

A critical reflection on the intersections of mixedness, marriage and conversion among female converts in the Netherlands

'But I did it for myself'

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between marriage and conversion from a critical gender perspective, based on a comparative ethnographic study of women's conversion to Judaism, Islam and Christianity in the Netherlands. In the study of religion and gender, a valuable conceptual framework developed that questions the limited representation of religious women (as somehow 'oppressed') and recognises agency within observance. However, up to now, theories and conceptualisations of female conversion have not been able to successfully deal with the tension between individual agency and relationality, more concretely: between individual choice and the impact of intimate relationships. This article suggests a framework more capable of grasping the complexities of conversion and marriage, by introducing the concept of mixedness. In this approach, relationships are understood as agential spaces of religious becoming. Conversion forms and reforms what is 'mixed' within a relationship, and intimate relationships indeed play an important role in religious becoming. The goal is to move beyond the binary options that women seem to have to vocalise their process: either they convert because of someone else (implying less agency) or their religious transformation is an expression of autonomous, individual choice (neglecting the impact of relationships). Mixedness highlights the dynamic and fluid aspects of intimate relationships, whilst simultaneously focusing on the interactions between the couples' experiences of mixedness and social norms of majority and minority religio-racial groups.

Keywords: religious conversion, gender, mixedness, marriage, women's religious agency

Introduction

I [wanted] to be able to pass something on to my children. [...] This was one of the most important motivations. But most important is that I did it for myself, because you shouldn't [become Jewish] for any other reason.
– Ruth¹

Ruth and I had a long conversation about the role of her marriage to a Jewish man in her decision to pursue a Jewish 'conversion' (*giyur*).² One of the most important motivations, Ruth recalled, was to 'respect' the family background of her Jewish husband. However, she also mentioned that she 'did it for myself'. I had these conversations with many interlocutors I met during my comparative ethnographic study of women's conversion to Judaism, Islam and Christianity in the Netherlands. My interlocutors positioned themselves in between two discourses: On the one hand, they spoke back to the widespread assumption that women primarily, or only, convert because of a (prospective) marriage, by emphasising their individual choice. Considering the persistent social frame in which female converts are perceived as lacking agency or 'give up' their emancipated status there is a lot at stake in their self-representation. In addition, many religious authorities only consider a conversion valid when this choice is, indeed, 'authentic' – which makes the autonomy narrative ever more important in all contexts. On the other hand, processes of conversion are understood, by converts and academics alike, as deeply relational. Romantic partners often did play an important role in the lives of the women I met.

The tension between emphasising agency and acknowledging the relationality of conversion is to some extent reflected in scholarship. The past decade has seen an increase in attention to women's conversion, especially in the context of Islam (e.g. Galonnier, 2015; Mossière, 2016; Özyürek, 2014; Vroon-Najem, 2014). In the study of religion and gender, a valuable conceptual framework developed that questions the limited representation of religious women (as somehow 'oppressed') and recognises agency within observance. However, up to now, theories and conceptualisations have not been able to successfully deal with the tension between individual agency and relationality in conversion experiences. With a few exceptions (e.g.

Mossière, 2022; Vroon-Najem & Moors, 2019), studies of female converts usually do not conceptualise the dimension of the couple and the impact of intimate relationships is often overshadowed by the focus on religious agency, despite their relevance in everyday religious lives.

This article suggests the framework of mixedness as a means to conceptualise the complexities of conversion and marriage. The goal is to move beyond the binary options that women seem to have to vocalise their process: either they convert because of someone else (implying less agency) or their religious transformation is only an expression of autonomous, individual choice (neglecting the impact of relationships). The concept of ‘mixedness’ helps to overcome this binary by highlighting dynamic agential modes of negotiation within intimate relationships (couples, primarily). The value of the concept of ‘mixedness’ lies in its recognition that what is mixed is fluid, socially constructed, context-bound and varying over time and place (Cerchiaro, 2022; Collet, 2015). This gives room to consider religious transformations such as conversions: what is considered and experienced as ‘mixed’ often changes when one of the partners converts. The relationship itself thus becomes an agential context that ‘makes the convert’ (Rau 2023).

The vast majority of my interlocutors was involved in a heterosexual relationship, mainly in the context of marriage or an engagement, and often with someone with whom they did not share the same religious background before, or after converting. As such, they can be considered to be in a mixed relationship, although this often changed in relation to their conversion. To return to the example of Ruth: At the time of her marriage to a Jewish man, Ruth did not consider herself to be Jewish, nor was she seen as such according to *halacha* (Jewish law). This would qualify her marriage as ‘mixed’ – or even invalid according to some Jewish authorities. When Ruth finalised her *giyur* a few years into the marriage, both partners were Jewish. However, it seems rather rigid to suddenly not consider her marriage as mixed, because what is mixed is more complex than the formal religious status alone. Moreover, only explaining Ruth’s conversion as a ‘marital strategy’ to overcome religious difference – as some studies on mixed couples argued (Cerchiaro, Aupers, & Houtman, 2015) – would not adequately reflex the complexity of her process. This complexity is analysed in this article.

Description of the research

To situate this research within the context of the Netherlands, a few points are worth mentioning briefly. Although the Netherlands is widely considered

to be secularised, its specific white Christian background left its impact on society, leading to continuing marginalisation of religious minorities such as Muslims and Jews (Arab, 2018; Lauwers, 2022). Further, secularisation in the Netherlands went hand-in-hand with ideals of a 'sexual revolution' and women's 'emancipation' (Mepschen, Duyvendak, & Tonkens, 2010). A common narrative was that in order to be 'free', religion should be left behind. This assumed connection between gender oppression and religion continues to shape public perceptions of religion. Whilst Christian churches were considered the main source of oppression in the 'sexual revolution' era, the attention today shifted to Muslims. Muslims and Jews are religio-racialised minorities in the Netherlands, and the process of othering is deeply interwoven with gendered and sexual stereotypes (Beekers and Schrijvers, 2020; Van den Brandt, Van den Berg, & Meijer, 2023). The different social positions of the three groups motivated me to employ a comparative ethnographic approach. The aim to further understand how notions of gender, religion and race/ethnicity intersect for different religious women, as a means to critically reflect on broader societal manifestations of religio-racialised and gendered difference.

Between 2017 and 2020 I undertook participant observation in different (Modern Orthodox and non-Orthodox³) Jewish and (Sunni) Islamic⁴ communities and Pentecostal Christian churches in the Netherlands (Schrijvers, 2022). The focus was on self-identified women who were not, or marginally, socialised in a religion, but became Jewish, Christian or Muslim later in life. All women can be considered observant, with varying practices and religious participation. In addition to the observations, the outcomes consist of in-depth life narrative interviews with 20 new Jewish women (seven Orthodox and thirteen Liberal or Reform), twelve Pentecostal women and eight Muslim women. These 40 interlocutors were between 20 and 72 years of age at the time of the research and came from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds. Although the interlocutors were not (or marginally) raised with a religion, the majority had a Christian/secular family background. This meant that conversion to Christianity did not imply a process of becoming a minority, as was the case for Jewish and Muslim converts. The intersections of racialisation, minoritisation and conversion are analysed in the dissertation (see Schrijvers, 2022). A few Jewish converts had a mixed Jewish-Christian (or secular) family history, which will be elaborated upon below. All identified as female and used female pronouns, and the majority was heterosexual and white.

In all three communities, I was an outsider to a certain extent since I was not raised with a religion myself and do not identify with a religious

tradition or community. However, since both my parents are white and were raised as Christian, I benefit from Christian and white privileges, similar to the majority of the interlocutors. My position impacted the fieldwork settings in different ways. Some were happy to share their experiences for the first time with someone outside of their community (especially Jewish women), some had grown quite familiar with the presence of white researchers (especially Muslim women), and others considered me to be a potential convert (especially Christian women). In general, I was, at least in terms of appearance, quite similar to my interlocutors prior to their conversions, which enabled me to participate in, and observe the trajectories of newcomers from a close distance.

I employed a lived religion approach (McGuire, 2008), to understand how conversion was practiced in everyday life. Religious conversion is marked by specific formal rituals: *shahada* for Muslims, baptism for Christians and meeting a rabbinic court with a subsequent ritual bath in Judaism. However, conversion in a lived religion perspective is a complicated process without a clear beginning or end that reflects a coming together of several of life's circumstances. The women I met gave a variety of factors that, in hindsight, had played a role in their religious commitment and to narrow it down to one factor (a marriage) would not reflect the complex reality of everyday life. At the same time, the question of marriage does often come up and can be one of the important factors in a convert's religious becoming. In what follows, this dimension is analysed further.

Women's conversion, religious agency and 'authentic choice'

In the last decades, the study of religion and gender has made a significant contribution to the conceptualisation of women's agency, criticising the implicit secular/religion binary in gender studies and its subsequent assumptions about religious women's agency (e.g. Avishai, 2008; Bilge, 2010; Bracke, 2008; Jouili, 2011; Mahmood, 2004). The central scholar in this debate is Saba Mahmood, who was known for her critique of the neo-liberal, resistance-based and secularist understanding of agency (2004). Mahmood raised questions about agency in feminist academia and problematised the secularist perspective in which religiously observant women are conceived as lacking agency or having a 'false consciousness' (Bilge, 2010). As Lori Beaman (2013, p. 2) suggested:

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

Mahmood proposed a re-conceptualisation of agency as disconnected from resistance, proposing that this should be understood within religious traditions, as the desire to adhere to norms or submit to a transcendental will. Inspired by this critique and proposal, many scholars continued this focus on women’s agency in piety, also known as religious agency or compliant agency (Avishai, 2008; Bilge 2010).

Theories of ‘religious agency’ can be seen within the broader ‘turn to piety’ (Fadil & Fernando, 2015) in religious studies, stressing the importance of observance and submission over a mere strategic or social function of religion. However, this focus can result in an overemphasis on piety in studies of religiously observant women, overshadowing other concerns. Instead of only focusing on compliant agency, Jeanette Jouili (2011, p. 56) argued that women in Islamic revival movements make use of different ethical regimes, including “modern” assumptions regarding personal autonomy, freedom, self-realization and equality which are set against their non-secular (i.e., “traditional”) counterparts (submission, unfreedom, and so forth). In other words, it is important to realise that observant women combine several frameworks, including strategies that may be considered resistance agency. Despite the importance of acknowledging agency within piety, my research points to several limits to this approach. Most important for this current article is the emphasis on the individual in ‘religious agency’ research. ‘Religious agency’ primarily focuses on the individual’s capacity to act, and does not fully capture the relationality of religious observance or the broader social structures that shape women’s religious practices and choices. In the (important) amplification of female converts’ individual stories of authentic choice, the question of intimate relationships is not always addressed. As dominant frameworks typically do not represent observant (Muslim, especially) women as capable of religious choices beyond a position as wife or mother, this emphasis on autonomy can be understood as a strategy to ‘talk back’ (Bracke, 2011). Criticising stigmatising frameworks, this scholarship often points to the emphasis on individual and ‘authentic’ choice in women’s conversion narratives.

Narratives of authentic choice

In contrast to the stereotype, many academic studies of female Muslims do not support the assumption that marriage is the direct reason why women convert. This was confirmed by my own research. In describing their initial motivations to join their religious groups, the majority of interlocutors first emphasised their autonomous, individual choice before mentioning social relations. This narrative of authenticity was most prevalent amongst Muslim women and confirms outcomes of other ethnographic studies with converts in Islam (e.g. Badran, 2006; Van Nieuwkerk, 2008). One expression can be found in the story of Iman, a woman in her late thirties who had been involved in a Muslim community for three years before she took the *shahada*. Iman had introduced several Islamic practices in her daily life, primarily in her diet and dress, which led many of her friends to assume that she was a Muslim. However, Iman ‘postponed’ the formal conversion for a long time because ‘I had these thoughts: “I am not a Muslim yet because I can’t pray.” For her, a correct and genuine practice was considered a prerequisite for conversion. However, her idea about this changed one day: ‘I thought to myself, “You should be done with that nonsense! You really *are* a Muslim, you *feel* Muslim!”’ She took her *shahada* that same day. In this later statement, Iman considered her own individual feelings as authoritative with regards to becoming Muslim, rather than a correct mode of conduct. Therefore, common understandings held that one can only ‘truly’ convert to Islam if this is an individual, authentic choice. This narrative was also common amongst Jewish and Christian interlocutors and was reflected in and by the religious authorities of their communities.

In the Pentecostal Christian context, conversion was conceptualised in individualistic terms, implying that through conversion, each individual can enter in a direct relationship with God. About conversion, Anne, a 28-year old Pentecostal convert, said: ‘It is a conscious choice not to live alone anymore, not to live just for yourself. That is what being Christian means, you stop living for what you want, but start to live according to the will of God.’ In this context, the discourse and practice of conversion were rather paradoxical. On the one hand, the importance of individual choice was constantly emphasised, both by newcomers and ‘born’ Christians. Yet, at the same time, evangelising is a key devotional practice in the church and conversion did carry with it expectations from the community, particularly the abandoning of sins and the conformation to particular Pentecostal gender scripts (e.g. Bowler, 2019; Martin, 2003). The gender framework is

highly heteronormative, rejecting same-sex relationships and premarital sex. The church typically attracts a large number of young women who are single, but are expected to find a Christian (male and heterosexual) partner, typically leading to quick engagements and marriages. This shows that while the authenticity narrative is very strong in the church's discourses about conversion, the regulation of intimate relationships is an equally strong discourse on the other side of the coin.

These two sides are also, albeit in a less explicit way, reflected in the Jewish case. The majority of Jewish women stressed the importance of individual choice and remarked that *giyur* would not be allowed by the authorities if it was not an expression of an inner authentic choice. Sara, an Orthodox Jewish woman, even remarked that the *giyur* process is so demanding that it would be impossible to maintain if it did not come out of a personal desire. The suspicion was strongest for women, according to Sara, who mentioned that:

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

With 'pass it on', Sara refers to the *halachic* principle of matrilineal descent, by which only people born to a Jewish woman are considered Jewish.⁵ This means that Jewish women give birth to Jewish children, and the authorities would stress the importance of carrying on the tradition and of marrying a fellow Jew. Precisely because of this responsibility, rabbis are more wary towards women and the risk that they 'do it for their husband' instead of having 'the drive' themselves. This already points to the intimate connections of family life and Jewishness and, in a broader sense, individual choice and relationships.

Similar to existing research, many interlocutors highlighted individual agency and authentic choices. However, the analysis does not stop here, because I also found that for many interlocutors, relationships indeed played an important role in their everyday religious lives and conversion trajectories. To understand this relational aspect, the concept of agency – with its focus on the individual and questions of authentic choice – is limited. Here, it is valuable to build on insights from mixedness studies and intimate relationships.

Mixedness, conversion, and intimate relationships

Where studies of women's conversion usually start at the individual, mixedness studies focusses on intimate relationships to analyse religious, racial and/or ethnic difference in relationships and the degree of inequality that results from this (Cerchiaro, 2022; Collet, 2015, 2017). Studies have shown that mixed couples usually have to deal with multiple forms of mixedness in their everyday life, including ethno-cultural or racial inequalities (Collet, 2017, p. 152). Moreover, 'mixed' couples do not always experience their relationship as such and find their own shared ritual practices.⁶ What I find especially valuable in the concept of mixedness, is the argument that couples can be considered microcosms (Arweck and Nesbitt, 2010) to study societal norms, majority/minority relations and social change. By studying the ways in which 'mixed' couples give meaning to, and navigate, difference in their everyday life – amongst themselves and in relation to their family or society – helps to understand the manifestation of difference in the broader social context.

The potential of romantic relationships to reflect on broader societal norms, also comes up in theories of intimacy (Huygens, 2022; Jamieson, 2011). According to Jamieson (2011), intimate relationships are an interesting study subject because they occur on the intersection of the private and the public, the personal and the political, or individuality and societal normative frameworks such as heteronormativity and patriarchy. Intimate relationships 'are implicated in innovative individual efforts to change biographies and histories but they are also implicated in protective responses to enforced change and in the re-creation of tradition' (Jamieson, 2011, p. 2). In this approach, the intersections between individual choice and conformation to norms are considered as characterising most relationships. Jamieson recognises 'the power of discourse' in relationship choices, for example the impact of norms related to endogamy and heteronormativity. Whilst finding a partner is clearly impacted by social norms, this does not make relationships or experiences of love less genuine. Or, in the words of Jamieson, this does not 'erase the significance of intimacy with embodied living others' (2011, p. 6). Whilst realising that relationships are not merely expression of an authentic, inner desire (since the 'self' is always constructed), this does not mean that they are any less significant in people's everyday life. This perspective on intimate relationships resonates with the aforementioned tension in (speaking about) the role of partners in conversion processes, where individual choice is stressed, whilst the significance of romantic

partners cannot be denied. The following paragraph analyses my research with female converts from such a mixedness perspective, showing the value of such an approach next to the aforementioned ‘agency’ approach.

Mixedness, marriage, conversion

When Dunya (a white woman with secular Dutch parents) met her Muslim boyfriend Said (whose parents were born in Morocco), she had been studying Islam for a few years but had not converted. In our conversation, Dunya recalled how, at the start of their relationship: ‘I was very firm that I really would *not* become a Muslim. Because I thought: “He will probably try to convert me.”’ In fact, Dunya planned to break up with Said if he were to ask her to convert, which he never did. For a few years, the couple experienced mixedness in terms of ethnic background (Moroccan Dutch and white Dutch) as well as religion (Muslim and non-Muslim). However, after a few years, Dunya continued to be interested in Islam herself and eventually took the *shahada* and implemented Islamic practices in her daily life. When we discussed her boyfriend in relation to this process, Dunya said:

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

Her conversion to Islam meant that the relationship of Dunya and Said was less ‘mixed’ in terms of religion. However, they continued to navigate differences in their ethnic and racial background, being a white woman with a brown man, something I discuss more extensively elsewhere (Schrijvers, 2022, p. 226–261; see also Mossière 2022).

Most participants expressed an interest in Islam prior to meeting their partner. Some were intrigued and attracted to Islam because of its status of ‘otherness’. Hanan, for example, recalled that she has always felt attracted to men with a Muslim background.⁷ She suggested that this attraction may have been influenced by, or a sign of, her attraction to Islam. Indeed, she and her Muslim husband had been together for a few years when she became Muslim. I often heard that having a Muslim boyfriend should not be a direct motivation to become Muslim, but at the same time, would be preferable to a non-Muslim partner. This preference was never voiced in terms of Islamic guidelines or principles, such as the idea that Muslim women cannot marry a

non-Muslim (as suggested by Cerchiaro, 2022, p. 16). Instead, having a Muslim partner was considered to help with the implementation of Islamic practices, for example in having a Muslim family-in-law to celebrate Ramadan with (see also Vroon-Najem & Moors 2019, p. 30). Whilst this ideal came to fruition for most interlocutors, Fatima experienced disappointment when dating Muslim men, especially with regards to their observance. She reflected that she had idealised a relationship with a Muslim, and came to realise that some differences would be difficult to overcome. For example, one of her ex-boyfriends drank alcohol, which she found 'un-Islamic' and eventually broke up because of different interpretations of Islamic principles. She mentioned that she would actually prefer to have a non-Muslim partner in the future to avoid conflicts, preferring a more explicitly mixed relationship with a non-Muslim partner.

Similar to the Muslim interlocutors, many Christian women expressed a preference for a Christian partner, specifically a partner in the same church.⁸ In these communities, the group of young adults was quite large and very active, with many social activities throughout the week. The single men and women were encouraged to find a partner in church, one church even organised a 'speed dating' event. For many converts, their perspective towards marriage had changed in their conversion to a conservative and heteronormative framework. The couples tend to get engaged at a relatively young age (early 20s) and sometimes this engagement can span a few years, offering a sort of liminal space in which couples are permitted to live together and often have sex, without being formally married (Schrijvers, 2021). I did not meet women who had a partner outside of the church, but a few women had a Christian partner before they explored the religion themselves. These situations, where an intimate partner became the first encounter with a religion, did not come up among the Muslim participants, who all expressed to have been interested in Islam before meeting their partner. Sanne, in contrast, was unfamiliar with Christianity, let alone Pentecostalism, when she met Tim, a born-and-raised Pentecostal Christian who devoted a lot of his time to church. Sanne and Tim were living together when we met and intended to get married 'someday'. Because Tim was a musician in the church's band, Sanne joined church services, but felt out of place. This motivated her to follow an introductory course, where she was 'touched' herself and decided to commit to the church as well. In her recollection, Tim had been the first to invite her to a service, but had never explicitly expressed the wish for her to convert.

In the Jewish context, the notion of mixed marriage is very diverse, of which I will give three examples. First, in this context, too, I met women

who met a Jewish partner during their conversion (*giyur*) process. Similar to Ruth, who was introduced at the start of this article, Deborah and Karen were both married to Jewish men who did not identify as religious and were called 'secular Jews' but came from a Jewish family. Entering the relationship, Ruth, Deborah and Karen were confronted with this different background. However, they had already begun their studies into Judaism years earlier and met their prospective spouses whilst researching and participating in Jewish communities and activities. Finding a Jewish partner strengthened their bond to Judaism and offered a social network to develop their own Jewishness further, similar to the wish of many Muslim converts. Once their *giyur* was formalised, the relationship with their husband was no longer considered 'mixed' by the Jewish authorities. However, the difference in family background continued to impact the relationship.

In studying mixedness, a distinction can be made between formal requirements for marriage by religious authority structures, and lived experiences of couples, recognising that these two dimensions interact. This point is elucidated by the second example of Naomi, who finished her *giyur* many years before she met David. Naomi and David both participated in a Liberal Jewish community. While David was raised with the Jewish customs and in a Jewish family, his mother had not been Jewish. This meant that based on the principle of matrilineal descent, he was formally not considered Jewish. The relationship of Naomi and David was mixed in terms of family background and formal recognised status, but in opposite ways: David being not formally Jewish, but from a Jewish family, and Naomi being a Jew from a non-Jewish family. This was not considered a problem for the partners until they decided to get married. In non-Orthodox communities, having a relationship with a non-Jew is generally not considered a problem, but not all Liberal synagogues allow a Jewish wedding ceremony (*chuppah*) for such couples. Because David and Naomi wished to have such a ceremony, David underwent what is called a 'confirmation' procedure for patrilineal Jews in the LJG, in order to be recognised as Jewish. Naomi later recalled that this was mainly a matter of 'signing a paper' and that at no point, the couple had considered themselves to be a mixed Jewish/non-Jewish couple.

Lastly, I return to the story of Sara, who converted to Orthodox Judaism, which usually is a more difficult process than converting in a Liberal community (Schrijvers, forthcoming 2024). Sara had a Jewish father and felt inspired to reconnect to this family line, opting for a *giyur* in an Orthodox community where she fell in love with Joachim. Their union was rejected by the rabbis and the couple was asked to break up. Sara and Joachim agreed to this to show that Sara's wish to become Jewish was 'authentic' and not

motivated by her partner. A few years later, Sara finalised the *giyur* and the love between her and Joachim had not waned. However, a particular internal Orthodox Jewish principle provided yet another obstacle. Joachim was born into a *Cohanim* family, which refers the highly esteemed priest lineage that is thought to be descending from Aaron. Men with the status of *Cohen* are (among other things) not permitted to marry someone who did a *giyur*. Despite the recognition of Sara as Jewish, which made her *halachically* equal to 'born' Jews on almost all levels, their mixed background did prevent them from getting marriage. In their case, the status of Sara as a converted woman – even though she was now considered to be Jewish – still deemed her unfit for marriage and their relationship was still in some forms considered 'mixed' by the authorities. Eventually, with the help of several rabbis and genealogical research, Joachim's status as *Cohen* came to be considered 'disputed', which is why he could eventually marry Sara without needing to formally renounce his status himself.

Conclusions

The outcomes of my research emphasises the malleability and fluidity in the concept of mixedness. Such an approach moves beyond the binary between individual choice and relational influence that seems to haunt representations of female converts. Mixedness highlights the dynamic and fluid aspects of intimate relationships, whilst simultaneously focusing on the interactions between the couples' experiences of mixedness and social norms of majority and minority religio-racial groups. Conversion forms and reforms what is 'mixed' within a relationship and intimate relationships make the convert. In this conclusion, I highlight the most important contributions of such a mixedness approach in the study of women's conversion.

A preference for a partner of the same religion could be found in all three case studies and came up in other research (Huygens, 2022) as well. This could be considered as a strategy to cope with the secularity of the Dutch public sphere, and to help developing a social network in a religious community one was not born and raised in (Vroon-Najem & Moors, 2019). An approach from the perspective of relationships and mixedness would suggest this to be an expression of the norm of endogamy that shapes intimate relationships throughout society (Jamieson, 2011). The comparative angle of this article shows that similar experiences of mixedness figure across different traditions, offering fluidity to the often rigid framing of traditions as supposedly neatly defined entities and 'interreligious' couples

as doomed to a status of in-betweenness. So far, the majority of studies into 'religiously' mixed relationships focuses on couples where one partner is a brown Muslim and the other a white Christian. When converts are included, usually the white partner had converted. The focus on these couples should be no surprise: this type of relationship figures as a more 'dramatic' form of mixedness in media discourses (Van den Brandt, Van den Berg, & Meijer, 2023). However, a comparative approach has the benefit of expanding the understanding of mixedness as well as the concept of conversion.

The focus of the analysis was on religion, but the findings suggest that what is 'mixed' is complicated, which becomes apparent when studying everyday life. Moreover, the experience and perception of mixedness are highly dependent on the social and cultural context. This was most evident for white Muslim women who were involved in a relationship with a non-white Muslim man, usually with a Moroccan, Algerian, Pakistani or Turkish migration background. For these couples, mixedness was experienced on the intersections of race and religion and the conversion did not 'resolve' the mixedness within the couples. More understanding should be gained about the varying manifestations of this 'race-religion constellation' in mixed unions (Topolski, 2018), including, but not limited to, couples where a conversion occurred. One of the few recent articles that do in fact focus on conversion, mixedness and race is by Géraldine Mossière (2022), but it is clear that more scholarly work is needed in this area.

Furthermore, reconsidering the focus on 'religious women's agency' and the impact of marriage in conversion narratives can add to feminist scholarship. For one, the emphasis on individuality as it appears in secular, neoliberal and consumerist discourse, is questioned by the elaboration on intimate relationships. I explicitly focus on this private domain of the household in order to recognise agency within the private sphere. The concept of 'religious agency' calls for a re-conceptualisation of agency in which it is disconnected from notions (often associated with secular feminism) of resistance and subversion. While this important intervention within the study of religion and gender highly influenced my own research and is crucial in understanding diverse religious women's practices, my concern is that the dimension of the couple can be overshadowed if it leads to a limited focus on individual narratives of 'authentic choice'. Moreover, in the search for authenticity, the reiteration of normativity should be acknowledged. In the examples provided, mixed couples contested and crossed certain boundaries, but confirmed others, including norms of heteronormativity and marriage. Future research can focus more on queerness and mixedness, as such couples navigate multiple forms of marginalisation. In addition, mixedness studies

can benefit from a gender approach. Although it is suggested that women convert to the tradition of their partner more often than men, gender remains rather un-conceptualised (cf. Cerchiaro, 2022, p. 5; Collet, 2015, p. 142). It is here that gender studies and, specifically, critical reflections on women's agency in piety, can contribute to mixedness studies.

This article contributes to ongoing discussions about women's religiosity and agency. It was motivated by a concern with the dominant stereotype that women convert because of a (prospective) marriage and are therefore lacking agency, leading to a tension in studies of female converts between individual agency and relationality. Clearly, a lot is at stake in emphasising personal choice in describing conversion processes. However, the impact of significant others in the lives of converts cannot be denied. Even if an intimate relationship influenced the process of religious transformation, there is no causal relationship and not all conversions that take place *while* married, happen *only* because of this marriage. The concept of mixedness has the potential to dissolve this binary by considering the domain of intimate relationships as agential and relational spaces of religious becoming.

Notes

1. All personal names are pseudonyms.
2. The majority of Muslim and Jewish interlocutors considered 'conversion' (*bekering* in Dutch) to be an outsider term. They preferred other terminology such as *giyur* or 'becoming Jewish', and 'taking the Shahada' or 'embracing Islam'. Conversion is thus primarily an etic term that is not univocally used by new Jewish or new Muslim women themselves. Christian women did use the term 'conversion' (*bekering*) to characterise their process.
3. See (Schrijvers, forthcoming 2024) for an extended analyses of *giyur* and the differences between these denominations in the Netherlands.
4. Most mosques are organised around ethnic/cultural groups and interlocutors who identified with a particular community (not everyone did) were affiliated with Turkish, Moroccan or Surinamese communities (Schrijvers, 2022).
5. A small minority of reform communities released this rule and includes everyone with one Jewish parent as 'fully' Jewish, including patrilineal Jews.
6. These questions are the focus of an ongoing research project about Muslim-Christian, Jewish-Christian, and Christian-secular couples in the Netherlands at the VU Amsterdam and KU Leuven, with prof. Marianne Moyaert as principal investigator and Deniz Aktaş and myself as researchers.
7. In the case of Judaism, this connection between desires for a Jewish partner and for Judaism in general has been called an expression of 'philosemitism'

- in the German context (Rau, 2023; Steiner, 2016). I did not meet any Jewish women who expressed a similar attraction to Judaism because of its 'otherness'.
8. In the churches in which I conducted fieldwork, as reflected in other studies, the majority of participants were women. This may lead to a scarcity of preferable Christian men, but this was not a cause for concern among my interlocutors (cf. Huygens, 2022).

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