Sociology of Religion: A Quarterly Review 2024, XX:XX 1–21
https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srae006

Race and Religion in Everyday Life: Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Christian Privilege Among Female Converts in the Netherlands

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This article analyzes how the intersections of race and religion impact the experiences of women converting to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam in the Netherlands. It builds on the innovative historical and philosophical work by scholars who call attention to the intersections of race and religion. In ethnographic studies of female converts such entanglements of race and religion have primarily been noted in the case of white converts in Islam. However, research into race and racialization among Christian and Jewish female converts is rare, and a comparative approach even rarer. A bottom-up comparative approach, I argue, has the potential to critically examine not only the positions of religio-racialized minorities, but also the mechanisms of religious/racial hegemony at work in Western Europe. The article thus explores how becoming a religious minority impacts one's sense of belonging to the nation and how processes of racialization, specifically antisemitism and Islamophobia, impact the conversion process.

Key words: conversion; race; whiteness; gender; comparative ethnography; Islam; Judaism; Pentecostalism.

What happens to the intersection of race and religion when white people join a religious minority? This article analyzes this question on the basis of a comparative ethnographic study of new Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women. When women become Jewish or Muslim, they are often confronted with racialization

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in the form of antisemitism and Islamophobia. Previously belonging to a white Christian/secular majority, their conversion comes with a loss of privilege. In contrast, women who become Christian hardly ever encounter such negativity. This article analyzes how the intersections of race and religion impact the experiences of women converting to these three groups. In ethnographic studies of female converts such entanglements of race and religion have primarily been noted in the case of white converts in Islam. These studies have shown how white converted Muslimas are suspected of giving up, or stronger still, "betrayed" their national identity (Galonnier 2015; Özyürek 2014; Piela and Krotofil 2023; Vroon-Najem 2014). However, research into race and racialization among Christian and Jewish female converts is rare, and a comparative approach even rarer. A bottom-up comparative approach, I argue, has the potential to critically examine not only the positions of religio-racialized minorities, but also the mechanisms of religious/racial hegemony at work in Western Europe. It further offers insight in similarities and differences in everyday experiences with antisemitism and Islamophobia.[1]

This research builds on the innovative critical theoretical work by scholars who call attention to the intersections of race and religion in Europe. Over the past decades, scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds have pointed to the historical and conceptual interwovenness of categories of race and religion, from the perspective of theology (Gruber 2021), history (Meer and Noorani 2008; Moyaert 2024; Westerduin 2020), and critical philosophy (Topolski 2018). Moreover, anthropologists have begun to investigate how these associations in the cultural archive continue to permeate contemporary European societies, including the Netherlands (Wekker 2016).

While categorizations of "race" and "religion" have had different meanings and implications over time and space, their intersections have been noted since antiquity (e.g., Meer and Noorani 2008; Moyaert 2024). Most scholars consider the colonial encounter as the crucial context to understand the formation of religious/racial categorizations (Anidjar 2008; Chidester 2014). A relevant approach comes from scholar of political philosophy Anya Topolski (2018:59), who coined the concept of the "race-religion constellation" to refer to "the practice of classifying people into races according to categories we now associate with the term 'religion'." By emphasizing the continuing presence of religio-racialized imaginaries in Europe today, this approach works against the utopic framing that Europe has somehow "left racism behind": a myth of color blindness called "white innocence" by Gloria Wekker (2016). Instead, scholarship challenges this assumed "innocence" by highlighting the persistency of religio-racialized frames of difference in many aspects of society. This includes research on (self-)representation (Van Es 2016) and anthropological work with religio-racialized minorities such as Muslims (de Koning 2016; Fadil 2011). Even more recent work focuses on white

[1]Realizing that antisemitism and Islamophobia these have different histories, it has been argued that the "underlying logic of racism is the same" (Weaver 2013:483, see also Meer and Noorani 2008).

Christian/secular hegemony from this similar critical theoretical perspective, arguing for a critical assessment of the supposed neutrality of white Christian secularity (Lauwers 2023). This article continues this anthropological investigation of the "race-religion constellation" in the Netherlands by suggesting a comparative approach to white women's experiences with conversion and privilege. I ask how becoming a religious minority impacts one's sense of belonging to the nation and how racialization and racism, specifically antisemitism and Islamophobia, impact the conversion process. The focus is on differences as well as similarities between the groups. Doing so, the ethnographic study of women who embraced Judaism, Islam, as well as Christianity, enhances understanding of everyday religious lives and the impact of the race–religion constellation in the contemporary Netherlands.

FEMALE CONVERTS IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND ISLAM

This article is based on an extensive ethnographic study with women who converted to different religious groups in the Netherlands. This nation-state is widely considered to have secularized, although this secularity is strongly connected to white Christianity (Roman-Catholicism and Protestantism). Recently, Statistics Netherlands (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2020) estimated that 46% of the currently 17 million population considered themselves as belonging to a religion, meaning that the majority does not identify with a religion at all. 3.5 million people identified with Roman-Catholicism and 2.5 with Protestantism, making Christianity the largest religion, but not a majority in absolute numbers. This means that in terms of statistics, Christians form a minority group. However, white Christians are not widely conceived as such in public discourses (Lauwers 2023). Muslims and Jews, among others, are considered religious minorities and are racialized in different ways. Sephardic Jews were present in the country since the sixteenth century, while Ashkenazim settled in the early seventeenth century and grew quickly with the coming of German and Polish Jews (Michman 1999). Since then, Jews have continued to have a position of an "outsider within" (Moyaert 2024; see also Schrijvers 2024). They are paradoxically included in a problematic right-wing narrative of shared "Judaeo-Christian" roots in the country (Topolski 2020; Van den Hemel 2014), while antisemitism is rising and many Jews do not feel fully included. Muslims, on the other hand, are increasingly framed as non-European and non-Dutch, collapsing ethnic, racial, and religious categories in a nativist discourse (Jones 2016; Kešić and Duyvendak 2019). This process by which national belonging became linked to (associations about) culture, ethnicity, or religion, reflects the "culturalization of citizenship" as discussed by scholars such as Halleh Ghorashi (2010) and Jan Willem Duyvendak (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016). This refers to the "global trend with local variations" (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016:9) by which the parameters of national citizenship are connected to assumptions about, in this

case, "Dutch culture." One example refers to the extended citizenship exams, in which those seeking to obtain citizenship have to show their understanding of certain Dutch cultural practices. In a more symbolic matter too, citizenship and national belonging have become culturalized, partly in relation to religion, which is reflected by the representation and perception of Muslims who are perpetually represented as the Netherlands' cultural Other (Sunier 2010).

Between 2017 and 2020, I undertook participant observation in different Jewish, Islamic, and Christian communities. Here, I participated in services and events, sometimes related specifically to conversion. In addition to the fieldwork, the outcomes consist of 40 in-depth interviews with women who were not, or marginally, socialized in a religion but decided to do *giyur*, embrace Islam or convert to Christianity later in life. These interlocutors were met through participant observation, snowballing, online calls, networks of colleagues, and personal networks. The focus on religious communities implied that most interlocutors can be considered observant or practicing in some ways. Of the 40 interviewees, 20 were Jewish, 12 Christian, and 8 Muslim.[2] The interlocutors were between 20 and 72 years of age and came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. All identified as female and used female pronouns. The majority was white and heterosexual (respectively, 38 and 37). I employed a lived religion approach (Ammerman 2007; McGuire 2008) to study how conversion was practiced in everyday life, shedding light on a wide variety of expressions such as food preferences, clothing style, and family life. In order to provide more context, I also spoke with religious leaders of the communities in which I participated.

The Jewish setting consisted of Liberal Jewish (LJG), independent progressive, and Orthodox (NIK) communities. Eight interviewed women finished their *giyur* in the LJG, six in an independent progressive community and six converted in Orthodox. Orthodox *giyur* tends to be the most difficult process, although not impossible (Schrijvers 2024). Conservative/Masorti and Haredi Jews were not included in the sample. All Muslim interlocutors were Sunni. Most Islamic mosques tend to be organized around ethnic groups and languages, with Moroccan, Turkish, Surinamese, or Pakistani mosques. In addition, some communities explicitly aim to cross these ethnic boundaries, which tend to be most attractive for converts because sermons would typically be in Dutch rather than Arabic, Turkish, or Urdu. Five Muslim interlocutors were active in such a mosque, two participated in a Moroccan or Turkish mosque, and one did not affiliate with any particular community. As for the Christian case, I selected neo-Pentecostal churches because these churches offer an interesting comparative angle to study conversion,

[2]All names are pseudonyms. All participants signed an informed consent form and were given the opportunity to provide feedback prior to the initial publication of the research. All data are stored according to the latest privacy and data protection requirements on the research data management service Yoda. Access is closed to everyone but the author, and the data will remain private indefinitely. The metadata is publicly available under doi:10.24416/UU01-SYZJPG.

as these communities typically tend to have a strong evangelizing discourse and appeal to young adults. In contrast to mainline Protestant and Roman-Catholic congregations, these churches seem to be growing and are characterized by a hip and modern aesthetic, albeit accompanied by a rather conservative framework toward gender and sexuality. The selected communities were all associated with the global Hillsong network.[3]

In all three communities, I was an outsider since I was not raised with a religion myself and do not identify strongly with a religious tradition or community. At the same time, since my grandparents were white Protestant and Roman-Catholic, I do benefit from Christian privileges. This includes a familiarity with the Christian calendar and holidays, as suggested by Lauwers (2023), as well as a social majority position: The national belonging of me or my family has never been disputed. My role impacted the fieldwork settings in different ways. Some interlocutors were keen to share their experiences, often for the first time, with someone outside their community (especially Jewish women), while others had grown quite familiar with the presence of white researchers (especially Muslim women), and others still considered me to be a potential convert (especially Christian women). In general, a white woman in her late 20s, 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.

Gender initially formed the main analytical focus of the project. However, questions of belonging turned out to be crucial if to fully grasp the complexity of female converts' everyday religion. Thus, taking an intersectional approach, the larger study does not merely focus on gender but includes other axes of difference. I recognize that structures of sexism and racism intersect, which is why I reflect on both. Here, I follow Gloria Wekker's (as quoted in Van den Brandt et al. 2018:80) suggestion that doing intersectionality, has the benefit that "you're able to put gender and sexuality at the forefront one moment [. . .] and put race and its intersections forward the next time." In other works, I analyzed the various intersections of religion, gender, and sexuality (e.g., Schrijvers 2021, 2023). In this article, I approach the same research material from a different conceptual framework, looking into the entanglements of religion and race, and the racialization of conversion.

PATTERNS OF EXCLUSION

"I Was Asked Whether I Had Become Moroccan": Questioning National Belonging

Judaism, Islam, and Christianity each hold a different position in the Dutch nation. It is therefore also likely that converting to either of these groups has a

[3]This research was undertaken before the resignation of global pastors Brian and Bobbie Houston amidst a number of scandals, which led to a rapid decrease of members and member churches.

different impact on the individual's sense of national belonging. Interlocutors in all groups, including Christians, were confronted with stereotypes about their religious practices. Yet Jewish and Muslim interlocutors were not only confronted with stereotypes about religion, but often encountered exclusionary discourses in the context of direct social contact, media representations, and political discourses. Christian women at times also felt alienated from the rest of society, mainly because of the perceived lack of religion in society (which, according to them, implied a moral degradation). However, their conversion did not have an impact on their sense of national belonging, nor were they considered to be "less Dutch" or even traitors of the Dutch nation in the way that others were.

Women who were visibly seen as Muslim because of the way they dressed, were most confronted with assumptions that their conversion meant they also crossed an ethnic and/or racial boundary (for similar observations, see Galonnier 2015; Özyürek 2014). Muslim convert Yara told me: "I was frequently asked whether I had become Moroccan," reflecting the intersection of religious and ethnic Othering mechanisms in which a Muslim identity is conflated with being Moroccan.[4] Since she started to wear a headscarf, Yara was treated differently in public spaces. She described how non-Muslim classmates were surprised to learn that she enjoys Dutch food and watches the same "typically Dutch" television shows, such as the Dutch version of "Farmer Wants a Wife." When she expressed herself in public as Muslim, she was no longer associated with this national identity by these peers, but instead conceived as a cultural and racialized Other. This reflects the lived implications of broader societal tendencies of religio-racialization. This idea of conversion as moving into another racial/ethnic group is also apparent in the title of the well-known Dutch reality show about Muslim converts, which was called "*Van Hagelslag naar Halal*" ("From chocolate sprinkles [which are considered typically Dutch] to *halal* [Islamic food guidelines]," Van Diepen 2015). Yara told me that she had been approached by the producers of this show to participate. According to her, the "idea that 'First you're this, and then you're completely different'" made the show "really ridiculous," which is why she declined. The idea that embracing Islam implied becoming "completely different" and moving away from being Dutch (as exemplified by eating *hagelslag*) often arose among my Muslim interlocutors. Most converted Muslimas found a way to connect being both Dutch and Muslim in their process of religious self-making. Fatima described this process in the following terms: "I wanted to belong to something but did not want to fully blend into the Moroccan culture. So, I started to form my own mix."

[4]The mentioning of "Moroccan" is relevant for the Dutch context. A large percentage of Dutch Muslims has a family connection to Morocco, although most in fact do have a Dutch citizenship. In public discourse, however, being Moroccan is not only conflated with being Muslim, but also considered in opposition to being Dutch (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Sunier 2010).

Women who became Jewish often did not come across such strong accusations of betraying their national identity. At first instance, there did not seem to be a change in their sense of belonging to the Netherlands. When I asked whether joining the Jewish people (which *giyur* entails) is similar to changing a nationality, Bracha replied: "No. Only in Israel, where the religion is interwoven with being Jewish." In a similar vein, Aliza described a form of hybrid identity, giving the example of Israeli citizenship, where "you can be Jewish, but not be an Israeli, you can be Israeli but not Jewish." For Aliza, the same principle applied to the Netherlands: "You are both, I mean, you are Jewish and you are Dutch." In the Netherlands, so it was thought, being Jewish was not interwoven with the nation-state in terms of citizenship, and so these things could exist separately. An interesting comparison comes from the work of Michal Kravel-Tovi (2017), who studied *giyur* in the context of Israel, where it is indeed very much entangled with national belonging and ethnocultural citizenship. Contrary to the Muslim converts, the loyalty to the Dutch nation of my Jewish interlocutors was not questioned by their non-Jewish peers or family members, nor did they encounter assumptions that they had become Israeli when converting, in the way that Yara was asked whether she had become Moroccan as a Muslim. This can be explained by the fact that the country has known a historical presence of Jews since the sixteenth century, despite the near annihilation of Dutch Jewry in the Second World War. As a result, Jews are typically considered insiders to the Dutch nation, albeit a sort of outsider within. Muslims are instead often portrayed as being "new" to the Netherlands, even though there too has been a historically significant Muslim population—especially during the colonization of Indonesia, when the Dutch dominated "one of the most populous Muslim areas in the world" (Sunier 2010:115). Yet Muslims are repeatedly portrayed as "newcomers," which is reflected in the responses my interlocutors encountered when they converted. In our conversations, my interlocutors did not explicitly reflect that becoming Jewish implied that they were seen as somehow less Dutch, while this was the case for Muslim interlocutors.

At the same time, many Jewish women felt that they were excluded in the imagined community of the nation, especially considering the Shoah and continuing antisemitism. In this regard, they experienced a change with their status prior to joining Judaism. According to Naomi, "Dutch people see Jews as insiders, as belonging to Dutch society, but many Jews," including herself as she mentioned later on, "feel like outsiders." With "Dutch people," Naomi meant non-Jewish people, who, in her experience, did not recognize the continuing presence of antisemitism and showed little empathy. This points to a position in which Jews are not completely excluded, yet also not fully included in the nation. This paradox reflects a broader societal tendency. On the one hand, the term "Judaeo-Christian" became popular among right-wing politicians to describe the nation, as to include Judaism in the Dutch national identity. In reality, this problematic discourse is used to exclude Muslims while simultaneously downplaying antisemitism (Topolski 2020; Van den Hemel 2014). On the other hand, there is the lived

reality of Jewish people who often have an ambivalent relationship to Dutch national identity because of (historical and contemporary) antisemitism. While their national belonging is often not questioned by others like it is for converted Muslimas, many Jewish interlocutors did feel a distance from the Dutch symbolic nation. This negotiation did not play a role among the Christian interlocutors, who often envisioned a Netherlands where more people were Christian, but did not reconsider their national belonging, nor were they confronted with religio-racism in the same manner that Jewish and Muslim converts were, as will be discussed in the next paragraph.

"And Then, Things Continued to Suck": Feeling Unsafe as a Jew or Muslim

Both new Muslim and Jewish women experienced a sense of decreased safety in the Dutch public sphere after they became part of a religious minority. In these groups, dealing with Islamophobia and antisemitism, respectively, was an integral part of the conversion trajectory. Although not everyone experienced verbal or physical assaults directly themselves—which I return to in the next section—a general wariness was tangible in the Jewish and Muslim communities, which I did not find at all in the Christian fieldwork settings. Most interlocutors felt unsafe, either based on personal experiences, stories of others, media representations, or discourses in the community.

The hegemonic discourse is that the Dutch left antisemitism behind at the end of the Second World War. Yet, as the late Evelien Gans (2016) argued, antisemitism did not appear out of thin air with the Shoah, nor did it leave after. While Islamophobia is becoming more outspoken and explicit, antisemitism is often more covert in public discourse, yet it is far from absent and has a deep impact on Jewish people. Indeed, the past years have seen an increased visibility of antisemitism among adherents of far-right politics and conspiracy theories, as well as an increase in antisemitic violence (Akkerman, de Lange, and Rooduijn 2016; Tierolf, Drost, and van Kapel 2018; Vellenga 2018). These groups seem to grow, especially in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic (CIDI 2021; Seijbel, van Sterkenburg, and Spaaij 2022). It is also likely that this context enabled antisemitic rhetoric—which has always been there but in a more covert way—to come to the surface and gain some public legitimacy through political representatives. Moreover, at the time of writing the war in Israel/Palestine led to an increase in antisemitism as well as Islamophobia, of which the global and local consequences cannot be comprehended yet. The testimonies of the people I interviewed confirmed the continuing presence of antisemitism, even prior to the pandemic or war. Naomi said:

> *I feel like a lot of Dutch people have the idea that everything was fine, sucked for five years [during the Second World War], and was fine again. But for many Jewish people that is not the case. Antisemitism has existed for a long time, globally. Suddenly there were those five, six years of extreme, extreme, extreme horror, and then things continued to suck. (Naomi)*

The possibility of antisemitic violence led the Dutch government to increase security matters around synagogues. All synagogues are guarded by military

police (*marechaussee*, in Dutch), especially when service is held on Shabbat.[5] Furthermore, everyone who is not a member of the congregation is vetted to see "if they are not suspicious or on some blacklist," to cite a rabbi. For a few congregants, the visible presence of heavily armed military police offers a sense of safety, as Leah told me: "It is ridiculous that we need [that protection], but I do feel like nothing can happen to me, I do not feel unsafe." Yet, to the contrary, the vast majority expressed increased anxiety and saw a confirmation of their precariousness confirmed in the presence of the guards.

The persistent nature of antisemitism had a profound effect on women who embraced Judaism. A frequently asked question by the rabbinate to *giyur* candidates is what they will do if antisemitism spikes up again and leads to violence. Esther told me: "I was asked: 'It is quite peaceful now, but what if it gets worse? How do you stand up for. . . will you suddenly not be Jewish?'" All converts replied to that question similar to Deborah: "Of course I am Jewish if things get worse. I am committed." Nevertheless, the fact that this question is almost always asked by a rabbi or in the context of the rabbinic court, implies that rabbis do want to ensure newcomers are aware of the potential lack of safety that comes with being Jewish. Becoming Jewish is not merely about certain religious rituals, as I was frequently told, but it includes joining of the Jewish people, which was characterized as a persecuted people by the rabbis I spoke to.

There is no official study program to become Muslim, but how to deal with discrimination and Islamophobia is often part of the informal teaching structures in Muslim communities. Islamophobic rhetoric can be found in several political parties, especially among right-wing anti-migration parties such as, most notably, the Party for Freedom and its leader Geert Wilders. Here, Islam is often associated with foreignness and as incommensurable with "Dutch values." Several scholars have argued that the current rise in Islamophobia in the Netherlands can be traced to the 1980s, when an image of collective Muslim identity emerged in the light of different events in Muslim majority contexts, such as the Iranian Revolution and the Rushdie affair. Thijl Sunier (2010:124) wrote: "Islam increasingly became the explanatory factor, not only for specific (collective) behaviour of Muslims, but also for all kinds of societal problems they faced." The association of Islam with anti-modernness and oppression grew further in the early 2000s in light of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the rise of the so-called "Islamic state" in Syria, and the subsequent increase in refugees from Muslim majority countries. This dominant public and political idea of Islam associated with migration and violence, as non-Western and anti-modern, has had a significant impact on the daily lives of Dutch Muslims. Just as with antisemitism, reports of antidiscrimination offices show that Islamophobia is increasing (Abaâziz 2019).

[5]In July 2017, the permanent physical guard posts were replaced by cameras. Now, guards are employed during services on Friday and Saturday, and whenever there is an increased level of threat. The most recent example at the time of writing is the war in Palestine/Israel in late 2023 and 2024.

Similar to the Jewish women, Muslim interlocutors were afraid of potential attacks directed at their community. Recent years have seen a rise in attacks on mosques worldwide, such as the attack in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019. As far as I can tell, military police have not been deployed and mosques are not as heavily guarded by the Dutch state, as was the case for synagogues.[6] Guests are not vetted, and the matter of safety is often in the hands of the communities themselves. Besides the fear of attacks on mosques, interlocutor Dunya was anxious for a backlash after an attack by terrorists who claim to be Muslim: "Whenever that happens, I'm scared for a few days, that I have to justify myself, or that someone may react out of emotion, take something out on me." Negative media coverage of Muslim violence often increased the hostility toward all Muslims, both in the public sphere and in the media. Anticipating this negativity was often discussed among converted and born Muslims alike.

Most newcomers to the faith were additionally confronted with stigmatizing discourses by their immediate family and friends, who did not always understand their choices and were informed by stereotypes. This was different for the Jewish women. Even though their immediate family did not always fully understand their choices, I did not meet anyone whose family was explicitly antisemitic, while some converted Muslimas struggled with Islamophobic rhetoric within their families. This exemplifies how antisemitic rhetoric is not as mainstreamed or accepted (although this is increasing, CIDI 2021) and how the Netherlands is often considered to be post-antisemitism. However, despite these differences, becoming Jewish or Muslim had similar implications with regard to concerns about safety. Converts usually discussed what it meant to be part of a racialized religious minority, learned to be alert to antisemitic and Islamophobic rhetoric, and expressed a general feeling of precarity.

Questions of race and racism were almost absent in the Christian neo-Pentecostal churches where I did my fieldwork, and becoming Christian did not imply a reduced sense of safety for these interlocutors. This does not mean, however, that Christian groups are not impacted by structures of exclusion. Instead, this confirms the argument that (white) Christianity forms the unmarked majority position which can appear to be neutral, but nevertheless is shaped by the race–religion constellation.[7] In the churches where I did fieldwork, many members and leaders were very concerned with inclusion in their community. A common ideal

[6]This relates partly to the role of the National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security (NCTV), which falls directly under the Ministry of Justice and Security and is primarily investigating jihadi "Muslim" terrorist threats. Extreme right-wing violence was only recently included as a potential threat to national security, but this did not lead to a lot of additional protection for mosques. Another reason is that mosques do not always reports incidents to the NCTV and that they do not always know the route to apply for funding for security (NCTV 2022; Nieuwsuur 2016).

[7]Another interesting comparison out of the scope of this article, comes from studies of black Christianity in the Netherlands, such as African Pentecostalism (Bartelink 2022; Knibbe 2018).

was to spread their influence (or faith) across the city, country, and eventually, the world. All of the churches made a great effort to show that they were diverse and welcoming to everyone. This was reflected in their communities, which were diverse in terms of language, race, and cultural background. Yet this seemed to be important mainly to the women of color, not for white women, and race and privilege were usually not explicitly discussed in the community. Miranda Klaver similarly remarked: "With the church's core metaphors of 'Family' and a place called 'Home', Hillsong presents itself as an intimate, welcoming, open, and inclusive space where diversity is celebrated yet ethnic differences are neutralized." (2018:244). My Christian interlocutors, including women of color, never talked about race and racism in Bible groups beyond such a welcoming discourse, nor did I encounter the topic in any other church meeting or services. It seemed to be a nonissue in these communities, yet the leadership structures clearly tell a different story. Although the communities often included many young adult people of color, their pastors were all white and the majority was middle aged. This is a common characteristic of these type of international Pentecostal churches. Kate Bowler showed that members in these communities often come from a variety of socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, but leaders are predominantly white and upper middle class (2019). So, while inclusivity is advocated for and a welcoming atmosphere cherished, questions of privilege do play into the structures of the church, but are hardly ever talked about. Becoming Christian does did not imply actively dealing with structures of oppression in the same way that this impacted the process of becoming Jewish or Muslims.

Although this silence about race is not unique to the Dutch context (Bowler's work is situated in the United States), there is a relation with a broader tendency in the Netherlands. Silence about race is, according to Gloria Wekker, typical of the hegemonic Dutch context (2016). Wekker called this "white innocence" in the book with the same title, in which she raises awareness to the denying of structural racism as a fundamental signifier in Dutch society. The hesitancy to engage with the topic of race is thus partly reflective of general trends among (white) majority groups in the Netherlands. The comparison between these three settings and the manner in which safety was discussed, reflects how the race–religion constellation impacts everyday experiences of religious communities and individuals. People born into these communities also deal with safety issues but are likely to be socialized with these from a very young age. For newcomers in Judaism and Islam, these questions are often addressed explicitly as they become familiar with their changed position as racialized minority. How this perception of safety was reflected in everyday life is the subject of the following section.

"No Longer Part of the White Majority": Dealing with Religio-Racism in Everyday Life

For all Jewish interlocutors, antisemitism was an issue. Many pointed to increasing antisemitism in media discourses and political rhetoric. Some also experienced assaults directed at them personally. However, because many interlocutors were not directly visible as Jewish in the public sphere, they could pass as belonging

to the hegemonic white majority. Explicit antisemitism mainly came when they were visibly recognized, for example by the typical Orthodox Jewish fashion of long dark skirts and a wig (*sheitel*) or headscarf. At other times, the Jewish status of women was revealed via gossip, which could lead to antisemitic comments and threats. Judith told me about an incident when a few children at the school she worked at, learned she was Jewish: "They spit on me from the stairs and shouted 'nasty Jew'. That was hard and I cannot deal with it well." Another time, when Judith and her husband returned from a trip, they found graffiti on their front door saying that they should leave. Judith is a member of a Liberal Jewish community and does not wear a *sheitel*, nor does she have any clear physical markers that makes here stand out as Jewish. These were both instances of antisemitic assaults when people in her neighborhood, somehow, found out she was Jewish. Channah, on the other hand, identifies as Orthodox Jewish and is, for those who are even marginally familiar with Judaism, easily recognizable as such. She described several antisemitic attacks, mainly by strangers in public spaces. This ranged from "swearing to throwing food" to an instance when she almost fell off her bike because someone threw a liquid in her face, shouting "Jew!" For Channah, "the worst thing I've ever experienced," was when she was attacked on a bus. Dealing with these types of attacks was an "unfortunate part" of becoming Jewish, she reflected: "It's not easy, but you know it might happen. And when it does, you have to know how to deal with it." However, even though she discussed antisemitism often during her *giyur* trajectory, the first attack still came like a complete shock to her, realizing that "you don't actually know what it's like until you experience it yourself." While other women had experienced fewer direct assaults, safety was an important concern for all of my Jewish interlocutors. For Jewish women who converted, antisemitism was mainly felt in relation to the community and the biggest threats were felt in the context of the synagogue. Personal attacks were less common, although not unheard of. This was different for some Muslim women I spoke to, who experienced Islamophobia mainly in personal attacks.

Most Muslim women I interviewed experienced verbal and nonverbal assaults on a daily basis. Here, as with Jewish women, the visibility of their religion appeared to make the difference. As suggested by other research, Muslimas who did not wear a *hijab* received fewer negative comments. For those who did, dealing with comments and stares in public spaces was a common implication of their conversion (see also Haddad 2006; Van Nieuwkerk 2004). Comments in public spaces were often along the lines of "go back to your own country," as Yara described it, asking: "But I am Dutch, am I not part of this society?" This is something that born Muslims and people of color also have to deal with. Prejudice at work also occurs, as was the case for Amal. She has a high-status position, but noticed how people change to a simpler language when she joins a conversation or speak to her in a belittling tone. These types of micro aggressions have an impact on every aspect of the day-to-day lives of converted Muslimas and are examples of how conversion to Islam is racialized. Yara's experience captured the process of racialization well: "As a convert, you're thrown into the deep end and

you're suddenly no longer a part of the white majority," or at least, she added, "not treated as such." However, the racialization of white converts is complicated. On the one hand, they experience a loss of white privilege. On the other hand, they continue to have privilege within the Muslim community. Dunya remarked: "I am a white Dutch person, that is an unchangeable fact. But I am seen as less [white], there is a difference." At the same time, Dunya told me how her whiteness makes her recognizable as a convert in migrant Muslim communities, and she is often treated as such when born Muslims either consider her to be "naïve and exploited" or put her "on a pedestal" because she decided to convert.

The public expression of religion can of course take different forms, but in the context of exclusion and racism, it is something with which Jewish and Muslim female converts alike struggled. Some women saw similarities in their experiences of antisemitism and Islamophobia, such as Jewish Sara, who encountered hatred against her personally and "can't stand the hatred against others in general." Even though the public image of relations between Muslims and Jews is not always positive, Sara "found more support and acknowledgement amongst Muslims than among atheistic Dutch people." This sense of allyship was strongly felt by some of my interlocutors, who emphasized the importance of interreligious dialogue in combating racism (and sexism) toward both Muslim and Jewish women in the Netherlands. My interlocutors each had different strategies via which cope with these (anticipated) experiences with racism in Dutch society and to create a sense of belonging, which are analyzed in the next section.

CREATING A SENSE OF BELONGING

The (In)Visibility of Women's Conversion in the Public Sphere

While a sense of anxiety was expressed by all Jewish and Muslim interlocutors, my research material suggests that most (albeit not all, see the example of Judith before) direct assaults arise when certain practices or clothing styles visibly question the hegemonic Christian secularity of the public sphere. The way that Christian women conducted themselves in the public sphere typically caused little to no disturbance. This might suggest that these women did not express their religion in a strong symbolic manner, they did not wear clothes that marked them as Other. However, that their dress style was not so different from secular peers, also indicates that a Christian/secular dress indeed is normative in the Netherlands. In other words, women who express a belonging to a minority religion receive more negative responses than those belonging to Christianity, even if the majority is perceived to have "secularised." Overall, their presence in the public sphere did not elicit attention and they blended in with little trouble. Some Christian women occasionally struggled with talking about their religion. Speaking about their beliefs in the form of testimony and evangelization was an important aspect of their Pentecostal faith—and even a religious duty. Yet many women, especially young adults, were afraid of negative reactions and often

refrained from speaking about their religion to others. During one Bible study evening, Emma confessed that she had not answered honestly to a coworker's question about what she had done over the weekend. While Emma did not think believing in God was something to be ashamed of (as she repeatedly said), she did not dare to tell this colleague that she had gone to church. When she told the Bible group about this, she expressed a feeling of embarrassment because she had not been open and perhaps even missed an opportunity to inspire someone. When I asked Emma why she had not disclosed her religion, she replied that she was afraid her colleague might find her weird and look at her differently.

Not talking about religion so as not to cause a disturbance was a common way to mitigate negativity in other groups as well. For Jewish and Muslim women, however, not talking about their religion did not always work to counter negative comments, as certain visible markers made them recognizable, even when they did not verbally disclose their religious belonging. Almost all of the Jewish women I spoke to wore a Star of David in the form of jewelry, most commonly on a subtle necklace. Most played with the visibility of this Jewish symbol. The majority of women wore a necklace underneath their clothes in public settings so as not to disclose their religious affiliation. This strategic concealing is more difficult for men (and some women) who wear a Jewish cap, a *kippah*. Leah mentioned how she is anxious for her Jewish husband who "has no problem wearing his *kippah* in the parking lot of the *shul*," while most people only put it on at the front door of the synagogue. Despite the fact that "people bother us in that context"—meaning verbal assaults—her husband is determined to wear a *kippah* in the car and on the parking lot. Lucy was the only woman I spoke to who expressed a desire to wear a *kippah* herself in public (which is permitted in some non-Orthodox communities), but she does not dare to because she has regularly witnessed antisemitism in her neighborhood, albeit not directed at her personally. The fear of negative responses also has the material effect that some women chose not to put a *mezuzah* (small container with Torah parchment) on their front door, as is common, but rather to put it on a doorpost inside their homes.

Negotiating, concealing, and disclosing their religious status via religious symbols was more difficult for some other interlocutors. The typical modest dress style of Orthodox Jewish women visibly marked them as such, this was especially the case for married women who covered their hair. No one told me they refrain from wearing a headscarf or wig because of safety concerns, but most opted for a particular style of covering that was not directly associated with religious otherness. A headscarf, *tichel*, for example, can also take the form of a small headband that someone unfamiliar with these practices will likely not recognize as Jewish attire. Illustratively, Channah initially wore a headscarf after her marriage, which led others to perceive her to be a Muslim woman. This led to many Islamophobic comments on the street and at her office. As a result of this negative association of the headscarf with Islam, she eventually decided to wear a *sheitel* instead. She still encounters discrimination in the form of antisemitism, as described above, but felt like this changed when she was no longer perceived as a Muslim. In this

case, racialization works via the headscarf, something that Muslim women were quite familiar with.

Although not all Muslim interlocutors wore a headscarf or *hijab*, the majority did. When they began to wear a *hijab* or *khimar*, their visibility as Muslims made them quite suddenly a potential target for Islamophobia: "I do experience more negativity because I look like a Muslim and profile myself as such," Dunya said. This fear for their safety, combined with the social repercussions from their families and friends, often makes converts hesitant to wear a headscarf, despite their wish to do so. Some women, for example, told me that their parents struggled the most with their decision to wear a headscarf, rather than with their conversion. When I asked Bushra why this was the case, she replied: "Because that is visible, people see it as a sign of oppression." According to Nilüfer Göle, the *hijab* has become the master symbol of Islam's Otherness (2017). Because of the status of veiling, it is not only a pious choice, although women would first and foremost point to their religious desires. Rather, it is also a politicized choice that makes converts visibly Muslim in public spaces. This is to some extent similar for Orthodox Jewish women who wear a *tichel* or *sheitel*, although this is a less powerful symbol of Otherness and mainstream society is less familiar with it. The only—albeit hypothetical—option for Muslimas to really avert negativity in the public sphere was to stop wearing a headscarf, but this was considered to be such an important expression of piety that unveiling was never considered.

Göle further argues that the public presence of Muslims in Europe questions the secularity of the public sphere which often leads to tension and conflict. Göle writes: "The publicly visible daily lives of Islam disturb the collective imaginary of European countries shaped by the secular values of freedom and a non-religious way of life." (2017:1) Controversies and conflicts come up, Göle argues, when Muslims demand the possibility to following Islamic prescriptions in their daily lives and do so visibly and publicly. In this regard, it can be understood why being visibly Muslim raises so much anxiety in the secular public space. When it concerns white women, who are part of the majority, who wear a headscarf—the master symbol of the ethnic, cultural, and religious Other—the discomfort only increases. These boundaries of the public sphere were not felt as strongly among Christian women, who belonged to the (largely white) majority and had options in talking or not talking about their beliefs. The argument of Göle can be applied to the position of Jewish women who adhered to the more conservative dress style, and whose public presence also disturbed the presumed secularity of the public sphere. Most Jewish women, however, passed as members of the majority and received few negative comments. However, as the examples of Judith show, this could quickly change when people found out about their Jewishness in another way. Besides negotiating the disclosing of religious symbols in public, others, particularly Muslim women, were invested in assimilation strategies to show that, contrary to public image, being Muslim did not conflict with being Dutch.

"I Am Still Dutch, of Course": Assimilation Strategies

Several scholars have noted how Muslim converts are often at the forefront of assimilation strategies (Özyürek 2014; Van Es 2019), which was confirmed by my own fieldwork and can be considered a (subconscious) strategy to talk back to Islamophobia and foster a sense of belonging. Iman, for example, stressed that "that there is nothing special about Islam, it is just very ordinary. I really try to normalise it." In this process some interlocutors made a distinction between religion (Islam) and culture (Moroccan, Turkish, Dutch, etc., see also Van Es 2019). Bushra and Dunya were particularly invested in showing that the religion of Islam did not clash with Dutch culture. To non-Muslim family and friends (and to me as a researcher), they emphasized the continuation of their Dutch selves to destabilize the idea of a neat "before" and "after" in their conversion. Bushra asserted:

> *Islam is a religion, but you have your own life too. And that is culture and that is different everywhere. But I do think Islam actually fits best with the Dutch culture. [. . .] You can adapt to a culture to a certain extent, of course, but what I mean is: You choose a religion, you do not choose a culture. I have my own culture. (Bushra)*

This might be a subconscious strategy that is a reflection of my positionality as a white non-Muslim and researcher. I am not sure whether they would give the same emphasis in conversation to their Muslim peers, but this does resonate with the findings of (Muslim) scholars Vroon-Najem (2019) and Anne Sofie Roald (2012). However, what being Dutch actually entailed, varied. Dunya mentioned her personality traits ("very direct and honest" and "a white woman's mentality") as being "typically Dutch." For Iman, food preferences were important markers of being Dutch: "I am still Dutch, of course, I still enjoy mashed potatoes and stews, with vegetarian bacon now." Being Dutch thus had multiple aspects for my interlocutors: It was a sense of belonging shaped via the body, via food, but also part of someone's attitude and personality. The tendency of white converts to normalize Islam by stressing its similarity to "Dutch culture" has the risk of downplaying the obstacles that Muslims of color encounter. The distinction between religion (true Islam) and the culture of migrant Muslim communities (which should be removed) can paradoxically reiterate a hegemonic Dutch discourse in which Muslims are excluded from symbolic national citizenship. One explanation of the trend by which white converts take center stage in assimilation processes is that many speak the language well, which can also be why they are often approached by media outlets as spokespersons for Islam. Another possible explanation might lie in the fact that white converts are quite suddenly confronted with negativity about their religion and suffer from a kind of culture shock once they live and embody the role of Other to a society that had never questioned their belonging before. Although most women opted for such an assimilation strategy, not all did. Because of the change in social status after their conversion, they did not feel fully at home in the Netherlands anymore. Hanan did not have the energy to "constantly explain myself." To return to Yara, she was

fed up with it and embraced her status as an outsider. When I asked her whether she found it important to show that she belonged, she replied:

> *No. No, thanks. In the end, hearing those things all the time, I feel distanced too and do not want to belong anyway. In some way I do not really consider myself to be part of that group either, because of the way they think 'we are like this, and you are not'. (Yara)*

Christian and Jewish women were also invested in combatting stereotypes about their religious groups, but in a different way. In one of our conversations, Christian Lisa expressed the hope that the readers of my research "won't only look at those stereotypes about Christians in the news, which shows just the bad things." She added that she hoped people would do their research to "learn what people are actually like—what God is like." None of my Christian interlocutors found it important to stress the normalcy of Christianity or its compatibility to Dutch culture. To the contrary, they explicitly framed their religion as being outside of the mainstream and as an alternative to the "worldly life of sins." Jewish women did not express such a hope for readers to convert but did wish to offer a more nuanced and positive view of what it means to be religious. Sara, to offer one example, often has conversations with others about Judaism:

> *I continue to talk about it, also to people who are not religious, about what I find special, important, about my way of life or about Judaism. And it almost never happened that this led to a negative conversation. Many people realise that it is something good to turn your phone off [on Shabbat], to be focused on each other, on food, to talk, and read and all. (Sara)*

By trying to build connections with people outside their religious community, Sara, Lisa, Iman, respectively, did their best to create a place for themselves in the Netherlands and sought to offer alternatives to existing stereotypes.

CONCLUSION: RELIGIO-RACIALIZATION AND CONVERSION

This article explored some everyday manifestations of the race–religion constellation among converted Dutch women. It builds on theoretical, conceptual, and historical scholarship that stresses the historical and continuing intersections of race and religion and criticize the supposed neutrality of white Christian/secular hegemony. Ethnographic studies can add to the existing and innovative research into the entanglements of race and religion as concepts, as structures of inequality, and in their everyday embodied implications. Specifically, I analyzed the experiences of female newcomers in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in the Netherlands. This comparative approach enables insight in similarities (such as safety concerns) and differences (such as visibility of religion) in dealing with racism. While research shows how converting to Islam intersects with race and national belonging—an argument confirmed by my research—experiences of Jewish and Christian newcomers are rarely taken into consideration from this same conceptual perspective. I consider antisemitism and Islamophobia as processes of racialization, but I also recognize that they have different histories,

take multiple forms, and have different impacts. White female converts in Islam indeed experienced processes of racialization, by which their white privilege changes. This shows how deeply intertwined the perception and experience of religion and race are, especially in the context of Islam. At the same time, they continue to be white, which makes their racialization context-depended and complex. New Jewish women had similar experiences with antisemitism, both in the perceived safety as well as in direct assaults. However, Jewish women could often pass as belonging to the majority in public and did not feel fully excluded from the symbolic Dutch nation. White women who converted to Christianity hardly ever addressed concerns with racism, which were largely absent from this group. Yet this invisibility does not mean that their whiteness is insignificant or "neutral." Rather, it is a result of the same othering mechanisms and offers a comparison with the experiences of women who became Muslim or Jewish.

The comparison of the experiences of women converting to different religious groups, each with their own history and place in the cultural archive, enables a fuller understanding of the race–religion constellation in the everyday lives of people in both majority and minority positions. These findings confirm the argument that citizenship is culturalized, reflected in the disputes around national belonging for converts. In addition to this culturalization of citizenship, my article shows the intimate connections between (assumptions about) culture, religion, and ethnic/racial otherness. It contributes to the growing field of critical theory that investigates race–religion constellations in Europe, showing how historical and conceptual patterns of exclusion in the cultural archive manifest themselves today in the everyday experiences of female converts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks Anne-Marie Korte, Katja Rakow, Maria Vliek, Marianne Moyaert, Deniz Aktaş, Luca Naus, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript.

FUNDING

This work was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) [grant numbers 360-25-170 (research); VI.VIDI.191.078 (preparing the manuscript)].

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