“Islam Is My Washing Line”

Long-Term Religious Trajectories of Dutch Female Converts to Islam

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Abstract

Although conversion is an ongoing religious journey, it is rarely studied as such. This article provides a longitudinal study of conversion to Islam by Dutch women. People who recently convert might firmly hold on to their new convictions, not providing space for doubts and uncertainty, whereas studying the long-term process also gives insights into moments of weak belief, doubts, and ambivalence, or growing faith and spirituality. Not only these internal contestations are important to examine, also the context of the conversion narrative can change over time. Conversion is a contested issue, yet which aspects of the conversion are contested can shift due to societal debates on Islam. This article conceptualizes the conversion experience as a contextual narrative of the ongoing religious transformation of the ‘self’ in relation to different ‘others’ over time.

Keywords

conversion – longitudinal study – Islam – gender – religious doubt

1 Introduction

I am 46, but only now I feel that I more or less found myself in life. I had to go through lots of developments to come closer to myself. The only thing that remained steady (…) is that part of Islam. Islam is the thread that links it all together. But I also strongly internalized it: it is all my way, no longer what others tell me! When I spoke to you [1998] I was still searching for my own way. (…) When I reflect about my journey, I think it is...
like in statistics: on the long run there is an upward trend, but there have been waves—downwards as well. I discovered in Islamic sources that the stronger your faith is, the deeper the periods that you neglect things you should do. Like disregarding prayer or having a hard time to fast during Ramadan. Whereas the first 10 years I did this without any problem, it now takes a huge effort. So I experience those waves going up and down, but in the end you become stronger. But still, the stronger my belief the more difficult it is to practice like I smoothly did 20 years ago. So why was I able to do it easily then and is it so difficult now?!

Thus, reflected Khadisha on her journey with Islam when I visited her 16 years after our initial meeting, trying to confront her “weakness in belief”, as this “downward wave” is often called (Beekers and Kloos 2018).

It is generally agreed that conversion is an ongoing religious journey and process of self-transformation. Despite the acknowledgement that conversion is a continuous journey, it is rarely studied as such. People who recently convert might firmly hold on to their new convictions, not providing space for doubts and uncertainty, while studying the long-term process might also give insights into these moments of weak belief, doubts, and ambivalence, or growing faith and spirituality. Studying the longitudinal process thus adds to the emerging field of the ‘anthropology of doubt’ (Pelkmans 2013) as well as the ‘anthropology of Islam’, which explores ambivalence and ambiguity in everyday life (Schielke 2009; Schielke and Debevec 2012).

Not only these internal contestations are important to examine, also the socio-political context in which conversion is experienced and narrated can change over time. Conversion is a contested issue, yet which aspects of the conversion are contested can shift due to societal debates on Islam. Studying conversion within the changing societal debates offers possibilities to study the impact of these contestations on the conversion experience and narrative.

In order to conduct a longitudinal study on conversion I revisited my interlocutors to discuss their ongoing trajectories in life in general and with Islam in particular. What role does Islam play in their current lives? How do they now reflect on their motives to convert? What kind of metaphors do they use to describe their journeys? How did their life course and societal debates on Islam change their understanding of Islam and how did the shifting understanding of Islam inform their lives? In this article, I will examine my interlocutors’ internal contestations and reflections on Islam as well as the influence of external soci-

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1 Interview, March 18, 2014.
etal contestations about Islam on their narrations. Both forms of contestations come together in my interlocutors’ attempts to develop their “own path”.

In 1997–1998, I interviewed 24 Dutch women who embraced Islam. In addition, I interviewed ‘significant others’, that is relatives and friends they hold dear, and visited their religious study circles. I was able to revisit only half of them because not all were traceable—for instance, because they now live abroad in an Islamic environment—while others were not willing to participate—for instance, because Islam lost its meaning for them. For that reason, I conducted additional interviews with a few former converts who left Islam and with Dutch converts living in a Muslim majority country, to wit Egypt. In this article, though, I will concentrate on those women with whom I was able to discuss recurrently and in great detail their continuous journey.

First, I develop a longitudinal approach towards conversion. Next, I introduce three women and analyze their initial conversion narrative and its retelling in light of the changing societal discourses on Islam. Finally, I discuss the three women’s long-term journey and analyze the role Islam has come to play in their life and the metaphors for change they use to describe Islam within their life course.

2 Longitudinal Study of Conversion

Conversion studies were long based on the Western paradigm of a radical and definitive break with the past. Yet currently the idea that it can take place gradually over a period of time and can take a less dramatic form has been generally accepted in conversion studies (Rambo and Farhadian 2014). This holds particularly true for the field of conversion to Islam, in which the notion of ‘conversion’ was criticized by scholars (Barylo 2018; Van Nieuwkerk 2006b) for not capturing the ongoing and gradual process of most—but not all—trajectories. ‘Converts’ themselves prefer alternative and descriptive terms like ‘becoming Muslim’ and ‘embracing Islam’ or the more ideologically loaded term ‘revert’ (Van Nieuwkerk 2006a).

I will use the sources from several studies. 1997–2000: 24 interviews with converts, interviews with their families and friends and participant observation among study circles; 2000–2001: analysis of 100 online conversion narratives; 2013: 10 interviews with converts who moved to Egypt; 2014: restudy of 12 converts; 2014: 4 interviews with former (male and female) converts who left Islam.

Since this small sample of women I revisited also includes one convert who lives in a Muslim majority country and two women who no longer self-identify as Muslim, most of the trajectories I discovered in the larger study are illustrated by the women I present in this article.
I propose to study the conversion experience as a contextual narrative of the ongoing religious transformation of the ‘self’ in relation to different ‘others’ over time. I will unpack the different elements of the proposed approach below.

The discussion about ‘sudden versus gradual’ change touches upon an important element of conversion: time. In addition to the bias in conversion studies to analyze the short and radical trajectories at the expense of the slow and protracted ones, there used to be a preference for studying the ‘moment of change’. Yet, as the introductory quote illustrates, Khadisha’s journey is still enfolding. Currently there is more attention to conversion as an ongoing journey and even as a ‘career’ (Gooren 2010). This concept particularly encourages scholars to study how people affiliate, disaffiliate and re-affiliate to other denominations and religious currents. The metaphor of ‘career’, however, recalls associations with deliberate choice and clear-cut decisions to change affiliation. Another concept that stresses the continuous and ongoing character of the change is ‘moving’ (Van Nieuwkerk 2018). This leaves room for examining less clear-cut positions of in-betweenness such as ‘moving within’ and ‘moving towards’ (Galonnier 2018) as well as ‘moving in’ and ‘moving out’. Despite the awareness of the need to study conversion as a continuous journey, there is a dearth of empirical studies to take up this challenge.

Another crucial dimension of conversion is the idea of ‘transformation’. In line with the idea of a ‘break with the past’, concepts are used to indicate the ‘new state’ converts enter: they cultivate a ‘new’ identity, become ‘new Muslims’ and develop ‘new’ forms of belonging. In order to study the manifold trajectories we also need a more nuanced vocabulary regarding change and continuity. Khadisha, for instance, indicates the many vicissitudes in life she experienced in order to “come closer to herself”. We also need to reflect on different dimensions in which converts might change—or not. Important work has been done to highlight not only the transformation in religious views and worldviews, including ideas regarding sexuality and gender, but also the importance of embodying these ideas (Bourque 2006). Learning the ritual aspects of faith as well as changing habits regarding food and dress are important to examine.

Khadisha indicated an important additional element that conversion entails: changing and working on the ‘self’. Conversion is a continuous process of self-transformation. The insights of Saba Mahmood (2005) on the cultivation of a pious self are incisive to study the continuous effort exerted by converts to mold the self in the desired direction of change (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). Khadisha’s struggle to overcome her “weakness in faith” is a clear example of the continuous efforts converts can display to cultivate a pious self.
Conversion also involves a change in the converts’ sense of belonging and community. The transformation of the self often results in a changing relationship with ‘others’. The most important ‘others’ with whom converts interact in shifting constellations are the direct relatives and friends, the Muslim community of converts and born-Muslims—including in-laws—into which they enter, and actors in the societal debates about Islam in the Netherlands at large. As Roald (2004) observed, converts often show a fascination with the Muslim community at first—a period in which they often clash with their relatives. Yet after a while some of them express their disappointment with the Muslim community and distance themselves from born Muslims (Özyürek 2015). This can cause a re-alignment with the original community—a re-appraisal of relationships with parents and relatives—and the re-appearance of the “plausibility structures” in which they were raised (Roald 2006, 51). They develop their “own way” as Khadisha expresses: no longer obeying what others tell them to do. Yet other converts no longer feel at home in their country of origin due to increased Islamophobia and migrate to an Islamic country.

This brings me to a last element that is crucial in order to understand conversion: the changing context of narrating the conversion. A contextual approach of conversion needs to take several dimensions into account: the context of narrating the conversion experience within a particular research setting; and the societal context in which the conversion takes place and is (re)told.

Not only the importance of examining the conversion as narrative but also the telling and retelling of the story as a constitutive part of the conversion experience has been highlighted by several scholars (Harding 1987; Stromberg 1993). Whereas the first encounter with my interlocutors was instigated by my interest in their conversion story as such, in my second encounter I was more generally interested in their life story as a whole in order to understand where Islam comes into the story, rather than presupposing it was still a prime aspect of their enfolding lives (see also Wohlrab-Sahr 1999). A religion-centric approach informs conversion studies, which particularly in studying conversion as a long-term journey should preferably be avoided. We should rather investigate what role religion plays within the life course instead of a priori taking the religious dimension as the primary lens. Obviously, my previous interviews on their conversion narrative framed our next meetings, but it often took a long while before we discussed the religious aspects of their journeys. The second encounter was also different because we knew each other. As Buitelaar (2014, 35) observed for longitudinal research in general, our previous experience also enhanced the re-established contact, encouraging a more interactive exchange of life course events.
The shifting societal contexts in which the stories are told are also important to understand the conversion experiences. During the first encounter, the Dutch discourse on Islam emphasized ‘gender inequality’. I was perceived as a feminist author who would probably assume that female converts were oppressed by Islamic gender practices. Not only my personal interest why they as women were attracted to Islam but also the societal discourse on the assumed contradictory relationship between Islam and emancipation informed their narratives. In the meanwhile, without erasing these notions about gender inequality, the societal discourse on Islam has shifted towards terrorism, radicalization, and violence in name of Islam. Not only 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror, also the assassination of producer Theo Van Gogh in 2004, and the continuous anti-Islam rhetoric of populist politicians like Geert Wilders has shifted the discourse on Islam from gender inequality towards notions of ‘bad Islam’ versus ‘good Islam’ (Topolski 2018; De Koning 2020).

Accordingly, during my second encounter issues of emancipation and gender were less prominent whereas their critical views on right-wing views on Islam, Islamophobia, but also on the Muslim community, ‘strict converts’ and ‘Salafi Islam’ featured large. For many, the theme of gender was overshadowed by the issue of belonging within different communities and the attempt to develop their “own way” of living—or leaving—Islam.

3 (Vernacular) Theories of Conversion Motives

Several theories and explanatory models for understanding the conversion motives have been developed (e.g. Beckford 1978; Bruce 1999; Rambo and Farhadian 2014). I will limit myself to conversion to Islam by women. The advantage of a longitudinal study is that it opens up the possibility to let the interlocutors themselves reflect on their conversion experiences in hindsight. In this section I will analyze the initial conversion narrative as well as its retelling in order to explain the conversion motives and experiences, not only based on scholarly theories but also on vernacular insights of the interlocutors themselves. I will do so by presenting three women: Imaan, Miriam and Nura, each of them highlighting different motives and patterns as most clearly outlined by sociologist Wohlrab-Sahr (1998; 2006). Wohlrab-Sahr introduces three ‘problem zones’ and types of biographical crises, which converts try to solve by converting to Islam: ‘belonging and identity’, ‘methodization of life conduct’ and crises mostly related to ‘gender and sexuality’. I have slightly adapted her ideas for my Dutch interlocutors (see Van Nieuwkerk 2008) and have added a different trajectory because not all trajectories involve the rework-
ing of a biographical crisis (Van Nieuwkerk 2014). I will accordingly introduce another pattern inspired by Mahmood (2005), as briefly introduced in the previous section: the continuous strife to develop a pious self.

Imaan was born in a socialist family and had no religious upbringing or even an anti-religious upbringing. She was interested in other cultures and fell in love with a South-African Muslim. He married someone else, but her interest in Islam was awakened. She kept visiting the South-African community and related that this was also a way to break away from home. She had a strained relationship with her mother who—after the death of Imaan’s father—claimed her as the daughter who would stay and live with her. As Imaan reflected herself, the conversion helped her to build up her own life, independent from her mother. Within this South-African Muslim community Imaan felt treated as “an adult” and it felt like a “warm nest”. She met an Egyptian Muslim who encouraged her to read Qur’an. She experienced several moments of receiving signs from God, like reading a passage in the Qur’an on giving alms while commuting, upon which a beggar enters the train. Imaan’s conversion started as a process of spiritual awakening and, under the supervising of her Egyptian husband to-be, it developed into an intellectual journey as well. Particularly the individual and direct accountability towards God attracted her. She did the confession of faith and the Islamic marriage on the same day, without her mother knowing. The choice for a radical rupture with the past was also visible in her immediate adoption of the hijab and devotion to the five daily prayers. She described her past as “my Jahiliya”, “my period of ignorance”, an Islamic expression for the pre-Islamic historical past. Islam became her entire world.

In retelling her conversion narrative, Imaan was brief since Islam had become such a self-evident part of her life and she took the shahada, the profession of faith, so long ago. She regularly experiences events she perceives as “signs” confirming her faith. Besides, she displays an attitude that “you have to take it all”, not only “the easy bits and pieces”.

Miriam is the daughter of a protestant feminist theologian, her father deceased when she was a baby. She had lived in Israel with her mother and sister for a year and was well-acquainted with the Christian and Jewish religious traditions. She fell in love with a non-practicing Moroccan boy and became curious about Islam. She married him but because he was non-practicing it were her in-laws in Morocco who introduced her to Islam. She asked whether

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4 I have described the initial part of her life story in van Nieuwkerk (2008, 440–442). The first interviews took place January 14 and 23, 1998.
5 Interview, October 10, 2014.
6 Interview, December 6, 1997.
she could join her sisters-in-law for prayer and went for the first time to a mosque. She was impressed by the ritual aspect of purification, the beautiful sounds of the call for prayer, the embodied way of praying while sitting on the ground and prostrating. It felt very “spiritual”, and “so natural”, as “the way it should be”. She had practiced meditation before and was struck by the beauty, simplicity, and practical aspects of faith and ritual in Islam. The practical was spiritual to her. She took her time to slowly grow in Islam, did not rush to take the profession of faith, reflected for some time on whether and how to wear a scarf, and how to embody Islam, eventually taking her husband along. She did not practice any religious duty as long as she did not feel an inner urge. She took up praying and felt how this made her aware of the divine presence and made her conscious of her daily acts in God’s eyes.

Also in recounting her initial attraction to Islam, Miriam mentioned the spiritual aspects and God-consciousness through ritual acts such as prayer, as opposed to the rules and regulation or “haram-halal kind of attitude” that she often witnessed in the Dutch-Muslim community. It is the spiritual feeling and state of being that was and is essential to her. This feeling, however, is difficult to sustain and nourish when daily life is busy and bursting of work, kids, and domestic chores.

Finally, Nura, explained how it were particularly the rules and regulations, the do's and don'ts that helped her through a very difficult period in her life. She was 15 when her father died and 16 when she ran away from home after—undefined—difficulties at home. She lived in a multicultural neighborhood and had many Muslim friends. She often visited a Dutch-Pakistani family and was impressed by the familial harmony. An imam gave lessons at home, which she also attended. She took her profession of faith within this family. When she stayed in the run-away house she closely followed all Islamic rules and regulation, like no drugs, no alcohol, and no sexual relationships before marriage. She later on married a man she met during her holiday in Tunisia and lived with him in Tunisia before they settled in the Netherlands.

In her retelling, Nura restated that Islam literally saved her and made her stay on the right path amidst prostitution and drug abuse. In the second interview, she was more explicit about her difficult youth, her feelings of insecurity at home due to her mother’s psychological problems. In hindsight, the conversion was not only connected to the need of rules and regulations but also to

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7 Interview, September 16, 2014.
8 Interview, July 2, 1998.
9 Interview, April 2, 2014.
the yearning for a safe and homey place, which she witnessed in the Dutch-Pakistani family and with her in-laws. It also made her marry young because that enabled her to start her own family. However, this specific function was attached to a particular phase in her life, which was closed: “A family that is what I needed and, well, family life is very strong in Islam. In hindsight I think that was the motivating reason for me [to convert].”

Although she no longer self-identifies as Muslim, she feels a strong gratitude that Islam had come into her life at that particular turbulent time.

3.1 Reflections

In these three stories, we can recognize the biographical themes as outlined above. Imaan represents and reflects on her own trajectory as a means to build a new space and identity, and to find a community to which she felt she belonged. Miriam’s narrative illustrates the Mahmoodian trajectory of the ongoing spiritual search for God-consciousness in which the religious practice and rituals are important to cultivate a pious self, a journey that is ongoing and difficult at times. Nura illustrates the biographical theme of ‘belonging’ as well as the ‘methodization of life conduct’. She emphasized the clear-cut rules and regulation that were strongly related to gender and sexuality, and which, as she reflects in hindsight, “saved her life”. The three women’s own reflections on their conversion thus confirm academic theories that relate conversion to biographical crises experiences, the search for belonging and a new identity, the methodization of life conduct—particularly regarding gender and sexuality—and the cultivation of a pious self.

The initial interviews of the late 1990s took place at a time when societal debates on the assumed contradiction between Islam and gender equality were in full swing. Therefore, Imaan, Miriam, and Nura extensively reflected on women’s status in Islam. Imaan advocated the view that the Islamic practice of gender complementarity—rather than of gender equality—brings huge advantages for women (see Van Nieuwkerk 2003). The complementary model entails that the husband is responsible for the income and the wife for the household and children. This does not deny women’s possibility to have a career, but they should not “leave the kids in the nursery to keep on working”. In contrast to the Western conception of gender equality, “women are not forced to become like men”. Women can live according to their own “fitra”, “nature”. Women are valued for “who they are, not for how they look like”. Hijab is a necessary practice that prevents sinful attraction between the sexes; the spouses should be the other’s mutual “cover”.

Miriam added that women’s bodies are not “objectified like in the Western conception of gender and sexuality”. Instead of being on a diet all the time,
Miriam felt comfortable covering her curves. “Islam is friendly for women”, she expressed. She was experimenting with loose clothes and a fitting headscarf, also informed by her wish to strengthen her faith.

Nura was not veiled and did not consider wearing a headscarf because she judged that it is women's conduct and intention—radiating in their appearance—“what really counts”, not what they wear. She added another aspect to the gender discourse heard among Dutch female converts: women are highly valued and respected as mothers. Nura also argued that women have many rights in Islam but that it is necessary to separate religion and culture since many men deny women the rights they are entitled to in Islam.

The three women had to negotiate different ‘others’ or communities as a result of their conversion. Imaan's story is colored by the lack of feeling at home in Dutch society and a difficult relationship with her mother. I was not allowed to interview her mother but was directed towards a friendly uncle and aunt. She particularly looked for an Islamic community to practice her faith and a partner who educated her in Islam. Miriam had debates with her critical mother but had no objection with me having a conversation with her. Miriam was impressed by her in-laws’ simplicity in faith and longed for a similar unpretentious way of believing. She also regularly visited the meetings of converted Muslims and felt at home with an open and liberal organization like al-Nisa. Nura and her husband patiently managed to get their marriage accepted on both sides and stayed aloof from converts or other Muslim communities in the Netherlands. Nura tried to live her life as calmly and “invisible” as a Muslim as possible, concentrating on her family life and baby. In line with that, she preferred me not interviewing any ‘significant other’.

Accordingly, like many other converts I interviewed in the late 1990s, their discourse on gender was articulated, the relationships with Dutch relatives rather strained and the interaction with different Muslim communities neutral or expectantly. This assessment of different ‘others’ would transform into a more critical stance, particularly towards the ‘Muslim community’ but also towards the discourse on Islam in Dutch society, while relationships with Dutch relatives usually improved over time, as we will explore in the next section.

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10 Interview, February 19, 1998.
Long-Term Transformation Processes and Metaphors of Change

In my longitudinal study, I was interested in their present life events and particularly in tracing the long-term conversion processes and metaphors of change. I also noted transformations in their narratives due to the changing socio-political context and discourse on Islam from a focus on contestations regarding gender inequality to “radicalization”, “ISIS”, “terrorism”, and “Salafism”. I will first continue the life story of Imaan, Miriam, and Nura before returning to the socio-political context.

After a few years, Imaan asked for a divorce from her Egyptian husband. Although he was her religious and intellectual mentor, she became annoyed by his lack of income. She became well versed in her rights as a Muslim wife, that is, her right to maintenance, whereas in reality she was running the household and working to earn an income. Besides, they had two disabled children with whom she wanted to stay at home. She was granted a divorce and deliberately planned her second Islamic marriage within the Indonesian Muslim community because she had “enough of the Arab male mentality.” She succeeded and eventually migrated to Indonesia with her husband due to the “wretched political climate for Muslims” and Islamophobia in the Netherland. Her husband was arrested once when the debate on radicalization of Muslims (particularly related to the Hofstad group) was heightened, but she did not know all details since her husband did not share them extensively. She was sick of the anti-Islamic rhetoric of right-wing populist politicians like Geert Wilders and discussions such as about a potential prohibiting of slaughter according to Islamic prescriptions. She even feared that custody of her disabled children might be taken away in this atmosphere of “bullying Muslims” and felt accordingly very vulnerable. In Indonesia she found it easier to give her children an Islamic upbringing. They properly learned to fast and pray in Indonesia by imitating all people around them in this Islamic environment.

Her husband took a second wife, with which she agreed, but of course, it was a painful experience. She approved of it because she feared she might have a genetic problem but still wanted a larger support family for her two children.

12 Interview, October 10, 2014.
13 Imaan here uses common stereotypes about “the Arab male”: Arab men are often depicted as family patriarchs, concerned about family honor, having fragile marital bonds due to polygamy, as hyper-virile etc. This hegemonic masculinity is analyzed as a residual form of Orientalism by Marcia Inhorn (2012, 57–60).
14 A group of radical Muslim youth who were accused of being part of a terrorist organization.
Due to low salary costs, she could now also afford a nanny at home. Having
experienced Islam in the Dutch, Egyptian and Indonesian contexts, she liked
the more relaxed Indonesian interaction between the sexes, which was also
closer to her Dutch understanding, than the strict segregation her former Egyp-
tian husband adhered to.

Asked about a metaphor for her trajectory with Islam she explains that since
her initial fast growth, Islam has become a steady line. She experienced no ups
or downs, but it is like “a line onto which you hang all events of your life”, like “a
washing line”. The domestic metaphor of the washing line indicates the extent
to which Islam has become an intimate part of her daily life. The laundry to be
hung on the washing line symbolizes the difficulties she experienced, which
could be safely attached to the stable rope of Islam.

For Miriam the trajectory was less straightforward and cloaked in reflec-
tion, doubts, and searching. She had had her “tight” period as she calls it, when
she was doing lots of prayers—also during the night—and often read Qur’ān.
Also her husband became more devoted after going to Mecca with his par-
ents. Miriam shortly considered wearing a niqab but felt uncomfortable with
the idea. However, during our second meeting after more than 15 years, she
confessed that she felt “weak” in her belief. Besides her job and three children,
there was not much time left for spiritual growth. In addition, she did not find
companionship within the Muslim community, neither from the side of con-
verts, nor from born Muslims. She had grown tired of the well-intended but
frustrating comments and nosiness from co-religionists about how to dress, or
how to behave. When she bought a ham sandwich for her Dutch colleague she
was told that it was “not halal” and “improper to eat” by the Muslim shop ten-
der, who rightly guessed from her headscarf that she was a Muslim. When she
experimented with her headscarf, she was told it was inappropriate because it
showed the neck. Miriam stopped visiting the mosque that “was hammering
home what you have to do. I want to discover it for myself! It is mentioned in
the Qur’an that there is ‘no force in Islam’ so why do they keep on pressuring?
I found it so suffocating that I turned into an adolescent [rebelling] Muslim”.

Just two weeks before I interviewed her the second time, Miriam had de-
cided to take off the headscarf. While she started wearing it 18 years ago—
because she wanted to express the inner strong faith in her outer radiance—
she now felt weak in her belief. The headscarf felt as an empty shell, even
as “hypocritical”. She longs to go back to the spiritual content that initially

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15 Interview, September 16, 2014.
16 ‘Adolescent’ but in the connotation of rebelling against parents and authorities.
attracted her. She does no longer want to be assessed by others, except for “Allah who rightfully judges the pious acts of the believers”. Therefore, taking off the scarf even felt as a religious act because she intended to regain the spiritual core of her faith. She thus described her trajectory as a zigzag movement of searching, doubts, and reflection and particularly of trying to return to Islam’s initial spiritual attractiveness.

Nura\textsuperscript{17}, on the other hand, was clear in the function Islam had in her life: it saved her from bad experiences by sticking to rules and regulations when she left home and lived among “drug dealers and prostitutes”. In the meantime she is divorced from her Tunisian husband, which she ascribed to cultural differences since “he was used to go out with friends and not the family type” she needed so dearly. Her husband was sad about her decision and they retained a good relationship for the sake of their daughter. Except for a few Muslim friends, she did not participate in any Muslim community: “I am not the type that likes to be a part of a group. They are too sectarian. I prefer to discover it by myself. These are my feelings and I feel no need to share it”. Only recently, she remarried a non-Muslim Dutch man from a Surinamese background. Although she still does not eat pork—because this had become such an ingrained habit—she no longer self-identifies as Muslim. She is neither practicing, nor perceiving Islam as the truth. She started to doubt several Islamic principles and practices. Seven years ago, she did no longer feel like fasting anymore. Not only because it is hard to do, but she increasingly changed her focus from living for “the hereafter into living in the here and now”. The purpose of life is “to enjoy life now not to suffer for the afterlife”. For her, leaving Islam was like “growing up, becoming an adult”. She did not “fall out of faith”, but gradually phased out.

4.1 Reflections

These three stories show some patterns that I have also found among my other interlocutors. Some have become more deeply involved and attached to Islam. Within this pattern of ‘moving in’, however, for some it is a steady and calm path, whereas for others it is journey full of obstacles. A second group ‘moves inward’ and looks for a more spiritual way of living Islam, while a third group ‘moves out’. Like with the patterns of ‘moving in’ this latter pattern can take the form of a smooth path of ‘fading out’ but also of ‘falling out’.

Among the first group, we can count Imaan. Her domestic metaphor of the washing line indicates how much Islam was part of her daily life and sorrows.

\textsuperscript{17} Interview, April 2, 2014.
Another interlocutor described that Islam first felt as “a separate piece but now has taken root in me”. Using the headscarf as an illustration, she said: “It is part of me; it is inseparable from who I am”. Others, who experienced a gradual or steady growth, described it as slowly “walking a staircase, with lazy stairs”.

Yet most interlocutors experienced ups and downs, or sometimes “mountains and abysses”, in which they were devoted to and then disliked Islam, regularly connected to marital problems. Khadisha, whom I quoted in the introduction, was having her period of “weakness” in faith but sustained her belief through her personal motto “God had brought you to it, so he will bring you through it”. Despite all her marital trouble with an abusive and violent husband and huge disappointment in the Muslim community from whom she received little support, faith also helped her to bear these hard times.

A second group ‘moved inwards’. By this I mean that converts transform their initial appreciation of Islam into a different—quite often a less literalist and more spiritual—understanding. As we saw with Miriam, she first had a more spiritual grasp, but lost it in her “tight” period. This second group of converts keeps on developing their spiritual search and often moves towards a less literal understanding of Islam in comparison to their Muslim communities. A few took off the headscarf because it had lost its original meaning. They did not feel the need as strongly as before to highlight their identity as a Muslim. The outward aspect became less meaningful than their personal and spiritual growth.

A third—small—group eventually leaves Islam. Some still identify as religious and do believe in God but do not necessarily connect this to Islam, or exclusively to Islam. They consider other religious and spiritual paths valid and important as well. One of my interlocutors, Sara, was initially attracted to Islam for its non-materialistic spiritual way of life, but particularly to other cultures. In the meantime, she found a new ‘cultural home’ in the Latin American dance culture of her husband. Not all ‘phase out’ so smoothly as Nura and Sara. Some of those who fluctuated between ‘up and down’-moods jump out of it in a phase of great dissatisfaction and disappointment with Islam and Muslims. These deconverted women, however, were difficult to trace because they were not inclined to talk about their past experiences. Yet several of my interlocutors were acquainted with these cases.

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18 Interview, June 4, 2014.
19 Interview, March 18, 2014.
20 Interview, April 10, 2014. It was particularly the music and dance culture of her husband that attracted her.
21 I came across this pattern in the additional interviews with two deconverted men and particularly in my research among male and female nonbelievers in Egypt.
The smooth path, whether regarding moving in or moving out, is less common, whereas experiencing periods of religious doubts, ambivalence, or peaks and valleys is more apparent. The interlocutors who experienced periods of doubt often returned to the initial source of attraction or search for a different interpretation of Islam. This mostly takes the form of an inward-looking spiritual religiosity, which is less informed by outward appearance and the gaze of the Muslim community. They develop their “own path” and their “own Islam”.

These reflections on their “own path” are understandable in light of their longstanding journey with Islam: they are no longer novices to Islam. Age is an obvious part of their identities that influences their journeys. Their life course brought them in contact with different Muslims among whom they situate their own understanding of Islam, be they their husbands, in-laws, converts or born Muslims in the Netherlands or elsewhere. Yet I observed that these considerations are also informed by societal discourses on Islam in which militant Islamism, radicalization, and Salafism have become central. They have to position themselves towards these different discourses within and about Islam.

The societal discourse on (radical) Islam became particularly pronounced after 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror. The discourse on the contradiction between Islam and Dutch emancipation was surpassed by a discourse on the fear of Islamic terrorism and radicalization. Accordingly, my interlocutors’ relationship with the different Muslim communities and religious movements, “strict” Islam, “Salafism” etc., also appear in their discussion with me, like gender issues did when I interviewed them in the late 1990s. Their “own path” also became a way to represent “another Islam” in which they differentiated themselves from “other Muslims”, mostly the “strict” and “nosy” converts, or “Salafi currents”, while also criticizing Dutch discourses on Islam.

Imaan clearly expressed her view on Islamophobia in Dutch society. It impacted her life even to the extent that she preferred to migrate to an Islamic environment. Her view on how to live an Islamic lifestyle was, in her experience, no longer commensurate with the present climate in the Netherlands. Other interlocutors experienced being questioned after any attack of whatever nature by Muslims. Safia, for instance, related her fear of taking the tram after the murder of play writer Theo van Gogh in 2004:

I thought ‘Oh My God, there we go again. All people will look at me again ...’ My religion is hijacked by a bunch of idiots. I don’t want this. I don’t want to be associated with this. It feels like rowing against the tide to make this clear to people. You can tell them ‘Islam is peace’ but they will tell you ‘what about this or that’. It is so difficult to refute. I feel so powerless.
Yet luckily she was not questioned by the commuters and received encouraging friendly nods in the tram as if they wanted to tell her ‘We know not all Muslims are bad’.22

My interlocutors’ narratives are also colored by the “interference” of the Muslim community, particularly by “uninvited Islamic advice” extended by “strict Muslims” as Miriam’s story made clear.23 Khadisha as well was fed up by Muslims who were judgmental, particularly among Salafi circles of converts and born Muslims: “They easily tell you ‘you are going to hell because you are a bad Muslim’”. She continued:

In the beginning I was idealistic and thought that now that you have found your belief, it would by definition be all good. We would all be one large family. But there is so much hate and jealousy and dishonesty. Dishonesty among Muslims hurts me much more than dishonesty in other communities.24

Safia likewise mentions that her “love-hate relationship” with the Muslim community is a “common thread” in her life. “There is too much finger-wagging and people telling you ‘this is not allowed and that is haram’. I can’t stand it at all”.25 Sara, who left Islam because her attraction to Islamic culture waned and she found another ‘cultural home’, related: “I started to be bothered by how people wanted to transform me into what they thought is right. Because I am a Muslim, I was supposed to do this or that. What a hassle! Some of them were really strict and extreme ... It did not make any sense; it was all about outward appearance and rules”.26

In singular cases, like Nura and Sara, the Salafi circles gave them a push to leave Islam, yet most of my interlocutors developed their “own path”. As Khadisha—with whom I opened this article—expressed: “This is what I mean by ‘I went my own way’. I did not let myself being dragged along with the [Salafi] ladies but also not with those who take it all with a grain of salt: ‘Allah will forgive everything’. (…) It does not work like that. So I created my own middle way”.27

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22 Interview, March 10, 2014.
23 See further Esra Özyürek (2015) for an interesting analysis of the complex interaction between born Muslim immigrant communities and white converts in Germany in which similar tensions appear.
24 Interview, March 18, 2014.
25 Interview, March 10, 2014.
26 Interview, April 10, 2014.
27 Interview, March 18, 2014.
5 Conclusion

In this article, I proposed a longitudinal approach towards conversion. I offered an ethnographic case study to flesh out an approach in which conversion is studied as a contextual narrative of the ongoing religious transformation of the ‘self’ in relation to different ‘others’ over time.

First, the proposed approach contributes to a deeper understanding of conversion motives and experiences by including vernacular theories of conversion. I observed that my interlocutors’ own reflections on their conversion confirm academic conversion theories related to reworking biographical crises, searching for ways of belonging and a new identity, crafting clear guidelines in order to structure their daily life—particularly related to gender and sexuality—and cultivating a pious self.

Second, a longitudinal perspective accommodates moments of doubt and weaknesses, as well as possible trajectories of leaving faith or intensifying commitments—and all of these transformations in the course of the converts’ life. People who recently convert might firmly hold on to their new convictions, not providing space for doubts and uncertainty, whereas a long-term study offers space to address these variations over time. It thus adds to the ‘anthropology of doubt’ (Pelkmans 2013) and the ‘anthropology of Islam’ which addresses ambivalence and ambiguity (Schielke 2009; Schielke and Debevec 2012). My interlocutors strive to cultivate a pious disposition, overcome a period of weakness in faith, or take a different course altogether. These different developments of moving ‘in’, ‘inwards’ and ‘out’ of Islam can only be traced by a longitudinal approach.

Thirdly, the proposed contextual approach offers the possibility to study the impact of shifting socio-political contestations on the conversion experience and narrative. Converts are addressed as representatives of Islam. Whereas in the Dutch context these interpellations were initially related to gender inequality, it transformed into societal discourses about radicalization and terrorism. Accordingly, my interlocutors’ reflections change from a focus on gender issues to matters of community and belonging. Societal discourses on Islam provoked critical thoughts on different groups of significant ‘others’. In this study, this was connected to Islamophobia in Dutch society as well as critical deliberations on the different Muslim communities. They articulated critical stances towards both side’s appropriation of Islam, which was reflected in their modes of religious engagement and the development of their “own path”.

Finally, a longitudinal approach offers a way to study my interlocutors’ religious trajectories within their entire enfolding life story without a priori assuming religion’s continuous primary role. It provides a perspective on how
my interlocutors engage in modes of self-fashioning in which they rework doubt, ambivalence, and disappointment in ways they feel are in accordance with their own understanding and desires. We saw that despite divergences in motives, trajectories and experiences, my interlocutors develop their “own way”. This continuous mode of self-fashioning within changing socio-political contexts can only be grasped in a longitudinal study. There is no way of knowing the outcome of my interlocutors’ journeys without following them in future research.

References


