Creating a Female Islamic Space

Piety, Islamic knowledge and religious authority among Born-Muslims and converts to Islam in the Netherlands and Belgium

Sahar Noor

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door

Sahar Noor
geboren op 14 april 1983
te Kabul (Afghanistan)

For my daughters Ranna and Hila

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Note on transliteration

For the transliterations of Arabic words I have followed a simplified version of the rules laid out in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) for transcribing words in Modern Standard Arabic. I have not used diacritics; only ʿ (ʿayn-ع) and ʾ (hamza) are distinguished.

Introduction

It was the fifth of December in the winter of 2010, a cold, cloudy day, in the south of the Netherlands. It was not just an ordinary day, as it was the day on which the feast of St Nicolas (*Sinterklaas)* was being celebrated. For Dutch people this is an important annual festival. A day on which families and friends give each other surprise gifts. The gifts are bought weeks prior to the event and much time and effort is spent on writing the accompanying small poems. Walking past the typically Dutch brick houses and glancing into their brightly lit living rooms, I noticed that family and friends had gathered and the children were in a cheerful mood. As I witnessed how this national festival was been celebrated in a picturesque Dutch village, I moved along to step into another Dutch world.

I entered the female space of a mosque in which Muslim women of a "sister group" had organized a "sister day"; a day that involved listening to lectures, praying together, acquiring Islamic knowledge and sharing religious experiences. Above all, it was a sister day through which pious Muslim women strengthen their bond with Allah and with each other.[1] The sister group used the female space of this particular mosque as it offered accommodation for over eighty women. They attended the gathering fully covered in black and dark blue *hijab,*[2] *khimar,*[3] *abaya*[4] plus a few in *niqab.*[5] They were from diverse ethnicities. The women of Moroccan background combined their *hijabs* and *khimars* with trendy handbags from brand-names such as Burberry, Dolce & Gabbana and Gucci. Their Somali-Dutch sisters wore black satin *abaya.* The blue-eyed *hijabi*[6] converts were perhaps most noticeable. Often as a group, but in a few cases, alone, they were attempting to meet fellow sisters-in-Islam

On this day, just as most Dutch people were happily celebrating the feast of St Nicolas, these women were also excited and cheerful about experiencing Muslim sisterhood. This sisterhood was symbolized by the prayer "I love you for the sake of Allah." The implication of this prayer was that they loved each other not because of their personalities or friendships, but because they shared the common goal of dedicating themselves to God. They strove for an unconditional surrender to Allah, commitment to Islam and ultimately to enter paradise in the Hereafter that they viewed as the final reward. These sisters formed a community of Muslim believers who were devoted to leading a pious life. On this particular day, I finally understood

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1   I use the words Allah and God interchangeably.
2   The veil with which a Muslim woman covers her hair, but leaves her face exposed.
3   A scarf or single piece of cloth which is long enough to cover the hair and the upper body.
4   A cloak, or a loose over-garment. It is basically a robe-like dress which covers the whole body.
5   A veil that covers the head, face and torso.
6   Women who wear the *hijab* were commonly called *hijabi* by my interlocutors.

that cultivating piety in sister groups contributes to the preservation of these pious women's faith. By praising Allah in unison, they achieve a "sky-high *iman*" as one of the women said.[7] A religious boost which fueled their aspirations for piety.

In sister gatherings, debates were waged about how to live piously. During this particular gathering, an interesting discussion evolved about how to be active in society without forfeiting piety. For instance, how far should a Muslim woman go to find employment? A young girl with a Moroccan migrant background explained that, despite her university degree, she could not find a job because employers always asked her to take off her headscarf if she wanted to work for them. She refused and, as a consequence, she had been unemployed for over a year. Many other participants related to her story and explained how they had also experienced discrimination on account of their headscarf.

Another Born-Muslim took a different stance on this matter and averred that a woman did not have to search for a job in the first place. She argued that, according to the tenets of Islam, her father, brother or husband has the responsibility of taking care of her financially. Therefore, women should focus on their religious duties towards Allah instead of "wasting" their time searching for employment. The discussion grew more heated and different opinions could be heard among the crowd. A few agreed, but the majority disagreed. "On what do you base your arguments, Sister?"; "Islam encourages us women to study, learn and become educated; not to sit at home!" and "Khadija, may Allah be pleased with her, earned her own income. Why shouldn't we?"[8] were samples of the opinions expressed by different Muslim women. The question of the role of women in society became the center of their discussions. To support their arguments, the women referred to verses in the Qurʾan, the Prophetical Traditions (*ahadith*) and to the deeds of historical Muslim women. Their discussion continued until the sister day had drawn to a close and the women performed the evening prayer together.

In the eyes of many non-Muslims, these pious Muslim women are considered un-emancipated, oppressed, fundamentalists or extremists. However, the story presented here shows the complexity of Islamic discourses articulated by pious Muslim women in Europe. It shows how Islam is being interpreted and reconfigured. Pious Muslim women are actively molding Islam and giving their religion new meanings within a European context. They engage in lively debates about what is and is not

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7   *Iman* in Arabic means faith or trust.
8   Khadija bint Khuwaylid was the first wife of the Prophet Muhammad and the first person to convert to Islam.

Islamic behavior; they interpret and re-interpret religious dogma and search for ways to implement them in their daily lives. This process elucidates an intellectual enterprise of women shaping their religion to suit their needs and personal demands. This also means that they have to face questions to which they not always have answers, or experience phases of confusion and religious ambiguities they cannot always solve. Nevertheless, they state that they need Islam to structure their daily lives, to assign meaning to their pasts and to be imbued with hope and motivation for their future. Islam ties in with every aspect of their lives.

1.1. Research background, aims and questions

To gain insight into the discourses and practices of pious Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium, this dissertation examines the process of piety cultivation in "sister groups." I shall refer to these groups as pious circles for women and refer to the women attending them as participants.[9] In this research, I focus on the forms of piety, individual and collective, that have taken root in the Netherlands and Belgium and shed light on the way women give meaning to Islam.

I have chosen to study Belgium (Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part) and the Netherlands as both countries - also called the "Low Countries" - have a common identity marked by a shared history, culture, institutions and language. For instance, Belgium's history is intertwined with the history of the Netherlands because, in different periods, Belgium was a part of Dutch territory. Consequently, both share a common language: Dutch in the Netherlands and - known as - Flemish in Belgium.[10] Both countries have a separation of church and state, neutrality of the state towards religions and freedom of religion and belief. Moreover, both countries have a constitutional monarchy. An important difference between the countries is that in Belgium, Roman Catholicism is traditionally the majority religion, whereas in the Netherlands, for a long time religious adherence was divided between Roman Catholics and Protestants.[11] Nowadays, both countries are experiencing secularization and a pluralization of religious beliefs. These commonalities between the countries make it possible to discover commonalities and contrasts between the pious circles in the

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9   There are also many pious circles for men only. However, in this study I have focused on pious circles for women.

10   The majority of Dutch-speaking Flemings in Belgium live in the north of the country and the French-speaking Walloons in the south.

11   See also Bernard A. Cook, *Belgium: A history* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002); Lieve Gevers, "Catholicism in the Low Countries During the Second World War. Belgium and the Netherlands: a Comparative Approach," In: *Religion Under Siege: The Roman Catholic Church in occupied Europe (1939-1950)* (eds.) Lieve Gevers & Jan Bank (Leuven: Peters, 2007), pp. 205-242 and Shadid, W., & Van Koningsveld, P. S., *Islam in Nederland en België. Religieuze institutionalisering in twee landen met een gemeenschappelijke voorgeschiedenis* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008).

Netherlands and Belgium. Furthermore, this comparative - qualitative - approach makes it possible to obtain insights into developments towards a 'European Islam.'[12]

In a broad perspective, 'European Islam' simply means Islam - Muslims - *in* Europe.[13] In this dissertation, I understand 'European Islam' to have a context-oriented nature, meaning that the religious beliefs and practices that are shaped by Muslim women are explicitly related to their European - secular - contexts. Consequently, specific religious knowledge and practices are produced in response to local needs and adapted to a Dutch or Flemish setting. Furthermore, I argue that my interlocutors' approach in the study of Islam and its sources is also 'European.' I shall highlight the relevance of religious individualization and autonomy, which I consider a part of European tradition, as important features in the women's study of Islam.

Importantly, the study and dissemination of Islamic knowledge takes place in the Dutch and Flemish languages, and in pious circles in which native Dutch and Flemish converts to Islam also participate. Hence, in these settings Islam is not only studied in Europe, in a European context, in a European language, and within a European tradition - of religious individualization and autonomy - but also *with* native Europeans who have become Muslims. These European characteristics are not present in pious circles in which the main spoken language is for instance Arabic or Turkish, and in which converts - for this very reason - are usually not part of these circles. Consequently, I shall illuminate how Muslim beliefs and practices and modes of religiosity are being transformed among Muslim women in these European societies.[14]

The focus of this study is Muslim women's discourses on piety, knowledge and religious authority. Research for my master thesis aroused my curiosity to do research in this field.[15] In my master thesis, I studied how historical Muslim women have inspired contemporary Muslim women and I came across themes that were of great importance to the female Muslim interlocutors studied. The women I studied participated in pious circles or Muslim - women's - organizations. Among them, there was

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12   See also Tariq Modood, Anna Triandafyllidou & Ricard Zapata-Barrero (eds.), *Multiculturalism, Muslims and Citizenship: A European Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

13   See also Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Samir Amghar, Amel Boubekeur & Michael Emerson (eds.) *European Islam: Challenges for Public Policy and Society* (Brussels: Centre For European Policy Studies, 2007) and Jocelyne Cesari (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of European Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

14   I will come back to various other reasons for studying the Netherlands and Belgium in Section 1.6. 'The Dutch and Flemish context.'

15   Sahar Noor, Religious role models of contemporary Muslim women: Historical Muslim women as a source of inspiration for the emancipation of Muslim women in the Netherlands, (Master thesis: Radboud University Nijmegen, 2008).

a Dutch convert connected to the Muslim women's foundation *al-Nisa*, the oldest Dutch Muslim women's organization in the Netherlands.[16] Her story opened up to me a fascinating world of converts and Born-Muslim women's interactions. They influenced each other in different ways and assumed different roles in these interactions that appeared to be very vibrant. Here, the idea of studying piety and Islamic knowledge among Born-Muslims and converts in pious circles was born.

As my research proceeded I found that these spaces in which to cultivate piety offered some Muslim women opportunities to become religious authorities.[17] In the process of becoming pious and obtaining knowledge of Islam, some Muslim women emerge as religious agents of knowledge and authority. They (re)produce and disseminate religious knowledge associated with religious issues that they find important to other Muslim women. This might be about prayer, *hijab*, fasting, motherhood or marriage. Nevertheless, pious circles are challenged by traditional Muslim organizations. Female religious authorities run up against limitations imposed by the patriarchal norms of traditional - male - Muslim authorities. Many female religious authorities have no ambition to resist male religious power. In general, the pious circles I studied respect and follow traditional - male - religious authorities, both globally and locally. Modest as it may be, female expansion of religious space outside the traditional spaces of knowledge production can be experienced as challenging by local - male - religious authorities. Consequently, pious circles consisting of women become contested spaces. Given these dynamics, I decided to concentrate on female religious authorities, and this added an interesting new layer to this research. Throughout this dissertation, I shall demonstrate how female religious authorities are challenged by male religious authorities.

The focus on the interplay between piety, Islamic knowledge and female religious authority among Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium makes the present study innovative. The combination of these themes has not been previously researched from a comparative perspective. Furthermore, this is also the first time that the interaction and influence between converts and Born-Muslim women in formulating Islamic discourses in the Netherlands and Belgium has been focused on in empirical research. Besides its scholarly interest, the outcomes of this study can also be significant for those who are interested and involved in formulating policy concerning Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium. The present study provides empirical data that underlines a strong relationship between religious activism and female empowerment. These results lead to a better understanding of

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16   I shall elaborate on *al-Nisa* in Section 1.7. of this Introduction.
17   I use space both in terms of locality and of place.

Muslim women's self-definitions of empowerment and of women's needs, activities and challenges in the context of emancipation. Therefore, these findings can be important to those formulating policies and projects empowering Muslim women by adopting their own strategies. If this is done, policies and projects whose aim is to empower Muslim women can become more effective.

By integrating the concepts of piety, knowledge and religious authority, my purpose is to (1) explore the discourses and practices through which piety is cultivated; (2) analyze the acquisition and production of Islamic knowledge (related to piety); (3) discuss how the production of knowledge is connected to increased female religious authority; and (4) explore how being a Born-Muslim or being a convert influences the women's understanding and expression of piety, knowledge and authority. The central research questions are:

(1)   How do Muslim women in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium cultivate piety?
(2)   What is the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge acquisition and production?
(3)   To what extent do pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium provide space for the emergence of female religious authorities?
(4)   How does being a Born-Muslim or being a convert to Islam affect Muslim women's understanding and expression of piety, knowledge and female religious authority?

1.2. Theoretical perspectives

This study combines theories on piety, agency, authority and individualization to arrive at a better understanding of how a renewal of Islamic thought and practice is taking place among pious Muslim women in Europe. To achieve my goal, I situate the emergence of female pious circles in the context of the Islamic revival. The Islamic revival refers to the proliferation of religiosity occurring among Muslims in Muslim majority countries and among Muslim minorities throughout the world, encouraging Muslims to strengthen the influence of Islamic values and practices in their everyday lives. I use the term Islamic revival to refer to the process by which Muslim religious beliefs and practices are being reconfigured through the effect of greater religious engagement and piety.[18] The Islamic revival is analyzed as an expression of modernity used to cope with contemporary challenges presented by Western and

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18   See Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006); Jeanette S. Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe* (California: Stanford University Press, 2015).

secular trends.[19] These challenges have been generated by such changing political, economic and social conditions as post-colonialism, capitalism, consumerism, individualization and secularization.[20] The goal of the ideology of the Islamic revival is to expand the influence of Islam in political, economic and social life to counter the challenges mentioned. The production of Islamic knowledge is an important aspect of the Islamic revival.[21] By deepening their Islamic knowledge, Muslims gain a better understanding of their religion and learn more about the religious guidelines it sets out. Unquestionably, the acquisition of Islamic knowledge is essential to the formation of piety. In the present study, I analyze the views of pious Muslim women on the importance and value of Islamic knowledge.

In Islamic knowledge production the question of religious authority is particularly relevant. Whereas - male - religious scholars of Islam were traditionally the producers of and had access to religious knowledge, nowadays Islamic knowledge can be produced by any Muslim, with or without a religious education. The field of religious knowledge production, and the structures inherent in it, has been transformed as a consequence of modern technologies, a rise in literacy, mass education and new ways of communication.[22] This development has created new spaces for lay Muslim men and women to gain interpretive religious authority.[23] How women have taken their place in these spaces is central in this study. I shall focus especially on Islamic knowledge and religious authority structures and the emergence of female religious authorities in pious circles. My approach to authority is in accordance to Max Weber's notion of *Herrschaft*: '...the probability that a command with a given specific content

19   Ali Rahnema (ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic revival* (London/New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1994).
20   Ira M. Lapidus, "Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms," In: *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 40, no. 4, (January 1997): pp. 444-460.
21   Frank Peter, "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam," In: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 17, no. 1, (January 2006); Martin van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi (eds.), *Producing Islamic Knowledge. Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011).
22   See Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Dale F. Eickelman, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," In: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 19, no. 4, (November 1992): pp. 643-655.
23   See for instance Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," In: *Social Compass*, Vol. 50, no. 1, (March 2003): pp. 35-46; Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France," In: *ISIM Newsletter*, 14, (June 2004): pp. 28-29; Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Jeanette S. Jouili & Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, no. 4, (October 2006): pp. 617-642; Pieternella Van Doorn-Harder, *Women shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qur'an* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006) and Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012).

shall be obeyed by a given group of persons.'[24] This shall be elaborated on in my theoretical Chapter Three, *The concept of religious authority*, and empirical Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*.

In this study, I view female piety as a significant aspect of the Islamic revival. I understand piety to be intensified religiousness leading to God-consciousness in thought and practice. Thanks to the work of such scholars as the anthropologist Saba Mahmood, more attention is being paid to the practice of piety as a form of agency. Mahmood states that although agency can manifest itself in terms of resistance, scholars should expand its meaning beyond resistance. Accordingly, she locates agency within ethical self-formation among Muslim women as they express agency not only by resistance or subversion, but also by 'subordination.' Mahmood demonstrates that through their 'subordination' to patriarchal Islamic norms, Muslim women are able to expand their participation in the religious arena, a space that had generally been an almost exclusively male domain until recently.[25] Mahmood's insights into piety and agency have provided a theoretical basis for the present study. My problem with Mahmood's approach is that, in her efforts to address the notion of agency, Mahmood perhaps puts too much and exclusive emphasis on agency in terms of 'subordination.' I shall argue that, at least among the pious women in the Netherlands and Belgium, agency is both 'subordination' - which I shall formulate in terms of conformism - and resistance. The women in my study are second- and third-generation Born-Muslims from migrant backgrounds and converts to Islam who live in secular European societies. Their relationship to Islam is being shaped and reshaped through globalization, Westernization and the impact of living as a religious and migrant minority.[26] All these factors lead to multiple and contradictory articulations of agency both as conformism and resistance.

Like Mahmood, Lara Deeb focuses on how *shiʿi* women in Lebanon are attempting to discover how to live as Muslims in the modern world.[27] Deeb states that modernity does not have to lead to secularism, but can lead to the cultivation of a more self-conscious way of being Muslim. This is visible in the process of what she calls 'authenticating' Islam.[28] Authentication is, she argues, the process by which Muslims establish 'the true or correct meaning, understanding, or method of various

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24   Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 152.
25   Female religious teachers and preachers are discussed in Chapter Three, *The concept of religious authority*.
26   Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, p. ix.
27   Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).
28   *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.

religious and social practices.'[29] This implies that Muslim women find themselves in a continuous process of establishing the true meaning of various religious practices and beliefs. Both Mahmood and Deeb argue that religion and piety should be studied in the terms and contexts of the interlocutors interviewed, rather than in secular, feminist and liberal terms. Mahmood's and Deeb's theorizations on piety, agency, and Islam shall be used here to analyze Muslim women's piety discourses.

The concept of religious individualization is also important in the present study. Generally speaking, the cultivation of piety is an individual process. Women emphasize self-improvement and disciplining the self in performing the daily rituals of worship such as prayer. Furthermore, the choice to devote oneself to becoming a pious Muslim can be considered to be an expression of individualism. Therefore, many scholars who have studied the individualization of Islam in western societies argue that Muslims are increasingly becoming individualized believers. This implies that Muslims study Islam on their own terms, and consequently are less bound by traditional religious authorities and institutes. The individualization of Islam means that Muslims have more space in which to define Islam. My emphasis on the individualization is in agreement with Lara Deeb's notion of an 'authenticated' Islam. As I shall discuss in detail in Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*, individualization tendencies among Muslim women are a continuous process of making religious meaning of various religious practices and beliefs.

Besides these individualizing tendencies, there is also a collective dimension to piety.[30] In the present study, I shall show that women's cultivation of piety is embedded in what I call pious communities. In this study, the term pious communities refers to communities that my interlocutors say are pious.[31] They might be pious circles, but also - female - congregations in mosques, or specific religious - ethnic - communities. In sum, I define a pious community from the perspective of my interlocutors as a religious community in which the goal is to strive for and form piety. Within the setting of pious communities - in specific pious circles - I shall highlight the role of interactions among Muslim women who cultivate piety. I shall distinguish two types of piety: individually formed piety and piety in agreement with the norms of pious

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29   *Ibid.,* p. 20.
30   In Islamic ethics there is a strong relationship between the Muslim collective and individual, especially in the realm of rituals. For instance, four of the five pillars of Islam (prayers, fasting, almsgiving and pilgrimage) have both an individual and a collective dimension. These rituals focus on increasing individual piety, but also emphasize communal worship and a sense of religious belonging to the worldwide community of Muslims. See Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, pp. 86-93.
31   See Chapter Two, Section 2.4. 'Communities of practice' and Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*.

communities. Therefore, I shall analyze the religious individualization of pious Muslim women as a socially embedded transformation. This means that they cultivate piety both individually and collectively, as a member of a pious community.

Finally, I shall elucidate the contradictions Muslim women experience in their aspiration for piety. In my explication I shall refer to the work of Samuli Schielke.[32] Schielke states that subjectivity, religiosity and morality have become central topics in the anthropology of Muslim societies, but that the issues of ambivalence and fragmentation have been paid relatively little attention.[33] The problem with these approaches, according to Schielke, is that, 'although they give considerable attention to practical judgement in the face of conflict, debate, and contestation, they look at the practice of morality and religion primarily from the perspective of coherence.'[34] Schielke's concern is that focusing on the aim of the cultivation of piety rather than the actual outcome does not give grounds to explain the ambiguity and fragmentation that individuals can experience in their journey towards becoming pious.[35] For that reason, Schielke argues that scholars should broaden their focus to include the concerns, practices and experiences of everyday life in all its various moments and directions. Bearing Schielke's words in mind, I shall analyze how Muslim women experience contradictions between their interpretations of an ideal Islam and the lived reality of their Muslim community. However, my focus is slightly different from that of Schielke, as I did not engage in participant observation in the daily lives of the Muslim women outside the pious circles. My study concentrates on how Muslim women give meaning to their experienced contradictions within the context of pious circles. I shall examine the different views and experiences that Muslim women articulate. I shall demonstrate how conflict emerges at three points: the struggle to define gender roles and an ideal pious womanhood; the controversies around female religious preachers; and the differences in piety practices and ideas between converts to Islam and Born-Muslim women. The empirical results are explained in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

1.3. Situating pious circles in Europe

Female pious circles are a recent phenomenon in both the Muslim world and in Europe. However the idea of study circles, especially for women, is, as we shall see,

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32   Samuli Schielke, "Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians," In: *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.), (2009): pp. 24-40.
33   He refers to morality as 'the conscious cultivation of virtues with the aim of developing a virtuous self.' Samuli Schielke, "Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians," p. 25.
34   *Ibid.,* p. 25.
35   *Ibid.*, pp. 24-40.

rooted in the Islamic tradition. *Halqa* in Arabic literally means 'circle' or, more specifically, it refers to a religious gathering in which a religious teacher gives lessons on Islam to small groups of students. *Halqa* (plural *halaqa*) in the present study refers to informal gatherings in which people learn about the teachings and practice of Islam. In a nutshell, Islamic learning and Islamic knowledge acquisition are the central focus in these *halaqa* or pious circles. Knowledge is spread through courses in the Arabic language and the Qurʾan, lectures by female preachers and religious books. Significantly, in these study circles Muslim women initiate Islam-inspired activism by establishing Islamic welfare and charity associations, websites and forums, by becoming volunteers and arranging lectures about Islam. In their pursuit of piety and Islamic knowledge, Muslim women create a religious space in which they express their religiosity. This leads to enhanced female religious autonomy and agency.

In the present study, I shall show how Muslim women in pious circles share their interest in Islam, and interact with each other collectively to produce Islamic knowledge. In doing so, they strive to maintain the women-only character of pious circles for the purpose of articulating their religiosity independently of male religious authorities and through this approaching Islamic sources autonomously.

As mentioned before, pious circles are modeled on the idea of a traditional *halqa* and the Muslim women who initiate women-only pious circles view them as a continuation of that tradition. However, their emergence within a secular European context makes them different. Muslim women in Europe acquire, interpret and transmit specific knowledge relevant to their local needs, challenges and solutions. Hence these Muslim women's experience of Islam is adapted to a western setting. Therefore, in contrast to pious circles in Muslim countries, I consider the organization of piety in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium a European phenomenon with its own European character. As explained previously, the religious beliefs and practices that are transmitted and disseminated by Muslim women in these pious circles are related to their specific European contexts and, in the case of Born-Muslims, have little or no connection to their countries of origin. Furthermore, in these pious circles Muslim women approach Islamic sources individually and autonomously. They provide each other with space to reflect on Islamic sources and find arguments for adhering to specific beliefs and practices. The presence of native Dutch and Flemish converts and the study of Islamic knowledge in the Dutch-Flemish language are the most important European characteristics of these pious circles. I argue that the pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium are a new phenomenon.

It should be noted that most of the pious circles I encountered have been recently, and often spontaneously, founded. Therefore, with the exception of a few (see Section 1.7.), most pious circles are fragmented, non-formal gatherings that are not run according to any organized structure. Because of their non-formal character, there is no historical documentation of pious circles, which means that I have not been able to study pious circles from a historical perspective. The first Muslim women's organization that I could situate in a historical perspective is that of *al-Nisa*, which was established in the Netherlands in 1982 (see Section 1.8.).

In this dissertation, I focus on multiple pious circles. Before outlining those I encountered, I shall explain the reason my choice fell specifically on female pious circles. Previous works have studied the development of Muslim communities in Europe by focusing on formal Muslim organizations. For instance, they analyze the political and societal integration of Muslims[36] or the relationship between Muslim organizations and European governments.[37] The question of whether and how political Islamist movements in Muslim countries influence - and finance - Muslim institutions in Europe has also received academic attention.[38]

The attention on formal Muslim institutions means that the predominant focus in the data has been on the organizational activities of Muslim men, since they are the people best represented in the majority of Muslim associations throughout Europe. The radicalization of Muslim communities in Europe has also been a stimulus for many academic works to concentrate on the organizational activities of Muslim men.[39] As a result, other types of Muslim engagement, and female involvement in - both formal and informal - Muslim organizations, are under-researched top-

36   Yasemin Nuhoğlu Soysal, "Changing parameters of citizenship and claims-making: Organized Islam in European public spheres," In: *Theory and Society*, Vol. 26, no. 4, (August 1997): pp. 509-527; Steven Pfaff & Anthony J. Gill, "Shall a Million Muslims March?: Muslim Interest Organizations and Political Integration in Europe," In: *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 39, no. 7, (September 2006): pp. 803-828 and Matthias Kortmann & Kerstin Rosenow-Williams (eds.), *Islamic Organizations in Europe and the USA: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2013).

37   Marian Burchardt & Ines Michalowski, (eds.) A*fter Integration: Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015); Maria Grazia Martino (ed.)*The State as an Actor in Religion Policy: Policy Cycle and Governance Perspectives on Institutionalized Religion* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2015).

38   See Juan Jose Escobar Stemmann, "Middle East Salafism and the Radicalization of Muslim Communities in Europe," In: *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 10, no. 3, Article 1/10 (September 2006); Lorenzo Vidino, The Muslim Brotherhood's Conquest of Europe, In: *The Middle East Quarterly,* Vol. 12, no. 1, (Winter 2005) pp. 25-34; Leslie Lebl, The Islamist Threat to European Security, In: *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 21 no. 3, (Summer 2014): pp. 3-11.

39   Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," In: *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* Vol. 33, no. 9, (Summer 2010): pp. 797-814 and Carolin Goerzig & Khaled Al-Hashimi, Radicalization in Western Europe: Integration, public discourse, and loss of identity among Muslim communities (London-New York: Routledge, 2015).

ics. In the present study, my purpose in focusing on Muslim women's activities in pious circles is to deepen our understanding of female Islamic discourses in Europe. Concentrating on Muslim women in pious circles, gives me a chance to study how Muslim women organize themselves and how their activities, initiatives and ways of knowledge dissemination resemble or differ from traditional - male - Muslim organizations. The practices, thoughts and experiences of pious Muslim women are my central perspective and from them I shall demonstrate how pious circles for learning about the teachings and practice of Islam have also become spaces in which Muslim women - both as participants and female religious authorities - negotiate patriarchy. Moreover, I shall show how pious circles give Muslim women a place in which they can interpret and re-interpret their gender roles within the Muslim community.

1.4. Pious circle activities

Pious circles - in Dutch *zustergroepen* and Flemish *zusterwerking* - are informal groups, consisting of Born-Muslims and women converts to Islam. Pious circles offer space in which their participants can listen to lectures, deepen their Islamic knowledge, share personal experiences, become a member of a support network consisting of religiously active Muslim women and engage in Islam-inspired activism. It is above all a space in which Muslim women can shape their religiosity. During my fieldwork in 2009-2011, I searched for and found more than fifty pious circles via Internet and through my interlocutors. Eventually, over a period of three years I conducted participant observation in thirteen Dutch and eleven Flemish pious circles. The pious circles I came across are dynamic and flexible. Some are active and organize activities on a regular basis according to an annual schedule and others are more loosely organized and meet only occasionally.

Most of the Dutch and Flemish pious circles I studied, meet in domestic spaces, rent community centers, and, in a few cases, in a neighborhood mosque.[40] The number of participants attending the lectures, workshops and the Qurʾan and Arabic classes fluctuates between ten and thirty. However, the number of participants during a "sister day", as described in the opening Section of this introduction, can be more than hundred. Sister days are one of the activities of pious circles that attract large numbers of Muslim women. Each sister day has a particular theme, for example, "The success of a Muslim woman", "The practical success of a marriage", "Death" or "Love."

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40   The relationship of pious circles to traditional Muslim organizations is detailed in Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*.

These sister days provide a framework in which many events like Qurʾan recitations, lectures, Islamic clothing stalls, Islamic quizzes, traditional Islamic song performances, fashion shows and debates on how to be a pious Muslim woman can be planned. The whole event is organized alongside regular prayers. These gatherings exude a spirit of religious and moral discipline. They also emphasize the sense of belonging to a community of Muslim sisterhood. The weekly or monthly lectures in pious circles focus on Islamic topics. Recurring themes are Muslim sisterhood, the Five Pillars of Islam, the Six Pillars of *Iman* (faith), knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad's life, how to learn to achieve *sabr* (patience) and *taqwa* (piety) and so on.[41] All these themes are connected to the question of how and why a Muslim woman should cultivate piety. Obtaining Islamic knowledge by attending lectures is crucial to the women who cultivate piety.[42] The lectures are prepared by a female preacher, who is often also the organizer of the pious circle. Sometimes, guest preachers are invited to give a lecture on a specific theme.[43] Workshops are also offered to help participants to "practice" their knowledge. For instance, how to wash bodies of deceased Muslims; how to wear the *hijab* or how to perform the daily prayers. In the empirical Chapters, Four, Five and Six, I describe the different types of activities pursued in pious circles and explain the context and the function of these activities in detail. I shall analyze how Muslim women strategically reconfigure, reinterpret, criticize or reject certain ideas about their position in Muslim European communities. Furthermore, I shall shed light on how engagement in pious activities can be experienced as empowering by Muslim women.

1.5. Organizers and participants of pious circles

The Muslim women I study in this dissertation are both organizers of and participants in pious circles. They come from all age groups and different ethnic, educational and social backgrounds. The organizers are motivated to set up these pious circles for different reasons. For instance, their purpose might be to activate Muslim women, to study Islamic teachings and practices religiously, and to inspire each other to persist in a pious lifestyle. The most important reason pious circles are established

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41   The five pillars of Islam are the *shahada* (testimony of faith), *salat* (prayer), giving *zakat* (almsgiving), *saum* (the month-long fast during Ramadan, the ninth Islamic month and the month of the first Qurʾanic revelation) and *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca). The six pillars of *iman* are belief in Allah; belief in the angels; belief in the revealed books (including the Torah of Moses, the gospel of Jesus and the Qur'an); belief in the divine Messengers; belief in the Day of Judgment and the events of the *yawm al-qiyamah* (The Day of Resurrection) and the belief in the predestination by Allah of all things, both the good and the bad.

42   I shall shed light on the position of the participants of pious circles in Section 1.6.

43   In Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*, I shall discuss the type of knowledge and how knowledge of Islam is gained and transmitted in pious circles and how it relates to the knowledge that is produced in traditional Muslim spaces such as mosques in detail.

is to create a space in which participants can exchange knowledge of Islam, increase personal contact and, especially, generate sisterhood.

All women organizers in the present study are of the opinion that Muslims should improve themselves morally by the cultivation of piety. Organizers are concerned with the challenges that their Muslim communities are facing. Among these challenges are the need for Muslim foster families for Muslim children, the upbringing of Muslim children and youth in a secular society, the misogyny experienced by Muslim women, discrimination against Muslims, Islamophobia and the intolerance shown to Muslim women, Muslim women's Islamic rights, the integration into and participation of Muslims in Europe and, for most, the passing on of the Islamic tradition to the next generation. These challenges are a powerful motivation for them to found pious circles and to improve the position of the Muslim community both religiously and socially.

Their organizers are usually also the preachers in a particular pious circle. Inspired by their sense of social involvement and aided and abetted by their organizational and communication skills, they set up pious circles, organize activities and disseminate knowledge of Islam to other Muslim women. It stands to reason that because of their drive the organizers of pious circles are more active in the Muslim community than are the participants. In Chapters Five and Six, I shall elaborate on how the organizers of pious circles encourage religious autonomy in their participants. These women can be both Born-Muslims and converts to Islam. I have also encountered pious circles that were jointly initiated by converts and Born-Muslims. Converts are just as active as organizers in pious circles as Born-Muslims. However, as I shall discuss, some studies argue that converts to Islam often are more likely than Born-Muslims to play an active role in organizations or to become mediators or to be bridge-builders between the Born-Muslim community and the non-Muslim community.[44] To a certain extent this has also been the case in the present study. Most converts tend to play an active social role that they say is a consequence of their 'secular European' upbringing. Furthermore, converts state that in such countries as Belgium and the Netherlands, community work - by men and women - especially on a voluntary basis, is encouraged by both society in general and by government policy. Such statements are used by converts to explain why they consider themselves to be more active in the organizing of pious circles if they compare themselves to Born-Muslims.

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44   See Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: The experience of Scandinavian converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Tomas Gerholm and Yngve Gerog Lithman (eds.), T*he New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* (London: Mansell, 1990), pp. 263-277 and Tina Gudrun Jensen, "Religious authority and autonomy intertwined: the case of converts to Islam in Denmark," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, no. 4, (October 2006): pp. 643-660.

Born-Muslim women admit that they do face cultural limitations in organizing themselves. Despite being born and raised in Europe, they are still challenged by the patriarchal norms of their parents' migrant countries. It should also be mentioned that the majority of activities organized by Born-Muslims continue to take place according to ethnic lines. There are many pious circles among the second- and third-generation Born-Muslims of Turkish origin. As these circles are organized on their ethnic identity, the language spoken is Turkish. Hence, their activities are not accessible to non-Turkish speaking Muslims, including converts. This is also the reason I was not able to study pious circles that were set up by Born-Muslims in which the spoken language was non-Dutch.[45] Language was a barrier for me. I shall elaborate on this matter in more detail in Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*.

The participants in pious study circles also come from diverse backgrounds and the majority are second- and third-generation Born-Muslims, and native Dutch and Flemish women who have converted to Islam. As said, their motives are varied: they join pious circles to expand their knowledge of Islam, to share their experiences, to build a "sister" support network and, most importantly, to strengthen their piety. The habits of the participants who visit the circle vary: some wear a headscarf, some do not, and some are practicing and others are not. Their social and economic backgrounds differ as do their educational backgrounds. Hence, there is no 'typical' participant from one specific background. Nevertheless, participants distinguish themselves into two main categories: "beginner" or "advanced."

The participants who view themselves as "beginners" have recently committed themselves to becoming religiously active and thereby strive to reinforce their piety.[46] Therefore, they view themselves as "beginners" in Islam. They consist of Born-Muslims who have decided to take Islam seriously and become a pious Muslim and of converts who have recently converted to Islam and are also eager to learn and practice their - new - religion. The second-category participants can be viewed as being "advanced" in Islam. They are Born-Muslims who have a solid foundation in the basic tenets of Islam and, in some cases are even more advanced, and have joined pious circles to achieve a deeper understanding of their religion. The converts in this category converted to Islam many years ago and find themselves at a similar - "advanced" - level as the Born-Muslims in this category. Hence, being a "beginner"

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45   For instance, I heard of pious circles in which the spoken language was Indonesian, Turkish or Arabic. Because of the language barrier, I could not participate in their meetings.

46   This is because of different reasons and situations that I shall explain in detail in Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*.

or an "advanced" participant refers to their self-perception of their level of knowledge and religious experience. This diversity in these pious circles causes interesting dynamics to rise to the surface, creating a plurality of knowledge, opinions and experiences that I shall discuss in Chapters Four, Five and Six.

1.6. The Dutch and Flemish context

The present study focuses on Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part). As I referred to briefly in Section 1.1., there are many similarities between Belgium and the Netherlands. However, for my comparison, I shall discuss the similarities and dissimilarities between the countries only in the context of Islam and Muslims as that is the focus in the present study.

One of the main reasons I chose to study the Netherlands and Belgium is to try to uncover better insights into the development towards a 'European Islam.' The ongoing changes in the religious discourse highlighted in the present study reveal a more broader transformation in Muslim beliefs and practices and modes of religiosity among Muslim women in western societies. By focusing on the similarities between the two countries, I am able to shed light on specific developments taking place in both contexts.

The shared language and cultural heritage is another reason I chose to study the Netherlands and Belgium. By comparing the same phenomenon - pious circles - I hoped to find out what factors might have influenced any possible differences and similarities between the female religious discourses in both countries. As I shall explain, differences in government policy - towards religious institutions and concerning Muslim women - have been the only factor that has caused differences between Dutch and Flemish pious circles. Hence, by studying both countries my hope was to discover how national policy can affect the ways Muslim women organize their pious activities and to map different forms of (new) Islamic organizational structures.

Finally, in both the Netherlands and Belgium, politicians and policy makers put Islam and Muslim women's emancipation high on the social and political agenda. However, the political climate in these two countries is different. This research therefore has also provided insights into the influence of politics on the religious development of Muslim women.

People of the Muslim confession in the Netherlands are estimated to number between 850,000 and one million.[47] This figure includes second- and third-generation Muslims and converts, the latter estimated around 13,000.[48] Muslims make up around 6 percent of the Dutch population. Muslims in Belgium are estimated to be between 350,000 and 400,000, including between 6,000 and 30,000 converts of Belgian or non-Belgian origin.[49] The Muslims in Belgium make up around 5 percent of the population.[50] The majority of Muslims in the Netherlands and Belgium have a migrant background. Since the arrival of Turkish and Moroccan labor migrants in the 1960s and 1970s, Islam has become the second largest religion in both countries. The number of Muslims was later swelled by family reunions throughout the 1970s. Furthermore, since the 1990s, smaller groups of Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq, Iran and Somalia have settled in Belgium and the Netherlands. In both countries, *sunni* and *shiʿi* Muslims are present.

In terms of similarities, the first is that religious freedom is guaranteed as a constitutional right in the Netherlands and Belgium.[51] Both countries are governed on the basis of a constitution and have signed international human rights conventions that protect freedom of religion. In each country there is a separation between church and state. Therefore, the state must maintain a neutral attitude towards different religions. However, there is a slight difference between both countries. In the Netherlands, although there are no subsidies for faith communities, the Dutch government is obliged to provide religious believers with means to be able to use their constitutional rights. Consequently, religious communities can receive an indirect government subsidy. For instance, by the subsidizing of education, arts, culture and sports of particular religious communities.

In Belgium too there is a separation of church and state. The difference with the Netherlands is that in Belgium religions can be legally recognized by the state and

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47   Mieke Maliepaard & Mérove Gijsberts, *Moslims in Nederland* (Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, 2012) and *De positie van Moslims in Nederland: feiten en cijfers* (Utrecht: Forum, 2012).

48   Converts are estimated around 13,000, however it is unclear whether this group only consists of native Dutch converts or perhaps other categories, for instance, non-Dutch-western converts living in the Netherlands, or converts who are half-Dutch. Third-generation Born-Muslims are also included in this category.

49   Corinne Torrekens, "Islam in Belgium: From Formal Recognition to Public Contestation," p. 154, In: *After Integration: Islam, Conviviality and Contentious Politics in Europe*, Marian Burchardt & Ines Michalowski, (eds.), (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2015); pp 153-169.

50   *Ibid.*, p. 154.

51   Wasif Shadid & Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, *Islam in Nederland en België. Religieuze institutionalisering in twee landen met een gemeenschappelijke voorgeschiedenis* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008) p. 18.

consequently receive state financial support.[52] Islam was legally recognized by the Belgian state in 1974. However, in the financial sense, as a religion Islam has not been treated as equally as the other recognized religions in the country.[53] The biggest stumbling block has been the difficulty experienced by the Muslim community in establishing a Muslim council that would be considered authoritative in the eyes of the state.[54] This matter sheds light on the second similarity between both countries, the complicated process of the official representation of Islam.

The establishment of an official representative council of Muslims has been complicated by the diversity of Muslim ethnic backgrounds and religious schools of law in both countries. Eventually, in 1998 the *Executief van de Moslims van België* (EMB, the *Executive of the Muslims of Belgium*) was recognized as the official body on behalf of the Belgian Muslims.[55] However, it took thirty-three years before Islamic institutions could be supported financially by the Belgium government. In the Netherlands, the *Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid* (CMO, Dutch National Council of Muslims) was established in 2004. The Dutch government thought it important to have one official partner that could speak on behalf of the majority of Muslims in the Netherlands. Since 2004, the CMO has been officially recognized as the representative of Muslims in the Netherlands.[56] In 2005, the Dutch Minister for Integration also accepted a federation of the Alevi, Shiites and Ahmadiyya, that established the Contact Group Islam (Contactgroep Islam, CGI) as their official dialogue partner alongside the CMO.

Although the emergence of a representational structure of Islam was a slow and complicated process, the institutionalization of Muslims along ethnic and theological lines did develop rapidly in both countries. The first migrant labor workers established religious spaces like prayer-rooms that had both a religious and social function as a meeting place. After the reunification with their families, the need for mosques and Islamic education became more important and led to the establishment of hundreds of mosques in both countries by the end of 1980s.[57] Those migrants who wanted

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52   *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.
53   *Ibid.*, pp. 19-21.
54   *Ibid.*, p. 21.
55   See for a detailed discussion on the implementation of this recognition: Patrick Loobuyk & Petra Meier, "Imams in Flanders, Belgium: Toward the First Flemish Imams," In: *Islamic Organizations in Europe and the USA: A Multidisciplinary Perspective*, Matthias Kortmann & Kerstin Rosenow-Williams (eds.), (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2013), pp. 170-174.
56   For an overview of the establishment of the *Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid*, see Welmoet Boender, "Polderen in de participatiesamenleving. De kantelende positie van het Contactorgaan Moslims en Overheid," In: *Achter de zuilen*, Peter van Dam, Friso Wielenga & James Kennedy (eds.), (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).
57   Wasif Shadid en Pieter Sjoerd van Koningsveld, *Islam in Nederland en België. Religieuze institutionalisering in twee landen met een gemeenschappelijke voorgeschiedenis*, pp. 23-24.

to establish institutions and mosques often received financial support from their countries of origin.[58] Nowadays, a shift is slowly taking place in the councils of these mosques, in which the second-generation of Born-Muslims is taking over the organization. This shift is important to the development and the continuation of Islam. The majority of first-generation migrants established mosques to create a place in which Islam and, most emphatically, their ethnic cultural heritage could be passed on to the next generation. The second generation is less ethnically concerned. Their point of orientation is their country of residence (Belgium or the Netherlands) and not their parents' country of origin. As I shall demonstrate in the present study, most second- and third-generation Born-Muslims from migrant backgrounds are critical of the first-generation Muslims for being too focused on their cultural heritage and too little concerned with the promotion of a "culture free" Islam. Their argument is that because of their parents' attitude Islam and culture have too often become inextricably mixed and this has led to a Muslim community that is Muslim by culture instead of Muslim because of Islam.

The third similarity between the Netherlands and Belgium is that Islam has been on the political agenda of both countries since 9/11.[59] Moreover, a number of developments have meant that the political discourse concerning Islam and Muslims has sharpened. Among these incidents are the attacks of 9/11, the murder of the Dutch Islam criticaster Theo van Gogh in 2004, the electoral success of politicians who have been critical of Islam in the Netherlands (Pim Fortuyn, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders) and in Flanders (Filip Dewinter). Recently, the emergence of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS), the attack on Charlie Hebdo and the subsequent violence in in Paris in 2015 and Belgium in 2016 have more sharply defined the polarization in the public debate on Islam and Muslims. The upshot is that Muslims in both countries feel stigmatized by the media and claim that they have experienced discrimination on religious grounds in Dutch and Flemish society.

The similarities mentioned above are the reasons I chose to do fieldwork in Belgium instead of any other - neighboring - country such as Germany. These common grounds between both countries make it possible for me to understand the dynamics between Dutch and Flemish Born-Muslims and converts to Islam that are practically the same in both countries. This has enabled me to describe an active female religious space that has evolved around the organization of female piety. Nevertheless,

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58   For instance, Turkish migrants received financial support from the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) in Turkey.

59   See also Teun Pauwels, *Populism in Western Europe: Comparing Belgium, Germany and The Netherlands* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

in my comparison of the countries, I have found at least one important difference between my interlocutors in Belgium and the Netherlands. This is a difference in the political engagement of my interlocutors.

The wearing of religious signs has been the topic of heated debate in Belgium since the French government banned all religious symbols, including the Muslim headscarf, from public institutions such as state primary and secondary schools or town halls in 2004. The board of the Flemish Network for Public Education also issued a headscarf ban in the city of Antwerp in 2009.[60] Therefore, once the ban was in place, Muslim girls could not choose to attend public education if they continued to wear their headscarf.[61] For many Flemish interlocutors, this ban on headscarves in public education was a strong motivation to establish Islamic educational institutes for girls who choose not to discard their headscarves. For instance, a project called *al-Qalam*, pen in Arabic, was initiated in 2010 by three Muslim women. *Al-Qalam* is a direct response to the headscarf ban in public schools.[62] The organizers wanted to help these girls obtain their secondary school diploma. Other Flemish interlocutors also showed their activism, for instance, by joining local demonstrations against the ban or by appearing in the media and claiming their right for wearing the headscarf. Comparing my interlocutors in the Netherlands and Flanders, the latter appear more politically engaged and more involved in local political debates about their position in Flemish society.[63] It is feasible to postulate that this is a consequence of the ban on the headscarf. Besides this difference, I also found another difference between the Dutch and Flemish circles in the organizational structure of pious circles. This is discussed in the next Section.

1.7. Dutch versus Flemish pious circles: case studies

The Flemish pious circles have the option to register themselves as a voluntary non-profit association.[64] This means that they can become legal entities on the

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60   In the Dutch context, there was and still is an ongoing debate about a ban on facial covering (not headscarf) however, so far nothing has been enforced.
61   Nella van den Brandt, "Feminist Practice and Solidarity in Secular Societies: Case Studies on Feminists Crossing Religious–Secular Divides in Politics and Practice in Antwerp, Belgium," In: *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 14, no. 4, (2015): p. 494.
62   Another example is that of Jamila who established the women's educational institute called 'The Guidance' in Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*.
63   For instance, I spoke to some members of BOEH, a Flemish feminist group that formed in 2007 after the city of Antwerp banned staff from wearing headscarves or other conspicuous religious or political symbols. BOEH stands for "*Baas over eigen hoofd*" (Boss over/of my own head) This name is a homage to a feminist slogan in favor of abortion rights from the 1968 protests, "*Baas in eigen buik*" (Boss in my own belly). See Nella van den Brandt, "Feminist Practice and Solidarity in Secular Societies: Case Studies on Feminists Crossing Religious–Secular Divides in Politics and Practice in Antwerp, Belgium," pp. 493–508.
64   In Belgium they are called "Vereniging Zonder Winstoogmerk" (VZW).

basis of the statute by which they formulate their aims. Registration brings with it administrative obligations, such as paying an annual tax. On the positive side, their formalization entitles them to receive government funding that enable them to facilitate their events. It allows them to rent a space for their activities, pay the preachers and teachers they hire for lessons in the Qurʾan and Arabic or to pay for study materials like books. Consequently, the pious circles I studied in Belgium were better organized, more active and less dependent on other Muslim organizations than are their Dutch counterparts. However, this does not mean that every Flemish pious circle makes use of this possibility. I also examined Flemish pious circles that, despite the option of receiving government funding, chose to hold their activities in private living-rooms. They elected to be independent of the government. Their reasons are varied: a preference for a smaller-scale character of their activities at home and because they enjoy the privacy the domestic space accords them. Some mentioned not wanting to be bothered by the administrative obligations that government support entails. From my eleven Flemish case studies, only two were not registered as a non-profit association (VZW).[65] As I shall explain later, unlike my Dutch case studies, the pious circles and Muslim organizations in my Flemish case studies - with the exception of one - had no problems with facilitation and space. [66]

A good example of a Flemish pious circle that was able to operate on a large scale - as a voluntary non-profit association - is the charitable organization for Muslim women, *al-Minara*.[67] I visited a number of its activities in different cities.[68] *Al-Minara* was founded by Flemish converts more than fifteen years ago. Initially, it was as a "sister support center" to help Flemish converts to understand Islam by offering them courses and mentor guidance in Islamic knowledge. It also provided a support network for women who had already converted to Islam or who were interested in converting. These networks served converts who needed a particular type of background knowledge that were superfluous for Born-Muslims. Their problems covered a wide range: how to deal with their non-Muslim families and relatives, whether to celebrate non-Islamic festivities such as Christmas, New Year and birthdays with families or whether to attend other family gatherings in which, for example, alcohol and pork might be served. These are common problems among converts. Therefore, most pious circles offer specific courses for converts only.[69]

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65   In Section 1.7. I shall elaborate on the organizations I studied in the Netherlands and Belgium.
66   See the case of Zahra in Chapter 5.7., a Born-Muslim who built a mosque with her mother.
67   *Al-Minara* in Arabic means The Lighthouse.
68   I visited the activities of *al-Minara* on March 27, 2011; May 15, 2011 and May 27, 2011.
69   In Chapter Four, *The Pious individual and the pious community*, I shall explain how the increase in support activities for converts alone is experienced as problematic by Born-Muslims. Some Born-Muslims state that because of the specific attention paid to converts, the latter are treated

Although offering specific courses and activities for converts is one of *al-Minara's* main activities, it also offers lectures, courses for women and children, excursions to mosques and Islamic exhibitions in museums for both convert and born-Muslim participants. It also offers special programs for first-generation illiterate Muslim women to teach them how to read and write. Furthermore, it has set up local "sister support centers" in many parts of Flanders - in Antwerp, Gent, Kortrijk but also in Brussels - and in Rotterdam in the Netherlands.[70] Muslim women and women who are interested in Islam can consult these local centers. Besides its educational activities, it runs charity projects, like raising money for the needy or sending clothes to underprivileged children in Morocco.

At the time of my fieldwork (2009-2012) there were more than 800 estimated volunteers in *al-Minara*. Its activities were well attended by both Born-Muslims and converts. Its channels of communication are its website, its Facebook page and Islamic forums. *Al-Minara* is a special case as it is the only non-profit charity association of Muslim women that has expanded throughout Belgium and the Netherlands. Its Islamic activities have attracted hundreds of participants in both countries.

The Dutch pious circles I studied - with one exception - do not receive government subsidy nor are they registered as a non-profit association. As said, the Flemish voluntary non-profit association construction is non-existent in the Netherlands. Dutch Muslim organizations can formally register themselves as a - religious - association or a foundation, but they can only receive funding if their societal activities are non-religious.[71] For instance, these activities should lead to the promotion of integration and the participation of minorities, and/or encourage intercultural dialogue and understanding between different religions. This means that religious associations are free to engage in all sorts of activities, but shall receive financial support only for activities of a non-religious nature. In other words, in order to obtain a subsidy, organizers of pious circles must distinguish their societal activities from their religious activities. This is a difficult undertaking for Muslim women organizers in view of the overridingly religious character of pious circles and therefore, without exception, Muslim women's religious activities are not supported financially by the

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differently by the Muslim community than Born-Muslims. Accordingly, the specific attention to converts has led to an unequal position between them in the Muslim community.

70   Consequently, on a small scale it is possible that there has been an exchange between the Dutch pious circles and their Flemish counterparts. For instance, a few Dutch interlocutors occasionally visited the sister days that were organized by *al-Minara*. However, the exchange between them was sporadic and confined to only a few members. Therefore I was not able to analyze its effect.

71   There are many differences but the main difference between an association - In Dutch *vereniging* - and foundation - in Dutch *stichting* - is that an association has members and a foundation does not.

government. As an example, I shall discuss a foundation for Muslim women set up by the Born-Muslim Marjan and the convert Umayma.

Marjan and Umayma are both volunteers who have begun a professional online database of societal and welfare organizations and Muslim women volunteers. Umayma even gave up her job so she could concentrate on this project. Muslim women can call them with questions, access their website or their private forum - after registration - and fill in an online form detailing their questions and problems.

Marjan and Umayma want to help Muslim women who cannot solve their problems because of their deficiency in Islamic knowledge that, in most cases, is related to the specific Dutch context. For instance, one woman asked: "My husband has left me but I am not religiously divorced, what should I do? What are my rights according to Islam? Is it possible to ask for a divorce according to Dutch law?" In this case, Marjan and Umayma put her in touch with a religious scholar - from their database - who was able to give her information on divorce from an Islamic perspective. The woman's question about Dutch law was answered by Marjan and Umayma themselves as they have built up a reservoir of knowledge on the bases of previous cases with which they have had to deal.

Converts Marjan and Umayma receive different types of questions from convert-Muslims, for instance: "My parents found out that I have become a Muslim. I am no longer welcome to stay at home. I don't know where to go." Marjan and Umayma view such cases as urgent. They believe that, from an Islamic point of view, it is not safe for a woman to wander alone and have no shelter. Moreover, they see it as their religious obligation, as pious Muslim women, to help Muslim women in distress. In most cases, they connect the convert with a - Muslim woman - volunteer who will offer the convert a place to sleep in her house. Despite their efforts to help Muslim women, because of the religious character of their foundation, they do not receive government funding.

Two of my Dutch case-studies did receive government funding and here I shall discuss one of them.[72] This pious circle was originally set up in 1991 as a support center for Muslim women and children by both Born-Muslims and converts. It is officially registered as a societal foundation and has launched many projects to improve the position of Muslims. For instance, it has paid attention to the issue of "Loverboys" among Muslim girls by offering information and organizing workshops. It has also

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72   This particular pious circle - like the majority - wished to remain anonymous in this study.

focused on interreligious dialogue, for example, it has organized a visit to a Hindu temple. In one initiative it launched a "buddy project" for Muslim women. The purpose of the "buddies" is to stimulate Muslim women to take part in society by initiating activities together. Since 1997, it has also been religiously active through the foundation of a pious circle in which lectures are given by one of the - convert - organizers. The female preacher assisted by the volunteers also gives weekly classes in Arabic to children and Muslim women. More than thirty Born-Muslims and converts participate. Access to these religious activities is free. It is important to state here that, because of its societal activities, this pious circle has managed to facilitate its religious activities. I emphasize that from all the Dutch case studies, although only two receive funding (for social activities), all of them wished to obtain funding. Not being able to fund the activities for Muslim women is one of the reasons organizers in the Netherlands have to confront more organizational obstacles than do pious circles in Belgium.

1.8. Research method

I began this research by taking a broad approach during my fieldwork between 2009-2012. When I commenced my fieldwork, I attended meetings, lectures and debates that revolved around Islam and Muslim women from a perspective that was related to the topic of integration. For instance, I visited many organizations such as the LIVN, a Dutch nationwide Islamic women's network. The goal of LIVN is to promote Muslim women's emancipation and participation in Dutch society by connecting professionals.[73] It organizes activities for policy makers, local authorities, activists and Muslim women to exchange expertise and to build bridges between civil society organizations. Among the problems concerning Muslim women discussed are domestic violence, forced marriages and female circumcision. I often witnessed how ideas about and solutions to new projects were born and how attendees discussed how to qualify for a state subsidy in order to begin a project.

I also visited the activities of the Muslim women's foundation *al-Nisa*.[74] *Al-Nisa* is a nationwide Muslim women's foundation in the Netherlands that was founded by

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73   I attended the book presentation: "It is culture, I believe" organized by LIVN on September 7, 2009.

74   I attended four public activities of *al-Nisa*. The first was in September 2008 with Ceylan Pektas-Weber as the keynote speaker on Islamic Feminism. The second public lecture I attended was with US Muslim feminist scholar Asma Barlas as guest speaker. She lectured on: "A Globalizing Equality: Muslim Women, Theology, and Feminisms in the United States, Europe and Asia", on October 28, 2009. The third time I joined an organized network meeting at the embassy of the USA with US academic scholar Margot Badran as guest speaker that discussed: "Islamic feminism", on December 23, 2009. Finally, the fourth time I visited the opening of their campaign *"Kopje thee in de moskee"* (A cup of tea in the mosque) on June 3, 2010. I also visited an *iftar* meeting during Ramadan in the female space of a mosque organized by *al-Nisa* in 2010.

female converts to Islam in 1982. *Al-Nisa's* goal was and is 'to provide information about Islam that is as independent as possible of any specific cultural or religious background.'[75] It encourages women to study Islam, to become aware of their position in Islam and within Dutch society. In the 1980s, *al-Nisa* evolved special events for women including monthly lectures, organized instruction classes in Arabic and on how to perform ritual prayer. At that time, its membership consisted largely of converts. Many converts in this study who were above forty - both from Belgium and the Netherlands - mentioned that one of their important channels of Islamic knowledge had been the monthly Islamic magazine of *al-Nisa* and its lectures in the 1980s and 1990s.

Nowadays, *al-Nisa* is also active in many public debates touching upon Islam and Muslim women. It cooperates with other civil society and governmental organizations, and engages in interreligious dialogues through events like lectures, annual interreligious dialogue weekends and workshops. It also focuses on the dissemination of Islamic knowledge and encourages the acquisition of Islamic knowledge by Muslim women. Although its activities can be piety motivated, in view of its interreligious focus and cooperation with other organizations, I do not view it as just a pious circle offering pious activities. Its position is also that of a bridge-builder between the Muslim community and the majority non-Muslim community. Moreover, in a later stage, many key members of *al-Nisa* have begun to use an Islamic feminist discourse, that is not the case in pious circles.[76] However, by studying other Muslim organizations such as *al-Nisa* and also attending their activities, I have been able to contextualize pious circles more precisely. After due consideration, in 2010 I decided to narrow my focus to pious activities of Muslim women in pious circles. I did so because the cultivation of piety in pious circles has not been previously studied in the Netherlands, or in Belgium. Furthermore, I was interested in what motivated Muslim women in pious circles to deepen their piety and how this was cultivated.[77]

In order to create a multifaceted image of pious Muslim women, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews and gathered the religious biographies of

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75   http://www.alnisa.nl/english/al-nisa/ (Accessed 12, November 2014).
76   Islamic feminism promotes women's rights on the basis of gender equality and social justice as basic and intersecting principles enshrined in the Qurʾan. See more on Islamic feminists Chapter One, *The theoretical framework: piety as a concept*, Section 1.7. See also Badran, M., *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, N. J. : Princeton University Press, 1996); idem, *Feminism beyond East and West: New Gender Talk and Practice in Global Islam* (New Delhi: Global Media Publications, 2007); *idem, Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* (London: Oneworld, 2009) and Azza karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (London: Macmillan, 1998).
77   See Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*.

sixty interlocutors. I interviewed nineteen interlocutors in Belgium and forty-one in the Netherlands. From the sixty interlocutors, thirty-four were Born-Muslims and twenty-six were converts to Islam. My interlocutors consisted of both religious authorities and organizers of pious circles. I interviewed thirteen female and three male religious authorities, two male chairmen of Muslims organizations and forty-two female participants in pious circles. I met most of my interlocutors through participant observation during activities in pious circles, Muslim organizations and mosques. After exchanging emails and phone numbers, I contacted them and planned an interview. Sometimes, they would invite me to join them and participate in other pious circles run by their friends of families. In this way, I discovered different ways of accessing pious circles and interlocutors whom I could subsequently meet.

My interlocutors were practicing Muslim women between eighteen and fifty-six of age at the time of the interviews. I selected them on the basis of their participation in pious activities, their cultivation of a pious lifestyle and their willingness to cooperate. All my interlocutors had one commonality: their wish and striving to become pious Muslim women. The majority wore the headscarf or had begun to wear it. Two wore the *niqab*, and a few did not wear or no longer wore the *hijab*. Their ethnic backgrounds were also diverse. My interlocutors were native Dutch and Flemish, as well as women from Antillean, Moroccan, Turkish, Kurdish, Indonesian and Pakistani backgrounds. I also interviewed interlocutors who were half Dutch-half Pakistani, half Dutch-half Moroccan and half Dutch-half Turkish. I only studied Muslim women who were Sunnis. My original intention was not to focus solely on *sunnis*, but as it happened all the pious circles I approached and studied consisted of Sunni Muslims.[78]

In order to understand the dynamics and the position of pious circles in the larger Muslim organizational field - consisting of predominantly male traditional Muslim organizations - I also interviewed five men. Three are male preachers and two are the chair of Muslim organizations. Interviewing both men and women helped me to deepen my understanding of the obstacles that female preachers face when they want to operate as a religious authority in pious circles. I also found it necessary to interview men in order to understand the issue of gender that plays an important role in the construction of Islamic knowledge in pious circles.[79]

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78   There are also many pious circles that consist of participants who are *alevis, ahmadiyya,* and *shiʿa.* However, my focus in the present study was on pious circles consisting of participants who were *sunnis.*

79   See Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles.*

Besides conducting semi-structured in-depth interviews, I also made use of participant observation. During my fieldwork I came across more than fifty pious circles by researching the Internet and via my interlocutors. Eventually, I conducted participant observation in thirteen Dutch and eleven Flemish pious circles over a period of three years. Besides pious circles, I also studied three women's support networks that had been initiated by pious Muslim women, two educational initiatives, three Muslim women's organizations and pious women's participation in six Muslim organizations.[80]

Gaining access to the pious activities of Muslim women was not always easy. Organizers of pious circles are not open to outsiders such as researchers or journalists. Many organizers have had previous bad experiences with these types of people. Considering the overload of negative media attention in past years, it is understandable that Muslim women have become more cautious toward outsiders who wish to 'study' them. For this reason, organizers of pious circles occasionally refused to cooperate. Most of them feared being portrayed as fundamentalist Muslim women who are oppressed by their husbands, fathers and brothers. Nevertheless, I also received a plenty of positive responses and so I was able to attend a total of fifty-six pious activities.

The pious activities I attended were situated in areas in which there are large populations of Muslims. In the case of the Netherlands, I visited pious activities in Amsterdam, Rotterdam and in the southern provinces of the Netherlands, Limburg and North Brabant. My research in Belgium concentrated on Flanders, Antwerp and its surroundings was my particular area of focus. Pious activities were held in living-rooms, community centers, classrooms of elementary schools and female spaces in mosques. Whenever possible, I often traveled to a pious activity with an interlocutor. In this way, I could observe, listen and ask my interlocutors questions both while participating in a pious activity and while traveling to and from our destinations. By this means, I could expand my participant observation beyond the actual pious activity and also discuss my interlocutors' thoughts afterwards.

The pious activities I visited were diverse. On the whole, I visited lectures by female preachers in pious circles, in mosques and during Islamic conferences of Muslim organizations. I also participated in workshops, assisted an interlocutor with her Islamic clothing stand during "sister days" and joined my interlocutors during the Friday sermons and prayers in mosques. Besides this, I followed online discussions

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80   See Chapter Five, Section 5.1. for the list.

between Muslim women on women-only forums and Facebook pages. With a few of my interlocutors, I had occasional contact by telephone. Hence, besides interviews and participant observation, I also made use of other channels to gather data. I was scrupulous in maintaining contact with my interlocutors by sending them a quarterly e-mail. In these e-mails, I would update them on the progress of my research, explain my findings and refer to future plans. I also actively requested them to think along with me and send me their feedback. This way of maintaining contact was very helpful to both me and my interlocutors because it created academic transparency. It also gave them an idea of my work as a researcher as well.

I analyzed my data according to Grounded Theory (GT).[81] Grounded theory refers to theory that is developed inductively from a corpus of data. The basic idea of the grounded theory approach is to read (and re-read) a textual database and "discover" or label variables (called categories, concepts and properties) and their interrelationships. Firstly, I gathered data through participant observation and chose my main topics: piety, Islamic knowledge and later, authority. Then, I set up semi-structured interviews in which I discussed these - and other related - topics with my interlocutors. Through different phases of coding - open, axial and selective - I was able to describe my data and categorize them.

During open coding, I categorized the interview data into bits such as words, phrases, sentences or sections with each interview. The question I tried the answer was: 'What is this about? What is happening here? In which context have these statements been made?' Then I was able to describe the terms by which statements had been made during interviews, for instance, "learning to know Allah", "Islamic education", "wife-husband relations", "reality versus ideal of Islam", "*umma*", "male-contestation", "upbringing of children", "*imams*", "mosques", "studying Islam", "How to be a good Muslim woman" and "Loving Allah." Thereafter, I grouped them into different categories such as piety, Islamic knowledge, gender relations, motherhood and so forth. Then, I applied axial coding in which I tried to connect the different categories and understand their relationships. During this phase, I discovered a strong relationship between piety cultivation and Islamic knowledge acquisition, on which I shall elaborate in Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*. During selective coding, I worked out the main category and searched for its relationship to the other categories. I discovered that the main category was piety built up by Islamic knowledge acquisition and it was the quality which led to female religious authorities. Consequently, religious authority became the third category.

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81   Barney Glazer & Anselm Strauss, *The discovery of grounded theory: strategies for qualitative research* (Chicago.: Aldine, 1967).

This helped me to understand the story behind all the categories. Finally, I sought for explanations in order to answer the research questions and the relationship between the different categories.

The many logbooks I kept during my fieldwork proved very helpful and formed the basis of my dissertation. In these logbooks, I jotted down many theoretical and empirical field notes after the interviews and the gatherings I visited. By referring to these notes - memos - I was able to describe the patterns in the interviews of my interlocutors that are analyzed in the Chapters Four, Five and Six.

In most cases, with one exception, I was allowed to record the interviews with my interlocutors. I also made notes during the interviews and reflected on them in my logbook afterwards. In my analysis of my interlocutors, I have tried to stay close to their thoughts and practices as they presented them. I have consciously chosen to use their own vocabulary when describing their views and practices. Consequently, the conclusions from the data are based on the Muslim women and men I have interviewed and observed and, in where this is not the case, I shall refer to them as my personal reflections.

I have guaranteed the anonymity of my interlocutors by using pseudonyms. The majority of my interlocutors also requested they remain anonymous. Given the regional character of pious circles, I have chosen not to mention the cities in which the pious circles are active. In such manner, I have attempted to protect the ano-nymity of my interlocutors. This brings me to my role as researcher. As mentioned before, the majority of my interlocutors had had negative experiences with previous researchers. Many explained that they felt they had been "used" by researchers because they would never hear back from them once they had been interviewed. Therefore, I knew that I had to find a way to maintain contact and to build a relation-ship that was based on trust and mutual respect.

When I began my fieldwork, I was quite naive in the sense that I was not aware of the different ways I would become classified and questioned by my interlocutors. I viewed myself as a PhD candidate who had a genuine interest in studying Muslim women. Furthermore, I am a woman from a Muslim Afghan background. Therefore, because of my shared religious background and gender, I was convinced that I would not experience many difficulties in gaining access to pious circles to interview Mus-lim women. However, in the eyes of my interlocutors I was not only an academic researcher, but also a journalist, a woman, a feminist, a humanist, a Muslim, a Born-Muslim, a westernized Muslim, an educated Muslim, a non-*hijabi* Muslim woman, an

ex-refugee, an Afghan Muslim and so forth. Hence, I was simultaneously an outsider and an insider. Furthermore, back then, it did not occur to me that, although my Muslim background would help me gain access to my research group, it could also set limitations. My interlocutors expected that I would only write down things that would be "to the benefit" of Muslims and Islam. Some expected me to be a "loyal Muslim" instead of a critical academic researcher. Moreover, I was not yet aware of the cascade of questions I would have to answer during my fieldwork. For instance: "What is your perspective on Islam? Are you aware of the fact that your research data might be used by the Dutch intelligence services against Muslims? Are you conscious of the possibility that your research might cause a bad image of Muslims? Who are your mentors? What are the aims of your research? Must it lead to a specific result? Who do you serve? Do you believe in Allah? Do you take responsibility for the positive and negative consequences resulting from your research?" and so on. I would also receive many *masha'allahs* through which my interlocutors showed appreciation for my efforts in doing a PhD research.[82] Using the phrase, my interlocutors showed respect but also reminded me that I was only doing a PhD research by the will of Allah. Once confronted with these questions and reactions, I decided to engage into a conversation with myself before I could engage into a conversation with my interlocutors. I was not aware that this inner conversation would eventually last longer than I thought; I still reflect on this matter even now, while I am writing this Section.

Eventually, I gained the trust of my interlocutors through honesty and openness. My open and honest attitude toward my interlocutors led to understanding, but also disappointment. Sometimes discussions would evolve that were not always to my benefit as a researcher. For instance, many interlocutors asked me whether I was a practicing Muslim woman. I would - in all honesty - answer that I was not. This also meant that I consciously did not join the congregational prayers during pious activities. I deliberately did so because I believed that my task was to study my interlocutors and not to pray with them. I am aware that from an anthropological perspective, it would have been understandable for me to join them in prayer, in order to immerse myself in their religious worlds. However, since I did not practice Islam, praying with them would have created an inaccurate image of me as a practicing Muslim. I did not want to gain my interlocutors' trust by joining a supposedly common practice that I did not share. Consequently, during prayers I was often placed by my interlocutors as an outsider. I also noticed that some interlocutors were disappointed. For instance, one of my interlocutors, Hagar, had difficulties understanding my choice

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82   *Masha'allah* is an Arabic term meaning as God has willed it or whatever God wills.

not to practice Islam. She engaged in many discussions with me in order to explain the importance of practicing in Islam. From my point of view as a researcher, her conversations and attempts helped me fully to understand her reflections on piety and offered me insights into the practice of piety.

Another type of question I was asked was whether I would consider wearing a headscarf. I generally replied that I shall probably never wear a headscarf. As a consequence, some interlocutors tried to convince me to wear the *hijab*. Some even prayed to Allah to guide me in making this decision. Finally, another obstacle I often faced was the assumption, that since I was a Muslim, my research would "naturally" present a positive image of Muslims. I experienced this assumption as problematic both toward my interlocutors and non-Muslims. For instance, during public lectures Dutch audiences would ask me what "my sisters" thought about certain matters. I would respond to both in a similar way. Namely, that I intended to stay close to the opinions and experiences as stated by my interlocutors. To what extent those opinions or experiences are positive or negative, was not for me to judge. Eventually, I convinced myself and my interlocutors by convincing them of the idea that I was conducting research on Muslim women, on their thoughts and practices of Islam. The Muslim woman is the story-teller, not me. Although their stories are subjective, as a researcher I strove as far as it was possible for neutrality. The requirement of neutrality meant that I had to maintain a specific distance from my research group. I find this distance crucial if researchers are to remain critical of their data. This also means that I am not an apologist of Islam or Muslim women either. Once I was aware of this factor, it did not matter whether I shared the ethnicity, gender, religious or cultural identity of my research group. As long as I stayed close to their discourses.

1.9. Structure of this dissertation

This dissertation is divided into three theoretical and three empirical chapters. Chapter One, *The theoretical framework: piety as a concept*, is a theoretical elaboration on the variety of definitions of piety and its expressions. Therefore, it provides a framework for understanding the interlocutors articulations of piety. Chapter Two, *Islamic knowledge and Muslims in Europe*, is a theoretical elaboration on Islamic knowledge, and contextualizes processes of knowledge production and acquisition among Muslims who live as a minority in Europe. Chapter Three, *The concept of religious authority*, attempts to provide a theoretical examination of religious authority in relation to Muslim women. The theoretical point of departure in this chapter is how and which type of religious authorities are constructed. Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*, presents the results of my fieldwork on the process of piety formation of my interlocutors. Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious*

circles, discusses how Muslim women in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium acquire and transmit Islamic knowledge, and what type of Islamic knowledge is produced by Muslim women through their engagement in pious activities. Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*, seeks to map out the kinds of authority that Muslim women become in the process of (re)producing and transmitting Islamic knowledge. It also examines how female religious authorities interpret and counter restrictions related to their authority.

All these chapters shall provide answers to the main questions posed in this dissertation: How do Muslim women in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium cultivate piety? What is the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge acquisition and production? To what extent do pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium provide space for the emergence of female religious authorities? How does being a Born-Muslim or being a convert to Islam affect Muslim women's understanding and expression of piety, knowledge and female religious authority? In these chapters, I shall describe a dynamic female religious field that revolves around the cultivation of piety through the deepening of Islamic knowledge in pious circles, leading to the emergence of female religious authorities, and a pious community of Born-Muslim and convert believers.

CHAPTER 1

The theoretical framework: piety as a concept

Piety is not a goal but a means to attain
through the purest peace of mind
the highest culture.[83]

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Introduction

Throughout the Muslim world Muslims have been experiencing a renewed religious engagement. This is often referred to as an 'Islamic revival' and is explained as a consequence of globalization. Olivier Roy speaks in terms of a 'globalized Islam' in which the relationship of Muslims to Islam is being reshaped through globalization, Westernization and, in the case of Europe, the impact of living as a minority.[84] Roy postulates that population flows and migration have 'deterritorialized' Islam; meaning that Islam is less ascribed to a specific territory and area of civilization and has entered a global space.[85] Nowadays, more Muslims are living as minorities in non-Muslim societies. In these newly settled communities, Muslims have to 're-invent what makes them Muslim.'[86] In this process of re-defining Islam, Muslims are reconstructing their religiosity and religious practice, and re-shaping certain aspects of the modern era according to an 'Islamic' vision.[87] Although the Islamic revival is often set in opposition to modernity, it can in fact be seen as an expression of it. The focus on Islamic principles is a 'modern' way of coping with contemporary challenges which are caused by changing political, economic and social conditions, including post-colonialism, capitalism, consumerism, individualization and secularization. [88]

As I argue in this chapter, female piety has become a significant aspect of the Islamic renewal. This is the reason that I have chosen to study the reformation of Islamic thought and practice among Muslim women. My interlocutors' purpose in becoming pious is to intensify their religiosity. Their piety aspirations go beyond the concept of piety as traditionally explained in the concept of *taqwa,* which is the Arabic term for piety (see Section 1.4). In their eyes it is more than just becoming religiously committed. Becoming pious is a way of life in which their Muslim identity is experienced as the most important factor. Therefore the purpose of this chapter is to study the concept of piety in the Netherlands and Belgium from a historical, religious and gender perspective.

This chapter is devoted to examining the various definitions of piety and its expressions. My intention is to develop a theoretical framework of piety within which to

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83   Thomas Bailey Saunders' selection, *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe* (1893), p. 15 http://www.philaletheians.co.uk/study-notes/living-the-life/goethe's-maxims-and-reflections.pdf (Accessed December 22, 2016).

84   Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, p. ix.

85   *Ibid.*, p. 18.

86   *Ibid.,* p. 18.

87   For more on Islamic Revival and modernity see: Ali Rahnema (ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic revival* (London/New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd, 1994).

88   I shall elaborate on the concept of individualization in more detail in Chapter Two, *Islamic knowledge and Muslims in Europe.*

place and understand my interlocutors' articulations of piety in the ensuing chapters. It is organized as follows: in Section 1.1. I elaborate on the Islamic Revival and compare it with the Pietist movement in Protestantism. In Section 1.2. I provide an outline of the different academic studies on piety and agency in Muslim societies, and in Section 1.3. in non-Muslim societies. The selection is based on those works which I found relevant to the present study. In Section 1.4., I elaborate on the nuances and various meanings of *taqwa*, which is the Arabic term for piety and is often used by Muslim women. In the next Section, 1.5., I discuss piety in terms of 'religious excellence' and the creation of 'virtuoso religiosity.' In Section 1.6., I shed light on the relationship between piety and gender, and whether there are particular gendered forms of piety. In Section 1.7., I discuss the types of gender roles which are specified for women, both from a traditional and progressive perspective. In Section 1.8., I address the relationship between piety, gender and conversion. Finally, I draw a conclusion in Section 1.9.

1.1. The Islamic Revival and Pietism

Muslim revival movements are not a new phenomenon. In the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, revival movements emerged as internal initiatives within the Islamic world and also as reactions to the collapse of Muslim empires and the economic and colonial intervention of Europe.[89] These Muslim revivalists attempted to restore Islamic tradition. They felt that the Muslim society was in need of moral reconstruction, as these societies were teetering on the brink of cultural stagnation and had begun to lag behind European societies in development.[90] The rationale of their founders was that the only way to revive Muslim societies was by strengthening Islamic thought and practice.[91] If this were to be achieved, Islamic practice and belief had to be renewed. To a certain extent, the contemporary revival movements are rooted in these earlier reformist ideas. Ira M. Lapidus states:

> The past history of Islamic societies contains many examples of reform and revival movements that developed as a response to changing political and economic conditions. These movements may be traced back to the example of the Prophet himself whose own life constituted an Islamic response to conditions of "modernization" in his own society. [92]

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89   Ira M. Lapidus, *Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms*, p. 444.
90   Asʿad Abu Khalil & Mahmoud Haddad, Revival and renewal, Source: The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236/e0682 (Accessed June 4, 2014).
91   *Ibid.*
92   Ira M. Lapidus, *Islamic Revival and Modernity: The Contemporary Movements and the Historical Paradigms*, pp. 444-445.

I think that it is very important to stress that piety in terms of religious renewal as described above is not confined to Islam. As a matter of fact, the term pietism originates from the Pietist movement in Protestantism in Europe, Germany in particular. Pietism comes from the Latin word *pietas* which means 'devotion' and is an umbrella concept for intra-church devotional and renewal movements.[93] During both the seventeenth and the eighteenth century, it became a major reform movement within German Lutheranism. It emphasized a practical, active piety - *praxis pietatis* - rather than doctrine[94] and its translation into religious practice ('tätiges Christsein' [Ger., 'active being-a-Christian'].[95] According to Nick Trakakis, this involved - among other actions - an emphasis on 'the performance of good works, the scrutinization of daily life, the diligent study of the Scriptures with particular reference to its moral teachings, a conviction in the centrality of forming a personal and experiential relationship with God.'[96]

The Pietism movement emphasized practices of devotion and introduced such new forms of religious gatherings as Bible study circles in the context of 'brotherhoods' and pious conversation groups. Soon such 'colleges' or 'conventicles' became part and parcel of the Protestant church communities.[97] Gradually a new style of religiosity emerged in which, on the one hand, religious social activity was emphasized and, on the other hand, the growth of personal religious experience was encouraged.[98] In this same era, the Protestant tendency towards missionary activity emerged.[99]

Although it does take these historical precedents into account, the present study deals with contemporary Muslim piety movements. The majority of present-day Muslim revivalist approaches are based on individual reformulation of personal religiosity in which devotion becomes important. A large number of scholarly works

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93   Christoph Bochinger. "Pietism." *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*. Edited by Kocku von Stuckrad. Brill, 2011. Brill Online. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bdr_COM-00343 (Accessed March 22, 2011).

94   Nick Trakakis, Piety and Pietism, In: *Theandros, An online journal of Orthodox Christian Theology and philosophy*, Vol. 2, no. 3 (Spring 2005): pp. 1-4.

95   Christoph Bochinger, Christoph Bochinger. "Pietism." The Brill Dictionary of Religion. Edited by Kocku von Stuckrad. Brill, 2011. Brill Online. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bdr_COM-00343 (Accessed March 22, 2011).

96   Nick Trakakis, Piety and Pietism, pp. 1-4.

97   According to Christoph Bochinger Pietism as a 'movement' can be studied from the works of Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705): 'In 1670, in Frankfurt/Main, Spener founded a Collegium Pietatis (Lat., "Association of Devotion/Piety"), a pious conversation group or circle for Bible study and mutual edification, which met in his study. After this exemplar, such 'colleges' or 'conventicles' sprang up in many places - small communities of pious Christians, within the Protestant church communities, and frequently beyond their local boundaries.' Cited from: Christoph Bochinger, *ibid*.

98   Nick Trakakis, Piety and Pietism, pp. 1-4.

99   *Ibid,* pp. 1-4.

from the fields of anthropology, sociology and religion have examined a variety of Muslim pious practices in different societies in relation to men and women, among them, Azam Torab (1996), Charles Hirschkind (1999/2006), Saba Mahmood (2005), Lara Deeb (2006), Sherine Hafez (2006), Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami (2006), Joy Kooi-Chin Tong and Bryan S. Turner (2008), Karin van Nieuwkerk (2008/2013) and Samuli Schielke (2009). In these studies, Muslim piety is expressed by emphasizing the importance of the Qurʾan, the *sunna* of the Prophet and historical religious figures as exemplary role-models.[100] Piety practices are often manifested through the daily prayers, fasting, wearing Islamic clothing such as the *hijab*, observing gender segregation and so on. Moreover, embraced as a way to construct piety, these studies demonstrate how Muslims engage in pious study circles to gain knowledge of Islam and to learn piety practices.[101]

1.2. Studies on piety and agency in Muslim societies

One of the first scholars to have studied the piety of Muslim women has been Azam Torab.[102] Between 1992-1993 she conducted fieldwork in the city of Teheran and examined pious women's prayer meetings. Torab describes collective rituals of groups of pious *shiʿi* women - mostly performed in their homes - with a focus on prayer meetings called *jalaseh*. Torab positions these *jalaseh* as part of the religious revival which has taken place since the 1979 revolution in Iran. Cogently, Torab shows how these women's gatherings provide opportunities for female religious leaders called *guyandeh* (Persian for speakers) to express their ideas during prayer meetings and demonstrates how these circles offer women space to work on their well-being and to acquire self-control. She explains:

> The women meet regularly, often on a daily basis, not only because of the social support and freedom of expression these settings provide in the absence of men, but also because of the immense enjoyment they derive from a sense of self-esteem, competency and moral and social worth conferred by attendance at the gatherings and by becoming more pious.[103]

Torab explains how women's gatherings can provide a context for interpreting cultural notions of gender. She argues that, in dominant *shiʿi* discourse, religious

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100   Ali Rahnema (ed.), *Pioneers of Islamic revival*, pp. 4-10.
101   Islamic knowledge production and acquisition in pious circles will be dealt with in the next chapter.
102   Azam Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighbourhood in Iran," In: *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 2, no. 2 (June 1996): pp. 235-252. See also Azam Torab, *Performing Islam: Gender and Ritual in Iran* (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006).
103   *Ibid.*, p. 236.

scholars seize on the attribute of emotion as the factor which overrules women's reasoning capacity. This happens 'in a highly gendered way to define all dimensions of personhood and justify women's exclusion from leading religious posts.'[104] Despite their rejection on emotional grounds, Torab explains that these women's understanding of intention - *niyyat* in Persian - implies that, alongside their putative overabundance of emotion, they are fully capable of rational thought. Torab explains this aspect by referring to one of her interlocutors 'Mrs. Omid':

> To her, intention is not only a means to faith and a way of establishing her relationship with God, but is also a rational and controlling process. Although to Mrs Omid faith means being subject to the will of God, she speaks of intention in ways that imply that individuals also have wills of their own. Intention is thus her way of invoking an inner 'power', not in the sense of control or domination, but of enablement (cf Fardon 1985; Strathern 1988:119), of being a self-governing agent capable of independent thought and action. (...). Thus, to Mrs Omid, intention is enabling, generative and transformative. It can transform not only relationships between people, and between them and God, but also the personal experience of putatively 'natural' facts such as gender. In other words, intention may be a key to understanding how Mrs Omid produces novel interpretations of, or in some respects even reverses, dominant cultural definitions of "reason" and "emotion".[105]

Torab illustrates a paradoxical situation in which pious women accept dominant gender discourses which dismiss women's reasoning's capacity as being overruled by emotion, but also behave and speak in a manner which contradicts this discourse.[106] Torab explains this paradox by referring to different - even contradictory - models of gender which can exist within the same culture, allowing women to re-interpret gender models contextually and practically.[107] Torab suggests that notions of intention and faith can arouse forms of resistance by interpreting and challenging established norms of gender within certain structural constraints. Torab concludes that 'subversion' might be too strong a word, and it is not used by the women studied. 'Rather than contest the dominant discourses, the women appropriate and transcend them through their particular constructions.'[108]

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104   *Ibid.*, p. 237.
105   *Ibid.*, p. 241.
106   The concept of gender is discussed in Sections 1.6., 1.7. and 1.8. of this chapter.
107   Azam Torab, "Piety as Gendered Agency: A Study of Jalaseh Ritual Discourse in an Urban Neighbourhood in Iran," p. 237.
108   *Ibid.,* p. 248.

More recently, the same point has been expatiated on by Saba Mahmood in her ethnographic study of the Women's Mosque Movement in Egypt.[109] Mahmood describes how female preachers - *daʿiyat* - address congregations of women in mosques, a space which has generally been an almost exclusively male preserve.[110] The mosque movement, in which informal teaching takes place in study circles across Cairo, is women-centered.[111] Mahmood's interlocutors focus on cultivating an embodied practice of personal piety, in which practices such as veiling are considered normative.[112] In these study circles, the cultivation of the ideal virtuous self is the central goal. Her contention is that the women's mosque movement is a reaction to the growing secularization and Westernization in Egypt. In this movement, women attempt to define how they can live as Muslims in the modern world. Mahmood states that women's cultivation of piety helps them construct pious ethical moral selves and thereby seeks to transform many aspects of Egyptian social life. By accepting this challenge, the Women's Mosque Movement becomes a transformative force. The members aim to construct a strong moral community by reconfiguring wider aspects of human life according to an Islamic vision.[113] These women's entry into the religious space has been taking place under the umbrella of *daʿwa,* that is, Islamic propagation.[114] Hence *daʿwa* becomes an effective strategy in expanding and claiming religious space.[115]

What I find interesting is the connection Mahmood makes between piety and agency, which is applicable to the present study as well. I consider agency to be the capacity to act, make choices and to interpret. Throughout her ethnographic study of pious women, Mahmood criticizes feminist theories and assumptions about agency. She questions the tendency in feminist scholarship to 'conceptualize agency in terms of

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109   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

110   Female religious teachers such as *daʿiyat* are elaborated in Chapter Three, *The concept of authority*.

111   Mahmood positions the mosque movement as part of a larger Islamic Revival which has been gaining in ground throughout the Muslim world since the 1970s.

112   Embodiment refers to the body. Embodiment suggests things extraneous to the body are added to the body and thereby the abstract and the concrete are united. According to Mahmood's interpretation, 'the body is not a medium of signification but the substance and the necessary tool through which the embodied subject is formed.' She uses embodiment as a tool to analyze the way in which moral ethics are cultivated bodily. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 29.

113   The focus on female religious authority in the study of Mahmood is elaborated on in Chapter 3.1.

114   In Arabic the primary meaning of *daʿwa* is to call or to invite. In the religious sense, *daʿwa* is addressed to human beings who believe in the true religion of Islam by God and his prophets. It is used for both Muslims and non-Muslims. See Chapter 5.2. for an elaboration of *daʿwa*.

115   In the empirical Chapters Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*, and Six, *Female religious authorities*, I shall demonstrate how the interlocutors in the present study also claimed religious space through their engagement in *daʿwa* activities. See also Chapter Three (3.1).

subversion or resignification of social norms, to locate agency within those opera-
tions that resist dominating and subjectivating modes of power.'[116] Although Mah-
mood admits that agency can manifest itself in terms of resistance, she insists that
scholars should expand its meaning beyond resistance. For instance, she refers to
how scholars analyze the agency of contemporary Egyptian Muslim women through
their practice of veiling. Some explain veiling from a functionalist point of view, in
terms of making it easier to avoid sexual harassment on public transportation.[117]
Others explain it in terms of resistance, for instance, to the hegemony of western
values.[118] Mahmood argues that, although these explanations are valuable, they
disregard Islamic practices of piety, which are the terms through which women -
who take up the veil - explain their motivations.[119] Therefore, Mahmood contends
that, in the case of pious Muslim women, agency should not be understood primarily
in terms of resistance to relations of power. The meaning of agency should not be
'fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts
that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity.'[120] Consequently,
the cultivation of piety by Muslim women shows how agency can also be articulated
in - embodied - ethical practices such as the donning of the veil. Hence agency can
also be exhibited through the cultivation of piety.[121]

Despite her insistence on the multiple meanings of agency, Mahmood herself does
not explain what her interlocutors thought that agency was. Her principal emphasis
is that agency can also be located within ethical self-formation.[122] Furthermore,
Mahmood tends to focus rather heavily on agency in terms of 'subordination.' By
doing so, she runs the risk of over-emphasizing the meaning of agency solely in
terms of 'subordination.' On the basis of my empirical findings, which I shall present
in the Chapters Four, Five and Six, I argue that, at least among the pious women in
the Netherlands and Belgium, agency is both 'subordination' which I shall phrase in

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116   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 14.
117   *Ibid.,* p. 16.
118   *Ibid.,* p. 16.
119   *Ibid.,* p. 16.
120   *Ibid.,* p. 14.
121   A key term in understanding the cultivation of Islamic virtues in Mahmood's argumentation is
       habitus, which she uses in the Aristotelian sense. She defines habitus 'as an acquired excellence at
       either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a
       permanent mark on the character of the person. Thus, moral virtues (such as modesty, honesty
       and fortitude) are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviours (e.g., bodily acts,
       social demeanor) with inward dispositions (e.g., emotional states, thoughts, intentions) through
       the repeated performance of acts that entail those particular virtues.' Saba Mahmood, *Politics of
       piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 136. See Pierre Bourdieu (1990a[1980]),
       The Logic of Practice, (trans. R. Nice), (California: Stanford University Press, 1980) for his elabo-
       ration of the term habitus.
122   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 34.

terms of conformism to communal norms and resistance. Hence I move beyond the notion of agency in terms of 'subordination' and explain how the women in my study, who live in secular European societies, have multiple and contradictory articulations of agency both as conformism and resistance.[123]

Lara Deeb also focuses on piety by elaborating how notions of modernity and piety are intertwined, expressed and shaped through veiling and public participation by *shiʿi* women in Lebanon.[124] Contrary to dominant assumptions - which hold that Islam and modernity are incompatible - Deeb's interlocutors consider themselves both pious and modern. Deeb focuses on how public piety is formed by the community service and volunteerism of her interlocutors. This combination elicits a specific activism which allows them to participate and enter the public sphere. Public piety - or visible piety - Deeb postulates is a way for her interlocutors to express religious commitment. By making piety visible, these women establish their 'morality and membership in the *shiʿi* pious modern.'[125] Consequently, Deeb states that modernity does not have to lead to secularism, but can lead to the cultivation of a more self-conscious modern way of being Muslim. This 'modern piety' is visible in the process of what she calls 'authenticating' Islam.[126] Authentication is the process by which Muslims establish 'the true or correct meaning, understanding, or method of various religious and social practices.'[127] This implies that her interlocutors study and question Islam on the basis of religious knowledge and understanding.[128]

Despite the merits discussed, various aspects of piety have not been received much attention in these studies. Firstly, they have focused on Muslim women who cultivate piety through bodily acts - such as veiling - that in Deeb's study is the symbol of public, visible piety. Such bodily acts are considered to be 'critical markers of piety' to paraphrase Mahmood.[129] Although veiling was one of the critical markers of piety among my interlocutors as well, these works tend to underexpose ways of becoming pious which I have found among my interlocutors. For instance, they do not make clear how Muslim women who do not or no longer wear the veil still strive for piety by devoting themselves to other pious practices.

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123   See Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*.
124   Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon* (Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006).
125   Deeb refers to the Arabic concept of *iltizam* meaning religious commitment. Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*, pp. 34-36.
126   *Ibid.*, pp. 20-22.
127   *Ibid.*, p. 20.
128   Knowledge is discussed in Chapter Two, *Islamic knowledge and Muslims in Europe*.
129   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 158.

Secondly, the dynamics between the individual and the collective has been paid scant attention in the studies discussed above. As I shall demonstrate in Chapter Four, Muslim women cultivate piety through interaction with their religious communities. At times they pursue piety individually and at others they adhere to the norms of piety as these are understood by their communities. In the process of constructing piety, my interlocutors' individual religious experiences were strongly connected to their communities. In short it is imperative to focus on their social contexts.[130]

Thirdly, both Mahmood and Deeb do not elucidate the contradictions that women can experience when aspiring to piety. I shall illustrate this by referring to the work of Samuli Schielke and his discussion of young Egyptian men. Schielke states that in the anthropology of Muslim societies, subjectivity, religiosity and morality have emerged as the central topics, whereas the issues of ambivalence and fragmentation have more or less been relegated to the sidelines.[131] The problem with these approaches is, Schielke thinks, that, 'although they give considerable attention to practical judgement in the face of conflict, debate, and contestation, they look at the practice of morality and religion primarily from the perspective of coherence.'[132] He is referring to such scholars as Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind and the way they juxtapose the ideals of the Islamic revival with an equally idealized secular liberal position.[133] Schielke's main criticism is that, by focusing on the aspiration of piety cultivation rather than its actual outcome, the ambiguity and fragmentation which individuals might experience while becoming pious is left unexplained.[134]

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130   See my elaboration on religious individualization in Chapter Two, *Islamic knowledge and Muslims in Europe.*

131   He refers to morality as 'the conscious cultivation of virtues with the aim of developing a virtuous self.' Samuli Schielke, "Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians," p. 25.

132   *Ibid.,* p. 25.

133   In his book '*The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics'*, Charles Hirschkind analyzes different modes of ethical self-improvement among Muslims in Cairo. Hirschkind notes how taped sermons can become instruments by which Muslims cultivate piety and aspire to a pious life. See Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

134   Schielke refers to Katherin Ewing and Gary Greg who argue that: 'While people may present their identity, aims, and trajectory as clear and coherent at a given moment, they routinely shift between conflicting self-representations and are regularly torn between conflicting self-ideals.' He also refers to Magnus Marsden who states that approaches which emphasize self-discipline 'are unable to confront the ways in which Muslims are called upon to face, explain and content with inconsistencies and complexities in their attempts to live virtuous lives.' Samuli Schielke, "Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians," pp. 24-40.

As a consequence, Schielke argues that scholars should pay more attention to 'the complex and often contradictory nature of everyday experience.'[135] I agree with his concern and shall therefore focus on the complex discourses which Muslim women articulate, and the contradictory outcomes which piety ideals of perfection can have for - some of - them. Nevertheless my focus is different, as I shall examine how Muslim women give meaning to the ambiguities they have experienced - between their interpretations of an ideal Islam and the lived reality of their Muslim community - in the context of pious circles. As mentioned earlier, I did not engage in participant observation in the daily lives of Muslim women. Therefore, I cannot give an account of their everyday experienced ambiguities and contradictions. However, besides interviews, I attended their gatherings in pious circles and observed their religious engagement. Consequently, I shall provide examples of the contradictions and ambiguities experienced about which my interlocutors spoke of during their meetings in pious circles.

In line with the works mentioned above, throughout this dissertation I shall argue that piety practices should be examined within their own contexts and on their own terms. Therefore, akin to Mahmood's approach I am concerned with how agency can also be exhibited through the cultivation of piety. Furthermore, drawing on Mahmood's argument that it is essential to expand the meaning of agency beyond resistance, I shall examine whether resistance or conformism, or both, are present in my interlocutors' articulations of agency.

1.3. Studies on piety among Muslim minorities

Having discussed studies on piety and Muslim women in majority Muslim societies, I now turn my attention to three works which focus on pious practices of Muslim women in minority Muslim societies, in which there are elements which resonate with my own material. Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami describe the process of pursuing piety among pious Muslim women in France and Germany.[136] They have investigated the relationship between knowledge accumulation and religious authority, focusing on the ways in which these women engage with religious authorities and on their religious discourses. The authors show how the cultivation of a pious self is more than a personal trajectory, as the women studied aim to con-

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135 Schielke argues that, rather than searching for moments of perfection, researchers should look at the 'conflicts, ambiguities, double standards, fractures and shifts as the constitutive moments of the practice of norms.' Samuli Schielke, "Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians," pp. 37-38.

136 Jeanette S. Jouili & Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, no. 4, (October 2006). See also Jeanette S. Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe*, (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2015).

struct a pious Muslim community. Moreover, through the accumulation of piety, the women gain religious authority.[137] However, the authors state that 'the women's priority given to the constitution of a pious self is not so much a struggle for trans-formations in authority structures, but an essential need for religious authorities in order to reach the desired effect of self-reform and piety.'[138] In other words, the women's engagement with religious authorities is a necessary pre-condition for their production of Islamic knowledge and for their cultivation of piety. Furthermore, the authors - as does Mahmood - attempt to go 'beyond the common binary drawn between subjection or resistance to authority.'[139] As an alternative, they argue that, for these women, 'both a reflexive and also an affirmative engagement with religious authorities' create the necessary conditions for the production of religious knowl-edge and for cultivating piety, which is deemed central to their self-understanding as Muslims.[140]

The results of their study are similar to the findings in the present study. As I shall examine in the Chapters Four, Five and Six, although becoming pious is the main purpose of my interlocutors, the means by which piety is formed are engagement in the acquisition and dissemination of Islamic knowledge and becoming female religious authorities.[141] Consequently, this leads to multiple expressions of agency.

Another view has been offered by Jan A. Ali who studied piety among *Tablighi*[142] women in Australia. He illustrates how aspirations to piety by Muslim women are an attempt to find a religious response to modernity.[143] His interlocutors are opposed to the western ideologies of secularism, liberalism and materialism and find 'the vocation of discovering God, more fulfilling and rewarding than participating in the consumer culture of material capitalism.'[144] What is more, Ali's interlocutors

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137   Muslim women's religious authority is elaborated in Chapter Three, *The concept of authority*, and six *Female religious authority*.

138   Jeanette S. Jouili & Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," p. 619.

139   *Ibid.*, p. 619.

140   *Ibid.*, p. 619.

141   Their study will be discussed at greater length in Chapter Two in relation to Islamic knowledge and in Chapter Three in relation to female religious authority.

142   The *Tablighi Jamaat* is an Islamic revival movement which was founded in India in 1927 by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas. It means 'the Society for Spreading Faith.' Jan Ali describes it as an apolitical religious movement which places emphasis on 'personal renewal and spiritual eleva-tion'. The aim of this movement is to encourage and invite Muslims to take a closer step to Islam and to 'inculcate in them a high moral order and guide them toward righteousness and Islamic spirituality.' See Jan Ali, "Islamic Revivalism: The Case of the Tablighi Jamaat," In: *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol. 23, no. 1 (April 2003): pp. 173-181.

143   Jan A. Ali, "Piety among Tablighi women," In: *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 5, no. 3 (October 2011): pp. 225-247.

144   *Ibid.,* p. 226.

conceptualize piety in terms of resistance to and a defense against Westernization, secularism and consumerism. Resistance to and a defense against Westernization were also expressions of agency among my own interlocutors. They also mentioned criticism by their own ethnic community and families, a feature especially marked among the Born-Muslims. This point is also put forward by Santi Rozario, who has analyzed young women's piety in Bangladesh and the UK, looking at it as a mode of resistance to parental authority. She discusses some of the ways in which Islamic piety was deployed by her interlocutors in their efforts to resist it. Her interlocutors showed how they baulked at parental authority by wearing the *hijab* or marrying a Muslim spouse from another ethnic group. Rozario argues that there are limits to the expression of individual agency by her interlocutors, 'since women's choices are made, and their lives are crafted, as with all human lives, in a space between social determination and voluntary choice.'[145] Rozario reminds us that women's agency should be understood in the context of their specific social structure, relationships of domination, individual desires, motivations and so on.

Hence, incorporating piety in non-Muslim societies can have a twofold meaning in terms of agency. Firstly, as explained by Saba Mahmood, agency can mean the capacity to ingrain religious norms for pious living. Secondly, agency can stand for resistance to the norms of the majority non-Muslim society and possibly, their own ethnic communities. Following and building on these observations, I have set myself the task of examining the multiple meanings of women's agency in the context of piety cultivation: Is it a way of acquiring religious space and authority? Is it a response or resistance to western ideologies? Is it a force for transformation in trying to construct a strong religious community or conformism to communal norms?[146]

1.4. *Taqwa*

My interlocutors regularly referred to the Arabic term *taqwa* in their discussion of piety. In order to understand my interlocutors articulations of piety in the upcoming chapters, in this Section I describe the nuances and various meanings of *taqwa*.

Taqwa is a central concept in Qurʾanic theology and ethics, and refers to piety and virtue.[147] In some contexts *taqwa* is also translated in terms of fear/awe/dread,

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145   *Ibid.*, p. 287.
146   See Chapter Four for my analysis of piety and its meaning for Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium.
147   See for the study of Islamic ethics based on study of the Qurʾan: Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qurʾan* (Canada: McGill-Queen's Press, 2002). See for an understanding of the development of ethics in the contemporary Muslim world: Ataullah Siddiqui, "Ethics in Islam: key concepts and contemporary challenges," In: *Journal of Moral Education*, Vol. 26, no. 4, (1997): pp. 423-431.

especially as the fear of God which must lead to God consciousness.[148] Besides *taqwa*, the terms *khawf* and *khashya* also refer to fear/awe in English-language translations of the Qurʾan.[149] The main difference between *taqwa, khawf* and *khashya* is that *taqwa* is viewed as a positive Qurʾanic virtue. *Khawf* and *khashya* have both a positive connotation ('of a virtue to be embraced and cultivated') and a negative connotation ('of those unwelcome states of anxiety or dread typically associated with fear').[150] Hence *taqwa* is the kind of piety which originates from the awe of God, making Muslims aware of their thoughts and actions in relation to God. It can also mean self-restraint, in terms of protecting the self and one's actions to forestall God's wrath and punishment.[151]

In different contexts the Qurʾan mentions that those who fear Allah[152] and are virtuous will be rewarded, forgiven and their sins remitted (Q. 40:9, 40:45, 52:27, 76:11, 3:198 etc.) *Taqwa* appears in the Qurʾan 251 times and is often put on the same footing as 'faith, justice, truthfulness and obedience to God.'[153] For many Muslims, *taqwa* is one of the most important spiritual values of Islam and part of the ʿibadat. ʿIbadat refers to the ordinances of divine worship, in this case obedience to God and individual religious practice.[154] In the works of *fiqh* - Islamic jurisprudence - ʿibadat designates such individual ritual duties - *fard ʿayn* - as the daily prayer, fasting, alms and the *hajj*.[155] The *muʿamalat*, on the other hand, are those parts of Islamic law which are defined by the relationship between human beings.[156] Therefore as part

148   Leah Kinberg. " Piety." Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill Online, 2012. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-Qurʾan/piety-SIM_00326 (Accessed October 23, 2012).

149   Scott C. Alexander. "Fear." Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill Online, 2012. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-Qurʾan/fear-COM_00064 (Accessed October 23, 2012).

150   *Ibid.*

151   Marina A. Tolmacheva. "Religious Practices: Piety: Overview." Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures. General Editor Suad Joseph. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/entries/encyclopedia-of-women-and-islamic-cultures/religious-practices-piety-overview-COM_0613 (Accessed 8 January, 2014).

152   Those who have *taqwa* are called *muttaqun*.

153   http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t243/e339?_hi=1&_pos=1   (Accessed October 30, 2012)

154   G. H. Bousquet. " ʿIbādāt." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online , 2012. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ibadat-SIM_3014 (Accessed October 30, 2012).

155   *Ibid.*

156   In Islamic law there are two types of legal obligations: individual and collective. Individual duty, *fard ʿayn*, is everything which is commanded by God and hence is obligatory for each individual Muslim, such as prayer and fasting. Communal obligation, in Arabic *fard kifaya,* must be discharged by the Muslim community as a whole and includes having a Muslim who can perform the funeral prayer in a Muslim community or *jihad*. Although pursuing Islamic knowledge is not a *fard ʿayn* or *fard kifaya,* many Muslims do regard it as an important religious duty.

of the *muʿamalat* piety is socially constructed and relational. For example, it encompasses how to be a pious wife or a pious mother.[157] For this reason, Marina A. Tolmacheva makes the distinction between 'spiritual piety' between human being and God, *ʿibadat,* and piety in the sphere of human beings, *muʿamalat.*[158] Tolmacheva explains *taqwa* as the foundation of a good character, as it stops human beings from committing evil actions and doing bad deeds.[159] She explains:

> Taqwā originates in pure faith (īmān) in God and is expressed by acting in obedience to God. The God of the Qurʾān is awe-inspiring, and the proper posture of man toward God is one of fear. Taqwā is the fear or love and awe of God that a Muslim feels, and a person with taqwā strives to obey God, observe the bounds and limits set by God, and stay away from what may displease God.[160]

Amina Wadud defines *taqwa* as God-conscious piety. She elaborates on *taqwa* as:

> 'piety', that is, a pious manner of behavior which observes constraints appropriate to a social-moral system; and 'consciousness of Allah', that is, observing that manner of behavior because of one's reverence towards Allah.[161]

In her reading, *taqwa* is a means by which one is constantly reminded to worship God and observe all of God's commands. This reflects both the individual's attitude and actions towards God, making *taqwa* a multidimensional term.[162] As does Wadud, I understand piety to be God-consciousness in thought and action. As I shall discuss in the empirical chapters, the definition of *taqwa* as given by Wadud comes close to the experiences of my interlocutors. Furthermore, in Wadud's definition we observe a practical side of *taqwa.* This practical and performative aspect of *taqwa* has been studied by Saba Mahmood.

Mahmood argues that *taqwa* suggests 'both an inward orientation or disposition, and a manner of practical conduct.'[163] She contends that virtues are ingrained by the combination of outward behavior and inward disposition. For instance, the virtue of modesty is, according to Mahmood, cultivated by the donning of the veil as it expresses true modesty and is the means by which modesty is incorporated by

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157   *Ibid.*
158   *Ibid.*
159   *Ibid.*
160   *Ibid.*
161   Amina Wadud, The Qurʾan and Woman: *Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 37.
162   *Ibid.*
163   Saba Mahmood, Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, p. 4.

Muslim women.[164] By bodily acts one is trained to behave in a certain way. Hence the body becomes a means through which a particular virtue is created.

Following the definitions of piety provided by Tolmacheva, Wadud and Mahmood, I explore my interlocutors' understanding and nuances of piety. How do they define piety? Why and how do they aspire to piety? How do they perform piety? What are the practical dimensions of piety?

1.5. Religious excellence and qualification

In a special issue of the journal of Contemporary Islam on Piety, Politics and Islam, the sociologist Bryan Turner uses piety in a different manner to that discussed above.[165] He defines piety in terms of 'religious excellence.'[166] Turner turns to Aristotle for whom 'virtue is a state of character in which excellence has been achieved in a particular sphere such as morality, warfare or gymnasium.'[167] Turner states that piety has a tendency to have a radical impact on everyday life, as it stimulates believers to change their lifestyle in terms of habits and behavior but also in terms of their disposition and tastes in the material world.[168] In other words, piety is '*par excellence* a technology of the self designed to produce religious excellence or virtues.'[169] Furthermore, Turner argues that becoming pious leads to the construction of new lifestyles, religious tastes and preferences. Turner, states that piety is:

> ...combining new elements to create a religious habitus that stands in competition with other possible combinations in a competitive religious context. These new combinations are then defined as the orthodox standards by which the worth of a good Christian or a good Muslim could be measured.[170]

Here Turner puts piety in the context of measurement. He states that the successful combination of religious - orthodox - practices leads to positions in which believers might be considered pious. This can lead to hierarchies of virtue, in which some are

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164   *Ibid.,* p. 22.
165   Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim life, Vol. 2, no. 1 (March 2008).
166   Bryan Turner's definition of understanding piety - *taqwa* - in terms of religious excellence is not unique. The well-known Islamic theologian Abdul A'la S. Maududi defines *taqwa* in his *tafsir* - exegesis - of the Qurʾan as 'moral excellence.' See: Kamal, A. A., (ed.) *The Meaning of the Qurʾan*, 13 vols. 6th edn., translated by Ch. Muhammad Akbar (Lahore: Islamic Publication Ltd, 1982), p. 117.
167   'If manly heroism is the excellence of the warrior, then we can for the time being regard piety as excellence in religious activities.' Bryan. S. Turner, "Introduction: the price of piety," In: *Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 2, no. 1 (March 2008): p. 2.
168   Bryan. S., "Introduction: the price of piety," Turner, p. 2.
169   *Ibid.,* p. 3.
170   *Ibid.,* p. 2.

'measured' more piously than others. Turner is actually building on the sociologist Max Weber's theory of 'status stratification.' Weber states that piety unavoidably creates hierarchies of religious virtues in the form of pious status groups which are defined by their successful combination of orthodox practices. Within this competitive struggle over virtue, there is a hierarchy of virtuous values and practices which Weber expresses as the distinction between 'virtuoso'[171] and 'mass religion.'[172] The religious qualities with which some people are endowed cannot be attained by everyone, therefore people's 'religious qualifications' are different.[173] Weber strongly connects this religious qualification with the possession of charisma, since those who possess charisma are, he states, religiously qualified.[174] This difference in qualities leads to a sort of 'status stratification.' In this stratification, there is a virtuoso religiosity, which consists of 'religiously qualified people', and mass religiosity, which consists of 'religiously unmusical people.'[175] Weber adds that there is a tendency for all types of 'intensive religiosity' eventually to lead to a status stratification, on the basis of the difference in charismatic qualifications.

Piety as religious excellence, Weber's notion of religiously qualified people and the emergence of a hierarchy of virtues, has been a very valuable tool for the present study. I attempt to examine how - in Turner's terms - becoming pious brings about a major transformation in dispositions towards oneself and one's community. Building on Weber, I analyze how pious endeavors created differences among my interlocutors, especially between converts to Islam and Born-Muslim women. In other words: Does the cultivation of piety lead to a hierarchy of virtues in which some individuals are considered more pious than others? And if so, on the basis of which aspects of piety?

1.6. Piety and gender

In the present study it is also relevant to focus on how piety relates to gender. In this Section I shall elaborate on how the definition of piety as God-consciousness has implications for Muslim women. As we have seen, Amina Wadud argues for a holistic interpretation of piety when it comes to the position of women.[176] Wadud

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171 The most important single source for Weber's concept of religious virtuosity is the essay called 'The social psychology of the world religions'. Virtuoso is a term by which Weber refers to someone who strives for perfection within an existing religious tradition. The virtuoso does his utmost to fulfill the demands of his or her religion. Max Weber, "The social psychology of the world religions" In: *From Max Weber: essays in sociology,* (eds.) H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (Cornwall: Routledge, 1991) (first published in 1948), pp. 287-291.
172 Max Weber, "The social psychology of the world religions," p. 287.
173 *Ibid.,* p. 187.
174 Max Weber's discussion on authority is elaborated in Chapter Three, *The concept of authority*.
175 Max Weber, "The social psychology of the world religions," p. 287
176 Amina Wadud refers to the Arabic *taqwa* when speaking of piety.

- following Muhammad ʿAbduh[177] - believes that God does not differentiate on the basis of wealth, race, gender or historical context, but on the basis of *taqwa,* as this is explained in the Qurʾan.[178] She refers to the Qurʾanic verse *al-Hujurat* (49:13) in which the degree of piety between men and women - or men and men and women and women - in the sight of God is explained:

> O [people!] Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most God-fearing of you.[179] Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.[180]

Following Wadud, therefore *taqwa* is not gender-specific and, for this reason, men and women are seen as equal in the realm of worship. Moreover, there are some Qurʾanic verses in the context of piety which are addressed only to women.[181] Marina A. Tolmacheva says that the Qurʾan mentions modesty, the observation of *hijab,* seclusion, special regulations governing personal hygiene and bodily functions, controlling anger and bad feelings, and refraining from gossip as qualities for piety that are addressed specifically to women.[182] Consequently, this particular form of female piety - such as the observation of the *hijab* - can lead to different pious roles for men and women. It affects their gender roles as well. Consequently, becoming pious can influence women's perspectives on gender roles. Many paradoxes and ambiguities arise as a consequence of a pious lifestyle in the field of gender role division. Therefore in the next Section I address gender roles within the Islamic tradition.

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177   Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849 - 1905) was an Egyptian theologian and reformer. ʿAbduh believed that Islam could be reconciled with modernity as both were, he postulated, based on reason and rationality. ʿAbduh is viewed as one of the key figures of Islamic modernism. He did not focus on political activism - as did his mentor Jamal ad-Din al Afghani - but on theological and educational reform. See Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad Abduh* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009).

178   Amina Wadud, *The Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, p. 37.

179   Some scholars have translated *taqwa* differently. For example, *taqwa* as 'best conduct', 'warding off evil', 'most righteous', 'not to transgress', 'moral excellence' and 'a unique balance of integrative moral action...to be squarely anchored within the moral tensions, the limits of God and not to transgress or violate the balance of those tensions or limits.' *Ibid.,* p. 43.

180   Marina A. Tolmacheva. "Religious Practices: Piety: Overview." Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures. General Editor Suad Joseph. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/entries/encyclopedia-of-women-and-islamic-cultures/religious-practices-piety-overview-COM_0613 (Accessed 8 January, 2014).

181   Saba Mahmood speaks of feminine virtues in terms of shyness, modesty, humility and so on. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 22.

182   Marina A. Tolmacheva. "Religious Practices: Piety: Overview." Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures. General Editor Suad Joseph. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.paulyonline.brill.nl/entries/encyclopedia-of-women-and-islamic-cultures/religious-practices-piety-overview-COM_0613 (Accessed 8 January, 2014).

1.7. Gender in the Islamic tradition

Gender is a much debated theoretical concept and it is defined in different ways. For instance, according to Harriet Bradley, gender 'refers to the varied and complex arrangements between men and women, encompassing the organisation of reproduction, the sexual divisions of labour and cultural definitions of femininity and masculinity.'[183] Raewyn Connell, on the other hand, describes gender as 'the structure of social relations that centres on the reproductive arena, and the set of practices (governed by this structure) that bring reproductive distinctions between bodies into social processes.'[184] Although these definitions of gender have been differently formulated, they both contain some general characteristics of gender.

I understand gender to be the diverse and complex arrangements between men and women which cover the personal, symbolic and social systems in which meaning is given to the biological differences. Consequently, the concept touches on such multiple facets as the organization of reproduction, access to employment, child care and the cultural definitions of masculinity and femininity. These social arrangements - in which meaning is given to the differences between men and women - lead to the creation of roles for women and men which inescapably brings us to the topic of gender equality. Gender equality refers to the idea that men and women are equal and should be treated equally and offered equal opportunities in law and by society. Hence gender equality stands for the equal treatment of people, regardless of their gender (or sexual orientation).

The relationship between men and women in the Islamic tradition is complex. Women's position has been most clearly elaborated in the shariʿa, which has drawn upon the revealed sources such as the Qurʾan and the sunna, but also on interpretations by Muslim historians and local cultures within Muslim societies. Different religious interpretations by religious scholars have offered diverse standpoints on the status of men and women in Islam, leading to different discourses on gender. Although the Qurʾan views women and men as spiritually equal, this equality is not reflected in the shariʿa. For example, women do not have equal rights to make independent decisions about the choice of a partner, divorce and the custody of their children.

These differences between the rights of men and women are a consequence of the different roles which men and women have been assigned in the Islamic tradition. When speaking of the role division of Muslim men and women, the idea of

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183   Harriet Bradley, *Gender* (Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 2007), p. 1.
184   Raewyn W. Connell, *Gender: a short introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), p. 10.

the complementarity of the genders is often used as the Islamic ideal.[185] Gender complementarity, or equity as it is frequently called, refers to the idea that men and women are of equal value but do not have identical rights because God has created them differently. The role division according to the principle of gender equity usually suggests that women should be the caretakers of the households in the private sphere, and men the breadwinners in the public sphere. This means that women rely economically on men. Consequently, the great responsibility which men have as financial supporters in society gives them authority over their families, putting men in a 'privileged' position.[186] Despite this 'privilege' of men over women, the idea of gender complementarity suggests that no gender is religiously superior or inferior. The goal of this division between the genders is to maintain the 'natural order' in which men's and women's roles are of equal worth. Therefore, gender role division is based on the psychological and biological differences between men and women, leading to complementarity between them.

Jamal Badawi, a religious scholar, speaks of gender equity as the ideal Islamic gender role division.[187] Based on his study of the Islamic scriptures on the position of men and women, he explains what gender equity means:

> Equity is used here to mean justice and overall equality in the totality of rights and responsibilities of both genders, and allows for the possibility of variations in specific items within the overall balance and equality (....). It should be added that, from an

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185   As I explained previously, the Qurʾan affirms women's religious equality. Here my focus is not on the spiritual comparison between the sexes, but the ideal role division between the genders according to Islamic Law.

186   In explaining marital relations according to the Islamic tradition, Qurʾanic verse 4.34 *Surat an-Nisa* - the women - is an important source. The following part of the verse especially illustrates the ideal gender role division: 'Men are in charge - *qawwamun* - of women, because Allah hath men the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High Exalted, Great.' Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *Meanings of the Holy Qurʾan* (Hyderabad-Deccan: Government Central Press, 1938). On the one hand, this verse indicates women's rights in terms of a degree of autonomy over her own income and property, and her right to be financially maintained by her husband. On the other hand, it refers to her obligations and her position of obedience to him. There are differences in opinion about the degree of men's authority over their wives. Traditional interpretations regard men as women's guardians - socially and religiously - whereas Muslim feminist scholarship views men's role solely in terms of a financial support. Nonetheless, throughout Muslim history, this verse has been used to justify traditional gender roles and thereby privileging men over women.

187   In his publications, the religious scholar Jamal Badawi focuses on a Muslim audience living in the West and for that reason is interesting for the present study.

Islamic perspective, the roles of men and women are complementary and cooperative rather than competitive.[188]

Muslim feminist scholars argue that a more 'progressive' interpretation of Islamic textual sources including the Qurʾan can create a role division between the genders which is more just than the role division according to Islamic Law.[189] By adopting this stance, Muslim feminist scholars are challenging the traditional role division. Their main argument is that in its essence the Qurʾan is egalitarian and anti-patriarchal. However, as Asma Barlas writes:

> Since the Qurʾān was revealed in/to an existing patriarchy and has been interpreted by adherents of patriarchies ever since, Muslim women have a stake in challenging its patriarchal exegesis.[190]

What scholars such as Barlas are suggesting is that gender roles are not divinely ordained. They are not a reflection of the 'natural order' of things but are and have been socially constructed and defined by patriarchy. Similarly, Leila Ahmed acknowledges both women's equality and women's devaluation in the Islamic tradition. In her book *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a modern Debate,* Ahmed speaks of an 'ethical egalitarianism' of Islam. She argues that Islam's ethical vision of women - and other matters - is at its core egalitarian. However, orthodox religious institutions established a hierarchy of men over women which has never been displaced since. Another scholar who stresses the egalitarian character of Islam is Fatima Mernissi. In her book *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, Mernissi explains why the female share of women's inheritance is half of the male's. There are some traditional arguments which explain the rationale behind this rule. For instance, as the financial responsibilities of men are heavier than those of women, 'logically' men should inherit more than women. However, Mernissi argues differently. Her main point is that women were not allowed to inherit before Islam, but could 'be "inherited" like camels and palm trees.'[191] However, after the revelation of this Qurʾanic rule women could inherit personally themselves and no longer be inherited. This rule was therefore an improvement compared to the situation women

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188   Jamal Badawi, *Gender equity in Islam: basic principles* (USA: American Trust Publications, 1995), p. 47.
189   I have elaborated on Muslim feminist scholars and their authority in Chapter Three *The concept of authority*.
190   Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qurʾan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. xi.
191   Fatima Mernissi, *Women and Islam: An Historical and Theological Enquiry*, translated By Mary Jo Lakeland (University of Virginia: Kali for women, 1991), p. 120.

faced before Islam. Hence, according to Mernissi, this regulation indicates the very 'egalitarian character' of Islam.[192]

In the present study, I analyze how the cultivation of piety influences the notions of gender of my interlocutors. Which concept, gender equality or gender equity, is most prevalent among my interlocutors? What implications does adhering to the idea of gender equality or equity have for pious women's gender roles?

1.8. Conversion to Islam in Europe

Since half of the interlocutors in the present study were converts, in this Section I shall discuss female converts to Islam.[193] Many works have focused on female converts in Europe.[194] Academic studies indicate that two-thirds of converts to Islam are women.[195] Although Islam has proven to be an attractive religion to native 'western' women, it is also viewed in western societies as a religion oppressive to women.

The book, *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* and, in particular, an article by Karin van Nieuwkerk shed light on the relationship between gender and conversion.[196] Van Nieuwkerk studied Dutch converts to Islam, and elaborates - among other matters - on their discourses on gender and women's status in Islam. She claims that the matter of gender is central to the convert's con-

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192   *Ibid.,* p. 120.
193   My research does not focus on how and why women convert to Islam. As a matter of fact, most of my convert interlocutors had already been a convert for many years. I am more interested how they cultivate piety and how they relate to Born-Muslims.
194   Ali Köse, *Conversion to Islam: A Study of Native British Converts* (London: Kegan Paul, 1996); Madeleine Sultan, "Choosing Islam: a study of Swedish converts," In: *Social compass*, Vol. 46, no. 3 (September 1999): pp. 325-335; Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts* (Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2004); Karin van Nieuwkerk (ed.) *Women Embracing Islam: Gender and Conversion in the West* (Austin: Texas University Press, 2004); Anna Mansson-McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's conversion to Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006); Tina Gudrun Jensen, "Religious authority and autonomy intertwined: the case of converts to Islam in Denmark," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, no. 4, (October 2006): pp. 643-660; Egbert Harmsen, "Nieuwe Moslims in West-Europa: bekering tot de Islam als keuzemogelijkheid in hedendaagse westerse samenlevingen," In: *Religie & Samenleving*, Jrg. 3, nr. 3 (December 2008): pp. 173-196; Anne Sofie Roald, "The conversion process in stages: new Muslims in the twenty-first century," In*: Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (July 2012): pp. 347-362; Vanessa Eleonoor Vroon, *Sisters in Islam. Women's conversion and the politics of belonging: A Dutch case study*, (Ph.D. diss.: University of Amsterdam, 2014) and Esra Özyürek, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).
195   'Some academic research indicates, however, that maybe not four-fifths, but still two-thirds, of converts to Islam are female.' Karin van Nieuwkerk (ed.)*, Women Embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the West,*(Austin: Texas University Press, 2004) p. 1.
196   Karin van Nieuwkerk, "Gender, conversion, and Islam: a comparison of online and offline conversion narratives," In: *Women Embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the west*, (ed.) Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin: Texas University Press, 2004), pp. 95-119.

version narratives and an organic part of them, especially in revealing how female converts experience the process of becoming Muslim.[197] Firstly, the female converts in her study disapproved Dutch notions of gender. They thought the sexual freedom in the West 'exaggerated' and criticized how - according to them - women were viewed as sexual objects in society.[198] Interestingly, Van Nieuwkerk points out how this sort of argumentation resembles 'radical' feminist thinking. Secondly, the Islamic idea of gender complementarity, 'equal in value but not in nature', was viewed by her female convert interlocutors as the ideal role division.[199] The interlocutors in Van Nieuwkerk's study were convinced that Islam does give women equal rights, however, they do admit that the reality in Muslim countries is different. Importantly, they explain how motherhood is respected and valued in Islam, whereas Dutch society obliges women with small children to earn an income.[200] On the basis of Van Nieuwkerk's study, the idea of gender equity has proven to be attractive to converts to Islam. Through their criticism of 'western' notions of gender, female converts, distanced themselves from 'western' societies. Moreover, by adhering to traditional Islamic role division, they legitimized their conversion.

Another, more recent study on female converts in the Dutch context is that of Vanessa Eleonoor Vroon. In her book, *Sisters in Islam: Women's Conversion and the Politics of Belonging*, she focuses on converts' ethnic, national and religious belonging and argues that women's conversion to Islam 'is a process instead of a (radical) change from one "cultural identity to another".'[201] She describes how the converts in her study constantly reflected on and negotiated their position as converts to Islam in the Netherlands and, by doing so, developed their own religious way of life. Besides their personal transformation process as a consequence of their conversion, they also became connected to the *umma*, the world community of Muslims. This is what Vroon means when she says to 'take part in and shape their (feelings of) belonging to the *ummah*.'[202] The converts in her study also found it necessary to distinguish between culture and religion when speaking about religious practices and sources of Islamic knowledge, in order to practice an Islam which is free from traditional cultural influences.[203]

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197   *Ibid.,* p. 105.
198   *Ibid.,* pp. 102-105.
199   *Ibid.,* pp. 102-103.
200   *Ibid.,* p. 104.
201   Vanessa Eleonoor Vroon, *Sisters in Islam. Women's conversion and the politics of belonging: A Dutch case study*, (Ph.D. diss.: University of Amsterdam, 2014), p. 5.
202   *Ibid.*, p. 101.
203   *Ibid.*, p. 134-135.

Anne Sofie Roald studied converts in Scandinavia. In her book, *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts*, Roald describes how the process of becoming pious and the process of conversion - especially in the beginning - go hand in hand. On the basis of her study of (mostly) female and male converts to Islam, she describes a three-stage process of conversion. These stages in the Muslim conversion process are, Roald claims, largely connected to converts' relations to the Born-Muslim community. Roald defines the three stages through which converts go after they have converted to Islam: 'falling in love', 'disappointment/rejection' and 'maturity/understanding.'[204] In the first phase, converts want to absorb everything about Islam as rapidly as possible, as they are in fact 'in love' with every aspect of it, and tend to be 'emotionally obsessed' with the new religion.[205] During this stage, some converts tended to become 'fanatical', as this stage does go hand in hand with a kind of absolutism in which everything about Muslims is 'angelic' and everything which falls outside Islam and Muslims is 'demonic.'[206] Furthermore, during this stage converts tended to go through a radical change.[207] Roald says that there was a tendency to alter their lifestyle completely, for instance, by wearing Islamic clothing. Women in Roald's study changed their clothing with the aim of becoming the ideal pious Muslim woman. However, after a period of obsession with Islam, converts tended to slow down and realize they had demanded too much of themselves in a short period of time.[208]

This is followed by the second stage of the conversion process, which is 'disappointment' and or 'rejection' by the Muslim peer group. Roald describes how many converts experienced a sudden realization that Muslims cannot live according to the lofty Islamic ideals. Some new Muslims turned away from Islam. Those who did not leave Islam, entered a third stage, which was 'maturity 'or 'understanding.' In this stage, converts realized that Muslims were human beings and not supernatural creatures and came to accept a discrepancy between the ideal and the reality. Roald

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204   Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: The experience of Scandinavian converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 283-287.

205   *Ibid.,* p. 283.

206   In this regard, Roald refers to the quote by Tim. J. Winters, in which he terms this phase as 'convertitis.' See for her elaboration: Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts*, p. 283.

207   In a latter publication that I discuss a little later, Roald renames the first stage 'zealotry' and explains: 'I have previously named the first stage of conversion the stage of 'falling in love' (Roald 2004, 283-4). The term 'zealotry' (or 'enthusiasm', to use Schindler's term) is, however, more applicable in the polarized era of the 'war on terror.' Anne Sofie Roald, "The conversion process in stages: new Muslims in the twenty-first century," In: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (July 2012). p. 349.

208   Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts*, pp. 284-287.

says that in this stage many new Muslims reconfigured Islamic ideas and attitudes and shaped new understandings of Islam tailored to their own cultural context.

In a later publication, Roald adds a fourth stage in her conversion theory which elucidates the post-conversion development among converts.[209] This latter stage is one of secularization, 'when converts tend to adopt a private religious attitude to the religion.'[210] According to Roald, almost invariably this stage is linked to the post-9/11 situation, 'in which many Muslims feel targeted as potential terrorists, but it also reflects the extent to which converts integrate into Muslim communities.'[211] Accordingly, some converts continued to practice Islam, while others became non-practicing Muslims. Roald explains:

> The converts at this "secularized" stage of the conversion process are critical towards born-Muslims, adopting an attitude resembling that of converts at the second stage. The difference, however, is that, while most converts at the second stage still believe that "Islam is a way of life", the converts at the fourth stage tend to be critical even of this Islamic ideal. This is particularly due to their disappointment with the political situation in Muslim countries, the huge problems within Muslim communities in Western countries, and the recent link between Islam and terrorism.[212]

The post-9/11 situation and the increasingly Islamophobic European climate is the focus of Esra Özyürek in her study, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*. She examines how converts shape Islam in a European German context, in which the religion is considered unfitting by the majority society.[213] Özyürek describes how Muslims in Germany are being marginalized and racialized by politicians and society. The German political climate is 'antagonistic' towards Muslims and towards German converts to Islam as well.[214] Therefore, converts searched for ways to combine their Germanness with their Muslimness. In their efforts, some German converts aimed to 'open up a legitimate space for Islam by disassociating it from Turks and Arabs.'[215] Özyürek explains:

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209   Anne Sofie Roald, "The conversion process in stages: new Muslims in the twenty-first century," In: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 23, no. 3 (July 2012).
210   *Ibid.*, p. 347.
211   *Ibid.*, p. 347.
212   *Ibid.*, p. 357.
213   Esra Özyürek, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).
214   *Ibid.*, p. 2.
215   *Ibid.*, p. 2.

> Having become new Muslims in a context where Islam is seen as everything that is not European, ethnic German converts disassociate themselves from Muslim migrants (...) and promote a supposedly denationalized and de-traditionalized Islam that is not tainted by migrant Muslims and their national traditions but instead goes beyond them. Some German Muslims along with some other European-born ethnic Muslims promote the idea that once cleansed of these oppressive accretions, the pure Islam that is revealed fits in perfectly well with German values and lifestyles (...). Some even argue that practicing Islam in Germany builds on the older but now-lost values of the German Enlightenment (Aufklärung), including curiosity about and tolerance of difference.[216]

This shaping of a European Islam by converts and Born-Muslims and their relationship to each other is also a central issue in the present study.[217] The questions I aim to answer are: How do Born-Muslims and converts relate to each other in the context of piety? In other words, how does being a Born-Muslim or a convert define their relationship, and which group - according to whom - 'excels' in piety? I also focus on similarities and differences in cultivating piety, and whether these lead to a religious hierarchy.

1.9. Conclusion

In this Chapter I have surveyed the renewed religious engagement throughout the Muslim world, which is often referred to as the 'Islamic revival', and focused on the cultivation of piety by women. Having studied various definitions of piety and sticking as closely as possible to the experiences of my interlocutors, I define piety, *taqwa* in Arabic, to be God-consciousness in thought and action. *Taqwa* is a way by which one is constantly reminded to worship God and observe all of God's commands. Piety reflects both the individual's attitude and action towards God and towards others, which makes *taqwa* a multidimensional term. I have underlined that piety should be viewed as an intensification of religiosity in thought and practice.

Many recent studies have reported the trend of a growing interest among Muslim women to become pious and live according to the Islamic tradition. Becoming pious and completely altering one's lifestyle is analyzed as an expression of agency. These women's choice to cultivate piety depends on their social contexts and is captured in different terms. Therefore, there are multiple meanings of agency in the context of piety cultivation. For instance, piety cultivation can be a way of acquiring religious

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216   *Ibid.*, p. 2.
217   I shall return to the study of Esra Özyürek in my analysis of Born-Muslims and converts in Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*.

space and authority; a response or resistance to western ideologies; a transformative force in trying to construct a stronger religious community as Saba Mahmood puts it; or a way to 'excel' religiously in Bryan Turner's terms.

Gender plays an important role in women's understanding of piety. I understand gender to be the diverse and complex arrangements between men and women which cover the personal, symbolic and social systems in which meaning is given to the biological differences between men and women. According to the Islamic tradition, particular forms of piety, such as the observation of wearing the *hijab*, are meant only for women. In addition, there are particular gender roles specified for women on the basis of the idea of gender equity. Gender equity refers to the idea that men and women are equal in value but do not have identical rights because God has created them differently. The role division according to the principle of gender equity suggests that women should be the caretakers of the households in the private sphere and men the financial supporters in society and active in de public sphere. The purpose of this division between the genders is to maintain the 'natural order' in which men's and women's roles are of equal worth.

At the same time, a number of Muslim feminist scholars have been arguing for a 'just' gender model of role division in which women are not solely the caretakers of their family. These scholars emphasize the egalitarian character of Islam and their goal is to eradicate its patriarchal elements. Interestingly, the idea of gender equity has proven to be attractive to converts to Islam. Although gender is not necessarily a motive for their conversion, studies do indicate that gender is an important aspect of it and forms an integral part of their conversion narratives. Furthermore, conversion and piety are inextricably linked. The works studied demonstrate how converts tend to become rather over-eager in their cultivation of piety and experience different phases leading to different dispositions ranging from 'falling in love', 'disappointment/rejection' and 'maturity/understanding.' The additional fourth stage is that of 'secularization', in which converts adopt a private religious attitude to Islam. This stage is contextualized in the post-9/11 situation, in which Muslims feel targeted as potential terrorists and is reflected in how converts are integrating into the Muslim communities. The increasingly anti-Islamic atmosphere in European societies, in which Islam is seen as 'an anomaly' in the majority society, also has an effect on the relations between converts and Born-Muslims. Consequently, converts tend to distance themselves from the ways of religious thought and practice of Born-Muslims. By doing so, the goal of converts is to shape a European Islam which is de-nationalized and de-culturalized from the Born-Muslims immigrant backgrounds and is experienced as being closer to European values.

CHAPTER 2

Islamic knowledge and Muslims in Europe

Seeking knowledge is an obligation
upon every Muslim.[218]

Prophet Muhammad

Introduction

In Chapter One I have described the present Islamic revival as a modern piety move-ment in which Muslims aim to cultivate piety and to re-define what makes them Muslim in the face of modernity. In this process of reconstructing Muslim religious beliefs and practices, Islamic knowledge plays a crucial role. Firstly, the acquisition of Islamic knowledge is seen by Muslims as essential to the formation of piety. By building up Islamic knowledge, Muslims can gain a better understanding of their religion. Secondly, in the course of acquiring Islamic knowledge, Muslims learn how to live piously and practice piety. As I shall show, the acquisition of Islamic knowledge is important to my interlocutors who strive to become 'ideal' pious Muslims. In addi-tion, from the point of view of most of my interlocutors, gaining Islamic knowledge is in itself a devotional exercise and a form of worship in its own right. The intention to acquire Islamic knowledge and the actual act of reading, listening or attending lec-tures is considered a commendable act which will be divinely rewarded. The upshot is that the demand for Islamic knowledge has led to the emergence of many pious circles.[219] In this Chapter, I shall analyze aspects of Islamic knowledge - production and acquisition - which are important to understanding the piety discourse of my interlocutors.

Many studies have described the changes leading to the pluralization of Islamic knowledge.[220] It has been a consequence of a rise in literacy and mass education, modern technologies and new ways of communication; processes which have trans-formed traditional systems of knowledge dissemination.[221] Religious knowledge is

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218   Bin Yazeed ibn Majah Al-Qazwini, *English Translation of Sunan Ibn Majah with Commentary*, translated by Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2007). See also "Seeking knowledge is a duty on every Muslim."

219   I shall elaborate on pious circles in Section 2.3.

220   See Sonia Nûrîn Shah-Kazemi, *Untying the knot: Muslim women, divorce and the Shariah* (London: Nuffield, 2001); Alexandre Caeiro, "Transnational ʿUlama, European Fatwas, and Islamic Author-ity: A Case Study of the European Council for Fatwa and Research," In: *Producing Islamic Knowl-edge. Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe*, (eds.) Martin van Bruinessen & Stefano Allievi (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011): pp. 121-141; Frank Peter, "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam," In: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 17, no. 1, (January 2006): pp. 105-118; Vit Sisler, "The Internet and the construction of Islamic knowledge in Europe," In: *Masaryk University Journal of Law and Technology*, Vol. 1, no. 2, (Fall 2007): pp. 205-218; Herman Beck & Gerard Wiegers, *Moslims in een Westerse Samenleving. Islam en ethiek* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008); Saminaz Zaman, "From Imam to Cyber-Mufti: Consuming Identity in Muslim America," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 98, no. 4, (October 2008): pp. 465-474 and Martin van Bruinessen & Stefano Allievi (eds.), *Producing Islamic Knowledge. Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011).

221   See Dale F. Eickelman, *Knowledge and Power in Morocco: The Education of a Twentieth-Century Notable*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) and Dale F. Eickelman, "Mass Higher Edu-cation and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," In: *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 19, no. 4, (November 1992): pp. 643-655.

spread through websites,[222] via podcasts - that have taken the place of 'traditional' audio cassette recordings - and Islamic video-clips on YouTube.[223] Nowadays Muslims can find many sorts of religious knowledge online, via TV or books. While these technological changes have been happening, the field of religious knowledge production and authority structures have also been transformed.[224] Whereas once religious scholars - ʿulamaʾ - were the traditional disseminators of religious knowledge, nowadays Islamic knowledge can be expounded by any Muslim, with or without a religious education.[225] The rise of daʿwa - Islamic propagation - organizations and their activities, Islamic satellite TV programs and channels, cyber-imams, Muslim preachers and religious scholars from different schools of law, madhahib, are irrefutable evidence of this change. For instance, Peter Mandaville points to personal pious narratives of lay Muslims with little religious education, in which they weave elements of 'philosophy, modern populism and Qurʾan reference.'[226] These narratives are often published in books but are also found online.[227] These examples illustrate how technological innovation has resulted in the development of new channels for the spread and acquisition of Islamic knowledge.[228]

Before describing the development of Islamic knowledge production in western societies, I shall first explain the aim and the structure of this chapter. The purpose of this chapter is to study the significance of Islamic knowledge to Muslim women's cultivation of piety. Therefore, I elaborate on the religious duty to acquire Islamic knowledge in the Islamic tradition that is the religious framework of my interlocutors. In addition, I contextualize processes of knowledge production and acquisition among Muslims who live as a minority in Europe.

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222 See Jon W. Anderson, "The internet and Islam's new Interpreters," In: *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere*, (eds.) Dale F. Eickelman & Jon W. Anderson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press*,* 1999) pp. 41-56; Gary R. Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000); and idem, *Islam in the Digital Age: E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto, 2003).

223 Jan Scholz, Tobias Selge, Max Stille & Johannes Zimmermann, "Listening communities? Some Remarks on the Construction of Religious authority in Islamic Podcasts," In: *Die Welt des Islams* 48, issue 3-4, (2008): pp. 457-509.

224 By knowledge production I mean how knowledge is developed and produced.

225 The position of ʿulamaʾ is discussed in Chapter Three, *The concept of authority*.

226 Peter Mandaville, "Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World," In: *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 23, no. 4, (Spring 2007): p. 102.

227 Karin van Nieuwkerk, "Gender, Conversion, and Islam: a comparison of online and offline conversion narratives", In: *Women embracing Islam: gender and conversion in the West,* (ed.) Karin van Nieuwkerk (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), pp. 95-119.

228 Some authors have argued that new forms of information and communication technology, such as the Internet, have increased religious knowledge production. See Peter Mandaville, "Globalization and the Politics of Religious Knowledge: Pluralizing Authority in the Muslim World," p. 102.

This chapter is organized as follows: in Section 2.1. I discuss the Arabic term ʿilm, which stands for knowledge. I do so in order to provide a background to the role of knowledge in pious female circles. In Section 2.2. I contextualize recent developments among Muslims living in Europe. In particular, I have chosen to focus on religious individualization in relation to Islamic knowledge. In Section 2.3. I describe the position of converts to Islam as 'producers' and 'consumers' of Islamic knowledge. In Section 2.4. I elaborate on different sites of Islamic knowledge production. I also put forward the hypothesis that pious circles are communities of practice in which religious capital is gained and shared. In Section 2.5. I concentrate on the relationship between knowledge and gender. By so doing, I provide a context for a more detailed analysis of the views of my interlocutors in Chapters Four, Five and Six. Finally, in Section 2.6., I offer my conclusions on these matters.

2.1. The concept of ʿilm

This chapter began with a reference to a *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad underlines the duty of a Muslim to acquire (religious) knowledge.[229] As explained in the introduction, the importance of acquiring religious knowledge is rooted in the tradition of Islam. Furthermore, *al-ʿalim* (the All-knowing/Omniscient) is one of the ninety-nine attributes of Allah stated in the Qurʾan and it has a broad definition. Therefore, before going any further, I should discuss the meaning of knowledge from an Islamic perspective.

Many Muslims throughout the Muslim world regard seeking knowledge as an important religious duty which is not class- or gender-specific. According to the Islamic tradition, the first verse which descended on the Prophet Muhammad was 'Read in the Name of your Lord Who has created' (Q. 96:1). In this context, the Arabic word *iqra* means to 'read loud, to recite' or 'to proclaim.'[230] However, according to Islamic Tradition, Muhammad was illiterate and therefore could neither read nor write. For this reason, *iqra* is usually interpreted as 'to recite.' In spite of this, the idea that the Qurʾan encourages Muslims to read and learn is widespread among Muslims. Robert Heffner states:

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229 There are many *ahadith* in which knowledge is mentioned, for instance, 'Seeking knowledge from the cradle to the grave' and 'Seek knowledge even if it is in China.' See Ian Richard Netton, *Seek knowledge: Thought and Travel in the House of Islam* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1996).

230 William A. Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of 'Qurʾān," In: *Die Welt des Islams*, New Series, Bd. 23/24 (1984): pp. 361-377.

The study and transmission of religious knowledge (ʿilm) have always been at the heart of Islamic tradition. Islam is a religion of the Book and of religious commentary, and most Muslims regard religious study as a form of worship in its own right.[231]

The word used for knowledge in Arabic is ʿilm, a term which frequently recurs in many verses in the Qurʾan. The word ʿilm is used in the Qurʾan as the opposite of jahl, which means different forms of ignorance.[232] For instance, the word ʿalim, one who knows,[233] occurs 140 times in the Qurʾan. According to the Qurʾan, someone who is an ʿalim is knowledgeable about God's existence, His creation, and consequently regards this as the truth. An ʿalim is not necessarily a person who has acquired any particular degree of learning.[234] Those who know or have knowledge are in fact those who truly fear Allah.[235]

The most important ways to acquire Islamic knowledge are two primary sources, the Qurʾan and the hadith. Mark Halstead states that in the Qurʾan God encourages the believers to pursue knowledge (e.g. Q. 20:114).[236] The Qurʾan proclaims the superiority of those who have knowledge (e.g. Q. 58:11 and 39:9) and, at the same time, underlines 'wisdom and guidance instead of blind acceptance of tradition' (Q. 2:170, 17:36 and 6:148).[237] Generally, ʿilm is applied to knowledge of a religious character, and consequently implies being knowledgeable about God, or any matter which concerns religion.[238] As mentioned before, knowing is also an attribute of God. Allah is viewed as the All-Knowing (al-ʿalim) and eventually all knowledge comes from God (Q. 35:28).[239]

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231   Robert W. Heffner & Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.), *Schooling Islam: the culture and politics of modern Muslim education* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University press, 2007), p. 4.
232   Ed.. "ʿIlm." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2012. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN.   <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ilm-SIM_3537 (Accessed December 4, 2012).
233   The plural of ʿalim is ʿulamaʾ meaning 'those who know.'
234   Paul E. Walker. "Knowledge and Learning." Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan. General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill Online , 2012. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/knowledge-and-learning-SIM_00251 (Accessed November 15, 2012).
235   See for instance Qurʾan 35:28, surat fatir: 'And of men and beasts and cattle, in like manner, divers hues? The erudite among His bondsmen fear Allah alone. Lo! Allah is Mighty, Forgiving.' Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *Meanings of the Holy Qurʾan* (Hyderabad-Deccan: Government Central Press, 1938).
236   J. Mark Halstead, "An Islamic concept of education," In*: Comparative Education*, Vol. 40, no. 4, (November 2004): p. 520.
237   *Ibid*., p. 520.
238   Ed.. "ʿIlm." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2012. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN.   <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ilm-SIM_3537 (Accessed December 4, 2012).
239   J. Mark Halstead, "An Islamic concept of education," p. 520.

In his comprehensive study, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam,* Franz Rosenthal argues that as a synonym for the Arabic ʿ*ilm,* the English term knowledge fails to express 'all the factual and emotional contents of ʿ*ilm*.'[240] Rosenthal underlines that ʿ*ilm* is an all-embracing term which covers many aspects of Muslim intellectuality and encompasses the very distinctive character of the Islamic civilization. Rosenthal explains:

> For ʿ*ilm* is one of those concepts that have dominated Islam and given Muslim civiliza-
> tion its distinctive shape and complexion. In fact, there is no other concept that has
> been operative as a determinant of Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same
> extent as ʿ*ilm*. This holds good even for the most powerful among the terms of Muslim
> religious life such as, for instance, *tawḥīd* "recognition of the oneness of God", *ad-Dīn*
> "the true religion", and many others that are used constantly and emphatically. None
> of them equals ʿ*ilm* in depth of meaning and wide incidence of use. There is no branch
> of Muslim intellectual life, of Muslim religious and political life, and of the daily life of
> the average Muslim that remained untouched by the all-pervasive attitude towards
> "knowledge" of something of supreme value for Muslim being.[241]

The most frequent correlative of ʿ*ilm* in the Qurʾan is *maʿrifa*.[242] *Maʿrifa* is the type of knowledge which is acquired through reflection or experience - also called gnosis - and is therefore different from ʿ*ilm*.[243] *Maʿrifa*[244] is a human construct, and therefore denotes knowledge acquired by human effort, by exercising human rationality (ʿ*aqliyya*).[245] ʿ*Ilm* is religious, revealed knowledge, given to human beings by God, as stated in the Qurʾan, and transmitted through the prophetic revealed tradition (*naqliyya*).[246] In the Islamic Tradition, the purpose of acquiring religious

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240   Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1970), p. 1.

241   *Ibid.,* pp. 1-2.

242   The problem with the English translation of the terms ʿ*ilm* and *maʿrifa* is that both would mean knowledge, whereas there is a profound difference according to their Arabic roots. ʿ*Ilm* is 'knowl-edge of' and *ma'rifa* is 'knowledge about.' This distinction does exist in the German and Dutch languages: *wissen-kennen* (German) or *weten-kennen* (Dutch). Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, p. 4.

243   The concept of *maʿrifa* also emerged as an expression of the specific kind of - mystical - knowl-edge proper to the Sufi tradition. See Reza Shah-Kazemi, "The Notion and Significance of Maʿrifa in Sufism," In: *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 13, no. 2, (May 2002): pp. 155-181.

244   *Maʿrifa* has traditionally been divided into three levels of knowledge: intellectual knowledge; truth or certainty and that which is termed eye or vision. See A'ishah Ahmad Sabki & Glenn Hardaker, "The madrasah concept of Islamic pedagogy," In: *Educational Review*, Vol. 63, no. 3, (April 2012): p. 4.

245   J. Mark Halstead, "An Islamic concept of education," p. 520.

246   *Ibid*., p. 520.

or secular knowledge is to worship Allah and to benefit humanity.[247] As Halstead states: 'All knowledge has religious significance and should ultimately serve to make people aware of God and of their relationship with God.'[248] A similar stance is taken by A'ishah Ahmad Sabki and Glenn Hardaker. They state that, although God has created human beings with an intellect, this intellect cannot fully comprehend the truth without divine guidance, because 'both types of knowledge - secular and religious - contribute to the strengthening of faith.'[249] Hence knowledge is valuable insofar as it serves divine revelation, and 'so long it is undertaken within the boundaries defined by revelation.'[250]

Likewise, Paul E. Walker states that the terms for knowing and knowledge in the Qurʾan - such as ʿilm, maʿrifa and fiqh - seem to imply 'an absolute, in which the known object is simply the truth - what truly is - in its ultimate reality and not some fact of ordinary perception.'[251] Accordingly, to have knowledge or to come to have knowledge suggests becoming aware of the true nature of the universe as God's creation and of His role in it.[252] This implies that knowledge or ʿilm is all-encompassing as it stems from the knowledge of God's existence and creation.[253] When I examine ʿilm in the present study, I am interested in the views of my interlocutors about the importance and value of Islamic knowledge. The questions which arise from this Section are the following: Why and how do my interlocutors gain Islamic knowledge? What type of Islamic knowledge do they receive?

2.2. Individualization of Muslims in western societies

At this point I turn to acquisition and dissemination of Islamic knowledge in the context of Muslims in Europe. Many studies have focused on how Islamic normativity is constructed by investigating what it means to be a Muslim in the West.[254] Scholars from different disciplines have elaborated on the broader question of how knowl-

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247   See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) for the discussion on the relation between Islamic knowledge and secular knowledge.

248   J. Mark Halstead, "An Islamic concept of education," p. 520.

249   A'ishah Ahmad Sabki & Glenn Hardaker, "The madrasah concept of Islamic pedagogy," p. 4.

250   J. Mark Halstead, "An Islamic concept of education," pp. 524-525.

251   Paul E. Walker. "Knowledge and Learning." Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾan . General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. Brill Online , 2012. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/knowledge-and-learning-SIM_00251 (Accessed November 15, 2012).

252   *Ibid.*

253   See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) and Mark Sedgwick, *Muhammad 'Abduh* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009) for the modern developments of Islamic knowledge.

254   See, for example, Herman Beck and Gerard Wiegers, *Moslims in een Westerse Samenleving. Islam en ethiek* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008) in which the authors explain how Muslims in western societies seek Islamic knowledge in order to deal with religious questions and dilemmas in their

edge of Islam is produced and reproduced. They do so by studying the different Islamic authorities such as imams, preachers and transnational *fatwa* bodies.[255] They have paid particular attention to examining the religious questions posed by Muslims living in western societies to *muftis* - traditional legal scholars who issue religious advice - in Europe. For example, the question of whether a Muslim is allowed to work in fast food restaurants in which *haram* products such as pork are consumed. Or, how and under which circumstances Muslim women can ask for a divorce in a s*hariʿa* court. These are just a few of the many questions with which Muslims living in western societies are faced if they wish to live according to Islamic norms. These questions can be addressed to imams in mosques or to online scholars or Islamic councils such as the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR).[256]

Because of the western contexts in which these questions are embedded, some scholars speak of the emergence of a 'European Islam': an Islam which is adapted to a western setting, with its own local challenges and solutions.[257] This would mean that Muslim beliefs and practices and Muslims' modes of religiosity are transforming in western societies. Jocelyne Cesari claims that Muslims in the West have transformed into 'Muslim individuals.'[258] At least some of this transformation is the result of the way in which second- and third-generation Born-Muslims have detached themselves from the way their parents and grandparents believed and practiced Islam.[259] Through individualization - 'sharpening of self-consciousness' and 'privileging personal choice over the constraints of religious tradition' -[260] more space has been created for the believer to achieve an individual understanding of Islam.[261]

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everyday lives. They acquire religious knowledge online - for instance via Q&A websites of Islamic scholars - and offline, by consulting Muslim religious authorities and Islamic institutions.

255 A *fatwa* - or *fatawa* plural - is a legal opinion or piece of advice which is issued by an Muslim religious scholar.

256 According to Alexandre Caeiro - who studied *fatawa* for European Muslims - the greatest number of questions received by the EFCR concern women's issues. Caeiro states that this indicates that the 'status of women is the most politicized issue for Muslims in Europe.' See Alexandre Caeiro, "Transnational ʿUlama, European Fatwas, and Islamic Authority: A Case Study of the European Council for Fatwa and Research," In: *Producing Islamic Knowledge. Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe,* (eds.) Martin van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 128.

257 See Jørgen S. Nielsen, *Towards A European Islam* (London: Palgrave McMillan, 1999); Frank Peter, "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam," In: *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 17, no. 1, (January 2006): pp. 105-118 and Samir Amghar, Amel Boubekeur & Michael Emerson (eds.) *European Islam: challenges for Public Policy and society* (Brussel: Centre for European Policy Studies, 2007).

258 Jocelyn Cesari, "Muslim Minorities in Europe: the silent revolution," In: *Modernising Islam: Religion in the Public Sphere in the Middle East and in Europe*, (eds.) J. Esposito and F. Burgat (London: Hurst, 2003), p. 259.

259 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

260 *Ibid.*, p. 260.

261 The scholar Frank Peter has said that, in the current research on the development of Islam in western societies, individualization has become one of the most dominant key words, especially

This reflection is also found in the study of Peter Mandaville on second- and third-generation British Born-Muslims. Mandaville shows how young British Born-Muslims are finding less meaning in the Islam of their parents, from imported Islam teachers in mosques and Islamic schools, and transnational ʿulamaʾ.[262] To fulfill their need, young Born-Muslims have begun to establish Islamic youth organizations and produce and acquire Islamic knowledge in order to make Islam 'relevant to their own hybrid condition.'[263] This process is akin to what Olivier Roy calls the 'deterritorialisation of Islam', in which 'religion and culture no longer have a relationship with a territory or given society.'[264] He explains:

> It means that religion has to define itself solely in terms of religion: there is no longer any social authority or social pressure to conform (by praying, observing Ramadan, wearing the *hijab*, and so on). It has to define itself in comparison with all 'others' – other religions, other values, other environments.[265]

Roy states that the question which is asked in this context, 'What is Islam?', leads to an answer that is individualistic and couched in terms of self-appropriation.[266] In a similar way, Nadia Fadil - who has studied young women of Moroccan descent in Belgium - argues that 'at the level of the individual "believer" religious practice is no longer the consequence of prescription, but rather of choice.'[267] I would like to add that this process of individualization is also a consequence of better accessibility to Islamic knowledge which enables the implementation of religious knowledge in a person's own life and on their own terms, independently of - male - traditional authorities and institutions. Nevertheless, I would like to question whether religious individualization actually does mean a break with religious authorities, institutions and communities.[268]

Detlef Pollack and Gert Pickel explain how, according to religious individualization theory, 'processes of modernization will not lead to a decline in the social significance

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in the context of second- and third-generation Born-Muslims. Frank Peter, "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam," p. 106.

262 Peter Mandaville, *Transnational Muslim Politics: Reimagining the Umma* (London-New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 124.

263 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

264 Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst & Company, 2004), p. 38.

265 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

266 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

267 Nadia Fadil, "Muslim girls in Belgium: individual freedom through religion?" In: *ISIM Newsletters* 13, (December 2003): pp. 18-19.

268 This matter will be dealt with in Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*.

of religion, but rather to a change in its social forms.'[269] They argue that, despite individualization tendencies, individual believers stay embedded in social structures such as - traditional - religious institutions. Ulrich Beck also views individualization as a socially mediated process which exists 'more in people's consciousness, and on paper, than in behavior and social conditions.'[270] In line with these elaborations, I understand religious individualization among Muslims to be a socially embedded transformation. Despite the enhanced religious agency of individuals, I demonstrate that they do remain connected to social structures such as pious communities.

Frank Peter assesses the implications of the individualization and fragmentation of authority structures for second- and third-generation Muslims in the West.[271] He concludes that recent studies point towards two opposite developments. On the one hand, academic works indicate 'the liberalization of Islam' and, on the other hand, they point towards a more dogmatic lifestyle.[272] Hence individualization among Muslims leads either to a liberal or to a conservative way of Islamic belief and practice. On the basis of his observation, I would like to make two remarks.

Firstly, I am not so much concerned with the question of whether religious individualization leads to a more dogmatic lifestyle, such as salafism or a liberal/secular lifestyle (or any other lifestyle for that matter). I view my interlocutors as agents who are making meaning of their everyday religiosity. This also means that they are searching for new creative ways to understand and practice their religion. Muslims as agents interpret Islam and implement it in their everyday lives according to what they consider to be Islamic piety. Hence, there are many ways of believing and practicing Islam. My aim is not to characterize types of Muslimness but to understand the dynamics of the individualization process of my interlocutors. My primary interest is: under what conditions does religious individualization among my interlocutors occur and how do my interlocutors define it. In empirical Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*, I examine what factors encourage my interlocutors to become religiously individualized and the type of individualization it leads to.

Secondly, I situate the process of religious individualization within the context of piety formation. I pose the question of whether my interlocutors have experienced

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269   Detlef Pollack & Gert Pickel, "Religious individualization or secularization? Testing hypotheses of religious change- the case of Eastern and Western Germany," In: *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 58, no. 4, (December 2007): pp. 603-604.

270   Ulrich Beck & Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and Its Social and Political Consequences* (London: Sage Publications Inc, 2002), p. 203.

271   I shall elaborate on the fragmentation of religious authority in Chapter Three, *The concept of religious authority*.

272   Frank Peter, "Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam," p. 107.

religious individualization as a consequence of becoming pious and, if so, how it is expressed and experienced by them.[273] How does religious individualization relate to piety formation and vice-versa? Moreover, I am also concerned with a question which has so far attracted less scholarly attention, namely: Does religious individualization change Muslim views on and interactions with their religious communities?[274] How do Muslims who consider themselves to be individualized believers interact with pious circles?[275]

2.3. Converts as consumers and producers of Islamic knowledge

So far, I have discussed how Born-Muslims engage in the process of Islamic knowledge acquisition and dissemination. However, second- and third-generation Born-Muslims are not the only ones engaging in the field of Islamic knowledge production, a growing group of converts to Islam are also participating. Alexandre Caeiro - who studied *fatawa* for European Muslims - has stated that converts make an 'important segment of the petitioner population.'[276] He explains:

> Their concerns extend from questions as to which *madhhab* to follow, to guidelines on answering external criticism of Islam and, especially for women, ways of regulating family conflicts arising from cultural differences.[277]

Furthermore converts are now not only 'consumers' of Islamic knowledge, they have also become 'producers.' In her study of Scandinavian converts, Anne Sofie Roald explains the presence of a tension between converts and Born-Muslims when it comes to producing Islamic knowledge. Whereas the converts in her study explained to her that, as their knowledge of Islam grew, Born-Muslims tended to view them as competitors, as they - Born-Muslims - no longer had a monopoly on being 'Islam experts.'[278] They also have another role as some studies have shown that converts to Islam also take the roles of mediators and bridge-builders between the Born-Muslim community and the non-Muslim community.[279] Drawing on her study in Denmark,

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273   The questions concerning religious individualization are answered in Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community.*

274   In Section 2.4. I shall elaborate on religious communities.

275   The questions I pose here are answered in Chapters Four and Five. In Chapter Four in relation to piety and in Chapter Five in relation to knowledge.

276   Alexandre Caeiro, "Transnational ʿUlama, European Fatwas, and Islamic Authority: A Case Study of the European Council for Fatwa and Research," p. 128.

277   *Ibid.,* p. 128.

278   Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: The experience of Scandinavian converts,* pp. 279-281.

279   See Anne *Sofie Roald, New Muslims in the European context: The experience of Scandinavian converts* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Tomas Gerholm & Yngve Gerog Lithman (eds.), *The New Islamic Presence in Western Europe* (London: Mansell, 1990), pp. 263-277 and Tina Gudrun Jensen,

Tina Gudrun Jensen describes the emergence of new Muslim organizations, in which the founders and participants are primarily second-generation Born-Muslims and recent converts to Islam.[280] Jensen describes how both groups cooperate and share a collective mission:

> What they [Born-Muslims and converts, S.N.] share is their conscious choice for Islam, in the sense of conversion and religious awakening respectively. Both groups can be seen as representing a break with their families' biographies and religiosities, and in the case of born (-again) Muslims from a national/traditional Islam to a Danish and global Islam.[281]

Jensen's study found out that the majority of those who take up teaching roles in Danish-speaking Islam classes in mosques are either Danish converts or second-generation Born-Muslims from an immigrant background.[282] Asked about acquisition of Islamic knowledge, Jensen states that Born-Muslims think that converts are more knowledgeable than they are:

> (…) because of the fact that they have studied Islam without having any previous information or experience in the faith. They thus possess a distinct discursive consciousness and knowledge about Islam. Implicit in this kind of knowledge is also, however, a certain distance from Islam that is conducive to a verbalization of the religion. This can be seen as contrasted to preconscious and practical logic, an embodied knowledge acquired by incorporating practices, such as the performance of ritual practices taking place in everyday life and at Muslim feasts. Converts thus remain in fragile positions with regard to the question of embodying Muslim identity in authentic ways.[283]

Both Roald and Jensen observe a competitive struggle between Born-Muslims and converts when it comes to their role as producers of Islamic knowledge. These developments are also found in the study of Esra Özyürek (see Chapter One and Chapter Four). She describes how some German converts aim to disassociate their Islam from that of Born-Muslims who have a Turkish and/or Moroccan migrant background. Some converts feel that Islam as believed and practiced by Born-Muslims has been

"Religious authority and autonomy intertwined: the case of converts to Islam in Denmark," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, no. 4, (October 2006): pp. 643-660.

280 Tina Gudrun Jensen, "Danish Muslims: Catalysts of National Identity?" In: *ISIM Review*, nr. 19 (Spring 2007): p. 28.

281 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

282 *Ibid.,* p. 28.

283 Tina Gudrun Jensen, "Religious authority and autonomy intertwined: the case of converts to Islam in Denmark," p. 647.

tainted by Turkish and/or Moroccan culture. Therefore, they find it necessary to work towards 'an Islam' which is free from cultural influence.[284]

As explained in Chapter One, Max Weber states that piety unavoidably creates hierarchies of religious virtues in the form of pious status groups which are defined by their successful combination of orthodox practices. In this competitive struggle over possession of virtues, there is a hierarchy of virtuous values and practices. At this point I am interested to learn to what extent possessing religious knowledge is a religious virtue. In other words, how can possessing Islamic knowledge among both Born-Muslims and converts be a way of demonstrating 'religious excellence', leading to emergence of pious status groups? Moreover, can Islamic knowledge be a tool by which to acquire religious authority?[285]

2.4. Islamic knowledge sites, pious circles and religious capital

In the previous Section, I have argued that Muslims' modes of religiosity are transforming in western societies. The fragmentation of religious authority and the pluralization of Islamic knowledge are important aspects of this transformation.[286] Now I shall examine how Islamic knowledge has become pluralized. On the basis of Martin van Bruinessen's discussion of models of production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge, I shall attempt to contextualize pious circles as important sites of Islamic knowledge production.

A collection of essays edited by Van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi sheds light on this matter. In *Producing Islamic knowledge: transmission and dissemination in Western Europe*, the authors focus on the ways in which Islamic knowledge is produced in an interactive setting of religious authorities and lay Muslims.[287] Martin van Bruinessen discusses the existing literature on young Muslims in the West, and distinguishes two models of production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge. The first model is the 'religious market model.' This refers to such traditional sites as mosques and Islamic institutions in which knowledge production takes place in a hierarchical system: from 'teacher/preacher' to 'student.' This model consists of a supply side of

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284   See Esra Özyürek, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

285   I shall answer these questions in Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*. I shall elaborate on the concept of religious authority in the next chapter.

286   The fragmentation of religious authority is elaborated on in Chapter Three, *The concept of religious authority*.

287   'Whatever Muslims consider to be correct or proper belief and practice, in the widest meaning of those words, and including non-discursive, embodied forms of knowledge.' Martin van Bruinessen, "Producing Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe: discipline, authority and personal quest," In: *Producing Islamic Knowledge. Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe*, p. 1.

religious specialists or movements and associations which are involved in 'producing and marketing Islamic knowledge.'[288] In this model, the traditional authorities such as imams and Islamic scholars and emerging authorities such as Muslim intellectuals and cyber-imams are active producers of Islamic knowledge. On the demand side in the religious market model, there is 'a public of potential consumers who more or less critically make a choice out of what is on offer.'[289] Van Bruinessen points out that in this model a strict distinction is made between the producers and consumers of religious knowledge.

In the second model which Van Bruinessen distinguishes, an active role is assigned 'to young Muslims in rejecting their parents - and their practice of Islam - and established institutions and constructing their own forms of Islamic knowledge in an eclectic and creative process.'[290] In this second model, everyone - to a certain degree - is involved in the production of religious knowledge. These new Islamic sites of knowledge production are less hierarchical and everyone is involved in the process of knowledge production. Muslim youth organizations and Muslim students' associations are a good example of the second model. This model demonstrates the way in which Islam is becoming localized in Europe. This 'localization of Islam in Europe'[291] refers to the process by which the Islamic tradition is being (re)interpreted and adapted to the local conditions of Muslims in Europe.[292] Van Bruinessen emphasizes that the acquisition of non-discursive forms of knowledge - such as prayer and fasting - are as important as the discursive forms. These embodied forms of knowledge are produced and acquired for the purpose of disciplining the pious self.

This edited work is insightful as it demonstrates how - through the production and dissemination of Islamic knowledge - a localized and a 'European Islam' is emerging. However, the female production of Islamic knowledge and female religious authorities - in terms of local Muslim religious leaders - are absent from this study.[293] In

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288   *Ibid.*, p. 2.
289   *Ibid.,* p. 2.
290   *Ibid*., p. 2.
291   This is similar to the emergence of a 'European Islam.'
292   See the article by M. Amer Morgahi on Minhajul Qurʾan in the Netherlands. M. Amer Morgahi, "An emerging European Islam: the case of the Minhajul Qurʾan in the Netherlands," In: *Producing Islamic knowledge: transmission and dissemination in Western Europe*, (eds.) Martin van Bruinessen and Stefano Allievi (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 47-64.
293   Martin van Bruinessen, "Producing Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe: discipline, authority and personal quest," pp. 68 and 108. As I shall discuss in Chapter Three *The concept of religious authority*, female religious authorities have been studied by many researchers prior to the publication of this book. See, for instance, Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," In: *Social Compass*, Vol. 50, no. 1, (March 2003): pp. 35-46; Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France," In: *ISIM Newsletter*, 14, (June 2004): pp. 28-29 and Jeanette S. Jouili & Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious

Chapters Four, Five and Six, I show how my interlocutors engage in the process of Islamic knowledge production and even become female religious authorities.

Unquestionably, Van Bruinessen's elaboration on the different models and sites of Islamic knowledge production is relevant to the present study. I shall demonstrate that pious circles can be positioned within Van Bruinessen's second model of knowledge production, as a new site of Islamic knowledge production in which Islamic knowledge is obtained and produced by Muslim women in a less hierarchical manner. It is a site in which participants have the possibility to become, or are already involved in the production of knowledge. As I shall argue in the following chapters, this egalitarian character of pious circles is precisely what makes them attractive to many Muslim women.

This study focuses on the cultivation of piety through the lens of pious circles, which I consider sites in which Islamic knowledge is obtained and produced by my interlocutors. The idea of pious circles, especially for women, is not entirely new, as it is rooted within the Islamic tradition. In this regard it is useful to examine the concept of *halqa*.[294] *Halqa* in Arabic literally means 'circle' or refers more specifically to a religious gathering in which a religious teacher gives lessons in Islam to small groups of 'students.' According to a *hadith* which is narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim, a woman came to the Prophet Muhammad and asked:

> O Messenger of Allah, the men have taken all your time; give us a day when we can come to you and you can teach us what Allah has taught you.' He said: 'Gather together on such and such a day in such and such a place (…) So they gathered and the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came to them and taught them what Allah had taught him.[295]

This concept of *halqa* can be related to the theory of 'communities of practice' developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wegener.[296] 'Communities of practice' are, the authors say, a group of individuals who share an interest in a particular field or domain and who interact with each other collectively to produce and reproduce specific knowledge.[297] In such communities, sharing information and experiences

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Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, no. 4, (October 2006): pp. 617-642.

294   *Halaq* is the plural of *halqa*.

295   Al-Bukhari *hadith* 7310 and Muslim *hadith* 2634. http://islamqa.info/en/cat/16 (Accessed February 2, 2012).

296   Jean Lave & Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 38 and 47.

297   *Ibid.,* pp. 38 and 47.

is deemed central to the spiritual progress of each individual. A common interest in and a desire to learn from and contribute to the community is what makes a group a 'community of practice.' As I understand it, *halaq* or pious circles of Muslim women work in a similar way. In such communities of practice, becoming pious paves the way for an individual to bond with people with similar thoughts, find support and gain benefits from that relationship in terms of 'social capital.' Pierre Bourdieu has defined 'social capital' as:

> the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.[298]

Hence social relations of influence and support are very valuable to its members as they bind together people sharing similar interests and concerns, in which each person can benefit from that relationship.[299] Within this social relationship, we can speak of mutual acquaintances and recognition 'which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.'[300] In the case of my interlocutors in pious circles, I borrow the term 'religious capital' as this is more appropriate to the present study.[301] Laurence Iannaccone used this term by which he means:

> skills and experiences specific to one's religion, including religious knowledge, familiarity with church ritual and doctrine, and friendships with fellow worshipers. [302]

Iannaccone uses the concept of religious capital in the study of Christianity. He views religious capital from an economic theory of religious organization in the context of churches. More specifically, he uses economic aspects of household production and human capital to study religious participation and practice. For instance, he argues that religious practice can also be viewed as a productive process, through which

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298   Pierre Bourdieu, "The forms of Capital," In*: Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, (ed.) John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 51.
299   *Ibid.,* p. 51.
300   *Ibid.,* p. 51.
301   The term religious capital takes the concept of cultural capital by Pierre Bourdieu and applies it to religiosity. Cultural capital as defined by Bourdieu refers to resources which provide human beings with social mobility. Bourdieu postulates that cultural capital can exist in three categories: the embodied state (personality, speech, skills); the objectified state (in the form of cultural goods and belongings such as 'pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.') and the institutionalized state (education or specialized knowledge). Pierre Bourdieu, "The forms of Capital," p. 47.
302   Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Religious Practice: a Human Capital Approach," In: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 29, no. 3, (1990): p. 299.

religious satisfaction can be 'produced.' The 'inputs' to religious production are, he says, both purchased material goods (such as Sunday attire, sacrificial offerings and monetary contributions which finance the church) and time and labor (such as devotional time spent praying, meditating and reading scriptures).[303] Accordingly, greater investments in one's religion will lead to the production of such valued social commodities as voluntarism. Hence, religious capital is an important product of religious activity. Furthermore, he argues that there is a fundamental interaction between religious capital and religious participation, because religious capital is both a 'prerequisite for and a consequence of most religious activity.'[304] He explains:

> Religious capital - familiarity with a religion's doctrines, rituals, tradition, and members - enhances the satisfaction that one receives from participation in that religion and so increases the likelihood and probable level of one's religious participation. Conversely, religious participation is the single most important means of augmenting one's stock of religious human capital. [305]

The concept of religious capital from an economic perspective as used by Iannaccone is not relevant to the present study. Furthermore, his concept of religious capital emerges from a Christian practice of religiosity.[306] However, I do find the idea of religious capital as the believers' set of religious skills, experiences, knowledge of norms and doctrines an interesting concept to apply. Furthermore, 'friendship with fellow worshipers' as part of religious capital corresponds well to the concept of Islamic sisterhood.[307] I show how, through contacts with other women, my interlocutors build a religious 'sister' support network. I use the important notion of religious capital (as the believers' set of religious skills, experiences, knowledge of norms and doctrines) to explain why Muslim women participate in and organize pious activities. In this context, I view pious circles as the site in which religious capital is produced and gained.

In this study, I examine to what extent pious circles are 'religious communities of practice' in which my interlocutors gain and share 'religious capital.' I am also

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303   *Ibid.,* pp. 298-299.
304   *Ibid.,* pp. 298-299.
305   *Ibid.,* pp. 298-299.
306   Rodney Stark & Roger Finke define religious capital as 'the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture.' I find their definition less appropriate to the present study as they pay less attention to friendship with fellow believers as an important part of religious capital. In Chapter Five *Gendering Islamic knowledge* I shall pay attention to Islamic sisterhood as an important part of religious capital for my interlocutors. Rodney Stark & Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkely, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 120.
307   Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Religious Practice: a Human Capital Approach," pp. 298-299.

interested in whether pious circles compete as suppliers of Islamic knowledge within the larger religious field of traditional authorities, Islamic institution, and other types of Islamic knowledge production and dissemination.

2.5. Islamic knowledge and Muslim women

So far I have described Islamic knowledge production and acquisition among Muslims in western societies and positioned pious circles as a site for knowledge production. Now my focus will turn to the position of pious Muslim women in these sites of Islamic knowledge production. As discussed in Chapter One, Muslim women gather in pious circles for the purpose of cultivating piety.[308] Furthermore, as described above, previous studies have shown how the cultivation of piety among Muslim women can also lead to expanding and claiming religious space. I think this connection is vital because, in their pursuit of Islamic knowledge, my interlocutors are also creating a space in which they articulate their religiosity independently. For this reason, in this Section, my focus will be the connection between gender, piety and knowledge by elaborating on the studies of Gerdien Jonker and Jeanette S. Jouili.

Gerdien Jonker has studied how Muslim women produce and acquire religious knowledge in pious circles in Germany.[309] She argues that such global norms as human rights, individual rights and gender equality have led to religious pluralism and this has given women access to knowledge in diverse ways.[310] Jonker maps the different sites of Islamic knowledge production of Muslim women.[311] She describes how the majority of Muslim women who produce Islamic knowledge are members of female congregations in mosques. As in these female congregations in mosques, the women's production of Islamic knowledge is under the control of male religious authorities, Jonker considers these sites to be 'internal production sites' in which female religious experts teach, preach and pray collectively.[312] 'Internal' refers to the traditional religious sites of knowledge production in which knowledge is controlled by male religious authorities. In the Turkish context the female preachers in these mosque congregations are called *hocas*. Besides internal production sites, Jonker also describes 'external production sites' in which Muslim women produce Islamic

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308   There are more studies on the emergence of pious circles in Europe. These studies are examined in relation to female religious authority. For this reason, I shall elaborate on them in the next Chapter in which I discuss piety and authority. In this Chapter, for the sake of clarity, I have focused on the connection between piety and knowledge.

309   In Chapters Four, Five and Six, I shall also analyze the connection between piety and knowledge through empirical data.

310   Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," p. 44.

311   *Ibid.*, pp. 35-46.

312   In Chapter Three, *The concept of authority*, I elaborate in more detail on the types of female religious authority Jonker describes.

knowledge beyond the control of Islamic institutions.[313] Here women 'venture into new religious fields, such as religious education and religious textbooks for state-schools, religious mediation and the art of inter-religious dialogue.'[314] In this instance, Jonker is referring to university-trained women born in Germany of Turkish descent as well as German converts who engage in Islamic women's networks and act as religious experts.[315] Their domain is found in publication, dialogue and discussion.[316]

Jonker compares the Muslim women who are active in both sites and concludes that those who operate in external production sites hold a key position as mediators between the minority and majority community. The female preachers who are active in the internal production sites she feels are unable to maneuver between the Muslim community and the - German - majority community:

> For Muslim communities in Europe, any actor negotiating communication with the outside world might prove to be of decisive importance for the future of Islam in a minority situation. In this field of action, Muslim women now seem to be outdoing their male counterparts.[317]

Jonker argues that production of Islamic knowledge by Muslim women offers them hitherto unknown possibilities. It is 'a powerful window of opportunity', bringing Muslim women into a key position between both communities.[318] However, as Jonker has said, this is only the case among women who are active outside Islamic institutions and operating in external production sites. Religious communication outside their own communities is not an option for the *hocas* in internal production sites, nor is it encouraged by their 'male superiors.'[319]

The categories internal and external are not applicable to the present study as my interlocutors' sites of Islamic knowledge production are, in Jonker's terms, both 'internal' and 'external.' My interlocutors produce knowledge in sites which are outside the mosque congregations and not under the control of traditional male religious authorities. Therefore their site of Islamic knowledge production is 'external.'

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313 Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," p. 4.
314 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
315 Jonker's 'internal production site' of Islamic knowledge is comparable to Van Bruinessen's religious market model and Jonker's 'external production site' of Islamic knowledge is more in line with Van Bruinessen's individualized, less hierarchical model of knowledge production.
316 Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," p. 37.
317 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
318 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
319 Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," p. 38.

At the same time, most pious circles do not engage in dialogues or mediate between the majority community or take initiative in Islamic networks (with the exception of a few). This aspect also makes pious circles 'internal' sites of Islamic knowledge production.

Furthermore, religious communication with the majority community is described by Jonker as a 'window of opportunity' through which Muslim women can influence society. This is certainly an important aspect in any analysis of Muslim women's impact as mediators between the minority and majority community. However, the focus on Muslim women as active mediators between the - minority and majority - communities inevitably has strong associations with debates on the integration of Muslims. For instance, the integration of Muslim communities is often measured through the lens of 'emancipated' and 'active' Muslim women. Consequently, Muslim women's participation in society has become politicized. The upshot is that the participation of Muslim women is often used by politicians as a yardstick to measure Muslim women's level of integration into society. In this study, I want to try to move beyond political debates about integration and the role of Muslim women in it. I am more interested in how my interlocutors aim to communicate religiously - to speak in Jonker's terms - within their own Muslim community and how they strive to transform the Muslim community from within.

Jeanette S. Jouili provides a different perspective on the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge among Muslim women. In her study on Muslim women in Germany, Jouili describes how they are refashioning themselves through religious knowledge acquisition.[320] She describes women who engage in Islamic organizations and informal meetings, whose main goals are knowledge acquisition and transmission. Jouili describes a Muslim community market consisting of Islamic organizations and audio-visual media through which Islamic knowledge is consumed by Muslims. The Islamic landscape in Germany is, she argues, characterized by a 'dominant transnational Turkish German dimension, in which Turkish religious diversity is transplanted into the German environment' and in which the Arabic Islam gives it 'a more global feature.'[321] She also refers to how converts occupy 'high profile roles' in the newer, non-ethnically Islamic organizations.[322]

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320   Jeanette S. Jouili, "Re-Fashioning the self through religious knowledge: how Muslim women become pious in the German Diaspora," In: *Islam and Muslims in Germany*, (eds.) Ala Al-Hamarneh & Jörn Thielmann (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2008), pp. 465-488.
321   *Ibid.*, p. 473.
322   *Ibid.,* p. 473.

Jouili states that, through knowledge acquisition and transmission, Muslims construct a distinct 'Islamic counter public sphere' in the German context.[323] By 'Islamic counter public sphere', Jouili means 'a specific Islamic public sphere set up through institutions of Islamic education, modern media technologies, and/or semi-private gatherings.'[324] This Islamic public sphere offers a diversity of means by which religious knowledge can be acquired, and by which a sense of belonging and identification is constructed. She states that, despite the fact that religious knowledge production in Europe is often analyzed in terms of individualization - 'because it represents a certain autonomization and privatization of the quest for knowledge' - it also creates a public by which individuals can identify themselves as a community.[325] In the case of her female interlocutors, Jouili concludes that the goal of Muslim women is to become pious not 'in an isolated, individualist mode but inside a specific Islamic public sphere set up through institutions of Islamic education, modern media technologies, and/or semi-private gatherings.'[326] She emphasizes the importance of these religious communities through which Muslims can imagine themselves as a community.[327] In doing so, she in fact conflates the individual with the community, despite individualization tendencies.[328]

The relationship between the 'individual' pious Muslim woman and her religious community as studied by Jonker and Jouili is also important to the present study. I shall use their elaborations to analyze how my interlocutors experience individualization. I shall also discuss how individualization tendencies among my interlocutors relate to their (collective) engagement in pious circles. In other words, how does the pious individual relate to a pious community and how does participation in pious circles influence the type of piety Muslim women cultivate?

2.6. Conclusion
In this Chapter I have analyzed a number of empirical and theoretical studies on Islamic knowledge production and acquisition among Muslims in European societies. In this process of reconstructing Muslim religious beliefs and practices, Islamic

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323   *Ibid.*, pp. 469-473.
324   *Ibid.*, p. 484.
325   *Ibid.*, p. 473.
326   *Ibid.*, p. 484.
327   In her recent work, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe*, Jouili again argues that the study of Islamic knowledge and piety cannot be limited to the dimension of individuals. Rather, it is related to the 'well-being of the Muslim community, umma' as a whole. Jeanette S. Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015) pp. 49–51.
328   Jouili connects the individual with the collective through the concept of *daʿwa*, which is Islamic propagation. I shall elaborate on this matter in Chapter Three, *The concept of religious authority*, and in Chapter Four, *The pious individual and the pious community*.

knowledge plays a crucial role. The Islamic tradition sets great value on the concept of ʿilm. Firstly, the acquisition of Islamic knowledge is essential to the formation of piety. By obtaining Islamic knowledge, Muslims can gain a better understanding of their religion and learn how to live piously and observe piety practices. The goal of acquiring religious knowledge is to worship Allah and to benefit humanity. Islamic - and secular - knowledge have religious significance and should ultimately serve to make people aware of God and of the believers' relationship with God. Nowadays, Islamic knowledge has become pluralized as a result of a rise in literacy and mass education and technological innovations, both tools which have ushered in a greater accessibility to the sources of Islamic knowledge. This increased accessibility has also contributed to the process of religious individualization among Muslims in western societies. Religious individualization enables the implementation of religious knowledge in one's own life and on one's own terms, independently of traditional authorities and institutions.

Despite individualizing tendencies, I understand religious individualization to be a socially embedded transformation. This means that individualized believers remain connected to such social structures as pious circles. In this field of knowledge production, both Born-Muslims and converts are active. This creates a dynamic interaction between them.

Martin Van Bruinessen has postulated there are two sites of Islamic knowledge production: firstly the traditional sites - mosques and Islamic institutions - in which knowledge production takes place within the strictures of a hierarchical system: from 'teacher/preacher' to 'student.' The second site is that of the new Islamic sites of knowledge production which are less hierarchical and in which everyone can be involved in the process of knowledge production. These new spaces of Islamic knowledge production are characterized by their local settings. In these local settings Muslims are trying to give meaning to their lives as European Muslims according to their own local conditions, also captured in the term 'localization of Islam in Europe.' This 'localization of Islam in Europe' refers to the process by which the Islamic tradition is being (re)interpreted and adapted to the local conditions of Muslims in Europe.

I situate pious circles within the second site of knowledge production postulated by Van Bruinessen. It is a site in which Islamic knowledge is obtained and produced by Muslim women in a less hierarchical manner and in which the participants of the circle are involved in the production of knowledge. In constructing the pious self, women engage in what I call religious communities of practice, in which they

acquire and transmit religious capital. These pious female study circles are rooted in the Islamic tradition known as *halqa*. Recent studies demonstrate how religious knowledge production and acquisition in pious circles is an important step in the process of becoming pious and reforming the self.

In this chapter, the connection between piety and Islamic knowledge has been dissected. The next chapter will look more closely at the theoretical results of Chapters One, on piety, and Two, Islamic knowledge in Europe, and will introduce the third theoretical aspect of this study, which is the concept of religious authority.

CHAPTER 3

The concept of religious authority

Power is neither given, nor exchanged, nor recovered, but rather exercised, and (…) only exists in action. [329]

Michel Foucault

Introduction

A considerable number of scholarly works have discussed Muslim communities in Europe through the lens of religious authority. Most of these studies concentrate on specific types of religious authorities, particularly on religious scholars, male preachers and Islamic institutions or a combination of these.[330] Some, but only a small number, of these studies have focused on Muslim women in European contexts.[331] Interestingly these studies have pinpointed increased religious engagement among Muslim women and describe the emergence of these women as religious agents of knowledge and authority. Muslim women have become female religious authorities in the different spaces in which they convey Islamic knowledge to other women. Their purpose is to help the latter cultivate a pious way of living. Other recent developments indicate that Muslim women are also becoming Muslim religious scholars both in and outside such educational institutes as universities in Muslim[332] and non-Muslim countries.[333] Importantly, the emergence of faith-based feminist

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329   Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977* (The Harvester Press: Brighton, Sussex 1980), p. 89.

330   See Sonia Nûrîn Shah-Kazemi, *Untying the knot: Muslim women, divorce and the Shariah* (London: The Nuffield Foundation, 2001); Alexandre Caeiro, "The European Council for Fatwa and Research," In: *Fourth Mediterranean social and political meeting* (Florence: European University Institute, 2003); Gudrun Krämer & Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006); Herman Beck & Gerard Wiegers: Moslims in een Westerse samenleving: islam en ethiek (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008) and Martin M.Bruinessen & Salvatore Allievi, (eds.) *Producing Islamic knowledge: transmission and dissemination in Western Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010) and Daan Beekers, "A Moment of Persuasion: Travelling Preachers and Islamic Pedagogy in the Netherlands," In: *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. no. 2, (July 2015): pp. 193-214.

331   Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," In: *Social Compass*, Vol. 50, no. 1, (2003): pp. 35-46, Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France," In: *ISIM Newsletter,* Vol. 14 ((June 2004): pp. 28-29; Jeanette S. Jouili & Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, no. 4, (October 2006): pp. 617-642; Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012); Nathal M. Dessing, "Thinking for oneself? Forms and elements of religious authority in Dutch Muslim Women's groups," In*: Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic Authority*, (eds.) Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 217-234; and Els Vanderwaren, "Muslimahs' impact on and acquisition of Islamic religious authority in Flanders," In*: Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic Authority*, (eds.) Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012), pp. 301-322.

332   For instance, the female religious scholar Suad Saleh is the dean of the Women's College at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo - Egypt -, a professor of Comparative *fiqh,* and supervisor of the boards which examine PhD candidates. Saleh is also a media personality with her own TV program in which she addresses matters to do with Islam. She is widely considered the most influential female religious scholar in Egypt and wields a great deal of authority. See http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/766/profile.htm (Accessed January 14, 2012).

333   They are academic scholars and professors in different non-Islamic universities across the United States and Canada. Their works on Islam have been produced throughout their training in American academia. They have published their books with American university presses. These Islamic feminist scholars have even entered the field of Qurʾanic exegesis. Among the most notable are Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Riffat Hassan and Laleh Bakhtiar. See Amina Wadud, *Qurʾan and*

transnational advocacy and social justice networks of Muslim women is also a sign of the growing religious authority among women.[334]

There are five factors which have contributed to the increase in female religious authority. Firstly, since the early twentieth century processes of modernization have led to the spread of literacy in general. This has resulted in increased access to education for girls and women in many Muslim communities and, because of this, Muslim women have also gained access to the sources of Islam. Secondly, the rise of Islamic modernism - in the early nineteenth and in the twentieth century - paved the way theologically speaking for the growth in women's religious authority. Various modernist Islamic theologians such as Muhammad ʿAbduh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Syed Ameer Ali, Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Rashid Rida have advocated modernist interpretations of Islam and gender relations. For instance, they have promoted women's rights to education, involvement in social affairs, criticized restrictions on women and questioned men's attitudes and behavior toward women. Some of them have also rejected polygamy.[335]

Thirdly, the pluralization of religious knowledge, described in Chapter Two, has created space for female religious commitment to the practice and study of Islam. Fourthly, Muslim women now have the opportunity to follow religious education in Islamic educational institutes such as Islamic universities, and hence become experts in Islamic fields of knowledge. Fifthly, as I shall show, by espousing the practice of *daʿwa* - Islamic propagation - Muslim women are expanding and claiming religious

women: rereading the sacred text from a women's perspective (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and idem, *Inside the gender Jihad: women's reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); Asma Barlas, *Believing women' in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qurʾan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Riffat Hassan, *Women's Rights and Islam: from the I.C.P.D. to Beijing* (a monograph), (Louisville: NISA Publications, 1995); Riffat Hassan, *Woman and the Qurʾan: A Book of Readings and References* (Utrecht: FORUM, 2001) and Laleh M. Bakhtiar, *The Sublime Qurʾan* (Chicago: Kazi Publications, 2007).

334   Two recent initiatives are interesting: the *Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality*, WISE, and *Musawah* - equality in Arabic - for Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family. These movements are composed of women scholars, lawyers, activists, journalists, artists, and religious and civil society leaders from all over the world. In some literature, the women involved in such organizations are called 'Muslim women reformers' and sometimes 'Islamic feminist reformers', as they aim to reform Islamic law in Islamic countries by a re-interpretation of Islamic sources. See Meena Sharify-Funk, *Encountering the Transnational: Women, Islam and the Politics of Interpretation* (Cornwall: Ashgate Publising company, 2008), p. 103 and Madhavi Sunder, "Keeping faith: reconciling Women's human rights and religion," In: *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction*, (eds.) John Witte and M. Christian Green, pp. 289-290, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

335   See also Mansoor Moaddel, "Religion and Women: Islamic Modernism versus Fundamentalism," In: *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (1998), pp. 108-130; Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Religious Modernists and the "Woman Question": Challenges and Complicities," In: *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran since 1979* (ed.) Eric Hooglund (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), pp. 74-95.

space.[336] In a nutshell, in different contexts and spaces, Muslim women are emerging as religious authorities and taking their place as transmitters of religious knowledge.

As I have argued in Chapter Two, authority and religious knowledge are intertwined, because religious knowledge is one of the principal, inalienable sources of religious authority. As they grow in knowledge and acquire greater religious authority, women's production expands religious discourse. The aim of this chapter is to attempt to understand the complexities and dynamics engendered by the emergence of female religious authorities. I present an analysis of the insights and key studies which provide a background to the emergence of Muslim women as religious authorities. To describe this background, I combine the results of the previous theoretical chapters on piety and knowledge and thereby round off the theoretical framework for the present study. This chapter is organized as follows: in Section 3.1. I highlight the very latest position by reviewing scholarly studies on female religious authority in Muslim countries, and repeat the exercise for Europe in Section 3.2.. In Section 3.3. I focus on theoretical studies of authority and provide a theoretical framework of authority which is applicable to the present study. In Section 3.4. I discuss the interrelationship of (religious) authority and power, and how influence is exerted. In Section 3.5. I elaborate on the perspective of individuals over whom influence is exerted and describe how individuals acknowledge religious authority. In Section 3.7. I discuss female religious authority. In Section 3.8. I shall draw a conclusion.

3.1. Scholarly works on female religious authorities in Muslim countries

An important contribution to the study of female religious authority is the work by Pieternella van Doorn-Harder about Muslim women in Indonesia. In her book *Women Shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qurʾan,* she describes active Muslim women in Indonesia: female preachers, intellectuals, university professors and activists.[337] The situation in Indonesia is different from other countries with large Muslim populations, because it is a country in which many institutes offer women the chance to become specialists in Islam. For instance, an Islamic boarding school - *pesantren* - is a place in which male and female students can spend years studying Islamic texts.[338] Van Doorn-Harder explains that most of the 'leaders' she discusses have jobs or are housewives, and they voluntarily engage in *daʿwa* activi-

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336   In empirical Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious study circles* and Six *Female religious authorities*, I demonstrate how the interlocutors in the present study also claim religious space through their engagement in *daʿwa* activities.

337   Pieternella van Doorn-Harder, *Women shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qurʾan*, pp. 5, 95-97.

338   *Ibid.,* p. 2.

ties.[339] Nevertheless, despite their significant religious activities, they do not hold formally recognized religious positions. The author's interlocutors describe their religious activism by referring to themselves as *muballighat*, which means female propagators of Islam.[340] By claiming this status, they do in effect create space in which they can be religiously active in a field which is male dominated. However, as they do not claim religious authority, they do not challenge the existing male authorities. These female leaders have arisen within two central non-governmental Muslim organizations, in both of which women can become Islamic teachers and preachers.[341] Van Doorn-Harder describes the many ways in which Muslim women leaders understand and utilize Islam as a significant force for societal change. For instance, they participate in the interpretation and re-interpretation of religious texts, they contribute to the shaping of national discourses on Muslim women and challenge radical Muslim groups which propagate 'conservative' ideas about the role of Muslim women. Van Doorn-Harder' argument is that women's enhanced religious participation is changing the Islamic discourse in Indonesia, and she demonstrates how these women interpret sacred texts and exercise religious influence. Following in the footsteps of Van Doorn-Harder, I shall explore the diverse ways my interlocutors become religiously active. I shall also examine whether those interlocutors who preach and lecture on Islam choose to define themselves in terms of being religious authorities.

Saba Mahmood, whose work on piety movements was discussed in Chapter One, also focuses on female religious authorities. Mahmood describes the Women's Mosque Movement in urban Egypt which is led by female religious teachers who are called *daʿiya* (plural *daʿiyat*). In her book, *Politics of Piety*, she describes how female preachers address congregations of women in mosques, a space which had hitherto been almost exclusively a male domain. These female religious teachers obtain their religious training in preaching through *daʿwa* institutes. A large number of these *daʿwa*

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339   *Ibid.*, p. 35.
340   The Arabic term is derived from the male *muballigh,* related to the word *tabligh* which means to communicate, fulfill or implement a mission. In general, a *muballigh* refers to the function of a lay preacher or speaker who propagates Islam. Doorn-Harder, Nelly van, "Teaching and Preaching the Qurʾān", in: Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān, General Editor: Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Georgetown University, Washington DC. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/teaching-and-preaching-the-quran-EQCOM_00201?s.num=17&s.q=+muballigh+(Accessed December 24 2016). The same can be said for the term *daʿiya* - pl. *daʿiyat* - female preacher in Egypt - or *murshidat*, who are female preachers funded by the Moroccan state.
341   These two organizations are the reformist/modernist Muhammadiyah, founded in 1912 with around twenty million followers; and the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), founded in 1926 with around thirty million followers. Both are grassroots organizations and do not depend on governmental support or funding from western organizations. Pieternella Van Doorn-Harder, *Women shaping Islam: Indonesian Women Reading the Qurʾan*, p. 2.

training centres are managed by Islamic non-profit organizations. Mahmood argues that these women's entry into the mosque space in the context of *da'wa* has been an effective strategy by which they have been able to enlarge their space and acquire a status of influence and authority. She states that, although there is an absence of Islamic institutions training women in Islamic scholarship, it is within the institutional space of *da'wa* that these female *da'iyat* acquire religious knowledge and 'create the conditions for their exercise of religious authority.'[342] Mahmood states that these *da'iyat* are socially accepted as religious specialists in Egyptian society. But, despite their religious commitment, they also 'evoke skepticism, if not condemnation, from the religious establishment.'[343]

Mahmood's study underlines how the emergence of female religious authorities raises significant questions about traditional Islamic authority and its relationship to female religious authority. Having studied her observations, I discuss whether female religious authorities do face real difficulties in acquiring legitimacy through their knowledge. To what extent can my interlocutors assert their religious authority and be accepted by the religious establishment? Are they challenging the existing traditional authorities?

The research by Samia Huq and Sabina Faiz Rashid among elite women in Bangladesh also describes the emergence of female religious authorities.[344] 'Self-made' female religious teachers produce and reproduce religious knowledge and guide women in domestic space. By acquiring religious knowledge and performing *da'wa,* these women influence the larger society and acquire a position of authority. In contrast to the previous studies by Van Doorn-Harder and Mahmood, the women in the study of Huq and Rashid have had no previous religious training and have become religious authorities through self-study. I also examine to what extent religious training is necessary for the validation of a religious authority. In addition, I ask: What personal qualities and abilities do female religious authorities need to establish religious authority?

The studies reviewed so far point towards an enhanced female religious engagement in Indonesia, Egypt and Bangladesh, which has led to the emergence of female religious authorities.[345] These studies demonstrate how the practice of *da'wa* is

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342   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist subject*, p. 89.
343   *Ibid.*, p. 66.
344   Samia Huq-Sabina & Faiz Rashid, "Refashioning Islam elite women and piety in Bangladesh," In*: Contemporary Islam*, Vol. 2, no. 1, (March 2008): pp. 7-22.
345   See also Momotaj Begum, "Female Leadership in Public Religious Space: An Alternative Group of Women in Tablighi Jamaat in Bangladesh," In: *Journal of International Development and*

connected to women's religious participation in mosques, religious organizations and private gatherings in domestic spaces. As these studies have done, I also examine whether and how practicing *daʿwa* can be a way of expanding religious space thereby allowing some women to become female religious authorities. I also examine how female religious authorities define themselves: as religious authorities, as Islamic propagators, preachers or religious teachers?

3.2. Scholarly works on female religious authorities in Europe

Following this brief discussion of studies on Indonesia, Egypt and Bangladesh, I now focus on several similar studies conducted in European countries. Gerdien Jonker's study of Turkish women also concentrates on female religious authority in Germany.[346] She describes *hocas*, Turkish female teachers who have access to religious training through various Turkish organizations. The religious training can be state-controlled, provided by the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the *Diyanet,* in Turkey, or non-governmental, for instance, that offered by the Islamic organization Milli Görüs.[347] The *hocas* work as female religious preachers in mosques. Their activities range from giving basic religious education, for instance, Arabic and Qurʾan reading, to delivering sermons. The *hocas* must have followed religious training before they become religious guides in mosque spaces. As a contrast to *hocas*, Jonker also describes a younger generation of university-trained women born in Germany - of Turkish descent - who engage in Islamic women's networks outside the mosque space with German converts. These religious experts take part in the process of reinterpreting the Qurʾan from a female point of view. Hence, although religious training can be essential for claiming religious authority in mosque space, the requirements are less stringent outside the mosque spaces. I shall also examine in which spaces - mosque space or outside mosque or elsewhere - religious education is made a necessary requirement for asserting religious authority.[348]

Another study in this field which focuses on both Germany and France is the above-mentioned article by Jeanette S. Jouili and Schirin Amir-Moazami in which they discuss knowledge, empowerment and religious authority among pious Muslim

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Cooperation, Vol. 22, no. 1, (In Press March, 2016): pp. 25-36.

346   Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," pp. 35-46.

347   Milli Görüş is the largest Turkish diaspora organization in Europe. Milli Görüş as a religious movement, controls numerous Turkish mosques in Europe. Ali Çarköğlu & Barry M. Rubin (eds.), *Religion and politics in Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 64-65.

348   *Hocas* are also discussed more fully in Chapter 2.4. in the context of sites for Islamic knowledge production.

women.[349] They were among the first to address female religious authority and its relationship with knowledge and piety explicitly.[350] Their subject is women who belong to established Islamic organizations and to pious circles. The women studied have become religious authorities through their cultivation of piety and by engaging in *daʿwa* activities.[351] However, they do not engage in *ijtihad*, leaving this right to interpret texts to the *ʿulamaʾ* as they believe that *ijtihad* is a prerogative of Islamic scholars.[352] They say that lay believers should not draw their own conclusions.[353] Two other studies which also discuss *ijtihad* in some depth are those by Nathal M. Dessing and Els Vanderwaeren in *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*.[354] This book is a collection of essays which shed light on the different strategies resorted to by female religious authorities. In twenty articles it explores the diversity of female religious activities in Muslim communities in various parts of the world, including the Middle East, Asia, North America and Europe. The authors analyze the diverse ways in which women acquire and exercise religious authority.

The article by Nathal M. Dessing deals with Muslim women's groups in the Netherlands and their approach to the sources of religious knowledge. The women in her study come together in different settings such as mosques, community centers or in their homes. They do so because they wanted to devote more time to their religion. Dessing points out that these Muslim women's groups display two important features which assist in our understanding 'of the forms and elements of female religious authority': the women's personal aspiration to become pious and their reluctance to exercise *ijtihad*.[355] Dessing argues that, with the exception of the members of *al-Nisa*,[356] the extent to which Muslim women obtain and exercise religious authority

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349   For more research in France, see the work of Amel Boubekeur on second- and third-generation Maghrebi women in France. Amel Boubekeur, "Female Religious Professionals in France," In: *ISIM Newsletter*, no. 14, (June 2004): pp. 28-29.

350   Jeanette S. Jouili & Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," pp. 617-642.

351   In another article, Jeanette S. Jouili explains knowledge dissemination by Muslim women not only as a means to cultivate piety but also in terms of *daʿwa* among the Muslim community. Here *daʿwa* is experienced as an individual duty of every Muslim whose aim is to improve the social conditions of the Muslim community. I return to her observations in Chapter Five *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*. See Jeanette S. Jouili, Re-fashioning the self through religious knowledge: how Muslim women become pious in the German Diaspora," pp. 465-488.

352   *Ijtihad* is the use of individual reasoning or interpretation, in distinction to *taqlid* which is following the established religious authorities. See Section 3.5.

353   Jeanette S. Jouili & Schirin Amir-Moazami, "Knowledge, Empowerment and Religious Authority Among Pious Muslim Women in France and Germany," pp. 632-633.

354   Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach (eds.), *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic Authority* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012).

355   Nathal M. Dessing, "Thinking for oneself? Forms and elements of religious authority in Dutch Muslim Women's groups," p. 1.

356   The Foundation of Muslim Women in the Netherlands, *al-Nisa,* was established in 1982.

is limited precisely because of these female groups' reluctance to exercise *ijtihad*.[357] Dessing explains: 'Many of the women would say that their knowledge of Islam is too limited, and that one must consult reliable sources for authoritative viewpoints.'[358] Admittedly Dessing's claim is based on the fact that the women in her study do not exercise *ijtihad,* but, as I discuss in the empirical chapters, women do assert their religious authority in different ways. They might be by the practice of *ijtihad*, but not necessarily.[359] Furthermore, many of my interlocutors, were in fact applying *ijtihad*, but did not view it in this light or were not are aware of the fact that this is what they are actually doing.

Els Vanderwaeren also focuses on the use of *ijtihad* among Muslim women in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, Flanders.[360] Vanderwaeren shows that young Muslim women of Moroccan descent are contributing to the pluralization of religious authority structures in pious circles. During these meetings, some women act as spokeswomen and are considered to have sufficient religious knowledge to transmit it to others.[361] Vanderwaeren also pays attention to how religious authority is acquired and ascribed. She has found that, in order to become a religious authority, the spokeswoman's attitude and irreproachable behavior are more important criteria than any previous religious education.[362] A female religious authority 'acquires authority by influencing other women through her devotion to the group, by her self-tuition efforts and her sincerity.'[363] She also argues that the social involvement and emphatic personality of a spokeswoman contribute to the essential basis of her leadership.[364] Unlike the study by Jonker, not religious education but pious behavior and social engagement form the foundation on which religious authority is based.

These studies are important because they raise questions which are also central to my research. How do Muslim women acquire religious authority? What abilities and qualities are important in this process of authority-making? How do female religious authorities exert religious influence? Of particular importance to the present study is the comparison of the process of authority-making between Born-Muslims and converts to Islam. As stated in previous chapters, this study focuses on their

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357   Nathal M. Dessing, "Thinking for oneself? Forms and elements of religious authority in Dutch Muslim Women's groups," pp. 217-234.
358   *Ibid.,* p. 217.
359   See Chapter Six *Female religious authorities* in which I elaborate the multiple ways of women exercising their religious authority.
360   Els Vanderwaren, "Muslimahs' impact on and acquisition of Islamic religious authority in Flanders," pp. 301-322.
361   *Ibid.,* p. 317.
362   *Ibid.,* p. 317.
363   *Ibid.,* p. 317.
364   *Ibid.,* p. 318.

interaction in pious circles. Although this relation is, in my view, a very interesting area of research, the connection between religious authority and converts has so far been neglected. Therefore, I pose the following questions: To what extent do converts to Islam and/or Born-Muslims become female religious authorities in pious circles? What are the similarities and differences in the grounds on which they base their religious authority? To find an answer I must turn to the concept of authority.

3.3. Defining authority

Authority is difficult to define, as its meaning shifts depending on the context.[365] The purpose of this Section is not to develop a new definition of this complex concept, but rather to abstract a framework which can encapsulate the different dynamics displayed by the female religious authorities of my study. Matthias Pilger-Strohl says that in Roman antiquity the concept of 'authority' basically indicated a relationship of voluntary subordination without the direct application of force and is derived from the Latin *auctoritas* ('prestige,' 'influence'), the ideal embodied in the ancient Roman Senate.[366] Pilger-Strohl explains:

> By way of distinction from potestas ('power,' 'control'), which can be imposed by violence or compulsion, auctoritas is a voluntarily attributed quality, connected with control, prestige, authorization, and dignity, which leads to the statements and behavior of the one in authority being confidently accepted. 'This special trust establishes loyalty, to the point of an unconditional obedience-which, of course, can be refused, once the integrity of the person in authority is shaken and the confidence of the subordinate lost.[367]

Pilger-Strohl makes the distinction between two types of authority: personal and formal.[368] Personal authority is constructed through the acknowledgement of 'subordinates' and therefore 'must be earned, and repeatedly reconfirmed.'[369] Formal authority is what happens when personal authority is transferred to institutions or to groups of persons, and is exercised by their representatives. The idea of a personal authority is appropriate to the present study because the female

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365   See for the many studies on the concept of authority for example, Hannah Arendt, "What is Authority?" In: *Between Past and Future* (ed.) Hannah Arendt (New York, Penguin Books: 1977) and Robert Bierstedt, An analysis of Social Power, In: *American Sociological review*, Vol. 15, no. 6, (December 1950): p. 731.

366   Matthias Pilger-Strohl. "Authority." The Brill Dictionary of Religion. Edited by Kocku von Stuck-rad, Brill, 2011. Brill Online. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bdr_COM-00036 (Accessed November 8, 2011).

367   *Ibid*.

368   *Ibid*.

369   *Ibid*.

religious authorities I address do not hold formally recognized religious positions. Pilger-Strohl also explains that, whereas power can be gained and maintained by force, personal authority is dependent on trust, loyalty and integrity. The distinction between power and authority made by Pilger-Strohl is based on the insights of Max Weber, to whom I now turn.

Power - *Macht* - is described by Weber as '...the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.'[370] Authority - *Herrschaft* - is according to Weber '...the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons.'[371] In Weber's definition, an authority has the possibility - chance - to influence others or to have rules and rulings followed or obeyed; individuals in power, on the other hand, can enforce their rules and rulings by violence. In short, power is coercive, whereas authority is persuasive.[372]

Weber's understanding of authority is intricately interwoven with his interest in organizations, institutions or formal structures of leadership and domination. For this reason, Weber thinks of domination as an important tool to be used in the analysis of power relations. In my understanding, authority does not necessarily have to be associated with formalized systems of domination. Authority structures can also emerge outside formalized systems of domination as is the case in the present study. Hence, an individual does not have to be formally appointed in order to be an authority. Importantly, Weber does not view persuasion or influence as an exercise

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370   Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, translated by A.M. Henderson and Talcot Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p.152.

371   *Ibid.*, 152.

372   Max Weber postulates three types of authority. The first type of authority is legal authority. In this type, the head of the system are officials and government structures. The source of the authority is based on the formal rules and established laws of a state. The form of legitimacy is belief in the validity of the basic rules and principles of the system. The second type of authority is called traditional, which is a patriarchal rule. The head of the system is a monarch or a religious dignitary. The source of the authority is based on tradition or heredity often supported by religious rituals, which might also be derived from long-established customs and traditions. The form of legitimacy is the belief in the prescriptive order of things, which might be religiously motivated. The type of administration staff and legal system are strictly traditional and dependent on the head of the system. The third form of authority is called charismatic. The head of the system could be a prophet, warlord, demagogue or a leader. The source of the authority is the emotional devotion of the 'retinue' to the charismatic leader. Charismatic authority is derived from a divine gift or when the leader claims that his authority is derived from a 'higher power' or 'inspiration.' Therefore the retinue might see it as a duty to follow the charismatic leader. The form of legitimacy is emotional belief in the extraordinary qualities of the charismatic leader or in the values which are revealed by (usually) him. Believing in the power or knowledge of the leader is therefore important to the construction of this type of authority and to its perseverance. The type of administrative staff is the retinue of the leader because all officials are personally devoted to the charismatic leader. Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, pp. 57-77.

of power. Force *can be* an exercise of power, but is not a synonym for power. I shall deal with this in more detail in Section 3.4.

The idea of coercion and persuasion is also dominant in the work of Khaled Abou el Fadl. He does not connect power to coercion but does make a distinction between coercive and persuasive authority. He defines coercive authority as '…the ability to direct the conduct of another person through the use of inducements, benefits, threats or punishments so that a reasonable person would conclude that for all practical purposes they have no choice but to comply.'[373] Abou el Fadl states that persuasive authority involves 'normative power' and is therefore '…the ability to direct the belief or conduct of a person because of trust.'[374] He does not exclude the power of influence. It is in fact the power of persuasion, which he calls 'normative power', by which an authority has the ability to influence the opinions, thoughts and actions of another individual. As does Pilger-Strohl, Abou el Fadl adds the presence of trust to the definition of persuasive authority, presenting it as the decisive factor contributing to the construction of an authority. Besides, Abou el Fadl explains *how* a persuasive authority exerts influence:

> Persuasive authority influences people to believe, act or refrain from acting in a certain fashion by persuading them that this is what ought to be, it influences people to believe that acting according to a certain directive is consistent with their sense of self-responsibility.[375]

Having looked at some different perspectives on authority, for my case study I shall define authority as the normative power to persuade and influence the ideas as well as the conduct of others. As I understand it, authority is a personal attribute, an innate personality trait or an ability with which an individual might be gifted.[376] Moreover, I would like to make clear that the female religious authorities in my study exercise power not because they have been formally appointed as a religious authority by a higher religious authority; they are not 'in' authority. Nevertheless, as I explain in Chapters Five and Six, some of my interlocutors have become religious authorities and have found ways to exert their religious influence without having achieved the status of being a formal authority. In the next few pages, I discuss how normative power can be asserted.

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373   Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: One-world, 2003), p. 18.
374   *Ibid.*, p. 18-19.
375   *Ibid.*, p. 22.
376   In Section 3.5. I explain that, prior to becoming an authority, it is essential that those over whom influence is exerted acknowledge an individual as an authority.

3.4. The power of an authority

In the previous pages I argued that power does not have to be coercive. Michel Foucault developed a theory of power in which power is not viewed as negative and coercive, but as a dynamic and positive force in society. Foucault disagrees with any notion of power which focuses predominantly on oppression and constraint, and does not define power as 'an organ of repression.'[377] According to Foucault, the exercise of power is:

> ...a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it cites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions.[378]

In short, according to Foucault, power *can be* constraint, but is not necessarily so. He looks beyond the idea of oppression and analyzes how power functions in everyday relations between individuals and institutions. In this context, individuals are not powerless and oppressed, but active agents. Individuals are 'the vehicles of power and not its point of application.'[379] Therefore, in Foucault's eyes the individual is the performer of power; the negotiator of local forms of power, or in his own words: 'The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation.'[380] Foucault's emphasis on the individual as an agent of power reflects the fact that every individual can exercise power. Power is not something like a commodity a person possesses or acquires through force or contract, but it is exercised and 'only exists in action.'[381]

Drawing on Foucault's understanding of power, I analyze how my interlocutors exercise power through their production of religious discourse. What makes his theory especially appropriate to the present study is the connection Foucault makes between power and knowledge. Foucault argues that there is a constant interaction between power and knowledge and vice-versa: 'It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power.'[382] Foucault does not mean that having knowledge can lead to power or that

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377   Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, pp. 88-90.
378   Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," In: *Critical Enquiry*, Vol. 8, no. 4, (Summer 1982): p. 789.
379   Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, p. 98.
380   *Ibid.,* p. 98.
381   *Ibid*., pp. 88-89.
382   *Ibid*., p. 52.

individuals can expand their power by gaining knowledge. His view is that knowledge does not depend on power, because the very exercise of power is a mechanism which gives form to knowledge. Therefore power and knowledge are integrated. He argues that, 'the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power.'[383] Hence Foucault states that, in producing knowledge, one is also making a claim to power:

> We should not be content to say that power has a need for such-and-such a discovery, such-and such a form of knowledge, but we should add that the exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information.[384]

This is the basis on which I analyze how pious circles open up a space in which power and knowledge are produced by their participants. I analyze how, on the basis of Foucault's reasoning, power and knowledge can co-exist and be intertwined, and therefore become interrelated. I am interested in the process by which knowledge functions as a form of power. How does knowledge in pious circles function as a form of power? How does the exercise of - religious - power produce knowledge and what type of knowledge?

3.5. Acknowledgment of an authority

In the previous Section, I defined authority in terms of exercising 'normative' power to persuade and influence the belief and concomitantly the conduct and actions of others. Before becoming an authority, it is essential that those over whom influence is exerted, acknowledge an individual as an authority. This recognition by others is fundamental to the validity of an authority. Therefore, an individual must possess a particular knowledge, experience or personal characteristics which will create a willingness in others to attribute authority to that individual. In my research, those over whom influence is exerted are the participants in pious circles. These participants seek the guidance of female religious authorities, and are important to the construction of the latters' religious authority.

Khaled Abu el Fadl points out that acknowledging an authority does not mean that an individual has been subdued into 'blind obedience.'[385] By way of elaboration, Abu el Fadl gives a personal example to illustrate this matter and explains the conditions

383   *Ibid*., p. 52.
384   *Ibid*., p. 51.
385   Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, p. 20.

through which his authority - as a professor - is established and maintained by his students:

> ...the students are not transferring or surrendering their judgment to me. They are simply delegating a certain amount of trust in me and granting me the benefit of their judgment. That is why when students ask questions, generally speaking, a yes or no will not do. They will rightly expect an explanation of my reasoning as a condition for continued delegation of their trust. If I continually fail to explain the reasoning behind my analysis, I eventually lose their trust and my authority as a teacher is eroded.[386]

Here trust is defined as an important factor in the establishment of an authority. Cogently, the acceptance of an authority is not unconditional. As will become clear, my discussion builds on his approach by analyzing the qualities which make a person religiously authoritative in the eyes of participants in pious circles and how this relates to the participants' independent reasoning. As I demonstrate in the empirical chapters, participants in pious circles can undermine the authority of female religious scholars and withdraw their recognition.[387] Consequently, female religious authorities must affirm and re-affirm their position in order to be and remain recognized as an authority. Moreover, participants who acquiesce in a religious authority do not surrender their personal judgment. They do not fling self-examination and self-evaluation to the four winds.[388] Hence, their independent reasoning always remains important because they demand rational arguments or justifications from authorities.

Furthermore, influence does not have to be exercised in an one-way direction. Authorities can also be influenced by the individuals over whom influence is exerted, without their authority necessarily being challenged. For instance, the individual over whom authority is exercised has the freedom to question any of the ideas, beliefs and attitudes which a particular authority is imposing, or the sources these

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386   *Ibid.,* p. 20.
387   Matthias Pilger-Strohl. "Authority." The Brill Dictionary of Religion. Edited by Kocku von Stuck-rad, Brill, 2011. Brill Online. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bdr_COM-00036 (Accessed November 8, 2011).
388   According to Richard Friedman, there are two kinds of independence of the will or judgement exercised by a person involved in an authority relationship. The first kind, persuasion through rational argument is the case 'in which one man influences another to adopt some course of action by helping him to see the merits of that particular action.' In this case, the subject does not have to obey the authority under all circumstances and at all times. In the second case, Fried-man describes an absolute surrender of judgment and obedience; 'the case in which no reasons have to be given to a person to gain his compliance with a prescription because he "accepts" the person who prescribes it.' Richard B. Friedman, "On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy," In: *Authority*, (ed.) Raz, Joseph, (New York: New York University Press, 1990), p. 67.

authorities draw upon. Alternatively, an individual over whom authority is exercised can draw on a different source, and by doing so, hold a different opinion. Finally, I demonstrate that, in situations in which differences of action and thought exist, the individuals who seek the guidance of an authority are free to search for an alternative authority. Hence I propose to complement the focus on female religious authority as *de facto* authority holder, because participants over whom authority is exercised make an important contribution to this process by their recognition, questioning or withdrawal of authority. The questions which I would like to address are: How do participants in pious circles acknowledge an authority? On what grounds? To what extent is trust important? Do participants in pious circles challenge female religious authorities? If so, how?

3.6. Islamic authority

Now that I have defined the way in which I use the concept of authority, I shall turn to the matter of religious authority itself. In order to understand the background to my interlocutors' ideas of religious authority, it is necessary to elaborate on its meanings according to Muslim beliefs. For this reason, in this Section I discuss Islamic authority in very broad terms. For Muslims, the ultimate authority rests unquestionably in Allah. It derives from God's divine words, as written in the foundational texts of the Qurʾan. Muslims believe that the Qurʾan is not just divinely inspired: it is God's very word, His divine speech revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Khaled Abu el Fadl also emphasizes the Qurʾan's sacred character:

> In Islamic theology, ultimate authority for any determination resides in God. God is the ultimate authority in the sense that if God wants one thing and not another, any person who wants the contrary does so in defiance of God. More concretely, God is the ultimate authority in the sense that God has the power to provide exclusionary reasons that warrant deference. This is assumed as matter of faith or conviction and, therefore, it is a starting point for the analysis. Having made this faith-based assumption, we still need to deal with understanding what God wants as well as the means for understanding what God wants. For a Muslim, the most obvious ways of knowing what God wants are the Qurʾān and *Sunnah*.[389]

The Prophet's 'way' or 'path', the *sunna*, is also an important source of religious authority. This is derived from the Prophet Muhammad's role as the messenger of God during his lifetime, known through the Traditions of the Prophet, the *sunna*.[390]

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389   Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, p. 86.
390   See Aisha Y. Musa, *Hadith as sic scripture: Discussions on the Authority of the Prophetic Traditions in Islam* (New York/Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

The *sunna* of the Prophet is considered the second important source of Islamic normativity, complementing the Qurʾan.[391] As El Fadl states, if the regulations and recommendations described in the Qurʾan and in the *ahadith* are to be implemented, interpretation is needed. Therefore, Muslims need to explore the meaning of particular rules and recommendations. The field of Qurʾanic exegesis and *ahadith* interpretations is where Muslim religious scholars make their entrance. The religious scholars have the important task of explaining Islamic beliefs to Muslims because, as the Sunni axiom says, 'scholars are the heirs of the prophets.'[392] In Islam there are neither ordained clergy nor an institutionalized church as in the Christian tradition.[393] However, throughout Islamic history, a network of religious authorities has come to exert religious influence over Muslim communities.[394] Hilary Kalmbach elaborates on the diverse forms of these religious authorities:

> In the more than 1,400 years since the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Islamic authority has coalesced into a wide variety of positions and institutions. These have included the caliph, the ʿ*alīm* (scholar, plural ʿ*ulamāʾ*), the *muftī* (legal scholar who issues opinions in the form of *fatawās*), the *qāḍī* (judge who issues binding rules), the Sufi *shaykh* (mystical leader), and *khaṭīb* or *imām* (mosque preacher).[395]

Hence, throughout the history of Islam, diverse Muslim religious and legal scholars have made their voices heard. At this point I am going to focus on the ʿ*ulama*ʾ, the religious scholars of Islam. These scholars of the religious sciences are regarded as the guardians, transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge, and consequently of the *shari'a* or religious Law.[396] The four major sources from which classical Islamic law is derived are the Qurʾan, the *sunna*, *ijma*ʾ*,* that is consensus of scholars, and *qiyas* or analogical deductions made using these previous three sources. *Ijma*ʾ is the binding consensus of Muslim interpretive scholars at a specific time.[397] *Qiyas*,

391   Gudrun Krämer & Sabine Schmidtke, *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, p. 4.
392   David Waines, "Islam," In: *Religions in the Modern World: traditions and transformations*, second edition, (eds.) Linda Woodhead, Hiroko Kawanami and Christopher Partridge (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 242-244.
393   Robert W. Heffner & Muhammad Qasim Zaman (eds.), *Schooling Islam: the culture and politics of modern Muslim education*, p. 5.
394   *Ibid*., p. 5.
395   Hilary Kalmbach, "Islamic authority and the study of female leaders," In: *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in contemporary Islamic Authority*, (eds.) Masooda Bano & Hilary Kalmbach (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2012), p. 4.
396   "ʿUlamāʾ." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/ulama-COM_1278 (Accessed September 23, 2014).
397   http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e2444 (Accessed September 24, 2014).

on the other hand, is the process of analogical reasoning, in which the teachings in the Qurʾan and the *ahadith* are compared.[398] In the exercise of *qiyas*, the purpose of scholars is to offer a response to or to resolve a new religious problem by analogy to past practices and beliefs. This body of methodologies is referred to as *usul al-fiqh*, that is, the sources of Islamic jurisprudence.

In the contemporary era, many Islamic institutions have become widely known for their religious scholarship. One influential Islamic educational institute is al-Azhar in Cairo in which Muslims from all over the world attend studies in different Islamic sciences. Al-Azhar was established in the tenth century and has become one of the major learning centers of Islam. The Islamic scholars in al-Azhar dispatch *fatawa* to Muslims around the world. Although these classes of ʿ*ulama*ʾ have become authoritative religious scholars, the proliferation of Islamic knowledge, and with this authority, has to a certain extent affected their position.[399]

Until the ninth century, any scholar of the law had the right to exercise *ijtihad*, the use of individual interpretation.[400] But, with the establishment of legal schools, *mad-hahib*, the scholars of all schools of law concluded that all essential questions had been comprehensively discussed.[401] Therefore, individual interpretation of Islamic law was no longer deemed necessary. Furthermore, all future religious scholars had to limit themselves to the 'explanation, application, and, at most, interpretation of the doctrine as it had been laid down once and for all.'[402] Therefore later gen-erations of jurists were considered to be bound to *taqlid*, which is the unquestioned acceptance of their predecessors as authoritative. However, such eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Islamic reformists as Shah Wali Allah, Jamal al-din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh felt that the unquestioning acceptance of religious teachings of the past authorities had led to a moral and intellectual stagnation in the Muslim world. Therefore, Muslim society had to be morally reconstructed and its Islamic

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398   http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e1936 (Accessed September 24, 2014).
399   For two more insights on this matter see Khaled Abou el Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, (San Francisco: Harper, 2005) and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
400   J. Schacht and D. B. MacDonald. "Idjtihād." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman; , Th. Bianquis; , C.E. Bosworth; , E. van Donzel; and W.P. Heinrichs. Brill, 2012. Brill Online. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0351 (Accessed February 8, 2012)
401   There are four schools of law in Sunni Islam: *hanafi*, *maliki*, *shafiʿi* and *hanbali*. The *shiʿa*, the second largest denomination of Islam, also have schools of law, however in the present study I focus only on s*unni* Islam.
402   J. Schacht and D. B. MacDonald., *Ibid.*

intellectual tradition had to be restored.[403] One way to do this was by opening the door to *ijtihad*.[404] In their efforts to achieve this, the reformists reasserted the right to individual interpretation. Hilary Kalmbach explains how in this way these reformists:

> ...opened the door for literate individuals with little or no exposure to traditional religious learning to claim the right to teach and interpret Islamic texts. These leaders, dubbed "new religious intellectuals," are seen as religious authorities due to their pious reputations, commitment, and ability to connect with lay audiences, as well as a capacity to understand and interpret Islamic texts, often (though not always) gleaned through part-time instruction obtained outside traditional scholarly institutions.[405]

These 'new religious intellectuals' included modernists[406] and Islamists[407] both of whom were of great significance to the growth of Islamic thought and practice throughout the twentieth century.[408] The opening of the door of *ijtihad* resulted in the fragmentation of religious authority, meaning that there is no longer one, exclusive, authoritative institute claiming to have the right to interpret Islam.[409] However, Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke argue that, as the religious authorities have never been unified under one single authority, it would be more apposite to speak of

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403 John L. Esposito, *Islam and politics,* fourth Edition (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 36.

404 J. Schacht and D. B. MacDonald., *Ibid.*

405 Hilary Kalmbach, "Islamic authority and the study of female leaders," p. 5.

406 'Those usually educated in modern Western or westernized institutions of learning and aspiring to rethink their practices, institutions, and discourses in light both of what they take to be "true" Islam and of how they see the challenges and opportunities of modernity.' Cited from: Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Consensus and religious authority in modern Islam: the discourses of the ʿUlamāʾ," In: *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, (eds.) Gudrun Krämer & Sabine Schmidtke (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006), p. 154.

407 Assia Maria Harwazinski postulates that: 'Islamic fundamentalist or 'Islamist' ideologies are distinguished by a selective adoption of modern accomplishments, largely limited to technology and science. Their conspicuous notes are: (a) a rejection of the primacy of human reason—the radical subordination of reason to revelation; (b) a rejection of the emancipatory principles of the modern age; (c) a dismissal of the idea of popular sovereignty, with its secular consequences; (d) a rejection of individuation or individuality, and the principle of subjectivity it entails; (e) a rejection of the universality of human rights.' Islamists are also against 'Westernization' and modernization. However, they do selectively adopt modern inventions, largely limited to technology and science. See Assia Maria Harwazinski. "Fundamentalism." The Brill Dictionary of Religion. Edited by Kocku von Stuckrad. Brill Online, 2014.Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/brill-dictionary-of-religion/fundamentalism-COM_00176 (Accessed September 24, 2014).

408 Hilary Kalmbach, "Islamic authority and the study of female leaders," p. 5.

409 Dale F. Eickelman & James P. Piscatori, *Muslim politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Herman Beck & Gerard Wiegers, *Moslims in een Westerse samenleving: Islam en ethiek* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008).

a fragmentation of the 'religious field.'[410] Furthermore, these authors contend that, despite a rise in literacy, modern technologies and new ways of communication - such as the Internet - the ʿulamaʾ and their characteristic means of expression have by no means disappeared: 'But next to them, and often in competition with them, other actors, forums and forms of expression have emerged.'[411] Martin van Bruinessen also states that the traditional forms of authority have not been replaced by books, journals, television, the Internet or knowledgeable individuals. Ultimately, spread by new means, most opinions are, he says, still justified by the authority of specific ʿulamaʾ or by reference to a 'recognized established religious authority.'[412] Although I take these developments into account, I am concerned with the following questions to do with female religious authorities: How do female religious authorities function as religious authorities alongside such traditional religious authorities as male preachers? To what extent is the religious authority of female religious authorities mediated or challenged by traditional religious authorities? How do female religious authorities view themselves?

3.7. Female religious authority

In this Section, I attempt to provide a framework by which to study female religious authority in order to understand the background to my interlocutors' elaboration of female religious authority in Islam. For this reason, I offer a brief discussion of the position of female religious scholars in the Islamic tradition.[413]

Throughout the history of Islam, it has been socially accepted for women to hold positions of religious authority and leadership. Despite this fact, their role in religious scholarship has barely been documented and there is little information about their activities. Nevertheless, a growing number of studies have demonstrated that, as did - male - religious scholars, women also engaged in scholarly pursuits. For instance, the Islamic scholar Mohammad Akram Nadwi explains how women had

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410 Gudrun Krämer and Sabine Schmidtke, *Speaking for Islam: Religious Authorities in Muslim Societies*, p. 12.
411 *Ibid.*
412 Martin van Bruinessen, "Producing Islamic knowledge in Western Europe," In: Producing Islamic Knowledge. Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe (eds.) Martin van Bruinessen & Stefano Allievi (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 19-20.
413 My aim is not to elaborate on the classical Islamic sources which discuss the permissibility of women in religious positions according to the Islamic legal tradition. For a discussion on the permissibility of women in leading the prayer see Behnam Sadeghi, *The Structure of Reasoning in Post-Formative Islamic Jurisprudence: Case Studies in Hanafi Laws on Women and Prayer*, (PhD diss.: Princeton University, 2006); Simonetta Calderini, "Classical sources on the permissibility of female imams: an analysis of some hadiths about Umm Waraqa," In: *Sources and Approaches across Near Eastern Disciplines*, (eds.) Verena Klemm *et alia*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2011): pp. 53-70 and Juliane Hammer, *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority and Activism: More Than a Prayer* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

an important role in preserving the Prophet's teaching, the *ahadith*. He has studied female scholarship throughout the history of Islam and the Muslim world, resulting in an encyclopaedic collection of 8,000 biographies of *muhaddithat* - Muslim female scholars of *hadith* - consisting of forty volumes.[414] Nadwi describes how female scholars have enjoyed considerable public authority in diverse Muslim societies and throughout different Islamic eras. He gives examples of women who have given classes in the major mosques, travelled extensively in search of knowledge, transmitted and critiqued *ahadith,* preached and also issued *fatawa*. Moreover, Nadwi argues that some of the most renowned male scholars depended on, and praised, the scholarship of their female teachers.

Aisha Geissinger has also emphasized the importance of the role of female Muslim scholars in Islamic history.[415] On the basis of her study of Aisha bint abi Bakr - one of the wives of the Prophet - in early Islam, she argues that the role of Aisha was more than mere transmitter of *ahadith*, as she was first and foremost a woman with exegetical authority.[416]

These authors suggest that the reason Muslims are less familiar with female Islamic scholarship can be reduced to two factors. Firstly, as stated earlier, female Islamic scholarship in early Islam has not been sufficiently documented. Secondly, despite female engagement in Islamic scholarship in early Islam, female religious scholars became marginalized because of the patriarchal structure of Islamic scholarship in the later period. For instance, Riffat Hassan argues that:

> The Islamic tradition has, by and large, remained rigidly patriarchal till the present time, prohibiting growth of scholarship among women particularly in the realm of religious thought.[417]

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414   See Mohammad Akram Nadwi, *al-Muhaddithat: the women scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2007).

415   Aisha Geissinger, "The Exegetical traditions of Aisha: Notes on Their Impact and Significance," In*: Journal of Qurʾanic Studies,* Vol. 9, no. 1, (April 2004): pp. 1-2; and idem Umm al-Darda Sat in Tashahhud Like a Man: Towards the Historical Contextualization of a Portrayal of Female Religious Authority, In: *The Muslim World*, Vol. 103, no. 3, (July 2013): pp. 305-319.

416   Besides the books mentioned, other studies have also focused on the scholarly authority of Muslim women; see Asma Sayeed, *Shifting Fortunes: Women and Hadith Transmission in Islamic History* (PhD diss.: Princeton University, 2005); and Ruth Roded, *Women in Islamic Biographical Collections: From Ibn Saad to Who's Who* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1994).

417   Riffat Hassan, "An Islamic Perspective," In: *Women, Religion and Sexuality: Studies on the Impact of Religious Teachings on Women*, (ed.) Jeanne Becher (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), pp. 95-96.

Echoing Hassan, such Muslim feminists as Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas and Nimat Hafez Barazangi criticize the way women have been 'excluded' from the process of interpreting the primary sources of Islam.[418] The general idea behind these studies is that, throughout the course of Islamic history, women have understood Islam through men. For this reason, women had fewer possibilities to express religious autonomy, a situation which has endured up to the present time. However, the present emergence of female religious authorities demonstrates that religious authority structures have recently undergone fundamental change. Hilary Kalmbach explains:

> Though men have held a near-monopoly over public religious leadership for much of Islamic history, over the past thirty years, the rank of Muslim women active as religious leaders have swelled to include individuals from almost all parts of the globe (…) The activities of female leaders represent a major shift in structures of Islamic authority, as they have curtailed male domination of religious leadership and core religious spaces such as the mosques and *madrasahs*, and have increased female attendance at public prayers and mosque lessons.[419]

Using Kalmbach's research as a starting-point, I intend to investigate whether, and if so, how female religious authorities in the present study claim to be an ʿ*alima*. In what way do they seek to connect themselves to a tradition of Islamic scholarship? Who do they regard as historical female religious scholars? To what extent are they inspired in their activism by these historical female religious scholars?

3.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented an analysis of insights into recent key studies which provide a theoretical and historical background to the emergence of Muslim women as religious authorities.

Having examined different theories on authority, I understand authority to be normative power. It is the power to persuade and influence the beliefs and the conduct and actions of others. Understood in these terms, authority is established through an individual's exercise of power which in my research primarily a personal attribute. Moreover, individuals over whom authority is exercised have an important share in this process because of their recognition and questioning of or their withdrawal

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418   See Amina Wadud, *Qurʾan and women: rereading the sacred text from a women's perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Amina Wadud, *Inside the gender Jihad: women's reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2006); Asma Barlas, *Believing women' in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretation of the Qurʾan* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002) and Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Woman's Identity and the Qurʾan: A New Reading* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2006).
419   Hilary Kalmbach, "Islamic authority and the study of female leaders," p. 1.

from authority. In this regard, trust is an important factor in the establishment of authority.

When studying the concept of authority from a Muslim perspective, three levels of authority can be distinguished: Allah's divine words, as written in the foundational text of the Qurʾan; the Prophet Muhammad's role as the messenger of God during his lifetime - the Prophet's *sunna* - his 'way'; and religious scholars - *ʿulama'* - who have the important task of explaining the Islamic belief to Muslims. The position of religious scholars has, however, undergone many changes because of (among many other factors) the proliferation of Islamic knowledge and of the Islamic reformists' reassertion of the right of individual interpretation, *ijtihad*. All this had resulted in a fragmentation of the religious field of authority. Despite these developments, the *ʿulama'* are still important religious authorities to many Muslims around the globe.

In early Islam it was socially accepted for women to hold positions of religious authority and leadership. However, historically, those Muslim women who have been religious scholars and leaders have been less documented and, because of the patriarchal structure of a later period, their position has become marginal. Contemporary academic investigations show that Muslim women have now become religiously active again. The present enhanced religious authority of Muslim women is attributable to the spread of literacy; equal access to religious educational for women; nineteenth-century Islamic reformists; the pluralization of religious knowledge and the fragmentation of the religious field of authority, not to mention their participation in the practice of *daʿwa*. Furthermore, Islamic feminist discourse has also influenced the growth of female religious authority. All these factors have led to the expansion of religious space which is and has been traditionally male dominated.

In the Chapters Four, Five and Six, I present my empirical data and analyze how Born-Muslim women and converts in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium are becoming increasingly religiously active - and authoritative - as a consequence of their striving for piety and for the acquisition of Islamic knowledge.

CHAPTER 4

The pious individual and the pious community

God is always the focal point in my life. Whether I am going to the university or working, studying, or am with my colleagues…I am always led by a feeling of responsibility toward God. Actually, God is my point of reflection. So when I do something, I first reflect on my deed towards Allah.[420]

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of my fieldwork on the process of piety forma-tion of my interlocutors. Its aim is twofold: I begin by discussing two types of piety cultivation, namely: individually formed piety and piety which accords with the norms of pious communities. I show that interaction with fellow Muslims in religious communities is a significant factor in cultivating a certain type of piety.[421] Despite a general tendency towards religious individualization which will also be dealt with in this chapter, I argue that religious individualization among pious Muslim women is a socially embedded transformation. I also explain how agency can be exhibited through the cultivation of piety, and discuss whether resistance or conformity, or both, are present in my interlocutors' articulations of agency. Thereafter, I analyze how being a Born-Muslim or a convert affects a person's understanding of piety, and whether it is possible to speak of a religious hierarchy. I demonstrate how the interaction between individual pious women and pious communities leads to differ-ent types of agency, pious beliefs and practices and to the formation of a religious hierarchy in which some are considered more pious than others.

This chapter is organized as follows: in Section 4.1. I describe the ways by which my interlocutors cultivate piety, why it is cultivated and how for some living piously becomes an ongoing trajectory. In Section 4.2. I analyze three phases of piety forma-tion among my interlocutors. In Section 4.3. I concentrate on the communal aspect of piety cultivation during gatherings of pious circles. In 4.4. I focus on the wearing of the *hijab* as a pious practice and, in this context, demonstrate how this practice can lead to contestations and the experience of being pressurized religiously among Muslim women. In Section 4.5. I discuss how Born-Muslim and convert interlocutors influence and view each other and what they feel are indicators of piety. Finally, I shall sum up my thoughts in a conclusion.

4.1. Becoming and staying pious: a project in progress

When analyzing my data, I came across two types of piety formation: individually formed piety and piety which has been cultivated in accordance with norms of reli-gious communities. I introduce these types of piety formation by the narratives of the convert Hagar and the Born-Muslim Fouzia. I commence with the case of Hagar. My findings in this section are based on my interviews.

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420   Interview with Widiana (January 14, 2011).
421   I use the term religious communities and pious communities interchangeably. Both refer to a community of believers whose aim is to cultivate piety.

Standing alone for Allah

Hagar is a thirty-six year-old Dutch convert to Islam who has been on a religious journey ever since she converted at the age of seventeen.[422] Her interest in Islam developed on account of her relationship with her Moroccan- Dutch boyfriend - later her husband. For almost twenty years, she has been striving to be pious in her every-day life. Shortly after her conversion, she espoused 'visible piety'[423] by beginning to wear the *hijab* and Islamic clothing; later she also adopted the *abaya* - a long robe-like dress - and the *niqab* as well.[424] Hagar felt the need to express piety visibly to underline her religious devotion, both towards God and the Muslim community.[425] Donning of the *hijab*, *abaya* and later the *niqab* was a way by which Hagar could present herself as a Muslim and assert her piety. Her case coincides with the 'falling in love' phase of Roald's conversion theory: conversion and becoming pious went hand in hand.[426] Hagar aspired to absorb everything about Islam as quickly as she could by incorporating all aspects of piety. She considered all these to be Islamic requirements.

In the initial stages of her conversion, Hagar was very "strict" in her religious thought and practice, and chose to adhere to a literal interpretation of Islam.[427] She became religiously active and established a pious circle in 2003, organized Islamic activities and gave lectures.[428] Hagar set a standard of pious behavior to which others aspired. During her lectures, she encouraged sisterhood by advising women how to behave piously and set a norm for proper Islamic clothing according to the religious sources she considered normative.[429] With the sisters in her pious circle, Hagar focused on

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422   Interview with Hagar (May 31, 2010).

423   'Visible piety' is, Deeb defines, a way for her interlocutors to express religious commitment. Here Deeb refers to the Arabic concept *iltizam*. Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*, pp. 34-36.

424   The choice to wear the *niqab* in secular Dutch society, as a Dutch Muslim with non-Muslim parents in a non-Muslim environment, was challenging. The biggest challenge came from her husband, who had difficulties accepting her facial covering. Eventually, she discarded the *niqab* out of respect for him.

425   In his study on British converts, Leon Moosavi argues that converts 'represent their Muslimness, by etching their identities onto their bodies.' Leon Moosavi, "British Muslim Converts Performing 'Authentic Muslimness', In: *Performing Islam,*" Vol. 1 no. 1, (2012): p. 109.

426   Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts*, p. 283.

427   Generally speaking, when they use the word "strict", my interlocutors meant those who are severe in religious discipline, who conform rigorously to all Islamic rules and who are also strict in their interpretation of Islam. This means that they interpret the Qurʾan literally and often they wear a *khimar*, a long, cape-like veil which hangs down to just above the waist. It covers the hair, neck and shoulders completely, but leaves the face clear. Some wear a *niqab,* which also covers the face.

428   In Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*, I shall discuss her role as a religious authority and the challenges she has faced in that context.

429   Hagar uses religious sources recommended by the *Salafi* Movement. *Salafism* refers to the pious predecessors: the first three generations of Muslims who represent the golden age of Islam. The

the adoption of visible expressions of piety. However, at some point she found it difficult to live according to those "strict" pious norms which she had encouraged herself to live by. For instance, the sisters in her pious circle considered television "demonic" because the programs were not "Islamically appropriate." Therefore, if they "sincerely" aimed to be pious, they should no longer watch television and even go as far as getting rid of their television sets. Hagar did not go that far and experienced pressure from her pious circle when her sisters saw a television in her living-room. Hagar felt ashamed and tried to defend herself by saying that she only looked at news channels and certainly not films, even though this was not true.

Despite her protestations, this attitude caused tension in her pious circle. After she had felt the pressure, she began to reflect on her pious life. Nowadays she considers herself to have become more nuanced, realistic and more of a "reflexive religious being." In Hagar's eyes, piety is all about "being a good Muslim woman and, within your bounds of possibilities, striving for that what you think Allah desires from you." Accordingly, Hagar places her every thought and action within her greater project of religious growth and self-improvement. She concentrates on her intention, *niyya*. As long as she has the right intentions, Allah will have mercy on her soul, even if the results might not be satisfactory to others. In the following conversation, she reflects in detail on this matter:

> Hagar: 'I do not know if it has been a good development, but something has occurred; there has been a shift. I have grown older, and I am no longer naïve. I do not believe that [everything between us Muslim sisters, S.N.] is "jolly and fun", that "all is sweetness and light" and that "we all love each other". That part of niceness is good but it is not always real.'

> S.N.: 'Were you perhaps too idealistic?'

Salaf were distinguished by their exemplary piety. In terms of ideals, the movement advocated a return to an Islam purified of unwarranted accretions. In particular, Hagar studies the ideas of Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani (1914–1999), an Albanian Islamic scholar who specialized in the fields of *hadith* and *fiqh*, and who was a well-known proponent of *Salafism*. In the present study, all my interlocutors praised '*al-salaf al-salih*', "pious forefathers", however, *Salafism* as a political movement is something many had difficulty understanding. For more on Salafism, see "Salafiyya", Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs, Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/salafiyya-COM_0982 (accessed December 29, 2014). For more on Salafism in the Netherlands see Martijn de Koning, *Zoeken Naar Een 'Zuivere' Islam geloofsbeleving en identiteitsvorming van jonge Marokkaans-Nederlandse moslims*, (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2008) and idem How Should I Live as a 'True' Muslim? Regimes of Living among Dutch Muslims in the Salafi Movement, In: *Etnofoor*, Vol. 25, no. 2, (2013) pp: 53-72.

Hagar: 'Yes, I think so. I had so much passion...oh I cried so many times [during lectures, S.N.], then I would say "Sisters, we need to do this, and we need to do that" and I really stood on the barricades. (...) Later you discover that things are more nuanced. It is also very much related to age. At a particular age, you think that your vision, at least that is what I felt strongly, that my vision was the right one and I knew it all, and that was how things should be done, and why didn't people get that? (...) Now, I have become more individualistic. I believe in the Afterlife, and I believe that one day I shall stand before Allah, but I shall stand alone before Allah. (...) Everyone goes through different phases of religious growth, and eventually it all comes to this: Allah guides whom He wants, when He wants and how He wants. (...) I have now found more peace and I am more focused on myself and on how I am building my relationship with Allah.'[430]

Hagar explained how now she has become 'rational' in her religious experience. Whereas at first she was focused on expressing 'visible piety' and performing *daʿwa* - Islamic propagation -, she now concentrates on strengthening her bond with God and developing "an inner state of piety" as she called it. Hagar now experiences her religiosity "egocentrically" and as "an individual" continuously striving to satisfy Allah in every way she can.[431]

A year after this interview, I asked her how she had been experiencing her piety cultivation since the last time we spoke.[432] Hagar explained that she still reflects. She referred to a Canadian documentary about a female convert who tried to convince her teenage daughter to wear the *hijab*. However, at the end of the documentary, the mother herself took off her *hijab* as she could no longer understand why she had donned it in the first place. After seeing this documentary, Hagar explained how the story of the mother had confused her and consequently she had begun to reflect on her decision to wear the *hijab* twenty years earlier. Hagar found out that she had begun wearing it because it was considered an act of worship in the eyes of her pious community, especially her in-laws. She followed the example of the women around her, in order to "hold on to something." Hagar explained how she had "uncritically conformed" to this custom as she considered her in-laws to be exemplary and acted in conformity with their custom of wearing the *hijab*. Hagar discussed the documentary with her pious circle, hoping that her sisters would also reflect on their decisions to wear the headscarf. However, most of them reacted negatively and accused her of causing "confusion." They all considered the *hijab* a religious obligation for all Muslim women, the value of which should never be called into doubt. They saw the *hijab* as

430   Interview with Hagar (May 31, 2010).
431   Interview with Hagar (April 3, 2011).
432   Interview with Hagar (April 3, 2011).

an indispensable aspect of a pious Muslim woman. Although Hagar still approves of the *hijab*, she sometimes wonders whether it would be more "sincere" she should first take it off and then deliberately make the choice to wear it again, provided she was sure that it would indeed be an act of worship towards Allah.

In an analysis of Hagar's narrative, one of the most interesting aspects is the shift she has experienced in cultivating piety. Although initially she conformed to the religious norms of her pious community without questions, now she cultivates piety individually, and evaluates every religious thought and deed, even if it does cause her to doubt certain religious traditions. This corresponds to what Jocelyne Cesari calls the emergence of European 'Muslim individuals', in which personal choice is privileged above religious tradition. Although Cesari explains this development in the context of Muslim migration to Europe rather than conversion to Islam, Hagar's religious individualization and her 'sharpening of self-consciousness' does fit Cesari's observation.[433] As a consequence of her shift, Hagar's individually formed piety clashed with the type of piety adhered to by her pious community. While Hagar tried to give meaning to the religious ambiguities she experienced, the sisters in her pious circle ignored, even rejected, her experiences. The religiously accommodating behavior of the sisters in Hagar's pious circle is what Karin Phalet calls the religious behavior of 'loyal Muslims.'[434] Loyal Muslims give their wholehearted support to pre-scribed rules, cultural traditions and authorities, in both private and public contexts, and focus on a closed Islam which rejects alternative visions.[435]

In terms of agency, Hagar's desire to become devout produced two different types of agency. At the beginning, she articulated agency by conforming to norms and by acting in line with her pious community. Furthermore, Hagar also tried to cultivate piety by such physical acts as donning the veil and later the *niqab*. Her actions are similar to Saba Mahmood's usage of the term '*habitus*', referring to the process of piety

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433   Jocelyn Cesari, "Muslim Minorities in Europe: the silent revolution," p. 259.
434   Karin Phalet, "De constructie van etnisch-religieuze identiteit en alteriteit: Beeldvorming en beleving van de islam in Nederland," In: *Identiteitsbeleving bij allochtone jongeren*, (eds.) M. Foblets & E. Cornelis (Leuven: ACCO, 2003) pp. 155-184.
435   Likewise, Ton Nabben, Berfin Yesilgöz and Dirk J. Korf call this group 'conformist Muslims.' According to their classification, these Muslims conform to religious norms as they appreciate the certainty given by religion and tradition. Although such classifications can be useful in grasping specific types of religiosity of Muslims, these typologies are wanting in that they present the everyday religious experiences of Muslims as static and fixed, whereas I believe them to be much more dynamic, leading to different religious dispositions. However, the descriptions of a 'loyal' or a 'conformist' Muslim do fit some of my observations, for instance, of Hagar. See Ton Nabben, Berfin Yesilgöz & Dirk J. Korf, *Van Allah tot Prada: Identiteit, leefstijl en geloofsbeleving van jonge Marokkanen en Turken* (Utrecht: Forum, 2006).

cultivation through the combination of outward behavior and inward disposition.[436] However, after feeling religious pressure and experiencing religious ambiguities, she grew self-critical. Agency then encompassed processes of reflection, compelling her to think for herself and to determine which virtues of piety best suited to her. This second notion of agency is phrased in terms of reflection and becoming critical, and to a certain extent showing resistance. Hence, in locating agency in Hagar's process of piety cultivation, I find both resistance and conformity.

Hijab: a symbol of suppression and piety

A similar account is that of Fouzia, a thirty-four year-old Moroccan-Fleming living in Belgium. As a practicing Born-Muslim Fouzia grew up in a strictly traditional Moroccan family: meaning that she always fasted and never skipped a prayer. Although Fouzia observed her religion with dedication, as she grew older she had trouble living according to the norms which were set by her family and the Moroccan community. Her community expected her to be "a particular type of Muslim woman" who lived according to a collectively shared standard of piety. Her decision made her "rebellious" because she no longer wanted to be "compliant":

> For instance, we [Moroccan-Flemish girls in her community, S.N.] began wearing a headscarf because it was expected that we would wear it. (...) I was fourteen back then. Everyone began wearing it at the same time. (...) Because the daughter of so-and-so wore it, it became the trend and, if you did not wear it, you did not belong to the community. However, no one asked questions about the meaning of a headscarf. That was the crazy thing about it, and when I turned sixteen, I had enough of it. I began to rebel against it and no longer wanted to wear it.[437]

Fouzia began resisting the *hijab* as she felt that it had not been her personal choice. Her community had expected her to conform to their norms for piety. The type of piety which was common among all "the other girls" in her community elicited a critical attitude in Fouzia. In every part of our conversation, whether discussing clothing, fashion, marriage or education, she referred to how she had "resisted" her community's expectations to be a certain type of Muslim woman. She then decided that she no longer wanted to be "compliant" to norms and began to reflect

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436 Habitus 'is understood to be an acquired excellence at either a moral or a practical craft, learned through repeated practice until that practice leaves a permanent mark on the character of the person. Thus, moral virtues (such as modesty, honesty, and fortitude) are acquired through a coordination of outward behaviors (e.g., bodily acts, social demeanor) with inward dispositions (e.g., emotional states, thoughts, intentions) through the repeated performance of acts that entail those particular virtues.' Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 136.

437 Interview with Fouzia (June 6, 2011).

consciously. She studied for a longer period of time than the average girl in her community, married and divorced, took off her *hijab* and decided to work as a social worker in another city. Her job and its location formed a physical break with community norms, as working with men and far from home were not considered proper for a pious Muslim woman. Reflecting on being pious, Fouzia explained how Allah has always had a special place in her heart. In difficult periods in her life, whenever she has felt sad and defeated, she has always felt that Allah was there to support her:

> It might seem weird, but, in my prayers, I would ask Him for guidance. (…) And when I wanted a divorce, everyone said that I was making the biggest mistake of my life and I did not get support from the people around me (…). So I held on to my religion. Actually, to Allah. And I did not need a headscarf to do that. The headscarf was not very important to me.[438]

After some years, she decided to attend some Islamic lectures which were being organized by the youth in her neighborhood mosque. By visiting her local mosque, attending lectures and participating in Islamic activities, she gained more knowledge of Islam. Fouzia gradually became more religiously committed and worked on her religious growth. The lectures she followed motivated her to take her religiosity seriously. Interestingly, cultivating piety made her reconsider wearing the *hijab*. Both lectures she followed and the books she read said that wearing the *hijab* was an important requirement for women if they were to live piously. At some point she "felt" that she had to wear the headscarf:

> The headscarf never had any meaning for me. I would only wear it during our family vacations in Morocco, out of respect for my parents and grandmother. When I reached the airport, I would take it off immediately. (…) Until four years ago…that was really weird. It was more of a feeling. When I reached the airport in Morocco, I did not feel like taking off my headscarf. When I reached Belgium, I still did not want to take it off. Suddenly I felt that, if I were to take it off, I would be naked. It was a weird feeling and I thought maybe this is a phase I am going through. At work, I told my colleagues that I hadn't begun to wear the headscarf because I was getting married, which is what most Belgians thought. No, I said because it is my choice. (…) And now I stand more strongly than before. [439]

Despite her previous resistance, she donned the veil again. The difference was that this time wearing the headscarf was her personal choice. After she commenced

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438   Interview with Fouzia (June 6, 2011).
439   Interview with Fouzia (June 6, 2011).

wearing the headscarf again, she also adopted a different clothing style and became more conscious of how she behaved. Fouzia finds it important to act modestly so that her behavior "fits" her headscarf. As an embodied practice of piety, veiling became the means through which Fouzia cultivated pious behavior. Mahmood argues that, 'the veiled body becomes the necessary means through which the virtue of modesty is both created and expressed.'[440] By wearing the veil, Fouzia both expressed and cultivated modesty.

Fouzia's exercise of agency is articulated in multiple and contradictory forms and some of her experiences have been similar to Hagar's. At first, she did not want to become religiously devout. Having to conform to religious norms - such as wearing the veil - made her rebellious. Her rebellion against and resistance to community norms was her expression of agency, through which her purpose was to change her social and religious circumstances. At this point, Fouzia's articulation of agency took the form of 'resistance to relations of domination.'[441] However, as she grew older and gained more life-experience, she wanted to become religiously devout, and the hijab became a necessary act of worship. Moreover, Fouzia explained she had donned the veil in order to cultivate the virtue of modesty. At this point, Fouzia's expression of agency is similar to Mahmood's understanding of agency as a modality for action which enables the internalization of religious norms.[442]

Piety formation and agency

Analyzing the narratives of Hagar and Fouzia - and of many other interlocutors whom I present in the following pages - I have come across two types of piety cultivation: individually formed piety and piety which acquiesces in the norms of religious communities. Their narratives show that individuals can express different types of agency depending on their age, phases in their lives and in interaction with their religious communities. The theorization of agency by Saba Mahmood suggests that, although agency can manifest itself in terms of resistance, scholars should expand its meaning beyond resistance, as agency can also encompass the capacity to 'endure, suffer and persist.'[443] Although Mahmood urges that people should move beyond the common binary drawn between subjection or resistance, in the narratives of my interlocutors subjection and resistance are both present. My interlocutors' agency is oriented towards achieving piety and realizing their pious selves. In almost all the narratives of my interlocutors, resistance and conformity have led to multiple and

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440   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 23.
441   Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," In: *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 16, no. 2 (May 2001), p. 203.
442   *Ibid*., p.203.
443   *Ibid*., p. 217.

contradictory articulations of agency. At times, their agency is exhibited in terms of resistance, rebellion, autonomy, religious self-reflection, personal autonomy and self-determination. At other times, agency is articulated in terms of being compliant and in subjection to the norms of pious communities. Hence their articulations of agency are multiple and contradictory developed within their specific contexts (living in a non-Muslim society) and in relation to their pious communities.[444] Their expressions of agency should therefore be viewed as dynamic, leading to different dispositions depending on their contexts and relations.

4.2. "Conquer your place in heaven"

A common element in the religious biographies of my interlocutors is that becoming and remaining pious is a continuous project whose purpose is religious growth and building a bond with Allah.[445] For instance, a participant in a pious circle said during a discussion:

> We are created to worship God. We must focus on Him continuously in our everyday lives. We should question our intentions during every action and thought, and ask ourselves: "Am I doing this for Allah?"[446]

For pious Muslim women, working on building a personal bond with Allah is the most important purpose in life. For instance, statements such as "Unconditionally committing myself to Allah is my way of life";[447] "Piety to me is surrendering myself to Allah in every possible way"[448] and "Piety is all about connecting with Allah"[449] were often repeated by women during interviews and in lectures and pious circle gatherings. Above all, a great emphasis is put on knowing Allah. During her lecture, the Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim Yasmin explained:[450]

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444   In her study on Gazan women, Aitemad Muhanna also points toward the multiplicity and contradictory nature of the agency of her interlocutors. Muhanna states: 'The ethnography of both myself and my research participants reveals that the specific model of agency of Gazan women, including myself, developed throughout their specific historical context is neither a universal model of a self-bounded and autonomous individual (Joseph, 1999), nor is it a single coherent model of socially and culturally constituted self. It is rather a multiple and contradictory model of socially and culturally constructed subject (…).' Aitemad Muhanna, "When the researcher becomes a subject of ethnographic research: studying "myself" and "others" in Gaza," In: *Women's Studies International Forum* (2014) p. 6. http://dx.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.11.010 (Accessed 22 January, 2014).

445   This is also noted by Saba Mahmood. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, pp. 11 and 30.

446   A participant in a pious circle made this statement during a gathering in the Netherlands on March 27, 2011.

447   Interview with Nora (April 6, 2011).

448   Interview with Zarina (May 15, 2011).

449   Lecture by Saadiya (May 5, 2011) in Belgium.

450   I shall introduce her in Section 4.5. of this chapter.

Allah is your best friend (…) everything you do, you should do out of fear or love for Allah. If you choose for Allah, you might lose some of your friends, but the doors of Heaven will open to you. Choose consciously for Allah, choose now before you die. When that time comes, you will regret not having learned to know Allah while you had a chance. By learning to know Allah, you will conquer your place in heaven.[451]

The idea that piety inevitably increases their chances of entering Heaven in the Afterlife was common among the women studied. As a matter of fact, the prospect of "entering the gates of Heaven", as many said, motivated them to become devoted, pious individuals. Furthermore, once women had committed themselves in leading a pious life, everything which had previously occurred in their lives, was interpreted within the larger picture of religious self-realization. On the basis of my findings during my observations and interviews, I view their process of piety cultivation as pious trajectories, in which my interlocutors are the 'meaning-makers' of their own biographies.[452] Nevertheless, there are similarities in the pious trajectories of these women. These resemblances are part of what I consider the process-oriented nature of their pious trajectories. This consists of three phases: awakening, transformation and individualization. Not all interlocutors went through all of them or went through them in the same order. Most of my interlocutors have experienced two or three of these phases, which were constructed retrospectively. The time has now come for me to discuss how my interlocutors experienced these phases.

The awakening

The majority of my interlocutors stated that they had experienced a "religious awakening": a moment in their lives when they suddenly realized the importance of "genuinely" choosing for the lifestyle of a committed Muslim woman. Many of my interlocutors who were Born-Muslims spoke in terms of waking up religiously, becoming conscious and being aware of their "humble" position towards Allah as a religious being. I consider them 'born-again Muslims' who rediscovered their faith and experienced a religious revival.[453] My convert interlocutors called this experience

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451   Lecture by Yasmin (May 7, 2011) in the Netherlands.
452   In her study on converts, Anna Mansson McGinty considers her interlocutors to be 'meaning-makers' by which she means: 'The convert is trying to make sense of herself in the world by employing and integrating divers and sometimes seemingly irreconcilable representations. Throughout the conversion process the women reconcile old with new, reflecting the process of meaning-making. (…) Consequently, neither sense of self nor meaning is fixed; both are objects of reflection and transformation.' Although she is referring to converts, her observation is also applicable in the case of Born-Muslims. Cited from: Anna Mansson McGinty, *Becoming Muslim: Western Women's conversions to Islam*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) pp. 8-9.
453   'Born-again' as a theoretical concept has its roots in Christian theology. See James S. Bielo, "'The Mind of Christ': Financial success, born-again personhood and the anthropology of Christianity," In: *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 72, no. 3, (Augustus 2007): pp. 316-338.

"reversion." As they saw it, experiencing a religious awakening occurred in the context of their conversion to Islam. However, they called it reversion in the sense of "finding your roots again" and "reversing back to Allah."[454] Reversion is the term which converts most used to explain their own conversion, making the assumption that they did not convert to Islam, but returned to Islam. Both my Born-Muslim and convert interlocutors asserted that they had experienced a religious awakening at some point in their lives which inspired them to cultivate piety.

There is one important difference between Born-Muslims and converts. To some of my Born-Muslim interlocutors, the process of becoming religiously devout was accompanied by feelings of shame and guilt. They realized that, although they had been Muslims their entire lives, they had never taken their religion seriously. For instance, Samar is a twenty-year old Palestinian-Dutch Born-Muslim living in the Netherlands. During my interview with Samar, she often spoke of feelings of guilt and shame. For instance, she regretted not having prayed and having had boyfriends. She explained how she, as a Born-Muslim, has now become more committed in practicing her religion:

> During my religious upbringing, my parents only told me who Allah was. That He had no wife, no children and that He was the Almighty (…) They said: "You must pray, you must fast and you must worship Allah."(…) [I was also told] that I was not allowed to have boyfriends, smoke weed or cigarettes. And when I asked them: "Why?" They would say: "Because Allah forbids you to do so." They would not explain the reasons. Therefore, I did not understand why I had to abide by religious rules. Consequently I felt no compulsion to act according to them.(…) Now that I know why I am supposed, for instance, to pray, I am more motivated to do so.[455]

The religious awakening experienced among my interlocutors is attributable to different factors. The majority had been confronted with unpleasant events in their lives. This might have been the death of a family member, violence, oppression and physical or mental illness such as depression. The last was what happened to Samar, who at times experienced intense fear and anxiety. Nevertheless, pleasant events such as marriage, motherhood and bringing up children were also mentioned. A few Born-Muslims stated that, as they entered adolescence, they became more aware of their identity. Consequently, their religious development was formed concurrently

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454   Converts often explain their conversion in terms of "reversion" rather than "conversion", as the choice to practice Islam is viewed as returning to one's original state by birth. This explanation is based on the Islamic concept of *fitra*. See Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: The experience of Scandinavian converts*, pp. 86-87.
455   Interview with Samar (March 24, 2011).

with their identity formation.[456] My convert interlocutors - unlike Born-Muslims - named being married to or being in a relationship with a Muslim man in particular.

The "hostile" attitude of Dutch and Flemish politicians towards Muslims and Islam has also stimulated my interlocutors' striving for piety. This antagonism inspired them to learn more about Islam so that they could defend it properly. Finally, maturity is also mentioned as one of the reasons my interlocutors decided to become religiously devout. A few of my interlocutors mentioned that, when they initiated their process of piety formation, they were not - yet - aware of the consequences a pious lifestyle would have for them. On the whole, they were very idealistic in their piety aspirations and had little time for reflection and evaluation.[457] When I compare the pious trajectories of my Born-Muslim and my convert interlocutors, the differences in this phase of awakening are modest, as both groups reported that they had had similar religious experiences.

In my study, the radical change which can take place in the 'falling in love' stage postulated by Roald is a complex and multidimensional phase.[458] The complete alteration of one's lifestyle happens on different levels and is experienced in different pious beliefs and practices, and therefore I shall elaborate on it separately in the next Section, Transformation.

Transformation

A second phase which is mentioned by all my interlocutors is what I call the stage of transformation. This refers to the alterations which my interlocutors experienced as they continued their process of piety cultivation. First and foremost, transformation is viewed in terms of an internal transformation like a "cleansing of the soul",[459] "cultivating a pious state of mind"[460] or "being aware of Allah in every thought and action."[461] In contrast, the second type of transformation is external and is made manifest in the expression of 'visible piety' by wearing Islamic dress - the *hijab* or the

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456   Lori Peek's insights into the religious development of Muslim students in America show similarities in some respect to my analysis. However, the three stages she speaks of are within the context of identity and not piety formation. See Lori Peek, "Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity," In: *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 66, no. 3, (Fall 2005): pp. 215-242.

457   This is comparable to the 'falling in love' stage of Roald. Although Roald's theorization is based on her research on converts, her findings resemble my data among both my convert and Born-Muslim interlocutors. My interlocutors indicated they had rapidly absorbed everything about Islam, as they were 'in love' with every aspect of it. Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts*, p. 283.

458   *Ibid.*, p. 283.

459   Interview with Farida (March 1, 2012).

460   Interview with Hagar (January 27, 2011).

461   Interview with Zarina (May 15, 2011).

khimar - and, for a few, observing particular gender norms such as no longer shaking hands or working with men.

The virtues which were deemed necessary to the formation of their pious selves were to pray, fast, wear the *hijab* and acquire Islamic knowledge. The last was accomplished by joining religious communities, such as pious circles, attending regular lectures in mosques or by following courses in Arabic or the Qurʾan. My interlocutors insisted that the cultivation of these virtues demanded discipline and was a necessary condition for their religious growth.

I observed some small differences between my Born-Muslim and convert interlocutors. For instance, converts tended to practice piety more visibly and accede to it more rapidly than Born-Muslims, who took more time to adjust themselves to their new roles as pious Muslims.[462] Pertinently, as my interlocutors' transformation continued, the majority of them mentioned that they had experienced religious pressure exerted by their families, friends, colleagues and religious communities. Wearing Islamic dress - especially *hijab* - was often mentioned in this respect.[463] I want to emphasize that even many of my Born-Muslim interlocutors asserted that they had faced difficulties when deciding to wear the *hijab* in religious communities in which donning the headscarf was not a norm. Parents especially were afraid that - in view of the politicization of the *hijab* - their daughter might become the target for discrimination at work, in public spaces or might even be physically attacked by right-wing extremists. For instance, the Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim Yasna, who is twenty-six-years old, explained how her father found her decisions to wear the *hijab* a problematic one:

> From my sixteenth to my eighteenth year I took the time to think about how and when I would adopt an Islamic clothing style. (...) This process was gradual. First I stopped wearing a bikini at the beach. Then I began wearing dresses which were long (...) And at some point around my eighteenth birthday, I decided that I was ready to wear the headscarf.(...) I spoke about it with my parents. My mother was very happy about it [Her mother wore the headscarf, S.N.] But my dad's first reaction was: "No!"

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462 I did not analyze the process of conversion among my convert interlocutors. The converts whom I studied in pious circles had already been converted to Islam for some time. However, my convert interlocutors considered piety cultivation an ongoing process which began after their conversion to Islam.

463 In the case of my Born-Muslim interlocutors, the religious norms set by their Muslim community in which they grew up played a more vital role in their sensitivity to religious pressure. See Section 4.4.

At that time, I was studying law and he said: "You cannot become a lawyer with a headscarf."[464]

Yasna's father was afraid that her headscarf would hinder her career as a lawyer. This idea that the headscarf decreases Muslim women's career and job opportunities was common among my interlocutors. The majority asserted that they had had difficulties adjusting themselves to their new roles as pious Muslim women. A few admitted that pious ideals of 'perfection' had had contradictory outcomes for them. As a consequence, many of my interlocutors had experienced their transformation as demanding and burdensome. For instance, the convert Hagar explained that it is impossible to be in a "pious state every minute of the day." She explained:

> The reality is that I do not read the Qurʾan every day. It is not a novel or my favourite book. However, people find this hard to admit. They would rather say that they read the Qurʾan every day and that it is their favourite book. (…) In my daily life, I cannot always put Allah above everything, because I also have an ego. (…) People should admit that it is difficult to live according to exacting demands of piety.[465]

Hagar's statement is similar to Samuli Schielke's critique discussed in Chapter One. Schielke argues that scholarship on piety tends to focus on the declared aim of a pious discipline rather than its actual outcomes. Cogently, studies on piety do 'not do justice to the complex and often contradictory nature of everyday experience.'[466] In this context, prayer was often mentioned as a way of achieving inner peace and strengthening their bond with Allah. In order to continue their religious growth, all interlocutors referred to the ritual of daily prayer as a way to remain motivated. Finally, in this phase of transformation, all interlocutors joined or established pious communities - such as pious circles - through which they sought to create Islamic sisterhood and feel empowered in their pious aspirations.[467] The majority of my interlocutors stated they had experienced an ongoing transformation and continued to pursue their cultivation of piety as described above.[468] However, about one-third had at some point entered a third phase, which I consider to be individualization.

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464   Interview with Yasna (May 23, 2011).
465   Interview with Hagar (January 27, 2011).
466   Samuli Schielke, "Being good in Ramadan: ambivalence, fragmentation, and the moral self in the lives of young Egyptians," pp. 37-38.
467   See for my elaboration of sisterhood Chapter 5.3.
468   It is also possible that some stop cultivating piety for personal reasons, circumstances or because they had experienced the process as burdensome. However, as they were not my focus, I have not studied them.

Individualization

Individualization was mentioned by - one-third - my interlocutors as an important phase in their process of piety formation. Religious individualization was described by my interlocutors as a period of intensive self-reflection whose purpose was to evaluate one's religious biography and question the sincerity of one's intentions in the past and in the present. The majority of my interlocutors concluded that their individual relationship with Allah should be the most important aspect of a pious way of life. Subsequently, this realization led to prioritizing a powerful bond with Allah over that with a religious community. Many interlocutors spoke in terms of stimulating their religious growth and focusing on the cultivation of inward piety, rather than the cultivation of 'visible piety.' However, this did not mean that they no longer interacted with religious communities. They simply said that the focus of their religious gravity became Allah, and because of this, their foremost aim was to become pious in the eyes of God and no longer merely in the eyes of religious communities.

Individualization occurred most frequently among interlocutors who had stated they had experienced religious pressure which had motivated them to cultivate piety individually rather than in conformity with communal norms. Furthermore, my interlocutors explained that, as they grew older, they developed a more realistic view of their capacities and of the possibilities of the extent to which they could actually live according to Allah's rules. Furthermore, a few interlocutors indicated that they had travelled to Islamic countries in which they had encountered "types of Islam" other than their own. They explained how coming across other ways of being a pious Muslim challenged them to think critically about their own lifestyles. For instance, Jamila was twenty-seven years old and a Moroccan-Flemish Born-Muslim living in Belgium.[469] She explained how studying at an Islamic residential school for girls named *Jamia al-Hudaa* in England, changed her views: [470]

> I studied there for three years. I met many people, spoke to people of different nation-
> alities, cultures and traditions and I learned how they experienced Islam. A new world
> opened up to me. I began to view Islam differently, no longer from the perspective of

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469   See her narrative in Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles.*

470   'The Jamia Al-Hudaa project was started due to an ever increasing demand for Islamic Education for Muslims within Europe. Jamia Al-Hudaa was officially opened on the 17th August 1996 by the eminent scholar Maulana Sayyed Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi. The aim of Jamia Al-Hudaa is to provide learning and training opportunities for students over the ages of 11 and 16 within an Islamic environment.' Cited from: http://www.jamiaalhudaa.com/ (Accessed 11 January, 2016).

the mosque in which I had studied Islam in Belgium. [The focus] was much broader and so my interest in knowing more also developed.[471]

Some of my interlocutors also mentioned the gaining of a deeper knowledge of Islam as the trigger which stimulated a critical attitude in them, prompting them to scrutinize their own lifestyle. They asked themselves the following question: "What kind of Muslim do I *want to be* and what kind of Muslim *can I be*?" The Born-Muslim Dahlia, who was fifty-six, had this to say on the matter:[472]

> I used to be a conservative Muslim. I really thought in black and white terms with nothing in between. Now I am a realistic Muslim woman. I still have particular ideals I aim to achieve, but I adjust them on the basis of my own reality.[473]

The way piety was cultivated was very much related to age, life experience and having gained more insight into their capabilities. It was individual and centered on the individual self. Now that I have described this three phases, I turn my attention to how religious individualization among -individualized - interlocutors impacted on their relations with their pious communities.

Religious individualization in relation to pious communities
In Chapter Two I posed the question of whether my interlocutors had also experienced religious individualization and, if so, how they expressed this. As mentioned before, I am studying religious individualization in the context of piety formation and hence examining individualization among Muslims who are religiously devout. The first point I would like to emphasize is the very fact that my interlocutors decided to commit themselves to the quest of leading a pious life can be seen as an individual decision. This form of 'solitary self-education, carried out privately' as Jouili put it, refers to a personal approach to Islam.[474]

Secondly, as explained in the previous Section, one-third of my interlocutors explicitly asserted that they had become individualized believers. By making this choice they had become self-aware and studied Islam on their own terms. This corresponds to the findings of Jocelyne Cesari, Peter Mandaville and Nadia Fadil discussed in Chapter Two. However, this form of individualization is not an indication of Olivier Roy's 'deterritorialization of Islam' as stated in Chapter One. Roy argues that, as a

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471   Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).
472   Dahlia portrayed in Chapter 6, *Female religious authorities.*
473   Interview with Dahlia (February 2, 2011).
474   Jeanette S. Jouili, "Re-Fashioning the self through religious knowledge: how Muslim women become pious in the German Diaspora," p. 470.

consequence of the transnational migration of Islam in Europe, Islam has become less bounded to traditional Muslim societies and their religious authorities. He therefore postulates that this gives believers more space to define Islam individually as 'there is no longer any social authority or pressure to conform to religious obligations' such as the *hijab*, as is the case in traditional Muslim societies.[475] Contrary to what Roy suggests, on the basis of the narratives of some interlocutors, religious pressure was a predominant factor in donning the *hijab*.[476] This pressure was not exerted by social authorities but by their religious communities. Hence, despite the migration of Islam to Europe, some interlocutors did experience pressure to conform to religious norms.

This brings us to another question: Does religious individualization mean a break with religious communities? Looking at the women I studied, I would say that individualization does not necessarily lead to a break with religious communities. As a rule, individuals tend to remain embedded within religious structures such as pious circles. An individual can aspire to piety collectively as a member of a religious community. Paraphrasing Jeanette Jouili, 'the individual selves combine to make up a "collective self".'[477] She states that Muslim women do not aim to become pious 'in an isolated, individualist mode'.[478] She argues that the reference to the Islamic community and its authorities remains fundamental to the constitution of the pious self.[479] Jouili's emphasis on the importance of religious communities through which Muslims can imagine themselves as a community confirms my findings. Despite individualizing tendencies, as pious individuals my interlocutors viewed themselves as members of a pious community: a community of religiously committed Muslims. This choice meant that they were in a continuous interaction with other pious members. What is more, their pious selves were shaped through their interaction with pious communities. Therefore, pious communities do play an important role in forming the beliefs and practices of individual believers.[480] How this process takes place is the focus of the next Section.

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475   Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*, p. 38.
476   See Section 4.4. on *hijab* in this chapter.
477   Jeanette S. Jouili, "Re-Fashioning the self through religious knowledge: how Muslim women become pious in the German Diaspora," p. 477.
478   *Ibid.,* p. 470.
479   *Ibid.,* p. 470.
480   In Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*, I add another argument to support my findings on the relationship between the pious individual and the pious collective. I shall analyze the way in which becoming a pious woman becomes a means through which social conditions in the Muslim community can be improved. Hence, cultivating piety becomes more than just an individual trajectory and is seen as beneficial to the Muslim community as a whole.

4.3. The dynamics of piety cultivation in pious circles

In the previous Sections the focus has been on the pious trajectories of Muslim women. In this Section I focus on the communal aspect of piety cultivation during gatherings of pious circles. In this case my findings are based on my observations, not interviews. At this point I offer insights into the interactions which took place among participants and lecturers of pious circles. I offer three examples of discussions on the cultivation of piety which took place in different pious circles. The first case is of the Born-Muslim Saadiya in Belgium; the second case is that of the convert Hagar in The Netherlands and the third case is of a "sister day" in the Netherlands. The themes in these cases were centered on sexuality, love and female piety. All three cases show the important role of pious communities in Muslim women's cultivation of piety.

The Islamic ideal and the Muslim reality

Saadiya is a Moroccan-Flemish Born-Muslim living in Belgium. She studied Islam at an Islamic university in Belgium, and is often asked by pious circles to give lectures. She regards herself as a "free Muslim who does not belong to a particular group", and finds the Islamic knowledge of *sufis* just as instructive as that of *salafi*s. She is also a community advisor to Muslim women. Most of her lectures are about bringing up children and sexuality from an Islamic perspective. When she lectures, she attempts to make her audience aware and motivate them to think critically and individually. She advises them not to accept "ready-to-eat answers", but to learn to reflect on their own standpoint. Saadiya uses phrases such as: "Think for yourself"; "Try to find your own link with Allah"; "You are responsible for you own deeds"; "Everything is between you and Allah"; "We are here to think and to speak of our weaknesses" and "Don't categorize and condemn individuals as nothing is black or white."[481]

I attended Saadiya's lecture on sexuality, which she had been asked to deliver by an active pious circle in Belgium.[482] The organizers of the circle had issued the invitation to Saadiya because they considered her the most knowledgeable they had heard of on the topic of sexuality in Islam. In her lecture, Saadiya explained that love and sexuality should be openly spoken about as these topics are an important part of human life. She stated that sexual feelings are not something "to be ashamed of", as they are natural, *"fitra"* and given by God.[483] However, sexuality should only be

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481   Statements during her lecture on May 15, 2011, in Belgium.
482   The gathering was held on May 15, 2011, in Belgium.
483   The Arabic word *fitra* is often translated as "original disposition", "natural constitution" or "innate nature". As a concept *fitra* is used in Islamic legal and theological discussions about human nature. In this context it means "a kind or way of creating or of being created." Hoover, Jon, "Fiṭra", in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE, Edited by: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Krämer, Denis

practiced within the framework of marriage. Saadiya mentioned that she had mediated in families in which young girls had become pregnant before marriage. The family pressured the pregnant daughter to abort the child in order to prevent her from having to live as an unwed mother and, for this reason, from being expelled from the community. Saadiya advised the family not to abort the child because, she argued that this was "Islamically unjustified" and the daughter should be given with the opportunity to keep the child and ask forgiveness from Allah: "What she has done is between her and Allah, and not between her and the community," Saadiya explained.[484] She spoke of a discrepancy between the Islamic ideal and the Muslim reality, but overcame this lack of consistency by referring to a personal God Who might forgive transgressors. However, not all participants agreed with Saadiya's approach. A Born-Muslim commented:

> I thought that this lecture on sexuality would explain what we are allowed and not allowed to do according to Islam. But you only speak about cases of people, and not of what is *halal* and *haram*.[485]

In reaction to the participant's comment, Saadiya replied:

> We already know what Allah desires from us, namely: not being sexually active outside marriage. But Allah also demands from us that we think for ourselves, as the reality is different from the ideal.[486]

In the dialogue which followed between them, the participant argued that, if "one truly wants to be a good Muslim, she must control her sexuality" and, if she fails to do so, it means that she had not tried her best, and was therefore not a "real Muslim." And so their discussion continued. This is a good illustration of how participants in pious circles demand justifications and engage in discussions with lecturers and how different ideas about piety can clash. This lively interaction underlines that the cultivation of piety is a dynamic process in which Muslim women as a group interpret how to become pious.

Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. Consulted online on 08 November 2016 http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_ei3_COM_27155 (Accessed November 8, 2016) and D. B. Macdonald, "Fiṭra." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/fit-ra-SIM_2391 (Accessed December 29, 2014).

484   On discussions about sexuality see Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics: feminist reflections on Qurʾan*, Hadith and Jurisprudence (Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2006).
485   Statements during her lecture on May 15, 2011, in Belgium.
486   Statements by participant during the lecture of Saadiya on May 15, 2011, in Belgium.

Love out of love of Allah

The second case occurred in The Netherlands.[487] Around forty Muslim women, both converts and Born-Muslims, attended the gathering organized by Hagar. The theme of the gathering was 'Love.' To the accompaniment of an online lecture by an American female convert to Islam, Hagar elaborated that a - married - pious woman should love in a "specific order":

> Firstly, love Allah, secondly love the Prophet and thirdly love your husband. Love is searching for Allah's approval and not that of your husband. Love of Allah, not love of your husband, is the basis of your marriage.[488]

In this context, love is considered to be an act of piety for Allah. Love is viewed as a devotional practice which expresses Muslim women's piety towards Allah. As a contrast to this concept of love as a devotional practice, Hagar spoke of "passionate love." Passionate love was, she argued, dangerous as it could lead to a "loss of self-control, instability and was therefore unpredictable." Following Hagar's lecture, Nora and Awatif shared their personal stories with the audience.

The Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim Nora explained how she lost her virginity before marriage when she was "seduced" by a young man who promised to marry her if they had sexual intercourse. As Nora was "passionately in love", she was "blinded" and agreed. However, he did not marry her, broke off the relationship and boasted to the community that she had lost her virginity to him. Nora felt ashamed and had to suffer the ubiquitous gossip and the social pressure of her community. Although she had now married and had children, her past was always with her. She warned the younger participants to be strong and to resist seduction. Nora's story reinforced Hagar's view of love, and was used to convince the participants in the pious circle to love in a certain, to them, Islamic way. If they did not, the consequences, as had happened to Nora, could be major.

After Nora, a Dutch convert named Awatif shared her personal story. She explained how, at a very young age, she was encouraged to "experiment with men" and to dress and act "pleasurably" towards them. Awatif blamed her mother, friends, the media and society for influencing her in this line of thought. As she had grown up and had had a succession of boyfriends, she began to feel as if she had become a "sexual object" and lost her self-respect. Awatif blamed this on her Dutch upbringing which she thought taught her that women should be raised to be "sexual objects" for men.

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487   The gathering took place on May 25, 2010, in the Netherlands.
488   Statement by Hagar during her lecture on May 25, 2010.

However, once she discovered Islam, she felt "saved" and "liberated." She was now married, had children and was glad that Islam has given her back her self-respect. Awatif told her story to prove that, in the Islamic tradition, women are respected and not treated as a sexual object. She set the "woman-friendly" perspective of women in Islam against that of a "women-unfriendly", "western/Dutch" view of women.

After the lecture and the recounting of the personal stories, a lively debate ensued between the participants. Taking examples from their daily lives, women spoke openly of the misogyny towards women in the Muslim community. For instance, how some men married young girls, or married them solely in order to obtain visa; how some men asked women whether they were a virgin before marriage, or how some demanded a "white handkerchief with bloodspots on the wedding night" as proof of virginity. The participants agreed that this was a matter between Allah and the women involved, and no man had the right to ask questions about women's sexual experiences. However, the participants asserted that the "Muslim" reality is different. One participant recalled how her husband demanded that she undergo a virginity test, and how humiliating this had been for her:

> No man has that right, it is Islamically unjustified. Make sure you draw up a marriage contract in which you state what your demands are and, if he does not comply, you have the right to sue for divorce.[489]

She went on to explain that now she has become a "practicing Muslim", she will prevent this from ever happening to her daughter. She opposed injustice towards women, which she claimed was unjustified from an Islamic point of view. Gaining religious knowledge and becoming aware of the possibility to draw up a marriage contract offered her a modality of action to take a stand against this injustice.[490] This case demonstrates how lectures and discussions about the cultivation of piety provide space in which Muslim women can speak about their personal experiences, recall past events as well as, condemn and reject certain practices which are considered unfair. In this way, piety is cultivated collectively within a dynamic setting in which beliefs and practices are both questioned and conformed to. Pertinently, this case shows how forming and discussing piety in pious circles can also improve the social conditions of the Muslim community.[491]

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489   Statement by a participant during the gathering on May 25, 2010.
490   This example, and many to come in the next chapter, show how my interlocutors' narratives such as the one mentioned, illustrate how Islam has helped them to become more aware of their rights. Religious knowledge and emancipation are discussed in Chapters Five and Six.
491   This aspect will be dealt with in Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*.

The ideal pious Muslim woman

The third case is also taken from a pious circle in The Netherlands. Every three months this circle organized a "sister day" on a specific theme. I shall describe one of the sister days which had the theme: "How can I be a successful Muslim woman?"[492] The lecturers were the organizers of the circle and the first lecture was a workshop about encouraging *nasiha*, Arabic for advice or recommendation in the Islamic context. The first speaker, a Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim, encouraged each of the visitors to give others *nasiha*, as "sisters are obliged to correct each other." She referred to the case of the sister who bought *haram* - religiously forbidden - meat in the supermarket. "Sisters, under such circumstances you must forbid her to buy *haram* meat and offer her an alternative," she argued.[493] By correcting each other and encouraging pursuit of the "Islamic way", the speaker persuaded her public to cultivate an Islamic code of conduct to stimulate pious behavior.[494] She praised the virtues of the Islamic code of conduct which were to be calm, patient, honest and forgiving. A second speaker explained how a woman could be successful from an Islamic point of view. First and foremost, a successful Muslim woman is a pious woman, she worships Allah unconditionally, she wears her *hijab*, she raises her children and takes care of her home. The pious woman is "patient like the [historical] Hagar, loyal as Khadija and honest as Fatima", she stated. She should acquire a sound knowledge of Islam because she has the important task of raising her children Islamically, but she also needs this knowledge in order to cultivate piety and perform *da'wa*. She is religiously committed, but at the same time very humble about her devotion. She takes care of herself, lives modestly and does not eat too much. She respects and honors her parents, which is an important act of piety towards Allah. She is obedient to her husband, respects him and does not complain about the household chores. Bringing up children is her most important duty and in return her husband takes care of her financially. The lecturer said, "It is vital that these roles are not divided differently, as this role division is Islamic."[495] Here the speaker was echoing Jamal Badawi's concept of gender equity and gender complementarity explained in Chapter One. The idea of complementarity of the genders is often used as the Islamic ideal in many pious circles. Gender complementarity, or equity, as it is frequently called, refers to the idea that men and women are equal in value but not in nature because God has created

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492   I attended their gathering on February 21, 2010.

493   Statement made by the lecturer during the gathering on February 21, 2010.

494   The sort of behavior which these women are being encouraged to exhibit is taken from the works on *hisba,* in particular, from the Islamic dictum *'al-amr bi'l-ma'ruf wa'l-nahy 'an al-munkar'*, which means enjoining someone to do what is proper and forbidding what is reprehensible or promoting good and condemning evil. For the history of *hisba* in the Islamic tradition see Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

495   Statement made by the lecturer during the gathering on February 21, 2010.

them differently. The role division according to the principle of gender equity suggests that women should be the caretakers of the households in the private sphere, and men the breadwinners in the public sphere.

Most participants approved of what the lecturers recommended, yet two participants did voice some criticism. The first asked how could a woman who is expected to stay at home and guard "her beauty" carry out *daʿwa*? When the question was not answered, the discussion tried a different tack. A second participant noticed another contradiction and asserted that, although *nasiha* is "ideally" a commendable exercise, in reality offering it is difficult because, however well-meaning, this could be perceived as "being nosy."[496] The lecturers clarified that offering *nasiha* is only appropriate when it is "couched in the right words" and has been built up on the foundation of "correct Islamic knowledge."[497] The lecturers did not define either "properly" or "correct Islamic knowledge." It has to be said that both the comments by these participants which highlighted the discrepancies between the ideal and practice, were ignored or denied, or one and the other.

The focal point of the lecturers in this pious circle was how to become pious. Their goal was to invoke religious conformism in the participants. Their strategy was to refer to the importance of a "united *umma*" in which all Muslims lived piously and experienced "unity", by which they meant the egalitarian character and harmony of Islam. The lecturers did their best to convince the participants that acquiescing in their recommendations was consistent with their sense of responsibility as members of the *umma*. The idea of the *umma* was their common ground, a mutual framework of ideas, beliefs, attitudes and sources. This common ground is what Richard Friedman describes as an 'epistemological presupposition', meaning that the lecturers and the participants shared an epistemological framework, or a common tradition in their ideas about a certain field of knowledge.[498] Advising and encouraging each other in *taqwa* were seen as religious duties of each Muslim member of the *umma*.[499] On the whole, participants in pious circles see themselves as active members of the *umma* who are trying to cultivate a pious community. As Jeanette Jouili explains, this

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496   Statement made by a participant during the gathering on February 21, 2010.
497   Statement made by the lecturer during the gathering on February 21, 2010.
498   Richard B. Friedman, "On the concept of authority in political philosophy," In: *Authority*, (ed.). Joseph Ratz (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 83.
499   In this regard, I am referring to two verses in the Qurʾan in which advising is explicitly mentioned. For instance, in Q. 5:2: (…) 'And let not your hatred of a folk who (once) stopped your going to the inviolable place of worship seduce you to transgress; but help ye one another unto righteousness and pious duty. Help not one another unto sin and transgression, but keep your duty to Allah. Lo! Allah is severe in punishment.' And Q. 103:3: 'Save those who believe and do good works, and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance.' Pickthall, M. M., *Meanings of the Holy Qurʾan* (Hyderabad-Deccan: Government Central Press, 1938).

'broad social logic' is 'expressed by the feeling of responsibility for the welfare of the Muslim *umma*.'[500] As has also been shown in the studies of Saba Mahmood and Lara Deeb, the participants in these circles viewed the cultivation of pious individuals as a precondition for the cultivation of the pious collective.[501]

The cases presented give some indication of the complexity of piety discourses articulated by Muslim women's pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium. Some lecturers attempted to provide a clear-cut model of religious norms in which contradictions and inconsistencies were either denied or, at the very least, dismissed as "un-Islamic" behavior. This ties in with what Schielke describes as 'upholding the aim and the image of perfection.'[502] Not all were so conformist. Instead of compliance, their purpose was to evoke critical thinking among Muslim women, encouraging them to reflect on ambiguities, to solve them and to view them as part of Muslim experience in the formation of piety. In sum, all these cases demonstrate how cultivating piety in pious circles is a dynamic enterprise in which Muslim women are continuously interpreting pious beliefs and practices. Pious circles are therefore an important place in which Muslim women can pursue their desire to become pious individuals.

4.4. Hijab as an act of piety

Muslim women active in pious circles pursue their desire to become pious by engaging in lively discussions about what piety is and how one can become pious. At times, they focus on particular virtues which denote piety. For instance, cultivating 'visible piety' by wearing pious Islamic clothing was felt to be an important act of piety among my interlocutors. Nevertheless, it is also a contested pious practice; many heated debates erupt among Muslim women about whether they should wear it and how it should be worn. Therefore, in this Section, I focus on the *hijab* to illustrate the diversity of opinions and experiences of pious Muslim women about what is and what is not considered pious Islamic clothing. These discussions about the *hijab* can lead to the formation of a religious hierarchy in which those who wear it in a certain way can be considered more pious. My findings in this Section are based on my interviews and on participant observation.

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500 Jeanette S. Jouili, "Re-Fashioning the self through religious knowledge: how Muslim women become pious in the German Diaspora," p. 477.
501 I shall return to this aspect in Chapter 5, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*.
502 Samuli Schielke, "Ambivalent Commitments: Troubles of Morality, Religiosity and Aspiration among Young Egyptians," In: *Journal in Religion of Africa* 39,(2009): p. 179.

Lisa is a participant in a pious circle which holds its gatherings in a mosque. She is attending this particular pious circle since she converted in 2006.[503] Lisa occasionally visited the mosque on Sundays and the pious circle meetings after the Friday prayer. Lately, she had become critical of the participants in her pious circle. Her complaint was that the female participants in the pious circle were not truly motivated in their pursuit of piety: "They are very good at praying five times a day but it kind of ends there."[504] For Lisa, wearing the *hijab* was an important sign of piety and religious commitment. When she decided to wear the *hijab*, she felt disapproval from the participants of her pious circle: "They did not want me to become very pious," she asserted. The pious circle had problems accepting her *hijab* because the women in it only wore the *hijab* in the mosque, whereas Lisa also wore it outside the mosque. In their eyes the *hijab* was not a critical marker of piety. Lisa was convinced that piety was about self-improvement, and that is precisely what she thought was lacking among the women in her pious circle. Lisa considered adopting the veil a virtuous practice; wearing it as a vital act of worship. Therefore, she did not understand how it was possible to experience inner piety and yet not express it visibly. To make her point, she referred to a participant in her pious circle:

> She is so spiritual and she knows an enormous amount about Islam, but she dresses so sexy! How can you pray five times a day while dolling yourself up so sexily at the same time? [505]

Interestingly, Lisa had had the opposite experience in another pious circle:

> I was at a sister meeting at which many women were dressed in dark *khimar*, dark blue, pitch black, dark purple (…), covered from head to toe. They said that this was fully in compliance with a *hadith* which recommended the wearing of a *hijab* which covered you and fell loosely [over your breasts, S.N.]. I said: "I don't know which *hadith* that is, I only know that you should cover yourself, with the exception of your face and hands. (…) Apart from that, it is everyone's own individual responsibility to cover themselves. (…) And if the wind blows hard, it will surely show more of your body [if you are wearing a *khimar,* S.N.] (…) And there is no *hadith* or any Qurʾan verse which says that it [your *hijab*, S.N.] should be of nylon and should be black." But again, I guess these are ideas which they find normative, [if they are not followed] one is not pious enough.[506]

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503   Interview with Lisa (September 21, 2010).
504   Interview with Lisa (September 21, 2010).
505   Interview with Lisa (September 21, 2010).
506   Interview with Lisa (September 21, 2010).

The case of Lisa shows how there can be differences in opinion about what is and what is not proper Islamic clothing, in this case the *hijab*. Furthermore, wearing it in a particular manner (or not wearing it at all) can be viewed as "lacking in piety" in the words of Lisa. Lara Deeb has stated that expressing 'visible piety' is particularly important to women because it is understood as an outward and visible sign of women's morality.[507] Therefore, pressure is 'the strongest around these publicly visible aspects of piety.'[508] This is the attitude which also clearly emerges in the next case.

Hijab workshops during which women are encouraged to don the veil are organized in the Netherlands and Belgium. I attended a *hijab* workshop in the Netherlands. During the gathering, one particular discussion caught my attention since it caused confusion among the participants.[509] The workshop leader was Wajidah, a Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim. Wajidah gave many *hijab* workshops, because making women wear the *hijab* "properly" was one of her personal aims. By properly she meant: "You are not allowed to wear such bright colors as yellow. Dark colors are better and a *hijab* is only really properly donned when it is worn with an *abaya*."[510] This is a long robe-like dress which covers the whole body with the exception of the face, hands, and feet. For the Muslim women present Wajidah defined how a *hijab* is properly donned and presented her statements in terms of "this is how it should be done."

Another Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim, Karima, wore a colorful *hijab* in combination with jeans. She disagreed with Wajidah. Karima's argument was that Dutch society is already "anti-*hijab*" and, for this reason, Muslim women should not make wearing headscarves any more "conspicuous" by wearing them long and in dark colors. After all, the idea of wearing the *hijab* is not to be "showy." If Muslim women wear them long and dark, this draws even more attention and hence is precisely what it is not meant to be, "showy."[511] Bringing in more ammunition, Karima referred to France where the *hijab* is "already banned in schools."[512] She expressed her concern that the

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507   Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*, pp. 204-205.
508   *Ibid.,* pp. 204-205.
509   I attended the gathering on May 7, 2011.
510   Statement made by Wajidah during the gathering on May 7, 2011.
511   Statements made by Karima during the gathering on May 7, 2011.
512   In September 2004, a law banning Islamic headscarves and other religious symbols from French public secondary schools came into effect. The French government banned all religious symbols, including the Muslim headscarf, from such public institutions as state schools or town halls. Officially, the idea behind this law was that French secondary schools must preserve religious neutrality and protect the French principle of secularism. Many years later, in September 2010, the French Senate passed an Act of Parliament which introduced a ban on face covering. Under this law, face coverings - among other items - prevent the identification of individuals in public and forms a social hindrance in communication. See http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3478895.stm (Accessed April 23, 2016).

hijab ban might also be implemented in the Netherlands. Wajidah became defensive and asked whether Karima would hold her responsible if the *hijab* were to be banned in the Netherlands. Karima argued:

> What I am trying to say is that a dark *hijab* with an *abaya* should not be the norm for all women. I mean, it could prompt the Dutch government to draw up a more anti-*hijab* policy for all types of *hijabi* women, preventing them from becoming stricter observers of Islam.[513]

To Karima, a dark *hijab* with an *abaya* was an outward and visible sign of "a strict Islam" and she was convinced that the Dutch government was working towards preventing the growth of "a strict Islam." Karima was worried that "the less strict" *hijabi* women such as herself might also become the target of government policy. Wajidah angled to end the conversation by suggesting that: "If all women wore the dark *hijab* with the *abaya*, we would not even been having this discussion!" Wajidah made it clear that deflecting from her norm of what is proper Islamic clothing (dark *hijab* and an *abaya*) lay at the root of the very discussion in which they were engaged. This did not signal the end of their debate and they continued citing references to Qurʾan verses, the opinions of ʿulama and giving their expositions of the meanings of the word *khimar* and *hijab* and so on.

These cases demonstrate that the *hijab* is a dominant theme in pious circles. On the whole, it is viewed as a critical marker of piety as well as a sign of spiritual progress and religious commitment. Moreover, it is considered a powerful expression of women's inner piety. At the same time, even those interlocutors who stated that they had had to put up with religious pressure referred to the *hijab* as a dominant pious norm. Interestingly, discourses around the *hijab* as a marker of piety create hierarchies of religious virtues in which some were considered more pious than others. This corresponds to the theorization of piety by Bryan Turner. He postulates that piety can be viewed in the context of competition and measurement. He argues that the successful combination of religious practices can lead to hierarchies of virtues, in which some are 'measured' as more pious than the other:

> Being virtuous or pious can be effectively measured by contrast to those who are impious or lacking in virtue. There is therefore a competition over virtue.[514]

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513 Statements by Karima during the gathering on May 7, 2011.
514 Bryan. S. Turner, "Introduction: The price of piety," p. 3.

Such women as Wajidah and to a certain extent Lisa create hierarchies of religious virtues on the basis of their normative opinions on how to wear the *hijab* 'properly.' Thereby, they act as a pious status group, in terms of 'virtuosi' who define themselves as pious by what they see as their successful practice of 'visible piety.' [515] These hierarchies of virtues are built on such pious practices as the donning of the *hijab*. Accordingly, piety is measured by wearing the *hijab*. This hierarchy of virtues will be a central theme in the next Section.

4.5. Pious Born-Muslims or pious converts

Whether they are a Born-Muslim or a convert, it affects Muslim women's understanding and expression of piety. I noticed that the perceptions of the Born-Muslim and convert women in this study do diverge from each other. Both groups defined Islam (and Muslims) according to their ethnic and cultural understandings, behavior, norms and values. The way they viewed each other in a specific way was based on their personal experiences and interactions, both inside and outside pious circles. Interaction is a mutual process in which Born-Muslims and converts influence each other. When they do this, they are also positioning themselves religiously through comparison. In this Section, I present data that elucidate the perspectives of the former on converts and vice-versa about the way in which being a Born-Muslim or a convert defines their relationship. I also analyze which group - and according to whom - 'excels' in piety. My findings in this Section are based on my interviews and on participant observation.

Born-Muslims on converts

During my fieldwork and observations in pious circles, I noticed that Born-Muslims tend to be very positive about converts. The fact that converts "chose" to become Muslim, despite the difficulties they faced - and still face - from their families and friends, colleagues, and society in general, was admirable in the eyes of many Born-Muslims, most of whom had met converts or had converts as their friends in pious circles, educational institutes or mosques. During gatherings in pious circles, I often observed how Born-Muslims approached converts with a natural curiosity and asked them questions about how and why they chose Islam. The Born-Muslim was often the initiator of the interaction. Hearing the conversion narratives of converts had an impact on Born-Muslims. Besides listening out of curiosity, most Born-Muslims felt strengthened in their belief. I often heard Born-Muslims express the sentiment

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515   'Virtuoso' (third person singular) is a term Weber uses to refer to someone who strives for perfection within an existing religious tradition. The virtuoso strives to fulfill to the utmost the demands of his or her religion. Max Weber, "The social psychology of the world religions," pp. 287-291. See Chapter one, *The theoretical framework: piety as a concept*, Section 1.5.

of how wonderful it was to see that "even European people discover the beauty of Islam." Furthermore, to many Born-Muslims it was proof that Islam is in fact the one true religion: how else could these conversions of Dutch and Flemish women be explained? Hence, Islam as the "perfect" religion is confirmed by the presence of converts among the Born-Muslim communities. Consequently, Born-Muslims were also inspired by converts.

The case of the Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim Yasmin, living in the Netherlands, illustrates this. Yasmin is the initiator of a pious circle and has also begun preaching in pious circles. She actually explained her motivation to preach and to deepen her pious feelings because of her "jealousy of the pious endeavor of a convert." This led to her "religious awakening":

> There was a Dutch girl who converted to Islam. She followed lessons in the same mosque to which I went. This was at a time at which I did nothing with my religion. (…) She was just following lessons, she was searching [for knowledge, S.N.] and at some point she asked me questions I could not answer [about Islam, S.N.]. I grew jealous of her. How come she was searching for knowledge and I was not? I was jealous in a positive way, nevertheless I was also feeling ashamed. I could not answer her questions even though I had been raised with the religion. I was actually supposed to be much more advanced in my religion and this motivated me to learn about Islam and do more with my religion. I even wrote a poem[516] about this event, it is called "jealous of a convert."[517]

Yasmin was inspired to learn more about Islam and to practice it consciously. By comparing herself with a convert, Yasmin defined her own position as a Muslim.

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516   The 'he' is in the poem in fact a she. For personal reasons, she chose to refer to her as a 'he'. The translation of her poem in English: *Subhan Allah when I was born, [And] the adhan was uttered in my ears, My mother taught me everything, I said bismiʾllah before I ate, [And] Alhamdulillah after sneezing, [And] I learned to choose right [from wrong]. Nothing could overcome me in an inner struggle, [As] a very good foundation had already been laid for me. I was growing older and older, and I thought wiser, however, my intentions were becoming vaguer and vaguer, I followed my friends to every corner and alley, and forgot the knowledge I had received from my mother. Gradually I had [new] rules in my life, by which I could gain a high worldly status, I felt good but not good enough, I did not know what I missed [in my life], until someone suddenly asked me, about my faith and my point of view, out of interest to convert. He asked me questions so he could learn from me, [However] I could not explain more than the basics, which was very embarrassing for me to confess, the roles were changed and he began explaining to me, what my faith meant and what it expected of me, I became jealous of a convert, who would have thought that! I had to surpass him and also decided to convert, because [only] with awareness does the journey of learning begin.'*

517   Interview with Yasmin (February 22, 2011).

The next case of the Turkish-Dutch Born-Muslim Laleh reinforces what happened to Yasmin, and shows how converts can also inspire Born-Muslims to become critical. Laleh is a chairwoman of a Dutch Islamic female organization. In Laleh's opinion, converts have a "conscious and critical attitude" which is less apparent among Born-Muslims. She gave the case of prayer:

> There are minuscule differences in prayer [according to the four schools of law, S.N.]. A convert finds that strange, she does not understand these differences. "How come? What should I do as a new Muslim?" she asks herself. So they become confused, a confusion that I as a Born-Muslim do not have, because I have been praying in a particular way all my life. However, as converts question [religious practices, S.N.], they make us Born-Muslims reflective as well.[518]

Although most Born-Muslims emphasized converts' positive influence on them, not all of them viewed them *positively* as I shall show in the next two cases.[519] The Indonesian-Dutch Born-Muslim Widiana is active in an Indonesian pious circle, mostly attended by Indonesian Muslims and converts:

> Many people become Muslim in our mosque but, after a while, they no longer agree with our "liberal" mosque, whatever liberal may mean.[520] Converts feel that, according to their experience of Islam, we are too free. (...) Then they go to a different mosque, because for a while converts [want to become, S.N.] stricter and gain more knowledge, and become conservative, but they eventually return to our mosque. (...) I feel that converts should stay in their "equation" and that is OK.[521] (...) I am more...I don't want to use the word stable, but more tranquil...slower in the confession of Islam. But they want to have a crash course in becoming practicing Muslims [she laughs] Do you

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518 Interview with Laleh (September 13, 2009).
519 I would like to analyze Laleh's observation in light of the types of piety formation I have distinguished in the previous Sections. Laleh suggested that converts form piety more consciously and critically than Born-Muslims to whom religious ideas and practices are self-evident. Hence, the type of piety that converts cultivate is one in which differences are not denied but reflected upon. This type of piety cultivation is an individually constructed piety which arises from critical introspection of one's own beliefs and values. This give rise to religious ambiguities and consequently the challenge is to make sense of these through reflection. Although, some converts explained their formation of piety in terms of an individual process, expressing the idea that their conversion to Islam was a consequence of self-guided choice, this is not always the case. Some follow an individual process of piety formation, whereas others do not.
520 By 'liberal', by and large most Born-Muslims and converts mean those who are not strict in their interpretation of Islam and do not live according Islamic rules. By liberal, they also mean those who interpret Islam in such a manner that rules and regulations become a matter of choice and not of obligation: for example, wearing or not wearing the *hijab*, praying or not praying five times a day or mixing or not mixing with men.
521 She used the English word equation, by which she meant that converts should follow their own process slowly and try not to "exaggerate."

understand? (...) And for us Islam is here to stay. It is something which exists and you can have it anytime you want.[522]

Widiana viewed converts as unstable in their process of piety formation. She viewed conversion and piety formation as a joint process. Comparing herself to converts, she regarded herself as being more "stable" in her religious disposition.

The half-Pakistani and half-Dutch Born-Muslim Zinat viewed converts in a similar way. Zinat is an active member of a pious circle in the Netherlands. She explained:

> When people convert to Islam, they are so convinced of the religion, they go too fast. (...) They go from mini-skirts to wearing *khimar*; they stop talking to men. They stop being themselves (...). As if they don't grow. (...) It is almost like having a new identity. But you can remain yourself and be a believer, without changing your entire personality.[523]

Zinat added a new element, namely: religious growth. She thought that converts - unlike Born-Muslims - did not take the time to grow religiously because they were over-eager to become pious overnight as it were, even change their personality in the course of becoming Muslim. Leon Moosavi offers an interesting insight from the perspective of converts. He explains that converts feel the need to change their identity entirely in order to become Muslims. This occurs through an overt changing of their identity by adopting a Muslim name, observing gender norms and by wearing Islamic dress. Hence, in the eyes of converts, an identity transformation is considered necessary in becoming and feeling Muslim.[524]

Two aspects come to the fore in the cases I have just discussed. Firstly, in terms of *influence*, Born-Muslims have the idea that converts influence them in a positive way. Converts inspire Born-Muslims to acquire piety, to cultivate piety in a critical manner and, through their presence in Muslim communities, converts strengthen Born-Muslims' faith. Secondly, on the other side of the coin, Born-Muslims can *perceive* converts and their ways of piety cultivation less positively. They find converts' ways of piety formation unstable, too fast, too stringent and therefore lacking in the benefit of religious growth. Born-Muslims prefer their own "steadier" and "slower" ways of piety formation. The latter eventually leads to a more profound religious growth. Experiencing religious growth becomes an important indicator of piety

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522   Interview with Widiana (14 January, 2011).
523   Interview with Zinat (October 8, 2010).
524   Leon Moosavi, "British Muslim Converts Performing 'Authentic Muslimness'," p. 109.

by which Born-Muslims measure who 'excels in piety.' Now I shall elaborate on the perspective of converts on Born-Muslims.

Converts on Born-Muslims

The idea that converts are being over-enthusiastic in becoming pious Muslims is not confined to Born-Muslims. My convert interlocutors had the same opinion.[525] However, converts who have been Muslims for a longer period do admit that they eventually had had to adjust their speed. This is concurs with the second stage of Roald's conversion theory. In this stage of 'disappointment' or 'rejection', converts realize that they have asked too much of themselves in a short period of time. Roald argues that this stage of disappointment is strongly connected to converts' experience of Born-Muslim behavior and ideas. Converts become frustrated with what they see as Born-Muslims 'cultural' expressions of Islam instead of what they see as 'true Islam.'[526]

Most of my convert interlocutors asserted that Born-Muslims had become too "routinized" because they prioritized culture above their religion.[527] I shall illustrate this by discussing a Belgian study weekend in Brussels.[528] The Islamic organization which organized this weekend focused on empowering converts. By providing converts with tools and skills, they attempted to teach them how to mentor "new Muslims" and help Born-Muslims "revert" and perform *daʿwa* in Europe.[529] During the discussions, converts mentioned the Born-Muslims' lack of Islamic knowledge as the main reason the average Born-Muslim is "Muslim through culture instead of religion." The converts agreed that Born-Muslims' cultural prioritization "almost creates a clash" between them. At one point the female workshop leader, Fatima, - a British convert - said:

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525 What is also interesting is that some of my Born-Muslims and convert interlocutors consider "fundamentalist" Islamic movements to be an expression of "over-eager" converts who in their conversion to Islam have become "extreme Muslims."

526 Anne Sofie Roald, *New Muslims in the European context: the experience of Scandinavian converts*, p. 286.

527 However, recent studies indicate that also second- and third-generation Born-Muslims in Europe are increasingly detaching religion from culture. See, for instance, the study by Nadia Fadil on young girls of Moroccan descent living in Belgium. Nadia Fadil, "The political mobilization of Muslim minorities in the West: a gender (un)friendly project?" In: *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, (ed.) Joseph Suad, Vol. 2, (Leiden: Brill, 2005), pp. 293-295.

528 I attended the study weekend on June 11, 2011.

529 During this weekend, the female convert workshop leader said that "new Muslims" is an incorrect term to describe converts. She herself and many others had converted to Islam more than ten, fifteen and even twenty years ago. They felt that they had been Muslims longer than many second- and third-generation Born-Muslims. For this reason, I am chary in my use of the term "new Muslims." However, in the course material provided at the workshop, this phrase was used and for this reason I shall refer to them as "new Muslims."

> You have to work with the Born-Muslim communities [in providing them with, S.N.] skills they do not have [in tutoring new Muslims, S.N.]. They have different backgrounds, so we have to create a buffer zone, in educating them as mentors (...) as the lack of knowledge of Born-Muslims turns people away [from becoming Muslim, S.N.]. We have real problems with Born-Muslims and we need to mentor them more.[530]

Fatima found Born-Muslims - in comparison with converts - 'unskilled and lacking in religious knowledge and tools' in performing *da'wa*. In this context, Fatima was talking about *da'wa* on two levels: inner-focused, whose aim is to revive Islam among Born-Muslims; and outward-focused, whose purpose is to convert non-Muslims to Islam. In both situations, Fatima thought that converts were in a better position than Born-Muslims to perform *da'wa*. In comparing converts with Born-Muslims, she defined their position as the religiously "skilled", "educated" and the "knowledgeable" members of the Muslim community. Fatima referred to a "buffer zone" in which culture did not influence religion; a neutral space of "culture-free religiosity." This placed converts in a position of power as the more religiously "skilled people", possessed of more religious knowledge, and with a better capacity for leadership than Born-Muslims.[531] My findings are similar to that of Esra Özyürek in her study, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*, which I mentioned earlier. She examined how converts shape Islam in a European German context, and describes how converts search for ways to combine their German-ness with their Muslim-ness. She reports that converts argue that:

> Being German is not only compatible with but also can even lead to a better way of being Muslim, and some advance the idea that becoming Muslim can be an especially proper way of being German. In doing so, German converts to Islam simultaneously challenge and reproduce biological and cultural racisms as well as a homogenous understanding of a German and European culture.[532]

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530   Statement by Fatima during study weekend on June 11, 2011.
531   Although there is a difference between the first-generation Born-Muslims who were immigrants and second- and third-generation Born-Muslims who have been born and raised in The Netherlands and Belgium, my convert interlocutors are also beginning to regard the second- and third-generation Born-Muslims in the context of their migrant backgrounds and as "cultural Muslims." This was especially the case with converts who are married to Born-Muslims from migrant backgrounds and whose in-laws are first-generation migrants. However, in some situations, for instance, in pious circles in which a Born-Muslim is the most knowledgeable about Islam, I noticed that converts changed their definition of a Born-Muslim to that of their religiosity rather than their migrant background.
532   Esra Özyürek in her study: *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe,* p. 2.

The tendency among converts to disassociate themselves from Born-Muslims and their immigrant culture was also common among my interlocutors. The following example illustrates this vividly.

Converts as the virtuosi

During a weekly meeting in a pious circle in The Netherlands, an interesting discussion evolved between a convert and a Born-Muslim.[533] The convert Rumaya, who wore the *hijab*, was enthusiastic about a lecture given by a well-known - male Born-Muslim - speaker because of his -good- opinion about converts:

> He said that converts are prepared to give more for Islam than Born-Muslims. They immediately begin wearing the *hijab* and in so doing run into trouble with their non-Muslim families, which leads to their isolation by their families. They make a greater sacrifice than Born-Muslim girls who have been Muslim for twenty or thirty years but still say: "I am not ready to put on the *hijab.*"[534]

Rumaya smiled the whole time she was recalling the lecture. Laila, a Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim who did not wear the *hijab* disagreed. She explained that wearing or not wearing the *hijab* was a personal choice which had nothing to do with "how much you are prepared to do for Islam."[535] Laila disagreed and did not see the wearing the *hijab* as an act of piety. However, their discussion ended abruptly as food was served. This case shows that, even among preachers, there is a tendency to value converts' piety aspirations more than those of Born-Muslims. In this instance, the preacher set the female converts apart as a pious status group which was 'religiously qualified', whereas Born-Muslims become 'religiously unmusical', in the words of Weber.[536] In this context, the *hijab* has become the virtue which defines who does or does not belong to the virtuosi. Those most lacking in virtue are Born-Muslim women who do not wear the *hijab*.

Furthermore, some converts said that they understood and identified more with the 'first Muslims' because the Prophet himself and his wives, family and friends were actually all converts. They became the first Muslims despite the difficulties they faced from their families, friends and clans; despite the physical and economic dangers they encountered and despite the battles they had to overcome. By adopting this analogy, some converts were expressing the idea that they understood the holy

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533   I attended this gathering on January 14, 2011.
534   Statement made by Rumaya during the gathering on January 14, 2011.
535   Statement by Laila during the gathering on January 14, 2011.
536   Max Weber, "The social psychology of the world religions," pp. 287-291.

message of Islam more profoundly, because their situation was more like that of the Prophet.[537] Hence, contemporary converts become exemplary role models just as the first converts in the history of Islam.

Each year, a group of male and female converts from different European countries is invited to receive a two-week 'revivers' training program in Kuwait.[538] The original idea behind this program[539] was to train native European Muslims - converts - to become representatives of Islam in the West.[540] Muhammad is a male Flemish convert whom I met in Belgium. He was one of the first to have followed this program. Muhammad is active in a Belgian Islamic organization whose aim is to empower converts by giving them tutorial guidance. Because of his involvement in the organization, he was asked whether he was interested in following the reviver's training program in Kuwait. However, he and other converts criticized the organizers, who were Arab Muslims, principally on the grounds that it was discrimination that only converts were allowed to take part in the program. As a result, Born-Muslims have now also been included in the program. Nevertheless, Muhammad did understand why there is more focus on converts than on Born-Muslims:

> Converts have power (...) in the sense that they have a bigger impact on the outside
> world. (...) If, for instance, a Dutch politician decides to convert to Islam, he will have
> more impact on society than when, for instance, a Born-Muslim decides to revert to

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537   Sahar Noor, *Religious role models of contemporary Muslim women: Historical Muslim women as a source of inspiration for the emancipation of Muslim women in the Netherlands*, (Master thesis: Radboud University Nijmegen, 2008).

538   The revivers program is part of the center for Cross Cultural Dialogue which, their website states, was founded in 1984 under the umbrella of the International Islamic Charitable Organization. The revivers program aims to spread the 'true message of moderate Islam' by which it wants to build a bridge between Muslims in the West. See website: www.islamrevivers.com_ (Accessed October 13, 2012).

539   Their website states that their training is focused on: Islamic Leadership, Strategic Planning, Team Building, Communication Skills, Social and Community Service. http://islamrevivers.com/NewsDetails.aspx?ID=7 (Accessed October 13, 2012).

540   On their website the Arab Muslim organizers state: 'The existence of the Muslim in a non-Muslim country makes him/her a representative of Islam. How Muslims conduct themselves is the way by which those around them judge Islam as a whole. And how they interact and behave is fundamental in how far understanding and tolerance is promoted for our faith. Thus this great responsibility can be best carried out when our fellow Muslims in these countries are trained and educated with the proper knowledge necessary for the success of this task. In our quest to enhance the understanding of Islam in Europe and promote respect for our religion, we aim to prepare European converts and second generation Muslims to become the ambassadors and representatives of Islam. They will lead and guide the community of new Muslims and work with the non-Muslim community for the benefit and growth of the society as a whole. The message of Islam is best received by people when it is delivered by one of their own. This is the way Allah has always chosen His prophets and messengers for a people- from their own.' http://islamrevivers.com/AboutUs.aspx?ID=0 (Accessed October 13, 2012).

Islam. (…) Born-Muslims find themselves in the middle of a process in which they are emancipating themselves, but converts are already emancipated, so they begin to emancipate Islam and, for this reason, play a major role. (…) The Prophet, may peace and blessings be upon him, said: "One day, Islam will rise again as a stranger and that will be from the *Maghreb*." [541] And what does *Maghreb* mean? The West![542]

Muhammad defined his position within the Muslim community by comparing himself with Born-Muslims. He referred to his Flemish background as an emancipated European, and because of these circumstances having more impact in society and being in a better position to propagate and spread the message of Islam than the average Born-Muslim.[543] Muhammad experienced his European background as positive, a factor enabling himself and other converts to excel in Islamic propagation. In this he echoed Fatima's ideas.[544] Muhammad's opinion confirms the findings of Leon Moosavi in his study on converts in England. Moosavi discusses how 'whiteness' functions in the lives of converts and argues that white converts are privileged in Muslim communities because of a 'racialized hierarchy':

(…) white converts are often beneficiaries of white privilege, which I define as receiving benefits and advantages, or increased opportunities and decreased restrictions, due to being racialized as white in a context where whiteness is considered as superior to non-whiteness.[545]

Moosavi thinks that white privilege should be understood as a post-colonial remnant. He also argues that 'white converts can lose access to "whiteness"' upon conversion to Islam. Moosavi calls this the process of 're-racialization' upon converting to Islam,

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541   Here, Muhammad is referring to two different *ahadith* of the Prophet which have emerged from an eschatological Muslim tradition. The first is 'Islam began as a stranger and shall return as a stranger as it began' (Reported by Muslim) and the second is 'In the Latter Days, the sun shall rise from the West' (reported by Bukhari). The sun here refers to Islam. Both traditions are seen as referring to the special position that Muslims occupy in the West.

542   Interview with Muhammad (June 8, 2011).

543   Muhammad also explained how many converts in his organization are rediscovering the Islamic heritage in Europe by organizing trips to Andalucía and to once Moorish cities in other parts. Muhammad's frame of reference is the Islamic heritage in Europe. During our interview, he explained theories which he claimed prove the impact of the European Islamic heritage. For example, he elaborated on how the country Andorra is supposedly named after the Moroccan city of Nador, as it lies geographically directly above Nador and the letters in Andorra are constructed from the same letters as the city of Nador. Or how the name of the Spanish city Alicante actually means "Ali" (a prophet) "sings" ('cantar' in Spanish). this would be a reference to Ali's *adhan*.

544   Muhammad's views are not widely shared by converts. However, the idea that converts have a "bigger impact" in propagating Islam and performing *daʿwa* is shared to a certain extent by many converts. I shall discuss *daʿwa* among my interlocutors in the next chapter.

545   Leon Moosavi, "White privilege in the lives of Muslim converts in Britain," In: *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 11 (2015), p: 1919.

by which he means converts are no longer viewed as white, but are racialized as non-white, making them similar to the majority of the Muslim community in Britain who are from South Asia.[546] His findings on the position of converts in the racial hierarchy are from the perspective of Born-Muslims and the non-Muslim community. However, as I have shown in the present study, some converts also adopt this hierarchy by viewing themselves in a position of being possessed of more privilege and power than Born-Muslims.

The next case adds some more nuances.[547] The convert Awatif discussed how converts can be marginalized both on account of or given privileges because of their European background:

> We are all Muslims, in the sense that we are sisters. And, although this feeling is dominant, I have to be honest, some difficulties do arise because, as a convert, you are perceived differently. On the one hand, there are many Born-Muslims who say: "The converts, they are doing much better [than us, S.N.]." I always refute such statements. The assertion is nonsense of course, and anyhow, this is a superficial consideration. Because I wear that long piece of cloth, the *khimar*, they jump to the conclusion: "Oh, that is a good Muslim woman." (…) You cannot measure that from the length of my headscarf! (…) And they say: "You must be more knowledgeable." That's not necessarily true, but we do have a disadvantage (…) we began reading books about Islam. If you don't, you can never convert, if you do not know what you are talking about. So, in that sense, yes we have read more books. The fact that I wear such a long headscarf is just my urge to compensate [she laughs]. I hope to receive some bonus points by wearing the headscarf. It is that simple. (…) On the other hand, there are also people who think: "That *kaaskop* just happened to come along and now she thinks she knows it all."[548] (…) I have noticed that with my in-laws in Tunis, they think: "You did not understand this or that correctly. What do you know about it?"[549]

Awatif, on the one hand, stated that converts are considered more pious because of their deeper knowledge about Islam and expressions of piety. Nevertheless, converts are viewed as less pious in the religious hierarchy as they are "new" Muslims and have yet to prove themselves as Muslims. The converts' ethnic background is connected

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546   *Ibid.,* p. 1919.
547   Interview with Awatif (May 16, 2011).
548   "Kaaskop", meaning "cheese head", is a slightly derogatory term for Dutch people.
549   Awatif here offers an insight into which converts -just like Born-Muslims- are viewed in the light of their ethnic background. A few of my Born-Muslim interlocutors also saw converts through the lens of their ethnicity. "Being greedy" and "harsh in one's communication" were mentioned. In the opinion of Born-Muslims these traits are contrary to exemplary Islamic behavior in which hospitality and mildness are prized.

to what, according to Awatif, Born-Muslims associate with being a European, namely: being "pedantic." Furthermore, Awatif explained that a convert is "disadvantaged" rather than "privileged." By this remark, she was referring to the amount of religious knowledge on which converts have to catch-up, compared to Born-Muslims who have gained it gradually throughout their lives. Awatif compensated her "disadvantage" by expressing piety more visibly than average Born-Muslims. From her perspective, Born-Muslims have a privileged position in the religious hierarchy as they have more 'religious capital', especially Born-Muslim who are advanced in Islam.

As we have seen above, by religious capital I mean religious knowledge, experience, growth, established religious support networks and access to religious resources.[550] This is what Leon Moosavi refers to as being 'authentic Muslims.' He states that converts are troubled by the idea that they might not be viewed as 'authentic Muslims' by Born-Muslims, so they go to great lengths to avoid raising doubts about their authenticity as Muslims.[551] The concept of 'the authentic Muslim' refers to being viewed by others as 'genuine, sincere and legitimate in claiming to be a Muslim.' [552] Therefore, Moosavi argues that converts aim to 'pass as Muslims by performing their Muslimness.' This means changing their identity, adopting a Muslim name and embodying Muslimness by growing beards and wearing headscarves.[553] This is similar to the way in which Awatif explained her motives for wearing a "longer" headscarf. Awatif felt that she literally had to go to greater lengths to prove that she is indeed an 'authentic Muslim', despite doubts being raised about her Muslimness by her Tunisian in-laws.

Born-Muslims' critique of converts as the virtuosi

While the overall trend is to view converts as the virtuosi, I also noticed a new development towards the end of my research. Born-Muslims were becoming critical of converts' "special position" and pointing out the consequences of converts' privileged position in the *umma*. In a column[554] in a Dutch digital Muslim magazine,

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550   Interestingly, converts also use religious capital to measure who is most pious among themselves. I once witnessed two converts who were discussing their points of view and which one of them was more Islamically accurate about a religious matter. At the end of their discussion, the convert - who had converted more than twenty years ago - concluded that, because she had gained more knowledge and religious experience, she had been more accurate. Hence, religious capital is used both by Born-Muslims and converts to measure each other's piety.
551   Leon Moosavi, "British Muslim Converts Performing 'Authentic Muslimness'," p. 1.
552   *Ibid.,* p. 2.
553   *Ibid.,* p. 2.
554   "Stop the special treatment of converts" in Dutch: "Stop met de speciale behandeling van bekeerlingen."

a Born-Muslim female columnist expressed her critique.[555] Her general statement was: "Converts are not special, and do not need to be specially treated by us, Born-Muslims." [556] According to the author, "Allah guides whom He wants" and conversion should be viewed only within that context.[557] She discusses how converts receive guidance once they convert, whereas many Born-Muslims who are "born-again" also need guidance but are not given "the special treatment which converts receive." She explains:

> While converts get free books, guidance, scholarships and pilgrimages; Hasans and Muhammads have to figure it out themselves. (…) So why should converts receive special treatment? Islam cannot be measured by the number of converts (…) Islam is already perfect. We do not need converts to confirm this.[558]

While in the eyes of most Born-Muslims, converts' presence in the Muslim community is a proof of Islam being the perfect religion, this author has taken the opposite stance. She argues that the organization of "special days" which only converts are allowed to attend and training especially for converts have both led to more convert than Born-Muslim preachers. This creates the image that Born-Muslims are less knowledgeable and have fewer skills. Furthermore, such special treatment causes division in the *umma*. The author argues that the differentiation between Muslims is only by their degree of *taqwa*, not conversion. This classification of converts on the basis of their exemplary religious qualifications also worried the Moroccan-Flemish Born-Muslim preacher Bilal who lives in Belgium. He stated that this separation in the *umma* has been caused by the arrival of converts. He asserted that, although converts can play an important role in the Muslim community, he wondered whether they really did fulfill such roles:

> In the beginning, many converts were [geographically, S.N.] spread out, some went to a Moroccan mosque for prayer (…) and others went to the Turkish or Pakistani mosques. (…) However, as most sermons are in Arabic, Turkish or some other language, converts did not understand a word of them. At some point, they felt the need to have a place of their own. Meanwhile, many mosques had begun to notice this and began translating sermons into Flemish. I was in fact one of the first to do this in our mosque (…) In spite of this, in 2001 they [converts, S.N.] established the first Flemish mosque in Antwerp in which the sermons were given in Flemish (..) But the question

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555 Muslim Today, in Dutch *Muslim Vandaag*, published on the 29th of April 2013 on www.moslim-vandaag.nl (Accessed June 16, 2013).
556 *Ibid.*
557 *Ibid.*
558 *Ibid.*

is: Is this a turn in the right direction? I am afraid not because regardless of our origin and race we are brothers in Islam (…) and must be united.[559]

Bilal was concerned that converts are becoming a new Islamic community on their own, with their own mosques and own Flemish imams instead of "building bridges" between the different communities. In his opinion, converts were becoming Dutch or Flemish branches of the Muslim community instead of joining the existing Born-Muslim community. However, he did understand why many converts had become disappointed in the Born-Muslim community, which had not been able to include converts thereby transcending differences in ethnicity, culture and/or language. This was, he thought, an important reason both groups sometimes have difficulty mixing.[560]

4.6. Conclusion

My interlocutors were definite that piety is about self-improvement, building a bond with God, achieving religious growth and working towards the improvement of the *umma*. It has both an individual and a communal dimension. In this chapter, I argued that two types of piety must be distinguished: individually formed piety and piety formed in accordance to the norms of pious communities. I have emphasized that piety cultivation takes place in interaction with pious communities. Both types of piety formation co-exist, depending on one's interaction with pious communities, experiences, the events in one's life and one's age.

My interlocutors' articulations of agency are multiple and sometimes contradictory. Agency is constituted in specific contexts and in interaction with pious communities. When agency is located in the process of piety cultivation, both resistance and conformity can be found among my interlocutors. Three phases are distinguishable in

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559   Interview with Bilal (June 9, 2011).
560   Like the mosque in Antwerp, there have also been other initiatives to create a united Muslim community. For instance, the Dutch Polder Mosque in Amsterdam was established in 2008 by a group of young Muslim men and women, consisting of Born-Muslims, a convert and a female non-Muslim. The main initiator was the Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim, Mohammed Cheppih, who hoped to go back to the 'real message of Islam', in which Islam was a religion whose aim was to unite the people of different tribes. His goal was to establish a mosque which would dismantle cultural influences. In the Polder Mosque, the main language was Dutch, but all the sermons were also held in other languages, delivered by imams from different ethnic backgrounds. They also had a main prayer room in which women had the choice of praying behind men, or separately. In addition, women preachers were allowed to preach, something which did happen occasionally. Despite their efforts, the Polder Mosque was heavily criticized by different groups. On the one hand, first-generation Born-Muslims and strict Muslim groups found the Polder Mosque too liberal, and considered it an attempt to make Islam 'Dutch.' On the other hand, some politicians and media distrusted the whole enterprise and considered its organizers extreme Muslims who pretended to be liberal, in order to radicalize the youth. Eventually, because of financial problems, the mosque went bankrupt in 2010 and closed.

the narratives of my interlocutors: religious awakening, transformation and individualization. Religious individualization can occur in two ways: firstly, the commitment of my interlocutors to becoming pious Muslims is in itself a sign of individualization. Secondly, my interlocutors stated that they had become religiously individualized, by which they meant understanding Islam on their own terms and hence having become critical. I have argued that, despite individualizing tendencies, as pious individuals each of my interlocutors views herself as a member of a pious community: a community of religiously committed Muslims. They continue interacting with other members in pious communities and their beliefs and practices are shaped through interaction with pious communities.

By presenting several cases, I have shown how cultivating piety in pious circles is a dynamic enterprise by which Muslim women are continuously interpreting how to live piously. Pious circles have become the stage on which Muslim women learn about, accept or reject certain pious beliefs and practices. This inevitably leads to a hierarchy of religious virtues in which particular norms are viewed more virtuous than others. I have illustrated how a hierarchy of religious virtues comes into being by taking the example of the *hijab*. Donning the *hijab* is on the whole viewed as an important act of piety, automatically making those who wear it more pious than those who do not.

In the interaction between Born-Muslims and converts, I have demonstrated how differences and similarities in the cultivation of piety between converts and Born-Muslims can lead to mutual prejudices and stereotyping. On the one hand, Born-Muslims consider converts do have a "positive influence" on them by inspiring them, motivating them to take their religion seriously and by making them think critically. On the other hand, Born-Muslims view converts less positively, referring to them as unstable, overly strict and deficient in religious growth because of the speed of their piety cultivation. Despite criticism, converts are viewed as more pious because of their successful combination of expressing visible piety, gaining religious knowledge and performing *daʿwa*.

Converts view the Born-Muslim culture as an obstacle to its members' religious growth. Their immigrant background, "lack of skills" and deficiency in the religious knowledge they need to perform *daʿwa* were also mentioned as obstacles because of which they are counted as less pious. However, some converts stated that Born-Muslims' religious capital makes them more pious than converts. This is especially the case among Born-Muslims who are advanced in Islam. Nevertheless, on the whole, converts are viewed as a pious status group and more successful in their

combination of virtues by both Born-Muslims and converts. Some converts reinforce this perspective by positioning themselves as being more powerful in terms of ability to have a societal impact and in the practice of Islamic propagation. These differences between Born-Muslims and converts lead to the privileging of converts over Born-Muslims in terms of religious educational opportunities and special treatments. Born-Muslim interlocutors claim that the tendency to set converts apart as the 'religiously qualified' causes differences and prevents the *umma* from being united.

CHAPTER 5:

Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles

What is the point of obtaining knowledge if you don't practice it? (…) For instance, you know that it is important to perform the daily prayers on time, therefore pray on time! You know that you should wear the headscarf, therefore wear it! You know that you are not allowed to eat pork, therefore don't eat pork! And, if you are not sure about a specific rule follow the most logical interpretation, but, in the meanwhile, continue searching for more knowledge about that matter.[561]

Introduction

In this chapter I discuss how Muslim women in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium acquire and transmit Islamic knowledge. My purpose is to describe and analyze how and why my interlocutors established pious circles, and what type of knowledge was produced within these circles. The central question that I address is: What is the role of Islamic knowledge acquisition in the process of becoming pious?

In the following pages, I demonstrate how acquiring Islamic knowledge is an important means through which piety is cultivated. Furthermore, as I show, knowledge acquisition is a devotional practice in itself, a form of worship in its own right. My data also point toward a strong connection between knowledge and gender. Obtaining Islamic knowledge specific to women was essential in my interlocutors' cultivation of piety. Moreover, some of my interlocutors experienced knowledge as empowering, leading them to engage in Islam-inspired activism. Finally, I demonstrate how the possession of Islamic knowledge is used to measure each other's piety in Born-Muslim and convert interaction.

This chapter is organized into eight Sections. In Section 5.1. I provide an outline of the sites of knowledge production for Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium. In Section 5.2. I discuss the motives of Muslim women in searching for Islamic knowledge. In Section 5.3. I analyze why pious circles have become important sites for Islamic knowledge production for Muslim women. I do so by making a comparison between them and traditional sites of Islamic knowledge production. In Section 5.4. I describe how the process of Islamic knowledge acquisition and transmission can be a devotional enterprise in its own right. In Section 5.5. I elaborate on the type of knowledge that is produced in pious circles. In Section 5.6. I discuss why some of my interlocutors have established women-only pious circles. In Section 5.7. I examine how my interlocutors gained Islamic knowledge and how, for some, it had led to Islam-inspired activism. In Section 5.8. I concentrate on the relationship between Born-Muslims and converts to Islam in terms of who perceived whom to be the most knowledgeable. Finally, I draw all these strands together in a conclusion.

5.1. Sites of knowledge production and transmission

In this Section I describe the various sites of knowledge production, and how, why and in which settings Muslim women search for Islamic knowledge. I have studied the different types of spaces in which Islamic knowledge is produced. Besides the thirteen Dutch and eleven Flemish pious circles I examined, I attended many

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561   Interview with Zarina (May 15, 2011).

conferences, gatherings and lectures organized by different organizations and networks. Below, I have listed the various organizations that I studied.

Muslim organizations	Country
Euro Islam	Belgium
Al-Mawada	Belgium
De Koepel	Belgium
Landelijke Platform Nieuwe Moslims (LPNM)	The Netherlands
Poldermoskee	The Netherlands
Dar-al-'Ilm	The Netherlands

Educational institutes (by Muslim women)	Country
Al-Hidaya	Belgium
Al-Qalam	Belgium

Muslim women's organizations	Country
Al-Minara	Belgium
Al-Nisa	The Netherlands
LIVN	The Netherlands

Women's support & welfare networks[562]	Country
Network A	The Netherlands
Network B	The Netherlands
Network C	Belgium

The spaces of knowledge production have multiplied in the Netherlands and Belgium in the last fifteen years. More and more mosques, Islamic organizations and educational institutes are offering a wide variety of lectures - often called conferences - and courses. Islamic youth organizations, Muslim student associations and pious circles have also entered the arena of Islamic knowledge production. Nevertheless, so far the majority of these spaces of Islamic knowledge are organized by men and the teachers and preachers are also male. Women are less visible as active organizers and producers of Islamic knowledge in established organizations. This is partially attributable to the male-dominated character of traditional Islamic organizations. As they are constantly subjected to gender segregation, Muslim women have been less included in the process of knowledge production and acquisition. Nevertheless,

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562   These networks requested to be anonymous.

I shall show that some of my interlocutors have actually striven to maintain this sort of gender exclusion for the purpose of being able to articulate their religiosity independently. They do not wish to be led by - male - religious authorities and want to study Islamic sources autonomously.[563]

My interlocutors obtained their Islamic knowledge through different channels. Their initial step in acquiring knowledge has been by reading the Qurʾan, Islamic books, surfing the Internet and listening to online lectures.[564] A few have watched Islamic satellite programs broadcast from Morocco, Turkey or other Muslim countries like Egypt with their parents. This is indicative of a setting in which knowledge has been selectively acquired. The first source of Islamic knowledge in the case of Born-Muslims have been their parents, later reinforced by Qurʾan lessons in mosques. All Born-Muslims in this study initially learned, especially non-discursive knowledge such as how to pray or fast, about Islam from their parents. Converts' initial channels of knowledge acquisition have mostly been books, online lectures and Born-Muslim friends.

Both Born-Muslims and converts have also acquired knowledge outside the domestic space, for instance, by joining pious circles, but also by following lectures organized by Islamic organizations, and attending courses given by Islamic educational institutes. The *Dar-al-'Ilm* Institute for Islamic Studies in the Netherlands was often mentioned. Many interlocutors followed its courses for learning the Qurʾan and the science of *Hadith*.[565] Its annual National Islamic Congress was attended by both the Flemish and Dutch interlocutors.[566]

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563   This aspect is discussed in Chapter 6.3.
564   Different types of books were read by my interlocutors. Most of them bought books at Islamic book stands during Islamic conferences and "sister days." The books (translated from Arabic and English by the Islamic book publisher *Noer*) most often bought were: Muhammad Ali Al-Hashimi, *The ideal Muslim woman: the True Islamic Personality of the Muslim Woman* (Ryad: International Islamic Publishing House, 1996); Huda Khattab, *The Muslim Woman's Handbook* (London: Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd, 1993) and Aaïdh Al Qarni, *You Can Be the Happiest Woman in the World: A Treasure Chest Of Reminders* (Ryad: International Islamic Publishing House, 2005). Four interlocutors read books of Islamic feminists such as Asma Barlas (*Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qurʾan*) and Amina Wadud (*Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*). Popular websites that are consulted by my interlocutors include: http://www.ontdekislam.nl, https://www.al-yaqeen.com, http://forums.ansaar.nl, http://www.moslima.nl/nl and http://www.risallah.com.
565   *Dar-al-'Ilm* offers different courses in different cities in the Netherlands, for instance, "Islam for Beginners" and "Learning the Qurʾan in Four Days." *Dar-al-'Ilm* is established in 2001. See for more information: http://www.daralilm.nl/ (Accessed April 26, 2016).
566   I attended the first National Islamic Congress held on May 29, 2009. The congress was attended by more than 1,500 participants. Popular international and national preachers gave lectures, among them the converts Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips from Canada and Khalid Yasin from USA. Interestingly, on the basis of their research such social scientists as Martijn de Koning had also been invited to give workshops on specific topics.

Among my Flemish interlocutors, the conferences, lectures and courses organized by the mosque/Islamic center *De Koepel*[567] based in Antwerp and the previously mentioned *al-Minara* were popular.[568] Both organizations were established by converts with the specific aim of supporting Flemish converts. In fact, both organizations were the first to organize a national Convert Day on the 4th of March, 2007. The Islamic foundation *al-Mawada* was also familiar to my interlocutors.[569] Many of my interlocutors attended its lectures on the different challenges facing the life of Muslims in secular Dutch/Flemish societies. The purpose of *al-Mawada* is to activate Muslim citizens to engage in social and religious activities. It assists them to achieve this goal by arranging lectures by popular Islamic preachers, seminars and debates.[570]

Inspired by the Flemish convert organizations, such Dutch organizations as *Ontdek Islam* (Discover Islam) and the *Landelijk Platform Nieuwe Moslims* (National Platform for New Muslims), both established by converts, also organized a National Convert Day in the Netherlands in 2009 and have been organizing it since.[571] During national convert days, the central theme is conversion.[572] Many visitors also convert to Islam publicly on this day.[573] The lectures and courses organized by these organizations have frequently been attended by my interlocutors who were eager to improve their knowledge about Islam.

Nowadays Muslim women also have other channels to choose from in their search for Islamic knowledge, for instance, if they opt to study classical Islam. Consequently, Islamic higher educational institutes have also become important spaces for women. Four of my interlocutors in the Netherlands were enrolled in such classical Islamic sciences as the study of *ahadith, fiqh* and Qurʾan at The Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR).[574] One interlocutor studied Islamic social work at the Amsterdam-

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567   *De Koepel* was established by Flemish converts with the aim to advocate converts' rights in the Muslim community and offer them support and coaching due to their conversion to Islam. They were the first in Antwerp to offer the Friday sermon in the Dutch/Flemish language. See for more information: http://de-koepel.be/ (Accessed April 26, 2016).
568   For more on *al-Minara* see the introduction and http://www.alminara.be/ (Accessed April 26, 2016).
569   See http://www.almawada.be/home (Accessed April 26, 2016).
570   I attended one of their lectures on the life of the Prophet Muhammad in Belgium on May 22, 2011.
571   See http://www.ontdekislam.nl/ (Accessed April 26, 2016).
572   See also Chapter 6.4.
573   I attended National Convert's Days on January 31, 2010, and on January 8, 2011.
574   The IUR was established in 1998 to offer Islamic theological education to Muslims. Their master's program, Islamic Spiritual Care, and the bachelor's program, Islamic Theology, are officially accredited by the Dutch and the Flemish governments. http://www.islamicuniversity.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=238&Itemid=1300&lang=nl (Accessed November 12, 2014).

based Higher Vocational School InHolland.[575] Another interlocutor had studied Islamic Theology at the Free University in Amsterdam that offers a master's degree in Islamic spiritual care.

The European Institute of Human Sciences (EIHS) at Château-Chinon in France was mentioned by my Flemish interlocutors as a place that offered them the opportunity to learn more about classical Islamic sciences. Two Flemish interlocutors had studied at the EIHS. Five Flemish interlocutors worked as Islamic teachers in public secondary schools and had a bachelor's degree in teaching Islamic education.[576] Finally, four interlocutors had followed Islamic schooling outside Europe. *Al-Azhar* in Egypt, *pesantren* - Islamic boarding schools - in Indonesia and private Arabic and *tajwid* - the science of Qurʾanic Recitation - schools in Syria and Jordan were also mentioned.

5.2. Motives behind the quest for knowledge

In this Section I shall discuss the reasons that women were so eager to acquire Islamic knowledge. This Section is principally based on my interviews and, to a lesser extent, on participant observation. I have abstracted three principal reasons. Firstly, my Born-Muslim interlocutors began their quest for knowledge after having made the decision to become a practicing pious Muslim woman. I have referred to this as the process of religious awakening (see Chapter Four). In the case of convert interlocutors, knowledge has been acquired before and after conversion and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, it was related to the process of conversion. In both cases, the purpose of knowledge acquisition was to pursue the formation of piety. Importantly, all interlocutors underlined that knowledge should be obtained for the purpose of practicing Islam, as the quotation of the convert Zarina at the beginning of this chapter reveals. My interlocutors were aware that to remain committed to Islam, they were dependent on active knowledge acquisition by which they could continue to nurture their spiritual growth. Zarina explained this process vividly:

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575   InHolland offers a practical training to become an Islamic social worker, spiritual worker and *imam*. Islamic schooling at InHolland also provides a classical study of Islamic texts and Islam in the Dutch context. The educational institute was established with government funding with the aim to train Dutch Muslims to become *imams*, so that they could lead mosques instead of foreign-trained *imams*, who lack knowledge of the Dutch language and Dutch society. However, InHolland stopped offering professional training in 2013. This information is based on my visit to InHolland and on my interview with my interlocutor Kaya who had studied to become an Islamic social worker at InHolland.

576   They had obtained their degree at the Erasmus University College in Brussels that offers a bachelor's program for becoming a teacher in Islamic education in both primary and secondary schools.

I have noticed that when you begin to think "Oh never mind", rules become less important to you, despite the fact that you should adhere to them so you can continue your devotion. I have noticed myself that there are moments at which I experience my submission to God very intensely and very powerfully. And there are moments at which [it is less intense, S.N.] especially when you are caught up in your daily life. (…) But it is important to keep reminding yourself to stay connected to God. (…) For instance, I listen to the Qurʾan and read its translation digitally. The other day I was at the playground with my children. And, as I was listening to it, a sentence was recited: "If you have found the light, go on." I found that so beautiful! At that moment I felt I am doing good and that Allah was seeing me. I experienced a harmony with His creation. (…) But then you shouldn't stop. Don't think: "I am there!" Submission is not something you can achieve completely at some point. Submission is a way of growing.[577]

Hence in order to grow in piety, my interlocutors needed to continue to pursue their quest for knowledge.

The second major reason my interlocutors wanted to increase their Islamic knowledge was to raise their children in an Islamic fashion. Most of my interlocutors were already mothers, or wished to become a mother soon. They emphasized the importance of cultivating a new generation of pious Muslims imbued with Islamic knowledge, so that they in their turn could build or continue to build the Muslim *umma.* This desire should be viewed in the context of living as a religious minority in a secular society. Consequently, obtaining Islamic knowledge became more than just an individual project of cultivating piety. It was a way of creating a pious community of conscious Muslim believers. The latter was related to the third reason my interlocutors sought Islamic knowledge, that was to perform *daʿwa*.

The primary meaning of *daʿwa* in Arabic is to call or to invite. In the religious sense, *daʿwa* is addressed to human beings, urging them to believe in the true religion, Islam. It is used for both Muslims and non-Muslims; two forms Egdūnas Račius calls intra-ummaic and the extra-ummaic *daʿwa*.[578] The intra-ummaic *daʿwa* is inward-focused, as it aims to revive Islam among Born-Muslims, and encourage them to practice their religion more intensely. The extra-ummaic *daʿwa* is outward-focused, and its purpose is to convert non-Muslims to Islam.[579] My Born-Muslim and convert interlocutors had different opinions about the type of *daʿwa* that should be

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577   Interview with Zarina (May 15, 2011).

578   Egdūnas Račius, *The multiple nature of the Islamic Daʿwa* (PhD diss.: University of Helsinki, 2004), pp. 109-145.

579   *Ibid.,* pp. 147-183.

performed. I shall present an example of a gathering at a pious circle that illustrates this difference.

The theme of the gathering was "The responsibility of Muslims." The female lecturer was Dahlia, a Dutch-Indonesian Born-Muslim.[580] At some point, a convert participant said that she was worried about her sister as she was a non-Muslim. Therefore, she wanted to convert her sister to Islam. The participant asked Dahlia whether it was her responsibility to convert others such as her sister, to Islam. Dahlia replied:

> Let there be no compulsion in religion," says God. My intention is not to convert non-Muslims to Islam. I am not going to visit them at their homes, ring their doorbells and ask whether they want to become a Muslim. We should improve our own Muslim community first. *Daʿwa* is setting a good example. My exemplary behavior as a Muslim [is what, S.N.] should encourage others to learn more about Islam. If someone is interested in Islam and asks you for help, you should help them to understand Islam. But my main concern now is the *umma*. You should not try to convert others to Islam if you are not solidly grounded as a Muslim community in the first place.[581]

Dahlia was critical of the Muslim community. She was convinced that there was plenty of work to be done among the *umma*, especially among the youth. Dahlia stated that the Muslim youth are "too busy with their appearance, whereas they should work more on themselves internally."[582] She found them unmotivated to learn more about Islam. She referred to her classes for learning Arabic saying that many young participants quit because they lacked the motivation. Hence, for many Born-Muslims such as Dahlia, *daʿwa* was performed for the purpose of making fellow Muslims conscious of their Islamic identity, and encouraging them to become committed Muslims. They saw *daʿwa* as a means to improve the moral fiber of the Muslim community, and to create a positive image of Islam in Dutch or Flemish societies.

These views contrasted with those of convert interlocutors who considered *daʿwa* to non-Muslims equally important. Because of their own conversion narratives and their relationships with their non-Muslim families, converts thought that both types of *daʿwa* were an important responsibility of Muslims. They gave two reasons for their opinion. Firstly, convert interlocutors viewed their conversion as a progressive life-changing event that had had a positive effect on their lives. Therefore, buoyed up by their own good experiences, converts were more convinced of the importance

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580   See the portrait of Dahlia in Chapter 6.2.
581   Lecture by Dahlia during gathering on March 27, 2011.
582   Lecture by Dahlia during gathering on March 27, 2011.

of converting non-Muslims to Islam than limiting *daʿwa* to awakening more interest among Born-Muslims. Secondly, many convert interlocutors said that they suffered from the idea that their non-Muslim parents and siblings will not have a chance to enter Paradise. Haunted by this thought, many convert interlocutors tried to convert their non-Muslim family.

5.3. Reasons behind participation in pious circles

In this Section I describe pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium as important sites for Islamic knowledge production for Muslim women. By comparing pious circles with traditional sites of Islamic knowledge production, I attempt to analyze why Muslim women choose to participate in women-only pious circles. My findings in this Section are based on my interviews and participant observation. My interlocutors gave five reasons they had joined women-only pious circles. These reasons were related to ways of knowledge production, the authorization of knowledge, the absence of traditional - male - religious authorities, gender and cultivating sisterhood.

Ways of knowledge production

Firstly, in pious circles Islamic knowledge is disseminated differently compared to the way it is propagated in mosques and Islamic organizations. Traditional sites of Islamic knowledge production generally offered knowledge via lectures, Islamic conferences, courses in Arabic and the Qurʾan in a teacher-student setting. Most of these teachers were male, had followed Islamic education and were viewed as *shuyukh* (pl. of *shaykh*). In these traditional spaces of knowledge production, the distance between students and the *shaykh* was formalized and hierarchical, comparable to the traditional *halqa* system. Although female pious circles did function as a *halqa*, their ways of knowledge dissemination were less traditional.

Knowledge in pious circles was offered traditionally in the form of lectures about Islam, courses in Arabic and the Qurʾan, but also in other, more creative ways. For instance, by making "knowledge cards" with questions and answers that could be asked during "Islam quizzes"; offering Question & Answer sessions with religious lecturers; making PowerPoint presentations of *hadith* and Qurʾan verses; distributing hand-outs about Islamic regulations, passing on summaries of books and offering workshops in which knowledge could be "practiced." This sort of knowledge included how to wash bodies of deceased Muslims. Furthermore, the religious lecturers who presented knowledge, did so in an interactive setting. As I described in Chapter Four, pious circles offered space in which their participants could question lecturers, debate Islamic obligations and share personal experiences and knowledge.

Importantly, the female lecturer did not claim to be a teacher but considered herself a "hatchery" of knowledge. Hence the knowledge production in pious circles was informal, less traditional and more interactive compared to the way knowledge was produced in mosques and Islamic organizations.

Authorization of knowledge

Secondly, the knowledge that is disseminated in pious circles was less dependent on religious authorities and hence on forms of control or authorization. Consequently, pious circles created space for an autonomous type of knowledge production. This diverged quite widely from the way in which mosques or Islamic organizations produced knowledge. Their instruction was usually given according to a specific school of law, religious authorities or an Islamic institution. In Sections 5.5. and 5.6., I present cases of some of my interlocutors who attempted to construct knowledge autonomously. Constructing autonomously did not mean that they ceased to underline the importance of the established religious authorities as points of references. As I shall also explain in Chapter Six, despite the fact that some women became female religious authorities, they continued to be consistent with and rely on institutionalized male religious authorities as their religious frame of reference. In a nutshell, constructing Islamic knowledge autonomously meant studying Islamic sources independently of - male - religious authorities and understanding Islam - individually and collectively - in a setting in which there was space to interpret the knowledge attained.

The absence of traditional - male - religious authorities

Thirdly, the absence of traditional - male - religious authorities was another reason my interlocutors participated in women-only pious circles. Traditional religious authorities in mosques and Islamic organizations were usually male preachers and *imams*. My interlocutors had differing opinions about male preachers and *imams*. Many women said that male preachers who preached in Dutch/Flemish, did not always understand the consequences of their lectures for Muslim women. The next case exemplifies this point.

In 2010, I attended a "sister weekend" at a pious circle in the Netherlands.[583] The weekend was organized by a pious circle and was held in the female space of the mosque.[584] The theme of the weekend was the position of Muslim women in society.

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[583]   The "sister weekend" was held on December 4 and 5, 2010.
[584]   Of all the pious circles I studied, there were two that regularly held their meetings in a mosque space, and one pious circle that only held an annual "sister day" in a nearby mosque because of a lack space. The two pious circles that held their meetings regularly in mosque space stated that

This subject was tackled by different male preachers via a live connection on screen, and their audience consisted of more than eighty Muslim women. This meant that the female participants had no face-to-face contact with the preachers and therefore it was impossible to pose any direct questions. The theme of the first male preacher was *niqab*. He began his lecture by addressing the problem of whether the facial covering was a cultural expression or an obligation for Muslim women, using references in the *ahadith* to construct his argument. He concluded that the *niqab* was not a cultural expression. As a matter of fact, on the basis of his study of the *ahadith*, he stated that it was compulsory for Muslim women to wear the *niqab*. He referred to the "*al-salaf al-salih,*" the pious forefathers, and elaborated on how they had obliged women to wear a facial covering. He stressed that the pious forefathers did not have differences of opinion about the *niqab*. He ended his lecture by saying: "The *niqab* is a sign of chastity and submission to Allah."[585] As he ended his lecture many participants began discussing it. A Born-Muslim who sat next to me immediately said:

> I have read so many *ahadith* on this matter. What he is saying is simply not true. You are not obliged to cover your face and your hands.[586]

Her convert friend who sat next to her agreed and added:

> He should not say things in such an absolute manner. He should not say: "It is so." People should decide for themselves whether they agree or not.[587]

Both continued their discussion. At some point, the Born-Muslim wondered why this male preacher and all the other male preachers had been asked to come and talk about women. "Why not ask female preachers? We know so many of them who are very knowledgeable!"[588] She felt that he and many other male preachers did not understand the consequences that such lectures had for women. This was a pertinent statement as many participants reacted in a confused manner after listening to his lecture. This was very apparent during the question and answer session.[589] Among these questions asked were: "Are you implying that, as long as a Muslim woman does not wear the *niqab,* she is in a state of sin?", "Would you say that a Muslim

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they had good relations with the council of the mosque, and received full cooperation. However, these two pious circles were the exceptions among the twenty-four pious circles studied.

585   Statement made by preacher during the gathering on December 4, 2010.
586   Statement made by participant during the gathering on December 4, 2010.
587   Statement made by participant during the gathering on December 4, 2010.
588   Statement made during the gathering on December 4, 2010.
589   During segregated Islamic gatherings, the women write down their questions and put them in a question box that is handed to the male lecturer. He then reads some of them and answers them via a live connection on a television that is situated in the female space.

woman with only a headscarf is improperly dressed? What about other *ahadith* in which only the *hijab* is obligatory?" and "If the *niqab* is indeed obligatory, how come Muslim women are not allowed to wear them during the *hajj*?" The male preacher did not answer all the questions. He began to say that this was not his opinion or interpretation, and therefore the matter was not debatable. He argued that he was passing on a piece of knowledge on the basis of the "inviolate" reports of the pious forefathers. He insisted that in the end, the choice was that of the "individual sister" to act according to what she thought right.

In their views on imams, my interlocutors adopted different stances. On the whole, they found *imams* not fluent in Dutch or Flemish, and lacking in communication skills. My interlocutors referred to "imported *imams* from Morocco and Turkey" who had not mastered Dutch or Flemish that were the languages spoken in pious circles. Subsequently, my interlocutors stated that the *imams'* lack of knowledge of Dutch-Flemish society prevented them from understanding the complexities women had to face in European societies. My interlocutors criticized the "traditional" knowledge of *imams* that they felt was less applicable to their situations. This local character of pious circles in which specific knowledge was acquired and transmitted according to local needs, was one of the reasons women felt attracted to these circles. However, above all else their membership was related to gender.

Gender

Fourthly, gender was an important reason Muslim women participate in pious circles. As discussed in Chapter One, the Qurʾan mentions qualifications for piety that are addressed specifically to women, for instance, modesty, observation of the *hijab*, seclusion and regulations governing personal hygiene and bodily functions. These themes were also dominant among the interlocutors in pious circles. Especially prominent were what conditions were applicable to women regarding prayer and fasting while menstruating, being pregnant and breastfeeding. The matter of observing gender norms was also often discussed. Pertinently, it was precisely this kind of gendered knowledge that was less often produced in such traditional sites of knowledge production as Islamic organizations and mosques, which made pious circles attractive to women. Furthermore, my interlocutors admitted they found it "embarrassing" to ask male religious authorities questions about menstruation, marriage or sexuality. The opportunity to be inspired by female lecturers was another reason they cited. The convert Anna underlined this explicitly:

> I am not inspired by how men experience Islam. I do get inspired by how women interpret and experience Islam, that comes close to my own experiences. (...) With women,

it's not only about what you are allowed and not allowed, but there is also space for you to express how you shape your religiosity.[590]

Anna said that women-only pious circles provided space for Muslim women to shape their religiosity and share their experiences. Moreover, a woman's interpretations and experiences of Islam inspired her more than men's. Anna's opinion was not shared by all participants of pious circles. However, for some women, becoming inspired by female religious authorities was an important reason for joining female pious circles.[591]

Islamic sisterhood

Finally, the fifth reason for joining pious is related to Islamic sisterhood. The Dutch convert Nadia explained what sisterhood meant for her:

> The sister bond is about experiencing things together, like praying, spending the night together, talking about things you usually don't talk about with others, meeting sisters from different cities (...), you just feel it.[592]

Many interlocutors explained how they built a religious "sister" support network by contacts with other participants in pious circles. In such manner, they motivated, supported and encouraged each other. To most of the women I spoke to and met during my research, being sisters in Islam meant belonging spiritually to a big religious family, the *umma*. It was a bond that transcended ethnicity, culture, race and color, and bound everyone in the name of Islam. It provided a sense of belonging and of being connected to each other. In most cases this could be more powerful and intense than family ties according to my interlocutors. Above all, sisterhood was "experienced" and "felt" by participants in pious circles when they were together. Most interlocutors described it as becoming united and in solidarity with each other. I attended a lecture that addressed the theme "Sisterhood in Islam" at a pious circle in the Netherlands. During this gathering, several reasons for the importance of sisterhood were discussed. All these characteristics were based on verses in the Qurʾan and *ahadith* according to the lecturer Soraya:[593]

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590   Interview with Anna (November 20, 2011).
591   As I shall explain in Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*, being religiously inspired by women is also an important reason for participants in pious circles to ascribe religious authority to female lecturers.
592   Interview with Nadia (May 31, 2010).
593   See Chapter 6.2. for the portrait of Soraya.

> Sisterhood is important to the *umma* and important to the individual believer.(…) Sisterhood is important to the *umma* because it makes the Islamic community stronger; (…) it provides us with a mirror in which we can see ours flaws and correct ourselves (*nasiha*) (…) it encourages us to practice our religion more intensely instead of being lazy, (…) it minimizes our differences, (…) it stops us from being alone (…) it helps us to revive the *sunna* (…) and it helps us to consolidate our will-power.'[594]

Sisterhood functioned as a social support system. In the daily lives of my interlocutors, it meant that they could depend on each other, and also advise and motivate each other on how to become a pious Muslim woman. The main idea was that helping fellow Muslim sisters was an important obligation for all Muslim women; it was voluntary work and should only be done in the name of Allah, and as an act of *daʿwa*. My data reveal strong indications of the importance of the social relations of support and sisterhood. As I discussed in Chapter One, Laurence Iannaccone argues that believers build their stock of religious capital through religious participation.[595] Therefore, Islamic sisterhood (or as Iannaccone puts it 'friendship with fellow worshippers') was an important part of the religious capital of my interlocutors.[596]

On the basis of these five motives why Muslim women join pious circles, I conclude that pious circles were a space in which Islamic knowledge was produced according to Van Bruinessen's model of local knowledge production. These pious circles offered Muslim women space to discuss sensitive matters in an informal and less hierarchical manner. They could address their religious questions directly to female preachers, share their personal experiences and produce and obtain Islamic knowledge in the Dutch and Flemish languages. Above all it was the women-only character that made pious circles so attractive. These pious circles could be regarded as religious communities of practice in which my interlocutors gained and shared religious knowledge. In these religious communities of practice, women shared norms of piety and their interest in Islam. They interacted with each other to produce Islamic knowledge collectively. In doing so, my interlocutors gained direct access to religious resources and accumulated religious capital: the believers' set of religious skills, experiences, knowledge of norms, doctrines and sisterhood.

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594   Statements made by Soraya during the gathering on October 25, 2009.
595   Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Religious Practice: a Human Capital Approach," p. 299.
596   *Ibid.*, p. 299.

5.4. "Keep the river of knowledge flowing": knowledge as a devotional enterprise

The main reason my interlocutors wanted to obtain Islamic knowledge was to become pious or to continue cultivating piety. Therefore, if a woman was to remain pious she needed to "keep the river of knowledge flowing," as one of my interlocutors expressed it. Hence, actively seeking religious knowledge was viewed as necessary to the continual process of piety cultivation. Aware of this requirement, my interlocutors regularly (often weekly, mostly monthly) participated in pious circles to enrich their pool of knowledge continuously. Besides, during pious gatherings I noticed how knowledge acquisition and transmission not only generated a pious lifestyle, but were also devotional practices in themselves.

In the eyes of my interlocutors, the quest for knowledge acquisition was part of exemplary pious behavior. It was greeted by many *mashaʾallahs*. For instance, when I explained to women that I had traveled for hours to attend their meetings, they reacted very positively. They would say how God would reward my efforts in searching for knowledge.[597] My interlocutors viewed the intention of gaining and producing Islamic knowledge, the actual act of reading, listening or attending lectures as commendable acts that would be divinely rewarded. Besides, as far as I was able to observe, my interlocutors participated in pious circles in a ritually pure state of worship. They arrived at the meetings after having performed the *wuduʾ*, one of the forms of ritual washing performed by Muslims before prayer. Although most of them commenced the gathering by praying collectively and in this context performing the *wuduʾ* was necessary in order to pray, those who did not pray were also said to have performed their *wuduʾ*. Through the performance of *wuduʾ*, my interlocutors created a state of ritual purity because they would speak of God, the Qurʾan and the Prophets in a devotional context. They viewed these topics as sacred, and therefore needed a type of purity that had to be created both in their bodies and in their minds. They also ended their gatherings by praying collectively.

Another example that underlined the worship-like character of knowledge acquisition and transmission was the way most women expressed their feeling of closeness to God during meetings. They tried to understand His commands, and they stated they had experienced His presence. As a consequence, the women often became

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597   In the introduction, in the Section on methodology, I explained how my interlocutors' enthusiasm sometimes made me uncomfortable as my purpose in attending their meetings was not searching for knowledge but observing their quest for knowledge. I had no aim of cultivating piety. After explaining my actual purpose, I immediately became an outsider, no longer an insider. This had consequences for the ways in which they would treat me. See introduction 1.9.

emotional and sometimes cried, or raised their hands to speak a *duʿaʾ* collectively.[598] In these invocations they asked God to reward them for their efforts in seeking knowledge. Just as my interlocutors put effort into performing their daily prayers, donning their *hijab* and fasting, they devoted just as much endeavor to attending these gatherings to obtain Islamic knowledge.

For instance, my interlocutors often spoke of the domestic challenges they faced because of their participation in pious circles: finding a babysitter for their children, rearranging household activities such as preparing meals for their families, finding transportation or even convincing their husbands to let them participate in these pious circles were mentioned. Some women confided that their husbands were not always supportive of their religious activities. Speaking in general terms, these interlocutors spoke of their husbands' distrust of their participation in pious circles.[599] Hence, before they were able to join pious circles, they had to convince their husbands that these activities were commendable from an Islamic point of view.

Reviewing my observations in pious circles, I conclude that knowledge acquisition and transmission can be viewed as a form of worship in its own right. The quest for knowledge is regarded as bringing divine reward. Therefore, it becomes a devotional practice similar to other practices of worship, such as wearing the *hijab*.

5.5. The production of gendered knowledge in pious circles

Pious circles offer various types of knowledge, both discursive and non-discursive. Discursive knowledge is what my interlocutors described as "basic knowledge," by which they meant the five pillars of Islam, the six pillars of *iman* and knowledge of the Prophet Muhammad's life. Non-discursive knowledge was what my interlocutors described as "practical" knowledge referring to the performative aspect of Islamic regulations such as prayer and ritual washing. The construction and application of discursive and non-discursive knowledge in pious circles were first and foremost related to gender. At this point I shall present two cases based on my participant observations elucidating the connection between knowledge and gender, and its implications for my interlocutors' ideas on gender roles, and how gendered knowledge is collectively constructed.

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598   The idea that crying increases their *iman* - faith - was common among my interlocutors.
599   This matter will be discussed further in Section 5.6.

Obedience as worship

The meeting I attended in the Netherlands was led by the preacher Soraya, a Dutch convert.[600] Although the theme of the meeting was *Ramadan*, the element of gender very soon came to the fore when Islamic obligations were discussed.[601] One of the participants in the pious circle confessed that she - despite the holy character of *Ramadan* - found *Ramadan* a difficult period. This was not a consequence of fasting, but because of her task of preparing meals for her family. For instance, she sometimes had to shorten or skip her prayers or could not perform the *tarawih* prayers, the extra congregational nightly prayers at the mosque during *Ramadan*.[602] Moreover, she also had to wake up earlier than her husband in order to make the pre-dawn meal called *sahur*. Although she considered taking care of and serving her husband an Islamic obligation as a spouse, she sometimes felt that this task was preventing her from performing the rituals of worship during *Ramadan*. She wondered how to "solve" this difficulty. The participant was experiencing a religious contradiction: Should she perform her religious rituals toward God or miss them in order to fulfill her task as a pious wife?

Soraya and the other participants confirmed her feelings and shared their experiences. At no point did any participant voice disapproval of the gender hierarchy behind her story. Soraya provided space for the participants to interact and share their experiences on this matter. One participant referred to what she had read in an Islamic book.[603] She said that being obedient and serving one's husband was also part of showing piety to Allah and worshipping Allah. In her explanation she used the word ʿ*ibadat*, meaning divine worship.[604] Therefore woman involved should not worry whether she was performing all her religious obligations. Eventually, all the work for her husband would "count as devotional deeds" to Allah. Hence obedience toward their husbands eventually expressed Muslim women's piety toward Allah.

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600   The portrait of Soraya is discussed in Chapter 6.2.

601   The gathering was held on January 30, 2011.

602   ʿ*Tarāwīḥ*" Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Glossary and Index of Terms. Edited by: P.J. Bearman, Th. Banquis, C.E. Bowworth, E. van Donzel, W. P. Heinrichs Bowworth. Brill Online, 2015. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2-Glossary-and-Index-of-Terms/tara-wi-h-SIM_gi_04787 (Accessed 12 January, 2015).

603   Participants in pious circles often referred to what they had once read in a book, even though they could not always provide the title of the book or the author. If the other participants thought that knowledge obtained from a book was unclear, they questioned the book, the author or whether the book had been written by a scholar with a background in a specific school of law.

604   ʿ*Ibadat* refers to the ordinances of divine worship, in this regard submissive obedience to God and individual religious practice. In the works of *fiqh* - Islamic jurisprudence - ʿ*ibadat* designates individual ritual duties, namely: the daily prayers, fasting, alms and *hajj*.

Other participants and Soraya confirmed what she said. They stated that they also learned this fact during a lecture they once heard or a book they once read. By giving a reference, they validated this explanation as convincing and justified. These assertions meant that the knowledge was socially constructed and thereafter approved by the women in the gathering. In these sorts of discussions, the participants in this pious circle were transformed into a small 'interpretative community' in which shared meaning was developed through on-going social interaction.[605] The participants depended on their shared interpretations and beliefs to provide each other with meaning and interpretation on the basis of a text someone had read. Consequently, all the other women with comparable experiences benefited from the interpretation provided.

"Have you now become a shaykh?"

The second case is also an example of how gendered knowledge is collectively constructed. I attended a pious circle in Belgium that consisted of only Moroccan-Flemish Born-Muslims plus one Flemish convert.[606] The circle had a permanent lecturer, Jahida, a Moroccan-Flemish Born-Muslim. This circle was different because its members followed the religious and political teachings of ʿAbd al-Salam Yasin,[607] who was a religious leader in Morocco. The participants were all married to men who were affiliated with Yasin's movement, *al-ʿAdl wa al-Ihsan*, Arabic for 'Justice and Charity.' Their husbands - like the women in this circle - were active in national and international networks of Yasin's movement and were involved in political developments in Morocco. They attended local conferences organized by adherents of *al-ʿAdl wa al-Ihsan*. This was the only pious circle I encountered during my fieldwork that focused not only on religious teachings but also on the politics of the country

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605 Stanley Fish uses the term interpretive communities as a theoretical concept to indicate that readings of a text are culturally constructed by members of interpretative communities who employ different interpretive strategies. These strategies are learned and, for this reason, Fish argues that there are no 'fixed texts' but only interpretive strategies 'making' or giving form to a text. In other words, texts only have meaning within a set of cultural assumptions. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, (London, England: Harvard University Press 1980) pp. 338-355.

606 The gathering took place on March 1, 2012.

607 ʿAbd al-Salam Yasin (born 1928, Marrakesh, Morocco - died December 13, 2012) was a Moroccan religious leader who began practicing Sufism in the 1960s. By the early 1970s, he had adopted a more political view of Islam and was influenced by the writings of such Egyptian Islamists as Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. After sending a lengthy open letter to the king of Morocco advocating the establishment of an Islamic state - a consistent theme in his work - he was confined to a mental institution (1974–77). In 1986 he founded a movement known as *al-ʿAdl wa al-Ihsan* ('Justice and Charity'), that became one of the most prominent elements in Morocco's Islamic opposition. Yasin was held under house arrest from 1989 to 2000. Henri Lauzière, "Post-Islamism and the Religious Discourse of Abd Al-Salam Yasin," In: *International Journal of Middle East Studies,* Vol. 37, no. 2, (May 2005) pp. 241-261.

of origin. Although Morocco was their point of reference, they nevertheless sought Islamic knowledge for the purpose of applying it to their lives in Belgium.

During one of their meetings, the discussion was about a book entitled *Tanwir al-muʾminat* ("Enlightening the Believing Women") written by Yasin in which he explains the perspective of Islam on women.[608] The women in the pious circle explained that his book did "justice" to the position of women in Islam, and how it had "strengthened" them. The women drew upon what they considered Yasin's "progressive" perspective on gender. They also passed the book on to their husbands so they could absorb the same knowledge and "begin treating their wives accordingly." The idea behind their action was that "if they are to improve themselves, men can only be convinced by authoritative Islamic knowledge."[609]

One participant said her husband had read the book three times, but still had "difficulties" living according to Yasin's recommendations. For instance, Yasin's advice that taking care of the household was a joint undertaking and viewing housekeeping not solely as the task of a woman, was one of the "difficulties" her husband faced. The participant said that according to a *hadith sahih* - a sound tradition - Salman the Persian - one of the Prophet's companions and the first Persian convert to Islam - kneaded dough. The Prophet himself also used to help his wives with the household chores. However, the participant no longer used the example of the Prophet because it had not led to any improvements. These pieces of knowledge on ideal gender roles had failed to convince her husband. She now told her husband that he should take care of the house because it was "their" house and they both had a share in looking after it.

Another participant, who was a convert, explained that her Born-Muslim husband had also read the book, but eventually put it aside. After confronting her husband with verses and *ahadith* from the book, her husband asked her: "Have you become a *shaykh* now, an ʿ*alim*?" She also concluded that, despite the knowledge provided by an authoritative religious leader like Yasin, men refused to implement it in their marital relationships. Culture, upbringing and personal character traits were mentioned as reasons men "don't change for the better."

This case demonstrates the way knowledge is constructed collectively and is a form of 'authenticating Islam' as studied by Lara Deeb discussed above. Deeb explains her interlocutors believed that men would eventually come to understand gender

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608   The book is called: *Tanwir al-muʾminat* (Bayrut: Dar Lubnan, 2003).
609   Statement of a participant during the gathering on March 1, 2012.

roles and relations from the perspective of an authenticated Islam.[610] Authentication here was an indication that women aimed to establish 'a true or correct meaning' of Islamic beliefs and practices. In Deeb's case, religious textual interpretations by religious authorities were used by her interlocutors to teach men to share domestic responsibilities in order to facilitate women's public participation. Hence, through authenticated interpretations of religious texts, women set out to reconfigure what they believed to be "traditional" gender roles.[611]

These cases demonstrate how becoming pious and obtaining gendered knowledge in a pious circle influenced my interlocutors' perspectives on gender division. In terms of gender roles, the participants of the first case adhered to the idea of gender equity by confirming the complementarity of specific gender roles, in which the wife's main task as housewife and caretaker is reinforced. The purpose of the participants was not to reconfigure Islamic ideas on gender division, but to underline the existing ideas of gender equity. The participants reconfigured spousal obedience as a type of worship, and by doing so, reinforced and prioritized patriarchal norms. This reinforcement of a traditional gender role division echoed the principle of gender equity.[612]

In the second case, the participants searched for gendered knowledge to feel empowered to confront patriarchal practices. They obtained gendered knowledge to improve their gender relations. They tried to find religious arguments to confront patriarchal norms and initiate religious reform. This example resembles the Muslim feminist ideas described in Chapter One. Muslim feminist scholars like Asma Barlas, Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed, argue that a more progressive interpretation of such Islamic textual sources as the Qurʾan can create a role division between the genders that is more just.[613] Hence, the second example demonstrates how an Islamic feminist project can operate on a micro-level in a pious circle.

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610 Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*, p. 215.
611 *Ibid.,* p. 20.
612 As I discussed in Chapter One, gender equity refers to the idea that men and women are equivalent but not equal in nature because God has created them differently. Hence women should be the caretakers of the households in the private sphere and men the breadwinners in the public sphere. The purpose of this division between the genders was to maintain the "natural order" in which men's and women's roles are of equal worth before God.
613 Muslim feminists challenge the traditional role division and argue that in its essence the Qurʾan is egalitarian and anti-patriarchal. They are convinced that, by reinterpreting the religious sources of Islam, the egalitarian nature of Islam can be revived. I want to emphasize that, although my interlocutors would not call themselves feminists, their type of struggle against patriarchy was similar to that of Muslim feminists. They were trying to bring change into the lives of Muslim women by reinterpreting Islamic sources about gender role division.

Empowerment through Islamic knowledge

I have now reached a point at which I want to discuss the experiences of empowerment stated by the participants in the two previous cases. As I have shown, the type of empowerment my interlocutors described takes place in the context of Islamic knowledge acquisition and transmission. By improving their Islamic knowledge my interlocutors felt empowered to devise strategies to confront or to surrender to limitations they experienced. In the first case, the participants felt empowered by surrendering themselves to their role as pious wives. This meant enduring and submitting to those patriarchal norms and then reconfiguring them so that their situation was transformed into something religiously beneficial to them ("Missing out religious rituals towards God but fulfilling the task of a pious wife"). Their acceptance reinforced the traditional gender role division.

In the second example, the participants felt empowered by their interpretation of Yasin's book. Their acquisition of religious knowledge was driven by the purpose of confronting patriarchal norms. The Islamic knowledge they acquired offered the participants the religious arguments they needed to confront patriarchy. Their attempts were unsuccessful as their confrontations did not stimulate their husbands to take a greater share in the household tasks. However, feeling empowered did lead to questioning their gender role division at home.

In both cases, to my interlocutors feeling empowered meant deriving religious arguments from the study of religious sources and the thoughts of historical Muslim figures in order to negotiate patriarchy. I consciously use the verb 'to negotiate' here. I understand to negotiate both in terms of to make compromises (the first case presented) and to engage in confrontation (the second case presented). My interlocutors' empowerment can be viewed as finding a middle ground from which they could question certain patriarchal beliefs and practices, and finding strategies either to surrender to them or confront them. I would like to emphasize that my interlocutors had no explicit agenda to fight male domination. In her study on *shiʿi* women in Lebanon, Lara Deeb states that women's chief motive in confronting patriarchal norms is not the 'emancipation of individualized selves but equity in the possibilities for practicing a pious and moral lifestyle.'[614] Although this is also true of my interlocutors to a certain extent, I would like to stress that their motives in condemning "misogynist" practices were also an attempt to improve their social position.[615] Dur-

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614   Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*, p. 218.
615   As I shall explain by presenting the cases of Jamila and Zohra in Section 5.7., some interlocutors consciously stated that they were confronting patriarchal norms that prohibit women from obtaining Islamic knowledge and moving beyond the domestic space. They considered confronting "misogynist" norms part of their piety endeavor.

ing many gatherings and interviews, my interlocutors spoke explicitly of unfairness toward women in the Muslim *umma*, and exchanged Islamic knowledge with the intention of improving their circumstances. Although they did not always succeed in their endeavor to achieve gender equality, among my interlocutors condemning "misogynist" practices was experienced as something more than creating equity in order to be pious. It was empowering and, to a certain extent, an emancipation, in the broadest sense.[616]

My conclusion from the cases presented and many others to come is that Muslim women interpret Islamic knowledge and actively seek to apply it in their lives. But, does applying gendered knowledge lead to reforming gender roles or reinforcing traditional gender roles, or perhaps both? Both the developments described in the cases above can be found among Muslim women in pious circles. Without exception, my interlocutors had adapted to patriarchal norms, leading to inequality toward women in Muslim communities. However, obtaining gendered knowledge did help them to put their experienced inequalities into perspective: they either found a strategy to confront those norms or surrendered to them.

5.6. Religious autonomy

In this Section I discuss how those interlocutors who had established women-only pious circles had done this so that they would be able to articulate their religiosity independently of - male - religious authorities and institutions, and study the sources of Islam autonomously. I suggest that my interlocutors did not explicitly aim to resist male religious power. Nevertheless, increased female religious autonomy could be experienced as a challenge by local - male - religious authorities. I understand religious autonomy broadly as the power to bolster one's own religiosity independently of religious authorities and institutions. I present two cases of pious circles that were both situated in the Netherlands. On the basis of my participant observation in these pious circles and interviews with their founders, I demonstrate how the knowledge that is disseminated in pious circles is less dependent on religious authorities and male forms of control or authorization.

Contesting knowledge

The first example is that of Hagar, the convert to Islam whom I introduced in Chapter Four. Hagar established a pious circle in 2003. Her purpose was to create a space in which participants could exchange knowledge of Islam, and deepen personal contact. Specifically, through contact with fellow sisters, Hagar was attempting to generate

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616   I shall return to themes of empowerment and emancipation in Chapter 6.2.: Portraits of Soraya and Dahlia.

sisterhood. In her pious circle, Hagar - and a convert friend Nadia - addressed many themes. One particularly important theme was the rights and obligations of Muslim women in marriage. In her lectures, Hagar focused on sharing a "basic practical knowledge of Islam." She described this as non-discursive knowledge related to Islamic rituals, such as prayer, fasting, giving *zakat* or how to wash the deceased. She explained that "basic practical knowledge" was not "knowledge of *shariʿa* or *fiqh*" as she did not know much about those subjects.[617] "Sharing knowledge from our experiences as Muslim women" was, Hagar said, her main purpose in transmitting Islamic knowledge.[618]

Lara Deeb argues that women's religious knowledge and practices are often stereotyped as 'folk' in belief and 'practice-based' in religion, as opposed to that of men being 'orthodox' in belief and 'text-based' in religion.[619] Contrary to Deeb's interlocutors, Hagar and many other interlocutors in the present study did not experience the 'practice-based' ways of Islam as problematic. However, even though my interlocutors certainly did not view their ways of believing as 'folk,' most of my interlocutors thought that Muslims - both men and women - could only become involved in the process of religious textual analysis if they had followed a religious education. If that was not the case, the transmission of religious knowledge should be restricted to the rituals of Islam only. Therefore, many interlocutors, among them Hagar, emphasized their experiences as Muslim women in the context of Islamic knowledge transmission.

Hagar intended to teach participants how to put their obligations and virtues to practical use. When Hagar or the participants in her pious circle had to deal with 'text-based' questions, they searched for the answer in religious sources. For instance, they looked in books, on Internet sites they considered authoritative or they consulted someone with "profound knowledge." After she had explained this, Hagar stated that they were not "producing knowledge but reproducing existing knowledge by making it accessible" to the participants in the pious circle.[620]

Hagar's greatest challenge in trying to organize the gatherings was that she had to look for a different space every time they were held. Sometimes they rented a community center but these facilities did not always meet the requirement of gender segregation. Therefore, Hagar approached the local Moroccan mosque and asked

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617   Interestingly, all the mentioned rituals are part of Islamic Law and by that are knowledge of the *shariʿa*.
618   Interview with Hagar (May 31, 2010).
619   Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*, p. 122.
620   Interview with Hagar (May 31, 2010).

its council if they could use the female space in the mosque. Hagar explained her motivation: 'At one point we said: "Our gatherings are about Islam. Therefore, our activities belong in a mosque."[621] Hagar and Nadia were allowed to use the mosque space. They decided to organize a large Islamic conference about marriage, the obligations of women in marriage, divorce and polygyny. The themes were already important to them. However, they had to cancel their program after being criticized:

> We then heard from a male teacher in the mosque: "Who do you think you are? You have no knowledge of Islam!" He explained to us that he, not us, was the real teacher; we were on the level of students. We had not followed an Islamic education and so we were not in the position to pass on knowledge about Islam to others. [622]

The male Born-Muslim educator sent Hagar an email telling her that she had to stop their pious circle lectures because Hagar and her group were spreading "incorrect" knowledge about Islam. He stated that they must fear *Allah*, and what they were doing was "terribly wrong." As an alternative, they should join his classes, because if they did, they would have "sufficient" knowledge of Islam and would not need to search for more. Hagar was disappointed as he was setting the limits of their knowledge production and acquisition in a problematic way. Moreover, he also defined what was "proper knowledge of Islam" and what was not for them. After her experience with him, Hagar held her meetings in her living-room. She no longer wished to cooperate with mosques or Islamic organizations.

Finding the correct knowledge

The next case illuminates how one pious circle encouraged religious independence. I interviewed its founders, the Dutch convert, Iman, and the Born-Muslim from Surinam, Aatifa.[623] They had founded the pious circle in 2009 and held their weekly meetings on Sundays at a local community center and not in a mosque. Iman and Aatifa were very conscious of their choice of the venue of their pious circle. They did not want to be connected to a mosque, as they said that most mosques did not offer women-only courses and instruction. Importantly they stated that they did not want to work with men: "We want to do it ourselves, just like Aisha, the Prophet's wife did."[624]

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621   Interview with Hagar (May 31, 2010).
622   Interview with Hagar (May 31, 2010).
623   Interview with Aatifa and Iman (November 26, 2010).
624   Interview with Aatifa and Iman (November 26, 2010).

Their reference to the historical figure of Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, legitimized their quest for knowledge. In their view, they were following in Aisha's footsteps as she was known to have been extremely knowledgeable. Furthermore, Iman gave one more reason they preferred a community center to a mosque:

> Fortunately we do not hold our meetings in a mosque, because we want to be independent. We do not want to have to connect ourselves to an organization and become financially dependent on them.[625]

The expenses incurred by the pious circle were paid by Iman and Aatifa personally. The weekly lessons were given by a Born-Muslim woman who had studied Islam in *al-Azhar* in Egypt. They established the pious circle to help Muslim women find "genuine knowledge in this chaotic abundance of Islamic knowledge." Aatifa explained:

> You are always supposed to make inquiries; [ask, S.N.] what is right and what is wrong knowledge. Many people have lost their way. Who should they follow? We tell them: "When you don't know things, find the evidence." For instance, search in the *ahadith* of Muslim or Bukhari. Seek evidence in the Qurʾan and the *ahadith*. Just look things up and check that the source is right. [626]

Aatifa and Iman were in fact encouraging other women to deconstruct knowledge. To achieve this aim, they attempted to offer the participants in their pious circle skills that were needed to study the religious sources individually. By providing Arabic lessons and studying the Qurʾan and the *ahadith* on a weekly basis, they intended to teach the participants the tools required to study religious sources. For instance, Iman and Aatifa also took into account whether a *hadith* is *sahih* (sound), *hasan* (good) or *daʿif* (weak). By this method, Iman and Aatifa wanted to familiarize the participants in the pious circle with the foundations of the Traditions. Aatifa also said that they took care to emphasize the differences in interpretations and opinions among religious scholars:

> In our eyes, the Qurʾan and the *ahadith* are the most important religious sources. If you can't find an answer on the basis of these two sources, then study the opinions of different religious authorities. Not just one, but many. Some, for instance, just follow al-Albani and no other authority.[627] That is not what we want. We want to put all the

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625   Interview with Aatifa and Iman (November 26, 2010).
626   Interview with Aatifa and Iman (November 26, 2010).
627   Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani (1914 –1999) was an Albanian Islamic scholar who specialized in the fields of *ahadith* and *fiqh*. He was a well-known proponent of Salafism. Kamaruddin Amin,

sources alongside each other. So in our pious circle, if someone says something, we say: "What is your evidence? Bring it along. Search it. What did you read in it? Who said it and why?" [628]

Iman and Aatifa were building the stock of their participants' religious capital. They did so by offering them religious knowledge, but were also simultaneously providing them with religious skills and tools to enhance their own religious autonomy. By teaching the participants in their pious circle the plurality of religious interpretations, their purpose was to instill awareness, a critical attitude and an understanding of how religious sources functioned. They encouraged participants to study Islamic sources independently and understand Islam individually. While they did this, they were also underlining the importance of the traditional religious authorities as points of references. Despite the fact that Iman and Aatifa were keen to make the participants aware of the diversification of Islamic knowledge, they did actually encourage them to adhere to the teachings of such religious authorities as Muhammad Nasiruddin al-Albani.

The cases presented show how knowledge production and acquisition can go hand in hand with finding space that generates religious independence and autonomy. Claiming space for knowledge acquisition was in this instance a contested and gendered space. In Chapter Two, I elaborated on Michel Foucault's ideas of power. Foucault states that individuals are not powerless and oppressed, but active agents and 'the vehicles of power and not its point of application.'[629] Foucault thought of the individual as the performer of power and the negotiator of local forms of power. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of power, I argue that my interlocutors exercised power through their production of Islamic knowledge. My interlocutors did not claim religious power, nor did they assert that they possessed it. However, through their production of Islamic knowledge, they did produce power, or, to paraphrase Foucault, 'exercise' power. My interlocutors derived power from an Islamic framework that encouraged them to obtain and transmit Islamic knowledge in order to become pious and promote piety among other women.

This process illustrates that the purpose of my interlocutors was to articulate their religiosity independently of male religious authorities, mosques, or Islamic organizations. My interlocutors did not explicitly set out to resist male religious power.

"Nāṣiruddīn al-Albānī on Muslim's Ṣaḥīḥ: A Critical Study of His Method," In: *Islamic Law and Society*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2004): pp. 149-176.

628   Interview with Aatifa and Iman (November 26, 2010).

629   Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*, p. 98.

However, despite their strategy of creating women-only spaces, they discovered that increased female religious autonomy could lead to confrontation with male religious authorities. Female expansion of religious space outside the traditional spaces of knowledge production could be experienced as a challenge by local - male - religious authorities.[630] When this happened, pious circles by women could become contested spaces.

5.7. Improving the *umma*

This Section focuses on how some interlocutors feel empowered by Islamic knowledge to initiate Islam-inspired activities. Their Islam-inspired activities support my findings in Chapter Four about the relationship between the pious individual and the pious collective. I argue how becoming a pious woman and gaining Islamic knowledge becomes an instrument for the improvement of the social conditions of the Muslim community. I present two detailed narratives of Muslim women whom I interviewed, both of them are of second-generation Moroccan-Flemish Born-Muslims living in Belgium.

Becoming like Aisha

Jamila was twenty-seven and had been raised as a Muslim in Belgium.[631] As a child, she attended the mosque and followed lessons in Qurʾan and Arabic. When she became older, she experienced hostility from Belgians because of her religious background, especially when she - at the age of nine - decided to wear the headscarf.[632] From that moment on, she was criticized and had to endure negative reactions from her non-Muslim environment. She wanted to know why Belgians took such offense at the headscarf and Islam. When she was sixteen, she concluded that she could no longer be her "Muslim" self in Belgium. Hence, she decided to go to an Islamic residential for girls named *Jamia al-Hudaa* in Nottingham, England, to learn more about Islam. She studied there for three years and became acquainted with Muslims - students and teachers - from different nationalities and cultures. She followed lessons in Arabic and various Islamic sciences such as *fiqh*, *tajwid* and Islamic history. Jamila asserted that the Islamic knowledge she gained and the acquaintance she had made with "different types of Muslims and Islams" made her more tolerant and opened up a new world for her:

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630   In Chapter 6 *Female religious authorities*, I shall return to this matter.
631   Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).
632   The headscarf was a gift from her Palestinian friend and she thought that it would be "fun" to wear it, not being aware of the implications that it would have for her.

In the mosque, it was very simple. You went to a mosque, you learned Arabic and the Qurʾan and that was it. It was superficial. You listened to a lecture and saw older people. But what did I see in England [at the boarding-school, S.N.]? I saw active Muslims and I gained knowledge that went much deeper than just Arabic and the Qurʾan. I learned about history, I learned about the Prophet, his wives, how active they were, what great examples they are and that you can learn from them. Aisha was my great example. She had done so many things, I wanted to become like her. And Hind bint ʿUtbah[633] was a true hero (...). After becoming Muslim, she didn't cringe back, no! She activated men! She was a type of woman who makes me think: it would have been great if she were alive now.[634]

Jamila did not experience a religious awakening like many other Born-Muslims in the present study. As she said, from a very young age she decided to commit herself to becoming the ideal pious Muslim woman. Historical female figures became Jamila's inspiration in her quest for more Islamic knowledge and in her becoming "determined" as a woman. Reciting the Qurʾan became her hobby and "specialty" during the years she studied abroad. The art of *tajwid* fascinated her: "In mosques you always see men reciting, women automatically find that this is something for men and not for women."[635] Jamila disagreed, and when she returned to Belgium - at the age of twenty - she voluntarily began teaching women *tajwid* in an Islamic organization. She wanted to teach women how to use their vocal cords to recite the Qurʾan "in all its beauty." After a while, she wanted more: "I thought: if Aisha is my inspiration, I cannot stop here." With a friend, she moved to Jordan and followed lessons in the science of *tajwid* at a private school for five months. She was awarded her diploma and also received permission - *ijaza* - to teach other women and also award them a *tajwid* diploma. After returning from Jordan, she married a Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim man.

Shortly afterwards, Jamila began to feel the need to share her knowledge and established a women's educational institute called "Guidance" in which she has been active since.[636] Through her institute, Jamila hopes to educate women about Islam and the upbringing of children. Her women's institute has over 200 students and a children's wing. The council of the institute consists of thirteen women, including

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633 According to my interlocutor Jamila, Hind bint ʿUtbah was an Arab woman who lived in the late 6th and early 7th century CE. Before her conversion, she originally opposed the Prophet Muhammad and the Muslim community. However, Hind eventually accepted the message of Islam and is now considered to be among the ranks of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad by *sunni* Muslims.
634 Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).
635 Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).
636 She established 'The Guidance' in 2008.

Jamila herself. They jointly give lessons in Arabic, *tajwid*, the Qurʾan and *ahadith*, alongside pedagogical classes in which Islamic teachings are combined with knowledge of Flemish society. For instance, they teach how to support your children during puberty, how to give sexual education, what Islam teaches about homosexuality and a host of other topics. She also gave lessons about the rights of women. This theme was very important to her because she had noticed that some men forbade their wives to attend her classes:

> Some men decide for their wives that they don't need knowledge of Islam. That their wives should just stick to the children's upbringing, prepare their dinners and make sure that their houses are clean.[637]

Her purpose was through her institute to make "every Muslim woman an Aisha or Khadija" and by that make them active beyond their domestic spaces. To achieve this goal, Jamila argued that contemporary Muslim women should learn more from inspirational historical Muslim women. In such way, Jamila hoped to make women "steadfast."

Jamila insisted on working independently: "To show the outside world that women can stand on their own two feet and work hard." [638] For this reason, she did not want to cooperate with mosques or Islamic organizations. Jamila's husband was - like her - involved in the process of knowledge production and was supportive of her activities. They also went together to different Islamic countries to follow Islamic study programs. Nevertheless, she has personally experienced how some men think that women's knowledge should be curtailed. For instance, she and her husband followed an Islamic study program with religious scholars in Kuwait.[639] During the program, she noticed how some men did not like the fact that she was asking religious scholars questions in the presence of males, and that some men did not want to join the outdoor activities if women were also present:

> I thought: I as a woman have just as much right as you men to gain knowledge. I find it very important for men to hear the type of questions women want to ask, so that men understand women's Islamic rights.[640]

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637   Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).
638   Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).
639   Jamila could not recall the name of the program or the religious scholars present.
640   Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).

Jamila is one of the few women in the present study who emphasized the importance of the mixing of the genders in the context of knowledge production. She wanted to make men aware that women also have specific questions about their gender rights. Therefore, men should allow women to make use of these rights. For instance, Jamila had asked questions about the rights of women in the case of divorce, to which the religious scholar had replied that women too can ask for a divorce. Jamila said that she had not known this fact and in her community many women were not aware either. Furthermore, Jamila referred to the fact that Aisha - as a woman - taught and advised men about Islam and how women went to the Prophet for Islamic knowledge. By these examples, she wanted to legitimize that religious knowledge production and acquisition transcend gender:

> Some men think that a woman should not speak in public or let her voice be heard. Islam does not say anything about that! [641]

Her narrative demonstrates how in some cases Islamic knowledge acquisition can begin as a personal trajectory, and lead to initiating Islam-inspired activities with the aim of benefiting the Islamic *umma* as a whole. What commenced as a personal interest in Islam had led to the establishment of a women's educational institute in which Jamila taught over 200 women and children about Islam. Her previous education at an Islamic boarding-school for girls (*Jamia al-Hudaa*) in England, her courses in the sciences of *tajwid* in Jordan and the many study trips she has undertaken to Islamic countries, have placed her in a position from which she can transmit Islamic knowledge to other women. Her experience has determined her to work on the production of gendered knowledge and to empower women, to make every woman as "steadfast" as the historical figures of Aisha and Khadija. Jamila hoped to bring about change in the *umma* and to improve the religious and social conditions of Muslim women and children.

Building a mosque

The next case shows - as had happened to Jamila - how knowledge acquisition can lead to Islam-inspired activism with the aim of building a strong *umma* of conscious Muslim believers. Zahra was twenty-five and raised as a Muslim.[642] As a child, she followed Arabic and Qurʾan lessons in a mosque in the city of Antwerp. Unlike Jamila, she was very fond of the *imam* who taught her Arabic and Qurʾan: "His teachings had a great impact on me, and he has influenced my quest for knowledge."[643] Zahra

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641   Interview with Jamila (June 17, 2011).
642   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).
643   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).

affirmed that the *imam* had the pedagogic skills necessary to teach children. When she grew up, there were many Islamic activities for women in their mosque and other Islamic organizations. However, for her mother and the generation before her that had not been the case: "Back then, men did not take it for granted that women could leave their houses and follow lessons in Islam."[644] The wife of the *imam* was the first woman in her community to initiate activities for women only. Unfortunately, she did not receive any cooperation from the mosque board. Therefore she established her own pious circle, in which Zahra and her sister became participants.

Throughout her childhood, Zahra was supported by her mother in her quest for Islamic knowledge. Zahra's mother did not speak or write Flemish, and was also illiterate in the Moroccan - Berber - language. However, raising her nine children Islamically was very important to her. Her devotion meant that Zahra was raised in an Islamic environment in which becoming Islamically active had become an important part of her life. When Zahra became a teenager, her parents decided to move to a village, as they found the social environment and the schools in Antwerp were deteriorating. They moved to a small village with a small Moroccan-Flemish community. In their village, they had one small mosque for men that did not organize activities for women.

Meanwhile, Zahra and her sister continued to follow the Islamic lessons given by the *imam's* wife, traveling back to the city twice a week by train. Zahra found it very important not to neglect her studies. The mosque in their village had no courses for women, only for small children. Besides, Zahra mentioned that the mosque teacher was inept in his teaching of the children, and was often not even present in class. Hence, Zahra and her sister decided to become active in the mosque and teach children Arabic, and founded an *anashid* - religious chants - group for children as well. However, they faced difficulties:

> It was not really successful, you know, the mentality of men there...they were so difficult. You did not have a space of your own. They intruded into your class and regularly checked what you were teaching children. We did not feel like this was our class and we were the teachers. (...) And there was nothing for women or girls. As girls grew older, they were no longer allowed by their parents to come to the mosque, because the children's classes were gender mixed. The parents wanted their girls to be taught by a woman in a women's class, but there was none.[645]

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644   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).
645   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).

The *imam* in their mosque wanted to control the knowledge that Zahra and her sister were transmitting. He would often enter their class or check their teaching materials. Zahra and her sister felt that their religious autonomy in producing Islamic knowledge was being restricted. They also thought that he eroded their religious authority as teachers.[646] As a consequence, Zahra and her sister stopped their lessons in the mosque but they still felt that they should look for other ways to provide their community with Islamic knowledge. Zahra believed that it is the duty of every Muslim to spread knowledge of Islam.[647]

Meanwhile, her family had opened a small shop that had an extra room in the back. Zahra and her sister made use of that space as a classroom and began teaching children Arabic and the Qurʾan. In this space, Zahra and her sister could produce religious knowledge without being controlled or authorized by any male religious authority such as an *imam*. However, when they had to close the shop, Zahra and her sister again had to stop their activities. Subsequently, Zahra - by then sixteen - decided to launch a petition in which she requested the local - village - council to assist her in obtaining space for Muslim women's activities. She and her sister collected signatures from Muslim women in her village. Although the local council had initially reacted positively to their request, in the end it did not do anything for them: "This had to do with the narrow-mindedness of the men in the village-mosque," Zahra recalled.[648] While she and her sister were busy collecting signatures, the men in her community showed resistance to their project. Some men thought Zahra and her sister had acted provocatively by trying to "set up women against men." Concerned about the situation, the council of the mosque paid a visit to the local council, and blamed Zahra's father and family for trying to "sow unrest" in the Muslim community. The members actually confronted her father and told him not to "upset" the community:

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646   The matter of religious authority is discussed in Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*.
647   As did Zahra and Jamila, many Muslims in the present study stated that those who have knowledge of Islam, have the responsibility to share their knowledge with others. This matter is also discussed in the *ahadith*. For instance, according to *ahadith* collected by al-Tirmidhi, who was a Persian Islamic scholar and one of the collectors of *ahadith,* the Prophet Muhammad said: 'Acquire knowledge and impart it to the people,' and this is followed by another *hadith* in which he said: 'Knowledge from which no benefit is derived is like a treasure out of which nothing is spent in the cause of God.' See Al-Tirmidhi, *ahadith* 107 and 108.
648   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).

> At some point, my father, my brother and sister had to go to the police station and make a statement! This had nothing to do with my father because we, the women, were just trying to start a petition in order to obtain space for our activities.[649]

Zahra explained that the male community did not want them to "wake their wives and daughters up from their winter sleep."[650] Zahra was forced to see how the growing enthusiasm of the women to become active was dashed by their husbands. According to Zahra, their activism "terrified" the men in her village because they were not used to seeing women demand and claim things. On account of Zahra's petition, her father had been cast in the role of the local "agitator" and was no longer welcome in the local mosque. Although it was very normal for Zahra and her family to be Islamically active and organize activities, she recognized that the village, back then, was not ready for this modernity. However Zahra stated that women also had a share in the disapproval. When she was convincing women to join their project of obtaining space for Islamic lessons, she noticed that many women seem to think that it was not very important:

> Culturally, a woman can't do much even though Islamically, women are allowed to be active. Historically Muslim women were much more active than women nowadays. I tell women: "Study Islamic history, and see what Muslim women used to do! Be ashamed of yourself, that you are doing practically nothing!" In those times, men even depended on the knowledge of women, on their opinions and religious advice. Then I wonder: How come that this has changed nowadays? We [women, S.N.] have more resources now, we have more space, we have become modern and can initiate things much more easily than back then. So why is this not happening?[651]

Zahra expressed her frustrations. She did not understand why many Muslim women were not inspired to engage in Islamic activities by the example of historical Muslim women. Like Jamila, Zahra used historical Muslim women's activism, piety and knowledge as a point of reference. However, she viewed her culture as an obstacle that prohibits women from becoming active outside the domestic space. As one of the few among my interlocutors, Zahra thought that Muslim women themselves also had a share in not being Islamically active. Zahra's mission to make Muslim women active did not end at that point and her narrative continued. After finishing secondary school, Zahra and her sister moved to the Netherlands in order to study Islam and Arabic at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. Zahra and her sister wanted

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649   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).
650   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).
651   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).

to deepen their knowledge of Islam. However, after a year, she had to stop her study as she could not find proper accommodation. After returning to Belgium, Zahra followed the course for an Arabic-French interpreter. While spending two years studying for this diploma, she wanted to resume studying Islam and Arabic. Gaining Islamic knowledge was still her primary interest. She decided to study Islamic sciences in Arabic and went to The European Institute of Human Sciences (EIHS) in Château-Chinon, France. In the meantime, she was engaged - and later married - yet she continued studying Arabic and *shariʿa* for three years at the EIHS. However, after her son was born, she had to stop and move back to Belgium.

Meanwhile, her mother regretted the fact that there was still no space for women's Islamic activities in her village. So, when a single house - divided into two main spaces - came up for sale, her mother decided to buy the house from her personal savings and some borrowed money, and rebuilt the second Section of the house as a mosque. Her mother's intention was to perform a voluntary charity - *sadaqa* - by offering the community a mosque. This place was meant not only for worship, but was also to have a societal function, a place in which children and women were encouraged to engage in Islamic activities. Interestingly, it was her mother who took initiative in providing space for women and children to become religiously active. Hence, her mother disproved Zahra's observation that the first generation Muslim women were not eager to be Islamically involved.

Although it seemed an impossible endeavor to accumulate the amount of money, they managed "miraculously," Zahra explained. They even organized charity evenings to raise money for the part that became a mosque. Eventually, Zahra's mother bought the house and became the president of the board of the mosque, meaning that all decisions to do with the mosque were made by her.[652] Nowadays Zahra and her sister use the mosque classroom to teach Arabic and the Qurʾan to children and also run a pious circle for women every Sunday. Both sisters make use of the knowledge they have gained while studying Islam and Arabic in the Netherlands and France. Besides teaching women and children Islam and Arabic, both sisters work in a secondary school as Islamic teachers. In the meantime, women from their village and neighboring villages have also joined their pious circle. Zahra noted how things have changed:

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652   According to my fieldwork in Belgium, Zahra's mother was actually the first female president of a mosque board in Belgium. Before she took office, there were no records of female presidents of mosques in Belgium. When I told Zahra's mother this, she smiled and said that she was not aware of it.

When we moved to this village, we never saw any women. They did not even come out of their houses let alone go to work. Now if you look [eleven years later, S.N.], you see how many women venturing outside their houses and joining our activities. It has been a huge development.'[653]

Lately, converts have also been attending their pious circle. Zahra said that this was because of the fact that their main language in class is Flemish. Zahra also organizes annual Islamic conferences for women addressing different themes. The last conference was about women in the *umma*, for which she asked her teacher - the *imam's* wife - to give a lecture.

In a comparison of the narratives of Zahra and Jamila many similarities appear. Just like Jamila, Zahra deepened her knowledge of Islam by studying Islamic sciences abroad. While Jamila had less positive experiences in the mosque, Zahra had a happier experience as the *imam* in her mosque and his wife, inspired her and motivated her to take her quest for knowledge seriously. As did Jamila, Zahra made use of her acquired knowledge by transmitting it to a new generation of Muslim women and children. Both women are examples of Born-Muslim women who were "advanced" in Islam. Their increased religious capital has placed them in a position from which they can transmit Islamic knowledge to both Born-Muslims and converts. Both women emphasized women's roles as the educators of their children and, by that, the *umma*. Through these narratives I have argued that although becoming an 'Islamic ethical subject' in the words of Saba Mahmood is the main goal of my interlocutors, the cultivation of piety could also be a way of generating an Islamic ethical community.[654] My interlocutors transcended the purpose of gaining Islamic knowledge for their personal benefit. Their examples show that Islamic knowledge acquisition can be more than a personal trajectory and could be an attempt to transform the Muslim *umma* at large. They carried on their Islam-inspired activism, despite the challenges they faced. Their goal was to improve the social conditions of the women in their *umma*.

Finally, it is interesting to note that, on the basis of the cases presented, more often than converts did Born-Muslims experienced cultural barriers as a consequence of living in or descending from what they considered a patriarchal culture. Consequently, Born-Muslims were more eager to initiate Islam-inspired activities that were not only focused on the transmission of Islamic knowledge among women, but also on empowering women to claim what they believed to be women's "God-given"

653   Interview with Zahra (June 18, 2011).
654   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, pp. 1-39.

rights. They were determined to help Muslim women to demand their rights for knowledge acquisition, to organize themselves and to gain freedom of movement beyond the domestic space. This type of Islam-inspired activism whose purpose is to evoke female empowerment happens less often among converts.[655] I return to difference between Born-Muslims and converts in the next Section.

5.8. The most knowledgeable

In this last Section I discuss the interaction between Born-Muslims and converts to Islam in terms of who is perceived to be the most knowledgeable in pious circles. I deepen my discussion on religious knowledge as an indicator for piety and analyze to what extent possessing Islamic knowledge can be a way of demonstrating 'religious excellence.'[656] Pertinently, Islamic knowledge was seen by my interlocutors as an important virtue in the formation of the pious self, but it was also essential to performing *daʿwa* and to building up a pious *umma*. Not only second- and third-generation Born-Muslims engaged in the field of Islamic knowledge production, converts are also active. Looking over my interviews and observations, I have noted different perspectives on who was perceived to be most knowledgeable, this is the focus of the next pages.

The Born-Muslim as the less knowledgeable

There was a tendency among Born-Muslim women to consider converts more knowledgeable. This is especially the case when older converts are compared to first-generation migrant Muslim women. By older converts, I mean converts who are of the same age of the first-generation Muslim women, hence older than forty-five. For instance, the preacher Soraya, whom I have discussed in this chapter, is fifty-six. She had converted to Islam more than thirty-five years ago, when the first migrant families from Morocco and Turkey arrived in the Netherlands and Belgium. Over the last thirty or more years, Soraya has actively sought Islamic knowledge, perhaps more assiduously than the Born-Muslim women of her age. At the time, the cultural norms observed in first-generation migrant women's home countries limited their freedom of movement and action. Islamic knowledge acquisition and organizing Islamic activities were not considered a self-evident female task. Moreover, most first-generation migrant women were illiterate or had had very little education. For these reasons, they had fewer skills and possibilities to gain Islamic knowledge by reading and attending lectures. Furthermore, as mosques were considered a male

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655   However, as I shall explain in Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*, converts who were married to first-generation Born-Muslim men also experienced cultural limitations because of the cultural background of their husbands. See for instance the portrait of Soraya in Chapter 6.2.

656   Bryan. S. Turner, "Introduction: The price of piety," p. 3.

territory, women could not obtain knowledge of Islam in those traditional spaces of knowledge production.

This was not the case with Dutch and Flemish women like Soraya who converted to Islam in that period.[657] They had more freedom and possibilities to organize themselves, and obtain knowledge of Islam by reading articles and books that had been translated into Dutch from English and Arabic. A shining example of their achievements is *al-Nisa*, a nationwide Muslim women's organization in the Netherlands, that was founded in 1982 by female converts to Islam. *Al-Nisa's* goal was and is "to provide information about Islam that is as independent as possible of any specific cultural or religious background."[658] Its members also encouraged Muslim women to study Islam, to become aware of their position in Islam and within Dutch society. Furthermore, in the 1980s *al-Nisa* began to develop special programs for women, including monthly lectures and organized instruction classes in Arabic and ritual prayer.[659] Initially its membership consisted largely of Dutch-speaking Muslim women.[660] Many older converts in this study - both from Belgium and the Netherlands - mentioned that one of their important channels of knowledge was the monthly Islamic magazine of *al-Nisa* and the lectures it organized. *Al-Nisa* is an example of how older converts established and channeled Islamic knowledge production, whereas first-generation migrant women who had had far fewer educational opportunities lagged behind in this process.

The Turkish-Dutch Born-Muslim Laleh in the Netherlands also mentioned this development.[661] Laleh was a chairwoman of a Dutch Islamic female organization and had many international contacts. She has been impressed by the level of knowledge among converts, that she said was the reason "older" converts have been taken more seriously and could achieve higher positions in Islamic organizations. One of her examples was Ingrid Mattson, a Canadian convert who became president of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). She was the first woman and convert to become president of the organization.

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657 However, I shall discuss in Chapter Six: *Female religious authorities*, this was also the case with those converts who married first-generation migrant men. Despite their non-migrant background, they also experienced similar limitations on account of the cultural background of their husbands.

658 http://www.alnisa.nl/english/al-nisa/ (Accessed 12, November 2014).

659 I shall describe *al-Nisa's* activities throughout the narratives of Dahlia and Soraya in Chapter 6: *Female religious authorities*.

660 See A. van Bommel, "Muslim Information Centre, The Hague," In: *Islam in Dutch Society: Current Developments and Future Prospects*, (eds.) W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992) pp. 138-139.

661 Interview with Laleh (September 13, 2009).

As well as the first-generation migrant Muslim women, 'born-again-Muslims' are also considered less knowledgeable than converts and I present a case that illustrates this contention. The Surinamese-Dutch Asia was a Born-Muslim.[662] She had been actively seeking knowledge for some time, and put great emphasis on cultivating a pious lifestyle. Recently, she married a convert Dutchman who had become a Muslim a couple of years earlier and was also engaged in the process of knowledge acquisition. Asia explained that she knew many Born-Muslims who were Muslim by birth, but did not commit themselves to leading a pious life. For instance, they did not pray five times a day. When such Born-Muslims met her convert husband they felt ashamed:

> Born-Muslims who do not practice Islam feel guilty when they see my husband pray. They think: "How come he, a Dutchman, is praying and not me, while I have been a Muslim my entire life?"

Thus "beginners" in Islam - who had not yet committed themselves to leading a pious life or had just experienced a religious awakening - thought that the converts' knowledge was more profound than theirs. Their impression was that converts had built up substantially more knowledge of Islam in a short period of time compared to what they themselves who have been Muslim their entire lives knew. Hence converts became inspirational role models for them. What I find interesting in this example is that the ethnicity becomes a marker for piety. Referring to Asia's husband as "a Dutch man" refers to both his nationality and to his previously being a non-Muslim.

Born-Muslim as the more knowledgeable

In contrast to the first-generation migrant Born-Muslim women and Born-Muslims who were "beginners" in Islam, Born-Muslims such as Jamila and Zahra were considered - both by themselves and converts - to be more knowledgeable than converts. They were thought to be "advanced" in Islam and to have always been religiously involved in the quest to gain knowledge by following courses at mosques, Islamic educational institutes or abroad.

For instance, Kaya a Born-Muslim with Turkish roots in the Netherlands was also "advanced" in Islam.[663] Kaya was raised with Islam and had followed lessons in Arabic and the Qurʾan at a Turkish mosque throughout her childhood and teenage years. Being a conscious Muslim, practicing Islam and engaging in Islamic activities has been a "natural" part of her life. Kaya studied to be an Islamic social worker at

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662   Interview with Asia (August 11, 2010).
663   Interview with Kaya (August 5, 2010).

the Amsterdam-based Higher Vocational School InHolland. She has had less con-tact with converts and has always been surrounded by Turkish Muslims in Turkish mosques, organizations and pious circles that use Turkish as their main language of communication. Kaya was convinced that converts did not necessarily have more knowledge than Born-Muslims. Instead converts are more "publicly" active and engaged in practicing Islam:

> You see that converts [after their conversion, S.N.] immediately become active in their local mosques. They don't sit in their homes, they begin initiating things.[664]

Kaya's argument was that, after their conversion converts became Islamically active by arranging activities and taking leadership roles, for instance, by establishing pious circles. Kaya said that converts were more successful in exhibiting their knowledge than Born-Muslims, assuming that this did not mean that converts actually *did have* more knowledge. In the latter instance, Kaya said that this was largely a product of Dutch or Flemish culture. European women had no difficulty organizing themselves and they did not meet any obstacles. If there did happen to be any hindrances along the way, as one of my convert interlocutors said: "If walls stand in your way, as a Dutch person you just stand up against walls and break them down."[665] This is exemplary of the lively attitude with which most converts had been raised. Born-Muslims who - despite being born and raised in Europe - felt challenged by the patriarchal norms of their parents' migrant countries and were consequently less able to throw down the gauntlet and pose questions. Quite apart from their cultural cocoon Born-Muslims have also experienced cultural marginalization, stigmatization and discrimination purely on the grounds of their ethnic background as a non-native Dutch or Flemish. As a consequence, Born-Muslims have said that at times they have had to struggle to develop their identity and their sense of belonging.[666] All these factors conspired to form obstacles for some of them to take the step to be religiously active and display their religious knowledge.

Clearly, the public character of converts' Islamic activities was important. Most Islamic activities organized by converts were posted on Islamic websites and forums and these were communicated in Dutch and Flemish, making their activities

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664   Interview with Kaya (August 5, 2010).
665   Interview with Hagar (May 31, 2010).
666   Experiences of ethnic, cultural and religious marginalization, identity struggles and overt dis-crimination were mentioned by all the Born-Muslim interlocutors studied. During many gather-ings of pious circles, and Islamic conferences this matter was often referred to in terms of a lived reality, or the *status quo*. However, as this theme was not my focus, I shall not delve too deeply into this matter.

transparent and accessible to all women. Although this was also the case with some Born-Muslims' activities, the majority of them was still organized along ethnic lines, as the example of Kaya reveals. For instance, during our interview, Kaya mentioned more than ten pious circles in her city in the Netherlands, which had been established by female Turkish preachers who had had previous Islamic training in Turkey. These pious circles consisted of both first- and second- generation Muslim women and in them the main language was Turkish, but Arabic was taught. Their activities were communicated by word-of-mouth and promoted along ethnic lines in their own community.

Finally, most Born-Muslims who were "advanced" in Islam did have a religious advantage that converts lacked: their knowledge of the Arabic language. Knowledge of Arabic is an important criterion for being viewed as a knowledgeable Muslim because its possession provides immediate access to religious knowledge.[667] Born-Muslims were able to listen to Arabic lectures and read Arabic books about Islam. Not only did they have more access to knowledge, but they also had more choice in their knowledge acquisition as most literature on Islam is written in Arabic.

This advantage was a closed door to converts, who were dependent on translated books and lectures in Dutch, Flemish or English. Hence, in terms of 'hierarchies of religious virtues' to quote Max Weber, mastering the Arabic language can be considered an important virtue.[668] Mastery of this language immediately made Born-Muslims religiously more 'qualified' than those who have not done so, mostly converts. Therefore, to a greater degree than converts, "advanced" Born-Muslims have already acquired considerable religious capital. Their religious capital included both knowledge of Islam and also tools by which they could improve this knowledge continuously.[669]

The converts as the more knowledgeable

On the whole, my convert interlocutors had different opinions when it came to whom they viewed as the most knowledgeable. Addressing this matter, converts referred to their own as well as the Born-Muslims' ethnicity and culture. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the converts' critical attitude was often mentioned by both converts and Born-Muslims as a way to explain differences between their ways of engaging with Islamic knowledge. The general idea behind this was that, because of their cultural background, converts questioned Islamic knowledge more

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667   See the portrait of Dahlia in Chapter 6.2.
668   Max Weber, *The social psychology of the world religions*, pp. 287-291.
669   This aspect is elaborated in Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*.

than Born-Muslims.[670] Therefore, converts considered that they - more than Born-Muslims - were more knowledgeable about the religious arguments behind Islamic obligations and recommendations. I shall illustrate this by discussing the convert Annelies, who had been a Muslim for over four years.[671] She had friends who were both converts and Born-Muslims but thought that Born-Muslims' "lack of a critical attitude" prevented them from understanding Islamic knowledge more profoundly:

> I have a Moroccan friend. If I ask her: "What a specific piece of knowledge is based on," she invariably answers, "Because it is! Because my father, my uncle or the *imam* said it." Good for her! But I can't do anything with that information. I need to know why! This is a Dutch way of thinking…(…) We don't just assume that something is right and adopt it. When I ask my Moroccan friend at that moment I can see that she is beginning to think and wonders why she hadn't asked for the reasons behind it.[672]

Annelies thought that the main reason for her critical attitude was her upbringing in Dutch culture in which things are not simply "assumed." The questioning nature that this encouraged, she thought, meant that converts obtained a deeper understanding of Islamic knowledge than Born-Muslims who were more compliant about their acceptance of Islamic knowledge. Annelies' attitude resembles the type of piety that is individually formed (see Chapter Four). People who form their piety individually have a different approach to religious knowledge. In her case, Annelies wished to make sense of religious obligations by reflection on and analysis of religious argumentations. Her Born-Muslim friend's piety formation was in accordance with norms of religious communities that demanded her to conform to religious norms instead of questioning them.

The convert Janny underscored this matter.[673] Janny had recently converted to Islam and was actively seeking knowledge, from both Born-Muslim and converts. She explained differences between both groups:

> It is different with Born-Muslims. I don't know, is it because converts are also trying to figure things out that I, as a convert, share more with other converts than with Born-Muslims? Pertinently, Born-Muslims don't know everything because their ways of knowledge acquisition are different to ours.(…)They are more used to knowledge passed on by word of mouth, and listen more to what their parents tell them about

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670   See also Esra Özyürek, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).
671   Interview with Annelies (November 29, 2009).
672   Interview with Annelies (November 29, 2009).
673   Interview with Janny (January 6, 2011).

Islam, and read fewer books [than converts, S.N.]. But nowadays you do see more Born-Muslims reading books about Islam, and then you hear them say: "Oh, so that is how one should practice Islam! But my father or mother told me to do it differently." I search for knowledge from both groups. Sometimes I think that Born-Muslims know more than converts, but then I find out that they don't. Then you ask yourself: How is it that someone who is Muslim by birth, doesn't know much about Islam?[674]

Janny was comparing herself, a recent convert, not with Born-Muslims who were "advanced" in Islam, but to Born-Muslims who were "beginners" in Islam. Just like converts they have recently begun to gain Islamic knowledge. In her opinion, Born-Muslims did not possess profound Islamic knowledge, and she thought this strange. She did her best to explain this ambiguity, by referring to Born-Muslims' main religious sources: their parents and *imams* at mosques. In Janny's eyes, reading books was actively seeking Islamic knowledge. By referring to how Born-Muslims have now also begun to read books, she indicated that Born-Muslims were now also searching for other religious sources, beside their parents and *imams*, from which to imbibe Islamic knowledge.[675]

The cases presented in this Section show that the possession and demonstration of Islamic knowledge, by which one can be viewed as the most knowledgeable and therefore most pious, is an import indicator of piety. In the knowledge hierarchy, converts and Born-Muslims can both be viewed as the more knowledgeable. As my examination has shown, the answer depended on whether my interlocutor was a "beginner" or "advanced" in Islam, an older convert or a recent convert. Hence my interlocutors' own level of knowledge was important when it came to perceiving the other as more or less knowledgeable.

5.9. Conclusion

In this chapter I have analyzed the dynamic process by which Dutch and Flemish Muslim women in pious circles gain transmit, produce, deconstruct and interpret knowledge as they pursue their goal of cultivating piety. Pious circles are local production sites of knowledge for women, providing them with a space in which to demonstrate their religious autonomy. In these surroundings, Muslim women produce knowledge that can at times be contested by traditional sites of knowledge production. This is attributable to the patriarchal character of traditional Islamic organizations. On account of the segregation this system implies, Muslim women do

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674   Interview with Janny (January 6, 2011).
675   This was not the case among my Born-Muslim interlocutors who were "advanced" in Islam. They had all read many books and had read them throughout their lives.

their best to maintain the concomitant gender exclusion for the purpose of articulating their religiosity independently of - male - religious authorities and institutions. This is a sign of their enhanced religious autonomy.

Clearly, these pious circles can be seen as religious communities of practice, in which Muslim women with similar norms of piety shared an interest in Islam, and interacted with each other to produce Islamic knowledge collectively. By their actions, my interlocutors have gained direct access to religious resources and hence accrued religious capital.

Muslim women seek Islamic knowledge throughout their entire lives - in the case of Born-Muslims who were "advanced" in Islam - or after having deciding to become a practicing pious Muslim woman - "beginners" in Islam - or as converts. Furthermore, in order to remain committed to Islam, Muslim women were and are dependent on active knowledge acquisition by which they can continue to fuel their spiritual growth. On a more practical level, they were also eager to widen their Islamic knowledge so they could raise their children Islamically. On a more spiritual level, they also sought knowledge with the aim of performing *da'wa*; intra-ummaic *da'wa* in the case of Born-Muslims. Born-Muslims were committed to making fellow Muslims conscious of their Islamic identity and history, and motivating them to practice their religion. Converts thought that extra-ummaic *da'wa*, converting non-Muslims to Islam, was also an important mission. By acquiring Islamic knowledge, my interlocutors did more than just cultivate piety, the acquisition in itself was also a devotional exercise. My interlocutors commenced their meetings in a state of ritual purity, prayed collectively, discussed God's commands and made their supplications to God in *du'a'*. These acts underscored the process of knowledge acquisition, transmission and production as a devotional enterprise that would be divinely rewarded.

The type of knowledge, both discursive and non-discursive, that is produced in pious circles is gendered knowledge highlighting a strong connection between knowledge and gender. By acquiring gendered knowledge, Muslim women put patriarchal norms into perspective, and discover a strategy either to confront these norms or surrender to them. My interlocutors derived religious arguments from the study of religious sources and found strength in the knowledge of historical Muslim female figures. Obtaining gendered knowledge also influenced their ideas about gender division, leading to both gender equality and equity.

Construing these data I have collected, my conclusion is that acquiring religious knowledge facilitates negotiation with patriarchal norms. The type of empowerment

found among these women was about finding a middle ground from which they can question certain patriarchal beliefs and practices, and find strategies either to confront them or surrender to them. The upshot of their findings could sometimes be two-fold: it could lead to either a reinforcement of traditional religious discourses or to religious reform.

Some of my interlocutors experienced knowledge as empowering, leading them to engage in Islam-inspired activism. They organized gatherings, taught in different Islamic sciences, established Islamic educational institutes - even a mosque - and arranged lectures about Islam.

Both converts and Born-Muslims were actively engaged in the field of knowledge acquisition and production. Older converts were thought to be more knowledge-able compared to first-generation migrant women by Born-Muslims, because the former were more successful in organizing Islamic activities and obtaining Islamic knowledge. Born-Muslims who were "beginners" in Islam frequently viewed con-verts as more knowledgeable because they had obtained their knowledge within a short period of time; an opinion backed up by their accessible and transparent display of Islamic knowledge. It was the other way round with Born-Muslims who were "advanced" in Islam and who had acquired Islamic knowledge throughout their lives. They thought themselves more knowledgeable than most converts, as they had accrued religious capital and had the skills to read and write Arabic. This was an advantage that offered them more direct access to religious sources and widened their choice of consultation of the different sources.

Converts thought Born-Muslims' patriarchal cultural norms an obstacle to both acquiring knowledge and organizing Islamic activities. Most converts regarded Born-Muslims as uncritical in their approach to religious knowledge. They also stated that Born-Muslims tended to rely more on their parents and traditional authorities for their knowledge of Islam, instead of actively searching for it in other channels. In both cases, a person's own level of knowledge of Islam was an important indicator in considering the other more or less knowledgeable.

CHAPTER 6

Female religious authorities

Historically, of course, only male scholars and socially sanctioned interpretative communities have interpreted the Qurʾan. However, the text itself calls on each of us to use our own intellect and reasoning, ʿaql, ʿilm [knowledge, S.N.] to decipher its *āyāt* [Qurʾanic verses or signs, S.N.]. [676]

Asma Barlas

Introduction

This chapter contains an empirical examination of the relationship between pious circles and the emergence of female religious authorities in the Netherlands and Belgium. In this final chapter, the themes of piety, knowledge and authority conflate as some of my interlocutors did accrue religious authority in the process of piety cultivation and Islamic knowledge acquisition. My goal is to provide an understanding of both the nature and the limits of the possibility of acquiring female religious authority in the setting of pious circles. To achieve it I examine the grounds on which female religious authorities are both legitimized and challenged. Moreover, I discuss the perspectives of the participants in pious circles who consider these women religious authorities and the views of the authorities themselves.

This chapter is organized as follows: In Section 6.1. I give an overview of the female religious authorities in the present study, while taking their Born-Muslim and convert background into account. In Section 6.2. I present two narratives of female religious authorities at length and analyze how they acquired religious authority. In Section 6.3. I focus on the perspective of the participants in pious circles and discuss the characteristics participants ascribe religious authority to some women. In 6.4. I elaborate on the resistance and the limitations female religious authorities experience. Finally, I offer a conclusion.

6.1. Born-Muslim and convert religious authority

In the previous chapters, I have explored the diverse ways in which my interlocutors have striven for piety, sought Islamic knowledge and have become religiously engaged. In the process of becoming pious and acquiring Islamic knowledge, some of my interlocutors have attained the status of religious authorities. By establishing the pious circles in which they organize religious activities and through their lectures, they have (re)produced religious knowledge for other Muslim women. Therefore, they have transformed themselves into an important source of Islamic knowledge for those women who sought and seek their religious advice.

In my study, I interviewed twelve Muslim women who, as far as I could observe, exerted religious influence. Participants in various pious circles stated that female religious authorities influenced them in diverse ways. Some participants altered their thoughts and behavioral patterns so that they could adjust to the piety discourses that have been propagated by female religious authorities. In many gatherings I

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676   Asma Barlas, "Hold(ing) Fast by the Best in the Percepts: the Qurʾan and Method," conference on the Changeable and Unchangeable in Islamic thought and practice, Sarajevo, May 7-9, posted at www.asmabarlas.com (Accessed July 8, 2015).

noticed that after they had been attending a pious circle for some time, participants expressed 'visible piety', to paraphrase Lara Deeb, by donning the veil or wearing the *niqab*. Participants stated that they had stopped listening to - secular - music and listened only to the religious chants called *anashid*. They no longer attended weddings or parties at which people sang and danced nor bought their children human-shaped dolls, because the latter could lead to polytheism. In these instances, the 'internalization' of piety practices and beliefs took place both publicly and privately. I understand 'internalization' as the process of acceptation. On the whole, the majority of participants in pious circles tended to accept the piety discourses that were expounded by female religious authorities and, by doing so, showed that they viewed female religious authorities as influential individuals. Nevertheless, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, the Islamic knowledge provided by female religious authorities was also sometimes questioned by participants in pious circles. Their dissension could lead to discussions in which different participants expressed their views on a certain matter. In short, the religious influence of female religious authorities was both accepted and challenged by participants in pious circles.

In the table below, I have listed all the female religious authorities, their ethnic backgrounds, their previous religious education and whether they were converts or Born-Muslims.[677] Of the seven Born-Muslims, six considered themselves "advanced" in Islam. They have deepened their knowledge by following religious education. Only Yasmin was a "born-again Muslim" and viewed herself as "beginner" in Islam who had recently decided to become religiously committed.

Born-Muslim	Previous religious education	Convert[678]	Previous religious education
Dahlia Indonesian-Dutch The Netherlands	Arabic and Qurʾan lessons at the mosque; Arabic at the American University in Cairo; Arabic and *shariʿa* at *al-Azhar* University Egypt	Soraya The Netherlands	Self-schooling via books and lectures, and courses in the sciences of *Hadith* and *Fiqh* at the Islamic University of Rotterdam
Yasmin Moroccan-Dutch The Netherlands	Arabic and Qurʾan lessons at the mosque and self-schooling via books and lectures	Hagar The Netherlands	Self-schooling via books and lectures, and course in Arabic at the Islamic University of Rotterdam

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677 There are many other women who are female religious authorities in pious circles. However, I could not interview them as some of them did not speak Dutch or Flemish, and gave lectures only in Arabic, Moroccan, Indonesian or Turkish.

678 During my fieldwork, I came into contact with two Flemish convert female religious authorities, however, I was unable to interview them. One of them had moved to another city and the other did not want to be interviewed. Therefore, there are no Flemish convert female religious authorities in this table.

Nora Indonesian-Dutch The Netherlands	*Pesantren* in Indonesia and Islamic Theology at the VU in Amsterdam	Miriam The Netherlands	Self-schooling via books and lectures
Jahida Moroccan-Flemish Belgium	Arabic and Qurʾan lessons in private educational institutes in Morocco	Imra The Netherlands	Self-schooling via books and lectures
Jamilla Moroccan-Flemish Belgium	Arabic and Qurʾan lessons at the mosque; Islamic boarding-school in England, and *tajwid* lessons in a private educational institute in Jordan	Awatif The Netherlands	Self-schooling via books and lectures
Saadiya Moroccan-Flemish Belgium	Arabic and Qurʾan lessons at the mosque; a bachelor in Islamic teaching at the Erasmus University College Brussels	Chanan[679] The Netherlands	Islamic Studies at a Dutch university, engagement in academic conferences on Islam, international contacts with Muslim academia and self-schooling via books
Zahra Moroccan-Flemish Belgium	Arabic and Qurʾan lessons at the mosque; Islamic Studies at the Radboud University and Arabic and *shariʿa* at the European Institute of Human Science (EIHS) in Château-Chinon France		

A quick glance at this table confirms that all Born-Muslim female religious authorities have had lessons in Qurʾan and Arabic, and hence had some knowledge of the Arabic language. This knowledge provided female religious authorities with immediate access to religious sources and therefore to the possibility to interpret and reflect on those sources individually. The category converts did not have access to this same knowledge.

All the converts who functioned as female religious authorities mentioned that they did not speak, read and write Arabic fluently. Soraya and Hagar, for instance did say that they had gained a basic level of Arabic from the courses they had followed. Despite their efforts, they had not yet succeeded in mastering Arabic on an advanced level. Therefore they admitted that they did not have autonomous access to the religious sources. On the whole converts are dependent on translations into English, French and Dutch. Subsequently, on a different level, several converts like Hagar translated English and French books into Dutch so as to make this knowledge accessible to Dutch- and Flemish-speaking readers. Nevertheless, Hagar confessed that she considered her lack of Arabic a "handicap" that prevented her from gaining autonomous access to the religious sources.

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679   Chanan was the only female religious authority in the present study who did not lecture in pious circles.

The Dutch convert Chanan had a similar opinion. Chanan was not active in female pious circles and operated in what Gerdien Jonker describes as 'external production sites.' In these 'external production sites' Muslim women engage in Islamic women's networks and act as religious experts.[680] Chanan regularly lectured on Islam and women's rights in academic and societal settings. Her audiences were gender-mixed and consisted of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Chanan was a public figure and wielded religious authority both among converts and Born-Muslims. She placed herself within an international Islamic feminist discourse.[681] Although Chanan was - and is no longer - engaged in the female organization of piety as described in this study, from personal experience she knew that knowledge of Arabic was extremely important if a person was to attain religious authority in pious circles:

> In the past, Born-Muslims were generally more authoritative than converts, and they still are, especially when the Arabic language is concerned. (...) If you speak Arabic, you immediately accrue authority (...) and enhance your social status. (...) I do think that women can be religious authorities even if they can't speak Arabic, but a knowledge of Arabic is to be preferred. For me personally, it is one of my shortcomings. I can read very little Arabic (...) and I occasionally want to check whether texts have been correctly translated from Arabic. Therefore, I am dependent on others. Happily, now I am acquainted with a woman who is an Arabist and who does a quick check for me.[682]

As argued in the previous chapters, mastering the Arabic language is considered an important religious virtue both by Born-Muslims and converts.[683] Consequently, those who have mastered Arabic are religiously more 'qualified' to act as a religious authority.[684] Chanan also explained that using Arabic terms could increase a person's religious authority. Women could demonstrate their 'religious capital' by using Islamic terms.

Generally speaking, Born-Muslims who operated as a religious authority had followed some type of religious education abroad, whether at a recognized institute

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680   External here means that this space is outside the control of Islamic institutions and traditional authorities. Their domain is found in publications, - interreligious - dialogues and discussions. See Gerdien Jonker, "Islamic Knowledge Through a Woman's Lens: Education, Power and Belief," p. 4 and p. 37.
681   It is important to emphasize Chanan's background, because for most Muslim women such notions as "Islamic feminism" or "reinterpretations of the Qurʾan from a female perspective" are not self-explanatory terms. These specific notions were not neutral to my interlocutors. For instance, for many the term Islamic feminism - although prefaced by the word "Islamic" - had connotations of a Western and secular way of life and in some cases was even considered anti-Islamic.
682   Interview with Chanan (September 13, 2010).
683   Max Weber, "The social psychology of the world religions," p. 287.
684   *Ibid.*, p. 287.

like *al-Azhar* or private Islamic educational institutes. In contrast, converts stated they had acquired most of their Islamic knowledge by their own efforts and by self-schooling. Consequently, they considered themselves to be "autodidacts"; women who have learned about Islam without the benefit of a teacher or any type of formal education.[685] Furthermore, converts - more than Born-Muslims - underlined that they took their own religious experiences as the basis for their knowledge transmission. Like Hagar, many converts stated that their knowledge of Islam was essentially practical non-discursive knowledge and hence is 'practice-based.'[686]

At this point I present two portraits of female religious authorities that have been constructed on the basis of multiple interviews and by participant observation in their pious circles. By describing their life-stories and getting the two women to converse with each other, I have been able to examine the grounds on which their authority has been acquired and challenged. In the course of these investigations, a number of differences begin the surface.

6.2. Portraits of female religious authorities

The first portrait is that of Soraya, a Dutch convert to Islam, and the second is of the Indonesian-Dutch Born-Muslim Dahlia.[687] Both were born and raised in the Netherlands. Soraya is an example of a religious authority who considered herself an "autodidact", and had taught herself about Islam and Arabic from library books. Dahlia, in contrast, had learned Arabic at the American University in Cairo and studied *shariʿa* at *al-Azhar* University in Cairo. Their authority was based on different qualities and social preconditions. To achieve my research goals, I have compared three aspects of their narratives: 1.) How they gained religious authority; 2.) Through which abilities and qualities they have gained religious authority; and 3.) The type of authority that they have become.

The self-made preacher

Soraya is fifty-six years old and a Dutch Muslim woman living in the Netherlands.[688] She converted to Islam when she was twenty-eight years old. Although she was

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685   Hagar, Chanan and Soraya referred to the term autodidacts during our interviews.

686   Lara Deeb, *An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shiʿi Lebanon*, p. 122.

687   I have chosen for the portraits of Soraya and Dahlia for two reasons. Firstly, during my fieldwork, I attended their lectures on many occasions and had multiple in-depth interviews with both women. This provided me detailed insights into their lives, allowing me to draw up their portraits. Secondly, both women were over fifty and had reflected on their lives and religious activities intensively. This made their life-stories comparable.

688   Interviews with Soraya (September 26, 2010; October 13, 2010; and February 2, 2011). I attended five of her lectures on May 30, 2010; August 29, 2010; September 26, 2010; January 30, 2011 and February 27, 2011 at her pious circle in the Netherlands.

raised a Protestant, she had difficulty understanding whether Jesus was the Son of God or a Prophet. When she moved out of her parental home, her religious affiliation gradually became less important to her. She trained as a nurse and - during her work as a nurse - she came into contact with Muslim children for the first time. On one occasion the - Muslim - parents did not drink the coffee she offered them, and this caught her attention. It turned out that they were fasting during the Islamic holy month of *Ramadan*. She became curious and began to gather information about Islam. Shortly after this event, she met her future husband, a first-generation Moroccan guest-worker. He was a Muslim but did not practice his religion. He accepted her Christian background and explained that he, as a male Muslim, was allowed to marry a Christian woman. They quickly got married and, after their wedding, he began to pray and attend the mosque. By doing this he "found his faith again" Soraya remembered.

In the meantime, Soraya had begun reading the Qurʾan and discovered its perspective on Jesus. She said this ultimately became the crucial factor that led to her conversion. She began attending meetings at the Muslim Information Centre in The Hague, at that time the only Islamic center in the Netherlands for Dutch-speaking Muslims.[689] She took her duty of gaining Islamic knowledge seriously and learned Arabic from library books. She also became a member of the parent's council of her children's Islamic primary school, and participated in the local Muslim community by doing charity work and working as a volunteer. As Soraya described, the way she incorporated her knowledge of Islam into daily practice caught the attention of many converts. They began asking for her religious views about certain issues and requested that she give lectures:

> I talk easily. My character is sociable and open. I am interested in people. So, when you are among people and you talk a lot, they soon ask you to lecture (…) I can explain knowledge properly so that people can do something with it straight away. Therefore it does not remain limited to dry words, laws and regulations in a book. (…) There was also the fact that there were no other people then. (…) In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.[690]

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689   The Muslim Information Centre in The Hague is an umbrella organization that was established in 1980/81. It is a continuation of the earlier Federation of Muslim Organization in the Netherlands that operated between 1975 and 1981. The aim of the umbrella organization is to transcend 'ideological commitment, theological particularities, ethnic allegiances and personal rivalries.' A. van Bommel, "Muslim Information Centre, The Hague," In*: Islam in Dutch Society: Current Developments and Future Prospects*, (eds.) W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992), pp. 134-143.

690   Interview with Soraya (September 26, 2010).

Soraya's reputation gradually led to her becoming a speaker much in demand at many Muslim women-only meetings. More than a hundred women attended her lectures at some of these meetings; some of whom had traveled more than two hours to be able to be there. At that time, her audience consisted mainly of converts because her lectures were given in Dutch. After hearing her lectures, some women asked her to give lectures in their private pious circles as well. Soraya reflected on the qualities that have placed her in the position of a female preacher:

> I have received certain qualities from Allah, *Alhamdulillah* [praise belongs to God, S.N.] Eloquence, understanding, insight and the ability to put knowledge into practice. I began to lecture because I was asked to. (…) I was not "discovered" but became much in demand by word of mouth.[691]

Even though she had been a Muslim for more than twenty-eight years, she still strove to deepen her knowledge of Islam. She was attending classes in the science of *Hadith* and *fiqh* at the Islamic University of Rotterdam (IUR) in the Netherlands. Since 1997, Soraya had been the chair of a pious circle for women, in which she taught children Arabic script and gave monthly lectures to women in Dutch. Many young Dutch women who wished to become a Muslim also joined her pious circle. Aside from lecturing, Soraya advises women on religious matters touching upon their personal lives. Her advice covers such topics as marriage, divorce, raising children, prayer, fasting and wearing the *hijab*. In her lectures, she often referred to herself and her own experiences as a Muslim woman. She felt that it was her compassionate personality and open character that had placed her in a position to advise other women about certain Islamic issues:

> Look, everything comes from Allah. What you can and who you are comes from Allah. So I am sociable, and that is probably because my parents nurtured me so. And I have an open character. All my life I have noticed that people easily confide their problems to me, tell their story, even though I cannot do anything for them. They probably feel that I am interested in them as a human being and I think that is something. (…) Maybe it is a gift from Allah to be open to people.[692]

One of the main reasons that the pious circle was attended mostly by Muslim women who have been born and raised in the Netherlands and converts was because Soraya lectured in Dutch. In her lectures, Soraya adhered to the accepted interpretations of Muslim scholars belonging to all four Islamic schools of law. Soraya did not consider

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691   Interview with Soraya (September 26, 2010).
692   Interview with Soraya (September 26, 2010).

her discursive knowledge of Islam profound; however she felt that with her practical - non-discursive - knowledge of Islam she could help many women in specific situations, informing them how to perform the prayer, how to wear the *hijab*, how to fast and how to perform the ritual washing. Above and beyond such practical matters, one very important topic was how to build *taqwa* - piety - and how to worship Allah. This was the type of knowledge that the participants in her pious circle wanted. The majority were recent converts to Islam or Born-Muslims who had just begun practicing, and were therefore also interested in Islamic knowledge to do with the praxis and rituals of Islam. They are the category which I have referred to as "beginners" in Islam.

Soraya was adamant that she did not interpret religious rules. However, when women approached her in a one-to-one setting, Soraya occasionally did interpret Islamic regulations pertinent to the situations in which the women found themselves. For instance, I once witnessed how Soraya explained to a young Born-Muslim about whether she was allowed to marry a Muslim man from a different ethnic background to hers. Soraya spoke of the conditions of marriage, and the qualities that a man "must have" according to Islam. He had to be a "true believer", he had to practice his religion, he also had to be physically strong, have a job and an income so he could take care of her. She also explained the advantages and the disadvantages of living in the same house as her in-laws, in case he should ask her to live with his parents. Soraya also elucidated on what differences might crop up between her and her future-husband as both were from different Islamic schools of law. On these occasions Soraya offered gendered knowledge by referring to her own experiences. If Soraya was asked a question she could not answer, she consulted people whom she considered did have profound religious knowledge.[693] Soraya emphasized her "not having much knowledge of Islam":

> I consider myself to be a preacher, as a person, say, who is reviving the faith and encouraging [people, S.N.] to go and do something! (...) I am an ordinary Muslim on an ordinary level. I just pass on what I know, and I consider myself to be someone who gives lectures to revive faith, say, to renew, to make enthusiastic, to encourage.[694]

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693   Soraya knew Dahlia personally and considered her to be very knowledgeable. According to Soraya, Dahlia had the advantage of having mastered Arabic and studied *shariʿa*. Therefore, when she had or received theological questions she could not answer, she occasionally consulted Dahlia by telephone and on some occasions invited her to be a guest-lecturer in her pious circle. Dahila is portrayed in the next Section.

694   Interview with Soraya (October 13, 2010).

Soraya took a humble view of her level of knowledge and presented herself as a grassroots "ordinary" interpreter of Islam. She did not see herself as a religious authority. She emphasized that every Muslim had the "responsibility" to pass on Islamic knowledge. Although she downplayed her religious influence, she did state she was a disseminator of knowledge to the participants in her pious circle.

Her daughters were also involved in the pious circle, and one daughter occasionally gave lectures under Soraya's guidance. Soraya was thinking about the future of her pious circle. Therefore, she was training new female lecturers and hoped that in this manner, she could foster the growth of Islamic knowledge.

Soraya said that she had always been encouraged by her audiences to give lectures. However, throughout these years her husband had found it difficult to adjust to her position in the community. On the one hand, she had begun to gain a reputation as a female preacher with a mission to revive Islam and to perform *daʿwa*; on the other hand, she had to fulfill her duty as a wife and mother at home. This often caused tension. Gradually, by emphasizing the importance of propagating Islam, Soraya expanded her freedom of movement beyond the domestic space. She explained:

> It is emancipation in a broader sense. (…) You strengthen your position at home as well (…) because for most women, every step outdoors is a struggle.[695]

In Soraya's own words, becoming religiously active was transformed into an emancipatory process. Nevertheless, Soraya explained that her husband still followed her activities critically, asking her which message she intended to give to women during her lectures. Although in her daily life Soraya tried to live according to the Islamic norms, in her lectures she did admit that at particular moments she had deviated from those norms. For instance, she upheld the ideal of gender equity and encouraged female obedience toward husbands.[696] Nevertheless, on many occasions in her personal life she stated during our interviews, that she had not always been obedient to her husband. For instance, she kept preaching despite his resistance. She explained that she had no wish to "engender *fitna*", that is, a dispute, in this case between men and women in the Muslim community. She had no intention of telling her participants to "stand-up" to their men. This was the reason, she thought it better not to share all the personal information about her life that might deviate from the Islamic ideal she was propagating.

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695   Interview with Soraya (February 2, 2011).
696   See the example *Obedience as worship* in Chapter Five. There I have analyzed one of the pious circle gatherings that was led by Soraya, in which female spousal obedience was discussed.

Having read it, we can now analyze Soraya's authority on the basis of three aspects: 1.) How she gained religious authority; 2.) On the basis of which abilities and qualities; and 3.) The type of authority she had become.

Soraya's authority was based on a combination of factors. In the first instance, she gained religious authority by word of mouth. At the time she began her mission, there were only a few women who were able to demonstrate their knowledge of Islam the way she did. This social precondition made her a role model for many converts who were in need of religious guidance. Other social preconditions were her being married to a first-generation Moroccan guest-worker and her Islam-inspired activism in the Muslim community through charity work, making her well-known in the *umma* as an exemplary Muslim woman. These factors created a common ground between her and her environment allowing her to emerge as a religious authority.

In the second instance, she had gained religious authority because she possessed specific personal qualities. She was sociable, interested in people, compassionate, eloquent, sympathetic, insightful but also modest. Her possession of knowledge of Islam and her ability to disseminate that knowledge to other women legitimized her religious authority to the participants in pious circles.

In the third instance, her religious authority was both experience- and knowledge-based. Soraya had been successfully able to demonstrate her religious capital, especially her religious skills, experience and practical knowledge of Islam. Her religious skills were performing *da'wa*, organizing Islam-inspired activities and giving lectures. Her religious experiences were related to the rituals of praying and fasting. Her knowledge of Islam was, as she said herself, not focused on doctrinal issues, but concerned with non-discursive knowledge, especially regarding gender.[697] This type of non-discursive knowledge was significant for the participants in her pious circle, as the majority were either 'born-again Muslims' and converts who had recently embraced Islam. This immediately marked Soraya as a religious authority in a context in which gendered non-discursive knowledge of Islam had a privileged position.[698]

I want to emphasize that Soraya's pious circle was one of the few in the present study that had been being visited by an increasing number of participants over a number of years. This meant that Soraya had been successful not only in gaining but also in retaining her religious authority. There were two important reasons for this.

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697   Actually, in reality, she regularly focused on doctrinal issues.
698   In contexts in which doctrinal and canonical knowledge of Islam was privileged, Soraya did not operate as a religious authority.

Firstly, as she was modest, Soraya was very aware of how she was being perceived by her audience. Acting modestly was an important feature of Soraya's lectures and also characterized the way she approached women. For instance, she would occasionally play down her knowledge of Islam, and admit that she did not know all the answers and offered space for the participants to "correct her knowledge" if she was wrong.[699]

Secondly, as I noted earlier, at times Soraya presented herself as more traditional than she actually was. Especially in the context of her marital relationship, she upheld the image of the ideal pious woman who was obedient to her husband under all circumstances. She did not speak openly of the difficulties she had had and still experienced in her life. She never mentioned her husband's misgivings about both her lectures and her *da'wa* activities. By presenting herself as a pious woman who was both active for Islam and obedient to her husband, she provided the participants with a coherent image of a pious woman to which they could aspire. This was the path she had chosen to continue to function as a religious authority.[700]

Emancipation and da'wa
Before moving on to the next portrait, I want to connect this chapter with Chapters Four and Five by discussing the theme of emancipation. Emancipation was used by Soraya to describe her engagement in *da'wa* activities; even though her husband was not supportive of them. Soraya claimed that engaging in *da'wa* activities eventually strengthened her position at home, by which she meant that because of her performance of *da'wa* she had been able to move beyond the domestic space. At this point I want to refer to the framework for the conditions of performing *da'wa* set out by Saba Mahmood. In her study among pious women in Egypt, Mahmood explains that, in the eyes of religious scholars associated with the Islamic revival, *da'wa* is seen as a duty for both men and women.[701] The requirements for women to perform *da'wa* are similar to those required of men:

> The dā'iya [one, who preaches, S.N.] must practice what she preaches, and her exhortations must be in accord with the Quran and the Sunna, undertaken with wisdom and

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699   I shall return to this point from the perspective of her participants in Section 6.3.
700   However, this did not mean that she did not offer the participants in her pious circle space to speak about their own experiences. It was just that she would rather not speak of *her* experiences in these matters. Later, in Section 6.4., Soraya will argue that those female religious authorities who do speak of their personal lives in sensitive matters make themselves vulnerable to criticism from the *umma*.
701   Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, p. 65.

sincerity of the heart (…), and performed for the purpose of pleasing God rather than for personal gain or popularity.[702]

Mahmood explains that, according to the dominant interpretations of *da'wa*, anyone who is 'familiar with, and observant of, Islamic rules of conduct' is qualified to engage in *da'wa* activities.[703] Therefore, 'the ability to practice da'wa has come to depend not so much on doctrinal expertise as on one's moral uprightness and practical knowledge of the tradition (…).'[704] However, Mahmood states that, in the view of the majority of Muslim jurists and female preachers, *da'wa* is considered a voluntary act for women, whereas obedience to husbands is perceived as an obligation 'to which every Muslim woman is bound.'[705] These conditions for *da'wa* enumerated by Mahmood fit my analysis of Soraya.

On many occasions, Soraya asserted she did not need to have profound knowledge of Islam to engage in *da'wa* activities. For instance, she did not have to have studied *shari'a* to know how rules were interpreted in practice. Tying in with Mahmood's observations, Soraya's engagement in *da'wa* activities became an effective strategy by which she could expand and claim space. The space she gained eventually enabled her to study Islam at an Islamic University. Soraya had also experienced that combining obedience to her husband and engaging in *da'wa* activities could be problematic. She was eventually able to convince her husband by explaining to him that the requirement to live piously insisted that she practice *da'wa*. Emancipation for Soraya meant that she was able to create the conditions through which she could become her ideal pious self. As I described in Chapter Four, one of the characteristics of an ideal Muslim woman is engagement in *da'wa* activities.[706] I shall now present the portrait of the born-Muslim Dahlia.

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702   *Ibid.,* p. 65.
703   *Ibid.,* p. 65.
704   *Ibid.,* p. 65.
705   *Ibid*, pp. 178-179.
706   In Chapter Four, I have described the characteristics of the ideal pious Muslim woman according to my interlocutors. The ideal Muslim woman is first and foremost a pious woman, she worships Allah unconditionally, she wears her *hijab*, she raises her children and takes care of her home. The pious woman is "patient like the [historical, S.N.] Hagar, loyal as Khadija and honest as Fatima." She builds up knowledge of Islam as she has the important task of raising her children Islamically, but she also needs to acquire knowledge to be able to give *nasiha* and perform *da'wa*. She is religiously committed, but none-the-less very humble about her commitment. She takes care of herself, lives modestly and does not eat too much. She respects and honors her parents, an important act of piety towards Allah. She is obedient to her husband, respects him and does not complain about the household chores. The upbringing of children is her most important duty, while she can expect her husband to take care of her financially.

The ʿalima

Dahlia was a Born-Muslim who was fifty-six when she was interviewed.[707] Her mother and father had migrated from Indonesia to the Netherlands where she was born and raised as a Muslim. As a child Dahlia told her father that she wanted "to get to know Allah and study the Qurʾan." She knew little about these subjects, beyond her prayers and the verses she had memorized. Her father asked a friend who was an *imam* living in Saudi Arabia to come to the Netherlands and teach young children - including his daughter - the Qurʾan and Arabic. Arabic was a language that Dahlia did not understand. Besides her native Dutch, she only spoke a bit of Indonesian. The *imam* arrived and commenced teaching Arabic and the Qurʾan to all the Indonesian-Dutch children in their mosque in her city. Although the communication between Dahlia and the *imam* was halting, because he did not speak Dutch and she did not speak Arabic, she never missed a lesson. She followed his lessons a whole year until she was the only student left. Dahlia claimed that this was because the *imam* was an inept teacher.

When she finally began to read Arabic, the *imam* said that he could no longer teach her as she had become an adult woman and he was an adult man and could not be alone with her in an empty classroom.[708] At this point she became convinced that she had to go to Saudi Arabia, "where Islam emerged." Eventually, after finishing high school, she did leave, not for Saudi Arabia but for Egypt. Her parents thought Egypt a better option because it had many facilities for young women from abroad. Her parents helped her to settle down and returned to the Netherlands. She began by enrolling in an Arabic course for foreigners, initially in a program at *al-Azhar* University and later at the American University in Cairo. She felt that the Arabic language was the key to understanding the Qurʾan and by that Islam. In a short period of time, she mastered Arabic and, once this goal had been achieved, she studied the science of *shariʿa* and continued to deepen her knowledge of the Arabic language at the American University in Cairo.

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707   Interviews with Dahlia (February 21, 2011 and March 4, 2011). I attended four of her lectures on May 29, 2010; November 28, 2010, February 21, 2011 and March 27, 2011 in the Netherlands.

708   This incident refers to the concept of *khalwa*, that means seclusion. *Khalwa* is a term from mysticism referring to isolation in a solitary place or cell, to practice spiritual exercises. In Dahlia's case, *khalwa* referred to the seclusion of a man and a woman who could be potential marriage candidates according to Islamic Law, hence who were not each other's *mahram* (unmarriageable kin). Therefore, it was forbidden for them to be alone in private space. See H. Landolt,"Khalwa." Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online, 2014. Reference. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/k-h-alwa-SIM_4178 (Accessed December 10, 2014).

She enjoyed that period with thousands of other women from Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia and other parts of Asia. Although the women studied at the *Madinat al-Azhar*, a separate area for women, the teachers were men. Her Arabic teacher at the American University was male and also from Indonesia. After she had attended his class for seven years, he asked her hand in marriage by sending a letter to her parents in the Netherlands. She decided to marry him as "he was well-grounded in Arabic" and "was gentle." He promised that he would offer her space for her religious activities.

After returning to the Netherlands, she began to teach Arabic to women and preach at women-only Islamic gatherings. Although she had become a mother, she took her children with her in a small car packed with books, Qurʾans and everything her children might need while she preached in different cities. Motherhood and educating Muslim children - "the future Muslim community" - became very significant to Dahlia and therefore she chose to make teaching Muslim mothers her mission. All her lessons and lectures were given on a voluntary basis. Despite her busy schedule, she always made sure that dinner was ready when her husband came home.

Muslim women from all over the country began to ask for her opinion on religious matters. Everyone knew that Dahlia was an educated woman, an ʿalima as some called her, who had studied Arabic and *shariʿa* at *al-Azhar* University in Egypt. She was one of the few Muslim women in the Netherlands who had had a religious education in one of the most prestigious Islamic universities in the world. Women began to ask her advice on all types of matters. Of particular interest to them were the rights and obligations of women in marriage and divorce and these issues still are her main topics.

In her lectures, Dahlia did not expound Islamic knowledge according to one specific Islamic school of law, instead she elaborated on the standpoints of all Islamic schools of law. By adopting this method, she wanted to transcend the differences in interpretation and create tolerance and unity among Muslims. At the end of every lecture, Dahlia apologized - and occasionally cried - if she had "mistakenly" passed on incorrect knowledge. Like Soraya, Dahlia was humble about her knowledge and activities and underlined that she was not "a scholar." Dahlia referred to herself as a *daʿiya,* a female propagator of Islam.[709] She did state that she performed *ijtihad* during her lectures and teaching, by which she meant she created space for individual reasoning. What she did not mean was textual *ijtihad* in terms of re-interpretation

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709   *Daʿiya* is a term that female religious teachers and preachers call themselves in Egypt.

the Qurʾan or *hadith*. Her use of *ijtihad* was to try to create space to question rules and allow a possibility to adjust them:

> Rules are not flawless, they are made by men. That is why the door of *ijtihad* is still open. Therefore, the things I am very sure of I pass on, things that are for the good cause. I have my references and books of laws. (..) But I do not pass [rules, S.N.] unthinkingly, (...) because one day I shall have to justify my actions in front of Allah.[710]

The next example is good illustration of her asserting her right to adjust rules. At first, Dahlia restricted her giving of Arabic lessons and lectures to such public spaces as rented community centers, classrooms in schools or domestic spaces such as living-rooms, always and only to women. As time passed, she found the Arabic lessons in the mosques around her inadequate didactically speaking. Her observations revealed that it took a very long period of time before students were proficient in Arabic. Nothing had really changed since she had been given lessons in Arabic when she was a child. Impressed by her didactic skills, not only women, but also young men wished to learn Arabic from Dahlia. Determined to improve matters, she decided to break with the Islamic principle of gender segregation, and began to teach the young men as well. Some men had difficulties being in the same room with her. So she instructed an advanced male student and put him in front of the class and kept an eye on the classroom from a distance, with the door open. She would correct the advanced student or elaborate on any grammatical point that was difficult for the student to explain. By this method, she increasingly affirmed her religious authority among the male students:

> I asked their women: "Do you mind if I teach your men?" I emphasized: "This is about knowledge and this is *darura*, a necessity." (...) I cannot teach the men in mosques, because in the mosques men are not allowed to be taught by me. And the educators in the mosque do not provide adequate Arabic lessons. (..) I say, your time is well spent here. When you have finished my course, you will speak and read Arabic fluently, in the mosques their time is, not to put too fine a point on it, being wasted.[711]

As a woman, Dahlia did not see it as her duty to teach men, however, by referring to the concept of *darura,* she legitimized her teaching and was now leading a group of young Muslim Arabists who were translating the books on *fiqh* from Arabic into Dutch, a project by which she hoped to make Islamic knowledge accessible to young Dutch-speaking Muslims. She was convinced that it was important that Muslims

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710   Interview with Dahlia (February 21, 2011).
711   Interview with Dahlia (March 4, 2011).

gain knowledge of Islam via the language they are fluent in. This was an important aspect that the *imams* yet had to realize, Dahlia stressed. She was very critical of them because *imams* "did not have a clue" about what was happening in the country and were badly informed about the reality in which most Muslims live. Furthermore, most *imams* did not preach or provide Islamic knowledge about the problems that Muslims were facing in Dutch society. Dahlia was adamant that these problems were particularly related to gender issues. Dahlia urged women to learn Arabic so they could use verses in the Qurʾan, *ahadith* and Islamic books of law to study Islam independently of male religious authorities:

> Women should not hesitate to ask *imams* questions. They should learn how to write their questions and make their arguments sound. They therefore needed to know Arabic to read the Qurʾan and ask the *imam*: "This verse says this, but the reality is different. Please pay attention to this verse or that *hadith*." If they did this, the *imam* might be shaken awake so he realized: "Hey, this person knows things."[712]

As might be expected, *imams* were also critical of Dahlia who saw herself as a preacher and thought that her "preaching is empowering people." Her goal was to empower women by preaching in mosques as well. However here she ran into difficulties:

> You cannot easily penetrate that area; it is a man's world. I have proven myself many times, although I did not need to prove myself, but I know that they [*imams,* S.N.] needed that to trust me.[713] Therefore when I entered a mosque to give a lecture or give lessons, they would ask me: "What books, references and titles are you using? On the basis of which sources?" I looked at their material and would say: that it was all in Arabic. (…) I have translated my sources from Arabic into Dutch. (…) I have used the *tafsir* [Qurʾan exegesis, S.N.] from the *fiqh* books of *Ibn Kathir*, and from Medina online.[714] (…) And they were immediately sold. They would say: "*Alhamdulillah.*" (…) So no, I am not afraid of them. I never fail to provide them with the Arabic references I use in my lectures. If you do not know Arabic, you cannot depend on your Arabic references, while all those *imams* want to see proof. (…) I also make a copy for them,

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712   Interview with Dahlia (February 21, 2011).
713   In Section 6.6. I shall elaborate on the role of trust in obtaining religious authority.
714   Ibn Kathir was a narrator and wrote one of the best-known *tafsirs*: *Tafsir al-Qurʾan al-ʿAdhim*. He was born in Busra in circa 700/1300 and died in Damascus in 774/1373. See Laoust, H., "Ibn Kaṯẖīr", in: Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition, Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1573-3912_islam_SIM_3237 (Accessed December 24, 2016).

so they can learn as well [she laughs]. (...) It is a process, but gradually mosque doors are opening up to me.[715]

Although Dahlia thought of herself as a person who has never stepped outside the limits set by orthodox Islam, she has challenged the patriarchal mosque system by being critical of their activities and their regulations about women. She has been especially critical of the traditional authority of the *imam*. Dahlia wanted to "reform" the patriarchal mosque system "from within." For instance, her husband, who was a male preacher, preached regularly in mosques. Sometimes she has written his sermons, for which she did not want to receive credit, because her mission was to change the Muslim reality internally. Another example to which she referred is that one day she and her friend wanted to pray in the mosque. However, the door to the women's area was locked and the care-keeper of the mosque denied them access. He told them that women were not obliged to pray in the mosque and could do so at home. Dahlia grew furious and asked him in Arabic whether he was prepared to justify his actions before Allah. What would he answer when Allah asked him why he prohibited two women to perform the prayer, and by so doing to worship Allah. The care-keeper immediately apologized and opened the mosque door for them:

> I believe in the cause I am fighting for. I always say: believe in yourself and don't be dictated to by a man. I think that most women are controlled by men. And, when that happens, they have no initiative. (...) I am convinced that it is very important that women educate women and do not become dependent on men. I think that [that situation, S.N.] is awful. (...) There should be more strong women, who can tell other women about their rights, but also point out their duty to learn.[716]

Her aim was to help women to evaluate their religious rights critically and to (re) define their own social and religious realities. During her lectures and Arabic lessons, she was never without a message to pass on to women. She told them to educate themselves, be tolerant of differences in Islamic practice and, most importantly, to be independent and learn to stand on their own two feet. Like Soraya, Dahlia was very conscious of what she preached and the message she gave her public. For instance, if she was asked whether a woman might travel without a *mahram* - a kinsman with whom one might not marry - on the basis of traditional interpretations of religious scholars, Dahlia explained that it was not safe for women to travel alone. However, in reality she herself did travel alone by plane and did not consider it unsafe. Neverthe-

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715   Interview with Dahlia (March 4, 2011).
716   Interview with Dahlia (March 4, 2011).

less, if she were to have mentioned to her public that she deviated from the Islamic norm she preached, "They would lose their trust in me", she explained.

At this point I want to analyze Dahlia's authority on the basis of the same three aspects I used for Soraya.

In the first instance, Dahlia's religious education and knowledge of Arabic were the basis of her religious authority. Her scriptural knowledge and her familiarity with a variety of canonical sources definitively formed the foundation of her religious authority. It equipped her with a detailed knowledge of Islam that enabled her to teach, even in mosques, even to men. Hence her religious education was a necessary credential in gaining religious authority. Critically, at the time when she returned to the Netherlands, there were not many women who were considered an ʿalima. As with Soraya, this factor worked to her advantage. This marked her as a religious authority in a context in which doctrinal and canonical knowledge of Islam had a privileged position.

In the second instance, the other qualities that placed her in the position of a religious authority were her confidence and her determination to reform the umma and, in doing so, fight its patriarchal elements. Being a mother was also important to her. Propagating motherhood and preaching to women urging them to educate their children Islamically had also helped her to obtain religious authority. Therefore, she was not only admired for her piety as a Muslim woman, but also for being a pious mother.

In the third instance, the type of authority that Dahlia had become was knowledge-based. Her knowledge of Islam and the Arabic language allowed her to achieve the position of being an educator of the Muslim community. By knowledge-based authority, I mean discursive doctrinal and canonical knowledge of Islam. She was also knowledgeable about how rules work in particular contexts. For instance, by recourse to the concept of darura she was able to adjust specific settings and even break with certain traditions, such as gender segregation.

Empowerment and patriarchy

It was in terms of female empowerment that Dahlia explained her motives for becoming a preacher. Dahlia's type of empowerment was different to empowerment among the interlocutors previously discussed in Chapter Five. There I argued that empowerment among my interlocutors took place in the context of the acquisition and transmission of Islamic knowledge. When they experienced empowerment, my

interlocutors stated that they felt "strengthened" to think out strategies that would enable them to confront, or surrender, to the limitations they experienced. My analysis has shown their empowerment as creating a middle ground through which they questioned and negotiated patriarchal beliefs and practices. In this discussion, I emphasized that empowerment did not necessarily lead to religious reform. However, the case of Dahlia was one of the few in the present study that indicated the contrary.[717]

Dahlia explicitly positioned herself within the discourse of empowerment. She used empowerment as a synonym for preaching. She described her motivation to preach by referring to its empowering impact on women and herself. Empowering women in Dahlia's eyes was pointing out to them what their rights were in Islam and teaching them how to question patriarchal elements in the Muslim community. When she discussed these topics, Dahlia spoke in terms of "fighting" for female religious independence. Resourcefully Dahlia devised strategies to confront the limitations she and participants in pious circles experienced. Her strategies were derived from her knowledge of religious sources that not only facilitated a negotiation with patriarchal norms, but also enabled her to resist those norms "from within."

She asserted her right to interpret divine law in order to transform patriarchal settings. For instance, she had been able to break with the tradition of gender segregation; she had been successful in persuading *imams* in the mosques to let her instruct women in these traditional sites of knowledge production; and she had also been able to convince mosque care-takers to open up their doors for women during prayer. Her efforts have shown how Islamic knowledge can create space for resistance in social relations of power. Dahlia's mission does have similarities with the Muslim feminist projects described in previous chapters. However, Dahlia did not conduct Qurʾan exegesis from a female point of view. Although she admitted to staying within the margins of orthodox Islam, she constructed a religious authority that was more than a simple reproduction of institutionalized religious views. She achieved this by developing scholarly arguments to support interpretations of Islamic practices that were responsive to women's perspectives and needs.

Finally, I would like to argue that the female religious authorities such as Soraya and Dahlia - and many others - exercised religious influence not because they had been formally appointed as a religious authority. They were not 'in' authority, in the sense of holding an official position that authorized a person to issue commands

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717   See the case of Nora in Section 6.4. of this chapter.

or recommendations.[718] The female religious authorities in the present study were 'an' authority, because they had accrued a particular degree of authority. They had acquired religious authority based on a range of grounds, for instance, specific personality traits, abilities and/or knowledge. Therefore, they had asserted religious authority outside the institutionalized religious authority structures. Consequently, I consider these women local religious authorities. In a similar way to how pious circles function as local sites of Islamic knowledge production, I view female religious authorities as local producers of Islamic knowledge. As elaborated in the previous chapters, the knowledge produced by female religious authorities was for local use. This meant that female religious authorities shaped the religiosity of participants in pious circles to the local circumstances that affected their daily lives. This also meant that the religious authority of female religious authorities was local. The local character of their religious authority also limited their exercise of authority. They focused only on the - female - participants in their pious circle. Pertinently, the female religious authorities in the present study do not claim to have religious authority, nor do they view themselves in these terms. Despite the fact that they did produce knowledge, they considered themselves to be disseminators of knowledge only.

6.3. Ascribing religious authority: becoming inspired

In this Section I focus on the perspective of the participants in pious circles and analyze the characteristics they ascribed to female religious authorities as I have abstracted these from my interviews. When they ascribed authority to someone, many characteristics were important to participants. On the basis of my interviews, I shall describe the combination of multiple qualities that make a person religiously authoritative.

The Indonesian-Dutch Born-Muslim Widiana, living in the Netherlands - whom I introduced in Chapter Four - regularly attended lectures. She ascribed authority to the Born-Muslim Samira because of the fact that she possessed several qualities:[719]

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718   Richard Friedman distinguishes two types of authority: 'being in authority' and 'being an authority.' To be 'in authority' means holding an official position that authorizes a person to issue commands. Persons in authority are obeyed because of their displayed 'marks or insignia' that communicate to others that they are entitled to issue such a command or directive. The second concept of authority is being 'an' authority. In this case, an individual is in compliance with the person in authority because of the knowledge or expertise that an authority has. Richard B. Friedman, "On the Concept of Authority in Political Philosophy," In: *Authority* (ed.) Joseph Raz (New York: New York University Press, 1990): pp. 56-91.

719   I tried to contact Samira throughout my PhD, as her name was occasionally mentioned by three of my interlocutors. However, I did not manage to contact her.

I think of Samira as a person who has a lot of knowledge. Why? Because of her person-ality. She is very humble yet active at the same time. (...) She has a gift for listening attentively to individuals and gives good advice. (...) She always refers to *ahadith* and the verses in the Qurʾan (...) and has memorized the Qurʾan. She can quote [any verse, S.N.]. She implements knowledge in her daily life. (...) When I first met her, I asked her: "How do you know so much of Islam? What did you study?" It turned out that, although she had followed some studies, she had never finished [any of them, S.N.]. So in my view, a person does not need to have a diploma. (...) You often see people who have obtained a diploma but have no charisma. They are not interesting and don't even know how to lecture. [720]

Widiana did not blindly ascribe authority to someone who has obtained a diploma in religious education, but to a person, like Samira, who was a charismatic personal-ity in her eyes. The Palestinian-Dutch Born-Muslim Samar living in the Netherlands ascribed authority to the *daʿwa* preacher Soraya whose portrait I have sketched in the previous Section:

You need people to motivate you, Soraya motivates me.(...) I see her as a real example. She can guide and be a leader. Moreover, she knows such a great deal, *mashaʾallah*. Nevertheless, she will say: "I do not know much." And I think, "Is that really true?" [721]

To Samar, Soraya was a motivational religious guide as she has had the ability to lead her by setting the right example. Samar mentioned such qualities as being knowledgeable and humble but, to her personally, Soraya's ability to motivate and guide her was most significant. Another example is Farida, a Moroccan-Flemish Born-Muslim living in Belgium. She attended the weekly lectures given by Jahida, the Born-Muslim in Belgium whom I introduced in Chapter Five. Farida ascribed author-ity to Jahida. She elaborated in detail on the qualities that had placed Jahida in the position of a religious authority:

'We are very much in need of someone who will instruct us in knowledge. (...) We are not ready to transfer [knowledge, S.N.] ourselves. Jahida has that knowledge, I don't. (...) And she knows Arabic. (...) That is one of my greatest obstacles. (...) She has direct access to the sources. (...) She also has experience, a lot of experience. And she is spiritually more advanced than we are. (...) She knows how to transfer knowledge. (...) She is very understanding, she can feel people. I can't. I don't have that talent. (...)

720   Interview with Widiana (January 14, 2011).
721   Interview with Samar (March 24, 2011).

> She can sit with very traditionally minded people and try to talk with them, I can't. (...) I become rude. (...) It is also the way she talks about these themes that you can see she has made it her own. It's not just theory that she explains out of books, she does not reproduce. (...) Jahida says: "I have experienced it, I felt it, I know what I am talking about, and now I am telling it to you."[722]

Farida indicated that the religious authority ascribed to Jahida was based on a combination of various qualities. Hence, in acquiring religious authority, female lecturers not only had to display their knowledge of Islam, they also needed to be blessed with certain qualities such as empathy, modesty, didactic skills, humility, leadership qualities, being a role model, being spiritually more advanced and possessing charisma.[723] The last two qualities need further elaboration as I have not discussed them previously.

Farida mentioned "being spiritually more advanced" when I asked her why she ascribed authority to Jahida. Previously, I had classified my interlocutors into two categories: "beginners" and those "advanced" in Islam. The idea of being spiritually farther along the path denotes being "advanced" in Islam and refers to the combination of women's gained religious knowledge, experiences and skills; in other words their 'religious capital.' In a spiritual sense, being "advanced" referred to a level of piety which meant that an individual was viewed as morally upright in her thoughts and practice of Islam. It was a stage at which an individual had managed to apply the Islamic teachings to her entire way of life. This was what many interlocutors such as Farida referred to as, "She has made Islam her own."

Furthermore, I would like to emphasize that the - "advanced" - religious beliefs and practices of female lecturers were considered consistent with those of the traditional religious authorities. This meant that the female lecturers' religious authority relied on the traditional religious authorities. As I mentioned previously, female religious authorities did use the traditional religious authorities and their sources as their frame of reference. Accordingly, the female lecturers' religious consistency in their use of traditional religious authorities was an important legitimization chosen by participants to ascribe authority to female lecturers.

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722   Interviewed Farida (March 1, 2012).
723   My interlocutors referred to female religious authorities as female lecturers. In my conceptualization, I view them as female religious authorities. Therefore, I use female lecturer interchangeably with female religious authority.

Turning to the second quality, Widiana was the only interlocutor who mentioned charisma explicitly in our conversations.[724] Charisma is a personal quality that makes an individual exceptional, charming, attractive or outstanding in a particular way. In sociology, Weber explained charisma in relation to systems of domination or authority structures.[725] Although Weber was primarily interested in religious and political leaders, charisma was, he says, the source of all creative individual leadership. It is a personal ability to generate and express intense excitement. He defines charisma as follows:

> ..a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader.[726]

Charisma is the quality that identifies a particular person as a leader in the eyes of those around him or her. Charisma is a quality that sets certain individuals apart and draws others to them. Catherine Wessinger says that charisma is the first means by which women in particular gain authoritative positions in religions, regardless of their cultural settings.[727] She argues that women have to struggle to find a central place in the institutional structures of their religious traditions. Charisma enables women to achieve positions of religious leadership both inside and outside the religious mainstream, that was also the case in the present study. Wessinger explains:

> Charisma as a source of authority enables a woman leader to achieve self-empowerment and increased personal autonomy, and she is then able to empower, to a lesser degree, the people to whom she ministers by bringing meaning and healing to their lives.[728]

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724 The term charisma is derived from the Greek and means 'a gift of grace.' In its original religious meaning from the perspective of church history, it went back to the Apostle Paul who used it in connection with Christian Divine 'gifts' such as mercy and prophetical speech. Jutta Bernard: "Charisma." The Brill Dictionary of Religion. Edited by Kocku von Stuckrad. Brill, 2012. Brill Online. RADBOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=bdr_COM-00076 (Accessed April 10, 2012) and John Potts, A history of Charisma (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009) p. 2.
725 See Chapters One and Three of the present study for more on Max Weber.
726 Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, p. 358.
727 Catherine Wessinger (ed.), *Religious Institutions and Women's Leadership: New Roles Inside the Mainstream*, (Columbia South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1996) p. 5.
728 *Ibid*., p. 5.

The female religious authorities in the present study can be viewed as charismatic women who empowered, motivated and inspired the participants in pious circles. Examining the data in my interview material, being religiously inspired was also mentioned as a requirement for participants to ascribe authority to female lecturers. For instance, the convert Anna explained:

> You [female lecturer, S.N.] really need to inspire people with knowledge. You should be able to inspire. (...) Inspiration is when something affects you, touches you, gives you food for thought and makes you reflect on your own actions and thoughts.[729]

Or, as the Dutch convert Awatif said: "Lecturers should stimulate you to do something and give you inspiration."[730] Authority was attributed to female lecturers because of a combination of qualities. Participants ascribed authority to female lecturers who inspired them with knowledge; who were able to guide, motivate and empower them; who displayed an exemplary religious attitude; who were active in the community; who were empathetic to the feelings of participants; and who were consistent in keeping to the institutionalized religious authority. In such manner, female lecturers became a source of charismatic inspiration to participants and consequently were ascribed religious authority in pious circles.

6.4. Resistance and limitations

In this Section, on the basis of my interview material and participant observation, I discuss the resistance and limitations that female religious authorities have experienced in pious circles, Muslim organizations, networks and in mosques. While I have so far focused on interlocutors who were participants in pious circles and who ascribed religious authority to female lecturers, I also came across one interlocutor who did not ascribe religious authority to female lecturers. She was the only interlocutor who denied female lecturers authority on the grounds of their gender. I think it important to explain her perspective as well, because her case illustrates resistance toward female lecturers. This resistance, overwhelmingly from men, has certainly been experienced by female religious authorities.

Shayen was a convert who regularly attended different pious communities - mosques and pious circles - and listened to lectures by men and women. She was part-Dutch, part-Antillean, part-Surinamese, and married to a Born-Muslim Kurdish-Dutch man. I accompanied Shayen to a gathering in which the female lecturer, Yasmin, gave a

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729   Interview with Anna (November 20, 2011).
730   Interview with Awatif (May 16, 2011).

lecture about repentance.[731] After the lecture, I asked Shayen what she had thought of Yasmin's lecture:

> Sister Yasmin did well. But you know those lectures on Youtube? Do you know those *men* who preach so passionately? That is what I like, speakers who preach passionately! I like that approach the most.[732]

Although Yasmin received many compliments after her lecture, Shayen dismissed Yasmin as "good enough" as a speaker but that she was not a passionate speaker. However, the supposed lack of passion among female preachers was not the only critique Shayen had:

> I don't listen to female preachers. I...to be honest, I'd rather listen to male preachers. Maybe because men are not as emotional, if you understand? They speak more often in terms of black and white [in their thinking, S.N.]. (...) I don't mean to denigrate us women; we women have great qualities that Allah has given us. But....I'd rather listen to a man. I find that more reliable and I would accept [his knowledge, S.N.] more readily. I don't want to discriminate but...how should I explain this...(...) I don't mean to say that women are less, I mean there are women who teach their husbands about Islam. Do you understand me? This is my situation at home. I teach my husband. (...) I think that there is plenty of ignorance among women. Too much ignorance. (...) Women rapidly tend to say: "Oh, I am just a housewife, I just want to stay at home" and we women take the attitude of saying: "Oh, I shall ask my husband." For instance, when you see women in Morocco, you see that they have made themselves so dependent on men that they don't even make the effort to make inquiries on their own. Perhaps their situation won't let them, but perhaps it is also a bit of laxity and laziness, and a bit of their culture.[733]

Shayen said she found men more "black and white." By this, she meant that men provided clear-cut knowledge and did not speak of their experiences and feelings. Furthermore, she found the knowledge provided by men more reliable than the knowledge provided by women. She referred to women's lack of knowledge - "ignorance" - that she ascribed to women's dependence on men and their passive attitude toward knowledge acquisition. In Shayen's eyes male preachers carried more author-

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731   Yasmin is the interlocutor whom I described in Chapter Four who, as a "born-again Muslim", had begun to preach. See Chapter 4.5.
732   Interview with Shayen (January 23, 2011).
733   Interview with Shayen (January 23, 2011).

ity. I would like to stress the fact that Shayen was my only interlocutor to have such an outspoken opinion about female lecturers.

According to the female religious authorities in the present study, many men shared Shayen's opinion. Female religious authorities could be perceived as threatening by leading male religious authority figures, *imams* or preachers, who are the traditional bearers of religious authority. The case of the Dutch convert Hagar in Chapter Five has already illustrated this matter. Hagar held lectures in the female space of a mosque, a move to which a Born-Muslim preacher reacted negatively. He demanded Hagar to stop her lectures and told her to fear Allah for spreading "incorrect" knowledge about Islam. My interviews with interlocutors provide plenty of evidence of women who had had negative experiences with mosque boards and traditional Muslim organizations and hence have shown that there is still resistance toward women. For instance, in Section 6.2., the preacher Dahlia explained how she had experienced resistance because she was a woman. She explained how she had to win the "trust" of traditional male authorities such as *imams* in order to enter the mosque space and teach women:

> Men distrust women. That is why I say to all those women who lecture: go and school yourselves! Don't be less than a man. Most men are learned. Make sure that you are not just sitting quietly.[734]

Dahlia claimed that men did not trust women and this distrust was the main reason men exhibited resistance toward women. In Dahlia's eyes, the most vital way by which female religious authorities could gain the trust of male religious authorities and counter resistance was by mastering Arabic. If a woman mastered Arabic this skill would provide her with direct access to the Arabic sources through which she could gain religious authority, even in mosque spaces.

Dahlia's statements are interesting in the light of Abou el Fadl's theory on persuasive authority that I discussed in Chapter Three. Abou el Fadl says that persuasive authority involves normative power and is therefore '...the ability to direct the belief or conduct of a person because of trust.'[735] In Abou el Fadl's definition of persuasive authority, an authority can only demonstrate the power of influence and persuasion - that he calls 'normative power' - when trust is present. I consider female religious authorities to have 'persuasive authority.' Likewise, I understand authority as being able to exercise 'normative power'; to influence the ideas as well as the actions of

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734   Interviews with Dahlia (February 21, 2011).
735   Abu el Fadl, *Speaking in God's name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women*, pp. 18-19.

others. I understand the exercise of power in the *Foucauldian* sense, that is, in terms of 'acting upon' an individual.[736] Female religious authorities have the possibility, or 'chance' as Max Weber puts it, to persuade the participants in pious circles.[737] Female religious authorities help participants to give their faith a concrete form and, by that, influence the participants' understanding of Islam in diverse ways. Likewise, from the perspective of a female religious authority such as Dahlia, trust was the decisive factor that contributed to the constitution of a woman's religious authority among women, but especially among men.

The Turkish-Dutch Born-Muslim Laleh, whom I introduced in Chapter Five, expounded on this point as well. Laleh was the first Muslim woman in the Netherlands to have sat on the board of a mosque. Although her experiences were not within the context of female religious authority, she described how she also managed to quell men's resistance during her work as a mosque board member by gaining their trust:

> Women are not present on the boards of mosques, let alone as preachers. The problem is that men do not give the stage away, and women do not claim the stage. This is a mutual responsibility. (...) Men do not want to lose their privilege of power. And women are just lazy. (...) [Nevertheless, S.N.] it begins with the men: they should offer women space. And if men do not offer them space, women should claim it and think strategically. (...) For instance, when I look at my own experiences (...) I would say: "Become active in those organizations, and try to change them from within. (...) Don't generate resistance but win men's trust. (...) Begin by discussing this matter positively. (..) Shake the women who are already in those organizations and who don't see the problem awake, and draw their attention to this matter." (...) Some women don't understand that their opinions must be heard by men as well. (...) If we believe that men and women are created to complete each other, why not listen to both perspectives? (...) Actually men should revolt and demand to hear women's opinions too! (...) In the case of female preachers, it must be self-evident that women can also spread knowledge and men have the right to hear their opinion and gain knowledge from women.[738]

Her tactic was that women should win men's trust by stating that women's opinions were just as important as those of their male counterparts. Akin to Dahlia, Laleh found that women themselves should take matters into their own hands and become

736   Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," p. 789.
737   Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, p. 152.
738   Interview with Laleh (September 13, 2009).

active. Again like Dahlia, Laleh believed that the best strategy by which to confront this challenge was to change the system "from within."

The Moroccan-Dutch Born-Muslim Zarifa - and several other interlocutors - stated that female religious authorities should reform the institutionalized authority structures by expanding their religious influence beyond the niche of pious circles. For instance, by "breaking" with the tradition of male-only speakers at gender-mixed conferences. Nonetheless, the "real change" had to come from men as they were in the position to pave way for women as religious authorities:

> If the possession of knowledge is the only requirement [for preaching, S.N.], I don't understand why women should not preach as well. (...) But this tradition has to be broken by men. A man should stand-up and say: "Hey, the women are also going to speak." However, I don't see that happening. Now the men have the leading positions.[739]

Zarifa's opinion was shared by the Born-Muslim male preacher Bilal, whom I introduced in Chapter Four. He preached in both the mosque space and for Islamic organizations. Although he shared Zarifa's thoughts on this matter, he also expressed the sensibilities that men face when breaking with the tradition of male-only speakers:

> I am absolutely certain that a break has to occur. However, I do think that the organizations that would dare to initiate this [asking women to lecture, S.N.] will be risking a lot. Do you understand what I am trying to say? What organization is going to say: "I shall be the first to invite female preachers?" To be honest, I think organizations will adopt a wait-and-see-attitude, sitting on the fence watching how are people going to react. And, of course, you do not want to lose your audience.. (...) You have built an audience and worked hard for years to do so, and all of a sudden you want to introduce radical reform.[740]

Interlocutors like Zarifa, Bilal and a few others - Annelies, Chanan, Nora, Dahlia - also stated that the traditional religious authorities needed to give the stage to female religious authorities, and that men should encourage women to lecture. Despite these thoughts, the question of whether female religious authorities would wish to take stage remains. This was also pointed out by the convert Wahid.

Wahid is a Dutch convert to Islam and a member of the board of an Islamic organization. It organizes annual "convert days" in which conversion and the position of

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739   Interview with Zarifa (August 15, 2010).
740   Interview with Bilal (June 10, 2011).

converts in the Islamic *umma* and the European society are central. At these convert days - that are attended by hundreds of converts and Born-Muslims - more women than men turn up. The first time I attended their convert day was in 2010.[741] The gathering was held in a mosque, and therefore was gender segregated into a male and a female space.

The second convert day I attended was in 2011 and this was held in a large conference room.[742] Although the gathering was again gender segregated, the sexes were not divided into two spaces. Men took their seats to the left of the room and women took theirs to the right of the room. Half way along the middle rows, a screen had been placed for those who did not wish to have eye contact with the opposite sex. Hence the participants had a choice of sitting out of sight of the opposite sex. In addition, unlike the previous event - in which one female lecturer spoke in the female space - female speakers were invited on stage in front of the public. Two female converts participated in the lively debate - alongside male converts - and addressed societal matters that affected converts. However, the religious speakers were all male. I noticed these changes and questioned Wahid on this matter:

> We try to offer women space. We don't think that because a speaker is a woman, she might not say something. (...) A woman can have her say and it can be very inspiring for men. But we are not the type of organization that is pushing women to take the stage. (...) Nevertheless, it is already happening. There are more Muslim women who are coming forward in the media, for instance, this shows that it is already an ongoing process. (...) But the sphere among Muslims is too closed. There is no sphere in which a woman can also give a religious lecture. (...) It has to do with customs. I think many Muslims would find it strange to listen to women explaining things. I think it rather interesting. (....) Moreover, there are also women who do not dare to lecture in front of men.[743]

Wahid's observation that women did not always wish to lecture in front of men - he used the word "dare" to which I shall return in the end of this Section - was also shared by the female interlocutors in the present study. The majority of my interlocutors - including those who were female religious authorities - were of the opinion that it is not the task of women to lecture men. They often referred to the concept of ʿawra. ʿAwra, Arabic for defectiveness, imperfection or weakness sets out the parts of the human body that should not be viewed by or publicly exposed to others, in this

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741   I attended the National Convert's day on January 31, 2010.
742   I attended the National Convert's day on January 8, 2011.
743   Interview with Wahid (October 5, 2010).

case to men.[744] The purpose of covering is public modesty and decency. However, it is not clear-cut which parts of the body are viewed as ʿawra, because there is a considerable debate on the matter among Islamic scholars.

As a whole, all schools of law - except the *Hanbali* - agree that the entire body of a woman, with the exception of her hand palms and face, is her ʿawra.[745] Sometimes, the voice of a woman is also considered part of her ʿawra, but some maintain that not her voice but the melody of her voice is her ʿawra.[746] Furthermore, the Islamic concept of modesty holds that men and women who are not married or closely related by blood should not view each other's ʿawra. What is part of a woman's ʿawra also depends on the situation, for instance, whether she is at prayer, at home, with un-related men or in the presence of her husband or other women. ʿAwra to my interlocutors was the women's voice, and to a few the women's face as well.

The majority of my interlocutors had a clear standpoint on the matter of ʿawra in the setting of gender-mixed audiences. As one of the participants said during a gathering: "Men might lose their concentration and admire her beauty instead of her knowledge."[747] Therefore, the statement that it was not the task of women to teach men in Islam and/or preach in front of men (with a few exceptions) was widespread among my interlocutors. Therefore, ʿawra has become an Islamically legitimate reason not to include female lecturers in lecturing gender-mixed audiences. The logical consequence is that this limitation - excluding women from lecturing gender-mixed audiences - was not invariably experienced as resistance toward female lecturers. At the same time, the statements of my interlocutors showed inconsistencies. Despite the argument of ʿawra, all interlocutors thought that, in theory, it should not matter whether Islamic knowledge was transferred by a man or a woman. For instance, all interlocutors asserted that the Prophet's wife, Aisha, preached to men and women. Therefore, nowadays women should also be able to share their knowledge with men as well. Interestingly, in the case of the historical Muslim woman, Aisha, the argument of ʿawra somehow seemed irrelevant according to my interlocutors.

In the present study, there was one interlocutor who was of the opinion that women's ʿawra should not be a reason for women to exclude themselves or be excluded from addressing men. The Indonesian-Dutch Born-Muslim Nora recited

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744 Shiu-Sian Angel Hsu. "Modesty." Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān. Brill Online, 2013. Reference. RAD-BOUD UNIVERSITEIT NIJMEGEN. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-the-quran/modesty-SIM_00286 (Accessed 17 January, 2013).
745 *Ibid.*
746 *Ibid.*
747 A statement made by a participant during the National Islamic Congress on May 29, 2010.

the Qurʾan regularly before a gender-mixed audience in a mosque. Nora migrated to the Netherlands fifteen years ago. She was married to a convert Dutch man. Back in Indonesia, she had boarded at a *pesantren* - an Islamic boarding school - in which she studied Islam, throughout her teenage years. After migrating to the Netherlands, she had studied Islamic Theology and she now worked as an Islamic spiritual caregiver. She counseled men - mostly converts to Islam who had married Indonesian women - and Indonesian women. She gave monthly lectures and preached in her living-room. Nora was also active in a mosque in which she regularly recited the Qurʾan before a gender-mixed audience, consisting of mostly Dutch male converts and Born-Muslim women. In doing so, Nora deviated from the practice of male-only reciters:

> I recite for a gender-mixed public in the mosque. (...) Sometimes I ask myself: Why am I doing this? (...) Everyone tells me that I am blessed with a beautiful voice. So I wonder, why did God bless me with this gift? (...) I don't recite to gain the respect of others. I don't want that. But I do want to use my voice to give them spiritual pleasure by reciting the Qurʾan. (...) I do not have a stake in this. I mean, this matter is a matter of debate for me. For instance, what is the limit? How far can one go? But for me personally, it is not an issue. God has given me knowledge and people want to listen to me.[748]

Nora is ambivalent about whether women should or should not recite in front of a gender-mixed public. She reflected on this matter and wondered whether there were or should be limitations for women who recite the Qurʾan before men.[749] Nora was familiar with the fact that most religious scholars have prohibited women from reciting the Qurʾan in front of men, and was well aware of the concept of ʿawra. Yet she broke with the Islamic tradition of male-only reciters in mosques. In doing so, she has not experienced her ʿawra as a limitation.

Before ending this Section, I want to discuss one more limitation experienced by female religious authorities. The convert Wahid used the word "dare" to explain why some women did not claim the stage to lecture in front of men. "Not daring" suggested that women might have been afraid to lecture in front of men. What Wahid left unsaid did not explain why women might be afraid. This argument was also put forward by the Dutch convert Kharija who was an active participant in Soraya's pious

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748   Interview with Nora (January 12, 2011).
749   Although not explicitly mentioned by my interlocutors, this matter also has to do with *ikhtilat*, referring to non-familial inter-gender mixing in the same place that could lead to *fitna* - chaos, rebellion, seduction - between men and women, such as the arousing desire and committing indecencies.

circle. However, she did offer an explanation of why some women might be afraid of lecturing before gender-mixed audiences:

> I think many women are afraid of giving lectures. (…) Because the community will begin talking about them. Like: "You know that woman? She said this or that." That is what I think is happening. That men will also talk about women. I think this fact is hindering many women from lecturing to gender-mixed audiences.[750]

Kharija thought that female lecturers were scared of the fact that men would begin to discuss their role as lecturers. Her fear was that female lecturers could make themselves vulnerable to criticism by both men and women. The *daʿwa* preacher Soraya addressed the same point drawing on her personal experiences with her husband. It was one of the reasons her husband followed her religious activities so critically:

> Men [her husband in this context, S.N.] do not always want you to show yourself everywhere and make statements. They will think: "What would other men think of her [my wife, S.N.]? What will the community think?"[751]

This is a good example of how community pressure can prevent some Muslim women from addressing religious matters before a gender-mixed audience. What many might refer to as a female lecturer's lack of courage in addressing gender-mixed audiences is partially born of a fear of becoming the focus of male criticism. This in turn can put pressure in women's marital relationships and community ties. Hence, in order to avoid becoming the focus of criticism of the *umma*, some women, Soraya among them, excluded themselves from the speaker's chair when a gender-mixed audience was present.

6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that female religious authorities have mainly asserted religious authority outside the institutionalized authority structures and have therefore become local religious authorities. This meant that their production of Islamic knowledge was for local use. Female religious authorities shaped the religiosity of female participants in pious circles to local circumstances, within the compass of their daily lives. They did not claim to have religious authority, nor did they view themselves in these terms; it was the participants in pious circles who ascribed religious authority to them.

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750   Interview with Kharija (February 28, 2011).
751   Interview with Soraya (February 2, 2011).

There were a few differences between Born-Muslim and convert female religious authorities. The Born-Muslim female religious authorities I studied were on the whole fluent in Arabic and had followed some degree of religious education. The convert female religious authorities have had to acquire most of their Islamic knowledge by themselves and by self-schooling. The upshot was that Born-Muslims had direct access to religious sources because of their knowledge of Arabic, whereas converts were often deprived of this privilege.

By constructing the two portraits of female religious authorities, I have demonstrated how religious authority was constituted by a combination of such qualities as compassion, eloquence, sympathy, insight, piety and modesty. Religious education and knowledge of Arabic were also important qualities through which women acquired religious authority.

Participants in pious circles attributed authority to women in three ways: they attended the lectures of female religious authorities; they viewed them as religious role models; and they sought their knowledge in order to become religiously inspired. From the perspective of the participants, the combination of such multiple qualities as didactic skills, being religiously "advanced", morally upright, possessed of leadership qualities, being a role model and being inspirational made a person religiously authoritative. These women were able to motivate and empower. They displayed an exemplary religious attitude and were possessed of a profound Islamic knowledge.

The female religious authorities in the present study did not deviate from traditional Islamic authorities. They built on traditional religious sources and - male - religious authorities as their religious frame of reference. This religious consistency was found among all female religious authorities in this study. Dahlia and Nora were the only women in the present study who constructed authority in a way that went beyond the reproduction of institutionalized religious views. They did so by developing scholarly arguments to support interpretations of Islamic practices that were responsive to women's perspectives and needs. By their actions, they expanded the parameters of religiously permissible practice but never strayed beyond the margins of orthodox practice.

Nevertheless, female religious authorities were confronted to a great or lesser degree by gendered resistance. Many reasons were given for this: men's distrust of women, men's privilege to occupy leading positions; women's supposed lack of Islamic knowledge, passive attitude and fear of male criticism. Numerous women in the study stated that, at its core, resistance toward female religious authorities

was a question of trust. Neither men nor women invariably trusted female religious authorities. Therefore, women had to win their trust, especially of men, and try to change religious authority structures "from within." For instance, female religious authorities should be able to address gender-mixed audiences in order to constitute their religious authority among men as well. In order for that to happen, they said, the male religious authorities needed to grant female religious authorities space. However, the question remains whether female religious authorities wish to take the stage. A big stumbling-block is the ʿawra, the area of the body that should not be publicly exposed, and fear of becoming the focus of male criticism. Most female religious authorities hesitated to lecture in front of gender-mixed audiences. Only two female religious authorities in the present study had broken with the tradition of male-only lecturers and reciters.

Conclusion

Dutch and Flemish Born-Muslim women and converts to Islam have created a religious space in the setting of female pious study circles, in which they articulate their religiosity. In their pursuit of piety and knowledge of Islam they have organized a female religious space. They have experienced becoming religiously active as empowering. They stated that arranging religious activities has given them freedom of movement and action. Pertinently, the religious activities of these groups have a strategic function. By undertaking these activities the Muslim women studied have reconfigured, reinterpreted, criticized or rejected certain ideas about their position in the larger Muslim community and society. Therefore, they have demonstrated agency.

The goal of this dissertation was to map Muslim women's religious activities in the Netherlands and Belgium. I have used empirical findings to show that piety, Islamic knowledge and religious authority are strongly intertwined.

The study sought to answer four research questions:
(1)   How did Muslim women in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium cultivate piety?
(2)   What was the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge acquisition and production?
(3)   To what extent did pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium provide space for the emergence of female religious authorities?
(4)   How did being a Born-Muslim or being a convert to Islam effect Muslim women's understanding and expressions of piety, knowledge and female religious authority?

On the basis of interviews with sixty interlocutors and by attending the gatherings and conferences of twenty-four pious circles, six Muslim organizations, three Muslim women's organizations, three Muslim women's support and welfare networks and two Muslim women's educational institutes, I have sought to answer these questions. This produced the empirical findings that are summarized in the empirical chapters dedicated to: *The pious individual and the pious community* (Chapter Four), *Gendering Islam knowledge in pious circles* (Chapter Five) and *Female religious authorities* (Chapter Six). In what follows I shall synthesize the empirical findings in an attempt to answer the study's four research questions.

7.1. Comparing the Dutch and the Flemish context

The starting point for this research was the question of how Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium cultivated piety individually and collectively in pious circles. The present study focused on Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part) and examined Dutch-Flemish-speaking pious circles. The results show that pious circles in both countries are quite similar in most respects. Muslim women in both countries set up pious circles and arranged religious activities for similar reasons - piety cultivation and Islamic knowledge acquisition - and they did so in similar ways. Furthermore, the pious circles in both countries were set up by volunteers who also had jobs, families or were attending some form of education. Their discourses on piety, Islamic knowledge and religious authorities also turned out to be comparable. Nevertheless, I found two differences between my interlocutors in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Firstly, from a comparative perspective, my interlocutors in Flanders tended to be more politically engaged and involved in the political debates about their position in Flemish society than were my interlocutors in the Netherlands. Among the reasons for the engagedness of the former was the ban on the headscarf in Belgium. The ban on headscarves in secondary education in Flanders certainly had implications for the way my Flemish interlocutors experienced their religiosity. They felt that their religion and their pious way of life was under attack by politicians. The response to this feeling of threat by some Flemish interlocutors was to establish Islamic educational institutes for young girls who had chosen not to discard their headscarf. In the Dutch context, I have discovered no educational institutes founded by Muslim women. Other Flemish interlocutors had been inspired to play the role of activists, that they did by joining local demonstrations against the ban or by appearing in the media and claiming their right to wear the headscarf.

The second difference was in the organizational structure of Dutch and Flemish pious circles. Generally speaking, the pious circles in both countries were similar. However, Flemish pious circle could apply for a government subsidy, but their Dutch counterparts could not. As a consequence, the pious circles I studied in Belgium did seem better organized, more active and less dependent on other Muslim organizations than did those in the Netherlands.

Now I move on to discuss the second part of my question, namely: How my interlocutors cultivated piety. The answer to this question was more complex than I had initially thought when I began my research. I discovered that piety cultivation was a continuous project, leading to a diversity of - sometimes contradictory

- experiences. Furthermore, I realized that events in women's lives, interaction with other pious lifestyles and cultures, increased knowledge of Islam, life experiences acquired and advancing age were all factors that conspired to influence the way women had chosen to become pious. During my research I came across two types of piety: individually constructed piety and piety that accorded with the norms of pious communities. Those who cultivated piety by conforming to the norms of pious communities, tended to reflect less on their religious aspirations and were less open to other ways of becoming pious. They adhered to the religious norms that were accepted by the majority of international and national Muslim - *sunni* - scholars and preachers, and refrained from raising religious doubts.

Those interlocutors whose goal was to become pious individually did so through reflection. At times they did conform to religious norms of pious communities, but at other times they differed from those norms because of a decision based on their personal study of Islam. They were more open to other ways of religiosity and more focused on studying Islam on their own terms. They were also critical of norms posed by pious communities and this caused them to think more deeply about them. For instance, they reflected on their decision to wear the headscarf and wondered whether it was indeed an act of worship toward Allah or perhaps just an act of conformity toward their pious community.

My investigation of piety produced findings that elaborated on the arguments of Saba Mahmood. Saba Mahmood's theorization of agency suggests that, although agency can manifest itself in terms of resistance, scholars should expand its meaning beyond resistance because agency can also be the capacity to 'endure, suffer and persist.'[752] As did Mahmood, I also located agency in the process of piety cultivation. However, in this study, I have striven to show that conformity and resistance were both present in the narratives of my interlocutors. The Muslim women studied had expressed both resistance and conformity - in terms of individual piety and in piety according to the norms of a pious community - that had led to multiple and contradictory articulations of agency. At times, their agency was exhibited in terms of resistance, rebellion, autonomy, religious self-reflection, personal autonomy and self-determination. At other times, agency was articulated in terms of being compliant and subjected to the norms of pious communities. The difference with Mahmood's study can be explained by two factors.

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752   Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," p. 217.

In the first instance, obviously the Muslim women studied in this book differed from the Egyptian women in Mahmood's study. The former were either second- and third-generation Born-Muslims from migrant backgrounds or converts to Islam who lived in secular European societies. They were members of an ethnically and culturally diverse minority Muslim community, in which Muslims followed different Islamic schools of law and upheld different interpretations of Islam. In this variety of 'Muslimness', confrontation, religious pressure and resistance were more readily experienced by the Muslim women in Europe than by the Muslim women in Egypt.

In the second instance, my interlocutors lived in European societies in which Islam is politicized and problematized. Hence, in order to practice piety freely, my interlocutors felt forced to show resistance and claim religious freedom in the face of right-wing politics, Islamophobic reactions and experienced discrimination. These factors clearly led to multiple and contradictory articulations of agency, both as conformism and as resistance in the process of piety cultivation.

7.2. Pious trajectories and Islamic knowledge

The second question examined in this dissertation focuses on the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge acquisition and production. Piety was defined by my interlocutors as increased religiousness leading to God-consciousness in thought and practice. This definition comes close to the definition of piety elaborated by Amina Wadud.[753] Throughout this research, I have argued that piety cultivation among pious Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium is a dynamic process. In any attempt to understand Muslim women's thoughts and practices, it was therefore crucial to begin with their experiences. After having studied almost sixty interlocutors, I concluded that, on the one hand, piety is first and foremost about individual self-improvement, building a bond with God, achieving religious growth and, on the other hand, it is working toward the improvement of the Muslim community. Hence it was a project in progress and encompassed both an individual and a communal dimension.

These findings resulted in the theorization of piety as pious trajectories. This means that Muslim women interpreted everything that happened in their lives within the larger picture of religious self-realization. In order to understand how and why

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753   According to Wadud, piety is a 'pious manner of behavior which observes constraints appropriate to a social-moral system; and 'consciousness of Allah' is 'observing that manner of behavior because of one's reverence towards Allah.' Amina Wadud, *The Qurʾan and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, p. 37.

Muslim women cultivated piety, I studied their biographical narratives. In the process I discovered some common elements in their pious trajectories, in that they consisted of three phases: awakening, transformation and individualization. The first two phases had been experienced by the majority, the third phase by only one-third of my interlocutors.

Awakening referred to a moment at which my interlocutors had realized the importance of "genuinely" choosing the lifestyle of a committed Muslim woman. In the stories of many Born-Muslims whom I followed, they spoke in terms of religiously waking up, becoming conscious and being aware of their "humble" position as a religious being toward Allah. The convert interlocutors called this experience "reversion" because experiencing a religious awakening had led to or was part of their conversion to Islam. Being religiously awakened, my interlocutors said, had been caused by different factors. Their responses supplied the answer to why Muslim women become pious. Pleasing events such as marriage and motherhood, but also unpleasant events such as the death of a family member, violence, oppression, physical or mental illnesses had stimulated them to become religiously committed. In the case of Born-Muslims, becoming religious awake was also related to becoming an adolescent.

My convert interlocutors particularly mentioned being married to or being in a relationship with a Muslim man. Some Dutch and Flemish politicians' "hostile" attitudes toward Muslims and Islam had also activated my interlocutors' striving for piety. They wished to learn more about Islam as the religion was considered to be "under attack." Lastly, advancing age was also one of the reasons some decided to become religiously devout.

Transformation was the stage in which my interlocutors demonstrated an alternation in their life-styles, thoughts and practices, that would allow them to become pious women. My elaboration of the phase of transformation provides an answer to the question of how Muslim women cultivate piety. The conditions that were deemed necessary to cultivate piety were prayer, fasting, adopting Islamic clothing - *hijab* - and acquiring Islamic knowledge. In this stage, women often joined pious circles and attended lectures in mosques or took courses in Arabic or the Qurʾan. These were the settings in which the collective cultivation of piety occurred. Pious circles offered them space to listen to lectures, obtain Islamic knowledge, share personal experiences, become a member of a support network consisting of religiously active Muslim women, and to engage in Islam-inspired activism.

I discovered two ways of altering the self in this phase: and internal and an external phase. Internal transformation refers to the forming of pious thoughts. For instance, the "cleansing of the soul", "cultivating a pious state of mind" or "being aware of Allah in every thought and action." The second type of transformation was external and was achieved by expressing 'visible piety' by wearing Islamic dress - the *hijab* or the *khimar* - and adopting particular gender norms such as no longer shaking hands with men. Converts tended to practice piety more visibly and changed their lives more rapidly than Born-Muslims. At times, this transformation was experienced as a difficult passage by my interlocutors. The mostly negative reactions of their families, friends and the general Dutch-Flemish environment were often mentioned. Furthermore, changing their worldview and lifestyle was experienced as demanding and burdensome. Despite these hindrances, their religious striving induced feelings of peace and tranquility. These positive feelings helped them to remain focused and to be able to continue cultivating piety. The majority of my interlocutors remained in this second phase of transformation.

The third phase, *individualization*, was mentioned by one-third of my interlocutors when they explained how they "at some point" commenced reflecting on their relationship with God. At that moment they decided that their individual relationship with Allah should be the most important aspect of their pious lifestyle. Individualization tended to occur mostly among those interlocutors who had experienced religious pressure from communal norms of piety. Advancing age and a growing realistic assessment of their capacities and of the possibilities of the extent to which they could actually live according to Allah's rules were also mentioned. Those who had traveled to Islamic countries and encountered "other types of Islam", different to their own, felt challenged to think critically about their own lifestyle as well. Increased knowledge of Islam also induced a critical attitude in some women. All these factors made them question themselves: "What kind of Muslim do I want to be and what kind of Muslim can I be?"

Consequently, many interlocutors spoke in terms of stimulating personal religious growth and focusing on the cultivation of 'inward piety', rather than the cultivation of 'visible piety.' This shift indicated that Allah became the focus of their religious gravity and hence they aimed to become pious first and foremost in the eyes of God and what their pious communities thought of them became less important.

Despite these individualizing tendencies, I argue that the majority of Muslim women remain embedded in their pious communities. Individuals tended to aspire to piety collectively, as a member of a religious community. As does Jeanette Jouili, I argue

that the reference to the Islamic community and its authorities remains fundamental to the constitution of the pious self. Jouili's emphasis on the importance of religious communities by which Muslims can imagine themselves as a community concurs with my findings. Following Jouili, I have demonstrated that, regardless of individualization among some of my interlocutors, they still continued to view themselves as members of a pious community: a community of religiously committed Muslims. This meant that they were in a continuous interaction with other pious members. Therefore pious communities play an important role in forming the beliefs and practices of individual believers.

Using the concept of knowledge acquisition, I explored another dimension of piety. Muslim women gained, transmitted, deconstructed, produced and interpreted knowledge in order to become committed Muslims. By obtaining Islamic knowledge, my interlocutors increased their religious capital, that is a believer's set of religious skills, experiences, knowledge of norms, doctrine and networks of fellow worshippers. Although knowledge was being acquired individually through books, online films and websites, the collective aspects of knowledge acquisition and production in pious circles was also important to the women studied.

Pious circles provided women with the space in which to demonstrate religious autonomy. In the traditional "patriarchal" settings of knowledge production, in a number of cases women were discouraged from producing Islamic knowledge. Surprisingly, the production of Islamic knowledge in pious circles demonstrates how women in their turn also maintained gender boundaries for the purpose of articulating their religiosity independently of male religious authorities and institutions. This signified that they did not wish to be led by such - male - religious authorities as *imams* or male preachers. Consequently, pious circles provided a solution to women's demand for religious independence.

My data also pointed toward a strong connection between knowledge and gender. Obtaining Islamic knowledge in relation to their roles of women was important to my interlocutors. Examples of gendered knowledge are the conditions for women regarding prayer and fasting while menstruating, being pregnant and breastfeeding, and observing gender norms. It is precisely this kind of gendered knowledge that is less often produced in traditional Islamic organizations and mosques that made joining pious circles even more attractive. Furthermore, in a few pious circles, religious interpretations were used to teach men to share domestic responsibilities in order to facilitate women's public participation. Lara Deeb explains how authentication of Islam meant that women aimed to establish 'a true or correct meaning' of Islamic

beliefs and practices.[754]The women studied in this dissertation aimed to reconfigure what they believed to be 'traditional' gender roles through 'authenticated' interpretations of religious texts. Obtaining gendered knowledge helped them to put their experienced inequalities into perspective and to find a strategy to deal with them, either by confronting those norms or surrendering to them.

My interlocutors derived religious arguments from the study of religious sources and knowledge of historical Muslim female figures. The religious arguments they had found in the process of Islamic knowledge acquisition facilitated a negotiation with patriarchal norms. Therefore, my interlocutors' empowerment can be viewed as finding a middle ground from which they could question certain patriarchal beliefs and practices and find strategies to cope with them.

Finally, in the cases presented I have shown how claims to knowledge by women were at times contested by traditional - male - religious authorities. Some women felt "forced" to confront patriarchy and to think up a strategy to cope with patriarchal norms. In these instances, claiming space for knowledge acquisition became a contested issue. Drawing on Michael Foucault's understanding of power, I have argued that my interlocutors exercised power through their production of Islamic knowledge. My interlocutors did not claim religious power, nor did they assert they possessed it. However, through their production of Islamic knowledge, they did produce power, or, to paraphrase Foucault, 'exercise' power. My interlocutors derived power from an Islamic framework, encouraging them to obtain and transmit Islamic knowledge in order to become pious and encourage piety among other women.

I have also explored the relationship between the process of becoming pious and Islamic knowledge production. I discovered that this relationship was very strong. In the first instance, the acquisition of Islamic knowledge is essential to the formation of piety. By obtaining Islamic knowledge, women acquired a better understanding of their religion. In the second instance, by acquiring Islamic knowledge, they learned the religious rules enabling to live piously. Hence Islamic knowledge became a means to achieve piety and to become committed to Islam. In the third instance, my interlocutors obtained Islamic knowledge in order to raise their children in an Islamic fashion. Most of my interlocutors had children, or wished to become a mother soon. They emphasized the importance of cultivating a new generation of pious Muslims with Islamic knowledge, so that they, in their turn, could build or continue to build the *umma*. As Jeanette Jouilli explains, this 'broad social logic' is 'expressed by the feeling

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754   Lara Deeb*, An enchanted modern: gender and public piety in Shi'i Lebanon*, p. 20

of responsibility for the welfare of the Muslim *umma*.'[755] As shown by the studies of Saba Mahmood and Lara Deeb, the Muslim women studied viewed knowledge acquisition and transmission as a means by which the social conditions of the Muslim community could be improved. Importantly, knowledge was sought with the goal of performing *daʿwa*. Born-Muslims mainly performed 'intra-ummaic *daʿwa'* by which they aimed to make fellow Muslims conscious of their Islamic identity and history, as well as to motivate them to practice their religion with greater consciousness. Converts were also focused on 'extra-ummaic *daʿwa'* and, in their case, the goal was to convert non-Muslims to Islam.

Finally, I analyzed how the approach to gaining Islamic knowledge of most of my interlocutors was in itself a devotional enterprise and a form of worship. The intention of acquiring Islamic knowledge and the actual acts of reading, listening to or attending lectures were in themselves considered a commendable act that would be divinely rewarded. Consequently, the quest for knowledge became a devotional practice similar to other practices of worship, like wearing the *hijab*.

7.3. Female religious authority

The third question that I have addressed is the extent to which pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium have provided space for the emergence of female religious authorities. Throughout this dissertation I have described how Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium have increased their religious participation. One of the interesting outcomes of the study has been the new insights gained into the importance of female religious authorities. Some women gained religious authority in the process of piety cultivation and Islamic knowledge acquisition. Therefore the question I wanted to answer was to what extent did the context of pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium provide space for the emergence of female religious authorities. The answer to this question is that women-only pious circles have indeed paved the way for - some - women to become female religious authorities.

It is in these spaces that women have served other women as religious role models and guides. By establishing pious circles in which they organized religious activities, and through their lectures, they have (re)produced religious knowledge for other Muslim women. Therefore, they have become an important source of Islamic knowledge for those who seek their religious advice.

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755   Jeanette S. Jouili, "Re-Fashioning the self through religious knowledge: how Muslim women become pious in the German Diaspora," p. 477.

I have described female religious authorities as having 'persuasive authority', enabling them to help participants to form their religiosity and, by that, influence the participants' understanding of Islam. For instance, participants stated they had become religiously inspired, empowered and motivated by female religious authorities to practice a specific piece of knowledge or to adhere to certain religious belief. Some women have acquired religious authority on a range of grounds, including the possession of specific personality traits, capacities and/or knowledge. Their success has been derived from their ability to move from abstract theological doctrine to the everyday realities of women, considering their real-life issues and offering women pragmatic interpretations of Islamic doctrine.

By doing this work, female religious authorities have become a source of charismatic inspiration for participants. Religious education and a knowledge of Arabic were also important qualities by which women could acquire religious authority but were (seen as) less vital. Participants viewed female religious authorities as morally upright in their thoughts and practice of Islam and as women who have managed to apply the Islamic teachings to their entire way of life. I have underlined that the female religious authorities did not claim to have religious authority, nor did they view themselves in these terms. They considered themselves to be disseminators of knowledge.

For this reason, at times, female religious authorities are perceived as threatening by leading male religious authorities, *imams* or preachers, who have been the traditional bearers of religious authority. Many reasons are suggested to try to explain this situation: men's distrust of women, men's privilege to occupy leading positions, women's supposed lack of Islamic knowledge and fear of male criticism. Numerous women in this study stated that, at its core, men's resistance to female religious authorities has to do with trust. Men as well as a few women did not always trust female religious authorities. Therefore, women have to gain this trust and try to change the religious authority structures "from within." From this perspective, mastering the Arabic language has provided a few women with direct access to the Arabic sources from which they have gained religious authority even in mosque spaces.

Female religious authorities supported their knowledge statements with reference from within an authoritative religious discourse. They used the traditional religious authorities and their sources as their frame of reference. Nevertheless, they never failed to communicate the limits of their knowledge to the participants in order to emphasize their "humble" role as disseminators of knowledge. A few women did construct authority in a way that went beyond reproduction of institutionalized religious views. They did so by developing scholarly arguments to support their

interpretations of Islamic practices that were a direct response to women's perspectives and needs. For instance, by breaking with the rule of gender segregation in Islamic classes and/or reciting the Qurʾan before a gender-mixed audience. They thereby expanded the parameters of religiously permissible practice.

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated how female religious authorities are shaping and giving meaning to their religion in a setting that is women-only. I have explained that they were motivated by a number of reasons including creating the freedom to discuss whatever theme they thought important and by being able to question religious regulations and expound on their implications for women thereby eschewing male dominance. Taking a broad perspective, I have viewed this development as an attempt to produce a female Islamic space. I have argued that Islam has been a useful resource for Muslim women. They have used their religious agency to study Islamic beliefs and practices. Accordingly, the study of Islam has enabled them to create their own Islamic knowledge that is largely gender related. Therefore, they have become religious agents with the power and authority to interpret and produce Islamic discourses. However, the ability of Muslim women to produce and disseminate Islamic knowledge has also depended on their level of Islamic knowledge, knowledge of the Arabic language, analytical ability and, to a certain extent, previous religious education.

7.4. Born-Muslim and convert interaction

This dissertation has discussed two groups of Muslim women: Born-Muslim women and converts to Islam. Most of the Born-Muslim women in this research were second- and third-generation women from migrant backgrounds. Converts to Islam were women with either a Flemish or a Dutch background who had decided to become Muslims when they were adult. Throughout my research, I noticed that Born-Muslim and convert women had different perceptions of each other. Both groups defined Islam (and Muslims) in accordance with their ethnic and cultural understandings, behavior, norms and values. The question that I aimed to answer was how patterns of piety, Islamic knowledge and female religious authority informed the interactions between Born-Muslims and converts to Islam.

Excellence in piety

With regard to the question who excelled in piety, the overall trend among my interlocutors was to view converts as the virtuosi (in Weber's sense). Almost all Born-Muslims admired converts because of their conversion to Islam and because of the speed with which they had become knowledgeable, practicing Muslims.

Born-Muslims often set converts on a pedestal as an example for themselves. The converts' perseverance in becoming pious Muslims despite the obstacles they experienced was especially often mentioned. For instance, the negative reactions and pressure from converts' Dutch-Flemish families, friends and environment resulting from their conversion or wearing Islamic clothing were common arguments used by the born-Muslim interlocutors. Born-Muslims also appreciated the converts' active practice of - extra-ummaic - *daʿwa* and active involvement in Islamic activities.

In terms of religious influence, the general opinion among Born-Muslims was that converts had a positive effect on them, for instance, by inspiring them, motivating them and by making them think critically about their pious trajectories. Despite converts' positive influence, the majority of Born-Muslims indicated that converts tended to cultivate piety too rapidly. Consequently, converts were also viewed as "unstable" and overly strict in their religious thoughts and practices. Converts were viewed by the Born-Muslims in this study as less focused on religious growth - internal transformation of piety - and more focused on external transformations of piety like wearing the *hijab*.

The converts were also critical of Born-Muslims' knowledge and practices of piety. From the perspective of converts, the Born-Muslims' birth culture was often viewed as an obstacle to their religious growth. Converts thought that Born-Muslims practiced their religion "through their culture" and were therefore less critical in their pious trajectories. Born-Muslims' immigrant "un-emancipated" backgrounds were also frequently brought up. The converts considered Born-Muslims less eager and less motivated to become pious compared to themselves. My findings confirm those of Esra Özyürek. She explains how being a European convert to Islam can 'simultaneously challenge and reproduce biological and cultural racisms as well as a homogenous understanding of a German and European culture.'[756] The tendency of converts to disassociate themselves from Born-Muslims and their immigrant culture was also common among the converts in this study. A few converts in the present study reinforced a 'racialized hierarchy', as Leon Moosavi calls it, by locating themselves in a position of privilege and power so as to 'educate' the Born-Muslims about how to be Muslims.[757]

Interestingly, toward the end of this research project, I noticed a growing criticism of converts by Born-Muslims. My Born-Muslim interlocutors held the opinon that the

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[756]   Esra Özyürek, *Being German Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*, p. 2.

[757]   Leon Moosavi, "White privilege in the lives of Muslim converts in Britain," pp: 1918-1933

tendency to set converts apart as the more religiously qualified among the Muslim community had caused differences between Muslims and had prevented the *umma* from being united. Born-Muslims' admiration for converts had led to the latter having a privileged position in the Muslim *umma* that had resulted in religious educational opportunities, grants and special treatment for converts only. Therefore, a few Born-Muslims demanded equal opportunities for both converts and Born-Muslims.

'The most knowledgeable'

Turning to the question of knowledge, I have demonstrated that both Born-Muslims and converts were actively engaged in the field of knowledge acquisition and production in pious communities. Older converts were thought to be more knowledgeable compared to first-generation migrant women by Born-Muslims, because older converts had been more successful in organizing Islamic activities and obtaining Islamic knowledge. Importantly, Born-Muslim who viewed themselves as "beginners" in Islam often regarded converts as more knowledgeable on account of the knowledge they obtained in a short period of time. This impression was reinforced by their accessible and transparent exhibition of Islamic knowledge. Nonetheless, Born-Muslim women who described themselves as "advanced" in Islam were viewed as the most knowledgeable by both converts and Born-Muslims. Born-Muslims who were "advanced" in Islam felt that they possessed more religious capital. The possession of religious capital – especially the knowledge of Arabic - was a privilege that only "advanced" Born-Muslims enjoyed. This privilege offered them access to religious sources and increased their options when they needed to consult the different sources.

On the whole, converts were considered by my Born-Muslims and convert interlocutors to be mediators and bridge-builders between the Flemish-Dutch societies and the Muslim *umma*. By organizing Islamic activities, taking on leadership roles and establishing pious circles, converts had become more visible than knowledgeable Muslim women in both communities. In both roles, as mediators/bridge-builders and initiators of Islamic activities, converts exhibited their Islamic knowledge more readily than Born-Muslims did. Born-Muslims and converts explained this characteristic in terms of the Dutch-Flemish culture in which, from a cultural perspective, there were no obstacles for women who wanted to organize themselves. Born-Muslims, despite having been born and raised in the Netherlands or Belgium, still felt challenged by the patriarchal norms of their parents' migrant countries. Furthermore, Born-Muslims also stated that they had experienced cultural marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination because of their ethnic background.

Being an authority

When it came to religious authority, Born-Muslims were viewed as more authoritative. For instance, the majority of the Born-Muslim female religious authorities were fluent in Arabic and had pursued some form of religious education. Their knowledge of Arabic provided them with immediate access to religious sources, allowing them the possibility to interpret and reflect on those sources individually. This is the reason that many Born-Muslim female religious authorities stated they had acquired a doctrinal and canonical knowledge of Islam. The convert female religious authorities said that they has acquired the bulk of their Islamic knowledge through their own efforts and through self-schooling. As a consequence, they considered themselves to be "autodidacts"; women who had learned about Islam without the benefit of a teacher or any type of formal education. The converts in this study were more dependent on Islamic knowledge sources that were written in English, Dutch or French. Convert female religious authorities tended to play down their knowledge by referring to it as "basic practical knowledge of Islam", meaning non-discursive knowledge related to Islamic rituals, such as prayer, fasting, giving *zakat* or how to wash the deceased. On the whole, in terms of 'hierarchies of religious virtues' mastering the Arabic language was considered an important religious virtue both by Born-Muslims and converts.

7.5. Theoretical implications and further research

In this final Section, I would like to point out three theoretical contributions that have been made in this dissertation and make some suggestions for further research.

Status stratification

The first important implication of this study is my application of Max Weber's theory of 'status stratification' to a new context, that is, that of Muslim women in Europe. Weber's notions of religiously qualified people and the emergence of a hierarchy of virtues tied in well with the findings in the present study. They provided an explanation of how piety unavoidably created hierarchies of religious virtues. The status groups in this study were either converts or Born-Muslims, depending on the virtue that was considered most pious. For instance, converts were considered more pious as they tended to display their religion more visibly by wearing Islamic clothing such as the *hijab*. By applying Weber's theory of 'status stratification', I have offered new perspectives on how piety among Born-Muslims and converts to Islam can create hierarchies of religious virtues in the form of pious status groups, indicating a competitive struggle over virtues. My findings have described a specific set of virtues like the visible practice of piety, knowledge of Islam and Arabic and the ability to organize religious activities because of which some interlocutors were considered more

'religiously qualified', to paraphrase Weber. Piety as religious excellence, Weber's notions of religiously qualified people and the emergence of a hierarchy of virtues, were valuable to my analysis of Born-Muslim and convert interaction. This enabled me to analyze the way in which pious endeavors created differences between Born-Muslims and converts. Therefore, the theory of 'status stratification' proved to be a useful theoretical framework.

Considering the results of the current study, I would also like to suggest a more penetrating examination of the interaction between both groups. For instance, research among Born-Muslim and convert marriages might produce interesting results. The majority of the convert women studied in this dissertation were married or in a relationship with Born-Muslim men. Even the few male converts I interviewed were also married to Born-Muslim women. Therefore, the question that presents itself is: What type of Islam is produced in Born-Muslim and convert marital relations? How do both groups define Islamic practices and thoughts within a marriage? The Islamic upbringing of their children could offer an interesting perspective from which to study this matter. Further research is therefore needed to deepen our insights.

Islamic knowledge and piety

A second important implication of my study derives from my findings on the strong relationship between Islamic knowledge and piety. Consequently, this study places Islamic knowledge at the heart of Muslim women's piety discourses, both as a means of cultivating piety and as a devotional exercise in itself. My interlocutors were convinced that it was not possible to become pious without having acquired knowledge of Islam. Obtaining Islamic knowledge enabled them to become practicing and believing pious women. Furthermore, my interlocutors viewed the intention of gaining and producing Islamic knowledge and the actual acts of reading, listening or attending lectures as commendable acts that would be divinely rewarded. They participated in pious circles in a ritually pure state of worship. By this I mean that they arrived at the meetings after having performed the *wuduʾ*, one of the ritual washings performed by Muslims before prayer. Therefore, this dissertation has shown that it is not possible to study piety without focusing on Islamic knowledge. Consequently, when discussing the need for future research, the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge certainly warrants a deeper investigation. I am especially interested in the question of how knowledge acquisition as a form of worship relates to other piety practices. The answer to these questions will lead to a deeper understanding of the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge.

Pious circles and religious capital

A third important implication of my study is my theorization of female pious study circles as pious communities of practice in which religious capital is gained. I have combined the concept of 'communities of practice' by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger and specified it to suit the research group in the present study. I have supplemented the concept of pious communities by adding a common goal, namely: gaining religious capital. Here I have borrowed Laurence R. Iannaccone's definition of religious capital - 'familiarity with a religion's doctrines, rituals, tradition, and members' - and redefined it as the believers' set of religious skills, experiences, knowledge of norms, doctrine and networks of fellow worshippers. In this way, I have pointed toward the social functioning of pious communities as a setting in which piety is also expressed in terms of cultivating Islamic sisterhood and building a network of believing Muslim women. This communal aspect emerged as just as important as the individual endeavor of becoming a pious woman. By studying women as members of a pious community of Muslim believers, in which knowledge of Islam is gained, experiences are shared and in which participants can bond with people with similar thoughts and find support, I have put the focus on the collective dimensions of piety cultivation. These communal aspects of piety should be taken into account in future studies on piety.

Concluding remarks

The research project was set out to explore the organization of a female religious space by Born-Muslims and converts to Islam. I have examined the beliefs and practices by which they have cultivated piety. I have also analyzed the acquisition and production of Islamic knowledge and discussed how piety and knowledge are related to female religious authority. Finally, I have studied how being a Born-Muslim or a convert influences Muslim women's understanding and expressions of piety, knowledge and authority.

Qualitative methods have enabled me to understand their experiences and emotions, but have also underlined the dilemmas they have experienced in their pursuit of piety. Throughout this dissertation I have shown how the increased degree of my interlocutors' access to religious knowledge, its sources and religious interpretations have contributed to their enhanced religious autonomy. Furthermore, I have demonstrated the importance of Islamic knowledge in the piety discourse, both as means by which piety is cultivated and as a form of worship. I have demonstrated how Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium have been expanding on their opportunities to establish themselves as religious agents. They have worked hard to create Muslim community members who are sincere and contribute to a well-functioning Muslim

umma. Therefore, their aim is to influence beyond the niche of pious circles, as they offer relevant answers to how to live as a Muslim in European societies.

This study has demonstrated how Muslim women have been producing specific religious knowledge and practices that tie in with their local needs and have been adapted to a Dutch and Flemish setting. In the pious circles consisting of native Dutch and Flemish converts to Islam and Born-Muslims the study and dissemination of Islamic knowledge takes place in the Dutch and Flemish languages. My interlocutors' approach to the study of Islam and its sources accords with such European phenomena as religious individualization and autonomy. These characteristics illuminate how Muslim beliefs and practices and modes of religiosity are being transformed among Muslim women in these European societies and can be considered 'European Islam.'

Clearly, these spaces and the female pious activities are on the whole invisible to the majority European societies. For this reason, the image of Muslim women as believers who possess little or no agency continues to be dominant in European majority societies. Through this study, I hope to have adjusted this image and have demonstrated an evolving religious space of Muslim women in the Netherlands and Belgium.

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Glossary of Arabic Islamic terms

Abaya: a sleeveless, flowing dress for women.

Adhan: "announcement," or "call to prayer;" a technical term for the call to the divine service of Friday and the five daily prayers.

Alhamdulillah: praise belongs to God.

ʿAlim (pl. *ʿulamaʾ*)*:* religious scholar.

ʿAlima: female religious scholar.

As-salamu ʿalaykum: peace be upon you.

ʿAql: intellect, reason or rationality.

ʿAwra: private areas of the human body to be covered in the presence of others in order to preserve modesty (they are considered different for men and women).

Aya (pl. *ayat*)*:* Qur'anic verse.

Dalil: evidence or legal proof.

Darura: necessity, urgency, basic necessity of human beings.

Daʿwa: has the primary meaning in Arabic to call or to invite to Islam. In the religious sense, *daʿwa* is addressed to human beings by God and his Prophets. It is used for both Muslims and non-Muslims.

Daʿiya (pl. *daʿiyat*)*:* female preacher.

Duʿaʾ: prayer, invocation (addressed to God) either on behalf of another or for oneself (calling either for blessing, or for imprecation).

Fard ʿayn: individual religious duty. It refers to the obligation that is incumbent upon every Muslim.

Fard kifaya: collective religious duty. It refers to the obligation that is incumbent upon a group of Muslims.

Fatwa (pl. *fatawa*): legal opinion or advice, usually (but not always) issued by an acknowledged Muslim religious scholar.

Fiqh: Islamic jurisprudence.

Fitna: disorder, chaos, rebellion, seduction.

Fitra: theologically, the original state in which humans are created by God. It is also understood as an inner essence of an individual or intuitive sense by which one distinguishes right from wrong and moral from immoral.

Jahl: ignorance.

Hadith (pl. *ahadith*): oral and written accounts of sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.

Hajj: the pilgrimage to Mecca and its surroundings.

Halqa (pl. *halaq*): lit. "circle" or more specifically it refers to a religious gathering in which a religious teacher gives lessons in Islam to small groups of students.

Halal: religiously allowed, lawful or permitted.

Haram: religiously forbidden.

Hijab: lit. obstruction, shield, shelter, protection. Or seclusion. It is also the veil with which the woman covers her head, except her face.

Hijabi: (from the word *hijab/muhajjaba*) woman wearing a headscarf.

ʿIbada (pl. *ʿIbadat):* refers to the ordinances of divine worship, in this regard obedience to God and individual worship.

ʿIlm: Islamic knowledge.

Ijaza: an indication that one has been authorized by a higher authority to impart certain subjects or text of Islamic knowledge.

Ijmaʿ: consensus of scholars; a binding agreement of Muslim interpretive scholars in a specific time, on legal rules concerning matters that are not covered in the Qurʾan or *sunna*.

Ijtihad: individual, rational, reasoning or interpretation of the sources of Islam.

Ikhtilat: refers to non-familial inter-gender mixing in the same place.

Imam: lit., one who stand out in front. In Islamic Law an *imam* is a leader of prayer or of a congregation. *Imam* is commonly used to refer to a religious leader.

Iman: faith, belief or conviction.

Isnad: a list of authorities who are said to have transmitted accounts of the saying or deeds of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, via his companions or later authorities.

Inshaʾallah: God willing.

Khalwa: seclusion. *Khalwa* is a term from mysticism referring to isolation in a solitary place or cell, involving spiritual exercises. *Khalwa* also refers to the seclusion of a man and a woman who could potentially marry according to Islamic Law, hence who are not each other's *mahram* (unmarriageable kin).

Khashya: fear, anxiety, fear for God.

Khatib: deliverer of the *khutba*: sermon during the Friday prayer/mosque preacher.

Khawf: fear, anxiety, fear for God.

Khimar (pl. *khumur*): lit., scarf, partition, turban, piece of cloth, flowing garb or a garb without stiches.

Khutba: friday congregational sermon by a *khatib* (mosque preacher).

Madhhab (pl. *madhahib*)*:* Islamic school of law. There are four schools in *sunni* Islam known as the *Shafiʿi, Hanafi, Maliki* and *Hanbali madhhab.* The schools are associated with the name of the jurist who founded the school.

Mahram: close male kin, which include a woman's immediate family such as a husband or a certain blood relative such as father, uncle, brother or a son.

Maʿrifa: (derived from the verb *ʿarafa*) is a synonym of *ʿilm* (religious knowledge).

Mashaʾallah: an exclamation/statement made to marvel at and recognize God's blessings ("whatever God wills, "My God," "How wonderful is God").

Muʿamalat: parts of Islamic law that deal with the relations between human beings.

Muballigh (muballigha): male, viz. female *muballigh*, from the word *tabligh* which means to communicate, fulfill or implement a mission. In general a *muballigh* refers to the function of a lay preacher of speaker who propagates Islam.

*Murshid (*pl. *murshidun female murshida/murshidat*): religious guide or preacher in Morocco.

Mufti: in the *sunni* tradition legal scholar who issues advice in the form of *fatawa* (legal opinion or advice).

al-Muttaqun: Qurʾanic term for those who are the "truly Godfearing."

*Mujtahid (*pl. *mujtahidun)*: jurisprudent (jurist) who exercises *ijtihad* (Individual, rational, reasoning or interpretation of the sources of Islam).

Nasiha: advice.

Nashid (pl. anashid): in music, a piece of oratory, a chant, a hymn and a form of vocal music, or religious chant.

Naql: revealed knowledge, given to human beings by God, as stated in the Qurʾan and transmitted in the Prophetic tradition.

Niyya: intention.

Niqab: a form of the veil that covers the head, face, and torso.

Qadi: Islamic judge.

Qara'a: to "read aloud, to recite" or "to proclaim." The imperative of the same verb, *iqra*ʾ, is generally acknowledged to be the opening of the first utterance revealed by God to the Prophet Muhammad, in *sura* 96 (The Blood-Clot) that is God's command to Muhhammad that he "proclaim God's revelations."

Qawwam: support, protection, maintainer or guardianship. In this context, men as supporters/guardians of women.

Qiyama (Yawm al-): resurrection (Day of).

Qiyas: the process of analogical reasoning, in which by the teachings in the Qurʾan and the *ahadith* are compared with the aim to offer a response or resolve to a new religious problem in analogy with past practices and beliefs. It is one of the methods used in exegesis to derive new rules from existing ones.

Ramadan: the Islamic month of fasting.

Sahur: the last part of the night when, during the month of *Ramadan*, it is still permitted to eat and drink. The pre-dawn meal is also called *sahur.*

Al-salaf al-salih: the pious forefathers. It refers to the first three generations of Muslims who according to Muslims, are the best in Islamic history.

Salafism: a movement within Islam that takes its name from the term *salaf* meaning "ancestors'" through which they identify themselves with the first Muslims, who according to them are the most exemplary Muslims since the Prophet Muhammad.

Salam: peace, Islamic greeting.

Salat: Islamic prayer ritual that is considered obligatory to perform five times a day.

Saum: fasting, foremost during the month-long fast during *Ramadan*, but also at other occasions.

Shahada: declaration of faith, also declared in order to become Muslim according to Islamic law.

Shariʿa: religious Law.

Shaykh (pl. shuyukh): lit., "elder," title for a religious teacher and/or leader.

Shiʿa: the second largest denomination of Islam. The term refers to *shiʿat ʿAli* meaning "followers" or "the party" of the Prophets Muhammad's son-in-law and cousin Ali.

SubhanʿAllah: "Glory be to God." Also: "God is free and far-removed from all imperfections."

Shuʿur: a term for knowing and knowledge in the Qurʾan.

Sunna: the Prophet's "way" or "path," referring to the teachings, deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as the messenger of God.

Sura: chapter, subdivision of the Qurʾan.

Tablighi Jamaat: is a Islamic revival movement, founded in 1927 by Maulana Muhammad Ilyas in India. It means "the society for spreading faith."

Tablighi: adherent of the *Tablighi Jamaat.*

Tafsir (pl. tafasir): explanation of the Qurʾan.

Tajwid: refers to the rules governing pronunciation during recitation of the Qurʾan.

Taqlid: the unquestioned acceptance of the opinions of previous religious scholars through which Islamic legal schools are adopted.

Taqwa: piety or virtuous fear (God-consciousness). In the Qurʾan it used both for piety and fear of God.

Tarawih (pl. *tarwiha):* superogatory, meritory prayers performed after the *ʿishaʾ* prayer, during the month of *Ramadan.*

Umma: the worldwide community of Muslims.

Usul al-fiqh: [science of the] sources of Islamic jurisprudence.

Wuduʿ: minor ablution, obligatorily required for the performing of certain religious acts especially worship.

Zakat: almsgiving.

Nederlandse samenvatting

In de afgelopen drie decennia is er wereldwijd sprake van een opleving van de islam. In veel analyses wordt dit proces in verband gebracht met islamistische bewegingen die zich vanuit politiek-ideologische redenen vormen. In dit onderzoek is de focus op een breder proces van vroomheid, waarbinnen de nadruk ligt op het modelleren of transformeren van het "zelf" en de gemeenschap. Ook onder Nederlandse en Belgische vrome moslimvrouwen is deze tendens zichtbaar.

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de vrome activiteiten van moslimvrouwen in Nederland en België (Vlaanderen) in 'zustergroepen', bijeenkomsten georganiseerd voor en door moslimvrouwen, met als doel een vrouwelijke islamitische ruimte in kaart te brengen. Dit onderzoek heeft tussen 2009-2014 plaatsgevonden. De focus van deze dissertatie ligt op drie kernthema's: vroomheid, (religieuze) kennis en religieuze autoriteit. Door middel van interviews en participerende observatie is in dit onderzoek gekeken naar hoe geboren-moslimvrouwen en bekeerlingen tot de islam samenkomen in deze zustergroepen waar vroomheid wordt gecultiveerd en kennis over de islam wordt opgedaan onder leiding van vrouwelijke islam deskundigen. Ik noem deze vrouwelijke islamdeskundigen vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten. Er is ook gekeken naar hoe geboren-moslims en bekeerlingen zich tot elkaar verhouden.

De onderzoeksvragen in dit proefschrift zijn:
1) Hoe cultiveren geboren-moslimvrouwen en bekeerde vrouwen tot de islam vroomheid in zustergroepen?
2) Wat is de relatie tussen vroomheid en islamitische kennis acquisitie en productie in zustergroepen?
3) In hoeverre draagt de organisatie van vroomheid in Nederland en België bij aan de opkomst van vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten?
4) In hoeverre is geboren-moslim of bekeerling zijn van invloed op de wijze waarop moslimvrouwen vroomheid, kennis en vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteit definiëren en tot uitdrukking brengen?

Methodologische verantwoording

Om een veelzijdig beeld te verkrijgen van vrome moslimvrouwen, heb ik semigestructureerde diepte interviews gevoerd met moslimvrouwen - en enkele mannen - en de religieuze biografieën van zestig respondenten verzameld. In totaal heb ik negentien respondenten in België en eenenveertig in Nederland geïnterviewd. Van de zestig respondenten waren vierendertig geboren-moslims en zesentwintig bekeerlingen. De gesprekspartners waren zowel religieuze autoriteiten als organisatoren en participanten van zustergroepen. Ik ontmoette de meeste van mijn respondenten

tijds activiteiten in zustergroepen, moslimorganisaties en moskeeën. In totaal heb ik vijfenzestig bijeenkomsten bijgewoond.

Zustergroepen in Nederland en België

De zustergroepen kunnen het best omschreven worden als studiekringen van moslimvrouwen, waarin kennis over de islam centraal staat. De vrouwen krijgen les in de Arabische taal, reciteren de Koran en bestuderen de rechten en plichten van moslimvrouwen. Tegelijkertijd zijn het meer dan studiekringen. Tijdens de bijeenkomsten wordt er samen gebeden, zijn er lezingen en workshops, wisselen de vrouwen islamitische boeken, kledij, hoofddoeken uit, wordt er geld ingezameld voor goede doelen en tijdens de ramadan wordt het vasten gezamenlijk verbroken. Hiermee hebben zusteractiviteiten ook een sterk sociaal karakter. De overeenkomsten in de organisatie van deze zustergroepen tussen Nederland en België zijn groot. Ook de manier waarop vroomheid gepraktiseerd wordt zijn overeenkomstig. Ik heb echter twee verschillen geconstateerd tussen beide contexten.

Ten eerste, mijn respondenten in Vlaanderen (België) zijn meer politiek betrokken dan de Nederlandse respondenten. Zo namen ze veel vaker deel aan debatten over hun positie in de Vlaamse samenleving. Het verbod op de hoofddoek in het secundair onderwijs in Vlaanderen gaf daartoe een belangrijke aanleiding. Dit verbod had gevolgen voor de manier waarop mijn Vlaamse gesprekspartners hun religiositeit ervoeren. Zij voelden dat hun religie en hun vrome levensstijl bekritiseerd werd door de politiek. Als reactie hierop hebben sommige Vlaamse moslimvrouwen islamitische onderwijsinstellingen opgericht voor jonge vrouwen die hadden gekozen om hun hoofddoek niet af te doen. Andere Vlaamse gesprekspartners waren geïnspireerd om de rol van activisten op zich te nemen. Dat deden zij door lokale demonstraties tegen het verbod te organiseren of door in de media te verschijnen en hun recht op het dragen van de hoofddoek te bevechten. Dat was niet of minder het geval bij de Nederlandse moslimvrouwen die ik heb onderzocht.

Ten tweede, in Nederland zijn de zustergroepen geen officiële organisaties. De meeste hebben geen inkomstenbronnen. De kosten worden gefinancierd uit eigen middelen en alle activiteiten worden op vrijwillige basis uitgevoerd als vrome handelingen om God te behagen. In België zijn de zustergroepen veelal Verenigingen Zonder Winstoogmerk (VZW). Dit betekent dat de vrouwengroepen subsidie kunnen aanvragen en verkrijgen voor hun activiteiten. In Nederland hebben religieuze organisaties geen recht op subsidie voor hun religieuze activiteiten. Hierdoor zijn de vrouwengroepen in België in staat om bijvoorbeeld ruimtes af te huren. Subsidiëring

biedt hun ook de vrijheid om vaker activiteiten te organiseren, grootschaliger en voor grotere groepen vrouwen.

Vroomheid in zustergroepen
Hoe cultiveren geboren-moslimvrouwen en bekeerde vrouwen tot de islam vroomheid in zustergroepen?

Steeds meer moslimvrouwen uit verschillende lagen van de maatschappij, hoog- en laagopgeleid, getrouwd en ongetrouwd, jong en oud, tonen een hernieuwde interesse voor de islam. Dit geldt zowel voor geboren-moslimvrouwen (vrouwen die als moslim opgevoed zijn) als voor bekeerde vrouwen. Deze moslimvrouwen bevinden zich in een proces waarbij ze hun religie opnieuw definiëren, een ontwikkeling die in de eerste plaats een individuele aangelegenheid is. Iedere moslimvrouw heeft de mogelijkheid het geloof op haar manier te bestuderen, (teksten) te lezen en te (her) interpreteren. Via internet en een veelheid aan religieuze boeken komt islamitische kennis binnen handbereik, waardoor verdieping in de Koran en de *hadith,* de overleveringen over de uitspraken en handelingen van de profeet en zijn de eerste moslims, kan plaatsvinden.

Actieve moslimvrouwen beschouwen het opdoen van islamitische kennis als een belangrijke plicht voor iedere moslim(vrouw). Het vergroten van kennis moet leiden tot een vromere houding en het praktiseren van de vijf zuilen van de islam (de geloofsbelijdenis, het gebed, vasten, aalmoezen geven en één maal de pelgrimstocht naar Mekka maken). Opvallend is hoe middels het bidden, het dragen van een hoofddoek en aandacht voor correcte islamitische kledij moslimvrouwen een piëtistische levenswijze proberen te construeren. Vroomheid wordt door mijn respondenten gedefinieerd als een toegenomen religiositeit die tot een godsbewustzijn leidt, zowel in gedachte als in handelen.

Tegelijkertijd leidt deze individuele verdieping tot een collectieve vorm van religieuze expressie. De persoonlijke religieuze ontwikkeling is een motivatie om andere (vrouwelijke) leden van de gemeenschap van gelovigen, de *umma*, te ontmoeten en met elkaar kennis over de islam op te doen en ervaringen uit te wisselen. Hierbij ontstaat een nieuw religieuze ruimte waarbinnen moslimvrouwen elkaar treffen als 'zusters in de islam'. Dit manifesteert zich in vele zustergroepen en zusteractiviteiten die op landelijk en lokaal niveau functioneren en plaatsvinden.

In dit onderzoek heb ik aangetoond dat het streven naar vroomheid onder moslimvrouwen in Nederland en België een dynamisch proces is. Vroomheid heeft in de eerste plaats betrekking op de transformatie en verbetering van 'het zelf' door een sterke band met God te onderhouden en te streven naar religieuze groei. Op de tweede plaats heeft het streven naar vroomheid tot gevolg dat er ook gewerkt wordt aan een moslimgemeenschap die leeft volgens de regels van de islam. Om deze reden omvat het streven naar vroomheid zowel een individuele als een gemeenschappelijke dimensie.

Vrome trajecten

Deze bevindingen hebben geleid tot mijn conceptualisering van vroomheid als vrome trajecten. Dit betekent dat moslimvrouwen hun levensgeschiedenis interpreteren en plaatsen binnen het grotere geheel van religieuze zelfrealisatie. Deze trajecten heb ik kunnen destilleren op basis van hun religieuze biografieën. Hierin ontdekte ik enkele gemeenschappelijke elementen. Deze bestaan uit drie fasen: ontwaken, transformatie en individualisering. De eerste twee fasen zijn ervaren door de meerderheid, de derde fase door slechts een derde van mijn gesprekspartners.

Ontwaken verwijst naar het moment waarop mijn respondenten beseften dat ze als een 'authentieke', toegewijde moslimvrouw door het leven moeten gaan. In de verhalen van veel geboren-moslims, spraken ze in termen van 'religieus ontwaken' en bewust worden van hun 'nederige' positie als religieus wezen tegenover Allah. De bekeerlingen noemden deze ervaring een soort 'terugkeer' omdat het ervaren van een religieuze ontwaking gepaard ging met het bekeren tot de islam.

Transformatie is het stadium waarin de onderzochte moslimvrouwen aangaven een verandering te hebben doorgevoerd in hun levensstijl, gedachten en praktijken. Deze algehele transformatie in hun dagelijks leven stelde hen in staat om vroom te worden. Mijn uitwerking van de fase van transformatie geeft een antwoord op de vraag hoe deze moslimvrouwen vroomheid ontwikkelen. De voorwaarden die zij noodzakelijk achten om vroomheid te cultiveren zijn: het gebed, vasten, islamitische kleding - *hijab* - en het verkrijgen van islamitische kennis. In deze fase hebben vrouwen zich vaak aangesloten bij zustergroepen, lezingen in moskeeën bijgewoond of cursussen Arabisch of Koran gedaan. Vooral in zustergroepen kunnen zij naar lezingen luisteren, islamitische kennis opdoen, persoonlijke ervaringen delen, lid worden van een ondersteuningsnetwerk bestaande uit religieus actieve moslimvrouwen en participeren in islam-geïnspireerd activisme.

De derde fase, individualisering, is genoemd door één derde van de onderzochte vrouwen. Deze fase ving aan op het moment dat ze begonnen te reflecteren op hun relatie met God. Op dat moment besloten ze dat hun individuele relatie met Allah het belangrijkste aspect van hun vrome levensstijl zou moeten zijn. Individualisering heeft met name bij die vrouwen plaatsgevonden die een vorm van religieuze druk hadden ervaren. Ze noemden bijvoorbeeld dat ze door hun gemeenschap verplicht een hoofddoek moesten dragen - of juist geen hoofddoek mochten dragen. Leeftijd en een groeiende besef van hun capaciteiten en mogelijkheden om conform de regels van Allah te kunnen leven werden ook genoemd. Degenen die naar moslim landen waren gereisd en 'andere vormen van islam' waren tegengekomen, voelden zich uit-gedaagd om ook kritisch op hun eigen levensstijl te reflecteren. Toename van kennis van de islam heeft bij sommige vrouwen ook een kritische houding veroorzaakt. Al deze factoren hebben ervoor gezorgd dat zij zichzelf in deze fase afvroegen: "Wat voor soort moslim *wil* ik zijn en wat voor moslim *kan* ik zijn?"

Ondanks deze individualiserende tendensen laat ik in deze studie zien dat de meer-derheid van deze moslimvrouwen in hun vrome gemeenschappen ingebed blijven. Ik heb aangetoond dat, ongeacht de individualisering van sommige van mijn res-pondenten, zij zich nog altijd als religieus toegewijde moslims en lid van een vrome gemeenschap beschouwen.

Opdoen van kennis

Wat is de relatie tussen vroomheid en islamitische kennis acquisitie en productie in zustergroepen?

Het verwerven van islamitische kennis is essentieel voor de cultivatie van vroom-heid. Door islamitische kennis op te doen, krijgen vrouwen een beter begrip van hun religie. Daarnaast leren deze vrouwen door islamitische kennis te verwerven de religieuze regels die horen bij een vrome levenshouding. Vandaar dat de islamitische kennis een cruciaal middel is om vroomheid te bereiken en een toegewijde moslim te worden. Ook wordt kennis opgedaan met als doel kinderen op een islamitische manier op te voeden. De meeste van de bestudeerde vrouwen hadden kinderen, of wensten snel moeder te worden. Zij benadrukten het belang van het opvoeden/creëren van een nieuwe generatie van vrome moslims met islamitische kennis, zodat zij op hun beurt de moslimgemeenschap voort kunnen zetten. Tot slot, doen vrou-wen kennis over de islam op met als doel niet-moslims te bekeren tot de islam (met name de bekeerlingen nemen deze taak serieus) of diegenen die reeds moslim zijn te motiveren hun geloof intensiever te praktiseren (met name geboren-moslims).

Door het opdoen van kennis over de islam in zustergroepen tonen deze vrouwen religieuze autonomie. In de traditionele "patriarchale" instellingen van kennis-productie - moskeeën, onderwijsinstellingen, islamitische organisaties - ervaren moslimvrouwen obstakels om islamitische kennis op te doen en te produceren. Deze obstakels kennen zij toe aan het feit dat zij vrouw zijn. Volgens de bestudeerde vrou-wen is het doorgaans niet eenvoudig voor moslimvrouwen om binnen de traditionele islamitische instellingen islam te doceren aan vrouwen (laat staan aan vrouwen én mannen). Meerdere geïnterviewde vrouwen gaven aan dat hun kennis van islam kritisch onder de loep genomen werd, en in sommige gevallen in twijfel werd getrok-ken, door imams of mannelijke predikers.

Om deze reden is voor veel moslimvrouwen de productie en overdracht van isla-mitische kennis in zustergroepen een manier om religieus onafhankelijk te zijn van mannelijke religieuze autoriteiten en instellingen. Religieuze onafhankelijkheid betekent hier: de religieuze bronnen bestuderen, islamitische kennis opzoeken en interpreteren en zelfstandig de thema's van de bijeenkomsten bepalen. Sommigen gaven expliciet aan niet door mannelijke religieuze autoriteiten als imams of man-nelijke predikers te willen worden begeleid in hun religieuze ontwikkeling. Ook waren ze kritisch over de algemene kennis en ontwikkeling van imams die uit het buitenland naar Nederland zijn gekomen. Ook vroegen de meeste vrouwen zich af in hoeverre deze imams capabel zijn om moslimgemeenschappen religieus te helpen inbedden in Europa.

Mijn bevindingen wijzen ook op een sterke band tussen kennis en gender. De bestu-deerde vrouwen willen vooral kennis opdoen over hun rol als - vrome - vrouwen. Voorbeelden van het zoeken naar 'gegenderde-kennis' betreffen de voorwaarden voor vrouwen in verband met het gebed en vasten tijdens menstruatie, zwanger-schap, borstvoeding, en het naleven van gendernormen. Het is precies dit type kennis dat minder vaak wordt geproduceerd in traditionele islamitische organisaties en moskeeën. Het bezoeken van bijeenkomsten van zustergroepen is daarom een aantrekkelijke keuze voor de vrouwen uit mijn studie omdat in deze ruimtes kennis wordt geproduceerd die vooral genderspecifiek is: het betreft de rol en de positie van vrouwen in islam.

De kennis over hun positie en rol binnen de islamitische gemeenschap helpt deze vrouwen niet alleen om vroom te worden, maar ook om hun ervaringen een plek te geven. Vrouwen bespreken in deze kringen openlijk onrecht dat zij ervaren. Ken-nis over hun rechten in de islam helpt hen een strategie te vinden hoe om te gaan met dominante patriarchale normen binnen de gemeenschap. De geïnterviewde

vrouwen gebruiken argumenten op basis van hun studie van de religieuze bronnen van de islam en kennis van historische moslimvrouwen om hun positie binnen de moslim gemeenschap te versterken. De religieuze argumenten die zij in het proces van islamitische kennisverwerving hebben opgedaan, vergemakkelijken hiermee hun onderhandeling met patriarchale normen. Met onderhandeling wordt bedoeld: het vinden van een 'tussenruimte' waaruit vrouwen bepaalde patriarchale overtuigingen en praktijken in twijfel kunnen trekken en strategieën vinden om daar mee om te gaan. Een aantal voorbeelden van praktijken die als patriarchaal ervaren worden: huwelijksdwang bij vrouwen, ongelijke verdeling van taken in het huishouden en beperkte toegang tot religieuze instituties zoals de moskee.

Ook heb ik in deze studie laten zien hoe de kennisproductie en overdracht bij en door vrouwen soms worden betwist door traditionele mannelijke religieuze autoriteiten. Sommige vrouwen voelen zich gedwongen om patriarchale normen te betwisten en een strategie te vinden om deze normen te deconstrueren. In deze gevallen werd de fysieke ruimte voor kennisverwerving beschouwd als een probleem. In mijn studie analyseer ik hoe de bestudeerde vrouwen 'macht' uitoefenen door hun productie en overdracht van islamitische kennis. Zij eisen geen religieuze macht, noch beweren zij die te hebben. Echter, door hun streven naar vroomheid en de productie en over-dracht van islamitische kennis, ontstaat er een religieuze articulatiemacht. Dit is het vermogen om islamitische regels van betekenis te voorzien voor een grote groep vrouwen. Dit betekent niet per se dat er 'macht' wordt uitgeoefend in de zin dat vrouwen gedwongen worden om een bepaalde manier te geloven. De vrijheid om te kiezen uit de diverse religieuze interpretaties blijft overeind. Articulatiemacht is de mogelijkheid verwerven om de islam (zelfstandig) te interpreteren.

Tenslotte heb ik geanalyseerd hoe het opdoen van islamitische kennis op zichzelf een vorm van religieuze toewijding en aanbidding is. De handelingen die verricht worden om islamitische kennis te verwerven, het lezen, luisteren naar of bijwonen van lezingen worden door deze vrouwen beschouwd als een lovenswaardige daad die door God beloond zal worden. Bijgevolg wordt ook de zoektocht naar kennis een vorm van devotie, vergelijkbaar met andere vormen, zoals het dragen van de *hijab*.

Concluderend kan ik zeggen dat moslimvrouwen in zustergroepen hun vroomheid cultiveren door kennis van de islam te verwerven, deze over te dragen, te decon-strueren, te produceren en te interpreteren. Door het opdoen van kennis vergroten zij hun religieuze kapitaal. Hiertoe behoren religieuze vaardigheden, ervaringen, kennis van normen en netwerken van mede-gelovigen. Hoewel kennis ook indivi-dueel - door middel van boeken, online films en websites - wordt verworven, zijn

de collectieve aspecten van kennisverwerving en productie in deze vrome kringen evenzeer belangrijk.

Religieuze autoriteit

In hoeverre draagt de organisatie van vroomheid in Nederland en België bij aan de opkomst van vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten?

De derde vraag die ik heb bestudeerd is de mate waarin zustergroepen in Nederland en België ruimte bieden voor de opkomst van vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten. In dit proefschrift heb ik beschreven hoe moslimvrouwen in Nederland en België hun religieuze deelname hebben verhoogd door hun organisatie van en deelname aan islamitische activiteiten. Eén van de significante resultaten van deze studie betreft de nieuwe inzichten die zijn opgedaan omtrent vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten.

De islamitische vrouwengroepen creëren ruimte voor vrouwelijke sprekers en predikers, dat wil zeggen voor vrouwen met een zekere mate van religieuze autoriteit. Tijdens zusterbijeenkomsten worden lezingen gegeven door vrouwen die zich al langer met de islam bezighouden - en die "gevorderd in de islam" zijn - en vaak ook ouder zijn dan de rest van de groep. De lezingen behandelen verschillende thema's zoals *sabr* (geduld), de vrouwen van de profeet, zusterschap, het gebed en de wonderen van de Koran. De religieuze kennis die vrouwelijke predikers overbrengen wordt vaak gecombineerd met persoonlijke verhalen over bijvoorbeeld de relatie met echtgenoten, ouders of kinderen. De meeste vrouwelijke sprekers zijn veelal bescheiden en claimen geen diepe kennis van de islam te bezitten. Ze beklemtonen dat ze door middel van lezingen en preken slechts 'doorgeven' wat ze uit een boek, een cursus of van een geleerde 'overgenomen' hebben en noemen het slechts 'basiskennis.' Het gaat volgens hen niet om het produceren van islamitische kennis, maar om het reproduceren van kennis die al voorhanden is. Ze stellen zich nederig op en verontschuldigen zich aan het eind van een lezing, want 'alleen Allah weet het het best.' Een paar van deze vrouwen hebben islamitische onderwijs in Egypte en Indonesië gevolgd en hebben diepgaande kennis van de islam. Ondanks hun bescheidenheid spelen deze vrouwen een grote rol als religieuze gids voor andere vrouwen. Zij geven betekenis aan een islamitische levenswijze en selecteren uit een omvangrijk oeuvre van islamitische artikelen en boeken, afkomstig van diverse islamitische wetscholen, theologische stromingen en *'ulama* (geleerden). Bovendien zijn het vaak charismatische vrouwen met grote communicatieve en analytische vaardigheden, die hun boodschap goed over weten te brengen.

Vrouwelijke deelnemers van zustergroepen gaan bij voorkeur naar een vrouwelijke prediker toe wanneer zij vragen hebben over de islam in relatie tot specifieke 'vrouwen' thema's. Bijvoorbeeld over het vinden van de juiste huwelijkspartner, het opvoeden van kinderen, het wel of niet dragen van een hoofddoek of het omgaan met ouders en familie die geen moslim zijn (bij bekeerlingen het geval). Vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten zijn daarom een belangrijke bron van islamitische kennis en helpen vrouwen hun religiositeit te vormen. Hiermee beïnvloeden zij de manier waarop Islam gepraktiseerd en beleden wordt. Vrouwelijke deelnemers van zustergroepen , geven aan religieus geïnspireerd, bekrachtigd en gemotiveerd te worden door vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten. Vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten onderbouwen hun kennis van de islam door zich te baseren op gezaghebbende religieuze bronnen. Zij gebruiken traditionele religieuze autoriteiten en hun bronnen als referentiekader. Echter, twee vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten in deze studie vertoonden een vorm van religieuze autoriteit die verder ging dan reproductie van geïnstitutionaliseerde religieuze opvattingen. Bijvoorbeeld, door te breken met de regel van gendersegregatie in islamitische lessen of de Koran voor een genderge-mengd publiek te reciteren. Zij pogen hiermee de grenzen van het religieus toelaat-bare te verleggen.

Vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten verkrijgen religieuze autoriteit op basis van ver-schillende kenmerken, kwaliteiten, capaciteiten en kennis. Hun succes ligt in het feit dat ze het vermogen hebben om abstracte theologische doctrine naar de dagelijkse realiteit van vrouwen te vertalen, en hen pragmatische interpretaties van de islamiti-sche leer te bieden die zij in hun dagelijkse leven kunnen toepassen. Eerder opgedane religieus onderwijs en kennis van het Arabisch zijn belangrijke kwaliteiten waarmee vrouwen religieuze autoriteit kunnen verwerven. Vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten zelf menen dat zij geen religieuze autoriteit hebben. Zij beschouwen zichzelf slechts als degenen die kennis overdragen. Desalniettemin, worden vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten soms als bedreiging beschouwd door mannelijke religieuze autoriteiten, imams of predikers, die de traditionele dragers van religieuze autoriteit zijn. De redenen die gegeven zijn door de vrouwen uit mijn studie zijn dat mannen vrouwen niet altijd vertrouwen en hun religieuze privilege binnen bestaande islamitische instituties niet willen verliezen. Ook gaven de bestudeerde vrouwen aan dat religi-euze mannelijke autoriteiten doorgaans vinden dat er sprake is van een gebrek aan islamitische kennis onder vrouwen waardoor zij niet in staat zouden zijn om kennis over te dragen en te verspreiden.

In dit proefschrift heb ik laten zien hoe vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten hun religie vorm en betekenis geven in een ruimte die alleen voor vrouwen is. Ik heb geanalyseerd

waardoor zij worden gemotiveerd, zoals het verlagen naar de vrijheid om zelf te bepalen welke kennis zij belangrijk vinden. Door het creëren van een eigen ruimte kunnen zij patriarchale normen in twijfel trekken wanneer deze nadelige implicaties hebben voor vrouwen.

In grote lijnen beschouw ik deze ontwikkeling als een poging om een vrouwelijke islamitische ruimte te creëren. Ik heb aangetoond dat de islam als bron gebruikt wordt om islamitische overtuigingen en praktijken te bestuderen en soms te betwisten. Bijgevolg heeft het bestuderen van de islam deze vrouwen in staat gesteld islamitische kennis te produceren die grotendeels gendergerelateerd is. Op deze manier hebben vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten een religieuze articulatiemacht ontwikkeld om een islamitische discours te interpreteren en te produceren.

Geboren-moslims en bekeerlingen
In hoeverre is geboren-moslim of bekeerling zijn van invloed op de wijze waarop moslimvrouwen vroomheid, kennis en vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteit definiëren en tot uitdrukking brengen?

De meeste geboren-moslimvrouwen in dit onderzoek waren Soennitische, Nederlandstalige vrouwen van de tweede en derde generatie met een migratieachtergrond. Bekeerlingen waren vrouwen met een Vlaamse of een Nederlandse achtergrond die besloten hadden om moslim te worden. Tijdens mijn onderzoek merkte ik op dat geboren-moslims en bekeerlingen verschillende percepties van elkaar hebben. Beide groepen definiëren de islam (en moslims) in overeenstemming met hun etnische en culturele begrippen, gedrag, normen en waarden.

Met betrekking tot vroomheid is de algemene trend dat bekeerlingen werden gezien als het meest vroom. Bijna alle geboren-moslims bewonderen bekeerlingen vanwege hun bekering tot de islam en vanwege de korte duur waarin ze kennis van de islam hadden opgedaan. De onderzochte geboren-moslims vonden dat bekeerlingen een positief effect op hen hebben de islamitische gemeenschap. Ondanks de positieve invloed van de bekeerlingen gaf de meerderheid van de geboren-moslims echter ook aan dat bekeerlingen zich te snel willen ontwikkelen als vrome moslims waardoor ze soms "instabiel" en te streng in de leer worden. Ook vonden ze dat bekeerlingen minder oog hebben voor een innerlijke religieuze groei en zich eerder richten op een uiterlijke transformatie bijvoorbeeld door (grote betekenis toe te kennen aan) het dragen van een hoofddoek.

Tegelijkertijd waren de bekeerlingen ook kritisch ten opzichte van de geboren-moslims. Vanuit het perspectief van de bekeerlingen werd de cultuur van geboren-moslims vaak gezien als een belemmering voor de religieuze groei van geboren-moslims. Bekeerlingen vonden dat geboren-moslims hun religie meer "in harmonie met hun cultuur" beoefenen en daarom minder kritisch zijn op bepaalde culturele uitingen. Hierbij werd de migratieachtergrond van geboren-moslims als reden opgevoerd. De bekeerlingen vonden dat geboren-moslims minder gemotiveerd waren om zich religieus te ontwikkelen en "de islam" van hun ouders overnamen. De neiging van bekeerlingen om zich los te maken van geboren-moslims en hun immigrantencultuur was sterk aanwezig onder de onderzochte bekeerlingen in deze studie. Een enkele bekeerlingen versterkten dit idee door zichzelf in een positie van privilege en macht te positioneren tegenover de geboren-moslims en door zich als "Europees geëmancipeerde" moslim te beschouwen tegenover de "niet-geëmancipeerde migrantenmoslim."

Tegen het einde van dit onderzoeksproject merkte ik een groeiende kritiek op bekeerlingen door geboren-moslims op. Mijn geboren-moslim gesprekspartners waren van mening dat de neiging bekeerlingen apart te zetten als de 'voorbeeld groep' ongelijkheid tussen moslims heeft veroorzaakt. De bewondering voor de bekeerlingen vanuit de geboren-moslims heeft volgens sommigen ertoe geleid dat bekeerlingen een bevoorrechte positie hebben verkregen in de moslimgemeenschap. Zo zouden zij meer religieuze onderwijskansen in het buitenland, subsidies en speciale behandelingen ontvangen dan geboren-moslims.

Met betrekking tot de kennisproductie van islam heb ik in dit proefschrift in beeld gebracht dat zowel geboren-moslims als bekeerlingen actief betrokken zijne. Oudere bekeerlingen werden beschouwd als meer deskundig dan de eerste-generatie vrouwen met een migratieachtergrond. Dit omdat oudere bekeerlingen succesvol waren geweest in het organiseren van islamitische activiteiten en het verkrijgen van islamitische kennis. Belangrijk is dat geboren-moslims die zichzelf als "beginners" in de islam beschouwen – tegenover de "gevorderden in islam" - de bekeerlingen als meer deskundig beschouwden gezien de kennis die ze in een korte tijd hadden opgedaan. Desalniettemin werden geboren-moslimvrouwen die als "gevorderd in islam" werden beschouwd uiteindelijk gezien als het meest deskundig door zowel bekeerlingen als geboren-moslims. Geboren-moslims die "gevorderd in islam" waren, bezaten religieus kapitaal. Vooral de kennis van het Arabisch werd gezien als s een voorrecht dat alleen "gevorderde" geboren-moslims genoten.

Wat betreft religieuze autoriteit werden geboren-moslims als meer gezaghebbend beschouwd. Bijvoorbeeld, de meerderheid van de geboren-moslim vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten waren vloeiend in het Arabisch en hadden religieus onderwijs genoten. Hun kennis van het Arabisch gaf hen directe toegang tot de religieuze bronnen, waardoor ze die bronnen individueel konden bestuderen en interpreteren. De vrouwelijke religieuze autoriteiten met een bekeerling achtergrond gaven aan dat zij het grootste deel van hun islamitische kennis middels zelfstudie hadden verworven en noemden zich doorgaans "autodidacten": vrouwen die over de islam hadden geleerd zonder docent of religieus onderwijs. De bekeerlingen in deze studie waren meer afhankelijk van islamitische bronnen die in het Engels, Nederlands of Frans zijn geschreven.

Conclusie

Deze studie heeft geanalyseerd hoe moslimvrouwen religieuze kennis en praktijken ontwikkelen en vormgeven die aansluiten bij hun lokale behoeften en zijn aangepast aan een Nederlandse en Vlaamse omgeving. De studie en verspreiding van islamitische kennis in dit onderzoek vindt plaats in de Nederlandse en Vlaamse taal en in vrome studiekringen bestaande uit geboren-moslims en bekeerlingen met een Vlaamse of Nederlandse achtergrond. Bovendien is het zo dat de manier waarop mijn respondenten de islam bestuderen overeenkomen met Europese ontwikkelingen als religieuze individualisering en autonomie. Derhalve beschouw ik deze zustergroepen en hun vrome activiteiten als vormen van zich ontwikkelende Europese islam.

Deze vrouwelijke islamitische ruimte en de vrome activiteiten die daarin plaatsvinden zijn over het algemeen onzichtbaar voor de meerderheid van de Europese samenlevingen. Om deze reden blijft het beeld van moslimvrouwen als gelovigen die weinig of geen *agency* bezitten hardnekkig bestaan. Door deze studie hoop ik dit beeld te hebben aangepast en een dynamische religieuze ruimte van moslimvrouwen in Nederland en België te hebben laten zien. Een ruimte waarin moslimvrouwen zich door het zelfstandig bestuderen en interpreteren van de islam een religieuze articulatiemacht hebben eigen gemaakt.

Zo bewerkstelligen zij de nabijheid van Allah op hun eigen manier, naar aanleiding van de behoeftes die zij hebben en aansluitend op thema's waar zij vragen over hebben. Hiermee maken zij ruimte voor een islam die geleefd en gevormd wordt door vrouwen.

Summary

The spaces of Islamic knowledge production have multiplied in the Netherlands and Belgium in the last fifteen years. More and more mosques, Islamic organizations and educational institutes are offering a wide variety of lectures and courses. Muslim women who strive for piety obtain Islamic knowledge through different channels. These include reading the Qurʾan, Islamic books, surfing the Internet and listening to online lectures. Besides these channels, Muslim women join female study circles, which I refer to as pious circles for women. In these pious circles, Muslim women engage in lively debates about what is and is not Islamic behavior; they interpret and re-interpret religious dogma and search for ways to implement them in their daily lives.

This study deals with the forms of piety, individual and collective, that have taken root in the Netherlands and Belgium and sheds light on the ways women assign meaning to Islam. Two groups of Muslim women are studied: Born-Muslims - mostly with a migration background - and converts to Islam - native Dutch and Flemish women. This study reveals how Muslim women acquire and disseminate Islamic knowledge, and how some women achieve the status of female religious authorities in female pious study circles. The research questions that underpin this study are: How do Muslim women in pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium cultivate piety? What is the relationship between piety and Islamic knowledge acquisition and production? To what extent do pious circles in the Netherlands and Belgium provide space for female religious authorities to emerge? How does being a Born-Muslim or being a convert to Islam affect Muslim women's understanding and expression of piety, knowledge, and female religious authority? These question are central to the relationship between piety, Islamic knowledge and religious authority and are answered in the different chapters.

On the basis of interviews with sixty interlocutors and by attending the gatherings and conferences of twenty-four pious circles, six Muslim organizations, three Muslim women's organizations, three Muslim women's support and welfare networks and two Muslim women's educational institutes, I have been able to reflect on the strong intertwinement of piety, Islamic knowledge, and religious authority.

In these chapters, I have described a dynamic female religious field that revolves around the cultivation of piety by the deepening of Islamic knowledge in pious circles, leading to the emergence of individual female religious authorities and a pious community of Born-Muslim and convert believers.

Piety

In the chapters on piety (Chapter One, *The theoretical framework: piety as a concept* and Chapter Four*, The pious individual and the pious community*), I treat piety from both a theoretical and an empirical perspective.

In Chapter One, I focus on the cultivation of piety by women and in the context of the 'Islamic revival'. I define piety or *taqwa* as a way by which one is constantly reminded to worship God and observe all God's commands. In this process I underline that piety should be viewed as an intensification of religiosity in thought and practice. Gender plays an important role in women's understanding of piety. I take gender to be the diverse and complex arrangements between men and women that cover the personal, symbolic and social systems in which meaning is given to the biological differences between men and women. In the Islamic tradition, particular forms of piety, for instance, wearing the *hijab* is reserved for women. Furthermore, particular gender roles are assigned to women on the basis of the idea of gender equity. Gender equity refers to the idea that men and women are equal in value but do not have identical rights because God has created them differently. The role division set out in the principle of gender equity suggests that women should be the caretakers of the households in the private sphere and men the financial supporters and active in de public sphere. The purpose of this division between the genders is to maintain the 'natural order' in which men's and women's roles are assigned an equal worth.

In Chapter Four, I investigate women's own views on piety. The interlocutors in this study define piety as self-improvement, building a bond with God, achieving religious growth and working toward the improvement of the *umma*. Hence it has both an individual and a communal dimension. Hence, this study distinguishes between two types of piety: individually formed piety and piety formed in accordance with the norms of pious communities. Both types of piety formation co-exist, depending on a person's interaction with pious communities, experiences in their lives and their age. I distinguish three phases in the religious transformation processes of my interlocutors: religious awakening, transformation and individualization. I argue that, despite individualizing tendencies, as a pious individual, all my interlocutors view themselves as a member of a pious community: a community of religiously committed Muslims. They continuously interact with other members in pious communities and consequently their beliefs and practices are shaped through interaction with pious communities. Pious circles have become the stage on which Muslim women learn about and accept or reject certain pious beliefs and practices. This inevitably leads to a hierarchy of religious virtues in which particular norms are viewed as more laudable

than others. I illustrate how a hierarchy of religious virtues is formed by taking the example of the *hijab*. Donning the *hijab* is viewed as an important act of piety, which makes those who wear it appear more pious than those who do not.

In the interaction between Born-Muslims and converts, I demonstrate how differences and similarities in their cultivation of piety can lead to reciprocal prejudices and stereotyping. Born-Muslims say that converts have a "positive influence" on them by inspiring them, motivating them to take their religion seriously and by making them think critically. However, Born-Muslims also view converts less positively, criticizing them for being unstable, overly strict and deficient in religious growth because of the speed with which they cultivate piety. Despite this criticism, converts are viewed as more pious because of their success in combining visible piety, gaining religious knowledge and performing *daʿwa*. Converts view the Born-Muslim culture as an obstacle to their religious growth. Their immigrant background, "lack of skills" and deficiency in religious knowledge in order to perform *daʿwa* were mentioned weaknesses in attaining piety. However, some converts stated that Born-Muslims' religious capital, particularly their ability to read Arabic and directly access sources, makes them more pious than converts. On balance it can be said that converts are viewed as a pious status group and as more successful in their combination of virtues by both Born-Muslims and converts.

Islamic knowledge
In the chapters on Islamic knowledge (Chapter Two, *Islamic knowledge and Muslims in Europe* and Chapter Five, *Gendering Islamic knowledge in pious circles*), I elaborate on the importance of Islamic knowledge in the process of cultivating piety.

In Chapter Two, I contextualize processes of knowledge production and acquisition among Muslims who live as a minority in Europe. I point out that the Islamic tradition sets great store by the concept of *ʿilm*. In short, the acquisition of Islamic knowledge is essential to the formation of piety. By obtaining Islamic knowledge, Muslims can acquire a better understanding of their religion and learn in greater depth how to live piously and observe pious practices. The goal of acquiring religious knowledge is to worship Allah and to benefit humanity. Both Islamic and secular knowledge have a religious significance and should ultimately serve to make people aware of God. Nowadays, Islamic knowledge has become pluralized as a result of the rise in literacy and mass education, and by technological innovations, two factors that have ushered in a greater accessibility to the sources of Islamic knowledge. This increased accessibility has also contributed to the process of religious individualization among Muslims in western societies. Religious individualization enables a person

to implement religious knowledge in his or her own life and on his or her own terms, independently of traditional authorities and institutions. Nevertheless, despite these individualizing tendencies, I understand religious individualization to be a socially embedded transformation. This means that individualized believers retain their links to such social structures as pious circles. Both Born-Muslims and converts are active in this field of knowledge production and this creates a dynamic interaction between them. I see pious circles as a site in which Islamic knowledge is obtained and produced by Muslim women in a less hierarchical manner than would be the case in traditional learning centres, and in which the participants in the circle themselves are involved in the production of knowledge. In their construction of the pious self, women engage in what I call religious communities of practice, in which they acquire and transmit religious capital. These pious female study circles are rooted in the Islamic tradition known as *halqa*.

In Chapter Five, I analyze the dynamic process by which Dutch and Flemish Muslim women in pious circles attain, transmit, produce, deconstruct and interpret knowledge as they pursue their goal to cultivate piety. Pious circles are local production sites of knowledge for women, providing them with a space in which they demonstrate their religious autonomy. In these surroundings, Muslim women produce knowledge that can at times be contested by traditional sites of knowledge production because of the patriarchal character of traditional Islamic organizations. Muslim women do their best to maintain the concomitant gender exclusion for the purpose of articulating their religiosity independent of - male - religious authorities and institutions. This is a sign of their enhanced religious autonomy.

Pious circles are religious communities of practice, in which Muslim women with similar norms of piety share an interest in Islam, and interact with each other in a collective production of Islamic knowledge. By dint of their own endeavors, my interlocutors have gained direct access to religious sources and hence have accrued religious capital. In their acquisition of Islamic knowledge, my interlocutors have done more than just cultivate piety, the attainment in itself is also a devotional exercise. My interlocutors commenced their meetings in a state of ritual purity, prayed collectively, discussed God's commands and made their supplications to God. These acts underscore the process of knowledge acquisition, transmission and production as a devotional enterprise that is worthy of divine reward. The type of knowledge, both discursive and non-discursive, produced in pious circles is gendered knowledge, highlighting a strong connection between knowledge and gender. By acquiring gendered knowledge, Muslim women discover a strategy by which they can either confront these norms or acquiesce in them. In their spiritual journey, my interlocutors

have found strength in the knowledge of historical Muslim female figures. Obtaining gendered knowledge has also influenced their ideas about the gender division, leading to the idea of both gender equality and equity.

My conclusion is that acquiring religious knowledge facilitates negotiation with patriarchal norms. It empowered women by finding a middle ground from which they could question certain patriarchal beliefs and practices, or find strategies with which to deal with them. The upshot of their findings could sometimes diverge enormously: it could lead either to a reinforcement of traditional religious discourses or to religious reform.

Both converts and Born-Muslims were actively engaged in the field of knowledge acquisition and production. Older converts were thought to be more knowledgeable than first-generation migrant women by Born-Muslims, because the former have been more successful in organizing Islamic activities and acquiring Islamic knowledge. Born-Muslims who were "beginners" in Islam frequently viewed converts as more knowledgeable because they had attained their knowledge within a short period of time; an opinion reinforced by their accessible and transparent display of Islamic knowledge. It was the other way round with Born-Muslims who were "advanced" in Islam and who had acquired Islamic knowledge throughout their lives. They thought themselves more knowledgeable than most converts, as they had accrued religious capital and mastered Arabic. This advantage offered them more direct access to religious sources and widened their choice of the different sources for consultation. Converts deemed Born-Muslims' patriarchal cultural norms an obstacle to both acquiring knowledge and organizing Islamic activities. Most converts regarded Born-Muslims as uncritical in their approach to religious knowledge. They also found that Born-Muslims tended to rely more on their parents and traditional authorities, instead of actively searching for knowledge of Islam independently through other channels. For both groups, a person's own level of knowledge of Islam was an important factor in how they evaluated the other's level of knowledge.

Female religious authority

In the chapters on female religious authority (Chapter Three, *The concept of religious authority*, and Chapter Six, *Female religious authorities*), I map the kinds of authority that Muslim women attain in the process of (re)producing and transmitting Islamic knowledge. I also examine how female religious authorities interpret and counter restrictions to their authority.

In Chapter Three, I present insights into recent key studies that provide a theoretical and historical background to the emergence of Muslim women as religious authorities. I understand authority to be normative power. It is the capacity to persuade and influence the beliefs, the conduct, and actions of others. Authority is established through an individual's exercise of power, which, in my research, has turned out to be primarily a personal attribute. Individuals over whom authority is exercised have an important share in this process because of their recognition and questioning of or, at the other extreme, their withdrawal from authority. Hence, trust is an important factor in the establishment of authority. When the concept of authority is studied from a Muslim perspective, three levels of authority can be distinguished: Allah's divine words, written in the foundational text of the Qurʾan; the Prophet Muhammad's role as the messenger of God during his lifetime - the Prophet's *sunna* - his 'way'; and that of religious scholars who have the important task of explaining Islamic belief to Muslims. The position of religious scholars has, however, undergone many changes because of -among many other factors- the proliferation of Islamic knowledge and of the Islamic reformists' reassertion of the right of individual interpretation, *ijtihad*. This has resulted in a fragmentation of the religious field of authority.

In early Islam it was socially acceptable for women to hold positions of religious authority and leadership. However, historically Muslim women who have been religious scholars and leaders have been less documented and, because of the patriarchal structure of later periods, their position was marginalized. Contemporary academic investigations suggests that Muslim women have now once again become religiously active. The present enhanced religious authority of Muslim women is attributable to the spread of literacy, access to religious education, the right of individual interpretation, the pluralization of religious knowledge and the fragmentation of the religious field of authority, as well as women's participation in the practice of *daʿwa*. Undoubtedly Islamic feminist discourse has also influenced the growth of female religious authority. All these factors have led to the growing accessibility for women of the traditionally male-dominated religious spaces.

In Chapter Six, I argue that female religious authorities have mainly chosen to assert religious authority outside the institutionalized authority structures and consequently have emerged as local religious authorities. This means that their production of Islamic knowledge has been particularly for local use. Female religious authorities shape the religiosity of female participants in pious circles to local circumstances, within the compass of their daily lives. They do not claim to have religious authority, nor do they view themselves in these terms; it is the participants in pious circles who ascribe religious authority to them. There are some differences between Born-Muslim

and convert female religious authorities. The Born-Muslim female religious authorities I studied were on the whole fluent in Arabic and had followed some degree of religious education. The convert female religious authorities acquired most of their Islamic knowledge by self-study. The upshot is that Born-Muslims have had more direct access to religious sources because of their knowledge of Arabic, whereas converts have often been deprived of this privilege.

I have demonstrated how religious authority is constituted by a combination of such qualities as compassion, eloquence, sympathy, insight, piety and modesty. Religious education and knowledge of Arabic have also been important qualities by which women have acquired religious authority. Participants in pious circles attribute authority to women in three ways: they attend the lectures of female religious authorities; they consider them to be religious role models; and they sought their knowledge in their own quest for religious inspiration. From the perspective of the participants, the combination of such multiple qualities as didactic skills, being religiously "advanced", having a morally upright character, possession of leadership qualities, being a role model, and ability to inspire have endowed a person with religious authority. These women have been able to motivate and empower others. They have displayed an exemplary religious attitude and possessed a profound knowledge of Islam.

The female religious authorities in the present study have not deviated from traditional Islamic authorities. They build on traditional religious sources and - male - religious authorities have been their religious frame of reference. This religious consistency was found among all female religious authorities in this study. Only two women in the present study constructed authority in a way that went beyond the reproduction of institutionalized religious views. They have done so by developing scholarly arguments to support interpretations of Islamic practices that were responsive to women's perspectives and needs. Nevertheless, female religious authorities have been confronted by gendered resistance to a greater or lesser degree. Many reasons are given for this: men's distrust of women, the privilege of men to occupy leading positions; women's supposed lack of Islamic knowledge, an alleged passive attitude and fear of male criticism.

Numerous women in the study have stated that, at its core, resistance toward female religious authorities has been a question of mistrust. Neither men nor women invariably trust female religious authorities. Therefore, women have had to win trust, especially of men, and try to change religious authority structures "from within". For instance, many women in this study stated that in their view female religious

authorities should also have the opportunity to address gender-mixed audiences in order to constitute their religious authority among men as well. If this would happen, male religious authorities would have to grant female religious authorities space. However, this begs the question of whether female religious authorities wish to take the stage. One big stumbling-block is the attitudes towards the ʿawra, the area of the body that should not be publicly exposed, and the fear of becoming the focus of male criticism. Most female religious authorities hesitate to lecture in front of gender-mixed audiences. Only two female religious authorities in the present study had broken with the tradition of male-only lecturers and reciters.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Dutch and Flemish Born-Muslim women and converts to Islam have created female pious study circles in which they articulate their religiosity. In their pursuit of piety and knowledge of Islam they have organized a female religious space. They experience the process of becoming religiously active as empowering. They state that organizing religious activities has given them freedom of movement and action. Pertinently, the religious activities of these groups have a strategic function. By undertaking these activities my interlocutors have reconfigured, reinterpreted, criticized or rejected certain ideas about their position in the larger Muslim community and society. Accordingly , they have demonstrated agency. The goal of this dissertation was to map and analyze Muslim women's religious activities in pious study groups in the Netherlands and Belgium.

I have showed how Muslim women are producing specific religious knowledge and practices, which are congruent with their local needs and have been adapted to a Dutch or Flemish setting. In the pious circles consisting of native Dutch and Flemish converts to Islam and Born-Muslims the study and dissemination of Islamic knowledge takes place in the Dutch and Flemish languages. My interlocutors' approach to the study of Islam and its sources accords with such European phenomena as religious individualization and autonomy. These characteristics shed light on how Muslim beliefs and practices and modes of religiosity are being transformed among Muslim women in these societies into a form that can be considered 'European Islam'.

About the author

Sahar Noor was born in Kabul, Afghanistan, on April 14, 1983. She migrated to the Netherlands in 1994. She graduated in 2001 from the Thorbecke Scholengemeenschap in Arnhem (The Netherlands) after which for four years she studied Journalism at the Christelijke Hogeschool in Ede. After receiving her bachelor degree, in 2005 she entered the Radboud University Nijmegen obtaining her bachelor and master's degree in Religious Studies in 2008. For her master's thesis, she studied historic Muslim women who still inspire contemporary Muslim women (Born-Muslims and converts). In 2009 she commenced her PhD-research at the Department of Comparative Religious Studies at the Radboud University, financed by the NWO research program Mosaic. She presented her PhD-findings at national and international conferences. While working on her PhD thesis she was a freelance journalist and moderator concerning debates about Muslim women's rights, Islam, Afghanistan and Afghans in the Netherlands.

Since 2015 she started working as researcher / trainer and advisor at Movisie, the Netherlands Centre for Social Development. Her areas of expertise are gender, empowerment, Muslim youth, and diversity.

This dissertation describes a dynamic female religious field that revolves around the cultivation of piety through the deepening of Islamic knowledge in pious circles. This quest for knowledge has led to the emergence of female religious authorities and a pious community of female Born-Muslim and convert believers in the Netherlands and Belgium (Flanders). The thesis focuses on the increased degree of Muslim women's access to religious knowledge, Islamic sources and the religious interpretations that have contributed to their enhanced religious autonomy. This study also reveals the importance of Islamic knowledge in the piety discourse, both as a means by which piety is cultivated and as a form of worship. *Creating a Female Islamic Space* demonstrates how Muslim women are expanding agency to establish themselves as religious authorities. They work hard to create Muslim community members who are sincere and contribute to a smoothly functioning Muslim *umma*. Their aim is to extend their influence beyond the niche of pious circles, as they offer relevant answers to how to live as a Muslim in European societies. In pious circles consisting of native Dutch and Flemish converts to Islam and Born-Muslims, the dissemination of Islamic knowledge takes place in the Dutch and Flemish languages,. These women's approaches to the study of Islam and its sources accords with such European phenomena as religious individualization and autonomy. These characteristics shed light on how Muslim modes of religiosity are being transformed among Muslim women in these European societies into a form that can be considered 'European Islam.'

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