

4 Embodied conversions and sexual selves

New Jewish, Christian and Muslim women in the Netherlands

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Introduction

Becoming religious is a project of the body. For a long time, religious change, such as conversion, has been approached as a change in disembodied mindset or worldview. In line with the rediscovery of the body in religious studies, recent scholarship on conversion has shown that it is as much an embodied process as other religious practices are. Rather than considering converting as a simple ‘switch’ in state of mind, conversion has since been redefined as having to do with a change of habitus, as a conscious and subconscious learning process (Klaver and van de Kamp, 2011; Winchester, 2008).¹ Joining a religion that one was not raised in is a process of ethical self-fashioning through training and disciplining of both the body and mind. Converts have to learn how to eat, how to pray, how to dress and how to have sex in such a way that it gives shape to their religious subjectivity and pious desires. Of course, these are no mere individual processes; the community is often of crucial importance. At the same time, many research participants described their conversion as a primarily individual process. They often emphasised their autonomy and modernity in negotiating religious guidelines and enacting their beliefs in daily life. Being recognised as ‘authentic’ by fellow congregants and non-religious peers was crucial for many in their religious becoming (Ezzy, 2016; Klaver et al., 2017). What I found is that performing authenticity is a central and embodied characteristic of modern-day conversion stories in the ‘age of authenticity’ (Taylor, 2007). These performances of religious transformation were often played out through the sexual and gendered body. This interrelatedness of religion (or secularity) and sexuality has been analysed throughout the field of religious studies (Cady and Fessenden, 2013; Nyhagen and Halsaa, 2016; Scott, 2018). Less attention has been given to everyday sexual practices, though dominant discourses and body politics have consequences for daily religious life as well (Roodsaz and Jansen, 2018; Schrijvers and Wiering, 2017). This is also the case in nation-states such as the Netherlands, which has a particular self-image of sexual progressiveness and women’s emancipation. Here, religions are often positioned as opposite to secular, supposedly ‘modern’, ideals of women’s freedom and sexual liberty (Mepschen et al., 2010; Schuh et al., 2012).

This chapter regards conversion therefore as a complicated embodied process of negotiating several secular/religious norms of sexuality. This expands the field of women's conversion – which has typically focused on Islamic women – by employing a comparative analysis of interviews and participant observation with Jewish, Christian and Muslim Dutch women converts. In all traditions, specific guidelines about female bodies exist, and women construct their religious embodied self in relation to these norms as religious agents who are 'doing religion' (Avishai, 2008). In particular, I take a closer look at one aspect of my fieldwork material, namely: norms and practices about the female sexual body, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) sexuality.² My aim is not to disregard the underlying – or perhaps overarching – norms and performances of gender in the case of female converts. Rather, I start from the less accessible and intimately embodied sphere of sex. In my approach, sex is something someone *does*, a practice, act or performance, but sexuality can also constitute an important part of subject formation and self-identification. Even more encompassing, as Rachel Spronk (2014:4) argues, sexuality is a broader social arena 'where power relations, symbolic meanings of gender, and hence moral discourses in relation to sexual behaviour, are played out'. The research participants linked religious learning to their understanding of sexuality, sexual praxis and ideals of sexual subjectivity. The main question I ask in this chapter is thus whether, and how, religious and sexual self-fashioning are intertwined among female converts. In the following, I will first go into theoretical debates about conversion that informed my analysis. The second half of the chapter focuses on my own research material and case study. In the conclusion, I return to the question of modern sexuality, the body and ethics in relation to the comparative approach to conversion. Based on this material, I argue that becoming religious has many characteristics of modern notions of selfhood, such as in the emphasis on free choice and the importance of sexual autonomy. As such, conversion can no longer be understood as a step away from modernity, but rather as an embodied process of negotiation between different ethical frameworks.

Converting bodies

'There was a time when conversion didn't need any explaining', Talal Asad (1996:263) wrote in his reflections on conversion studies. According to Asad, the need to explain conversions in contemporary secularised nation-states is a rather modern development. One of the most important reasons as to why conversion has become 'in need of explaining' can be found in the dominance of secularist politics and national imaginings. Although individualistic spiritual practices are gaining popularity and becoming more mainstream (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Knibbe, 2013), elements that are considered to be part and parcel of 'traditional' religions, such as emphasis on community, doctrine and institutional power, are met with increasing suspicion in this secularist ideology. Furthermore, notions of individualism, autonomy and freedom,

which are central to neoliberal political ideology, are explicitly positioned on the side of the secular. Religion at its worst is referred to as incommensurable with progressive values of modernity and neoliberal individualistic notions of personhood (Casanova, 2009). In this overarching framework – where secularism is connected to autonomy and emancipation, and where religion is not only positioned as antagonistic but also as a potential threat to these liberal values – voluntary conversion has indeed become a paradox in need of explaining. On the one hand, the emphasis on individual autonomy gives space for various religious affiliations and changes in communities. On the other hand, religion is increasingly constructed as a space where individual freedom is limited and autonomy needs to be given up for the benefit of the community and the relationship with God. This is especially the case in Islam, which is nowadays constructed as a cultural Other to modern neoliberal values and increasingly politicised (van Nieuwkerk, 2006:11).

In recent decades, scholars came to understand that – contrary to much popular belief – conversion does not end with the official ritual of conversion (Chong, 2006; Kent, 2014; Mossiere, 2016). Certainly, many religious traditions have a *rite of passage* to mark the transformation, such as the *Shahada* in Islam, the ritual bath *Mikveh* in Judaism and baptism in Christianity. These ritual passages are often a very important moment for converts, although their impact and set standards might vary from one community to another. However, by studying the lived realities of converts' lives, it is evident that it does not end there. Karin van Nieuwkerk's (2006) study of female converts to Islam showed how these women often continue to feel the need to prove one's sincerity to themselves, their community and to the religious authority. As such, conversion is likely a process without a clear end, even after the official rituals. The understanding of conversion as a process consists of the voluntary decision to commit to a religious community, doctrine and practice, regardless of the level of observance in daily life or the alignment of one's personal beliefs. Furthermore, a lived religion approach to conversion as negotiation process enables insight in both continuities and discontinuities in identity formation and social surroundings of converts. Yet this focus on practices should not, according to McGuire (1982:49), eliminate the importance of belief system, as conversion often indeed implies a change in worldview, or a 'transformation of self concurrent with a transformation of one's central meaning system'. Thus, conversion as a process of subject transformation takes place on the intersection of personal beliefs and group dynamics, while often in relation to a sense of a transcendent (cf. Jouili, 2015; Kravel-Tovi, 2017). A last important aspect of conversion is the intersectionality and embodiment of the process. Conversion is related to gender, sexuality and belonging, which take form in the connection of moral ethics, desires and practices. In the following sections, I will continue this line of inquiry to see how my participants' sexual ethics and experiences relate to questions of modern selfhood, autonomy and religious-sexual self-fashioning. I approach sexual ethics as situational, dialogical and often characterised by ambivalence (Beekers

and Schrijvers, 2020; Lambek, 2010). In the expanding field of anthropology of ethics, many scholars have highlighted ordinary people's capacity to make balanced judgements that suit the immediate circumstances (e.g. Lambek, 2010; Jouili, 2015). Sexual ethics for converts, then, does not simply entail the application of a universal religiously informed framework to their everyday life choices. Rather, anthropological approaches to ethics, much as with the notion of 'lived religion', emphasise the practices, performances and the relational and embodied aspects of ethics in everyday life.

In order to further understand the role of the body in religious/secular imagined boundaries, this chapter builds on an anthropological study of converted women in the Netherlands, where sexual freedom has long been understood as emblematic of modern secular selfhood (Scott, 2018). The Netherlands is a particularly interesting space to study manifestations of sexuality on the imagined boundary between religious and secular spaces. Jan Willem Duyvendak and Paul Mepschen argued that the very process of secularisation in the Netherlands goes hand in hand with sexual emancipation (Mepschen et al., 2010). These connections between secularisation and sexual self-governance in the Netherlands greatly influenced the Dutch imagined national identity as sexually liberated. This is especially the case with sexual selfhood and LGBTQ and women's status as free and liberated subjects (Mepschen et al., 2010; Schrijvers and Wiering, 2017; Schuh et al., 2012). The conflation of nationalist imaginary and acceptance (or, most would say 'tolerance') of homosexuality has been criticised recently as a form of *homonationalism*. This is a term coined by Jasbir Puar to refer to the symbolic inclusion of mainstream LGBTQ bodies in right-wing nationalism as representing liberal values against – particularly Muslim – Others (Buijs et al., 2011; Puar, 2007). This context can be an explanation as to why so many women in my fieldwork talked about sexuality and expressed their conversion in relation to notions of sexual liberty, either in line with, or against, 'secular others', and both on a moral level and in embodied everyday experiences.

Studying women's conversion

Between 2017 and 2019, I visited several synagogues, churches and mosques as part of my fieldwork. The overarching question guiding this project was whether, and how, converted women negotiate different ideas of gender and sexuality. Women are often positioned and perceived as gatekeepers of the symbolic – and in the Dutch case, secular – nation (Nyhagen and Halsaa, 2016), and often via the trope of gender and sexuality. Therefore, I was particularly interested in women's own experiences in light of these broader Dutch discourses of women's freedom, national belonging and religion. Because there is an imbalance in research material of Jewish and Pentecostal converts in comparison to that of Muslim converts, the main focus was on the first two spaces. Overall, the participants were aged 20 to 72 years. The majority were of white Dutch descent, and they had a variety of class backgrounds. In

terms of gender and sexuality, as far as they told me, most were cisgender and heterosexual, with one genderqueer participant. Two participants identified as lesbian.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not impossible to become Jewish without having a Jewish mother, although it is not encouraged and a highly individual process. Many research participants described their process of conversion (called *giyur*) as intense, life altering and difficult. It often takes years of classes, self-study and participation in the synagogue. Jewishness is moreover not self-assigned, but a rabbinic court decides whether *giyur* candidates can convert and thus become part of the Jewish people and religion. Though Judaism is a community-based religion, *giyur* is often experienced as solitary, especially because there is a widely shared taboo to speak about conversion within the congregation.³ Moreover, many synagogues only have *Shabbat* services twice a month, especially Reform or Liberal shuls. This meant that not only the possibility of participant observation was limited, but also that conversion itself was experienced more as an individual trajectory. In total, I interviewed 24 converted Jewish women and 5 rabbis and visited their different shuls once or twice. The women came from different types of Judaism: six converted in a Modern Orthodox synagogue, seven in a Dutch Liberal community⁴ and eight in a Reform synagogue. Three were still in the process of *giyur* when I spoke to them, all participating in a Modern Orthodox community.

The role of community was very different in the Pentecostal churches where I did my fieldwork, first of all because the very rationale of these types of evangelical church is to convert people and grow the community. I undertook 10 months of extensive participant observation in three Hillsong-affiliated⁵ Pentecostal churches in which I joined in weekly Sunday service and extra services during the week, participated in a weekly Bible study group and joined for activities such as weekends and conferences. During these meetings, I had many informal conversations with 38 women who were not raised in a religion but chose to convert later in life. Additionally, I had in-depth interviews with eight converted women and three women pastors and church leaders (one of whom was a convert herself). During my fieldwork, I found that the community is the most important factor in women's conversion, rather different from Judaism or Islam. Evangelisation was an important characteristic for such groups, as I noticed during church services, where newcomers were encouraged to convert. Because of the importance of testimony, a good conversion narrative was a means to belong to the community, often following the same narrative pattern. Converting in this context, broadly, was not so much a change of personal beliefs, but a particular embodied performance of 'having received the Holy Spirit' during church and in everyday life.

My Muslim interlocutors were somewhat in between individual and community as prime space for conversion. As has been researched elsewhere (van Nieuwkerk, 2006; Vroon-Najem, 2014), many new Muslim women start practising and start identifying as Muslim privately. The ritual of conversion,

pronouncing the *Shahada*, can be done either in private or in public. Because of the politicised status of Islam in the Netherlands, certain forms of visible Islam were taken on with caution by my interlocutors: wearing a *hijab*, doing prayers during workhours or eating *halal*. While often initially a private undertaking, many converts seek out communities. These can be groups of born- and converted Muslims, but there is also an increase in groups catered specifically to converted men and women. In this case study, I have interviewed seven Muslim converted women – all practising Sunni Islam – and attended meetings at mosques and the annual National Converts Days [*Nationale Bekeerlingendag*].

Because of the further difference within the Jewish case study, I will specify their community in the following, while all ‘Christians’ are Pentecostal, and all ‘Muslims’ are Sunni practising. During my fieldwork, I always introduced myself as a researcher, and interviews were held after participants signed a consent form. Whenever asked, I was open about my own (lack of) religious upbringing and beliefs, which at times resulted in hopes for me to convert, especially among Pentecostal interlocutors. At the same time, my position as an outsider added to a sense of safety for those who were not keen to share their stories within their communities themselves. For the sake of anonymity, all personal names were changed, as well as names of churches and exact locations of the participants. I always asked my questions in an open manner, using the same topic list for all interviewees. Many brought up topics of sexuality and gender themselves, and were eager and open to discuss some of the difficulties and pleasures they found related to sexuality in their conversion trajectory.

‘Authentic’ notions of conversion

Most of my interlocutors narrated their conversion in terms of authenticity and personal choice. Anna, a young Pentecostal woman, repeatedly emphasised that someone cannot truly convert as long as they do not make this conscious decision themselves. Talking about a non-converted peer, she said, ‘you see, I do want him to be touched, but I can’t do that for him because it is a choice he has to make on his own’. Similarly, Dunya, a Muslim, found in Islam a sense of direction that suited her, and spoke about religion as individual choice:

I was convinced that for me, this is the truth. I thought... this is something that I would like to implement in my daily life, in my own way of course. Everyone experiences their religion differently, so you have to find your own path in it. And I don’t think it will ever stop, but you will continue to be you, but will meet new people, new perspectives so it will keep on changing.

(Dunya, Muslim)

Such perspectives of conversion connect to Charles Taylor's (2007:473–504) understanding of our current ideas of selfhood as the age of authenticity, by which he argues that a notion of individuality and autonomy is central. The 'ethics of authenticity', according to Taylor in his earlier book with the same title, consists of the idea that:

People are called upon to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfilment. What this consists of, each must, in the last instance, determine for him- or herself... The moral ideal behind self-fulfilment is that of being true to oneself, in a specifically modern understanding of that term.

(Taylor, 1992:14–15)

At the same time, Taylor (1992:33) recognises that these ethics are not free floating, but – as all ethics – 'fundamentally dialogical' and only through recognising the *shared* value of authenticity, the notion of the 'true individual' is made legitimate. In other words, one is never as 'autonomous' as imagined, since the very notion of autonomy is socially constructed. What I found interesting in this regard is that many converts follow this logic of authenticity, and often claim their personal sovereignty in the religious choices they made. At the same time, especially Muslim and Pentecostal converts experienced a shift in the sense of selfhood as less highly individualised. Coming to faith meant an acceptance of God's presence in their daily lives, leading to a different ontology in which life is not devoted to one's individual will alone. This often led to seemingly paradoxical statements, such as:

That is of course the whole point. It is a conscious choice to decide not to live alone anymore, not to live only for yourself. That is what being a Christian is all about. You stop living just according to your own wishes, but you start living according to the way God wants you to live.

(Lisa, Christian)

Lisa told me that even though she chose to let another actor determine her life path (God), she nevertheless *individually* chose to do so. Or take the example of another participant Hanan, who sometimes struggles with her personal tendency to want to understand everything in depth before adhering to some guidelines:

What I found very difficult to accept at first... is that, at times, you just have to do something because He asks you to... For example, with the headscarf. You can ask and ask 'Why should I, why why why?' There are some reasons, but the most important reason is that He just asks you to.

(Hanan, Muslim)

The comparison of these experiences with those born in a particular religion would be a further step in research.⁶ Almost all participants recognised this difficulty in combining personal ethics and desires with what was perceived to be a law or guideline from the Torah, Bible or Qur'an, and even though these texts were considered to be provided by God, many also acknowledged the multitude of interpretations. This negotiation became apparent whenever I spoke with the participants about sexuality in the broadest sense; we would talk about a broad range of topics such as marriage, appropriate dress styles, flirtation, menstruation and non-heterosexuality.

'Sexuality is something very special': Women's sexual bodies

Many research participants perceived their sexual ethics to be changed in conversion, and especially concerning their own sexuality. Indeed, it was especially in relation to, and against, the imagined 'secular other' (Beekers and Schrijvers, 2020; Fernando, 2014; Roodsaz and Jansen, 2018) that they reconsidered and discussed their perspective of sexual behaviour. When we met in 2017, Hanan was 28 years old and had converted to Islam at the age of 23. She was particularly frustrated with the way women are encouraged to dress in the Netherlands, which according to her lacks religious morals. Hanan became noticeably agitated when discussing the question of women's sexuality. We talked about stereotypes about Muslims, mainly about the idea that Islam is bad for women. About this, Hanan said:

Well, it's actually very misogynistic [*vrouwonvriendelijk*] that you're seen as a sex object all the time in the Netherlands. Because that is what men do, and we as women don't even realise it!

(Hanan, Muslim)

In Islam, Hanan encountered a framework where women's bodies are more protected and considered to be of almost sacred value, rather than commercialised and commodified, something that worries her about the state of the Netherlands. I found a similar tendency to distance oneself from 'secular others' among converts in Christian communities. Often, the conversion story was told in a way that distinguished the current sense of self from the pre-converted self, something which is characteristic for Pentecostal converts but can be found in other religions as well (Klaver et al., 2017). Converted women frequently spoke about their non-religious pasts as guided by flirtation and sexual provocation, which are now coded as being improper or even sinful acts. Kirsten, a Pentecostal convert in her early 20s told me:

I used to desire men's attention, you know, going out, wearing provocative clothing... but I do not feel comfortable with that anymore, I do not

want to show that to everyone... I think I was trying to fill the emptiness, which has now been filled by God.

(Kirsten, Christian)

In the Orthodox Jewish communities of my fieldwork, sexual ethics were not so much framed in opposition to an imagined secular other. They did not explicitly consider women's sexuality in need of protection from loose sexual morals. Rather, they spoke about sexuality as connected to motherhood and saw spiritual significance in reproduction. These elements were important for the others as well, but less explicitly foregrounded. In general, the Orthodox Jewish participants followed the marital laws that state that sex only occurs in heterosexual marriage, and then only during the time of fertility. Additionally, sex was conceived as something that benefits the relation between husbands and wives and places extra value on women's bodies, as evident in the participant's quote, below:

There is [a] part in Jewish tradition that considers sexuality as something very special, something exclusive and full of love. That's what attracted me [to Judaism], sex and love belong together.

(Femke, Orthodox Jewish)

What my research participants have in common is that their religious framework provides them with a different interpretation of sexuality, or that their prior desired ethics were affirmed in this religious language. Not unexpectedly, sex was often perceived as highly valued, but in a rather limited way within heterosexual marriage. My participants often told me that they previously did not have the tools or language to see sex as something special, and explicitly or implicitly searched for a sexual ethics that considered sexuality as such. As one might expect, most participants consider marriage to be the ideal – and often only proper – context for sexual contact, and ideally would enter marriage without having had sexual relations.

(Pre)marital sex

Within the sacred institution of marriage, sex was to be cherished and encouraged in a way that potentially brought offspring, but also as a means to get closer to one's husband and to find pleasure themselves. Very importantly, marriage was almost exclusively talked about in heteronormative terms. This was similar for women in all three religious groups, although there was some ambivalence in dealing with the practicalities of reproduction, for example, contraception and menstrual rites. Naomi, a 30-year-old woman, had her *giyur* in her teens. She framed her sexual values in terms of freedom:

Freedom should also include the freedom not to do it [have sex before marriage]. I mean, I've only ever had sex with my current partner, with my fiancé.

(Naomi, Liberal Jewish)

Naomi's notions of sexual ethics are very much informed by both Jewish scripture and tradition, as well as what she called 'feminist' language of freedom: Not engaging in sex before marriage is, to her, an expression of her freedom. Contrary to much popular belief, none of the participants expressed that they became active in their religion as a direct consequence or requirement of a romantic relationship or marriage; many did not have a romantic partner when they took steps towards conversion. At the same time, some did have sex with men before marrying, in some cases before they converted. A few women expressed that this created a feeling of insecurity and shame, and doubting their eligibility for marriage with a partner of their own faith (when men were perceived to prefer a virgin bride). The way they dealt with this potential conflict in community and in their self-image was, again, via negotiation and often in creative ways. Most women made a distinction between the ideal of having no premarital sex and real-life circumstances:

You know, having sex before marriage... it happens a lot in the Islamic community! I also had a relationship before I married my partner. And yeah, we lived together before we got married... He did not think it was a problem [to have sex], but when I converted I really wanted to get married, because it didn't feel right anymore.

(Dunya, Muslim)

When Dunya became a practising Muslim, she felt like it became *haram* (forbidden by Islamic rules) to have sex with her boyfriend at the time and explained to him that she wanted to get married for this reason. Another Muslim woman, Karima, also prefers to be married and feels like having sex with her partner now is *haram*. Yet she does so, and considers their desire beyond their control because their 'love is too strong', adding that she and her boyfriend will do their best to live a faithful life and hope Allah will forgive them in the end. Similarly, many Christian participants live together with their boyfriends, have intimate relations and told me that they will get married 'someday'. These women are often engaged for a long time, thus permitting their sexual relationship because it will eventually lead towards marriage. Interestingly, the Pentecostal research participants would not argue that not having intimate relations before marriage is a *personal* choice, but consider the, albeit ambivalent, guidelines of physical contact to be guided by God. Take, for example, the case of Emma, a 24-year-old convert:

I believe God did set a clear line of what you can and can't do. For me ... when you know that someone's right for you, and you've prayed for it, kissing would not be a problem. But you can't go any further than that!

(Emma, Christian)

Looking back at past experiences, some converted women rejected having sexual relations before they were married, but most told me that it was

permissible because they did not know any better. Others have a sense of guilt and shame about this that they continue to struggle with going forward. And yet some others have different interpretations, such as Jewish Channah, who actually values her past experiences and experimental sexual phase and feels somewhat disheartened that her Jewish-born daughter will not have the same possibilities within their Orthodox community.

Menstruating bodies

For my Jewish and Muslim participants, becoming religious went hand-in-hand with a change in perception of their reproductive cycle. Within their desire to become a pious ('good') Muslim or Jew, menstruation became ritualised and given religious meaning of purity and impurity. Married Jewish women often considered whether they will observe *niddah*, the Jewish family laws according to which there should be no physical contact between the spouses during and one week after the menstruation (Avishai, 2008). For many Orthodox women, this provided religious significance to sexual self-hood, though in different ways. They often told me how these practices keep their marriage exciting, such as Sara who feels like it enhances the sacralised status of her sexuality. Others really had to get used to these rituals, such as Channah, who became Orthodox Jewish ten years ago:

The relationship with the rabbi can be that intimate; you will even go to the rabbi with your panties to check for blood... I've always been quite a private person, you know... And coming from that, to have to go to the rabbi with your panties all of a sudden... is absolutely terrible for me.

(Channah, Orthodox Jewish)

The *niddah* is not practised among the majority of Liberal and Reform Jewish women. Some women told me that the difference in gender and sexual regimes was a primary motivation to seek a Liberal *giyur* and not an Orthodox one. For them sex is something pleasurable and procreation is not a necessity for a spiritually rewarding life. I did not meet any Liberal women who observe the *niddah*, but some of them do have a small ritual cleansing ceremony at home after their menstruation. Becoming Jewish meant that they had to relate to these traditional Jewish prescriptions in some way or another.

While Jewish Orthodox women saw value in menstrual rituals, most Muslim converts felt uneasy with their limitations during their menstruation. Muslim women are generally not permitted to pray, hold the Qur'an or fast when on their period. Not all interlocutors followed these rules the same way. Sahar, for example, does not pray but will read the Qur'an. Because she is not allowed to physically touch the Holy Book, she innovatively uses an app on her mobile phone instead. Different from the Christian groups I studied, where there are no particular rituals regarding menstruation, converts to Judaism and Islam had to negotiate certain rules and aspirations that often

came with a feeling of strangeness. One aspect is that regulation of women's menstrual cycle through a religious framework was most unfamiliar for women who grew up in a non-religious environment. Moreover, this was a form of body politics that regulated women's bodies in what was experienced to be the most intimate ways. It has been argued that ovulation tests and contraceptives regulate women's cycle, albeit in a secular manner (Klassen, 2019). Yet reproductive care from secular medicine is largely considered to provide women with sexual self-governance and freedom (Fernando, 2014). In this day and age, regulating menstruation and conceiving of the state of the menstruating body as impure were often perceived as difficult, but also at times as a welcomed change. I previously suggested that religion is learnt through the body; this is very much the case through the female menstruating body (cf. Avishai, 2008; Fedele, 2012).

'No one talks about it': Ethics of homosexuality

The second theme has less to do with women's bodily sexual practices, but more with a broader ethical framework. As previously articulated, the Dutch context has a particular history of sexual emancipation where acceptance – and even celebration – of certain LGBTQ bodies has come to be embedded in nationalist secular imaginings against a religious or ethnic 'other'. Homosexuality was most often brought up by my interview partners as a field of tension, but also as an example of transformation. Though in social movements the abbreviation LGBTQ [*LHBTQ* (lesbisch, homoseksueel, biseksueel, transgender, queer)] has recently dominated, my participants mainly used the term 'homosexuality' [*homoseksualiteit*] to refer to all same-sex actions and desires. Some Christian participants used the (often perceived as derogatory) term 'homophilia' [*homofilie*] instead. I did not specifically ask whether they opposed homosexuality, and many across the three groups did not explicitly voice an outright rejection. Most told me that they cannot justify homosexuality through their religious ethics, which was strongest among the Christian participants. At the same time, all interlocutors acknowledged that they live in a context where homosexuality is widely accepted, and were careful in voicing these concerns. Among Muslim, Orthodox Jewish and Christian converts, I often found a similar discourse: sexual acts between two people of the same gender were rejected, but people having feelings of attraction were not. Instead, homosexual desires were perceived as a burden that should be dealt with in a 'hate the sin, love the sinner' discourse. This could be experienced as a change in perspective:

I really do oppose homosexuality, my views on that changed a lot. I used to think it was normal, but now I think it's just wrong, at least in my view.
(Dunya, Muslim)

Dunya later on told me that she had felt a bit uncomfortable voicing her perspective in the public space we were meeting, a small cafe, because she feared

that people would overhear her and judge her. It appears that homosexuality is conceived as being so accepted that rejecting this openly has become a form of ‘coming out’ for Dunya, even though it is only very recently that such a conservative view has ceased to be the commonly accepted norm in our society.

Similarly, Christian women tended to reject homosexual acts in more or less explicit terms. During one Bible study group, the topic came up and led to discussions among the participants and the Bible study leader (a ‘born-again’ Christian woman). The leader said that homosexuality is a sin – following the dominant discourse of the church, and that ‘though homophilia cannot be cured [*genezen*], because it’s not a disease, it can be helped [*verholpen*]’. Another participant voiced concerns about this view, worrying that it would not follow God’s most important message of ‘love for all’. In more private settings such as Bible groups, these types of conversations were possible. However, in church services there was a clear line that regarded non-normative sexual behaviour, particularly homosexuality, as sinful. This was repeated by all church leaders as well. At the same time, a female pastor I interviewed told me that the question of ‘homophilia’ was almost always asked by newcomers in the church, and she recognised that some converts struggled to bring different understandings of homosexuality together.

The acceptance of LGBTQ people and sexual practices turned out to be a major point of contestation between Orthodox and Liberal Jewish communities. In Orthodoxy, having sex with someone of the same gender is not permitted and this is not a topic of discussion within the communities; it is often as if homosexuality does not exist. Channah told me about this:

People can be homosexual, but as soon as they do something with that, it’s forbidden and it’s more forbidden for men than for women... you see, we pretend it’s not here. Of course, no one talks about it.

(Channah, Orthodox Jewish)

People who come out as homosexual can be asked to remove themselves from the community but it is never spoken of. The problem is not so much if someone ‘is’ homosexual, but rather the extent to which these practices are visible and speakable. Even though some contexts might have more space for this visibility, there are some initiatives in all groups to gain more inclusivity and to be able to speak more about it in orthodox communities. Sara is an Orthodox woman of 31 years old who converted in her 20s and has non-Jewish friends of whom some are homosexual, and this is often frowned upon by more conservative members of her community. This is different in the Liberal Jewish communities. Inclusion of LGBTQ people has been an important marker of difference for Liberal Judaism globally, but the interpretation varies (Meyer, 1995). In the following I will untangle this difference a bit more to show how varying the interpretations and links between religious and sexual self-making can be.

Mainline Liberal communities connected to the *Liberaal Joodse Gemeente* (LJG) do not explicitly reject homosexuality, but there is a distinction

between the traditional Jewish marriage *chuppah* and same-sex marriage. One openly lesbian rabbi told me that her authority is often undermined and she is frustrated with the continuing distinction between types of relationships. In general, homosexuality is more or less acceptable but not spoken of, as said by one participant:

Homosexuality is totally accepted [in our shul]. As long as you don't actively advocate for it... Uhm, it's something that doesn't belong in the synagogue. I mean, we come to shul because we're Jewish, not because we sympathise with some political views, so to say.

(Bracha, Liberal Jewish)

For Bracha, non-heterosexual forms of sexuality are mainly something political, rather than embodied, personal or 'natural'. In this type of reasoning, heterosexuality maintains the norm, while homosexuality is politicised. Some independent Reform shuls have a different view on the matter, which often used the abbreviation LGBTQ rather than 'homosexuality' as a generic term. They actively adopt the gay-tolerant narrative of the broader Dutch society: these progressive shuls offer a *chuppah* to all couples, and some organise special events for LGBTQ people such as a *Shabbat* service during Pride week in Amsterdam. Some contributed to this inclusive agenda, but other participants were unfamiliar with LGBTQ tolerance discourse and practice prior to becoming Jewish. For Karen, this explicit gay-friendly atmosphere in the progressive shul limited her sense of belonging:

I thought, well, I'm coming to shul and not to the Gay Pride, you know? I felt that the balance was gone. And again, it doesn't matter if two men or a man and woman visit shul, I am way past that.

(Karen, Reform Jewish)

For Karen, learning to be Jewish in this particular community came with a change in her ethics and a remaking of the self as 'gay friendly'. Ruth's example is even more telling on the links between conversion and sexual self-fashioning. Ruth is in her 40s, has two children from a previous marriage with a Jewish man and has a very high level and demanding job. At some point in our conversation, when we talked about the gay-friendly environment of her shul, Ruth told me that – divorced from her husband before converting – she had 'become a lesbian herself after conversion'. Because she had already done so much 'work on herself', and because she was in this community, coming out as lesbian was not such a big issue for her anymore. Ruth's sexual relationship with women and her self-identification as lesbian are inseparably connected to her religious self-fashioning, just the same as Judaism offers tools to understand heterosexuality and gender difference for many other women.

Many newly religious women (as well as those 'born' to a religion) struggle with what it means to be a good Muslim, Christian or Jew and how to

implement ethics in everyday life. For many interlocutors, the importance of love and care for another overthrew the rejection of what they conceived to be deviant sex. These questions were particularly difficult for interlocutors with LGBTQ people in their intimate social circles. One Muslima's mother is lesbian, and she found it very difficult that part of her conversion would imply a rejection of her mother's loving relationship. Lisa, a Christian convert, told me in tears that she finds it very difficult that many of her fellow congregants reject her sister, who identifies as a lesbian:

What really annoys me about Christians is that they have all these opinions but don't actually empathise with others... it is not up to you to judge; God will do that!

(Lisa, Christian)

Lisa tries to find space in her personal religious framework to accommodate LGBTQ people similar to Sara and Ruth, but official structures in the communities of my fieldwork did not respond to these efforts or change their discourse. What I found is that all converts were very aware of the dominant Dutch framing by which religion and homosexuality are often paired as oppositional. One strong idea here is that all religious people (especially those in 'traditional forms') oppose homosexuality, and that religion in general is a stumbling block on the way to true secular emancipation. This opposition between religious and secular views of homosexuality is to some extent reiterated by the participants in my project. At the same time, this question is often posed by non-religious people in their social environment. As such, describing or justifying views regarding homosexuality itself becomes, to some extent, part of the conversion narrative.

Conclusion

Conversion has an impact on women's bodies, not only in the sense of prescriptions but also very much in relation to the making and shaping of the religious self in an intimate, sexual and personal way. Learning through these practices, and implementing learning into practice, does not conflict with the modern subject, as is often expected. The last example regarding homosexuality shows that many women in this project, to some extent, adhere to religious frameworks when these reject homosexuality. This is a form of freedom of choice *against* sexual liberty, while other elements of this liberty were confirmed. Language of choice and free will were consistent, and some considered their religion to provide value to sexuality in general, and women's bodies in particular, in a time when women are sexually objectified and asked to 'undress', as one interlocutor put it. Many interviewees told me that they find more self-worth in their religion, and have less need for male attention or flirting, something which, according to the Pentecostal women, 'can never fill the emptiness in your heart'. This shows that sexual liberation is not merely

about proper and improper relations, but also about having autonomy over one's own body and choices, including the choice to submit one's body to religious regulations. These women find in their religious community and texts a new kind of embodiment, based on a sacralised understanding of women's sexuality, procreation and binary gender relations.

My interlocutors strongly upheld an idea of the modern subject as autonomous and individually sovereign over their body. At the same time, many explicitly disconnected their understanding of sexuality from secularism, and instead legitimated their views by religious prescriptions, and based on a quest for religious knowledge. Performing as an authentic convert is often done via the trope of sexuality, both in public expressions (such as dress style or marriage) and in personal experiences (such as practising *niddah*). This does not mean that religious discourse is in its core opposed to secular discourse. Taking into account Asad's (1996) notion that the secular and religious are two sides of the same coin, this type of argumentation would not hold ground, despite that secular and religious are often imagined to be opposites in public debates. Rather, sexual embodiments and ethics cannot be understood as either religious or secular, but rather as a new form of religious subjectivity within Europe as a space where authenticity has become the most important mode for selfhood.

Notes

- 1 In this chapter, I follow the understanding of *habitus* as formulated by Saba Mahmood, who adds to and questions Bourdieu's interpretation by going back to Aristotle's original concept (Mahmood, 2012a:233). Instead of focusing on sub-conscious practices and mimesis, Mahmood points to the importance of bodily and explicit training of (religious) experiences in habitus, which is 'concerned with ethical formation and presupposes a specific pedagogical process by which a moral character is secured' (Mahmood, 2012b:135).
- 2 This chapter is based on my five-year PhD research on women's conversions, gender and ethnicity in the Netherlands. This is a subproject of the NWO-funded project 'Beyond "Religion versus Emancipation": Gender and Sexuality in Women's Conversions to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe'. Other outcomes of my research have been published elsewhere (Beekers and Schrijvers, 2020; Schrijvers 2020; Schrijvers and Wiering 2017) and will be combined in my PhD dissertation (forthcoming 2021).
- 3 The widely spread taboo to speak about the non-religious past of someone who became Jewish via a *giyur* comes from the Talmud (Bava Metzia 58b–59b), where it is stated that converts should not be mistreated and/or treated as non-Jews.
- 4 The Netherlands has three main types of Jewish congregation: Orthodox (made up of both modern orthodox and a minority of strictly orthodox people), Liberal (which is more in line with American conservatism) and Reform, which is similar to American reform (confusingly, internationally often also called 'liberal'). For a more comprehensive description of the particularities of Dutch liberal/reform Jewry, see Brasz (2016) or Schrijvers (2020).

- 5 Hillsong is a growing neo-Pentecostal, global church founded in Australia by Brian and Bobbie Houston in 1983. They are well known for catering to a young and urban audience via music and multimedia. They currently have 80 branches worldwide and many more in the wider 'Hillsong Family'.
- 6 In another publication, Daan Beekers and I conducted a comparative analysis of born- and converted Muslim and Christian young adults' sexual ethics, where we found that especially converts tend to be most vocal and outspoken about questions of sexuality (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020).

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