Religion, sexual ethics, and the politics of belonging: Young Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands

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Abstract
This article offers a comparative study of everyday sexual ethics among Dutch Sunni Muslim and evangelical Christian young adults, both those born into religious families and those converted later in life. In European public debates, the sexual values of observant Christians and – especially – observant Muslims, are commonly understood to deviate from progressive norms. Particularly for Muslims, this has become a ground for questioning their belonging to the moral nation. Our ethnographic analysis complicates these conventional representations, which are partly reflected in quantitative survey research. We argue that the sexual ethics of the young Muslims and Christians we studied are multi-layered, situational, and dialogical. Discussing the convergences and divergences between these groups, we point to a paradox: while Muslims tend to be set apart as sexually 'other', the young Christians we worked with – and to a lesser extent the converted Muslims – put strikingly more effort into distinguishing themselves from, and criticising, dominant sexual norms.

Keywords
Christianity, comparison, Islam, sexuality, the Netherlands, young adults

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Résumé

Cet article présente une étude comparative de l'éthique sexuelle chez les jeunes adultes musulmans sunnites et évangéliques chrétiens néerlandais, qu'ils soient nés dans des familles religieuses ou qu'ils se soient convertis plus tard dans la vie. Dans les débats publics européens, les valeurs sexuelles des chrétiens pratiquants et – en particulier – des musulmans pratiquants, sont généralement comprises comme s'écartant des normes progressistes. Pour les musulmans en particulier, cette situation est devenue un motif de remise en question de leur appartenance à une conception morale de la nation. Notre analyse ethnographique complexifie ces représentations conventionnelles, qui sont en partie relayées par les enquêtes quantitatives. Nous soutenons que l'éthique sexuelle des jeunes musulmans et chrétiens que nous avons étudiés est à la fois multiscalaire, situationnelle et dialogique. En discutant des convergences et des divergences entre ces groupes, nous relevons un paradoxe: alors que les musulmans ont tendance à être considérés comme sexuellement « différents », ce sont ici les jeunes chrétiens – et dans une moindre mesure les musulmans convertis – qui ont fait le plus d'efforts pour se distinguer des normes sexuelles dominantes et les critiquer.

Mots-clés

Christianisme, comparaison, Islam, jeunes adultes, Pays-Bas, sexualité

Introduction

Public debates about religion in Western Europe have increasingly centred on questions of sexuality, sexual emancipation, and gender relations. Issues such as the social position of women, sexual freedom, and homosexuality time and again feed controversies about religious groups. These debates are often based on binaries between a liberal-progressive stance towards sexuality – taken to be the secular norm – and a restrictive-conservative stance, associated with religion in general and orthodox religious communities in particular (Bracke, 2012; Mepschen et al., 2010). In the process, sexuality and gender have come to constitute not only dominant fields in which the relation between religious and secular positions are negotiated and redefined (Cady and Fessenden, 2013), but also major fault-lines in what sociologists have described as the 'culturalisation of citizenship':

> a process by which culture (emotions, feelings, norms and values, and symbols and traditions, including religion) has come to play a central role in the debate on what it means to be a citizen, either as an alternative or in addition to political, judicial and social citizenship. (Duyvendak et al., 2016: 3)

In the Netherlands, this emphasis on sexuality in debates about citizenship and belonging is related to the country's marked secular character. Protestant and Roman Catholic religion played a central role in politics, culture, and morality until the 1960s. The subsequent cultural – and perhaps before all sexual – revolution, the process of de-churching and the unhinging of religious institutions from a range of social domains, have contributed to a prevailing self-image of the Dutch as progressive, secular, and sexually liberated

(Duyvendak et al., 2016: 9–10). Religious morals are now often perceived to violate Dutch progressive sexual norms. For Muslims particularly, such perceived sexual deviancy has increasingly become a ground for questioning their integration in – and belonging to – the moral nation (Mepschen et al., 2010; cf. Rahman, 2014).

While much work has been done on critically deconstructing this mobilisation of sexuality as a tool of exclusion (e.g. Mepschen et al., 2010; Puar, 2007; Scott, 2017), less attention has been given to the question what the everyday sexual ethics of religious practitioners can tell us about these normative discourses. In this article, we focus on this question through a comparative ethnographic study of young Sunni Muslims and evangelical Christians in the Netherlands. We look at young adults aged between 18 and 28: a life phase in which questions of sexual practice and romantic relationships play an important role and in which personal convictions about sexuality become strongly defined (Yip and Page, 2013). We look at what we call 'born' Muslims and Christians (those born and raised in Muslim or Christian families, respectively) as well as those who converted later in their lives.

By concentrating not just on post-migrant Muslims, but analysing them alongside Christians of white Dutch descent, we cast a critical light on the tendency to conflate conservative sexual ethics among Muslims with a lack of integration or belonging. We show that young white Christians, whose 'Dutchness' generally goes unquestioned, share much common ground with their Muslim counterparts when it comes to the everyday articulation and negotiation of sexual values, notwithstanding significant distinctions between them. One of the most striking differences is that the young Christians with whom we conducted research expressed a particularly explicit social critique of liberal sexuality. They shared this explicitly voiced critique to some extent with white Dutch converts to Islam but less so with post-migrant, 'born' Muslims.

These findings suggest that the analysis of the culturalisation of citizenship should include not only religion but also conceptualisations of ethnicity and race (Balkenhol et al., 2016). In relation to this, we point to the crucial role of positionality in how our Muslim and Christian interlocutors relate, in divergent ways, to dominant sexual norms. In part, then, our ethnographic analysis demonstrates that the study of everyday sexual ethics in religious life asks for an intersectional approach. For another – related – part, our discussion shows that these everyday ethics are articulated through processes of moral reasoning (Lambek, 2010) that are situational, dialogical, and often characterised by ambivalence. These ethics did not simply entail the application of a universal, religiously informed, ethical blueprint to the choices our interlocutors made in their everyday lives. While authorised religious discourses informed their personal moral reflection, for the religious actors we studied, norms were negotiated and ethics were lived out in various ways. We can only offer a fragment of this broad field of experience here, focusing on particular dimensions of sexuality.

Studies of sexuality have emphasised the differences between sexual practices and representations of sexuality (e.g. Bajos and Bozon, 2012). Based on survey research in France, Maudet (2017), for example, argues that observant Muslims differ from the non-religious population in terms of both attitudes towards sexuality and sexual practices, while Catholics do so more in terms of attitudes than in terms of practices. In relation to this, a recurrent question in research on sexuality is whether what people say about their

sexuality corresponds to what they actually do. In this respect, we agree with Fidolini (2017: 7) that even if representations of sexuality differ from private practices to a degree, they are nonetheless significant because they reflect social norms that are constitutive of social interactions and self-presentations. Taking into account both sexual practices and values, we look at how our interlocutors formed, articulated, and negotiated their sexual ethics. We are particularly interested in how they did so in relation to authorised religious norms and to alternative expressions of sexuality they encountered in their everyday lives.

An ethnographic comparison of Muslim and Christian sexual ethics

Most of the existing comparative literature on sexuality among Muslims and Christians, in varied national contexts, is based on quantitative research (e.g. Adamczyk and Hayes, 2012; Koopmans, 2015; Roggemans et al., 2015). Many of these studies affirm the opposition between secular progressive and Muslim conservative values, often assigning Christians with a position in between these two. Likewise, Norris and Inglehart (2012) conclude that the basic (sexual and other) values of Muslim migrants in Western societies are located roughly in between the dominant ('egalitarian' and 'liberal') values of the societies in which they live, and the ('highly conservative') values of their Islamic countries of origin. Such results have the advantage that they can claim a measure of representativeness, are straightforward, and amenable to policy-making. Yet, based on respondents' stated opinions with regard to often rather narrowly defined questions, many of these studies – but not all (e.g. Maudet, 2017; Schnabel, 2016) – fall short of accounting for the more complex and multi-layered ways in which sexual values are experienced, mobilised, and expressed in everyday life (Schrijvers and Wiering, 2018). Moreover, they often uncritically use broad social categories and thereby tend to reflect and reproduce taken-for-granted ideas about 'ethnic minorities as forming separate groups that are sexually distinct' (Krebbekx et al., 2017: 651).

Qualitative, especially ethnographic, research has the potential not only to complement but also to add a critical perspective to this existing quantitative focus in the comparative study of religion and sexuality. Yet comparative ethnographic work on Muslims and Christians, not only on sexuality but also on other themes, has up to now been underdeveloped. The qualitative study of contemporary religion continues to be characterised by disciplinary boundaries between scholarship on different religious communities, with limited theoretical exchange between these fields (Beekers, 2014; Janson and Meyer, 2016).[1]

In what follows, we pursue an ethnographic, comparative line of inquiry by examining discourses and experiences of sexual ethics in the everyday lives of Sunni Muslim and evangelical Christian young adults in the Netherlands. We focus on particular themes that played a significant role in our fields: (1) ethical discourses on sex and sexual practice, (2) views on homosexuality, and (3) encounters with explicit sexuality in the public sphere. In the following sections, we first offer an empirical overview of these themes, before moving to a more conceptual discussion of our findings in terms of situated moral reasoning and questions of positionality. Yet we first comment on our research projects and the groups we worked with.

This article engages in a double comparison of sorts, as we juxtapose not only specific groups of Muslims and Christians, but also converted and born religious subjects. This approach is a fruit of our collaboration based on individual research projects. Daan Beekers carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the Netherlands between 2009 and 2012 among Sunni Muslims (mostly, but not exclusively, of Moroccan descent) and Protestant Christians (mostly of white Dutch descent). His interlocutors generally shared an orientation towards revivalist movements, specifically Salafi Islam and evangelical Christianity. They were between 18 and 28 years old, mostly born and raised in religious families, and included equal numbers of men and women. Beekers conducted interviews with 48 young Muslims and Christians, and undertook participant observation in a range of activities within evangelical and Islamic student associations, including Bible study groups and Islamic talks. Outside these student associations, he also conducted participant observation during church services, Friday prayers, talks in mosques and in other settings including religious conferences and festivals, as well as outreach and social activities. His research did not focus on sexuality specifically but rather on the ways in which his interlocutors pursued their religious aspirations under conditions of pluralism, moral individualism, and high capitalism (Beekers, 2015). Issues of sexuality, romantic relationships, and gender relations did however regularly come up in this regard.

In her research project on women's conversion to Pentecostal Christianity, Sunni Islam and (liberal and orthodox) Judaism, Lieke Schrijvers did explore the specific themes of gender and sexuality. She conducted fieldwork in 2017 and 2018 among Dutch women from all ages who decided to join a religious community later in life. The majority, but not all, of her interlocutors were of white Dutch descent. Schrijvers undertook participant observation in three Hillsong-affiliated Pentecostal churches (partaking in church services, religious conferences, Bible study groups, and study weekends) and attended meetings in Sunni mosques, such as lectures and study groups. All were located in cities, mainly Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht. Schrijvers also undertook in-depth interviews with 42 converted women and eight religious officials, focusing on the conversion process and religion in daily life, as well as questions of gender and sexuality. The women in the broader project had a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, and were between 18 and 72 years old. For the purpose of comparison, we limit ourselves here to Schrijvers' interlocutors between 18 and 28 who – generally in their late teens or early 20s – had converted to Pentecostalism or Sunni Islam. The latter were, to varying degrees, oriented towards reformist Islamic trends (which included but were not limited to Salafism).

While the comparison of material drawn from these individual projects on 'born' religious actors and converts, respectively, enriches our analysis, it also entails challenges and limitations. These include, first, the differences between our research sites when it comes to time, location, and the specific groups we worked with. Of particular importance here is the difference between our Christian interlocutors: while they can all be typified as 'evangelicals', those of Beekers hailed from Calvinist Protestant backgrounds, while those of Schrijvers had recently converted to Pentecostal Christianity.[2] Second, these challenges pertain to our divergent subject positions as researchers, especially in terms of gender and related to the fact that Beekers worked with both men and women, and Schrijvers with women only.[3] Third, they entail the different thematic emphases of our

research projects. Throughout the article, we address these challenges by reflecting on the ways in which they may have impacted our findings. We hold that there is sufficient common ground in our research projects for a unified analysis of Dutch evangelical and Sunni young adults, which pays explicit attention to the differences between born and converted religious actors.

The young people on whom this study is based, all of whom living in urban areas, were enrolled in – or had already completed – higher education. While their social backgrounds varied, with many of the born Muslims coming from socially disadvantaged families, their high level of education prepares them for the higher echelons of the job market. So, while class can play a (complicated) role in the articulation of sexual values and sexual tolerance (e.g. Tissot, 2014), the socio-economic differences between the groups we worked with do not seem substantial enough to explain the variation in sexual ethics between them. Although not all of Schrijvers' interlocutors identified as heterosexual, the young adults included in this article did. Beekers did not explicitly address this question, but most of his interlocutors expressed heteronormative discourses whenever issues of sexuality and relationships were discussed. Furthermore, while the majority of Beekers' interlocutors were not converts, they had commonly experienced a process of self-conscious religious revitalisation (Beekers, 2014). The young Muslims and Christians in both projects aspired to live a pious life, characterised by prayer, contemplation, and a strong personal relationship with God. Issues of sexuality played an important role in this regard.

Ethical discourses on sex and sexual practice

In the mosque classes and public talks we attended among Muslim young adults, marriage and proper relationships between men and women were much discussed. Yet, issues like homosexuality, pornography, or masturbation were very rarely addressed. In Beekers' interviews, too, these latter topics – except, in some cases, homosexuality – were hardly discussed explicitly. His young male interlocutors did regularly refer to sexual attraction and feelings of lust as their most difficult temptations in daily life. Topics of (sexual) embodiment related to ritual practice, such as the rules of ritual purification after a wet dream, were more openly talked about by both religious leaders and some of the interviewees. In Schrijvers' interviews, sexuality was often more explicitly discussed. For many of the converts, their turn to Islam implied a change in their experience, understanding, and moral assessment of sexuality. This sometimes resulted in a sharp distinction with the ways they acted or thought about sex before converting. This entailed carefully reconsidering their sexual ethics with regard to such topics as pre-marital sex, proper dress styles for women, and homosexuality. For others, Islamic sexual ethics provided a clear frame in which to express their personal views of sexuality, or their discomfort with sexual norms and practices in the broader society.

Our Muslim interlocutors and their religious leaders generally held that men and women should only interact intimately in the context of marriage. Sex was not only considered to be important for procreation, but was also given personal, relational, and spiritual significance. It was generally held that Islam did not oppose sexual pleasure, as long as it took place within the demarcated space of heterosexual marriage. These views reflected normative Islamic discourses on sexuality (Ajouaou, 2016). Their implementation

was however somewhat more ambivalent. Most of our Muslim interlocutors agreed that it was preferred not to have any sexual or romantic relations before marriage, but not all strictly followed this norm (cf. Ajouaou, 2016). Many sought to find a balance between their aspirations to live a life of Islamic piety on one hand, and to fulfil their romantic and sexual desires on the other – that is, between what Schielke (2015: 83–104) terms different 'moral registers' with regard to sexuality. Those who did have a relationship before they were married often stated that they 'guarded their boundaries', trying to avoid sexual intercourse or any form of physical contact. Some of our interlocutors, both converts and non-converts, did have a pre-marital relationship but decided to end it, or to get married, after they became (more) religiously committed. As a 26-year-old convert put it, 'Me and my [Muslim] boyfriend also had a relationship before we got married. Yeah, we even lived together. But when I converted, I felt the need to marry, because it didn't feel right anymore'.

Many converted women did have sexual relations before they became Muslim. Despite the widespread belief that conversion entailed forgiveness of prior sins, these past experiences fuelled doubts about their eligibility – as non-virgins – to marry a Muslim partner.[4] Interestingly, but beyond the scope of this article, Schrijvers only observed such doubts among some of the young adults in her fieldwork, in contrast to the older converted women she spoke with.

The question of avoiding any form of physical contact between men and women, in particular, was a cause of negotiation. When it came to Islamic norms not to shake hands of members of the opposite sex, our interlocutors often made concessions in their interaction with non-Muslims. The pressure to do so is especially present in the Netherlands, where not shaking hands with members of the opposite sex has become a charged political issue allegedly denoting Muslims' lack of 'integration' (Fadil, 2009). Many of our interlocutors emphasised the notion of 'intention' in this regard. Some, for example, regarded shaking the hand of a non-Muslim colleague as unproblematic when it was part of general courtesy norms. Others struggled with this question, like a 23-year-old student and converted Muslim whom Schrijvers interviewed:

> Imagine that you're going for a job interview and you are eager to get the job . . . and then a male employer wouldn't appreciate it if you reject his hand. So I'm like . . . what would I do in that case? That's quite difficult.

In addition, some converted women preferred not to socialise with male friends anymore, and equally expected their partners not to have female friends. Beekers' interviews with Muslim students often took place in rooms at a university. Some of his female interlocutors told him that it was religiously forbidden to be in a room alone with a man outside of their family circle (*mahram*). Nevertheless, they felt that their participation in the interview was justified by the academic purpose of the meeting.

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Unlike the Muslim settings in which we conducted fieldwork, issues such as pre-marital sex, pornography, and homosexuality were often explicitly addressed in the evangelical

student associations and church groups in which we participated (cf. Derks et al., 2014). In the bi-weekly Bible study group (*kring*) that Beekers attended at an evangelical student association in Rotterdam, for example, one of the standard set of questions with regard to lifestyle and sins that the group members could choose to answer was:

> Have you committed sins in the field of sexuality? Have you exposed yourself to any kind of explicit sexual content or have you allowed your thoughts to dwell on sexual phantasies? In what way does God continue to lead you towards a holy life and a pure heart in this regard?

While the participants usually appeared to avoid answering this set of questions, it demonstrates how these Christian young adults were stimulated to share their experiences in matters of sexuality. Likewise, during a weekend for newcomers to a Pentecostal church that Schrijvers attended, participants joined in a ritual to redeem their sins. The list of possible sins provided to all participants included – but was not limited to – lustfulness, masturbation, flirting, pornography, adultery, prostitution, and dreaming of sexual intercourse with someone other than your husband or wife. At the same church, the services of a full month were dedicated to the topic of marriage.

Sexual temptation was also addressed in many of our one-to-one conversations and interviews with Christian young adults. Several (non-converted) young men talked about their struggles with watching pornography on the Internet. A member of an evangelical student association in Rotterdam was troubled that he sometimes watched 'videos' online, because he could not 'share this with God' and it 'made him dirty'. He found it difficult to ask God for forgiveness after watching sexually explicit videos, but when he once did so right away, he said, it had felt 'really fantastic', 'as if a fresh wind of the Spirit blew right through me'. In Christian talks, such encounters with explicit sexual content were often mentioned as opportunities to 'choose for one's faith', as opposed to giving in to temptation.

Our Christian interlocutors neither sought to maintain a general segregation between men and women, nor did they have problems with giving a handshake or hug to someone of the opposite sex. At the same time, interactions between men and women were based on assumptions of heteronormativity and directed towards marriage. The female converts to Pentecostal Christianity often talked about following God's path as a woman and striving to build a family life. All sexual relations not directed towards these aims were generally seen as deviating from God's path and were therefore regarded as sinful. In practice, however, both our born and converted Christian interlocutors were ambivalent about pre-marital sex. Some told us that they had sex with their partners to whom they were not married, sometimes arguing that this was proper because they were already (planning to be) engaged. Some emphasised that pre-marital sex was acceptable as long as it was based on spiritual love and trust between partners. Many others explicitly rejected pre-marital sex, but differed from one another in what this entailed. A student from Rotterdam told Beekers that he and his girlfriend consciously chose not to have sex before they were married. Yet, they wrestled with the question where they should draw the line: 'Uhm, no sex before being married, that's very simple, that's about sexual intercourse (*geslachtsgemeenschap*). But what is excluded? That's something I have never heard a straightforward answer to'. For this couple having no sexual contact meant,

as they phrased it themselves (in English): 'no hands in the pants'. This kind of moral deliberation about proper pre-marital sexual acts was common among our Christian interlocutors involved in romantic relationships.

Most of the women who did have sexual relations before their conversion to Pentecostal Christianity were, unlike some of the younger Muslim converts, not troubled by this. Some said they simply 'didn't know any better' at the time. Or as a single woman put it, 'I used to do that too, flirting, being with guys. I just didn't know that there was something else to fill that emptiness inside of me, so I turned to men'. Because conversion was understood to entail the redemption of previous sexual sins, these prior sexual relations were not perceived as problematic. Moreover, in Hillsong churches, everyone is expected to redeem sins, and changes in sexual behaviour (from, for example 'having multiple partners' to 'being in Christ') could even be celebrated as examples of true conversion. In contrast with some of our Muslim interlocutors, virginity itself seemed less of an issue: the emphasis was put on one's intention and 'cleanness' of heart and spirit before marriage.

Ambivalent stances on homosexuality

While homosexuality was rarely a topic of discussion in the public settings our Muslim interlocutors attended, the topic did occasionally come up in our interviews. Several of our interviewees pointed out that they were regularly confronted with this topic by non-Muslims. Particularly Schrijvers' converted interviewees addressed homosexuality at length, often raising the issue themselves. These women were generally raised in non-religious environments in which, in their recollection, explicit rejection of homosexual acts was rare. Conversion often prompted their non-Muslim family members and friends to question whether they had 'turned against' homosexuality – a particularly striking illustration of the way 'sexular' thinking, in which homophobia is linked with Islam, can become 'part and parcel of "lived worlds"' (Verkaaik and Spronk, 2011: 84). Some converts had indeed changed their ideas about homosexuality. A female university graduate said,

> My views [on homosexuality] changed quite a lot. I considered it to be normal before, but now I do view it as something which to me, in my view, is not right. Because I just believe that a man and woman are made for one another, and not a man and man, or woman and woman.

The emphasis put here on one's personal 'view' is characteristic for the way the Muslim converts spoke about topics like this. They were often careful to stress that they expressed their personal views and did not necessarily represent the broader community.

Many of our interlocutors shared a multi-layered argument with respect to homosexuality. On one hand, they said that everyone should determine for themselves how they want to live their lives. As a, Muslim born, female student whom Beekers interviewed in Rotterdam put it, 'they should do whatever makes them feel good'. On the other hand, they did point out that homosexuality was not permissible in Islam. The same student mentioned that if one of her Muslim friends would be homosexual, she would remind her of 'the rules of the religion'. For her, these rules implied that although one

may fall in love with someone of the same sex, one should not 'act' on these feelings, that is, engage in sexual practices. Falling in love with someone of the same sex, she thought, is a test of God. This distinction between feelings and practices was more widely shared among our interlocutors. Again, this was mainly directed at fellow Muslims. While this rejection of homosexual practices reflects normative Islamic discourses (Rahman, 2014), it seems that our interlocutors adhered to these primarily with regard to fellow believers, while articulating other normative registers (such as tolerance for sexual diversity) in relation to non-Muslims.

This affected how converts responded to LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people in their direct environment. A student from Rotterdam who became a Muslim at the age of 15, for example, noted that while the lesbian relationship of her mother is not allowed 'according to Islam', she personally rejected neither her mother nor her partner. She emphasised that one of the most important Islamic values is to respect and care for other people, one's parents in particular. To her, this implied accepting different perspectives on homosexuality. Here we see how moral deliberation might involve negotiation not only between religious and other kinds of normative registers but also between different norms drawn from Islam. This outcome relieved the mother, who had worried that her daughter would no longer accept her relationship after she had become a Muslim. When young Muslims had questions about this issue, they often searched out online discussion platforms or individual Muslim friends, but more rarely brought up the topic during public events.

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During our fieldwork among Christian young adults, the theme of homosexuality was regularly addressed. In the evangelical student association in Rotterdam, for example, people often brought up the question how one could follow God's will as a homosexual Christian. Similar to the Muslim young adults, homosexuality was often perceived as a test of God: our Christian interlocutors generally made a distinction between the feelings one has for someone of the same sex and how one decides to act on those feelings. A commonly shared view was that homosexuality should not be 'practiced'. Accordingly, and echoing statements of several orthodox Protestant theologians on the issue (Derks et al., 2014: 48), some of our interlocutors expressed their appreciation for Christian homosexuals in their social circles who consciously chose a single and celibate life.

In the Pentecostal churches attended by Schrijvers, homosexuality – in contrast to themes such as sexuality within marriage, masturbation, flirting, and pornography – was rarely discussed in public. It was mainly addressed implicitly by advocating sexual contact only between married, heterosexual couples. A possible explanation could be that the explicit rejection of homosexuality is by and large off-limits in the Dutch urban spaces in which these churches are located. Some of the pastors told Schrijvers that while newcomers in church often raise questions about homosexuality, 'sensitive topics' like this could be better addressed in personal conversations and smaller Bible study group than in the services. In these more intimate contexts, a discourse circulated in which homosexual behaviour was rejected because it did not align with the heteronormative, procreation-based sexual ethics of the church. For the converts, this could imply a

difficult change in perspective. In one Bible study group with young women that Schrijvers attended, for example, a converted young woman asked about the church's view on homosexuality, noting that she personally thought that 'God loves everyone, and I can't imagine that God didn't mean for a loving relationship to happen. It's not a disease or something'. The group leader, a 23-year-old Pentecostal woman, agreed that 'God loves everyone', but continued,

> But if you take a look at the Bible, it very clearly states that homosexuality is a sin. And it very clearly states that God loves the sinner, but hates the sin. And I also think that, yeah, you know, it's not a disease of course, so healing [*genezing*] is not the right term . . . but I do think it can be remedied [*verholpen*].

The convert thought this was 'quite harsh' and pointed out that homosexuality is not a choice. Noting that this is 'a difficult subject', the group leader said, 'I see this quite plain and simple actually: something is a sin or something isn't. [. . .] But that doesn't mean He doesn't love people, because God loves all sinners, and all people are with sin'.

On one hand, this exchange exposes a rather uncompromising view on homosexuality among Pentecostal church leaders (that differed from the discourses in the evangelical settings Beekers studied). On the other hand, the discussion demonstrates that the views on homosexuality varied among individual converts. Furthermore, there might be Bible group leaders who individually disagreed with this perspective but refrained from questioning the views of the pastors while speaking to church members.

Encountering explicit sexuality in the public sphere

Muslim young adults often brought up their struggles with the presence of explicit sexuality in the public sphere. Especially the young men (in Beekers' research) talked about their constant confrontation with explicit sexual images shown on, for instance, public advertorials. Thus, one student from Rotterdam recounted that when he arrived on Amsterdam Airport after conducting a pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina, the first thing he saw was a billboard displaying women in lingerie. Having barely arrived from these holy Islamic places, this was 'quite a shock' for him. It made him realise he had to 're-adjust' to being back in the Netherlands. A student in Islamic spiritual care from Amsterdam talked about similar struggles and explained how prayer helped him to deal with these:

> You see a lot of nudity on the streets, on billboards too you know, lingerie advertisements, those kinds of things. [. . .] And at some point, when you are outdoors for a long time, you've done so many of those things that you feel very heavy and dirty. Then you long for prayer to become clean again, to take it off of you again. You see. And then you *really* feel very good again.

This quote shows not only that young Muslim men experienced confrontations with explicit sexual images as an assault on their personal piety. It also demonstrates how such confrontations stimulated them to invest in worship practices as a means of alleviating the burden of perceived sins (cf. Beekers, 2015).

While they talked about the temptations of other sources of explicit sexuality, such as pop music, born Muslim women did not seem to worry about the public presence of sexual images, including those depicting men, as much as the men did (it is however possible that they did experience temptation but were taken aback to share this with Beekers as a male researcher). Similar to the discourse on non-Muslim homosexuals, some connected this to personal freedoms in a pluralist society. A female student from Rotterdam told Beekers with regard to advertorials, 'I may choose to walk around in a headscarf, she may choose to wear her bikini'. With some exceptions, these women hardly articulated a social critique of explicit sexuality in public. Neither did the non-converted men, who mainly spoke about it as a source of personal temptation.

By contrast, the converted Muslim women regularly criticised the position of women's bodies in broader society. Many felt that in their non-religious urban environments, sexuality has become a commodity and lost its spiritual significance. As a convert in her late 20s put it,

> Faith gives us guidelines on how things should be. But because we see [faith] as something foreign in the Netherlands, we think such guidelines are strange. [. . .] You see, it's not a positive thing, to be looked at, to start feeling insecure, and to believe that everyone should be naked all the time. It's very misogynistic that you're always seen as a sex object here! Because that's what men do, and women don't even realise it!

Both the female converts and born Muslims described wearing loose clothing and a *hijab* in terms of the protection and safeguarding of women's bodies. The converts, however, also more commonly framed wearing a hijab as a withdrawal from the sexualisation of women. As a student from Rotterdam remarked 'Not to play along with the sexualisation, I think that's quite a feminist act, don't you think?'

A reason for this more explicit political position among the converted women may be that their conversion generally entailed acquiring a sexual ethics that partly conflicts with the morals they were raised with. Another reason may be that some did have sexual partners and wore revealing clothing before their turn to Islam, or might have felt uncomfortable with the gender norms and expectations they were raised with. As their conversion was accompanied by a modest dress code, they were often confronted with critical questions from their non-Muslim friends and family, on top of their own self-reflections. By framing Islamic dress as a feminist act, they countered the idea that their embrace of Islam implied forsaking the benefits of women's emancipation.[5] Apart from such discursive strategies, however, their social criticism was also motivated by a spiritual desire to define womanhood in ways not determined by the sexualisation and commodification of female bodies, but in ways protected by religious codes and guidelines.

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Like the young Muslims, our Christian interlocutors talked about their recurrent confrontations with explicit sexuality in the public sphere, including public advertorials, music videos, movies, literature, and TV-series. They generally sought to avoid input

that would potentially invoke sexual feelings and thereby move them away from what they regarded as God's intentions. This particularly concerned content that, in their view, objectified women or promoted sexual permissiveness. The converted women felt particularly exposed to sinful seductions because of their non-religious social circles and their personal experiences before converting, which they often characterised as more sexually permissive, or 'loose'.

We were struck by the ways in which these young Christians set out to very explicitly distinguish themselves from the sexual ethics they associated with mainstream culture. For instance, the members of the evangelical student association in Rotterdam distanced themselves emphatically from secular fraternities by emphasising their own more cautious engagement with sex. Secular fraternities, they sometimes pointed out, were worlds of 'one-night stands'. The converted Christians similarly voiced strong objections to brief sexual relations and (non-Christian) dating apps.

By making these moral distinctions, these young Christians did not only seek to buttress their personal piety but also formulated an explicit critique of what they regarded as mainstream sexual ethics. One of the standard questions in Beekers' interviews was, 'Are there any things in our society that, based on your convictions, you really have difficulties with?' A large majority of his Christian interlocutors answered by referring to sexuality, or what they called 'the sexualisation of our society'. A young, female Christian nurse from Rotterdam, for instance, responded by saying,

> Sexualisation, I think. That, uhm, there is so much focus on free sex and such things [. . .]. I do also see this as something that can destroy society, to put it that way. If there are no more stable families, of love and fidelity, and if everyone is getting divorced and so on (I'm just exaggerating for a moment here), than society will become very unstable.

To compare, almost none of Beekers' Muslim interlocutors gave a similar answer to the same question. In their replies, they mainly referred to the intolerance they encountered as Muslims in Dutch society.

In the light of today's negative political climate regarding Islam, it is not surprising that Muslims worry more about intolerance than about sexual permissiveness. It is however striking that, compared to our Christian interlocutors, these (non-converted) Muslim young adults only rarely voiced an explicit social critique of sexual norms in broader society. They seemed to be mostly concerned with the way the temptations evoked by explicit expressions of sexuality endangered their personal piety. While our Christian interlocutors worried about temptation as well, they also articulated an explicit social critique of (what they considered to be) dominant sexual morals.

Everyday sexual ethics compared

The young Muslims and Christians with whom we worked all faced, and often grappled with, questions of sex and sexuality. Yet, even though their moral views on intimate and sensitive issues around sexuality broadly converged, the young Christians tended to discuss them more openly than the young Muslims. The converted Muslims were located somewhere in between these two positions, since these kinds of topics were rarely

addressed within their mosque communities but more commonly in private conversations. Another notable difference was the stronger ideals of gender segregation and the avoidance of physical and sexual contact between men and women among our Muslim research participants, as compared to the Christians. If one focuses on these differences, one could argue that these young Muslims took up a more conservative position than the young Christians towards sexual values and conducts. This interpretation would confirm the perception of Muslims as the prime exception to 'mainstream' sexual morality. Yet the fuller story that emerges from our ethnographies complicates this picture.

In spite of the differences already mentioned, the reflections and ethics with regard to sexuality among our Muslim and Christian interlocutors overlapped to a large extent. Members of both groups opposed the – in their eyes – permissive and explicit expressions of sexuality in the public domain. These were seen as both immoral and dangerously tempting. Young men, in particular, talked about their daily struggles with seductive sexual images. They felt that such confrontations moved them away from God. Yet, they also saw these as opportunities to confirm and strengthen their piety by resisting temptation, asking God for forgiveness, and investing in worship practices. Next to this, both the young Muslims and Christians pursued a personal sexual ethics that entailed restricting or avoiding sexual contact outside of marriage. Many of our Muslim interlocutors even considered any kind of romantic relationship prior to marriage inappropriate (although not all abstained from it).

Furthermore, the Christians and Muslims we met generally shared a disapproval of homosexuality. While they commonly did not condemn people with homosexual desires, many did reject sexual acts with someone of the same sex. A nuance that came out of our data, which is often overlooked in quantitative studies, is that homosexual acts were particularly condemned with regard to fellow believers rather than non-believers. As Bos and Bouchtaoui (2010: 282) have remarked, this divergent moral evaluation may enhance the acceptance of non-religious LGBTQ people but at the same time limit that of Christian and Muslim LGBTQs. Be that as it may, this comparative finding suggests that it is highly problematic to portray Muslims as the singular exception in an otherwise gay-tolerant society, setting them apart as 'flawed' moral citizens.

On a more general level, the common ground between our Muslim and Christian research participants also concerned the nature of their everyday sexual ethics. These tended to be heterogeneous and situational, rather than stable and one-directional. Our interlocutors' ethical decisions were characterised by constant negotiations, for example, when the young Muslims determined whether or not to shake hands, or the young Christians set the limits of pre-marital sexual contact. These negotiations entailed moral deliberations based on such factors as social context, personal intentions, divergent moral expectations (of fellow believers and others), and distinctions between feelings and practices (in the assessment of homosexuality, for instance).[6] These deliberations often also involved negotiating between different 'moral registers' (Schielke, 2015: 53), such as the ideals of religious piety and those of romantic love. These negotiations may be partly influenced by our interlocutors' education within urban spaces, in which a variety of moral views tend to come together.

Our interlocutors' sexual ethics, then, involved ongoing acts of moral reasoning and decision-making. In the expanding field of the anthropology of ethics, scholars have

highlighted 'ordinary' people's capacity to make balanced judgements that suit the immediate circumstances (e.g. Jouili, 2015; Lambek, 2010). In a similar vein, we argue that while stated values such as those recorded in quantitative studies of religion and sexuality tend to appear relatively unambiguous, the everyday sexual ethics articulated by our interlocutors were rather characterised by ambivalence, negotiation, and contextual assessment. Moreover, these sexual ethics were highly dialogical by nature: many of our interlocutors' discourses and practices regarding sexuality were formed in relation to the conception of a 'sexual otherwise', particularly that of a more permissive, and allegedly less moral, secular realm.

Social critique and moral distinction

It is with regard to this dialogical character of sexual ethics that we identified a striking divergence between our born Muslim, converted Muslim, and Christian interlocutors. Our born Muslim interlocutors primarily articulated their sexual ethics in the context of their attempts at attaining a pious life and striving towards rightfulness and purity, both as individuals and as a community. While this was important for our Christian interlocutors too, they also approached sexual ethics as grounds of moral distinction and social critique. Christian young adults tended to foreground issues of sexuality when they talked about their faith, invoking their sexual values as a means to distinguish themselves from secular peers and wider society. They also articulated explicit criticisms of the predominance of explicit and permissive expressions of sexuality – or what they often referred to as the 'sexualisation of society'. While the born Muslims pursued a sexual ethics that differed from the widespread norms of liberal sexuality, they seldom explicitly emphasised this difference and rarely criticised wider society for its sexual norms. Such critique was more commonly expressed among the converted Muslims, albeit primarily in the individual conversations we had with them. In the light of public discourses in which Muslims in particular are framed as deviating from dominant sexual norms, it is remarkable that the young Christians with whom we worked, more than the young Muslims, strove to emphatically distinguish themselves from the 'mainstream' in terms of sexuality.

In part, this divergence between our Christian and (particularly born) Muslim interlocutors may be explained by long-standing anxieties regarding sexual desire in Christian traditions, probably expressed most strongly today by conservative evangelicals (Kamitsuka, 2010). Yet, we suggest there is also a particular social dynamic at play concerning our interlocutors' position in wider Dutch society. Among the evangelical and Pentecostal groups we worked with, we discerned an underlying, often implicit, worry about the extent to which they were different from their secular peers when it came to their moral conduct and outlook. In her study of evangelicals in London, Anna Strhan (2015) similarly shows that these Christians recognise that they are 'shaped by the same moral currents as those they seek to be different from'. As a result, 'the lines marking them out as different are fragile', encouraging them to 'stake out symbolic moral boundaries of distinctiveness' (p. 169). For our Christian interlocutors, we argue, sexuality provided a relatively clear-cut domain to set apart their views and behaviours from those of their secular peers (cf. Schnabel, 2016).

Such needs of re-affirming one's moral distinctiveness were less prominent among our Muslim interlocutors, who tended to be always already perceived as 'other' in widespread public discourses – and who themselves also regularly positioned Islam in opposition to 'Dutch culture'. Faced with prevalent perceptions of Muslims as sexually deviating, they generally did not invest in foregrounding the differences between their sexual ethics and those prevailing in the wider society. We suggest that this is connected to what Margaretha van Es terms the 'dynamics between stereotyping and self-representation' (2016: 5ff). Van Es has shown that Dutch and Norwegian women with a Muslim background respond, for an important part, to stereotypical and exclusionary representations by constructing alternative images of themselves that are aimed at affirming their belonging to society, 'trying to resist being construed as an Other and negotiating the boundaries drawn between "us" and "them"' (2016: 302). Likewise, in the light of dominant discourses that single out Muslims as exceptions to the assumed norm of progressive sexuality, our Muslim interlocutors seemed to opt for de-emphasising, or even downplaying, the contrast between themselves and prevailing norms. We suggest that this stance is informed by their position as young Muslims who were born and raised in the Netherlands, but often did not feel accepted within wider society. The situation is different for other groups of Muslims, such as converts to Islam or recent Muslim immigrants, who may be less inclined to de-emphasise their sexual distinctiveness (cf. Fidolini, 2017, on recent immigrants).

Conceptions of ethnicity/race play an important role in this regard. Because the Christians were generally considered to be part of the white majority population, their digression from dominant norms did usually not provoke questions about their belonging to the Dutch nation. For our Muslim interlocutors, it did (cf. Beekers, 2014: 77). In this context, it was less risky for the young Christians to foreground their sexual otherness. The converted Muslims took up a complicated position in this regard. Those considered in this study were young women of white Dutch descent and hence perceived to be part of the majority population. Socialised in white, non-Muslim environments, they had not grown up experiencing similar processes of othering as born Muslims. At the same time, after turning to Islam, they often experienced exclusionary processes of 'ethnicisation' or 'racialisation', whereby their Dutchness came to be questioned in public encounters. This is particularly the case for female converts wearing a *hijab* (cf. Vroon-Najem, 2014). The effects of this on their outspokenness regarding sexual issues could work two ways. That they seemed to question prevalent sexual norms more explicitly than the born Muslims in our study may suggest that they faced less uncertainty regarding their symbolic citizenship than the latter. Personal circumstances of the converted Muslims in our study also played an important role: they often felt the need to justify their religious choices to non-Muslim family and friends, who worried that the young women gave up parts of their sexual freedom.

This article has, on one hand, complicated the picture of Muslims as the unequivocal sexual 'other' to a progressive mainstream. It has done so by delineating the common ground between our Muslim and Christian interlocutors with regard to sexual ethics and by showing that such everyday ethics do not simply reflect religious blueprints but are rather contextual and, often, ambivalent. On the other hand, it has shown the importance of an intersectional analysis by taking into account sexuality, religion, and ethnicity/race in an attempt to grasp the relations between sexual ethics and the politics of belonging.

Our reflection on these relations invites new comparative questions on the dynamics between religious ethics, secular discourses, and the politics of representation.

Notes

1. Notable exceptions of qualitative comparative work on sexuality and gender among Muslims and Christians in Europe include the work by Yip and Page (2013) and Nyhagen and Halsaa (2016). In the Netherlands, some policy-oriented studies based on comparative qualitative research look specifically at the acceptance of homosexuality and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people (Huijnk, 2014; Keuzenkamp, 2010).
2. While an issue of scholarly debate, Pentecostalism is commonly categorised as part of the broader evangelical movement (Klaver, 2011: 44–45).
3. We have not conducted the research that would enable us to make decisive conclusions about the impact of our gender on the research findings, which would, for example, include re-interviewing each other's interviewees. Whenever we expect that our subject positions – in terms of gender, our ethnicity/race (white), and age (late 20s at the time of the fieldwork) – may have influenced our findings, we make this explicit.
4. Some women met their now-husband in the trajectory to conversion, but no one stated that their partner was the primary motivation to convert. Most began to implement Islam in their daily lives when they were not involved in a romantic relationship.
5. As Jouili (2015) and Van Es (2016) show, such reflections on feminism and Islam are shared by non-converted Muslim women across Europe. There is a large body of research on the alleged opposition between orthodox forms of religion (particularly Islam) and women's emancipation, critically addressing particularistic and exclusivist secular conceptions of womanhood (cf. Bracke, 2008; Mahmood, 2005).
6. For similar analyses of situational moral assessments among Muslims, see Kloos (2018) and Liberatore (2017).

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