



QUESTIONING THE CONVERSION PARADOX

Gender, Sexuality, and Belonging amongst Women Becoming
Jewish, Christian, and Muslim in the Netherlands

Lieke Schrijvers

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Cover image: 'Ruth and Naomi' by Chana Helen Rosenberg, original in coloured inks and acrylics.

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De paradox van bekering bevraagd: Gender, seksualiteit en *belonging*
onder vrouwen die Joods, Christen en Moslim worden in Nederland.

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Acknowledgements

The cover of this dissertation depicts the Biblical story of Ruth, who converts to Judaism. The story unfolds as follows: Naomi, a refugee in Moab, following the death of her husband and two sons, sets out to return to her home country, Judea. Her widowed Moabite daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, initially travel with her. When Naomi urges them to stay behind in Moab, where they were born and raised, Orpah complies. Ruth, however, holds on to Naomi and says: ‘Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you [...]. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God’ (Ruth 1:16, JPS). Ruth indeed travels to Judea and joins Naomi’s people, which indicates her conversion to Judaism. The emphasis here on belonging and the relationship between the two women resonates powerfully with my research. Surely, Ruth speaks about God, but she mentions the people first: Conversion was (and remains) a question of belonging. The story is beautifully captured by artist Chana Helen Rosenberg, who generously gave me permission to use a digital copy of her painting ‘Ruth and Naomi’.

A PhD trajectory shares many parallels with a conversion process. Similar to religious conversion, a PhD is an embodied, relational, cognitive process without a clear beginning or end. It culminates in a ritual ceremony—the defence—marking one’s inclusion in the academic community. A further similarity with religious conversion can be seen in the manner in which academic conversion is often considered an individual process, whilst in reality, it is deeply shaped by social relations. My own has been an intense and immensely rewarding process. I am grateful for being afforded the opportunity to embark on such a journey and would like to thank those who contributed.

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collaboration led to the very exciting book project: *Transforming Bodies and Religions*. In its introduction, we wrote: ‘working together has not only improved our theoretical grounding, but it has also been one of the highlights of our academic practice and community building’ (2020, xiii)—a sentiment that is as true today as it was then. My heartfelt thanks to the members of the ‘Scuola di Torino’: Mariecke van den Berg, Nella van den Brandt, Kathrine van den Bogert, Marco Derks, Erik Meinema, Amal Miri, Nawal Mustafa, Daan Oostveen, An van Raemdonck, Rahil Roodsaz, Maria Vliek, Matthea Westerduin, and Jelle Wiering.

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A note on language

All recorded interviews and informal conversations were conducted in Dutch, transcribed (in the case of interviews), and translated into English. Throughout this dissertation, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Arabic terminology is italicised and provided in its English phonetic spelling. The meaning of such terms is provided upon the first instance, whilst a full glossary is provided in appendix A for terms that appear more than once. Jewish interlocutors used both Hebrew and Yiddish words and, in these instances, I adhere to the interpretation used by the individual concerned and/or their communities. Variations between different Jewish communities are not further specified. Muslim women used Islamic terms interchangeably in Arabic and Dutch. Here I also closely follow their original statements, for example: Whenever cited as saying ‘God’, they said God in Dutch, whilst ‘Allah’ (which can also mean ‘God’) is left untranslated.

In all cases, the personal names of my interlocutors are pseudonyms. For clarity and structure, I primarily used Hebrew names for Jewish women, Arabic names for Muslim women, and Christian names for Christian women. Whilst the dates of my interviews are not included in the main text, an overview of all interlocutors and interviews is provided in appendix B.

For references to the Hebrew Bible, I made use of the Jewish Publication Society’s English translation, called *The Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh*, second edition of 2003, and abbreviated as ‘JPS’ in this dissertation. In the Christian case study, I mainly used the *New International Version* (the edition of 2011 and abbreviated as ‘NIV’) for quoted Bible verses unless stated otherwise. The NIV is a translation by biblical scholars from Evangelical communities, published by Biblica, and used and sold by the Hillsong church. Citations from the Qur’an are from the 2007 *The Qur’an translated into English*, by Alan Jones, abbreviated as ‘QAJ’. Following the Chicago Manual of Style, generic references to scripture are not italicised.

Introduction

Becoming Jewish is not an intellectual process. Becoming Jewish is something you do with your heart, with your soul.

—Aliza

It is a conscious choice not to live alone anymore, not to live just for you. That is what being a Christian is all about, you stop living according to your own desires, but start living according to God's plan.

—Lisa

At some point... Islam becomes part of your life, a part of who you are.

—Hanan

Aliza, Lisa, and Hanan are three women who shared their experience of religious conversion with me. They all give different understandings of what this process meant for them: It can be a process of the heart; it can be a conscious choice to submit to the plan of God; it can also occur gradually until, at some point, religion becomes part of who you are. Although none of them were raised with a religion, Aliza became Jewish, Lisa became Christian, and Hanan became Muslim. All three converted, and respectively, 'did *giyur*', 'accepted Jesus', or 'returned to Islam'. Within each religion, specific guidelines exist about what it means to join and there are often rituals in place to mark the inclusion of newcomers, such as the *mikvah*, baptism, or *shahada*. Conversion is, however, far more than official rituals or guidelines and implies negotiating various aspects of life, many of them gendered. Such negotiations emerge in areas as diverse as religious authority, food, attire, relationships, sexuality, and parenthood. Furthermore, all of the women converted in a society in which religion is associated with the oppression of women. This meant that my interlocutors had to position themselves in relation to hegemonic discourses that regard conversion to be a step away from women's emancipation. Conversion is thus a multi-layered process that cannot simply be captured by a single moment, ritual, or decision. Moreover, conversion does not take place in identifiable phases, but rather is a non-linear process of negotiation in which women form their sense of self—both in relation to their religious community, and to the wider society.

The main aim of this research is to understand how gender and conversion intersect for women who embrace religion in an otherwise secularised country—in this case, the Netherlands. Doing so, I question the apparent paradox of women's conversion: That previously secular women, who are assumed to be 'liberated', join a religion associated with gender conservatism is often stereotypically read as indicating a lack of agency or as a sign of oppression (Avishai 2008; Bracke 2008). This is especially pertinent for women who join a minority religion associated with ethnic otherness, such as Islam (e.g., Özyürek 2014), adding yet another layer to the conversion paradox. In this dissertation, this apparent paradox is

unravelling and problematised. I argue that considering women's religious conversion to be paradoxical itself relies on the fundamental and persistent assumption that only secularism offers women emancipation and freedom (Scott 2017). As such, this dissertation contributes to current academic and socio-political debates about the secular/gender/emancipation triad in West Europe. The research is situated in the Netherlands, a small nation-state in North-Western Europe with a Christian history that continues to influence socio-political life, but is widely conceived to have secularised. The Netherlands' self-image of a secular, modern nation is furthermore intrinsically connected to women's emancipation and sexual freedom, making this a relevant context to investigate women's conversion 'paradox'. In this context I undertook two years of fieldwork in three research settings, which included in-depth interviews with forty converted women.

This research is part of a larger research project called 'Beyond "Religion versus Emancipation": Gender and Sexuality in Women's Conversions to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe'. This project, which was funded by NWO and led by Anne-Marie Korte, grew from a critique of the public conception that religion and women's emancipation are fundamentally conflicting. The research encompassed three subprojects that examined conversion and gender narratives in the context of their cultural productions (van den Brandt 2021); public discourses (van den Berg 2020); and everyday experiences of religion. Whilst the focus of this dissertation is on the latter, it has been informed by the other two (postdoctoral) subprojects by Nella van den Brandt and Mariecke van den Berg. This dissertation explores women's conversion in the Netherlands from a lived religion, religious studies, and gender studies perspective. The majority of studies of contemporary conversions in Europe focus on Islam (e.g., Galonnier 2018; van Nieuwkerk 2006b; Roald 2012) and comparative research on this topic is therefore limited. My project thus expands upon the field of conversion and gender by employing a comparative analysis of interviews and participant observation with Dutch women with first-hand experience of Jewish, Christian, or Islamic conversion. The dissertation's innovation is the manner in which it brings together insights from gender studies and religious studies to further analyse notions of religious agency, women's everyday religious lives, and the role of gender in the construction of the secular/religious binary. This research problematises academic, public, and political discourses in which liberal-secular mainstream society and traditional religious communities are placed in opposition on the basis of gender. In this introduction, I first introduce my approach to conversion, and then my approach to gender.

Religious Conversion

Conversion can refer to a wide range of historical and contemporary practices, experiences, identifications, processes, and theologies, many of which lie beyond the scope of my research.

My research encompasses the experiences of people who self-identified as women; were not socialised into a religious tradition from birth; and joined a religion later in life. The research specifically does not include those who move *between* religions (such as Christians who become Hindu); those who express a form of ‘multiple religious belonging’ (such as Jewish Buddhists or Buddhist Jews, e.g., Oostveen 2017); or those who move away from religion (such as Muslims who disaffiliate, e.g., Vliek 2021). I acknowledge that there are instances in which conversion is directly forced upon, or related to, the most vulnerable people in our society—for example, those suffering from addiction or serious mental health problems. Such groups are not included in my research, and the focus is on women who voluntarily joined their new religious group. I focus specifically on Modern Orthodox and Liberal Judaism, Pentecostal Christianity, and Sunni Islam. Because of the small size of the Jewish population, women from different subgroups were included. The majority of Dutch Muslims identify as Sunni, which is why this group was chosen. Whilst Christianity forms the majority religion in the Netherlands, Pentecostalism is a rather small and relatively new denomination, associated with a strong evangelising discourse, which makes this an interesting and innovative site to study conversion. Crucially, all of the women who took part self-identified as either Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. Throughout, wherever I refer to ‘conversion’, I mean the phenomenon by which someone who was raised without a religion comes to identify as religious, belonging to a religious community, and/or engaging in some form of religious practice.

For a long time ‘conversion’ has been considered to represent a change in mind set—as if there exist clearly demarcated ways of ‘seeing the world’ from which one can simply choose. However, such a simplistic understanding of conversion does not do justice to the complex reality of conversion I have come to know in recent years. In line with the rediscovery of the body in religious studies (e.g., Mahmood 2001; Page and Pilcher 2021), recent scholarship indeed points to the multi-layered nature of conversion. Rather than considering it merely as a transformation in the individual’s state of mind, conversion has been redefined as involving a change of habitus—a conscious and subconscious learning process (Klaver and van de Kamp 2011; Kravel-Tovi 2017a; Winchester 2008). Whilst conversion often does include embodied practices, the spiritual dimension should not be overlooked. In this respect, I follow Saba Mahmood (2005), who showed that piety and practice are interwoven. I build on these insights to argue that joining a religion in which one was not raised is a process of self-making through training and disciplining—of both body and mind.

The research goes beyond the idea of conversion simply as a transformation, boundary crossing, or move as none of these concepts, I argue, adequately capture the process of becoming religious, which also includes notions of returning, confirmation, and reconciliation. This also means that I am critical of attempts to think about conversion in different steps or phases (cf. Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Roald 2006, 2012). My research shows that conversion has neither a clear beginning or end, nor an identifiable linear structure.

It is also difficult to exactly pinpoint the precise moment of conversion as formal rituals within religious communities are not necessarily the most important events for converts themselves. Another problem with associating conversion with change is that this idea is fundamentally informed by Christian understandings of rupture (Robbins 2007). Because of its Christian connotations, in my own study, Jewish women hardly ever used the terminology of ‘conversion’ themselves, preferring instead the Hebrew term *giyur*. Muslim women often used the term ‘conversion’, but also spoke about reversion or ‘becoming Muslim’. Throughout, these different terminologies are included when reflecting my interlocutors’ personal experiences. It becomes clear, especially when studying different religious groups, that the concept of conversion is both open-ended and limited. Conversion refers to a particular process in our contemporary society (of people joining a religious tradition), but trying to capture this in phases or moves ultimately fails to do justice to the different lived realities of people who become religious.

Conversion takes place at the intersection of the individual and the community, and is therefore a profoundly relational process. Visiting services in synagogues, mosques, and churches, I was immediately struck by the great sense of community such spaces exude, although this often conflicted with the emphasis on autonomous choice that many interlocutors voiced during our conversations. Personal intention was often considered crucial for conversion and this, it was widely considered, should be an individual autonomous choice. However, this sense of autonomy was not only shaped by inner desires, but also within the community in which social codes existed that determined whether someone’s conversion was ‘authentic’. The self constructed in conversion is, in a Foucauldian sense, always relational (Foucault 1976; Jouili 2011; Roodsaz 2014). Performing religiosity in an ‘authentic’ way increased the inclusion in the new community, where converts often had to negotiate different power structures—not least those of religious authorities. This means that learning how to express the authenticity of conversion is part of the process itself. In short, I approach conversion as a relational and embodied process of self-making. In becoming religious, women try to combine different ethical frameworks, practices, and expectations in order to create a coherent story of the self. This process is gendered in several ways, not just because I study women, but also because gender is one of the central issues on which the boundary between religion and the secular is imagined, and it is this boundary that converts are thought to cross.

Gender and Conversion

The oppositional pairing of emancipation and religion stretches well beyond the borders of any single nation-state. Time and again, the rights of women and LGBTQI+¹ individuals become hot topics in debates about religion in secular societies (e.g., Cady and Fessenden 2013; El-Tayeb 2011; Göle 2015, 103–34). On the one hand, there are those religious actors who take an explicit stance against the central topics in women’s and sexual rights, opposing issues such as abortion, birth control, and same-sex marriages. On the other hand, secularist actors increasingly position themselves at the vanguard of women’s rights, supposedly offering protection against supposedly oppressive, often foreign influences (Scott 2017). Women’s emancipation as such is predominantly framed in terms of rights, equal opportunities, individual autonomy, and freedom of choice. Religion is framed as confirming male/female inequality, restricting autonomy, and limiting the possibilities of free choice and expression. Underlying this oppositional pairing of women’s emancipation and religion are strong assumptions that secularism provides women with individual moral and bodily autonomy (Butler 2008). ‘Traditional’ religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, allegedly advocate hierarchical differences between men and women and, furthermore, suggest that the subordinate role attributed to women is divinely sanctioned.

Probably the most persistent and prominent framing of women’s conversion in public discourse concerns the supposed opposition between women’s freedom and religion. Women who embrace a religion that is associated with gender-conservatism are often portrayed as lacking agency (Avishai 2008). Over the course of my research, I frequently met colleagues and friends who doubted that women would convert to a religion out of free choice. Why would someone convert simply because it offered them joy or fulfilment, or without any clearly identifiable reasons at all? This assumption that joining a religion means giving up freedom and emancipation has a significant impact on the type of questions female converts are asked. There is a preoccupation with the motivations and explanations for conversion: Why do they convert? In this research, I argue that the ‘why’ question is never neutral. Instead, the question reproduces conversion as something strange and in need of explaining. The ‘why’ question is also deeply gendered. For example, Kelly Chong (2006, 697) asks: ‘Why are women, many of them well educated and middle class, becoming increasingly attracted to and supportive of religious groups that seem designed to perpetuate their subordination?’ I argue that beneath this question lies a deep-seated assumption that religion

¹ This stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans(gender), Queer, Intersex, and + for other. Several acronyms exist to refer to sexual and gender nonconformism. I based my choice for this acronym on common terminology used by main organisations in the United States (GLAAD: LGBTQ); the United Kingdom (Queer Britain: LGBTQ+); and the Netherlands. The main Dutch organisation COC uses LHBTI, where the H (*homoseksueel*) replaces the G (gay), and Intersex is added. Combining these dominant terminologies at the time of writing, I use LGBTQI+.

and emancipation are fundamentally opposed. One of the most dominant stereotypes is, for example, the idea that women convert because their husbands force them. The ways in which my interlocutors deal with these stereotypes are discussed most explicitly in chapter six, however, the issue arises throughout this dissertation.

Another assumption is that women join a given religion for external reasons, such as seeking a community or dealing with personal crises in an instrumentalised way (e.g., Chong 2006). Yet such an approach overlooks the attraction some women feel to certain religious groups, practices, or beliefs. Of course, conversion, whilst not solely predicated on belief, often does include a spiritual dimension that should not be overlooked. Becoming religious can be difficult, but it also comes with a significant amount of joy and comfort. Asking ‘why’ is very much an outsider’s stance that assumes that the whole process of religious becoming can be explained by clearly identifiable motivations, whilst the reality of everyday life is that conversion cannot be explained by any single factor. My study shows that religion can be attractive for women for several reasons that often overlap. Moreover, motivation narratives are always constructed in retrospect and do not represent the complexity and wide range of experiences in religious self-making. Whenever motivations are included, I deliberately do so to analyse how women produce stories about themselves, how they reflect on this process, and which aspects of their religion they highlight in telling this story.

This dissertation argues that gender plays into conversion in several ways. Women who are new to a given religious group often encounter (official and informal) rules concerning gender roles, and indeed, the meaning attributed to a specifically religious woman can be very different to that attributed to a woman within broader secular Dutch society. For example, motherhood carries a new layer of meaning for converted Jewish women, who will pass on their Jewish identity to their future children. Similarly, regarding the interpretation of Islamic modesty rules, sexuality is perceived as something sacred and protected, instead of ‘up for grabs’. Christian women often struggle with the notion of male authority promoted in their neo-Pentecostal church. For some, these norms were not new, but rather confirmed principles to which they had adhered their entire lives anyway. Finally, a small minority did not experience ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ gender roles as in any way different, downplaying the centrality of gender issues altogether.

Whilst the experiences of converts are not only related to gender questions, gender did form the analytical and ethnographic focus of this dissertation. However, gender does not refer to any form of biological difference between male and female bodies. Rather, I approach gender as a broad social construct (Butler 1993). It refers to all of the practices, informal and formal norms, desires, spaces, moral considerations, representations, discourses, and bodily performances that are coded in gendered terms. A critical gender approach analyses how these issues are constructed and performed as ‘masculine’, ‘feminine’, or beyond, for example as ‘non-binary’. Similar to my approach to the concept of conversion, I understand ‘gender’ as an open-ended concept in which meaning is produced in specific contexts. However, the

conversion paradox is not only significant in the case of gender, as conversion often also implies the crossing of racial, national, or ethnic boundaries and often encompasses a change in sexual ethics. In order to understand these layers of conversion, I take an intersectional approach to gender as crossing with other axes of difference. My intersectional approach in this dissertation is informed by, amongst others, cultural anthropologist and professor emeritus in gender and ethnicity, Gloria Wekker. She states:

When you do intersectionality, you're able to put gender and sexuality at the forefront one moment [...] and put race and its intersections forward the next time [...]. Intersectionality is such an enriching approach for precisely this reason. It enables you to work with this toolbox, depending on your interests, and emphasize something different each time. Meanwhile you should continue to ask questions about what else is going on there. (Wekker as quoted in Van den Brandt et al. 2018, 80)

Although I place the intersection between gender and religion at the forefront of my research, I discovered that other axes were also very important for my interlocutors. In order to account for these differences, two chapters bring these other axes of difference to the fore. In chapter five, I analyse the way in which women converts negotiate ideas about sexuality. In chapter six, the Dutch context is foregrounded to see what conversion means for notions of national belonging and how women deal with the negativity shown towards religion, antisemitism, or Islamophobia in the public sphere.

Religion and Emancipation in the Netherlands: 'The Paradox of Freedom'

The Netherlands has an interesting history of secularisation, and sexual and gender emancipation movements, relevant to the study of women's conversion. In the Dutch context, the dominant ideal of modernity is very much shaped by notions of freedom, women's rights, and sexual liberty, as well as a deep understanding that secularism ultimately offers the preferred route to emancipation. This is the result of a particular development of secularisation in which the secular and sexual freedom came to be imagined as interconnected (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Schrijvers and Wiering 2017; Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012). For many years, there has been a degree of recognised religious pluriformity in the division of the country with a large presence of both Protestantism (northern provinces) and Roman Catholicism (southern provinces). The dominant narrative holds that prior to the 1960s, the country was divided into different ideological or religious groups called 'pillars', which also included socialism. During the 1960s, however, church

attendance declined, and the pillars began to merge, hence the common term of ‘depillarisation’ used to describe this secularisation process.

The same decade saw the rise of social movements, amongst which feminist and gay movements played a significant role, which advocated that in order to be sexually free, religion (primarily the Christian church) should be left behind. This led to what is now called the ‘sexual revolution’ (Schnabel 1990). If we look at recent Dutch history, there are many examples of success for women’s and LGBTQI+ movements. In 1919, women were allowed to vote in general elections. In the 1960s, the policy of forcing women’s resignation from their jobs after marriage was abolished. In 1969, the women’s action group ‘Dolle Mina’ was founded. The group protested for women’s sexual rights, with the now famous quote ‘*Baas in Eigen Buik*’ (literally translated as ‘boss in own belly’), referring to abortion rights. The country is probably best known for being the first to open up marriage for same-sex couples in 2001—something upon which the Dutch pride themselves internationally. Many Dutch government officials devoted themselves to ensuring women’s equality and protecting the rights of sexual minorities, and the connection between the process of sexual liberation and depillarisation became ingrained in the collective consciousness of the nation (Wiering 2017). Yet, simultaneously, the remnants of pillarisation can still be found. For example, the Christian Democratic Party continues to have a high voter turnout, and the Reformed Political Party SGP has a small, yet very stable support from orthodox Protestant communities. In 2015, the new political party Denk was founded, which has a majority of Muslim voters. On another side of the political spectrum, there are secularist right-wing politicians who are increasingly critical about religious groups in the Netherlands, especially in relation to Islam.

Recent years have seen an increase in anti-immigration discourse and Islamophobia, often framed in a rhetoric of supposedly protecting ‘our’ women’s and LGBTQI+ people’s rights against ‘their’ (the inference is predominantly Muslim) influence. One example of this instrumentalisation of women’s rights against religion can be found in a speech by Edith Schippers in 2016, who was minister of Health, Welfare and Sport at the time. Schippers is a member of the conservative-liberal and centre-right People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD in Dutch), the largest party in the country of which the current Prime Minister Mark Rutte is a member. The lecture was called ‘The Paradox of Freedom’ and was inspired by Schippers’ (2016, 14) self-declared concerns about ‘the freedom my daughter will have to make her own choices’. In this lecture, Schippers argued that women’s freedom in the Netherlands is in a paradoxical relationship with the freedom of religion. She strongly warned against ‘compromising’ the values of equality—for example, by accepting that Muslim men will not shake hands with women (Schippers 2016, 19). Schippers argued against defending the rights of religious people who have different understandings of gender roles and interactions on the grounds that the Netherlands should protect women’s freedom.

Compromising with such ‘different cultures’, warned Schippers (2016, 20), would have very negative outcomes for ‘people who don’t have a choice in who they are: Gays, transgenders², women’. She further stated: ‘Our culture is a lot better than all others I know. In any case, for the woman. In any case, for the gay or the transsexual. In any case for people who do not belong to the group of those in power’ (Schippers 2016, 18). Towards the end of the speech, she made the case for cutting the budgets for all religious groups and protecting Dutch values of equality against such influences from outside. The outspoken anti-religious sentiment in this lecture, voiced on the basis of protecting women’s freedom, is not unique. In the recent years, newspapers and political parties have reported increasingly on the supposed ‘backwardness’ of religious minorities, especially towards Muslim minorities and certain forms of conservative Christianity. These groups are often stigmatised on the basis of gender, as religions of oppressive men and victimised women. The attention to Islam in public discourse, especially in relation to gender questions, stands in disproportionate contrast to the size of the Muslim population, which has been estimated to be only five per cent of the entire population (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020).

Although Dutch society is secularised, many citizens adhere to a variety of religions. Statistical census research offers some insight into religious participation in the Netherlands, but it does not offer any data specifically regarding converts. Since people are not asked to register their religious affiliation, there are no absolute numbers on converts in any of the three groups I studied. The latest census sample research of Statistics Netherlands (CBS; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020) gives the impression that overall, religious affiliation is declining. The CBS report estimated that 46 per cent of the currently 17 million population considered themselves as belonging to a religion.³ Of those religious groups, Christianity is by far the majority religion, with around 3.5 million Dutch citizens identifying as Roman Catholic and around 2.5 million identifying as Protestant. According to this report, roughly 1 per cent of the Dutch population identifies as belonging to a ‘Pentecostal or Evangelical community’. However, my research shows that many Pentecostal Christians do not necessarily identify as such, but opt for a general label as Christian. The CBS report estimated the total Muslim population to be around 850,000, whilst other groups are combined under ‘other affiliations’, at 1 million. Whenever Judaism is included in the census reports, it is most often estimated at 0.1 per cent of the population, however, the question of who belongs to

² Schippers said in Dutch: ‘*homo’s, transgenders, vrouwen*’, using transgender as a noun instead of an adjective. I consider transgender to be an adjective (i.e., ‘transgender people’). The use of ‘transgender’ as a noun is problematic and derogatory. The same goes for ‘transsexual’ in the next sentence, translated from Schippers’ statement: ‘*in elk geval voor de homo of de transseksueel*’.

³ For this outcome, the research (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020) used the question ‘Which religion do you belong to?’ They also asked about attendance to religious services, which was for a long time considered a benchmark of religious participation. Here the estimate was that 79.8 per cent of the Dutch population never attends a service.

Judaism is complicated and depends on the definition used—something that is discussed in the second chapter. All in all, these statistics offer only a very limited estimate about Dutch religious affiliations and do not provide any indications of the numbers of converts. This illustrates the problems when trying to measure religious belonging, affiliation, or belief—especially that of converts. Therefore, rather than narrowing the research down to pure statistics, I find it more useful to write about the broader context and historical processes of these three groups. For now, it is important to note that I focused on neo-Pentecostalism in Christianity and on Sunni Islam. In the Jewish case study, I explored different denominations, both Modern Orthodox and Liberal or Progressive Judaism. In the ethnographic chapters of this dissertation, I provide more contextual background to the groups of my fieldwork.

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of six chapters. In the first chapter I outline my theoretical and methodological approach to women's conversion. I draw on different yet related conceptual frameworks: secularism and religion; conversion studies; and the study of religion and gender. The question of religious women's agency is particularly prevalent in the study of women's conversion. I argue that whilst the notion of 'religious agency' offers important conceptual tools with which to understand women's observance, it does not enable a full understanding of gender in conversion processes. This chapter also provides my methodological approach of lived religion. Here I reflect on my position as a researcher and describe my research methods in the three different case studies. The focus of my research was on gendered negotiations in everyday religion, both in the public and private sphere, which I approached via participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews. For methodological reasons, digital spaces were not included (e.g., Midden 2016; van Nieuwkerk 2018). Similarly, discourse analysis of public representation—the main topic of the two other researchers in this NWO research project—lies beyond the scope of this research (e.g., van den Berg 2020; van den Brandt 2021; van den Brandt, van den Berg, and Meijer, forthcoming).

The subsequent three chapters focus on each of the religious groups in turn. These chapters form the ethnographic building blocks of my dissertation and contain empirical descriptions of my research outcomes. This allows me to gain an understanding of the specific conversion trajectories in Judaism (chapter two); Christianity (chapter three); and Islam (chapter four). Importantly, the order of these three chapters is not coincidental and part of the reason is that this is a common chronological representation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in their founding narratives. The more important value of choosing this order is that it does not begin the story with a Christian or Muslim understanding of conversion. Christian ideas about conversion (and its associations with rupture and redemption) for a long time provided the dominant model via which to think about religious change, informed, amongst

others, by missionary work. Today we see a paradigm shift in studies of contemporary conversion, which now more often focus on conversion to Islam. Although recent studies offer a more nuanced view of conversion as a gradual process, it does mean that Muslim conversion is now disproportionately represented in the study of conversion. There is thus a tendency to build theories of conversion in general on ethnographic material about people—and especially women—who embraced Islam. In contrast, conversion to Judaism is only rarely studied and hardly ever in the diasporic sense outside of Israel or the United States. The study of contemporary Judaism in relation to gender is also underdeveloped. The ethnographic chapters in this dissertation therefore start with the experiences of new Jewish women, offering important and innovative insights into gender and conversion. Christianity follows and the Muslim case study is third. Setting up the dissertation this way allows for comparisons between the experiences of my interlocutors whilst acknowledging their particularities. Each chapter follows a similar structure and focuses on the intersection of religion and gender: After first offering context about the specific religion and the process of conversion, I analyse how women produce their own conversion narratives and reflect on their motivations. I then investigate how women ‘do’ (Avishai 2008) conversion in their religious communities and in the private sphere, focusing on the relational aspects of becoming religious. The last sections of these chapters focus on embodied aspects of conversion.

Chapters five and six take a different approach and are explicitly comparative. These start from concepts and themes frequently brought up during my fieldwork, but which cannot be captured by gender alone. In chapter five, I analyse my interlocutors’ negotiation of sexuality. Sexuality as an analytical concept is connected to gender, but also profoundly different. Here, starting from the understanding that conversion is embodied, I analyse how this is related to sexual ethics and practices. Various interlocutors across the communities gave different answers, but this was one of the most important topics of discussion. This challenges the assumption that religion is sexually conservative (or even negative) whilst secularism provides sexual freedom. At the same time, sexuality was one of the most important areas in which Christian converts distanced themselves from their secular surroundings and their pre-converted self. This was less the case for Muslim or Jewish converts, who sometimes (but not always) expressed a change with regard to sexuality, but did not use this as a form of cultural critique.

Chapter six is the second comparative chapter and focuses on questions of belonging. In studies of Muslim converts, it has often been noted how conversion has an impact on national belonging. For white Muslim women in particular, conversion can lead to a questioning of one’s national belonging and a presumption of having crossed racial boundaries. This shows that the Dutch nation as an imagined community is not only shaped by secularisation, but also by a connection between religion and race. In this comparative chapter I explore how national belonging, race, and religion intersect in the conversions of

women to different religious groups. It shows how my interlocutors related to the global imagined religious community—for example what it means to join the Jewish people. I also further analyse how women in religious minorities deal with their visibility in the public sphere and potential negativity in the form of antisemitism and Islamophobia. Here, I also reflect on the silence on issues of race in the Christian setting. Embracing a religion and creating a sense of inclusion and belonging always comes with the production of the boundaries between in- and outsiders. The focus here is on both different and similar strategies via which my interlocutors negotiate such boundaries in the process of conversion.

By comparatively studying women's conversion, this dissertation contributes to the understanding of gender and religion in a secular nation-state. It analyses conversion as a relational, embodied, and negotiated process of self-making, taking place at the intersection of religion, gender, sexuality, and race. As such, I argue that women's conversion in secular times is only paradoxical from an outsider, secularist perspective. This dissertation moves beyond an opposition between religious and secular gender discourses, instead offering insight into how women themselves give meaning to their religious becoming.

Chapter 1
A Critical Gender Approach to
Conversion and the Religion/Secular
Binary

Women's participation in conservative religions is paradoxical only from the perspective of the observer, who is unwilling to register forms of agency that embrace religiosity *for the sake of religiosity*. To see agency, one does not need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing. It suffices to note how members of conservative religions 'do'—observe, perform—religion, wherever that might lead. (Avishai 2008, 429, emphasis in original)

Becoming religious raises many questions: Why does someone convert? What does it mean to believe in God? Will converted people eat or dress differently? For women, questions often relate to emancipation and freedom: Do religiously observant women have agency? Are women forced to convert by their husbands? In addition, women's conversion often leads to broader political and societal questions, such as what conversion means for the secular nation-state and whether conversion itself is a threat to presumed secular moral values such as emancipation and individual freedom. Time and again media outlets portray converted women as having given up their emancipated status and agency, as irrational or in possession of a false consciousness. This is especially noticeable when women join religions associated with gender conservatism and traditionalism such as (specific forms of) Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. There seems to be a paradox in women's participation in such gender conservative religious groups. This paradox, in the words of sociologist and Jewish studies scholar Orit Avishai (2008, 429), often reflects a narrow understanding of agency in which religious observance 'for the sake of religiosity' is not included. Furthermore, the assumed paradox of conversion, as I will explain, reflects a secularist and gendered view of religion that my dissertation seeks to unravel, contextualise, and problematise. This chapter further introduces this 'conversion paradox' and explores the conceptual frameworks undergirding my research.

Throughout this dissertation I take a critical intersectional approach to ask how gender plays into the experiences of female converts. I build on the developing field of the study of religion and gender starting from the assumption, not only that religion is inherently gendered, but also that the question of gender intersects with religion. In my approach, therefore, conversion is a gendered and religious form of self-making. More broadly, my research aims to question the religion/secular binary and the part it plays in representations of conversion. I should reiterate here that my study focuses on women who were not raised with a religion and were therefore socialised in a largely secular environment, choosing later to join a religious group. My study problematises the common conception of conversion as crossing a boundary between supposedly different (secular and religious) spheres of life. Moreover, I argue that, rather than merely representing a change in mindset, conversion is both embodied and multi-layered. Following Avishai (2008), I study how women perform and observe conversion as a form of 'doing' rather than reflecting fixed identities or a form of 'being'. My methodology is reflective of this theoretical approach and was informed by feminist ethnography and the approach of lived religion.

The first section of this chapter provides further insight into religion and the secular. The second section focuses on the study of religion and gender. In section three, I provide my conceptual approach to conversion as lived, negotiated, and embodied. In section four, I move from the theoretical to the methodological approach, whilst in the final and fifth section, I describe my research methods and the research setting.

1.1 The Secular and Its Religious Shadows

Western Europe, and in particular the Netherlands has, since the 1950s, been influenced by increasing secularisation. Religion and the secular have long been considered to be distinct binary social spheres, modes of thinking, or political strategies, with conversion often framed as the crossing of that binary. For my research, theories that question this binary have proved invaluable as a way to rethink conversion. In recent decades, theories have been developed that critically assess the so-called ‘secularisation thesis’ (Taylor 2007). Rather than being eliminated from society—as the thesis held—the role of religion changes. In contrast to previously hegemonic understandings in the study of religion that predicted its gradual decline, religion is far from disappearing.

Referencing the work of Talal Asad (2003), Jose Casanova (1994, 2001), and Charles Taylor (2007), a new conceptual framework has been developed that starts from the assumption that religion and the secular are not distinct, but co-constitutive. In his book *Formations of the Secular*, renowned sociocultural anthropologist Talal Asad (2003) makes a distinction between secularism as a political ideology and doctrine, and the secular as an epistemic category. In my approach, I am mainly interested in this second aspect of the secular. Here, ‘the secular’ refers to the public space and discourse, or even an ontological framing or way of life (Asad 2003, 24), by which human subjectivity is ideally disconnected from religious factors. Important to note is Asad’s (2003) argument that ‘the religious’ is always part and parcel of ‘the secular’, as the two are interwoven. The secular aims to regulate religion, which in turn helps to define the very notion of religion as something (ideally) private, absent from the public sphere, and individual. In other words, in order to envision a secular public space in which religion is a private matter, the terms of religion, public space, and the boundary between the two have to be negotiated. In this line of argument, the secular always includes a notion of ‘religion’, and the binary is constructed rather than ontological. This binary is also always open to contestation and re-negotiation: The religious sphere is not easily privatised and demarcated, since religion continues to affect many different spheres of both public and private (social) life (e.g., Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011; Göle 2010). Birgit Meyer’s (2012, 6) description of a ‘post-secular perspective’ further illustrates this approach to religion and the secular as interconnected:

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

The ‘post’ in this post-secularist perspective does not indicate a set time-period or an era that chronologically follows secularisation. Instead, the ‘post’ refers to a particular academic field of inquiry that moves beyond the secularisation thesis. As such, this is not a temporal indication, but rather a theoretical intervention. In studying conversion, this post-secularist perspective is especially useful since it debunks the assumption that religious and secular realms of life are essentially different. This, in turn, problematises the idea that a convert crosses a boundary between ‘the religious’ and ‘the secular’. Rather, I understand that conversion can mean a variety of movements and processes. Part of this might be (albeit not conclusively) a transition from a secular selfhood to a religious selfhood; from a non-religious community to a religious community; or from an unbeliever to one submissive to God. However, I consider the conversions that I studied to be shaped by, rather than a move away from, wider secular society. From a post-secularist perspective, it becomes possible to analyse conversion, not as a confirmation of the religion/secular binary, but rather in its capacity to challenge some of the secularist assumptions that shape contemporary notions of selfhood and autonomy.

Until now, most post-secular scholarly work has focused on political or legal discourses of secularism (e.g., Butler 2008; Casanova 1994; Scott 2013). In this context, the notion of secularism as a moralistically neutral ideology became subject to extensive criticism, and many scholars took up the aim of ‘rethinking secularism’ (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011). Another important intervention came from the late anthropologist Saba Mahmood, who argued for the contextualisation of multiple secularism(s). In her book *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood (2005) convincingly argued that secularism is not a universal ideology, but rather moves and changes in different contexts and times. However, studies on secularism as a political ideology do not directly reflect the everyday level of the secular. There seems to be general agreement on the understanding of secularism as a political doctrine, but not so much on the space, materiality, and experience of that which constitutes ‘the secular’ as an ontological frame, public space, or way of life.

Asad (2003, 16) suggests that the secular can best be traced ‘through its religious shadows’. Following this approach, and in order to understand the broader secular public sphere, some studies focus on religious groups. Sociologist Nilüfer Göle (2015, 79), for example, wrote that ‘one can go beyond the political level of comparing state secularisms and understand the ways that (voluntary) secularism takes place at the level of presentation of the self and the phenomenology of everyday modern life’. In order to study the secular in everyday life, Göle (2015, 2017) built on her research about Muslim minorities in Europe

who, by publicly representing Islam, contest the secularity of the public sphere. In a similar vein, anthropologist and religious studies scholar Jeanette Jouili (2011, 49) argued that the experiences of religiously observant people provide a point of entry from which to study the workings of the secular, as ‘they respond and tackle the normalizing forces of secularity at work in [France and Germany] in analogous ways’. In this sense, Jouili (2011) analyses the secular via the experiences of religiously observant people whose very existence questions the secularity of the public sphere. These are both examples of how the secular can be studied through its ‘religious shadows’.

My research is inspired by these recent studies of everyday religion and the secular. Following this approach, conversion not only tells us something about ‘religion’, but also about ‘the secular’—not least, the difficulty of distinguishing between the two. Religious conversion in this context highlights the workings of the secular, both as a public space and as a discourse. This is especially pertinent when it comes to questions of gender, which often serve to symbolise the imagined boundary between the religious and the secular (Cady and Fessenden 2013; Göle 2010; Scott 2013). My research problematises the common connections between the secular, agency, and emancipation on the one hand; and religion, oppression, and conservatism on the other. To explore this further, I turn to the study of religion and gender.

1.2 Gender and Religion

My research on women’s conversion has mainly been inspired by the critical study of religion and gender. A critical gender studies approach goes beyond merely studying ‘women’, but analyses how issues (such as norms, rituals, or representations) are constructed and performed in gendered terms. In the study of religiously observant women, one concept often comes up: agency. A secularist feminist understanding of agency, framed as a resistance to patriarchy, suggests that women who adhere to a gender conservative, patriarchal form of religion, lack agency. Scholars of religion and gender made an important intervention by suggesting that the notion of agency should be disconnected from secularist connotations of autonomy and resistance (e.g., Bilge 2010; Bracke 2008; Mahmood 2009). Following this intervention, the concept of ‘religious agency’ became a common tool via which to analyse agency within religious submission. My research builds on this critical intervention, but also broadens its scope. I suggest a focus on negotiation as a means to show the interwovenness of different aspects of the self, communities, and society. This is combined with Avishai’s (2008) suggestion of ‘doing religion’, which similarly attempts to move beyond the submission/resistance binary that dominates the debate on women’s (religious) agency. In this section, I delve into this debate on agency in gender studies, intersectionality, and the study of

religion and gender, before elaborating on my suggestion to move beyond the concept of religious agency to understand women's religious observance.

1.2.1 Agency as Resistance or Submission

The dominant feminist approach in the academic study of gender has, until now, been rather secular in nature (Korte 2011). Building on secular feminist movements, the underlying assumption has been that, in order to be truly 'liberated', women have to leave religion behind. This was initially directed at Christian churches, however, over recent decades Islam has also been represented by secularists as resisting women's liberation (Bracke 2011; Scott 2013). In public and political discourse, traditional religion continues to be conceived as the antithesis of the secular and secularism. Religion is portrayed primarily as a patriarchal structure that limits the potential for women's emancipation and liberation. This is partly reflected in feminist studies in which a secular understanding of agency as resistance is common (Aune 2011). 'Agency' in its broadest sense refers to the individual's capacity to act. In the social sciences and gender studies, this became connected to narratives of individualism, free choice, and resistance, which are also associated with secularity. This conceptualisation of agency continues to be dominant in many areas of gender studies, including intersectionality, despite its emphasis on the variety of (women's) lives.

Intersectionality calls attention to the interwovenness of axes of difference, mainly with regard to race and gender, and is today one of the most common approaches in gender studies—even cited as a 'buzzword' by Kathy Davis (2008).⁴ However, religion is often not included in intersectional approaches. This is remarkable, considering that intersectionality aims to understand (women's) lives in all of their diversity, and that religion is an important factor for many women worldwide. One possible reason, as argued by political theorist Jakeet Singh (2015), is that intersectionality often focuses on resistance to oppression, which leans very much towards identity politics and a secular notion of agency that is fundamentally in a state of tension with the idea of religious submission (Bilge 2010). This upholds a notion of agency as primarily individual, empowering, and directed towards the resistance of patriarchy. When religious women are studied, the focus often remains on moments of resistance to religious patriarchy and does not locate agency within religion.

Recently, scholars from a wide range of disciplines have started to question the implicit secular/religion binary in gender studies and the assumptions it makes about women's agency (e.g., Abu-Lughod 2015; Hawthorne 2011). Mahmood was one of the central figures in this debate and is known for her critique of the central neo-liberal notion of agency.

⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) is credited with coining the term 'intersectionality' as a means to bring into view how gender and race intersect in the lives of women of colour. Other prominent black feminist scholars who made similar arguments are Angela Davis (1981), bell hooks (1989), Audre Lorde (1984) and, in the Dutch context, Gloria Wekker (2006, 2016).

Mahmood (2001, 2009, 2012) raised questions about agency in feminist academia, citing its connection to resistance against the burden of tradition. She problematised the secularist perspective in which religiously observant women are often conceived as lacking agency, and converted women as giving up this agency. As Lori Beaman (2013, 2) wrote:

Women who are religious, especially fundamentalist, orthodox, observant, or practicing (as they are variously labelled or label themselves) are not imagined to make choices in the same way as ‘free’ women of the sexually liberated neo-liberal market capitalist society.

Mahmood (2005, 9) problematised this narrow interpretation of women’s agency and proposed that this should also be understood *within* religious traditions, as the desire to adhere to norms or submit to a transcendental will, which ‘describe[s] a whole range of human action, including those which might be socially, ethically, or politically indifferent to the goal of opposing hegemonic norms’. Inspired by Mahmood’s critique, scholars have begun to question this individualised feminist secularism as a socio-cultural project, arguing for the recognition of women’s religious agency (e.g., Bilge 2010; Bracke 2008; for an overview, see Burke 2012). Such an approach does not seek agency-as-subversion within religious groups, but asks instead for a reconsideration of the terms of the debate itself. Sarah Bracke (2008, 52–53) related to this project, stating: ‘Thinking from the lives of women who most often fall out of the realms of those considered as “emancipated subjects” simultaneously makes use of feminist methodologies while investigating and challenging existing feminist theories.’ Bracke stresses the importance, not only of studying women’s religious lives in the context of emancipation, but also to include those subjects who conform to religious norms.

Returning to the question of intersectionality, Singh (2016) proposed the inclusion of ‘religious agency’ in intersectional gender studies, which has until now been shaped by notions of resistance. However, Singh (2016, 670) argues, ‘intersectionality must at least have room for diverse notions and practices of both oppression and liberation’. Combining intersectionality with insights from the study of religion and gender, Singh (2016, 670–71) continues:

[N]ot only pushes intersectionality to begin to consider an axis of difference that has received relatively little attention within its framework, but [it] also challenges the negative consensus on anti-oppression that increasingly serves as the basis of intersectionality, especially in light of the turn away from identity politics and toward critical structural analysis.

Singh argues that the concept of ‘religious agency’ can push intersectionality further. These studies on ‘religious agency’ build on, but also question, dominant feminist frameworks and move beyond the simplistic opposition of women as either submissive or liberated (Avishai

2008; Neitz 2014). My research is greatly indebted to these theories and concepts. However, I propose to take this a step further in order to broaden the study of religiously observant women because the question of agency alone does not fully capture their experiences.

1.2.2 Negotiation and Doing Religion

The interventions by Mahmood and others have left their impact on the study of religion and gender, opening up discussions about women's religious practice on both an empirical and theoretical level. Despite the importance of the concept of 'religious agency', I observe several limits to this approach. First, whilst it acknowledges agency within submission to religious authorities, it does not adequately account for notions of emancipation that can also shape a person's religious practices. I am inspired here by Jouili (2015), who studied women in Islamic revival movements in Germany and France. Jouili builds on, but also questions Mahmood's conceptualisation. In focusing on agency as submission, Jouili (2011, 56) writes, Mahmood 'brackets her interlocutor's views on gender issues'. In other words, because of the overt focus on pious practices, questions about gender, the position of women, and emancipation are often omitted. Jouili (2011, 56) shows that women instead make use of different ethical regimes, including "modern" assumptions regarding personal autonomy, freedom, self-realization and equality which are set against their non-secular (i.e., "traditional") counterparts (submission, unfreedom, and so forth). As such, Jouili proposes an understanding of religious subject formation as processes of struggle and negotiation.

The second limit to the concept of 'religious agency' lies in its focus on the individual. Religious agency focuses mainly on the individual's capacity to act, and does not fully capture the relationality of religious observance or the broader power structures that shape women's religious practices and choices. Conversion includes many relations with fellow believers and religious authorities, and women have to negotiate their position within a new community. Rather than an expression of individual agency, I approach women's religious participation as a process of negotiation. I analyse how women make use of different frameworks in order to form their sense of selfhood. Moments of submission can be as much a part of this process as actions constitutive of resistance. As such, approaching women's conversion as a process of negotiation instead of 'religious agency' does not limit itself to either submission or resistance. As gender studies scholar Chia Longman (2008, 224) suggests: 'Women actively negotiate rather than passively submit to/reproduce patriarchal structures and ideologies.' All in all, my question was never whether my interlocutors possess or lack agency. Rather, I investigated how women moved between and within different spheres and communities, how they encountered a variety of gender norms, and how they made these their own. I approach negotiation not simply as a matter of coming to terms with two (or more) different frameworks, but rather as a continuous ethical practice that is often subconscious and embodied.

In order to understand this process further, I borrow the notion of ‘doing religion’ from Orit Avishai. Similar to Jouili, Avishai (2008) questions the centrality of agency in studies of religiously observant women, offering a different suggestion to move beyond this. I opened this chapter with her statement that one does not ‘need to identify empowerment, subversion, or rational strategizing’ (Avishai 2008, 429) in order to understand women’s religious practices. Analysing agency alone, Avishai suggests, does not account for the vast variety of practices. Instead, she proposes to study how women in ‘conservative religions “do” religion (Avishai 2008, 429). This focus on ‘doing’ understands religion as a practice, rather than an identity (such as being religious) or something to obtain (such as having religious agency). This further suggests an active process that is ultimately ‘unfinished’ (Gill et al. 2005, 40). Building on these insights, I therefore propose to analyse how women ‘do’ religion, as a process in which different ethical frameworks and practices are negotiated. This ‘doing’ sheds light on the way in which women form their sense of self via religious practices and performances, social relations, emotions, and questions of the divine. This connects to the methodological approach of ‘lived religion’ discussed in section 1.4. First, however, it is important to further explain how I conceptualise conversion.

1.3 Religious Conversion

In this section I propose my concept of conversion and question what I refer to as the ‘conversion paradox’. I propose an understanding of conversion as a process rather than a choice—simultaneously individual and relational, as well as contextualised and embodied. Converting to a tradition that values community or the divine over the individual can be considered a change in moral framework, the learning of a new habitus, or the formation of a new social circle. In any case, conversion is more than merely a change in individual mindset or worldview. Conversion further includes notions of individual change and autonomous choice, but it also relates to power structures and communities. In short, I approach conversion as a process of religious and gendered self-making that is both relational and embodied. In this section, I unpack the different aspects of this definition.

1.3.1 The Conversion Paradox

‘There was a time when conversion didn’t need any explaining’, 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. The concept of conversion is often traced to Greco-Roman sources (such as Philo of Alexandria) and is an etymological derivation of the Latin term *conversio*, meaning ‘to turn (around)’. Historically, conversion became associated with the turn to Christianity and the concept knows a particular Christian genealogy, which has been both the norm and default religious option in North-

Western Europe. Peter van der Veer (1996) shows how historically, converting to Christianity was both encouraged and celebrated. David Chidester (2014) points to the ways in which the conversion strategy of Christian missionaries was integrated into colonial politics, enacting cultural violence all over the colonised world. Historical research has further shown that in the colonial context, conversion carried with it the potential to cause ‘massive cultural and social change’ (Rambo and Farhadian 2014, 4). This background not only shapes the experience of conversion itself, but also, from an academic perspective, has implications for our understanding of the concept as influenced by its predominantly Western European Christian history. Christian understandings of conversion are often connected to notions of turning, rupture, and redemption (Robbins 2007, 10–14). However, such a definition cannot easily be applied to people who embrace other religious traditions, which is why some scholars are sceptical about defining all religious transformations in terms of ‘conversion’ (e.g., van Nieuwkerk 2018). Nonetheless, conversion continues to be the most common way to describe becoming religious or joining a religious community. Therefore, instead of abandoning the concept altogether, I propose a definition of conversion that opens up the debate to include various experiences of becoming religious. This dissertation understands conversion from an ethnographic, everyday perspective and includes localised notions such as ‘embracing Islam’ or ‘doing *gijur*’ in order to account for different emic terminologies. Interestingly, despite its initial Christian background, a significant area of conversion studies focuses on those who become Muslim. Whilst comparative research on this phenomenon is rare, it remains crucial to further the conceptual and socio-political debates on conversion in secular societies.

One of the most important reasons why conversion has become in such need of explaining can be found in the dominance of secularism in many Western European nation-states. Although individualistic spiritual practices are gaining popularity and are becoming more mainstream (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Knibbe 2013), elements that are considered to be part and parcel of ‘traditional’ religions such as an emphasis on community, doctrine, and institutional power are met with increasing suspicion in secularist ideology. This leads to what I call the ‘conversion paradox’ in public discourse. The conversion paradox resonates with what Bernice Martin (2003, 2013) called the ‘gender paradox’. Martin was puzzled by the increasing popularity of Pentecostalism amongst women—a religion that is characterised by conservative patriarchal family values. Joining Pentecostalism, women are expected to submit to the formal authority of men. However, Martin (2003, 51) suggests, they also gain power in the domestic sphere, since Pentecostalism ‘puts the collective needs of the household unit above the freedom and pleasures of men’. The gender paradox reflects that, whilst conversion to Pentecostalism means submission to male authority, this submission is simultaneously accompanied—albeit in strictly conservative and patriarchal terms—by a specific form of empowerment. I suggest that this gender paradox is not only applicable in the Pentecostal context. In a broader sense too, it can be summarised as follows: Women’s autonomous choice is a central tenet of modern societies and feminism, but from this free choice, women

can join a religion that (seems to) undermine their autonomy by promoting patriarchal gender norms.

Following Martin's observation of this gender paradox, I argue that this can be broadened to the 'conversion paradox' that we see emerging in contemporary modern, secular societies. An important principle in secularist discourse is that people can make life choices by their own free will, especially with regards to their religion. This means that people can freely choose to join a religion, which seems to limit this freedom by asking for submission or conformity to sources of authority. Within the context of this overarching framework, in which the secular is connected to autonomy and emancipation, and in which religion is not only positioned as antagonistic, but also as a potential threat to these liberal values, voluntary conversion becomes paradoxical. In this dissertation, I analyse and question this conversion paradox. I argue that the idea of conversion as paradoxical, or as in need of explaining, stems from limiting secularist notions of autonomy and agency. The notion of 'freedom' underlying all such assumptions is too narrow and directed towards a particular type of subjectivity, in which religious submission does not have a place. My intention in this research is not to ascertain whether women convert out of free choice. Rather, I analyse how these notions of individual freedom and autonomy play into their conversion narratives and how their experiences nuance a secular understanding of agency. Ultimately, it would seem, conversion is not as paradoxical as secular representations suggest.

1.3.2 Self-making and the Question of Authenticity

In my dissertation, I approach conversion as a process of religious and gendered self-making. This self-making takes place at the intersection of the personal, the community, and society, and is often characterised by a relation to the transcendent (e.g., Davidman and Greil 1993; Jouili 2015; Kravel-Tovi 2017b; McGuire 2008). The concept of self-making has been informed by a social constructivist approach to selfhood that considers the self as constructed and performed instead of reflecting a fixed identity (Butler 1993; Foucault 1976; see also Roodsaz 2014). From this perspective, the self is always in the making. This might lead to experiences of incoherence when different frameworks do not align or if there is a difference between ideals and daily practices. However, individuals do often long for 'narrative closure and experiences of coherence' (Roodsaz 2014, 45). Forming a coherent narrative about the self is as much a part of conversion as self-making, and converts often negotiate different expectations and practices to (often subconsciously) find complementarity.

One of the stories converts most often share (and are most often asked) is what motivated them to join a religion. In many public representations of conversion, the focus is on the decision to convert, as if this can be neatly captured in a single moment or explanation. This is also reflected in dominant conversion narratives that stress individual choice and seek to capture such motivations. Even though motivations to convert vary widely, there is one that tends to recur in academic literature, namely, religious conversion as a means to an extra-

religious end. Davidman and Greil (1993, 88) note: ‘The majority of the literature on conversion asserts that converts often turn to new religious belief systems in a time of crisis or at a turning point in their lives.’ Furthermore, according to Kelly Chong (2006), religion can be a way to gain a more secure social circle, and to deal with domestic crises, such as abuse. In a religious community, Chong (2006) suggests, women find the security to deal with their individual and relational difficulties. In these explanatory models, the autonomy of women is central and the individual choice to convert is emphasised and rationalised as a tool. Other studies of conversion (e.g., Klaver 2011b; McGinty 2006) similarly point to how converts often stress their individual, autonomous choice to join a religion. Indeed, theologian and cultural anthropologist Miranda Klaver (2011b) even used a quote from one of her interlocutors as the title for her dissertation examining conversion in Evangelical and Pentecostal communities: ‘This is my desire.’ However, these expressions of inner desire and personal choice should be situated in the wider secular context in which the stereotypical view that religion limits individual freedom dominates. That said, I understand the emphasis on individual freedom as an expression of the negotiation process, and as such, the dominance of personal choice narratives in conversion stories is a ‘religious shadow’ of the secular. Paradoxically, this affirms the secularist perspective which, by foregrounding individual choice and freedom, and omitting notions of subjection to God, regards Western women as the archetypal modern autonomous subject. It also individualises the self-making process, whilst a social constructivist approach to the self also includes power structures and relations.

In line with Foucauldian understandings of subjectivity, I consider self-making and broader regimes of authority to be two sides of the same coin (Foucault 1976; Jouili 2015). Rather than subjects being merely shaped by power structures, they intervene and negotiate such regimes as much as they are formed by them (see also Amir-Moazami 2005). An example from my research is the complicated question of who counts as Jewish and should be included in the Jewish community. The mere presence of converts and non-Jews interested in Judaism often leads communities to reconsider the boundaries of their group. Such a process asks for the establishment of some form of guideline, either implicit or explicit, to determine someone’s worthiness and belonging. The religious groups themselves remain neither static, nor unchanged by the question of who should belong. Rather, the norms and boundaries of religious communities are fluid, challenged, guarded, and stretched—something that becomes apparent when studying the experiences of converts. Simultaneously, such conceptions of ‘who belongs’ have a direct impact on those outsiders wishing to join the community. Conversion thus takes place at the intersection of autonomy and authority and, as my study reveals, this is an important area of tension and negotiation for women wishing to convert. Yet how to analyse this complicated web of self-making is a puzzle to which there are no straightforward solutions. One of my suggestions is to focus on the question of authenticity, as I found this to be illustrative of the back-and-forth process that takes place between the individual and the community.

The concept of authenticity is related to individual choice, but also extends beyond this to refer to self-expression, originality, sincerity, and the discourse of ‘being yourself’ (Derks 2018). This is related to agency, but not limited to moments of resistance to authority. Instead, it also acknowledges the impact of authority in constructing the criteria for authentic religious behaviour and the desire to conform to such norms. Charles Taylor (2007) argued that the contemporary emphasis on authenticity should be seen as part of the normative framework about modern secular subjectivity. In other words, claims of authenticity do not express an unfiltered truth about the self, but rather are expressions of the broader dominant regime of modernity (Jouili 2011). This conceptual understanding of authenticity offers a way to understand the complicated relationship between individuals and communities. It relates to the question posed by sociologist Meredith McGuire (2008, 22): ‘Who is authentically “one of us”? Who can authoritatively determine what beliefs and practices are true to a religion’s tradition?’ This question is particularly relevant in the context of conversion, which is an expression of an inner wish, as well as a willingness to conform to the norms of a community that judges whether such conversion is ‘authentic’. In this way the claim of authenticity is an ‘important myth for the maintenance of boundaries for the imagined community’ (McGuire 2008, 207). As a further example, scholar of Islam Karin van Nieuwkerk (2008) showed that converted Muslimas often continue to feel the need to prove the authenticity of their choice to themselves, their community, and religious authority long after embracing Islam. Calling on a notion of authenticity in conversion therefore provides strength and legitimacy to the stories of converted women. The question of authenticity was important in my field research in several ways. First, conversion was often considered ‘valid’ only if the choice was made ‘authentically’—the level of which was often explicitly or implicitly judged by the religious community concerned. Second, on a conceptual level, the question of authenticity offers a way to understand the constructed norms and boundary-making processes of religious communities interacting with individuals seeking to join the group. The way in which authenticity is performed and negotiated is not merely a cognitive process, but is also embodied. This is the final aspect of my conceptualisation of conversion.

1.3.3 Conversion and the Body

For a long time, a definition of religion dominated that considered personal belief to be more important than practice—hence the common definition of conversion as a change in belief. Meyer (2006, 27) called this the ‘Protestant bias’ in the study of religion and criticised the prioritisation of belief in religious studies, stating: ‘In order to account for the richness and complexity of religious experience, we need theoretical approaches that can account for its material, bodily, sensational and sensory dimension.’ Such a perspective towards religion thus focuses on its material and bodily aspects, including the study of religious experience through the use of ritual objects. Following this critique, conversion cannot be understood to reflect

(only) a change in mental state or worldview (Rambo and Farhadian 2014; Sachs Norris 2003; Winchester 2008). Instead, it is a material and embodied process.

One of the most cited material expressions of conversion refers to conversion rituals in religious communities. Many religious traditions include a rite of passage or set ritual acknowledging the new relationship between the convert, the faith, and the community. Examples of these rituals are the recital of the *shahada* in Islam; meeting the *beit din* and the subsequent ritual bath (*mikvah*) in Judaism; and baptism in the Christian tradition. These rituals are often a very important moment for converts, although their impact and standard might vary in different contexts. In recent decades, scholars of conversion have come to understand that, contrary to popular belief, conversion does not end with the official ritual or event (Chong 2006; Kent 2014; Mossière 2016). Instead, it encompasses a variety of embodied practices. However, such a focus on religious practices should not, according to McGuire (1982, 49), eliminate the importance of a belief system, as conversion often does indeed imply a change in worldview, or a ‘transformation of self concurrent with a transformation of one’s central meaning system’. I follow McGuire in this regard and consider beliefs as shaped through bodily practices. This problematises the separation of beliefs and practices, or mind and body, suggesting instead that beliefs are expressed and experienced through material forms.

My approach to the body and embodiment has primarily been informed by gender studies. I follow Sarah-Jane Page and Katy Pilcher (2021, 1–2), who argue: ‘One’s gender and sexual identity are fundamental to how one experiences religious practices and beliefs, structuring and shaping this engagement in profound ways.’ Bodies, they suggest, are not isolated, but instead bound temporally, spatially, and to specific ‘projects of the self’ (Page and Pilcher 2021, 8). Such a perspective can further the understanding of conversion as an embodied process instead of a change in worldview. Writing about this, Eliza Kent (2014, 319) suggested: ‘One of the most important contributions of feminist scholarship on conversion has been to demonstrate incontrovertibly that religious conversion entails not merely a change of worldview or ethos, but a change in lifeworld.’ Kent argues that focusing on conversion from a feminist perspective is beneficial for the whole of conversion studies, including, but not limited to, those working at the intersection of religion and gender. Indeed, in this dissertation I take a similar approach. My interlocutors formed their sense of religious self via sensory experiences related to movement, sounds, or food, but also through equally embodied emotions.

Similar to my approach to self-making, I recognise that embodiment is related to power relations. Page and Pilcher (2021) take a social constructivist approach to point out that religious embodiments are shaped by power relations and body politics. This question of body politics is important because this is where religion and the secular are often thought to be different. Secularists often claim that traditional religious discourses regulate and control bodies, whilst the secular provides a supposedly neutral zone through which bodies are

allowed to move and express themselves as they please. Religious embodiment takes place within these broader power structures and converted women are often confronted with questions related to these (supposedly) different body politics. As such, conversion relates to the body on several levels: It is a process of bodily training and embodied practices, as well as a negotiation of body politics.

To conclude this conceptual discussion, I consider religious conversion as a process of self-making that is relational, embodied, and related to power structures. It is also a process of negotiation by which converts—in my case, women—draw on different ethical frameworks in order to form a coherent sense of self. They do so via different practices in everyday life, as well as in relation to authorities. I also emphasised that religion, and therefore conversion, is inherently gendered. My approach to gender is not merely about studying women. Rather, it critically analyses how gender plays into conversion and how religious subjects give meaning to their religious selves via gender, and vice-versa. The methodology I employed to study these conversion processes is similarly indebted to insights from gender studies and religious studies. More concretely, I take a feminist ethnographical and lived religion approach. One of the most important contributions from feminist methodologies is related to questions of positionality. Doing ethnography, the body of the researcher is the most important research instrument, and this role is central in the construction of knowledge. The next section reflects on my role as a researcher and my methodological approach.

1.4 Observing the Observant: Feminist Methodology

This section describes my methodology and functions as a bridge between the conceptual approach discussed above, and the practicalities of fieldwork that follow in section 1.5. It also offers the background for certain choices I made in my analysis and methods. Why, for example, ask about someone's food practices when studying religion? How did my own religiosity affect the relationship with my interlocutors? Three methodologies describe my approach: First, I employ a feminist ethnography, which is related to questions of my own position and my role in participant observation. Second is the 'lived religion' approach, which is partly informed by feminist scholarship. Third, since I focus on three case studies, there are some brief reflections on comparative ethnography.

1.4.1 Positionality and Participation

Doing ethnography, Adriaan van Klinken (2020, 24) wrote, 'is an embodied and relational practice'—a description that fits with my experience too. It has become quite common to reflect on the bodily nature of fieldwork and the impact of the position of the researcher on the field. Here feminist scholars have been at the vanguard (Pereira 2017; Wekker 2006).

Most important was the critique of women of colour to hegemonic feminist movements and research:

Feminists of color and lesbian and queer feminists have articulated critiques, largely targeting white, liberal, heterosexual feminism, that question who and what feminist theory includes and excludes, how, and to whose benefit. (Avishai, Gerber, and Randles 2012, 396)

Such critique calls for scholars to be accountable for their research project, to be critical of hegemonic epistemologies, and to pay attention to marginalised groups that have not always been part of academia. Methodological reflexivity and positionality are now common in research projects. Many research papers and books include a paragraph about the position of the researcher in the introduction: ‘As a white, Dutch, middle-class, able-bodied, queer identifying, cisgender woman...’ Van Klinken (2020, 23), however, doubts the value of such statements, writing:

The meanings of these terms cannot be taken for granted, and simply using them says little about how I understand them, how they affect my identity and subjectivity, and how they affect the ways in which I conduct my research and relate to research participants.

I recognise his doubts towards expressing positionality in this way, which sometimes appears to be more like a ‘disclaimer’. If one is committed to feminist scholarship, then accountability for the role of the researcher should be integrated into the whole of the research, not just in one sentence with presumably meaningful identity markers. Yet, simultaneously, in academic publications such as dissertations, the story ultimately is about the research participants, unless of course one is writing an autoethnography. This leads to a dilemma for many authors about where and how to include personal encounters. Furthermore, feminist ethnographers often have a double commitment: ‘[a] political commitment to advance progressive social change through research and a methodological commitment to prioritize our subjects’ voices’ (Avishai, Gerber, and Randles 2013, 395). These two aims can sometimes be a cause of tension, when, for example, views or practices in the field clash with feminist perspectives. Such a situation leads to what Avishai, Gerber, and Randles (2013, 395) call the feminist ethnographer’s dilemma: ‘What do you do when your feminist politics clash with your empirical findings?’ This dilemma is pertinent for feminist scholars studying gender conservative groups, such as Orthodox Jewish women (Avishai 2008) or ‘ex-gays’ in Evangelicalism (Gerber 2011). I experience this dilemma in my own fieldwork, where views towards gender (such as the idealisation of ‘male headship’ by Christian women) and sexuality (such as the rejection of same-sex sexuality by some interlocutors in all groups) often contradicted my personal perspectives. However, in our conversations, my aim was to

understand rather than challenge the views and experiences of my interlocutors. This enabled insight into the complexity and ambivalence of such ‘conservative’ views, which were furthermore not shared univocally by all interlocutors. Personal reflections from ethnographic encounters will be part of the text whenever this was relevant. These were mainly instances where I experienced some form of tension, either related to this feminist ethnographer’s dilemma or my own positionality.

Whenever asked by those I met during my fieldwork, I was open about my own (lack of) religious upbringing and beliefs.⁵ This had a different impact in the three different groups of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim converts and their communities. This was not only related to my self-identification, but also in my ability to participate in certain rituals or events. I recall the first time I visited a service in a synagogue, which includes a lot of rituals and movements. In my notes, I reflected on the fact that I was busier trying to keep up with whether I should be sitting or standing and figuring out when to face the Arc with the Torah scrolls, than with participant observation. However, by attending these services more frequently, I learned how to move and, at least to a certain extent, how to fit in with the community. Struggling with the movements required in the synagogue is one example of how I stood out as an outsider, as well as how the bodily training of religious skills can be part of fieldwork. This also enabled me to come close to the experiences of my interlocutors, who all expressed a similar confusion the first time they attended *shul*. This shows the value of participant observation over several months, adding a level of bodily learning to the somewhat more disembodied and formal interview settings. Not identifying with a particular religious tradition or community enabled me to embody the position of an outsider, which offered a sense of safety to some who might not have felt able to share their stories with an insider. Yet, equally, that same outsider position might have had the effect that participants did not feel able to share everything, or they used other language than they would amongst community members.

At times, my noticeable lack of religious skills and affiliation resulted in the hope amongst my interlocutors that I might convert. This was especially true of my Pentecostal Christian participants. In that setting in particular, I was most similar to other potential converts, because of my regular church attendance, my involvement in activities, my age, and my gender. This meant that I was not just seen as a researcher, but rather I fitted the profile of potential converts, which are often women in their twenties. The wish for me to convert came up frequently. This is not new in the field, as many other ethnographers in Pentecostal groups have encountered the often strong evangelising tendencies within the communities they study.

⁵ My father was raised Roman Catholic, whilst my mother was raised a Protestant, however, both disaffiliated when they were young adults and my siblings and I were raised without a religion. I have never felt opposed to religion and would now see myself more as agnostic and humanist, rather than affiliated with one group in particular. During my research, I replied I was agnostic whenever asked. I did not particularly seek to convert myself, but I was, to some extent, open to the experience and not actively resisting religion (which might have made it impossible to do this research anyway).

An important and still relevant example comes from Susan Harding (1987, 171), who did extensive research on Evangelical Christianity and reflected on her position:

I was naïve enough to think I could be detached, that I could participate in the culture I was observing without partaking of it. I could come and stay for months, talk mainly to church people, attempt to ‘learn the language’, ask questions based on respect and knowledge; and still remain outside, separate, obscure about what I believed and disbelieved. But there was no such ground. I might think there was, but they did not, no matter what I said. It was inconceivable to them that anyone with an appetite for the gospel as great as mine was simply ‘gathering information’, was just there ‘to write a book’. No, I was ‘searching’.

According to Harding, anthropologists ideally occupy an in-between position: neither insider to the group, nor a complete outsider. Whilst proper preparation is crucial, the negotiation of distance is a continuing practice of fieldwork that demands flexibility. I recognise Harding’s experience that in the Pentecostal fieldwork setting, there was less of a middle-ground or in-between position. Indeed, in my fieldwork there was an expectation of a quick conversion. Even though I always explained my interest as academic, this was conceived as a first step that would ultimately lead to my conversion. However, this was different for Miranda Klaver (2011b), who also studied Pentecostal churches, but was considered a believer herself. Klaver (2011b, 38) wrote in her PhD dissertation:

Especially in the study of a conversionist religion like evangelicalism, whether or not the researcher is perceived as a genuine believer has profound consequences for one’s position in the field. Since I was able to present myself as a believer as I knew the language codes and accompanied behavior practices, I was refrained [sic] from being viewed and approached as a potential convert as Susan Harding has described.

I initially felt uneasy with my inability to be a researcher, rather than a ‘seeker’, in the eyes of many Christian interlocutors. However, I gradually understood that for many, spreading the gospel was a central moral obligation and they would always wish for me to convert. I eventually began to feel bad for some of my core interlocutors, because of my continuous resistance to accept the ‘truth’ in my heart. This caused a degree of tension and I felt it necessary to elaborate on my position regularly, either because it felt appropriate, or because other church members asked me about my status. Even though I had said ‘I was open to the experience’, I must confess that ultimately, I was resistant to the constant evangelisation. After a few months, this also created distance between myself and some interlocutors, because the conversion experience was an important means via which to be fully included in the

community. Not having this experience made me an outsider towards the end of the fieldwork, whilst I was initially perceived as one of them.

These dynamics were less prevalent in the Jewish and Muslim communities in which I did my fieldwork. I only recall a few instances where Muslim interlocutors expressed such a wish for me to convert. Fatima, for example, said: ‘I hope it might inspire you too. Because, you see, that’s in the end the most beautiful thing. To see others be inspired by Islam.’ In the case of Islam, my difference was visibly marked by my lack of a *hijab*, which most (but not all) Muslim women wore. Moreover, most Muslim interlocutors were used to the presence of non-Muslim, primarily white, university researchers or journalists. Recent years have seen a vast increase in research on Muslim women, often undertaken by non-Muslims, from undergraduate level to senior scholars (see chapter four for more reflections on this). Most of my Muslim interlocutors knew that researchers were going around in their communities, although not everyone had encountered someone or given an interview before meeting me.

In the Jewish case study, my role was different again. Judaism does not know formal evangelisation⁶ and I was never encouraged to become Jewish myself. The Jewish community tends to be rather small and close-knit, and more focused on family and heritage than the other two settings. Because I am white and have a last name that is shared by some in the Jewish community, many people I met were curious to know if I had a Jewish background myself—for example, if I was related to Emile Schrijver, the director of the Jewish Cultural Quarter in Amsterdam (to be clear, I am not). There was a general curiosity as to why I decided to study ‘them’, but the Jewish interlocutors were often satisfied with my explanation of academic interest. Moreover, because I had to register before attending a synagogue, the board and most members had already been made aware of the presence of a researcher. These factors meant that I was often welcomed with open arms, but the question of becoming Jewish myself was never on the table. In fact, many were happy to share their stories with an outsider who guaranteed their anonymity, because they did not want to disclose to their community that they had converted. For some, this was the first time they openly discussed their experiences. One important exception to this openness to participate in the research were rabbis from Orthodox Jewish communities. I interviewed four non-Orthodox rabbis, but my requests to meet with a rabbi from an Orthodox community received no responses, even if someone had introduced me via their personal network. This could be because the issue of conversion (*giyur*) is a more difficult process and less spoken about in Orthodox communities, which might make Orthodox rabbis more hesitant to discuss it with a non-Jewish outsider.

⁶ An exception are certain Chasidic movements, such as Chabad (also called Lubavitch), which are known to evangelise amongst non-observant or secular Jews (mainly in the United States) in order to bring them ‘into the fold’. This is sometimes called conversion, but is not directed at non-Jews who want to join Judaism (Davidman 1993).

These examples show how my positionality and participation in the field impacted my relationship with my research participants. This was related to my self-identification, but even more so to the role I embodied in the field and the way in which I grew familiar with certain practices. Participating and observing at the same time meant a negotiation of my own in-between position, and a balancing act between closeness and distance to my fieldwork. This was a matter of self-positioning (by introducing myself as a researcher), as well as relating to the position I was assigned by those in the community. By partaking in their communities, and subsequently meeting most interlocutors in their homes, I was able to study the everyday religious lives of the people I met. This perspective of ‘lived religion’ forms the second part of my methodology.

1.4.2 Lived Religion

The ethnographic ‘lived religion’ approach enables a recognition of religion outside of its formal institutions. The methodological shift to look at ‘religion-as-lived’ (McGuire 2007, 187), ‘everyday religion’ (Ammerman 2007), or ‘lived religion’ (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Neitz 2011) is a bottom-up approach grounded in the everyday experiences and practices of (mainly) lay people. This broadens the study of religion, which has often focused on official structures of authority, and as such disproportionately included white, cisgender men. The idea is eloquently expressed in the following excerpt of Nancy Ammerman’s (2007, 5) introduction to her book *Everyday Religion*:

To start from the everyday is to privilege the experience of nonexperts, the people who do not make a living being religious or thinking and writing about religious ideas. This does not mean that ‘official’ ideas are never important, only that they are most interesting to us once they get used by someone other than a professional.

The approach to lived religion mirrors the study of religion and gender, as well as feminist anthropology (e.g., Lewin 2006; Pereira 2017). A focus on the everyday enables the inclusion of the voices of people who have historically been excluded from officially sanctioned representative roles, such as cisgender women, transgender people, queer people, and people of colour. The lived religion approach makes a move towards everyday and domestic religion—traditionally the space in which women’s ideal roles are situated (McGuire 2008, 164; see also Berlis, Korte, and Biezeveld 2017; Nynäs and Yip 2016). This is why, starting from the ‘messiness’ of everyday life can be, in my view, a feminist undertaking. This does not mean that dogma, institutions, or public discourses are separate from those experiences. Courtney Bender (2011, 282) writes: ‘The question of the everyday always engages issues of social power, in particular the ways that “daily” practices (from the most fleeting to the most central) reproduce and naturalize systems of distinction and domination.’ In my research, I

wanted to understand this relation between the local, the individual, and the broader societal and academic structures and discourses (Buckser and Glazier 2003, 9). This leads to a form of grounded theory in which everyday religious practices form the basis from which to rethink concepts such as gender, conversion, the secular, and religion. In my case, this is even more complicated, since I compare experiences of women who joined three different religious settings.

1.4.3 Comparative Qualitative Research

Most of the existing comparative literature on gender and religion in Europe tends to focus on Muslims and Christians, and primarily consists of quantitative studies (e.g., Adameczyk and Hayes 2012; Koopmans, 2015; Norris and Inglehart 2012). Qualitative and especially ethnographic research has the potential, not only to complement, but also to add a critical perspective to this existing quantitative research focus (van der Veer 2016). Yet, comparative ethnographic work on different religious groups has up to now remained underdeveloped. The qualitative study of contemporary religion continues to be characterised by disciplinary boundaries between scholarship on different religious communities (Davidsen 2020, 219; Janson and Meyer 2016). Part of the hesitancy to engage in comparison relates to the critique of systematic generalising theories of religion that do not account for the particularities of religious groups (Stausberg 2011, 22–26). This led to a paradigm in which individual researchers are expected to be experts in one area or religion, with limited theoretical exchange between the different fields.

However, a comparative analysis does not necessarily have to stand in the way of particularity and variety. The aim of my comparative approach is not to offer generalised analyses based on top-down, seemingly clearly defined categorisations such as ‘religion’ (cf. Davidsen 2020), nor do I propose a systematic comparative analysis of a pre-determined category of ‘conversion’. Instead, my comparative practice is ‘bottom up, from the particular case to the larger picture’ (Rakow 2020a, 257). Doing so, Van der Veer (2016) suggests, enables the investigation of, and reflection on, the categories used in religious studies and gender studies. In my dissertation, I analyse how conversion takes place in the daily lives of religious people and how this concept gains its meaning in different contexts. As such, rather than offering generalisations or sweeping statements, comparison has the potential to undercut essentialisms by ‘pointing to diversity and variety’ (Stausberg 2011, 29). This form of comparison, Oliver Freiberger (2019, 1) argues, is ‘indispensable for a deeper understanding of what we call religion’.

The research by Dutch anthropologist Daan Beekers (2015, 2021) is an example of such a bottom-up approach. Beekers is one of the few researchers who has undertaken extensive ethnographic fieldwork on multiple religious groups—specifically young adult Muslims and Christians—in the Netherlands. Beekers draws on the anthropology of both Islam and Christianity in order to compare the experiences of these young adults. According

to Beekers (2015, 53), a comparative approach ‘makes it possible to compare trends and developments within these groups when it comes to their forms and manifestations of religiosity’. I agree with Beekers’ call to bring different fields together in the study of religion, and not to isolate one religious group from another. This also resonates with Katja Rakow’s (2020a, 261) reflections about her ethnographic research amongst Western Buddhists and Evangelical Christians in the United States (see also Emling and Rakow 2014): ‘The comparative angle prompted me to make sense of my findings not by explaining it as a particular feature of religion, but as religious practices and discourses shaped by larger socio-cultural processes that effect religious and secular practices alike.’

In a similar approach, I compare the experiences of women who became Jewish, Christian, and Muslim in order to understand religious conversion and gender in relation to the larger socio-cultural context that shapes such experiences. I consider a comparative approach to be especially fruitful to better understand how gender, sexuality, and belonging are experienced in the everyday lives of newly religious people and how experiences between groups differ. This focus means that I do not study my interlocutors’ entire lives—indeed, their work life, childhood, politics, digital spaces, hobbies, or cultural productions are discussed only when relevant to understanding their religious and gendered self-making. What my interlocutors share is that they were largely socialised without a religion, and chose to join Judaism, Christianity, or Islam later in life. In my research outline, this comparative approach comes up in different ways: in the type of questions asked, in the methods used, the analytical focus, and the structure of the dissertation itself. Concretely, I used the same methods and approach in all three case studies, but adapted these to the features of the different fieldwork locations. How this played out practically in my research is discussed in the subsequent section.

1.5 Research Methods

Between 2017 and 2019, I visited several synagogues, churches, and mosques as part of my fieldwork. I interviewed forty women, several religious leaders, and spoke to numerous other converted women in informal meetings. With some women I developed strong relationships and rapport, especially with those I met frequently over the course of several months and who became key interlocutors. I used two main methods: participant observation and in-depth interviews. Participant observation provided me a context and wider perspective on the lives of my interlocutors whilst also allowing me to meet more women, to talk to them informally, and to become acquainted with the process of conversion in each community. This approach yields another layer to the often more formal interview setting. Furthermore, interviews are always retrospective: Events are reconstructed in relation to current convictions, the groups in which someone is active, and wider societal developments (van Nieuwkerk 2008, 2014). As

such, these narratives and life stories form a negotiation of the people themselves and the dominant sociocultural contexts in which they live (Longman 2008). This, in combination with participant observation (during which I took numerous notes that I later worked out in fieldwork reports), enabled me to understand conversion in the context of this interplay between the community and the individual. It also offered insights into the construction of certain conversion narratives that were dominant in the different settings. I consider these stories, which often focus on motivations, as part of the conversion trajectory itself and the telling of such stories as part of everyday religion (McGuire 2007, 187; Ganzevoort, de Haardt, and Scherer-Rath 2013). In our conversations, many interlocutors expected me to ask about their motivations and often began their story describing such factors. I find it important to emphasise that, because conversion is a varied process that cannot be captured or explained by any single factor, I include these stories in my dissertation only in their reflective capacity and not as explanations.

Participant observation was one of the primary means via which to meet the women and schedule interviews. Those I met then introduced me to others (also called the snowball method). Others I met via online calls or my own personal network. Whenever I wished to attend a meeting for participant observation, I always introduced myself as a researcher. The interviews were held after signing an informed consent form. In participant observation, such consent was more difficult. In those cases, I contacted the organisers or religious leaders of the event to explain my role and motives. Whenever I had an informal conversation, I mentioned as early as possible that I was a researcher. In smaller groups, everyone knew, but in larger meetings such as church services, it was not possible to notify every individual. These informal encounters informed my analyses of the broader research setting, however, the people cited or described in this dissertation were all fully informed. For the sake of anonymity, all names have been changed, as well as the names of congregations and exact locations of those I met. I always asked my interlocutors how they wished to be anonymised and if there was something they would prefer to be omitted. This was because, especially in small communities, they best knew themselves what would make them identifiable. Thus, where necessary, I made changes according to their wishes.

The comparative outline meant that I often undertook fieldwork in three settings at the same time. As such, I did not isolate one group, but studied them alongside each other. This also shaped my focus and drew me to issues that might otherwise have escaped my attention. To recall a previous example: When I was confronted with the difficulty of learning how to move during synagogue services, I began to look more closely how newcomers in Islamic or Christian services acted and moved. Similarly, because I had seen how men and women interact in Islamic or Jewish congregations, I noticed how different the Christian setting was, where there is a lot of hugging and other amicable contact between men and women. This meant that the comparison did not only occur after I had 'returned' from the field and began to structurally analyse my data, but rather formed a central part of my participant observation.

I used the same topic list for all interviewees and asked questions in an open manner. This list consisted of several themes related to my research, such as the conversion process (e.g., motivations, rituals); the community (e.g., inclusion, belonging, friendship); and religious daily practices (e.g., prayer, food, dress). These first questions were used to give a more general overview of the stories of my interlocutors. I aimed to focus the second half of the interview on gender, with topics such as ideas about gender difference; women's roles and tasks; and sexuality. More often, however, these issues came up organically and many interlocutors brought up topics of gender and sexuality themselves. In this open way the interviews often took the form of a conversation, rather than adhering to a clear question and answer structure. At the start of the interviews, I explained my motives and encouraged my interlocutors to talk about what they found important, and to correct me if I said something wrong. In closing, I stressed once again that they could always contact me if they wanted to rectify something, and that I would notify them when the dissertation was published. Only one person, a church leader, asked a few days after our meeting not to use a certain part of our interview.

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed (with informed consent) either by myself or a research assistant with whom I signed a confidentiality agreement. I made sure the data was stored and exchanged with the assistant in a safe and secure manner.⁷ My fieldwork notes are stored in a similarly secure way. All the research data was analysed using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, version 12 (2018). In this software, I first coded the texts with the themes that came up in the interviews to allow a open interpretation based on what my interlocutors found important. In the second round, I added terms based on my research outline and coded the interviews and fieldwork notes accordingly. These codes were largely the same for all three cases to support my further comparative analysis. The only adjustments made to codes per case study were intended to make them applicable. For example, 'gender roles in the mosque' was changed to 'gender roles in the synagogue' for the Jewish case study, and so on. The outcomes of the first round of coding led me to topics that I had initially not expected. One example is the sixth chapter of this dissertation on questions of belonging. This was not part of my initial research outline, but throughout my analysis it appeared as such a central topic for all case studies that I felt the need to dedicate a separate chapter to the subject. Having explained my approach, methods, and analytical tools, it is now time to introduce the women with whom I met and the spaces I visited. In the final section of this chapter, I give some brief information about my interlocutors, the three case studies themselves and the type of research material that resulted from them.

⁷ In the early years of the project, data was stored on the encrypted SURFdrive. At the time of writing, Utrecht University has developed its own safe data storage called Yoda, which is where the data is currently stored. Access is closed to everyone but myself, and the data will remain private indefinitely (Schrijvers 2020).

1.5.1 Fieldwork Setting and Interlocutors

It is difficult to give an exact number of women converts I met over the course of my fieldwork. I interviewed forty interlocutors, however, the total number of converts I met is at least twice this figure. In this section, as in my following chapters, I will focus my analysis on the interlocutors with whom I spoke longer and more frequently, such as those who participated in the interviews. This group had an age range from 20 to 72. The majority, but not all, were of white Dutch descent. They came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. I did not find a clear correlation between socio-economic strata and the three groups, interlocutors in all groups showed a range in family background, work status, and education. However, the issue of class is not dominant in this dissertation because I focused my analyses on gender, sexuality, national belonging, and religion. In terms of gender and sexuality, the vast majority identified as (cisgender⁸) woman, with one Jewish interlocutor identifying as genderqueer. My main analysis examined the ways in which gender played into the lives of women, which meant that this final interlocutor's story was included as a means to gain insight into the wider Jewish context, rather than in the analyses of 'women's experiences', since they did not identify as such. This participant also identified as queer in terms of their sexuality. Two women identified as lesbian, whilst the others all identified as heterosexual. An overview with some general information about the participants can be found in appendix B. This also includes the dates of the interviews.

Other people who did not convert, but were raised with a religion, are sometimes introduced in this dissertation. The common manner to refer to these people is as being 'born' Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. However, this does not suggest that those born into a religion do not experience forms of religious transformation. Rather, it is merely a pragmatic choice and a way to differentiate between my main interlocutors and members of their community who were raised within a given religion. In a similar vein, I refer to people who were not raised with a religion and did not convert, as 'non-religious'. This reflects the way in which my main interlocutors referred to others—usually their families and friends. This is, however, not a matter of self-definition, since I usually did not speak to these people myself. My interlocutors used the Dutch terminology '*niet religieus*' (non-religious), '*ongelovig*' (non-believing), or (to a lesser degree) '*seculier*' (secular) interchangeably. Whilst I am aware of some academic discussions about the use of the term 'non-religion' (e.g., Lee 2015; Wiering 2020, 34–41) I stress that my use of this terminology reflects my ethnographic encounters.

The different case studies will be thoroughly introduced in the following chapters, but I will offer some first insight into these communities here, starting with the Jewish case study. Contrary to popular belief, it is not impossible to become Jewish without having a Jewish

⁸ The term cisgender points towards someone whose gender identity matches their gender assigned at birth, and is the antonym of the adjective 'transgender'. Although my interlocutors usually did not use this terminology, I do find it important to clarify that the vast majority of this group of women were cisgender.

mother, although it is not encouraged and is often a highly individual process. Jewish conversion is called *giyur*, and those aspiring to become Jewish are referred to as *giyur* candidates: *ger* (male) or *giyoret* (female). Most interlocutors preferred the term *giyur* over ‘conversion’ which, for them, was associated with Christianity. In English, a common term used to describe those who did *giyur* was ‘Jews by choice’, however, this term was not used in my fieldwork (cf. Kravel-Tovi 2019). Many participants described their *giyur* as intense, life altering, and at times difficult. It often takes years of classes, self-study, and participation in the synagogue for candidates to become familiar with Jewish practices and rituals. An important difference with the other case studies is that Jewishness is not a self-assigned status. A rabbinic court (*beit din*) ultimately determines if candidates are formally allowed to join the Jewish people and religion. Although Judaism is a community-based religion, *giyur* is often experienced as a solitary endeavour, especially because there is a widely shared taboo to speak about conversion within the congregation. Moreover, there are many synagogues that only hold services twice a month. This meant that the possibility of participant observation was limited, but also that conversion itself was experienced more as an individual trajectory. In total, I interviewed twenty converted Jewish interlocutors and five rabbis and experts, visiting different *shuls* at least once or twice. The women came from different types of Judaism. As I will explain in chapter two, I divided these into three (rather than the more common two) groups: Modern Orthodox Judaism; Dutch Liberal Judaism (*Liberaal Joodse Gemeente*, LJG), which is in form similar to what is called Conservative Judaism in the United States; and Progressive Judaism, which captures non-Orthodox communities outside of the LJG. Although internationally, the last two are often both called Progressive, and although the LJG also belongs to the World Union for Progressive Judaism, in the next chapter I argue why their difference is relevant for the Dutch case. Six interlocutors did their *giyur* in an Orthodox community; eight in a Liberal, LJG, community; and six in another Progressive (non-LJG) community. Of these twenty, the *giyurs* of three women (two Orthodox and one Progressive) were not yet certified by a rabbinic court during the time of my fieldwork.

The role of community was very different in the neo-Pentecostal Christian churches of my fieldwork, not least as the very rationale of these types of Evangelical church is to convert people and grow the community. Here, my interlocutors used the terminology of *bekering* (conversion) to describe their experiences. Conversion was often represented as a shift from being oriented towards the ‘worldly life of sins’ to the ‘life of God’, whilst some also spoke of ‘inviting Jesus into your heart’. In contrast to this common discourse in the church, the everyday experiences of my interlocutors pointed towards a more gradual process. Their participation in church and their religious self-making often went hand in hand and the process of conversion was supported and structured in the community. Usually, several months separated first attending church and baptism. Whilst baptism itself indicated full inclusion in the church, often women recalled that their conversion occurred prior to the

actual event. Evangelism was, as is characteristic of such groups, a central moral endeavour and newcomers were encouraged to convert during each service. Furthermore, because of the importance of testimony, a convincing conversion narrative was a means to belong to the community, often following the same narrative pattern. Converting in this context, whilst often described as a change in belief, indicated a particular embodied performance of ‘having received the Holy Spirit’, both during church and in everyday life. I undertook ten months of extensive participant observation in three Hillsong-affiliated neo-Pentecostal churches, where I joined in weekly Sunday service and extra services during the week. In addition, I participated in a weekly Bible study group and joined in with activities such as weekend workshops and conferences. During these meetings, I had many informal conversations (numbering in total around forty participants) with women who were not raised with a religion, but chose to convert later in life. Sixteen of them are cited in this dissertation but all encounters informed the broader analyses. Additionally, I had in-depth interviews with eight converted women, as well as three female pastors and church leaders.

Most Muslim interlocutors used the term ‘conversion’ (*bekering*) but also expressed a degree of hesitation, preferring the terminology of ‘becoming Muslim’ or ‘embracing Islam’ instead. Many new Muslim women started practising Islam and identifying as Muslim privately. The ritual of conversion, 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 and this included, for example, wearing the *hijab*, doing prayers during workhours, or eating *halal*. Yet whilst conversion in this context was often initially a private undertaking, many converts later sought out communities. These included mixed groups of born and converted Muslims, but there are also an increasing number of groups catering specifically for converted men and women. In this case study, I interviewed seven converted Muslim women, all of whom practiced a form of Sunni Islam, and attended meetings at mosques and the annual National Converts Days (*Nationale Bekeerlingendag*). This is, however, far less than in the other two case studies. The reasons for this are twofold: First, it was simply not possible to undertake three case studies of the same size during the time allocated for my PhD research. The second, and more significant reason is that a lot of research is already available about Muslim converts. The study of conversion in general has also been significantly impacted by research about converted Muslimas. In contrast, there is hardly any knowledge about women converting to Judaism outside of Israel or the United States. Similarly, research about gender and conversion in Pentecostalism is sparse, even though, as I noted above, conversion used to be primarily associated with Christianity. It is for this reason that I decided to focus my fieldwork on these latter two groups to see what such a perspective might add to the dominant focus on Muslim converts, with the addition of my own interviews with converted Muslimas. In the following chapters, I first explore conversion and gender in Judaism in chapter two and Christianity in chapter three, returning to the subject of female converts to Islam in chapter four.

Chapter 2
Women Becoming Jewish
‘Daughter of Avraham ve’Sarah’

Becoming Jewish is not just about religion. Becoming Jewish means that you become part of the Jewish People, you become a partner in Jewish history, which becomes *your* history. It's a language, it's a culture. It's an enormous spectrum of things.

—Bracha

Becoming Jewish is not because you want to philosophise about who God is, and all of that. The Orthodox don't care about that. What matters is that you're willing to live Orthodox, to *live* Jewish.

—Channah

Over the course of my research, twenty interlocutors told me about their process of becoming Jewish. Its meaning, implications, and how the women concerned reflected upon it, varied enormously. However, most agreed that Judaism cannot simply be captured by the word 'religion', and that becoming a Jewish woman encompasses far more than a narrow interpretation of 'conversion' can capture if it were only understood as a shift in belief.⁹ Throughout history and across the world, people have converted to Judaism. The Netherlands is no exception and has been home to Jewish communities since the Middle Ages (Kruger 2006). At least in part, the remarkable resilience of Jewish groups to antisemitism, colonialism, and the *Shoah* (Holocaust) can be attributed to the emphasis on oral history and tradition within Jewish communities. The continuation of Jewish tradition in the face of persecution and diaspora can also be explained by an innate suspicion towards newcomers, or proselytes, and the clear management of group boundaries via Jewish law. Converting to Judaism can therefore be difficult, but it is far from impossible. Both men and women join Judaism throughout Israel and the wider Jewish diaspora, but up until now knowledge about the Dutch context is scarce.¹⁰ My interlocutors who became Jewish later in life all experienced their conversion trajectory, which is called *giyur*, as an intense, life altering, and at times difficult experience. Becoming Jewish, as one rabbi put it, 'is not about knowing

⁹ The term 'conversion' is often used in English academic discourse. This term is sometimes used to refer to secular *halachic* Jews who begin to observe Orthodox Jewish religious tradition and as such 'convert' to Orthodoxy (Davidman 1991, 219). In the Netherlands, the term conversion is often not used for that, but refers instead to people born without a *halachic* Jewish status. My interlocutors said '*gioer doen*' ('doing *giyur*'), '*uitgekomen als Joods*' ('coming out as Jewish', e.g., Stratton 2000) or '*Joods worden*' ('becoming Jewish'). Born Jews who become orthodox are called *ba'ale teshuva*, returnees. The English term 'Jews by choice' was not used in Dutch.

¹⁰ There are only a few publications about Jewish conversion in the Netherlands. Most notable are the Dutch book *Joods worden in Nederland* (Becoming Jewish in the Netherlands) by rabbi Hannah Nathans (2021); The PhD research by Minny Mock-Degen about Dutch born Jewish women who 'return' to Orthodoxy (2009); And the autobiography *Just Jew It* by Suzanne van Bokhoven (2009, see also van den Brandt 2020)

Judaism, it's about feeling Jewish', which connotes a form of identity that is learnt as well as embodied. Even though Judaism traditionally limits the responsibility of religious learning solely to men, this mainly concerns scriptural learning. Women, too, often have to undertake several years of classes or self-study, connected to participation in their (future) synagogue. Furthermore, self-identification is not enough to be recognised as Jewish. After years of study, a rabbinical court finally decides whether converts can become part of the Jewish people and religion (Angel 2009; Finkelstein 2006).

There are newcomers in all Jewish denominations¹¹, and for this research I interviewed new Jewish women from three different types of communities: Orthodox communities connected to the *Nederlands Israelisch Kerkgenootschap* (NIK, 'Orthodox' going forward); communities connected to the non-Orthodox *Liberaal Joodse Gemeente* (LJG, 'Liberal'); and other non-LJG Progressive Jewish communities ('Progressive'). The role of gender difference seemed to be one of the most important experienced differences between Orthodox and non-Orthodox forms of Jewish life. Not only is there an impact in the decision to join one or another community, but notions of gender and sexuality also influence the whole process of conversion, from first attraction to continued learning, implementation, and practising of a 'Jewish life'. In line with the broader research questions of this dissertation, the main focus of this chapter is on negotiations of gender and sexuality in the process of conversion as self-making, on the interaction between the individual and community. A particular point of interest in the case studies that follow is their ability to reflect upon the tension between notions of authority and autonomy: How is 'being Jewish' decided, modelled, taught, and enacted? The theoretical lenses developed in the first chapter of this dissertation will be used to analyse women's experiences converting to Judaism. Two fields of tension will form the basis of my analysis. First are questions of authenticity and authority: Who decides who is authentically Jewish, and how do women negotiate such questions? Second is the tension between 'doing' and 'feeling' religion. Judaism has a strong ritualistic tradition, coupled with an embodied, 'lived' dimension. Yet simultaneously, many of the women in my study verbalised their motivations from intellectual and rationalised perspectives. In the specific context of conversion, it thus poses the question: What is the ideal type of Jewish convert, and how do women reflect upon these expectations? In all of the above contexts, gender and sexuality appeared as important topics of discussion.

During my fieldwork between 2017 and 2018, I interviewed nineteen converted Jewish women and one genderqueer person, ranging in age from twenty-two to seventy-five, with an average age of fifty. The time elapsed since their *giyurs* varied, and they became Jewish in different decades, the longest being a sixty-year-old woman who did her *giyur* forty

¹¹ The term denomination is used to refer to the different types of Jewish practice, law interpretation, and synagogues. This includes (but is not limited to) Modern Orthodox, Reform, Reconstructionist, Liberal, Progressive, Conservative, Masorti, and Haredi Judaism.

years ago at the age of twenty. Three participants were studying to become Jewish at the time of the interview, but had not gone through the official *giyur* ritual yet.¹² Almost all of my interlocutors lived and/or participated in a synagogue in the broad urban area known as the Randstad, with a focus on Amsterdam. Eight women did their *giyur* in a Liberal community, six in a Progressive synagogue, and six women had converted in an Orthodox community. Their current levels of religious participation varied, as some women who were initially Orthodox, are now active in a Liberal community—the converse also being true. In addition to the interviews with converted women themselves, I interviewed five Jewish authorities—one Orthodox professor and four non-Orthodox rabbis.¹³ In order not to harm their anonymity, no further details will be provided and I refer to them with gender neutral pronouns. In addition, I attended several *shul* (synagogue) services. In this chapter I first provide some more context to their individual stories, the Jewish community in the Netherlands in the following section. After that, I analyse the official and unofficial procedures of *giyur* and the way my interlocutors reflected on their process and motivations. I then explore the experiences of becoming Jewish in relation to gender discourses; the Jewish communities; the private sphere; and lastly, the body.

2.1 Judaism in the Netherlands

There are no clear statistics on the number of Jews currently in the Netherlands, let alone the number of converts. The discussion of ‘*Mi Jehudi?*’ or ‘Who is Jewish?’ is years, even centuries old, and is part of an ongoing schism between different varieties of Judaism (Evers 2010; Smelik 2011). According to Jewish law (*Halacha*), Jewish identity is given via matrilineal descent or via an approved *giyur*. There are many people with only a Jewish father who feel a profound connection to Judaism, but who are only accepted as Jewish in a minority of non-Orthodox communities. We know that the Nazis found three grandparents enough in order to consider an individual fully Jewish (de Haan 2010). Hence, the question of ‘Who is Jewish’ does not only impact the status of converts, but also potentially has far-reaching consequences for everyone related to Jewish people.

2.1.1 Dutch Judaism

In a research project conducted by the sociologist Marlene de Vries in 2004, those considered ‘Jewish’ were defined as people with either one or two Jewish parents. Based on this

¹² At the time of writing, in the Summer of 2021, two interlocutors (one Orthodox and one Progressive Jewish woman) told me that their *giyur* had been certified after my fieldwork. This chapter is based on the fieldwork and interviews prior to that.

¹³ All interviewed rabbis were non-Orthodox. I approached Orthodox rabbis numerous times, often with the help of my interlocutors, but received no, limited, or negative responses.

definition, De Vries (2004) estimated that, at the time of her study, there were between 41,000 and 45,000 Jewish people in the Netherlands. Of this group, around 30,000 people (70 per cent) were so-called *halachic* Jews, which means they have a Jewish mother or did a *giyur*, the rest had a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother (de Vries 2004). Another research project, this time conducted by the national welfare organisation for the Jewish community in the Netherlands (JMW), is the one most often referred to by Jewish organisations. The research estimated the population to be 52,000, or 0.3 per cent of the Dutch population (van Solinge and van Praag 2010). JMW used the definition that anyone with at least one Jewish parent can be considered a Jew.¹⁴ Both De Vries and JMW uphold a rather broad definition of Jewishness. According to the Organisation of Jewish Communities (*Nederlands Israelisch Kerkgenootschap*, NIK), which represents all Orthodox communities, ‘there are 30,000 Jews in the Netherlands’.¹⁵ Finally, there is the Dutch Union for Progressive Judaism, according to whom there are between 40,000 to 50,000 Jews, ‘depending on the definition used’.¹⁶ These differences between estimates is neither insignificant nor accidental, reflecting instead very particular interpretations of Jewishness. These interpretations of ‘*Mi Jehudi?*’ are crucial if we are to understand the separation between Orthodox, Liberal (meaning: LJG), and non-LJG Progressive Judaism, as well as the different conversion trajectories. Whichever definition is used, the population is starkly smaller than a century ago, especially when looking at the Jews who consider themselves to be ‘religiously active’, which is only between 7000 and 11,000 people. Today, the vast majority of religiously active Jews live in and around Amsterdam (*Mokum*), whilst a minority reside in the *Mediene* (outside of Amsterdam) in a total of 40 Jewish congregations.¹⁷

The *Shoah* had a devastating impact on Dutch Jewry. In the 1930s, the Jewish community included thriving middle- and upper-class citizens. It is estimated there were around 140,000 Jews prior to the Second World War (de Haan 2010), extending well beyond

¹⁴ Nine years earlier, in 2001, they undertook a similar research project and estimated the number to be 43,000, suggesting a growth of 21% in 2010 (van Solinge and de Vries 2001). This was not only a result of growth within the Jewish population, but also, according to JMW, the result of structural underestimations after the Second World War. Other explanations are the increase of the Israeli people in the Netherlands, but also the broader availability of Jewish knowledge and the slight increase in *giyur* (van Solinge and van Praag 2010).

¹⁵ This is in line with the findings of De Vries (2004), who estimated a similar number of *halachic* Jews, meaning those born to a Jewish mother or with a recognised *giyur*.

¹⁶ <https://www.ljgarnsterdam.nl/nl/joods-nederland>

¹⁷ Besides the different types of Judaism, there are variations amongst Ashkenazi, Sephardi, and Mizrahi Jews. Sephardim were present in the country since the fifteenth century, whilst Ashkenazim settled in the early seventeenth century, but grew quickly with the coming of German and Polish Jews (Michman 1999). Today, Ashkenazi Jews substantially outnumber Sephardic Jews. There is no specific Mizrahi synagogue in the Netherlands, and the Sephardi community consists of around six hundred people, which is five per cent of all practicing Jews in the Netherlands. This difference played only a marginal role in this research, as most interlocutors did not identify with either. It was mainly relevant for those with a Jewish family history: Two interlocutors identified as Sephardim via family lines and three as Ashkenazi, the rest did not specify.

the urban centres of the Netherlands. During the Nazi occupation, around 107,000 Jewish men, women, and children were deported by train to Germany and Poland. From the Dutch camp Westerbork, most were transferred to Auschwitz or Sobibor, where they were killed or perished due to illness, starvation, or forced labour. Following the defeat of the Nazi regime, only 5,500 of the deported Jews had survived and returned home, meaning that between seventy and seventy-five per cent of the Jewish population had been murdered (Burg 2009; Croes and Tamme 2004; Presser 1965). This left many synagogues empty, and what was left of Jewish religious and cultural life became focused in Amsterdam. Furthermore, many historians have noted how the threat and shame of being Jewish became internalised after the war—referred to as ‘Jewish self-hate’—and led many Jews to disguise their Jewish identity (de Haan 2010; Smelik 2011). As a result, the Jewish community in the Netherlands became very small and marginal. Many synagogues were closed, whilst others only had attendee numbers in the tens or hundreds (ten being the minimum number needed to hold a service). Each community responded in its own way to the immense trauma of the *Shoah*, and their desire to rebuild the community. Whereas some groups deemed it necessary to include people with only a Jewish father to ensure the continuation of the community, others saw the arrival of those without a Jewish mother as threatening to dilute ‘true’ Jewish identity (Michman 1999). However, the Jewish community has seen a steady growth since its near annihilation. One reason for the growth of the population is that more people discover their previously hidden Jewish ancestry and seek to explore and renew this bond of kinship. Another reason might be an increase in the number of converts without any kinship relations with Judaism. The approach towards *giyur* is an important marker of difference between Orthodox, Liberal and Progressive communities. In order to understand these differences, it is therefore important to first briefly explain conversion to Judaism.

2.1.2 Jewish Conversion

You know, it’s a strange phenomenon. [*sighs*] There are so many Jews that don’t do anything with Jewish life or who do not believe in God. Judaism is widely considered to be a culture, a People even. But if you want to become Jewish, you have to go to a *religious* authority. Whereas there are many people who might feel, live and act as Jewish but are not religious. That seems so unfair to me.

—Orthodox Jewish professor

I spoke to this Modern Orthodox Jewish professor several times during my research, who expressed the frustration shared by many converts. Even though believing in God¹⁸ is not

¹⁸ In Jewish communities, ‘God’ is sometimes referred to as Hashem, Adonai, Shechinah or The Eternal One. My interlocutors mainly used the word ‘God’, which is why I cite them accordingly. Many Jews prefer not to write the name of God and use G-d instead. Because this is an academic and not religious text, I did not follow

considered the most important factor of Jewish identity, converts have to go through a difficult process to show their authenticity to a religious court. It is not possible to ‘become a Jew secularly’ (Stratton 2000, 9), even though a large portion of Jewish people do not identify with a religious interpretation of Judaism. The term *chilonim* (secular Jews) is often used to refer to those Jewish people without any affiliation with the religious aspects of Judaism. Yet such individuals are considered Jewish via the *halachic* matrilineal understanding of Jewishness. It is clear that there is much more to Judaism than the term ‘religion’ can capture. Similarly to many other interlocutors, this professor considered Judaism a ‘complicated web of culture, religion, history and family life’. In fact, the most used official definition of *giyur* to ‘join the Jewish people and religion’ already points to the multi-layered understanding of Judaism. Becoming part of ‘the people’ implies a reconfiguration of kinship bonds and gaining a different sense of Jewish history and of the Holocaust (see chapter six), whilst becoming part of the ‘religion’ refers to the importance of observing the commandments, holidays, prayers, and morality. These aspects of ‘the people’ and ‘religion’ become indistinguishable from one another.

The paradox lies in the fact that the authority to deem someone rightfully Jewish (or not) lies with a rabbinical court (*beit din*). Converting to Judaism is not a matter of self-definition, as is the case in Islam and Christianity. Instead, *giyur* is a highly formalised and ritualised process in which only the *beit din* determines if a candidate (*giyoret*, female; *ger*, male; *gerim*, plural) is permitted to officially become Jewish. The road to Judaism is often rocky, because conversion is not encouraged. Furthermore, it is a taboo to talk about conversion amongst Jews. According to Jewish custom, it is improper to remind someone of their previous status as a ‘non-Jew’—a means to protect the person who had undergone *giyur*. As a consequence of this taboo, conversion can be a solitary and isolating experience.¹⁹ At the same time, it is highly relational because of the dependence on the rabbis involved. In many cases, the women I spoke to had been studying parts of Judaism for a long time before even encountering the possibility of conversion. What all conversion trajectories have in common, is that it formally starts by meeting a rabbi, and ends with a ritual bath (*mikvah*) after the candidate has been approved by the *beit din*. When rising from the *mikvah*, the person is officially recognised as a Jew.

this tradition. The same goes for, for example, the Islamic custom of following the words Prophet Muhammad with ‘Peace be upon Him’.

¹⁹ In the light of this taboo, my interlocutors and I had to be somewhat strategic in finding new participants. Many helped me by introducing me to other converts, but we could not remind the person in question of their *giyur*-status, as to not break the taboo. This led to quite funny constructions, in which, for example, Sara would tell Rachel: ‘Lieke is interested in women’s conversion, and because of your work in the synagogue you might be able to teach her more’, knowing perfectly well that Rachel had done *giyur* herself, and with Rachel equally aware of the double entendre.

The process of *giyur* is different per Jewish denomination. Based on the ethnographic material and the structure of Judaism in the Netherlands, I split these congregations into three categories: ‘Modern Orthodox’, ‘Liberal’, and ‘Progressive’. All of these terms are emic and descriptive and should not be considered normative. From an Orthodox perspective, the latter two categories might appear the same so my grouping is different from that dominant in other studies. However, the stance towards conversion and Jewishness makes the main Liberal communities (*Liberaal Joodse Gemeente*, LJG) and other smaller Progressive communities significantly different in the Netherlands. The term progressive carries a normative connotation. By lack of a better term, I decided to use the notion Progressive Judaism as a descriptive term to refer to non-LJG and non-Orthodox communities, since this best captures the style, self-identification and international comparison of these communities. This does not mean that people in the LJG or in Orthodoxy are *not* progressive, that is in my view besides the point.²⁰ I will for example show that discourses about gender that might be labelled as ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ circulate in all Jewish communities and I refrain from using either adjective as normative values. In what follows I briefly introduce these three groups and their perspective toward conversion.

2.1.3 Orthodox Judaism in the Netherlands

The largest type of Jewish community in the Netherlands can be characterised as Orthodox or, more specifically, Modern Orthodox, to distinguish from strictly Orthodox. These are all part of the Organisation of Jewish Communities (*Nederlands Israelisch Kerkgenootschap*, NIK). In total, there are between four and five thousand members of the twenty-four congregations in the NIK, with the main synagogue in Amsterdam. The term ‘Orthodox’ is commonly used, but also disputed. Only with the rise of Liberal Judaism, it became common to describe non-Liberal communities as Orthodox. I follow the argument of Daniel Boyarin (2018), who states that the term ‘Judaism’—as referring to a religion—is a modern invention, which can be traced to eighteenth-century Germany and is heavily influenced by Christian understandings of religion. In this genealogy, Boyarin considers the notions of Liberal and Orthodox as two sides of the same modern Jewish coin (Boyarin 2018). Influential Dutch Orthodox rabbis

²⁰ The terminology to describe the different non-Orthodox communities was one of the issues questioned most by my interlocutors. Some LJG members felt uneasy with the terminology of ‘Liberal’ and ‘Progressive’ because they would certainly describe themselves as progressive (in a normative sense). Furthermore, the LJG is connected to the World Union for Progressive Judaism. However, no useful alternatives were found. Members from other non-LJG ‘Progressive’ communities similarly criticised all other potential labels, such as Reconstructionist or Reform. With the explicit note that this is not a normative assessment of ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ communities or individuals, I opted for the terms Liberal and Progressive. Whenever reading ‘Progressive’, one could also read: ‘Other Progressive communities not connected to the LJG.’

Raphael Evers and Binyomin Jacobs²¹ actually prefer to use the term ‘traditional Judaism’ (*traditioneel jodendom*, in Dutch) instead of Orthodox, because of its negative connotation (Evers 2010; de Vries 2009). According to Rabbi Evers, Orthodoxy has a misguided connotation of rigidity, whereas this form of Judaism is open to change, albeit in line with strict *halachic* guidelines (Evers 2010). Similarly, the anthropologist Chia Longman (2008) argues that the term ‘orthodox’, especially ‘ultra-orthodox’, carries with it notions of anti-modern backwardness. This creates a false assumption that ‘orthodoxy’ is somehow unchanging and fixed (Longman 2008). Often, Modern Orthodox Jews seek to ‘engage with the secular world, attend universities, and participate in the broader culture’ (Davidman 2014, 10). This is less the case with Haredi Jews, also called ‘ultra-Orthodox’ or ‘strictly Orthodox’, who are characterised by their dismissal of modernity—even though, paradoxically, these groups emerged as *part* of modernity (Davidman 2014; Longman 2008). The largest Haredi subgroup in the Netherlands is Chassidism and the estimated 1500 Chassidic Jews tend to be members of one of the NIK *shuls* (there are no specific Chassidic synagogues). Chassidic women were not included in my fieldwork. Whenever I thus write about Orthodox Judaism, this does not include strictly orthodox Jews.

The first characteristic of Jewish Modern Orthodoxy is a belief in the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) as a direct message from God to Moses (or Moshe), with the desire to follow its teachings and the associated extended rabbinic guidelines as closely as possible. Second, (Modern) Orthodoxy attributes great value to practices and rituals: It is a ‘do-religion’ that considers the 613 commandments in the Torah (called the *mitzvot*) as binding.²² Ideally, all commandments, both positive and negative, are followed, although many *mitzvot* in themselves have been subject to rabbinic debate. In general, an Orthodox interpretation of the *mitzvot* holds that all such regulations should be observed.²³ Some of the Jewish commandments are only directed to men. Women are prohibited or exempted from following

²¹ Rabbi Raphael Evers was connected to the NIK from 1990-2016, where he was the headmaster of the Dutch Israeeli Seminary (where Orthodox rabbis are taught), and the main spokesperson for the NIK. Since 2016, Rabbi Evers is Chief Rabbi of Düsseldorf. Since 2009, Rabbi Binyomin Jacobs is Chief Rabbi of the Netherlands, which includes all Dutch congregations except for those in Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam (which have separate chief rabbis). Both have great authority in Dutch Orthodox Judaism, and were/are often seen guests on Dutch media platforms as representatives of the Orthodox community.

²² The *mitzvot* encompass various areas of life and are the basis of the *Halacha* as written down in the *Mishneh Torah*. Part of the *mitzvot* (also called ‘the Law of Moses’) are based on the Ten Commandments, and can also be found in the Christian Old Testament. Not all 613 *mitzvot* are observed: twenty-six only apply within Israel and many others cannot be observed since the destruction of the Second Temple. Today, 245 *mitzvot* can be observed outside of Israel. These commandments concern notions of belief in God, prohibition to curse, and emphasise the love for poor people and strangers. The *mitzvot* also include a broad spectrum of regulations of daily life. Most important for Jewish life are the rules regarding Shabbat rest (*mitzvot* 108–11); dietary laws or *kashrut* (143–69); prayer (22–25); and putting a *mezuzah* on the door’s entrance (21). Gender relations are also regulated, specifically sexual relations, marriage, and divorce (59–106), as is clothing (365–66).

²³ Observance in the broadest sense is often referred to with the Yiddish term *frum*, or *vroom* in Dutch.

these rules, which is a third characteristic of Modern Orthodox Judaism. Examples of this exemption are rules related to the ritual role of women in the *shul*. In Orthodox synagogues, there is typically a women's section on a balcony or behind a curtain (*mechitza*), and women are traditionally not permitted to study the Torah or attend *Yeshiva* (Jewish religious school), even though some might be taught at home. Labour at home and caring for children are often regarded as the main tasks of women, including the responsibility for following the dietary laws. As a result of their domestic obligations, women are not required to be at *shul* services, nor can they take on an active role in the *minyan*—the group of ten men needed to hold a service. This, however, does not mean that women are absent from Orthodox communities. Rather, because men historically had to spend quite a lot of time at the synagogue, women were traditionally the ones with work both in- and outside of the home (Peskovitz and Levitt 1996; Ross 2004). Furthermore, even though women cannot become rabbis in the Netherlands, the role of the rabbi's wife (*rebbetzin*) has historically been of great status and importance, as has that of other women teachers.

My interlocutors, in all groups, widely considered a *giyur* in Orthodox communities the most strenuous and difficult. At the same time, only an Orthodox *giyur* is recognised globally, because non-Orthodox rabbinates accept Orthodox conversions, but not the other way around. A significant number of people who wish to do a *giyur* are rejected by Orthodox rabbis, especially in the Netherlands, I was told. The process can take a lifetime, although it is slightly easier for people who already have a familial connection via a Jewish father or grandparent. Traditionally, Orthodox rabbis reject a potential convert, or 'proselyte', three times. This is, according to Rabbi Evers (2010), a way to test whether someone's motives are genuine. When someone is accepted as a candidate, they have to learn, yet most importantly, they must also practice: 'Giyur is an all-encompassing change and is, besides a halachic process, also a social process' (Evers 2010, 287). Channah, one of my Orthodox Jewish interlocutors, described this as follows:

If you want to become Jewish, you'll have to live like an Orthodox Jew at the end of the road. That's the most important. Becoming Jewish is not because you want to philosophise about who God is, and all of that. The Orthodox don't care about that. What matters it that you're willing to live Orthodox, to *live* Jewish.
(Channah)

The *giyur* process is, with some exceptions, similar for men and women. All people should observe *Shabbat* (holy day of rest) and the *kashrut* (dietary laws), and both men and women are expected to learn Hebrew to a high standard. At a certain time, which is never known at the beginning of the trajectory, the rabbi considers the candidate ready for the *beit din*. Because men and women have different obligations and prescriptions according to the *Halacha*, the way in which they implement their Jewishness is different. Men are expected to

be circumcised before they meet with the *beit din*. They are trained in ritual roles and tasks, and are expected to pray three times a day. In general, there is more emphasis on the rules regarding the home, marriage and sexuality in women's *giyur*. After all, a woman is primarily responsible for a *kashrut* household, and her children will become Jewish too. Mixed marriages are not permitted in Orthodoxy, which is why women with a non-Jewish partner are generally rejected for *giyur*, and female Jews by choice, should they desire marriage, are expected to find a Jewish husband. A married Jewish woman usually covers her hair with a wig or headscarf. In addition, women are asked to implement the rules of the *niddah*, which allows a couple to have intercourse only on the fertile days of the month (see chapter five).

2.1.4 Liberal and Progressive Judaism in the Netherlands

In the nineteenth century, different groups of Jews responded to the challenges posed by modernisation in different ways. One of the developments was the formation of new forms of Judaism adapted to modernity, liberalism, and industrialisation (Brasz 2016; Longman and Schnitzer 2011). These tendencies were described as Progressive, Liberal, or Reform Judaism and led to the establishment of the World Union for Progressive Judaism in 1926. The main difference with Orthodox Judaism is the interpretation of the Torah and the *mitzvot*. In short, albeit generalised terms, Orthodox Judaism follows a more strict interpretation of the *Halacha*, whilst Liberal and Progressive Judaism consider this open for change and personal interpretation. The most important value of Liberal Judaism is *tikkun olam*, which means 'healing the world', and is firmly grounded in the challenges of contemporary life.²⁴ Caring for the world should be the prime motivation to implement certain commandments in daily life, and the intention is often considered more important than the practice, I was frequently told. An important additional change related to the position of women and their possibilities to observe certain *mitzvot*. Liberal Judaism's adaptation to modernity was summarised by one of the rabbis I interviewed:

In Orthodoxy, the exemption of certain *mitzvot* was changed to a sort of prohibition. From 'you don't have to do it', to 'you aren't allowed to do it'. [...] First, [we believe that] if you say you don't *have* to, doesn't mean you shouldn't be *allowed* to. And second, a hundred years ago women weren't even allowed to study, something which wouldn't be accepted nowadays. So the world back then... there were no women at all as political or religious leader. That wasn't a particular feature of *Judaism*, but a worldwide phenomenon. All of that has changed, so this should change too. (Rabbi)

²⁴ Interestingly, the notion of *tikkun olam* originates in Jewish mysticism, *Kabbalah*, which developed in Chassidic Judaism. This continues to be an important tenant in Chassidism, albeit differently interpreted than in Liberal or Progressive Judaism.

In the Netherlands, such new forms of Judaism were only successful in 1931, when the first Liberal synagogue was founded (Brasz 2016). After the Second World War, only fifty people continued life in the Liberal *shul* in Amsterdam, yet since that time Dutch Liberal Judaism has appeared surprisingly successful and resilient, the group growing to 2000 members in recent years. The *Liberaal Joodse Gemeente* (LJG) currently has nine synagogues, with its main location in Amsterdam Buitenveldert. The general character of the service is relatively traditional, pursuing a somewhat conservative interpretation of the Tenach. Compared to other countries, the LJG was rather slow in allowing women to become rabbis. After Elisa Klapheck became the first woman to be appointed as a rabbi in 2005 in a Progressive synagogue (see below), the LJG followed suit in 2008 with the appointment of Rabbi Hetty Groeneveld.²⁵ Today, five of the eight synagogues outside of Amsterdam have a woman as rabbi, and women are permitted to participate in services as rabbis or singers, or to take on other ritual roles. The LJG continues to be connected to the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

Notwithstanding the above, there are some elements in Liberal Judaism that are less likely to change, for example certain gender roles. In general, women are allowed to take on ritual tasks and there is no segregated seating. However, the division of tasks is often gendered. Tasks related to care and emotional labour are often taken on by women, whilst men usually take on the more physically challenging task of carrying the Torah scrolls during services. Some *shuls* provide a wedding blessing ceremony for same-sex couples, but this is not an officially recognised *chuppah* wedding ceremony.²⁶ The liturgy is also more in line with conservative forms of service. All in all, it has been argued that the practices and character of the LJG shows more similarities to what is known in the United States as Conservative Judaism (also called ‘Masorti’), than with Progressive Judaism. In order to bypass potential confusion, I refer to Dutch Liberal Judaism as ‘LJG’ and ‘Liberal’, whilst I use the term ‘Progressive’ to refer to the other Progressive non-LJG synagogues.

The process of conversion in Liberal communities was experienced as slightly more accessible by my interlocutors, but as difficult as Orthodox *giyur*. The learning process can take years, however, support exists along with an established programme to guide the learning. If someone only has a Jewish father, they are permitted to follow a shorter version of the *giyur* trajectory until being ‘confirmed’ as a Jew. The use of the term ‘confirmation’ is a linguistic distinction and recognition of Jewish kinship and affiliation of so-called ‘father-

²⁵ The first woman who was publicly ordained as a rabbi was the American Sally Priesland in 1972. In 1935, Regina Jones was ordained privately in Germany. Jones was killed in Auschwitz in 1944 at the age of 42 (Klapheck 2004).

²⁶ *Chuppah* (canopy, in Hebrew) particularly refers to the canopy under which Jewish couples have their wedding ceremony. In the Netherlands, the term ‘chuppah’ is often used in a broader sense, meaning ‘Jewish wedding’.

Jews', although the ritual itself is the same as for people without a Jewish parent. In most cases, my interlocutors found *giyur* to be an intense experience:

Becoming Jewish is not an intellectual process. [...] Becoming Jewish is something you do with your heart, or with your soul. Yes, of course you have to know certain things, but that's less important than the emotional relationship. It's like a civic integration path [*inburgeringstraject*], you have to learn things and become integrated in a community. (Aliza)

When someone has the wish to become Jewish, they first meet with the rabbi of their nearest synagogue to explain their wishes. When accepted, the candidate is expected to visit different *shuls* and to talk to different rabbis over the course of six months. After that, the council of rabbis reflects whether this person will be admitted to the class. Then, after two years of classes, the next step is to appear for a Liberal *beit din* who determine if the Jewish status can be provided. Even though marriages between Jews and non-Jews are not forbidden, they are discouraged. Women with a non-Jewish partner are usually rejected if they seek conversion. Women are not expected to follow the rules of the *niddah* or to cover their hair, but are often asked to reflect on these issues. Lastly, in general, people who underwent a *giyur* process in an LJJ synagogue are not recognised by Orthodox rabbis.

Progressive Judaism is the third type of Judaism I studied. This is inspired by different so-called progressive movements in Judaism, such as Reconstructionism, Liberal Judaism UK and Jewish Renewal. There are several *shuls* that fall under this category but because of the anonymity I cannot specify these any further. The main difference with LJJ, 'Liberal' Judaism in the Netherlands is the very different approach to conversion, and to gender and sexuality. Progressive Judaism developed out of the same liberalising tendencies that emerged during the nineteenth century and is part of the World Union for Progressive Judaism. These communities built on streams of Judaism that were mainly developed in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States and United Kingdom, inspired by counter-cultural movements. These are ecumenical movements with an emphasis on spirituality, *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism), and 'joy' in the services (Meyer 1995; Weissler 2007). The mission statement of the main Reconstructionist organisation (Reconstructing Judaism 2021) states that its vision is to provide 'a more just and compassionate world where creative Jewish living and learning guide us toward lives of holiness, meaning and purpose'. Typically, their services are less formal and more musical than those of the LJJ or Orthodox synagogues, and they are explicitly open to non-Jewish people. Another characteristic is deep egalitarianism and inclusive gender and sexual organisational structures. In the Netherlands, Progressive synagogues advocate for the acceptance and celebration of sexual diversity, and both hetero- and homosexual couples are allowed to have a *chuppah*. In the Netherlands, this type of Judaism is marginal, the first *shul* was founded in 1995. In 2003, the same *shul* was the first

in the country to have a female rabbi with the appointment of Rabbi Elisa Klapheck. Since then, most of their rabbis have been women—some explicitly feminist. People of all genders participate in services and can wear a *kippah* (traditional Jewish cap) or *tallit* (prayer shawl). These concessions have often led Progressive Judaism to be considered ‘too progressive’ by the LJG—a theme to which I return later in this chapter. Similar to the LJG, the focus in the Progressive movement is on *tikkun olam*, but with an added emphasis on God or spirituality through *Kabbalah*. Whilst there are many collaborations between these communities and the LJG, a major point of difference is their inclusion of father Jews and their stance towards *giyur*.

Progressive Jewish conversions are in structure quite similar to those of the LJG, albeit with a few important differences. First, everyone with one Jewish parent is considered to be Jewish, which means that the *halachic* rules of matrilineal descent are relaxed, and ‘father-Jews’ do not have to go through a confirmation or *giyur* trajectory. They also do not have to undergo the six-month selection period, but are accepted as candidate after one or two initial meetings with the rabbi of their (future) congregation. Priority is given to people with Jewish grandparents and partners of Jewish individuals, similar to the LJG. However, those without any Jewish kinship or affiliation face less difficulty in being accepted. Another important difference is that they do not reject mixed marriages. For some converts, this made all the difference, such as for Anouk, who has been interested in Judaism since the 1970s, but never had the option to convert before encountering a Progressive synagogue. She told me: ‘In the existing denominations, it [conversion] wasn’t an option, I didn’t even have to think about it because I wouldn’t be accepted anyway with my non-Jewish husband and non-religious children. No one was interested in that.’ However, these types of *giyur* are usually only recognised by similar synagogues. One of the synagogues provides the option to appear for a Liberal *beit din* instead of a Progressive in order to receive a more widely accepted *giyur* certificate. This last option is generally only accessible to people with Jewish family who wish to take classes in a Progressive synagogue, but do their final *giyur* (or ‘confirmation’) ceremony in the LJG.

Despite these fundamental differences in, amongst others, conversion processes, in practice there is certainly mutual respect between rabbis and congregations, and Jews by birth from all communities are at least accepted in Orthodox *shuls*. Although they often fail to agree on a religious level, Orthodox and non-Orthodox officials collaborate when it comes to socio-political issues, for example in joint efforts to counter antisemitism, and in the recent debate on ritual slaughter (Valenta 2012). Even though contested, the terms Orthodox, Liberal and Progressive were commonly used by my interlocutors—including rabbis—which is why I also employ them. Furthermore, the term ‘Orthodox converts’ is used to describe women who did a *giyur* trajectory supervised by an Orthodox rabbi or approved of by an Orthodox Jewish rabbinical court, the same for Liberal and Progressive. In the following section I focus on the stories of my interlocutors to see how they experienced the process of *giyur*.

2.2 Reflections on *Giyur*

In the experiences of my interlocutor, two understandings of *giyur* often overlapped. There was the formal recognition of the Jewish status by a *beit din*, and there was the experience of *giyur* as a process of self-making. Rabbi Hannah Nathans (2021), a Progressive rabbi who wrote about *giyur* in the Netherlands, made a distinction between Jewish status and Jewish identity. Nathans (2021, 171) writes that the *beit din* formally provides a Jewish status to people who already had a Jewish identity or ‘Jewish soul’. In my research, these different dimensions of *giyur* also came up, although not in a way that can strictly separate ‘identity’ and ‘status’. Instead, different understandings of becoming Jewish often intersected, which are all shaped by the complicated interplay of individuals and authorities. In this section I explore how my interlocutors reflected on their process of becoming Jewish.

2.2.1 *Giyur* as Process or Ritual

The immersion in the *mikvah* is a major transition according to Jewish law, as it marks the conversion from proselyte to Jew. Once the candidate is considered to have studied sufficiently by the main supervising rabbi, a *beit din* of three rabbis of their denomination interview the candidate to determine whether they can join the Jewish people. When approved, the *giyoret* (female) or *ger* (male) enters the *mikvah* under supervision of a rabbi or *mikvah* man/lady and is immersed in the water whilst reciting prayers. They are affirmed as a Jew upon leaving the bath. If a child of a *giyur* candidate is under the age of *bar/bat mitzvah*²⁷ they can join their parent in the bath and become Jewish.²⁸ All converts take on a new name after this, by which they are known during *shul* services. Some women also began to use this name in their daily lives. Despite the non-linearity of many conversion stories, the *mikvah* was often an important moment for my interlocutors, as it *halachically* marked the moment of becoming Jewish. Channah explained:

As long as you haven’t entered the *mikvah*, you’re simply not Jewish. Even though you might observe all rules, you just aren’t. And I’d get married and have children who wouldn’t be Jewish. There’s a very clear line between being and not being Jewish. And for me, I just had to cross that line. I really wanted to become Jewish, yes. (Channah)

²⁷ For boys (*bar*) the age of thirteen, or for girls (*bat*) the age of twelve.

²⁸ Typically, a woman is asked by the *beit din* if she is pregnant at the moment of conversion. According to some rabbinic understandings, Jewish life starts at conception. Thus, if a woman is already pregnant prior to becoming Jewish, the child would need to enter the *mikvah* again after birth. If a Jewish mother did not carry her children, her child should have a *mikvah* ceremony as well to be confirmed in their Jewish status. This includes adopted children, surrogacy, and children of female same-sex couples carried by the non-Jewish partner. This is generally the same for all Jewish denominations.

Shoshanna is another woman active in an Orthodox community, but unlike Channah, she has not yet been approved by the *beit din* to have the *giyur* ritual. For her, this means she is in a liminal state of being:

I'm active in the Jewish community, but that would feel much better if I were to be Jewish myself. I'm in an in-between state right now. Like a teenager: Not a child, but also not grownup. So, I'm not really not-Jewish, but neither am I one hundred per cent Jewish. (Shoshanna)

Reading both Shoshanna's and Channah's words beside one another, I noticed a tension. For some, there certainly is a strict distinction between being Jewish. According to the *Halacha*, there is no space in between. Yet for others, such as Shoshanna, a sort of liminal space is possible, at least in their personal experience. This suggests that Jewishness is something gradually developed.

The story of Naomi points to such a broader understanding of *giyur* as a process. Naomi is a woman in her thirties who lives in the vicinity of Amsterdam and has been interested in Judaism since she was a teenager. At the age of thirteen, she began to participate in an Liberal *shul* and was taken under the wing of the rabbi and some elderly congregants. She did her *giyur* at the age of nineteen which was exceptionally young. Naomi was not raised with a religion by her parents, but because of her young age when she joined the *shul*, she felt that 'to some extent, I was actually raised in and by the Jewish community, and many people don't know [that I did *giyur*]'. The *beit din* and *mikvah* marked an important moment for Naomi, to which she refers as a Jewish rebirth. Many women do not like to talk about their conversion afterwards within their community, partly because of the taboo, and partly as not to be excluded. Letting people know about their previous status as a non-Jew might make them illegitimate in the eyes of 'born' Jews. For Naomi, *halachic* understandings of the *mikvah* provide a way out of these types of conversations: 'Ritually, from the moment I was submersed in the *mikvah*, I was born Jewish. [...] If I don't feel like talking about [my conversion], I just say: "I was born Jewish." Because I am.' Reflecting on her trajectory, Naomi told me:

What I find important for you to know, is that it was never a breaking point to me. You should emphasise that I don't feel like some sort of switch occurred at any moment, it was more like a slow ongoing process, a thread that started when I was born. I was always accepted and felt very happy with that. For me, this has always been a very positive story. (Naomi)

Even though Naomi recognised the ritual importance of the *mikvah*, she found it important to stress that becoming Jewish, in her experience, was a longer, slow process. Continuing this theme, one rabbi told me:

It's more about confirming who you already are, than converting. And that is the case with quite a lot of people who join my group, or who I meet for *giyur*. They'd say: 'I already feel it.' [...] The decision has already been made before they meet me. (Rabbi)

Indeed, most of my interlocutors did not describe *giyur* as a clear change or a breaking point, but rather as a long process of religious learning without a clear beginning or end. For some, this was a life-altering process, whilst others regarded their official *giyur* more as a confirmation of an already well-established identity. Generally, *giyur* was experienced as more demanding for people without any prior affiliation with Judaism or Jewish life. For this group, spending two years in a synagogue was considered the bare minimum: 'You have to live it, you can't just do an online course', Eva told me. Bracha described this as a full 'integration':

Becoming Jewish is not just a religion. Becoming Jewish means that you become part of the Jewish people, you become a partner in Jewish history, which becomes *your* history. It's a language, it's a culture. It's an enormous spectrum of things. (Bracha)

Becoming Jewish was regarded a long process of self-making, shaped by learning and relationships. This resonates with calls from religious studies to consider conversion as a non-linear embodied process (see chapter one). Jeanette Jouili (2011, 52), who studied women in Islamic revival movements, proposes to analyse religious change as a transformation of the habitus. This transformation is a complicated process and it can take years before someone feels truly comfortable as a Jew. Conversion is thus far broader than the official *giyur* process. For the interlocutors in Jouili's (2011, 56) study, the transformation of the habitus implied a distancing from ideals of the 'autonomous, rational subject' by submitting to the will of God and authority. Whilst some Jewish women had similar experiences, this was also cause for a lot of tension, since quite a few of my interlocutors did not wish for their autonomy to be questioned. At the same time that they reflected on their choices as determined by autonomous interests and desires, all had to deal with authorities at some point, especially in relation to the *beit din*.

2.2.2 Dealing with Authority

Converting to Judaism, to some extent, requires submission to the religious and legal authority of rabbis and the *beit din*. Many interlocutors expressed a tension between individual desires and religious authority, as well as feelings of insecurity because of the relationship of dependence. I did not meet anyone who started the trajectory, but was rejected by the *beit din* in the end. Most rabbis and converts told me that once someone is allowed to appear before the *beit din*, they will most certainly be accepted. This is partly because the

rabbi who supervises the candidate does not want to lose face in front of the rabbinate. There have been examples, however, of more difficult situations in which not all three rabbis in the *beit din* agreed. *Giyur* is a process during which my interlocutors had to prove themselves and were expected to do a lot of study without any guarantees of being acknowledged as a Jewish person in the end. Karen reflected:

Looking back at my process, I don't have any regrets. But when I was in the middle of all of it, I felt the insecurity. It's like hanging by a thread and the *beit din* has to decide if you're good enough or not. That feeling was omnipresent those two years. (Karen)

Karen can now reflect on her process with gratitude, but remembers the 'omnipresent' sense of insecurity whilst in the midst of it. To further illustrate this tension, I turn now to the story of Eva, a Dutch woman in her late forties, who had finished her *giyur* six years prior to our meeting in 2017. Eva had been participating in a Progressive synagogue for years already and was often asked if she wanted to begin the process of becoming Jewish herself. She hesitated a long time before she decided to join the *giyur* class: 'I already lived my life as a Jew and as I pleased. For who would I do that, was it just to get a sense of validation? A stamp, a sign of approval from others?' Even though she initially resisted this, she later on realised that she did want to do the *giyur*, but was afraid that others would 'think I'd longed for their approval'. Eva felt that the official trajectory of *giyur* was not a requirement for her feeling and living a Jewish life, but rather was a step in the process. This process resonates with many individuals who convert. Most of my interlocutors had a rather individualistic view of religion, as something they chose to follow in a model of religious freedom. Doing *giyur* then becomes a way to formalise a sense of inner, authentic self. This can potentially clash with the reality of the relation of dependence between the rabbi and the *giyur* candidate, to the extent that a *giyur* can come to mean only a 'stamp of approval'. Many interlocutors joined the community, studied literature and scriptures, became familiar with some Jewish *mitzvot*, such as keeping *kosher* and observing *Shabbat*, and participated in synagogue life. In the cases of Eva and Naomi, having a welcoming community was crucial to their motivation to start a *giyur* trajectory.

For Orthodox Jewish women, participation in the community was often more difficult. Channah, for example, was frequently rejected by Orthodox rabbis. If she was able to schedule a meeting with a rabbi, they would give her a list of books to read, never to follow up again. Sara's father was Orthodox Jewish, and she herself sought recognition for her Jewish status via an Orthodox *giyur*. Even though she was active in the Jewish community already and had been familiar with Jewish practice via her father, she was still discouraged to convert but not outright rejected as often as Channah. During the time that the rabbinate considered Sara's *giyur* candidacy, she was closely monitored. She described to me how 'they

would follow me to the supermarket and check my basket, to see if I was properly *kosher*, and had asked her to limit her friendship with non-Jews, or non-observant Jews. As such, Sara had the feeling she was under constant surveillance:

There were moments when I thought—which was near the end—that I thought ‘I’m not doing it, I just can’t take it anymore’. [...] It’s also physically just exhausting, because you’re under constant tension, like ‘who is looking at me now’... (Sara)

Because of this constant tension, Sara eventually decided to take a more pragmatic approach, and to do things ‘for the rabbis’ in order to cope. When I asked her why she decided to continue, she told me:

There were times that I wanted my desire to go away. I said that a number of times, I’d rather not want this. [...] But I just really wanted it, and there was no other option for me, than to follow that desire. (Sara)

When I asked Channah the same question—why she decided to go through with her *giyur*, even though it was so difficult—she also replied: ‘[B]ecause I just had to. There was no other way.’ The difficulty of ‘never knowing what to expect’, as Shoshanna described, came up often among my Orthodox Jewish interlocutors. This was somewhat different for those who were able to follow *giyur* classes in Progressive and Liberal synagogues, although that process too was experienced as difficult.

The only Orthodox woman I spoke with who had a different experience, was Rachel. Rachel had done a *giyur* in a Liberal community in her twenties—which was already forty years prior to our conversation—but felt uncomfortable that her *giyur* was not recognised everywhere. She approached her rabbi with the question: ‘How come I’m Jewish in one community, but not the other?’ Her rabbi was very supportive of her wish to explore Orthodoxy, and arranged a meeting with an Orthodox rabbi. Rachel recalled what this rabbi had told her:

‘It doesn’t have to be hard for you at all’, and then he said something that made it very easy: ‘You’ve observed the Jewish duties for a long time. Everyone thinks you’re a Jew, at this point it’s only about the Jewish law. That’s why you have to do another *giyur*.’ (Rachel)

An important reason for Rachel’s acceptance was that she was already known in the Jewish community, including amongst Orthodox rabbis, who had admired her work for the Liberal synagogue and respected her observance of the *mitzvot*, which she had already learned during her first *giyur* trajectory. For Rachel ‘it was all arranged within a few weeks, it went really

quickly'. This seems to be an exception to the rule, considering that all other Orthodox Jewish women described that the process was very long, discouraging and not transparent.

To conclude this section, the process of becoming Jewish can have a profound impact on the daily lives of those who go through it. The process of learning, and learning to practice, continues long after the Jewish woman exits the *mikvah* for the first time, and starts long before. For some, the ritual confirmation is a peak moment in their religious journey, whereas others see this more as a rather bureaucratic necessity. For most converts, the relationship of dependency with their rabbi and the eventual *beit din* was one of the most difficult aspects of *giyur*. This also makes the experience very different from conversion to Christianity or Islam, where no formal permission is needed to confirm the sense of religious self. Despite the difficulties, however, all women who had successfully finished their *giyur* trajectory or were on track to do so, regarded the process as valuable. The motivations to become Jewish varied. My interlocutors reflected on their process with different types of conversion narratives and motivations. These stories about what drew them to Judaism should not be read as indicating a clearly identifiable explanation. Rather, telling the story is part of conversion trajectories and the coming to a coherent sense of self. The next section analyses how women told this part of their story.

2.3 Jewish Stories of Motivations

Talking about my research with other scholars or friends, the first question on most people's minds tends to be: 'Why do they convert?' This 'why question' seems to preoccupy many scholars and journalists interested in women's conversion to 'traditional religions' (Chong 2006). However, in my project, I have tried to move beyond this overwhelming focus on motivations and explanations. I approach conversion as a process of self-making, in which stories are told about past experiences that reflect the here and now. From this perspective, responding to the 'why question' is regarded as part of the self-making process and stories of motivations are constructed in a retrospective narrative (Ganzevoort, de Haardt, and Scherer-Rath 2013; van Nieuwkerk 2008; see also the first chapter of this dissertation). In this section, I analyse these motivations narratives of my interlocutors. Almost all Jewish interlocutors reflected that they harboured a connection with Judaism for a significant period of time before taking the steps to become Jewish themselves. There were various elements that interested them, but all are reflective of the encompassing worldview of Judaism—its culture, language, family and spiritual life, and community. The connection to Israel and the question of belonging were additional important factors for most interlocutors. The topic of national belonging is discussed more fully in the sixth chapter of this dissertation.

One of the tropes around which motivations were narrated, has to do with the broader secularisation of Dutch society. Many women told me they felt 'lost' in the Netherlands as

secular nation-state and longed for a sense of purpose and community. A small majority (twelve out of twenty) started their *giyur* when they were young adults²⁹—a period in their lives that proved to be a turning point. Many women who reflected how they had missed a sense of direction and meaning found it in Judaism. This desire for order and belonging has been understood as a response to increasing globalisation and its seemingly endless possibilities for consumption and individual development (Yip and Page 2013). As such, the desire for structure and a longing for a transcendental creator and guidance is not necessarily opposed to modernity, but rather forms part of the very fabric of modern life (Jouili 2015; Meyer 1995). This search for stability can be accompanied by a search for religious guidance. Another characteristic for the life phase of young adulthood is that this is often the time when people start families, and a significant number of my interlocutors were concerned with that question.³⁰ Although not totally predetermined by familial questions, a significant number referred to motherhood as providing an important incentive to reflect on the wider questions of life. For some women, the wish to start a family came with questions of heritage and the religious upbringing of children—further factors shaping their path to Judaism.

The eight remaining women did their *giyur* in their late fifties and sixties. Anouk, in her seventies at the time of our meeting, was in her sixties when she became Jewish, but had been interested in Judaism for ‘thirty or forty years’ prior to that. She decided to go for early retirement at the age of sixty: ‘I did that more or less because I wanted to have more time to learn about Judaism.’ This period in the lives of these women was characterised by a similar search for belonging and meaning. Yet there were different factors that are specific for this life phase, such as aging, retirement, children leaving home for the first time, or the deaths of immediate family members. All of these implications impacted their longing for community, meaning, and structure. Another factor was that, upon retirement, there was simply more time at hand to study Judaism—time that they did not have when they were working or raising children.

Besides age, other factors played a role in their narratives. Some interlocutors were active in Jewish studies in universities, and this group emphasised their intellectual interest in Judaism. One of them is Deborah, who became interested in religious texts during high school. Following this initial interest, she set out to study theology at a university. She reflected that this was motivated by a fascination with the history of Jewish Scripture, the Hebrew Bible, and *Midrash* (rabbinic interpretation of Scripture). Stimulated by this interest, Deborah later undertook parts of her study in Israel, where she developed a more emotional bond with Judaism and began to visit synagogue services during the High Holy Days. However, it was ten years before she took steps to formally convert, mainly because she felt

²⁹ Young adulthood refers to the period between ages 18 and 30 in line with other research on the topic (Beekers 2021; Beekers and Schrijvers 2020; Yip and Page 2013).

³⁰ The average age for women to become mothers is 29,9 years in the Netherlands (Toorn 2019)

she had to ‘go through fire and water for that to happen here’, reflecting on stories of people who wanted to convert in Orthodoxy. After a few years had passed, Deborah moved abroad with her husband and two young children for a teaching job. Still interested in Judaism, she began to participate in a Masorti synagogue where she was welcomed enthusiastically by the rabbi and congregants:

I told [the rabbi] about my wish to convert, and he said I’d normally had to do a course, but because of my previous studies I didn’t have to. He told me to just come to the services, because that was the part I wasn’t familiar with; the liturgy and all. (Deborah)

After half a year, the rabbi invited her to meet with the three rabbis of the *beit din*. Because of her previous knowledge of Judaism via her study programme, the questions they posed were not difficult. To her surprise, they did not even ask Deborah about her belief in God. This was a relief for her, since she still had, and continues to have, doubts about the existence of God as a divine being. In our conversation, she repeatedly highlighted the intellectual and academic aspects of Jewish life. Nowadays Deborah finds joy in the synagogue services, the continuing studying and the community. She told me that everyone was very welcoming, which increased her sense of belonging. After returning from this stay abroad, she joined a Liberal community in which she is still an active member.

In contrast to Deborah, other women told me that they had possessed a sense of God from a very young age. For some, this initially led to a phase of ‘spiritual seeking’ (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), during which different groups were visited and religions were considered before finding ‘answers’ in Judaism. Ilana, a Progressive Jewish woman in her seventies, described how she felt a relation with God when she was ten years old, even though she was not raised with a religion:

That [God feeling] was the starting point for me, I thought: ‘I never want to let go of this God’, and I never did, I’ve always stayed religious. I still have the feeling that I’m guided by the hand, do you understand? And that’s how I eventually did the *giyur*. That was my path, I had to walk it, and it just had to be. (Ilana)

With a similar secular background, Channah became fascinated by religion as well, and went to university to follow Jewish studies. However, in contrast to Deborah, Channah’s motivation was more spiritual:

I’ve always known that God exists. [...] I went on to study theology and learned more about the history and background of the Christian religion, but I couldn’t align this with my own beliefs. When I had a class on Judaism, I felt like those people believed what I believed. So that’s where my search began. (Channah)

Later on I asked her whether she considered her initial attraction to Judaism to be an academic one, similar to the story I had heard from Deborah. Channah had a slightly different view on the matter:

No, it was clear from the start that the faith suited me, but my first approach was academic. It was by far the easiest path to follow, because I didn't know anything about Judaism in the Netherlands, and I didn't know who to contact. So, I followed the academic trajectory first, before approaching the rabbinate.
(Channah)

Participating in Jewish Studies was for Channah a means via which to gain more knowledge, the wish to join the Jewish people was there from the outset. Channah eventually converted in an Orthodox community and followed a very different trajectory than Deborah. Whilst Deborah was encouraged to follow this path, Channah was repeatedly rejected or ignored by Orthodox rabbis in the Netherlands. When she did meet with a rabbi, he gave her a reading list, but did not have any follow-up meetings. Channah also attended *shul* services in an Orthodox community in the Netherlands where she was welcomed by congregants and learned a lot about Jewish life. Nevertheless, she continued to feel out of place because of her limited access to a *giyur* trajectory. Eventually, and similar to Deborah, she travelled abroad and found an Orthodox community outside of the Netherlands where she finalised her *giyur*.

Besides intellectual and spiritual motivations, which are more individually located, some women's interest in Judaism was instigated by (previously unknown) connections with victims of the *Shoah*. This centrality of family history was unique for the Jewish case study. Judith's father was a member of the resistance during the Second World War and had seen many Jewish friends deported and killed. This connection to the Jewish community had an impact on Judith, who had always 'felt' Jewish because of her childhood:

Well, I am not [Jewish] because my mother isn't, and my father isn't enough Jewish to be acknowledged as such, but I do feel it. If I would say no, I would be denying my Judaism. But if I would say yes, I would be lying. (Judith)

Judith's family had always been connected to the Jewish community, and this was engrained in her childhood. This was different for Aliza, who only found out about their Jewish heritage later in life. Aliza, who was born during the war, had a Jewish grandfather who was killed in the *Shoah*. However, she only became aware of his existence when she was in her thirties. After she was told about her Jewish heritage, Aliza became intrigued by Jewish history and began to study Judaism herself, leading ultimately to her *giyur*. This narrative—being unaware of one's Jewish family heritage—came up more often and is directly connected to the post-war taboo and trauma concerning Jewishness.

Another moving story is that of Esther, who was in her sixties when we met. Esther's father, who passed away when she was eighteen years old, was Jewish but she was unaware of this for most of her life. She did not recount ever speaking to her father about his Jewish background, the only indicator, looking back, being the fish biscuits traditionally eaten on Friday afternoon. Years later after her mother passed away, Esther, now in her forties, received a letter regarding war reparations from the German government which her mother had applied for. The letter contained the names of various family members of her father, who had either been killed or injured in the *Shoah*, and this is how she discovered that her father had been Jewish. She set out to do research and found out that her grandparents and most of her father's family had been killed. This motivated her to 'search for my roots', but she did not feel welcomed by Jewish communities. Even though Esther was very much impacted by Jewish history, had one Jewish parent, and felt a strong connection to it, she was not considered Jewish, since she did not have a Jewish mother. This changed years later when she encountered a Progressive synagogue that recognises people with a Jewish father as full members. Still, she opted for a *giyur* trajectory (called 'confirmation') at a Liberal synagogue to be acknowledged according to Liberal *halachic* interpretations. This was a major step for Esther, who often could not hide her tears during our hours of conversation:

First of all, it feels like... sorry, I'm getting emotional now... [*Esther cries and takes a few deep breaths*] It's like a huge honour towards my grandparents, who have been murdered. And for the horrible life my father had because of that stupid war. [...] I had a similar experience when I went to Israel for the first time. I started crying. I thought: I am here. They tried to extinguish all of us, and they didn't succeed because I am still here. (Esther)

For Esther, and to a lesser extent for Aliza and the others with connections to *Shoah* victims, becoming Jewish was a form of reconciliation with her heritage and a way to come to terms with the annihilated past of her Jewish family. This marks the *giyur* story in a way very distinct from those without such a history. Their stories were often very emotional and shaped by loss and family trauma. Towards the end of our meeting, Esther concluded: 'Judaism is very important to me. Extremely important, to say the least. It is a form of acknowledgement. At first, when I began with the *giyur*, there was only the war. But now, Judaism is also beautiful.' For Esther, the Second World War was the most important theme in her discussion of her motivations to join Judaism.

Different interlocutors highlighted different aspects of their conversion story. It is often difficult to say where the initial attraction started and the stories often overlapped. My initial concern was not so much to dig up initial, 'true' motivations, but rather to understand how conversion is narrated and experienced in daily life. As such these retrospective reflections give hints about where the priorities of converted Jewish women lie today: Does it

offer a sense of purpose, intellectual depth, spiritual fulfilment or reconciliation? In most cases, a combination of different aspects impacted the way women reflected on their *giyur* process and I consider these recollections as part of the way women give meaning to their self, as well as part of their lived religion. The next sections to this chapter continue the analyses of women's lived religion by exploring how gender and Jewish conversion were related. In order to understand this, I first analyse the main gender discourses present in these communities.

2.4 Jewish Gender Discourses

Becoming a Jewish woman, for many interlocutors, had to do with a negotiation of gender norms and discourses. As personal ethics often come into being in relation to broader trends and discourses, this is related to wider issues of emancipation and the position of women in the broader society. Amongst the Jewish converts in my project, emancipation was mainly understood as the inclusion of women in traditionally male-coded spaces, but not vice versa. The unidirectional nature of women's equality discourse is increasingly questioned by scholars, amongst them Esther Fuchs, who wrote: [It] is considered a success when Jewish women gain access to the same privileges, resources, and symbolic assets that have previously been the preserve of Jewish men. (Fuchs 2018, 29). Many of my interlocutors also considered women's emancipation to be a struggle for access to the same privileges and symbolic assets as Jewish men. This was considered a problem by one non-Orthodox rabbi, who expressed that they would ideally see men lighting the *Shabbat* candles—the female-coded Jewish ritual *par excellence*. This rabbi encourages women to wear a *tallit* in service, and to partake in the more male-coded parts of service, such as carrying the Torah scrolls. As a rabbi's role is not to prescribe certain acts, but rather to offer guidance and support, they do not impose an opinion. However, in one of our private conversations this rabbi expressed frustration with the realities of both the Progressive and Liberal Jewish communities in which, in practice, many still uphold traditional gender roles.

From the group of converted Jewish women, Aliza was the most explicit advocate for dismantling gender difference in Jewish rituals. Similar to the rabbi, her type of gender argument reflected a liberal feminist 'equality discourse', based on a gender-constructivist concept that presumes that biological difference should not predetermine social roles. When she told me that she strives for equality, I asked her what this might entail. Aliza answered:

Well... if everyone would wear a *tallit*, if everyone covers their head... uhm, if everyone can do everything during service, and does so. You know, not just *can*, but actually *does* it. [...] I think that if you want to be egalitarian, you have to *act* egalitarian. It's all nice if you're allowed to do it, but if no one does it, we don't get anywhere. (Aliza)

Intergenerational differences played an important role in the perception of emancipation in general, and its day-to-day expression in particular. Many women over the age of fifty, such as Aliza, were inclined to have a view of gender emancipation as total equality. This is partly influenced by second-wave feminism in the Netherlands during the 1960s and 1970, when a range of emancipatory movements struggled against the religious (specifically Christian) influences and the unequal treatment of women by religious authorities. For those familiar with these movements it was crucial to have access to ritual space and positions of authority. Today, feminism has moved from legal and institutional spheres towards social acceptance and the recognition of multiplicity and diversity amongst women. Younger women in my study showed more diversity, and some were not keen on a total elimination of the gender binary. Interlocutors younger than 45 often dismissed the views of their older generation feminist community members, opting for a less ‘radical’ understanding of women’s roles in *shul*. Here, many different understandings of women’s role circulated.

About half of my Jewish interlocutors had a view of gender as a ‘complementary difference’, which understands men and women to have equal value, but different roles and tasks in life. This discourse was prominent in all congregations, despite the often heard statement by non-Orthodox women that this is a typical ‘Orthodox thing’. Women who had such a perspective considered equal access to spaces of ritual performance to be important, but they distanced themselves from a mode of equality that eliminated gender difference. In such a framework, men and women are considered to be essentially different—based on biological determinism—but do have equal value. This is not unique to Jews, but has often been described in relation to other religious groups. In the case of Muslim women, this is sometimes called an ‘equity discourse’ (van Nieuwkerk 2006b; see chapter four). Esther formulated this approach as follows:

A very important precondition for me in Judaism, is that I have equal value as a man. I won’t say that I’m equal, because a woman is different than a man. But I am of equal value, and I’m treated as such. (Esther)

In such a perspective, gender difference is essentialised (‘a woman is different than a man’), but at the same time, the equal value of both men and women (‘I am of equal value’) is emphasised. Esther stated that this is the most important reason for her to join a Progressive rather than Orthodox synagogue, which were often suspected of oppressing women. However, my outcomes show that this gender complementarity discourse came up in all Jewish denominations. Moreover, Judaism was often perceived as ascribing women gender value, similar to the Muslim and Christian converts in my project (see chapters two and four; Schrijvers and Wiering 2017). As an illustration of this, many Orthodox Jewish women told me that the best way to achieve a pious—or *frum*—lifestyle was to dedicate themselves to the task of caretaker and to pass traditions on to children.

Whilst equality and complementarity discourses might appear oppositional, in reality, many women move between them. For example, Judith stated:

[Gender equality] means that you don't have to sit somewhere high and hidden [in *shul*]. Yeah... that you can just celebrate with each other. And that you can have a female rabbi too... what I... well... the rabbis all wear a *kippah*, including the women. Yeah personally, that bothers me. Strange as that may seem. (Judith)

Judith described equality in terms of equal access: to space (women do not have to sit on the balcony behind a *mechitza*, 'high and hidden'); to celebrations; and to positions of authority. At the same time, she notices a 'strange feeling' of being bothered by the wearing of the *kippah*. This was quite common amongst Progressive and Liberal women. I found that both discourses of 'equality' and 'complementary difference' informed the perspectives on gender difference of my interlocutors across denominations. Overall, more Orthodox women opted for a view of 'complementary difference', whilst social constructivist equality discourse was more common amongst Progressive women. However, the distinction was not clear-cut, and many combined aspects from both sides, negotiating their own position on the matter. Rachel, for example, had initially joined a Liberal synagogue, but decided to convert to Orthodox Judaism in a second *giyur* trajectory. Rachel described how the change in gender dynamics between the LJJ and Orthodox groups affected her:

It was quite a challenge at first. Going to an Orthodox synagogue, the position of women is very different, and I was unaware of that. So instead of contributing—even though women were active in their own way—I couldn't do much anymore. You're just upstairs behind a fence, and I really had to get used to that. (Rachel)

Today, Rachel values the separation of men and women, and sees its benefits, such as the opportunity to bond with other women. Her story is but one example of how perceptions of gender norms and roles can change, and how these practices are negotiated by women converts. Discourses and ethical views are one thing; the experience and implementation of such views is quite another. Joining a different type of Jewish community came with a renegotiation of her role in *shul*, in which Rachel eventually found a way to be active (she is a teacher now) in a way that did not clash with the overall gender norms. This already shows how important communities can be in the process of religious and gendered self-making. The next section continues this exploration by focusing on the role of the community in *giyur* trajectories.

2.5 Gender and *Giyur* in the Community

All of my interlocutors had to negotiate gender discourses and the role of women in some form or another, albeit often in very different ways. Some interlocutors valued the gender equality in their community, whereas others found solace in clear gender segregation. Gender dynamics were often a factor in deciding to pursue an Orthodox, Liberal or Progressive *giyur*, since the position of women seems (at least according to my interlocutors) the most important difference between these types of Judaism. This section analyses the impact of the community on Jewish conversions. When I asked them to reflect on the position and situation of Jewish people in the Netherlands, three issues often came up as defining characteristics: The small size of the Jewish population; remembrance of the *Shoah*; and ongoing antisemitism. Interlocutors also spoke about the Christian-centeredness of public life (for example, in the demand to work during *Shabbat* whilst the Christian majority observe a day of rest on Sundays), and the negative perception of religion in general. These issues, which also came to the fore in the other case studies, are comparatively discussed in chapter six, which looks at national belonging.

2.5.1 Converts in Jewish Communities

Because of costs and low membership numbers, only a minority of Liberal and Progressive synagogues hold services twice a week (Friday evening and Saturday morning). Some rotate *Shabbat* evening and morning services every other week, whilst others only have one service every two weeks. In contrast to Orthodox synagogues, there are hardly any possibilities to attend prayers in their *shuls* during the week. This scarcity of Jewish services meant that some women were unable to attend services and this, for example, is why Ruth described that she felt her Jewishness ‘declining’. Another important factor for Ruth regarding the perceived decline of her Jewishness was that she does not enjoy a Jewish social life outside of *shul*. Many converted women without an established Jewish social circle encounter difficulties because they consider the home as an important space for worship and rituals, and *Shabbat* as a time to come together with friends and family. As Bracha suggested:

It’s easier to be Jewish if there’re more Jews around. It’s hard when you’re isolated. And well, there are quite some Jews in Amsterdam, but way less outside of Amsterdam. So then you really have to organise yourself to have some contacts. (Bracha)

The absence of a Jewish network beyond the immediate community was a reason for Anouk to participate in *giyur* classes for a second time:

I had been Jewish for nine years, and did all the things that belong to that role, but it became somewhat automatic. I live by myself, in a mostly non-Jewish world, because my friends and the people I do other things with are all non-Jews. I do feel the need, but I only meet Jews in *shul*, and that's only once every two weeks. And I heard from the people doing *giyur* now, that it's so enriching and informative, so I really want to commit myself once again. (Anouk)

In Progressive and Liberal synagogues, classes are organised to help *gerim* to learn about Jewish history and practice. These groups are often very active and organised, for example, sharing *Shabbat* meals or advice on learning how to pray. This was particularly helpful for potential converts in these communities, since other occasions to interact were often only during the bi-weekly services. This was different for the Orthodox women I interviewed who were living in and around Amsterdam, where there is more of a 'Jewish life' and community than in many other parts of the country. Rachel, for example, had Jewish friends years before she became (Orthodox) Jewish herself and felt living in this neighbourhood 'is often easier because of the Jewish solidarity. We're part of a people, we belong together, that's always been a strong feeling for me'. Rachel also mentioned that the sense of community is so strong because of its small size.

The precarity of Dutch Jewry was also related to a sense of 'not being safe', related to the history of the *Shoah* as well as contemporary antisemitism. Whilst this has an impact on all Jews, it was also a specific narrative in the case of converts. As previously discussed, although some interlocutors did have family connections to the *Shoah*, most did not and as such, they were to a large extent unburdened by its traumatic cultural memory. Yet, at the same time, they entered a community in which this trauma is still very tangible. Not only did the *Shoah* have an inconceivable impact on the community, its communal memory, and hence indirectly on converts; antisemitism also continues to impact the Jewish community in the Netherlands today—increasingly so, according to some reports (FRA 2019; van Wonderen and Wagenaar 2015). The question of 'becoming minority' in relation to processes of othering and racialisation came up in all of the case studies, especially amongst Muslim and Jewish converts. Therefore, this is part of chapter six of this dissertation, where these questions of belonging provide the starting point of my comparative analysis. In the following section I analyse how women find their place within their immediate community, namely their synagogue.

2.5.2 The Position of Women in the *Shul*

The sound of Hebrew hymns fills the old synagogue, on this Saturday morning filled with around fifty members of a Progressive congregation and a few visitors. The rabbi and ritual singer (*chazzan*) stand on the *bimah* (platform in the centre of the synagogue). Halfway through the service, after the Torah scrolls are placed on

the *bimah*, the rabbi calls for ‘*Leah bat Avraham v’Sarah*’ to step forward to read a part of the scripture. Leah is a woman in her sixties who became Jewish less than a decade ago. Leah wears a white prayer shawl with fringes. When she walks towards the *bimah*, our eyes cross and she smiles at me. Together with the *chazzan*, Leah sets out to read the weekly passage for about five minutes. After, she thanks the rabbi with a firm handshake and is clearly moved. She steps down and passes me again with a smile, this time accompanied by tears in her eyes. (Fieldwork notes, February 2018)

When Leah became Jewish, she became the daughter of Abraham and Sarah, *bat Avraham v’Sarah*. Even though Jewish communities officially have a taboo on reminding someone about their previous status as a non-Jew, everyone in *shul* would know that someone called to the *bimah* with Abraham and Sarah as parents was not born Jewish, as otherwise, the names of the birth parents would be given. During the service itself, Leah was addressed by the Jewish name that she chose after she did *giyur*. Leah chose to use her Jewish name in her daily life, although not all women take this step. For some it is a recognition of their new Jewish status, whilst for others such a change is simply too complicated and hence, they opt only to use it in *shul* (to occasional hilarity when someone has to be reminded of their name when it is called out). These names are primarily used to indicate those with a ritual task during service, such as the carrying of the Torah scrolls, or those reciting the weekly portion of the Torah.

In Orthodox synagogues, the tasks cited above can only be performed by men. Whenever there are ten Jewish men, a service can be held. The group of ten is known as the *minyan* and, whilst a rabbi has a supportive role, his presence is not required. Orthodox women are not expected to attend services, but can do so at their convenience. Men and women tend to sit separately, and in traditional synagogues women spectate from a balcony separated by a curtain or balustrade (*mechitza*) and do not have an active ritual role outside of the home. Many Orthodox women saw value in this separation, such as Shoshanna, who valued the traditional separation of men and women as a sign of ‘authentic’ Judaism:

If, after centuries of segregation during service, you all of a sudden let men and women mix... that’s a step too far for me. [Orthodox Judaism] is respectful, more authentic, and it’s just such a long tradition. I do think it’s good if men and women just get along and mingle after service, but you do need to respect and continue the tradition. (Shoshanna)

As I will show in chapter four, the physical segregation between men and women in the religious building was a concern for some Muslim women. This was not the case for Orthodox Jewish women, who did not object to the *mechitza*. The reason for this absence of critique is probably because there are other options available within Judaism, whilst there are

no mosques in the Netherlands where men and women have mixed seating. There is the option of joining a more gender balanced synagogue for women who reject the gender segregation in Orthodox synagogues. It is thus expected that women who would have an issue with that, would join a different type of Jewish denomination. Another explanation is that Orthodox Jewish women were often active in different ways and did not aspire to perform the ritual tasks and prayers that men do. The fact that Orthodox women cannot read the Torah during services does not mean that they are absent from the *shul* altogether. On the contrary, across the various denominations, many women take on tasks such as preparing the wine blessing (*Kiddush*) at the end of service, offering childcare, and organising events outside of the services. Jewish women tended to be most active in semi-official ritual roles often directed at care and community, which was similar for new Christian and Muslim women as the following chapters will show. In *shul*, there is often a hierarchy in such religious tasks, and anything to do with scripture is in most cases regarded the most important, with emotional labour involving care or food practices considered secondary. Rachel, herself a teacher at an Orthodox Jewish school, explained:

There are more women now who have a lot of knowledge of Jewish law, and who support the rabbinate. Especially if you have a question about the *niddah*³¹, or about family laws, then it's much more comfortable to ask a woman. These are women who are often highly educated and knowledgeable and begin to advise women. Many men even have respect for those women, so you see that changing gradually. (Rachel)

Conversely, in most Progressive and Liberal synagogues, both men and women can make up the *minyan*, and both can be called for ritual tasks during services. This change in women's role was one of the most controversial developments in progressive Judaism in the early twentieth century and continues to be disputed today (Fuchs 2018; Peskowitz and Levitt 1996). For many women active in these synagogues, gender equality in *shul* was of the utmost importance for their decision to join the community. Take for example Ilana, who said: 'I feel that Orthodox [*shuls* are] humiliating to others. I just find it humiliating when there's a rabbi who refuses to shake a woman's hand. Because you're only a woman, or something, that's humiliation.' Despite the formal equality, I frequently noticed how this was not necessarily reflected in practice. In some Liberal and Progressive communities, either written into policies or simply part of the common norms of a given community, there was a limit on the roles women can perform:

³¹ See chapter five for more about these family laws and the *niddah*.

There are still communities where a woman, for example, wouldn't be called upon to read the Torah ten years ago. They would sit together but there were many things a woman was not allowed to do during service. And that is still the case in some communities. (Bracha)

In my participant observation, I witnessed that whilst women might be officially permitted to carry the Torah scrolls or wear a prayer shawl, they often did not. This can be considered a reflection of the conservative population of a given community, but more common among Liberal Judaism. In some LJJ synagogues, women were unlikely to wear a prayer shawl whilst this was more common in others. In most communities, women took on the majority of care work and teaching responsibilities. Interlocutors in Liberal Judaism often appreciated these roles and considered women to be particularly capable of the emotional labour necessary for parochial work. They often expressed that they would not feel comfortable taking on 'men's tasks'. As such, participating actively did not contradict their notion of gender as 'equal but different' and many found great reward in caring for others.

The gendered undertone of the hierarchy between ritual and semi-ritual tasks sometimes frustrated one rabbi I met. As a rabbi, their role is more supportive than guiding, but on a personal level, they would like to see changes:

Both [men and women] can take on all tasks but in reality that doesn't happen for the full hundred percent, I do see way more women in the kitchen. And the carrying of the Torah scrolls is mainly done by a man. But with us, they don't have to. [...] But you know, that's not something you should complain about every single week, but I do comment on it yes, it could be more egalitarian. (Rabbi)

Such encouragements, built partially on their personal experiences, typically came from the Progressive and Liberal rabbis involved in this project but were not always reflected by members of the community. One last expression of gender equality in the synagogue came up only in Progressive communities where some women aspired not only for equality in roles, but also in liturgy. The change of gendered Hebrew in the liturgy is a particular feature of Progressive Judaism that is not found within the LJJ. Ruth said:

In Hebrew, words are gendered masculine or feminine, so we'd say things like 'God open my heart', but we'd add '*Shechina*, open my heart.' *Shechina* is the godly strength, a female word.³² [...] It never matters who you are, who you're

³² *Shechina* is derived from the Hebrew stem sh-kh-n, meaning to settle, indicate, or dwell, and refers to God's presence. This is grammatically a feminine noun. The feminine characterisation of the word itself came from *Kabbalah* (see Unterman et al. 2007), and is seen as an indication of feminine divine presence.

attracted to... We make sure that the prayers, what we sing, the blessings, that those are gender neutral. (Ruth)

These changes were again often considered a step ‘too far’ amongst LJG women, and constitute one of the reasons that this type of Judaism is rejected by Orthodox rabbis, who tend to advocate against any changes of liturgy or scripture. Orthodox women were also least keen to focus on women’s ritual participation in the synagogues. Not having the possibility to actively participate in *shul* life does not necessarily have a negative impact on the expression and potential of living a pleasing Jewish life. When I asked my interlocutors about the most important tasks and roles for women in Judaism, almost all replied that they are primarily responsible for Jewish non-congregational life, mainly in the domestic sphere. Many interlocutors, in all denominations, located women’s most important role in the informal ritual sphere of the family and home. The next section focuses on the role of the private sphere for women who did a *giyur*.

2.6 Gender and *Giyur* in the Private Sphere

Much of Jewish life is situated at home and within the family, and almost all women considered this as a particular valuable feature of Judaism. The traditional distinction between men’s and women’s spaces—public, ritual, and private or family life—was reiterated by many. Whereas most—especially Liberal and Progressive—women sought to participate in *shul* alongside men, all confirmed that the home was primarily their domain and did not question this as much as they questioned the masculine focus of public ritual places. This has an impact on conversion trajectories for women. Although men are not part of this research, the material does suggest that the process of *giyur* and the expectations are very much gendered. I often heard that the only important difference is the requirement for men to be circumcised. At the same time, the expectations and roles of women are considered to be different, primarily because women locate their role with the family and in the home, whereas men have more requirements in *shul* and with prayers. In this section I analyse the way conversion had an impact on the private sphere.

2.6.1 ‘The Cement of the Household’

Judaism is practiced extensively within the home, during *Shabbat* meals, daily prayers, and blessings throughout the day. Many women wished to surround themselves with Jewish artefacts during their *giyur* process, such as a *menorah* (seven lamp candelabrum) or a *mezuzah* (case containing Torah parchments) on the doorpost. As such, Judaism has the potential to impact the complete daily life of Jews. One of the most important tasks was cited as that of keeping a *kosher* kitchen—in most cases, the task of (married) women. This is by no

means a small responsibility, and the family and ritual were regarded as equally important as the more public synagogue:

I see that there is a special role for women within Judaism. The wife is in a sense treated with high esteem. The wife is the inspirer, she keeps the spiritual milieu. [...] In a way, she keeps the family together, she's like the cement of the household. (Hanneke)

The segregation of tasks such as these is the most noticeable and explicit expression of the gendered differences between men and women. Sara reflected: 'It's common to see the home as the place where women experience Judaism. It's she who is most at home, so she's in charge.' I came across such understandings and evaluations of women as mothers and caregivers across the different denominations. For example, Karen, who did her *giyur* in a Progressive community, expressed that 'women have the most important task, to pass [the] Jewish faith [*geloof*] and Judaism on to their children, I consider that, at home, one of my most important tasks'. Although these sentiments were reflected in all communities, this tended to be more institutionalised in Orthodox Judaism. Here women are not permitted to participate in the more public expressions of religion in synagogues which simultaneously limits the spaces in which they can express their religious lives, as well as giving more value and respect to their roles and tasks in the home. For Channah, this was an important change, not least because she sees no possibility to advance her career and does not wish to develop other areas of her life:

I work below my educational level now. But that does mean that I can be at home, I'm always there for my children and I think my most important task is to make sure that those two kids grow up well. And perhaps it isn't what I felt like my life would look like, but that's just life. Life can be really unfair, you might want something else, or want things to be different. But it's crystal clear to me that my task at the moment is to raise my children to be good people. (Channah)

The dual spaces of *shul* and home are often conceived, albeit in various degrees, of having equal importance in achieving a desirable pious life and in the formation of religious subjectivity. For Channah, caring for her children and preparing the *Shabbat* meals at her home were very valuable aspects of her Jewish status. The role of family was important for many interlocutors, in all denominations.

2.6.2 Raising Jewish Children

Family was often a difficult subject for women who became Jewish. For some with Jewish ancestors, *giyur* was a repairment of destructed family lines. Others were inspired to become Jewish because they met a Jewish partner with whom they wanted to form a family. Because

according to the *Halacha*, Judaism is transferred via the matrilineal family line, motherhood was felt as an important responsibility for them as new Jews. I asked Naomi whether she thought that *giyur* was different for men than for women, to which she replied:

Oh, absolutely, at least for me. If I were a man, I'd never have considered to do it, because it wouldn't have had any implications. But for me, I have a certain kind of responsibility since I will have Jewish children, so I have to think about the steps I take until then. (Naomi)

For Naomi, *giyur* was connected to her responsibility to raise Jewish children, as well as her ability to continue the Jewish matrilineal family line—something unaffected by a man's religious status. Yet this sense of responsibility for Jewish women does not lie only in the genealogical sense. Traditionally, men of the households have been responsible for their children's Torah studies, but mothers are the prime caregivers and transferors of the tradition and rituals (Davis 2016; Longman 2008; Ross 2004; Ruttenberg 2009). Naomi did not have children at the time of her *giyur*. Others already did and for some, the question about becoming Jewish was related to becoming a parent. One example comes from Karen, who told me: 'It changed for me when I met my husband. With that came the question: if we were going to have children, how do I want to raise them? What do you want to pass on to your children?' Karen had an interest in Judaism since her early twenties. When she met her husband, a secular Jew (*chiloni*), she felt encouraged to explore *giyur* further. For Karen, her interest in Judaism had started years before she met her partner, however, it was not until she was confronted with the question of heritage and motherhood that she seriously began to consider *giyur*. She developed the wish to raise their children in a Jewish home—a wish that resonates with, amongst others, Hanneke, who was studying for a *giyur* together with her husband and two young children when we met. Before their children were born, they had decided to raise them Jewish, even though they did not have that status themselves:

I don't want my children to look back and think 'They lived Jewish, but we aren't, what happened?' You know... what kind of identity do I pass on to my children, who are we then? It influenced our decision back then, to have the children participate in Jewish life and rituals. Yet they also know they don't really belong. So, if they're at the *bar mitzvah* age: no, they're not going to do that because they aren't Jewish. And if they want to get married: What are you? 'Yeah, I am not Jewish, I do live a Jewish life, but I am not a Jew.' (Hanneke)

The question of '*Mi Jehudi?*' thus becomes even more central when it concerns family identity and heritage. These women did not want their children to feel out of place as they had. Especially within Orthodox communities, this maternal responsibility is one of the reasons why rabbis are hesitant to allow women to convert. The fear is that if such women

become Jewish, but then don't live a *frum* (religiously observant) life, their children will be Jewish, but not raised in an Orthodox way. On this point, Sara stated:

There are more women who want to become Jewish than men, but [the rabbis] have more negative experiences with women too. As in, women who do it for their husbands and don't really have the drive themselves [...] there is more wariness towards women. I think that's partly because women, they will pass it on. (Sara)

Sara was not married when she did her *giyur*, although she did meet her partner when she was not acknowledged as Jewish (although she had a Jewish father). Their marriage was initially declined by the rabbi and they were asked to break up, which Sara agreed to in order to show that she was not motivated by her partner alone. After she had done the *giyur* the love between her and her partner (a Jew by birth from a *Cohanim* family)³³ had not waned, and they eventually got permission to marry in the community. However, in some cases, the status of a converted woman—even though she is now *halachically* Jewish—might still make her unfit for marriage with an Orthodox Jew, especially when it concerns the highly esteemed *Cohanim*.

At times, ideas of marriage and motherhood sat uncomfortably with my interlocutors' initial narratives of autonomous choice. Sara even remarked that the *giyur* process is so demanding that it would be impossible to maintain if it did not come out of a personal desire. This ambivalence is found in this interview excerpt from Ruth, who became Jewish ten years ago in a Liberal community after first encountering it via her Jewish husband:

Ruth: After my second child was born, I questioned more the meaning of life. I brought two kids into the world, who are connected to their family, to my family, but also to the family of their father. Their father who is Jewish in all of his family.

Lieke: Yet your children were not officially Jewish when they were born?

R: I do think so, honestly. I think they're Jewish with a Jewish father. [...] But I was the first non-Jewish woman in the family... and then to have children. But that family, with all that Jewish input, that interested me. What do they get from it, why do my children have a Jewish look in their eyes every now and then, what's that about? It's in their blood. (Ruth)

³³ *Cohanim* refers to the Jewish priesthood. *Cohanim* are said to be descendants—via the patrilineal line—of Moses' brother Aaron. Nowadays, *Cohanim* (singular: *Cohen*) fulfil special ritual tasks in Orthodox service, such as reading the first part of the Torah during weekly prayers and giving the blessing. Whilst *Cohanim* typically enjoy a high status in Orthodox communities, their priesthood is no longer recognised in most non-Orthodox communities. As a *Cohen*, Sara's husband was formally not allowed to marry someone who did *giyur*, although they managed to find a way.

Again, a tension exists here between the *halachic* interpretation of Jewishness—according to which her children were not Jewish—and the more performative and experienced notion of Jewishness—as a ‘look’, a feeling, or even a ‘soul’. Half an hour later, Ruth remarked: ‘I did [*giyur*] for me, for myself. With the feeling that I had to be able to pass something on to my children, but that was what *I* wanted. I didn’t do it because I had a Jewish family.’ When I asked her how that was related to her earlier statement that she wanted to respect her husband’s family, she responded: ‘Well, yes, though it wasn’t about respecting them...’ before falling silent, searching for an answer:

Hm. Well... It was more out of respect for the blood pumping through the veins of my children. Does that make sense? I didn’t do it for other people. I did it for me, although to me this was one of the most important motivations. But most important is that I did it for myself, because you shouldn’t do a *giyur* for any other reasons. (Ruth)

Even though my interviewees framed their decisions in terms of autonomy, the influence of relations on the process cannot be ignored. Furthermore, the question of autonomy is even more complex taking into account the idea of blood, belonging, and heritage, when only a woman is able to continue the Jewish bloodline. Non-Orthodox Jewish women especially, strongly held the ideal of autonomous choice, rejecting the stereotypical view that they only converted ‘for their husbands’. Yet in reality, a Jewish partner, as well as the wish to pass on the Jewish tradition to their children, were often significant factors in the choices made by the women, even though they did not ‘do *giyur*’ for their marriage. Naomi, who I started this section with, would never have considered doing *giyur* if it did not have implications on motherhood. Karen was interested in Judaism for many years, but was motivated to do a *giyur* when she met her husband. Sara was even asked to break up her relationship in order to prove that she did not merely want to become Jewish because of her partner. These examples all show how *giyur* is relational, regardless of the emphasis on individual and autonomous choice. In the final section of this chapter I analyse yet another aspect of Jewish conversion, namely the role of the body in the process of *giyur*.

2.7 Embodying a Jewish Self

As I wrote in the first chapter, the process of conversion should not be understood as a change in mindset or worldview, but as a complicated process of self-making (McGuire 2008; Rambo and Farhadian 2014). This making of the self not only occurs in particular spaces and in relation to broader societal discourses and politics, but also impacts individual bodies. A religious tradition can come with its own specific body politics, something to which my interlocutors related with ambivalence. I consider all religions as material and embodied, but

Judaism is especially known for its bodily regime and focus on practice. In their conversion process, my interlocutors had to learn to perform Judaism in a particular way, whilst simultaneously seeking the approaches with which they felt most comfortable. I asked women about the meaning they give to the common notion of ‘living a Jewish life’ (*Joods leven*), and they described this as a learned embodied everyday practice. Channah replied:

With eating *kosher*, with all the blessings we have to say all day. You see, it’s about how my day is scheduled, how my year is scheduled, how I dress. Because yeah, as an Orthodox Jewish woman you can only wear skirts or dresses, you have to be covered. And since my marriage I cover my hair as well. So yes, my whole life is marked by Judaism. (Channah)

In Channah’s description, different aspects of embodying Judaism came up, such as food, clothing, prayers and her daily schedule. Whereas Liberal and Progressive women tend not to cover their hair or adapt their style of dress, nonetheless, they experience ‘Jewish life’ in a similar all-encompassing way. The following section focuses on three aspects that were mentioned most: Food, *Shabbat* rest, and clothing.

2.7.1 Keeping Kosher

On a rainy day in September 2017, I visited a rabbi from a Liberal community. We spoke about *giyur* in their congregation and in Judaism in general, and they talked openly about the process, philosophy, and the *gerim* themselves:

Rabbi: The funny thing is... often when people come to me [for *giyur*], the first thing they’d say is ‘But I do eat *kosher*!’, and I always reply ‘Did I even ask about that?’ A: what you put in your mouth doesn’t concern me, and B: it all depends on the underlying thought you have with that.

Lieke: But in the conversations you have, keeping kosher is considered a yardstick of Judaism?

R: It is seen as a yardstick yes, and why, well Judaism is a very practical religion. And what is more practical than what you put in your mouth? But what’s important about eating *kosher* is being conscious. Consciousness is the core of the matter, and part of everything I do, teach, and tell others. (Rabbi)

Eating food that is *kosher* (‘fit for consumption’) by following the rules of the *kashrut* is often regarded as one of the primary signifiers of Jewish life and practice.³⁴ The matter of

³⁴ The taboo on eating certain meats—such as animals with cloven hooves, pork, and fish without scales—and the prohibition on combining dairy and meat are most well-known. *Kosher* meat refers to animals that were ritually slaughtered by a recognised *shochtim*. *Kashrut* also includes rules of having two sets of dishes, or even

‘consciousness’ that the rabbi talked about, is reflected in the central notion of *tikkun olam*, healing the world. I asked all my interlocutors if they remembered how they began to implement Jewish practice in their daily lives. Almost all of them answered with referring to *Shabbat* and *kosher*. Take for example Sara who responded to my question:

Keeping *Shabbat*. I started with that, though I already ate *kosher* for a while, or well, *kosher*-like, but that changed gradually. It went from only eating permitted animals to eating vegetarian just to keep it as safe as possible... So all of that came gradually. (Sara)

At first sight, this might not be any different for male converts, as both of these *mitzvot* apply to all Jewish people. However, I cannot tell for certain whether male converts would answer this question in the same way, or would perhaps foreground other expressions of religion. At the same time, food practices are inherently gendered, as is the space of the home. Keeping *kosher* is a crucial Jewish practice, and women are the main guardians of the *kashrut*, as Shoshanna asserts: ‘It honours and values women, and many women actually enjoy preparing the *Shabbat* meals.’ Following the *kashrut* can be an important change throughout the day prior to the official permission by the *beit din*. In that sense, it can be considered one of the more accessible steps towards becoming Jewish, in the sense that it is up to each individual to implement. Information about the *kashrut* is also widely accessible both online and in printed form via large encyclopaedia on permitted foods. For Orthodox women, eating completely *kosher* is often a prerequisite in gaining the desired recognition of the rabbinate. Shoshanna was in her early twenties when we met, and at that time she had been ‘doing *giyur*’ for two years in an Orthodox community. However, she had not been permitted to become Jewish because she was not able to make her kitchen completely *kosher* as a student who shares a house with non-Jewish people:

That is a criteria on which an Orthodox rabbi does not let me finish the *giyur*. I can learn, I can be active in a Jewish community, but I am not allowed the *giyur* certification, I am not far enough. (Shoshanna)

Most Liberal or Progressive (and indeed, some Orthodox) women have their own interpretation of how the *kashrut* should be implemented, of which not eating pork and not eating shrimps were the most common. Similar to international communities, most Liberal and Progressive women referred to their food practices with the English ‘*kosher style*’:

two kitchens, for dairy and meat produce, and a taboo on eating with people who do not keep *kosher*. In some Orthodox circles, only dairy, grain, meat, and wine that are approved by a rabbinical court are considered *kosher*.

I eat *kosher style*, which means that we don't eat pork and no animals such as slugs and those things, impure fish, we don't eat that. And I never combine meat with milk, I wouldn't do that. Not in a meal. (Esther)

There are two different related reasons to eat *kosher style*, rather than strictly following the *kashrut*. Many interlocutors had an open interpretation of these rules and told me that the intent is more important than the outcome. It was generally accepted that food practices should be an expression of *tikkun olam*, specifically with regard to an environmental consciousness. Another, even more recent form of *kosher style* is called 'eco-kosher', which explicitly prioritises ecological sustainability over any strict observance of the *kashrut*. This was especially advocated by one of the rabbis I interviewed. A second reason to opt for *kosher style* rather than strictly *kosher* is more pragmatic, as it is very difficult to keep a fully *kosher* kitchen because of the lack of available produce. Lucy mentioned: 'Since I started with *giyur*, we began to eat *kosher style* at home, because eating *kosher*, you can't really do that in the *Mediene*. You could in Amsterdam, but not here, you'd have to become a vegetarian.' Some women, like Sara described above, indeed chose to follow a vegetarian diet. Channah also initially began with a vegetarian diet. She told me that only after she moved to an Orthodox Jewish neighbourhood was she really able to live her desired *frum* life, which for her included a strict observance of the *kashrut*. The *kashrut* also includes the principle of *bishul Yisrael*, the prohibition of sharing food with people who do not keep *kosher*, or consuming food prepared by a non-Jew. This proved a challenge for Channah and other Orthodox women because they came from a non-Jewish family and social circle. It also clashed with important ideals of Jewish life such as the centrality of sharing meals with family. Some women had *Shabbat* meals on their own before they became acquainted with other Jews, or when they became linked to a Jewish family by their rabbi. The weekly *Shabbat* meal is often regarded as the most celebrated and happy occasion for Jews and affirms the importance of women as homemakers. Yet for Orthodox women, this could also be a very painful moment, and a reminder of their loneliness, because of *bishul Yisrael*. Channah found a solution to this problem, namely, when she visits her mother during the summer, she simply 'takes over the kitchen, so she doesn't have to cook for two weeks! I have my own pots and pans at my mother's place'. This way, she found complementarity between her new Jewish status and its implications for her existing social network and family, and this offered a resolution to the potential conflict between these two aspects of her life. These examples show that whilst food is central in conversions, the majority of converted women introduce different practices in their daily life gradually, trying to negotiate their personal desires, expectations from the community and pragmatic circumstances. The same goes for observing the day of rest on Saturday, *Shabbat*.

2.7.2 Observing *Shabbat*

A second ‘foundation of Jewish life’ (to cite Rachel) for my interlocutors was the observance of *Shabbat* rest. As stated by Sara in the previous section both *kosher* eating and *Shabbat* rest were gradually implemented in her daily routine. A major change took place when Sara was invited to other people’s homes in the Orthodox *shul* she attended. Before that, she found it difficult to observe *Shabbat*:

I did turn my phone off, for example, but continued to use public transport, those kinds of things. Also, purely because keeping *Shabbat* all by yourself is dreadful. If you don’t get any input from your social life. I did have a *Shabbat* meal by myself a few times, but when it comes to that, I did have very kind friends who told me ‘let me know if you’re alone because it’s just no fun by yourself’. And I could spend the night with those friends and visit *shul* with them. (Sara)

Regarding the observance of *Shabbat*, again, there is a difference between Liberal or Progressive and Orthodox interpretations. Some women chose to dedicate the day to rest and relaxation, exemplified by no longer doing groceries on Saturdays. Similar to merely eliminating pork from a diet, this kind of *Shabbat* enables women to ‘feel Jewish’ without demanding too much change in their regular routines. Another initial implementation of *Shabbat* rest was abstaining from using mobile phones, computers, or televisions from Friday’s sunset until sunset on Saturday.

Orthodox women tended to follow stricter rules, such as the prohibition to carry or to make fire. The first prohibition meant that they only moved on foot on *Shabbat* and did not carry anything outside of the Amsterdam *eruv*.³⁵ Fortunately, most Orthodox synagogues are located in the *eruv*, Rachel explained:

I live in a part of the *eruv*, and I often go to a synagogue there. So, I can just carry things, but I also go for long walks, and when I cross the [river], that’s a boundary of the *eruv*, I can’t carry anymore. So, in that case, I hide my key somewhere near my house, so I don’t have to bring it. (Rachel)

Living in the *eruv* enabled Rachel to go about her daily life on *Shabbat* without restrictions on what she could carry. Yet crucial to this was the possibility to live within walking distance of the synagogue, as my Orthodox interlocutors wished to observe *Shabbat* rest in the ‘traditional’ manner. This last observance proved difficult for women living in the *Mediene*,

³⁵ *Eruv* refers to the rabbinical means to extend the ‘private’ space—the space in which things can be carried—to a wider enclosed area, often a Jewish neighborhood. Common boundaries of the *eruv* are constituted by wires strung between poles, and natural surroundings such as rivers. The *eruv* only functions if all of its boundaries are closed. In 2008, the *eruv* in Amsterdam and Amstelveen was reinstated, after being out of use since 1972. It is currently the only functioning *eruv* in the country.

in which case the nearest *shul* would be impossible to reach without a car or travelling on public transport. All Orthodox Jewish women lived within walking distance of a synagogue, Liberal and Progressive women often did not. Therefore, most non-Orthodox synagogues are rather pragmatic concerning transportation. When asked if it is permissible for her to travel to her Progressive *shul* on *Shabbat* by car, Ruth replied: ‘Yes, yeah, I really don’t believe it makes any sense to hold on to 16th and 17th century habits...’, indicating that such interpretations of the *Halacha* and *mitzvot* are considered outdated and irrelevant for her Jewish practice.

Orthodox *Shabbat* habits have also been modernised. All kinds of modern gadgets have been developed to make the prohibition of carrying or making fire more bearable, such as *Shabbat* timers that automatically switch lights on and off (related to the prohibition to ‘make fire’) or pouches that can hold the key to the front door (the prohibition to carry). Rachel told me that she loves to walk and sees the prohibition of vehicles as being of great value, since it forces her to take long walks and rest. All in all, most women told me that *Shabbat* provides them with a day of rest, legitimately allowing them to slow down and rejuvenate after their often hectic working weeks. Indeed, many considered taking one day of rest a week to be a great advantage for *all* Dutch people in the often high-paced environment of modern life.

2.7.3 Women’s Clothing and Ritual Garments

In this final section, I explore how women converting to Judaism reflected on their dress style and potential changes in this. Most Orthodox rabbis expect a certain level of modesty from the women in their congregations. There are not many requirements for women’s dress in Liberal and Progressive communities, but there are some distinguishing habits in Orthodox communities to which Jewish women are expected to adhere. Married Orthodox women are expected to cover their hair, either with a wig (*sheitel*), headscarf (*tichel*), or simple headband. This was often an important point of change for women who converted in an Orthodox community, and began to cover their hair during, or after, the *giyur* process. Sara married a few months after she became Jewish and started to wear a *tichel*. For her, this was a particular feature of her marital status, yet she told me that her husband—himself a Modern Orthodox Jew—initially felt uncomfortable with this and did not completely agree with such a strict adherence. Sara said:

I wanted to give it a try, I was curious. I’d followed some classes on the topic, and I thought it was a nice idea. [...] Your hair becomes a part of you that you keep specifically for you and your husband. See, I don’t wear my headscarf with my parents, it won’t be a disaster if a girlfriend visits and I’m not wearing it, and I don’t feel naked without it, but it is, yes, it’s just... it helps... it makes it more exclusive. (Sara)

Besides hair covering, Orthodox guidelines require that women wear a skirt over their knees, and long sleeve shirts that cover their collarbones, preferably in darker colours. Or, in the words of Shoshanna: ‘If you want to do *giyur* and go to an Orthodox *shul* wearing pants, that doesn’t work, sorry.’ When she first started with the *giyur*, Sara was regularly checked on her attire, and she tried to fulfil the expectations as truly as possible. After she was officially considered Jewish, she began to change certain things, like wearing bright colours again. When we met, she wore a bright orange *tichel* which she saw mainly as a confirmation of her position as a married Jewish woman. This was different for Hanneke, who described her motivation as follows:

It’s written in the Torah that the woman covers her hair out of respect for God. It’s on your head, and by that you acknowledge that God is above you and is greater and higher than you. [...] This is how I express that my life has become dependent on the Eternal. (Hanneke)

For Hanneke, a *tichel* was not so much a confirmation of her status as married Jewish woman, but rather motivated by her belief in God. She was the only one I spoke to who decided to wear a headscarf prior to her official *giyur*. Channah was not married at the time of her *giyur*, but started to wear a *tichel* after her marriage. However, wearing a headscarf she became the victim of Islamophobic assaults, as people assumed she had converted to Islam. This became so untenable that she eventually decided to wear a *sheitel* instead (see also chapter six). She told me she had to get used to the new dress codes and did not feel comfortable from the beginning. This is in contrast to Hanneke and Sara, who framed their change in dress as motivated by their own pious desires and as an added value. Channah found it particularly difficult not to wear trousers anymore:

I’ve grown totally used to wearing skirts and I wouldn’t want it any other way. But sometimes I do think... I do like to look nice every now and then. But you have to wear a skirt that goes down to your knees, and we can’t have any outspoken clothes and all. I find at times, yeah, I might have to dress a bit old-fashioned, but I don’t want to look old! (Channah)

Such ‘old-fashioned’ styles of dress could be expected to be a marker of their Jewishness towards the non-Jewish world as well, but this was not such a heavy symbol, as is the case with Muslim women’s veiling, as I will argue in chapters four and six.

Wearing a *tichel* or *sheitel* is not common in non-Orthodox communities. Neither is wearing a *kippah*, which is traditionally only worn by Jewish men. In Progressive communities, women are also permitted to wear a *kippah*, although this is not compulsory as it is for men. The call to wear a *kippah* mainly came from a few rabbis I spoke with, although

they are often careful in voicing these wishes as not to alienate their community. A Liberal rabbi told me about this:

Formally, men and women are equal. Women can wear a *tallit* here, but not a *kippah*. And that's very strange, I don't get it... but anyway, we have a notion of *minhag hamakom*, which means 'the local custom'. You adapt yourself to what's common in that particular *shul*. [...] It's very strange to me that women can wear a *tallit* but not a *kippah*. (Rabbi)

In some Liberal synagogues, women are prohibited from wearing a *kippah*, with the exception of some rabbis and some individual communities. The majority of LJJ women does not wear any head coverage at all, although a few might wear a hat. I often noticed how the seemingly similar practice of head covering was coded very differently amongst my interlocutors. A headscarf, headband, or wig is typically associated with gender difference and Orthodox conservative views of womanhood, whereas women wearing a *kippah* are regarded as being at the cutting edge of progressiveness. The latter were frowned upon by many participants, leading to interesting paradoxes in our conversations. For example, Karen expressed that she finds gender equality in *shul* very important. At the same time, she added:

You sometimes see women wearing a *kippah* or a prayer shawl. That's just a step too far for me, it's something typically masculine. I can't even explain why, I can't argue with facts or scripture or something straightforward. It's a feeling, I don't find it necessary at all and I even reject those practices. (Karen)

For Karen, this type of 'men's clothing' (which was therefore unsuitable for women) did not only include the *kippah*, but extended to the use of ritual garments in service. In particular, the use of prayer shawls (*tallit*) often came up during our conversations. Whereas there was no space for negotiation about wearing a *kippah*—it is only allowed in Progressive synagogues—there was more room with regard to the *tallit* in Liberal communities.

The *tallit* is a ritual garment that 'symbolizes and activates both a social tie to a people (through a shared past) and a religious obligation to follow a righteous life (God's commandments) in the present' (Emmett 2007, 78). It is worn during prayer, especially *Shabbat* prayers in the synagogue. Male—and some female—converts start wearing it only after they have undergone the ritual immersion in the *mikvah*, which signifies their entrance into Judaism. As it is with many of the *mitzvot*, Orthodox women are 'exempt' from wearing a *tallit*. In Liberal Judaism, this interpretation is changed to signify something that is optional, rather than forbidden, which is why the dominant opinion holds that, should they wish so, women should be allowed to wear a *tallit*. According to Ayla Emmett (2007, 79), the practice of women wearing a prayer shawl should be recognised as 'historically ground-breaking. [...] Women who have taken to wrapping themselves in ritual garments such as the *tallit* signify a

monumental change in a long tradition of a gendered synagogue'. In the same manner, the *tallit* appeared particularly important for my interlocutors in Liberal synagogues and could affirm one's status as a Jew as well as undermine it.

Deborah expressed that the possibility of wearing a *tallit* was very important to her, as it enabled her to both fulfil her obligations and reinforce her piety. The fact that Deborah became Jewish later in life did add an extra dimension to this meaning of the *tallit*. I asked her if she could explain what it means for her to wear it, and after some moments of contemplation, she replied:

For me it means that I'm really Jewish and I'm really committed in the moment. And also... that I fully grasp what is happening, that I know the prayers. I think it's important that if I wear it, I should fully understand what I'm doing.
(Deborah)

For Deborah, joining the prayers indicates that she does not only have the right to wear it, but that she has earned her right and place within the Jewish community. She shows that she knows her prayers and is committed, not only to herself and to God, but also to her fellow Jews. This is very different from the experience of Naomi, who does not wear a prayer shawl. She is part of a different Liberal *shul* where few women wear a *tallit*, even though women are allowed to do so if they wish. The following is an excerpt from one of our conversations:

Lieke: Do you wear a tallit during service?

Naomi: No, I don't.

L: Why not?

N: I'm not sure to be honest. See... the thing is, if you take a look at our community... actually only people from an older generation who did a *giyur* wear a *tallit*. The older generation of women who've done a *giyur*.

L: That's quite a specific group.

N: It's not a big group, but it is still a group. And also a bit... it's a group of elderly feminists, in their fifties, sixties... [...] It's a feeling. I have to be honest here, it's partly because of group pressure—if I'm being totally honest—because actually no women from my generation wear a *tallit*. And that's part of it. It would mean you'd profile yourself in a certain way. It may be childish, but it does influence [my decision]. Also considering my status, that I think... it's difficult.

L: Your status?

N: Well, both my status as *giyoret*—the fact that I haven't been Jewish for as long as others—and my [role in the *shul*]. I think it would give some kind of signal. I find it difficult, and it's something you just have to find a balance in. [...] And for me, I don't have the feeling that I would be a better Jew if I do it. (Naomi)

Naomi shows many similarities to my other interlocutors. Similar to Karen, for example, she told me she does not really know why she chooses not to wear a *tallit*. By this, Naomi meant that she does not have any *halachic* or scriptural foundation to her decision. She recognises the prayer shawl as a sign of equality, but only in the case of a particular feminist agenda of some older converted women. No younger women or born Jewish women in her congregation practise this, and Naomi is afraid that if she were to, she would be perceived both as too feminist, and as someone who did *giyur*. This might limit her sense of belonging and raise questions amongst her fellow congregants about her Jewish status. She thus strives to ‘pass’ as a Jew in her community and prefers not to stand out too much. Importantly, Naomi (unlike Deborah) does not have any particular pious motivations to wear, or not wear, a *tallit* and does not feel she would be a ‘better Jew’ if she did.

This discussion, about wearing and not wearing clothing associated with Jewish tradition—specifically a *sheitel*, *tichel*, *kippah*, or *tallit*—was a source of negotiation and experimentation amongst women converting to Judaism. Channah initially began to wear a headscarf, but eventually decided to wear a wig. For women such as Deborah, the *tallit* functioned as a confirmation of a Jewish self. However, in some spaces where *only* converted women wore the *tallit* wearing it could have the countereffect of marking women’s bodies as converted, and thus as different from born Jews. The widely shared desire to become unrecognisable as a convert could thus simultaneously lead some to wear, and some not to wear, religious garments.

Conclusion

I started this chapter with the observation that for many Jewish people, being Jewish cannot be captured by the term ‘religion’ in its narrow sense. Both being and becoming Jewish affects life on multiple levels, ranging from personal decisions whether to follow a vegetarian or some other form of *kosher* diet, to wearing a prayer shawl in service; or from discovering that one’s grandfather had been Jewish, to trying to convince a *beit din* to grant you a Jewish status; and everything that happens in-between. This chapter has elaborated on the everyday religious practices of new Jewish women in relation to gender, by focusing on *giyur* from an everyday, gender perspective. At some point during their *giyur* trajectories, either on their own or under the guidance of their rabbis, all of the converts had to think about their attire, what they ate, the people they interacted with, the implications of starting a family, and many more issues besides. The vast majority of my interlocutors had a desire to become uncontested members of the community. I noticed during our conversations about gender dynamics at home, in *shul*, or in the regulation of one’s body, that these negotiations cannot be separated from broader societal tendencies and processes, nor can it be assumed that community-wide discourses on gender and the position of women are directly mirrored in the day-to-day lives

of converted women themselves. In this conclusion, I return to the two main theoretical questions with which I opened this chapter, namely, the relation between lived religion and gender; and the question of authority and autonomy.

Starting from lived religion, conversion has proved to be a process of negotiation, both on a rational and an emotional level. In many cases, the way my interlocutors spoke about clothing and garments was different from their description of *Shabbat* and following the *kashrut*, which they based on rationalised interpretations of the *mitzvot*. In the case of clothing, my interlocutors often told me that they did not really have an explanation, but based their rejection of wearing a wig or *kippah* on emotion, although being unable to explain why. Why this might be the case, remains open to speculation. For one, clothing and garments are particularly gendered material objects—in this case, gendered manifestations of Jewishness—whilst following the *kashrut* and keeping *Shabbat* rest are practices that do not generally exhibit any profound gendered difference (even though many considered this to be the domain of women). Wearing a *tichel*, however, is a gendered sign of having become a Jewish woman. Yet for some, this marker of difference was hardly of any relevance. These women found it more important to be recognised as a Jew, than specifically as a Jewish woman. Although many found this type of distinction to be outdated and contrary to their emancipatory ideals, other women did find solace in such a marked difference within Judaism. Most Liberal women, for example, found it important to be able to participate in synagogue services and to take on responsibility for rituals outside of the home. For them, Jewish gender difference was more subtly marked by the emphasis on the importance of women’s emotional labour at home and in *shul*; or by rejecting the option for women to wear a *kippah* or prayer shawl. Orthodox converted women were most likely to have an understanding of gender difference as ‘complementary’, finding value and joy in segregated roles and tasks, such as taking on the responsibility for the care of children; preparing *Shabbat* meals; or forming women-only groups to study the scriptures. This also came up among some Liberal and Progressive Jewish women. A minority of Progressive Jewish women, however, would be on the other end of this spectrum, advocating for a more thorough form of equality in which gender differences were eliminated. In this group, I found examples of liturgical change to include the feminine form of God; women taking on ritual tasks in service, such as carrying the Torah scrolls; and wearing a *kippah*. Yet, there are many instances of overlap and the official discourses and regulations regarding women’s roles were often not taken on uncritically, but were rather negotiated.

The second point on which I would like to provide some brief conclusions, is the tension between autonomy and authority. Throughout my interlocutors’ stories, I noticed a tension between the wish to fulfil an ‘autonomous’ desire to become Jewish on the one hand, and demands from the community on the other hand—from rabbis and, although this was not experienced as pressure, from spouses or family. Such tensions are not unique to the Jewish case, but I did notice that Jewish women were most hesitant to talk about the influence of

close relations, which could be explained by the highly individualised character of *giyur*, as compared to Christian or Muslim conversion. Especially in Liberal and Progressive communities, the emphasis was on personal intent and a person's inner motivation. This supposedly locates Jewish practice primarily in the individual, rather than in the community. Moreover, practices were widely regarded to lose their legitimacy when they were not the result of authentic choice. This language of authenticity was reflected in all of the women's stories. Progressive women would consider *giyur* a confirmation of a pre-existing 'authentic' selfhood. Some Orthodox women used the terminology of authenticity to explain their choice for Orthodoxy as the most 'authentic' form of Judaism. For this last group, the community, tradition, and family tended to be more important than individual motivations or spiritual desires. To paraphrase Channah: There are simply things part of Judaism that you do not agree with, but you should still do them. Conversely, some women aspired to such a status of being, in which guidelines provided them with a greater sense of self, history, and belonging. Becoming Jewish thus implied the negotiation of different rules and guidelines, different positions of women in *shul* and at home, and different relationships to others.

Chapter 3
Women Converting to Christianity
‘Welcome Home!’

It is a conscious choice not to live alone anymore, not to live just for yourself. That is what being Christian means, you stop living for what you want, but start to live according to the will of God.

—Anne

You cannot just change from one day to the next. [Conversion] is a slow and steady process, to be honest. At least that is how it has been for me, and I am glad for it.

—Lisa

These two citations come from my interviews with converted Christian women and together capture very different experiences of conversion within this context. For some Christian interlocutors, conversion meant a ‘conscious choice’, whilst for others, this was a ‘slow and steady process’. This idea of conscious choice reflects the dominant discourse of the neo-Pentecostal communities in which I conducted my fieldwork. Although in daily life, conversion experiences similar to Lisa’s came up more frequently, regarding conversion both as a process *and* as a moment of choice often went hand in hand. For Christian converts, these two experiences, whilst admittedly different, were not mutually exclusive. There are converts in many different types of Christianity. In the Netherlands, the different Christian denominations form the majority religion—although recent reports showed that just over half of the population do not identify with a religion at all (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020, see introduction to this dissertation). For my research I limited the case study among Christians to a relative newcomer in the Dutch religious landscape, namely churches affiliated with the neo-Pentecostal church conglomerate Hillsong. Pentecostal groups share many characteristics with Evangelicalism³⁶, but it additionally emphasises the power and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Klaver 2021). Scholars of Pentecostalism agree on the specific characteristics and rituals that make this group distinct from other Evangelical groups, namely the emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, healing practices, prophesy, and speaking in tongues (also called glossolalia; Albrecht and Howard 2014; Klaver 2011b; Robbins 2004). All of these elements are considered to be an effect, as well as evidence, of true belief and divine blessing by the Holy Spirit.³⁷ For this research, I undertook extensive fieldwork in two Hillsong affiliated churches, where I met around forty women in church services, bible study classes and an introduction course. With eight women I undertook in-depth interviews. In addition, I

³⁶ These are, according to Bebbington (1989): Conservative piety; high regard for the Bible as the Word of God; an emphasis on salvation through Jesus Christ; and a missional zeal.

³⁷ This focus on the Holy Spirit and its workings is based upon the biblical account of the Pentecost described in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit descended on earth and Jesus’ followers were ‘filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them’ (Acts 2:4, NIV).

met religious leaders from all groups. Because of the centrality of community in these conversion trajectories, participant observation was the most important method in this setting.

The notion of conversion is very dominant in Pentecostalism. Indeed, out of all of the case studies in my project, this social setting had the strongest impact on the lives of Christian converts and the manner in which they narrate their own conversions. Furthermore, becoming religious encompassed far more than simply believing in the biblical truths. Such truths were connected to personal and emotional experiences of the transcendent, albeit with attendant insecurities whenever certain signs of God did not occur. In addition, converting also included taking on a new moral framework for all of daily life. Converts often experienced a change in their family values and had to relate to a new sense of womanhood that was simultaneously conservative and modern. The term of ‘conversion’ is often connected to its specific Christian history (see chapter one), and sometimes indicates rupture or a clearly identifiable moment of change. In my study I had a broader approach to conversion, as a process of negotiation and self-making that is relational and embodied. Because of the Christian connotations, women in my Muslim and Jewish case study had more concerns with using the term ‘conversion’ to describe their experience. This was instead a widely used term in the Christian setting. However, many also understood their experiences as a process and this was similarly far broader than a narrow conception of conversion can capture.

Conversion in a neo-Pentecostal church, with its modern aesthetic, emphasis on musical worship, and revival of gender conservatism, is thus a story of ambivalence: The church embraces autonomous choice whilst simultaneously clearly structuring the choices women make. For example, it gives women power in church leadership, yet also expects them to be subject to their husbands. This chapter aims to provide insights into the ambivalences and negotiations present in the conversions of women in the context of Dutch neo-Pentecostal churches. The first section provides a brief overview of Pentecostalism and Hillsong, as well as the specifics of my fieldwork setting in the Netherlands. Section 3.2 then sheds light on the meaning of conversion in this context before turning to the different type of motivation narratives my interlocutors expressed. The sections thereafter are devoted to the analysis of the conversion experiences of women in relation to questions of gender discourses; the church and community; the private sphere; and the body.

3.1 Pentecostalism and Hillsong in the Netherlands

Pentecostalism is widely regarded as a movement rather than a denomination (Anderson 2004; D. Martin 2013), and is a rapidly growing form of Christianity worldwide (Hefner 2013; Robbins 2004). Its origins are often traced to the Azusa Revival in the United States, however, Allan Anderson, one of the central scholars in the field, questions this linear narrative. Instead, Anderson (2004, 2007) argues that different yet similar types of worship

came to exist in various parts of the world. Pentecostalism started as part of the broader charismatic move (or ‘revival’) across denominations and can be linked to Protestantism, American Methodism, as well as indigenous spiritual practices in Latin-America and Africa. Therefore, some would locate Pentecostalism as a denomination under the larger Protestant umbrella (Casanova 2001, 435; Robbins 2004). However, despite the links between Evangelicalism and Protestantism, Anderson (2004) argues that Pentecostalism is so different from ‘traditional’ Protestantism that it should be acknowledged as a fourth major form of Christianity, next to Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant forms.

The first Pentecostal communities were often independent, individual churches. However, this changed in the so-called ‘third wave’ of Pentecostalism in the 1980s, during which—amongst others—the phenomenon of the ‘mega church’, with memberships running into the thousands, arose. A well-known example of one such church is Lakewood Church in Texas, the United States, which has approximately 52,000 attendees per week (Rakow 2020b). The 1980s also saw the establishment of conglomerate churches, in which one church would have different locations throughout the world (Anderson 2010, 19–20; Reed 2014). One of these is Hillsong which, although founded in the 1980s, from the 2000s onwards began to establish churches worldwide.³⁸ Churches such as Hillsong are explicitly urban, modern, and transnational in nature and are often referred to as ‘neo-Pentecostal’ (McClymond 2014; Robbins 2004). In this section, I offer more background to this rise of Hillsong worldwide and in the Netherlands.

3.1.1 Hillsong Church

Hillsong is one of the largest global neo-Pentecostal church conglomerates and was founded in Australia in 1983 by former Assemblies of God leader Brian Houston and his wife Bobbie (Klaver 2021; Riches and Wagner 2017). Initially, Hillsong was known outside Australia mostly for their Christian pop-music band Hillsong United (Wagner 2019). Over the past decade, the churches gained popularity as well, and Hillsong has witnessed a vast increase in its churches and members worldwide, mainly amongst young adults. This emphasis on youth culture comes with a very trendy aesthetic, celebrity culture, the use of social media such as Instagram, and fashionable church leaders. This has led to their being (rather ironically) labelled ‘hipster Christianity’ (Mccracken 2010), referring to the young adult and urban hipster trend of the 2010s.³⁹ According to Hillsong itself, currently about 150,000 people

³⁸ Until recently, Hillsong was part of the Australian branch of Assemblies of God, one of the oldest denominations of first-wave Pentecostalism.

³⁹ Hipster came up in the early years of the twenty-first century and refers to the millennial subculture that is characterised by vintage clothing, sustainable food, leftist politics, and indie music. Whilst initially anti-mainstream, it quickly became a common trend throughout the world and many large clothing stores now offer ‘vintage look’ styles for high prices. A typical hipster look would be, for example, tight jeans, checked shirt, beard, and long hair in a bun for men.

worldwide attend services in one of the thirty countries in which the church is active (Hillsong Church 2021). At the time of writing, eighty Hillsong churches, known as ‘branches’, exist worldwide. Even more churches are affiliated to Hillsong, but have an independent organisational structure and do not carry the name Hillsong. These are part of the so-called ‘Hillsong Family’ and are churches that were not founded by Hillsong, but rather were invited to join the network whilst maintaining their legal independence.

At the time of writing, Hillsong’s founders Brian and Bobbie Houston are the global lead pastors⁴⁰ of the church-franchise and are located in the Sydney headquarters.⁴¹ Brian is called global senior pastor and Bobbie oversees the women’s activities as ‘co-senior pastor’. Women’s ministry has a special focus in Hillsong and is called the ‘Sisterhood’, with Bobbie as the exemplary Christian woman (e.g., Bobbie Houston 2016). The Houston’s children are also involved with the church.⁴² This emphasis on the family in the church’s leadership is not unexpected for Hillsong, as family values are one of the most important aspects of their moral makeup. The Hillsong community functions as an important example of ideal family life, which is mirrored by the local Hillsong-related churches in which I conducted my fieldwork. Hillsong further presents itself as a contemporary, modern, and universal church, but not specifically as Pentecostal. The background of the Houstons in Assemblies of God—one of the oldest Pentecostal denominations—is often downplayed and public representations rarely refer to typical Pentecostal practices such as glossolalia. Yet these practices and the underlying significance to the Holy Spirit is central to the Hillsong approach and meets all of the usual characteristics of a neo-Pentecostal church.

The rise of Hillsong has not been without its controversies, the most significant of which are the sexual abuse allegations made against Brian Houston’s father Frank, who molested multiple young boys between 1965 and 1977 whilst he was the leader of Assemblies of God New Zealand.⁴³ When Frank Houston was initially asked to step down, it was with the vague notion of ‘moral failure’. More recently, another type of ‘moral failure’ caused a scandal in Hillsong, unrelated to sexual abuse. In the Fall of 2020, amidst the Covid-19 crisis, Pastor Carl Lentz was fired from Hillsong New York City because of ‘moral failure’, namely

⁴⁰ In March 2022, after this dissertation was finalised and approved, Hillsong announced that Brian Houston resigned as Global Senior Pastor of Hillsong Church. Bobbie Houston stepped down a few weeks later.

⁴¹ Over recent decades, the church has been able to build a small town near Sydney, called the Hills Campus, where people can follow courses and live amongst Hillsong-affiliates from across the world.

⁴² Ben Houston is lead pastor of Hillsong Los Angeles; Laura Toggs (née Houston) is leader of youth ministry in Sydney; and their eldest child, Joel Houston, is the lead singer of the famous Hillsong United worship band.

⁴³ The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse investigated this abuse further and brought Frank Houston’s paedophilia to public attention in 2014 (Austin 2017; Coate and Atkinson 2015). According to the commission, Frank’s son Brian neglected to report the crimes, which he reportedly found out about in 1998 (Davidson 2015). At the time of writing, this case is still under investigation by the New South Wales police. This also focuses on Brian’s role (Taylor 2019).

infidelity.⁴⁴ Although the church in New York City was founded by both him and Joel Houston, in many regards, Lentz outshined the Houston family in popularity and media presence. To what extent a sense of competition impacted his dismissal is unclear. It is surprising that Lentz was immediately fired, whilst other men in similar positions who are unfaithful often simply take a break and later redeem themselves (Bowler 2019).

Another source of public controversy are the financial pressures placed upon Hillsong members, in particular, the pressure on them to donate. Hillsong churches typically ask members to give a ‘tithe’ or one tenth of their income to the church as based on biblical teachings.⁴⁵ This is a common practice in most Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, which are often built from the bottom-up and depend on such income to function.⁴⁶ However, it is common knowledge that Hillsong does not dedicate all of its tithe income to charitable causes and, whilst some of the money is invested in the church and its buildings, its leaders do not shy away from living a lavish lifestyle (Riches and Wagner 2017)—something that leads many to accusations of extortion.⁴⁷ This motivated Brian Houston to publish a statement online (2010), in which he stated: ‘The innuendos that suggest Bobbie, myself and our children are profiting off people’s tithes is [sic] completely false’ (Brian Houston 2010). Hillsong’s finances are often discussed by secular media outlets, but these are often explicit critics of the church, so it is difficult to know for certain where the truth lies (e.g., Ceasrine 2018). Yet such narratives had little impact on most of my interlocutors, even if some did wonder, for example in the words of Danielle: ‘Why we need a fancy LED screen on stage, we could also give to charities in Africa.’ It appeared most difficult for non-religious friends and family members to accept the points discussed above, who would often reiterate the often-heard accusation that Hillsong is a form of ‘sect’.

3.1.2 Hillsong in the Netherlands

Since the 2000s, the Netherlands experienced a rise of neo-Pentecostal churches with connections to transnational movements that were fundamentally different from the older Dutch *Pinkstergemeente*. The first Evangelical Baptist churches emerged in the Netherlands

⁴⁴ The official Hillsong statement does not give any further information about the type of moral failure (Brian Houston 2020). On his personal Instagram account, Lentz explained that he had been unfaithful in his marriage and that this made him unfit to continue as a church leader (Lentz 2020).

⁴⁵ Tithing is based on (amongst others) Leviticus 27:30: ‘A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord’ (NIV); see also Mal. 3:10 and Deut 13.22. Added scripture texts would often affirm the importance of ‘giving’. Most often cited was Luke 6:38: ‘Give, and it will be given to you’ (NIV), promising individual growth as an effect of giving to the church.

⁴⁶ The main revenue of Hillsong does not come from tithes, but instead from the worship band Hillsong United, which reportedly earns in the region of 61 million euros a year (Ceasrine 2018).

⁴⁷ In 2000, Brian Houston published a book with the telling title: *You Need More Money: Discovering God’s Amazing Financial Plan for Your Life* (Houston 2000).

via Germany. After the Second World War, the impact of American Evangelicalism grew with groups such as YouthForChrist and Navigators, as well as ‘televangelists’ Billy Graham and Tommy Lee Osborn (van der Laan 2011) becoming popular. Reflecting the global trend, the popularity of this type of Christianity increased in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s. During that time, the Evangelical Broadcasting Company was founded to cater to a variety of Evangelical audiences, such as Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal Christians (Klaver et al. 2017). Pentecostal groups also gained popularity and various communities developed new churches (*pinksterkerken*, in Dutch). Despite the fact that many churches do not keep official membership records, the total number of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches has been estimated to be 900, with over 120,000 members (van de Donk et al. 2006, 107; van der Laan and van der Laan 2007, 214). The global rise of modern neo-Pentecostal churches has had a palpable impact on the Dutch religious landscape, these neo-Pentecostal communities being known to attract many young adults (many of whom were raised in a different type of church).

The first encounter many Dutch people had with Hillsong was via their worship band, Hillsong United, which preceded the church itself as a global phenomenon. Hillsong United’s music was similar to the Dutch version of worship music often performed on Evangelical conferences such as *Opwekking* (‘revival’) and the annual festival for youngsters of the Evangelical broadcasting company, *EO-jongerendag* (EO youth day). During these festivals, (mainly) young adults and teenagers come together to pray and to sing worship songs, including an increasing number of (translated) Hillsong United songs. Hillsong United’s popularity grew so rapidly that in 2016, the band sold out the largest concert hall in the Netherlands, the Ziggo Dome. Via the worldwide popularity of Hillsong United, the Hillsong church also became well known and was able to establish a church in the Netherlands. Hillsong Amsterdam was founded in 2010 by the Dutch-Australian Richard Vanderkolk and his American wife Debbie. This is one of the churches that is part of Hillsong itself. In addition, several other churches have been invited by Hillsong to join their ‘family’, which means that although supported by Hillsong, these churches do not carry the name Hillsong and maintain their legal independence. This influence has led to rapid changes in many churches that are now quite similar to Hillsong proper (Klaver 2021). The only official Hillsong Family church in the Netherlands is ‘City Life Church’, which started in The Hague, but became its own local conglomerate, encompassing thirteen churches in the Netherlands and Belgium at the time of writing. Other individual churches are also Hillsong affiliated, but not officially recognised as ‘family members’ on the Hillsong website. These churches are likely to belong to the Hillsong Leadership Network in the Netherlands, led by the VanderKols. I noticed that they do identify themselves as belonging to the ‘family’, which is why I use the term accordingly. There is no central overview of exactly how many churches are affiliated to Hillsong this way.

As is typical with such neo-Pentecostal congregations, pastors are trained by Hillsong and usually do not require a theological education. Leadership is organised internally and follows a clear hierarchy. Dutch pastors of smaller Hillsong affiliated churches meet with each other under the supervision of Pastors Richard and Debbie VanderKolk from Hillsong Amsterdam, who in turn are under the guidance of Pastor Gary Clarke of Hillsong London. Hillsong London's lead pastors report to the leaders in the Hillsong headquarters in Sydney. In all cases, the pastors are a married heterosexual couple, but the men have the most power and authority. Because all new pastors are trained by a Hillsong institute and continue to be trained after they have started their own branch, many values and practices are similar throughout the world. Of course, Hillsong is localised in particular ways, a subject upon which I will focus in this chapter. At the same time, they are rather easily recognisable: The websites tend to look similar, the courses are similar, and the music sung in church often comes from the Hillsong United worship band. In the Netherlands, Hillsong Family churches are some of the most ethnically diverse congregations in the country, although leaders tend to be overwhelmingly white. They are also very young, especially in comparison to mainline Protestantism, where people aged sixty and above predominate.⁴⁸ The following section describes the two main churches in which I conducted my fieldwork.

3.1.3 Fieldwork Locations

Over the course of ten months between 2017 and 2018, I undertook fieldwork in different Hillsong affiliated churches in the Netherlands, all located in the greater urban (Randstad) area. Regarding their internal policies, structures, content, and training, they typically adhere to Hillsong's prescribed formula. However, the churches are, both legally and in name, independent and have not been founded by leaders or pastors from Hillsong proper. After joining the Hillsong Family, they all opted to use English to formulate their motto in line with Hillsong ('Welcome home!'); to describe their ministries (the women's ministry is called 'Sisterhood'); and to name their events (Bible study groups are called 'Connect Groups'). After an initial visit to several churches, I chose two communities as my main field research settings: The United Hope Church and the Grace City Church. Both are pseudonyms and their locations are omitted for reasons of anonymity (see the first chapter for methodology). All of the participants have been anonymised and an overview of my main interlocutors can be found in appendix B. In total, I met approximately forty women in this fieldwork setting, whose experiences are reflected in the general analyses even if not in individual examples and citations. Women with whom I exchanged only the briefest of conversations perhaps once or

⁴⁸ Up until 2017, annual statistics reports were published by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN). The 2017 report showed that 52 per cent of PKN members was age sixty-five or over (Dienstencentrum Protestantse Kerk, 2017, 8). In 2020, the PKN wrote that only eight per cent of the members are under the age of forty (De Reuver 2020).

twice are not included here, which results in the list of participants cited in this chapter numbering sixteen. These interlocutors were younger than those in the Jewish case study, ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-three, with an average of 31. The time elapsed since their conversion varied, but the average was five years, reflecting the relatively young age of the group, whilst the longest period of twenty-five years was an exception.

The United Hope Church (UHC) was founded in the early 1990s by a married couple, Johan and Helen. Both online and in meetings in church or with me personally, they often recalled how they had started small, in their living room. This is quite a common feature of neo-Pentecostal founding stories (Bowler 2019). When the community grew too large for their home, Johan and Helen held services in a neighbourhood centre before purchasing a large, former Roman-Catholic church building and changed their name from a Dutch to an English name (hence the pseudonym United Hope Church). A few years later, as Helen recalled during our interview, they were ‘invited by Pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston’ to become part of the Hillsong Family. Johan and Helen are both called senior pastors and their two children are also active contributors to the church. The church does not maintain a formal membership record, so it is difficult to establish an exact number of participants, however, they estimate a membership of approximately 2000. Services were typically attended by around 800 people, although the building could accommodate a greater number during special events and holidays. The church held two regular services on Sundays and special events were organised for the various ministries: children, teenagers, young adults, and adults (divided by gender). Bible groups in the youth ministry were also segregated by gender, although the groups came together during events such as youth services. The women’s ministry (‘Sisterhood’) was the primary responsibility of Pastor Helen⁴⁹, who would frequently speak during women’s conferences or other Sisterhood activities. During regular Sunday services, Pastor Johan usually delivered the sermon, although Pastor Helen would step in whenever he was unavailable. Besides Johan and Helen, a large team of leaders also contributed to the church—some giving sermons, others supervising events or Bible groups. Regular attendees usually participated in a Bible study group (‘Connect Group’) in their particular ministry, which came together on Thursday evenings. They would also contribute to the church financially and with voluntary work. A few years before my attendance, the church had founded a so-called ‘campus’ (a satellite church) in a different city. In addition to my fieldwork in the United Hope Church, I also undertook interviews and participant observation in this satellite church. I call this church the Life Point Church, led by Pastor Stephan and his wife Pastor Claudia. Since my research, yet another church was ‘planted’ (as they would say), this time with Johan and Helen’s eldest son in the position of lead pastor.

⁴⁹ Besides Pastor ‘Helen’ (a pseudonym), she was sometimes referred to in Dutch as *‘pastora’* (without her first name), a feminine take on the word pastor. This is uncommon in the English language, which is why I only use Pastor Helen.

Specific to this church (in contrast to most Hillsong churches) is their participation in the Alpha Course: the well-known, cross-denominational, worldwide introductory and Evangelical course. In order not to scare newcomers (often described as atheists), it is repeatedly denied that the Alpha Course carries any mandate towards conversion. Yet, in its founding, this is precisely what the Alpha Course is: a programme used specifically for evangelising purposes (Hunt 2003, 2019). The UHC organises an Alpha Course twice a year, one of which I attended. This enabled me to follow one of the common trajectories followed by converts, although not all would join the course. Before joining I approached the course leader and asked permission to join as a researcher, which was granted. At the same time, the leadership expressed the wish for me to fully participate and to allow space for the ‘personal changes’ in me, in other words: To be open to the contents of the course as well. The Alpha Course takes place over ten evenings and one weekend, meeting once a week, and I was able to attend all but one evening. A typical Alpha Course meeting starts with dinner provided by the church. After dinner, we would watch a movie in which the Alpha Course founder, Nicki Gumble, addressed the topic of that week.⁵⁰ After the movie, we split to smaller groups to further discuss the topic, accompanied by an Alpha-issued workbook. The culmination of the Alpha Course takes place during the weekend, usually around week eight of the course, which has the theme of the Holy Spirit. In the course I attended, the weekend included collective and individual prayers to invite the Holy Spirit and invited participants to profess their conversion.⁵¹ I was in the same small group for all meetings, which is where I met Anne, my key interlocutor from the UHC. I also went to several church services and conferences, often together with the women from ‘my’ Alpha group.

The second church I undertook the majority of my fieldwork is the Grace City Church (GCC). This church shows many similarities to the UHC. Also located in a former Roman-Catholic church building, the church was founded by a husband and wife couple, Marc and Nadine, in the late 1990s. They, too, initially participated in a different congregation, but decided to start their own church from their living room. Pastor Nadine told me about this first phase: ‘The first steps were, I think for two months, preparing at home. On Sunday mornings we would have a gathering at home... our eldest would babysit her siblings [*laughing*]. We really did a lot of preparation.’ After months of preparation and an organised event in the

⁵⁰ Topics are presented as questions and follow the same order everywhere the course is taught. Examples are: ‘Who was Jesus?’ (week 2); ‘Why and how should I read the Bible?’ (week 5); ‘How can I resist evil?’ (week 11). At the time of writing, all movies have been made available on the Alpha website since the Covid-19 crisis moved the Alpha course online: <https://www.alpha.org/preview/alpha-film-series/>. During my fieldwork, these movies were more difficult to find.

⁵¹ This programme of the weekend away is different across Christian denominations. The focus on the experience of the Holy Spirit and the invitation to give testimony are characteristic of Pentecostalism. The Alpha weekend is organised differently in Roman Catholic or other Protestant courses.

neighbourhood, a few people had already indicated their commitment to join. This is when they rented a school building:

That is where we started, in the auditorium. And the kids would have Sunday school in one of the classrooms. We did everything ourselves at first, but people did attend [our church] from the very start, and people began to help immediately.
(Pastor Nadine)

After the group outgrew the small school building, they rented a larger room in a neighbourhood centre, where they also changed their name from the generic *Evangelische Gemeente* (Evangelical Community) to Grace City Church (pseudonym for a different English name). In 2016, they moved once again, this time to a church building that was sold by its Roman-Catholic congregation because of a lack of attendees. Pastor Nadine⁵² often speaks during the regular Sunday services and oversees the Sisterhood ministry. They have five children, most of whom also have leadership positions. Their eldest son, for example, is the youth leader of the church, whereas their daughter oversees the young adult women's Bible study groups. Compared to the UHC, the GCC was small, albeit with the ambition to increase its numbers. I was frequently told that there were plans to 'plant' another church in a neighbouring city and, indeed, the junior pastor couple had already been selected although, at the time of writing, this plan has yet to bear fruit.

At the time of my research, the Grace City Church had about 1000 members, with services attended by approximately 400 people. These were divided amongst the three services held on Sundays. The late afternoon/early evening service was added to cater especially to the needs of young adults, and was typically shorter and more casual than the earlier services. In comparison to the UHC—which also has a substantial population of youngsters—the young adult ministry was even relatively larger in the GCC and its membership far outnumbered that of all the other age-based ministries. The young adult ministry maintained a very active social media presence, had their own worship band, and sold merchandise. Besides special events and services for that group, the church organised events for children, teenagers, married couples, and had gender segregated ministries for people over the age of thirty. Here too, Bible study groups (also called 'Connect Groups') were segregated according to gender and age-based ministries. Most of those attending services were contributing in one way or another, and most people knew each other by name.

I did not join a specific course at the GCC. Rather, I simply entered the church one Sunday morning, after which I was quickly approached by the welcoming team. Here, I was able to participate even more fully than in the UHC and for a greater time. First, I met

⁵² Marc and Nadine were both called Pastor and by their first name. Similar to the UHC's Pastor Helen, Nadine was sometimes called '*pastora*' in Dutch as well.

individually with the Connect Group leader, Emma, to discuss my intentions and the possibility to join. I was allowed to join her group on the basis that I would not simply sit and watch, but contribute and participate as well (similar to the UHC's response to my joining the Alpha Course). I joined this Connect Group for six months and Emma became one of my key interlocutors at the Grace City Church. My age (I was twenty-six years old at the time of my fieldwork) meant that I took part in the ministry for young adults. My Connect Group too was part of the young adult ministry and comprised young adult women between the ages of eighteen and thirty. The core group comprised six women, three of whom had converted, the others having been raised Christian. Several other women would attend occasionally. I attended Sunday services, often the midday service, and sometimes also the service at 5pm. I also attended numerous events such as services and conventions during weekdays that were organised for the youth ministry and the women's ministry; joined the decor team for services; and was allowed to participate in a weekend away for newcomers.

3.2 Pentecostal Conversions

Throughout this dissertation, I approach the process of conversion as the joining of a religious group one was not born into. Conversion in the neo-Pentecostal setting, however, is a continuous, reiterative process in which members are asked to 'convert' and redeem their sins regularly (e.g., Harding 1987; Klaver 2011b; Rocha 2011). From my perspective, and in line with my other case studies, I narrowed this 'conversion experience' to those born and/or raised in a household without religion, or where religion played a negligible role. My interlocutors all decided, at some point in their (young) adult lives, to join a religious group and henceforth converted into that community. The notion of 'born Christians' refers to people born and raised within a Christian household and who still identify as Christian. This includes those who were raised under a different denomination (often mainline Protestant or Roman-Catholic), but were 'born again' as Pentecostals. Largely because the churches do not keep records of this nature, it remains unclear how many Pentecostal members were indeed 'born again' and how many were converts in my definition. However, from my qualitative observations, it appears that whilst converts with no prior Christian socialisation were indeed in the minority (see also Klaver 2011b, 28), they remained a substantial group of about one in five church members. This section describes the process and meaning of conversion in this Pentecostal context by focusing on four key themes: the welcoming atmosphere of the church; the understanding of conversion as turning point or process; and the different rituals of conversion.

3.2.1 'Welcome Home'

Worldwide, Hillsong expresses the ambition to be welcoming and open to everyone. Newcomers are often met with a warm welcome and modern aesthetic, including stage lights, fashionably dressed church members, well designed posters with English mottos, and an emphasis on individual spiritual growth in Hillsong churches. When I first attended services in any of the churches, I was always welcomed by someone at the door who often wore a visible sign to indicate they were part of the 'welcoming team'. Members of this team usually asked me where I was from and had a short, informal conversation before guiding me to a place to sit. The service would then start with ten minutes of worship songs during which participants sing along.⁵³ The songs mostly adhere to a contemporary pop style of music with which most attendees, many of whom are young adults, were socialised (Klaver 2011b, 206). An example of the use of music to create a welcoming atmosphere is the often performed song 'Home' by The Planetshakers (2015), which includes the chorus: 'Home, I know I am Home, safe within my Saviour's arms, right back where I belong.' Such notions of 'coming home' and of being held in the arms of the Saviour are common Hillsong metaphors and reflect its preoccupation with evangelisation. During church services, often the desire was expressed to convert or 'save' other (mainly unchurched) people, for example by Pastor Johan of the Grace City Church:

The gospels say: 'Your Kingdom come.' But the Kingdom will only come once everyone is converted. We read that Jesus gave testimony to all people, everywhere. How did he do this? First, He spread the gospels and second, He trained disciples. How can we do this ourselves? How can we let the light of Jesus shine upon the whole city? Not only the group leaders or welcome team should invite new people, but we should encourage each other and pray that we each convert at least one more person and help them in their discipleship. In that way, we will double in size and continue to build the house of God. [Our city] needs Jesus, we need to spread the light! (Pastor Johan. GCC Sunday service, February 2018)

⁵³ A typical service would have the following order: After the opening ten minutes of worship music, a church leader (not the pastor) takes the stage and leads the prayer for donations. During these five minutes, instrumental music continues in the background whilst forms are passed around via which members can make a bank transfer. Services then continue with the main sermon taking approximately twenty minutes, followed by the 'moment of choice' prayer (see section 3.4). Finally, the band returns to the stage once more to conclude the service with another ten minutes of worship. News items or practical announcements occur most often either before or after the main sermon. Many churches also offered prayer cards, on which members could write their prayer wishes. These would be mentioned and collectively prayed for before or after the donation section.

This excerpt from a regular GCC Sunday service shows that the strong emphasis on conversion called upon all church members to take on their responsibility to bring new people to the church. This overt Evangelical message thus extended from the structures in place, such as the welcoming team, to include everyone present. My fieldwork settings possessed a clear infrastructure for newcomers, who were encouraged to join Bible study groups, join (gender segregated) weekends away, and participate in non-Sunday services catering to their specific age group. After a few weeks or months, they would also be asked to contribute to the church, both financially and via voluntary work, which ranged from serving coffee before or after service to helping with the (cutting-edge) audio-visual recording of services.

Newcomers were not expected to immediately convert, although this was an option. For most of my interlocutors, the time between the first service—often their first encounter with the church—and baptism confirming full participation is between two months and a year. So, although there is a ‘liminal space’ between those saved and those not, this is limited by time. This became apparent towards the end of my six-month fieldwork period in the Grace City Church. Since I introduced myself as a nonbeliever whenever asked, church members often considered me as a potential convert. Even though I made my research aims clear, it was quite difficult to maintain an ‘in-between position’ as a participating observer (Harding 1987, see section 1.4). Indeed, towards the end of my fieldwork, I noticed a tension amongst a few key interlocutors who had been expecting me to have chosen God’s path, and were disappointed when in reply to their inquiries about my personal beliefs I stated that they had not changed.

Community leaders thus ensure that the first ‘on stage’ experience of newcomers is one of welcome and inclusivity. Only then, on subsequent encounters, does a more normative ‘off stage’ discourse become apparent. I found both the discourse and the practice of conversion rather paradoxical. On the one hand, the importance of individual autonomy and ‘being yourself’ was constantly emphasised, both by newcomers and born Christians. Yet, at the same time, evangelising is a key devotional practice and moral obligation for church members. Thus, converting did carry with it expectations from the community, particularly the abandoning of sins and struggles. Scholars of Hillsong who elaborate further on the notion of authenticity in these conversion discourses point out that this discourse of ‘sincere’ or ‘authentic’ conversion usually includes certain struggles and failures, such as succumbing to minor sins such as gossiping or laziness, or not devoting as much time to God as perhaps one might (Klaver et al. 2017). Throughout my fieldwork, I was often told that ‘struggle’ (*strijd*) is a constant factor in belief and that sin always ‘lurked’ in the background. The notion of struggle was based more on practices and experiences than on any particular theological belief. The challenge was therefore not so much to convert and believe in God, but to do your best to follow the narrow path of God even—or especially—during such times of struggle.

Here the rather binary worldview of the church discourse became clear: Something is either ‘from God’ or ‘from the Devil’, with very little space in between. Although in my

experience there would not typically be much talk of the Devil per se, ‘worldly sins’ was a commonly used term to describe all non-Godly experiences, practices, or emotions. All members were asked to reflect on their sins and ‘convert’ from these regularly. One of the most referenced biblical passages was the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11–32), which was used as an example of how even those that go most astray are welcomed by the Father upon their return.⁵⁴ The final sentence of the parable states: ‘[T]his brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’ (Luke 15:32, NIV). This idea of being lost and found, is a common discursive trope within Hillsong.⁵⁵ For example, the song ‘Heart of God’ (2018) by the band Hillsong Young and Free includes the verse: ‘They say that it’s impossible, to ever save a sinner’s soul. But my God says to the prodigal: My beloved one, you’re welcome home.’⁵⁶

The ‘prodigal son’ is exemplary of the central discourse of conversion that characterises the churches of my fieldwork in three important aspects: First, the metaphor of ‘coming home’ is one of the main mottos of the church. Second, the parable implies forgiveness and compassion of the Father, no matter how sinful one’s life has been. Third, the younger son admits his sins and consciously chooses redemption. Hence, the main expected process of conversion is to admit your sins, accepting God in your life, after which a believer is redeemed and ‘freed’ from those sins and difficulties. Nevertheless, the message was that everyone, no matter how far away, can be welcomed and loved by God, representing a ‘radically modernizing egalitarian impulse’ (Martin 2003, 55). Conversion as such is not restricted to those already living a ‘good Christian life’, but is available to everyone who feels like they want to strive to live such a life.

⁵⁴ The parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15 is told by Jesus to his disciples, the Pharisees, and other followers. It describes a father with two sons, the oldest of which stays at home to work on the land. The younger son leaves and squanders his wealth. When this second son does not have money to eat anymore, he returns to the land of his father, exclaiming that he has been sinful and is not worthy to be called his son. The father, however, welcomes him with open arms and a feast. In the conclusion, the older son tells his father: ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’ The father replies: ‘You are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’ (Luke 15: 11–32 NIV).

⁵⁵ In my fieldwork reflections, I often noted the verses used in services and meetings, and must confess I got a bit tired from the repetition further along in my fieldwork: ‘It was a nice service, but there are the same answers all the time... again there was the prodigal son’ (fieldwork notes April 2018).

⁵⁶ Another example is the very popular song ‘Broken Vessels’ from Hillsong United (2014a). The chorus includes lyrics from the well-known Christian American hymn ‘Amazing Grace’, albeit with a different melody: ‘I once was lost, but now I’m found. Was blind, but now I see.’

3.2.2 Conversion as a Turn or Process

For my interlocutors, conversion often indicated an action and desire to change one's life in line with the expectations from the church's interpretation of the Bible, which was considered to be the true meaning of life provided by God. This was characterised not so much by a change in theological belief, but rather by a lived, experience-based transformation. Anne, a woman in her late twenties from the UHC who converted a few years before we met, described the meaning of conversion in the following terms: 'It is a conscious choice not to live alone anymore, not to live just for yourself. That is what being Christian means, you stop living for what you want, but start to live according to the will of God.' This idea of conversion as a turning was echoed by GCC Connect Group leader Emma. At one point, I asked her what conversion means. She arose from our table and stood facing me: 'Conversion is a turnaround [*omkeer*]. Like this: You first face the world', and she turned her back to me, 'and then you choose Jesus and direct your life to God', while she turned to face me again. For Emma, conversion meant just that: a turning around, to move your vision and all actions in life towards God. Conversion was thus determined by a desire to follow the 'right path'. What such a path might entail, can be differently interpreted, but that conversion should be visible in actions and experiences was clear, and this was a continuous process. Conversion, then, is imagined as a starting point and a decision to start following such teachings. For Emma, everything that was not on this one path was sinful and would lead someone to require further redemption and to 'convert' once again.

My interlocutors often told stories of almost instant and radical change, similar to Emma's understanding of conversion as a 180-degree turn. Added to that, they often narrated their process in terms of a 'before' and an 'after'. For many, becoming religious entailed overcoming past behaviours and thoughts, which were now coded as sinful. Kim, a woman in her early thirties in the Grace City Church, stated:

Before [I converted], I just did not know any better. So, there is no need to feel regret about it. But now that I know the Truth, and have chosen this path, I should not wish for those things anymore. Once you know that something is wrong, you should act on that knowledge. (Kim)

To some extent, talking about sinful acts prior to conversion were necessary to indicate the desired rupture and transformation: The more sinful one's life was before, the more convincing and celebrated the conversion becomes. Those invited to give testimony on stage, for example, were usually those with just such a story—although, of course, various parts might well have been reinterpreted. The practice of giving testimony and speaking out about one's authentic conversion is one of the main characteristics of Evangelical and Pentecostal groups (Harding 1987). Being 'sincere' about one's conversion is not only experienced as such by converts, but is also a community-informed performance.

Converts often voiced their beliefs in positive ways and generally refrained from statements about the implications of *not* converting. Emma regularly voiced the desire for me to convert. In May 2018, towards the end of my fieldwork in the Grace City Church, Emma and I met for a coffee when she asked again about my conversion trajectory. I told her in all honesty that I had neither actively resisted nor pursued conversion; I simply did not share this belief or experience myself. From my fieldwork notes:

I asked her the question that had been on my mind for a while ‘What if I don’t find God, what if it never happens?’ Emma was silent and gave me a puzzled look, before replying: ‘Nah well, I’m certain that you will find God.’ And that was that. (Fieldwork notes, May 2018)

In other meetings, in both the Connect Group and Alpha Course, the possibility of not converting also came up, but I hardly ever received a clear answer to the question ‘What if you do not convert?’ This reflected a tendency in the churches to focus on the positive values of religion rather than the negative, even though an underlying motivation for evangelisation is to make sure everyone is saved. An exception was the male leader of the Alpha Course in the United Hope Church who, when asked how one might resist evil, replied: ‘I do think that there is a hell. If you’ve met God but don’t accept Him, you will go to hell.’ The other interlocutors usually answered my questions more subtly, but all confirmed that in the end, only those who convert are ‘saved’.

On stage and by pastors, the decision to convert was often described as a conscious choice rather than a process: a clear moment in which one chooses to listen to God and to start a relationship with Him. When my interlocutors described their own personal experiences, they often nuanced the idea of a ‘rupture’. Tellingly, Lisa felt like her story might not be ‘of use’ to me since she did not ‘have such a drastic change in her life’ when joining the church. She indeed did experience it more as a process: ‘You can’t just change from one day to the next. It is a slow and steady process, to be honest. At least that’s how it’s been for me, and I’m glad for it.’ The dominant framework of ‘turnaround’ and quick changes was often repeated by my interlocutors in our informal meetings and interviews, but many also regarded their own experience more as a gradual process the way Lisa did. During this process several moments are relevant, of which the ‘moment of choice’ was considered the most significant for my interlocutors.

3.2.3 Rituals of Conversion

Several moments were significant in the conversion processes of my interlocutors, such as baptism by immersion in water and the first baptism by the Spirit (speaking in tongues). Adult baptism is characteristic of Pentecostal churches and often marked the full inclusion of converts into the community (Klaver 2011a). Whilst the water baptism was important for my

interlocutors, they did not consider this the most important moment in their conversion experience. The baptism was primarily a moment of confirmation that marked their belonging to the community. For their conversion, however, other, more personal moments were considered markers of their religious change. These were moments when interlocutors ‘chose Jesus’, felt ‘home’, or were ‘touched by God’. One example of the latter is ritualised in the ‘moment of choice’ (*keuzemoment*) during Sunday services. Typically, about a third into the service, all attendees are asked to close their eyes and, accompanied by soft worship music in the background, the pastor would pray for Jesus to ‘fill the heart’ of those present. The leader then invites all newcomers to raise their hand if they are ‘willing to choose to follow Jesus and get to know God’. For many interlocutors, the moment that they first raised their hands, still with their eyes closed, would be their most memorable moment of conversion. About half raised their hands during the first service they attended and often felt emotional doing so. Take for example Nina, a convert in her thirties:

I still cannot really describe what happened. It was very impressive, I immediately had a feeling of coming home, and of being able to be myself. [...] So, I joined and was crying, and I really consciously joined for the prayer: ‘Jesus come in my life, Jesus take over, I want to follow You.’ (Nina)

Most interlocutors felt comfort in the feeling of privacy of not being seen by the fellow attendees and regarded this a marker of their individual belief. During the first service Anne attended, newcomers were asked to stand up without everyone closing their eyes. At the time, Anne ‘did not dare to stand up’, as it felt too exposing. During a smaller service that was not on Sunday, she eventually did:

I did [raise my hand] then, I was truly touched by the sermon and very conscious of my actions, I was already living with God at the time, so it had more depth. I was crying a lot when I did. (Anne)

However, Anne later found out that a few people in church leadership keep their eyes open to see who raised their hands: ‘If you’ve raised your hand, they want to make sure that someone reaches out to you afterwards. That part of privacy is gone, there are people watching to see whose hands are raised.’ Anne told me that she perceived this as a lack of transparency, especially since she was unaware that the woman who approached her afterwards did so in order to evangelise, rather than out of friendship: ‘You really feel like someone is becoming your friend, but they are not. This person wants to help you, but once they see you are finding your way, they don’t reach out anymore.’ The feeling described by Anne came up more often: Converts would initially be approached and welcomed, but once they were introduced and ‘found their way’ in church, these people would shift their attention to yet another newcomer. When they talked about their conversion process, different themes about motivations came

up. The next section analyses how my interlocutors, retrospectively, spoke about their initial attraction to Christianity.

3.3 Christian Stories of Motivations

In comparison to the other two case studies, the Christian settings had the most outspoken evangelising discourse and conversion narratives were omnipresent. However, it is important to note that public conversion stories, expressed in the form of testimony, served an important purpose, namely to inspire others to also come to the faith. In my interviews, I often encountered such ‘model’ stories, especially those of women whose stories were deemed strong enough to be frequently shared online and on stage. I was more interested in the reflections of those people not typically on stage—the everyday believer. Their stories, whilst broadly adhering to pervasive conversion narratives, also exhibit a degree of ambivalence and negotiation. An important difference in motivations in comparison to Jewish converts was that spirituality was highlighted by most women. None of the participants came to Christianity via their study programmes (as is the case for Jewish women), nor did family relations play a significant role. My interlocutors in this group often spoke in emotional terms about their conversion, and rationalisations of their choices were less common than amongst my Jewish and Muslim interlocutors.

The first significant theme in the stories of women who converted to Christianity is related to young adulthood. Ten out of sixteen of my key interlocutors were between the ages of 16 and 25 when they converted and all described a longing for answers to life’s questions—a typical narrative during that phase of life (Smith and Snell 2009; Yip and Page 2013). Many young adult interlocutors described feelings of ‘emptiness’, that could not be filled with anything mundane. Lisa, a student who converted in her early twenties (four years prior to our meeting), told me how she had initially tried to fill that void by delving into the typical student life, one characterised by drinking and dating:

I would lie in bed the next morning, a bit depressed, thinking: ‘Is this what I’m living for? Is this truly “it”?’ I felt I had to do all those things because that what was expected in my life. But it did not give me life. I really thought: ‘What can I do, what’s the meaning of life, is this it?’ (Lisa)

At some point, a friend of Lisa invited her to a church service, where she felt like this void was ‘filled immediately’. Lisa recalled that they felt God’s presence very strongly in that first meeting and had not felt the feeling of emptiness that drove them there since that moment.

A last example of how questions associated with the young adult life phase impacted converts’ religious trajectories comes from Lian. Lian was a student in her early twenties when we met. She told me that she was adopted from Asia by white parents and had felt out

of place her whole life because she was one of the only people of colour in an otherwise white environment. Lian was not raised with a religion, but had, in her own words, ‘always felt God’s presence’. When a friend invited her to a youth ministry meeting at the age of sixteen, Lian joined. Here, she was touched when she heard the story of Jesus’ sacrifice:

I thought... ‘wow, that someone would do that, that someone can do that’. That a good and innocent person, completely free of sin, can take on all our sins. [...] that God would do that out of love for me. That He is willing to, as the highest person, to do that for me, just an insignificant person like me. (Lian)

In Lian’s description, rather than ‘filling an emptiness’, a sense of purpose and self-worth is felt by acknowledging that Jesus had sacrificed Himself for ‘an insignificant person’ like herself. For all of these women, who converted as young adults, whether that be recently or some time ago, a Christian belief in sacrifice and God’s love gave a longed for sense of direction and value, as well as providing answers to the life questions that trouble so many young adults.

Most women who converted in their teens or twenties had their first experience of a religious community in the churches in which I met them. In contrast, several older women I met, had participated in a variety of communities prior to their Christian conversion. Many had been involved in spiritual or ‘new age’ movements (the term they used themselves) before turning to Christianity. Indeed, stories of women leaving spiritual movements behind circulated widely amongst my research settings and were often provided as examples of what conversion could entail. The world of the ‘occult’ was perceived as one of the most dangerous lures of the Devil and needed to be left behind in converting. This could lead a woman to ‘throw away half her household items’ (in Nina’s words), meaning the cleansing of her house from things like statues of the Buddha, incense, yoga mats, mandalas, and other symbols of new spiritual movements. One example of such a story comes from Rianne, a woman in her fifties who had converted fourteen years prior to our meeting in the predecessor of the Grace City Church. She told me: ‘Truly, Lieke, I have done everything. I did reiki, Buddhism, everything with spirituality’, but she ‘knew that this wasn’t the true source, it didn’t come from God’. Eventually, she ‘tried out’ Christianity, and found the ‘truth’. The majority of converts were, to some extent, motivated by such a search for truth, although this particular trajectory was more prevalent amongst women converts between forty and sixty years of age. For these women, Christianity provided the final stop on a long journey through different religious and spiritual communities and traditions.

Truth claims were important in conversion narratives in another way. Some interlocutors conveyed stories of miracles or other material effects as leading them toward conversion. Bernice talked about several experiences prior to her conversion that she retrospectively perceives as evidence of God’s existence. These are moment in which she felt

God's presence or when He intervened in her life, even though she had no knowledge about Christianity at the time. This intervention was not only psychological, but also, according to Bernice, material. This could be seen as a modern-day miracle story (Korte 2017). One of these miracle stories relates to a time when Bernice was very depressed and started to walk along a highway: 'I just didn't care anymore. I did not really think "I want to die", but um... I'm not sure why I did it.' When she was walking along the highway: 'I had always wanted to see a shooting star, but never had. And then: [I saw a] shooting star. So, I thought "That's God! I am not so bad after all! So, get off the highway."' In hindsight, Bernice mentioned this as one of the first times she saw and felt God's presence in her life. When similar events occurred in the months thereafter, Bernice thought to herself: 'Well Bernice, you have to be honest. All these things are happening that you can't explain [...] that has to be God.' It was at that point that Bernice considered these miracles to be evidence of God's existence, strengthening her motivation to convert and devote her life to the church. For Bernice, evidence of God was related to visible material effects. These events might be explained otherwise, but she described these as a type of miracle. For other interlocutors, proof of God's existence was more related to moments of joy and emotional confirmation. For example, Anne was interested in near-death experiences and recalled a moment when reading the stories of people who encountered Jesus during such an experience. Reading this, she felt like her 'heart jumped' and 'felt a tingle in [her] stomach', which she understood as a confirmation of the truthfulness of the stories.

I only met a few men in my fieldwork, but some told me about their conversion in informal conversations. What I found remarkable is that the men often brought up evidence-based experiences. More often than women, they would emphasise the importance of material and visible proof, whilst women tended to base their sense of proof on their emotions and bodily responses. An example comes from my fieldwork notes of an Alpha Course evening at the United Hope Church. That evening, Jacob described how he went to a meeting where a lot of people were healed by laying on of hands. Only after asking around did he understand that the background of this meeting was Christian:

Jacob gives an explanation I have not heard before: He came to the faith because he witnessed the healing of a person by the laying on of hands. He said: 'that had to be God', he saw this as evidence and said that he needed this proof. Sanne and Christel do not share this need, for them faith is more about feeling and emotions. I say to Jacob that in some churches, healing by prayer is a debated issue, and ask him what he thinks of this: 'Yes, that's why I am here, because these kinds of churches believe what I've seen with my own two eyes.' (Fieldwork notes. Alpha Course UHC, September 2017)

During my fieldwork, I did not hear other stories where witnessing or experiencing physical healing led to conversion, however, I did encounter stories of healing that had started *after* someone had made the decision to convert (one example is discussed in section 3.6.2). Because my research participants consisted of women, I did not dive into these types of experiences of men further. Instead, I continued to follow Alpha Course participants Sanne and Christel at UHC. Their decision to join the church was not informed by this type of material proof of the existence of God. Instead both came to church for seemingly less miraculous reasons: to meet other people.

Sanne, a woman then in her late twenties, was one of the first people I met during the Alpha Course in the United Hope Church in the Fall of 2017. When we first met, Sanne had been attending different meetings in church for a year and a half ‘because [her] boyfriend is a member of the church’. Whilst Sanne had not experienced a religious upbringing herself, her partner had been raised within a mainline Protestant church. A musician in the UHC’s worship band, he and Sanne regularly attended Sunday services when he was performing. After a year or so, Sanne decided to join the Alpha Course because, whilst she enjoyed the atmosphere of the church, she could not grasp the meaning of all the beliefs and rituals. Moreover, she stated that she always ‘sat by myself and I wanted to meet other people’. A similar narrative is also true for Nina, who was a student when she joined the GCC ten years prior to our meeting. Nina described how she had found it difficult to meet new people after moving to a different city to study at the university. Then, a colleague of her invited her to join a meeting with her and a group of friends who got together ‘every Monday night, just to talk about how things are going, [and] to eat together’. Nina did not have to think twice before replying:

Nina: I was like: ‘Yes, meeting new people, I’m in!’ So, I went, and Lieke—you might know what is coming—that was a Connect Group.

Lieke: Did you know at the time that she was Christian?

N: Yeah, I knew, but we never really talked about it. I just joined the group to meet other people. But that was so nice, and I really connected with the girls there, so that brought me a lot of joy. (Nina)

In contrast to others, Nina did not have a phase of spiritual searching. When I asked her about this, she answered: ‘No, not at all! I was just looking to socialise and to meet other people, but I found God instead! Well, isn’t that the best person you can ever meet!’ Nina joined the Connect Group more often and after a few months also decided to visit a church service, to ‘see what that’s all about’. It was only after participating in the community for six months or so that she began to reflect upon her personal beliefs in relation to those taught in church. Nina was the only with such a compartmentalised narrative of conversion—first the social

aspects, and then, second, the belief aspects. For most of my interlocutors, these two elements went very much hand in hand.

Most of the participants were initially introduced to the church via a friend or colleague, even though some had already been ‘spiritual seekers’ for a longer period of time or had started to search for answers to life questions during their adolescent years. Christianity provided them with a personal relationship with God, a social life, and in some cases material effects of the presence of God. In the next section, I will continue the analysis of women’s conversion narratives by exploring how conversion was related to gender. First, I provide insights into dominant gender discourses in this setting. An examination of the community, the private sphere and the body in conversion to follow suit.

3.4 Christian Gender Discourses

For many women, becoming religious entails a profound reconsideration of what it means to be a woman. Whilst most had never heard of ‘biblical womanhood’, they now encountered norms and expectations which are scripturally ordained. Such ideas about gender not only impact the sense of community, ritual practices at home, and family lives; they also have an effect on the way in which women regard their own bodies and their individual selves. This section looks into the dominant gender discourses in the communities I undertook my fieldwork. Two features were especially central: Gender complementarity and (conservative) female empowerment.

In talking about the differences between men and women, one Bible passage was most often talked about: Ephesians 5. Ephesians 5 describes the relationship between men and women as follows:

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (Ephesians 5: 22–25, NIV)

This passage reflects a dominant understanding in Pentecostalism (and Evangelicalism more broadly) of gender complementarity. This term encompasses a form of gender discourse used by, amongst others, feminist historian Joan Scott (2017) to refer to an understanding of gender as binary (m/f) by which men and women are considered essentially different, but of equal value. This is to some extent similar to what I described in the Jewish case study and which will come up in the Islamic case study. Among Christian interlocutors, this was directly connected to the Christian Biblical notion of male headship, which refers to the leadership of husbands (or if absent, fathers or eldest brothers) over the rest of the family (Cornwall 2011,

199).⁵⁷ The notion of male headship that follows this gender complementarity was quite dominant in my fieldwork setting. This Pentecostal gender discourse combines elements of biological determinism and theological teachings of the creation and Biblical scripture, such as Paul's letter to the Ephesians (see also Hefner 2013; Klaver 2011b; B. Martin 2013). Among my interlocutors, discussions around this gender discourse often moved between biological and theological reasoning. For example, Anne stated:

I am convinced that a man has a different role in a relationship, a more leading role. And a woman has a more following role. I also believe that God created us that way, and not even in a way that... God does not say 'a man is higher' or 'a woman is lower', He does not mean that. He says that men and women are equal, in principle, but have a different role. (Anne)

This gender difference (based on creation) was often explained via the differing characteristics of men and women in social interactions: 'You see that women have the idea that everything is connected, that everything always affects everything. A man can bring more structure', Nina said. On the same issue, Pastor Nadine replied to my questions about gender difference: 'The brains are already different; a man's brain is different than a woman's brain! Women think in detail, men are more target focused. They are complementary, so it makes a beautiful whole. But they are different.' Whether it be located in the brain, body, or God's purpose for life, all interlocutors did see gender as binary difference, which was also reflected in the participation in church.

I asked all of my interlocutors if they felt that their ideas about gender had changed during their conversion process and most reflected that this complementarity was quite new. Lisa answered:

I was raised with the idea that you have to be independent, earn your own salary. Whilst now, I feel like if I were to have children at some point, I would like to stay at home to take care of the children whilst my husband puts the bread on the table. I would be fine with that, but that is not how I was raised. (Lisa)

When she joined the church, Lisa came across an understanding of gender roles different from her own upbringing, especially in family life. Many women, especially those raised after the second wave of feminism in the 1980s, were socialised in a society where a sense of gender equality was dominant. Such an idea focuses on the social equality of men and women, and urges women to be, for example, financially independent. The idea of male headship and

⁵⁷ In English, male headship is typically associated with this type of Evangelical or Pentecostal gender conservatism. My interlocutors only marginally used the Dutch *mannelijk gezag* (male leadership), which is closest to a literal translation of male headship. More often they interpreted this as '*de man is het hoofd van het gezin*': the man is the head of the household.

gender complementarity was occasionally a cause for tension when women first joined the church. Anne said: ‘When I became religious, I became more aware of the different roles for men and women’, meaning the role of men as heads of the household and that of women as caregivers. Anne and Lisa told me that they valued this difference, but the notion of male headship was often difficult for women who had just converted or were in the process of doing so. Bernice described this dynamic as follows:

At first, I struggled with that. I had an image from my past that needed to be deconstructed, and a different image had to come in its place, the way it is meant. Because it says [in the Bible]: ‘Wives, be subject to your husband.’ But before that [sentence], it says ‘be subject to one another’ and it starts with: ‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church.’⁵⁸ Well, isn’t that something? That is self-sacrificing love, that’s what love should be all about.
(Bernice)

Bernice, Lisa, and the others all understood that the image of wives being subject to their husbands was potentially not a very modern one, but they still accepted it as a biblical truth. Bernice was quick to tell me that this is not a relationship of inequality, but rather of mutual ‘self-sacrificing love’. Learning more about male headship, my interlocutors would often agree with the interpretation of gender in Ephesians 5, yet always emphasised that this did not mean that women are of any less value than men. At the same time, Nina said that whenever she and her husband do not agree on an important issue, her husband’s decision rules.

Lian was one of the few to voice explicit criticism of the gender discourse in her church. She placed the responsibility for such conservatism with her fellow church members, instead of being legitimised by either the Bible or biology. During our two-hour meeting on a sunny terrace, I asked her whether she thinks conversion is different for women than for men. She replied:

I do think so. Because the man is supposedly—or well, ‘supposedly’... it is written in the Bible—seen as the head of the family. [...] Women have to be really careful how they dress and show themselves, and how they are caring for the people around them. They are watched and judged, whether they do right by God or not.
(Lian)

Lian felt as if the understanding of male headship by some church members carries with it the consequence that some men in church feel like they can make judgements about the women in church. Even though she acknowledges that it is written in the Bible, she did add that for her,

⁵⁸ In Eph 5:25, contrary to Bernice’s statement, this comes a few sentences after ‘Wives submit yourselves to your own husbands’.

men are only ‘supposedly’ the head of the family. It is as a direct result of these norms that Lian believes conversion to be more difficult for women, since they are often watched and checked more than their male counterparts. When I asked her whether she experienced a change in how she sees gender herself, she replied:

Yes, I am more aware of the way women are seen by some conservative Christians, so that has changed. That women should actually be submissive shocked me because, in my view... well, my view about women changed to, but more in the sense that I can see how beautiful it is that women can be independent and have a great relationship with God on their own. Women really have a lot of strength. (Lian)

Here, again, Lian mentioned that she disagrees with the idea that women should be submissive and noticed the effect that had on women in church. She herself does not regard women as subject to men, but rather appreciates how the women in her congregation are able to have a personal relationship with God themselves, without the intervention of men. This corresponds to the value she attributes in Pentecostal denominations to the possibility of each individual to have a personal relationship with Christ. The idea of women’s strength, although seemingly in contrast with the ideal of submissiveness, also came up frequently in my fieldwork.

One of the most cited Bible verses in Pentecostal women’s ministries worldwide is Proverbs 31: 25–26: ‘She is clothed with strength and dignity, and she laughs without fear of the future. When she speaks, her words are wise, and she gives instructions with kindness.’ (NLT)⁵⁹. Indeed, many women converts hang posters with this text in their homes and it widely functions as a template for ‘ideal womanhood’ (Bowler 2019).⁶⁰ Many interlocutors frequently told me that they attributed newly added value to their position as women after they converted. In a sense, such a conservative gender framework carries with it a re-sanctification of womanhood. Some women emphasised this idea of women’s strength and were more hesitant to accept the notion of female submissiveness. One them was Pastor Claudia:

⁵⁹ Even though the majority of pastors and members would use the *New International Version* (NIV) when opting for an English Bible, Proverbs 31 on posters was mainly the *New Living Translation*. This is slightly different from the NIV translation, which reads: ‘She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.’

⁶⁰ Since 2016, an online platform exists in the Netherlands for young Christian women called ‘*Zij Lacht*’ (the Dutch translation of ‘she laughs’ in Proverbs 31). This platform is not explicitly Pentecostal, nor does it cater to one particular congregation. It does, however, show many similarities to neo-Pentecostal women’s networks in both its theology and aesthetics

I do recognise the strengths of a man, and I do not mind that at all. But if you talk about submissiveness and all that, no, I do not agree. I think we strengthen one another. There is a reason I have been able to bare children, there are things that make me very strong. Whilst my husband has other strong points. (Pastor Claudia)

In this citation, Claudia rejects the notion of submissiveness, but at the same time reiterated the idea of gender complementarity, placing the emphasis on a woman's strength. This strength was not based on her personality traits, but on the ability of women to give birth to children, which is of course a biologically deterministic view of the gender binary.

In Sisterhood activities, the focus was often on women's strength and the importance of overcoming insecurities.⁶¹ One example came up in my participant observation during a women's conference. During a presentation, a large image of the superhero Wonder Woman was projected on the main screen. Similar to Wonder Woman, the women present were urged to arm themselves against insecurity by 'Your shield: Faith' (Rom. 12: 2) and 'Your sword: The Word, the Truth' (Eph. 6: 11). This empowering message of femininity was often new for converts. This type of Christian empowered womanhood has been discussed by scholars such as Miranda Klaver (2021), who analysed the social media platforms of Hillsong women; and Kate Bowler (2019), who studied the public performances of pastors' wives. Within this framework, women portray a very modern and 'hip' form of femininity, wearing the latest fashion, having a trendy decorated home, and aligning themselves with a discourse of self-empowerment. At the same time, such women advocate traditional family values by, for example, introducing themselves as a 'wife', a 'mother', or a 'believer' online. According to Bowler (2019), this forms somewhat of a double bind: Women are asked to stand out and be strong and independent, whilst they are also expected to be heterosexual, married, and subject to their husband in that marriage. In other words: Women can be superheroes, but only within the rather conservative binary gender framework of Pentecostalism.

In my fieldwork settings, performing a particular notion of womanhood was often considered a marker of sincere conversion. Many converts aspired to become such a 'superhero', but not all wanted to. Nina found the focus on fashion to be 'shallow and distracting', whilst Lisa felt like she 'just doesn't have the proper looks' to be asked to do church commercials or other videos. Her noncommitment to the community's dominant fashion style had a direct impact on Lisa's access to leadership positions, since these were mainly filled by extravert young people wearing the latest fashion. The ideal women put on stage (often literally) by pastors would be a mother and devoted wife; be fashionable in dress, haircut, and makeup; help in church; and have a 'proper' job. In other words: She would embody the 'Proverbs 31 wife' I mentioned at the start of this section. I regularly noticed how the emphasis on women's empowerment was paradoxically based on the presumption that

⁶¹ This mirrors Hillsong's global Sisterhood image; see for example the books by Bobbie Houston (2016).

women overall lack confidence. Such negative thinking about oneself was considered to be un-Christian, but common for women. Take, for example, the following excerpt from Pastor Helen's sermon during a Sisterhood event:

Who do we let define us in life? Which voice can speak loudest? Is it the word of God? Sixty to eighty per cent of our own thoughts are negative, especially about ourselves. If your thoughts are toxic, so is your behaviour! If you have victory in your thoughts, your acts will be victorious! (Pastor Helen. UHC Sisterhood event, December 2017)

Many of my interlocutors found comfort in this idea of positive thinking, as it provided them with a sense of self-worth and legitimised a feeling of confidence about their lives and—especially in the case of young adult women—their bodies. Yet, at the same time, this can make the process of ethical self-formation even more challenging, since redemption should not only include external acts, but also internal, 'proper' thoughts. The centrality of the individual's agency in such a discourse of religious self-making often increased a sense of guilt for those interlocutors who did not meet these expectations, or who did not have the promised experiences.

Lastly, a few interlocutors made a connection to feminism. This came up far more often in conversations about sexuality, a topic in which Christian converts most often distinguished themselves from their secular peers (see chapter five). In discussing broader gender discourses and male headship, only two interviewees and a handful of women in informal meetings made references to wider secular Dutch society and its (supposed) feminist agenda. Lisa said: 'There's the text in the Bible that states that a man is the head, and the woman the body.'⁶² It doesn't really align with feminist issues, but I did start to see the power in that.' When I asked Lisa what she had meant by 'feminist issues' (*feministische dingen*), she mentioned that the wish to be a homemaker whilst her husband is responsible for the household's income is quite uncommon amongst her generation and might not be regarded as feminist. She also told me how she feels empowered to make this choice herself by the value given to marriage and motherhood in her church. Even though this might be frowned upon by her non-religious peers, it was a common and encouraged option in the Grace City Church. Grace City's Pastor Nadine reflected on this issue in the following way: 'Our society, so it seems, has become a bit "anti-man". In the sense that, yeah, a man should behave like a woman. But a man is not made like that, he isn't *wired* like that.' The inference here is that the church would ideally provide a space in which men could also express their true masculinity, the same way as the Sisterhood ministry offers women a form of conservative

⁶² Eph. 5:28-30, NIV: 'In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—for we are members of his body.'

empowerment. Indeed, in all of the churches, there were more women present than men, and activities of the Sisterhood ministries were well attended. According to Isabel, this was because men tend to give more value to status and have more difficulty with humility in the face of God. She said: ‘If you want to know God, who is bigger than us, you have to acknowledge how small you yourself are. And that’s more difficult for men than for women.’ It seems as if church not only attracted more women than men, but women also tended to be more active in the women’s ministry and found the church to be the most important space in which to express their religion. The following section continues this exploration by analysing the role of the community in women’s conversions to Pentecostal Christianity.

3.5 Becoming Christian in the Community

For all of the women I interviewed and with whom I spoke, the religious community was a central factor in their conversion. This was a space shaped by explicit discourses of conversion and more implicit conservative gender norms. My interlocutors negotiated their position in relation to these gender dynamics. This section explores how the relation of gender and conversion played out in the church. Church can have different meanings: It can be a physical building, but more often refers to the community connected to this physical space. In fact, the ‘church’ as a community reached far beyond the Sunday morning services—traditionally the most important moment of the week for Christians. Thus, when I refer to ‘church’, I mean both this emic meaning of community within the structures of a physical space (the church building), and the church as an institution. An often-repeated motto of the various churches was ‘Church starts on Sunday’ (stated in English), which was meant to encourage people not to devote a mere two hours on Sunday to church, but rather to see church as something ingrained in daily life throughout the week. In the words of Emma: ‘It doesn’t matter if you go shopping on Sunday, as long as you devote the rest to the week to Him.’ Based on my participant observation and interviews, three factors frequently came up. First is the idea of their church as a modern and hip alternative to existing Christian denominations. Second is the access to power for women in the churches and the ambivalent attitude toward female religious leadership. Third, and specific to this case study, is the great emphasis on voluntary work and friendship, which meant that large part of the social life of my interlocutors too was shaped by the church.

3.5.1 Choosing ‘A Very Different God’

Two factors stood out most in the reasons my interlocutors provided for why they joined this, and not another, branch of Christianity. The first important difference has to do with the notion and attribution of power in Pentecostal churches. Lian mentioned that she was attracted to Pentecostalism primarily because of the theological perspectives of a relationship with

God. In Pentecostalism, the emphasis is on a personal relation with God. According to Lian, this differs from, for example, Roman Catholicism, where she feels: ‘God is too big [...] I can’t even reach it. Only the fathers and pastors can reach Him, have that connection.’ Instead, Pentecostalism generally believes that everyone is able to have a connection with God. In Lian’s words: ‘In His eyes, we are priests too.’ The universalising message of Pentecostalism is often connected to such a gospel of equal access to faith, or a democratisation of Christianity in which the lay and the ordained members can have a similar relationship with God and Jesus. This was frequently mentioned as an important difference between their community and other Christian denominations (see also Martin 2003, 55).

The second difference—mentioned even more frequently—had to do with the self-proclaimed modern aspects of the church, mostly expressed in the use of multimedia platforms, music, and young, urban fashion styles. This is partly also related to the image of God. My interlocutors described God in terms of care and joy, whilst the image of God in more ‘traditional’ forms of Christianity was associated more with strictness and doctrine. Claudia, pastor of the Life Point Church, made a distinction between ‘her’ type of church and more traditional forms of Christianity:

The great thing is that [we] show a very different God than people might have ever thought of. [...] Often, people would think about an angry bogeyman, or sitting in pews, or about church organ music. It is fine if people believe in those ways, but I do not believe that is suitable for the year 2018, it is not the way to inspire people. (Pastor Claudia)

For Claudia, Calvinistic or Roman-Catholic (‘traditional’) forms of believing were not necessarily bad, but they are certainly not modern. On the contrary, her church, she claimed, was able to bring the gospel into the twenty-first century. Hillsong is well-known for its fashionable, ‘hip’ aesthetics (McCracken 2010; Wagner 2019). My interlocutors would not typically describe other Christian denominations in negative terms, but they did describe their community as more welcoming and more appropriate for modern times. The following excerpt from my interview with Anne is a good example of this ambivalent self-positioning:

In the end, we [Christians] all have the same aim, which is to follow the right path. In the end, that is what God wants us to do and it really does not matter how you do it. [...] The point is to touch other people, and that is why I think it is good that there are different spaces for people to go to who think they will be touched in a different way. Of course, a church like ours is very nice for people because we are accessible and you can just be yourself, everyone is welcomed, and it does not matter what you have done before. (Anne)

In this citation, Anne first links herself to a wider imagined community of Christians who, according to her, are connected by their shared aims and belief in God. Second, she noted that it is important to ‘touch’ other people. ‘Touch’ is a frequent term used to indicate conversion—to have someone experience the presence of God via evangelisation (see section 3.7.1). Yet in the third instance, she gives added value to her ‘type of church’, where people can, in her view, really be themselves. Whilst it was considered important to perform a conversion narrative in line with expectations from the community, it was simultaneously considered of high importance to do so without losing a sense of authentic selfhood—to still be able to ‘be yourself’.⁶³ To understand this impact of the community on conversion, it is important to explore how women in my study related to the notion of church and gender, and to consider the wide influence of the church on their daily lives.

3.5.2 The Position of Women in the Church

Church functioned as a building, but even more so as a community. This community often moved in between public and private spheres and was, in many regards, gendered. As I wrote before, most interlocutors adhered to the idea of ‘complementarity’, in which men and women are considered to be of equal value yet possessing ontologically different characteristics and responsibilities. This double discourse on gender—equal yet different—impacted the church in various ways. As an example, I provide an excerpt from my fieldwork notes during an Alpha Course evening:

The Alpha Course leader tells us he wants to give us the opportunity to experience what it is like to be filled by the Holy Spirit today. The Alpha leaders will pray for us, with an added anointment by oil to have that experience. [...] Sanne looks at me wide-eyed: ‘I am not sure what I am supposed to do now’, she says. I decide to go to the bathroom and on my return, I decide not to join, just to observe. The lights are dimmed, and soft piano music is played. In the room, I see about eight couples of leaders and newcomers. Sanne is prayed for by another woman and starts crying. Afterwards, she describes how beautiful it was, still with tears in her eyes. [Alpha Course leader] Hans tells me that men are usually done way faster and that men do not pray for women or vice versa. If they would, there can be some form of dependency, and romantic feelings might occur, just like a patient might fall in love with their psychologist. You might have people praying for one another on an individual basis, but with a prayer like this, genders usually do not

⁶³ Queer theologian Marco Derks (2018) compares this Christian idea of authenticity to the discourse of ‘being yourself’ as a particular feature of Dutch secular LGBTQI+ discourse. Derks further refers to Charles Taylor’s (2007) genealogy of this ‘expressive individualism’ in *A Secular Age*. The relation of Pentecostal converts to the broader society is discussed in chapter five, where I compare this with the other two case studies.

mix because of the intimacy and potential romantic feelings. (Fieldwork notes. Alpha Course UHC, October 2017)

Overall, the Alpha Course usually did not strongly advocate for gender difference and taught that both men and women are able to receive gifts of the Spirit and are equal in the eyes of God. This was also reflected in church services, where—as is common in all Christian denominations—men and women would sit together, and people of both genders would interact without obvious restriction. However, the above description of an Alpha Course evening also shows that there were limits to this interaction. Although the boundaries between men and women were not spatially marked (as is the case in mosques and Orthodox synagogues as the other case studies show), they were, nevertheless, closely monitored.

In Pentecostal churches both men and women can assume positions of leadership.⁶⁴ In most Evangelical and (neo-)Pentecostal churches (in which there is no ordination), women are called a pastor or co-pastor, albeit almost always as part of a married couple. These churches typically do not have positions for elders or deacons, which are a common feature of mainline Protestant congregations. Leadership positions are instead allocated according to ministry (youth ministry, Sisterhood); team (welcoming team, worship team, decor team); or course (Alpha Course, Bible college). There is also a group of about five people supporting the lead pastors. In my fieldwork settings, women were present in all teams, but men often assumed the role of team leader. Whenever a woman was in such a position, they would often share the responsibility with their husbands and as such were always ‘under the authority of men’ (Klaver 2018, 244). Overall, I noticed that although officially they have the same access to power as men, women’s power was limited. Women held significant authority in the women’s ministry, but not in the church as a whole. This tendency is common in Pentecostal churches, where, Bernice Martin (2003, 54) writes: ‘The implicit deal seems to be that a substantive shift towards greater gender equality will be tolerated so long as women are not seen to be publicly exercising formal authority over men.’ Bowler (2019) wrote in similar terms about the precarious position of Pentecostal pastors’ wives, who usually take on the role of female co-pastor and leader of the Sisterhood ministry. Even though pastors’ wives have a lot of power, their power is relational and provided because their husband is the lead pastor of a church. Pastors’ wives are typically dependent on their husbands’ income and employment, and are usually not able to appoint successors. Once their husbands leave the church, they are

⁶⁴ In other Christian denominations, women are not permitted to assume some leadership positions (cf. Schrijvers 2019). The mainline Dutch Protestant collaboration of churches (PKN) leaves it up to the individual churches to decide whether or not to appoint women. Churches on the more liberal side of the spectrum often do have this possibility, whilst more conservative congregations do not, or limit women to positions as elders or deacons. In the Roman-Catholic church, women cannot be ordained as priests.

forced to leave as well, as was recently the case with Laura Lentz.⁶⁵ This mirrors the Hillsong metaphor of family and the ideal of male headship, which I also found in my own research. The husband and wife pastoral team functions as a role model for other couples in the community and should thus embody the widely held belief that women should submit to their husbands. In all of my fieldwork locations, a similar organisational structure emerged from the available official documents: The male pastor has the role of chairman of the board, as well as head of the church and its pastor. The two other compulsory roles on the board, those of secretary and treasurer, were (when names were supplied) also filled by men. The wives of the pastors are not mentioned. Whenever salaries were specified, the largest expenses of the church were for the male pastor's salary, which was in turn shared (or was at least expected to be shared) with his wife and children. All the other workers at the church—with the occasional exception of a handful of leaders—do so voluntarily and all of the churches rely on hundreds of volunteers.⁶⁶ This precarity was hardly reflected on by my interlocutors.

One might suspect that this access to positions of authority, at least in theory, would impact the motivation of women to join this particular denomination rather than another. I argued in the previous chapter that this often was the case with Jewish women joining a Liberal rather than Orthodox synagogue. However, the fact that women could be co-pastor and give sermons and blessings was important for my interlocutors, but it was not a deciding factor in pursuing their conversion. Only on further reflection did they appreciate (or question) the presence of female leaders in church. Emma, the leader of a Bible study group, speaking about the GCC's pastor, Nadine:

It is a good thing that there are women on stage, Pastor Nadine is a very good speaker. There are very few famous Dutch women speakers, compared to [women in] the UK or Bobbie Houston. It does make a difference, listening to a woman, so it is important to have women role models too. Besides Pastor Marc, who is very great of course. (Emma)

Not everyone agreed with this view, a minority doubted the effectiveness of women pastors. Most women converts accepted that the husband was their lead pastor, whilst his wife, supporting her husband, had the role of co-pastor and Sisterhood leader. However, not all female pastors were considered capable of taking on a centre stage role. About the female pastor in the United Hope Church, Anne said:

⁶⁵ When the Lentz couple left Hillsong New York, it was unclear whether his wife Laura was on the payroll and whether she was actually fired herself, or was simply expected to leave when Carl was fired.

⁶⁶ According to their own published overviews, the United Hope Church has eight fulltime paid positions, whilst the Grace City Church has five. Church workers tend to have part-time appointments, so I am not sure how many people were actually on the payroll.

Anne: Pastor Helen is just not so strong, [giving sermons] is not her calling. I initially thought it was just me, but [my husband] heard that quite a lot of men have the same feeling.

Lieke: I did notice that there's often a couple leading the church rather than one pastor. What do you think of that?

A: Yes, I think that is a great thing that I really believe in. I believe that a man and wife together offer very different strengths and qualities. Pastor Helen is great in the focus on Sisterhood, the female component of the church, in a more caring way. She is great in the care aspects of the church. (Anne)

Interlocutors such as Anne appreciated that women could have some form of leadership, but the type of leadership was gendered to the extent that women were seen as responsible for the care and social wellbeing of church members. Men would have authority over the church's organisation, structure, and content of the services. Regardless of their gender, all members were called upon to contribute to the church, both physically in the form of work, and via donations.

3.5.3 Building the Church

Almost all of my interlocutors were involved with voluntary work for the church in some form. The reasons for this are twofold. The first is methodological: Most of the people who first approached me, and with whom I would initially connect, were given this task. For example, Emma and Miriam were part of the welcoming team when I first met them, and Emma first approached me because she recognised me as a newcomer. Emma introduced me to other converts, and this snowballing method often led to converts who were indeed known and active in the church. The second reason is that many churches asked a lot by way of contributions from their members and a large proportion of members were in fact volunteers. During services, the importance of 'building the church together' was often voiced by the pastors. This 'building' related to the community and not the actual physical space, although part of the task could be contributing to the maintenance of the church building itself. Members contribute to the church by joining one of the numerous teams on top of giving their tithe and other donations. To give the example of Emma: When we met in 2017, she had been a member of the Grace City Church for two years. In the GCC, she was a member of the welcoming team, the leader of a Bible study group, the leader of the audio-visual team of the young adults' ministry, and the assistant to that ministry's leader (the pastors' son). On occasion, she would also be asked to make videos for the Sisterhood ministry and organised several in-church conferences. She did all of this voluntarily. For her, truly, church only started on Sunday, but took all week. Many others had similar tasks, although not as many as Emma. To name a few: Isabel was a Bible group leader; Anne was a member of the children's ministry team; Lisa was a member of the welcoming team and leader of the decor team; Nina

taught Bible classes; and Rianne and Bernice were in the Sisterhood event team. Kim had an especially privileged position in church since she was married to the junior pastor of the church. As a couple they oversaw the Bible study groups for married couples and were appointed to be the leaders of the future satellite church of Grace City. Because of her position, Kim was closely monitored and often referred to by other members as an exemplary convert. She described herself as having previously lived a life of sin (mainly meaning drinking and having sex out of wedlock) before going to church. Once she devoted herself to the church, life turned around and she currently holds one of the most prestigious positions within the community available to non-family members. Kim would frequently talk to newcomers, but this meant that it was rather difficult for her to work on personal friendships, since welcoming was the main focus of her social contact within the church.

During my fieldwork, I observed how close many of the women were on a social level. They also interacted with men, especially the young adults whose ministry meetings were combined, albeit to a lesser degree. Women were encouraged to build a strong sense of ‘sisterhood’ and be involved in the women’s ministry under the same name. Women would always hug each other upon meeting and prayed for one another. Whenever something good had happened to a woman in our Bible study group, praise would be given, and the evenings would typically be filled with encouragements and laughter about all kinds of things. However, the closeness of this community also had its downside and left some converts feeling like outsiders:

Yes, you do feel like that [an outsider] at first. Especially because we are such a big church, a lot of people know each other. And you will join a Bible group, but then everyone there will know many more people outside of the group... Someone from another group would come over for one evening and everyone knew that person already. I thought: ‘I was the newcomer, but you’re even newer, yet everyone knows you already.’ (Anne)

Even after joining a Bible study group, Anne still felt like an outsider at times, until she gained some authority by joining the children’s ministry team, as well as being one of the leaders of the Alpha Course in which I participated. Feelings of unease on a social level were not frequently spoken about and not really considered something for discussion. Not everyone felt comfortable in the Pentecostal community with its emphasis on ‘sisterhood’ or the importance of engaging with other newcomers. Not participating in this dominant mode of interaction could certainly limit someone’s sense of belonging and women sometimes struggled with these normative expectations, especially when they had been active in the church for longer. The church was however not the only important space where women expressed and formed their religious self. Besides the church, the private sphere was considered to be an important space for women, as a woman’s primary role was considered to

be that of wife and mother, and always in a heterosexual marriage. This is where the next section continues.

3.6 Becoming Christian in the Private Sphere

Christian converts often located the ideal role for women in the private sphere, which reflected the discourse of complementary difference. In their homes, the primary responsibilities of women revolved around childcare and the construction of a space in which to practice their religion. For Jewish women, many rituals and acts were performed in the domestic sphere (see section 2.6). In contrast, becoming Christian did not come with particular guidelines for food or domestic celebrations, such as eating *kosher* or *halal*, as detailed respectively in the Jewish and Muslim case study. In neo-Pentecostalism, conversion implied some changes to the daily routine, albeit with less drastic impacts on the home. The domestic sphere was often redecorated with Hillsong merchandise. Conversion also took shape via domestic rituals such as praying and reading the Bible. For Christian interlocutors, their new sense of womanhood mainly took shape via the emphasis on motherhood and family life. These two dimensions of the private sphere are discussed in this section: Homes and families.

3.6.1 War Rooms and Quiet Time

Many converts to Christianity expressed a change in their domestic sphere during their conversion, related to decoration and daily routine. There were hardly any requirements to make specific changes to decor. The only exception would be the removal of symbols of non-Christian religions. I asked the pastors to describe what they saw converts struggling with most, and how they advise them to make the necessary changes. Claudia gave the testimony of a converted woman in her congregation:

There was someone a while ago who had a lot of fears, a difficult and violent relationship and all. And then you know, if someone is struggling for a while, I would pray and tell them: ‘I would leave some things out of your life. Buddha statues and stuff like that, are in fact idols that you’re letting in.’ But I did not say it pedantically, just in a very nice way. And the other day she called me: ‘You know what I did, I initially moved the statue, but it just fell down today!’ And she did not feel [sad] at all... you know, it is easy for me to say, ‘throw it out’, but these things had value for her, it was passed down for generations. [...] But she started to think differently and is so free now. That is so beautiful. She is truly liberated by thinking differently, by starting to trust in God. That is truly a blessing. (Pastor Claudia)

Claudia did not make the explicit connection between the woman's difficulties and her Buddha statue, but made it clear that there was some link between 'adhering to idols' and struggling in life. However, Claudia was also quick to point out that she did not want to 'point the finger' or tell people what to do in a 'pedantic' way. Nevertheless, she noticed a relation between the woman's abusive relationship, the idols in her home, and her subsequent experience of liberation from fear.

In addition to removing non-Christian images from their home, my interlocutors often redecorated their houses (or student rooms in the case of young adults) in line with the latest Hillsong trends. Pentecostal women, including converts, often had similar posters featuring lines of scripture on their walls as well as other Christian imagery. I described an example of such a typical neo-Pentecostal aesthetic in the following fieldwork notes:

Emma's living room is clean and tidy, the lights are dimmed, and scented candles are spread around the room. Softly, music from the Hillsong band is playing in the background. The room where the Bible group takes place is easily recognisable as belonging to someone religious. On the wall, a poster reads: 'She is clothed with strength and dignity and she laughs without fear of the future.'⁶⁷ Her shelves are filled with books about God and display a number of postcards with sayings like 'Jesus loves you.' (Fieldwork notes. Connect Group GCC, February 2018)

Of interest here is the way in which, upon reading this report, my supervisor, Katja Rakow, immediately recognised this description from her own fieldwork in the American Lakewood Church based in Houston, Texas (see Emling and Rakow 2014; Rakow 2020b). Although purely anecdotal, this particular aesthetic seems to be echoed across the world and forms part of a global trend amongst neo-Pentecostal women. This is also noticeable in the vast and growing market for similar Christian props (Wagner 2019).⁶⁸ Indeed, some larger churches have their own bookstores where they sell books from the Hillsong publishers, autobiographies of their own pastors and decorative items, such as posters and postcards featuring biblical texts.

Besides decorating the home, those interlocutors who lived with others also regarded it their responsibility to implement religious practices in the domestic sphere, such as praying and reading the Bible. The responsibility of implementing prayer in the home appeared to be a gendered undertaking. Most often, women had the task of ensuring the space and time for prayer. My interlocutors often referred to this as their 'quiet time' (*stille tijd*) and expressed a wish to have a marked moment with God each day. Miriam gave the example of a '15 minute' approach: five minutes of worship songs, five minutes of Bible reading, and five minutes of

⁶⁷ This is a section of the well-known Proverbs 31:25, New Living Translation, English in original.

⁶⁸ See for example the Hillsong online shop: <https://hillsongstore.eu/>; or the Dutch shop 'Majestically', <https://www.majestically.nl/>.

prayer. Almost all of my interlocutors strived to have such a moment in their day, although only a few managed to actually incorporate this into their daily routine.

Domestic prayer was not only demarcated by time, but also by space. In 2015, the Christian drama movie ‘War Room’ (dir. Kendrick) came out, in which the main character has a special room (a modified walk-in closet) devoted to prayer, called her ‘war room’. The handwritten prayers are pinned to the wall in this room. My interlocutors often expressed a wish to dedicate a particular section of their house to prayers, as inspired by this movie. Each had a different method of implementing this, although, primarily because of spatial limits, none of them had a separate prayer room as such. Instead, Anne had a corner in her living room dedicated to prayer in which she pinned up prayer questions written on sheets of paper. The efficacy of written prayers was further emphasised by Kim, who placed different printed sheets with single-sentence prayers on her bedroom wall. The religious texts displayed at home thus took two basic forms: inspirational bible quotes with a mainly decorative function; and written prayer questions with a more pious function. The prayers themselves covered a range of topics, from asking for guidance for job applications, to healing from mental or physical problems. Many not only prayed for themselves, but also had a list of prayers in which they frequently included others, especially when they knew someone was, for example, looking for a new job. I remember I was quite surprised (and also flattered) to hear from both Anne and Emma that they were praying for me on a weekly basis, asking God to offer me guidance in finding my way in their faith. Many interlocutors regarded domestic prayer to be a woman’s task and women were widely conceived as more skilful at this, particularly when it concerned empathically praying for others.

Although my interlocutors were more likely to devote time to their personal prayers than to reading the Bible, both appeared to carry the same significance and importance. Reading the Bible was seen as a marker of devotion, and many church members would annotate their Bibles, add post-it notes to indicate important pieces, and take comfort in their battered covers. In the words of Nina, referring to one of her favourite postcards on her wall: ‘Believing is having a worn-out Bible.’ Indeed, Miriam, a leader from the Sisterhood team in the United Hope Church, once told me that she has three Bibles: one to take to church; one to read at home; and one to make notes in. It was not enough just to read a section of the Bible: Miriam also encouraged women to actually engage with the text. This proved to be rather difficult for some interlocutors without prior knowledge of the text. Lisa initially just started at the beginning of Genesis 1 (‘which I wouldn’t recommend anyone’, she said), but stopped because she found it difficult to grasp the meaning. When I asked Lisa whether there is something she would like to change, she replied:

I want to have more discipline to read the Bible. It is improving a bit but not enough [...] I know it is good for you, because whenever I read it, I am filled by

the truth. It is a good way to start the day, knowing how God thinks about certain situations, knowing how He thinks about me. (Lisa)

Lisa's comments above echo a challenge frequently raised by the members of the Bible study group I attended. During these meetings, we would often discuss the theme of the sermon from the Sunday before, with a few added sections of scripture. However, members were not asked to prepare these meetings, and this was often, despite their ideals, the only moment in a week when participants would read (brief) sections of the Bible. Mothers were an exception, and would often try to find the time to read the Bible with their children. This brings me to the next theme of this chapter, namely that of the family. Whilst family life is obviously related to the domestic sphere, in some respects, it also moves beyond it.

3.6.2 'I've Always Been the Motherly Type'

When still a teenager, doctors had told Nina that she could never conceive a child. Nina was 19 when she first visited the Grace City Church—a full ten years before I met her. When we met in her backyard during the Summer of 2018, her young daughter was sitting with us and she was pregnant with her second child. Her story, most notably the conception of two children, is intimately connected to that of her conversion, and she is often asked to share her experiences as a testimony of the healing power of the Holy Spirit. In addition to our informal meetings and interview, I heard Nina tell her story on stage during a Sunday service, during the women's weekend away, and as retold by Pastor Nadine. When Nina had joined the church and converted, she started to participate in so-called 'healing rooms' at the invitation of the pastors. Healing rooms were organised prayer sessions held in a side-room of the church, during which people prayed for one another's healing through the Holy Spirit, often speaking in tongues.⁶⁹ Here, Nina received the message that, contrary to medical advice, she would be able to conceive a child herself and was thus healed. This was later confirmed by a gynaecologist, who she visited when she got married to a fellow church member. Whether you interpret this experience as a miraculous healing or as merely coincidental, for Nina, this was truly the work of God:

I knew then it would come someday. But it was not... we had not been married for that long, and I was not too old [to conceive], so I never felt pressured. For me, it gave me the confirmation that 'wow, it will really happen one day!' And I truly

⁶⁹ Healing rooms are growing in popularity worldwide, for example with the Healing Rooms Ministries (based in the United States)—a church that explicitly follows this trend. Healing rooms are spaces in which groups of people pray together with the purpose of healing (mental or physical) illness and addiction. These prayer sessions are often led by a pastor particularly skilled in healing. In the GCC, no physical place was solely used as healing room. Rather, the healing room was a constructed space in the annex of the church on specific evenings.

believed. Whenever I have my monthly periods with all its pains and miseries, I remember: ‘It’s for a good purpose. It’s a promise given by God.’ (Nina)

Nina’s success at becoming a mother was also taken by her pastors as the ultimate evidence of her true conversion. For Nina herself, it is seen as a confirmation of her faith and she takes great joy in her family. She strives to raise her children as Christians and finds it very important to be a ‘true’ Christian family. For her, amongst other things, this entails praying with her daughter, taking her to church whenever possible, and wanting both her and her second (unborn, at the time of our meeting) child to receive a Christian education. Similarly, caring for her two children also gave Julia, another convert in her late thirties, the motivation to ‘live a Christian life’:

I really enjoy talking with my children about [religion]. We—my husband and I—think about that quite a lot: How do we raise them? We also believe that... we can tell them all kinds of things, but as long as we do not live the life, they will not learn what we do not do ourselves. (Julia)

Anne expressed a similar sentiment, mentioning that she considers teaching her children about religion to be her most important task. When I asked her whether her view about motherhood had come about as a result of, or during, her conversion:

Anne: I do think so. But I have never felt animosity towards the ‘motherly type’. I am not really a feminist, and I don’t mind that my husband is responsible for the finances. [...] I do not mind that he makes those choices, I would not even mind to be more submissive concerning that. I’ve always had that, I’ve always been the motherly type.

Lieke: The motherly type... What do you mean by that?

A: I’ve always known I wanted to be a mother, I was one of those kids who would take care of dolls and play house. I’ve always been a ‘girly-girl’ who really does not mind to... I would have been fine being a stay-at-home mum, to stay at home with the kids. (Anne)

For Anne, Christian understandings of male headship were new, but she expressed that this connected well to the ideals she held before encountering Christianity. Becoming a wife and mother was also something to which my young adult interlocutors—those who did not have children—aspired. In their communities, women were commonly considered to be gifted with skills related to (child)care, and childbearing was often seen as the ultimate expression of a woman’s strength (see also Martin 2001, 51). Yet raising children was not considered to be *only* the task of women. This responsibility was shared, not only by both parents but, importantly, also by the church.

All of the churches of my fieldwork were very child-friendly and organised all kinds of children's activities such as day care during the Sunday services. All of the pastors took great care to accommodate young families, primarily targeting mothers:

You see worldwide that women are more sensitive to matters of the Spirit than men. They will bring their husbands along, who also become active in church, but it is crucial that the families are in harmony and doing well. As long as women take their place in the family, men will be motivated to come to church. (Pastor Nadine)

The idea that women would take along the rest of their family and help them to choose the 'right path' was a common trope throughout my fieldwork. Miriam, who organises events for children, told me that the younger a person is when they convert, the more likely they are to 'stick around'. This is one of the reasons why her church puts so much effort in the ministries for children, young adults, and mothers. The emphasis on, and support of, childcare and motherhood concur with the broader evangelisation aims of the churches: Women who were involved in church were likely to raise their children as Christians, and thus make sure that the new generation, too, stays on the 'right path'. Simultaneously, the churches acknowledged the difficulties that came with becoming a parent and makes sure women also have time to work on their faith. In church, the pastor couple and their children would additionally function as role models for the other couples in the community, it was not uncommon to have younger women describe their pastor as motherly or parental. There was often a great deal of emotional labour done by women, not only in childcare, but also via the Sisterhood ministries. As such, church itself functions as a family, both in relation to God, and in the leadership positions. The pressure on women to adhere to the expectation to bear children (which was considered to be the peak of a woman's strength) already points to the embodied aspects of conversion. The final section of this chapter focuses in greater depth on the body.

3.7 Embodying a Christian Self

Conversion implies a bodily transformation. Whilst this is not unique for Christian converts, the types of bodily acts learned through conversion are specific to this group. This was only marginally related to food practices or clothes, which were central for Jewish and Muslim women. Instead, the religious self was embodied via emotions as a direct expression of the relationship with God. A dominant belief in Pentecostalism is that the working of God and the Holy Spirit can be noticed in their material, physical effects. I was frequently told that the most important aim of praying and reading the Bible was to enable a direct connection with God, in which God's presence was physically felt (through emotions, mainly) or materially witnessed (through the fulfilment of prayers). Especially in the Netherlands, where (somewhat

disembodied) Calvinism had a great impact on Protestant practices, the focus on bodily experience sets these churches apart (de Witte 2011). In this setting, the body became the central locus of faith and therefore of conversion. This section focuses on this aspect by first analysing the different understandings of touch and emotion in relation to worship music and emotional build-up. Section 3.7.2 focuses on a central bodily practice most alien to my interlocutors, namely speaking in tongues.

3.7.1 Touch and Emotion

If there is one unifying way to describe the religious experiences for which my interlocutors strove, it was to ‘be touched’. The idea of touch here functioned on different levels, both in the vertical relation to God, and the horizontal relation with fellow members of the church (Rakow 2020b). Whilst much care was given to abstinence—the message being that men and women should not interact sexually before or outside of heterosexual marriage—the norms concerning gender interaction were not directly observable in church meetings. Men and women typically interacted in a rather unreserved and amicable manner, involving a lot of touching and hugs. A particularly awkward moment in my fieldwork occurred when I wanted to say goodbye to Nina after our interview and I approached to give her a hug. Even though it is not my habit to hug interlocutors, I had become used to this practice in the six months participating in the Grace City Church, where everyone greeted with a hug, even when I had met them only once. This was one of the unexpected bodily customs I had to learn myself, since I am not a natural hugger. I was not aware that Nina was not either, who said, with an annoyed sigh: ‘oh yeah, we’re all supposed to hug here...’ and stiffly responded to my approach before explaining why she actually strongly disliked this habit. This taught me again how dominant the mode of touching was in this church, and how difficult it can be when someone is more of a handshaker than a hugger.

Touch played an important role in another regard as well, namely in the ideal of being ‘touched by God’. The relationship with God was described as loving, caring, and explicitly two-directional. In other words: People’s prayers were expected to evoke a material response from God. The most common direct experiences of being touched by God were sudden emotions. For converts, this bodily and emotional dimension was often rather new, especially when immediately encountered in the first services they attended, and in particular during worship music. Worship music is a form of music that is intended to bring about a sense of connection to the transcendent. According to Tanya Luhrmann (2012), this music constitutes a form of prayer and since the lyrics would typically be sung *to* rather than *about* God, its aim is to enable a direct relation between the singer and God. During the worship sections of the service, almost everyone stands (if not for the first song, then certainly for the second) and sings along. Most popular were those songs known to the audience, such as the Hillsong

United classics ‘Oceans’ (2013) and ‘No Other Name’ (2014b), and The Planetshakers’ ‘Home’ (2015).⁷⁰ The lights in the audience are dimmed and the stage lights give the room the appearance of a pop concert. During this initial worship section of the Sunday service, which lasted about ten minutes, more and more people raise their hands towards the ceiling and close their eyes, making the songs indeed feel like a communal prayer.

Lisa told me how she initially felt very uncomfortable during worship: ‘Singing was so awkward! I was not aware that we were all supposed to stand up and was just waiting to sit down again.’ Because she was unfamiliar with the use of her body in this way, Lisa felt a sense of reservation towards participating—a feeling I recognised from the first services I attended myself. Since I was not raised in this type of church myself (in fact, in no church at all), I also did not know what to do and was similarly unfamiliar with the practices. At the same time, I found it important to participate in the service to try and understand what converts experienced. The boundaries of such participation are not clear-cut and might depend on the researcher in question, nonetheless, I decided to join the singing. Gradually, and similar to my interlocutors, I noticed that my body began to learn. Eventually, my discomfort faded, and I stood up almost automatically, singing along with the (intentionally catchy) Hillsong tunes. This experience was echoed by the converted women I met. Converts typically experienced a period in which they had to physically readjust in order to grasp the meaning of the worship and to be able to ‘let go’ and be open to be touched. This could also be the case for those born Christians new to Pentecostalism, because the style of singing is very different from that in other Protestant or Roman-Catholic services, although to some degree, born Christians would typically be familiar with communal singing in one form or another. In contrast, Bernice described how she had felt like ‘Alice in Wonderland’, since this was a ‘completely different world’ to her. However, this was not as negative and uncomfortable as it was for Lisa, but rather unfamiliar in an exciting way, and this motivated Bernice to learn more and to devote even more time to the church.

This emotional dimension of belief was strongest in collective worship during services, during which all of the senses were stimulated in such a way that the whole church became emotionally charged. In daily life, being touched by the Spirit often took more subtle forms: It could happen during individual prayers, and often referred to moments of spiritual insight. Although they would also listen to songs in their everyday life, the togetherness in Sunday services strengthened this experience of the transcendent. This is similar to Katja Rakow’s (2020b) analysis of the ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ connections enabled by collective worship. Based on the work of Bob Kauflin (2008), Rakow (2020b, 98) writes: ‘[P]raise music addresses the horizontal level on which the participants of the worship service share and express their praise for the work of God together; worship music creates the vertical level

⁷⁰ Hillsong affiliated churches have more freedom in their choice of worship music than Hillsong’s own churches, where only music by the Hillsong bands is performed.

on which the individual communicates with God'. According to Rakow, the stronger the horizontal bonds (between participants), the stronger the vertical bond can be (from the participant to God).

In many events and rituals, the sensory stimuli—sounds, lights, and voices—aimed to enable such emotional 'Godly' experiences. Even as a non-believer, I frequently experienced emotions during church services. This level of emotional build-up tended to be stronger still in rituals outside of the main Sunday services. On Sunday, the service was intentionally accessible and not 'too strange' for newcomers, as Claudia said. The 'off stage' rituals that followed after newcomers had already decided to convert usually had a stronger emphasis on the body and emotions. I joined in a weekend away with recently converted women from the Grace City Church. During this three-day retreat, all participants were first asked to fill in a list of their sins. This was a five-page document in which women had to mark numerous potential sins, such as occultism, greediness, flirtation, or having a tattoo. This act formed part of the build-up to the ritual on Saturday evening. The session that evening started with worship songs and prayers, after which three large wooden crosses were placed in the area that functioned as the stage for the weekend. Two Sisterhood leaders stood at either side of each cross. Each newcomer was asked to come forward, one by one, to staple their list of sins to the cross, which symbolised the sacrifice of Jesus. The symbolism was further reinforced by screening the final scenes of Mel Gibson's movie 'The Passion of the Christ' (2004), which rather graphically displays Jesus' crucifixion.⁷¹ All participants were silent, and the sound of the movie mixed with soft worship music contributed to the solemnity of the space. I observed that many in the room cried and a few participants told me afterwards that they had felt nervous—not least as they suspected the leadership might collect the written lists afterwards, thus fearing they would know about all of their sins. Most, however, felt nervous due to the two-day build up to this moment. This type of ritual is common amongst certain Pentecostal churches and follows a carefully thought out formula.⁷² First, the person's sense of self is deconstructed, as they are asked to reinterpret past experiences in a new paradigm. This sense of past self is further destroyed in the ritual symbolic crucifixion. The day after,

⁷¹ When the film was first released, it was met with a lot of controversy, particularly regarding the gruesome and vivid depiction of violence (Garber 2006). The well-known film reviewer Roger Ebert (2004) wrote: 'The movie is 126 minutes long, and I would guess that at least 100 of those minutes, maybe more, are concerned specifically and graphically with the details of the torture and death of Jesus. This is the most violent film I have ever seen.'

⁷² A similar weekend was not organised at the United Hope Church and does not appear to be a standard feature of all Hillsong (affiliated) churches. Although Sisterhood activities (such as weekends away) are frequently advertised during church services and on the church's media platforms, the contents and rituals are not. It is therefore not possible to know for certain how widespread these type of rituals for converts are, but they are not uncommon (for similar rituals, see Klaver 2011a). Many participants were unaware of the programme before attending, which was advertised with general descriptions referring to women's community building and 'getting to know God'.

the ritual build-up continues. During the Sunday, supposedly having left behind the sinful past self completely, newcomers were asked to invite the Holy Spirit and to speak in tongues. This had the potential to heal the brokenness of the evening before, rebuilding the self in the Christian light. Speaking in tongues was another important bodily dimension of religion for newcomers. Even though both men and women can speak in tongues, women were widely considered to be more palpable to be ‘baptised by the Holy Spirit’, as this was called.

3.7.2 Speaking in Tongues

The Holy Spirit forms one of the pillars of Pentecostal belief and is most noticeably present in the act of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues.⁷³ The ability to speak in tongues was called ‘baptism by the Spirit’ and considered as the ultimate direct effect of God on the individual’s body. Even though it is considered very important, glossolalia was not part of the regular Sunday services. I asked pastor Claudia why this was not the case:

The Holy Spirit is the connection Jesus gave us here on earth and we experience it very strongly in our lives. But we’re not very explicit in the Holy Spirit-experience on Sundays because we want to be an accessible church. Imagine people would be rolling around on the floor, so to say. You would exclude some people and that’s not what we want. (Pastor Claudia)

According to Claudia and the other leaders with whom I spoke, speaking in tongues would be regarded as too strange for newcomers and would contribute to the reputation of (neo-)Pentecostalism as a ‘brainwashing cult’ (as Miriam described it). This would thus not benefit the evangelical aims of the church. This is different from worship music, which was far more familiar to newcomers. Indeed, even though the singing and the closing of eyes might not be so familiar, the stage and style of the songs themselves resonated with secular pop music and thus contributed to the image of the church as modern and accessible (see also Rakow 2020b; Wagner 2019).

Rituals that were aimed towards speaking in tongues were only accessible once someone had already converted and was no longer a complete novice. Glossolalia was reserved for semi-private prayer sessions such as the healing rooms, Bible study groups, weekends away, or individual meetings. Theologically, speaking in tongues could happen

⁷³ The belief in glossolalia is based on the events of the Pentecost described in Acts 2, when the Holy Spirit entered the bodies of Jesus’ followers: ‘They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them’ (Acts 2: 3–4, NIV). Once ‘touched by the Spirit’, practitioners would begin to utter seemingly unintelligible ‘strings of syllables’ (McGraw 2012, 57) that do not follow a known linguistic structure. For a more in depth empirical analysis of this ritual, see the work of Felicitas D. Goodman (2008).

spontaneously. Yet in practice, it only occurred in those group prayers directed towards this specific aim, or during individual prayers in a private setting. This type of prayer presented the greatest challenge to converts, not least as it constituted a completely new and hence alien practice that they had never encountered before joining the church. Similar to other rituals, it can of course be difficult for any believer, but it is regarded to be the effect of true worship and personal work on the relationship with God. This difficulty also forms a type of hierarchy between believers—between those who can and those who cannot (yet) speak in tongues. Emma told me that it had taken her several attempts over the course of three months when she was finally able to do it, similar to Nina and Miriam. In the weekend away for newcomers I described before, effort had been made to ensure the optimal space for newcomers to be touched in this way on the Sunday—the day after the redemption ritual. Yet some women were unable to perform the ritual, one of whom was Danielle. From my fieldwork notes of that day:

We're all standing faced the side of the room. There, about ten young women stand on a narrow stage. Many of them have their eyes closed and their hands towards the ceiling. A low mumbling is audible from their mouths, though the words are incomprehensible. These women have all converted in the past year and are speaking in tongues for the very first time. Some are smiling widely, others have tears of joy on their cheeks. Pastor Nadine holds a microphone and stands by the last in row, Danielle. The pastor places her hand on Danielle's forehead and starts to speak in tongues, just like she did with the previous nine, and invites Danielle to join in the prayer. When the others joined, the pastor placed the microphone near them for the whole audience to hear, before turning to the next one. One by one, this pattern repeated itself, but not with the last in line. Danielle seems to be unable to speak in tongues. I see a frown of concentration on her face, but she stays silent. The pastor says: 'It's okay, just concentrate.' She asks the rest of the group, the audience: 'Everyone, pray for Danielle, so she may too... come on, Danielle, you can do it [speaks in tongues]', and places her hand with even more vigor on Danielle's stomach. After this second try, Danielle starts crying. She admits desperately that she's just not able to. The pastor lets it be and tells Danielle: 'Do not worry, these things happen. You haven't opened your heart enough for the Holy Spirit, focus more, pray a lot and it will happen.' After the prayer session, Danielle looks at me with tears in her eyes: 'I wanted it so bad, I tried so hard, but I guess I'm still not good enough for the Spirit.' (Fieldwork notes. Sisterhood weekend, May 2018)

According to those present in the room, Danielle's inability to speak in tongues did not mean that she was not properly converted. It did, however, affirm that conversion implied work on

the self and placed the responsibility of her not being touched with Danielle herself. In line with the argument of Daan Beekers and David Kloos (2017), I consider that this perceived sense of failure is part of the lived reality of many religious people, and believe it is relevant to acknowledge failure as part of conversion processes as well. Failure often motivates newcomers to commit more to their religion. This is similar to the argument of Martijn de Koning (2018, 50) regarding Salafi Muslims: ‘A state of weakness pertains to a lack of moral strength in one’s relationship with God.’ This leads to his assessment that ‘failure and weakness work as incentives to improve one’s moral self and the surrounding world’ (de Koning 2018, 50). In the case of my interlocutors, I would argue, not being able to express the proper bodily response worked to motivate new believers to invest in their religion more. In the example of Danielle, her inability to speak in tongues illuminated her liminal position as a convert. However, she is certainly expected to speak in tongues in due time—once her heart is truly open enough, to paraphrase her pastor. Such inability to perform certain rituals are expected and will gradually disappear as long as the convert is devoted to following the path of God in all aspects of her life.

Converts often described a yearning for religious fulfilment and sought out experiences that confirmed God’s presence in their daily lives. These moments of being ‘touched’ were often accompanied by bodily emotions. Such tears of joy were considered to be an authentic reflection of someone’s conversion and the presence of God. However, there were limits, not least because there was always a risk that such performances could be so expressive that their genuineness was doubted. For example, Anne told a story about a woman who was so ‘touched’ by Jesus that she actually fell in love with him, something that according to her was ‘too much’ and therefore not ‘how it should be’. Furthermore, Pastor Nadine described moments when people would be ‘rolling on the floor’ after being touched by the Holy Spirit—something that made her wonder whether it was genuine or fake. This distinction between authentic expressions of faith and fake performances was subtle and difficult to navigate, since all agreed that only the people themselves know what their intentions are. I certainly noticed that so-called ‘spontaneous’ displays of emotion were actually guided and structured.

Conclusion

The conversion experience in neo-Pentecostal Christianity is, in many regards, gendered. Whilst the churches tend to be very inclusive and welcoming ‘on stage’, converts encountered a profound normativity once they had entered and joined the ‘off stage’ meetings. Here, they (amongst others) come across a conservative gender complementarity discourse. Firstly, women often experience a change in perspective about gender relations. The Pentecostal ideals of male headship are often new. At the same time, as women are expected to

acknowledge the authority of men, they are also asked to affirm their own strength as based in biological determinism. Second, the church space itself is gendered. Whilst women generally can have ‘on stage’ positions of leadership and power, they do so always under the authority of men and, for example, do not receive a salary of their own. Furthermore, all church members are asked to contribute to the community with voluntary work, in which the bulk of the emotional labour is done by women. This is often overtly gendered: Whilst hospitality work is undertaken by women, men are overrepresented in technological support, although the younger generations tend to mix more. Conversion also comes with a change in the private sphere, not only in the context of decorative items, but also in allocating time and space for prayer and reading the Bible. The last section showed how conversion is an embodied process: Converts have to train their bodies to respond in the appropriate way to worship music (the raising of hands and tears of joy) and speaking in tongues. In this conclusion I return to two questions underlying my research, namely that of lived religion and of authenticity.

From the perspective of everyday religion, it becomes clear that conversion is most likely a nonlinear process without a clear beginning or end. Some converts experienced different phases of self-making. Whilst religious beliefs were certainly important, many were attracted to the lifestyle accompanying Pentecostalism. A common expression was that faith was expected to undergo different ‘seasons’ during which at times, faith was stronger, but could also provide more of a challenge at other times. In the words of one interlocutor: ‘Faith is a relationship, and a relationship needs work.’ This narrative of constant change and potential struggle in believing and following God has two implications: On the one hand, people who were not able to, for example, speak in tongues, were not shunned. Instead, they were supported and there was quite a lot of room in which to discuss uncertainties and doubts. On the other hand, this required a constant awareness of such doubts, followed by the expectation of work on the self via an ongoing reinvigoration of piety and the (continual) redemption of sins.

Another ambivalence in conversion is that it is both an individual and a relational process that is strongly shaped by the community itself. All of the women I met who converted to Christianity grappled with the question of authenticity. Conversion itself was often described as an authentic and conscious choice; as something that is only legitimate when motivated by personal intentions rather than, for example, group pressure. In the preceding chapter, I wrote about the emotional build-up during conversion rituals, the regulations of welcoming newcomers, and the practice of sharing joy during Bible study groups. I would not say that the presence of such a structure makes the experiences themselves ingenuine. Instead, I argue that the very notion of authenticity is part and parcel of neo-Pentecostal conversion discourse and practice, and as such situated, contextual, and regulated. The emphasis on authentic experience, and the norms and structures surrounding these experiences, went hand in hand. This paradoxical relation between authenticity and

authority marks the conversion experience in neo-Pentecostalism and it is, I would argue, particularly noticeable when it comes to gender. For my Christian interlocutors, conversion came with an often different conception of womanhood in which traditional family values were combined with modern ideals about work and appearance. The normative ideal was that of the 'Proverbs 31 woman': a woman who can 'do it all' (be a good mother, wife, and community member). Whilst this was often felt to be empowering, at the same time it created pressure for women to conform to these ideals. On a deeper level, it also created additional pressure for those women who were keen to grow within the church hierarchy and have access to leadership positions. Taking on extra work in church was regularly advocated as a sign of being a 'good Christian' whilst, at the same time, work alone was not enough. The public image also mattered a great deal. For those women who could not adhere to these ideals of the 'Proverbs 31 woman', or who did not feel comfortable hugging or wearing hip (yet modest) outfits, the options were decidedly limited. This means that forming a Christian self ultimately also implies the making of a gendered self, which confirms the argument that conversion is a process of both religious and gendered self-making.

Chapter 4
Women Embracing Islam
‘It Is In My Nature’

We believe that every person is born as a Muslim, but your surroundings play a determining role regarding which denomination or religion you will follow. I have always felt it in me. [...] Looking back, I realise that being a Muslima is in my nature, it just had to be.

—Iman

At first, I just followed my feelings, but over time it became more and more of a conscious choice. When the moment came that I became a real Muslim, I was very conscious of my decision.

—Dunya

Iman and Dunya, two Muslim women I spoke to during my research, reflected on their conversion to Islam in different ways. For Iman, becoming a Muslima⁷⁴ confirmed, with hindsight, a feeling that she had held for her entire life. She also followed a common Islamic understanding that speaks of ‘reversion’ (*fitra*) rather than ‘conversion’ to indicate that everyone is born a Muslim, but that the individual’s surroundings can make them unaware of this. Turning to Islam, in this interpretation, is a form of coming back to one’s original self. Dunya described her experience in different terms. She felt that the more she studied and learned about Islam, the more conscious and strong her decision to eventually convert became. For her, becoming a ‘real Muslim’ was the official moment of the *shahada*, but she had already observed Islamic precepts for years. All Muslim interlocutors emphasised that being a Muslim is a devotion to life-long learning. Indeed, they all stated that there was never going to be some moment in which they had completed their studies. Yet there were still moments that defined becoming a ‘real Muslim’. I chose these short examples as an initial indication of the variety of narratives of women’s conversion to Islam.

In this chapter, I focus on my case study amongst converted Muslim women and ask how conversion is related to gender in the case of Islam. In line with the preceding chapters, I understand conversion as a non-linear process of negotiation that cannot simply be captured by motivations or asking the ‘why question’. Instead, my focus is on practices and relations in conversion processes, which are in turn shaped by the broader socio-political context in which Islam is often positioned as Other to the Netherlands. Recent decades have seen numerous studies on Muslim converts in Europe (e.g., Jensen 2008; Köse 1996; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999; Zebiri 2008), often with a particular focus on women and gender (e.g., Badran 2006; Roald 2006; Spoliar and van den Brandt 2020). At all academic levels, from bachelor theses to

⁷⁴ I am aware that the word Muslim is gender-neutral in English. My interlocutors often used the word Muslima (*Moslima*, in Dutch) to refer to female Muslims and I will follow this convention in this chapter. This is similar to its use in the Dutch media, politics and scholarly work. Muslima is thus ‘borrowed’ from the Arabic (Vroon-Najem 2014, 3).

research grant proposals, the ‘Muslim question’ seems to preoccupy many researchers (Fadil 2014; Mossière 2016).⁷⁵ Since there are numerous students, academics, and journalists interested in female Muslim converts, the field has become quite saturated and converted Muslimas are frequently approached by researchers. Whilst I do not wish to undermine the contents of these works, I do think that this very interest in (women’s) conversion to Islam can be reflected on (see also de Koning and Sunier 2020). There seems to be a paradoxical risk, despite the best intentions, that by focusing on marginalised groups, research actually contributes to the othering of those groups. Whilst my own data runs like a thread through the chapter, however, even more than in the preceding chapters, this data is analysed in dialogue with existing qualitative studies of female Muslim converts. My research adds to this field in two regards: First, in my dissertation, I argue against this exceptionalism when it comes to conversion to Islam and connect it to other conversion stories to ask broader questions about what it means to become religious as a Dutch woman. Second, although many studies of conversion focus on Muslim women in particular (e.g., van Nieuwkerk 2008; Roald 2006; Vroon-Najem 2014), gender is not always thematised or conceptualised. Indeed, many of the studies mentioned so far focus on questions of national belonging, racialisation, and conceptions of ‘religion’ versus ‘culture’ as dominant themes in the experiences of converts (see also Galonnier 2015; Özyürek 2014). My research adds to existing scholarship by offering a critical gender perspective to the theme of women who embrace Islam.

Here, again in line with the two preceding chapters, I focus on gender issues from a lived religion approach. My research material for this case study consists of in-depth interviews with seven converted Muslim women, ranging in age from twenty-four to fifty-four, with an average of thirty-six. The majority had converted as teenagers or young adults, however, in one case twenty years had passed since then. In addition, I had two meetings with the board members of mosques; I participated in a course about women in Islam; and visited to the annual national Converts’ Day (*Bekeerlingendag*).⁷⁶ First, this chapter provides a short overview of Islam in the Netherlands. I additionally offer insight in the formal conversion processes in section 4.2. I then analyse women’s conversion experiences by focusing on their motivation narratives; Islamic gender discourses; the role of communities in conversion to Islam; and the role of the private sphere and family. The last section of this chapter analyses conversion to Islam as embodied.

⁷⁵ A quick search of Utrecht University’s theses archive (Igitur) shows that eight bachelor and master theses were written about Muslim conversion between 2015 and 2021, many authored by students of religious studies. Five of these focus on Muslim women alone. In comparison, there are no theses available about Christian conversion or about Jewish *g’yur*. Stronger still, ‘Muslim women’ gives 65 theses, in which the topic of veiling seems to be the most discussed, against 26 about Christian women and 7 about Jewish women.

⁷⁶ These days are organised by the Convert Association (*Stichting Bekeerling*) and often include different lectures by Islamic scholars or converts who share their stories. Important are the collective moments of prayer and the social gatherings, in which converts are encouraged to participate and meet fellow Muslims. Indeed, it was here that I met some of my interlocutors, whom I later interviewed.

4.1 Islam in the Netherlands

In comparison to Judaism and Christianity, Islam is often conceived by the public as a recent arrival in the Netherlands. However, this is simply not the case, and there has been a Muslim presence in Europe for centuries. Although immigration has undoubtedly increased the Muslim population in the Netherlands, Muslims were certainly not absent from the kingdom beforehand. Indeed, during the colonisation of Surinam and Indonesia, the Dutch dominated ‘one of the most populous Muslim areas in the world’ (Sunier 2010, 115; see also Kennedy and Valenta 2006). As Benjamin J. Kaplan (2006) showed, Muslims were already present in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. More recent projects look into the role Muslims have played in the history of modern Europe itself (e.g., Spaan 2021). It should therefore be noted that the image that Islam is a ‘new’ foreign presence in North-western Europe (in countries such as the Netherlands) is a fabrication and in no way adequately reflects historical events (e.g., Ghorashi 2010; de Koning 2016). Despite the historical presence of Muslims, the public image changed drastically over the past decades. In today’s dominant perception, Islam is constructed as Europe’s antagonist—as non-modern and foreign. More so than in my other case studies, this public debate impacts the experiences of converts. In this section I will first offer some characteristics of the Dutch Muslim population itself. Proceeding, I focus on media discourses about Muslims and the idea of Muslims ‘talking back’ to negative representation.

4.1.1 Dutch Muslims

It is difficult to give definite numbers of Muslims—let alone converts—in the Netherlands, because religion is not registered. As with the other religious groups, estimates by larger statistical research centres about the size of the population are based on self-definition of samples representative of the whole Dutch population. Recent census research by The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (*Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau*, SCP; Huijnk 2018) showed that about six per cent of the Dutch population over eighteen identifies as Muslim, of which the majority has a ‘non-Western migrant background’ (Huijnk 2018, 6).⁷⁷ According to

⁷⁷ Dutch citizens with one parent born in countries such as Turkey and Morocco were initially labeled *allochtoon* in the 1990s (Geschier 2009). People without such a migrant background were considered *autochtoon*, and in the public imagination, the last group concerned white Dutch people only. The terminology changed in 2016 when Statistics Netherlands (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*, CBS) replaced *allochtoon* with ‘migrant background’ and dropped the term *autochtoon*. The migrant background is further split into ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ in a rather arbitrary way. For example, Europe is considered Western, with the exception of Turkey; and Asia is considered non-Western, but with the exception of Japan and Indonesia. Although the new terminology was presented as more neutral, the distinction remain the same. This categorisation recently became the topic of debate and was critiqued for being colonialist, partly sparked by a discussion at Utrecht University (Agterberg 2021). In 2021, the CBS announced that they will revise this terminology (Heck 2021). However,

this report, the majority of Dutch Muslims has a background in Turkey or Morocco, however, there are (descendants of) Muslim migrants from most Muslim-majority countries. Huijnk (2018) further found that around eighty per cent of Moroccan and Turkish Dutch Muslims identify as Sunni, leading to the conclusion that Sunni Muslims largely outnumber the Shi'i minority. Whilst the women in my research are all Sunni Muslims, the PhD dissertation by Annemeik Schlatmann (2016) offers more insight into the 'minority within a minority' of Shi'i Muslims.⁷⁸ Schlatmann (2016, 37) estimated the number of Shi'i Muslims in the Netherlands between 70,950 and 92,235 compared to around one million Sunni Muslims. The *Hanafi* school of Islamic law (*madhab*) and the Maliki *madhab* are most common in the Netherlands, as these are associated with respectively Turkey and North-Africa (including Morocco). These differences between Islamic schools did not play an important role in my own case study (see section 6.2.2) and most converted Muslimas did not strongly identify with, or distinguished between, the different *madhab*. At the time of writing, there are over five hundred mosques in the Netherlands and communities tend to be differentiated into ethnic groups. Most mosques are, indeed, Moroccan or Turkish, but there are also Indonesian, Surinamese, Pakistani, and Somali mosques. In recent years, a few mosques have been founded with the explicit intention to cross ethnic boundaries. Interestingly many white converts were involved in those processes (see section 4.5.1).

Different estimates about the number of Muslim converts in the Netherlands circulate in the media and academia, but these are often unsubstantiated.⁷⁹ Dutch anthropologist and Islam expert Thijl Sunier (2010, 115) offered an estimate of twelve thousand converts in the Netherlands. In 2015, the Statistics Netherlands (*Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek*, CBS) published different statistics that give a (limited) indication (Schmeets and van Mensvoort 2015). Here the CBS estimated that 0.1 per cent of Dutch, 2.9 per cent of 'Western migrants', and 43.8 per cent of 'non-Western migrants' identified as Muslim. Since the total Dutch population was around seventeen million at the time, this means that roughly seventeen thousand Dutch people without a migrant background identify as Muslim. The same number is used by the Convert Association to indicate the number of converts (Stichting Bekeerling

they continue to use the term 'migrant background' to refer to anyone with one parent born outside of the Netherlands.

⁷⁸ For a specific study of women converting to Shi'a Islam, see Shanneik (2018).

⁷⁹ The backstory of one number that became common in the media illustrates how these can take on a life on their own. In 2015, women's magazine *LINDA* included the short statement that five hundred 'autochthonous' women convert to Islam annually, without references. In the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* (Meinema 2015), *LINDA* editor Maaïke Groeneveld is said to have referred to a news item of the show *IVandaag* of April 2014. An editor of *IVandaag* then claimed to have based this on publications in other media outlets, as well as the words of anthropologist Vanessa Vroon-Najem. The latter is said to have mentioned that there are a few hundred converts to Islam per year. I spoke to Vroon-Najem several times over the course of my research, and she told me that she really regrets having made this statement, which was then taken up (wrongfully) by mainstream media.

2015). However, I am hesitant to go along with this conclusion for several reasons. Besides the dubious nature of the categorisations of Western and non-Western, this estimate assumes that no people *with* a migrant background convert, nor does it include the possibility that people without a migrant background are born into Muslim families.⁸⁰ Claiming that all non-migrant Dutch Muslims are converts, reiterates the idea that Islam is foreign to the country and falsely merges national origin and religious affiliation. I agree with cultural anthropologist Vanessa Vroon-Najem (2014, 44)—who wrote her PhD dissertation about female converts in Islam—that, ‘since there are no formal records, aiming for a representative cross section of converts to Islam would be questionable in any event due to the absence of an overall picture’. What is clear, however, is that the relatively small size of the Dutch Muslim population (including converts) stands in disproportionate relation to the overwhelming public and political attention it attracts. This is where the focus of the following section lies.

4.1.2 Representation of Islam in the Netherlands

Most scholars of Islam in the Netherlands locate the roots of the current perception of Islam in the 1980s, a period during which numerous guest labourers came to the country from Morocco and Turkey (van Es 2016; de Koning 2016; Sunier 2010). At the time, these were not considered migrants, but temporary workers. The history of the Islamic presence in the Dutch colonies and mainland was swept under the carpet (Kennedy and Valenta 2006) and Islam became strongly associated with migration from Morocco and Turkey. When the Netherlands stopped labour migration from non-EU countries, this indirectly boosted family reunification (van Es 2016, 5). Many families from Muslim majority countries decided to settle in the Netherlands in the 1980s and the idea of transience that had initially shaped the perspective towards guest labourers, disappeared.

During the 1960s until the 1980s, Moroccan and Turkish migrant groups were initially defined via their ethnicity and country of origin, and not their religion. This changed in the 1980s, when an image of collective Muslim identity emerged in the light of different events in Muslim majority contexts, such as the Iranian Revolution and the Rushdie affair. Sunier (2010, 124) wrote: ‘Islam increasingly became the explanatory factor, not only for specific (collective) behavior of Muslims, but also for all kinds of societal problems they faced.’ This discourse of exclusion based on (presumptions about) the religious background of migrants strengthened and Islam ‘became foreignized’ (Sunier 2010, 127; see also de Koning 2016). The association of Islam with anti-modernness and oppression grew further in the early 2000s. Particularly impactful were the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on

⁸⁰ For example, the 0.1 per cent of non-migrant Dutch people who identify as Muslim includes the grandchildren of migrants who are born into Dutch families, but who do not fall under the definition of ‘migrant background’, since none of their parents were born outside of the Netherlands. In addition, non-migrant Dutch people who converted have had children after their conversion who are thus born into a Muslim family as well.

September 11, 2001, from which the figure of the Muslim terrorist emerged. Three years later, in 2004, the murder of Theo van Gogh further fed into the narrative of Islam as a threat in the Netherlands.⁸¹ In the 2010s ‘Arab Spring’, this negative image was further strengthened by the rise of the so-called ‘Islamic State’ in Syria (also known as ISIS or Daesh). The war and repression by ISIS drove millions of Syrians to flee and seek refuge in neighbouring countries and Europe. The portrayal of Muslims as second-class, unintegrated citizens was now connected to an imagined danger of attacks on European soil by people who claimed affiliation with Islam (de Koning 2016). This has led to a disproportionate attention to radicalisation and fundamentalism, and to Muslim groups associated with this, such as Salafism.⁸²

The construction of Islam as foreign, contributes to a continuing negative exclusionary representation of Islam and Muslims throughout Europe. In the introduction to her edited volume *Muslim Diaspora in the West*, Haideh Moghissi (2010, 1–2) writes:

Indeed, the essentialist view in the West of Muslims, which overlooks the remarkable diversity of people inside and outside Muslim-majority countries in particular the existence of a large number of secular and laic persons has ‘invented’ a ‘Muslim community’ that is held collectively responsible for the senseless violence committed by small groups.

This dominant public and political idea of Islam associated with migration and violence, as non-Western and anti-modern, has had a significant impact on the daily lives of Dutch Muslims. The idea that Islam is oppressive to women is one of the strongest stigmatising discourses in the Netherlands and women come to symbolise the boundary between ‘us’ (the Dutch) and ‘them’ (Muslims). Many Muslims continue to be associated with migration and foreignness, especially those with (grand)parents from Turkey or Morocco. Furthermore, Muslims are often associated with a foreign country with the same ease as people with a migrant background are considered Muslims (whilst this clearly does not have to be the case). Today, being a Muslim is considered to be the most defining feature of one’s identity, as individual actions and differences between Muslims are hardly ever acknowledged in hegemonic discourses (Wagemakers and de Koning 2015). However, Dutch Muslims are not

⁸¹ Theo van Gogh was a Dutch filmmaker and columnist who made a controversial film about Muslims in collaboration with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Dutch politician and Islam critic of Somali background. On 2 November 2004, Van Gogh was stabbed and killed in Amsterdam by a young Moroccan Muslim man. Ali went in hiding for safety reasons before emigrating to the United States in 2006.

⁸² Salafism is an Islamic revival movement characterised by conservatism and strict observance. Despite the attention to this form of Islam in the media, Salafism is marginal in the Netherlands. Moreover, whilst Salafism is often linked to violent Islam and *jihadism*, only a fraction of Salafi Muslims can be associated with ‘political Islam’ (de Koning 2013).

merely passive victims of stigmatising discourses, nor are those with a Muslim background only negatively represented.

Recent years have seen an increase in social movements and networks organised by people with a Muslim background who critique Islamophobia (e.g., van Es 2019a; de Koning 2016). These sometimes include Muslim converts, who, as I will show, are all to some extent impacted by the negative representation of Islam, but respond to this in various ways. There are Dutch television shows that aim to offer a more nuanced image of Islam and there are several well-known and respected Dutch individuals in the media and politics with a Muslim background. These people are often heralded as exemplary and moderate Muslims.⁸³ Although beyond the scope of my research, social media and online networks have further constructed a transnational network, primarily for young adult Muslims, in which notions such as Muslim or *hijabi* pride circulate (van Es 2016, 268). Interesting for my research are examples of Muslim women who try to counter the stereotype that Muslimas are oppressed by their religion and thus ‘talk back’ to the negative discourse (Bracke 2011; van Es 2016; de Koning 2016).⁸⁴ This ‘talking back’ is described as follows by Nella van den Brandt (2019, 694): ‘As critical counter-voices, they reclaim “emancipation” and give it new meanings and directions, sometimes in transversal connections with women across differences. As such, they try to create opposition to and/or space within dominant discourses.’ This focus on the opposition within dominant discourse shows a shift in representation and recognises the agency of Muslim women in contributing to, and questioning, public discourses. However, there is a risk in celebrating these instances of ‘talking back’ as a form of emancipatory heroism. This might reiterate the broader tendency to focus on some Muslims as modern, moderate, exemplary, or feminist whilst losing sight of the broader power structures at work. Importantly, Sarah Bracke (2011, 43–44) notes that the people who talk back are shaped by the same stigmatising discourses towards which they seek to point. In the words of Margaretha van Es (2016, 187): ‘Members of minority groups who want to subvert a stereotype must do so within a structure of unequal power relations.’

It should also be recognised that there are many Muslim women who cannot or simply do not wish to engage in such actions. This also came up in my fieldwork, as I will discuss further on in this chapter. I argue that this is not necessarily a sign of conformism as opposed

⁸³ Some examples are the major of Rotterdam, Ahmed Aboutaleb; hip-hop artist and presenter Ali B (who was called *knuffelmarokkaan*, ‘cuddly Moroccan’, in the early 2000s); or actor Najib Amhali. There are fewer Muslim women visible in Dutch media, especially women who wear a headscarf. Examples of these are presenter and journalist Samya Hafsaoui; and the presenter-sisters Esmā, Jihad, and Hajar Alariachi, who had a talk show in 2006 called *Meiden van Halal*, (‘Girls of Halal’). In 2021, the first woman with a headscarf, Kauthar Bouchallikht, was elected as member of the parliament for the Green Left party. Preceding and following her election, Bouchallikht became the victim of severe (online) hatred and threats (Saris and van de Ven 2021).

⁸⁴ This notion of ‘talking back’ can be traced to Black feminist interventions, mostly to bell hooks’ (1989) book *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (see also van den Brandt 2019, 290–96).

to ‘talking back’. Whilst Van den Brandt (2019) focuses on instances where women actively speak out, Bracke (2011, 46) recognises the option to ‘ignore it all together’ as a different form of talking back that ‘sought to by-pass the hegemonic script all together’. Similarly, Van Es (2016, 159) noted that whilst some Muslim women indeed actively ‘tried to change the public image’, some of them ‘did not want to participate’ and had been ‘reluctant to give interviews’ when contacted by journalists. Although not all female converts in Islam choose to participate in the media, research does suggest that white converts often play a special role in countering stereotypes and assimilation strategies (Özyürek 2014). This is especially true of white women who often experience a loss of privilege after embracing Islam (Galonnier 2015). For now, it is important to emphasise that the women I interviewed myself were white and were born and raised in the Netherlands, as were most of the interlocutors in the other studies considered for this chapter. This privilege comes with its own specific experience of conversion, racialisation, and Islamophobia—a question to which I return in the sixth chapter of this dissertation.

In my research the focus is not directly on the media or political discourses, but the women I spoke to did often relate to these representations and stereotypes of Muslim women. They responded to this in various ways, some more actively than others. Responding positively to my meeting request can also be considered one form in which my interlocutors sought to talk back. Those who did not respond might have done so in order to ‘ignore it all together’, as Bracke (2011, 46) wrote, but I will never know this for certain. Equally, some might just not have had the time. Some interlocutors actively distanced themselves from stereotypes, whilst others disengaged from the discussion, either as a form of critique or simply because they found it too tiring. In other words, not all forms of (not) talking about Islam by Muslim women are a direct response to public representation, despite its impact on the everyday lives of Muslims. Furthermore, although both public discourse and academia are preoccupied with the position of women in Islam, not all of my interlocutors were engaged with the topic of gender and emancipation. In this dissertation, I show the complexity and ambivalence in their relation to wider public discourses and gender questions. After offering this general contextual background to the Muslim case study, the next section to this chapter zooms in on the process and ritual of conversion for Muslim women.

4.2 Muslim Conversion and the *Shahada*

The use of the term ‘conversion’ to describe experiences of becoming Muslim is disputed. Most of my interlocutors used the Dutch word for conversion (*bekering*) to describe their experience, whilst some said: ‘I took the *shahada*’; ‘I became Muslim’; or ‘I embraced Islam’. The term conversion is widely used in relation to non-Muslims, however, many Muslims actually dislike the term. Karin van Nieuwkerk (2014, 669) writes that the concept

of conversion, ‘is thus considered an outsider’s perspective, whereas embracing Islam or becoming Muslim is an insider’s view’. Some also used the term ‘reversion’, following the Islamic notion of *fitra* (‘innate nature’). This theological concept, in short, refers to the idea that every person is created by Allah (God) and thus born a Muslim, only to be distracted from this via social upbringing (Ahmad 2010; van Nieuwkerk 2006a). From that principle, conversion implies coming to terms with a pre-existing Muslim self, hence the term ‘reversion’. Whenever I use the term ‘conversion’ in the following, I mainly do so because it is the most common way to describe their religious trajectory in academia, but not necessarily the way in which Muslimas would describe their experience to other Muslims. I will use ‘conversion’, ‘taking the *shahada*’, ‘embracing Islam’, and ‘becoming Muslim’ interchangeably.

The official ritual of conversion in Islam is technically quite straightforward. The main act is the proclamation of the *shahada*, the profession of faith, three times in Arabic: ‘[I testify that] there is no God but God, and Mohammad is the Prophet of God’ (Hermansen 2014, 635).⁸⁵ Whilst the profession itself is spoken on many other occasions, *shahada* most often refers to this conversion ritual. Often, the person will take a ritual bath and perform an ablution so as to cleanse themselves from their prior life and sins.⁸⁶ The *shahada*, when professed with a sincere belief in its truth, then officially marks the change from non-Muslim to Muslim. In comparison to the Christian case—where conversion has a broader meaning than the first time officially accepting Jesus (see section 3.2)—conversion is formally thought to occur in a single moment. There are few requirements about the location and manner in which the *shahada* should be taken. Some, but not all, Islamic scholars deem it necessary to have a witness present, in practice often an imam (Galonnier 2018, 44). There are no further formal requirements to fulfil, except a sincere and correct pronunciation of the *shahada*. Most converts emphasised that everyone is welcome in Islam, regardless of, for example, their level of observance and there is no formal permission to be granted—as was the case for Jewish converts. Informally there are certainly social norms and expectations for potential converts. Support structures have developed in the Netherlands to help potential converts in their process, some by people who themselves have embraced Islam, but not all Muslim communities offer supervision or help converts in their process.

The *shahada* is mainly informally organised and often not registered. An exception comes from converts who need official proof of their conversion via a *shahada* certificate. I was told that this certificate is needed when converts want to marry for the Moroccan consulate or want to go on the pilgrimage to Mecca, the *hajj*. One of my interlocutors, Bushra, was active in a mosque that offers these certificates. However, Bushra told me, they only do

⁸⁵ In phonetic Arabic: [*Ishadu an*] *la ilaha ill-Allah, wa ashadu anna muhammadan rasul ullah*.

⁸⁶ In English it is common to say ‘taking the *shahada*’ (Galonnier 2018; van Nieuwkerk 2018, 2). In Dutch, my interlocutors said ‘*de shahada doen*’, which literally translates as ‘doing the *shahada*’.

so after converts successfully take a test that shows their basic knowledge of Islam. The certificate provides conversion with some authority that others might not have, however, its absence was hardly ever noted by my interlocutors. I interviewed a board member of another mosque that supplies these certificates, who was quick to mention: ‘We state that this person took their *shahada* at our mosque, but it does not mean that we vouch for people who became Muslim.’ Even though the mosque offers the needed certificate of conversion, this did not mean that they could then be held accountable for the actions of the converts to whom it was provided.

Scholars who studied contemporary conversions to Islam have different understandings of the importance of the *shahada*. Juliette Galonnier (2018, 47) considers this to be a marker of the move from inner transformation to ‘practice and public recognition’. Galonnier also elaborates on the different meanings for converts: The *shahada* can be a community event, a private moment—climactic or indeed, anticlimactic, in the conversion process. Others concluded that conversion is most of all a gradual process and downplay the centrality of the *shahada* altogether. Anna Mansson McGinty (2006, 179) writes that ‘the process of becoming Muslim, is neither final nor predictable. When the self is becoming there are no sudden breaks or absolute changes, it is gradual without any fixed points’. Van Nieuwkerk (2014, 681) agrees that conversion is a non-linear process of constructing a (pious) self and writes that ‘conversion does not stop at the moment of embracing Islam’. Vroon-Najem (2014, 70) adds to this that different steps are often not taken in the same order and argues that conversion starts before the *shahada* and continues long after, even though ‘spiritually, conversion to Islam is considered to be a new beginning’. What these scholars all agree upon, is that the official moment of conversion (albeit understood by Islamic scholars as a new beginning) is but one of the many significant moments for converts.

This is similar to what I found amongst my interlocutors. All acknowledged that becoming Muslim is a process without a clear end point—a process that started prior to, and continues long after, the *shahada*. At the same time, they experienced the *shahada* as a formative moment in which, according to Islamic teachings, their identity changed from non-Muslim to Muslim. For some this moment was more of a recognition and confirmation of a pre-existing self, rather than a change. To explain what the *shahada* meant for my interlocutors, I turn to the story of Iman. Iman is a woman in her late thirties who had been involved in a Muslim community for two years before she took the *shahada*. Her story exemplifies the ambivalence between official teachings that consider the *shahada* to be the moment of conversion and the experience of gradual change. Iman recalled how she had begun to introduce some Islamic practices in her daily life, which led many of her friends to assume that she was a Muslim. Reflecting on her process, she told me:

I postponed [taking the *shahada*] for a long time... I had these thoughts: ‘I am not a Muslim yet because I can’t pray.’ Or ‘I can’t do this or that.’ But those are all

whispers of which I think... you know, the perfect Muslim does not exist, there will always be something that you're not perfect at. But that should not be the reason not to convert. (Iman)

When I asked Iman what eventually motivated her to take the *shahada*, she described how one morning she had felt a strong desire to do it: 'I thought to myself: "You should be done with that nonsense! You really *are* a Muslim, you feel Muslim."' The same day she approached a teacher in her mosque who performed the *shahada* with her. Iman had already experienced a process of self-making before her official moment of conversion and had told herself that morning: 'You really are a Muslim.' Later in our interview I asked her if she felt like she had become a Muslim gradually. She looked at me confused, before saying: 'Becoming Muslim? No... what do you mean? You are Muslim in one go, and that's it.' In this statement Iman also referred to the *shahada*. Two different understandings of this ritual overlap here: that of Muslim teachings by which someone is only a Muslim after taking the *shahada*, and a more personal and experiential understanding in which one can already 'feel like', or even 'be' a Muslim prior to this official moment of transformation. The *shahada* often confirmed, both internally and towards the community, a feeling my interlocutors already had for a long time and they had often already introduced Islamic practices into their daily lives. However, many interlocutors were hesitant to take the *shahada* because they felt they should master Islamic thought and practices first. Hanan was in her early thirties when we met and had taken the *shahada* five years prior. She had been interested in Islam since she was a teenager, but she felt she did not fully understand the Islamic teachings. Eventually Hanan decided to take the *shahada*, but she continued to doubt and ask questions. It took her a few years before she, in her own words, 'stopped asking all those questions all the time and started to accept things as they were'. This insecurity of not knowing enough was often taken away in conversations with other Muslims, who affirmed that Islam is about the process of learning and not about achieving some single, perfect state.

Whilst the *shahada* can be a private moment and does not include many ritual guidelines, women who embraced Islam often had a small celebration to mark the moment. During the annual Converts Day, for example, a part of the proceedings is reserved for those newcomers who want to take the *shahada* there and then, some of which I observed. Vroon-Najem (2014, 51) also noticed that different times a year were considered preferable, especially the month of *Ramadan*. None of my interlocutors chose to take their *shahada* during a mosque service. The majority (five out of seven) did so with one or more close friends, whereas three also had an imam present. Hanan and Dunya performed the *shahada* alone by themselves. I met Dunya early on in my fieldwork in 2017. She was in her late twenties and had become a Muslim seven years prior. She told me how she took the *shahada*: 'In bed, with no one there, just by and for myself. Because it's a private matter, I didn't want to share it in a mosque full of people on Friday afternoon. I don't want all the attention.' The

converts that did not have an imam or other religious official present during their *shahada*, preferred a private space, sometimes with friends, over the more public setting of the mosque. A few found a middle ground, such as Amal, who visited an imam in a mosque with a friend to take her *shahada*. Others simply did so at home by themselves. That this meant that there was no official witness, as some Islamic understandings would require, was never considered a problem.

The *shahada* was therefore mainly considered to be a private and intimate moment in which an individual's self-making was authenticated by an imam, friends or, in the case of Dunya, by Allah alone. For many interlocutors, other moments were considered as equally or even more significant than taking the *shahada*. This is similar to the findings of Vroon-Najem (2014, 70), who writes: 'For many participants, it was the practice of Islam that motivated them to consider becoming Muslim themselves, making it problematic to pinpoint the exact moment of their conversion.' Other moments indicated an outward expression of a Muslim self, such as wearing a headscarf, changing to a *halal* diet, and fasting during the month of *Ramadan*. These (semi-) public expressions were often experienced as more difficult and life altering than the formal ritual of the *shahada*. Another important outward expression of conversion can be a change in name. The majority of my interlocutors chose to take on a new Arabic name that expressed their Muslim identity. None of them had such a name from birth, but the way they reflected on this naming varied. Two used their new name fulltime, two continued to use their birth name, and three used both. For some it was an important expression of their new status and inclusion in Islam. Others were strongly opposed to choosing a new name and continued to use their birth name in order to show the continuation of the self before and after conversion (see also McGinty 2006). According to one woman, the question to change your name after conversion was problematic because she felt it required you to 'erase part of who you are', and for her, these past experiences remained valuable. Three women had a more pragmatic approach and used their new name amongst fellow Muslims whilst continuing to use their birth name amongst non-Muslim family and friends.⁸⁷ I asked these interlocutors what they preferred for this dissertation and all told me they would like to be addressed by an Arabic name. This variety is similar to Jewish converts, who were all asked to choose a Hebrew name after their *giyur*, but used this in various ways in daily life: Some newly Jewish women preferred to use their new name in all daily activities, others only within the religious context of the synagogue (see section 2.5.2). In this chapter I use Arabic pseudonyms for all women in line with the majority, as because of my small sample the specifics of their names might harm their anonymity. Most began to use this name after taking the *shahada*, but all had been studying Islam for longer. In the next section, I analyse

⁸⁷ Another option can be the choice for a name that functions as a compromise between Dutch and Arabic and is used in both languages. I thank Nina ter Laan for bringing this 'compromise-name' to my attention. Examples include Eva, Nora, or Sarah.

how women talked about the time prior to taking the *shahada* to see which types of motivations were important in their conversion narratives.

4.3 Muslim Stories of Motivations

When Muslim women reflected on their conversion process, they addressed similar issues as in other case studies. The ‘why question’, however, was asked far more often of Muslimas than of Jewish or Christian women (see the introduction to this dissertation). For Muslim women themselves having to endlessly justify one’s personal religious choices can become tedious and frustrating. This comes up in most studies of women who embraced Islam. According to Van Nieuwkerk (2014), answering this one question becomes part and parcel of the conversion trajectory itself. In this section, I analyse how women produced, retrospectively, this story about the self and their attraction to Islam. Following Van Nieuwkerk, I consider these reasonings as part of the wider process of conversion as self-making. These reflections can be divided into four main themes that often overlap, but in which interlocutors highlighted different aspects: adolescence; spiritual searching; evidence; and social relations. Different from Judaism, none of the women studied Islam or Arabic at a university before converting themselves, although most did start with a general interest in religion.

Muslimas who converted as young adults often described that they had searched for answers to broader questions about the meaning of life, similar to Jewish and Christian women who converted in this life phase. One example comes from Hanan, who described how she had first encountered Islam:

It’s not really one moment... it actually all starts with: ‘Do you believe in life after death? Do you believe that there is a heaven and hell?’ And then I started to look into how you get into heaven... and how does this work... When I found Islam, I found a kindness. (Hanan)

Hanan told me that she had been searching for answers since her teenage years, which is one of the most common narratives in studies of converted Muslim women (e.g., Vroon-Najem 2014, 69). Bushra, who had a similar experience, mentioned that this is even common for all young adults: ‘You often see that people start thinking about life: “What’s my purpose, my goal in life, what am I doing here?”’ At some point, I think, most teenagers become increasingly aware of those questions.’ This argument stresses that embracing Islam is not an irregular choice; it is merely one of the several potential outcomes of the search that all young adults seem to have.

However, in the stories of Dunya and Yara, this ‘strangeness’ of Islam came up in a seemingly opposite way. Both interlocutors reflected how they were ‘fascinated by and

attracted to the Otherness of Islam', as Van Nieuwkerk (2006b, 7) similarly pointed out (see also Vroon-Najem 2014, 77). Yara converted as a teenager, over ten years before we met, after reading about different religious traditions. I asked her why, in her recollection, Islam caught her eye. She said: 'I think also because it was a bit stranger and was often portrayed in a negative way in the media. So, I thought: "That's interesting!"' This attraction to Islam by its representation as Other was also mentioned by Dunya, who similarly encountered Islam as a teenager and converted when she was twenty years old. At the time, the Dutch politician Geert Wilders of the Freedom Party had started to gain popularity. Wilders was well known for his explicit Islamophobic stances and the media coverage of this motivated Dunya to learn more about Islam. Because, in her words, 'you cannot judge something that do not know anything about'. Women who converted as teenagers in the post-9/11 Netherlands often mentioned the impact of the negative stereotyping as motivating them to find out more about Islam. This narrative was most common of young adult women who often did not engage with other religions prior to embracing Islam. Others expressed a narrative of 'spiritual search'.

I did not meet any Muslim women who had been involved with new spiritual movements or esotericism, as was the case amongst Christian interlocutors (see section 3.3). This also did not come up in Vroon-Najem's (2014) study about Dutch women who became Muslim. On this very point, Vroon-Najem (2014, 76) offers a general note that '[m]any converts in my research studied several religions before converting to Islam', but there does not seem to be a previous practice or self-identification connected to 'new-age' spirituality. Muslim stories of my interlocutors that followed a search narrative mainly included references to Christianity. Most women had been socialised in an environment that was directly or indirectly formed by Christianity, as is common in the Netherlands. Amal, to offer one example, had begun her search with Roman Catholicism, which was the religion of her parents. Amal told me that she found this too restricting and hierarchical. She said: 'The direct relationship with Allah in Islam was beautiful to me. In Roman Catholicism there is always a pastor in between who tells you what to do. But Islam stresses your personal responsibility and I appreciated that a lot.' The possibility of a personal relationship with God was also important for other interlocutors and this was framed as an important difference with Christianity. Interestingly, a similar argument came up amongst my Christian interlocutors (see section 3.3). Christian women also stressed the importance of personal spiritual nurturing via direct contact with God and differentiated Pentecostalism from Roman Catholicism and other forms of Christianity. In addition, some Muslim converts explicitly distinguished the Islamic concept of the oneness of Allah, called *tawhid*,⁸⁸ from the Christian trinity. When I asked Iman what she considered to be the determining factors that attracted her to Islam, she replied:

⁸⁸ *Tawhid* also refers to the first part of the *shahada*: 'There is no God but God.'

The oneness. That is one of the first things you will read [if you encounter Islam]. At least, what I read. And that was such a revelation to me! That God is one and does not have any equals. And the clarity. But at the same time I noticed a lot of links with Christianity so it did not feel like a whole new world. (Iman)

For Iman, believing in God was not something entirely new, but rather motivated her to first explore and then embrace Islam, which offered her both a sense of clarity and familiarity. Vroon-Najem (2014, 69) argues that the distinction between *tawhid* and the Holy Trinity is a means to rationalise the choice for Islam. In contrast to the ‘vague’ Christian beliefs, the focus on personal responsibility in Islam made it a more straightforward option for her research participants. This is also reflected in Iman’s story. These rationalising strategies were not only connected to *tawhid* or spiritual pursuits. Some also pointed to science-based aspects of Islam.

Many interlocutors, in all groups, mentioned different types of evidence to explain their choice for their religion. Christian women who mentioned evidence often referred to miracle stories, however, this was different for converted Muslimas.⁸⁹ Muslim interlocutors often pointed to the scientific value of Islam. This might be a subconscious strategy that is a reflection of my positionality as a non-Muslim and researcher, and the public representation that rarely applies ‘the idiom of rational choice’ (van Nieuwkerk 2008, 431) to Islam. Perhaps my interlocutors thought that I would greatly value the idea of scientific proof, or at least, the secular language of evidence-based convictions. I am not sure whether they would reply the same to their Muslim peers, but it did resonate with the findings of Vroon-Najem (2014) and Anne Sofie Roald (2004), who are converted Muslimas themselves. Yara reflected on her attraction to Islam:

I found all the scientific stuff very interesting. There are so many things in the Qur’an that were written a long time ago but were only recently discovered in science. [...] I think it did actually convince me [to join Islam]. I thought, this just *has* to be right. (Yara)

More interlocutors told me about these instances where something had been written in the Qur’an that had been proven by science only relatively recently (see also Roald 2004, 28). One of the examples provided by Yara was the knowledge of conception and childbearing, something that is ‘only recently known here in the Western world, but written down way back

⁸⁹ The only person who mentioned such a ‘sign of God’ was Amal. Amal, who made the comparison to Roman Catholicism, told me that she had initially been ‘waiting for a sign from God’ before deciding to take the *shahada*. Miracle stories are quite common in Catholicism (Korte 2017). Of course, some Muslim women might have had these experiences too, as these are not limited to one religious group or another, but Amal did not receive her desired sign. Instead, she ‘waited and waited, but it never came’. In the meantime, she was integrating Islamic practices in her day-to-day life for years, deciding in the end that ‘Allah might just not work that way’ and to follow His guidance in this regard.

then' in the Qur'an. Hanan made a similar connection between secular and Islamic knowledge systems when she pointed to the similarity of laws in the Qur'an and the United Nations. UN-based laws and rights about war, for example, have an obvious moral component to them, and for Hanan, Islam provides the best example of translating moral values into practical and clear regulations. These reasonings make my interlocutors' conversions more compatible with their secular surroundings, and speak back to the stereotype that women who convert to Islam are irrational. Emphasising the rational, scientific elements of Islam has been called a common (albeit often subconscious) strategy to bridge this presumed distinction (McGinty 2006; Özyürek 2014).

However, spiritual features and more rational elements often went hand in hand. An example of this interconnectedness is the story of Fatima, who was raised in an atheist and socialist family. In her twenties, Fatima came to understand that the principles with which she was raised were actually quite similar to those with religious backgrounds: 'In my upbringing—communist, socialist—care for another was central, you know, don't cause pain. Those are of course religious principles too.' In Fatima's reproduction, belief in God was not the most important aspect of her search, but she came to appreciate how Islam connected to her own ethics. She also emphasised that Islam included affective and embodied elements that she had missed in her socialist, atheist background. Fatima stated that she strongly values this holistic dimension of Islam, as it is for her rational and explanatory, whilst also embracing the spiritual and emotional. These reflections show how different discourses of truth and values become integrated in the process of making a new Muslim self.

In almost all studies of conversion to Islam (as in conversion studies in general) the dialogical and relational aspect of religious transformation is foregrounded (Vroon-Najem 2014, 19). However, the women I met always first emphasised their autonomous, individual choice before mentioning social relations. This was especially the case when it came to their romantic partner. In contrast to the stereotype, academic studies of women's conversion to Islam do not support the assumption that marriage is the direct reason why women convert (e.g., Badran 2006; van Nieuwkerk 2008). Stronger still, conversions that were the outcome of group pressure or that were only motivated by the wish to marry, for example, were considered to be ingenuine. Therefore, common understandings held that one can only truly convert to Islam if this is an individual choice, which is similar to conversion in Judaism and Christianity. At the same time, relationships did play an important role and interlocutors told me that they would have probably never considered or even encountered Islam, were it not for those social relations. This led to a narrative by which women told me that they were inspired by friends, but ultimately made the decision on their own. To illustrate this dynamic, I provide the story of Dunya, who was studying Islam when she met her boyfriend, a Moroccan-Dutch Muslim:

Dunya: When I met my... my boyfriend—now my husband—I was very firm that I really would *not* become a Muslim. Because I thought: ‘He will probably try to convert me, because that is how foreign men do it.’

Lieke: So those ideas that [you mentioned] other people have, you had those too? Like you do it for...

D: Yes, I really did! I was so firm: ‘Nope, I don’t think so, if that is what you want, just beat it!’ (Dunya)

At the time, Dunya did not share with her boyfriend that she had been learning about Islam for a year already. Her boyfriend, who identified as Muslim, did not observe Islamic practices with the exception of fasting during *Ramadan*. He never asked her to convert, so she never had to tell him to ‘beat it’, however, because he was a Muslim, he did provide her with a sense of social safety to convert to Islam. In her words:

Of course he had an impact. I always call him the final piece of my conversion. I think I would have become a Muslim eventually anyway if I had not met him. But the process might have taken a bit longer because now I knew that there was at least one person I shared this with. (Dunya)

In their developing relationship, her boyfriend became inspired to implement more Islamic principles in his daily life too, and they are nowadays married and both observant Muslims. Bushra is the only woman I met whose husband had also converted. In fact, they went through the process together as teenagers. She recalled how her husband (then boyfriend) became friends with a Muslim man when she was fifteen years old. This friend began to talk about Islam and that inspired her husband to convert. Initially Bushra was ‘not so interested’ in Islam, but gradually noticed a change in her husband who became ‘calm’ and clearly found a lot of joy in his new religion. She recalled how she would ‘chill on the couch and watch a movie’ whilst he was on the other side of the room ‘with a carpet’, praying. Two years later, Bushra also decided to embrace Islam. When we met in 2019, she and her husband had been practicing Muslims for over twenty years. They now have four children and are active members of their Muslim community.

Muslim women had a variety of narratives about their initial attraction to Islam and highlighted different aspects of the time between their first encounter with Islam and their decision to commit to becoming a Muslim. Some were spiritual searchers, others intrigued by its otherness, but for all social interactions played an important role. All pointed to what they had found in Islam, and this was diverse. Some found answers to life’s questions, a straightforward image of God, or a religious confirmation of scientific evidence. These stories all indicate how women perceive their religion and give meaning to their process of conversion today. Gender questions played into the process of conversion in several ways and also often impacted motivation stories. Most recalled that Islam provided a gender discourse

that was different to that in the ‘secular world’ and which they often found attractive. Conversion also meant a negotiation of different gender discourses on several levels. The next section focuses on these different discourses amongst converted Muslimas.

4.4 Muslim Gender Discourses

The main understandings of gender difference amongst Muslim women were quite similar to those amongst Jewish and Christian interlocutors. The converted Muslimas I spoke to tended to follow a discourse of complementary difference—a so-called discourse of ‘gender equity’ (Jouili 2011, 51–52). On this subject, Van Nieuwkerk (2014, 677) writes:

Many female converts eventually find Islamic ideas related to sexuality, the construction of gender, and motherhood appealing. [...] [W]ith regard to the construction of gender, converts are convinced of the equality of men and women in Islam. Whereas they hold that the sexes are of equal value, most converts do not consider them of equal nature. They adhere to the concepts of ‘equal but different’ or of ‘gender equity’.

All of my Muslim interlocutors formulated their perspective on gender in terms of just such a gender equity discourse, phrased by Hanan as: ‘Men and women are not the same, but they have equal value.’ This difference between men and women was mainly related to biological and emotional factors, which some converts saw confirmed in Islam: ‘Our brains are so different, our hormones are so different, we’re not the same!’, Hanan said. She also reflected that, whilst this might be ‘a negative thing’ for some non-religious people, for her, it proved helpful. The Islamic understandings of gender difference was not something new for Hanan, but rather (at least, retrospectively) connected to her pre-existing ideas. Islam provided a framework to address this difference whilst integrating biological and religious knowledge systems. Islam provided Bushra with a deeper understanding of this difference and added an appreciation of women. In the figure of Khadija, the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad, Bushra found an important role model and saw their relationship as an example of equality: ‘The Prophet and Khadija would go out running together, and Khadija was a businesswoman!’ That some Muslim groups might consider women to be of lesser value than men was, according to Bushra, ‘cultural’ rather than ‘religious’ in origin (see also chapter six). Bushra mentioned several aspects of ‘cultural Islam’ that were harmful to women. These aspects also overlapped with some common stereotypes in the Dutch media: that women have to ‘stay home’, have to be submissive to their husbands, cannot have their own income, and should not participate in public life. Bushra emphasised strongly that this is not the intention of Islam and that it is perfectly acceptable that she, for example, has a fulltime job and plays an active role in a mosque—just like Khadija had been a businesswoman. However, Amal

held a different view, believing that men should be the main providers and have ‘more responsibilities’ in Islam. Conversely, women were given the responsibility of child care and more emotional labour, such as caring for family and friends. We see here the manner in which Islam empowered some interlocutors by providing extra value to women’s roles and tasks whilst the women themselves explicitly separated their own beliefs from the misogyny sometimes associated with Islam. As Van Nieuwkerk (2014, 677) similarly states, they were ‘convinced of the equality of men and women in Islam’, but also all considered men and women to be essentially different.

Yara offered another route to understanding gender, besides the more often heard emphasis on the different roles, emotions, and bodies of men and women:

It is said [in the Qur’an] that the woman is created from the rib of the man, so in the end they are one. Do you understand my point? In the end *one person* is made... uhm... two people were made of one person. I cannot even imagine that they are two different creatures, I do not see it that way, no. (Yara)

Whilst this rhetoric of the creation was not mentioned by other interlocutors, it does show that, also within Islamic understandings of gender complementarity, different positions and interpretations are possible. Some might find comfort in the connection of womanhood with the private sphere. Others found a role model in the Prophet’s wife Khadija as an empowered businesswoman, which made Islam compatible with her views on women’s ideal role. Finally, Yara formed her understanding based on the idea that in essence, men and women were created from the same person.

Most women thought and talked quite a lot about the position of women in Islam and some communities offered classes about topics such as Islamic feminism. The possibility of having these discussions and to think actively about women’s roles in the community was considered to be a great characteristic of Islam. Iman compared this to Christianity, where she felt such a discussion about feminism would be unheard of. In contrast, she stressed that, contrary to public perception, gender garners significant attention in Muslim communities. The availability of these events within Muslim communities can also be explained by the fact that Islam is currently widely perceived as a religion that oppresses women. Women, especially converts, often wonder about this and have questions about their position in Islam. They also seek strategies and input to guard themselves against unwanted questions from non-Muslims. After Iman explained extensively what took place in her mosque, I asked her whether she engaged with the topics of gender and Islamic feminism herself. To my surprise, her answer was a straightforward ‘no’:

No, I really do not care at all! [*laughing*] I do not consider myself a feminist at all, but now that I am telling you this I think perhaps... [*silence*]... well no, I truly do

not care. I am confident enough on my own, it does not matter if someone else thinks I am oppressed. (Iman)

This was an unexpected turn in our conversation, which left me somewhat lost for words. I was confronted with my own bias—that as a converted Muslima, these topics were of little or no interest to her. Other interlocutors had told me at length how they had personally dealt with questions of gender and feminism, the same as in much other literature about women who embraced Islam (e.g., Mossière 2016; Roald 2006). That Iman simply ‘did not care at all’ was both surprising and sobering to me. Her ‘no’—albeit a minority perspective—nuances the idea that converts are always actively devoted to either improving the position of Muslim women inside the community, or countering stereotypes about Muslimas in wider society. This connects to my previous section about (not) talking back. There should also be the option *not* to engage, to simply say: ‘No, I do not care’ and be done with it, in the same way that Bracke (2011, 38) mentioned that some Muslim women chose to ignore the ‘call of the public debate’. In the examples provided by Bracke (2011, 41), this ignoring ‘occurred through a primary investment in a different political and affective economy: that of grassroots women’s empowerment’. In other words, some Muslim women were engaged with grassroots Muslim women’s movements that left them ‘neither intellectual nor affective energy to spare’ (Bracke 2011, 41) to engage with public debate. This is different from Iman’s non-engagement with the issue, because she does not have a desire to be involved with Muslim women’s movements, nor is she invested in changing public discourse. Iman simply did not find it important and did not want to talk about emancipation or the position of Muslim women. She appreciated Islamic teachings about women’s roles and the value given to women’s position in the private sphere. At the same time, Iman was very active in her mosque and community, but engaged with other activities than those focusing on gender in Islam. For many, the community was indeed an important place to reflect on the position of women, and this negotiation was often a central aspect of my interlocutors’ stories of becoming Muslim. The next section analyses how the relation between gender and conversion played out in the community.

4.5 Becoming a Muslima in the Community

Women who embraced Islam often have an ambivalent relationship with Muslim communities. Whilst all my interlocutors wished to participate in a community of Muslims, many did not really feel at home. The women I spoke to were all white, which made them stand out as converts amongst other Muslims. Iman told me how she felt she will always be considered a convert, rather than fully included as a Muslim, because white Muslimas are always perceived as such. The feeling of being an outsider amongst those born Muslim has been similarly noted by other scholars (van Nieuwkerk 2006b; Özyürek 2014; Roald 2006)

and is related to the intersection of whiteness and religion (see chapter six). This complicates the position of white converts in Muslim communities and can lead women to seek out networks of converts. This section focuses on different aspects of conversion and gender in Muslim communities. First, I reflect on the impact of the community on conversion and the establishment of converts' networks. Negotiations of gender and religion were often related to the position of women in Muslim communities. For my interlocutors, this especially concerned women's spaces in mosques and the question of women's religious authority, which I discuss in the second and third subsections.

4.5.1 Community, Conversion, and *Da'wah*

It has been argued that most converts first encounter Islam via born Muslims with a migrant background (van Nieuwkerk 2008), but often not via organised *da'wah*. *Da'wah* is often translated as proselytisation by Muslims in Europe, as a process similar to Christian evangelisation. However, according to Jouili and Amir-Moazami (2006), this is not an accurate comparison, arguing instead that *da'wah* is better understood in terms of education and representation (see also Vroon-Najem 2014, 176). Today, *da'wah* is mainly associated with Islamic revivalist movements such as Salafism, and as stimulated by organisations. Organised *da'wah* was considered an important aspect of Islam for my interlocutors, although it was not the route via which most converts embraced the religion themselves. This image is also confirmed by other research. In her review of different studies of Muslim conversion, Van Nieuwkerk (2014, 671) concluded: 'Despite the importance of organizational *da'wah*, meeting Muslims in daily life is probably more important for present-day conversions.'

For many interlocutors, encounters with other Muslims in daily life were indeed very important. This often concerned interactions with Muslims who offered a more nuanced image of Islam than they had seen themselves in the media: 'I thought that Islam was far more extreme than I saw in practice', Amal said. The main advice that Amal would also give women who are interested in Islam is to connect to other Muslims and to seek support and knowledge within the Muslim community. Yet Amal reflected that she had actually done most of her studying on her own, both prior to and after she took the *shahada*. Other interlocutors, with the exception of some (anonymous) activities online (e.g., Midden 2016), similarly studied Islam individually and privately before talking about this with fellow Muslims. Some also began to observe certain Islamic practices, such as eating *halal* (allowed by Islamic rules) food and prayer (*salat*)—albeit often secretly. Often this did not reflect the ideal situation my interlocutors sketched during our meetings. Indeed, with hindsight, all regretted not reaching out to other Muslims sooner and their initial searches and practice were described as being lonely and isolating. Most women thought that in order to avoid the risk of isolation, it was best not to become a Muslim alone. Furthermore, becoming a Muslim in a community was also considering helpful when learning and improving pious practices.

The past years have seen the development of converts' networks and events such as the annual Converts' Day (*Bekeerlingendag*). Some initiatives are explicitly related to *da'wah*, such as the popular website 'Discover Islam' (*Ontdek Islam*). Others are primarily devoted to helping other (potential) converts by offering advice on a range of topics, such as how to deal with one's parents or how to eat *halal* food, of which the Convert Association (*Stichting Bekeerling*) is one example. The latter also organises events for converts to Islam, primarily directed at newcomers and often hosted at mosques similarly founded by, or visibly including, converts. Many interlocutors valued these networks because it gave them the opportunity to meet people (both online or offline) with a similar experience and to ask questions seen as particular for converts. To offer one example, Fatima struggled with the question whether to continue celebrating the Christmas holidays with her non-Muslim family—a type of question that often came up amongst my interlocutors and reflects a negotiation between values and expectations in their Muslim and non-Muslim social circles. However, Fatima did not receive adequate advice in the mosque she attended at the time, which was made up of born Muslims who did not share this struggle with family. This led her to contact people from the website Discover Islam and the Convert Association, where she came into contact with fellow converts. She eventually decided to join a mosque where one of the board members was a convert. In this group, she felt like she could discuss her questions more openly: 'I thought, "yes!", I understand your language and you are a Muslim!' When asked, Fatima specified that she did not mean the Dutch language—because many born Muslims speak Dutch—but language in a broader sense, related to values and mutual understanding of one's life experiences.

Another example comes from Amal, who struggled a lot with learning how to pray when she first started doing so.⁹⁰ She told me how it had taken her about twenty minutes each time, whilst she had read somewhere that it was 'supposed to take five minutes' maximum. When she first attended a Converts' Day she prayed collectively for the first time. When I asked her what this was like, Amal replied:

It was very stressful! I knew so little... I was so slow with my prayer—I still am—which became very obvious then. Every time the imam says '*allahu akbar*'⁹¹ you should change your position, but you also have to say things from the Qur'an to yourself ... So every time when [the imam said] '*allahu akbar*' I was only halfway and [I thought] 'Oh shit, I'm not done yet, what do I do?!' I wasn't relaxed at all. But then I told others that I felt stressed and they told me 'it is not

⁹⁰ Muslims are typically asked to pray five times a day, on times related to the position of the sun: at dawn (*Fajr*), noon (*Zuhr*), afternoon (*Asr*), sunset (*Maghrib*), and after dark (*Isha*). These five obligatory daily prayers are called *salat* and include several bows and prostrations facing in the direction of the Kabaa in Mecca.

⁹¹ *Allahu akbar* translates as 'God is the greatest' and is also called the *takbir*. It is one of the most common Islamic phrases.

an issue, if you are... when the imam says “*allahu akbar*” you’re just done, don’t worry about it. Just continue and there won’t be a problem.’ So for the second prayer—because there were two prayers that day—I felt more relaxed and could enjoy the experience. (Amal)

Amal’s description of these initial collective prayers reveals the importance of being in a community, but also the insecurity some women feel when they do not fully grasp or master Islamic practices. Speaking about her insecurities, Amal felt a sense of relief and connection to other converts attending the Converts’ Day, who also encouraged her to ask for help and offered their assistance.

Not all interlocutors were active in converts’ networks. For example, whilst Dunya was friends with some converted Muslimas, she did not know converts beyond this intimate circle. Hanan visited events at different mosques, none of which had a specific converts’ reputation. Yara was also active in a students’ association where she met Muslims with many diverse backgrounds (see also Beekers 2021). For all, this sense of community was crucial and all were involved to some extent when we met, although not necessarily in their first years of embracing Islam.

4.5.2 The Position of Women in the Mosque

Most women I met were active members of a community and attended lectures and prayers in a mosque on a weekly basis, which is not always the case for born Muslimas.⁹² Some Muslims might have different views on the importance of the mosque in women’s lives, such as is revealed in the occasionally heard expression that ‘women best pray at home’, as Bushra mentioned. For many converts, as other studies also reflect, the mosque was indeed a very important space. In her book about German converts to Islam, anthropologist Esra Özyürek (2014, 20) writes:

Converted Muslim women are overall more inclined to go to mosques than born Muslims. And in order to do that, they are ready to challenge some of the common assumptions among born Muslims that the mosque is primarily a male space. Granted, converted Muslims are in greater need of such spaces to learn about Islam and also meet like-minded people.

⁹² Ideally, mosques are open throughout the day to accommodate all five prayers of the *salat* (predominantly for men). The most important communal events are the Friday afternoon sermon and prayer, and the holidays of *Eid al-Fitr* (holiday to celebrate the end of Ramadan) and *Eid al-Adha* (holiday that commemorates the willingness of Ibrahim to sacrifice his son Ismael, also called *Eid ul-Kabir*, ‘great feast’).

Özyürek offers two explanations for female converts' participation in mosques: the need to learn about Islam and the wish to meet fellow Muslims. I would like to add a third explanation: The Christian idea of conversion as taking place within a religious institution (the church) has an impact on the expectations of those seeking to embrace Islam. This is noticeable in, for example, the increasing popularity of taking the *shahada* in a mosque. Many also expressed that part of being a 'good Muslim' meant being active in the mosque, similar to a church or *shul* for Christian and Jewish converts respectively, despite some official teachings that de-emphasise the role of the mosque in Muslim women's daily lives.

The term mosque holds the double meaning of community and building. Broadly, the mosque refers to the community associated with this building that stretches beyond the physical demarcations of the space. This is similar to the manner in which Christian women use the term 'church' as meaning both building and community (section 3.5). A mosque (like a church or *shul*) is thus more a place in the social sense of community, than a space in the narrow physical sense of the term. Nevertheless, the physical characteristics of the buildings do have an impact on women's conversions. More than in Christianity or Liberal and Progressive Judaism (section 2.5)—where there are no physical barriers between men and women—converted women in Islam addressed the structure of the space itself, which is typically segregated. In many mosques, especially older buildings, women have a separate entrance and their own room or balcony next to the general prayer hall. Men participate in the collective prayer led by an imam in the main room, whilst women attending the mosque listen and pray separately. Women's balconies are often enclosed by a fence, curtain, or opaque glass. For those women who are not on a balcony where they can see and/or hear the imam (for example because they are in a separate room), video or audio connections are provided. This segregation within the religious buildings is comparable to Orthodox Jewish synagogues (section 2.5.2), where women are also usually seated on a balcony behind a barrier (called a *mechitza*). Muslim women dealt with the realities of women's spaces in mosques in different ways. Some adhered to and appreciated the segregation, whilst others advocated for a less strict separation. Overall, the majority of my interlocutors accepted gender segregation in the mosque as part of the Muslim community. Even if they were critical, they usually did not voice their critique in their religious community so as not to limit their (often already precarious) sense of belonging in their new group.

Amal did not mind the separate space for women, but felt annoyed when the guidelines were not 'appropriately' put into practice. Amal told me that she had visited several mosques and communities (which is quite common amongst converts) before finding her place in a mosque where women pray in a separate classroom with an audio connection to the main hall. One of the reasons she did not like some mosques was because of their less strict separation of men and women. She described a day she attended different lectures in a mosque where the women's place was a balcony behind opaque glass. However, the lower part of this barrier was transparent, so women were able to look downstairs when crouching in

the front of the balcony. During one lecture, almost all women suddenly moved to the front to peek through the glass: ‘Because there was a very handsome man giving the lecture over at the men’s side! I was so astounded; they were just peeking! That was so weird!’ Amal described that she felt a disconnect between ideal and practice:

On the one hand they talk a lot about segregation and separation between [men and women], and limiting the contact. But then they just peeked with twenty women like that! I would not take part in it, so I just remained seated where I was.
(Amal)

This event caused Amal to find a mosque where men and women were completely separated and where such ‘peeking’ was not possible. Striving towards being a ‘good Muslim’ led her to find a space in which it would be possible to follow best practice according to the gender segregation norms she associated with Islam. Today, Amal is actively involved in a women’s group that comes together every week to discuss a section of the Qur’an. These informal women’s networks, often called ‘sisterhoods’ by Muslims, are considered crucial for women in Islam (Mahmood 2005; Vroon-Najem 2014). Not all women I met participated in such a regular group, but many did join occasional events for women or Arabic classes, which were usually also segregated. For Amal, these women-only spaces were very important, and she appreciated the separation of men and women.

Other women took a different route and were instead actively trying to have less strict segregation in the mosques. Although none questioned the separation between men and women itself, these women wanted to see the ideal of ‘different but equal’ reflected more in the mosque. This is also mentioned by Özyürek (2014) who argues that, besides being more active in mosques, converted women are more vocal in claiming their space within mosques and questioning patriarchal norms within the Muslim community. I recognised this in my own fieldwork, where some interlocutors felt uneasy with the limited space available for women in the buildings. They actively questioned this, but this should not only be seen as a form of resistance or ‘questioning patriarchal norms’. Instead, different types of agency, as resistance and as piety, merged. On this point, Dunya said: ‘Men should provide way more space for us. This should start with a reflection upon the way mosques are built. Give women a proper door for once and do not put them somewhere in a back corner.’ Bushra, who often separated ‘culture’ from ‘religion’, considered the unequal treatment in terms of space to be a ‘cultural thing’ unsubstantiated by either the Qur’an or Hadith. When she first became a Muslim, she joined a Turkish mosque, but eventually felt out of place because she felt that there was inequality between men and women. She recalled one day in particular:

I was in the women’s space watching a television screen whilst the sermon was given over there. Whilst there was even a balcony [in the main room]! And I thought to myself: ‘Am I going mad? Am I really sitting here in a sweltering room

with the door locked, watching a screen whilst I just as well could have stayed home and watch a movie on my computer? Am I really going to sit here and tell my mother that women are not oppressed [in Islam]?’ That was not right. (Bushra)

This moment of realisation (the mirror image of Amal’s experience) pushed Bushra to leave the Turkish mosque. Her current mosque was founded by a group of converts and explicitly aims to be a community across ethnic lines. This is also one of the few buildings where men and women both pray in the main hall, separated by a small barrier to indicate men’s spaces in the front, and women’s spaces in the back of the room.⁹³ Bushra described:

We pray in the main hall here. There is a small group that does not, but whenever new women come in, I always tell them to go to the main hall because we are part of the community too. We have the right to see the imam. The prayer is so much better if you are in the room together! (Bushra)

I spoke to a board member of this mosque, who told me that they had to ‘fight hard’ to give women their space. Indeed, there had been some complaints, and a few practitioners had not returned after women were allowed in the main hall. There had even been an attempt to reverse the policy by a minority of very vocal men (and a few women) when this board member was absent. They described how they found out last minute and ‘angrily stamped into the meeting’ to stop this attempt, which they described as almost a form of mutiny. Despite the complaints, the board overall decided to go through with the changes and women have been praying behind the men in the same room for several years now.

For Bushra, the ability to see and hear the imam was not only important because of the equality it gave women vis-à-vis men. She also found it important to enable women to strengthen their piety, for which collective prayers were considered important. Bushra believed that women should actively participate in, at least, the Friday prayers. As such, the importance of allowing women to pray in the main room mirrors Saba Mahmood’s (2005) notion of religious agency (see chapter one). One of Mahmood’s arguments is that agency should not only be considered as a form of anti-patriarchal resistance, but should also be acknowledged in women’s pious desires and practices. However, Bushra’s description of the importance of collective prayer cannot be captured by understanding agency through religious

⁹³ In places where Muslims pray in the same room it is common to have women praying behind men. This is based on modesty ideals, so that the women’s bodies do not distract the men. Several Islamic scholars have internationally argued for this style of praying, tracing this back to the time of the Prophet. One of them is Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (1914–1999), a Salafī Hadīth expert. As written by Marion Katz (2014, 285), al-Albānī said that ‘although it is permissible for women to pray on another level by hearing rather than seeing the imam, this is a suboptimal arrangement to which the mosque should resort only if no space is available on the same floor where the male worshippers are located’. Members of Bushra’s mosque often referred to Jasser Auda’s (2017) book *Reclaiming the Mosque*, which makes a similar argument.

submission alone. Instead, different types of agency (see also Bilge 2010) are interwoven. Her statement questions patriarchal norms, by which women are not offered a ‘different but equal’ space in the mosque. On another level, it is an expression of pious agency, with the ability to hear and see the imam as an important means to build and practice piety. As such, Bushra draws on different ethical regimes (Jouili 2011) as she negotiates her own position (and that of women in general) in her Muslim community. Interestingly, whilst the importance of the imam was widely recognised, none of the women actively challenged the fact that women are generally not allowed to take on this religious leadership role.

Whilst all Muslim interlocutors agreed that it was important for women to practice their faith actively in a mosque, there was more disagreement on the question of women’s official authority. In most Muslim communities worldwide, only men can lead the mixed prayers as an imam, although sometimes women can lead women’s prayers. Nevertheless, women can achieve high symbolic and social status as teachers, mentors, or in some cases board members—albeit with the caveat that such positions are often unofficial. For my Liberal and Progressive Jewish interlocutors (section 2.5.2), and to a lesser extent Christians (section 3.5.2), the option for women to take official positions of religious leadership was very important. For Muslimas this was less so, and many did not believe that women should be able to become imams.

In 2017, Amina Wadud visited the Netherlands and led a mixed prayer in Amsterdam—something that came up a few times during my fieldwork (Nieuw Wij 2017).⁹⁴ Some interlocutors, such as Fatima, mentioned this event as an example of emancipation gone ‘a step too far’. I participated in a course on Islamic feminism where the question of women religious leaders was also discussed amongst participants (many of them were Muslim converts).⁹⁵ One of the female Muslim converts in this course referred to Wadud’s prayer and said: ‘We should not want to do the same things as men. If so, we would also want men to get pregnant and have children. So we should not want to be the same, but we do have equal value.’ In this statement, leading prayers, as typically masculine and limited to men, was compared to women’s experience of pregnancy. As such, the difference was naturalised by this participant, who found that since (in her view) men cannot have children, women cannot lead prayers and be an imam. The course itself left the question open, but the view of this participant was shared by many others. This can seem like conforming to existing patriarchal norms, but it also challenges secular conceptions of women’s emancipation, as it could

⁹⁴ Amina Wadud is an Islamic theologian and Professor Emeritus of Islamic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Wadud is specialised in the role of women in Islam, particularly in the Qur’an. She was one of the first to lead public prayers for both men and women, mainly in the United States.

⁹⁵ The teacher of the course described Islamic feminism as a form of intellectual feminism that looks to Islamic sources to rethink questions of gender. This is considered different from Muslim feminists, who are people who identify both as Muslim and feminist, but do not necessarily engage with Islamic texts. Wadud was considered an example of the former: Islamic feminism.

supposedly be measured by the number of women in official leadership positions (which are traditionally filled by men). Yara, whose reflections offer a good example of this negotiation, also mentioned that women should not strive to be an imam, but she did want to see more women as Islamic scholars. She did not participate in this course about Islamic feminism, but was engaged with its topics:

I learned that certain texts have almost always been written by men. That has an impact on the writing, on how things are portrayed. There are also very few female speakers [...] You actually need a lot of them because they can bring in a whole new perspective. (Yara)

For Yara the main objectives of Islamic feminism should be to strive for the inclusion of women's perspectives, to encourage more female speakers, and to acknowledge the gendered nature of some Islamic texts and interpretations. My interlocutors emphasised that there are multiple ways in which women have authority within Islam, and this was much appreciated. This was quite similar to Orthodox Jewish women's reflection on their role and authority (section 2.5.2). Only looking into the question of female imams is too narrow and fails to recognise the different forms of power negotiated within religious communities. Most converted Muslimas did find it important for women to be in leadership positions such as board members of mosques. More important still were informal roles as teachers or mentors. Women were often considered to be more capable in emotional labour than men and this mentorship could give them high social status in the community, albeit not officially or with a salary. Moreover, women were often seen as 'in charge' of the private sphere and household. The next section focuses on the role of family and the home as important aspects of the private sphere, which all women considered the primary domain of women.

4.6 Becoming a Muslima in the Private Sphere

For my interlocutors the notion of home and the private sphere were often directly associated with family and home-making. However, the Muslim women I met tended not to make a great effort to redecorate or reorganise their homes similar to my Jewish and Christian interlocutors. Instead, they discussed family life, rather than physical space, when we spoke about their homes. Yet this is not necessarily reflective of other research amongst (converted) Muslimas. As Vroon-Najem (2014, 94) wrote: 'Many participants decorated their homes with visible signs of being a Muslim, such as framed Qur'an verses or self-made murals, special clocks displaying the proper prayer times, and small tables designed to hold a Qur'an.' Marjo Buitelaar (2010), a Dutch professor of contemporary Islam, wrote about the home-making practices of Moroccan-Dutch Muslim women and similarly showed that this is often an important aspect of making the religious self. In the context of conversion, cultural

anthropologist Nina ter Laan (2021), studied Dutch Muslim converts who moved to Morocco and especially focused on home-making there. These examples show that decoration can indeed play a role for (converted) Muslimas' self-making, but in this section I will follow my own empirical data where women spoke more about family in relation to the home. For my interlocutors, family had multiple meanings. It referred to their parents and siblings, and their own nuclear family with their husbands and children. Family was also discussed in more abstract and idealised terms. Even though not all had a normative nuclear family, they all considered it to be the ideal situation and aspired to fulfil that norm, as creating and nurturing a family life was considered an important responsibility for women. At the same time, conversion could lead to tension with their own parents and siblings, which is discussed next.

4.6.1 'I Never Said "Hey Mum, I Became a Muslim"'

Embracing Islam frequently led to tensions between my interlocutors and their relatives, who often did not understand their religious choices. The fear amongst converts to become alienated from their families comes up in many discussions of conversion to Islam, especially amongst women (e.g., van Nieuwkerk 2014; Roald 2006). The relationship with parents appears as particularly difficult. It has been noted how young adult women who live with their parents are afraid that they will be asked to move out of their home—a fear that is partly based on real life experiences (Vroon-Najem 2014, 145). Religious leaders also told me that these problems often come up. Indeed, the Convert Association gives the issue a lot of attention and the first advice on their website states: 'Respect your parents!'⁹⁶:

Avoid confrontation and do not bring up subjects your parents will continue to debate you on. It can be very difficult to guard yourself against misunderstanding and resistance from your parents and others close to you, but the conversion is not only a big change for the convert. It also changes a lot for your environment and can ask a lot of them. Stay aware of that. A lot of conflicts can be prevented with mutual understanding. Parents would often be against your conversion at first, but sooner or later they will realise that you are still the same person; after all, you remain their child. After this phase, many parents will see how their child radiates peace, which can make them reconsider. (Stichting Bekeerling 2021, translated from Dutch by the author)

⁹⁶ The other advices are, in order: 'Gather knowledge with known organisations and scholars'; 'Stay away from discussions'; 'Learn Arabic'; 'Practice Islam according to the satisfaction of Allah the Exalted'; 'Knowledge is deliberation'; 'Retain your identity'; 'Visit the mosque'; 'Search for Muslim friends but do not break the contact with non-Muslims'; 'Avoid loneliness'; 'Watch out for extremism'; 'Do not despair'; and 'Keep your head up' (Stichting Bekeerling 2021).

According to this statement, talking about Islam with family members is crucial if they are to accept the conversion of their children. It has the added value that parents might reconsider the faith and follow the path of Islam themselves. Converts are furthermore warned not to be a know-it-all (or ‘more royal than the king’; Roald 2006, 49), but to be mindful of the impact their choices have on their families. My interlocutors were careful to negotiate these relationships and searched to find compatibility between Islamic principles and the expectations of their families. One example that came up often is what to do when parents (or, for that matter, friends or colleagues) drink alcohol:

Some [Muslims] would say: ‘You are not allowed to be in the same room when your parents drink alcohol.’ My mother used to drink a lot of wine, does that mean I can never visit her? That is impossible! So I started to see when she drinks least and visit at those times. Luckily, she quit nowadays, but these are the kinds of considerations that come up, and you have to choose yourself what is best.
(Bushra)

Rather than being overtly critical of her mother’s drinking habits, Bushra negotiated a way for herself to engage with her mother, despite her drinking. In this way, she created coherence between different ethical frameworks, in this case caring for her family and the Islamic principle of avoiding alcohol. These negotiation narratives were far more common amongst my interlocutors than the idea of the ‘know-it-all’. I also always asked my interlocutors what they would say to potential converts and with no exception they answered: Do not rush things and involve your parents. Indeed, when I further asked whether they had done so themselves, they often said they had not involved their parents out of fear of alienation and kept their conversion to themselves.

Looking back, many regretted not involving their parents sooner. Dunya’s experience offers a good example. She was living with her mother when she began to implement certain Islamic practices a year before she took the *shahada*. She did not explicitly talk with her mother about her engagement with Islam, but had assumed that this was clear:

I stopped eating pork and did not want to drink [alcohol]. It was so obvious to me [that I was embracing Islam], but in hindsight it might not have been so obvious and I should have communicated better what I was doing and why I was doing it.
(Dunya)

Dunya’s example confirms my earlier argument that conversion is a process and that many women already feel and practice like a Muslim before taking their *shahada*. Dunya never really told her mother: ‘It was just a given that I started fasting [during *Ramadan*], and did this and that, so she eventually drew her conclusions. But I never said to my mother: “Hey mum, I became a Muslim.”’ Most others chose to tell their parents about their conversion

around the time they took the *shahada*. Yara wrote a letter to her parents and Iman, who was not living at home anymore at the time, sat her parents down and explained at the dinner table. The majority of converts avoided conflict and chose not to speak about it much after making their initial announcement. Not talking about religion in general is of course not unique to Muslim converts, but the immense tension felt by converts—whether or not to include their parents in their trajectory—characterises this case.

When they began to express themselves as Muslim, most interlocutors were confronted with stereotypes. Dunya's family members assumed that she would not have embraced Islam were it not for her husband. This came as a surprise to Dunya, since she had begun to explore Islam years prior to meeting him and he was not observant when they met. The assumption that female converts—especially young adults—become Muslim for their boyfriends is a common theme in the responses of non-Muslim family members. The stereotype that women are oppressed in Islam equally informs many parents' reactions, who are afraid for the freedom and safety of their daughters.⁹⁷ Another fear often heard from parents is that their children will radicalise and will adhere to a violent form of Islam. Yvonne Hazbeck Haddad (2006, 31) gives the example of one woman whose mother had asked: 'What's the matter with you, do you love Osama bin Laden? Do you want to be his wife?' In a similar vein, Dunya recalled how her mother had been afraid that she had left for Syria when she, her husband, and their toddler had went on a vacation to Italy. At the time of my research, ISIS was gaining ground in Syria and many stories had emerged about Dutch Muslims who had moved there to join ISIS. Whilst men were portrayed as most actively violent, women were portrayed as passive followers and the term 'ISIS bride' entered public debate to refer to young, often naïve women who fell in love with radical Muslim men (van den Brandt, van den Berg, and Meijer, forthcoming). In this light, 'leaving for Syria' was equated with joining ISIS. In contrast, Yara's mother did not express this fear herself, but instead stood up for her daughter: 'My mom told me that someone in her apartment building said to her, in the elevator: "Are you being careful, is your daughter going to Syria too?"' And my mother was stunned: "What are you talking about, that doesn't make any sense!"' Yara's mother, who actively countered negative stereotypes of her daughter's religious belonging, was somewhat in the minority. The parents of others experienced the fear of radicalisation and/or oppression. Such fears are strongly shaped by societal discourse, which tends to

⁹⁷ This is also the core theme in the Dutch reality show '*Van Hagelslag naar Halal*' (van Diepen 2015), which follows three young converted Muslimas and their mothers on a journey to Jordan. The main focus of the show is the strained relationship between the mothers and daughters, and reconciliation its main aim. In this show the fear of oppression frequently comes up. The three mothers were raised with feminist ideals (one was active in feminist movements) and felt that their daughters gave up ideals of women's freedom that had been so important to them in their twenties, hence also making the conversion a difficult generational conflict (see also Schrijvers 2016).

express two dominant tropes: the Muslim woman as the oppressed victim, or the Muslim woman as the radicalised *jihadi*. However, amongst my interlocutors, a third trope seems to be taking shape in the margins: that of the exemplary Muslim (see also van den Brandt, van den Berg, and Meijer, forthcoming; van Es 2019a). Today, Yara's mother accepts her decision (although this took several years), but other family members continue to invoke stereotypes about Muslims, aimed mainly towards her Moroccan-Dutch husband. Yara states: 'I think it still plays a part. Not related to me directly, but I think they still have this overall image of "Muslim men are oppressive, but he is not, he is different."' Similarly, she reflected upon the fact that her parents do see her as a 'reasonable person, but I am not sure if they see it as an effect of Islam. They think: "That is how *you* are, but Islam is not."' This idea of the exemplary 'good' Muslim arose more often in assimilation strategies that are discussed in the sixth chapter of this dissertation.

4.6.2 Raising Muslim Children

For many converts, becoming a parent themselves was very important, and quite a few regarded motherhood as the ideal expression of a woman's role. This is similar to Roald's (2004, 33) observation that '[a] family-centered lifestyle appears to be greatly appreciated by convert women'. Bushra, Hanan, and Dunya all had children after their conversion, whilst Iman became a mother prior to embracing Islam. All wished to raise their children as Muslims. For Hanan, childcare was one of the most important ways she engaged with her religion in her day-to-day life. Regarding her two-year-old son, she stated:

A lot, with him, raising him, yes, [I engage with Islam] all day long to be honest. There are prayers when you wake up, or if he goes to bed, doing supplications. When he eats, I say *bismillah* and *alhamdullilah*, I let him listen to the Qur'an.⁹⁸
(Hanan)

For Hanan, her most important task was to raise her son according to Islamic teachings: 'I feel it is *my* responsibility, I am the one who people will look at when I am not doing enough or not doing it correctly. I truly am responsible for him.' This resonates with the story of Jewish Channah (section 2.6.1), who considered it her most important task to raise her children to be 'good people'. Hanan's husband was also involved in raising their son, but she did not consider it to be his main task to transfer religious knowledge to their children. At times, the felt responsibility for childcare impacted their involvement in their mosque, especially for

⁹⁸ *Bismillah* and *alhamdullilah* are common Islamic exclamations. *Bismillah* translates as 'in the name of God' and is said before eating and drinking. *Alhamdullilah* means 'all praise to Allah' or 'thank God' and is said whenever something good happens. Along with *inshallah* ('if God wills') these exclamations are part of the everyday vocabulary of most Muslims, as well as many people from the Arabic world who are not Muslims. Their use is similar to the English 'oh my God' or 'bless you' in everyday language.

those women with young children. This is similar to the other case studies and probably a common narrative for new parents everywhere. Dunya added that mosques could be more accommodating of mothers with young children, because many lectures and meetings are planned in the evening around the time her daughter goes to bed: ‘That is truly a disadvantage and a lot of women have to deal with it.’ In the Christian case study, to compare, the church went to great lengths to accommodate women of young children by offering day-care and children’s services (section 3.6.2). Some, but not all, mosques organise similar support for childcare. For Dunya and Hanan, participating in a mosque became less of a priority, but they accepted the situation as being part of how life changes after having children.

To conclude this section, family could be a difficult subject for women who embraced Islam. My interlocutors often told me that many converts initially go through an intense phase where they try to convince their parents and friends of their religious beliefs and judge their non-Muslim habits. This is also reflected in academic studies and was called the phase of ‘love’ by Anne Sofie Roald (2006, 2012) in her study of converts in Scandinavia. During this phase, Roald (2006) argues, converts are ‘more royal than the king’. This has also been called, somewhat jokingly, ‘convertitis’ (Roald 2012, 347; Vroon-Najem 2014, 93). Certainly, many newcomers to Islam try to do their best when following Islamic principles and can feel the need to prove themselves. However, in relation to their family, this was not reflected by the experiences of the women I met. My interlocutors expressed a fear of rejection by their parents once they revealed that they had become a Muslim. Whilst some women did indeed recognise the idea of ‘convertitis’ or had experienced such a perfectionist phase themselves—which is quite common for Jewish and Christian converts too—they were not that judgemental of their immediate family. My research shows that most women try not to draw too much attention and often do not speak about their conversion for some time. The turning point did not come with the *shahada*. Rather, it came with the decision to wear a headscarf and thus to become visibly Muslim. At that point, silence is often no longer an option: ‘It wasn’t so bad when I just converted. It was a bit strange of course, but it got very difficult when I began to wear a headscarf’, Yara said. The most stressful concern of women who embraced Islam related to their visibility towards the outside world and the potential negative responses they would have to deal with once they wear a headscarf. This meant an embodied and visible expression of their religion, which confirms my argument that conversion is an embodied process. The last section of this chapter focuses on these negotiations.

4.7 Embodying a Muslim Self

Becoming a Muslim, Van Nieuwkerk (2006b, 4) wrote, is an embodied process that is related to praying, fasting, food, and appearance. The previous two sections, in which I discussed the role of the community, mosque, and family, foregrounded relationality rather than

embodiment. The importance of material forms and embodied practices came up in the section about mosques, where women encountered physical demarcations of gender segregation, and in the description of learning how to pray. In this section, I focus on two other embodied aspects of converting to Islam, namely clothing, specifically *hijab*, and food as a way to shape the body in the process of self-making. The connection between becoming religious and changing one's clothing style arose in all three case studies. Specific to the Muslim case is that the Islamic headscarf is such a strong symbol within the Dutch society that many women were hesitant to wear it since this immediately made them visibly Muslim. In the following, I discuss the decision-making process women encounter about whether (or not) to veil, and how they begin to do so. The second theme is related to food practices, as also arose in the Jewish case study (section 2.7.2). Becoming a Muslim often meant a change in diet and learning to fast during *Ramadan*. This is a less strong visible marker, but still an area of negotiation for new Muslim women.

4.7.1 Wearing the *Hijab*

I wear a headscarf because I want to be identified as a Muslim. I want people to see, and I'm proud of it too. It is part of who I am and I want to express it. And it's also part obedience. That's the most important part and that's what you first hear: It pleases Allah. I mainly think it was my inner wish, to be honest. It was not difficult at all... I wanted to do it right away, but that would not have been thought through and would have negative effects, it would be the cause of too many reactions, [it would have been] shocking. (Iman)

In this citation, Iman gave several reasons why she wears a headscarf: to express her new identity as a Muslim ('I want to express it'); to obey Allah's commandments ('it pleases Allah'); and to follow her own personal desires ('it was my inner wish'). At the same time, she mentioned that despite these motivations, she chose not to wear a headscarf until she had been a Muslim for two years because she did not want to cause trouble. However, it still came as a shock to her family and friends, even though she had taken her time and 'went through the process with care and consideration'. Wearing a headscarf comes with many negotiations, emotions, and tensions that will be explored in this section.

Hijab is often translated as either the overall practice of veiling, or as one particular style of Islamic headscarf alongside other styles, such as the *khimaar* (a long black headscarf that covers the whole upper body) or *niqab* (face veil). For Muslims it also refers to the broader set of the Islamic modesty codes that includes, for women, wearing wide clothes and covering one's body until the ankles and wrists (Göle 2017, 154–55). The concept of *hijab* as a modesty code is strongly related to the notion of *mahrem*, which refers to the 'interior,

sacred, gendered space, forbidden to exterior and stranger masculine gaze, which is both spatial and corporeal' (Göle 2015, 47).⁹⁹ In other words, *mahrem* indicates the private space in which women are free from the male gaze and therefore do not have to cover themselves. According to sociologist Nilüfer Göle (2015, 186), the *hijab* is a means to extend this sacred interior space into the public sphere, functioning as an embodied boundary of private space for Muslim women. Questions of agency are central in debates on the *hijab* and much research aims to counter the stereotype that veiled women are oppressed by emphasising their (religious) agency (e.g., Bilge 2010; Scott 2010). Wearing a headscarf can be a sign of Muslim pride, whilst it also 'helps [converts] come into contact with other Muslims' (Göle 2017, 158). However, these are not the only reasons women wear a headscarf: There are also pious motivations that are often overlooked in sociological studies of veiling.

When it came to dress style, the choices of Muslimas were, compared to those of Jewish and Christian interlocutors, more related to self-representation and negotiation in relation to the wider public sphere. As I wrote before, its status as Other in the Netherlands partly shaped the attraction some women felt to Islam. When it concerned wearing a headscarf themselves, converted white women encountered the other side of this Othering and were often confronted with Islamophobia and stereotypes (see also Haddad 2006, 31; van Nieuwkerk 2004, 236; Özyürek 2010, 173; Vroon-Najem 2014, 87). Van Nieuwkerk (2014, 679) argued that veiling 'means taking on a visible marker of Islam and publicly declaring the new identity', before adding that this can 'be a sacrifice and an enormous source of conflict with people in one's environment'. My interlocutors struggled with this visibility of their conversion and the negative reactions from their family and friends. They were often met with negative Islamophobic comments, such as 'what a pity that you're hiding yourself', in Bushra's experience, or with swear words and hateful looks. The potential negative comments were the most important reason why Hanan did not wear a headscarf when we met. At the same time, she expressed a strong desire to do so:

Because it is written, you cannot ignore it. You cannot say 'yes, but actually...', no, you simply must do it. [...] but you must only do it if you have good intentions, otherwise it doesn't count. If I wear it because someone tells me to, I might as well not, because the point is that you do it for Allah. And not because your neighbour does it and you want to prove you can too. (Hanan)

⁹⁹ Most of my interlocutors used the more common description of *mahrem* to describe men who are part of this private space. *Mahrem* stems from the same Arabic roots as *haram*—comprising the letters H-R-M—which indicates something (often ritually) forbidden. *Mahrem* refers to kin—someone you are forbidden to marry: (grand)parents, (grand)children, siblings, spouses of your direct relatives, as well as the direct relatives of your spouse. Amongst these men, wearing the *hijab* is not obligatory, nor is it in women-only groups, but most women found it most practical to only remove their headscarf at home. Göle's (1997) most important book about *mahrem* is called *The Forbidden Modern*; the Turkish edition was entitled *The Modern Mahrem*.

Hanan felt that as long as she did not have the true intention to start wearing a headscarf, she should not.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, because she does not wear a headscarf, Hanan felt ‘still just a beginner’ in Islam as a non-*hijabi* Muslima:

[Conversion] took a lot of years, and I still think I’m quite slow in my development. For some reason I do judge myself, that I am not good enough as long as I am not covered and do not wear a headscarf. (Hanan)

However, Hanan considered this to be a common phase for Muslimas, both those born and converted, which reduced the potential conflict between her practice and ideals. This reflects another common thread in studies of female converts: that women do not usually begin to wear a headscarf immediately after conversion (e.g., McGinty 2006; Mossière 2016). Instead, the overall picture is that converted Muslimas are initially devoted to prayer and righteousness in the broadest sense and strive to be a good Muslim before deciding to wear the headscarf. When they feel confident enough in their piety, they sometimes (but not always) change to a *hijab* dress style, first by wearing wide clothes and, often in a second step, by wearing a headscarf (see also Vroon-Najem 2014, 88). Although the women in my research all agreed that Muslimas should ideally follow Allah’s commandment to wear the *hijab*, Van Nieuwkerk (2014, 679) found that ‘not all converts decide to veil; not all are convinced it is necessary to do so’. Besides Hanan, all other interlocutors wore a headscarf, but also mentioned this was something they gradually came to understand: ‘At first I thought it was not necessary, but I delved more into it and thought: “yes, actually it makes a lot of sense”, to me at least’, Dunya said. Ultimately, there were different motivations for wearing the headscarf.

My interlocutors gave obedience and pious aspirations as the primary reason to wear the *hijab*, as Hanan stated above: ‘Because it is written.’ The visibility of their new status was merely a coincidental (or dreaded) secondary effect of veiling. However difficult at times, many Muslim women also wanted to express their religion in public. For many, wearing a headscarf increased their confidence and functioned as a confirmation of their changed self. Bushra began to wear the *hijab* a year after taking the *shahada* because she wanted to be more visible: ‘People didn’t know. I truly felt like a Muslim but I wanted the outside world to see it too, I wanted to express it and am very proud of it.’ Wearing a headscarf made Bushra more visible as a Muslim, not only in a negative manner, but also as a sign of her pride and connection to the Muslim community. A different effect of veiling comes from Amal:

I noticed that ever since I wear it I became more aware of truly being a Muslim. It helps [me] to have better behaviour, it is like a reminder! Well Lieke, you see it

¹⁰⁰ Hanan and other women who did not veil in public spaces did wear a headscarf when they attended the mosque, which is often, but not always, a requirement. When praying at the mosque or at home, they wore prayer outfits: a long skirt and *khimaar*.

better than I do, that's another thing I learned, others see it far more. [...] But I do *feel* it and it makes me remember that... uhm... you're a Muslim 24/7, it does not stop, and it helps me to be more patient and calm. (Amal)

For Amal, the most important benefit of wearing a headscarf was that it strengthened her relationship with Allah by making her aware of being a Muslim throughout the day. For her, the biggest change was not in the outward expression of Muslim belonging, but rather in her inward sense of piety throughout the day.

Besides following the commandment, expressing Muslim belonging, and building piety, another often heard benefit of wearing a headscarf is that it offers women protection from sexualisation in society. Amal began to wear a headscarf when she met her current partner. She liked the idea that 'you're a gift for one another', but did already wear wide clothes, so 'part of the package was already wrapped', she said, laughing. Most other women reflected on the importance of the *hijab* not in relation to their partners, but rather in relation to the wider secular society, where women were considered to be too sexualised. Yara said: 'The headscarf and all of the *hijab* is seen as a form of protection, it should be a protection. I notice that men call me out far less, that used to be very different.' Yara made a distinction between the way that women are often sexualised in the wider society and feel pushed to wear provocative clothes, and the protection afforded by the *hijab*. She said: 'In this society, if you wear a headscarf you are already a minority, and if you also wear a long skirt, you are very extreme!' With a laugh, she rhetorically asked: 'I think it's quite a feminist act not to go along with [the sexualisation], don't you think so?' This aspect of *hijab* was appreciated and often given as the main background to the commandment.

Once they begin to wear a headscarf, converted Muslimas often try out different styles. In her analysis of the relation between white converts and Turkish Muslims in Germany, Özyürek (2014) showed that her interlocutors often chose a style of dress associated with Moroccan or Egyptian women. The women in her study made sure that they were 'not looking like a Turkish woman' (Özyürek 2014, 65) and tried to establish distance between them and the Turkish migrant community, which they perceived as belonging to a lower class. I did not find the same tendencies amongst my interlocutors. Vroon-Najem (2014) did point out that many women decide on their style of dress along ethnic community lines. Some of her interlocutors wore a *djellaba*, a long type of dress associated with Moroccan women, whilst others opted for a Turkish style *hijab*, often mixing the different styles (Vroon-Najem 2014, 104–105). In contrast to Özyürek, Vroon-Najem did not observe a strong desire in converted women to distinguish themselves from these migrant communities—a point further borne out in my research. A more common idea in my research was that women's dress styles follow a continuum in modesty and conservatism. A typical 'modern' expression of *hijab* was an outfit of jeans, tunic, and a coloured headscarf. My interlocutors described a *khimaar* or *niqab* as a more conservative form (see also Moors

2009).¹⁰¹ Dunya wore a *khimaar* and told me that she finds it quite easy not to have to think about what to wear, since she always wears the same. However, her long black garments often make people suspect she is affiliated to Salafism and a ‘radicalised’ Muslim. However, this was not the case for Yara, who also wore long skirts that did not show the shape of her body, but combined them with a headscarf and often wore clothes in bright colours. Hanan, who did not wear a headscarf in public, received the fewest negative comments, partly because she was not visibly Muslim, which led her family to consider her to be a ‘moderate Muslima’. However, the dominant idea that the manner of dress is somehow an indication of level of piety was strongly rebutted by all women, who argued that the *hijab* is but one aspect of what can make a person a ‘good Muslim’, and that a headscarf is only one part of the *hijab*. This also shows that the bodily performance of piety comes with different layers of negotiation: anticipation of the responses of non-Muslims, common styles in a particular community, practical impacts and comfort, personal style preferences, and the interpretations of commandments. This negotiation and anticipation also came up in another embodied aspect of conversion, namely food practices. This is partly related to home-making, as discussed before, since women were considered primarily responsible for cooking. It also impacts conversion on a more personal level, and is one of the ways in which women change their bodies in the making of their selves.

4.7.2 Food and Fasting

New Muslimas most often mentioned food as the way they had begun to introduce Islam in their daily lives, similar to Jewish converts who started to eat *kosher* food (section 2.7.1). Two food-related practices were central: fasting during *Ramadan* and eating *halal*. *Halal* food is the food permitted by Islamic guidelines, whilst *haram* is its counterpart and indicates prohibited produce. Similar to the Jewish *kashrut*, pork meat is not permitted, whilst animals without split hooves—which are not allowed in the *kashrut*—are generally *halal*. Islamic food laws also do not permit alcohol and intoxicants, and prescribe that all animals are ritually slaughtered. This meat is termed ‘*halal*’ and whilst it used to only be available at Islamic butcher shops, it is increasingly available at the larger supermarkets. Converts often gradually introduced Islamic food guidelines by eliminating pork (and foods containing pork ingredients, such as gelatine) from their diets and by not drinking alcohol. Moreover, my interlocutors often did not completely change their diet. Most interlocutors preferred the same

¹⁰¹ A face veil is widely conceived in Dutch public discourse as most conservative. In August 2019, a law was passed that bans facial covering in public buildings. Officially, this law bans all face covering garments, including balaclavas, but it is commonly referred to as the ‘*burqa* ban’. Despite the widespread attention paid to, and anxiety about (mainly from right-wing politicians) the *burqa*, it has been estimated that under 400 Muslim women cover their face (Moors 2009). Of those who do, many wear the *niqab*, a black face veil, instead of the traditional *burqa*—the all-covering pastel garment worn by women in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Today, the term ‘*burqa*’ is used to refer to both in the media and politics.

dishes they had enjoyed before conversion, but with the change to *halal*. Some hardly ever ate Moroccan or Turkish food, which are in Dutch culture often associated with Muslims, and instead preferred traditional Dutch meals. Part of this seemed to be a strategy to counter the idea that becoming Muslim means a step away from being Dutch, and to construct a ‘sameness between a “before” and an “after”’ (McGinty 2006, 162) in conversion. Others mixed different cuisines, such as Yara, who enjoyed learning Moroccan recipes from her mother-in-law.

Despite the care with which the women introduced their new diets, some interlocutors told me that their non-Muslim family members and friends were often surprised that they still enjoyed Dutch dishes. Yara was frustrated because all kinds of food-related things were considered to be ‘Islamic’ by her family. We were having lunch together when she said, ironically: ‘Imagine I would not eat this salad with a fork but with a spoon. They would say: “Is that Islamic, what you’re doing?”’ Another example she gave was when she made pizza on a rectangular baking tray instead of the traditional round one, upon which her grandmother asked her (Moroccan-Dutch) husband: ““Is this something typical they eat in your country?”” No grandma, this is just a pizza... but everything is suddenly related to Islam.’ Despite that Yara cooked that night and her husband had nothing to do with it, her food choices were commented upon and linked to Islam as well as the Moroccan background of her husband.¹⁰² Yara laughed about this when we met, but she also mentioned that it can be quite tiring to be asked to defend her choices all the time and considered these to be forms of micro-aggression (see also chapter six). For Yara and most interlocutors, *halal* food offered a way to practice Islam throughout the day, and this diet was conceived as healthier and more conscious of the environment than their previous food habits.

Another food-related practice converts encounter, is fasting. Of course, fasting is not unique to Islam, as Christian teaching cites forty days of fasting before Easter called Lent, and Jews typically fast at *Yom Kippur*. However, Lent is only marginally practiced in the Netherlands, whilst Jewish practices are not well-known to the wider public. *Ramadan*, on the contrary, is widely known as a central feature of Islam and its impact is felt in the wider society. For example, in recent years, special ‘*Ramadan* items’ have been available in large stores and the media have also paid attention to it. During the month of *Ramadan* (which falls at a different time every year in the Roman calendar, since Muslims follow a lunar calendar), Muslims do not eat or drink between sunrise and sunset, nor can they have sex or smoke.¹⁰³ The month is often ascribed a special spiritual status and Muslims are encouraged to devote their time to piety, to refrain from gossip, and to support those in need (Buitelaar 2002). In

¹⁰² Connecting all kinds of unrelated practices to Islam also reminds me of Samuli Schielke’s (2012) comment that there is too much Islam in the anthropology of Islam and Van Nieuwkerk’s (2018, 12) addition that there is ‘too much emphasis on religion in the process of moving in and out of Islam’.

¹⁰³ People who are ill, menstruating, breastfeeding, or pregnant are exempted from fasting. Prepubescent children and elderly people are also exempted.

Muslim families, the breaking of the fast at sunset is often a communal event, as is the first day after the *Ramadan*, the holiday *Eid al-Fitr*. The month can be quite difficult for converts without a Muslim social network. Most of my interlocutors had already fasted at least once before taking their *shahada* and expressing themselves as Muslims. None of my interlocutors mentioned that they found the fasting itself difficult, but struggled with their initial lack of a social network. At the time of my interviews, *Ramadan* fell in the Summer or late Spring, when the days are quite long and sunset can be as late as 10 o'clock. This further reduced the options to have a joined celebration with family members. 'It was a pity, I just went to bed early... whilst it is really supposed to be a beautiful time', Dunya reflected on the first few times she fasted during *Ramadan*. In response to this loneliness, throughout the month, some converts' associations organise collective meals to break the fast (called *iftar*) in which non-Muslim family members are also be welcomed. Yet besides these difficulties, most agreed that *Ramadan* was a very special, spiritual month—a 'peak time for faith', to cite Bushra. This shows that fasting (like all food practices) can be a bodily expression of conversion towards other (non-)Muslims, but not only that. In addition, it is also a means to construct piety and to learn what it means to be a Muslim woman. As such, I argue that fasting cannot merely be seen as an expression of pre-existing inner conviction, but it also shapes this conviction and constructs piety via this bodily training. Food is an important means for women to negotiate their new religious belonging, to feel their religious self-making in their body, and to make their conversion compatible with both their chosen community and their non-religious family and upbringing.

Conclusion

It is difficult, it certainly is! But God did not say: 'Being a Muslim is easy.' No. 'Believing in me is easy.' No. God says in his book: 'Do you really think that I will guide you and then let you off the hook? That that is it?' No. (Fatima)

Women who embraced Islam often consider their conversion to be a process with neither a clearly defined start nor end. Part of being Muslim, Fatima told me, is to continue to work on yourself and study Islam. Although this can be difficult, it also brings her great joy, fulfilment, and happiness. This chapter analysed my research outcomes in the Muslim case study in order to study how women who embraced Islam relate to questions of gender. In other words, how their religious self-making impacts their experience, perspective, and performance of gender. For the most part, my own research outcomes confirmed the observations made by notable scholars of women's conversion in the Netherlands, such as Vanessa Vroon-Najem and Karin van Nieuwkerk. Interest in these stories is not new and recent years have seen an increase in studies of Muslim women, with a special focus on white women who convert. Less common is the comparison of these experiences with those of

women who join other religious groups—in my research, Judaism and Christianity. This offers a unique insight into the extent to which converting to Islam is as curious as some media reports might seem to suggest. I found that in many regards, these stories were similar to at least some of the stories of women who joined Christianity or Judaism. A major difference was the profound impact the hegemonic discourse in the Netherlands has, with its portrayal of Islam as its Other. Women who convert are often confronted by stereotypes, negativity, and a marked lack of understanding. However, this is only one aspect of Islam and certainly not the most significant to understanding the religious lives these women experience. In line with the previous two chapters, I focussed on the different levels of their everyday religion and self-making, with an emphasis on gender.

In Islam, most interlocutors encountered, and appreciated, a gender discourse of gender equity, or complementary difference. This is similar to the majority of converts in my wider research project and was experienced as different from the dominant gender discourse in the rest of society. Women who embraced Islam valued the special status given to women as caregivers and mothers whilst emphasising that women were equal, yet different to men. They were often socialised in an environment in which there were fewer explicit segregations between men and women. Coming to Islam they encountered a gender discourse that emphasised gender difference, but where complementarianism was deemed highly important. They often respected the segregation of genders, but there were differences in this regard, mainly concerning the position of women in mosques. Here too, experiences and perspectives varied, but most converts were actively engaged with the Muslim community and their mosque. One explanation is that converted Muslimas did not have a large Islamic social environment aside from the people they met during lectures, classes and prayers in the mosque. They also had a strong desire to be active in their faith and delve into Muslim life, which was perceived to be centralised around the mosque in the same way as the church functions in Christianity.

Despite the importance of the community, in describing their choices, all emphasised their personal autonomy to confirm the authenticity of their choices. In this case study, the tension between autonomy and community was not only related to internal discourses (as in the case of Judaism and Christianity), but also in relation to stigmatising discourses in which Muslim women are often portrayed as radicalised, passive victims, or as exemplary Muslims. Unsurprisingly, my interlocutors did not feel connected to any of these figures—indeed, some actively tried to counter this discourse and ‘talked back.’ However, whilst there is much more to being and becoming a Muslim woman than hegemonic discourses might suggest, but there is also more to being a Muslim than constantly actively reacting to those discourses. For most, this was not a priority. I argue that the overt emphasis on veiling and stigmatising discourses in academic literature does not acknowledge the richness of Muslim women’s everyday religious lives. The women in my study were most often devoted to living a good Muslim life and engaging with their immediate Muslim community, family, and their religious learning.

Becoming a Muslim is gendered and a multi-faceted and complicated process of negotiation, in many cases similar to, but sometimes markedly different from, the process of becoming Jewish or Christian.

This concludes the three chapters based on a specific religious group. The final two chapters of this dissertation are devoted to comparisons between the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim case studies. Some of these comparisons are already implicit in the preceding analyses focused on gender and this is reflected upon in the final conclusion to this dissertation. For these two subsequent chapters, I discuss two themes that were brought up most by my interlocutors and take a somewhat different conceptual approach, focussing on sexuality and national belonging. However, I do not mean to suggest that these two topics are completely separate from the study of gender. Rather, this approach foregrounds sexuality and belonging as axes of difference that intersect with gender and religion. It thus takes a different analytical and conceptual starting point to understand the same case studies.

Chapter 5
Conversion and Sexuality
‘It Didn’t Feel Right Anymore’

Freedom also implies having the freedom to *not* do it. To choose to be only with one partner. I've only ever slept with my current partner, my fiancé.

—Naomi, Jewish

I used to masturbate often too, but at some point, that need just went away. Sexuality actually distracts you from God's path.

—Rianne, Christian

Sex before marriage happens quite a lot in the Muslim community. I also had a relationship prior to my marriage, but once I was converted, I really wanted to get married, it didn't feel right anymore.

—Dunya, Muslim

Over the course of my research, I discussed many topics with the women converts taking part in the study, but it was sexuality that emerged as one of their central concerns. This chapter analyses how my interlocutors in all three groups negotiated sexual ethics and practices in relation to their conversion processes. Whilst a preoccupation with sex is not unique to converts, the resultant negotiation of different ethical frameworks and religious bodily practices is. In this chapter, I analyse the ambivalent nature and negotiation of sexual ethics in the daily lives of women converts. Some initially shared a view in line with wider public opinion, presuming religious sex to be somehow different to secular sex. Ethical considerations that questioned such stereotypes and critiqued sexual moral in the context of the wider Dutch secular society were also encountered. For example, Rianne stated that masturbation is a distraction from God's path. Issues that public opinion might deem prudish or restrictive provided some of my interlocutors with a sense of worth, such as was the case for Naomi, who found a sense of freedom in her choice not to engage in sex before marriage. However, some of the other sexual implications of their newly acquired status brought discomfort, for example rituals around menstruation. Moreover, even if official doctrine or opinion might assume that, for example, no one has sex outside of marriage, converts such as Dunya learnt that this 'happens quite a lot'.

My starting point in this dissertation is the understanding that conversion is an embodied process. Preceding chapters have shown how new Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women negotiate religious practices and spaces related to questions of gender. In this chapter, I examine the less accessible sphere of sex (as practices) and sexuality (as the broader social sphere of desires, identifications, and politics). Sexuality is intimately connected to gender, but also analytically different. Therefore, I answer the following question: If becoming religious is embodied and practiced—something that implies a 'doing' as well as a 'being'—then how is it related to sexuality? Although women converts across all the religious groups

featured in my fieldwork gave different answers to this question, generally speaking it was one of the most important topics of discussion, both with me as the interviewer and in the wider communities of my fieldwork.

In the Netherlands, sexuality has come to function as one of the main moral boundaries of religious and secular communities. This is not uncommon for secularised Western nation-states (e.g., Fernando 2014; Huygens 2021; Scott 2017), where religion is often framed as opposing sexual freedom. Whilst the introduction to this dissertation describes the Dutch context more fully, here it is important to recall that the process of depillarisation went hand in hand with a call to break sexual taboos as well as to improve the sexual rights of women and (in this context, sexual) minorities. In particular, Christian churches were considered to be at the vanguard of pillarisation, playing a dominant role in restricting sexuality (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010). The narrative of secularisation became intimately connected to the narrative of sexual liberation and openness—a link that continues to dominate Dutch public discourse on sexual freedom. For example, becoming the first country in the world to open up civil marriage to same-sex couples (commonly referred to as ‘gay marriage’) in 2001 is still considered the peak defining moment of Dutch sexual freedom and emancipation. Such developments contribute to the prevailing self-image of the Dutch as progressive, secular, and sexually liberated (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016, 9–10; Hekma and Duyvendak 2011). Religious morals, particularly Christian and Islamic, are now often perceived to violate Dutch progressive sexual norms. Christianity is seen as a religion that, by definition, has unyielding difficulties with sex, whereas secularity is suggested to always be non-restrictive. For Muslims particularly, perceived sexual otherness has increasingly become a ground upon which to question their integration in—and belonging to—the moral nation (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Rahman 2014). Converts in any of these religious traditions can encounter social (secular) anxiety regarding their sexual ethics and practices, echoing the pervasive stereotype that religious women are sexually repressed. This chapter starts from their own perspectives, experiences, difficulties, and desires. Therefore, it not only adds to the existing literature on sexuality and religion, but also undermines common assumptions within secularist discourses.

In the following section, I describe my conceptual approach to sex and sexuality, and the (im)possibility of studying sexual practices from an ethnographic perspective. Yet despite the difficulties, I do opt for an analysis of *lived* sexual ethics in order to contribute to and problematise dominant discursive ideas about religion and sexuality. I suggest that this focus on the lives of converts, as they are often considered to move ‘in between’ different frameworks, offers additional insights into the perceived binary between secular and religious conceptions of sexuality. In the sections thereafter I compare my research material from all three case studies, examining the sexuality-related issues most frequently mentioned by my interlocutors: Marriage and virginity; menstruation; LGBTQI+ sexualities; and women’s

sexuality in relation to secular others. In the conclusion, I will show how my interlocutors' notions and experiences of sex relate to questions of modern selfhood, autonomy, and religious-sexual self-making.

5.1 Lived Religion and Sexuality

Sex has become one of the pivotal issues where boundaries between religion and secularity are imagined, highlighted, and discussed. In the study of religion and gender, the popular conviction that secularity and sexuality are indisputable allies has been questioned (e.g., Butler 2008; Cady and Fessenden 2013). The best-known example of a critical reflection on religion, the secular and sexuality comes from Joan Scott. In her book *Sex and Secularism*, Scott (2017) calls attention to the notion of secular normativity in relation to sexuality, and questions the presumed differences between (supposedly oppressive) religious and (supposedly egalitarian) secular sexual morals. To refer to the interwoven nature of sexuality and secularity, Scott popularised the concept 'sexularism'. Most such studies of 'the sexular' discuss the experiences and representations of sexual minorities in secular societies.¹⁰⁴ It is only more recently that a small number of academics have begun to look into hegemonic sexualities and sexual majorities in the study of the secular (e.g., Fernando 2014; Wiering 2017). Other religious studies scholars have focused on sexual minority subjectivities *within* religious contexts (e.g., Armour 2010; Peumans and Stallaert 2012; Schippert 2011; Wilcox 2009). However, also in this body of work, studies of cisgender heterosexual men and, especially, women are rare (e.g., Hoel 2015).

Whilst much work has been done on critically deconstructing the mobilisation of sexuality as a tool of exclusion (e.g., Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016; Puar 2007), less attention has been given to the question of what the everyday sexual ethics of religious practitioners can tell us about the impact of different sexual politics. I note that many scholars (including myself) struggle to study sexuality in a way that moves beyond discursive identity categorisations. Often, sexuality tends to become a label rather than a practice—something that, as Jeffrey Weeks (2016, 10) put it, 'presupposes the existence of a particular identity which pins you down like a butterfly on the table'. It should thus be no surprise that the majority of research on religion and sexuality looks into public discourses and representation, since it is rather difficult to study sexual practices beyond this (Boellstorff 2007; Spronk 2014). Nevertheless, and remaining aware of the methodological difficulties, I think it is important to add to existing scholarship on religion and sexuality from the perspective of everyday life. In this way, studying everyday sexuality in relation to conversion

¹⁰⁴ For Dutch case studies, see Buijs, Hekma, and Duyvendak (2011); Derks (2018); Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens (2010); and Schuh, Burchardt, and Wohlrab-Sahr (2012). For international case studies, see Cady and Fessenden (2013); Fernando (2014); and Spronk (2014).

can reveal much about the sexual ethics, and the way in which new practitioners deal with them, within different religious communities.

Sex and sexuality can refer to a seemingly infinite number of practices and desires. Positioned at the crossroad of the social and the individual, sexuality can be considered as something deeply personal whilst also being subject to strong societal, religious, and cultural norms and regulations (Butler 1993; Foucault 1976). Sexuality is one of the most often discussed topics in relation to religion, both by religious and secular actors, whilst at the same time being considered inherently private and personal. I follow a Foucauldian understanding that avoids reducing sexuality to either dimension. I understand sex and sexuality as multi-layered concepts, open to various interpretations. Queer theory challenged the notion of sexual identity as something fixed by arguing for an understanding for sexuality as fluid, constructed, and performed (e.g., Schippert 2011). This opened up the conceptualisation of sexuality as shaped by historical contexts, individual desires and experiences, as well as social discourses. Yet despite all the emphasis on the social constructedness and diversity of sex, Gloria Wekker (2006, 445) argued that ‘the mere existence of a sexual identity is [still] usually taken for granted’. In her book *The Politics of Passion* (2006), Wekker calls for scholars to pay more attention to the multiplicity of subjectivity and to reduce the emphasis on identity in the study of sex. In other words: That a woman might have sex with another woman does not immediately mean she *is* a lesbian, nor the other way around. In a similar vein, I am hesitant to limit the understanding of sexuality as only referring to identities. In a narrow sense, sex refers to a set of erotic practices¹⁰⁵. It is something someone does (e.g., ‘I have sex’) and that can encompass a whole variety of practices (masturbation, oral, virtual sex, etc.). Sexuality can refer to a performance or act (e.g., ‘I show my sexuality’), often related to sensuality, dress style, and courtship. Sexuality can also refer to personal desires, related to the subject of the desire (same sex, heterosexual) or by desired practices (bdsm, fetishes, asexuality). Furthermore, sexuality can constitute an important part of subject formation and self-identification (e.g., ‘I am homosexual’). I follow the work of cultural anthropologist Rachel Spronk (2014, 4), who argues that 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’. Whilst the terms ‘sex’ and ‘sexuality’ are often used interchangeably, I suggest ‘sex’ be used to refer to practices, whilst ‘sexuality’ encompasses a broader sphere of self-making, of which sex practices are but one element. My point is that sexuality is not only a question of identity, but rather is composed of many different

¹⁰⁵ The term ‘sex’ can also refer to a biologically determined category of male or female, which is then often framed as the counterpart to gender as a social construct. However, I follow Judith Butler (1993) who argued that bodies, and the presumed biological categorisations of sex, are also shaped by political circumstances and discourses, and neither gender nor sex should be essentialised.

dimensions. Religion and secularity both have an impact on the myriad different levels and understandings of sexuality and sex.

Studying sex as a practice has obvious methodological limits. Unless one is especially well connected to one's interlocutors, it is ethically and practically impossible to be in 'the bedroom' to observe sex, let alone to do participant observation. This might lead some to think that studying sex in daily life is not possible, but I believe this limit is not that different from other daily life practices. For example, can a researcher truly be present during personal prayers? Here too, a researcher would need to depend upon their interlocutors' reflections in order to understand the meaning of the practice and interlocutors might be hesitant to share such an intimate moment with an observer. From this perspective, having sex and an intimate prayer might share methodological limits. Yet it seems less appropriate to study the first than the second. I argue that this should, and could, change. Limited access to 'actual' practices should, in my view, not lead scholars of religion to refrain from studying sexuality beyond public discourse. Not being able to study the actions themselves should also not lead to the all too quick understanding that these practices cannot have relevance for scholars: What my interlocutors do interests me less than the way in which they give meaning to their practices and desires; how they reflect on their past and current sexual experiences; and how they incorporate religious discourses into their personal lives and sexual ethics.

I approach sexual ethics as situational, dialogical, and often characterised by ambivalence (Lambek 2010). In the expanding field of the anthropology of ethics, many scholars have highlighted the capacity of ordinary people to make balanced judgments that suit the immediate circumstances (e.g., Jouili 2015; Lambek 2010). Sexual ethics for converts, then, does not simply entail the application of some 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. Here, I find the concept of sexual self-fashioning, coined by anthropologists Rahil Roodsaz and Willy Janssen (2018) in their article about negotiations of modernity amongst Iranian youth, useful:

Sexual self-fashioning is here understood as a discursive process in which sexuality, rather than indicative of a fixed cultural position, is deployed in the constructions of a subjectively experienced coherent self. [...] Fashioning the self via sexuality, we assume, involves concerns, concessions, negotiations and strategies in dealing with a multi-layered diasporic and domestic discursive field of inclusion and exclusion, difference and identification. (Roodsaz and Jansen 2018, 6)

The notion of sexual self-fashioning as 'an ongoing process of storytelling' (Roodsaz and Jansen 2018, 6) enables a methodological insight into the sexual self without needing to

observe actual sexual practices. This is reflective of my general approach to conversion in this research, as a process of self-making and offers an important analytical tool to study sexualities. Whilst an empirically based analysis of sex does not exclude the importance of public discourses and politics, I do believe this complicates the story of an identity politics built on a supposed neat divide between secular and religious sex. Rather, daily life is more nuanced and complicated than can be adequately described by public opinion and discourse alone, and thus, in this approach, I start from these negotiations and ambivalences.

5.2 Marriage, Virginity and Women's Sexual Pleasure

Many of my participants did perceive changes to their sexual ethics as a result of conversion, especially concerning their own sexuality. As described in earlier chapters, the majority of my interlocutors upheld an understanding of gender as complementary difference, in which men and women are essentially different, yet (should) have equal value. For my interlocutors, this connected to the question of sexuality. For example, the Orthodox Jewish participants observed marital laws that state that sex should only occur within the context of a 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. Women's sexuality was often regarded as something extremely valuable—almost sacred—a woman's value residing mainly in the reproductive and domestic spheres. However, it is not the case that the women merely considered their bodies and sexuality to be only of value in a reproductive sense. Rather, the sexual ethics of my interlocutors also encompassed questions of sexual pleasure, flirtation, and self-positioning. Within the sacred institution of marriage, sex was to be cherished and encouraged as a way to potentially bring offspring, but also as a means to get closer to one's husband and to find intimacy and pleasure themselves. Jewish and Muslim converts would point out to me that men are actually supposed to give women pleasure according to teachings from the Torah and Talmud, or Qur'an and Hadith.¹⁰⁶ Hanneke told me: 'There is 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.' Initially, Hanneke and others with a similar story, were surprised to read such explicit teachings, since they were unfamiliar with this aspect of the religion. This provided them with arguments against the stereotype that

¹⁰⁶ Jewish women often referred to the Talmudic teachings of the *onah* that state that a husband is obliged to have sex if the wife desires, but not the other way around (see e.g., Talmud Yevamot 62b: 'Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Whosoever knows his wife to be a God-fearing woman and does not duly visit her is called a sinner' [JPS]). Muslim women would point to the several Hadith and teachings that emphasise the importance of mutual sexual pleasure (see e.g., Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadith 25: '[The Prophet] said: "Has not Allah made things for you to give away in charity? [...] and in the sexual act of each one of you is charity."')

religion and sexuality are each opposites, but also contributed to an understanding of sex as something sacred. Conversely, in the Christian case no mentions were made to biblical teachings about (women's) sexual pleasure but women still emphasised the importance of mutuality. 'Pleasure' is a less obvious term in official Christian doctrine and similar texts were not available in Christian scripture. However, my interlocutors built on the understanding of complementary difference and the mutuality of relationships to formulate a similar perspective toward sexual pleasure. For them, too, marriage was a space to explore sexual pleasure as well as directed toward procreation.

Importantly, marriage was almost exclusively talked about in heteronormative terms. The emphasis on heterosexual marriage was similar for all interlocutors, but the way they gave meaning to this idea was different in their daily lives. Contrary to what one might expect, none of the participants cited a romantic encounter or marriage as the reason that they became active in their religion. Indeed, many did not have a romantic partner when they took their first steps towards conversion. Simultaneously, however, many had experienced sex with men before marrying—in some cases before they converted and a few times also after. For young adult Muslim converts, past sexual experiences could fuel doubts about their eligibility—as non-virgins—to marry a Muslim partner, despite the widespread belief that conversion entailed forgiveness of prior sins. This fear played less of a role amongst Christian and Jewish converts. The women would often creatively negotiate any potential conflict between the community and their self-image. Most women (including Muslims) 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 didn't 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)

When Dunya became a practising Muslim, she felt it became *haram* (forbidden by Islamic rules) to have sex with her boyfriend, even though they had done so before. Instead, Dunya explained to him that she wanted to get married in order to have a *halal* (allowed by Islamic rules) relationship and to abstain from any further intercourse until after their marriage. This was similar to the experiences of Christian Anne. When she and her (then) boyfriend met—before both converted to Christianity—they knew quite quickly that they wanted to be young parents. She said: 'We were not religious yet, back then. So, we did not think to marry first, we were quite practical: We wanted to become parents and a wedding is expensive, so we will do that once we have the money.' However, when Anne came across church teachings about marriage and motherhood, her perspective changed, and she came to regard marriage as the 'proper' place to have children, an indirect reference to having sex. When we met, Anne and

her partner were planning their wedding. Another Muslim woman, Amal, also preferred to delay any further sexual activity until after their marriage and idealised marriage as the proper place to engage in sex. However, Amal spoke of how she and her partner continued to be intimate, considering their desire beyond their control, because their ‘love is too strong’. Within this narrative, Amal added that she and her boyfriend will do their best to live a faithful life and hope Allah will forgive them in the end.

The description from Amal also connects to the Christian case study, where many women living together with their boyfriends have intimate relationships. Sanne was also living with her boyfriend and intended to get married ‘someday’, but did not consider this a problem in need of quick solving. During an Alpha Course meeting (see section 3.1.3), Sanne and I discussed the issue of virginity. She told me in a soft voice: ‘Well I don’t think it is a problem here [in church]... [my boyfriend and I] live together too, and have sex, but we are not married. And I have never heard anyone say anything about it.’ For women who had been active longer in church, this was seen rather differently, especially for those in leadership positions or aspiring to those positions. Among young adult Christians (both ‘born’ and converts), couples would become engaged at a relatively young age—sometimes lasting for years—permitting their sexual relationship because it will eventually lead to marriage. Many times, too, women would be actively encouraged to get married. Most of the Christian converts with whom I spoke had experienced sexual relations before their conversion, but were less troubled by this than the Muslim women in the study. Isabel and Anne both said that they simply ‘didn’t know any better’ at the time. Lisa made a distinction between her pre- and post-converted self by adding: ‘I used to do that too, flirting, being with guys. I just did not know that there was something else to fill that emptiness inside of me, so I turned to men.’ Because conversion was understood to entail the redemption of previous (sexual) sins, these prior acts were not perceived as problematic. Moreover, in Hillsong churches, everyone is expected to redeem sins and changes in sexual behaviour (for example from ‘having multiple partners’ to ‘being in Christ’) could even be celebrated as examples of true conversion. Further, and again in contrast with some Muslim interlocutors, virginity itself seemed less of an issue. Rather, emphasis was placed on intention and cleanliness of heart and spirit.

In negotiating norms of marriage and physical intimacy, Christians had various strategies and experiences. Interestingly, they did not suggest it to be a matter of personal choice, but rather considered the (albeit ambivalent) guidelines surrounding physical contact to be guided by God (cf. Huygens 2021). Only a minority of Christian interlocutors rejected any form of sexual interaction (including masturbation). This sentiment was expressed by Rianne, with whom I spoke during a women’s weekend away. During that weekend, participants were invited to reflect on their sinful behaviour by going through a list of sins and checking all that applied (see section 3.7). This included many sins related to sexuality, ranging from flirting and ‘improper’ dreams to sexual intercourse. When Rianne and I discussed why masturbation was on the list, she explained that it should be avoided at any

cost since all forms of sexuality outside of heterosexual intercourse will ‘distract you from God’s plan’, continuing that masturbation carries with it the risk of enhancing devious sexual desires. Similar to other types of sinful behaviours, Rianne believed that the further someone has progressed in their relationship with God, the less risk one has of succumbing to sexual desires. In a similar vein, Emma stated:

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)

Emma was the leader of a Bible study group that I joined, and this view was shared by almost all of the other members of the group, except for one young (born Christian) woman. During one of the Bible groups I joined, this participant told about a date she had the preceding weekend. As common among young adult women, two other participants giggled and asked questions about this man’s looks. Emma was more reserved and she asked with a frown whether this man was Christian and whether he knew that she was a devoted Christian. When the woman replied not and expressed that they had kissed, Emma’s worry increased and she stated that ‘it is better to date Christian men, and you should really be careful with kissing... it’s not forbidden, but it is also better not to.’ This woman’s behaviour frequently led to discussions within the group, in which Emma would usually remind her that even kissing is dangerous, because it leads to temptations away from God’s path.

There was somewhat more diversity among my Jewish interlocutors. In Orthodox Jewish communities, men and women would typically not date unless it was with the prospect of an engagement, often set up by family, friends or a Jewish matchmaker. Channah met her ex-husband this way, with whom she met a few times before deciding to get married. However, Channah had sexual experiences before converting to Judaism herself. This was not considered a problem. Instead, Channah valued these experiences, since they enabled her to get to know her body and desires before committing to having sex with only one person. She now raises her daughter in an Orthodox Jewish environment and feels somewhat disheartened that her Jewish-born daughter will not have the same possibility to discover sex the way she had. If her children stay in that community (as Channah hopes), they will likely not be able to date different people and discover their sexuality prior to marriage. Furthermore, sex is highly regulated in Orthodox Judaism, where the marital laws are ideally strictly observed. This was not the case among non-Orthodox interlocutors. However, here I similarly observed the idealisation of marriage as the proper place to engage in sexual activities. Naomi is a Jewish woman in her late twenties who had her *gilyur* when she was a teenager. She framed her sexual values in terms of freedom when she said: ‘Freedom should also include the freedom not to [have sex before marriage]. I mean, I’ve only ever had sex with my current partner, with my fiancé.’ Naomi’s notions of sexual ethics are very much informed by Jewish scripture

and tradition, as well as what she called a ‘feminist’ language of freedom. This variety of interpretations points to the diversity among Jewish interlocutors. It also problematises the assumption that Orthodox Jewish people are ‘conservative’ whilst Liberal or Progressive people are sexually ‘progressive’. Instead, Channah and Naomi combined different experiences and frameworks in forming their sexual ethics: Channah would prefer the option of premarital sex within the Orthodox environment where this is generally not allowed, whilst Naomi, on the other hand, prefers not to engage in premarital sex even though her community does not object to this. Becoming Jewish, both women encountered a sexual ethics they were unfamiliar with, described most explicitly in the *Halachic* guidelines of the *onah*—the law that refers to the frequency at which a husband must satisfy his wives sexual needs—and the *niddah*, the marital laws around menstruation. In the next section I analyse how my interlocutors dealt with such regulations.

5.3 Menstruation and (Im)purity

My interlocutors often told me that they previously did not have the tools or language to see sex as something special, and consciously or subconsciously searched for a sexual ethics that considered sexuality as such. Part of the sacralisation of women’s bodies and sexuality was expressed in the regulation of women’s reproductive cycle. There were no guidelines put forward by the neo-Pentecostal churches in which I did fieldwork, and it is not common for Christian communities to have particular rituals in place around menstruation. This was different for Jewish and Muslim interlocutors, where menstruation and fertility were both ritualised and observed. It should be noted, however, that regulation of female sexuality and the coding of menstruation as impure is a worldwide and cross-cultural phenomenon (Katz 2002, 188) based on the association of femininity with nature, chaos, and pollution (Ortner 1974; Vance 1984). This logic is also present in wider (secular and religious) Dutch society, where there is still—albeit often subtle and implicit—a taboo on menstruation. This taboo tends to be more ritualised and explicit in certain religious traditions, such as Judaism and Islam. For women in these settings, conversion went hand in hand with a changing perception of their monthly cycle, in which menstruation equals a status of impurity.¹⁰⁷

Islamic regulations of impurity are broader than reproductive cycle alone, but the ‘factor most relevant to the female experience of the Muslim rules of ritual purity’ (Katz 2002, 194)

¹⁰⁷ I did not speak with any women about this topic who said they do not have a regular cycle. Furthermore, it is only speculation how this ritualisation of menstruation impacts, for example, transgender people. In what follows, the term ‘women’ refers to the (cisgender) interlocutors with whom I spoke about the topic, and who all had functioning female reproductive organs, whilst being mindful that not all, and not only, women menstruate. The only story about inability to conceive came from Christian Nina, but this was told as a story of healing (see section 3.6.2).

is menstruation. According to most Islamic interpretations, menstruation implies a state of impurity, similar to illness. It is not permitted to have sex whilst the woman is menstruating, but this is commonly limited to penetration, based on the Hadith (Katz 2002, 10–11; Mazuz 2012).¹⁰⁸ Besides this, men and women can interact as usual during menstruation, and sex without reproduction as the aim was not considered taboo. Whilst menstruating, women are not permitted to touch the Qur'an, to pray, or to fast during *Ramadan*. This applies to all women, both married and single. Although often interpreted by feminists as a sign of patriarchal body politics (Barlas 2019; Katz 2002), my interlocutors frequently told me that these rules are in place to offer women relief. Instead of being a sign of women's impurity and submission, menstrual rules were considered a form of care provided by Allah that allows women to rest and deal with the pains and other discomforts that come with the monthly cycle. This meaning often came up when interlocutors described and explained official rules. However, it was often not in accordance with their personal experiences. Despite interpreting the restrictions as a form of divine care, the majority of Muslim interlocutors told me that they felt uneasy with the imposition of such limitations during their menstruation. For Iman and Amal, not being able to pray was felt to break the structure of the day, making it especially difficult to wake up early for their morning prayers once their period is over. Amal, a convert in her early fifties, told me:

There are women who would say 'Great, I'm on a break for a few days!' [...] And men never get a break like that. But, on the other hand, I find it quite difficult to start everything up again. Because as soon as you have your rhythm, you have to stop and start all over again. (Amal)

Whilst struggling in this way to maintain one's daily rhythm might be common for all Muslim women, it was something converted women were entirely unfamiliar with before joining Islam. Marion Holmes Katz (2002) remarks that even though these might be conceived as stable, such regulations are context dependent and changing, both in the life cycle of menstruating people and along wider time spans. Modern developments in fertility and reproduction have had their impact on Muslim women's experiences as well. For example, Marjo Buitelaar (1993, 115) noted that 'these days, many women use birth-control pills, which makes it possible to postpone menstruation until Ramadan has passed', since many women would prefer to be able to fast the full month of *Ramadan*. This was also the case for some women in my fieldwork, as were other contemporary interventions. Take for example Yara, who also finds it difficult to not be able to pray, because she misses the moments of

¹⁰⁸ Qur'an Surah Al-Baqarah 2:222: 'They ask you about menstruation. Say, 'It is a vexation. Withdraw from women during menstruation and do not approach them until they are clean. When they are clean, come to them as God has commanded you.' God loves those who repent, and He loves those who keep themselves clean.' (QAJ)

devotion and the relationship with Allah during those days. She found a way to continue these moments by reading a part of the Qur'an five times a day, when she would otherwise pray. Because menstruating women are not permitted to physically touch the book, Yara innovatively uses an app on her mobile phone instead.

In Judaism, menstruation regulations are limited to married women, but were experienced as more disruptive than Islamic regulations were for Muslimas. Married Orthodox Jewish women often observed the rules of the *niddah*. The term *niddah* refers to the Jewish 'family purity laws' and is often literally translated as 'impure'¹⁰⁹ (Cohen 2009, 66). The rules of the *niddah* are based on the Tenach and further expanded in the Talmud.¹¹⁰ On top of the understanding of menstruation as indicating a state of impurity—similar to Islam—the *niddah* regulates sex in such a way that intercourse only happens during the (two, most often) weeks a woman is most fertile (Avishai 2008). In the common interpretation and practice of *niddah* in Jewish Orthodoxy, spouses would have no physical contact whatsoever whilst the woman is menstruating, and seven days thereafter. They would, for example, not share the same bed, based on Lev. 15:24, which states that 'if a man lies with her, her impurity is communicated to him; he shall be unclean seven days' (JPS). As an example of this segregation, Sara described that she would not hand the salt directly to her husband during dinner, but put it on the table first before he picks it up again. After a woman has had no discharge for seven days, she is expected to visit the ritual bath—*mikvah*—after which she is pure once again. This means that for many women, they are in a state of impurity for two weeks per month. When women doubt whether they are still bleeding, they often visit a rabbi (or preferably, a rabbi's wife, called a *rebbetzin*) to check their underwear.

For many Orthodox Jewish women, the *niddah* provided religious significance to their body and sexuality, albeit in different ways. Sara told me that limiting (sexual) contact keeps her marriage exciting, and that the ritual cleansing ceremony in the *mikvah* creates a form of sensual tension. Whilst she had to get used to the practice, today, it enhances the sacralised status of her sexuality. Others struggled with the *niddah* more, such as Channah:

The relationship with the rabbi can be that intimate; you'll 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)

¹⁰⁹ *Niddah* can refer to menstruation itself, the laws and practices around menstruation, or to a menstruation woman. A woman can thus be 'a *niddah*', 'in *niddah*', or 'observing the *niddah*' (Ner-David 2009, 117). In this section of the chapter, 'the *niddah*' refers to the practices and laws.

¹¹⁰ Several sections of Leviticus 15 form the basis of the *niddah*: [19] 'When a woman has a discharge, her discharge being blood from her body, she shall remain in her impurity seven days; whoever touches her shall be unclean until evening; [22]: And anyone who touches any object on which she has sat shall wash his clothes, bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; [28] When she becomes clean of her discharge, she shall count off seven days, and after that she shall be clean.' (JPS)

When I spoke to her, Channah had been divorced and since she was not now expected to have sex, she did not have to adhere to the *niddah* rituals anymore. Similar to Rachel (who is unmarried), Channah experienced this as a relief from one of the most difficult aspects of being an Orthodox Jewish woman. Sara, in contrast, did not share this feeling of discomfort, although she did find ways to negotiate the limits of the *niddah* to fit her own context. When we met, her first child was only three months old and the rule not to pass something to her husband appeared untenable when it came to their baby. Not following the strictest interpretation of the touch rules, Sara does pass her baby to the arms of her husband when she is having her period. This motivated the couple to reconsider some other aspects of this rule. In her words, Sara and her husband ‘treat each other as if we were good friends during those weeks’, meaning they would give a kiss on the cheek or hug, but not have sex and not sleep in the same bed.

The majority of Liberal and Progressive Jewish women do not observe the *niddah*, and many synagogues do not even have a *mikvah*. The LJC shul in Amsterdam does have one, but I was told by the rabbis that only a limited number of women use it monthly. Some interlocutors told me that the difference in gender and sexual regimes was a primary motivation to seek a Liberal or Progressive, rather than Orthodox *giyur*. For such women, procreation was not a necessity for a spiritually rewarding life, and sex was only conceived as something pleasurable (see also Werczberger 2013). Although pleasure was also important for other interlocutors, procreation was seen as equally important for the majority of Christian, Muslim and Jewish women. I did not meet any Liberal women who observe the *niddah*, but some of them did have a small ritual cleansing ceremony at home after their menstruation. Thus, we see that for these women, becoming Jewish did, albeit to varying degrees, entail relating to these traditional Jewish prescriptions.

I previously suggested that religion is learned through the body, and this is very much applicable to the menstruating female body (e.g., Avishai 2008; Fedele 2012). Before conversion, menstruation was often considered a mundane week of the month—albeit often a rather uncomfortable one. Now, for the women converts in my research, the menstrual cycle became emphasised, monitored, and sacralised (or ‘enchanted’¹¹¹). The regulation of women’s menstrual cycles when mediated through a religious framework was most unfamiliar for women who grew up in an irreligious environment. Converts to Judaism and Islam had to negotiate certain rules and aspirations that were often accompanied by feelings of alienation.

¹¹¹ In March 2021, the final conference of our larger research project (entitled ‘Religious Transformation and Gender’) included a panel session with, amongst others, scholars of religion and sexuality Brenda Bartelink, Kim Knibbe, and Rachel Spronk, and Jelle Wiering. The panel (Wiering et al. 2021) coined the concept of ‘sexual enchantment’, meaning ‘particular features of sex that make it something extraordinary for people’. Although still in an explorative phase, the scholars suggested that this concept is useful to think about the way in which sexuality is experienced as something ‘extraordinary’ in both secular and religious domains (see also Spronk 2014; Wiering 2020).

Simultaneously, however, such regulation provided a feminine-coded religious experience that sacralised women's fertility and bodies (albeit whilst essentialising this to their functioning reproductive organs). It has been argued that ovulation tests and contraceptives regulate reproductive cycles as well, but in a secular manner (Klassen 2019). An important difference is that reproductive care from secular medicine is largely considered to provide menstruating people with sexual self-governance and freedom (Fernando 2014). To the contrary, in Islamic and Jewish frameworks, especially from a secularist perspective, purity rules regarding menstruation are a sign of patriarchal control. This was reinterpreted by many interlocutors as just a different type of reproductive care, added to existing medical care and with more space for women to take rest. Some interlocutors told me that they use contraceptives and that this does not clash with their religious morals, although not all women spoke to me about this issue. Yara, for example, used the birth control pill because she was married, but did not want to get pregnant (yet). Channah told me that she partly recognised the stereotype that Orthodox Jews have a lot of children, but also knew that contraceptives were regularly suggested by rabbis—and were *halachically* permissible—to women in the early years of their marriage (to allow the relationship to grow before adding children to the mix), or once they have had children (for example for health reasons). In a contemporary context, regulating menstruation and perceiving the menstruating body as being in some way impure was often difficult, but also at times a welcome change to their lives before converting. After looking into these sexual practices and ethics in relation to heteronormative marriages, the next section of this chapter discusses ethics concerning non-normative sexuality, in particular the views of converted women towards same-sex sexuality.

5.4 Same-Sex Sexuality

As previously articulated, the Dutch context has a particular history of sexual emancipation in which the acceptance—and even celebration—of certain LGBTQI+ identities has come to be embedded in nationalist secular imaginaries, set against a religious or ethnic Other. Homosexuality was most often brought up by my interview partners as a field of tension, since it did not concur with the idea of heterosexual marriage as the only 'proper' setting in which to engage in sex and/or sexuality.¹¹² My interlocutors were generally raised in irreligious environments in which, to their recollection, any explicit rejection of homosexual acts was rare. Conversion would often prompt (non-religious) family members and friends to

¹¹² My interlocutors mainly used the term homosexuality (*homoseksualiteit*, in Dutch) to refer to all same-sex actions and desires. Some Christian participants used the (often perceived as derogatory) term homophilia (*homofilie*, in Dutch) instead. In this section of the chapter, I will use the term homosexuality instead of LGBTQI+ when referring to my interlocutors' statements and fieldwork setting, since it is closest to the emic discourse of my fieldwork.

question whether they had ‘turned against’ homosexuality—something that was especially true for Muslim converts. This is a particularly striking illustration of the way ‘sexular’ thinking, in which homophobia is linked with Islam, can become ‘part and parcel of “lived worlds”’ (Verkaaik and Spronk 2011, 84). Some converts had indeed changed their ideas about same-sex sexuality. One example is that of Muslim Dunya, who said:

My views about homosexuality changed quite a lot. I considered it to be normal before, but now I do view it as something which to me, in my view, is not right. Because I just believe that a man and woman are made for one another, and not a man and man, or woman and woman. (Dunya)

Dunya later told me that she had felt a bit uncomfortable voicing her perspective in the public space we were meeting (a small café), because she feared that people would overhear and judge her. It appears that homosexuality is conceived as being so accepted that rejecting it openly has become a form of ‘coming out’, in Dunya’s terms, even though it is only very recently that such a view has ceased to be the commonly accepted norm in Dutch society.

Most interlocutors had a multi-layered argument with respect to homosexuality. Especially Muslims and Jewish converts would emphasise their ‘personal view’—as Dunya did above—and were careful to stress that their perspectives did not necessarily represent the broader religious community. Amongst Muslim, Orthodox Jewish, and Christian converts, I often found a similar discourse: Sexual acts between two people of the same sex 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 (see Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2004). This discourse was strongest in the Pentecostal Christian fieldwork setting. Here, the rejection of homosexuality was often only implicitly addressed in church services by advocating sexual contact only between heterosexual, married couples. Claudia, the pastor of Life Hope Church, told me that almost all newcomers ask the question about ‘homophilia’ (in her words), but said that such ‘sensitive topics’ were not suitable for discussion in open services. In more private settings such as Bible groups, these types of conversations were possible. In all church communities I regularly came across a discourse in which homosexual acts were explicitly rejected and regarded as sinful. This was not considered to be a ‘personal view’ the same way that Muslim converts would describe it to me, but rather formulated as based on a Biblical truth. The following is an excerpt of my fieldwork that describes a Bible study group I attended, in which Danielle asked what the view of the church was towards homosexuality, remarking that ‘I believe that God just loves anyone’. Emma, the group leader, replied:

Well... I know that God loves anyone and will abandon no one. But if you take a look at the Bible, it very clearly states that homosexuality is a sin. And it very clearly states that God loves the sinner but hates the sin. And I also think that,

yeah, you know, it's not a disease of course, so healing [*genezing*] is not the right term... but I do think it can be remedied [*verholpen*]. (Emma)¹¹³

When Danielle remarked that this was 'quite a harsh' ruling, Emma agreed that it was a difficult topic. Nevertheless, Emma stated: 'The Bible is clear about the matter: Something is a sin, or it is not.' Then, Danielle asked whether the love of someone ('what's in their heart') should determine their sinfulness rather than the person they have sex with. I additionally asked whether the person or the acts are deemed sinful—whether it was about the sinner or the sin. Emma further explained:

I believe, I read, and I *know* that God created man and woman to be with each other, not man and man, nor woman and woman. The way we are is the normal way. People who deviate from that are not immediately lost and you could still return to God, but I do think it can be changed, you can deal with your sins differently. Everything sinful comes from the devil. (Emma)

Emma framed the rejection of homosexuality in line with other types of sinful behaviour, echoing a Pentecostal understanding that all sins are equally sinful (see section 3.2), and considered this to be a Biblical truth that could be 'known'. Furthermore, she assumed a similarity in the group, a 'we' that is heterosexual and thus 'normal'. Emma's statement did not seem to convince Danielle, who replied that she 'find[s] it hard to believe that homosexuals are evil [*duivels*]'. After this, Emma was noticeably frustrated and started crying because in her view she did her best to explain, but Danielle simply 'd[id] not understand'. When we had reassured Emma that we did not mean to attack her, but simply wanted to understand her perspective, Danielle said that she valued how we can have such in-depth discussions about moral issues: 'I like that we can have different opinions and talk about those.' However, this was not what Emma had meant, who stated once again: 'Well, it is written in the Bible. It is not allowed.'

This exchange exposes a rather uncompromising view on homosexuality amongst Pentecostal church (in this case a Bible group) leaders. So early into my fieldwork, I was not yet used to such an open and firm rejection of homosexuality and remember well how much this affected me. Before starting the fieldwork, I had already heard about the homonegativity in these churches and this episode partly confirmed my own stereotypes that, despite my efforts to the contrary, still impacted my response. It also sparked my own anxieties about being a queer woman in such an environment, which I never spoke about in this group. I had

¹¹³ Interestingly, but outside the scope of this dissertation, 'conversion' is the common English term to refer to conservative, often Evangelical, therapies that seek to cure or 'reorient' homosexual desires (Gerber 2011). In this citation, Emma hints at the possibility of such 'conversion therapy', but it was not mentioned explicitly by my interlocutors. The past years, conversion therapy (*homogenezingstherapie*, in Dutch) has been increasingly scrutinised in Dutch political and public discourse (Derks 2019).

decided that I would tell them if they asked, but never proactively set out to challenge their reading of me as heterosexual. Although I rationally explained this by statements that the fieldwork ‘was not about me’, and that I do not ‘believe in identity labels anyway’, this approach was certainly underlined by my own emotions and a fear that my openness might limit my access and safety.¹¹⁴ The evening of this Bible group, I felt distraught and contacted a friend and colleague: ‘I think I made an interlocutor cry tonight!’ Only after a moment of reflection, and after more conversations, I noticed how this type of discussion also demonstrates that individual believers could have different perspectives. This was less the case for people in leadership positions such as Emma, who repeated the general discourse as I heard it from the pastors in her church. There might be Bible group leaders who individually disagreed with this perspective, but who refrained from questioning the views of the pastors whilst speaking to other church members. I also managed to calm my own anxieties and emotions on the matter and actually saw many different perspectives, some of which countered such stereotypes of Christianity and LGBTQI+ issues.

The acceptance of LGBTQI+ people and sexual practices has been a major point of contestation between Orthodox and Liberal Jewish communities. In Orthodoxy, having sex with someone of the same gender is not permitted, however, different from Christian settings, this is not a topic of discussion within the communities. As Channah said, it is often as if homosexuality does not exist: ‘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.’ People who do come out as homosexual can be asked to remove themselves from the community, and the topic is silenced. The problem is not so much if someone ‘is’ homosexual, but rather the extent to which these practices are visible and outspoken. Sara has many non-Jewish friends, some of whom identify as gay, and this is often frowned upon by more conservative members of her community. Nevertheless, she does try to advocate for acceptance of homosexuality, at least by making it possible to discuss such matters, even if the space to do so is marginal within Orthodox Jewish communities.

Whilst the inclusion of LGBTQI+ people has been an important marker of difference for Liberal Judaism globally, the interpretation varies (Meyer 1995; see also section 2.1). Liberal Jewish communities do not explicitly reject homosexuality, but there is a distinction between the traditional Jewish marriage *chuppah* and same-sex marriage. An openly lesbian rabbi told me that her authority is often undermined, and she is frustrated with the continuing

¹¹⁴ I did not discuss my own relationship and sexuality with the majority of my Jewish and Muslim interlocutors either, but the emphasis on the refusal of same-sex sexuality was not as strong in the Muslim and Jewish fieldwork as it was in the Pentecostal space. Hence, I was not as anxious for my inclusion and safety there, as it simply never came up.

distinction between types of relationships. In general, homosexuality is more or less acceptable, but not spoken of. This was repeated by Bracha:

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)

For Bracha, openness about non-heterosexual forms of sexuality, rather than being seen as embodied or personal, was perceived as a political view. In this type of reasoning, heterosexuality maintains the norm, whilst homosexuality is politicised. Some independent Progressive *shuls* have a different view on the matter and often used the abbreviation LGBTQI+ rather than homosexuality as a generic term. These Progressive synagogues offer a *chuppah* to all couples, and some organise events such as a *Shabbat* service during Pride week in Amsterdam. Some interlocutors active in these groups contributed to this inclusivity, but other participants were unfamiliar with LGBTQI+ tolerance discourse prior to becoming Jewish. For Karen, this explicit gay-friendly atmosphere in the progressive *shul* in fact limited her sense of belonging. She stated: 'I thought, well, I'm coming to *shul* and not to the Gay Pride, you know? I felt that the balance was gone.' In the case of Karen, learning to be Jewish in this particular community brought with it a change in her ethics and a self-making as 'gay friendly'. However, her remarks also show that an outward LGBTQI+ acceptance of a community is not necessarily reflected in the perspectives of the individual members.

Often, religion is ascribed a moral coherence from a secular perspective. However, as in all communities, different moral views exist and compete with one another. Moral deliberation about questions of sexuality does not only involve negotiations between religious and non-religious ethics, but also between views within a religious community. 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 such ethics in everyday life. For many interlocutors, the importance of love and care for others surpassed any rejection of what they perceived to be deviant sex, such as homosexuality. This affected how converts responded to LGBTQI+ people in their direct environment. For example, Yara's mother identifies as lesbian and Yara told me that, whilst the lesbian relationship of her mother is not allowed 'according to Islam', she personally rejected neither her mother nor her mother's partner. Instead, she emphasised that respect and care for other people is one of the most important Islamic values, especially with regard to one's parents. For her, this respect implied the acceptance of different perspectives on homosexuality. This is similar to the experiences of Lisa, a Christian convert who told me in tears how difficult it was for her that many of her fellow congregates reject her lesbian sister: 'What really annoys me about Christians is that they have all these opinions but don't actually empathise with others. [...] It's not up to you to

judge; God will do that!’ Similar to Sara, Lisa tries to find space in her personal religious framework in order to accommodate LGBTQI+ people, but the official structures in the communities themselves did not respond to these efforts or change their discourse. Furthermore, many would be strictest with fellow believers in their acceptance of homosexuality, but would not be as critical of non-believers. Bos and Bouchtaoui (2010, 282) remarked that this different moral evaluation might enhance the acceptance of secular LGBTQI+ people, whilst simultaneously limiting that of fellow Christian, Muslim, and (Orthodox) Jewish LGBTQI+ individuals. The majority of my research participants identified as heterosexual, with the exception of Jewish Ruth and Christian Lian. Their stories are even more revealing of the links between conversion and sexual self-making.

5.4.1 ‘When I Became Jewish, I Became a Lesbian’

Ruth is a member of a LGBTQI+ friendly Progressive synagogue. 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—she had ‘met her new partner in *shul*, and that was a woman’. She later added that this meant: ‘Actually, I am a lesbian, but I didn’t know that.’ In this statement she described her preference for a relationship with a woman in terms of identity. Falling in love with a woman, was an expression of a lesbian ‘being’ (‘I am a lesbian’) that Ruth had been unaware of, she ‘didn’t know’. For Ruth, this was new as she had never been in love with a woman before. However, her lesbian ‘being’ was not so much an expression of an inherent, ever-present self, as shaped under the influence of changes in her religious thinking and actions:

Because I had already gone through the process of *giyur* and a transformation of my inner strength and spirituality, I could be more honest about other things in my life, like: ‘Hey, can I also be open to a woman?’ and ‘am I bisexual or am I actually a lesbian?’ That was easier, because I had already done the *giyur*. (Ruth)

Because she had already done so much ‘work on herself’ through her conversion trajectory—meaning thinking about ethics and values, and implementing Jewish practices in her everyday life—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-making, just the same as Judaism offers tools to understand heterosexuality and gender difference for many other women.

The story of Lian offers somewhat of a counter image to this. As said, the neo-Pentecostal research setting had the most explicitly negative discourse about same-sex sexuality, albeit shaped in a ‘love the sin, hate the sinner’ discourse. This proved difficult for Lian when she joined her church as a teenager, around the same time that she began to explore her sexuality and started to identify as lesbian. In her church, homosexuality (which is

the term she used) is disapproved and as such the environment in which she formed her religious-sexual self was starkly different than that of Ruth. She told me how it had shocked her when she first heard how her fellow congregants thought about this:

Lian: They clearly stated that it's not allowed: Know that it's sinful and disgusting and that there is no... that such people are not real Christians. [...] I thought: 'Okay, but then you're also talking about me, because I am like that.

Lieke: Did you say this to them?

L: No, no, I didn't dare to. No... It shocked me, it really shocks me. I found that very intense. (Lian)

Because of this experience, Lian asked for a meeting with her pastor, who helped her in her struggle. Following the 'hate the sin, love the sinner' discourse, some religious LGBTQI+ people choose, or are asked, to never engage in sexual relationships. Lian's pastor also proposed such a celibate lifestyle for her. When we discussed this, Lian got very emotional. At intervals she told me how this had affected her:

It was very hard to hear from him that the best choice was to stay single, in celibacy. [...] That was very difficult... it was... that broke me, it truly broke me. I was torn at that moment, so uhm... the idea that you would deliberately choose to never have intimacy with someone you love... that... no, I couldn't handle that. (Lian)

Whenever I discuss such stories with my own secular peers or colleagues, I often encounter a misunderstanding about why people in such a position would stay in the church, knowing that their sexuality is not accepted. Lian never considered leaving her church. Indeed, it motivated her to work on her faith and ethics more, to read a lot, and engage with other Christian LGBTQI+ people. Even though this had been a struggle, she does feel at home in her church. In a (subconscious) attempt to find complementarity between her own experiences and desires, and Christian ethics, she stressed the importance of love, intimacy and sustainable relationships (see also Huygens 2021). From this perspective, she did not see a difference between heterosexual and non-heterosexual relations: 'If you treat people with love, and if there is true consent, there is really no problem.' Today, the question about celibacy continues to anger her and she strives to have more openness toward sexual diversity in her religious community.

All interlocutors were very aware of the dominant Dutch framing by which religion and homosexuality are paired as oppositional. A strong theme here is that all religious people (especially those following 'traditional forms' of religion) oppose homosexuality, and that religion in general is a stumbling block on the way to true secular emancipation. This oppositional stance, between religious and secular views of homosexuality, was to some

extent reiterated by the participants in my project. However, it is too much of a generalisation to argue that all religious people reject same-sex sexualities and are therefore excluded from the wider dominant society, which presupposes acceptance of sexual diversity as a unifying moral feature. Heterosexual interlocutors were often met with questions about their acceptance of homosexuality by non-religious people in their own social environments. As such, describing or justifying views regarding LGBTQI+ issues itself becomes, to some extent, part of the conversion narrative. Moreover, the stories of Ruth and Lian do not only question religious ethics about sexuality, but also offer a mirror to the broader secular society in which religion is all too often framed as an obstacle toward acceptance of sexual diversity. Certainly, there are many LGBTQI+ people who struggle with their religion and exclusion from their community. However, doctrines and official discourses are negotiated and not directly translated into everyday life. For Ruth and Lian, their self is inherently fluid and multiple: They are both lesbian and religious and do not prioritise either aspects of their lives, which shows that religion and sexual non-normativity do not necessarily have to clash. Instead, sexuality can be an integral part of conversion as self-making process. As this last section has shown, many converts would negotiate or question these norms, either within their own personal framework or within their religious community. The last section to this chapter continues the analysis of my interlocutor's self-positioning in relation to the wider secular society.

5.5 Sexuality and Secular Others

Sexual self-fashioning (Roodsaz and Jansen 2018) or the making of a religious-sexual self is a complicated process of self-positioning and negotiation. Via sexuality, women told me about their selves and the meaning given to their status as religious women. It was especially in relation to—and against—the imagined secular other that converted women reconsidered and discussed their perspective of sexual behaviour. This was a common trend amongst all interlocutors, especially young Christian and Muslim adults, and this is where the focus of this last section lies.

Many Muslim converts felt that in their non-religious urban environments, sexuality has become a commodity and had thus lost its spiritual significance. Hanan, who was in her thirties when we met in 2017, 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. On this point, Hanan suggested:

Faith gives us guidelines on how things should be. But because we see [faith] as something foreign in the Netherlands, we think such guidelines are strange. [...]

You see, it's not a positive thing, to be looked at, to start feeling insecure, and to believe that everyone should be naked all the time. It's very misogynistic that you're always seen as a sex object here! Because that's what men do, and women don't even realise it! (Hanan)

In Islam, Hanan found a framework that protects women's bodies and in which they are considered to be of almost sacred value, rather than commercialised and commodified—something that worries her about the Netherlands. Similar to those born Muslim (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020; see also Fadil 2011; Scott 2013), converts to Islam described wearing loose clothing and the *hijab* in terms of protection and safeguarding women's bodies. Converts would also commonly frame this as a withdrawal from the sexualisation of women. According to Yara, sexualisation refers to the sexual objectification of women's bodies and the visibility of sex in the public space. Because she wears a headscarf, Yara noticed that she is no longer catcalled or seen as an object of lust (see section 4.7.1). By withdrawing from commercialised sexualisation, Yara remarked that covering up can indeed be quite a feminist act.

I observed a similar tendency—a distancing from perceived secular understandings of sexuality—amongst converts in Christian communities. I was especially struck by the ways in which Christian converts, especially young adults, would explicitly distinguish themselves from the sexual ethics they associated with mainstream secular culture. For example, the members of the Bible study group I joined—mostly young adult women—rejected dating apps and regularly pointed out how secular university fraternities/sororities would be worlds of 'one-night stands'. In our discussion, Bible study members would often foreground issues of intimacy and sexuality when they talked about their faith. This partly reflects long-standing anxieties regarding sexual desire in Christian traditions, expressed most strongly today by a certain type of conservative Evangelicalism (Kamitsuka 2010; Strhan 2015). It can additionally be a reflection of anxieties common in this age group, where young adults experience pressure to be sexually active. I also noticed an underlying, albeit implicit concern amongst the Christian women regarding the extent to which they were different from their secular peers when it came to their moral conduct and outlook. In her study of Evangelicals in London, Anna Strhan (2015, 169) reveals a similar concern in which the women concerned argued that they are 'shaped by the same moral currents as those they seek to be different from'. For the Christian converts especially, sexuality was a relatively clear-cut domain via which to separate their views and acts from those of their secular peers (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020, 151).

In the Jewish communities of my fieldwork, sexual ethics were not so much framed in opposition to an imagined secular other, nor did they explicitly consider women's sexuality in need of protection from loose 'sexular' morals. I can only speculate why this is the case, but I did notice that today Jewishness comes up far less in public debates than Christianity and

Islam, and is rarely associated with prudery or sexual backwardness. In other words, there is less of a strong public image that Jewish converts might feel the need to counter. Another reason might be related to the average age of the women in these communities. Questions of sexuality seemed to be particularly prevalent amongst young adult women, whilst my Jewish interlocutors tended to be older in average age, but I did not notice a difference between the younger and older Jewish interlocutors. There was, however, a difference in positioning by Orthodox and Liberal or Progressive Jewish women. Similar to other interlocutors, Orthodox Jewish women 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. Such view of sexuality as something sacred and valued was common amongst all of my interlocutors, however, Jewish women would not typically frame this as starkly different from secular norms and morals. Some did formulate this as an important difference with Christianity, which was conceived as more repressive toward sexuality. Liberal and Progressive Jewish women also repeated this emphasis on the sacred value of women's sexuality, but would do so in a way that separated them from Orthodox Judaism, which was thought to be too restrictive and controlling on the issue of sex. Liberal Jewish groups came about especially by breaking with the conservative gender and sexual norms and practices in Orthodoxy (see section 2.1)—something that explains the explicit role sexuality played in their self-positioning in relation to other Jewish groups.

Christian and Muslim women in particular would use examples of sex as a means to distinguish themselves from their secular peers in a form of social critique. Doing so, they do not just respond to their immediate contacts, but they speak back to the hegemonic discourse in society in which sexuality was experienced as 'disenchanted', void of religious morals (Wiering 2020, 170–71). Indeed, my interlocutors took a political and religious stance against secular sexual norms. In our collaborative analysis, anthropologist Daan Beekers and I found that this social critique via sexuality is a particular strategy for converted Muslim women and not for born Muslims (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020). We suggested that several factors can explain this difference. Born Muslims tend to be perceived as 'other' in public discourse and are less inclined to position themselves against Dutch culture via sexuality. This is different from (born and converted) Pentecostal and Evangelical Christians, who were mostly part of the white majority population and framed their difference mainly in the trope of sexual morality. For them, emphasising sexual otherness was less risky than for born Muslims, who were already conceived as other. Socialised in a non-Muslim environment, Muslim converts did not grow up with these exclusionary processes. Instead, they often felt the need to justify their choices to their family who were worried that they gave up parts of their sexual freedom. In this light, converted Muslims and Christians had similar strategies by which sexuality came to function as an example of the difference between secular and religious morality. There are several reasons for this expressly political positioning of converted Christian and Muslim interlocutors. One is that their conversion generally entailed acquiring a sexual ethics that

partly conflicted with the morals with which they had been raised. This was also a means via which to signal their conversion and change, both in relation to their non-religious social environment and in their new community. Further reasons could be that some did have sexual partners and wore more revealing clothing prior to their conversion and aspired to find a way to reinterpret their past self from an explicitly religious perspective. Others had been uncomfortable with the gender norms and sexual expectations with which they had been raised and found a strong connection to religious sexual norms. Lastly, such social critique can also be explained by a spiritual desire to define womanhood in ways that are not determined by the sexualisation and commodification of female bodies, but rather are protected by religious codes and guidelines. This last element was common amongst my Jewish interlocutors as well, but they were less keen to make this the primary distinguishing factor of their community within wider (secular) Dutch society.

Conclusion

The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim converts I worked with all grappled with questions about sex and sexuality. Even though this is quite common (as a colleague rhetorically asked: ‘Don’t we all grapple with sex?’), the sexual self-making of my interlocutors was intimately linked to their religious process. 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, way. Sexual practices cannot be separated from wider moral views and normative frameworks, but I do think that the starting point—from everyday practices and ethics—provides depth to otherwise often simplistic portrayals of sex and religion as polar opposites. Instead, this approach to sexuality, starting from women’s daily lives shows how religious change affects bodies. At the same time, it shows how these bodies speak back to dominant public conceptions and stereotypes. Most interlocutors considered women’s sexuality as something sacred and cherished. They interpreted religious sexual guidelines and views as providing sexual value and self-worth, rather than being a sign of sexual repression, as was common in their secular environment. Members of all groups opposed—in their eyes—explicit and open expressions of sexuality in the public domain, which were seen as immoral and sexualising. The study of everyday sexual ethics also reveals what women gain from such an emphasis on sexuality. It confirms a sense of authenticity in their conversion by adhering to religious guidelines and constructing their personal ethics in line with those of their chosen religious community. Inviting a religious ethic to guide what was experienced as the most intimate sphere of daily life affirmed their conversion.

Many interlocutors pursued a personal sexual ethics in which sexual contact outside of heterosexual marriage was (albeit to varying degrees) avoided. There are many different attitudes to marriage and virginity, and even more variety between practices and ideals. For

some, all kinds of romantic relationships prior to marriage were inappropriate, whilst others considered long-term relationships and engagements as spaces in which sexual acts were permitted. The views toward homosexuality and the idealisation of heterosexual marriage shows that many converted women to some extent adhere to heteronormative religious frameworks, in which LGBTQI+ sexualities are more or less explicitly rejected. I noticed how many women have a strong sexual ethic, but would not adhere to this in practice, or would negotiate the rules to accommodate their own sexual and religious desires. Their sexual ethics were often not only based on religious precepts, but should be regarded as an area of negotiation. As a result, the sexual ethics in the everyday lives of converts are 'heterogeneous and situational, rather than stable and one-directional' (Beekers and Schrijvers 2020, 150), and are dependent on social context and personal intentions. This focus on everyday sexual ethics contrasts with larger quantitative studies of religion and sexuality, which often feed into stereotypes of 'prude religion' versus 'free secularism'. Instead, the way in which women converts deal with sexuality are characterised by ambivalence and negotiation. Different aspects of sexuality were assessed by converts in different ways, such as people identifying as homosexual and sexual acts between people of the same gender.

In describing their perspective, the use of the terms such as 'choice' and 'free will' was consistent. Some interlocutors suggested that this is an expression of freedom of choice for conservative family values against dominant expectations of sexual freedom, whilst other elements of this sexual freedom were confirmed. Many interviewees told me that they find more self-worth in their religion and feel empowered by the new regulations they encounter concerning women's reproductive cycle and marriage. 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 regulation. 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. However, at the same time that they appreciated religious sexual morals and practices, they would also often feel uncomfortable and insecure about their own experiences and question such regulations, either personally or in the context of their communities.

Overall, converted women in all case studies upheld an idea of a modern sexual self as autonomous and exercising individual sovereignty over her own body. At the same time, many explicitly disconnected their understanding of sexuality from the secular, and instead legitimated their view via 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 observing the *niddah*). Yet this does not mean that religious discourse is essentially opposed to secular discourse, since both are sides of the same coin and interact with one another, despite the fact that the secular and the religious are often conceived as opposites in public debates. Sexual embodiments and ethics cannot be understood as either religious or secular.

Rather, they could be conceived as representing a form of modern subjectivity where authenticity has become the most important mode of selfhood, and sexual freedom has become the most important marker of modernity.

Chapter 6
Questions of Belonging
‘No Longer Part of the Majority’

I chose the religion. But you do *giyur* to become Jewish for the people.

—Ilana, Jewish

I hope your readers won't only look at those stereotypes about Christians in the news, which shows just the bad things.

—Lisa, Christian

As a convert, you're thrown in at the deep end and you're suddenly no longer considered a part of the white majority.

—Yara, Muslim

Joining a religion often has an impact on various aspects of daily life. Previous chapters have shown how women who convert to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam practice, learn, and experience their religion with regard to questions of gender and sexuality. In this final chapter I explore how my interlocutors position themselves in wider society. This chapter analyses the different imagined communities¹¹⁵ in which converts construct a sense of belonging: the global religious community and the Dutch nation. I also discuss the longing for an elsewhere—countries in which the religion of my interlocutors forms the majority—that emerges in response to exclusionary discourses. This chapter explores what it means for Jewish women like Ilana to join the 'Jewish people'; how interlocutors such as Lisa dealt with stereotypes; and how becoming a member of a religious minority, as in the case of Yara, related to racialisation and inclusion in the symbolic nation-state.

Many studies of contemporary conversion focus on women who join Islam in countries where Muslims form a minority. A common argument in these studies is that white women who convert experience a loss of privilege, and their conversion can lead to a questioning of belonging to the nation. Many studies of female converts to Islam therefore analyse how religion intersects with race and national belonging (e.g., Galonnier 2018; Özyürek 2014; Roald 2006; Vroon-Najem 2014). Considering the dominance of these themes in conversion studies, I undertake a comparative analysis of my research material to see if and how these questions play a role for women converting to Judaism or Christianity. This comparative approach offers a closer look at the status of converts in the Netherlands and enables insights into the differences in the perception and position of women affiliated with these religions. Before I continue my analysis, I will further explain my approach to the subject of belonging; the intersection of race and religion; and the relation between religion

¹¹⁵ 'Imagined community' is the well-known concept coined by Benedict Anderson (1983) to describe the nation. A nation, Anderson argues, is imagined in the sense that members feel a sense of belonging and comradeship whilst never actually meeting all its members. The shared identity is, in other words, imagined (not to be confused with imaginary as fantasy).

and national belonging. Section three then analyses the sense of belonging my interlocutors feel to a global religious community and the manner in which they produce their own boundaries. Section four focuses on the Dutch nation as an imagined community. I analyse how my interlocutors reflected on the role of religion in the Netherlands; what conversion meant for their sense of belonging to the Dutch nation; and their experiences with racism, Islamophobia, and antisemitism. Section five focuses on the strategies women employ to deal with any ambivalence they might feel towards the Dutch nation. Such strategies relate to the disclosure or concealment of religion in public spaces; efforts towards assimilation; and idealising emigration to a country outside the Netherlands in which the adopted religion is the majority religion. First, however, I turn to the theories of belonging that informed my analysis.

6.1 (National) Belonging and the Race-religion Constellation

There has been a shift in approaching the question of belonging in the study of religion since the emergence of scholarship concerned with secularisation and religion in Europe. Whilst questions of belonging and community were always part of the anthropology of religion, this mainly focused on communities in the Global South. By the 1990s, a dominant argument was that, with secularisation in Europe, religious institutions lost their influence in the public and political sphere, making individual beliefs more important than communities. Grace Davie (1994) referred to this with the well-known phrase ‘believing without belonging’. Davie referred to people who, whilst not affiliated with a particular religious community, still harbour religious (or ‘spiritual’) feelings (see also Aune 2011; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The community, so it appeared, was no longer the locus of faith. However, this argument has since been questioned from several different angles. The prioritisation of belief over community can be regarded as an expression of ‘the Protestant bias’ (Meyer 2012) that until recently dominated the study of religion (section 1.1). Moreover, the thesis that religious groups would in time lose their importance is challenged by the appearance of several religious revival groups across Europe. José Casanova (1994) referred to this as a re-emergence and de-privatisation of religion. Of course, it should be emphasised that religious groups have always been there, and hence to speak of a ‘return’ of religion or a ‘de-secularisation’ would not be the appropriate terminology. Rather, revivalism is part of secular modernity and often a response to the limited role now assigned to religious groups in the public sphere (Jouili 2015). Indeed, Davie (2007, 15), reflecting on her arguments of thirteen years earlier, noted in 2007 that ‘European populations are beginning to opt in rather than out of churches’, and that there was a ‘gradual emergence of new forms of religious belonging’. My research shows that belonging can be more important than individual beliefs. In other words, to turn Davie’s earlier statement around, there can be belonging without believing.

Such an perspective troubles the idea that beliefs are central to religion and conversion, and instead focuses on the various questions of social relations and processes of in- and exclusion. This focus, on belonging rather than beliefs, enables a more nuanced understanding of religious conversion.

Another important insight is that the process of belonging is always accompanied by its counterpart: boundary making. In the process of creating a sense of belonging, the parameters of a particular (imagined) community have to be defined, either explicitly or implicitly. Such boundaries are not fixed, but often negotiated and fluid, albeit remaining influential and related to power. Converts are often considered to have moved from one place of belonging to another, and as such their experiences enable insights to be gained into the various ways in which boundaries are set, negotiated, and challenged. By comparing my research material from three case studies, it became apparent how different social and symbolic boundaries impacted the sense of belonging to different groups. For example, in the case of my Muslim interlocutors, conversion was most strongly associated with the crossing of a social boundary—stepping away from the nation. This dynamic is related to the social status of the religion women convert to and points towards the intersection of religion with race and national belonging, both of which demand some further explanation.

Previously, in religious studies, race has mainly been addressed in the (post)colonial context, for example in research about missionaries.¹¹⁶ More recently, however, scholars have taken up the task to unravel the intersections of race, whiteness, religion, and secularity within Europe (e.g., Topolski 2018).¹¹⁷ Gil Anidjar (2008), David Chidester (2014), and Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) are part of an influential group of scholars who argue that the concepts of race and religion share a colonial history and thus should always be studied together. Building on these insights, scholar of political philosophy Anya Topolski (2018) coined the concept of the ‘race-religion constellation’ to show how constructions of racial and religious difference have always gone hand in hand. The race-religion constellation refers to ‘the practice of classifying people into races according to categories we now associate with the term “religion”’ (Topolski 2018, 59). Historically, colonial categorisations of people constructed

¹¹⁶ I follow the conceptualisation of race defined by Stuart Hall (1997), who argued that race is a discursive, relational, cultural, and collective concept. However, considering race as a social construct does not mean that race and racism do not have a deep impact on all of life’s dimensions. The process by which differences are inscribed upon, and become fixed in, persons, groups, and bodies is called racialisation. As such, and as Kathrine van den Bogert (2019, 49) writes, ‘social constructions of racialised difference have very real consequences in the form of (structural) racism’.

¹¹⁷ In Europe, and the Netherlands especially, it is more common to talk about ‘ethnicity’ rather than ‘race’ in media and politics, as a seemingly more neutral way to refer to cultural difference. I follow Wekker in this regard, who stated: ‘While race by and large emphasises the biological side, and ethnicity the so-called cultural side, both have become rather interchangeable’ (as quoted in Van den Brandt et al. 2018, 78). The use of the term ethnicity rather than race in public and political discourse continues ‘the work that race used to do, ordering reality on the basis of supposed biological difference (although the term was banished), is still being accomplished’ (Wekker 2016, 23). In what follows, I therefore use the term race rather than ethnicity.

Christianity and whiteness in contrast to the racial categories of ‘Semite’, ‘Mohamedan’, ‘Oriental’, or ‘savage’ (see also Mustafa and Westerduin 2020, 137). These categorisations connected assumptions about religion and race, and particular types of religious practice became indicative of people’s political, cultural, or even biological inclinations (see also Jennings 2010; Maldonado-Torres 2014). In the early decades of the twentieth century, the idea of ‘world religions’ replaced these former categorisations (Masuzawa 2005, 3–13). Today, it is quite common to talk about world religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. However, the terminology of ‘world religions’ has a specific history in its racial differentiation of Christians, ‘Semites’, and ‘Mohamedans’. Scholars in this field seek a wider recognition of this history and an acknowledgment of the impact of racism expressed via the categories used to refer to religious groups.

To understand the link between religion and national belonging, I find it useful to think of the ‘culturalisation of citizenship’ (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016; Ghorashi 2010), which refers to the phenomenon by which citizenship is defined through (assumptions about) culture. This process takes place within legal domains and is exemplified by the cultural integration test migrants need to pass before they can be naturalised as citizens. However, more important for this chapter is the understanding of the nation as an imagined community rather than a legal institution. Belonging to this imagined community is often referred to as ‘symbolic citizenship’ (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016). Judaism, Islam, and Christianity each hold a different position in the Dutch nation. It is therefore also likely that converting to either of these groups has a different impact on the individual’s sense of national belonging. When joining a minority religion, converts to Judaism and Islam often encounter exclusionary discourses, both in the context of direct social contact, and in the media and politics. Despite the different histories of Muslims and Jews in the Netherlands, both Islamophobia and antisemitism are also shaped by similar nationalist, orientalist, secularist, and racialised hegemonic discourses and politics of national belonging.

To illustrate this culturalisation of citizenship, via the race-religion constellation, I provide two debates about the position of Islam and Judaism in Europe and the Netherlands specifically. First is the context of Muslims. Over the past years, the question has arisen in academia whether race and racism are useful conceptual tools via which to understand the current position of Muslims in Europe. On the one hand, race has a specific genealogy in the colonisation of Africa and the enslavement of black people, whilst on the other hand, othering mechanisms against Muslims reiterate racial categorisations. Several theories have been formulated that address this, but the question remains open-ended. Topolski (2018 73), for example, argued that contemporary anti-Muslim discourses show that the category of race ‘is still present, although the process of racialization is significantly different’. Whilst most scholars agree that there has been a shift in which ideas about the cultural or religious difference of Muslims have become fixed and essentialised (Ghorashi 2010), others remain doubtful whether race and racialisation can be used to understand Islamophobia. Markus

Balkenhol, Paul Mepschen, and Jan Willem Duyvendak (2016)—who wrote about public discourse in the Netherlands—reflected on the argument that ‘culture’ has replaced ‘race’ in essentialised othering mechanisms. They warned scholars that the conclusion that Dutch nativist discourse ‘has turned from a preoccupation with “race” to a preoccupation with “culture” runs the risk of overlooking existing forms of racism’ (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016, 12). The authors stress the importance of staying alert to other racialising mechanisms, such as antisemitism and anti-black racism. They argue that whilst anti-black racism and Islamophobia can overlap, this is not always the case and they are not the same process (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016). Another important critique comes from Nilüfer Göle (2017 32), who rhetorically asked whether terms such as ‘xenophobia, cultural racism, [and] racism “from above”’ can also ‘enable us to understand the current tension of European publics toward Islam’. Göle (2017) argued that there is something specific about the position of Muslims, who are framed as both racial and religious Others, and thus ‘race’ alone does not adequately capture this. This argument suggests that race and racism cannot simply be applied to the situation of Muslims because this omits the importance of religion and hence ‘de-Islamises the context of Muslims’ (van den Berg, Schrijvers, and Wiering 2020, 11). These scholars all point out that questions of religious difference are not inherently and uncritically questions of race, or vice versa. Nevertheless, race and religion (in this case, Islam) are interwoven, and it is with this in mind that I approach my research material.

An expression of the race-religion constellation in the Jewish context is the increasing popularity of the notion of ‘Judaeo-Christian’ as the roots of Dutch national identity and society. Since the early 2000s, this problematic term has been widely deployed across the European Union in a number of ways (van den Hemel 2014; Topolski 2020). According to Topolski (2020, 86): ‘The meaning of the signifier Judaeo-Christianity has shifted from originally excluding Jews and Catholics to now symbolically including them in order to fortify its exclusion of Muslims.’ It is also often used to indicate secularism, as if Judaism and Christianity together shaped the ground from which secularisation and progress stemmed. Topolski further argues that the dominant use of this terminology actually isolates both Jews and Muslims as non-Christian Others. At the same time, ‘Jews are being played off against Muslims who are not symbolically or materially included in this European family’ (Topolski 2020, 87). Topolski sees this as another example of the race-religion constellation. In the Netherlands, the term ‘Judaeo-Christian’ is most popular amongst right-wing politicians, who use it to downplay antisemitism whilst also representing Islam as its Other (van den Hemel 2014). Thus, there are two different ways in which Jewishness plays into the nation: There is the inclusion of Judaism in the constructed ‘Judaeo-Christian’ ideology of the nation, primarily by right-wing parties and Christians, and there is also the lived reality of Jewish people, in which the history of Judaism in the Netherlands is very important—as are continuing experiences of antisemitism. Since the Second World War, antisemitism was

considered to have left the continent. Yet, as the late Evelien Gans (2016) argued on numerous occasions, antisemitism did not appear out of thin air with the *Shoah*, nor did it leave soon after.¹¹⁸ Whilst Islamophobia is becoming more outspoken and explicit, antisemitism is often more covert in public discourse, yet it is far from absent and has a deep impact on conversion experiences.

In this chapter, I start from the experiences of my interlocutors and analyse moments in which their conversion interacted with processes and/or narratives of racialisation and (national) belonging. In this context, conversion also relates to a sense of belonging to a religion that stretches (historically and geographically) beyond the borders of the immediate community. The next section pays attention to the experiences and perspectives of my interlocutors in relation to the religious imagined community. Section four thereafter examines national belonging and conversion, before turning in section five to some of the different ways in which women negotiate or challenge their changing position in society.

6.2 Belonging and Difference in a Religious Community

This section analyses the relation my interlocutors had with the wider imagined community of their religion. Overall, women who converted to Judaism and Islam had a stronger tendency to relate to an imagined global Jewish or Muslim community. Amongst my Christian interlocutors, this sense of belonging, whilst still present, was not as strong. The experiences of my interlocutors were shaped by wider discourses that perceive religion (especially Islam) negatively and thus they sought a sense of positive belonging in and to their religion. My interlocutors sometimes contributed to the formation of boundaries within their communities, even though many were also confronted with boundaries when they wanted to join themselves. I first examine how my interlocutors related to a global religious community, how they found a place for themselves, and how they negotiated boundaries. I then analyse how they contributed to the construction of boundaries that might exclude others who adhere to the same religion.

6.2.1 Transnational, Transhistorical Connections

The most complicated relation to history, genealogy, and the diasporic community was found amongst my Jewish interlocutors. I was often told that becoming Jewish entailed joining both

¹¹⁸ Whenever political actors were accused of antisemitism in the recent years, it led to public controversy and questioning of their status as political representatives. The most recent example is the scandal in the Forum for Democracy in 2020, when it was discovered that WhatsApp groups of the party's youth organisation used explicit antisemitic language. These messages were published online and led to a crisis in the party, eventually leading to half of the party members stepping out. This shows that antisemitic rhetoric is common amongst certain groups and political parties, but often not as explicit as anti-Islamic statements.

a religion and a people.¹¹⁹ When I attended a meeting for people interested in conversion to Judaism, I had a brief interaction with a fellow attendee, a man in his fifties. After introducing myself, his follow-up question was brief: ‘Jewish blood?’ (*Joods bloed?*’, in Dutch). The question whether I had ‘Jewish blood’ came up more during my research.¹²⁰ This term is quite common to indicate whether someone has any Jewish ancestors. It adds a biological element to boundaries of the in- and outsider group. Even though someone can be Jewish without Jewish parents or grandparents, the least disputed way to guarantee one’s inclusion in Judaism is to be born to a Jewish mother. This makes someone *halachically* (that is, according to the dominant interpretation of Jewish law) Jewish. The other option to be Jewish according to the *Halacha* is to undertake an extensive conversion trajectory called *giyur*. People with some demonstrable descent from Jewish ancestors do have a slightly easier process. Many women told me they had looked into their family tree to find if they had Jewish ancestors. This was not a part of the study programme itself, nor a requirement, and it has been said elsewhere that the question of family lines does not come up in the official *giyur* process.¹²¹ It is also a controversial topic, as it is taboo to talk about someone’s conversion (and thus their non-Jewish family; see chapter two). Nonetheless, I found that genealogy has a far greater influence on my Jewish interlocutors than those who converted to Christianity and Islam. Contrary to those official guidelines, I found that many women did privately dive into their personal archives to see whether there had not been a Jewish family line after all. This was partly because having such an ancestry would provide greater legitimacy to their *giyur*, but also because they did feel a strong affinity with the Jewish people and wondered where this came from.¹²² Only a minority found out that they indeed had Jewish ancestors, about which I wrote in the second chapter.

The notion of conversion as joining a people was unique to my Jewish case study.¹²³ Women who did a *giyur* related to this sense of people and history in various ways. Naomi connected this to ancestry, stating: ‘Judaism is a complicated combination of religion, people, culture, all mixed. So if you separate those things, I would never belong to the Jewish people. Because I do not have the genes, so to say.’ Naomi was quick to add that she did not

¹¹⁹ My interlocutors spoke of ‘*het Joodse volk*’, which can also be translated as Jewish ethnic group, nation, or peoplehood.

¹²⁰ Even though most of my interlocutors knew that I was not Jewish myself (or at least, not practicing), the question of my own heritage often arose. As far as I know, I do not have any familial relation to Jewish people. Although my family from both sides come from Amsterdam, they were Roman-Catholic and Protestant (section 1.4 on positionality).

¹²¹ In conversation with rabbis and others with authority in the Jewish community (for example professors in Jewish studies), I have frequently been assured that genealogical research is not part of the conversion process.

¹²² Sporadically, interlocutors found solace in the notion of Jewish reincarnation in mysticism and Kabbalah, called *Gilgul*, often referring to the book *Beyond the Ashes* by Rabbi Yonassan Gershom (1991).

¹²³ From an insider perspective, the notion of the Jewish people can also refer to the chosen people: the descendants of the enslaved led out of Egypt by Moses in Exodus. In my fieldwork, the Jewish people referred more to an imagined community and sense of shared culture, and the notion of the chosen people never came up.

consciously separate these different aspects of being Jewish and did not feel excluded because she ‘does not have the genes’. Others considered joining the Jewish people in terms of culture or ethnicity, with conversion implying a cultural rather than a religious change. For Judith, joining the people was the most important aspect of conversion. She told me that she does not feel a deep connection to the ‘religion part’ of Judaism and did not consider this to be important in her *giyur*. In her case, conversion could not really be captured by ‘religion’ alone. Ilana also recognised the centrality of ‘the people’: ‘You do a *giyur* to transfer to the people. That you also choose the religion is because you do the *giyur* in the synagogue. I chose that religion. But you do *giyur* to become Jewish for the people.’ The notion of free choice that Ilana introduces here is interesting. According to her, it is not possible to undo the ‘people side’ of being Jewish, only the religious aspect, since this is something optional. For many interlocutors, this ethnic, cultural shift to ‘Jewishness’ left a greater impact and demanded a greater responsibility than the spiritual or religious elements of Judaism. In other words: Believing in God was not as important as being devoted to the imagined Jewish community. More complicated was the relation women had to Jewish history, especially the history of persecution.

Some Jewish converts in my study were directly affected by the second- or third-generation trauma of the *Shoah*, such as Esther and Aliza (see section 2.3). For them, conversion was partly a means to heal a broken family tree—to establish a connection to ancestors whose culture and religion had been destroyed. The majority of converts I spoke to did not have family members who directly experienced this. Nevertheless, they all had to deal with the omnipresence of trauma of the *Shoah* in the Jewish community. According to many interlocutors, including rabbis, this is part of the reason why newcomers are not always welcomed. Deborah told me:

In the Netherlands you’re an exception as a Jew and you feel the heavy burden of the history of the Second World War. [...] That is why we have the atmosphere of ‘not everyone who wants to should be allowed to join, because they did not share the history’. That is why they are so withholding, also amongst the progressives, of people becoming Jewish. (Deborah)

Deborah later added that she also feels a sense of pride in belonging to the Jewish history, which contains ‘horrendous elements like persecution’, but despite everything Jewish people ‘continue to exist’. For Channah, the fact that her family ‘did not experience the horrors of the Holocaust’ does not fully exclude her from taking part in Jewish history. In the collective mourning of the destruction of the temple (on the holiday *Tisha B’Av*), for example, all Jews mourn an event none of them directly experienced. Channah described the meaning of joining the people as follows: ‘You can join those feelings about the past and can join hoping for the future.’

For my Muslim interlocutors, this sense of genealogy and history did not play as substantial a role in the way they viewed the global community of Islam. The common term to describe this imagined community is *ummah*: ‘A fundamental concept in Islam, expressing the essential unity and theoretical equality of Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings’ (Esposito 2003, entry ‘Ummah’). *Ummah* is, in theory, transhistorical and transnational, and ‘often conceptualized as a symbolic family of brothers and sisters’ (Vroon-Najem 2014, 101). In contrast to women who embraced Judaism, my Muslim interlocutors did not describe their belonging to the *ummah* as becoming part of a cultural or ethnic group, nor did they express taking on centuries of history when becoming Muslim. Instead, the *ummah* was situated in the ‘here and now’ and conversion meant entering into this global community.

My Muslim interlocutors often had mixed feelings about the notion of *ummah*. On the one hand, it offered them a sense of belonging to something greater. The idea of sisterhood was often very appealing, as argued by Vanessa Vroon-Najem (2014, 210), who suggested that the employment of this Islamic term of sisterhood was ‘a means to take part in and shape their (feelings of) belonging to the *ummah*’. Yet this ideal abstract community is not reflective of the vast variety in Muslim practices worldwide. My interlocutors often searched for a ‘true Islam’—a universal religion unfiltered by history (in my case always a form of Sunni Islam). This sometimes clashed with the reality of Muslim diversity. One example was the existence of different schools of Islamic thought (*madhab*).¹²⁴ Whenever I asked Muslim interlocutors if they considered themselves to belong to one *madhab*, they would shrug and say that this was not important. Hanan replied to this question: ‘No, not at all, and to be honest I do not understand it for one bit!’ What mattered for Hanan was the oneness of the *ummah* and being a Muslim which, according to her, should simply be about reading the Qur’an and the Hadith and following the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Differences between *madhab*, in Hanan’s perception, only served to blur this fundamental and unifying feature of Islam. In reality, most converts chose to follow the guidelines set by their mosque, however, this choice was largely practical. Finding a mosque and denomination was often a process of negotiation between the ‘true’ unifying Islam of the *ummah* and dealing with the differences within this imagined community.

Several Muslim converts mentioned that many newcomers often initially follow Salafi Islam. This appeared particularly common for women who embraced Islam prior to the existence of conversion networks such as the Convert Association, which is an advocate for a more (self-described) moderate form of Islam (see section 4.5.1). Salafism is often described

¹²⁴ The four prominent schools of law (called *madhab*) in Sunni Islam are Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi, and Hanbali, but there are many more denominations, such as Sufism, Salafism, and more. These schools are often associated with particular geographical regions. In the Netherlands, Hanafi and Maliki are most common, reflecting the dominant school in the countries of origin of the majority of Muslim migrants: Turkey (Hanafi) and Morocco (Maliki; see chapter four; van Bruinessen 2010).

as a modern revival movement (de Koning 2013). It is characterised by conservative and strict observance, and in public discourse often closely linked to fundamentalism, violent Islam, and *jihadism* (Wagemakers 2012, 2–10). Studies suggest that converts to Islam often encounter Salafism and its stricter form of religious observance first (e.g., de Koning 2013; Roald 2006). The tendency has been called ‘convertitis’ (Roald 2006), implying this is a common temporary mental condition found amongst new converts (see section 4.6.1). Anne Sofie Roald (2006) also writes about this as ‘being more royal than the king’ (see also Vroon-Najem 2014, 101).¹²⁵ However, my research shows that this idea should be nuanced. Only a few women had initially encountered Salafi Islam because, as Yara attests, they found this the ‘clearest on what you can and cannot do, and that is great if you are still searching’. This came partly out of a desire for ‘true Islam’, which is also exemplified by the idealisation of the *ummah*. Yara quickly discovered that there are many differences within Islam and came to form her own, self-ascribed, ‘milder form’ of observance. My research shows that the argument of ‘convertitis’ is somewhat overrated. All converts, not only Muslims, struggled to find their own form of religious practice. Some Jewish, Christian or Muslim women indeed expressed an initial phase of perfectionism, but most tried out different styles before finding their own preference.

In contrast to Jewish and Muslim converts, the sense of belonging to a global religious community was not a dominant trope in the conversion stories of my Christian interlocutors. There is also no dominant terminology to describe such an imagined community similar to the *ummah* or the Jewish people or nation. Yet the women who embraced Christianity did feel strong connections to other (Hillsong-affiliated) churches and described Hillsong as a global family. Joining such a family and accompanying sisterhood was often attractive for women, as was the metaphor of ‘home’ within the churches. This offered a ready space in which belonging was encouraged and accommodated, although also structured by normative boundaries, as addressed in chapter three.

In my fieldwork and interviews, Christians frequently described their religion without specifying the type of Christianity to which they adhered. They rarely used the term (neo-) Pentecostal, in line with the tendency of Hillsong not to profile the church as such. For my interlocutors, the label Christian indicated anyone who believed in the Bible and Jesus Christ—similar to Hanan’s previous description of Islam as reading the Qur’an and following the Prophet Muhammad. Church leaders I spoke to similarly claimed a transnational, universal Christianity and were hesitant to describe themselves as one of several possible Christian denominations. Take for example this excerpt of an interview with pastor Claudia of the Life Point Church:

¹²⁵ The Dutch equivalent of ‘more royal than the king’ is ‘*roomser dan de paus*’, which is Christian in origin and literally translates as ‘more Roman (or papal) than the Pope.’

Claudia: We call ourselves Modern Reformed. We do not like... You know why we call it that? If we would say, 'We're Pentecostal', we will be put into a box. Or [saying we are] charismatic: 'Oh, that's just people with flags and drama.' No, we are an approachable, easy going, modern church, that is it.

Lieke: Earlier, you also mentioned that you are a charismatic—

C: Movement, yes. That was back in the days, with the Holy Spirit. Certainly, if you take an honest look, we are in that same flow. But we would never call ourselves that to the outside [world]. Modern Reformed and that is just that.
(Pastor Claudia)

For Claudia, identifying her church as Pentecostal or charismatic might limit their aim to be accessible because she suspects many people would have stereotypes associated with such labels. For her, it is most important to position her community as inclusive and open, hence the use of the seemingly more neutral label 'Modern Reformed'. This is not a common denomination, and is hence most likely made up by herself or other church leadership. The Life Point Church is a member of the Hillsong network and shares many characteristics of Pentecostalism, such as strong belief in the power of the Holy Spirit, high regard for the Bible, and an emphasis on salvation (Bebbington 1989; Klaver 2021). The church can thus certainly be considered Pentecostal which, whilst being a label that Claudia acknowledges, is not explicitly a label the church endorses as such to non-believing outsiders.

Although my Christian interlocutors had the least sense of connection to transnational and transhistorical religious communities, this did not mean that they had a weaker sense of 'belonging to something greater', as Lisa described it. To the contrary, they often promoted Christianity as the only 'righteous path'. Whilst pastors and other church members would not typically refer to their own church as neo-Pentecostal, but rather simply as 'Christian', they delineated their church from Roman-Catholicism, Protestantism, and their institutions. They were also the least keen to advocate for a religiously pluriform society. Church leadership strongly promoted the evangelisation of all people and constructed their own religion as the only 'true path'. This was different for Jews and Muslims, who often accepted the existence of different religions and did not object to religious diversity. Jewish and Muslim interlocutors considered their community, peoplehood, or *ummah* to be the right path for them personally, but did not regard this as the only correct way to be religious. That said, the lived reality of difference within a group could sometimes be a cause of tension. This led some converted women to distinguish between those who did and did not adhere to their ideal of a 'true' religion. As much as they aspired to create a sense of belonging, my interlocutors also contributed to discourses of difference and boundaries within those same communities.

6.2.2 Dealing with Difference

The experiences of converts can shed light on the boundaries of a group because they often work to create more flexibility to ensure a place for themselves and others in similar situations. They also often contribute to the maintenance, reconfiguration, or establishment of group boundaries. At times, some Christian and Muslim converts judged fellow believers according to their (religious) practices, despite their idealisation of the religiously-informed tenant not to judge others. This tendency came up far less in the Jewish case study. I could not find a clear reason why this is the case, but perhaps it has to do with the recognition of the wide variety of interpretations and forms of Judaism, even within such a small community as the Dutch Jewry. The connection between ethnicity and religion also means that many people who are considered Jewish do not observe commandments at all (so-called ‘secular Jews’, or *chilonim*). My Jewish interlocutors recognised that there were different styles of observance, but did not frame their choice as necessarily better in general terms. Some Liberal Jewish women rejected Orthodox practices (and vice versa; see chapter three), but did not discuss differences within their own respective communities. Here it was widely accepted that within one congregation, members can have different forms of observance—some stricter than others. This was not considered a problem, so long as these choices reflected the individual’s wishes. The unity of the Jewish people was also not framed in terms of a shared religious practice, but rather in those of a shared history and culture. This sense of shared history was so strong that Liberal, Orthodox, and Progressive Jews felt a connection to one another, despite their differences in style and practice. This was different for Muslim and Christian interlocutors. Even though converts in all religions had to deal with personal shortcomings or ‘failures’ (Beekers and Kloos 2017), Muslims and Christians had a tendency to idealise their religion as coherent and morally righteous.

It has been argued that converts often idealise Islam as a universal religious tradition that should be followed in daily life unfiltered by local norms and customs (Vroon-Najem 2019). Some interlocutors expressed feelings of disillusionment when they realised that not all Muslims adhere to the same level or form of piety as they did themselves or imagined others to do. Dunya said:

There are Muslims who go out, who choose to go out and drink. [...] I do not identify with that. They might be, they are Muslims if they call themselves that but yeah... I would never say that they are *not* Muslims, they see themselves as Muslims, so who am I to say they are not. But they do stupid things. (Dunya)

Dunya hesitated to say that Muslims who drink alcohol are not (proper) Muslims. Yet she was disappointed to learn that many Muslims do not follow Islamic principles, by, for example, drinking alcohol. She also noted how there can be a lot of different practices that are called Islamic by Muslims, but are in her view not a sign of ‘true Islam’—for example, the unequal

treatment of women or (what she referred to as) indulgence during *Ramadan* celebrations. The contextual differences in Islamic groups were often perceived as ‘culture’—as separate from religion—and many longed for a form of ‘de-culturalised’ Islam. The separation of ‘culture’ and ‘religion’ is a common thread in studies of Muslim converts, by which the first stands for the localisation of Islam in different contexts and is often associated with ethnic groups (van Es 2019b; Vroon-Najem 2019). In the Dutch case, ‘cultural influence’ most often referred to born Muslims from non-Dutch descent, such as Moroccan- or Turkish-Dutch people (see also Vroon-Najem 2014, 189–98). Bushra, for example, made a distinction between ‘true Islam’ and ‘Moroccan culture’, arguing that the first should get rid of the impact of the second. Esra Özyürek (2014) similarly found that white German converts often looked down upon Turkish German people as belonging to a lower class and being not well integrated into German society. Özyürek’s interlocutors were careful not to be associated with Turkish Germans, and instead aimed to form a ‘German Islam’. In a similar way, Roald (2006) speaks of the formation of a ‘Scandinavian Islam’ by converts in Norway and Sweden. Rogozen-Soltar (2012, 616), writing about the Spanish context, states: ‘Converts often claim to practice a “culture-free” Islam, which they contrast to Moroccans’ “traditions”, using a discourse that cloaks convert religiosity within an unmarked category of “European” and marks migrant Muslims as outsiders.’ In distinguishing between ‘true Islam’ and ‘Moroccan culture’ by white converts, exclusionary discourses are reiterated that contribute to migrant Muslims occupying the position of Other within society. Although my interlocutors did not explicitly use the term ‘Dutch Islam’, they frequently made references to the compatibility of ‘Dutch culture’ and Islam. Women active in converts’ networks also advocated for an Islam that crossed ethnic boundaries, in practice often led by white converted people.

A complication arises from the experience of some converts who do not always feel welcomed by communities mainly consisting of those born Muslim. Iman told me that she felt treated ‘as if we [converts] are simpleminded people’ and dislikes how converts are seen as ‘simplistic’ and naive by other Muslims, especially online, where she would encounter posts saying things such as: ‘Look at those poor converts, they’re exploited.’ Others felt that converts are put on a pedestal and considered ‘better in their religion because they practice more’, in the words of Dunya. Dunya told me that she was afraid that she might not be able to meet these high expectations and felt uncomfortable when she was singled out as a convert because this limited her sense of belonging. Similarly, Amal did not like to be considered special as a convert: ‘I don’t think I am special so it is strange if others do, that can be difficult.’ On the one hand, my interlocutors reflected the wish to belong to the *ummah*—they stressed the importance of surrounding themselves with other Muslims. This would solve the isolation and loneliness many converts experience, as well as strengthen the learning process by offering the possibility to, for example, pray together (see section 4.5.1). Yet, on the other hand, white Muslim converts tended to disaffiliate themselves from ethnic Muslim groups where they were singled out, and that were furthermore perceived as not well integrated, too

traditional, or too ‘loose’ with Islamic ideals. This often led women to seek out groups of fellow Dutch converts and to strive for assimilation—a subject to which I turn later in this chapter.

My Christian interlocutors were also very concerned with the question of how to be a ‘good Christian’. Similar to women who embraced Islam, they often made a distinction between converts and those born Christian, however, this was not mixed with ethnic axes of difference, as was the case with Muslimas. Lian, for example, told me:

I notice when people are raised with Christianity, people for whom these [church] services were part of their childhood, they do not know any different. People who converted later in life regard it as something new and something beautiful, a new part of their life. (Lian)

Because of the differing backgrounds of converts, Lian felt like they were more understanding towards non-Christians and more empathic towards those struggling with their faith. Nina also recalled how she had initially felt ‘jealous of people who knew the Bible by heart since their childhood’ and felt a pressure to ‘get up to speed’. At the same time, many thought that, because of the conscious decision taken in the process, converts were actually more likely to be consistent in their faith. This also meant that, as was suggested by Nina, converts were seen as better equipped to spread the faith and convert others.

Women new to Christianity were often surprised to discover that not all Christians in other denominations adhered to their faith, and/or did not always practice what was preached. Here too, some women had the tendency to be ‘more royal than the king’, so this is not a dynamic that is unique to women who embraced Islam. Lisa raised such questions about the incommensurability of her personal experience of faith and the behaviour of others who claim to have the same faith. Reflecting on other (non-Pentecostal) groups, she said that she found some Christians ‘weird too, you know, the reformed types with those skirts’, referring to the typical conservative dress style of reformed Christians. These groups are presumably most strict in their observance. However, Lisa mentioned a colleague who was born in such a family, but was not consistent in her faith: ‘[She] lived in the bible belt and had reformed parents. And she couldn’t go out [on Saturday night] because Sunday was the day of rest. But in the meantime, she smoked and did all kind of things God forbid.’ Lisa constructed a sense of difference in relation to other non-Pentecostal Christian communities, which were often seen as outdated and unmodern. Lisa also rejected the assumption that outward elements such as conservative dress are an indication of the level of piety or of being a ‘good Christian’. Many also pointed to other churches where the level of commitment was seemingly lower. Christians who ‘go to church on Sunday morning and leave it at that’, in Emma’s words, were frowned upon as not living up to the full potential of God’s grace.

More difficult were instances in which fellow church members (rather than outsiders) engaged in ‘un-Christian’ behaviour. Not having a strong faith was then often considered to be the main reason why fellow members engaged in (relatively small) sins such as smoking, drinking too much alcohol, or going on many dates. Kim, for example, told me the story about a woman in her bible study group who ‘was raised with the religion’, but who often ‘put her own needs first and did not really consider others’. Caring for others is for Kim one of the most important aspects of Christianity. That people raised with Christianity could be self-centred too, created a sense of disillusion and disappointment. This resonates with the reaction of some Muslim women to other Muslims. These examples illustrate that with conversion comes a negotiation of belonging in a given religious group and/or community. It also shows that conversion is not a clear boundary crossing from one sphere to another. Converted women often aspire to belong to a community, but doing so they also reiterate and produce differences and boundaries. Often becoming a member of a religion also had an impact on individuals’ sense of belonging to the Dutch nation, and it is to this dynamic that the chapter now directs its focus.

6.3 Conversion in a Secular Nation-state

Many interlocutors told me that, since converting, they have experienced alienation from wider Dutch society. This has been frequently mentioned in studies of converts to Islam in secularised countries, such as Canada (Mossière 2016); Germany (Özyürek 2014); Spain (Rogozen-Soltar 2012); Sweden (Roald 2006); the Netherlands (Vroon-Najem 2014); France, and the United States (Galonnier 2018). In these works, the focus is often on the impact of Islamophobic public discourses that construct Islam as Europe’s Other. A common argument is that women who embrace Islam encounter stereotypes and are accused of having ‘betrayed’ the nation. The public perception that moving into religion means moving out of the nation is less present (although not completely absent) in studies of Jewish and Christian converts. Discussions around national belonging in the Christian context sometimes focus on the sense of moral disaffiliation from the rest of society felt by converts (e.g., Beekers 2021; Strhan 2015). In studies of Jewish converts, national belonging, conversion, and citizenship are sometimes addressed in the context of Israel (e.g., Egorova 2015; Kravel-Tovi 2017b), although little is known about the impact of conversion to Judaism on national belonging in the diaspora. Using insights from all three case studies, I compare the experiences of women who convert to different religions in the shared socio-political context of the Netherlands. This offers a foundation for understanding the relations between religion and national belonging that is broader than the experience of Muslim women alone. It also explores how these women produce an idea of the Netherlands as a predominantly secular imagined community, in which they have to renegotiate their belonging. First, this section analyses how

my interlocutors reflected on secularisation and religious freedom in the Netherlands. Second, the focus turns to (experiences of) national belonging and symbolic citizenship, after which I describe how converts experience racialisation—specifically how Jewish and Muslim converts experience antisemitism and Islamophobia. Finally, I offer some preliminary reflections on why discussions about race were largely absent from the Christian case study.

6.3.1 ‘You’re Considered an Idiot if You Believe in God’

My interlocutors often described the Netherlands as a secularised society in which being religious has become a strange phenomenon. Three stereotypes were mentioned by women in all three case studies: that religion is outdated; that choosing religion is a sign of limited intelligence; and that women who convert lack freedom. Jewish convert Bracha, giving here perspective on the first stereotype, stated: ‘Religion has become synonymous with narrow-mindedness or primitivity’, continuing, ‘as if we do not need it anymore’. Christian women also pointed to this stereotype and were often invested in replacing the ‘dusty’ image of Christianity with their modern and inclusive church: ‘Others often have an image of the strict Father, whilst it can really be something beautiful’, Nina said. The idea of Christianity as dogmatic and promoting the fear of God is, according to Nina, an outdated image that ‘people are taught via their parents or grandparents’. Many interlocutors also referred to the second dominant stereotype: that religious people are irrational and unintelligent. Hanan, a Muslima, said: ‘You’re really considered to be an idiot if you believe in God’, before adding that she regrets how ‘atheistic’ her country has become: ‘[Being religious] used to be very normal, but now people look at religious people as if they are stupid and weird!’

My interlocutors were typically not very nuanced in their view of wider secular society. They did not, for example, mention the presence of religious political parties and the initiatives for acceptance and inclusion that we see emerging throughout society. For them, there was their religion on the one hand, and the Dutch secular public on the other. Only a minority noted the Christian influences on their secular society. Some Jewish and Muslim women pointed to the Christian-centredness of the public sphere, mainly in reference to the common day of rest on Sunday instead of Friday (for Muslims) or Friday afternoon and Saturday (for Jews). The secularity experienced in the public sphere made it difficult for some women to hold on to their religion. This was mainly the case for Liberal and Progressive Jewish women, because their *shuls* often only held services twice a month and they had few Jewish peers. I asked (Progressive Jewish) Ruth why she found it so important to ‘hold on to something’, to which she replied: ‘Because I did not do a *giyur* for nothing and it will otherwise fade away. It is so easy to fall back into the society we live in where there is a lack of spirituality.’ Whilst taking care of her spiritual needs was very important to Ruth, she found it slipping away in the hectic bustle of her everyday life. Ruth considered wider Dutch society to be lacking in spirituality and thus a sense of belonging to her community was crucial if she was to nurture her spiritual needs. For Christian women, holding on to one’s

religion in daily life had less to do with the presence of Christian peers (or the lack thereof), since their church communities were built on voluntary work and the formation of groups of friends amongst their (primarily) young adult members was widely encouraged. Muslim women also often had an Islamic social circle and were active in their mosques in multiple ways. For Christians, the difficulty lay in abstaining from ‘worldly sins’ that supposedly confronted them daily in the secular world, whilst Muslim women struggled more with stigmatising discourses that considered their religion strange and oppressive.

Yet some women also valued the religious freedom that came with secularisation, as it was this that enabled them to embrace a religion in which they were not socialised in the first place.¹²⁶ Ilana noted: ‘I feel like people are far more conscious about their religion and practices than “back in the day.”’ The secular nature of the public sphere thus had two distinct sides: Whilst Hanan regrets that being religious is no longer a common option, Ilana found that this encourages people to be conscious of their choices. Ilana stated: ‘People who go [to religious services], go deliberately—they choose to.’ This emphasis on free choice stood in contrast with the third dominant stereotype about religion: that becoming religious implies giving up freedom. The persistence of such presumptions had a significant impact on converts:

Yes, I follow [the] guidelines offered by something I cannot prove, I am obliged to do something. People who do not believe in that don’t understand it, because they feel like it would limit their freedom. But as I told you before, there is so much I *can* do [...], yet there is always a focus on what we *cannot* do, or what we’re not allowed to do. (Bushra)

None of the women I spoke to experienced a decline in their freedom as a result of their conversion. Instead, all found a sense of freedom within their particular tradition. However, in their perception, the focus is always on what religion prevents women from doing, rather than what it brings them. This is not unique to Muslims such as Bushra. For example, in a Christian context Nina mentioned that she was ‘often asked whether I am allowed to do something by my religion’. This is reflective of the ‘conversion paradox’ I described in the first chapter of this dissertation, namely that the freedom to practice the religion you choose is often seen as a cherished characteristic of Dutch society. In the light of this principle, citizens can choose to participate in whatever religion they want, even if that is a religion that seems to limit individual freedom.

¹²⁶ One rabbi compared the Dutch situation to that in Israel and valued the freedom of religion in the Netherlands: ‘It is not like they [Orthodox groups] are financed by the state and we [Liberal groups] are not, there is no discrimination in that sense, everyone can just do as they please.’ This is different than in Israel, where Orthodox Judaism dominates the public and legal sphere.

The notion that conversion implies a loss of freedom seems especially pertinent in the case of women instead of men. All of the women explained that the biggest stereotype facing them is that they are oppressed in their religion because of their gender. Lian explained that the suggestion was always ‘that [Christian] women wear a cross, glasses, long skirt and a hat—that they are conservative, you know’. In the same manner, Amal stated that the biggest stereotype against Muslim women is that ‘a woman only wears a headscarf because her husband forces her’. Indeed, I had an interesting conversation with another Muslim convert, Dunya, who encouraged me to reflect on my own role in countering negative stereotypes:

Dunya: Looking at Muslim women, the biggest stereotype is that women are oppressed. Everyone tries to combat that stereotype, but no one has been able to.

Lieke: How do people try to combat that?

D: Well, by presenting different research. I even think already with your research, Lieke. I think it’s great, but I still don’t think you will achieve anything with it. You want to offer a nuanced image, but yeah, people won’t really listen anyway. Who will you reach? Only the leftists in the middle. And the right-wing people—who you might wish to reach—won’t read it. They probably feel like it’s all nonsense anyway, like why would money be spent on that. That is such a pity.

(Dunya)

This sentiment was shared (albeit in less explicit terms) by a few other Muslim women. Even though they often appreciated the intentions of researchers, journalists, or other organisations to counter negative stereotypes by offering ‘a nuanced image’, they doubted the effectiveness of such attempts. To hear from an interlocutor that they think I ‘will not achieve anything’ with my research is a tough pill to swallow, but not something to be left out of the dissertation. I believe this is indicative of the deep-seated structures of racism and Islamophobia in our society that are unlikely to change and lead Muslims in general (and not just as in my case, converted women) to doubt whether good intentions, in this case by a non-Muslim white woman, are able to change these othering mechanisms that are so engrained in Dutch society.

6.3.2 Becoming Religious and Belonging to the Dutch Nation

When they converted, some interlocutors were not only confronted with stereotypes about religion, but also with questions about their national belonging. Women who were visibly Muslim were confronted with assumptions that their conversion meant they also crossed an ethnic and/or racial boundary. Yara told me: ‘I was frequently asked whether I had become Moroccan.’ This idea of conversion as moving into another ethnic group is also apparent in the title of the well-known Dutch reality show about Muslim converts, which was called ‘*Van Hagelslag naar Halal*’ (‘From chocolate sprinkles [which are considered typically Dutch] to

halal [Islamic food guidelines]'; van Diepen 2015, see also Schrijvers 2016). Yara told me that she had been approached by the producers of this show to participate:

I think that show is really ridiculous. Especially the title... when they told me, I immediately thought: 'No, I won't take part in that', as if I suddenly don't eat sprinkles anymore! They were really firm on the idea that 'First you're this, and then you're completely different.' [...] It was really focused on the contrast, so I declined. (Yara)

The idea that embracing Islam implied becoming 'completely different' and moving away from being Dutch (as exemplified by eating *hagelslag*) often arose amongst my Muslim interlocutors. Muslim converts Bushra, Dunya, Amal, and Iman were quick to stress that their national identity had not changed with their conversion. To non-Muslim family and friends (and to me as a researcher), they emphasised the continuation of their Dutch selves to destabilise the idea of a neat 'before' and 'after' in their conversion (see also McGinty 2006). However, what being Dutch actually entailed, varied. Dunya mentioned her personality traits—'very direct and honest' and 'a white woman's mentality'—as being 'typically Dutch'. For Iman, food preferences were important markers of being Dutch: 'I am still Dutch of course, I still enjoy mashed potatoes and stews, with vegetarian bacon now.' Being Dutch thus had multiple aspects for my interlocutors: It was a sense of belonging shaped via the body, via food, but also part of someone's attitude and personality. Yet all also pointed out that often, since they became visibly Muslim, the outside world no longer considered them to be (fully) Dutch.

Yara told me how she initially laughed when a non-Muslim woman had asked her if she had become Moroccan: 'The idea that I received a whole new ethnicity was funny and bizarre.' Since she started to wear a headscarf, Yara was treated differently in public spaces. She described how non-Muslim peers were surprised to learn that her favourite food is *snert* (split-pea soup) and that she enjoys watching the television show '*Boer Zoekt Vrouw*' (the Dutch version of 'Farmer Wants a Wife'). These are two things often associated with being Dutch. When she expressed herself in public as Muslim, she was no longer associated with this national identity, but instead conceived as a cultural and racialised Other. Whilst other women stressed their continued belonging to the Dutch nation, Yara was fed up with it and embraced her status as an outsider. When I asked her whether she found it important to show that she belonged, she replied:

No. No, thanks. In the end, hearing those things all the time, I feel distanced too and do not want to belong anyway. In some way I do not really consider myself to be part of that group either, because of the way they think 'we are like this and you are not'. (Yara)

Most converted Muslimas found a way to connect being both Dutch and Muslim in their process of religious self-making. Fatima described this process in the following terms: ‘I wanted to belong to something, but did not want to fully blend into the Moroccan culture. So I started to form my own mix.’ Bushra felt like she had her ‘own culture’, in which elements characteristically associated with the Netherlands mixed with Islamic practices, for example in celebrating birthdays: ‘There are some things I will just do, you know, I am Dutch in the end.’ Doing so, Bushra established a sense of complementarity with different aspects of her self that were often publicly represented as incommensurable.

Women who became Jewish often did not encounter such strong accusations of betraying their national identity. Yet I wondered: How did joining a different people impact their national belonging? The answer to this question presented itself very quickly: Joining the Jewish people did not really have an effect on their sense of belonging to the Netherlands at all, with most describing a form of hybrid identity:

You can be Jewish but not be an Israeli, you can be Israeli but not Jewish, and you can be in the Netherlands and be Jewish or not. So, it is a different type of distinction. Yes, you are both. I mean, you are Jewish and you are Dutch. (Aliza)

When I asked whether joining the Jewish people is similar to changing a nationality, Leah replied: ‘No. Only in Israel, where the religion is interwoven with being Jewish.’ In the Netherlands, so it was thought, being religious and Jewish were not interwoven with the nation-state and so these things could exist separately. There was also no need to ‘mix’ certain Jewish and Dutch practices, because these two were not conceived as being in conflict, as was the case for Muslim converts. At the same time, many converts felt that as a Jew, they are still outsiders, especially because of the *Shoah* and continuing antisemitism. Some Jewish interlocutors also referred to the paradoxical inclusion of Jewishness in the imagined community of the nation, and the supposed ‘Judaean-Christian’ character of the Netherlands. According to Naomi, ‘Dutch people see Jews as insiders, as belonging to Dutch society, but many Jews feel like outsiders’. Naomi also found that non-Jewish people often do not recognise the continuing presence of antisemitism and show little empathy.

Women who convert to Judaism and Islam are not the only ones who have to deal with presumptions about the place of religion in the Netherlands. Christian women at times also felt alienated from the rest of society, mainly because of the lack of religion in society (which, according to them, implied a moral degradation). However, their conversion did not have an impact on their sense of national belonging, nor were they considered to be ‘less Dutch’ or even traitors of the Dutch nation in the way that Muslim women were. Both Muslims and Jews know a long historical presence in Europe, but both are also considered outsiders to some extent. In what follows, I will shed light on how my interlocutors—the selected group of primarily white converts to Islam and Judaism—experience racism in the form of

antisemitism and Islamophobia. As I wrote in section 6.1, these mechanisms are both examples of the race-religion constellation and shaped by orientalist and Eurocentric understandings of religious and racial Others.

6.3.3 Encountering Racism

The persistent nature of antisemitism had a profound effect on women who embraced Judaism. A frequently asked question by the rabbinate to *giyur* candidates is what they will do if antisemitism spikes up again and leads to violence. Naomi told me: ‘I was asked: “It is quite peaceful now, but what if it gets worse? How do you stand up for... will you suddenly not be Jewish?”’ All converts replied to that question similar to Deborah: ‘Of course I am Jewish if things get worse. I am committed. But I still might be safer because my Jewishness cannot be traced, nor do I have a Jewish name.’ Naomi too affirmed that stepping away from Judaism is not an option ‘when things go south’.

The hegemonic discourse is that the Dutch left antisemitism behind at the end of the Second World War. However, the fact that this assumption is false is clearly demonstrated in research of contemporary antisemitism (e.g., Gans 2016), and by the testimony of the people I met during my fieldwork. Naomi said:

I feel like a lot of Dutch people have the idea that everything was fine, sucked for five years [during the Second World War], and was fine again. But for many Jewish people that is not the case. Antisemitism has existed for a long time, globally. Suddenly there were those five, six years of extreme, extreme, extreme horror, and then things continued to suck. (Naomi)

Despite the public perception that antisemitism is disappearing, all of my interlocutors experienced an increased threat over the past years. Because of the risk of attacks, all synagogues in the Netherlands are guarded by military police (*marechaussee*, in Dutch), especially when service is held on *Shabbat*.¹²⁷ One rabbi reflected:

I find it very contradictory. I would love to have the doors open, like: ‘Come in.’ But we can’t. People have to sign up beforehand and are vetted to see if they are not suspicious or on some blacklist. Only after they have been approved can we let them in. (Rabbi)

¹²⁷ During my fieldwork in July 2017, the permanent physical guard posts were replaced by cameras. At the time of writing, guards are employed around *Shabbat* services and whenever there is an increased level of threat, such as after attacks in other countries. The most recent example at the time of writing was the shooting in Vienna, in November 2020, near a synagogue.

For some congregants, the visible presence of heavily armed military police increased their anxiety and was a confirmation of the danger they are in as Jewish people. Yet, to the contrary, Leah told me that their presence gives her a sense of safety: ‘It is ridiculous that we need [that protection], but I do feel like nothing can happen to me, I do not feel unsafe.’

Although not all of the women experienced antisemitism directed at them personally, some did. Judith told me about an incident when a few children at the school she worked at, learned she was Jewish: ‘They spit on me from the stairs and shouted “nasty Jew”. That was hard and I cannot deal with it well.’ Another time, when Judith and her husband returned from a trip, they found graffiti on their front door saying that they should leave. Channah, who identifies as Orthodox Jewish, also described several antisemitic attacks:

Channah: It ranges from swearing to throwing food, attacking people, beating them up, yes. [...] When I had the first conversation with a rabbi, he asked: ‘What about antisemitism?’ And I figured: ‘Of course I will accept it.’ But you don’t know what it is like until you experience it yourself.

Lieke: Would you tell me about that experience?

C: The first time it happened I was astounded, truly astounded. I was riding my bike when someone threw a liquid in my face from the window of a car. I could not see for a moment and luckily, I was able to get off my bike and did not fall down. I was like ‘What on earth is happening to me?’ It can still give me a scare when they scream at me nowadays. I was attacked in a bus once and that was the worst thing I’ve ever experienced. It makes you feel terrible, but unfortunately it is a part of being Jewish. (Channah)

For Channah, learning how to deal with these types of attacks was an unfortunate part of becoming Jewish: ‘It’s not easy, but you know it might happen. And when it does, you have to know how to deal with it’, she added. Whilst other women had experienced fewer direct assaults, safety was an important concern for all of my Jewish interlocutors. Learning how to deal with antisemitism and staying committed when and if things get worse are part of the conversion trajectory. For Jewish women who converted, antisemitism was mainly felt in relation to the community and the biggest threats were felt in the context of the synagogue. Personal attacks were less common, although not unheard of. This was different for some Muslim women I spoke to, who experienced Islamophobia mainly in personal attacks.

There is no official study programme to become Muslim, but how to deal with discrimination and Islamophobia is often part of the informal teaching structures in Muslim communities. Similar to the Jewish women, some Muslim interlocutors were afraid of potential attacks directed at their community. In contrast to synagogues, mosques are not as heavily guarded by the Dutch state. Guests are not vetted by the government and the matter of safety is often in the hands of the communities themselves. Recent years have seen the

emergence of attacks on mosques worldwide (most notably the attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019), after which many mosques increased their level of security. As far as I can tell, military police have not been deployed. Besides the fear of attacks on mosques, Dunya was anxious for a backlash after an attack by terrorists who claim to be Muslim: ‘Whenever that happens, I’m scared for a few days, that I have to justify myself, or that someone may react out of emotion, take something out on me.’ Negative media coverage of Muslim terrorists often increased the hostility towards all Muslims, both in the public sphere and in the media.

Most Muslim women I interviewed experienced verbal and nonverbal assaults on a daily basis, not only when tension increased in the light of attacks. This ranged from comments or stares in the streets to prejudice at work. Comments in public spaces are often along the lines of ‘go back to your own country’, as Yara described it, asking: ‘But I am Dutch, am I not part of this society?’ Prejudice at work also occurs, as was the case for Amal. She has a high-status position, but often meets people who ‘expect me to be in a lower position, like a secretary. Personally, I don’t think those positions are of lesser value, but those people do.’ Amal noticed, for example, that people change to a simpler language when she joins a conversation or speak to her in a belittling tone (see also Vroon-Najem 2014, 84–85). Amal does not often directly confront these stereotypes, but thinks ‘they will learn soon enough that I’m the chair of the meeting. Just wait, you’re up for a surprise!’ These types of micro aggressions, as Yara called them, have an impact on every aspect of the day-to-day lives of converted Muslimas and are examples of how conversion to Islam is racialised. Yara’s experience captured the process of racialisation well: ‘As a convert, you’re thrown into the deep end and you’re suddenly no longer a part of the white majority’, or at least, she added, ‘not treated as such’.

However, the racialisation of white converts is more complicated. On the one hand, they experience a loss of white privilege. On the other hand, they continue to have privilege within the Muslim community (see also Galonnier 2018). Yara recalled a telling moment when she and her born Muslim, Moroccan husband walked across the street when she wanted to cross a red light:

[My husband] told me: ‘If the police come, you will be treated differently to a white person with blond hair—a non-Muslim.’ That person would be able to come up with excuses, whilst if the police would approach a person of colour, the excuse would not be tolerated. (Yara)

Whether Yara had become a ‘person of colour’ with her conversion was a difficult question. She told me that she is often not considered to be Dutch, but also does not encounter the same type of racism as brown or black Muslims do. Becoming a Muslim did have a racialising effect, but one that is often ambivalent and somewhere in-between ‘Dutch’ (white) and

‘Muslim’ (black or brown). Dunya remarked: ‘I am a white Dutch person, that is an unchangeable fact. But I am seen as less [white], there is a difference.’ At the same time, Dunya told me how her whiteness makes her recognisable as a convert in migrant Muslim communities, and she is often treated as such.

The public expression of religion can of course take different forms, but in the context of exclusion and racism, it is something with which Jewish and Muslim interlocutors alike struggled. Some women saw similarities in their experiences of antisemitism and Islamophobia, such as Jewish Sara, who encountered hatred against her personally and ‘can’t stand the hatred against others in general’. Even though the public image of relations between Muslims and Jews is not always positive, Sara ‘found more support and acknowledgement amongst Muslims than among atheistic Dutch people’. This sense of allyship was strongly felt by some of my interlocutors, who emphasised the importance of collaboration in combating racism and sexism towards both Muslim and Jewish women in the Netherlands.

Questions of race and racism were almost absent in the Christian setting, whilst beneath the surface, they are of course still present. Many church members and leaders were very concerned with inclusion in their community. A common ideal was to spread their influence (or faith) across the city, country, and eventually, the world. All of the churches made a great effort to show that they were diverse and welcoming to everyone (see section 3.2.1). This was reflected in their communities, which were diverse in terms of language, race, and cultural background. This was particularly important for the women of colour I spoke to, such as Miriam, a convert in her thirties with an Iranian migrant background, who stated: ‘This is not a white church. And that’s the way Jesus meant it!’ Similarly, Tina, a born Christian and Bible group member in her twenties, asserted: ‘Being black, I am welcomed here, there’s so much variety, that’s just beautiful.’ Yet this seemed to be important mainly to the women of colour—not for white women, and not discussed explicitly in the community. Ethnic and racial diversity was considered a given and not thematised in, for example, the Bible groups I joined. Miranda Klaver (2018, 244) similarly remarked: ‘With the church’s core metaphors of “Family” and a place called “Home”, Hillsong presents itself as an intimate, welcoming, open, and inclusive space where diversity is celebrated yet ethnic differences are neutralized.’ Although this does not seem to be unique to the Dutch context, there is a relation with a broader tendency in the Netherlands. Silence about race is, according to Gloria Wekker (2016), typical of the hegemonic Dutch context. Wekker (2016) called this ‘white innocence’ in the book with the same title, in which she raises awareness to the denying of race and racism as a fundamental signifier in Dutch society. The hesitancy to engage with the topic of race is thus partly reflective of general trends amongst (white) majority groups in the Netherlands. In an interview, Wekker stated: ‘400 years of colonialism have made race, in its various incarnations, a central but unconscious tool in our thinking, feeling, and acting. Race is ubiquitous, but mostly not recognized or acknowledged’ (as quoted in Van den Brandt et al. 2018, 79).

During my fieldwork, we never talked about race and racism in Bible groups, nor did I encounter the topic in any other church meeting or services. Although it seemed to be a non-issue in these communities, the leadership structures clearly tell a different story. The communities of all churches where I undertook fieldwork often included many people of colour and were often young. This was very different from their pastors, who were all white and middle aged. This is a common characteristic of these type of neo-Pentecostal churches, where members often come from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, but leaders are predominantly white and upper middle class (Bowler 2020). So, whilst inclusivity is advocated for and a welcoming atmosphere cherished, questions of race do play into the structures of the church, but are hardly ever talked about. For none of the white interlocutors in this setting was conversion explicitly related to race, but this does not mean it has no impact. That their conversion did not come with a change in privilege affirms the religion-race constellation in Europe by which Christianity continues to be associated with whiteness, whilst Judaism and Islam are not. The next section analyses how converted women reacted to exclusionary mechanisms and how they negotiated a sense of belonging in the Netherlands and, potentially, beyond.

6.4 Negotiating a Sense of Belonging

My interlocutors each had different strategies via which to deal with exclusionary discourses in the Dutch society, which they perceived as generally negative towards religion, and discrimination against Jews and Muslims in particular. In this section, I focus on the different strategies via which my interlocutors created their own sense of belonging in the wider society, as well as a safe environment in which to express their religion. The risk and reality of racist or religiophobic assaults made many interlocutors careful when expressing their religion in the public sphere—a subject to which I turn in the first subsection. The second subsection looks at another strategy: that of assimilation. Many studies of Muslim women have shown that white converts are often at the forefront of assimilation strategies. This is something common to the Muslim case study and did not come up as often amongst the other converts. Some Muslim women feel so fed up with Dutch negativity that they do not opt for assimilation at all, but instead aspire to emigrate to a Muslim majority country—the third strategy I discuss. This is to some extent similar to the frequently expressed wish of Jewish converts to emigrate to Israel, although disaffiliation with the Dutch nation played a lesser role for this second group.

6.4.1 Concealing and Disclosing Religious Belonging in Public

Many of my Jewish and Muslim interlocutors stated that often, non-religious others do not take offence at their religion per se, but at the visibility of certain practices. This is referred to

as orthopraxis versus orthodoxy, or ‘believing’ versus ‘doing’ religion. I have argued in the previous chapters that conversion in all three groups is a form of ‘doing religion’ (Avishai 2008) and that the distinction between belief and practice is unsuitable if we are to understand these processes (see section 1.3.3). Nevertheless, my research material does suggest that most conflicts arise from the visible aspects of becoming religious:

I don't think people have a problem with religion itself, they would accept it even though they might find it strange, like why you have to be religious. It is seen as a bit outdated. But I think people find the practical implication more difficult to accept. (Channah)

Channah's assertion was repeated by many other interlocutors: People take offence with the visible practices, but not with their religious convictions themselves, as long as these remained private and hence invisible. Another example is that some Muslim women told me that their parents struggled the most with their decision to wear a headscarf, rather than with their conversion (see section 4.7.1). When I asked Bushra why this was the case, she replied: ‘Because that is visible, people see it as a sign of oppression.’ One strategy to cope with negativity I found amongst my interlocutors was to conceal their religious status, either by simply not discussing it, or by hiding religious symbols.

Christian women did not typically express their religion in a strong symbolic manner. A minority wore a small cross on a necklace, and some wore Hillsong merchandise. Overall, their presence in the public sphere did not elicit attention and they blended into secular society with little trouble. Some occasionally struggled with talking about their religion. Talking about their beliefs in the form of testimony and evangelisation was an important aspect of their faith—and even a religious duty (see section 3.2.1). Yet many women, especially young adults, were afraid of negative reactions and often refrained from speaking about their religion to others. During one Bible study evening, Emma confessed that she had not answered honestly to a co-worker's question about what she had done over the weekend. Whilst Emma did not think believing in God was something to be ashamed of (as she repeatedly said), she did not dare to tell this colleague that she had gone to church. When she told the Bible group about this, she expressed a feeling of embarrassment because she had not been open and perhaps even missed an opportunity to inspire someone. When I asked Emma why she had not disclosed her religion, she replied that she was afraid her colleague might find her weird and look at her differently.

Not talking about religion so as not to cause a disturbance was a common way to mitigate negativity in other groups as well. On this point, Judith, a Progressive Jewish convert, said:

[My religion] is something of my own and I do not feel the need to share it with the whole world. Within our group it is fine, and I feel safe to wear this

[necklace], but I would not do it outside. I feel like it might provoke things. I am not very scared, but I did experience some tough things... (Judith)

Judith upheld the idea that religion is a private matter not to be discussed in the open: She does not ‘feel the need’ to share it. At the same time, Judith was afraid that expressing her Jewishness in public might ‘provoke things’, meaning antisemitism, which she had also experienced multiple times. When I asked her how she copes, she replied: ‘I do always wear a Star of David, this one [on my necklace]. Sometimes below my clothes, sometimes above.’ Almost all of the Jewish women I spoke to wore a Star of David in the form of jewellery, most commonly on a subtle necklace. Most also wore this necklace underneath their clothes in public settings so as not to disclose their religious affiliation. This strategic concealing is more difficult for men (and some women) who wear a Jewish cap, a *kippah*. Leah mentioned how she is anxious for her Jewish husband who ‘has no problem wearing his *kippah* in the parking lot of the *shul*’, whilst most people only put it on at the front door of the synagogue. Despite the fact that ‘people bother us in that context’, her husband is determined to wear a *kippah* in the car and on the parking lot. Lucy was the only woman I spoke to who expressed a desire to wear a *kippah* herself in public (which is permitted in some non-Orthodox communities), but she does not dare to because she has regularly witnessed antisemitism in her neighbourhood, albeit not directed at her personally. The fear of negative responses also has the material effect that some women chose not to put a *mezuzah* (small container with Torah parchment) on their front door, as is common, but rather to put it on a doorpost inside their homes.

Negotiating, concealing, and disclosing their religious status via religious symbols was more difficult for some other interlocutors. The typical modest dress style of Orthodox Jewish women, such as Rachel, Channah, and Sara, made them more recognisable as such. As was the custom, my married Orthodox Jewish interlocutors covered their hair with a scarf (*tichel*) or a wig (*sheitel*). No one told me they refrain from wearing a headscarf because of safety concerns, but most opted for a particular style of covering that was not directly associated with religious Otherness. A *tichel*, for example, can also take the form of a small headband that someone unfamiliar with these practices will likely not recognise as Jewish attire. However, Channah initially wore a headscarf after her marriage, which led others to perceive her to be a Muslim woman. This led to many Islamophobic comments on the street and at her office. As a result of this negative association of the headscarf with Islam, she eventually decided to wear a *sheitel* instead. She still encounters discrimination in the form of antisemitism, but felt like this changed when she was no longer perceived as a Muslim.

The Muslim women I met who wore a headscarf had similarly fewer options whether, and how, to disclose their religious commitment. When they began to wear a *hijab* or *khimaar*, their visibility as Muslims made them quite suddenly a potential target for Islamophobia: ‘I do experience more negativity because I look like a Muslim and profile myself as such’, Dunya said. This fear for their safety, combined with the social repercussions

from their families and friends, often makes converts hesitant to wear a headscarf, despite their wish to do so (see section 4.7.1). Take for example Hanan:

One of the reasons why I still do not wear a headscarf is because I am so afraid that everyone will say ‘oh what a shame’. So yes that is hard... I’ve actually been wanting to do it for a long time but I don’t, because I don’t feel like dealing with all those comments. (Hanan)

According to Göle (2017), the *hijab* has become the master symbol of Islam’s Otherness. Because of the status of veiling, it is not only a pious choice, although women would first and foremost point to their religious desires. Rather, it is also a politicised choice that makes converts visibly Muslim in public spaces. This is to some extent similar for Orthodox Jewish women who wear a *tichel* or *sheitel*, although this is a less powerful symbol of Otherness and mainstream society is less familiar with it. The only—albeit hypothetical—option for Muslimas to really avert negativity in the public sphere was to stop wearing a headscarf, but this was considered to be such an important expression of piety that unveiling was never considered.

Göle (2017) further argues that the public presence of Muslims in Europe questions the secularity of the public sphere and often leads to tension and conflict. Göle (2017, 1) writes: ‘The publicly visible daily lives of Islam disturb the collective imaginary of European countries shaped by the secular values of freedom and a non-religious way of life.’ Controversies and conflicts come up, Göle (2017) argues, when Muslims demand the possibility to following Islamic prescriptions in their daily lives and do so visibly and publicly. In this regard, it can be understood why being visibly Muslim raises so much anxiety in the secular public space. When it concerns white women, who are part of the majority, who wear a headscarf—the master symbol of the ethnic, cultural, and religious ‘Other’—the discomfort only increases. These boundaries of the public sphere were not felt as strongly amongst Christian women, who belonged to the (largely white) majority and had options in talking or not talking about their beliefs. It was also less of an issue amongst most Jewish women, who often passed as members of the majority and whose decision to wear a religious symbol (such as a Star of David) was not as politicised. The exception are those Jewish women who adhered to the more conservative dress style associated with Orthodox Judaism, whose public presence also disturbed the secularity of the public sphere. The strategy of concealing or disclosing religious belonging in the Dutch public sphere was thus experienced differently amongst my interlocutors. This is reflective of the different social status of their religion and the visibility of certain markers of religious belonging. A second strategy to find belonging in the Netherlands was via assimilation as a form of talking back to the stereotype that one cannot be simultaneously religious and Dutch, or the assumption that religious

women are always oppressed. Many women were devoted to this approach, as is discussed in the following section.

6.4.2 Assimilation

Towards the end of every interview, I asked my interlocutors: ‘Is there anything you would want readers to know?’ I found an interesting difference in the answers to this question. Christian and Jewish women often replied with a form of advice to potential converts, such as: ‘Remember to take it slow’; or ‘You don’t have to know everything’. They imagined the reader to be someone potentially interested in converting themselves. Christian women especially often expressed the hope for readers to be inspired by their story. Muslim women, however, often addressed a presumed secular audience that had no intention to embrace Islam. Iman replied to my question that she wants readers to know ‘that there is nothing special about Islam, it is just very ordinary. I really try to normalise it. I do interviews more often, and I always try to say: “I don’t think it’s special.”’ This tendency for normalisation and assimilation is the second strategy I witnessed amongst my interlocutors via which they created a sense of belonging to the Dutch imagined community.

Margaretha van Es (2016, 2019a) showed that converts in Islam are often at the forefront of assimilation strategies, for example in the Dutch Muslima network *Al-Nisa*. This includes many who do not have formal roles in religious communities, but who ‘try to break the stereotype of “the oppressed Muslim woman” by managing their own conduct in everyday encounters with non-Muslims’ (van Es 2019a, 375). Özyürek (2014, 16) observed a similar process in Germany:

A good number of individual German converts to Islam with no leadership role or formal institutional affiliation also see themselves as being in a unique position to engage assertively with mainstream German society and publicly present Islam in a way that immigrant Muslims cannot.

The idea that Muslim converts are often involved in assimilation strategies was confirmed by my own fieldwork. In this process, as I wrote before, some interlocutors made a distinction between religion (Islam) and culture (Moroccan, Turkish, Dutch, etc.). Bushra and Dunya were particularly invested in showing that the religion of Islam did not clash with Dutch culture. Bushra asserted:

Islam is a religion, but you have your own life too. And that is culture and that is different everywhere. But I do think Islam actually fits best with the Dutch culture. [...] You can adapt to a culture to a certain extent, of course, but what I mean is: You choose a religion, you do not choose a culture. I have my own culture. (Bushra)

Elements in Islam that Bushra found to be similar to ‘the Dutch culture’ were the habit of not eating or wasting too much, keeping your appointments, and being honest. In the Netherlands many mosques tend to cater to a particular ethnic group. After a few years in a Somali mosque, Bushra and her husband, who is also a white convert, realised that they did not feel at home there because of the ‘cultural differences’ and found a mosque founded by white converts. The founders of this mosque and community had similarly felt out of place in the existing communities and decided to start a group for all ‘Dutch Muslims’ (see section 4.5.1). In practice, such initiatives are often started by white converts and tend to attract (potential) converts in particular.

The tendency of white converts to normalise Islam by stressing its similarity to ‘Dutch culture’ has the risk of downplaying the differences and obstacles that born Muslims encounter. The distinction between religion (true Islam) and the culture of migrant Muslim communities (which should be removed) reiterates a hegemonic Dutch discourse in which Muslims are excluded from symbolic national citizenship. In a similar vein, Özyürek (2014, 17) cites one interlocutor who, next to ‘informing and educating mainstream society about Islam’, also feels a ‘responsibility for educating the traditional Muslim community’. One explanation of the trend by which white converts take centre stage in assimilation processes is that many speak the language well, which can also be why they are often approached by media outlets as spokespersons for Islam. Another possible explanation might lie in the fact that white converts (especially those who wear a headscarf) are quite suddenly confronted with negativity about their religion and suffer from a kind of culture shock once they live and embody the role of Other to a society that had never questioned their belonging before.

Christian and Jewish women were also invested in combatting stereotypes about their religious groups, but in a different way. Lisa expressed the hope that the readers of this dissertation ‘won’t only look at those stereotypes about Christians in the news, which shows just the bad things’. She added that she hoped people would do their research to ‘learn what people are actually like—what God is like’. None of my Christian interlocutors found it important to stress the normalcy of Christianity like Iman did at the start of this section. To the contrary, they explicitly framed their religion as being outside of the mainstream and as an alternative to the ‘worldly life of sins’. Jewish women did not express such a hope for readers to convert, but did wish to offer a more nuanced and positive view of what it means to be religious. Sara, to offer one example, often has conversations with others about Judaism:

I continue to talk about it, also to people who are not religious, about what I find special, important, about my way of life or about Judaism. And it almost never happened that this led to a negative conversation. Many people realise that it is something good to turn your phone off [on *Shabbat*], to be focused on each other, on food, to talk, and read and all. (Sara)

By trying to build connections with non-believers Sara, Lisa, Iman, and others did their best to create a place for themselves in the Netherlands and sought to offer alternatives to existing stereotypes. They also found it important to remain in the conversation in order to make it easier for others to explore religious beliefs and perhaps even convert.

Although most women opted for such an assimilation strategy, not all did. Yara and Hanan did not have the energy to, respectively, ‘prove that I belong’ or ‘constantly explain myself’. Because of the change in social status after their conversion, they did not feel fully at home in the Netherlands anymore. For some interlocutors the new status as a religious minority led them to desire to move to a country outside of the Netherlands where their group was in the majority. This forms a third strategy to negotiate their sense of belonging.

6.4.3 Imagining an Elsewhere

This final section looks into the desire to move to a country where the religion of my interlocutors holds the majority position. These places were often idealised and considered to be closer to a sort of religious truth or essence. Many Jewish women expressed a strong sense of belonging in Israel and some of them had more or less concrete plans to move there at some point. Similarly, converts to Islam often had a desire to eventually move to a Muslim majority country.¹²⁸ Many of the women regularly visited Morocco or Israel whilst maintaining the Netherlands as their home country. This was not a common strategy for Christian women, although the longing to a place of religious essence did come up in their descriptions of the Hillsong headquarters in Australia.

In theory, all Jewish people are allowed to immigrate to Israel via the process of making *aliyah* (Hebrew for ‘ascent’): ‘The [notion of the Jewish] people also means that you have a space in Israel, everyone who is Jewish can move to Israel’, Channah explained. The law about *aliyah* (‘Law of Return’) uses a broad definition of a Jew as anyone born of a Jewish mother or converted to Judaism and not a member of another religion.¹²⁹ Officially, Progressive and Liberal communities are recognised, and these conversions would make people eligible for *aliyah*. However, the Israeli state tends to favour Orthodox Judaism. There have been reports that the government is increasingly strict about the terms for *aliyah* and does not recognise all non-Orthodox conversions (Maltz 2017; 2020). In fact, there was a

¹²⁸ I did not interview Muslim women who had changed their country in their conversion process (see ter Laan 2021; Vroon-Najem and Moors 2021). For studies of migrant converts in Israel, see the work by Michal Kravel-Tovi (2017b) and Yulia Egorova (2015).

¹²⁹ This stems from the notion that all Jews in the diaspora have the right to settle in Israel and are, essentially, all Israeli citizens. The 1950 Law of Return states: ‘Every Jew has the right to come to this country as an *Oleh* (immigrant to Israel)’ (5710.-1950.1.). In 1970, this law was broadened to include the children and grandchildren of Jewish people and their spouses, even if these are not Jewish according to Jewish law themselves. The only exception is someone who ‘has been a Jew and has voluntarily changed their religion’ (5730-1970.1c). <https://mfa.gov.il/mfa/mfa-archives/1950-1959/pages/law%20of%20return%205710-1950.aspx>

widely shared belief amongst my non-Orthodox interlocutors that their *giyur* did not make them eligible for *aliyah* at all. The confusing aspect is that whilst non-Orthodox Jews (including converts) can certainly make *aliyah*, the Chief Rabbinate is run by the Orthodoxy and so is the majority of civil affairs. This means that, even if they are permitted to move there, non-Orthodox converts cannot get married in Israel (since the Orthodox rabbinate does not officiate such weddings), nor can they be buried at a Israeli Jewish cemetery.

Despite their potentially limited options for *aliyah*, there were converts in all Jewish groups who expressed a strong sense of belonging in Israel. Judith, Deborah, Rachel, and Shoshanna all undertook part of their studies there. Others regularly visited Israel for holidays, and a small minority wished to make *aliyah*. Many recalled the first time they visited Israel as one of the strongest motivating factors in their decision to start a *giyur* trajectory. Describing her first visit as a student in the early 1980s, Rachel said: ‘As soon as my plane landed, I thought “This is where I belong, this is my home.”’ She added that she recognises this feeling in other converts, who often feel a strong connection to Israel and the Jewish people who live there. Hanneke expressed a similar emotional response when she first visited Israel and had felt ‘at home’ right away. Whilst Rachel does not have the desire to emigrate, Hanneke did want to make *aliyah* once her Orthodox *giyur* was certified: ‘We want to bring our children to Israel.’¹³⁰ Hanneke was also the only convert I spoke to who had a strong wish to move to a Jewish ‘settlement’ on the West Bank because of its ‘more Orthodox environment’:

I feel very connected to the enthusiasm and spirit of people living there. Who are actually building the country from scratch, almost literally with their own hands in the dirt. And I want that too. [...] Plus, I would find it easier to keep my focus on my religion in an environment where everyone is religious, it’s easier than in a secular environment. (Hanneke)

None of the other Jewish women preferred such a ‘more Orthodox’ environment. When we met, Karen was in the process of moving to Israel to live closer to the family of her husband (who was born there), but preferred the larger cities over the controversial Orthodox settlements. Some, like Karen, were explicitly critical of the occupied territories on the West Bank and proponents of a two-state option. Most avoided the topic and had no strong opinions about the Israeli-Palestinian war. This was mainly because of the complexity of the situation

¹³⁰ When I interviewed Hanneke in 2017, she was living an Orthodox Jewish life in the Netherlands with her husband and three children, but had not yet appeared before the *beit din* to officiate her *giyur*. In 2021, she told me that her *giyur* had been certified two years after we met, and that she and her family had indeed emigrated to Israel. This section is based on our conversations during my fieldwork in 2017.

and the risk of offending others when taking any strong stance.¹³¹ When they did talk about Israel, they mainly idealised it as the longed-for Holy Land and did not refer to the ongoing conflict. Many saw in Israel a sort of essence of Judaism, but few had concrete plans to move there like Hanneke and Karen. In practice, many converts regularly visited Israel and this became somewhat of a ‘home away from home’. Many felt it was easier to be Jewish there than in the Netherlands because of the majority status of Jews. In Israel, Leah said: ‘You exit the plane and it is Jewish right away!’ With friends and relatives of her husband (who is born Jewish) they often visit the synagogue and celebrate *Shabbat* together—something that is more difficult in the Netherlands, where she has ‘to make up an excuse whenever [non-Jewish] people ask us to meet on Friday’. The idea that it is easier to maintain a focus on religion in a religious environment came up often amongst my interlocutors. This was also the most important motivation for Muslim women who expressed a desire to emigrate.

The religious emigration of Muslims to a Muslim-majority country is called *hijra* (Arabic for migration).¹³² The past decades have seen an increase in European Muslims moving to countries such as Morocco, Turkey, and Egypt, amongst them a small group who mainly leave for religious reasons (ter Laan 2021). According to Nina ter Laan (2021, 66), who studied Dutch converts who had moved to Morocco:

Based on the assumption in the call to *hijra* that it is harder to practice the essentials of Islam within a non-Muslim country, running the risk for the corruption of their religion in the current land where they reside in, many women believe it is better for the development of their faith (*iman*) to reside in a Muslim majority country, instead of the secular societies of their home countries, which they felt formed an obstacle in the practicing of their faith.

There are no migration laws specifically directed at *muhajirat* (Muslims who make *hijra*) and they usually do not have to offer proof of their conversion. The countries my interlocutors referred to most were Turkey and Morocco, where many Dutch Muslims have descendants. In both countries, EU citizens receive a three-month residence permit, which is even provided automatically in Morocco. After these three months, a short visit across the border to Greece or Spain, respectively, grants an extension of this permit.

Some Muslim converts expressed the wish to move to a Muslim majority country, but here too, my research group is limited to women who lived in the Netherlands. Some who wished to make *hijra* had religious reasons and considered it easier to focus on their piety in

¹³¹ Deborah also mentioned that she was frequently asked about the situation in Israel, as if having to justify the situation simply because she was Jewish. This was similar to some Muslim women, who were called to justify conflicts in Muslim majority countries or *jihadi* attacks.

¹³² *Hijra* also refers to the migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, which furthermore marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar (622 CE).

an environment with other Muslims. Amal frequently visits Turkey and expressed a wish to move there permanently. When I asked her why, she replied: ‘There’s a town and whenever I’m there I feel really connected to myself. Not happier per se, but closer to myself.’ When I asked Amal what made her feel more in touch with herself, she told me how life has a different pace there and how ‘normal’ it is to be a Muslim. This was similar for Hanan. When we met, Hanan and her husband had plans to find a home in Morocco, where they would live for six months, spending the other half of the year in the Netherlands. Her motivation to emigrate part-time was that being a Muslim is the norm in Morocco, which she felt would make her practice far easier. I am not sure whether Hanan and Amal will eventually move, but it will be interesting to see a parallel with studies of converts post-*hijra* (e.g., ter Laan 2021; Vroon-Najem and Moors 2021).

For other Muslim women who had a desire to emigrate, religious motivations were less dominant, although all women had the idea that it was easier to practice their religion in a less secular country. For Yara, the negativity towards Muslims in the Netherlands had such a deep impact that she considered emigration:

[My husband and I] do consider moving away once we have children. It depends on how things develop here in the Netherlands, it really depends. [...] If it becomes impossible to live a normal life here or to find a regular job... What will I do to my children by staying here? (Yara)

Yara added that she found this question difficult and would probably find it very hard to settle abroad, but would consider doing so for the safety of her children. When Yara discussed this with her family, they responded with the persistent assumption that women who embraced Islam often hear: ‘They said: “We’ll lose you!” As if it is something my husband would drag me along in. And again, women are seen more as a victim, as if they cannot speak for themselves.’ This stereotype is less common amongst Jewish converts. Only Sara mentioned that her family had been afraid that she would ‘move to Antwerp’, a city associated with strict orthodoxy, although Sara had never expressed a wish to move abroad.

Imagining a place elsewhere can be a means to cope with the lack of belonging in the Netherlands. This longing for a space outside of the Netherlands was not so strong amongst Christian interlocutors, whose conversion did not imply becoming a (racialised) minority. The only instances where I noticed a similar longing was when it came to the Hillsong headquarters in Sydney, Australia. Many aspired to go there for a period from a few weeks to several months. Traveling to Sydney was often discussed, albeit not in terms of emigration. Rather, they talked about it in a way that resonates with pilgrimage. The Hillsong headquarters (which is now a full-fledged town, called the ‘Hills campus’) were idealised, but not necessarily because converted women deemed it easier to practice their religion outside of the Netherlands. Instead, they expected to find inspiration and be charged by the power of the Holy Spirit there, which visitors (or pilgrims) would then take back to the Netherlands to

inspire others. People who had travelled there, for example Danielle's sister, who spent a summer at the Hills campus, were often admired and warmly welcomed. For Jewish and Muslim women, there was more a desire to emigrate and leave the Netherlands behind. In that imagined elsewhere, it was considered easier to practice their religion and to regain some social status that they might have lost after embracing a minority religion.

Conclusion

This chapter analysed women's conversion experiences in relation to belonging to different imagined communities—the experience of transnational religious communities and the Dutch nation. For Jews and Muslims, a third imagined community was added, namely countries in which their respective religions hold a majority status and which thus offered an escape from the current situation in the Netherlands. The focus of this chapter was on women's sense of belonging and the strategies they enact to deal with stereotypes and becoming a minority, including the negotiation, contestation, and reiteration of boundaries.

Many interlocutors felt that becoming religious in the Netherlands is frowned upon because of the secularity of the public sphere and secularist ideologies, according to which religion is located in the private sphere and preferably abandoned altogether. Joining a religion associated with ethnic otherness, such as Islam, also meant that white converts experience processes of racialisation and discrimination. Converts to Judaism and Islam often have to cope with antisemitism and Islamophobia, which was further interwoven with their whiteness. I consider antisemitism and Islamophobia as processes of racialisation, but I also recognise that they have different histories, take multiple forms, and have different impacts. It is also important to not merely discuss racialisation in the context of (becoming a) religious minority, but also to thematise whiteness, since 'being white is passed off as such a natural, invisible category that its significance has not been a research theme' (Wekker 2016, 23). White women who converted to Christianity hardly ever addressed the question of race and concerns with racism were largely absent from this group. Yet this invisibility does not mean that their whiteness is insignificant or 'neutral'. Rather, it is a result of the same othering mechanisms and offers a comparison with the experiences of women who became Muslim or Jewish. The comparison of the experiences of women converting to different religious groups, each with their own history and place in the cultural archive, enables a fuller understanding of the race-religion constellation in women's daily lives. Studying women who become part of a religious minority holds a mirror to the wider secularised society of the Netherlands. In 2007, Grace Davie (2007, 16) stated: 'We learn as much about ourselves as about the religious movements themselves as we examine their position in society. The essential question is straightforward enough: Which forms of religion are acceptable and which are not?' The comparative exploration of women who convert to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam offers a

starting point from which to think about which conversions are more accepted in the Netherlands and why. It also shows the many different strategies women employ to create a sense of belonging and to find complementarity in being both Dutch and religious.

Conclusion

I would like to encourage your readers to truly listen to what we have to say. Especially with these stories, why certain choices are made or how we do certain things, try to see beyond the negative, especially when it concerns women. Religion does not have to be an obstacle for women. It can offer support, peace, and reason, which can actually strengthen you.

—Dunya, Muslim

For me, it has been a long journey. ‘Conversion’ often sounds like one clear moment. Sure, there might be one moment that encourages you, but it is a journey. I really enjoyed our conversation today, Lieke, to reflect on my process, on how I think about some issues. Yes. And in that, I do see God’s greatness again, reminded of everything that happened.

—Nina, Christian

I sometimes don’t feel like answering those questions, like ‘why did you do this’, ‘what were you like before’, this and that, ‘where did you get the idea’. [...] I have an idea, but it’s not as if... I don’t know, I never received a vision from heaven or something. It’s a gradual process and it concerns so many aspects. There is the love for the language, a fascination with Israel... but that does not even mean you should become Jewish straight away. It’s just very complicated.

—Deborah, Jewish

This dissertation opened with three citations of interlocutors who reflected on their personal experiences with becoming Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. This conclusion opens with three reflections by other interlocutors in which they state what they would like readers to take away from this dissertation and how they reflected on the interviews in which they participated. Dunya, Nina, and Deborah all voiced concerns about the way in which they are often framed and approached, in particular, how they are constantly asked why they converted—how conversion is sometimes seen as an identifiable moment of change, or how others tend to focus on the presumed negative aspects of women’s religious lives. In other words, they spoke back to the supposed paradox of their conversion—one that I approach as a puzzle, consisting of many different pieces and layers related to issues of gender, belonging, and sexuality. In this conclusion, the different pieces of this ‘conversion paradox’ are analysed. I do so by focusing on three different levels of analyses: ethnographic, conceptual, and socio-political. First, I recall how my interlocutors gave meaning to religion in their daily lives with regard to gender and sexuality, summarising and comparing the different empirical chapters. In the second section, I offer conceptual reflections on conversion and gender by focusing on narratives of continuity and change, agency and authority, boundary making,

beliefs and practices. Finally, I make my concluding critical reflections on the conversion frameworks that currently dominate public representation—the ‘why question’; and ‘religion versus emancipation’.

Women’s Experiences with Conversion and Gender

The majority of the women in my research upheld a perspective of gender that has either been referred to as ‘complementary difference’ (Scott 2018) or as an ‘equity discourse’ (van Nieuwkerk 2006b). Such a view combines a binary understanding of gender with an emphasis on equity: Men and women are different, but of equal value. For my interlocutors, these perspectives were often informed by their religion and expressed in their community. Complementarity discourse has often been discussed in relation to Islam, however, my research shows that this is also common (albeit not universally so) amongst Jewish and Christian converts. For many, the framework of equity provided a sense of female strength and pride. This was sometimes based on creation stories and often connected to biological features such as childbearing and the supposed natural capacity for women to engage in emotional labour. For some interlocutors, this ‘equal but different’ discourse was first encountered during their conversion process, whilst for others it simply confirmed or reiterated a previously held perspective. A minority advocated for a more fluid understanding of gender and opposed a division of roles and tasks based on a male/female binary. Interestingly, many in this group also based this view on religious creation, for example citing the notion that men and women were created from the same source and therefore equal. The way in which this discourse was reflected in practice was even more varied. Below, I sketch the most important issues where gender and religion intersected in women’s everyday religion, based on my ethnographic material.

Religious Communities

For all of my interlocutors, the community was very important and social encounters were often a significant factor in the process of conversion. Joining a religion implied joining a community, although many women began to introduce religious practices in their daily lives before reaching out to others. A few Muslim women also recited the *shahada*, the official conversion ritual, privately. Most Muslimas regretted their initial loneliness, and all emphasised the great value of a social network of Muslims from and with which to learn about the religion, to practice rituals, and to gain support in dealing with non-religious others. The role of the community was most central in the Christian case study. The neo-Pentecostal churches played an important role in creating the structures for conversion, which was widely promoted and appreciated. However, in the Jewish case study, this was almost different. Whilst many foregrounded their desire to join the Jewish people, they struggled with the

reality that conversion was discouraged and, with the exception of some Progressive *shuls*, hardly ever discussed. Moreover, Progressive and Liberal Jewish women struggled with their acceptance by Orthodox Jewish communities, where their *giyur* was often not recognised. Nevertheless, *giyur* candidates in all denominations are asked to participate in a community for at least two years to become acquainted with the rituals and social codes. A prerequisite for *giyur* was thus the participation in a community, whilst this was not the case for Muslims and only implicitly the case for Christian women.

Most interlocutors were, to some extent, active in a religious community, although some Jewish and Muslim women struggled to maintain an active network outside of their *shul* or mosque. This was different for the Orthodox Jewish women I met, who were often fully immersed in what they called ‘Jewish life’. Christian women were most active in their community. Here, men and women interacted amicably (especially young adults) and there was no spatial separation. However, this does not imply an absence of gender norms. Instead, the interactions between men and women were closely monitored and the division of roles reflected a binary understanding of gender that assigned care tasks primarily to female members. Muslim women and Orthodox Jewish women were confronted with more explicit gender segregation in their religious institutions. Although most appreciated the separation of men and women, for some it took time to accept. Amongst these interlocutors, whilst some were critical of the limited space made available to women, they usually did not question the separation itself. Rather, the inequality between the men’s and women’s spaces was questioned as not in accordance with the ‘equal but different’ principle.

For many Liberal and Progressive Jewish converts, equal access to ritual tasks and leadership roles (such as that of rabbi) was a dominant factor in their decision to pursue a non-Orthodox *giyur* and was considered the main difference between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Judaism. Christian women often expressed their appreciation towards the role of female pastors as ‘Sisterhood’ leaders, but also expressed doubt about taking the position of lead pastor. This group generally adhered to the principle of male headship by which female leaders are ultimately always under the authority of men. In Orthodox Jewish and Muslim communities, women could not become rabbi or imam respectively. Whilst this was not considered problematic or widely critiqued, many interlocutors did advocate for greater visibility and power for women. However, women were not completely absent from leadership roles or authority, and could be active in positions such as teacher or board member. More common still, and carrying with it added social status, was the informal role of mentor. The emotional labour offered by women was cherished and many women took on such a role a few years after their conversion, especially to help and support recent newcomers.

This negotiation of power in conversion reflects Bernice Martin’s (2003) analysis of the Pentecostal ‘gender paradox’, which asserts that, although power is differently distributed between men and women in such settings, women do have the ability to gain status and power

in converting to a religion. However, I would like to take a moment to nuance this paradox (just like the overarching ‘conversion paradox’). Claiming that women’s power in gender-conservative religions is paradoxical indirectly produces its opposite—the secular—as a neutral space of gender equality. Power is also likely to be distributed unequally in secular spaces, which are subject to similar patriarchal structures. Most of my interlocutors pointed to the way in which religion makes this difference explicit. Another expression of this explicit gender difference is in the appreciation of the role of women as guardians of the domestic sphere, which is where the majority located their own (and other women’s) power.

Religion in the Private Sphere

Besides religious institutions, the private sphere represented an important space in which most interlocutors practiced and expressed their religion. In a broader sense, this shows that conversion also takes place in daily life and is not limited to more formal religious settings. Many interlocutors were attracted to the appreciation shown to traditional female gender roles, primarily as mothers and homemakers. This was expressed by changing the daily routine to include time for prayer or decorating the home with religious objects, such as posters with written prayers or a *menorah*. In all of the case studies, women valued domestic religious practices, the most important being prayer. However, most also struggled to meet their own expectations on this matter, which shows that ideals do not always align with everyday practice. Instead, this shows that, rather than a linear development, religious self-making is a continuous ethical practice.

The private sphere was mainly associated with family life and motherhood, which for many women provided one of the most important ways to express their religion. This reflects the gender equity discourse in which women’s strength was often connected to the capacities of birth and childcare. There were few reflections on this gender essentialist discourse that noted that not all women can or wish to be a mother, or that not all mothers give birth to their own children. This suggests that religious spaces can be rather exclusionary towards transgender or non-binary people, or towards cisgender women who do not fulfil a specific ideal of motherhood. Many also suggested that women are best capable to care for children and emotional labour in general. However, it is important to note that some women rejected this idea and instead preferred to share childcare responsibilities with their partners.

Further associated with the private sphere were tasks such as food preparation and shared meals with family and friends. The importance of, for example, *Shabbat* dinners could be painful for new Jewish women without a social network or Jewish family of their own. For Muslim women too, the first time fasting during *Ramadan* was often an isolating and difficult experience. Such struggles were less apparent regarding dietary changes—the adoption of *kosher* and *halal* food as part of the conversion process. Most women introduced these diets gradually and individually, without leading to feelings of isolation. Whilst food was often a very important marker of difference for converts to these traditions, this played a lesser role

amongst Christian women. One reason is that there are fewer food regulations in Christianity. More broadly, food often plays a significant role in the construction of boundaries between majority and minority groups. It is revealing that some Muslim women referred to their food preferences in order to establish a continuation of their national belonging, stating that they prefer traditional Dutch meals, but with the change to *halal* meat. Negotiating food practices and diets was an important aspect of becoming religious and is part of the way in which converts train their bodies. It is also one of the ways in which their religious identity can be felt—even tasted—throughout the day without significant interference from those in positions of religious authority.

As such, conversion takes place in the private sphere on different levels and relates to norms and aspirations to establish a family life, in which women are considered to have the most power and skills. For many, the private sphere was as important as more formal religious spaces. As such, I oppose the patriarchal paradigm that conceives the domestic sphere and all its (feminine) gendered connotations as secondary to formal and public settings traditionally dominated by men. The private sphere is also the first area in which women start to implement (or experiment with) religious practices if they are not yet active in a community, because they are hesitant to reach out, or because they are not given access. It is also reflective of an individualistic and private understanding of religion and conversion, as well as a reflection on the exclusion some experience when joining religious communities.

Sexuality and Embodiment

Connected to the gender discourse of ‘equal but different’ is a normative moral framework governing sexuality that was often perceived as very different from that of wider secular society. In short, the dominant discourse was profoundly heteronormative, and my interlocutors widely considered monogamous marriage as the ideal context for sexual relations. This often came with a disapproval of LGBTQI+ sexualities, although some were strong advocates of sexual diversity and inclusion. This was not necessarily related to the religious group in which the women were active, the widest variety of opinions being found amongst Jewish converted women. Whilst Progressive Jewish communities are often outspokenly welcoming to queer people, Orthodox communities tend to advocate a stricter sexual ethic. However, there were women in Progressive Jewish *shuls* who disapproved of the explicit LGBTQI+ atmosphere in their community, and Orthodox women who advocated for more acceptance towards LGBTQI+ people.

In the Pentecostal churches there seemed to be the smallest leeway to negotiate this heteronormative framework. The majority of Muslim interlocutors had a similarly heteronormative view of sexuality, but often did not actively promote this, or pass judgement on the views of others. My Muslim interlocutors were very careful to emphasise that their disapproval of same-sex sexuality was only their personal view, and they accepted that other people might think differently. Moreover, they also did not have the tendency to explicitly

judge others on their sexual moral or practices, whilst this was more common amongst some neo-Pentecostal women—mainly those in leadership positions. This shows that the idea that religion is sex-negative whilst secularity offers unlimited sexual freedom should be problematised. Within religious groups there is significant diversity of opinions, and indeed such opinions do not always fully reflect sexual behaviour and intimate desires. For example, many women who idealised sex as only taking place within marriage did indeed engage in premarital sex for several reasons and almost with no regret.

Conversion also had implications on the bodies of the converts themselves in relation to sexuality and reproduction. For example, Muslim and married Orthodox Jewish women were expected to adhere to guidelines surrounding menstruation that are related to purity and impurity. This was often experienced as the most intimate aspect of becoming Jewish or Muslim, but was performed differently by different women. Some Orthodox women disliked the *niddah*, whilst some Progressive and Liberal Jewish women wanted to observe some menstrual rituals, but did so at home because their synagogue did not include a ritual bath (*mikvah*). Some converted Muslimas felt a similar discomfort in the regulation of their cycle, whilst others appreciated the release of their religious duties (such as praying or fasting), or found a way to continue some form of practice during their menstruation without challenging the guidelines. These examples might suggest that sexual ethics were mainly a concern for (Orthodox) Jewish and Muslim women, albeit performed in various ways. However, a change in (sexual) ethics was expressed by the majority of interlocutors, further expressed by a change in dress style after conversion.

In most cases, a change in dress style implied wearing less ‘provocative’ clothing such as short skirts or shirts with a lot of cleavage showing. Here again the experiences differed and related to religion in different ways. For some women, their clothing style was not a direct expression of their religion and not everything they wore can be regarded a religious practice. Orthodox Jewish women, similar to Muslim women, tended to change their style of dress most, choosing to wear long skirts and modest blouses. This change was often perceived by family and friends as quite drastic and made them stand out somewhat from their peers. Liberal and Progressive Jewish and Christian women had the least noticeable change in wardrobe, although young adult Christian women did feel like this had been an important change in their process. Liberal and Progressive Jewish women often chose to wear a small item, such as jewellery, with a Star of David to express their religious belonging and to feel connected to this throughout their daily lives. This also came with negotiations of safety, some choosing to conceal this item if they feared antisemitic comments. For Orthodox Jewish women who wore a headscarf (*tichel*) or wig (*sheitel*) after their marriage there were fewer options to conceal their religious belonging. Showing this in public often came with a sense of pride, but also of insecurity and a fear of exclusion. These acts of negotiation were even stronger amongst those Muslim women who wore an Islamic headscarf (*hijab* or *khimaar*), which became a symbol of Islamic otherness. For them, wearing a headscarf in public spaces

was one of the most anticipated and anxious decisions in the process of conversion. This too was often done gradually and something that could give a great sense of belonging, joy, and pride, but also came with an attendant and sometimes openly expressed negativity in the wider public sphere. It was in this regard that the experiences of women embracing Islam, Christianity, and Judaism differed most.

Belonging and Boundaries

Conversion to any religion is shaped by its socio-political context. In my research, this was the Netherlands—a predominantly white, secular country with a strong Christian heritage. The Netherlands prides itself on having ‘progressive’ values, especially regarding gender and LGBTQI+ people. However, recent decades have seen an increase in right-wing Islamophobic (and to a lesser extent, anti-feminist) discourse. This dissertation pointed to the complex interplay of gender, race, and religion—at its most explicit when it comes to women who convert to a minority religion that is associated with Otherness, such as Islam. Becoming a Muslim often implied not only a (presumed) crossing of a religious boundary, but also the crossing of the boundary of national, symbolic citizenship. Muslim women often experience processes of racialisation, albeit in a different sense to Muslims of colour. Nevertheless, their experiences are an example of the European race-religion constellation. This is a recurring theme in studies of Muslim converts, thereby substantially shaping intersectional theories about women who choose to convert. By comparing the experiences of national belonging of Christian and Jewish converts, this field is broadened. Jewish women—although they themselves affirmed that they joined a people by becoming Jewish—did not feel such a distance from the Dutch nation. They did, however, encounter antisemitism and dealing with this racism was part of the *giyur* process. This resonated with Muslim women’s experiences of Islamophobia. Women in both contexts had similar strategies to deal with and talk back to these stigmatising discourses. Examples of this were assimilation, concealing one’s religious status in public, or aspiring to move to a county where the chosen religion is in the majority. Tellingly, these dynamics were largely absent from the Christian case study, where the issue of race was hardly addressed, despite its continuing impact on congregants and leadership alike.

Another dynamic of this boundary making is that many converts, having contested the imagined boundaries of their community, contribute to the production and maintenance of group boundaries themselves. This took place in their religious setting, for example by judging those who did not fulfil their ideal of ‘good’ Muslim, Jewish, or Christian behaviour. They also produced an image of wider society as secular: devoid of religion and its accompanying morality. Becoming religious offered an alternative to this secular lifestyle, giving them meaning and purpose in an otherwise uncertain world. These research outcomes speak to several theoretical approaches to conversion. They offer important contributions to

the conceptualisation of conversion as a process of negotiation. The next section explores the most important insights yielded by the study.

Conceptual Reflections on (Women's) Conversion

In this section I return to the concept of conversion by highlighting certain academic debates towards which my research contributes. I approach conversion as a process of self-making related to religion and gender. However, the idea of self-making does not imply that this is merely an individual process. Rather, the self is always constructed and performed in relation to others. Moreover, conversion—whilst often discussed as a form of transformation—was often not experienced as a clearly identifiable change, but rather a nonlinear process with neither a clear beginning nor end. The conceptual insights that arise from my research material add to academic theories on conversion and religion. In this section, I address the most important fields of tension: religious transformation and continuity; the relation between agency and power structures; conversion as a process of boundary making and boundary crossing; and the tension between belief and practice.

Conversion as Change or Confirmation

An important contribution to the study of conversion has been the insight that conversion is not a clearly identifiable moment of change. Static conversion models, in which becoming religious is defined in clear linear steps, does not adequately represent daily lived experiences. Several scholars have attempted to go beyond such a model, but often still refer to different stages and highlight change (e.g., Rambo and Farhadian; Roald 2006). My research shows that whilst there are certainly comparable periods in the lives of converts, such 'stages' often overlap and do not neatly follow each other in the same order. Furthermore, conversion is often associated with a Christian understanding of religious transformation as a process of rupture and redemption. Some Jewish and Muslim women disliked the term 'conversion' for precisely this reason. It is for this reason that throughout my dissertation, I have employed a different terminology alongside the concept of 'conversion' that continues to be dominant in academia—such as 'becoming religious' or 'embracing religion'.

Conversion and change are related in several ways. From an outsider perspective, the eye is often drawn to expressions of transformation. Noticeable changes are, for example, in dress style, food preparation and consumption, or the way in which people interact during community events. From an insider perspective, my interlocutors described conversion—in the sense of their social surroundings, daily schedule, and general sense of purpose and comfort in their belief in God—as a process of transformation. From this perspective, conversion became a form of religious change. However, in another respect, my interlocutors often pointed towards the continuity of their selves and questioned the idea that conversion

had a clear ‘before’ and ‘after’. Furthermore, it was almost impossible to indicate which moment best represented the supposed change. Other moments were often considered as equally or even more significant than the official ritual of *giyur*, *shahada*, or baptism. I do not mean to suggest that these moments are irrelevant. However, the tendency to focus on these formal, institutionalised moments of conversion suggest that this can still be captured in one particular moment, whilst my research consistently showed this not to be the case. For many, the official conversion ritual reflected a feeling they had held for a significant time, thus making this more a confirmation than a change. I argue that speaking about conversion as transformation, or as shaped by identifiable stages, does not fully capture the conversion experience. In order to truly understand this process of self-making, it is important to also include notions of continuity.

My interlocutors’ experiences of conversion in everyday life—as a gradual process that encompasses both change and continuity—did not always align with dominant discourses within the religious communities themselves. However, this played out somewhat differently in the various groups. In the neo-Pentecostal setting, the discourse of conversion was strongest, and this had a great impact on the way in which women talked about their own experiences. The conversion stories given centre stage were often those with the clearest separation between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. In short, the more dramatic the transformation, the more demonstrative it was considered of God’s work. This was the context in which my interlocutors were most likely to describe conversion in terms of rupture and change whilst also noting that this often did not fully reflect their personal experiences. Women who embraced Islam often used the term ‘conversion’ in conversation with me, but some preferred ‘reversion’, which suggests that all people are born Muslim, but are changed by their environment (called *fitra*). This also made Islam, in theory at least, accessible for everyone willing to convert. Reversion was not a common term in the Christian setting, but the same inclusive principles formed the official teaching of conversion. This was very different in the Jewish setting, where conversion was not accessible for everyone. For my Jewish interlocutors, the official ritual of *giyur* was perceived as a ritual of confirmation, since they had often been studying Judaism for years. The ritual bath after *giyur* spiritually affirmed their status as Jewish, although many changes in lifestyle and community took place before. Whether it be a form of confirmation, reversion, or rupture, in all cases conversion is not merely one ritual or decision. Instead, it is a complicated interplay of the community, the individual, and those in authority. Although the role of gatekeepers was most explicitly evident in the Jewish case study, power relations played a role in all cases, not only in the literal sense of (access to) religious leadership, but also in terms of who decides what a ‘proper’ conversion entails.

Religious Agency and Authority

When reading about religiously observant women, one would quickly encounter the concept of ‘religious agency’. Since Saba Mahmood’s (2004) publication of *Politics of Piety*, a research field has developed that questions the idea that religion oppresses women and that religious women lack agency. The realisation now is that women exercise substantial agency within their chosen religions—so-called ‘religious agency’. However, even the concept of religious agency sometimes results in a somewhat limited interpretation that defines women’s religious agency as a means to critique overarching patriarchal structures. The motivation behind such attempts to find agency amongst religious women paradoxically reflects a secular preoccupation with resistance and autonomy. Mahmood was critical towards such a secular feminist understanding of agency as subversion and resistance. Rather, she called for the recognition of different types of agency, including those realised through submission, compliance, and piety (Mahmood 2004).

This understanding of religious agency has been a crucial intervention in the study of religion and gender, but the theoretical field has continued to develop further since. My research points to several limits of this approach. I follow Jeanette Jouili’s (2011, 2015) critique on Mahmood, who argues that the focus on pious agency in women’s religious lives does not account for women’s potential engagement with issues of empowerment and gender. At times many of my interlocutors questioned the position of women in their religious institutions, whilst simultaneously complying to a gender complementarity discourse that idealised women’s role in the private sphere. Whilst, indeed, some of their views can be read as a form of critique towards patriarchal institutions, their lives also point to narratives of submission, compliance, reinterpretation, and/or negotiation. Hence, their experiences cannot be captured by the concept of ‘religious agency’ alone.

Another point of concern is the focus on the individual in the ‘religious agency’ discussion. There is a lot at stake in emphasising personal choice in conversion, and my interlocutors all stressed their autonomy in deciding to join a religion. Relationships were often downplayed, as was the influence of religious authorities. However, this emphasis on personal choice should be analysed in relation to the wider society that is shaped by secular modernity, in which individualism and authenticity are considered crucial if the human is to flourish. Thus, I adopt a Foucauldian understanding of subjectivity that understands subjects as always constituted by different powers, in the same way that people contribute to, negotiate, or subvert existing discourses. In other words, conversion is not just a matter of individual choice or expression of (religious) agency, but is inherently relational and dialogical. The frequently heard emphasis on autonomous individual choice in conversion should also be subject to reflection in relation to wider social norms and hegemonic neo-liberal discourses that greatly value authenticity and individualism.

The notion of authenticity provides an interesting conceptual starting point from which to think about the relation between the individual and the community. In my research, the idea

of authenticity, as understood by Taylor (2007, 473–504) as an expression of an inner self, was often connected to conversion. It was generally thought that one can only truly convert with the right, authentic intentions. Becoming religious was also at times considered a true expression of an authentic inner self. Simultaneously, community structure and religious discourse inform what is expected and considered authentic. In the Jewish case study, authenticity should even be proven in front of a rabbinical court before someone is accepted for *giyur*. For Christian women authenticity was often expressed through emotions and body movements, showing that one is truly touched by the Spirit. Muslim women also upheld the idea that pious intentions were more important than perfect practice, but were simultaneously concerned with performing correct practices. In all cases, whilst authenticity was performed in different ways, it was always the result of learning and training. This can be linked to the importance of ‘being yourself’ that dominates modern thinking about selfhood (cf. Derks 2018). On the one hand, conversion was considered the expression of a ‘true self’—a confirmation and outward expression of what was there all along. On the other hand, the way in which converts expressed this was shaped by the social codes and scripts within the community, especially those in which authenticity was frequently checked.

Conversion as Boundary Crossing?

In studies of conversion, the focus is often on the crossing of a presumed boundary between secular and religious spheres of life. This is then connected to other forms of boundary crossing, such as the racial or cultural shifts experienced during conversion. My research adds to the intersectional study of conversion as indicating a crossing of several boundaries, and is especially indebted to theories examining the relation between race and religion. In order to push theories of conversion further, Van Nieuwkerk (2018) proposed the concept of ‘moving in and out’ of Islam in order to capture all the varieties of religious affiliation and disaffiliation, including the liminality of conversions. ‘Moving in and out’ is characterised by several boundary crossings—an approach that affords a more nuanced approach to Muslim conversion than if it is understood as one clearly identifiable step. However, I doubt whether the moving metaphor is the most suitable way forward with the study of religious (or specifically Muslim) conversion. Certainly, the concept of moving in and out is a welcome nuance of the emphasis of identifiable change, as it permits multiple movements and in-between positions. I also agree that conversion does indeed come with boundary making and crossing. However, the moving metaphor does not fully reflect conversion experiences because it highlights aspects of change, rather than continuity. Furthermore, converts do not easily move between different spheres of life, but combine aspects and negotiate boundaries to find a space for themselves.

Since conversion is understood as relational, it can be expected that the social dimensions of joining a religious community played an important role in conversion narratives. Interlocutors in every group first encountered their religion via social contacts,

although such encounters were not the only determining factor. Yet becoming religious cannot solely be understood as a longing for a community (as a somewhat external motivating factor). Indeed, many converts had an ambivalent relation with the religious community, both in their immediate group and in the wider imagined community, such as the *ummah* or the Jewish people, and the manner in which they were included differed from group to group. Jewish converts often had the most difficulty being included, since many communities, with the exception of some Progressive Jewish congregations, were hesitant to welcome newcomers. Often it was only after they had officially been given Jewish status by the rabbinical court, and had undertaken the *giyur* ritual, that they were accepted into the community. Women were generally more welcomed into Christian and Muslim communities. In the Christian setting, conversion was often celebrated, and newcomers were encouraged to share their stories. Here, infrastructures were in place where women could learn about the religion. In the Muslim community, women were also invited, but there were fewer established teaching structures specifically for newcomers. Many also felt that they were never fully included in the community. White women also often stood out as converts in migrant Muslim communities. This meant that, whilst such converts were sometimes venerated, at other times they were ridiculed, and in a sense they were always read as converts—even if they had been Muslims for decades. This ambivalence led some Muslim women to seek out communities of fellow white converts in which they would not be reminded of their status as converts. Women who convert thus often imply a transformation from outsider to insider in a religious community, although some will always remain outsiders. The boundaries of these groups are questioned by the mere presence of converts, who wish to enter and ask if they can belong. Converts also often contribute to the establishment of boundaries between and within their community, often caused by feelings of disappointment when fellow believers do not fulfil the ideal of adherence to religious principles. Whilst such social codes and boundaries often took subtle forms, they were based mainly on more blatant practices, such as drinking alcohol as a Muslim, dating with a lot of men as a Christian, or being too feminist (or not feminist enough) as a Jewish woman.

A significant group experienced alienation from wider (what they called) ‘secular’ society, especially when they expressed their religion in public spaces. Becoming an insider to a religious group sometimes went hand in hand with becoming an outsider to broader Dutch secular society. Whilst some already felt disillusioned—which partly shaped their attraction to religion—for others, the feeling of alienation grew over time as, for example, they experienced antisemitism or Islamophobia. This shows that whilst conversion indeed comes with the negotiation of several boundaries, converts do not individually move between one sphere and another. Rather, for some conversion entailed becoming included in a minority, whilst for others feeling out of place motivated them to explore religion in the first place. Converts also reproduce and construct boundaries themselves and often, as a result, from where they cross and towards what they head remains somewhat opaque. What this clearly

demonstrates is that conversion comes with a reconfiguration of social position and relations to others, and thus is a negotiation of boundaries rather than a move.

Beyond Beliefs versus Practices

The ‘Protestant bias’ (Meyer 2012) has left a significant impact on definitions of conversion, by prioritising mentalist beliefs over embodied practices. This bias is part of the colonial legacy, in which religions associated with practices and materiality were considered less ‘civilised’ than Christianity. I built on more recent theories of conversion that question this mentalist bias and instead offer insight into lived religion (Avishai 2008; McGuire 2008). One of the problems with a definition of conversion that narrowly focuses on worldviews and beliefs, is that it is based on a hierarchical distinction between ‘orthopraxis’ and ‘orthodoxy’. This framework is partly reflected in the contemporary social status of Judaism and Islam, which have both been historically considered as practice-oriented religions—as orthopraxis. The dualism between practice and belief influenced the types of responses converted women received from others. For women converting to Judaism and Islam, visible observance was often questioned. Many told me that, for example, their parents did not object to the ‘beliefs’, but did struggle with the acceptance of certain ‘practices’. This was most noticeable for Orthodox Jewish and Muslim women who wore a headscarf. Such pious practice presented the largest contrast to previous non-observant lives and was notably related to questions of gender. This distinction, between practices and beliefs, reflects a wider secular understanding of religion as ideally located in the private sphere. By expressing religion in public by wearing certain clothes or eating a certain way, converted women challenge the presumed secularity of the public sphere.

However, this presumed neat separation between private beliefs and public practices did not reflect the experiences of converted women themselves, all of whom emphasised the importance of personal conviction and intent. Some also found this conviction to be more important than practice. Muslim women especially spoke frequently about the rationality of their decision to convert, constructing Islam as a more rational religion than (mainly) Christianity. This tendency is partly shaped by wider societal discourses in which Islam (and to a lesser extent, Judaism) is framed as irrational and converted Muslimas as having a false consciousness. However, the emphasis on rationality is not merely reactionary, but also reflective of aspects of their new religion they found attractive, for example the oneness of Allah as opposed to the trinity of the Christian God. Some new Jewish women similarly stressed the rationality of Judaism and appreciated the intellectual aspects of study. Conversely, new Christian women often stressed the importance of emotions, and Pentecostalism is known for its affective and bodily dimension. The emphasis on rationality and learning might lead to the assumption that mainly higher educated women are attracted to Judaism or Islam. However, amongst my interlocutors, there were women from various backgrounds in all three religions. Indeed, many Christian women were university graduates

and came from middle to upper class families, whilst some Jewish and Muslim women can be considered to belong to lower socio-economic strata. I did not encounter an obvious correlation between socio-economic status and the different religious groups women became active in. However, social status was not the main topic of my analyses and future research could take on the challenge to analyse the intersection of class and religion.

My research does suggest that the emphasis on rationality in Judaism and Islam, and on emotions and affect in Christianity, can (at least in the Western context) be explained by their social position as minority and majority religions respectively. This seems to relate more to the broader societal discourses than to the individual social class backgrounds of my interlocutors. This focus on the rationality of religiosity is a form of critical 'talking back' to the body/mind, doing/believing, and rationality/irrationality binaries that continue to impact the social position of religious minorities. However, that my interlocutors emphasised certain aspects of their conversion in their conversation with me does not mean that emotions were considered unimportant, nor was an 'evidence-based' discourse absent from Christian conversion.

For women in all three religions belief and practice were important. Conversion was practiced in various ways that were not considered secondary to belief systems. One example is in prayer. This does not simply follow beliefs, but rather was considered an important means via which to experience and build piety. Converts often had to learn how to move, what to say, and how to feel during these prayers. Prayer as such is thus not merely an expression of faith, but also part of religious self-making, and goes hand in hand with the formation of beliefs. Furthermore, these beliefs could consist of various ethical principles and drew upon several sources. The 'belief' part of the binary was thus as complex and ambivalent as daily life practices. The 'messiness' that 'leaks into everyday life' (Hall 1997, X) is not only noticeable in rituals and practices, but also in the negotiation of ethical frameworks. For Jewish women, God was not always considered important. Rather, the principle of *tikkun olam*, 'healing the world', was central. For others, piety was not the driving factor in practicing certain religious rituals. This research thus questions the body/mind dualism that so often dominates studies of conversion, by arguing that the practice/belief distinction is based on false assumptions about certain religious groups and traditions; the separation is not reflective of religious women's experiences; conversion is always embodied and related to questions of the divine; and such expressions exist as two sides of the same coin. In the final section of this conclusion, I return to some of the initial socio-political questions that motivated this research.

Relating to Public Frames of Conversion

The initial motivation to comparatively explore women's conversion in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam came from a dissatisfaction with the often limited representation of women who embrace religion in politics and media. Public discourse tends to primarily focus on Islam, which constructs conversion to Islam as something presumably special. In my study, I tried to see whether there is indeed something specific about Muslim conversion, or if there are similarities with women from other religious groups. The concern with women who join a religion takes place in all three traditions, which are, to some extent, associated with gender conservatism and at times portrayed as a step away from the modern secular ideal. Whilst this is undeniably strongest when Muslim women are concerned, this seems to be a more general issue with becoming religious in the secular nation-state of the Netherlands. This section offers a critical reflection of two dominant frames in which women's conversion is often discussed in public discourse: the 'why question'; and 'religion versus emancipation'.

The 'Why Question'

The questions most frequently asked of women converts is why they converted and what motivated them to choose a particular religion over another. At first sight these might appear to be neutral questions, however, as I have demonstrated in this dissertation, such questions are indicative of the limiting framework applied to narratives of conversion. Such questions are not neutral, but rather are underpinned by assumptions about legitimate life choices for Dutch women who were not raised with a religion. In other words, asking 'why women convert' in this political climate often entails the question: 'Why would secular, liberated, emancipated women join a religious tradition that seem to oppress them?' Answering this 'why question' is thus not only biased towards secularism (since becoming religious is in need of explaining), but also presumes that religious experiences can be captured by a single deciding moment, interaction, or insight.

Women have various motivations that draw them to religion. These can be 'external' motivations, such as finding a social network, but also include a search for purpose and structure, a fascination with language, a curiosity sparked by media attention, and even miracle stories. Moreover, these different motivations often overlap, and it is difficult to pinpoint which one exactly was the determining factor. Some interlocutors were frustrated with the constant questioning of their religious transformation—for example, Deborah in the opening to this conclusion, who sometimes does not feel like answering such questions. Part of her frustration is that her motivations, even if she can clearly describe them, do not fully explain what Judaism means for her and what her *giyur* process gave her. Motivation stories do not grasp the complexity of women's religious experiences and do not help to understand conversion as a gradual process of negotiation. Furthermore, conversion narratives such as

these are always constructed retrospectively (van Nieuwkerk 2006b). Throughout my dissertation, I approached the production of these narratives of the self as part of the self-making process of conversion. As such, telling this story and answering this question does not offer an explanation, but instead is an expression of lived religion. Such stories are but one aspect of my interlocutors' self-making processes. I mainly analysed the how and where of conversion—the 'doing' aspects of becoming religious (Avishai 2008)—whilst also taking into account the way in which women reflected on the 'why question'. The reason this question is so often put to women and not men is related to the second dominant public frame of women's conversion, namely the supposed opposition between emancipation and religion.

Religion versus Emancipation

The most dominant stereotype about women who become religious is that in some manner they relinquish both their freedom and emancipated status. This informed the general outline of the wider project 'Beyond "Religion versus Emancipation"' of which my PhD forms part. We started from a critique of the many assumptions and misunderstandings surrounding women's conversion that circulate in the Dutch media. Such media narratives suggest that religious women are either forced by their husbands, lack free choice, and/or are unemancipated. My intention has never been to show whether religious women are oppressed or emancipated. Rather, I question the very terms of the debate itself. Even more complex is the recognition that my interlocutors *were* influenced by the same notions of emancipation and freedom that their religious affiliation seems to undermine in the public's view. In line with other studies of (female) converts (Klaver 2011b; van Nieuwkerk 2008), my interlocutors upheld a modern discourse of individual free choice. Conversion was often framed in terms of assuming authenticity and freedom, rather than a step away from them. This is what I referred to as the 'conversion paradox'. Freedom of religion was often considered an important principle of Dutch society which, in theory at least, enabled women to form their religiosity as they wished. However, conversion to certain religions (those associated with tradition and gender conservatism) is clearly not as acceptable as joining others (those associated with spirituality and freedom). This notion of freedom is gendered and indicative of the imagined connection between secularism, women's rights, and the Dutch nation-state.

Empowerment and emancipation also had various interpretations for the women in my fieldwork. Women often found a sense of empowerment within their religious tradition. A minority of (mainly Progressive and Liberal Jewish) interlocutors promoted a feminist discourse that sought to remove the separation between men and women altogether. Most understood gender against a framework of complementary difference in which they were empowered in their traditional role as women, but in no way secondary to men. A few interlocutors critiqued instances in their community where women were not treated equally, whilst others actively rejected secular feminist frameworks as sexualising and disapproving of

female traits. The majority combined different discourses of gender and emancipation, and reacted to this frame in various ways. Many actively talked back to the stereotype by promoting their religion as empowering and liberating for women, whilst others neither talked back nor were particularly concerned with gender issues. This serves as a reminder that, whilst I consider the question of gender to be interesting and relevant (and with me, many other academics, politicians, or journalists), this does not mean that all converted women found this equally important. For them, becoming religious was about far more than gender discourse and expression.

In public discourse, there is often a preoccupation with what is left behind by becoming religious and on what converts ‘cannot do’ anymore. Converts, so it is suggested, move out of secular freedom and into religious compliance. Expressions of this freedom are then often related to drinking alcohol and having premarital sex, whilst compliance is often marked by women’s dress style and family life. This demonstrates that the religion/secular binary is indeed loaded with ideas about gender and sexuality as expressions of true individual freedom. However, I found that women did not experience this themselves as such. My interlocutors often used the same language of freedom in describing the benefits of their religious practices, such as the feeling of being protected from sexualisation by wearing a *hijab* by Muslim women, or Christian women for whom male headship offered freedom from having to provide for the family. Converted women do not simply move out of one sphere (of freedom, individuality, modernity) and into another (of submission, collectivity, conformism). Rather, they combine elements from different discourses.

Questioning the Conversion Paradox

This dissertation questioned the apparent ‘paradox’ of women’s conversion. Conversion is often framed as something in need of explaining, which in turn is a reflection of the secularist preoccupation with women’s religiosity and freedom. Instead of asking ‘why’ women would convert, I explored how and where conversion occurs as a process of self-making. In order to analyse how conversion is related to gender, sexuality, and belonging, I explored the stories of women who convert to different religious groups in the Netherlands. Besides contributing to gender studies, my research also connects to discussions about sexual ethics and the race-religion constellation. I recommend future research to follow these directions further by comparing the experiences of converted heterosexual, cisgender women with those belonging to the queer community; and by focusing on converts of colour to further understand the race-religion constellation.

With this dissertation, I aimed to contribute to the understanding of women’s religious practices in a secular nation. The study also enables a further understanding of the concept of conversion from a bottom-up comparative approach. Based on my comparative gendered

analysis of conversion, I question the assumption that conversion implies moving from one (secular) sphere of life to another (religious) sphere. This assumption reiterates a false binary distinction between religion and the secular, which are further supposedly defined via gendered terms. Religion comes to stand for gender conservatism and women's oppression, whilst secularism supposedly grants women their emancipation. My research problematised these assumptions. Instead, I consider the secular and the religious to be co-constitutive. Moreover, conversion is not merely a change or move. I argued in this dissertation that the notions of negotiation and self-making serve better to capture what becoming religious is and can be. This process is embodied and relational. My interlocutors negotiated different discourses and, in different spaces and social spheres, give meaning to their lives accordingly. My research further questions the assumption of a distinction between identifiable secular and religious gender discourses. Women who embrace religion deal with gender questions in different ways, but this does not mean that they leave discourses and norms of secular modernity behind. Instead, most women combined discourses, negotiating their use across differing terrains. They sometimes struggled with the gendered aspects of their new religion, but often also found solace. This confirms that whilst religion is gendered in various ways, gender questions are not neatly divided along the lines of the religious and the secular. All in all, my research shows that women's religious conversion is only paradoxical in the eyes of the secular observer.

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Appendix A. Glossary

Hebrew and Yiddish terminology¹³³

- Aliyah – Lit. ‘ascent’. Jewish migration to Israel as reflected in the ‘Law of Return’
- Bimah – Platform in the centre of a synagogue where the Torah scroll is read during service
- Bishul Yisrael – Lit. ‘cooking of a Jew’. Guideline that prohibits the consumption of food prepared by non-Jews
- Beit din – Jewish rabbinical court, consisting of three rabbis, often of the same denomination
- Chazzan – Ritual singer
- Chilonim – Non-religiously practicing Jewish people, also called secular Jews; *chiloni* for single
- Chuppah – Jewish wedding ceremony. Specifically refers to the traditional canopy under which Jewish couples are married
- Eruv – Rabbinical enclosure of a Jewish neighbourhood in which there is no prohibition to carry on *Shabbat*
- Frum – Yid. Religiously observant
- Giyoret – Female *giyur* candidate; masculine *ger*, plural *gerim*
- Giyur – Jewish conversion of someone without a Jewish mother. Stems from the Hebrew word *ger*, meaning foreigner or sojourner
- Halacha – Jewish law. Adjective: *halachic*
- Kabbalah – Jewish mysticism
- Kashrut – Jewish dietary laws
- Kippah – Cap worn by Jewish men; *Yarmulke* in Yiddish
- Kosher – Food considered fit for Jewish people to consume. Often described as ‘keeping *kosher*’ (rather than ‘eating *kosher*’); includes the segregation of dairy and meat. A strictly *kosher* diet only contains food certified by Jewish authorities (the NIK in the Netherlands)
- Kosher-style – A diet connected to the *kashrut*, but not strictly *kosher*. Mainly followed by non-Orthodox Jews. Expressions differ, but often include the *kashrut* principles of segregating dairy and meat; and not consuming pork or shellfish
- LJG – Acronym for *Liberaal Joodse Gemeente*, the largest Liberal Jewish denomination in the Netherlands

¹³³ All words are in Hebrew unless indicated with ‘Yid’ (Yiddish). The terminology in my dissertation follows the common use of my interlocutors, who, for example, said *kippah* (Hebrew) instead of *yarmulke* (Yiddish); but *shul* (Yiddish) instead of *beit kneset* (Hebrew).

- Mechitza – Physical barrier between men’s and women’s prayer sections in a (mainly Orthodox) synagogue, often a curtain, screen, or fence
- Mediene – Area outside of Amsterdam
- Mezuzah – Small case containing parchment with a part of Torah scripture. Traditionally hung on each doorpost, at an angle
- Mi Jehudi? – Lit. translation: Who is Jewish?
- Minyan – Group of ten individuals needed to perform a service in a synagogue. In Orthodox communities only men
- Mitzvot – Collection of 613 Jewish commandments
- Mokum – Amsterdam
- NIK – Acronym for *Nederlands Israelisch Kerkgenootschap*, the largest Orthodox Jewish denomination in the Netherlands
- Rebbetzin – Yid. Rabbi’s wife, typically used in Orthodox Judaism. *Rabbanit* in Hebrew
- Shabbat – Jewish holy day of rest, from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday. *Shabbos* in Yiddish
- Shechina – Feminine indication of God, comes from the Kabbalah. Used in Reform services to replace the masculine nouns referring to God
- Sheitel – Yid. Wig worn by married Orthodox Jewish women
- Shul – Yid. Synagogue. Also called temple by Reform Jewish people, or *Bet Knesset* in Hebrew
- Tallit – Jewish prayer shawl, plural *talliot*; *talles* in Yiddish
- Talmud – Primary source of the *Halacha*, second most important book of Judaism
- Tenach – Jewish Bible, includes thirty-nine books that are also included in the Christian Old Testament
- Tichel – Yid. Headscarf worn by married Orthodox Jewish women; *Mitpachat* in Hebrew
- Tikkun olam – Jewish central principle, translated as ‘healing the world’
- Torah – First five books of the Tenach
- Torah scroll – Handwritten copy of the Torah on parchment. Kept in the synagogue and used during *Shabbat* morning service

Arabic terminology

- Allah – God
- Allahu akbar – Exclamation: ‘God is greatest’, also called the *takbir*
- Burqa – Long wide garment that covers the whole body, including the face
- Da’wah – Dissemination of Islamic knowledge
- Fitra – Islamic concept of innate nature that understands every person to be born with the same purity. Related to the understanding of conversion as ‘reversion’ or ‘returning’

- Hadith – Collection of sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and accounts of his daily practice
- Halal – Permitted/lawful, often related to food
- Haram – Prohibited/forbidden, often related to food
- Hijab – Islamic modesty code, mostly related to women’s dress style. Can also indicate a headscarf
- Hijra – Islamic emigration to a Muslim majority country
- Imam – Muslim leader, almost always male, leads the prayers in mosques
- Khimaar – Long black headscarf that covers the whole upper body, usually in dark colours or black
- Madhab – School of Islamic legal thought
- Mahrem – Private space where *hijab* is not obligatory. Concretely refers to the group of family men amongst whom women do not (have to) wear a headscarf
- Niqab – Face veil, usually in dark colours
- Qur’an – Islamic sacred book, the word of God as dictated to the Prophet Muhammad
- Ramadan – Ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims fast between sunrise and sunset
- Salat – The five daily prayers
- Shahada – Islamic profession of faith, often referring to the official conversion ritual, when the newcomer pronounces it for the first time
- Tawhid – Islamic concept that refers to the oneness of Allah
- Ummah – Global imagined Islamic community, expresses unity and equality of all Muslims

Appendix B. Interlocutors

This list provides an intentionally brief overview of the people who participated in this study. All interlocutors were anonymised for privacy reasons. I provide (reflecting the situation during my fieldwork between 2017 and 2019): job sector; age range; sexual orientation; marital status; and race for each individual unless the characteristic is shared by all in one group. If applicable, the date of our interview is added. Besides Micah, who identifies as non-binary, all participants identified as (cisgender) women. They come from different socio-economic backgrounds and live across the western part of the Netherlands (Rotterdam, the Hague, Amsterdam, Utrecht), however, these specifics have not been included. For Jewish interlocutors, the type of *giyur* and the type of synagogue they were active in are added. For Christian women, I provide the pseudonym of their church. I also interviewed religious leaders, about whom fewer details are provided.

Jewish interlocutors

Pseudonyms were chosen alphabetically and are random Hebrew names. All Jewish interlocutors were white. Two interlocutors identified as Sephardi, three as Ashkenazi and the rest did not specify. These details have not been included. I additionally interviewed four non-Orthodox rabbis and one Orthodox Jewish professor. This list includes the type of *giyur* as well as the denomination they were active in at the time of our meeting.

Aliza. Retired office employee – 70–75 – Liberal *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – single – Interviews on 17-10-2017 and 31-01-2018.

Anouk. Retired teacher – 70–75 – Progressive *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – widowed – Interview 12-12-2017.

Bracha. Teacher – 50–60 – Orthodox *giyur* – Liberal synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 07-10-2017.

Channah. Office employee – 40–50 – Orthodox *giyur* – Orthodox synagogue – heterosexual – single – Interview 10-10-2017 and 06-03-2020.

Deborah. Teacher – 40–50 – Liberal *giyur* – Liberal synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 13-11-2017.

Esther. Volunteer worker – 60–70 – Liberal *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview on 21-11-2017.

Eva. Office employee – 40–50 – Progressive *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – in a relationship – Interview 15-11-2017.

- Gabrielle. Retired teacher – 70–75 – Progressive *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – widowed – Interview 20-11-2017.
- Hanneke. Office employee – 30–40 – Orthodox *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 16-11-2017.
- Ilana. Retired health care worker – 60–70 – Progressive *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 22-11-2017.
- Judith. Teacher – 40–50 – Progressive *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 22-11-2017.
- Karen. Office employee – 30–40 – Liberal *giyur* – Liberal synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 29-11-2017.
- Leah. Retired health care worker – 60–70 – Liberal *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 30-11-2017.
- Lucy. Health care worker – 40–50 – Progressive *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 05-12-2017.
- Micah. Office employee – 30–40 – Liberal *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – queer – single – Interview 27-11-2017.
- Naomi. Teacher – 30–40 – Liberal *giyur* – Liberal synagogue – heterosexual – engaged – Interview 11-12-2017.
- Rachel. Teacher – 50–60 – Orthodox *giyur* – Orthodox synagogue – heterosexual – single – Interview 07-03-2018.
- Ruth. Office employee – 40–50 – Liberal *giyur* – Progressive synagogue – lesbian – in a relationship – Interview 22-01-2018.
- Sara. Health care worker – 30–40 – Orthodox *giyur* – Orthodox synagogue – heterosexual – married – Interview 04-04-2018.
- Shoshanna. Student – 20–30 – Orthodox *giyur* – Orthodox synagogue – heterosexual – single – Interview 23-08-2018.

Christian interlocutors

Pseudonyms were chosen alphabetically and are random Christian names. With all interlocutors, I had several informal conversations during participant observation, whenever a date is provided I also conducted a more formal and recorded interview. For the women in the United Hope Church, informal conversations took place between September and January 2017; those in Grace City Church from December 2017 to July 2018. I additionally interviewed three female pastors: Claudia (of ‘the Life Point Church’), Helen (of ‘the United Hope Church’) and Nadine (of ‘the Grace City Church’). All pastors were white, in their fifties, heterosexual, and married with children.

- Anne. Teacher – 20–30 – United Hope Church – heterosexual – engaged¹³⁴ – white – Interview 12-11-2017.
- Bernice. Homemaker – 50–60 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – married – white – Interview 31-01-2018.
- Christel. Healthcare worker – 20–30 – United Hope Church – heterosexual – single – white – Alpha Course member.
- Danielle. Student – 18–20 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – single – white – Bible group member.
- Emma. Office employee – 20–30 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – single – white – Interviews on 13 February 2018; 28 May 2018; and 12 May 2019.
- Isabel. Student. 20–30 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – single – white – Interview 03-04-2018.
- Julia. Healthcare worker – 30–40 – Life Point Church – heterosexual – married – white – Interview 22-05-2018.
- Kim. Office worker. 30–40 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – married – white – church leader.
- Lian. Student. 20–30 – Life Point Church – lesbian – single – asian – Interview on 31-05-2017.
- Lisa. Student – 20–30 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – single – white – Interview 10-05-2018.
- Miriam. Artist – 30–40 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – single – middle eastern – Sisterhood leader.
- Nina. Teacher – 30–40 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – married – white – Interview 05-08-2018.
- Petra. Teacher – 40–50 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – married – white – Sisterhood leader.
- Rianne. Office employee – 50–60 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – single – white – Sisterhood leader.
- Sanne. Service industry – 20–30 – United Hope Church – heterosexual – in a relationship – white – Alpha Course member.
- Tina. Student – 20–30 – Grace City Church – heterosexual – single – black – Bible group member.

¹³⁴ At the time of the interview, married during the fieldwork period.

Muslim interlocutors

Pseudonyms were chosen alphabetically and are random Arabic names. All Muslim interlocutors were white. All observed Sunni Islam and those who specified a school of law (many did not) followed the Hanafi *madhab*. In addition, I interviewed two board members of mosques.

Amal. Office employee – 40–50 – heterosexual – in a relationship – Interview 19-01-2017.

Bushra. Health care worker – 40–50 – heterosexual – married – Interview 20-07-2019.

Dunya. Home maker – 20–30 – heterosexual – married – Interview 26-04-2017 .

Fatima. Office employee – 50–60 – heterosexual – single – Interview 03-05-2019.

Hanan. Teacher. 20–30 – heterosexual – married – Interview 20-02-2017.

Iman. Health care worker. 30–40 – heterosexual – single – Interview 19-07-2019.

Yara. Student. 20–30 – heterosexual – married – Interview 23-03-2017.

Summary

This PhD dissertation analyses the experiences of Dutch women who embraced Judaism, Christianity or Islam, from a comparative and critical gender perspective on lived religion. Based on fieldwork and in-depth interviews with forty interlocutors, the main aim of this ethnographic research is to understand how gender and religion intersect for women who embrace religion in an otherwise secularised country. Doing so, the research questions the apparent ‘paradox’ of women’s conversion: That previously secular women, who are assumed to be ‘liberated’, join a religion associated with gender conservatism is often stereotypically read as indicating a lack of agency or as a sign of oppression. This is especially pertinent for women who join a minority religion associated with ethnic otherness, such as Islam. In this dissertation, this paradox is unpacked and questioned, not asking *why* women convert but rather exploring *how* conversion takes place in everyday life; and how this is related to the wider societal debates about emancipation and the assumed religion/secular binary. The research is situated in the Netherlands, a small nation-state in North-Western Europe with a Christian heritage that continues to influence socio-political life, but is widely conceived to have secularised. The Netherlands’ self-image of a secular, modern nation is furthermore intrinsically connected to women’s emancipation and sexual freedom. As I write in the introduction, this history and self-positioning makes the Netherlands a relevant context to investigate women’s conversion ‘paradox’.

Whilst conversion can mean a multitude of practices, my analyses focuses on self-identified Dutch, mainly white, women who were socialised in a largely secular environment prior to their voluntary decision to become (Orthodox or non-Orthodox) Jewish, (Pentecostal) Christian or (Sunni) Muslim. The comparative approach is rather unique in the study of conversion, which is nowadays characterised by an overrepresentation of converts in Islam. Within each of these religions, specific guidelines exist about what it means to join, and there are certain rituals to mark the inclusion of newcomers, such as the Jewish *mikvah*, Christian baptism, or pronouncing the *shahada* in Islam. Conversion is, however, far more than official rituals or guidelines and implies negotiating various aspects of life, many of them gendered. Such negotiations emerge in areas as diverse as religious authority, food, attire, relationships, sexuality, and parenthood. In order to account for this rich variety, I employ a bottom-up comparative approach. This does not aim to offer generalised analyses based on seemingly clearly defined categorisations such as ‘religion’ or ‘conversion’. Instead, I analyse how conversion takes place in the daily lives of religious people and how this concept gains its meaning in different contexts. I consider a comparative perspective to be especially fruitful to better understand how gender, sexuality, and belonging are experienced in the everyday lives of newly religious people and how experiences between groups differ.

This dissertation consists of an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter outlines my theoretical and methodological approach to women's conversion. This research builds on the study of religion and gender starting from the assumption, not only that religion is inherently gendered, but also that the question of gender intersects with religion. In this chapter I draw on different yet related conceptual frameworks: secularism and religion; conversion studies; and the intersectional study of gender and religion. This chapter also provides my methodological approach, feminist ethnography and lived religion. Here I reflect on my position as a researcher and describe my research methods in the three different case studies: participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews.

Chapter two explores the experiences and narratives of Jewish women who experienced a *giyur* trajectory, the (often preferred) Hebrew term for becoming Jewish whilst not being born to a Jewish mother. In a few progressive Jewish communities, people without a Jewish mother, but with a Jewish father are accepted as fully Jewish. In the vast majority of the communities, however, this group is required to undertake a *giyur* trajectory, although Liberal Jewish congregations would rather speak of a 'confirmation' in those cases. The process of *giyur* is markedly different from the other case studies because *giyur* is not encouraged and not everyone who wants to, is able to formally convert. Instead, the power to grant access lies with a rabbinical court, a *beit din*. *Giyur* is often described as an intense period of study that usually takes a minimum of two years in which candidates are expected to be fully immersed in 'Jewish life' in the synagogue. Being and becoming Jewish affects life on multiple levels and extends far beyond the official *giyur* rituals. It ranges from personal considerations about *kosher* diets, to wearing a prayer shawl in service or observing the menstrual rites of the *niddah*; or from discovering that one's grandfather had been Jewish, to trying to convince a *beit din* to grant you a Jewish status; and everything that happens in-between.

Gender impacts *giyur* processes in several ways. The majority of Jewish interlocutors, as in all case studies, upholds an idea of complementary difference, which understands men and women to be of equal value, but essentially (often based on biological determinism) different. In Orthodox Jewish communities the segregation between men and women is usually more explicit than in (non-Orthodox) Liberal or Progressive synagogues. Non-Orthodox Jewish communities often position themselves as more progressive and oriented toward gender equality. Here, for example, women can become a rabbi and participate fully in the synagogue. However, the idea of a neat division between Orthodox and Liberal Judaism on the basis of gender, is nuanced by my research outcomes. Gender norms certainly affect non-Orthodox Jewish life, albeit often in more implicit ways. Most Liberal Jewish women find it important to be able to participate in synagogue services as well as to take on responsibility for rituals at home. For them, Jewish gender difference is more subtly marked by the emphasis on the importance of women's emotional labour at home and in *shul*; or by rejecting the option for women to wear a *kippah* or prayer shawl. Some Orthodox Jewish

women, on the other hand, are very active in their synagogue, or appreciated their role as home-maker. Yet, there are many instances of overlap and the official discourses and regulations regarding women's roles are often not taken on uncritically, but are rather negotiated.

In contrast to the Jewish case study, conversion is highly encouraged in the neo-Pentecostal Christian churches I undertook my fieldwork. This context of Hillsong affiliated churches, is discussed in chapter three. Evangelisation is a characteristic of such groups and a central moral endeavour—newcomers are usually encouraged to convert during each service. Church leadership often represents conversion as a shift from being oriented towards the 'worldly life of sins' to the 'life of God'. In contrast to this common church discourse, the everyday experiences of my interlocutors point towards a more gradual process. Here too, conversion implies an integration of several practices, relations, and gender norms.

This third chapter furthermore sheds light on the lifestyle accompanying Pentecostalism, which turns out to be very attractive for newcomers—who are often young adult women drawn to the modern aesthetics, the catchy pop-tunes of worship music, and the possibility to actively contribute to church. The churches tend to be very inclusive and welcoming 'on stage', however, converts encounter a profound normativity once they enter and join the 'off stage' meetings. Here, they (amongst others) come across a conservative gender complementarity discourse, expressed via notions such as 'male headship'. Moreover, conversion often comes with an different conception of womanhood in which traditional family values are combined with modern ideals about work and appearance. The normative ideal is that of the 'Proverbs 31 woman': a woman who can 'do it all' (be a good mother, wife, and community member). Whilst this can be felt to be empowering, at the same time it increases pressure for women to conform to these ideals. On a deeper level, it also creates additional pressure for those women who are keen to grow within the church hierarchy and have access to leadership positions. Yet, as in the other case studies, such gender norms are not incorporated uncritically but rather negotiated and expressed in various ways.

The fourth chapter explores the experiences and narratives of women who embraced Islam. This theme has become very popular in contemporary studies of conversion. This chapter confirms the common argument that women who embraced Islam often consider their conversion to be a process with neither a clearly defined start nor end. Many new Muslim women start to practice Islam and to identify as Muslim privately. Yet, whilst conversion in this context is often initially a private undertaking, many converts later seek out communities. However, my research nuances the dominant argument that converts in Islam—at least, initially—go through a phase in which they are 'more royal than the king'. First, my study shows that there are some converts in all groups who express perfectionism, something which is not indicative of Islam, but rather a common expression of enthusiasm combined insecurity with regards to the inclusion in their new community. Second, and more importantly, the vast majority of converts are not as normative in their expression as the 'more royal than the king'

theory seems to suggest. Especially in relation to their immediate family and friends, my interlocutors show hesitancy to discuss or express their religion.

Whilst Muslim converts often show a great deal of care in integrating Islamic practices in their daily lives, some visible practices can still appear as a sudden change to their secular peers. Wearing a headscarf, especially, is experienced as the most difficult decision because of the potential negative responses. Women who become Muslim are often confronted by stereotypes, negativity, and a marked lack of understanding, especially with regards to their *hijab*. However, this is only one aspect of Islam and certainly not the most significant to understanding the religious lives these women experience. Many find joy, comfort, and pride in their Islamic practice and expression. Becoming Muslim could affect many aspects of daily life and often includes a change to a *halal* diet, scheduling time for the daily prayers, attending mosque services and lectures, and a change in dress style. In Islam, most interlocutors encounter, and appreciate, a gender discourse of gender equity or complementary difference. This is similar to the majority of converts in my wider research project and is experienced as a significant change from the dominant gender discourse in the rest of society. My research shows that who embraced Islam value the special status given to women as caregivers and mothers whilst emphasising that women are equal, yet different, to men.

Chapters five and six take a different approach and are explicitly comparative. These start from concepts and themes frequently brought up during my fieldwork, but which cannot be captured by gender alone. In chapter five, I focus on sexuality, which as an analytical concept is connected to gender, but also profoundly different. Here, starting from the understanding that conversion is embodied, I analyse how this is related to sexual ethics and practices. Various interlocutors across the communities have different answers, but this was overall one of the most important topics of discussion. In short, the dominant discourse is profoundly heteronormative, and my interlocutors widely consider heterosexual monogamous marriage as the ideal context for sexual relations, even though many did engage in premarital sex and noted that this is, in practice, far more common than official guidelines might seem to suggest. The idealisation of heterosexual marriage as proper space to engage in intimacies often comes with a disapproval of LGBTQI+ sexualities and individuals, although some are strong advocates of sexual diversity and inclusion. This is not necessarily related to the religious group in which the women are active, the widest variety of opinions being found amongst Jewish converted women. In the Pentecostal churches there seems to be the smallest leeway to negotiate this heteronormative framework. Sexuality is indeed one of the most important areas in which Christian converts distance themselves from their secular surroundings and their pre-converted self. This is less prominent for Muslim or Jewish converts, who sometimes (but not always) express a change with regard to sexuality, but usually do not use this as a form of cultural critique. The majority of Muslim interlocutors, for example, has a heteronormative view of sexuality, but often does not actively promote this,

and are careful not to pass judgement on the views of others. Furthermore, the stories of two LGBTQI+ interlocutors exemplify the wide variety of experiences and views amongst my interlocutors. This challenges the assumption that religion is sexually conservative (or even negative) whilst secularism inherently provides sexual freedom.

In chapter six I turn the focus toward the wider societal context and questions of (national) belonging. The majority of female converts have to deal with secular stereotypes about religion, such as the dominant idea that becoming religious meant giving up emancipation as a woman. For white Muslim women in particular, conversion sometimes leads to a questioning of one's national belonging and a presumption of having crossed racial boundaries. In this comparative chapter I explore how these questions of national belonging, race, and religion intersect in the experiences of my interlocutors. It shows how they relate to the global imagined religious community, such as the Jewish peoplehood or the Islamic *ummah*. In contrast to some Muslim interlocutors, new Jewish women—although they themselves affirm that they joined a people by becoming Jewish—do not feel such a distance from the Dutch nation. They do, however, encounter antisemitism and dealing with this racism was part of the *giyur* process. This resonates with Muslim women's experiences of Islamophobia. Women in both contexts have similar strategies to deal with and talk back to these stigmatising discourses. Tellingly, these dynamics are largely absent from the Christian case study, where the issue of race is hardly addressed, despite its continuing impact on congregants and leadership alike. This chapter further discusses the strategies my interlocutors find to negotiate a sense of belonging in the Netherlands, such as assimilation, concealing one's religious status in public, or imagining a life in a community where their religion forms the majority.

In my conclusion, I return to the main findings of this dissertation that shed light on the different layers of women's conversions. This research adds to a more complex and complete understanding of conversion, by questioning the emphasis on change and boundary crossing that continue to dominate studies of conversion. From an outsider perspective, the eye is often drawn to expressions of transformation. Noticeable changes are, for example, related to dress style, food preparation and consumption, or the way in which people interact during community events. From an insider perspective, my interlocutors describe conversion—in the sense of their social surroundings, daily schedule, and general sense of purpose and comfort in their belief in God—as a process of transformation. However, in another respect, my interlocutors often point towards the continuity of their selves and question the idea that conversion implies a clear 'before' and 'after'. Furthermore, it is impossible to indicate which moment, beliefs, or practices best represents the supposed change. My interlocutors negotiate, consciously and subconsciously, rationally and embodied, various ethical frameworks and practices, which questions the assumption that conversion implies moving from one (secular) sphere of life to another (religious) sphere.

Another important research finding relates to the tension between the individual and community in conversion narratives and experiences. The social dimensions of joining a religious community play an important role in conversion narratives, despite the often heard emphasis on authentic, individual intentions. Becoming religious is at times considered a true expression of an authentic inner self. However, community structure and religious discourse inform what is expected and considered authentic. In the Jewish case study, authenticity should even be proven in front of a rabbinical court before someone is accepted for *giyur*. For Christian women, authenticity is often expressed through emotions and body movements, showing that one is truly touched by the Spirit. Muslim women also uphold the idea that pious intentions are more important than perfect practice, but are simultaneously concerned with the best way to express those intentions. In all cases, whilst authenticity is performed in different ways, it is always the result of learning and training in a community.

Many converts have an ambivalent relation with their (immediate and imagined) religious community, and the manner in which they are included differs from group to group. Jewish converts often have the most difficulty being included, since many communities, with the exception of some progressive Jewish congregations, are hesitant to welcome newcomers. Christian interlocutors are most active in their community. Here, men and women interact amicably (especially young adults) and there is no spatial separation. However, this does not imply an absence of gender norms. Instead, the interactions between men and women are closely monitored and the division of roles reflects a binary understanding of gender that assigns care tasks primarily to female members, whilst men take on most leadership roles. New Muslim women and Orthodox Jewish women are confronted with more explicit gender segregation in their religious institutions. Although most appreciate the separation of men and women, for some it took time to accept. My research also shows that it is not enough to merely focus on positions of official religious authority such as rabbis or imams—two positions not available to women in most Orthodox Jewish and Islamic communities. In order to understand the distribution of power in these settings, I argue, other forms of authority should be taken into consideration. Women are not completely absent from leadership roles or authority, and can be active in positions such as teacher or board member. More common still, and carrying with it added social status, is the informal role of mentor. The emotional labour offered by women is cherished and many women take on such a role a few years after their conversion, often to help and support recent newcomers.

Besides religious institutions, the private sphere represents an important space in which most female converts practice and express their religion. In a broader sense, this shows that conversion also takes place in daily life and is not limited to more formal religious settings. The approach of ‘lived religion’ offers insight into these private, informal religious practices and rituals. By focusing on embodied practices, my research further questions the assumption that conversion is primarily related to ‘beliefs’ or ‘worldview’. For women in all three religions embodied practices are very important. Stronger still, I show that ‘beliefs’ also

consist of material and embodied elements. One example that comes up in all case studies is related to food. Negotiating food practices and diets was an important aspect of becoming religious and is part of the way in which converts train their bodies. It is also one of the ways in which their religious identity can be felt—even tasted—throughout the day without significant interference from those in positions of religious authority. This research questions the body/mind dualism that so often dominates studies of conversion, by arguing that: the practice/belief distinction is based on false assumptions about certain religious groups and traditions (as ‘orthodox’ versus ‘orthopraxis’); the separation is not reflective of religious women’s experiences; conversion is always embodied and related to questions of the divine; and both expressions exist as two sides of the same coin.

Based on my comparative analysis of gender and conversion, I argue that, whilst conversion is gendered in several ways, it should not be regarded as a crossing between identifiable secular and religious gender discourses. My research shows that women who embrace religion deal with gender questions in different ways, but this does not mean that they leave discourses and norms of secular modernity behind. Instead, most women combine discourses, negotiating their use across differing terrains. They sometimes struggle with the gendered aspects of their new religion, but often also find solace. This confirms that whilst religion is gendered in various ways, gender questions are not neatly divided along the lines of the religious and the secular. All in all, my research shows that women’s religious conversion is only paradoxical in the eyes of the secular observer.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Dit proefschrift analyseert de ervaringen van Nederlandse vrouwen die joods, christelijk of moslim zijn geworden, vanuit een vergelijkend en gender-kritisch perspectief van geleefde religie. Dit etnografische onderzoek is gebaseerd op veldwerk en diepte interviews met veertig deelnemers en heeft als doel om te begrijpen hoe gender en religie elkaar kruisen voor vrouwen die een religie omarmen in een verder overwegend seculier land. Op deze manier bevraagt dit onderzoek de ogenschijnlijke ‘paradox’ van bekering door vrouwen: Dat voormalig seculiere vrouwen, die ‘geëmancipeerd’ zouden zijn, toetreden tot een religie die geassocieerd wordt met conservatieve gender opvattingen, wordt vaak stereotyperend beschouwd als een indicatie van een gebrek aan agency of een teken van onderdrukking. Dit is vooral het geval wanneer het gaat om vrouwen die toetreden tot een minderheidsreligie die met etnisch ‘anderszijn’ wordt geassocieerd, zoals de islam. In dit proefschrift wordt dit paradox ontrafeld en bevraagd, niet door te vragen *waarom* vrouwen bekeren, maar door te onderzoeken *hoe* bekering plaatsvindt in het dagelijks leven; en hoe dit in verhouding staat tot bredere maatschappelijke debatten over emancipatie en het veronderstelde onderscheid tussen religie en seculariteit. Dit onderzoek is gesitueerd in Nederland, een kleine natiestaat in noordwest Europa die als gesecculariseerd wordt beschouwd, maar waar de Christelijke achtergrond een continuerende invloed heeft op het sociaal-politieke leven. Het zelfbeeld van Nederland als seculier en modern is bovendien sterk verbonden met het idee van vrouwenemancipatie en seksuele vrijheid. Zoals ik beschrijf in de introductie, maakt deze geschiedenis en zelfpositionering Nederland een relevante context om de paradox van bekering te bestuderen.

Hoewel bekering kan verwijzen naar een verscheidenheid aan praktijken, betreft mijn analyse een selectie van zelfbenoemde Nederlandse, voornamelijk witte, vrouwen die gesocialiseerd zijn in een overwegend seculier milieu en vrijwillig besloten om (orthodox of liberaal) joods, (pinkster) christen, of (soennitisch) moslim te worden. De vergelijkende praktijk is vrij uniek in de studie van bekering, waarin tegenwoordig met name onderzoek naar moslimbekeerlingen oververtegenwoordigd is. Binnen elk van de drie onderzochte religies bestaan bepaalde richtlijnen over wat het betekent om toe te treden. Ook zijn er bepaalde rituelen om de inclusie van nieuwkomers te markeren, zoals het joodse *mikwe*, christelijke doop, of het uitspreken van de *shahada* in islam. Bekering is echter veel meer dan de officiële rituelen of richtlijnen en heeft een impact op verschillende aspecten van het leven, waarvan veel gerelateerd zijn aan gender. Dit soort aspecten betreffen uiteenlopende terreinen zoals religieuze autoriteit, voedsel, kleding, relaties, seksualiteit en ouderschap. Om deze rijke diversiteit in kaart te brengen, hanteer ik een zogenaamde ‘bottom-up’ vergelijking. Het doel is niet om generaliserende analyses te bieden over schijnbaar eenduidige categorieën als ‘religie’ of ‘bekering’. In plaats daarvan analyseer ik hoe bekering plaatsvindt in het dagelijks leven van religieuze mensen en hoe dit begrip betekenis krijgt in verschillende religieuze

contexten. Een dergelijke vergelijkende benadering is bijzonder waardevol om beter te kunnen begrijpen hoe gender, seksualiteit en *belonging*—het gevoel van thuishoren—worden ervaren door bekeerlingen en hoe ervaringen tussen groepen verschillen.

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit een introductie, zes hoofdstukken en een conclusie. Het eerste hoofdstuk beschrijft mijn theoretische en methodologische benadering van gender en bekering. Het onderzoek bouwt voort op de kritische studie van religie en gender, en start vanuit het begrip dat religie gevormd is door gender en vice-versa. In dit hoofdstuk beschrijf ik verschillende, aan elkaar gerelateerde, conceptuele kaders: seculariteit en religie; bekeringsstudies; en de intersectionele studie van gender en religie. Dit hoofdstuk legt ook mijn methodologische benadering verder uit, met name feministische etnografie en de geleefde religie benadering. Hier reflecteer ik op mijn rol als onderzoeker en beschrijf ik de onderzoeksmethoden in de drie verschillende casussen: participerende observatie, informele gesprekken en diepte-interviews.

Hoofdstuk twee bestudeert de ervaringen en verhalen van joodse vrouwen die een *gioer* proces hebben doorgemaakt, de (vaak geprefereerde) Hebreeuwse term voor joods worden zonder joodse moeder. In enkele progressief joodse gemeenschappen worden mensen zonder joodse moeder, maar met een joodse vader geaccepteerd als volwaardig joods. In de meerderheid van gemeenschappen wordt deze groep echter ook geacht een *gioer* proces te doorlopen, al spreekt men in liberaal joodse kringen eerder over een ‘bevestiging’ in dit geval. Het proces van *gioer* verschilt duidelijk van de andere twee casussen, omdat dit niet wordt aangemoedigd en niet iedereen die dat wil formeel kan toetreden tot het jodendom. In plaats daarvan ligt de uiteindelijke bevoegdheid om toegang te verlenen bij een rabbijnse rechtbank, een *beet dien*. *Gioer* wordt vaak omschreven als een intense studieperiode van doorgaans minimaal twee jaar, waarin kandidaten worden geacht zich volledig onder te dompelen in het ‘joodse leven’ in de synagoge. Joods zijn en worden beïnvloedt het leven op meerdere manieren en is meestal verstrekkender dan de officiële *gioer* rituelen. Het varieert van persoonlijke overwegingen omtrent *koosjer* eten, tot het al dan niet dragen van een gebedsjaal tijdens de *sjabbat* diensten, of het volgen van de menstruatieriten van de *niddah*. Het gaat van het ontdekken dat je grootvader joods was, tot het overtuigen van een *beet dien* om je formeel een joodse status toe te kennen; en alles daartussenin.

Gender beïnvloedt *gioer* processen op verschillende manieren. De meerderheid van de joodse onderzoeksdeelnemers, alsook deelnemers in de andere twee casussen, hanteert een idee van complementair gender verschil. Deze opvatting houdt in dat mannen en vrouwen weliswaar van gelijke waarde zijn, maar in essentie (vaak gebaseerd op biologisch determinisme) verschillend. In orthodox joodse gemeenschappen heerst over het algemeen een meer expliciet onderscheid tussen mannen en vrouwen dan in (niet-orthodoxe) liberale of progressieve joodse kringen. Liberaal jodendom profileert zichzelf vaak als meer progressief dan de orthodoxie op het gebied van gender gelijkheid. Hier kunnen vrouwen bijvoorbeeld rabbijn worden en volledig deelnemen in de synagoge. Het idee van een net onderscheid

tussen orthodox en liberaal jodendom op de basis van gender, wordt echter genuanceerd door mijn onderzoek. Gendernormen hebben wel degelijk invloed op niet-orthodox joods leven, zij het vaak op een meer impliciete manier. De meeste liberaal joodse vrouwen vinden het belangrijk om zowel actief te zijn in de synagoge, als de verantwoordelijkheid te dragen voor de rituelen thuis. Onder hen wordt genderverschil geuit door het belang van emotionele zorgtaken door vrouwen, thuis en in de *sjoel* te benadrukken; of door afwijzend te reageren op de optie voor vrouwen om een keppel of gebedssjaal te dragen. Sommige orthodox joodse vrouwen zijn aan de andere kant wel degelijk zeer actief in de synagoge, of waardeerden hun rol thuis. Bovendien is er veel overlap tussen ideeën over gender en worden de officiële voorschriften met betrekking tot de rol van vrouwen vaak niet kritiekloos overgenomen, maar op verschillende manieren eigen gemaakt.

In tegenstelling tot de joodse casus, wordt bekering sterk aangemoedigd binnen de christelijke pinksterkerken waar ik veldwerk ondernam. Deze context van kerken verbonden aan het Hillsong netwerk, wordt beschreven in hoofdstuk drie. Evangelisatie is kenmerkend voor dit soort groepen en een belangrijk moreel streven: elke kerkdienst worden nieuwkomers aangemoedigd om zich te bekeren. Door kerkelijk leiders wordt bekering meestal omschreven als een omkeer van gerichtheid op het ‘wereldse leven’ van zonden, naar gerichtheid op het ‘leven van God’. In tegenstelling tot dit gangbare discours in de kerken, wijzen de dagelijkse ervaringen van mijn onderzoeksdeelnemers op een meer geleidelijk proces. Ook hier betekent bekering een integratie van verschillende praktijken, relaties en gendernormen.

Dit derde hoofdstuk werpt ook licht op de levensstijl die gepaard gaat met de pinksterkerken, die erg aantrekkelijk blijkt voor nieuwkomers: vaak jongvolwassen vrouwen die aangetrokken worden door de moderne esthetiek, de aanstekelijke aanbiddingsmuziek en de mogelijkheid om actief bij te dragen aan de kerkgemeenschap. De gemeenschappen zijn meestal erg inclusief en verwelkomend ‘on stage’, aan de voorkant, maar bekeerlingen krijgen te maken met een sterke normativiteit wanneer zij eenmaal binnen zijn en deelnemen aan de ‘off stage’ bijeenkomsten. Hier stuiten ze onder meer op een conservatief genderdiscours van complementariteit, uitgedrukt in begrippen als ‘mannelijk leiderschap’. Bovendien gaat bekering vaak gepaard met een verandering in opvattingen over het vrouw-zijn, waarin traditionele familiewaarden worden gecombineerd met moderne idealen over werk en uiterlijk. Het normatieve ideaal is dat van een ‘Spreuken 31 vrouw’, een vrouw die alles kan (een goede moeder, echtgenote en gemeentelid zijn). Hoewel dit beeld vaak als krachtig wordt ervaren, creëert het ook extra druk voor vrouwen om aan deze idealen te voldoen. Op een dieper niveau zorgt het ook voor extra druk voor vrouwen die graag willen groeien binnen de kerkelijke hiërarchie en toegang willen tot bepaalde leidinggevende posities. Echter, net als in de andere casussen, worden ook dit soort normen niet klakkeloos overgenomen, maar vinden mijn onderzoeksdeelnemers hierin hun eigen weg.

Het vierde hoofdstuk onderzoekt de ervaringen en verhalen van vrouwen die de islam omarmden. Dit onderwerp wordt het vaakst besproken in hedendaagse studies over bekering.

Mijn hoofdstuk bevestigt het argument dat bekeerde moslima's hun bekering vaak beschouwen als een proces zonder duidelijk gedefinieerd begin of einde. Veel nieuwe moslima's beginnen individueel en privé islamitische praktijken te introduceren en zich te identificeren als moslim. Maar hoewel bekering in deze context in eerste instantie vaak een privé proces is, zoeken veel bekeerlingen later gemeenschappen op. Mijn onderzoek nuanceert echter het dominante idee dat bekeerlingen in de islam—althans in eerste instantie—een fase doormaken waarin ze 'roomser zijn dan de Paus'. Mijn resultaten laten zien allereerst dat er bekeerlingen met perfectionistische trekken te vinden zijn in alle groepen. Dit is dus niet kenmerkend voor de islam, maar moet eerder gezien worden als een uiting van enthousiasme gecombineerd met onzekerheid over de positie in hun nieuwe gemeenschap. Een tweede en belangrijker nuance is dat de overgrote meerderheid van bekeerlingen niet zo normatief in hun uitdrukking is als de theorie van 'roomser dan de Paus' lijkt te suggereren. Vooral met betrekking tot hun directe familie en vrienden tonen de onderzoeksdeelnemers aarzeling om hun religie te bespreken of te uiten.

Hoewel moslimbekeerlingen vaak met voorzichtigheid en zorg islamitische praktijken in hun dagelijks leven introduceren, komen sommige zichtbare praktijken voor seculiere familie of vrienden toch over als een plotselinge verandering. Het dragen van een hoofddoek vormt een bijzonder moeilijke beslissing vanwege de mogelijke negatieve reacties. Vrouwen die moslim worden, worden vaak geconfronteerd met stereotypen, negativiteit en een gebrek aan begrip, met name als het gaat over de *hijab*. Dit is echter slechts één aspect van islam en bovendien niet het belangrijkste om het religieuze leven van deze vrouwen te begrijpen. Velen vinden steun, vreugde en trots in hun islamitische praktijk en expressie. Moslim worden kan van invloed zijn op vele aspecten van het dagelijks leven en omvat vaak een verandering naar een *halal* dieet, het indelen van tijd om ruimte te maken voor de dagelijkse gebeden, het bijwonen van gebeden en lezingen in de moskee, en een verandering in kledingstijl. In de islam vonden en waardeerden de meeste deelnemers een complementair genderdiscours van 'gelijkwaardig, maar niet gelijk'. Dit komt overeen met de meerderheid van bekeerlingen in het bredere onderzoeksproject en wordt ervaren als significant verschillend van het dominante discours in de rest van de samenleving. Mijn onderzoek toont aan dat vrouwen die de islam omarmden, de speciale status die aan vrouwen wordt toegekend waarderen, als moeder of verzorger, terwijl zij ook benadrukken dat vrouwen gelijkwaardig, maar niet gelijk, zijn aan mannen.

De hoofdstukken vijf en zes hebben een andere invalshoek en zijn expliciet vergelijkend. Deze zijn gericht op concepten en thema's die vaak naar voren kwamen tijdens het onderzoek, maar die niet alleen door gender kunnen worden gevat. In hoofdstuk vijf analyseer ik seksualiteit, dat als analytisch concept verbonden is met gender, maar niet hetzelfde is. Vanuit het inzicht dat bekering een belichaamd proces is, analyseer ik hoe dit proces verband houdt met seksuele ethiek en praktijken. Verschillende deelnemers in de gemeenschappen geven verschillende antwoorden, maar dit was over de gehele linie een van

de belangrijkste gespreksonderwerpen. Kortgezegd is de dominante opvatting heteronormatief en de deelnemers beschouwen het monogame huwelijk alom als de ideale context voor seksuele relaties, al hebben velen wel degelijk seks voor het huwelijk, iets wat in de praktijk veel vaker voorkomt dan in eerste instantie lijkt. De idealisering van het heteroseksuele huwelijk als de correcte context voor intimiteit, gaat vaak gepaard met een afkeuring van LHBTQI+ seksualiteit en personen, hoewel een minderheid juist een sterke voorstander is van seksuele diversiteit en inclusie. Dit houdt niet direct verband met de religieuze groepering waarin de vrouwen actief zijn, al worden de meest uiteenlopende meningen gevonden in de joodse context. In de pinksterkerken blijkt de minste ruimte te bestaan om dit heteronormatieve kader te bevragen. Seksualiteit is juist een van de belangrijkste onderwerpen waarop christelijke bekeerlingen zich distantiëren van hun seculiere omgeving en pre-bekeerde zelf. Dit geldt minder voor islamitische of joodse bekeerlingen, die soms (maar niet altijd) een verandering ten aanzien van seksualiteit uiten, maar dit niet gebruiken als vorm van cultuurkritiek. De meerderheid van de moslima's in dit onderzoek heeft bijvoorbeeld een heteronormatieve kijk op seksualiteit, maar promoten dit vaak niet actief en oordelen niet over de opvattingen van anderen. Bovendien laten de verhalen van twee LHBTQI+ deelnemers de grote verscheidenheid aan ervaringen en opvattingen zien. Dit bevraagt de veronderstelling dat religie per definitie seksueel conservatief (of zelfs negatief) is, terwijl secularisme inherent seksuele vrijheid biedt.

In hoofdstuk zes richt ik de blik vervolgens op de bredere maatschappelijke context en vragen over *belonging*, een gevoel van (nationaal) thuishoren. Mijn onderzoek toont dat de meeste bekeerlingen te maken krijgen met seculiere stereotypen over religie in de samenleving, zoals het dominante idee dat religieus worden betekent dat je als vrouw je emancipatie moet opgeven. Onder witte bekeerde moslima's leidt bekering soms tot het in twijfel trekken van hun nationale verbondenheid en de veronderstelling dat men etnische of raciale grenzen oversteekt door moslim te worden. In dit vergelijkende hoofdstuk onderzoek ik hoe nationale verbondenheid, ras en religie elkaar kruisen in de ervaringen van mijn onderzoeksdeelnemers. Het laat zien hoe mijn gesprekspartners zich verhouden tot de bredere transnationale religieuze gemeenschap, zoals het Joodse volk of de islamitische *ummah*. In tegenstelling tot sommige moslima's, voelen nieuwe joodse vrouwen—hoewel ze aangaven zich bij een volk te voegen door joods te worden—geen afstand tot de Nederlandse natie. Wel krijgen ze vaak te maken met antisemitisme en is het omgaan met dit racisme een wezenlijk onderdeel van het *gioer* proces. Dit resoneert met de ervaringen van moslimvrouwen met islamofobie. Vrouwen in beide contexten hebben vergelijkbare manieren om met deze stigmatiserende discoursen om te gaan en terug te praten. Dat deze dynamiek grotendeels afwezig is in de christelijke casus is veelzeggend. Hier blijkt het onderwerp van ras (en racisme) nauwelijks aan de orde te zijn, ondanks de aanhoudende impact op gemeenteleden en religieuze leiders. In dit hoofdstuk worden verder de strategieën besproken die de deelnemers hebben om een gevoel van verbondenheid met de Nederlandse natie te

waarborgen, zoals assimilatie, het verbergen van de religieuze status in het openbaar, of het dromen van een leven in een gemeenschap waar hun religie de meerderheid vormt.

In mijn conclusie kom ik terug op de belangrijkste bevindingen van dit proefschrift, die een licht werpen op de verschillende lagen van bekering en gender. Mijn resultaten dragen bij aan een completer en complexer begrip van bekering door de dominante nadruk in bekeringsstudies op verandering en het overgaan van grenzen te bevragen. Vanuit het perspectief van een buitenstaander wordt het oog vaak getrokken naar uitingen van transformatie. Merkbare veranderingen zijn bijvoorbeeld gerelateerd aan kledingstijl, voedselbereiding en -consumptie, of de manier waarop mensen met elkaar omgaan in de gemeenschap. Vanuit een binnenperspectief beschrijven vrouwen hun bekering ook als transformatie, in het kader van hun sociale omgeving, dagelijkse routine en algemeen gevoel van zingeving en geloof in God. Echter, in een ander opzicht wijzen ze ook regelmatig op de continuïteit van hun zelfbegrip en stellen ze vraagtekens bij het idee dat bekering een duidelijk ‘voor’ en ‘na’ heeft. Bovendien is het vrijwel onmogelijk aan te geven welke momenten, overtuigingen of praktijken de verandering het beste vertegenwoordigen. De deelnemers onderhandelen, bewust en onbewust, rationeel en lichamelijk, over verschillende ethische kaders en praktijken. Dit bekritiseert het idee dat bekering een beweging is van de ene (seculiere) levenssfeer naar een andere (religieuze) levenssfeer.

Een ander belangrijk inzicht in dit proefschrift heeft te maken met de spanning tussen het individu en de gemeenschap in bekeringsverhalen en -ervaringen. De sociale aspecten van het horen bij een religieuze gemeenschap spelen een belangrijke rol in bekeringsprocessen, ondanks de vaak gehoorde nadruk op authentieke individuele intenties. Joods, christelijk of moslim worden soms gezien als de uitdrukking van een authentiek innerlijk zelf. De (religieuze) omgeving geeft echter impliciete en expliciete kaders over verwachtingen en over welk gedrag als authentiek wordt beschouwd. In het geval van jodendom moet authenticiteit zelfs worden bewezen voor een rabbijnse rechtbank alvorens iemand wordt geaccepteerd voor *gioer*. Onder christelijke vrouwen wordt authenticiteit vaak uitgedrukt door emoties en lichaamsbewegingen die aantonen dat men geraakt wordt door de Heilige Geest. Moslimvrouwen houden ook vast aan het idee dat oprechte intentie belangrijker is dan perfecte praktijken, maar waren tegelijkertijd veel bezig met de beste manier om deze intentie te uiten. In alle gevallen, hoewel authenticiteit en individualiteit een belangrijke rol spelen, kan dit niet los worden gezien van het leren en praktiseren in een gemeenschap.

Desalniettemin toont mijn onderzoek dat veel nieuwkomers een ambivalente relatie hebben met de (directe en bredere) gemeenschap waar zij toetreden, en de wijze waarop zij worden opgenomen varieert van groep tot groep. Joodse vrouwen hebben vaak de meeste moeite om geaccepteerd te worden, omdat veel gemeenschappen aarzelen om nieuwkomers te verwelkomen, met uitzondering van enkele progressief joodse gemeenten. Christelijke vrouwen waren over het algemeen het meest actief in hun gemeenschap. Hier gaan mannen en vrouwen vriendschappelijk met elkaar om en is er weinig zichtbare scheiding, vooral onder

jongvolwassenen. Dit betekent echter niet dat er geen gendernormen zijn. In tegendeel, de interacties tussen mannen en vrouwen worden nauwlettend gevolgd en de rolverdeling weerspiegelt een binair genderbegrip waarbij zorgtaken voornamelijk aan vrouwen worden toegewezen, terwijl mannen de leiding op zich nemen. Moslima's en orthodox joodse vrouwen komen een meer expliciete gendersegregatie tegen in hun gemeenschappen en religieuze gebouwen. Hoewel de meesten van hen de scheiding van mannen en vrouwen op prijs stellen, ervaren anderen meer ongemak en moeite dit te accepteren. Mijn onderzoek laat bovendien zien dat het niet voldoende is om de focus alleen te richten op posities van officiële religieuze autoriteit zoals rabbijn of imam, twee posities die niet toegankelijk zijn voor vrouwen in de meeste orthodox joodse of islamitische gemeenschappen. Om de machtsverhouding te begrijpen, zo beargumenteer ik, moet er ook gekeken worden naar andere vormen van autoriteit. Vrouwen zijn namelijk niet afwezig in leiderschapsrollen en zijn vaak heel actief in functies zoals leraar of bestuurslid. Nog gebruikelijker is een informele rol als mentor, wat vaak gepaard gaat met hoog aanzien. Het emotionele werk van vrouwen wordt vaak gekoesterd en veel vrouwen nemen enkele jaren na hun toetreding een dergelijke rol op zich, onder anderen om recente nieuwkomers te helpen en ondersteunen.

Naast de gemeenschap is de privésfeer een belangrijke ruimte voor bekeerde vrouwen om religie te praktiseren en uiten. In bredere zin toont dit aan dat bekering ook in het dagelijks leven plaatsvindt en zich niet beperkt tot meer formele religieuze instituties. Het perspectief van geleefde religie biedt inzicht in deze informele religieuze praktijken en rituelen. Door de aandacht te richten op belichaamde praktijken, problematiseert mijn onderzoek bovendien de aanname dat bekering primair gerelateerd is aan 'wereldbeeld' of 'geloof'. Voor deelnemers in de drie groepen zijn lichamelijke praktijken juist van belang, en bovendien toon ik aan dat ook 'geloof' materiële en lichamelijke aspecten heeft. Een voorbeeld dat in alle casussen naar voren komt heeft te maken met voedsel. Het eigen maken van eetgewoonten is een belangrijk aspect van joods, christen of moslim worden en is een van de manieren waarop mijn deelnemers hun lichaam trainen. Het is ook een van de manieren waarop de nieuwverworven identiteit de hele dag door kan worden gevoeld, zelfs geproefd, zonder noemenswaardige inmenging van bijvoorbeeld autoriteiten. Dit onderzoek bevraagt het dualisme tussen lichaam en geest dat vaak beeldvorming over bekering domineert, door te stellen dat: dit onderscheid gebaseerd is op valse veronderstellingen over bepaalde religieuze groepen en tradities (zoals 'orthodox' versus 'orthopraxis'); dit onderscheid geen weerklank vindt in de ervaringen van religieuze vrouwen; bekering tegelijk belichaamd is als mogelijk gerelateerd aan vragen over het goddelijke; en dergelijke uitdrukkingen twee kanten van dezelfde medaille zijn.

Op basis van mijn gender kritische vergelijkende analyse van bekering, beargumenteer ik dat bekering niet moet worden beschouwd als een beweging van ogenschijnlijk seculiere naar religieuze gendernormen, hoewel bekering op veel manieren gendergerelateerd is. Het onderzoek toont aan dat vrouwen die het jodendom, christendom of de islam omarmen op

verschillende manieren met genderkwesties omgaan, maar dit betekent niet dat zij discoursen en normen van seculiere moderniteit achter zich laten. In plaats daarvan combineren de meeste vrouwen deze kaders en onderhandelen zij over de vorm en praktijk op verschillende terreinen. Ze worstelen soms met vraagstukken rondom gender en seksualiteit in hun nieuwe religie of gemeenschap, maar vonden vaak ook waardering en troost. Dit bevestigt dat, hoewel religie en gender elkaar kruisen, er geen helder onderscheid te maken is over gender langs de lijnen van het religieuze en het seculiere. Al met al laat mijn onderzoek zien dat de religieuze bekering van vrouwen slechts paradoxaal is in de ogen van de seculiere buitenstaander.

About the Author

Lieke Schrijvers is a religious studies scholar and feminist anthropologist with expertise in the intersections of gender, religion, LGBTQI+, sexuality and the secular. She holds a BSc degree in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, and a MA degree (*cum laude*) in Gender and Ethnicity, both from Utrecht University in the Netherlands. For her master's thesis, she studied lesbian women in the Dutch Protestant Church (PKN). The results were published in *Tijdschrift voor Gender Studies* and in *Culture and Religion*. From 2016-2021 she worked as a PhD candidate in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Utrecht University. This was a joint doctorate with the Centre for Research on Culture and Gender at Ghent University, Belgium. Schrijvers' PhD research was part of the NWO research program 'Beyond "Religion versus Emancipation": Gender and Sexuality in Women's Conversions to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe'. For her PhD she conducted comparative fieldwork in (Orthodox and non-Orthodox) Jewish, (Pentecostal) Christian, and (Sunni) Islamic communities, interviewing women who converted in these groups. Whilst working on her PhD, she was editor in chief of *Junctions: Graduate Journal of the Humanities* (2017–2019); elected representative in Utrecht's University Council on behalf of Utrecht PhD Party (2019–2021); and representative member of the University's PhD network Prout (2019–2021). She presented her research at several international and national conferences (including EASR, NGG, and IARG); and published several articles and book chapters with her research outcomes in, amongst others, *Social Compass* and the edited volume *Transforming Bodies and Religions: Powers and Agencies in Europe*, edited by Jelle Wiering, Mariecke van den Berg, Anne-Marie Korte and herself. After working as a lecturer in religious studies at the University of Amsterdam, she started in 2022 as a postdoctoral researcher at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, in the VIDI project 'Unequal Partners? An Ethnographic Study of Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim Couples in the Netherlands'.

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