Article

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Becoming Muslim: Converting old and new practices through 'turning away'

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Abstract

This article focuses on the relationship between religion/secularism and national identity through the experiences of converts to Islam. These men and women occupy a controversial position in society: they are often born and raised in Europe *and* have chosen for a religion that is generally associated with 'foreignness'. In this context, converts are often represented in terms of loss, especially in relation to gender relations. In other words, their conversion to Islam is often read as a *turning away* from modernity or Western lifestyles, rather than a conscious choice *for* something new, such as spiritual fulfilment. Coulthard and Simpson however, interpret '*turning away*' in relation to the politics of recognition and decolonization. This understanding makes it possible to read conversion as an active choice for self-determination. *Turning away* then becomes a refusal to engage in the hegemonic recognition game of being situated and managed and to be politically consumed by the overarching system. The article will investigate how Dutch converts to Islam negotiate the different aspects of their identities and the boundaries connected to those through a politics of refusal. I will argue that by following Coulthard and Simpson, we can understand converts '*turning away*'– in an alternative, less negative way. They '*turn away*', as Fanon argues, to find freedom on their own terms and in accordance with their own values.

Keywords

Conversion, Dutchness, gender, Islam, national identity, turning away

Introduction

This article focuses on the intricate relationship between conversion to Islam and feelings of national belonging, specifically in the Dutch context. It emphasizes how converts negotiate old and new practices and identities after their conversion. Hence, it does not

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only aim to understand conversion itself, but also concentrates on how this process influences converts' feelings and experiences of belonging.

Scholars have recently argued that the Netherlands is going through a process of naturalization of cultural attributes with regard to minorities (see, for example, Van Nieuwkerk, 2004; Verkaaik, 2009). In other words, cultural differences are essentialized and used to distinguish the civilized self from the cultural Other. In this context, one could argue that 'the national minority issue' has transformed into a 'religious minority issue' (Van Nieuwkerk, 2004). The 'Islamization of migrants' can be connected to many factors, for instance, the rise of political Islam in Muslim countries and the 9/11 attacks in New York, but also the growing visibility of Islam in Europe, in general, and in the Netherlands, specifically. Generally, there have been two important developments in Dutch debates about migration and multiculturalism in the 21st century: (1) a transformation in the discourse about migrants—from guest workers to Muslims; (2) a new (or renewed) definition of national identities, strongly articulated with secularism (Peters, 2006). Among other things, this means that the debates about cultural diversity, recognition, and integration actually translate into a discussion about Islam (see also Midden, 2016). According to the logic of the neo-realist discourse, a 'straightforward critique' of Islam is considered to be an essential aspect of 'being Dutch' (Prins, 2002). Hence, the religion/secularism divide does not simply come to constitute one object of social and political debate among others but is mapped onto the very idea of 'Dutchness' and its 'Others', with 'Dutchness' and 'Islam' becoming mutually exclusive. This also counts for the larger European context. Europe is often constructed through the Other: 'The European is what the Other is not, (. . .) unmarked by race, ethnicity and religion, but in reality, implicitly constructed upon the idea of maleness, whiteness, and Christianity' (Ponzanesi and Blaagaard, 2012). This way, immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees across postcolonial Europe are Othered through 'physical', 'symbolic', and 'material' default positions and borders: 'Islam may be in Europe, but it can never be of Europe' (Buitelaar, 2010).

Oskar Verkaaik (2009) emphasizes the importance of cultural citizenship in relation to the construction of Dutch identity. He argues that such an interpretation of citizenship does not just ask citizens to be part of the democratic system, but also requires cultural loyalty and the endorsement of social and cultural practices. He sees the rise of a new nationalism in the Netherlands, which is most of all characterized by a defence of secularism. This means that the desire for freedom and individualism is for a large part presented as anti-religious, and this anti-religious attitude now turns against the religion of migrants. One could say that according to this narrative, secularism defines the Dutch self and religious intolerance of the Muslim Other. This way, secularism becomes not only an ethnic identity marker (of the Dutch self), but also something conservative, that is used to protect the status quo (Verkaaik, 2009). In this context, it is often considered remarkable that every year, a number of men and women (predominantly women) decide to convert to Islam and hence make a choice that seems incompatible with their 'Dutchness' (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). In the Netherlands, for example, it is estimated that approximately 500 people convert to Islam each year.

In my previous research on conversion to Islam, I focused on the gendered entanglements of the religion/secularism divide and national identity in the Netherlands. I demonstrated how inclusion/exclusion from the Dutch national body increasingly hinges

upon Islam's supposedly fundamental incompatibility with Dutch culture and values—especially the value of 'emancipation' (Midden, 2021). In this article, I will concentrate on how converts negotiate different aspects of their identities. Contrary to more classical approaches that see conversion as a 'turning from and to', this article is grounded in the perspective of conversion as a 'bricolage' (Verkaaik, 2009). I will argue that conversion is often a 'turning to', but not always a 'turning from'. The final aim is to reconceptualize conversion through 'the politics of refusal' and to show how converts' identity negotiations make alternative interpretations of categories such as 'Muslim' and 'Dutch' visible. In the next sections, I will first say something about how I approach Islam as an object of study and the interviews I conducted for this project. Then I will lay out the theoretical background, after which the analysis will follow. The first part of the analysis discusses how the converts in this research negotiate the different aspects of their identities, constructing a specific sense of self. The second part shows how they resist dominant discourses about Islam and Dutchness without necessarily turning away from their old identities.

Approach: Researching Muslims and Islam in the Netherlands

What does it actually mean to study 'Muslims' in European countries of immigration? Brubaker argues that it is important to recognize that Muslims are not just a category of social, religious, and political practice, but also a category of analysis (Brubaker, 2013). We live in a world, he argues, in which 'Islam is a chronic *object* of discussion and debate' (Brubaker, 2013). In this context, 'Muslim' is a category towards which one has to make a stance: one cannot simply inhabit it in an unreflective manner. While some scholars have registered this shift, Brubaker argues that others also actually contribute to this process of producing knowledge and representations of Muslims and hence risk 'methodological Islamism'. Or to say it differently: they are 'focusing too exclusively on the "Muslimness" of Muslims and treating "Muslim" as a master status and a continuously salient self-identification' (Brubaker, 2013: 6). Although religion can be very important for many Muslims, it is not necessarily the only or first identity marker for them. Moreover, concentrating on the 'Muslimness' of Muslims risks reproducing the idea that Muslims are particularly religious. Part of this is the making of the category of 'European Muslims', which has led to a re-labelling of populations previously identified and categorized in other terms than 'Muslim' (e.g. 'migrant'). In this context, Schielke proposes ethnographic approaches that account for the motivations, experiences, and complexities of everyday lives: to understand the complicated logic of lived experience, we will have to take the inherent ambiguity of people's lives as the starting point, just as we have to locate their worldviews in both the local contexts they are physically acting in and the global connections (Schielke, 2010).

In this research, I try to follow both Brubaker and Schielke by making Islam/Muslims central topics in my work, but not necessarily the *object* of my investigation. The final aim is rather to scrutinize Dutch identity and its relation to the religion/secularism divide. Hence, I am not so much interested in explaining the Muslimness of Dutch converts, but rather in Dutch national identity and what the category 'Muslim' (specifically converted

Muslim) *does* in this context. However, this does not mean that the term 'Muslim' does not also function as a category of analysis in my research, as I do look at converts to Islam. By asking men and women about their interpretations of their identity both as 'Muslim' and as 'Dutch', I aim to critically investigate these categories and thus use them (the 'category Muslim' and the 'category Dutch') as *objects* of analysis, rather than *tools* of analysis, as Brubaker (2013) suggests. I do, however, take Schielke's point about meta-narratives and daily experiences at heart as well. He argues that 'The problem with the meta-narrative of a critique of secular and liberal power through its other, Islam, is that it reduces the complexity, richness and ambivalence of human experience into providing evidence against a liberal/secular power constellation'. Hence, in such research, there would be less space for the actual lives, emotions, and experiences of people. I hope, that by focusing on how Dutch converts to Islam negotiate the different aspects of their identities and practices on a daily level, I can actually focus on people's lives and all the complexities and contradictions they entail.

I conducted[1] seven in-depth interviews with eight converts to Islam (one interview was with two people at the same time), whom I found through my personal networks and snow-ball sampling. The majority of the people interviewed were women (6), but I also talked to two men. All interviewees had converted to Islam at least several years ago and were thus no longer in early stages of conversion. Most interlocutors were in their 20s or 30s, but one person was older (50s) and some had children. Except for one, they were all born in the Netherlands and identified as White. Although I tried to talk to converts with different backgrounds, I only managed to do this partially, for example, with regard to gender, age, class/education, and time since conversion. It is to be expected that one gets different results with converts from various ethnicities, but it was my explicit aim to understand the experiences of those who had known the privilege of feeling that they belonged (in the Netherlands) before they became Muslim, and possibly felt excluded after their conversion. The interviews should also not be seen as a representation of all converts' voices in the Netherlands. First, because the sample is not large enough to be representative, and, second, because this research has other aims. It was my objective to produce new ideas about conversion and how it influences patterns of belonging. The interviews functioned as a starting point to think differently; to conceptualize conversion in an alternative way. In that sense, it was important to hear *various* voices, but not necessarily to capture *all* voices. Finally, as I did not want to focus too much on the Muslimness of the interviewees but rather on how they related to 'Dutchness', I did not ask them what kind of Islam they practised, although sometimes it came up naturally. During the interviews, I was also mindful of the relationship between researcher and researched, and the power relations imbedded in this process (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Among other things, this means that the interviews were informal and largely unstructured. There was ample space for the interviewees to guide the direction of the discussions.

Changing identities: 'Turning from and to'

Although one can (relatively easily) convert to Islam by saying the Shahada (confession of faith) three times in a row in front of Muslim witnesses, conversion is generally not seen as an instant change with a clear 'before' and 'after', but rather as a process. There

is, however, discussion about how to understand this process exactly (see, for example, Mansson McGinty, 2006; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006; Vroon-Najem, 2014). In recent debates about this, scholars question the understanding of conversion as an instituting rite, and rather focus on embodied, daily practices and transformation over time. Van Nieuwkerk uses the terms moving in and out of Islam, to take the attention away from the destination and rather towards the journey. This perspective makes it possible to see conversion as an ongoing trajectory between different worldviews and to focus on how people actually make sense of faith (Van Nieuwkerk, 2018: 9). Galonnier (2018) takes this a bit further and proposes to approach conversion as a process of 'moving towards', rather than an act of 'moving in', to emphasize the constant transformation during and after conversion (Galonnier, 2018: 48). In a similar vein, Barylo questions the term conversion itself, arguing that it implies a complete change, with a beginning and an end:

> One does not simply abandon a previous tradition or belief, but only parts of it, and one also acquires new elements of references. There is no clear distinction between 'before' and 'after', and there is no absolute rejection of a past identity (even if it is rejected it is not total), but rather the construction of a new one. (Barylo, 2018: 40)

Barylo argues that the issue of identity tends to become important for the people *around* the person who converts/embraces Islam. He quotes Suleiman who talks about 'cultural apostasy' to show how some family members expect that converts have to give up everything, their culture and their identity, for Allah (Barylo, 2018).

In my own work on converts in Dutch mainstream media, I noted converts are often represented in terms of loss, especially in relation to gender relations: converts are seen as having lost their emancipated 'Dutchness' (Midden, 2021). The mothers in the show 'From Dutch Chocolate Sprinkles to Halal', for example, consistently express the fear that their daughters will lose aspects of their identities through adherence to Islam, while their daughters explain that converting to Islam—and honouring modesty laws more specifically—is not about becoming another person but about being a better person. The connection between conversion and loss, I argued therefore, hinges in large part on a particular, secular European interpretation of women's emancipation. By choosing a faith that is considered to be particularly at odds with secularism, the converts are automatically understood to have given up their 'emancipated' status and values. This binary can be complicated by pointing to the emancipatory and *even self-identified* feminist struggles of some religious Muslim women, for whom emancipation is not necessarily secular in character and for whom religion is often an important source of inspiration in the struggle for emancipation (Midden, 2018). In some cases, Muslim women also explicitly redefine what emancipation means by focusing more on sexual difference and less on equality as sameness, or by shifting attention away from the individual by recognizing women's positions within the family (Midden, 2014).

According to Viswanathan, 'a change of religion is less a change of beliefs than a change of community' (Viswanathan, quoted in Galonnier, 2018: 62). Hence, the religious transformation would only be complete when one is accepted by fellow believers. In practice, however, it seems that the relationship between converts and communities is much more complex. Ozyurek (2015), for example, describes how the German converts

she interviewed distanced themselves from born Muslims by emphasizing that their faith was more rational and purer because it was not influenced by cultural traditions. While for the women I talked to, it seemed more important to show others that they could be both Muslim and Dutch (Midden, 2018). They never implied that they were 'better' Muslims than, for example, Muslim migrants living in the Netherlands. Jensen, on the other hand, states that in her research, many converts dissociated themselves from what they called 'Danish culture': When speaking about 'dansk kultur' and 'Danishness', they often mention activities that they can no longer take part in (Jensen, 2008: 395). Hence, it seems that depending on the socio-political context in a country, converts relate to Muslim communities in different ways. Elsewhere, I have described the position of converts to Islam as 'outsiders within', who do not cross boundaries from point A to B, but rather deconstruct boundaries. Just by the choices they make and the lives they live, they show that fixed ideas about religion, nationality, gender, and ethnicity do not hold (Midden, 2018). More research, however, is needed to draw more concrete conclusions on how converts in different countries connect with the Muslim communities already living there.

This article aims to show how Dutch converts to Islam negotiate the different parts of their identities and the boundaries connected to those. I agree with Verkaaik that we should not see conversion as a 'turning from and to', as many converts indeed turn to something new, but do not always reject something old (Verkaaik, 2009: 132). Moreover, conversion should not necessarily be seen as a conversion to tradition (and *away from* modernity), but rather *within* the context of modernity. Such modern conversions are often not a consequence of a revelation, but rather start with will. In this article, I will not only try to rethink conversion through the concept of bricolage, but also redefine the concept of 'turning away' itself. Rather than accepting the simplistic view that converts turn away from their old lives, or merely suggesting that they create a bricolage through old and new practices, my aim is to rethink the term 'turning away' in such a way that we can use it to understand the meaning of conversion as an affirmative choice, one that questions existing categories and boundaries, and does not merely reject them.

Becoming Muslim, being yourself

The next two sections will focus on the experiences of the Dutch converts I talked to and how they negotiate their multiple belongings. I will reflect on these negotiations through the concepts of turning away, politics of refusal, and self-recognition and self-affirmation. Understanding the experiences and positionings of Dutch converts to Islam through these concepts will make it possible to read how they combine and bring together different identities and practices, rather than turn away from their previous lives. As I mentioned before, Verkaaik argues that conversion to Islam is often read as a radical *turning away* from modernity or Western lifestyles, rather than a conscious choice *for* something new, such as spiritual fulfilment. Turning away, in this context, becomes something negative: a rejection. But Coulthard and Simpson interpret '*turning away*' in relation to the politics of recognition and decolonization. Using their work as a starting point enables me to read converts' choices as an active choice for self-determination, rather than a *turning away* from their original identity or modernity as such. Do converts turn away,

as Fanon argues, to find freedom on their own terms and in accordance with their own values (Coulthard, 2014)? This would be quite difficult to do and entails a constant nego-tiation between their own values and beliefs and people's responses to those.

Assuming that converts would leave everything behind once they convert goes against the lived experiences of the people I talked to as well. Rather, they seem to mix and match or bring different values, identities, and practices together on a daily basis. Melissa shows this very clearly when she describes how she lives her life:

> On Mondays I take the train. Then I go to Hoorn. Then I go to the Islamic Butcher and get meat for the whole week. I do all my other groceries at supermarket 'Deen'. I eat Dutch food ('Hollandse pot') very often, but I also cook everything I like from other places. I really do think you can be Muslim and Dutch. I don't think that once you convert you cannot be Dutch anymore. I really find it strange that people ask me: 'Have you become Moroccan'. Of course not. (Melissa)

In this quote, Melissa demonstrates that she is never one thing only; she is many things at the same time and it is almost offensive to her if people assume that she is not able to combine her Muslim identity with her Dutch identity.

In improving the position of Muslims in the West, there are traditionally two main approaches: a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution. According to Charles Taylor, the demand for recognition is the basis for multicultural politics (Taylor, 1994). Critics of the politics of recognition, however, argue that this approach has done little to actually change social oppression structurally (Coulthard, 2014). Another risk of this approach is that identities become fixed or simplified. Arguing that recognition also automatically leads to subjection, Coulthard proposes the concept of self-recognition instead. Referring to Fanon, he argues, 'rather than remaining dependent on their oppres-sors for their freedom and self-worth, the colonized must instead struggle to work through their alienation/subjection against the objectifying gaze and assimilate lure of colonial recognition' (Coulthard, 2014: 43). Coulthard uses the term self-recognition to refer to a self-directed 'strategic fixing' that aims to re-position, re-arrange, and re-cast available practices, discourses, and artefacts rooted in a given sociohistorical field in a manner that would serve the most 'enabling' potential for the subjects in question (Coulthard quoted in: Ali, 2018). This comes quite close to the argument of many con-verts that their conversion gave them the opportunity to become the person they want to be(come). Just as Coulthard suggests, they re-arrange, re-position, and re-cast certain practices, and many of the converts I talked to found their own way to do this. First, by combining different aspects of their different identities and, second, by actively choosing which practices suit them and which do not. Melissa, for example, describes how she often feels at Dutch birthday parties:

> everyone is drinking beer, and I don't drink beer. Then I am really a bit of an outcast. Then they say to me: ah come on, one beer, that should be ok! But one beer is not ok. And even if it would be ok, I wouldn't want it. I don't even like it. So I wouldn't know why I should do it. You make me much happier with a smoothie, or a real cold chocolate milk. And my enormous tea collection. With nice organic teas. I don't need any alcohol. Give me a piece of cake and a cup of tea! (Melissa)

Melissa nicely describes how people around her assume that she is limiting herself and that she should allow herself more. She, on the other hand, argues that she prefers a smoothie over alcohol and would like people to recognize this. Melissa seems to be very content about how she lives her life and consciously chooses what she wants to do and what she does not want to do. She is still Melissa, she likes the beach and a party, but she will party in a different way than she used to. She does not feel that she is limiting herself but rather that she chooses to do what gives her joy and strength. This was something that came back in all the interviews that we conducted. Marja, for example, says,

> I have never been a person that likes going out, I never drank alcohol. (. . .) I have always been a bit grandmother-like. (Marja)

For Marja, this also means she never had to choose between her old identity and Islam. She remained the person she already was. Thinking consciously about issues such as consumption and consumerism was always part of that as well. Only others now connect certain parts of her habits and practices to Islam, instead of to her as individual. Similarly, Isa argues that there was no radical break between her life before and after conversion, and emphasizes that her conversion never led to big conflicts. For example, with regard to food, she discusses how both she and her parents were always flexible. At first, she would just eat everything her parents made for her, even if it was not halal, and when this started to bother her, her parents adapted to her wishes:

> And now slowly we eat halal everyday. (. . .) My father says: I am not just getting chicken for you there, then we all eat this chicken. I am not going to Albert Heijn for us and to another place for you. We all eat the same. The taste is the same anyway. (Isa and Tim)

Recognizing these nuances and constant negotiations in how converts live their lives does provide us with better insights not only into their experiences and strategies but also into how to think differently about the possible tensions between Islam and Dutch identity. Hence, the idea that conversion is a 'turning to and from' does not only seem empirically incorrect, but also unjustly reinforces the idea that people can only be 'either' Muslim 'or' Dutch. Instead, the term self-recognition makes it possible to understand how converts actually give meaning to their lives and identities. They reposition themselves, making use of certain aspects from their past and Dutch culture, and other aspects from their new identity. This implies a constant negotiation of discourses and practices, as their specific position is often questioned: 'how can one be Dutch and wear a headscarf", 'how can you not want to drink a glass of beer or wine, 'you must be oppressed as a Muslim woman'. This means that they have to create space for their new positioning, and I would argue they do this through a politics of refusal. This means that they turn away, but not from their old identity but rather from dominant discourses about their identities, and at the same time they develop alternative ones. I will discuss this further in the next section.

Turning away and a politics of refusal

Ali uses the work of both Coulthard and Simpson to theorize the concepts of 'turning away' and 'refusal' (Ali, 2018: 22). Turning away in Ali's work becomes an active refusal

to engage in the hegemonic recognition game of being situated and managed and to be politically consumed by the overarching system (Ali, 2018). This so-called 'politics of refusal' is highly influenced by Fanon, who indeed argued that rather than remaining dependent on their oppressors for their freedom and self-worth, the colonized must struggle against the objectifying gaze of the colonizer (Coulthard, 2014; Fanon, 1961: 43; Simpson, 2014). The converts to Islam that I talked to operate in a different context than the people discussed by Fanon; they live in liberal, secular societies, in which they are often relatively privileged, but at the same time they actively choose a religion that is marginalized in their societies. As I mentioned before, they are regularly judged for turning away from their old lives and identities. Sometimes they are even seen as traitors (Midden, 2018). I would argue that by following Coulthard and Simpson, we can understand converts 'turning' in an alternative, less negative way. They turn away from certain dominant norms, and *towards* something new.

This negotiation that converts perform is often quite difficult to do and entails a constant mediation. Sometimes this indeed leads them to turn away from parts of their previous identities, but it can also very well lead to doubts about their new ones:

> Some people find it nice to hear that I am still very Dutch, and some people find it a bit strange. They ask me questions like why the headscarf if you are so Dutch, and feel so Western. Why the headscarf then. Well, because it is part of me. It is a bit difficult to explain. It isn't very easy either. Sometimes I think, I am going to take it off, so that I don't have to deal with this bullshit anymore. Then I will just be a Dutch person again amongst other Dutch people. Then I will never have to hear those things anymore. (Melissa)

Joost adds that he does not feel less Dutch after conversion and often has more trouble with, for example, Moroccan traditions than Dutch ones: 'I have been to Moroccan weddings in the past and I hated them. Such loud music' (Joost). Other interviewees also mentioned how they sometimes try to change the discourse around them, as a way to create more space for them to be themselves and to combine different practices and identities. Simone, for example, notes that she has a bag which she loves. The text on the bag says, 'extreme Muslim', and the picture underneath it shows a woman with a motorbike and helmet.

> That is what I love, raising questions about something by adding a different image to an assumption, and changing things a little bit that way. (Simone)

I would argue that one of the most important aspects of the politics of refusal of the Dutch converts I talked to is the active negotiating of various identities (as shown in the previous section). They redefine these identities exactly by combining them in their own ways, rather than switching from one to the other. First, they do this by emphasizing that Islam is only one part of who they are. Simone, for example, says,

> I am Simone, Islam is a part of me. Just as much as the fact that I am from Brabant and that I sometimes like to chat with my neighbor. I am just as much 'someone from Brabant, as I am Muslim'. (Simone, 7 minutes)

But they also show how Islam is not necessarily in tension with other aspects of their (previous) identity. Simone says she never felt less Dutch after her conversion: 'I never

thought now I don't belong here anymore' (minute 23). This is actually quite remarkable, especially considering the fact that many of the interviewees do mention experiencing discrimination or exclusion after their conversion. Apparently, this does not make them think that they lost some of their Dutchness, but rather encourages them to claim a different Dutchness for themselves. Their feeling of belonging is actively reinforced through their own actions, perspectives, and relations and not limited from above. One could say this is a 'turning away' as a 'politics of refusal': they turn away from dominant perspectives on Dutchness, not from Dutchness itself. Rather, they redefine what it means to be Dutch and what it means to be Muslim. Marja, for example, says she never felt the need to choose between being Muslim and being Dutch. In fact, she became much more interested in norms and values since her conversion. She finds citizenship very important and believes in constant self-development. In that context, she says, she is always looking for connections and tries to bring people together, rather than focusing on differences. Anna also emphasizes the importance of unity, but for her Dutchness is all about embracing the differences there are in the country. If she thinks about the Netherlands, she sees 'a place where many different cultures live together and are ok together, that you embrace that' (Anna).

Anna also mentions that often gender and emancipation-related issues are an important reason for people to think Islam and Dutchness cannot go together: 'they think you can only be emancipated if you walk on the streets naked' (Anna). She argues,

> the point of feminism is, and I see myself as a feminist, that you accept everyone. Every woman should make her own choices, decide for herself how she wants to live. If I tell you that you are not a feminist because you don't wear a headscarf, that would not be feminist. (Anna)

With Melissa, the issue of gender oppression, emancipation, and Islam also comes up regularly. She mentions that she often has to defend herself on this topic, but she is not afraid to be forward about it:

> they should come and visit me and see what my life looks like. If they really think that Muslim women are oppressed. I would have never converted to a religion that oppresses women. Are you crazy? Definitely not. I find that so ridiculous. All over the world women convert to Islam. Look, of course women are oppressed. But that has nothing to do with Islam. That has everything to do with culture. And men are just idiots. They mess up everything. Also religion, you know. Men are just wrongdoers. (Melissa)

Melissa is determined not to let others define for her what Islam means or how it would influence her life. In that sense, I read both Melissa's and Anna's perspectives on conversion as an active turning away from the dominant gaze. They turn away from those who tell them how to behave and those who assume that they know what women want. Instead they actively construct a new self, based on both old and new identities.

To summarize, the turning away from these converts is not negative, but rather a turning away from certain dominant perspectives, and hence an affirmative turning *towards* something new. Interpreting conversion in this way makes it possible to see these women's choices as positive, instead of negative: they choose *for* something, and not

necessarily *against* something else. It also makes it possible to understand these women differently. The idea that converts would just want to escape from something is often used in order not to have to take their decision seriously, or even ridicule them. Hence, this perspective makes it possible to assign more agency to these women. But reading their choices in this way also allows a different political and theoretical evaluation of the act of conversion itself—as something that is more than just shifting from one identity to another, but rather a shifting of identity boundaries. They create different meanings of Dutchness by turning away from the limiting interpretations of what it means to be Dutch.

Concluding notes

In this article, I have described how Dutch converts to Islam negotiate their different identities and belongings. Following Verkaaik, I showed the limitations in understanding conversion as a 'turning to and from' and instead proposed to think of conversion through the idea of a 'bricolage' in which old and new practices converge in different ways. This first seems to be in line with the claim of the converts that I talked to, as none of them felt that they left their old selves behind, but instead believed that they became a better version of themselves. Reading converts' negotiations through the terms of self-recognition and the politics of refusal made it possible to understand how converts actively produce a new sense of self, based on different aspects of their identities, practices, and belongings. In this context, one could argue that they still turn away, but not in the sense of *rejecting* their old identities. Rather, they turn away from certain dominant norms and towards something new. This perspective does not only make it possible to think differently about conversion itself, but also about the consequences of the act of conversion. While it is often assumed that converts lose aspects of their former identity or would even actively deny them (Midden, 2021), this article has shown how they actually combine, negotiate, change, and practise their different identities. But my argument would not just be one of understanding the nuances in conversion better. Instead, I say, that understanding the nuances in conversion will also give us better insight into the relationship between national identity and religion, Islam and Dutchness.

First, Dutch converts do not move into Islam and out of Dutchness, as is often assumed. They are both Muslim and Dutch, and their experiences in negotiating these two identities teach us something about the category of Dutchness and its borders and limits. For the converts, Dutchness is very much associated with their upbringing, Dutch traditions, and customs. They often talked about food, birthday parties, and going out. They all tried to combine (in different ways and with different emphases) these aspects of their identity, not just because they want to decide this for themselves, but also because they are forced to respond to how others define them as Dutch and/or Muslim. Through these negotiations, they do not just 'self-style', but they also create new categories of identities. Elsewhere I have argued that converts to Islam implicitly and explicitly criticize fixed boundaries of Dutchness, through the choices they make (Midden, 2018). They do not just take on new identities or hop from one category to the other, but rather create new combinations of identities and thus blur what was assumed to be fixed. In this article, I have zoomed into the theoretical conceptualization of conversion and how we

can use the concept of 'turning way' to rethink how converts negotiate their different identities. Reading converts' turning away, through Coulthard and Fanon, makes it possible to recognize that converts do not just turn away from their old selves in order to become someone new. Rather, they turn away from specific and limiting definitions of who they are supposed to be. Not necessarily or in first instance because they want to resist existing norms, but rather as a (side) effect of their conversion. One could argue that they expand the category of Dutchness, just by who they are and the choices they make. Obviously, this broader category of Dutchness is not recognized by everyone, and converts experience different forms of marginalization and exclusion. However, they are a very good example of how one can rethink the category of Dutchness. Just as Gilroy (2004) refers to 'conviviality' to emphasize how people from different cultures and ethnicities already live together, converts are an example of how Islam and Western national identities, such as Dutchness, already 'lived' together.

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