

4 Negotiating transformation and difference

Women's stories of conversion to Judaism and Islam

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Introduction

I muse on my complicated relationship to God. . . . This is how I must live if I am to find peace, bringing together the holy and the profane.

(Mann 2007, 324–326)

During this time I came to understand a lot about myself, human beings, faith and the meaning of marriage and friendship. Human beings will always disappoint. But God is there.

(Backer 2016, 364)

Stories have a habit of generating stories. They come to nest, one inside the other, like Matryoshka dolls, each a window into another's world. . . . Our lives are storied. Were it not for stories, our lives would be unimaginable. Stories make it possible for us to overcome our separatedness, to find common ground and common cause.

(Jackson 2013, 229; 240)

The first two quotations are taken from memoirs written by women who live in different Western European contexts and turned to Judaism and Islam. Reva Mann's memoir, *The Rabbi's Daughter*, tells the story of the daughter of a liberal rabbi becoming strictly Orthodox; Kristiane Backer's memoir, *From MTV to Mecca*, narrates her moving from a lifeworld of show business to becoming Muslim. The last quotation is taken from *The Politics of Storytelling* by anthropologist Michael Jackson. Together, the quotations convey some of the themes that are of interest to many scholars of religious conversion: conversion as a trajectory that includes changing perceptions of identity and the self, as well as shifting relationships with others, God, and different realms of life. But also: conversion as a story with a 'social life' (Jackson 2013, 227) as being influenced by and influencing other stories and other lives.

In this chapter, I contribute to discussions about religion, storytelling, identity, subject-formation, and conversion, by drawing upon an analysis of four recent memoirs written by women who turn to Judaism and Islam.

The analysis focuses on the ways in which female converts to Judaism and Islam negotiate their faith, transform their everyday life, and learn to inhabit social relations in new ways. This comparative analysis is relevant for various reasons. For one, the gendered experience of conversion is rarely studied from a cross-religious perspective. Second, focusing on two minority traditions in Western European contexts enables gaining comparative insights into multiple majority-minority relationships. In what follows, I first conceptualise stories of conversion by drawing from discussions about storytelling in religious studies and anthropology, and connecting these insights to conversion studies. Next, I introduce and analyse four memoirs by critically utilising the concepts syncretism and symbolic battle (Wohlrab-Sahar 1999), in order to look at the ways in which female converts narrate their past commitments and selves and their current religious environment. In conclusion, I draw attention to the different ways in which conversion to Judaism and Islam is politicised in Western European contexts.

Conversion stories

Authors across the humanities and social sciences have pointed at the centrality of narrative and storytelling for constructing subjects' sense of self and being-in-the-world. Subjects tell and live stories that, according to theologian Ruard Ganzevoort (2014), simultaneously invite and serve them to see the world in a certain way and act accordingly. The interaction with the religious tradition to which subjects belong is crucial as the latter "offer[s] possible worlds, created through narrative and portrayed in stories and symbols, rituals and moral guidelines" (Ganzevoort 2014, 1). In pluralistic and individualised Western European contexts, life stories and narrative constructions of the self can be approached as an important medium through which to study the manifestation and functions of religion. Religious studies scholars Marjo Buitelaar and Hetty Zock push such 'self-narratives' forward as an important opportunity to study the presence of religious voices (2013, 3). Anthropologist Michael Jackson argues for a cross-cultural understanding of what he calls the 'narrative imperative' as both social-political and existential. In his theorisation that departs from, and revises, the work of Hannah Arendt (1958), storytelling is considered a strategy for transforming private into public meanings, and vice versa. It is simultaneously "a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances" (2013, 34). Jackson explains that "[t]o reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own imagination" (2013, 34). Conversion can be considered as such a disempowering circumstance: it refers to an often slow and gradual, sometimes rapid, religious and social transformation that may unsettle an individual life trajectory, since it forces one to learn to inhabit new ways of being in relationship to oneself, the community one belongs to, and God.

In such a context of change, according to Jackson, stories may help people to discern and determine the meaning of our journey through life. A conversion story is precisely that: a story about “where we came from and where we are going” (2013, 36). This conceptualisation of conversion stories seems close to philosopher Charles Taylor’s emphasis on the connection between notions of the self, narrative, and the ethical or religious realm:

Our lives exists in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going.

(1992, 47)

However, while conversion can indeed be a disempowering circumstance, it might as easily be experienced as an empowering one: conversion can open up towards new, or expanded, horizons of thought, imagination, and action. And while Jackson emphasises the function of storytelling as a way of coping with crisis, stalemate, or loss of ground, enabling us to “renew our faith that the world is within our grasp” (2013, 36), as this chapter will show, stories of conversion can also be about *giving up* a notion of control over one’s life. This giving up of full autonomy takes place through giving in to God’s calling or a desire to belong elsewhere, no matter the uncertainties tied to it. Notwithstanding these remarks on the applicability of Jackson’s framework for the study of conversion stories, I agree with his claim that we need to understand and explore storytelling as a social process and an act of meaning-making (2013, 34–41). In what follows, I discuss stories of conversion not as ‘texts’ (which is the work of literary theory) but as stories embodied by subjects who participate in the full stream of their social and religious lives, embedded in webs of power relations. As such, stories of conversion are “produced in social contexts by embodied concrete people experiencing the thoughts and feelings of everyday life” (Plummer 1995, 16). Exploring conversion stories may provide insights into the ways in which conversion has been experienced. Studying memoirs therefore needs to negotiate a complex terrain that includes an awareness of narratives as constructed, as well as an appreciation of storytelling as a deliberate act of identity construction, subject-formation, and meaning-making. For example, sexual health researcher Marianne Cense and theologian Ruard Ganzevoort (2018) consider life storytelling as subjects’ reflections on their embodied experiences and the social reality around them. A double negotiation is intrinsic to life storytelling, in which, on the one hand, material reality is turned into narrative. On the other hand, narrative is simultaneously turned into material and behavioural reality, and as such, as the authors put it, narrative “facilitate[s] new experiences and changes in reality” (Ibid., 6).

Crucially, in addition to the aforementioned sketched complex and multifaceted relationship among stories, subjectivity, and experience, storytelling needs to be related to power and difference. Especially storytelling

by marginalised individuals and communities in society can have political effects when they talk back to universalist frameworks. In that light, stories of conversion, in particular conversion to minority traditions, may unsettle dominant expectations about religion, ethnicity, and belonging. This chapter will demonstrate that conversion stories told by people who turn to minority traditions on the basis of a notion of autonomous choice can be counter-voices to essentialist understandings of boundaries between differentiated social and religious groups and majority and minority positions and identities. Cultural theorist Gauri Viswanathan (1998) therefore considers conversion to be potentially a position of resistance, from which counter-narratives to dominant notions of the nation, community, and subjectivity can be envisioned. Alternatively, or simultaneously, converts might be foremost interested in constructing a story that is legible for the multiple audiences they have to relate to. Conversion stories might closely follow the scripts laid down for conversion narratives by the respective religious tradition and community. Religious studies scholar Geraldine Mossiere, for example, understands conversion narratives as designed to make the story being told “ideologically consistent with the norms of the community of adoption, symbolically coherent with personal experience, and socially acceptable for the community of origin” (2016, 99). This chapter will show how converts need to negotiate this ambiguous position: conversion may provide subjects a positionality that enables critique, subversion, and creativity, but it may as easily situate subjects in a tensioned terrain of having to prove one’s faith, belonging, and loyalty to the community of origin or the community of adoption, or to both.

This conceptualisation applies to the conversion stories investigated in this chapter. However, the genre of memoirs adds another element to the definition: since memoirs are published with the hope to reach a large and diverse audience, the story being told needs to connect in some way to broader social and cultural expectations of what a conversion looks like in relation to the particular religious tradition and community of adoption. However, memoirs can abide to, negotiate with, or subvert such social and cultural expectations about the self, change, tradition, and community, and they can do this in implicit or explicit ways.

Double bind of conversion

From here, I find it useful to draw upon the work of sociologist of religion Monika Wohlrab-Sahr to approach women’s memoirs of conversion for the ways in which notions of self, change, tradition, and community are formulated. Based on her qualitative research among Islamic converts in Germany and the US, Wohlrab-Sahr (1999) draws attention to converts’ complex positioning in terms of religion, culture, and belonging. She considers the study of the phenomenon of conversion to Islam in contemporary Western societies to be structurally relevant because of what she calls

‘the double frame’: the positionality of converts between the religious, cultural, and social frame they turn away from but stay related to, and the new religious and cultural frame they turn to, “but with which they cannot completely merge” (1999, 352). Therefore, she continues, the study of conversion to Islam is not only about Islam, but is also at least as much about the circumstances under which conversion takes place. This double bind of conversion, or the in-between positionality of converts, is a way of further conceptualising conversion stories as negotiating a terrain of dis/empowering transformation. The double frame, and the tensions inherent in it, are according to Wohlrab-Sahr, fundamental to the meaning of conversion. For converts to Islam in the US and Western Europe, embracing what is in political rhetoric and public discourse often perceived to be a foreign religion can be a means of articulating within one’s own social context one’s distance from this context and one’s conflictive relationship towards it (1999, 352). Wohlrab-Sahr’s assumption of conversion as distancing oneself from the religious, cultural, and social frame one turns away from needs to be extended, I think, from individual converts’ perceptions and experience to a broader religious, cultural, and social setting that may perceive converts in a particular way. As alluded to earlier, conversion can indeed be a highly politicised move. Conversion can take place from a position of resistance, but importantly, conversion can also be resisted by others, such as family members, friends, and colleagues, but sometimes also by strangers. Both forms of resistance may contribute to a convert’s in-between positionality. Especially women’s conversion to Islam is in Western contexts often considered as inherently political given the fact that “gender issues have been pivotal in the construction of Otherness between ‘Islam’ and the ‘West’” (van Nieuwkerk 2006, 1). However, also conversions to other minoritised traditions, depending on the historical, political, and religious context of discussion, can be politicised transformations (Viswanathan 1998). For example, a few decades ago, conversion to (strict) Orthodox Judaism in Western contexts similarly took place from a position of resisting geopolitical constellations and/or mainstream culture and society (Aviad 1983). Moreover, women’s contemporary embrace of Orthodox Judaism in the Netherlands is at times resisted by significant others (Mock-Degen 2009). Converts to Judaism therefore similarly need to be understood as having to negotiate, at times, the double bind of conversion. A simultaneous development over the latter half of the 20th century regarding Jewish conversion can be found in the relationship between established Jewish communities in Israel and the US and tribal groups throughout Africa and Asia, who regard themselves as Jews, such as the Abayudaya of South Africa and the Mizo (or Bene Menashe) of northern India and Burma (Charmé 2012; Egorova 2015). For Israeli Jewish organisations and the Israeli state, recognition of the Jewishness of individuals and communities belonging to these tribal groups is based on an essentialist view of Jewishness and is oriented toward conversion to Orthodox Judaism and preparation for immigration to Israel

(Charmé 2012; Egorova 2015). Contemporary American Jewish organisations reflect greater denominational diversity, as well as a more postmodern understanding of Jewishness as fluid and open-ended (Charmé 2012). This brief exploration shows how recent and contemporary Jewish conversion is enmeshed with issues such as cultural critique, race, immigration, belonging, and the very definition of Judaism.

Highlighting the relationships that converts articulate towards their social environments and their past commitments, Wohlrab-Sahr conceptualises two modes of adopting a new religion as syncretism and symbolic battle: “Whereas the syncretistic mode uses religious symbolism in a way that underlines the combination of the old and the new, the mode of symbolic battle stresses conflict and uses religious symbolism to demonstrate radical difference” (1999, 353). While the author analyses conversion narratives especially in light of individual biographies and crisis experiences in relation to gender or sexuality, social mobility, or national or ethnic belonging (1999, 2006), I suggest to utilise the notions of syncretism and symbolic battle in a broader sense in order to shed light on converts’ articulation of former and present lifeworlds and selves, without assuming an experience of crisis in converts’ biographies. As all four memoirs studied in this chapter narrate, in various ways, a moving between discursive realms and lifeworlds, and transformations of the self, I use the notions of syncretism and symbolic battle to analyse the memoirs’ representation of the construction of different lifeworlds and different selves throughout the conversion trajectory.

Women’s stories of conversion to Judaism and Islam

This next section engages with four memoirs recently published across Western European contexts. Two of them are women’s stories of conversion to and within Judaism: the 2007 British *The Rabbi’s Daughter: A True Story of Sex, Drugs and Orthodoxy* by Reva Mann; and the 2009 Dutch memoir *Just Jew It: Hoe Ik Joods Werd in 730 Dagen (Just Jew It: How I Became Jewish in 730 Days)* by Suzanne van Bokhoven. The other two are women’s stories of conversion to Islam: the 2009 German *Von MTV nach Mekka: Wie der Islam Mein Leben Veränderte (From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life)* by Kristiane Backer; and the 2008 Flemish memoir *Thuis in de Islam (At Home in Islam)* by Eva Vergaalen. Especially the memoir by Reva Unterman, who uses the pen name Reva Mann, became well-known. It was reviewed in British, Israeli, and American newspapers and received media attention,¹ and was considered controversial and banned by a few British synagogues (Jardine 2008). Kristiane Backer’s memoir was first published in Germany in 2009, was translated to English and published in the UK in 2012, and was also translated to Dutch (2011), Indonesian (2013), Arabic (unknown), Malay (2014), and Urdu (2015).² While it is difficult to know how many copies were sold in these different settings, Backer is,

as a former MTV presenter and former girlfriend of the Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, a well-known figure, and for that reason she has been interviewed and has participated in BBC programs, Fox News, and Middle Eastern documentaries about her life, Islam, Muslims, and conversion. She gave extensive book presentations in the UK and abroad.³ Both Mann's and Backer's conversion narratives can therefore be thought of as having been repeatedly mentioned and shared through various platforms, and having reached a broad, diverse, and international audience.

The memoirs by Suzanne van Bokhoven and Eva Vergaelen are less well known. The first was published in one edition for the Netherlands and Flanders, and is nowadays available in Dutch libraries. The second was written by a critical leftist journalist and activist, which might mean that this conversion narrative is particularly known by people situated in Flemish leftist and pluralist networks and civil society. It is also available in Dutch libraries. While it is hard to estimate the impact of especially less-known memoirs, I analyse the four memoirs together in order to put the memoirs by Mann and Backer in perspective, and arrive at a broader understanding of women's conversion stories as laid down in memoirs. All four memoirs narrate the changes and transformations of lifeworlds and selves through conversion. All four authors reflect on their experiences of conversion as women – for example, in relation to gendered changes in lifestyle and/or the negotiation of gendered stereotypes of pious women.

This observation about the fact that all memoirs thematise women's particular perspectives and experiences is no coincidence. Gender and sexuality therefore need to be centrally included as analytical categories in understanding conversion trajectories. Religious studies scholar Eliza Kent (2014) has pointed out that conversion entails much more than a change in worldview or ethos – it often also leads to radical gendered and sexualised transformations. These include the gendered division of labour, gendered roles within the family, kinship, sexual relationships, the organisation and experience of public space, and norms that govern how men and women should speak, dress, and walk. Drawing on these observations, Kent argues for the inclusion of gender as a central analytical category to open up new ways of investigating and understanding the lives of converts (2014, 318).

So far, I have reflected on storytelling and the potential politicised dynamics related to conversion and alluded to the differentiating role of gender and sexuality *in* conversion trajectories and experiences. In what follows, I analyse the memoirs by Mann, van Bokhoven, Backer, and Vergaelen. I look at the motivations for conversion, explore the narrated construction of lifeworlds and selves, and highlight the ways in which the memoirs thematise dominant perceptions on Jews and Muslims in Europe. The analysis will show 1) that the memoirs construct conversion stories from women's particular vantage point and experience; 2) that the memoirs narrate the negotiation of the 'double bind' of conversion in various ways mediated through individual biographies and material bodies; and 3) relatedly, that to come

to a social-political understanding of the narration of individual conversion experience, the storytelling needs to be connected to the differentiated positions of Jews and Muslims in contemporary Europe.

Motivations for conversion: between spirituality and community

The motivations for conversion for Mann, van Bokhoven, Backer, and Vergaalen include a longing for God, a spiritual quest, and a desire to belong to a well-defined community of like-minded people. While all share these motivations, the conversion narratives diverge in their emphasis on either the spiritual or the communal. The desire for community is for Mann and van Bokhoven mediated by their prior different relationships with Judaism and the Jewish people. Mann and van Bokhoven embarked upon two different types of conversion that have a different status in Jewish law: Mann can be considered and identifies herself explicitly as a ‘returnee’/‘*ba’alat tshuva*’ (Hebrew female form for ‘returnee’). Having always belonged to the Jewish people in a self-evident manner by being born from a Jewish mother, as a young woman, Mann makes the deliberate decision to strive for a pious life. Van Bokhoven converts to Judaism coming from a non-Jewish family and background, which is in Hebrew called *giyur*. This distinction in types of conversion is part of the explanation for the differentiated experiences of Mann and van Bokhoven. Mann seems to prioritise the spiritual and the communal equally. During a performance of the *mitzvot* of lighting *Shabbes* candles and reciting the blessings before eating, she experiences the transcendental presence of God. This experience may well explain Mann’s choice for strict Orthodoxy,⁴ since strictly Orthodox traditions and communities emphasise such (longing for) ecstatic spiritual experiences. But she equally longs for ‘home’ and a sense of security, and decides to join a *yeshiva* in Jerusalem. “I had exiled myself. Now I am trying to return to the fold” (2007, 12).⁵ Van Bokhoven takes a more rationalised approach. She repeatedly questions her religiosity:

I feel Jewish, but do I also feel that I am a Jew? Do I have a Jewish soul when I do not want to conform to issues I cannot agree with on the basis of rational thinking? . . . Coming out in Judaism should be a personal wish, but does this wish need to have a religious basis?
(2009, 128–129, translation mine)

During her conversion trajectory, van Bokhoven initially prioritises the unity of her family and her role as a mother. Since she married an Israeli Jew, she wonders about the cultural and religious identity of her children, and wants them to be accepted as ‘fully’ Jewish. She expresses a longing to belong to the Jewish people and have her entire family included in that. Mann expresses a similar desire to belong, but in her case this is framed as a ‘returning to the fold’, which denotes the understanding of an already

existing bond with Judaism and the Jewish people from which she has strayed.

The referred-to distinction in terms of ‘religion’ versus ‘ethnicity’ is not echoed in the Islamic tradition. However, also when it comes to Islam, it is helpful to take a closer look at the term ‘conversion’. As anthropologist Karin van Nieuwkerk (2014) notes, many converts to Islam prefer to speak about ‘becoming Muslim’, ‘taking *shahadah*’ (pronouncing the Islamic declaration of faith), or ‘embracing Islam’, which all refer to converts’ sense of a gradual realisation that their ideas were already Islamic even before they consciously turned to Islam. Also Backer narrates her sense of the Islamic precepts being “logical” (2012, 79). Other converts opt for the term ‘reversion’, which denotes the theological-missionary understanding that ‘all people are born Muslim’. This makes turning to Islam thus a move of returning. In Arabic, there is no word for conversion, but the verb *aslama* conveys the idea of becoming a Muslim (literally: to submit).⁶ In her trajectory of what is entitled ‘becoming a Muslim’,⁷ Backer, a single woman working in German and British show business, is foremost searching for higher meaning in life and for God. She finds this in Islam. Backer’s first encounter with Islam takes place through a romantic partner, Imran Khan. The relationship doesn’t last, however, and Backer embarks upon her spiritual journey from then on alone. Her search for a Muslim like-minded community is, however, not easy, and she picks and chooses her friends and spiritual guides carefully.

Eva Vergaelen describes how she grew up with communist parents and learned to identify with atheism. When she started working as a teacher in ethics at a high school in Antwerp, she encounters Islam for the first time through meeting Muslim children. She is interested in learning more and feels a connection to the Quran. What she calls her ‘intellectual conversion’ seems to just happen by circumstance, not because she was searching for it. As such, Vergaelen explains: “I wasn’t looking for Islam. Islam found me” (2008, 21). Vergaelen marries an Egyptian Muslim man, and together they raise a daughter. This intimate connection to her Muslim husband is important to nurture her faith and sense of belonging. But apart from that, Vergaelen takes up an individualistic approach to being Muslim and questions various assumptions about where she should (or should not) belong. She explicitly moves at intersections, criticises attitudes of non-Muslims, Muslims, and fellow female converts alike, and is selective about where she feels at home. Moreover, she criticises the ‘why did you convert?’ question:

Why did I choose for Islam? The question itself emerges from the rationalistic dogma. As if I went shopping and considered the advantages and disadvantages. I did not choose, instead, Allah opened up my heart. I do not believe because of a sense of guilt nor repentance, in Islam this concept does not exist. I believe because of love for purity, the beauty of happiness, the life force that is buzzing in the divine words of the

Quran. . . . [F]or the first time in my life, I opened to a power that I did not control.

(2008, 28–29, translation mine)

Vergaelen prioritises the spiritual elements in her conversion trajectory over the communal. Her experience of the transcendental presence of God trumps her sense of individual agency; God emerges as the primary agentive subject in this conversion story. As such, Vergaelen's storytelling does not primarily aim at establishing a sense of control and autonomy in the face of transformation (Jackson 2013) – instead, her conversion story is about 'opening up' and giving in to shaping an intersubjective relationship with God.

Jewish conversion battles and syncretisms

These various motivations for conversion can be related to the authors' biographies (Davidman 1991; van Nieuwkerk 2008). These partly explain the authors' discourses on past and present lifeworlds and selves that need to be situated on a continuum of scripts of symbolic battle versus syncretism. The formulation of these scripts is often expressed in terms of gender and sometimes sexuality. Moreover, the scripts are experienced through the material body. As will be fleshed out what follows, a conversion trajectory fully involves people's material bodies, not just their minds or spirits (McGuire 2008, 97–118).

On a sliding scale of symbolic battle and syncretic scripts, Mann's story of conversion resembles the symbolic battle most. Mann strongly desires to belong to a new lifeworld, that of strict Orthodoxy, and she rejects her former way-of-being-in-the-world. Connected to that, she rejects her old self and aims at embracing and nurturing a new self. Mann speaks of the need to repent for her sins and of distancing herself from former social contacts (including casual sex) and activities (including partying and drug use). The notion of sin, repentance, and renewal is therefore strongly embodied: Mann's story of conversion is about shedding her old life and body through repentance and purification, and learning to inhabit a new life and become a new body. Mann explicitly uses secular versus religious terminology to refer to what she considers to be oppositional lifeworlds, and uses this terminology to frame her story of conversion from the start. The distinction in lifeworlds is, in the case of Mann, physical/geographical: her former liberal 'wild' life was in London, while her current repentance takes place in Jerusalem. The opening chapter is situated in Jerusalem, where Mann considers her life and desires after her physical move to Israel and her religious move into a girls' yeshiva:

It is scorching hot and I imagine how cooling the Mediterranean waves would feel against my skin. . . . But I know that sunning at the seaside is a pleasure from my old life, the carefree secular existence that I have

willingly exchanged for the absolutes of ultra-Orthodox Jewish doctrine. Now I must keep strictly to the modesty laws and not reveal my body in public. Yet, even though I pray and perform the mitzvot daily, I still find myself longing to wear blue jeans, or worse, a bikini. . . . The more I read, the more I feel the Rambam's treatise [Hilchot Tshuva, Laws of Repentance] has been written especially for me, Reva Mann, atoning for a multitude of sins, yearning to change my past ways and live according to Jewish law.

(2007, 1–3)

Mann's story of conversion is formulated in terms of a symbolic battle throughout, positing a radical difference between secular and religious existence. Moreover, the term 'battle' can be taken almost literally in Mann's case, since the story is about her struggles in giving up 'old ways' and against illicit desires. While Mann would ideally want to reject her former life and self entirely, she cannot establish a definite break because of family (Mann continues to need to relate to her former lifeworld because of her liberal Jewish parents and her disabled sister in London), and because she does not control her dreams and desires completely (Mann continues longing for both ecstatic spirituality and ecstatic sex). She hopes to solve these issues in finding a perfect husband, who should be pious, a good father, and a great lover. She marries Simcha, whose piety and fatherhood qualities are excellent, but who ultimately disappoints in bed. Sexuality remains throughout the narrative an important challenge as a source of temptation and obstacle in becoming a religious subject (van Klinken 2012), in this case a pious woman. Sexual attraction to the opposite sex is not just a temptation to negotiate: when Mann starts an affair with Joe, it is the ultimate moment of failure in the move away from a former lifeworld and self and the becoming of a new self. Mann narrates this 'straying from the straight path' (Beekers and Kloos 2018) as carnal sin that damages the soul and its connection to God:

The enormity of what I have done hits me. Lying next to a panting Joe, I realise I do not love this man. I have sinned for only a transient moment of pleasure. Suddenly I am fearful of the chastisement of koret, excommunication from the divine forever. In his treatise, the Rambam, lists the sins for which there is no repentance. I try to remember if adultery is one of them. I imagine my soul floating in the dark of space, lonely, abandoned, unable to attach itself to God's light forever, and I tremble in the darkness. I need to know if I have truly been cut off. I say a prayer under my breath 'Shema Yisroel. . .', to test if I can still connect to the divine. I am relieved to find that I can still conjure up an image of God in heaven and of myself as His servant below.

(2007, 215–216)

Mann's conversion trajectory is therefore about a constant gendered and sexualised, conflictual, and guilt-inducing moving back and forth between secular and strictly Orthodox lifeworlds. As such, for Mann, both the secular and the sacred are "vividly real and present through the experiencing body" (McGuire 2008, 13). However, throughout her conversion trajectory, she increasingly learns to negotiate and reconcile her desires for spirituality, security, belonging, and sexuality. She moves away from strict Orthodoxy by not keeping the *mitzvot*, and she divorces from Simcha and builds a new independent life in which she continues to share with her ex-husband the care of their three children. Instead of perceiving and experiencing God, family, and community, versus sexuality and an independent life, as belonging to oppositional lifeworlds and selves, towards the end of the memoir, Mann increasingly establishes syncretism. This can be read in her narration of the travel she and her children make to India, where they find a *Chabad* community they join for the celebration of the holy fest of *Succah*:

As the rabbi continues his discourse, I muse on my complicated relationship to God. I still believe in Him and His holy Torah, but am unable to follow many of the laws. Like many Jews before me, I live in a spiritual exile. . . . [B]ut tonight, I welcome the opportunity to join in with the festivities, and to share the Sabbath with all these travelers. . . . This is how I must live if I am to find peace, bringing together the holy and the profane, merging them instead of ricocheting from one to the other.

(Mann 2007, 324–326)

On the other end of the spectrum of symbolic battle and syncretic scripts, we find van Bokhoven's story of conversion. Her story seems to establish from the beginning a smooth integration of old and new lifeworlds and selves. Van Bokhoven has a steady and valued position in society as a medical professional, mother of two children, and wife of a secular Israeli Jewish engineer. While strict Orthodoxy favours physical, social, and ideological encapsulation (Davidman 1991, 180–184), Dutch Liberal Judaism does not. As such, the tradition and community of Dutch Liberal Judaism may relatively easily welcome a highly educated, professional, and self-conscious woman like van Bokhoven. Moreover, Dutch Liberal Judaism is, similar to other progressive redefinitions of Judaism (such as Conservative and Reform), relatively open to the possibility of conversion of those with non-Jewish mothers in the first place. Van Bokhoven explicitly identifies as 'a modern Jew' with 'down-to-earth sense' (*'gezond verstand'*). This means for van Bokhoven that she needs to struggle with harmonising the *Halacha* with her sense for logic. A times, she expresses her annoyance about inequalities between men and women she feels she has to negotiate when learning about the Biblical stories and Jewish tradition, and in the everyday life of the Liberal Jewish community. Van Bokhoven does experience the ritualised

moment of conversion, after two years of studying Judaism at the Liberal synagogue in Amsterdam, as a 'turning point' (Hunt 2005, 26). The way in which she narrates this moment expresses a distinction between her former and present life and self, and at the same time dissolves such a distinction through capturing the former and the present in one word of her own creation: "*Dit is het dan: mijn voormalig-katholiek/atheistisch-nu-joods leven*" (2009, 187) ("So this is it: my former-Catholic/Atheist-now-Jewish life"). Overall, the match between Dutch Liberal Judaism and van Bokhoven seems to be a fairly good one, which facilitates a syncretic script.

Islamic conversion battles and syncretisms

Vergaelen's story of conversion to Islam can be put somewhere in the middle between symbolic battle and syncretic scripts about lifeworlds and selves. Vergaelen does not reject in a one-sided manner her former lifeworld and does not uncritically accept or embrace new forms of community or belonging. Her search for a faith and way of life that suits her is individualised and also takes place through her connection to her husband. She expresses fierce critique vis-à-vis the Islamophobia of mainstream society as well as Muslims she considers narrow-minded regarding notions of 'Islam' and 'women's role and position'. As such, Vergaelen's conscious targeting of various audiences (Cooke 2000) is infused by notions of women's specificities and emancipation. One of the chapters of her story of conversion is even entitled 'The Woman', and this quote sums up Vergaelen's point of view on women's specificity and individuality: "The crux of emancipation is one's individual right to define it. And [it] is not feeling guilty about being woman in everyday life" (2007, 207). At the same time, the author refrains from essentialising former and current lifeworlds and selves.

In some ways, Backer's memoir is more of a symbolic battle conversion script. When it comes to lifeworlds, Backer narrates her experience of an opposition between the world of show business and an Islamic way of life. Backer made a career in German and later British media and show business, and she became a well-known VJ of MTV during the early 1990s. She emphasises that working for MTV in London "wasn't just a job, but a way of life" (2012, 43). She is excited about MTV life, but after a couple of years, it also wears her down, and she feels depressed and lonely. Her first encounter with Islam and Muslims takes place through her romantic partner Imran Khan, with whom she travels to Pakistan, where he talks a lot about what he considers Islam and Eastern culture. Backer starts her story with this travel as a way of framing conversion in both religious as well as cultural terms as entering a 'new world', which she distinguishes from her MTV life:

I felt my excitement grow at the prospect of getting to know both the country and its people. It didn't occur to me that diving into a world so

different from the exciting life I was leading in August 1992 would have momentous consequences.

(2012, 4, emphasis added)

Backer contrasts MTV life with Islamic Pakistani culture. Her dissatisfaction with her MTV professional and social lifeworld grows, and she feels that Islam is logical and inspiring. The following years, Backer needs to negotiate her job in show business and her social circle with her growing Muslim faith and being-in-the-world. This opposition between lifeworlds is not absolute though: Backer at times finds opportunities to collaborate with Muslim artists and to do philanthropic projects that seem more close to what she deems important, and she continues some old friendships. Moreover, Backer does not narrate an opposition between former and current selves: instead, she experiences to be somewhat of an ‘outsider within’ in the world of show business, while Islam ‘suits’ her from the beginning. As also Mossiere points out, converts to Islam in Western contexts often were already occupying a hybrid space, or were experiencing marginality even before their conversion (2012, 101–103). As such, embracing Islam can mean “claiming affiliation to a liminal space that allows . . . to navigate between different universes” (2012, 103). At the same time, Backer’s story of conversion is an elaborate narration of her desire and actions to transform herself – and this subject-formation (Mahmood 2005) takes place through nurturing her Islamic self, learning about Islam from friends and Sufi guides, versing herself in Islamic practices such as prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage, and engaging in Sufi communities.

Backer does not uncritically embrace all types of Islam and does not endorse all Muslim opinions and communities she encounters. Instead, she carefully searches for suitable guides and a Sufi community in which she feels at home. She criticises majority society and its stereotypical renderings of Islam and Muslims, as well as young British Muslims, whom she finds often too conservative. Her position is therefore not one of easy belonging, but rather one of in-betweenness. Similar to Vergaalen, she criticises multiple audiences. But whereas Vergaalen embraces a rather individualistic-romantic approach to faith, Backer is more inclined to search for a spiritual community in which she can feel nurtured, inspired, and at home. At the end of the memoir, Backer formulates a syncretic script of lifeworlds, explicitly merging different lifeworlds and identities, but without dissolving differences altogether:

I feel that it is only now, after a long and challenging integrative process, that my private and professional life, my Muslim and my Western identity are in harmony with one another. I carry both worlds in me and it is my wish to live and express both and mediate between them.

(2012, 400)

Despite the wish to occupy such a hybrid location, this is not made easy for contemporary women converting to Islam. Both Vergaalen and Backer are compelled to ‘talk back’ (van den Brandt 2019) to prejudices about Islam and Muslims, to Muslim opinions and practices they deem incorrect and harmful, and at times to fellow converts they consider overly conservative. As such, they are engaged in what literary studies scholar Miriam Cooke (2000) has dubbed ‘multiple critique’ in order to contest multiple forms of marginalisation and silence, and as such “initiate new forms of conversations across what were previously thought to be unbridgeable chasms” (2000, 99).

But before Backer ends her memoir with hopeful notes on the opportunities for, and future of, what she dubs ‘European Muslims’, and with her reflections on her 17-year trajectory on the path of Islam, she narrates about her second marriage that unfortunately ends in disaster and suffering. This episode in Backer’s story of conversion is a narration of a symbolic battle of gendered and sexualised lifeworlds from the explicit viewpoint and experience of a convert: Backer feels that ‘as a convert’ (2012, 347; 355) she should learn to inhabit the position of a ‘good Muslim wife’ (2012, 347). Despite warnings and worries of her parents and Muslim and non-Muslim friends, this means for Backer that she needs to appreciate ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Arabic’ culture, become subservient, and comply with her husband’s wish to practice full gender segregation wherever she is – i.e. refraining from any contact with men. Her husband’s lack of trust and need to control every aspect of her life eventually leads Backer to become isolated and feel suffocated and lonely. Finally, her husband divorces her, and Backer finds herself alone and devastated. Writing about this episode of her life, Backer reflects on it as such:

I had wanted to submit to God and please him by fulfilling the wishes of my ex-husband. In reality, however, I hadn’t surrendered to God but to a man whose interpretation of Islam was very different from mine. His way to God was not mine. His interpretation of the religion had become a means of control and even oppression, maybe also because he feared he would lose me. As a result, I lost some of my friends, my job and even my own self. In the long run, it could never have worked. For love to be nurtured and grow, it needs trust and freedom (within God’s limits).
(2012, 358–359)

Backer repeatedly stresses her position as a ‘convert’ and her ex-husband’s as a ‘born Muslim’. In this hierarchically envisioned relationship, she tried to learn to embody his ideal of a Muslim wife. He became “my king” (2012, 348) and she “a sheltered virgin who had never much contact with the outside world” (2012, 353). Backer describes these efforts as destined to fail, since they imply a lifeworld and self that “wasn’t me and I could never become that person” (2012, 353). In this episode of Backer’s story

of conversion, we see an emergent notion of clashing selves resulting in the failure of becoming a certain type of woman inhabiting a lifeworld of her husband's making. Backer interprets this failure as eventually for the better, and concludes the chapter 'Marriage' with talking about how she learnt that "[h]uman beings will always disappoint. But God is there" (2012, 364). This story of conversion exemplifies the "process of trial and error surrounding the project of becoming Muslim" (Mossiere 2016, 103), and is in that sense similar to Revan Mann's 'trial and error' story of becoming strictly Orthodox.

The politics of conversion to Judaism and Islam in Western Europe

So far, I explored women's conversion memoirs and compared the experiences of women turning to Judaism and Islam. I investigated the multiple conversion motivations presented by the narratives and looked into the variety of ways in which understandings of former and current lifeworlds and different versions of the self are constructed on a continuum of syncretic versus symbolic battle scripts. These empirical insights shed light on conversion stories as situated in a complex terrain of multiple dimensions of political-social and religious belonging, and gendered and religious experience. In this terrain, stories of conversion formulate notions of self, change, tradition, and community, which reproduce and/or negotiate with or subvert existing dominant discourses and expectations. In this concluding section, I connect these insights to a further reflection on the gendered and culturalised/racialised politics of conversion to Judaism and Islam as expressed by the discussed memoirs.

As anthropologist Willy Jansen puts it, both conversion and gender are contested concepts, and conversion has a gendered political dimension, "whether intended by the convert or not" (2006, ix). Since conversion is often considered a confrontation between two religions or worldviews, conversion is perceived differently by the receiving and the departed community. In order to understand the potential impact of such a confrontation, power relations between the communities at stake need to be taken into account (Jansen 2006, x). Furthermore, at stake in stories of conversion, and their reception by others, is a gendered notion of subjectivity. While men are considered autonomous beings with full capacity to make independent religious choices, women are more often expected to be social and relational beings, which circumscribes the choices they are entitled to make (Jansen 2006, x). As sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) famously argues, women's bodies often symbolise the nation, and nationalist rhetoric and projects expect women to reproduce national culture and citizenship. In the context of conversion, therefore, "not only are women given less voice and autonomy in deciding about their religion, but also the protection of religious boundaries takes on a specific gendered character" (Jansen 2006, xi).

Drawing on this chapter's theoretical excursion and empirical analysis, I argue that conversion to minoritised religious traditions in Europe is an intrinsically politicised move – albeit differently experienced for converts to Judaism and Islam due to diverging geopolitical constellations and constructions of gender and 'race'/ethnicity. All women narrate their encounters with the question of why they turned to Judaism and Islam. But whereas Mann and van Bokhoven experience this question as only being posed by close family members and friends, Backer and Vergaelen explicitly address their memoirs to an imaginary readership whom they expect to harbour negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslim women. Mann is the only one who moved *within* the spectrum of Jewish traditions and the only one describing her trajectory and struggles in secular versus religion terminology. Van Bokhoven, Backer, and Vergaelen all became new members of Jewish and Islamic traditions and communities, and therefore need to be able to explain not only why they became religious but also to defend their turn to *another* religious tradition and community. In one particular chapter, Bokhoven narrates her experience with anti-Semitic prejudice and violence. When she steps outside of her home, one early morning to get the children to school and travel to work, she is terrified to see a star of David scraped on her frost-bitten car window.

How do they know Jews (in the making) live in this house? I suddenly feel very unsafe. . . . The menorah chandler should not have been standing at the windowsill! . . . Antisemitism is now a word I can feel.

(2006, 78–79, translation mine)

On the basis of this episode, Van Bokhoven questions her own formerly held assumptions about Dutch liberalism and tolerance.

The turn to Islam by Backer and Vergaelen seems to be contested on a more structural basis, as their narrative is permeated by a wish to talk back to common assumptions about Islam and Muslims and their engagement with multiple critique. As shown earlier, Vergaelen explicitly moves at intersections, criticising the attitudes of non-Muslims, Muslims, and fellow converts alike. She also criticises assumptions she considers underlying the 'why did you convert?' question. As such, the memoir reveals that the storyteller often encounters this question, and therefore expects her readers to have the same question and the same assumptions tied to it. Backer is similarly engaged in multiple critique. However, her narrative also conveys a notion of ambassadorship. The title of the chapter 'Coming Out as a European Muslim' draws on a notion of an invisible identity made visible, in the same way LGBTQ persons are expected to have to reveal the secret of their deviant gender and sexual identity and experience.⁸ The chapter elaborates on the phenomenon of Islamophobia and speaks out against prejudices, which the storyteller knows through experience. Backer labels Muslims in Europe, herself and fellow converts included, as 'European Muslims', and identifies for all the task of being ambassadors of Islam: "we are all ultimately ambassadors of Islam. And we need to reach out

and engage in the best possible manner, whatever the occasion” (2012, 377). The inclusion of the notion of ambassadorship in a broader strategy of countering negative stereotypes charges those who suffer prejudice and discrimination with a representational burden. Initially a convert strategy, it is now widely shared with born Muslim women and, according to social historian Margaretha van Es, while this ambassadorial role “may seem to be an effective and accessible strategy, it entails a form of self-essentialization where almost all aspects of everyday life become politicized” (2017, 15).

Situating women’s conversion stories in a larger Western European political and societal context in which Judaism has in recent decades moved from the position of the culturalised/racialised Other to being accepted as a ‘religion’ among others with its own liberal, conservative, and fundamentalist factions, explains why van Bokhoven needs to negotiate her father’s general atheist ambivalence about religion, while Mann needs to argue against her parents’ framing of her conversion in terms of the image of the ungrateful daughter, downward social mobility, and strict Orthodoxy as an improper Jewish faction:

After all the sacrifices we’ve made, the elocution lessons, exorbitant school fees, the nose job – is this our reward, having you wear that dowdy dress and mumbling prayers all the time? . . . They look like a bunch of freaks. . . . An embarrassment to Judaism.

(2007, 87; 109)

While *some* types of Judaism may raise secular, liberal, and middle-class eyebrows, Islam and Muslims are often homogenised and essentialised into complete difference and non-Europeanness. In this dynamic, the perceived oppression of Muslim women by Muslim men and Islamic tradition gets “framed as the specific way in which Muslim backwardness and alienness reveal itself” (Farris 2014, 304). The perceived non-Europeanness of Islam and Muslims, and the role gender plays in the construction of ethnic and religious boundaries, explains the in-between position Backer and Vergaalen find themselves in. Their engagement in multiple critique and ambassadorship reveals the agency of female converts to Islam in negotiating and countering this in-between position, but at the same time the difficulty – or sheer impossibility – of escaping the unequal power relations in which (new) Muslims in Europe find themselves.

Notes

- 1 See for a number of examples of reviews and interviews, Reva Mann’s own webpage: <https://revamann.wordpress.com/>, last accessed: 19 April 2019.
- 2 See for a list of these different translations: www.goodreads.com/work/editions/21654337-from-mtv-to-mecca-how-islam-inspired-my-life, last accessed: 19 April 2019. In this article, I used the English translation *From MTV to Mecca: How Islam Inspired My Life* (2012) as material for my analysis.
- 3 <http://kristianebacker.com/>, last accessed: 19 April 2019.

- 4 In recent years, various labels and self-labels have come to replace what has often been called 'ultra-Orthodox Jewry'. Some scholars argue that the label 'ultra-Orthodox' is a construction by outsiders rather than a native concept and find the term Haredi or Hasedim more appropriate. However, not all contemporary traditionalist or strictly orthodox Jews identify as Haredi or Hasidic, partly because of the specific histories of various groups. See Longman (2004) for an overview of the discussion about labels and their genealogies. While Mann structurally refers to 'ultra-Orthodoxy' (as some of the quotes from the memoir show), I decided to refrain from this label given its pejorative connotations and follow Longman (2004) in her choice to use 'strictly Orthodox' as a seemingly more adequate descriptive designation.
- 5 Interestingly, Mann compares her position of 'returnee' to that of one of her study partners in the yeshiva, Dvora, who was born into a Welsh Catholic family and converted to Judaism: "Even though I am on a similar quest, I am different from her and other [such] girls. . . . I am the daughter of an Orthodox rabbi, the granddaughter of a rabbi who was Chief Rabbi of Israel. The religious world is familiar to me. I already know that only an animal that chews the cud and has cloven hoofs is kosher and that's why pork is forbidden. I know that Jews can only eat fish that have both fins and scales. I know how to read Hebrew and recite the prayers by heart. Yet I am also learning that there is far more to this world than I was aware of. I certainly never imagined the intensity of the spiritual pursuit of holiness. . . . I always thought that my father's approach of straddling both the secular and the religious worlds and integrating contemporary concepts with ancient customs was the Jewish way. But here at the yeshiva this kind of synthesis is frowned upon, as the ultra-Orthodox believe any outside influences will contaminate their carefully circumscribed and protected world." (2007, 4–5) Mann's family history and knowledge of Judaism are an asset when integrating in yeshiva life. At the same time, her status as a returnee affords her a specific position vis-à-vis those born into strictly Orthodox communities. Mann narrates how being returnee hampers her search for a strictly Orthodox spouse, limiting her to marry a male fellow returnee. "I know that as a ba'alat tshuva myself, I am damaged goods in the Orthodox world. . . . I cannot join the ranks of the FFBs, frum (religious) from birth. . . . They will take into account that I am not a virgin, that I have eaten non-kosher foods and immersed myself in an impure world, and even the fact that I am a rabbi's daughter will not outweigh those negatives" (2007, 58).
- 6 See van Nieuwkerk (2014) for a discussion of the term 'conversion' in relation to Islam.
- 7 Chapter 7, in which Backer narrates her 'official' conversion through pronouncing the Islamic declaration of faith, is entitled: 'Becoming a Muslim'.
- 8 This notion of converts having to 'come out as Muslim' reveals the discursive intersection of issues of religious freedom and sexual freedom. From that perspective, it is interesting to note that anthropologist Esra Özyürek has conceptualised Islamophobia in terms of its similarity to homophobia – both seem to rely on, and reinforce, an underlying concept of 'choice'. An understanding of 'choice' informs both Islamophobic and homophobic discourses that treat lesbians and gays, and converts to Islam, as responsible for having 'chosen' a lifestyle in which they find themselves discriminated against, and thus as undeserving of legal protection (2015, 8–13).

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