CHAPTER 6

Public Renderings of Islam and the Jihadi Threat: Political, Social, and Religious Critique in Civil Society in Flanders, Belgium

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Since recent decades in West-European societies, the role of religion in the public sphere has been put anew on the agendas of political and media debates and policy-making, and is especially considered in relation to Islam (Cesari 2004; Modood et al. 2006). Public assertions of Islamic sensibilities and claims have, starting with the Rushdie affair in the UK, precipitated a sense of political crisis, which has been analysed

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by Talal Asad (1990) in terms of a perceived threat to particular ideological structures and cultural hierarchies organised around postimperial national/local identities. This sense of political crisis has furthermore been linked to what a number of scholars dubbed 'the Muslim question' (Bracke 2013; Meer and Modood 2009; Norton 2013; Parekh 2006; Selby and Beaman 2016). Public debates not only address Muslims as minority communities in Europe with presumably difficulties in adjusting to a new and more civilised world, but also discuss the role of Islam in politics and social life worldwide in the face of what is called the threat of terrorism globally and locally (Cesari 2004; Zemni 2006). Similar to other West-European countries, in Belgium, Islam and Muslims are subject of debate and policy-making on the basis of assumptions about Islam threatening local liberal and secular values, and about Muslims' lack of integration and propensity for violence (Zemni and Fadil 2004; Maly 2009; Zemni 2011). Islamophobia, or the fear in the face of Islam, is part of the 'Muslim question'; however, as Jennifer Selby and Beaman (2016) argue, the construction of 'the Muslim question' is broader than that. Matteo Gianni describes 'the Muslim question' insightfully as 'a conglomerate of discourses, attitudes, and practices that call into question the agency, subjectivity and moral equality of Muslims as individuals, as bearers of religious values, and as citizens' (2016, 23). 'The Muslim question' is therefore about the construction of Muslims, Islam, and Muslimness as essentially 'different' from the so-called Western culture and society. As such, Muslims have come to be perceived as inhabiting the 'religious' in need of policing by modern governments, whose governance and sovereignty, as Stack et al. (2015) argue, have been rationalised and marked out by crucial modern religious-secular distinctions.

On 22 March 2016, Brussels witnessed two terrorist attacks. Explosions hit the departure hall of Brussels International Airport and the subway stop Maalbeek that is located in the quarter in which the European institutions are housed. Over 30 people died, more than 260 people were (severely) wounded, and many were traumatised. These events will no doubt lead to a turn in 'the Muslim question' and intensify assumptions about links between Islam and violence, and most probably intensify or transform particular forms of policing of Muslim communities. However, concerns about terrorism or 'jihadi threat' have been part of public debates and policy-making for a much longer time. This chapter focuses on some instances of renderings of the 'jihadi threat' from the end of September 2014 and throughout 2015 in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking community and northern region of Belgium. It does so predominantly

from the perspective of counter-voices, as a conscious epistemological and empirical choice (Van den Berg and Popov Momčinović 2015). Locating and investigating counter-voices emerging from small initiatives in civil society may reveal important alternative perspectives on 'threatening' political, social, and religious developments as not solely located in terrorism and violence but also, or even more, in other societal dynamics. The counter-voices of civil society actors present in this chapter tackle not just the increasing equation between Islam, Muslims, and 'jihadi threat', but also the assumed essential difference of Muslims at large. These civil society counter-voices will be assessed for the ways in which they respond to 'the Muslim question' and thereby create more space for the construction of various forms of agency, religious/secular subjectivity, morality, and citizenship—for Muslims as well as non-Muslims. Moreover, the counter-voices will be considered for the ways in which they are local actors of religious critique/theory of religion.

Reconsidering Political-Religious Counter-voices and Locations for Building Theories of Religion

Up until recently, across the humanities and social sciences, religious authorities and traditions have been assumed to be of decreasing importance in politics, society, and people's individual lives (Casanova 1994), and therefore of no interest for academic enquiry beyond religious studies and theology (Korte 2011). Also in social movement studies, religion has traditionally been underestimated as a source of agency for civil society, movements, and activists, due to the fields' assumption that progressive politics are necessarily secular (Aune 2014; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008). These assumptions regarding the role of religion in the public sphere and civil society of modern Western societies bring along a sense of interruption or even danger when religious authorities, movements, or individuals (re)emerge and (re)assert themselves in the public sphere (Casanova 1994) of politics, policy-making, and grassroots claims for recognition and special rights. In Western Europe, this is especially the case when Islam, as a 'new' religion, is the mobilising factor, which receives responses that are complex combinations of xenophobic and Islamophobic attitudes (Zemni and Fadil 2004). Not only is a more nuanced perspective on the relationship between religion and the public sphere necessary, but critical scholars situated in different Western contexts also argue for a deeper understanding of the potential danger of the secularism myth (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008) for democracy in current multicultural societies

(Scott 2007; Modood 2007; Woodhead 2008). This danger stems from the lack of sufficient recognition of, as Braidotti et al. put it, 'the importance of religious and multicultural identities and their implications for active citizenship' (Braidotti et al. 2014, 1).

The undoing of the secularism myth in relation to civil society organisations and activism means that, first of all, the idea that emancipation can be solely based upon liberal individual rights and autonomy needs to be questioned. This refers to critically revisiting ideas about the 'proper' emancipation of various marginalised groups, such as women, LGBTs, ethnic-cultural minorities, and religious minorities, which has been imagined predominantly in secular terms (Braidotti et al. 2014; Scott 2009; el Tayeb 2012; Mahmood 2005). Second, undoing the secularism myth leads to critically rethinking the notion of political agency. According to Braidotti et al., 'political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed solely or primarily at the production of counter-subjectivities' (2014, 5). In this reconceptualisation, political agency is considered to be potentially subversive and affirmative at the same time. Critical resistance can be geared towards different groups (religious/secular) in society, and affirmation can be directed towards various groups facing mechanisms of exclusion, as well as towards the voice and experiences of minorities-within-minorities. Following this line of thinking, this chapter considers the public articulation and expressions of claims, arguments, beliefs, and practices within religious frameworks by civil society movements therefore as potentially emancipatory for marginalised groups.

This chapter will start by briefly exploring the 2014–2015 rendering of 'the Muslim question' in Belgian public debates and policy-making as increasingly taking place in terms of the 'jihadi threat'. Next, it turns to voices from civil society actors critical of the increasingly common equation of 'Islam' and 'Muslims' with the 'jihadi threat'. From there, I pay attention to three initiatives that emerged in different sectors of Flemish civil society, namely interreligious activist dialogue and writing (Halal Monk), critical theatre (*Travels-Jihad*), and a seminar by the faith-based NGO Motief (Resistance is Halal). These initiatives are relevant, as all of them receive(d) public recognition (prizes, audiences, and/or participants) and/or state financial support, and are therefore considered by a broad audience and/or the government to be valuable and/or legitimate counter-voices. I explore how these counter-voices are built and show that they are based on various argumentations, such as antiracism; geopolitical, culture-historical, and theological/ethical perspectives; and/or religious

critique. The antiracist position is here defined as comprising rhetorical 'strategies of equalisation' (Lamont and Flemming 2005) of racialised minorities.[1] Geopolitical, culture-historical, and theological/ethical perspectives are understood as those argumentations that explicitly take into account political, social, and theological histories and contexts to explain current structures of inequality.[2]

Finally, I utilise the phrase 'religious critique' here as pointing at critically deconstructing the category of religion, and/or the deliberate construction of something new and better in terms of ideals, values, and religiosity.[3] I consider especially public religious critique directed broadly at society at large as most destabilising the West-European secular assumption that religion should be a private issue—an assumption that is foremost articulated vis-à-vis public expressions of Islam. I moreover consider religious critique (directed at own communities and/or society at large) by civil society actors as potential instances of local theorisations of religion.

Because the faith-based NGO Motief provides elaborate religious critique, the second part of the chapter will focus more into depth on Motief. As a pluralist faith-based organisation for adult education, Motief made religious critique into its core task, and it suggests to look at the combination of Islam, Muslims, and the issue of resistance in new ways. This second part of the chapter looks into Motief's history, in particular its understanding of religion and the relationship between religion and society. As such, the analysis reveals how Motief constructs a counter-discourse about religion in general, and Islam in particular, and the way in which this counter-discourse enables Motief to voice a critique of the 'jihadi threat'.

[1] In literature, antiracism is not often explored in terms of what constitutes antiracist argumentations. As such, 'antiracism' is taken for granted and used as an adjective (antiracist organising, antiracist strategies, etc.). However, a recent article by Lamont and Flemming (2005) demonstrates the relevance of scrutinising what the authors call 'strategies of equalization', or rhetorical and practical aspects of 'everyday antiracism'. The article contributes to understanding the benefits and disadvantages of various forms of antiracism, as some strategies may create opportunities for inclusion for some members of racialised communities, while still excluding others.

[2] See for an argument for the importance of distinguishing between 'ethical, historical, social, theological and culture-historical' perspectives to analyse the various layers of current public controversies about minority practices in Western Europe, such as male circumcision: Westerduin et al. (2014).

[3] See for an insightful discussion about the importance for understanding the difference between these political–analytical steps, and for doing both: Goldstein et al. (2016).

Not only does the case study of Motief provide insights into the construction of critical religious knowledge by a civil society actor, and its contestation of religious/secular distinctions, but the analysis also considers Motief's understanding of religion as a particular and situated *theory* of religion. As a response to the questions Elizabeth Castelli (2001) poses about the relationship between theory and religion, and religion as theory, the case study will demonstrate that, indeed, critical religious thinking articulated by civil society actors may produce politically and socially situated forms of theory/theology. In the case of Motief, theory/theology is produced through a complex theoretical-theological 'repertoire' (2001, 129) in terms of what religion is (where it begins and ends, how it operates, and how it is linked to or involved in public life) and what it ought to be (and not to be).

The chapter ends by arguing for the combined relevance of antiracism, situating perspectives, and religious critique/theory of religion in order to produce counter-voices to dominant assumptions about Islam and Muslims. Such a multilayered and nuanced voice can be called 'multiple critique', a concept I borrow from Miriam Cooke (2002). Multiple critique may vitally enable and support critical counter-positionings and subjectivities.

Recent Public Renderings of the 'Jihadi Threat' and Counter-voices in Flanders

Since September 2014 and the violent rise and influence of extremist Islamic fundamentalist groups in various regions of the Middle East and North Africa, debates and policy-making have increasingly focused on the 'jihadi threat' and its potential impact on Belgian society. As some young Muslims—born Muslims as well as converts, male and female—have travelled to the Middle East to support one of the fundamentalist groups in its struggle to gain territory and influence, public debate throughout 2014 and 2015, and up until today, paid ample attention to the problem of what are dubbed 'Syria-fighters'. This question has been fuelled by the observation that in comparison to other European countries, the number of Belgian Syria-fighters is relatively high (Rabaey, 30 September 2014). Questions such as the following are formulated: why do some young Muslims radicalise and support Jihadist struggles abroad? How should policy-making and society treat those Syria-fighters who return home? Are returning Syria-fighters a threat to Belgian society? Various explanations have been voiced regarding the 'why' question, which can be (somewhat

simplistically) divided into arguments pointing at socio-economic factors of racism, marginalisation, and youth subcultures, or those blaming Islam for being a religion that calls for violence and intolerance.[4] As Rik Coolsaet, professor in international relations at the University of Ghent, summarises:

> Two opinions clash. For some, the departure of young people is caused by failed integration politics. Therefore, 'society' is to be blamed. According to others, the problem is Islam, and the cure lies exclusively in the hands of 'the Muslims'. (14 January 2015 in: De Standaard, translation NvdB)

We could therefore perceive September 2014 as the start of a new episode in Belgian public debates about Islam and Muslims, referred to by Sami Zemni as the 'Islam-debate' (2009). It draws upon the themes of much older and entrenched discourses about Islam and Muslims in the West, but seems to become increasingly intertwined with public discussions and policy concerns about security (Blommaert, 16 April 2015; Zemni 2006). In Flemish media, during the week in which the USA decided to 'combat ISIS [Islamic State in Iraq and Syria] and terrorism' (CNN, 11 September 2014),[5] the new Islam-debate episode kicked off with an opinion piece by freethinker and philosopher Maarten Boudry, published on 13 September in the newspaper *De Morgen* (which presents itself and is often considered to be progressive). In his opinion text, he argues that 'moderate Muslims' should not criticise terrorism by referring to holy texts, as this means taking up a position of sharing with terrorists the same starting point of argumentation and therefore abiding to their rules of the game. Principles such

[4] See, for example, various contributions to recent public debates: Maarten Rabaey, 30 September 2014, 'Jozef de Witte verklaart: daarom telt België zoveel Syriëstrijders', De Morgen; HLN, 28 February 2015, '"Wat Hebben Antwerpse Moslims met IS te Maken?"'; Knack, 19 April 2015, 'Dé Syriëstrijder Bestaat Niet: Er Zijn Loser-Jihadi's of Romanticus-Jihadi's'; Bilal Benyaich, 7 March 2015, 'Radicalisering, Extremisme en Terrorisme: Wat Moet de Federale Regering Niet Doen?', Knack; Jan Blommaert, 16 April 2015, 'Het Islamdebat en Racisme', Kifkif; Maarten Boudry, 15 April 2015, 'Links Vergist Zich in het Islamdebat', Knack; Montasser Al-De'emeh, 16 January 2015, 'Montasser al-De'emeh: "Het Zal Alleen maar Erger Worden"', De Morgen; Philip Verwimp, 19 April 2015, 'Waar Is Onze Aanpak voor Teruggekeerde Syrië-Strijders?', De Tijd; Jef Poppelmonde, 4 January 2015, 'Maarten Boudry en Sami Zemni over Islam, Koran en Fatalisme', Apache; Amelia Malfait, Adel Mouchalleh, and Jonas de Schaut, 20 October 2014, 'Mama, Ik Vertrek naar Syrië!', Schamper.

[5] At the end of September 2014, The Belgian federal government decided to support the US army in its attack on the violent spread of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq by sending six F-16 fighter aircrafts. Vandaag.be, 24 September 2014, 'Pieter de Crem: 'Kernkabinet Akkoord met Inzet Belgische F-16's''.

as freedom of consciousness, individual autonomy, and tolerance are products of moral progress, Boudry writes, and are not part of the core message of the Qur'an.[6] His opinion piece evoked various pro and contra responses at the opinion pages of not only *De Morgen*, but also the alternative leftist online newspaper *De Wereld Morgen*. As such, the question of an intrinsic relationship between Islam, Muslims, violence, and terrorism became a point of heated discussion among scholars, activists, and spokespersons of civil society organisations.[7]

Already in 2006, Zemni argued that the ways in which protagonists in public debate construct 'the jihadi threat' are not neutral, nor innocent. His analysis of academic and policy concerns in Belgium about terrorism reveals that the construction of the 'jihadi threat' relates to broader issues, such as definitions of citizenship, the identity of the state and global shifting power relations. At the level of policy-making, the 'construction of the jihadi threat has led to a securitization of the policy towards Muslim communities within Belgium specifically and immigrants in general' (2006, 233). More generally, he argues, public debates, especially in Flanders, have increasingly cast Islam as a political problem and Muslims as a threat (Zemni 2011). Zemni's analyses demonstrate that the ways in which Islam and Muslims are talked about in public debates have implications for the ways in which established Muslim communities, individuals, and new immigrants in Flanders are perceived and treated on a daily basis.

Some Critical Civil Society Voices in Flanders

Various voices emerge from civil society actors, initiatives, and organisations that aim at countering this dominant perception of Islam as a political problem and Muslims as a threat. Here, I highlight voices from

[6] Maarten Boudry, 13 September 2014, 'Beste Gematigde Moslim, Gebruik de Koran Niet om de Barbarij van IS af te Wijzen' *De Morgen*.

[7] Dyab Abou Jahjah, 15 September 2014, '"Beste Radicale Atheist": Dyab Abou Jahjah Antwoordt Maarten Boudry', De Morgen; Yassine Channouf, 16 September 2014, 'Als Moslim Ben Ik U, Maarten Boudry, Dankbaar dat U Denkt in Mijn Plaats', De Wereld Morgen; Björn Siffer, 16 September 2014, 'Verleen Je de Koran Teveel Autoriteit, dan Speelt dat Recht in de Kaart van de Fundamentalisten', De Morgen; Merijn Oudenampsen, 16 September 2014, 'Beste Islamcriticus, Uw Islamkritiek Werkt Radicalisering en Extremisme Net in de Hand', De Morgen; Maarten Boudry, 17 September 2014, 'Een Verhit Debat Over de Islam is Beter dan Geen Debat', *De Morgen*; Brecht De Smet, 19 September 2014, 'Geradicaliseerde Jongeren Zijn Géén Probleem van de Islam', *De Morgen*.

different sectors of civil society, namely interreligious dialogue and writing, critical theatre, and faith-based NGOs. They aim at targeting those visions that focus on Islam as the sole problem and explanation for terrorism, and on Muslims as solely responsible for solving the problem. The three examples I highlight all point at 'society' to be blamed and use, in various degrees, antiracist, as well as geopolitical, cultural-historical, and theological/ethical perspectives to build their critical voices. However, as Coolsaet alluded to, the 'society' argument is rather well known and is often put in opposition to the 'Islam-made-them-do-it' perspective. Due to this opposition, in which many politicians, journalists, and activists easily situate and understand themselves as embracing one opposite of the divide, religious critique becomes difficult or even impossible to articulate. When religious minority identities and attachments are blamed, discussions within these communities can be made more difficult. Moreover, to conceive of a minority religious tradition as potentially possessing the ingredients for a critical vision on society at large can even become near to unimaginable. Interestingly, the three examples discussed below do succeed in constructing or conveying in one way or another religious critique.

Halal Monk

The first example is the 2013–2015 travel, book, and blog project 'Halal Monk' by the Christian theologian Jonas Slaats. The main concern of the project seems to be the current relationship between Muslims and Christians (or broader, the majority population with Christian backgrounds) in the West. This relationship is considered to worsen due to the increasing perception (present at both sides) that it is necessarily a conflictual or violent one. The main goal of the project, as Slaats writes in his book *Soefi's, Punkers & Poëten: Een Christen op Reis door de Islam* (Sufi's, Punkers and Poets: A Christian on a Journey through Islam), is therefore creating more knowledge about Islam and Muslims, which enables to think beyond the notion of conflict (2015, 16). As such, the project seems to mainly target Christian readers. However, the book mentions additional goals. By speaking about diversity among Muslims worldwide, the book not only want to enlarge Christian understanding about Islam, but also to inspire Muslims (2015, 20). The travels and conversations part of the project were the means to achieve these goals. The importance of 'interreligious dialogue' is put to the fore, which is discussed in the book as speaking about both commonalities and differences, and as necessarily including 'confrontation'. In Slaats' point of view, 'real unity is the one

that includes diversity' (2015, 20), and 'if real dialogue dares to confront, it does not only confront "the other". True and genuine dialogue lies in the courage to confront oneself' (2015, 21, translation NvdB). The book became the winner of the 2015 audience award of the Flemish Prize for the Religious Book, an initiative of Catholic publishers and the Association for the Support of the Religious Book.[8] The website of Halal Monk puts interreligious dialogue more centre stage to the project:

> Halal monk has two aims: to be a concrete project of sincere interreligious dialogue and to seek for ways out of the cultural and religious impasse our world seems to be creating. […] The goal of the Halal Monk project is to revive the tradition of true interreligious debate and discussion like it used to be held between wandering monks, travelling artists and journeying preachers. Halal Monk does not do so for the sake of the argument but because of the hope that such deeper debate might lead to unexpected solutions for the problems the world is facing. […] For the whole globalized society is in dire need of reinterpreting the position of religion and spirituality. If it does not do so, it will eventually succumb to the assumption of the clash of civilizations and the aggression such an assumption leads to (http://www.halalmonk.com/about).

During his three-year solo project, Slaats met and interviewed influential Islamic spiritual leaders, critical thinkers, and artists living in countries such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Pakistan, the USA, and the UK. Prominent figures such as the British critical intellectual Ziauddin Sardar, the Pakistani Qawwali musician Muazzam Fateh Ali Khan, the American feminist professor of Religion and Society Amina Wadud, and the Dutch writer and lecturer Abdulwahid Van Bommel were Slaats' conversational partners. His travel stories were published on his own English website Halal Monk, and the websites of Nieuwe Moskee (a Dutch Islamic platform for critical thinkers) and Kifkif (a Flemish antiracist movement building alternative perspectives and media). The project was concluded by the 2015 book publication, which launch, entitled 'Fastfood Fatwa's', took place in various Flemish cities in fully packed theatre spaces. 'Fastfood Fatwa's' comprised of a multimedia presentation of the diversity among Muslims worldwide and current dynamics taking place in the Islamic world in fields

[8] http://www.prijsreligieuzespiritueleboek.be/de-genomineerde-werken/; http://www.kifkif.be/actua/halal-monk-genomineerd-voor-de-prijs-van-het-religieuze-boek-2015; http://www.medianetwerkplus.be/?p=555

such as popular culture, religious authority, identity constructions, international and local economic-political power relations, religious interpretations, and women's rights.

Slaats positions himself explicitly as starting from a Christian point of view and understanding of religion. His project opens up to rethink some of its own assumptions about what religion is and could be, through conversations with well-known Muslim religious authorities, researchers, writers, and artists. The project provides antiracist and geopolitical as well as culture-historical and theological perspectives to address the 'Muslim question'. Antiracist arguments are built by pointing at existing stereotypes about Muslim minorities that are considered harmful for good relationships between Christians and Muslims. These stereotypes are explored by looking at how they came into being through long geopolitical religious histories and current ideologies of 'clashing civilisations' and the 'war on terror' (2015, 13–16). As such, antiracist visions and culture-historical, geopolitical, and theological perspectives complement each other, and the project encourages to think beyond the notion of an opposition between Islam and liberal-democratic Western societies and culture. An important strategy is to provide knowledge and inform the reader about the 'other side' of the story. For example, Slaats' book explains that destructive and violent relationships between Muslims and Christians, and Islamic and Christian political entities, indeed existed throughout history; *but* that there have been various forms of fruitful and mutually beneficial relationships too, which are nowadays often forgotten. One of the main messages seems to be that there is no essential quality to relationships between groups of people. Instead, they are historically and politically constructed, and are therefore malleable and changeable. The logical conclusion is that we, as human beings who create the relationships between individuals and groups of people ourselves, should now transform relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in our own context for the better.

Finally, Slaats' book conveys insights about internal theological divisions and debates among Muslims and demonstrates that internal religious critique thrives. Especially, the fifth part of the book, entitled *Constructieve Tegenspraak* (Constructive Countervoice) not only points at internal theological debates, but also speaks of the possibilities for Islamic religious critique to be relevant for society at large. The afterword makes this internal/external potentiality of Islamic religious critique most explicit with the following reflection:

> Almost all persons God allowed me to meet, emphasised the necessity to go beyond the literal—the literality of the religious extremists, as well as the literality of extreme materialists. They resist excessive consumerism, but they also turn away from religious rigidity. They sustain strong roots in the Islamic tradition, but they do not limit religion to a total of convictions, rules and external characteristics. Not only with words, but above all with the example they put, they show us the directions away from [current contexts/relationships of] aggression and conflict. (2015, 255, translation NvdB)

At the final pages of the book, Slaats utilises Islamic religious critique to build a critique of what he considers to be dominant Christian understandings of religion and related Western ways of thinking. The author concludes the book by arguing that individuals in the Western world with Christian backgrounds are too much focused on faith as the core of religion and, relatedly, think too much in terms of the 'right convictions' when they debate about religion and society. He suggests that thinking in terms of what is ethically 'good', and transforming attitudes from a 'know-it-all' to one of more humility, might be a way out of the idea of clashing civilisations (2015, 256).

The project Halal Monk is concerned with improving the relationships between different religious groups in Western society. It is self-critical regarding the notion of 'religion' and opens up to new visions on religion through the meeting with Muslims. Therefore, the project contains some elements of both deconstructive and constructive religious critiques. The project replaces the centrality of convictions/belief and 'being right' with the ethical 'good' and 'doing good'. While Halal Monk stretches what is considered 'religion' by decentring faith, and opens up to the potentiality of Islamic critical political-social visions, the project doesn't stretch 'too far' perhaps in order not to become illegible or too confrontational for what seems to be its main audience: Christians in Flanders. Halal Monk does not contain a strong critique of unequal power relations. For example, it is concerned with denouncing stereotypes that mark 'others' as different, but the antiracist vision doesn't extend to denounce the structurally unequal position of ethnic-cultural and religious minorities. Also, the political, historical, and theological perspectives are concerned with 'the other side of the story' and bring in often forgotten elements of histories or religious traditions. But they do not thematise *the conditions* in which this amnesia takes place, which has been one of (post)colonial power relations. As such, Halal Monk, although a self-critical project, simultaneously

assumes that equal ground exists where individuals belonging to different religious traditions can meet, learn from each other, and build more harmonious relationships. This assumption is crucial to destabilise discourses that call into question the moral/religious equality of Muslims (Gianni 2016), but it seems to be based on the absence of a critical perspective on current postcolonial power inequalities. Activist interreligious dialogue initiatives like Halal Monk raise the question of how the 'Muslim question' can be tackled by doing both at the same time: assuming the political, religious, and ethical equality of minorities, *and* criticising structural power inequalities.

Travels-Jihad

The second example is a Flemish civil society art initiative that creates perspectives-from-below on Islam, youth, radicalisation, and violence. That is, the play takes perspectives from young Syria-travellers and their families as starting points. Entitled '*Travels-Jihad*' (*Reizen-Jihad*), the play was set up by SINCOLLECTIEF, an 'multi-ethnic' artist collective that aims at 'capturing the urban context in music and theater for a contemporary, modern and multi-coloured audience'.[9] The play was successfully staged in various locations in main Flemish cities (Antwerp, Mechelen) in March and April 2015. SINCOLLECTIEF re-embarked on its tour early 2016, starting with staging the theatre play in Ghent in January. Taking a perspective-from-below, the play aimed at generating new questions about the causes and consequences of Syria-travellers. As director Mthombeni puts it, 'We are not aware of it, but so many people are involved [in Jihadi travels]. In some families, dramas are taking place'.[10] The theatre linked Syria-travellers to other idealist forms of armed activism and struggle throughout history in order to shed light on the potential ideals and motives of young Belgians travelling to Syria. In its advertisement it posed explicitly the following question: 'Romantic souls, adventurers or a bunch of idiots?'[11] *Travels-Jihad* generated public attention, and its scenario writer, a well-known writer and columnist, Fikry El Azzouzi, was awarded the 'Arkprijs' by *Het Vrije Woord* (The Free Word).[12] The organisers of the

[9] www.sincollectief.be/over-sincollectief/

[10] Katrien V, 16 March 2015, 'Reizen Jihad: Van Party Animal tot Jihadi', *De Wereld Morgen*.

[11] http://www.monty.be/nl/voorstelling-detail/818/reizen-jihad

[12] http://www.arkprijs.be/arkprijs-laureaten.html

Arkprijs want to put those who promote freedom of opinion and thinking into the spotlights.[13]

The play text was published and sold at the end of its performances. As I was part of the audience of the play performed in Ghent in January 2016, I noticed the place (the major theatre hall of the well-known cultural centre Vooruit) was entirely packed with people of different colours and ages. Some neighbouring schools took their pupils to the play. The performance was enthusiastically received, and at the end, many copies of the play text were sold. This means that although the performance might have been rather unsettling, many took the original text home and, therefore, had the opportunity to read and think about the text again at own time and pace. The play's main protagonist is Kersje, a white female convert, who joins her husband travelling to Syria. Although Kersje is the main protagonist, she is never part of the play (as she is gone to Syria), and the audience never hears her voice. Instead, the play centres around the absence of Kersje and focuses at the why-questions and emotions attached to her departure among those who are left behind. At the end of the performance in Ghent, a conversation was set up between the performers and the audience, during which the performers told that part of the play is based on conversations that were set up between the playwriter and left-behind family members (especially mothers). The performers referred in particular to this text, which was articulated by the narrator of the play:

> You searched for a way to quench your despair
> You put your pillow at the front door and kept watch
> Not sleeping quietly for even one single time
> Even if you have many questions
> About why I do this and why I don't show up anymore
> It is not your fault; you didn't raise me this way
> I was chosen, a higher force is to be blamed. (El Azzouzi 2015, 19, translation NvdB)

The protagonists of the play, who pose the questions and provide various partial and sometimes contradictory answers, are all defined in their relationship to Kersje: her grandmother, her father, the 'travel agent' who encouraged and helped Kersje and her husband to depart, and the best friend of her husband. Additionally, there is a mu'adhin (the one who calls

[13] http://www.arkprijs.be/index.html

for the Islamic prayer), a madrassa (Islamic school) teacher, and a narrator. All these protagonists presumably play a part in the departure of Kersje to Syria (except for the narrator), and together they offer a wide range of motives, questions, and explanations (El Azzouzi 2015). As a piece of art, the theatre play did not seem to aim at providing a complete and overarching story and explanation to the phenomenon of young Syria-travellers. Instead, it provided partial perspectives and explanations. Issues and topics such as ethics, history, adolescent development, ideals, justice, belonging, and blame were all part of it. It pointed not only at racism and marginalisation, and political-social and psychological arguments, but also at the rise of a narrow and exclusivist interpretation of Islam and its potential influence on marginalised and/or frustrated youth. However, while the protagonists gave partial explanations, they simultaneously questioned their own perspectives, throwing doubt on explanations they earlier gave.

One can read a religious critique as part of this questioning-own-explanations. In this questioning perspective, certain phenomena and their causes and consequences are thrown into doubt. For example, the grandmother at some point during the play desperately exclaims that even if one is politically and socially marginalised, this cannot be in itself a legitimisation for religious violence and killing. Or can it be? (2015, 27) As the grandmother was followed by all other protagonists, who repeated her questioning of (religiously motivated) violence, the question became emphasised. A second example is provided by the scene in which the best friend of Kersje's husband, who also travels to Syria while talking about 'the search for true faith' (2015, 27), returns to Belgium questioning himself:

> When you start thinking, you start questioning yourself sometimes. Why did I leave my family behind, why did I only listen to the google-imam, the you-tube imam, the face-book imam. Why did I do all of it, and [I realised] that I started missing very much my own country with its many faults. (El Azzouzi 2015, 39, translation NvdB)

These examples demonstrate that the playmakers provide tools for deconstructing notions such as religiously motivated violence, true faith, and religious authority. The play throws doubt on these notions and implicitly conveys critique on issues such as legitimation, and the relationship between the subject, religious authority, and national/communal belonging. It encourages to pose questions such as do we excuse/legitimate violence if we try to explain? Do legitimations for violence exist at all, and if they do, what can they be? Where do we locate religious authority

(and where not?) What alliance comes first (national, familial, religious, the individual), or is there no such thing as one above the other? What is the religious community one belongs to? This type of religious critique is deconstructive, as it puts into question common understandings and their underlying assumptions. However, it is not constructive in terms of providing new or presumably better ideals, values, or 'true faith'.

This deconstruction (but no construction) might explain the success of the play. The continuous throwing of doubt on already partial explanations made the play not only unsettling but also appealing for many part of the audience, giving the enthusiastic reactions after the performance in Ghent. Such a set-up leaves ample space for individuals to draw out what they find most important or convincing, as a question or explanation, or both. The task of constructive critique therefore lies, in this case, with the audience.

Resistance is Halal

The third example of a counter-voice is an event organised by a faith-based civil society organisation, called Motief (in English: Motive). In October 2014, Motief organised in Antwerp, the largest Flemish city, a day-long seminar entitled 'Resistance is Halal' (*Verzet is Halal*).[14] Motief sets up every year a day-long seminar in honour of one of its main founders, the Catholic liberation theologian Remi Verwimp, who died in 2006 of leukaemia. Versed in liberatory and political-social readings of religious traditions, during this seminar, Motief aimed at discussing and exploring the political, social, and religious liberatory potentials of progressive readings of Islam. As it planned this seminar already months beforehand, Motief suddenly felt caught in the new episode of the Islam-debate focused on young Syria-travellers and forced to respond. Faithful to its own tradition of starting from the voices of marginalised individuals and groups, Motief's staff member Samira Azabar opened the seminar with a speech on the seminar's main theme, briefly touching upon the issue of Belgian young Syria-travellers but situating it within a broader structure of the marginalisation and regulation of Islam in Belgium. She suggested opposing dominant understandings of Islam and Muslims by starting from theological and feminist perspectives, and the experiences of young Muslims in Belgium, in order to create and support emancipatory movements:

[14] See for its advertisements: www.cvhs.be/docs/flyerHALALVERZET.pdf; http://www.kifkif.be/actua/verzet-is-halal

> Not only histories of migration disadvantage minority groups, but also the conscious choice to believe, especially when it is about believing in Allah. If you also want to practice [religion], this choice seems to be automatically associated with a deliberate act of putting yourself outside of society. The choice for a headscarf, ritual slaughtering, Ramadan, going to the mosque, is in the year 2014 apparently suspect. Miracle solutions are sought to counter this by establishing prohibitions—just think of the headscarf regulations and the recent introduction of a ban on ritual slaughtering, but also compulsory citizenisation courses, the screening of Muslims by the state intelligence services. All of this is framed within the idea of the 'clash of civilisations': the enlightened and rational West defends universal values vis-à-vis barbaric Islam with its Syria-fighters, who aim to conduct Jihad against everything Western. Forgetting that also we, Belgian Muslims, are part of the West. Muslims are also citizens, they are mums and dads, employees, students, lovers of nature, feminists and so on. They have an opinion about how we could build policies in Belgium regarding education, the labour-market, care, culture and many other things, taking into account those who are put in the most vulnerable positions. And some of them are inspired by Islam. Think about political emancipatory movements, such as the Arab-European League, and Boss Over One's Head!, who question in a powerful and consequent way dominant structures of power, racism and equal citizenship. These movements hold up a mirror and called for emancipation and self-determination. […]
>
> We deliberately chose to explore the emancipatory tendency in Islam, also from a theological and feminist point of view, and to put the concrete Belgian situation central. As Motief we are used to radically choose to embrace a different approach in which [vulnerable] groups can bring in their strengths. For that reason, today we want to give a face and voice to young people, whose voices are not always taken into account in the dominant discourse. I wish you all a recuperative afternoon, where creating emancipatory movement can be experienced as a shared identity and where new alliances can be build. (Azabar 2014, translation NvdB)[15]

At the seminar, debates about how to create emancipatory movements starting from/within Islam were set up with speakers such as the South-African Islamic liberation theologian Farid Esack, the director of the European Muslim Network Malika Hamidi, and the founder and head of NIDA (the Dutch Rotterdam political party inspired by Islam) Nourdin el Ouali, who have experience in building emancipatory critique and networks in various ways. As the above quoted speech by Azabar alludes to,

[15] Azabar's opening speech can be found and downloaded from: http://www.motief.org/sfeerbeelden (http://www.motief.org/phocadownload/inleidingverzetishalal.pdf)

the starting point for the seminar and its discussion was the assumption that Islam as a religious tradition may provide ingredients for building critical and emancipatory visions about how to reconstruct society in more equal and just ways. Her speech weaves various types of critique regarding the 'jihadi threat': the political and social mechanisms of exclusion of Muslims are mentioned, an antiracist argument against stereotyping of Muslims is referred to, but there is also the religious critique that puts emancipatory theology central for building new visions on society, movements, shared identities, and alliances. This type of emancipatory theology opposes racist and Islamophobic perspectives on Muslims and Islam. But it also profoundly destabilises the (related) secular understanding that religious identities and practices should remain part of individual consciousness and the private sphere and should not be part of public life, and the secularist push against Islamic public identities and practices in particular. Islamic emancipatory perspectives emerge in various locations, both public and private, and claim various histories and conceptual genealogies (Zemni and Fadil 2004; Vanderwaeren 2004; van den Brandt 2014). Motief provides a special case, as its history links not only to Christian and Jewish liberation theologies, but also to feminist perspectives. Its current work combines antiracist arguments, societal reflections, and religious critique. In what follows, the building of Motief's counter-voice will be explored through its history and its conceptual thinking.

The Making of (a Theory of) Religion

Motief's counter-voice in the debate on Islam and Muslims is based on specific understandings of religion (what it can be, but also what it ought to be) and its potential role in current West-European societies. Investigating Motief as a critical political and religious actor can be considered a contribution to current discussions in political philosophy, religious studies, and gender studies about the role and place of religion in Western societies, from the point of view of a local civil society organisation aiming at social justice.

A pluralist organisation for adult education in Antwerp, Motief provides a broad public with education about social, political, and religious issues from a progressive perspective.[16] Motief's history dates back to

[16] http://www.motief.org/index.php/en/visieenmissie/wat-doet-motief; http://www.motief.org/index.php/en/visieenmissie/onze-inspiratie-en-identiteit

1995, when it was founded as a partnership of a number of partaking Catholic and Protestant social education organisations. This collaboration was in 2006 narrowed to *Volwassenenvormingswerk Verenigde Protestantse Kerk in België* (Adult Education of the United Protestant Church in Belgium) and the *Werkplaats voor Theologie en Maatschappij* (Workplace for Theology and Society). Since 2006, Motief is officially recognised and subsidised by the Flemish Ministry of Culture. The 2006–2009 policy papers insist on an autonomous position:

> …Motief does not allow ruling institutions (such as the Catholic hierarchy, the pillars or political parties, et cetera) to patronise its work. We position ourselves in a critical relationship vis-à-vis these institutions, while at the same time we continuously try to open up dialogue. (2006, 12, translation NvdB)

The policy papers of 2011–2015 demonstrate a continuity in ambitions and mission. They explicitly name Motief's current sources of inspiration, namely the emancipatory tendencies within the Jewish and Christian traditions, socialism, feminism, the alterglobalisation movement, humanism, and Islam (Motief 2011, 11). However, they mark a shift concerning the social groups Motief intends to reach. While the 2006–2009 policy papers spoke of reaching out to individuals active in social movements, individuals searching for meaning and spirituality, traditional Catholics, pastoral workers, Protestants, and young adults (2006, 19–22), in the context of a society that is increasingly religiously and culturally diverse, Motief now also (or especially) wants to reach young people, socially and economically vulnerable groups, non-believers, and Muslims (Motief 2011, foreword). Moreover, Motief adapted its critical framework, concepts, and terminology to keep track of and analyse new social, political, and religious inequalities and to provide progressive alternatives.

From here, I will analyse the way Motief speaks about religion from both deconstructive and constructive perspectives, and thereby provides a local theory of religion.

Breaking through the Public-Private Dichotomy: Defining What Operates as Religion

In Motief's writings, religion is an overarching concept with broad contours. In the policy papers of 2006–2009, the term 'religion' is used abundantly, but it is only shortly defined in a footnote. The footnote attests

to the broad meaning given to religion as it states that '[Motief defines] Religion in a broad sense: the search of individuals/groups for meaning and for that which binds them to others, to nature, to the world, etcetera' (2006, 7, translation NvdB). Because of this broad understanding of religion as based on meaning-making and connections between people, throughout the years, the notion religion in Motief's writings came to embrace terms as diverse as meaning, tradition, spirituality, faith, community, religious-ideological-political consciousness, identity, struggle, and worldview. Motief considers all these dimensions of religion as part of both faith and society, and with this understanding of religion, Motief argues for reconnecting public and private life in productive and emancipatory ways. It therefore unsettles liberal as well as secularist understandings of religion as an issue of individual consciousness and private life, while politics and emancipatory struggles take place in the secular public sphere. The contours of religion are to some extent malleable because those dimensions that define them do not seem to be considered as an exhaustive list but rather as dimensions that could be adapted to a changing society and changing needs of religious and worldview communities. As Motief puts it in its 2011–2015 policy papers, its work field at the intersection of faith and society is not so much about dealing with one theme or a series of themes, but is rather about 'a certain approach to the theme of faith, that is contextual and societal' (2011, 14, translation NvdB).

As Motief explicitly denies that religion is only about individual belief and rituals taking place in the private sphere, religion has much to do with individual and collective positionalities in society. For Motief, it refers to private consciousness as well as to the social positions from which people speak, act, and experience. Religion is linked with personal and collective identities and social-political issues and debates (2006, 7–9). Motief's critical inclusivity in speaking about religion and worldviews as embedded positions needs to be understood against the background of a society that became increasingly secularised, multicultural, and neoliberal. Motief's critical inclusivity can be found in its vision on emancipation through religion, Motief's inclusion of humanism and atheism as worldviews, and its conceptualisation of capitalism and neoliberalism as forms of religion. In what follows, I elaborate on these three examples.

First, Motief regards religion as an area where emancipation needs to be located, envisioned, and encouraged, and at the same time as a potential means of emancipation. Motief's policy papers provide a reflection

on what Motief sees as the most important elements of current changes in society. In 2006, Motief writes that 'individualisation, pluralism and globalisation are today's core issues' (2006, 7, translation mine). In 2011, Motief points at the hegemony of neoliberalism and processes of individualism, increased importance of collective and nationalist identities and politics, common negative representations of Islam and Muslims, ecological issues, the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, increasing ethnic-cultural and religious diversity, and the ageing of the population as today's main challenges and barriers in working towards a pluralist and inclusive community (2011, 23–28). As Motief sees religion present in many aspects of social and political life, in both positive and negative ways, it feels that religion is a crucial area where emancipation should take place and regards the encouragement of such emancipation as its main objective. The popular adult education it provides aims at:

- Supporting individuals and groups in their search for meaning, for the (own) religious identity, for the meaning of that religious identity in their (social) choices and practices
- Analysing and clarifying the link between faith and society in our context
- Enlarging critical consciousness regarding faith experience and strengthening the social cohesion within the pluralist society (2006, 10, translation NvdB).

Here, religious emancipation seems to refer to a strengthening of identity, a self-reflexive perspective on religious experience, and raising awareness about the (potential) role of religion and faith in public life. This conceptualisation of the relationship between emancipation and religion goes against the grain of common understandings that deem religion foremost as an obstacle for the emancipation of women, minorities, and other socially vulnerable groups.

Second, we see Motief's critical inclusivity in the way it perceives humanism and atheism as specific worldviews worthy of reflection regarding their emancipatory (and/or oppressive) potentials. Whereas Motief in its early years spoke of the Jewish and Christian traditions as religious sources of inspiration, in later years, as the policy papers of 2011–2015 attest, it speaks of diversity at the level of religion and worldview in order to include also the experiences and visions of Muslims, non-believers, and humanists, and to enlist them in their project of critically reflecting on political, social,

and religious issues. This means that the contours of religion broadened to include secular inspirations, which enables Motief fluidity and speaking to a broader secularised public through its activities and points of view. Motief regards humanism, non-believing, or atheism as worldviews analogous to religion under the umbrella of what is called *levensbeschouwing* (life stance). As such, it deliberately politicises those points of view that are often considered politically neutral and valueless, instead of being embedded in political-social power relations and as value-ridden. However, the issue of whether non-believing or non-religion can be regarded as a life stance is still a matter of debate among Belgian humanist and atheist writers (Borms 2008). The official institutionalisation of humanism as deserving state recognition and support in analogy to religious communities in Belgium since the 1950s led to questions among humanists regarding the possibility of any analogy between humanism and atheism as secular worldviews, and religion. According to Belgian philosopher Eddy Borms, it is, however, important for non-believers to recognise their humanism or atheism as a life stance in order to remain aware of the partiality of one's own worldview as one among others:

> Only after we accepted that we have a specific life stance, we started to see our relationship with other life stances in a different way. As long as secular humanists think they are the spokespersons of science—which they present as having one clear direction and meaning—they believe they have no life stance. Why would truth give way even for only one millimetre? Certainly not for those religions that are irrational and that will disappear with time? This fundamentalist attitude still exists, but it slowly, at least I hope so, makes place for a more modest attitude. (2008, 46, translation NvdB)

Third, Motief conceptualises capitalism and neoliberalism as forms of religion. Already in its early years, Motief's concept of religion became broadened beyond the Jewish and Christian traditions in a different way—not only to acknowledge individuals and groups in society with other (non) religious backgrounds as potential partners in conversations and social struggle, but also to critique certain discourses for their hegemony in society as forms of religion. For example, capitalism and neoliberalism are constructed as forms of faith in individualism and powerful institutions, such as the financial market and the flexible labour market—all of which seem to be beyond critique. This line of thinking about capitalism and neoliberalism as religion or faith was already developed by one of Motief's

most important founders and thinkers, the Catholic socialist priest and theologian Remi Verwimp (Vandeperre 2010).

In 2003, Verwimp wrote a chapter entitled 'When Money Becomes God: On Religion and Capitalism' as a contribution to a book about social movements in Flanders. In this text, he argues that capitalism and the idea of the free market are worshipped as God, but at the same time this worshipping attitude is not recognised as such. This does not mean, according to Verwimp, that capitalism is religion in the sense of references to a transcendent reality. Through the lack of religious language, capitalism becomes an atheist economic structure in which money is not anymore an instrument to achieve something else, but its principal goal. It is precisely this 'atheist characteristic in the economy', as the author puts it, 'that is religion which needs to be rejected, [for i]t demands absolute submission' (2003, 12). The argument here is complex. On the one hand, it argues that capitalism is an economic structure that got rid of references to transcendental realities; on the other hand, the suggestion is made that the demand for absolute trust in the 'self-regulation' of the 'free market' makes capitalism into a religious structure (2003, 12).[17] The conclusion follows that capitalism needs to be rejected because it legitimises increasing differences between the rich and the poor and encourages war and conflict about resources (2003, 12–14). According to Verwimp, who refers to the Costa Rican liberation theologian Frans Hinkelammert (1998), those who legitimise and defend the capitalist world order can be labelled 'theologians of death' (Verwimp 2003, 14). He therefore regards the role of theology as twofold: on the one hand, theology needs to unmask the capitalist world order as religion and capital as god. And on the other hand, theology should search for the contours and content of the religion of the Biblical God, who is the God of Life and Love. Here he locates the importance of a dialogue between Marxists and Christians (2003, 14). Verwimp concludes by calling upon Christians who believe in 'the God of Solidarity' to make a collective and public confession against the god of capital and the increasing popularity of right-wing discourses (2003, 15). The legacy of Verwimp finds expression today in Motief's similar critique of capitalism and neoliberalism as formations of destruc-

[17] See the work of Thomas Sedlacek (2011) for a recent academic exploration into transcendental concepts present in various economic systems in different geopolitical and historical settings, such as the notion of the 'invisible hand' and the 'homo economicus' that are building blocks of current capitalist economies.

tive religion. Employing the theories of Pierre Bourdieu (1999) and the thinking of Arend Van Leeuwen on capitalism as a religion (1984) and criticising the writings of Francis Fukuyama about capitalism as the end of history (1992), Motief writes in its 2011–2015 policy papers:

> Sometimes the acceptance or defence of neoliberalism goes so far that it seems to have religious characteristics. Bourdieu used the term religion to describe the impact of capitalism on our thinking, practices and experiences. 'Economism', the impact of corporate life on all domains of life, marks Western society similar to a religion in which people submit to its prescripts, bring sacrifices, worship the system or 'deity' and never can or dare to question it. Civilians are expected to put their 'trust' in the self-regulating markets, consuming became a commandment, and it is generally assumed that a truly free global market will lead us to a paradise of freedom, peace, democracy and prosperity. Fukuyama spoke of 'the end of history'. People increasingly believe that no good alternative exists for this system, which is something all of us need to endure fatalistically. Within some religious tendencies, this economic system and the inequalities it brings along are represented as God's will or plan. (2011, 23, translation NvdB)

In this critique of capitalism, we can read the deconstructive element of religious critique. The notion 'religion' is deconstructed, and various possible forms of religion are distinguished as 'bad' or 'good' religion. The first is defined according to characteristics such as submission, blind trust, and fatalism, while the second is considered to comprise elements such as solidarity and struggle for justice. This deconstruction of 'religion' enables to point at capitalism as 'bad religion', to reveal some of the implicit logic of capitalist systems, and to propose alternatives. While this strategy is helpful, it seems to draw on stereotypes of religion (as irrational and authoritative), which could be the reason why the rhetoric is legible for non-religious leftist thinkers and activists. It could moreover cause setbacks for conversations about religious traditions that are considered conservative precisely because they are perceived to demand unquestioned loyalty to religious authorities and submission to the Divine and are therefore associated with the loss of individual autonomy and liberty. Both majority and minoritised religious traditions can be perceived as such, but currently Islam (as the above analysis of the public debates about jihadi threat demonstrated) is often associated with irrationality, submission, and even violence and is as such set apart from Judaism and Christianity. Therefore, this critique of capitalism as 'bad religion' enables the building

of critical knowledge about capitalism, but at the same time may disable constructive religious critique that tries to find nuanced ground between and/or combining authority and struggle, knowledge and faith, and submission and autonomy.

The below section will explore further this distinction made between 'good' and 'bad' religion and analyse its historical-conceptual genealogy. At the end of the section, I offer some thoughts about today's promises (but also potential tensions) of this type of deconstructive/constructive religious critique.

Religious Traditions as Dangerous (Feminist) Memories: Distinguishing between Good and Bad Religion

Not only the contours but also the meaning of the category religion in Motief's work and writings is unstable and rather unique. Motief conceptualised throughout its history monotheistic religions as a verb—a conceptualisation in which Remi Verwimp again played an important role. In this understanding of religion as a verb, religious traditions are invoked, and God comes into being through liberatory practices and relationships between people. Motief argues against an idea of God as being out there solely as a referent for people's rituals and beliefs. God is not just a verb, but also a story, source of critique, and a promise for the possibility of building a more equal and just world. This notion of religion emerged through Motief's engagement with liberation theology, progressive struggles, and the voices of weak and vulnerable individuals and groups in society. It is a critique of other, in Flanders more dominant, understandings of religion that equate religion with the official hierarchy, dogma's, morals, and rituals of specific traditions—notably Catholicism. Motief's understanding of religious traditions as potentially 'dangerous memories' is prophetic and calls upon liberatory and emancipatory struggle and action (Verwimp 1997a; Heens et al. 2006; Vandeperre 2010). For example, Heens et al. write in an article as a reply to Marxist antireligious sentiments about the liberatory potential of a prophetic understanding of God and reading of the Biblical stories:

> When you read [the Bible] contextually, the Biblical God is very consistent, or better: biased. JHWH is always the one who sides with the most vulnerable, who sides with a small and marginal group without any rights. From that position, JHWH indeed presents itself in one situation as merci-

> ful towards the vulnerable, and in another as a ruthless army commander of the same marginal and defenceless group. […] However, in general, Christians didn't learn to think that god may defend the rights of those who are deemed worthless also 'with violence'. [They learned t]o do good to those who are deemed worthless, yes. But to tackle with the perpetrators, no! In that sense, Christians are infected with too much conciliatory and charitable thinking, disconnected from existing contrasts. But Christians are not the only ones. And… things can be different. Why could the sources of inspiration of religions not contain valuable information about the struggle against injustice and oppression? They are indeed stories of people who reflected upon such struggles, on their attempts, their small victories and failures in that struggle. […] History taught us that whoever presents god as an omnipotent ruler, to which people should subject, to whom everything and everyone is subordinated, usually belongs to the group of rulers and oppressors. […] Where people aim at bringing religion into the public sphere, or where they connect religion and a political analysis, we see that religion CAN have an emancipatory role for those who find themselves in a situation of oppression. The only condition is, of course, that they do not hold onto a fundamentalist image of God. (2006, 5–8, translation NvdB)

Following the critical theological perspectives of Remi Verwimp, Motief believes that when the political and critical dimensions of religious traditions are retrieved and revealed, they can become instruments for radical change and emancipation of weak, vulnerable, and voiceless groups in society. In that way, religious traditions may be dangerous memories vis-à-vis the rulers and powerful groups (Vandeperre 2010, 10). In memoriam and honour of Remi Verwimp, Elke Vandeperre, Motief's current coordinator, edited and republished in 2010 old and recent articles and essays written by Remi Verwimp. The book's title *Gevaarlijke Herinnering: Remi Verwimp. Tegendraadse Stem van Levensbeschouwelijke Tradities* (Dangerous Memory: Remi Verwimp. A Voice Against-the-Grain Emerging from Religious and Worldview Traditions) attests to the centrality for Motief of the understanding of religious traditions as potentially critical and dangerous memories.

Similar to capitalism and neoliberalism, official Catholicism is deconstructed as a form of destructive religion. Motief's crucial point of critique here is that capitalism, neoliberalism, and official Catholicism are based on the visions and the interests of the powerful over and against the weak and the vulnerable. In its 2006–2009 policy papers, Motief formulates its mission not as educating people to better function in the existing social

system, but rather as changing both the people it educates and the social system:

> We see our mission rather in educating people in order to create a 'dignified' system. A system in which everyone, first of all people who belong to the most vulnerable groups in our society, can fully develop themselves, stand up for the own interests and learn to build solidarity with others. (2006, 10, translation NvdB)

To achieve this mission, Motief finds it important to refer in its 2006–2009 policy papers to the pedagogical methods of the priest of Laken and later Cardinal Jozef Cardijn, who through his writings and activism during his lifetime fiercely defended the rights of working-class youth. He was one of the founders of the Catholic youth working-class movement in Belgium (Blancke 1982). Cardijn emphasised the threefold mantra of 'seeing, judging and acting', which refers to the practices of analysing a problem, seeing reality in confrontation with a vision of a not-yet-realised and more utopian potential reality, and acting after this judgement (2006, 10). The enlargement of critical commitment with political-social realities is for Motief the basis for liberatory religiosity/spirituality, which is captured with the phrase 'anchored spirituality' (2006, 11). Motief feels it is therefore pertinent to help people develop their 'sociological imagination' (Negt 1975) through learning to see links between individual histories and social structures. As such it becomes possible to create what Motief calls 'counter stories', alternative stories that complicate hegemonic discourses, and provide meaning, courage, and solidarity (2006, 11).

From the start, as is claimed in the subsequent policy papers, feminism has been a source of inspiration in Motief's writings and work. The inclusion of perspectives from feminist theology attests to this. In Motief's writings, issues of women's inclusion and exclusion are often mentioned alongside issues of other vulnerable social groups, and sometimes women's perspectives or voice, or a feminist perspective, is put centre stage. For example, a chapter of the book *Rose of Jericho* (*Een Roos van Jericho*, published in 1997 by the Workplace for Theology and Society, one of the forerunners of Motief, at the occasion of its tenth-years anniversary) was written by Marianne Van Boxelaer and put a feminist perspective central. The chapter, entitled 'Not a Matter of Course', describes some main tendencies within feminist theology as it was developed during the 1990s. In the same book, Remi Verwimp wrote a chapter entitled 'Midrash of Maria'. In this so-called midrash (a term that refers to a body of stories and

interpretations by Jewish rabbinic sages to explain passages in the Hebrew Bible) Verwimp aims at humanising and revolutionising Mary, the Mother of Jesus, through giving her a voice and a critical opinion about today's tendencies within politics, economics and Catholic faith. The author criticises official Catholicism by emphasising the necessity of putting the needs of the poor and vulnerable centre stage in Christian faith and practice through Mary's voice:

> Later on, I felt desperate when I visited your churches and saw myself pinned against a pillar. What a mistake it was that people worshiped me as a virgin, but did not take care of fellowmen in need. I was most hurt by potentates and torturers who blasphemously sat on their knees, while I once sang to them hoping that they would feed those who are hungry and protect the weak. Did they forget all of that? It pleases me that from today on I may sometimes step outside those paintings and statues and climb off the altars and live again in women and men, who do not accept injustice anymore, and I can be the soul of their protest. It pleases me that there are people today who let go a bit of church religion and return to that which inspired us: a world where justice is done to the poor, the widows and orphans, where those who are hurt are healed and where there is bread with dignity for everyone. (1997b, 155, translation NvdB)

Today, feminist perspectives especially find expression in connection to Motief's antiracist agenda and in its critique of negative attitudes towards, and stereotypes of, Muslim women. Motief's antiracist argumentation not only points at harmful stereotypes, but also denounces structural inequality and discrimination of religious minorities. In several writings, Motief argues for fully including young Muslims and Muslim women as Belgian citizens with the right to express their identity and religiosity in their own terms. As such, it counters the 'Muslim question' by emphasising the necessity of acknowledging and protecting the different-but-equal agency, religious/ethical subjectivity, and citizenship of Muslims.

Several times, Motief employees wrote opinion articles in response to new developments within the headscarf debates and regulations (Heens 2007; Heens et al. 2008; Azabar 2010; Segers 2011). Samira Azabar is one of Motief's employees, identifies as Muslim and feminist, and has been an active member of the feminist pluralist activist platform *Baas Over Eigen Hoofd!* (Boss over One's Own Head!) that struggles against heads-

carf bans.[18] Azabar published some articles throughout recent years on issues of social inequalities due to racist attitudes towards Muslims in general, and racist and sexist attitudes towards, and stereotypes of, Muslim women in particular. So while many writings of Motief touch upon the unequal position of Muslim communities in society from a progressive and committed outsiders' perspective, those written by Samira Azabar bring also an insider perspective of a Muslim feminist into the work of Motief (Azabar 2012a,b). Not only Judaism and Christianity function as religious sources of inspiration and dangerous memories anymore, but also Islam. Azabar writes in a 2012 article about how Islam comprises traditions and memories of critique of social injustice, such as inequalities between men and women, and she puts this in contrast with common images about Islam as legitimising women's inferiority vis-à-vis men:

> The dominant feminist discourse is primarily Islamophobic. The majority of the Flemish women's movement does not see any benefit in Islamic feminism, which aims at gender equality and social justice from within an Islamic framework of reference. The idea exists that the Enlightenment liberated our society from patriarchal thinking. [The story goes that t]he demise of religion brought (gender)equality, the rise of religion will put women back into the Middle Ages. Muslim women, however, have struggled since decennia for a better position in society, without renouncing their Islamic faith. On the contrary, the Qur'an is for many women a source of strength for acquiring more freedom and equality. Muslim women often refer to the revolutionary concept of gender equality that was introduced in the Arabic tribal society of the seventh century. The Qur'an was a response to an unjust society in which the weakest were abused, and where women were regarded as possession and had no say. Islam changed this situation by dictating that women are full citizens and are not inferior to men, and it did so already centuries ago. […] Many women, both believers and theologians, started a search for leading [female] figures in the history of Islam. In their struggle for recognition, they employ these pioneering women often as religious arguments in order to achieve emancipation. For me, Islam is essentially feminist. (2012b, 1–2, translation NvdB)

While from early on Motief referred to the importance of Christian feminist theology in its work, the above reference to the current writings of

[18] http://www.boeh.be/; see also BOEH!'s speech at the Arkprijs prize award ceremony for Fikry El Azzouzi (who wrote the play *Travels-Jihad*), published at http://www.kifkif.be/actua/fikry-el-azzouzi-wint-de-arkprijs-van-het-vrije-woord-baas-over-eigen-hoofd-speecht

Samira Azabar shows that, today, Motief also expresses, conveys, and disseminates Islamic feminist perspectives (Motief 2013).

The above exploration into Motief's deconstructive/constructive religious critique and its commitment to work with and strengthen the voices of vulnerable or marginalised groups in society reveals the underlying assumptions in its September 2014 engagement as a counter-voice in the public debates about Islam, Muslims, and the 'jihadi threat'. As demonstrated, many years of thinking about 'religion' is present as the background to its counter-voice. These years of critical engagement lead Motief to produce a locally situated and informed theory of religion—about what it is, how it operates, and what are emancipatory and destructive forms of religion. Today, it enables Motief not only to provide antiracist arguments and political-social perspectives regarding the phenomenon of young Belgian Syria-travellers, but also to articulate internal/external religious critique. As such, it puts forward Islam as a potentially dangerous memory and emancipatory religious tradition that has relevant things to say about how a West-European society could or should look like from the perspective of marginalised religious communities. However, in the former section, I also pointed at potential tensions between different approaches to deconstructing/constructing religion that might contradict especially the desire to (re)claim Islam as an emancipatory religious tradition.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an exploration of various civil society counter-voices in Flanders to the increasing rendering of 'the Muslim question' in terms of the 'jihadi threat'. It looked into the cases of Halal Monk (interreligious activist dialogue and writing), *Travels-Jihad* (critical theatre), and Resistance is Halal (a seminar by Motief, a faith-based NGO). All three civil society initiatives situate themselves as part of and at the same time distance themselves from the discussion about Islam and violence and its 'the society made them do it' versus 'Islam made them do it' continuum of responses. They all aim at providing 'a different perspective' by putting central dialogue and a self-critical attitude, the deconstructive questioning and partial explanatory perspective, and/or theoretical-theological de/construction. The exploration of the different cases revealed various starting points for building critique and resituating 'the Muslim question', and their benefits and limitations.

The chapter furthermore analysed into depth the history and thinking of Motief, by looking at how a faith-based NGO builds religious cri-

tique. The case study of Motief conveyed insights into the ways in which local religious civil society actors may deconstruct and/or rebuild understandings of religion and the public sphere. Motief offers ideas about how religion operates in society and as such deconstructs the category of religion by arguing that atheism and neoliberal capitalism function similar to religion. It also provides normative statements about good and bad religion, whereby religious traditions that take the needs and perspectives of vulnerable and marginalised groups in society as its ethical centre are considered 'dangerous memories' due to their ethical-religious obligation to publicly criticise those societal groups that are more powerful in constructing norms about valid considerations in the public sphere about the nation, religion, emancipation, and structural inequalities. I have argued that these rethinkings and reworkings of religion can be valued as locally situated theory of religion.

Evaluating how religious critique of civil society actors deliberately breaks through public–private dichotomies enables to look at, as anthropologist Talal Asad suggests, some of the processes through which the discursive binary of religion and the secular are established, reinforced, challenged, or subverted. Turning attention to these processes enables to understand how individuals and communities live the religious and the secular informed by a variety of concepts, practices, and sensibilities (2003, 15–16). Religious critique, in its internal/external critique of own religious communities and society at large, when articulated by civil society actors and activists, challenges and subverts the normative assumption that faith is foremost a matter of individual consciousness, and religious practice is foremost located in the private sphere or confined to specific religious gatherings and institutions. Those who articulate religious critique demonstrate complex agency and ethical subjectivity in contesting secular discursive regimes that delineate boundaries for proper secular/religious subjectivities (Fadil 2011; Salih 2009). As well put in the introductory chapter, they 'are not simply dominated subjects but are themselves actors, within the existing constraints, in the creation of plural political regimes that will recognize them as legitimate citizens' (Mapril et al. 2016, 9). Religious critique may potentially lead to emancipatory knowledge in the face of constructions of religion and the secular in contexts of secular normativities (Mahmood 2006; Moors and Salih 2009) that are oppressive towards specific groups or individuals in society.

However, when it comes to challenging 'the Muslim question', other forms of critique are equally important. The three cases of civil society

counter-voices demonstrate the combined relevance of antiracism, situating perspectives, and religious critique in order to produce counter-voices to dominant assumptions about Islam and Muslims. Together they argue for the necessity of 'multiple critique', a concept coined by Miriam Cooke. Writing about Islamic feminists, Cooke conceptualises their rhetorical strategies aiming at different audiences simultaneously as 'multiple critique'. Islamic feminists balance criticising global systems, national political regimes, and patriarchal religious and family contexts, while still remaining cautious of others' desire to co-opt their struggle (2002, 145), and at the same time claim on behalf of all Muslim women their right to enjoy with men full participation in a just community (2002, 149). This complex balancing and combining of various forms of critique is enabled by Islamic feminists' multiple religious and ethnic loyalties, their national and local belongings (2002, 49), and their 'attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women' (2002, 45). Azabar's writings and work may well be considered as Islamic feminist multiple critique, although it should be noted that she emphasises antiracism, political-social perspectives, and external religious critique over internal religious critique. This may have to do with her BOEH!-activism and her background as a sociologist, which could make her feel she can't claim theological expertise of her own. However, it does enable her to point at existing internal religious debates in, for example, this 2015 interview:

> Some want a more 'women-friendly' reading, others blame the context for patriarchal thinking present in religious texts. Again, others point at predominantly male theologians and demand their own space as female theologians. So, there is much happening within religious communities that may benefit women's emancipation. (Azabar 2015, translation NvdB)

Borrowing Cooke's concept without disregarding that it originates from research about Islamic feminism, I suggest to think about the similarities (and potential differences) between 'multiple critique' and the multilayered critique we need in West-European contexts to challenge the 'Muslim question'. A multilayered critique is necessary that similarly targets various audiences at different levels of society; combining various types of arguments, explanations, and questions; and starting from loyalties to marginalised experiences, perspectives, and subject-positions. The counter-voices discussed in this chapter, with their antiracist attitudes, geopolitical, culture-historical, and theological/ethical perspectives, and their reli-

gious critique, may provide inspiring examples of what locally situated multiple critique looks like. As such, multiple critique may vitally enable and support the coming into being of critical consciousness and counter-positionings, as well as new forms of religious and secular subjectivities.

By Way of an Afterword

This chapter was mainly written throughout the year 2015, in which public panic about born and converted Muslim youth from Belgium travelling to Syria to participate in Islamist struggles against the Syrian regime rose. I intended to write about the ways in which the so-called Syria-travellers led to a new episode in what Sami Zemni has called 'the Islam-debate' (2009) in media in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking northern region of Belgium. In this new episode, the central theme was the relationship between Islam and terrorism, and a main question was whether there exists in Islam an inherent tendency towards intolerance and violence. I aimed at devoting the main part of the chapter to counter-voices in civil society in Flanders, looking at how specific counter-voices provide critical and alternative visions. Now, as I write this afterword at the beginning of April 2016, the on-screen images of the terrorist attacks on 22 March 2016 at Brussels Zaventem, the Brussels International Airport, and Brussels subway stop Maalbeek are still fresh in my memory, as well as my lived panic at the early morning of 22 March about the well-being of colleagues and friends living in or commuting to Brussels. Since that Tuesday, events and interventions connected to the attacks are daily headlines in Flemish newspapers, and they probably remain major issues of public outcry, discussion, and reflection for many months to come. New questions rose to the forefront, about how and why, where to locate responsibility and culpability, who is entitled to feeling anger and anxiety, and who is supposed to explain and take distance from violence. As much as I wish to, these recent developments couldn't be included in this chapter. However, while now finishing this chapter, the events of 22 March loom large, and they will most probably effect a new turn in the public debates and policy-making that will necessitate new academic/political reflections. An important question is, for me, not whether critical counter-voices in public debates and civil society remain to exist after 22 March (because of course they will), but rather whether these counter-voices can and will be heard.

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