would once again be that Europe becomes the unstated, yet implicitly present geographical, cultural,

or political point of departure. We therefore opted to stick to the notion of 'Europe' in our title, as most contributions in one way or another speak to this context, but emphasise the need to study Europe in relation to the Western and, especially, non-western Others that are part and parcel of its formation and self-understanding.

A post-secularist perspective

In contrast to the prior hegemonic understanding of religion that predicted a progressive declination of religion, religion is flourishing in contemporary societies across the world. One of the important tasks that the study of religion faces is to come to terms with the implicit expectations of secularisation that still abound both in academia and society as a whole. In this light, we apply a post-secularist perspective as outlined by religious studies scholar Birgit Meyer:

> A post-secularist perspective no longer takes secularization as the standard intrinsic to modernity, being alert instead to the specific ways in which the concept, role and place of religion – and its study – have been redefined with the rise of secularity.
>
> (Meyer 2012, 6)

In this volume we want to contribute to this project of critical appraisal of persistent secular presumptions in understandings of religion. To do so, we build on insights from the recently emerged field of secular studies. The initial topic of inquiry into secular-religious formations was secularism (an ideology that seeks to relegate religion to the private sphere) rather than secularity (an arrangement of religious/irreligious matters). This is understandable, as openly advocated ideologies are more easily accessible for researchers than the more concealed cultural environment that they are part of. Gradually, the notion of secularism as a morally neutral ideology became subject to extensive criticism, and many scholars took up the aim of 'rethinking secularism' (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011; Keane 2013; Asad et al. 2013). The notion of secularism as more than a statecraft, subsequently, encouraged other scholars to explore how, and particularly what, secular politics actually seek to achieve or produce. Building on Asad's (2003) articulation of the embeddedness of secularity in many facets of Western culture, the focus has shifted somewhat to an exploration of the embodied configurations and body politics that prevail in secular climates (Hirschkind 2011; Engelke 2015; Scheer, Fadil, and Schepelern Johansen 2019). Charles Hirschkind's attempt of finding an 'ontological' secular body has suggested that the essence of secularity does not consist of a specific set of embodied dispositions, but rather concerns a particular capacity to mobilise the religious/secular tension in a productive way (Hirschkind 2011, 643–644). Seen from this perspective, particular phenomena are perceived

to be religious or irreligious not because they 'are' so in an ontological sense, but because they have been identified as such by particular powers in specific contexts. This implies that the religious and the secular are never stable, but co-constitutive, the understanding of which is pivotal for gaining a more comprehensive understanding of both concepts.

This understanding of religion and secularity as co-constitutive forms the grounds of the post-secularist perspective used in this volume. Various attempts of identifying religion and secularity are examined to understand how constructions of (what is propagated as) the religious and the irreligious take place in society, but in particular how these acts of identification relate to transforming bodies. Maria Vliek, for example, shows how people who move out of Islam negotiate, and give meaning to, notions of non-religion in their daily life. In response to discussions of the secular body, Vliek carefully analyses how her interlocutors perform non-religion via bodily acts, such as drinking alcohol or engaging in premarital sex. In his chapter on the Dutch field of sexual health, Jelle O. Wiering explores what notions of sexuality are propagated in this setting and how these understandings of sex are, explicitly or implicitly, proposed as a superior alternative to supposedly 'religious' understandings of sex. Such acts that ostensibly separate the religious from the irreligious serve to let secular sexual health professionals more convincingly promote their own understandings of sexuality and to discourage other approaches. An van Raemdonck, then, analyses the construction of a religious/secular binary in sexual health policies, by comparing Roman-Catholic institutional and non-institutional voices. In her chapter, van Raemdonck illuminates broader societal processes in which gender and sexuality politics become identified as secular. And yet another chapter, by Megan Milota, analyses the role of religion in supposedly secular spaces of medicine via a close reading of the autobiography of a doctor who is terminally ill. In particular, by focusing on these acts of identification, the authors show how categories of religion and secularity are enmeshed with, or even used as a distraction for, processes of inclusion and exclusion along the axes of class, ethnicity, race, and gender.

Religion, gender, and sexuality

Gender and sexuality often figure prominently in contemporary European debates over national identity and belonging. Two questions inform our approach in particular. The first is: how are gendered and sexualised bodies implied in the European politics of belonging? (cf. Yuval-Davis 2006) And, second: how do embodied forms of resistance to these nationalist amalgamations of religion, secularity, gender, and sexuality come into being? We are thus asking how the politics of national identity and belonging relate to sexuality and gender, and how people perhaps seek to resist the forms of cultivation that these nationalist rhetoric pursue.

Gender, sexuality, and the politics of belonging

In many Western European societies like the Netherlands, policies geared at the emancipation of LGBTQ persons have been rather successful, particularly regarding the legal protection against discrimination and adjustments to family law. Although success in terms of legal emancipation does not necessarily imply success at social or symbolic levels (Hekma 2016), LGBTQ people and symbols have an increasing visibility in the public sphere. There are some celebrities and politicians in the Netherlands who openly identify as LGBTQ, and the national 'festivity curriculum' is difficult to imagine without Gay Pride parades. The growing acceptance of LGBTQ people is paralleled by the changing (and complicated) position of religion in society. Although religion is often seen as an inhibiting factor for LGBTQ emancipation, David Bos (2010) has observed that, at least in the Netherlands, Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy have been at the forefront of this struggle, advocating in public a more pastoral attitude towards sexual minorities (gays and lesbians in particular). Still, religion is often accused of being intolerant and/or backward in many Western European societies, and where it was once self-evidently present in the public sphere, it is now often ('ideally') relegated to the private sphere (van den Berg et al. 2014). In this process some religious groups have, in fact, made sexual and gender politics one of their identity markers (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004; Viefhues-Bailey 2010).

As a result of these shifts, religion, gender, and sexuality have come to function differently in imaginations of belonging. Bodies and freedoms of women and LGBTQ persons are increasingly called upon to form the symbolic demarcation of boundaries of belonging. The conditions for 'good citizenship' thus are frequently bound to the acceptance of gender equality and sexual diversity (Dudink 2011; El Tayeb 2011; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Hurenkamp, Tonkens, and Duyvendak 2012). This has consequences in particular for non-Western migrant minorities, who are suspected of not meeting these requirements. Whether it be in the co-optation of queer bodies in projects of nationalism (Puar 2007) or in limiting Muslim women in wearing the veil (Scott 2010), gender and sex seem to be crucial in stereotypical representations of the racial and ethnic Other. The work of Joan Scott is important in this regard (2010, 2018), as she pointed to the implicit secular assumptions underlying these othering mechanisms. While religion is often 'blamed' for instilling and maintaining patriarchal norms and defending homophobic positions, Scott outlined how, throughout history, secular actors (much like religious ones) set out to instil particular patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality (cf. Klassen 2015). Scholars such as Jasbir Puar and Nilufer Göle further inform this critical framework by unmasking gendered secular and nationalist tendencies, and questioning the supposed oppressed status of Muslim women (Fadil 2011; Göle 2015, 103–135; Jouili 2015).

Agency

Since 'transforming bodies' addresses two sides of the same coin (bodies that transform and that are subject to transformation), our analysis does not stop at the question of how bodies are affected *by* societal or political change. We also want to investigate how bodies negotiate the ways in which they are framed, regulated, and co-opted. Or, in other words: how bodies affect and negotiate societal change. This brings us to another central concept, namely that of (religious) agency.

Feminist approaches in the academic institutes of gender studies in Europe have been pre-eminently secular (King and Beattie 2005; Korte 2011). The cause for the neglect of religion as a category of interest can probably be found in the history of gender studies in second wave movements. During the 1970s and 1980s, emancipation movements perceived religion – and the Christian church in particular – primarily as patriarchal institutes that limited women in their personal, public, and political freedom. This anti-religious form of women's emancipation departs from an understanding of agency as primarily individual, empowering, and directed toward resistance to patriarchy. Traditional religion, from this point of view, constitutes the antithesis of liberal understandings of sex and gender, and is seen as a primarily patriarchal structure that limits the potential for women's emancipation and liberation.[1] These perspectives, and the irreligious interpretation of agency that it hinges on, have more recently been questioned from within gender studies (e.g. Braidotti 2008; Hawthorne 2011), but nevertheless continue to influence gender research throughout Europe.[2] In this volume, we go beyond such conceptualisations by including in our analysis the concept of *religious agency*. Saba Mahmood's well-known work on women in Islamic revival movements in Egypt raised questions about the central concept of agency in feminist academia and accentuated its assumption of being connected to resistance against the burden of tradition (Mahmood 2005). Mahmood criticised this individualised feminist secularism as socio-cultural project, and argued for a recognition of a multitude of women's agencies. Agency should also be conceptualised *within* religious traditions, as the desire to adhere to norms or submit to a transcendental will, which "describe[s] a whole range of human action, including those which might be socially, ethically, or politically indifferent to the goal of opposing hegemonic norms." (2005, 9). Sarah Bracke further relates to this project as "[t]hinking from the lives of women who most often fall out of the realms of those considered as 'emancipated subjects' [and that] simultaneously makes use of feminist methodologies while investigating and challenging existing feminist theories" (2008, 53).

This consideration of 'religious agency' has influenced a great deal of scholarship (e.g. Avishai 2008), and it also reappears throughout this volume. Several contributors focus on women's religious compliance and observance. Schrijvers, for example, examines several modes of negotiation of Jewish patriarchal customs by converted women. While some might

invoke a feminist liberal discourse, other new Jewish women find spiritual value in the particular roles assigned to women. Van den Brandt's chapter, too, elaborates on religious observance of women who convert by analysing two autobiographies as forms of religious storytelling.

Yet, we do not take categories such as gender, sex, or religion as self-evident but analyse them in their particular geographical, temporal, and intersectional space. Furthermore, these notions do not merely exist in the discursive abstract, but are concepts built from the ground up: situated in daily life realities and contestations. We consider it important to analyse *how* gender is conceived, reproduced, and subverted. This enables the use of gender and sexuality as epistemological and analytical tools to include a variety of bodies, including LGB, heterosexual, cis, intersex, trans*, masculine, feminine, and non-binary bodies. These are not fixed identity positions, but rather intersectional categorisations that reflect performative societal discourses and individual experiences. The chapters by Anne-Marie Korte and Mariecke van den Berg focus on these intersections of LGBTQ and religion in particular by, respectively, focusing on the religiously loaded performance of Drag Sethlas and the relation between religious and transgender transformations. Korte draws a parallel between the controversy generated by Drag Sethlas' deliberate interplay of sexuality and religious themes and the larger interrelation of religious, sexual, and ethnic identities as a major bone of contention in contemporary European societies. van den Berg proposes, in her chapter, to think of both gender and religious change together, as the one is often implied in the other.

To summarise so far, this volume combines a post-secularist and a gender-critical approach. We borrow from religious studies the understanding of religion in its powerful symbolic, political, and social value. Religion can be exploited to establish group boundaries, and it can be a discursive space where gender and sexual normativities are formed that potentially limit the space of women's individual sexual and gendered freedom. At the same time, religion is recognised as an important feature of daily life and a potential source of meaning and agency for many religious actors, including women and LGBTQ people. We examine and elaborate how various forms of agency are informed by structural developments, negotiated, and potentially subversive. And similarly, the chapters study how different experiences, representations, performances, and performativities render meaning to gender and sexuality. Religion and secularity, however, do not only intersect with gender and sexuality. A third important strand of theory that informed this volume comes from their relation with race.

Religion, race, and postcolonialism

Religion has played an important role in colonialism and continues to be a marker of difference among many people globally. Therefore, when studying the body and its relations with religion, one should include a study of

racial, ethnic, and cultural difference. This argument that race and religion are connected is not new. Edward Said and Frantz Fanon already pointed to the centrality of the religious body in colonial and decolonial imaginings. Hannah Arendt devoted her work to understanding racism and antisemitism. And womanist and black liberation theologians such as James Cone and Delores Williams advocated for inclusivity *within* religious discourse. These interventions were largely informed by social events or social movements, especially in the latter context of the US civil rights movements, with both Islam and Christianity taking main stage via figures such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. This is not limited to the US context alone; religion has long been present in social movements throughout the world, either as a source of empowerment, an institution to be criticised, or a neutral safeguard for victims. Yet thinking of religion, race, and gender together has proven difficult. Women of colour have questioned the overt whiteness and colour blindness of many feminist movements and theories. Likewise, as argued in the previous section, religion has long been absent from dominant fields of gender studies. Religious studies, moreover, also tend to ignore questions of racial difference (Hawthorne 2011). In our volume we commit to an intersectional approach and effort to put these different fields into dialogue: an approach that was introduced by female scholars of colour in order to enable more layered analyses of oppression that do justice to the complexity of daily life and differently located (individual and social) bodies.

Intersectionality first and foremost implies a move away from one single category (often: gender) as the central and dominant category of analysis in favour of a more complex analysis of the workings of power that includes other "categories of difference in individual lives, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies" (Davis 2008). Although intersectional theory has sometimes been criticised for its lack of a solid definition (Nash 2008), we find this complexity explained in a clear and concise manner in the definition offered by Lisa Bowleg:

> Intersectionality is a theoretical framework for understanding how multiple social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, SES, and disability intersect at the micro level of individual experience to reflect interlocking systems of privilege and oppression (i.e., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) at the macro socialstructural level.
>
> (2012, 1267)

This volume works from this definition, while stressing that here and elsewhere, religion needs to be more prominently present in the list of relevant social identities. This does not imply that we perceive 'religion' to be a seemingly isolate-able social space or identity category. Rather, we understand religion to be interwoven with race in a variety of ways.

Race and religion

In order to account for this intersection, we want to highlight what Anya Topolski (2018) has coined as the "race-religion constellation". Building on the work of Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), Gil Anidjar (2008) and others, Topolski developed this notion to denote "the practice of classifying people into races according to categories we now associate with the term 'religion" (Topolski 2018, 59). Racial divides have not only been established on the basis of what we now term 'religion': the formation of a modern comparative category of 'religion' (as something separate from the 'secular') is also intimately tied to constructions of (non)Christianness and (non)whiteness. As an idealised version of Christianity, the category of 'religion' has been largely conceptualised in contrast to its negative mirror images of 'Judaism', 'Islam', or 'idolatry'. These were classified as 'non-religion', 'not-yet-religion', or 'improper religion' and were mutually imbricated with 'race'. In both early colonial and post-Enlightenment epistemologies, particular types of worship have been considered to be indicative of people's political, cultural, and biological inclinations (Jennings 2010, see also Maldonado-Torres 2014). The drawing and redrawing of lines between 'religion' and its outsiders ('irreligion', 'idolatry', 'Judaism', 'Islam', etc.) have thus been intimately tied to the drawing and redrawing of lines between 'human' and its outsiders ('non-human', 'woman', 'irrational-human', 'Oriental', 'African'). Consequently, the emergence of a modern category of 'religion' cannot be understood outside of this dynamic, both inside 'Europe' as metropolitan empire and in the context of colonised peripheries.[3]

Here, it would be helpful to lay out more in detail how we use the concept of 'race' and what it means to apply a race-sensitive intersectional approach in the context of Europe. Stuart Hall argued that race – much like religion and the secular, we add – is a discursive, relational, cultural, and collective concept (Hall 1997). The question whether this term of race, with its specific genealogy in the colonisation of Africa and enslavement of black people, can be applied to other contexts as well continues to be a topic of academic debate. In 1991, Etienne Balibar famously asked whether we can see a new form of racism emerging in late 20th-century Europe, or whether this is a reiteration of already existing structures, as a form of 'neo-racism' (Balibar 1991). In response, Anya Topolski argues that:

> The race-religion constellation makes clear that what is at the roots of this distinction is the privileging of Christianity (or in today's discourse secularism) over the religion of Muslims. The category is still present although the process of racialization is significantly different.
>
> (Topolski 2018, 73)

Yet other scholars disagree with this view and point to the rather different histories of African Americans and people in Muslim majority countries. Nilüfer Göle, to name one, rhetorically asks whether terms such as

"xenophobia, cultural racism, racism 'from above' . . . can . . . also enable us to understand the current tension of European publics toward Islam?" (2017, 32). According to Göle, race and racism cannot be simply added to the situation of Muslims in Europe, because these terms omit any importance of spirituality or the divine; it de-Islamises the context of Muslims. In this volume, we take a position in between and reflect on the limits and value of intersectionality. The critical approach from race studies and postcolonial studies can be very important in understanding the current-day place of religion in Europe. At the same time, questions of race are not *inherently and uncritically* questions of religion, nor the other way around. Yet, the interlinked history and context of these fields are indisputable, which is a terrain that several authors explore in their contributions. Rahil Roodsaz elaborates in her chapter on religious disengagement of Iranian-Dutch people in relation to the racialisation of Muslims in European discourse. Becoming 'modern', as her interlocutors often aspire, is according to Roodsaz both a process of non-religiosity and of racial (dis)identifications. Nawal Mustafa and Matthea Westerduin further discuss their own experiences regarding the prevailing understandings of religion and race in the Netherlands and their observation of how narrow notions of race often hold back serious engagements with race and whiteness in academia.

Outline of the book

This edited volume combines the critical theoretical frameworks addressed herein, in order to understand 'transforming bodies' in relation to power, agency, and religion. The chapters have been divided into three main sections, which all take a different level of inquiry as their starting point. As such, the book crosses methodological boundaries, in order to understand how similar powers of religion and secularity play out on, or are shaped by, different bodies. We thus aim to look at different types of bodies – from global governing bodies of human rights to ethnographic thick descriptions of local daily life – while informed by the same body of theory of post-secularist, postcolonial/critical race, and gender/queer approaches in the study of religion. Before each subsection, the authors reflect on the theme of the book and the connections among the chapters and introduce their contributions more fully.

The first section brings three chapters together that focus on 'Governing Bodies'. Wiering, van Raemdonck, and Korte all explore societal attempts that seek to cultivate bodies, as well as embodied performances that aim to resist these cultivations. Wiering opens the section with an auto-ethnographic account of his fieldwork experiences in sexual health education, where he was trained as an educator. His own frank and open reflections on moments of failure are linked to broader discussions on how the secular body politic creates "ideal bodies", via a biomedical focus on sex and notions of normalcy. Both implicit and explicit, these body politics are heavily dependent

on the construction of a religious 'other', to affirm its self-image as progressive and liberated.

An van Raemdonck focuses on sexual health politics as well, but takes a different starting point by focusing on discursive engagements with Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). She shows that SRHR politics implicitly rely on a secular understanding of sex, which are questioned or affirmed by religious groups in different ways. She compares the engagement with SRHR from the Holy See – which has a naturalistic understanding of sex – and from non-institutional Roman Catholic voices, who in turn defend sexual and reproductive health.

The third chapter of this first section on 'governing bodies', by Anne-Marie Korte, also focuses on the relation between institutional and non-institutional voices. In her contribution, Korte analyses public and judicial responses to a 2017 performance of Drag Sethlas in Spain, in which s/he performed both as the Virgin Mary and as Jesus Christ. Korte compares the outrage and controversy regarding this act with other performances where gender play with religious symbols led to blasphemy accusations.

The second section then elaborates on 'Narrating Bodies'. In this part, van den Brandt, van den Berg, Milota, and Mustafa and Westerduin engage in the analysis of literature from various genres to see how bodies are expressed in texts. Starting from narrative material – such as personal narratives, memoirs, or semi-autobiographic novels – this section explores how literature is related to questions of race, religion, gender, and transformation.

In Chapter 4, van den Brandt analyses four memoirs produced by women who have converted to Judaism or Islam. In this chapter, van den Brandt uses the concept of 'symbolic syncretism' to reflect on the process of storytelling in conversion narratives, and offers a close reading of the memoirs in order to see how women's conversion is related to questions of gender and sexuality. Moving into a religion, van den Brandt argues, is an embodied process of transformation, which in turn is 'transformed' into text via memoirs.

van den Berg continues the exploration of transformative narratives in her chapter about Jewish religious and gendered stories of change in Chapter 5. van den Berg opts to think of gender transformations (such as transgender transitions) and religious transformations (such as conversion or revitalisation) together, as both processes are often intimately linked. Moreover, the chosen autobiographies of Joy Ladin and Leah Lax question the – often simplistic – "misery-turning-to-happiness" trope that often dominates contemporary literature about transitions.

In Chapter 6, Megan Milota uses the concept of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, to explore the role of literature in the transformation of the ethics of both author and readers. She does so by offering an innovative multidisciplinary approach of literary analysis and the analysis of readers' responses. Her material is the autobiographical novel *When Breath Becomes Air* (2016), in which former surgeon Paul Kalanithi reflects upon

his transformation from doctor to patient when he comes to suffer from a fatal illness. This in turn has a transformative effect on medical students engaging with the work.

Nawal Mustafa and Matthea Westerduin take yet another approach to narrative in Chapter 7, the last chapter in this section. Their text is the result of a series of personal exchanges in which they reflect on the role of race and whiteness in academic knowledge production. Here they argue that the dominance of white perspectives in academia has led to the acceptance of certain forms of knowledge and the discarding of other forms. Departing firmly from their own particular histories and locations, this chapter shows how a situated reading of fundamental texts (such as the Bible) enables a critical perspective on the relation among race, religion, and knowledge.

Lastly, section three brings together contributions about daily life realities via 'Negotiating Bodies': bodies engaged in mediations regarding supposedly correct forms of expression. In Chapter 8, Maria Vliek explores the embodied aspects of the process of people moving out of Islam in the Netherlands and the UK. Bodies, she argues, form an important part of processes of belonging either to a religious community or to the realm of the secular in how they – for instance – act, eat, or make love. A focus on the body as it transforms 'out of religion' shows, among other things, that there is no neat demarcation between 'in' and 'out' of Islam.

Rahil Roodsaz's Chapter 9 addresses the ways practices of self-fashioning of Iranian-Dutch draw on the body. In particular, Roodsaz explores intersections of religion and race in expressions of Iranian-Dutch self-identification belonging to Dutch, secular majority culture rather than Muslim minority culture. However, in a context where having *sabzeh*, 'brown', skin is predominantly associated with Turkish and Moroccan immigrants and therefore (admittedly, already a rather limited perspective) with Islam, many Iranian-Dutch find themselves 'moving in and out of whiteness' in their practices of non-religiosity. As such, they mirror Western assumptions on self-evident relations between ethnicity and religion.

Finally, in the last chapter of this section, Lieke Schrijvers discusses how converted women in liberal Jewish congregations in the Netherlands embody their religious transformation, focusing on the practice of wearing the *tallit* (prayer shawl). While on the one hand, the *tallit* as a visible marker of Jewishness might affirm inclusion for converts, it is historically a symbol of Jewish *maleness*, and its use by women has been subject to controversy. Schrijvers traces how this ritual object functions in ambivalent ways in converts' processes of embodying their Jewish identities as belonging-yet-different.

In order to invite the interaction between academic spaces within and outside of geographic Europe, we have asked renowned scholar of religion Pamela Klassen from the University of Toronto to write a response to the volume.

In the Afterword, Klassen reflects on the aims of the book as a whole, as well as the individual chapters, by focusing on three themes: classification and concept; narration and genre; and collectivity and individual. Important questions for the future study of religion are asked here, which move beyond the scope of this volume itself, by distilling important issues from the contributions. Klassen insists that it is "always productive to think locally, temporally, and systematically within specific times and places to see the ways that gender, race, religion, and sexuality are both fluid and fixed, enabling and constraining" (pp. 223), and we wholeheartedly agree with this argument.

Notes

1 In contrast to 'traditional religions', topics such as 'spirituality' are often addressed in the scope of feminist scholarship and even recognised in its emancipatory potential. Similar to public conceptions and life experiences, spirituality is often delineated from 'religion'. This distinction is based on a false assumption that 'spirituality' refers to agency and authenticity, while 'religion' implies structural and patriarchal structures. We understand both 'spirituality' and 'religion' to be located in a particular historical discursive context in which different types of agency are formed (cf. Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Utriainen 2011).
2 In theology, feminist scholars have a rather marginal position, and the role of religious actors in feminist movements tends to be disregarded in genealogies of feminist struggles (Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013; Loughlin 2007). Modern womanist theology is even more marginal and has not sufficiently been taken into mainstream theology.
3 This argument will be presented and elaborated further upon in Matthea Westerduin's forthcoming PhD dissertation called: "Displacements and loss in the Muslim question. Re-membering the making of race, religion, and whiteness in Europe and its colonies" (working title), Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

References

Anidjar, Gil. 2008. *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Asad, Talal, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood. 2013. *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Avishai, Orit. 2008. " 'Doing Religion' in a Secular World: Women in Conservative Religions and the Question of Agency." *Gender & Society* 22 (4): 409–433.

Balibar, Etienne. 1991. "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?" In *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, edited by Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, 9–19. London: Verso.

Bashir, Shahzad. 2011. *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Boisvert, Donald L. and Carly Daniel-Hughes. 2017. "Introduction." In *The Bloomsbury Reader in Religion, Sexuality, and Gender*, edited by Donald L. Boisvert and Carly Daniel-Hughes, 13–15. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Bos, David. 2010. *De Aard, de Daad en het Woord. Een Halve Eeuw Opinie- en Besluitvorming over Homoseksualiteit in Protestants Nederland, 1959–2009*. The Hague: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.

Bowleg, Lisa. 2012. "The Problem with the Phrase 'Women and Minorities': Intersectionality – an Important Theoretical Framework for Public Health." *American Journal of Public Health* 102 (7): 1267–1273.

Bracke, Sarah. 2008. "Conjugating the Modern/Religious, Conceptualizing Female Religious Agency. Contours of a 'Post-Secular' Conjuncture." *Theory, Culture and Society* 25 (6): 51–67.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2008. "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism." *Theory, Culture & Society* 25 (6): 1–24.

Calhoun, Craig, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen. 2011. *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Davis, Kathy. 2008. "Intersectionality as Buzzword. A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful." *Feminist Theory* 9 (1): 67–85.

Dudink, Stefan. 2011. "Homosexuality, Race, and the Rhetoric of Nationalism." *History of the Present* 1 (2): 259–264.

El Tayeb, Fatima. 2011. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.

Engelke, Matthew. 2015. " 'Good without God': Happiness and Pleasure Among the Humanists." *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5 (3): 69–91.

Fadil, Nadia. 2011. "Not-/Unveiling as an Ethical Practice." *Feminist Review* 98 (1): 83–109.

Fedele, Anna and Kim E. Knibbe (Eds.). 2013. *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*, Vol. 26. New York: Routledge.

Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.

Göle, Nilüfer. 2015. *Islam and Secularity: The Future of Europe's Public Sphere*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Göle, Nilüfer. 2017. *The Daily Lives of Muslims. Islam and Pubic Confrontation in Contemporary Europe*. London: Zed Books.

Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Hawthorne, Sian. 2011. "Religion and Gender." In *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, edited by Peter B. Clarke, 134–151. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hekma, Gert. 2016. "Queer in the Netherlands: Pro-Gay and Anti-Sex-Sexual Politics at a Turning Point." In *Queer in Europe*, edited by Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett, 151–164. London: Routledge.

Hirschkind, Charles. 2011. "Is There a Secular Body?" *Cultural Anthropology* 26 (4): 633–647.

Hurenkamp, Menno, Evelien Tonkens and Jan Willem Duyvendak. 2012. *Crafting Citizenship. Negotiating Tensions in Modern Society*. Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jakobsen, Janet and Ann Pellegrini. 2004. *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Jennings, William James. 2010. *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Jouili, Jeanette. 2015. *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Keane, Webb. 2013. "Secularism as a Moral Narrative of Modernity." *Transit: Europäische Revue* 43: 159–170.
King, Ursula and Tina Beattie, eds. 2005. *Gender, Religion and Diversity: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. London: Continuum.
Klassen, Pamela E. 2015. "Fantasies of Sovereignty: Civic Secularism in Canada." *Critical Research on Religion* 3 (1): 41–56.
Korte, Anne-Marie. 2011. "Openings: A Genealogical Introduction to Religion and Gender." *Religion and Gender* 1 (1): 1–17.
Krause, Sharon R. 2011. "Bodies in Action: Corporeal Agency and Democratic Politics." *Political Theory* 39 (3): 299–324.
Llewellyn, Dawn and Marta Trzebiatowska. 2013. "Secular and Religious Feminisms: A Future of Disconnection?" *Feminist Theology* 21 (3): 244–258.
Loughlin, Gerard, ed. 2007. *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Mahmood, Saba. 2009. "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" *Critical Inquiry* 35 (4): 836–862.
Maldonado-Torres, Nelson. 2014. "Race, Religion, and Ethics in the Modern/Colonial World." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 42 (4): 691–711.
Masuzawa, Tomoko. 2005. *The Invention of World Religions. Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
McCarthy Brown, Karen. 1991. *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Mepschen, Paul, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and Evelien H. Tonkens. 2010. "Sexual Politics, Orientalism and Multicultural Citizenship in the Netherlands." *Sociology* 44 (5): 962–979.
Meyer, Birgit. 2012. *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Toward a Material Approach to Religion*. Inaugural Lecture 19 December, Utrecht University.
Nash, Jennifer C. 2008. "Re-thinking Intersectionality." *Feminist Review* 89 (1): 1–15.
Orsi, Robert. 1985. *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Puar, Jasbir K. 2007. *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
Scheer, Monique, Nadia Fadil, and Birgitte Johansen Schepelern. 2019. *Secular Bodies, Affects and Emotions*. London: Bloomsbury Academic
Scott, Joan W. 2010. *The Politics of the Veil*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
Scott, Joan W. 2018. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton University Press.
Topolski, Anya. 2018. "The Race-Religion Constellation: A European Contribution to the Critical Philosophy of Race." *Critical Philosophy of Race* 6 (1): 58–81.
Utriainen, Tehri. 2011. "The Post-Secular Position and Enchanted Bodies." *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 23: 417–432.
Van den Berg, Mariecke, David J. Bos, Marco Derks, Ruard R. Ganzevoort, Miloš Jovanović, Anne-Marie Korte, and Srdjan Sremac. 2014. "Religion,

Homosexuality, and Contested Social Orders in the Netherlands, the Western Balkans, and Sweden." In *Religion in Times of Crisis*, edited by Gladys Ganiel, Heidemarie Winkel and Christophe Monnot, 116–134. Leiden and Boston: Brill.

Viefhues-Bailey, L. H. 2010. *Between a Man and a Woman?: Why Conservatives Oppose Same-Sex Marriage*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Yuval-Davis, Nira. 2006. "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214.