The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link.
http://hdl.handle.net/2066/206638

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2020-02-13 and may be subject to change.
‘It’s Not Just about Faith’: Narratives of Transformation When Moving Out of Islam in the Netherlands and Britain

Maria Vliek

To cite this article: Maria Vliek (2019): ‘It’s Not Just about Faith’: Narratives of Transformation When Moving Out of Islam in the Netherlands and Britain, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, DOI: 10.1080/09596410.2019.1628459

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2019.1628459

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 20 Jun 2019.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 513

View related articles

View Crossmark data
‘It’s Not Just about Faith’: Narratives of Transformation When Moving Out of Islam in the Netherlands and Britain1

Maria Vliek
Faculty of Philosophy, Theology & Religious Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, Netherlands

ABSTRACT
This article investigates the narratives of people with Islamic backgrounds in the Netherlands and Britain who have moved out of Islam. Rather than focusing primarily on ‘leaving faith’ (i.e. a predominantly negative and religiously centred approach), it will present four types of thematic trajectories that consider the broader life-worlds and experiences of the interlocutors. These themes will illustrate the relative weight of the religious voice in trajectories, rather than presupposing the centrality of religion in one’s (former) identity or trajectory. It will thereby display a broader understanding of the interlocutors’ experiences as being in a negative relation to religion alone: not only religious, but also political, social, ethnic and gender boundaries provided the contexts in which people moved out of Islam. The themes (‘religious break’, ‘social break-away’, ‘the entrance’ and ‘unconscious secularization’) will be illustrated by four case studies. A fifth case will be presented to illustrate the potency of the intertwinement of the themes.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 October 2018
Accepted 4 June 2019

KEYWORDS
Islam; Islam in the West; deconversion; ex-Muslim; apostasy; dialogical self

Introduction

Whilst Hiranur was not the first of my interlocutors to elaborate on matters other than religion when talking to me about moving out of Islam, she was the first to articulate the sentiment that ‘it’s not just about faith’ so explicitly. She had told me about her extended family situation, wanting to belong to them, but struggling to do so without her inner belief or capacity to perform all the rituals properly, but she also spoke of the political environment in her parents’ country of origin, Turkey, and how her parents, her siblings and she herself were the only ones in the family who were not supportive of President Erdoğan. She told me about the problematics of leaving the parental home as a single woman to go to university, and about her love of psychology and her current research job. When I asked her about her doubts about the existence of Allah or leaving Islam behind, she responded: ‘You know, I find it hard to talk about religion, because it is not just about faith.’

The role that religion plays in people’s lives has throughout history received the keen interest of sociologists and anthropologists alike. In recent decades, with regard to Islam, the works of Talal Asad (1986, 1993, for example), Saba Mahmood (2005) and

CONTACT Maria Vliek m.vliek@ftr.ru.nl

© 2019 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.
Charles Hirschkind (2006) in particular have inspired many scholars to investigate ‘Islam as a discursive tradition’ and how it informs the construction of religious piety through embodied practices. Samuli Schielke (2010), in response to this growing body of literature, has wondered whether this line of inquiry has overemphasized the importance of ‘Islam’ and ‘religiosity’ in the study of the anthropology of Islam, and whether it has neglected questions of ambivalence. Rather, he proposes adopting a broader focus on people’s lives and considering ‘the everyday’: in daily life, people negotiate a plethora of possibilities, not merely religious ones, when making decisions about being in the world.3

In much recent scholarship interrogating ‘the secular’, emphasis has been placed on the absence of religion in post-secular societies, i.e. that which emerges when religious diversity increases, as well as on the ideology of ‘secularism’ as a neutral method of governance to aspire to. Similarly, the study of what ‘being secular’ constitutes on an individual level has primarily focused on what one is in relation to religion (atheist, non-religious and so forth). This line of inquiry has departed from the logical view that the secular and the religious are mutually constitutive and therefore have always to be considered in relation to one another. However, this assumption has led to an implicit bias in religious studies towards the absence of religion in secular lives, rather than to a thorough investigation as to what such lives may in fact entail besides how one now relates to religion. Studies into ‘losing religion’ have similarly focused on what is left behind and how people narrate their trajectories ‘out of faith’ (see, among others Bromley 1998; Bromley and Shupe 1986; Cottee 2015; Fenelon and Danielsen 2016; Gooren 2010; Sevinç, Coleman, and Hood 2018; Streib et al. 2009).

In response, this article focusses on narratives of people with Islamic backgrounds in Europe, and their transforming lives when they move out of Islam.4 Rather than concentrating primarily on a predominantly negative and religiously centred focus, it will present four types of thematic trajectories that consider the broader life-worlds and experiences of my interlocutors. I have singled out these themes in the analysis of 44 in-depth interviews that I have conducted with born Muslims who have moved out of Islam in the Netherlands and in Britain. I thereby aim to go beyond the traditional dichotomies of religious–secular, Muslim–non-Muslim and religious–atheist. Through a dialogical analysis of the interviews, it appeared that a plethora of matters were relevant for my interlocutors when they described their lives affected by religious change – matters to which scant attention has been given so far in descriptive narrative approaches to ‘deconversion’, ‘apostasy’ or ‘religious disaffiliation’. This article will provide insights from my interlocutors’ post-migration contexts and contemporary life-worlds and into how this has informed their lives, which were affected by religious transformation. The four thematic trajectories will display a broader understanding of their experiences as being in a negative relation to religion alone; religious, but also political, social, ethnic and gender boundaries overlapped considerably and provided the contexts in which they moved out of Islam.

First, I shall outline the contemporary emphasis on (the absence of) religion in the study of ‘deconversion’ by discussing three aspects of the current interdisciplinary literature: terminology, exit-trajectories and narrative typology. Second, I shall provide a brief overview of the methodological lens through which I investigated people’s narratives, Hubert Hermans’s Dialogical Self Theory, and how this has provided a broader understanding of the self as acting in the world, rather than in relation to religion alone. Third, I shall present four thematic trajectories, each exemplified by a case study, which
will show that the study of ‘moving out of religion’ is about more than religion or exiting alone. A fifth case will demonstrate the potency of intertwinement of these themes. Last, I shall interrogate the differences that arose between Britain and the Netherlands in the prevalence of certain trajectories in each country respectively. This is explained through the relative centrality of religion to one’s identity, discursive differences surrounding ‘ex-Muslim’ voices, and the relative presence or absence of support groups.

State of the art

Conversion has historically been a popular topic in the study of religion. There has been a particular interest in conversion to Islam in Western contexts (see, among others, King 2017; Köse 1994; McGinty 2006; Özyürek 2014; Roald 2012; Wohlrab-Sahr 2006; van Nieuwkerk 2006, 2008). It has in turn been argued that the concept of ‘deconversion’ (see, among others, Barbour 1994; Streib et al. 2009) should be utilized when people move out of religion, which Barbour (1994, 2) defines as simply ‘a loss of faith’. Streib et al. (2009) utilize the term in their extensive and insightful psychological study into ‘deconversion’, in order to avoid religiously connoted terminology such as ‘apostasy’. The negative prefix was seen as beneficial, since it showed its potential relation to conversion studies. Furthermore, ‘deconversion’ has been taken up by numerous other scholars (see, among others, Fazzino 2014; Pauha and Aghaee 2018; Račius 2018; Sidło 2016). However, whilst I agree that ‘deconversion’ denotes an undoing of conviction, in my understanding it implies an undoing of ‘conversion’ in the first place. This is problematic for the study at hand since my interlocutors, and probably most Muslims, would claim that one is born Muslim rather than being converted to the religion during one’s upbringing. Furthermore, ‘deconversion’ defines the transition from one state of belief to another as an inherently negative shift in relation to religion, whilst this does not necessarily represent how my interlocutors narrated their lives. The problematics with using this terminology to describe my interlocutors’ experiences is thereby threefold: first, it refers to one side of a coin (deconversion), the other side of which (conversion) my interlocutors never experienced. Second, it is a negative description of transition, which, third, chiefly centres around one’s former religion, rather than including the complex life-worlds people inhabit.

Other studies on the subject of ‘moving out of Islam’, or non-belief in Islamic communities, have adopted a more religiously inspired terminology, such as ‘apostasy’ (see, among others, Andre and Esposito 2016; Bromley 1998; Cottee 2015; Larsson 2018; Samuri and Quraishi 2014; Sidło 2016). The use of this term indicates a religion-centred approach and is therefore not suitable as an analytical description here. Furthermore, ‘apostasy’ and ‘apostates’ (Dutch: afvalligheid or afvallige) are theological terms for so-called ‘defectors from the faith’ and carry a religious judgement that was not applicable to my interlocutors’ (self-)identifications. Rather, if the term were to be interpreted, they referred to ‘apostasy’ as denoting the affront of speaking out against one’s former religion, rather than no longer adhering to it, or as the religious judgement they sometimes received. Relatedly, the term ‘ex-Muslim’ (Dutch: ex-moslim) is widely-used in both academic literature and the media. However, this is also problematic for addressing this group since only some of my interlocutors self-identified as such; by some it was considered a highly politicized term, whilst others simply did not want to ‘self-define as a negative’.
Moreover, the term is indicative of both the negative and religion-centred ways in which ‘leaving Islam’, or ‘becoming a non-believer’, is approached. The term directly assumes both a mere binary potentiality of identity according to which one once identified as ‘Muslim’ but now does not, as well as the centrality of one’s former religious identity in relation to who one now ‘is’.

The above is a short summary of issues encountered in the complexity of terminology in the study of religious transformation in the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology. Whilst I do not aim to settle this dispute, for this study I shall follow Karin van Nieuwkerk (2018, 2), who, in her recent edited volume, has suggested ‘moving in and moving out’ as terms that may denote ‘the ongoing nature of the religious transformation processes’. In my view, ‘moving’ as an analytical term may encompass experiences of moving in and out of both community and religion as well as an ongoing process of development. Furthermore, the concept of ‘moving’ is able to encompass both individual agency and positionality within larger discourses without necessarily assuming the centrality of religiosity.

It is important to note in any empirical study how both the researcher’s selection criteria and the interlocutors’ self-definitions relate to the conceptual terms utilized in the analysis. For this study, the parameters for finding interlocutors were that they should be people with Islamic backgrounds, who were born and/or raised in Britain or the Netherlands, who no longer believe in an Abrahamic God. These parameters were set for my interlocutors to be classified under the analytical notion of ‘moving out of Islam’, whilst ensuring that no religious conversion had taken place, and to provide a European context with a potentially comparative perspective. In what follows, I set out thematic descriptions of my interlocutors’ transforming lives when moving out of Islam in contemporary Europe, in which there is space for all the (self-)identifications I encountered. When ‘faith’ is mentioned, it refers to empirical descriptions of a potential part of the process of ‘moving out of Islam’ rather than to an analytical category per se.

The process of ‘exiting’, as implied by the term ‘ex-Muslim’, has been explored by Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh. Inspired by her own experiences as a former nun, she published Becoming an Ex (1988), in which she describes the process of ‘role exit’, which may be about religion but might also be, among others, about gender transition, retirement, divorce, the death of a spouse or recovering from addiction. She distinguishes four stages of role exit: ‘Doubts’, ‘Seeking Alternatives’, ‘The Turning Point’ and ‘Creating an Ex-Role’. Central to Ebaugh’s model is that becoming an ‘ex’ entails disengaging from a role central to one’s idea of self-identity, and that people take on a new role that includes their old identity as, for example, ‘ex-Muslim’.

In line with this type of analysis of ‘exiting’, with regard to religion, Streib et al. (2009), on the basis of their extensive psychological, mixed-method study into ‘deconversion’ in Germany and the United States of America, discern six possible so-called ‘deconversion trajectories’: (1) secularizing exits: complete disaffiliation from organized religion, (2) oppositional exits: adopting a completely new set of beliefs, switching to a higher tension religious group, (3) religious switching: switching to a different religious group with only marginal differences, (4) integrating exits: adopting a new set of beliefs, affiliating with a more ‘accommodated religious organization’, (5) privatizing exits: disaffiliation from religious institutions but continuation of private praxis and ritual, and (6) heretical exits: also disaffiliation from previous religious organization, but with an unaffiliated
appropriation of a new belief system. In this typology, the prominence of ‘exiting’ stands out. As with the terminology discussed above, the emphasis is again on a relatively negative shift.

Notwithstanding the focus on ‘exiting’, with regard to individual experience, according to Streib et al. (2009), people have different ways of narrating these exits. The first way that they distinguish through narrative analysis is ‘pursuit of autonomy’, which is characterized by a long process of leaving behind the faith one was born or brought up in. It is a search for individuality and often occurs during adolescence or early adulthood. The second type of deconversion narrative that Streib et al. (2009) refer to is ‘debarred from paradise’. These people are often mid-life converts and this narrative is marked by the experience of disappointment with religion and the abandonment of earlier hopes. One may move to secularity or private practice, but there is no reaffiliation with organized religion. The third type of deconversion is ‘finding a new frame of reference’, which is marked by deconverts searching for and finding a higher level of intensity of religious experience, making this rather a type of reconversion. The last type is ‘life-long quests-late revisions’, which are characterized by life-long searches. These are often life-long searches for inner peace, a spiritual environment or coming to terms with trauma.

The approaches of Ebaugh and Streib et al. to both exit-trajectories and exit-narratives have provided valuable insights into the experiences of people who move out of religion. However, what limits their findings for my case is that they pay little attention to matters outside of one’s former religion or identity and the relative weight given to religion in one’s narrative. Both approaches emphasize a negative shift of exiting or leaving something, which then necessarily defines the individual in relation to his or her former faith. Whilst Streib et al. (2009, 232) do refer, for example, to ‘finding a new frame of reference’, implying a move toward something rather than an exit, as well as the attention to ‘gains and losses’, the assumed relative centrality of religion in narratives of religious transformation is scarcely overcome. Both approaches thereby assume a binary potentiality of identity that evolves around religion: i.e. Muslim vs. ex-Muslim, or religious vs. non-religious. For my interlocutors, their experiences of moving out of Islam did not resonate with these identifications or classifications alone. Their search for identity and conviction was rarely merely a religious one; during the course of this research, other factors proved to be relevant for their stories and these are included in the thematic typology that I propose.

In conclusion, the current terminology, description of exit-trajectories and narrative approaches all display – perhaps naturally so – the centrality of ‘negative religion’. They consider individuals always to be somehow in relation to their former religion, or a to new one. In the thematic typology that I propose, religion is not absent – far from it: my interlocutors have in common that they moved out of Islam, a move addressed in all narratives. However, I aim to explore the relative weight of religion in complex life-worlds in which my interlocutors negotiated not only religious, but also social, political, ethnic and gendered discourses in a search for self and identity.

**Dialogical self: self-understanding in a heterogeneous world**

The analytical approach to the data was inspired by Hubert Hermans’s Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans 2012; Hermans and Gieser 2012). This theory assumes that the self is inherently dialogical in processes of self-making, and sees the self as a ‘society of mind’.
This means that others in the environment have a voice within the self and its narration – so-called ‘external voices’. Furthermore, the self adopts certain roles or I-positions, such as self-as-daughter, self-as-Muslim or self-as-professional, from which various changing environments are negotiated dialogically. This dialogue, reflectively narrated by the individual, emerges between these various I-positions and external voices such as friends, parents, religious values, the Devil, communities and political discourses (see also Vliek 2019).

Whilst Hermans developed Dialogical Self Theory for clinical psychology, the concept has also been taken up by scholars in the humanities as an analytical tool for the discussion of religious self-constitution in post-secular and post-migration contexts (see, for example, Aveling and Gillespie 2008; Bhatia 2002; Buitelaar 2006, 2013; Pitstra 2013; Vliek 2019). Self-understanding within Dialogical Self Theory does not relate to only one topic such as religion, but rather includes the external voices of individuals, groups, discourses, beliefs and practices that people engage with in their lives. Dialogical Self Theory recognizes and utilizes the potential of self-reflection by giving voice to the various ‘others’ that co-construct people’s narratives, and therefore their sense of self and identity and the different roles they take on when dealing with their changing surroundings. Dialogical Self Theory thereby allows for there not being only one nominal identity, such as ‘deconvert’, ‘ex-Muslim’, ‘professional’ or ‘activist’. Rather, these personas or I-positions can exist alongside one another and negotiate the realities and discourses around the self. This represents a different approach to the way people identify [terminology], move [trajectories] and narrate [narratives] themselves, as elaborated on above. By approaching the analysis of the data dialogically, I gained various insights that did not merely focus on religion or being Muslim, or non-religion and not being Muslim. It also laid bare shifts in self-understandings in relation to the outside world and inner belief as well as the interaction between these. This approach, then, allows for the recognition of the relative weight of religion in narratives, rather than presupposing the centrality of religion in one’s identity or trajectory.

What makes Dialogical Self Theory unique as an analytical tool for life-narratives is that it recognizes the organization of different voices within self-narratives. It provides tools to analyse ‘how individuals speak from different I-positions within the self, switching between various collective voices and sometimes mixing them as they take different positions’ (Buitelaar 2006, 262). Furthermore, it makes it possible to explore how memories, personal emotions, cultural or religious schemata and the basic narrative themes of agency and communion are organized. Analysing this from the various I-positions provides a way of dissecting the different ways in which people have arranged the world around them to make sense of their selves.

The concept of the dialogical self has not been involved in the design of the semi-structured interviews or the participant observations that have been conducted. Rather, for this research I have collected the life-stories of adults who have moved out of Islam in either the Netherlands or Britain. Naturally, these interviews did not occur in a vacuum but were rather ‘in dialogue’ themselves. Whilst various interview techniques were employed to ‘give back’ control to my interlocutors (e.g. ‘could you tell me the story of …’), narratives are inherently shaped by the audiences the interlocutor has in mind. To start, my own positionality as a white, non-Islamic, female, Dutch researcher, will undoubtedly have triggered either tacitly or explicitly, the desire to subvert certain dominant discourses that
potential readers of my research would have in mind. The dialogical self allows for the recognition of various I-positions in relation to the audiences they may address and these positions have been considered in the analysis rather than in the design.

After data collection, I have utilized the concept of dialogical self both for the close reading of the narratives (Vliek 2019) and for coding the entire dataset. First, I identified all the various internal and external voices of individuals, groups and discourses, as well as the multiple identities and roles people assume in different settings, and coded the type of dialogue they constituted. Thereby, stages in people’s experiences of transition and, eventually, four themes were identified. This analysis and thematic typology are not meant to be final and exclusive; they constitute a descriptive approach to data with specific parameters, which revealed the relative rather than absolute weight of the religious voice for those moving out of Islam.

**Thematic analysis**

Through the dialogical analysis described above, and by critically examining the plethora of internal and external voices and I-positions, as well as what my interlocutors said, their interaction and how they were hierarchically organized (see Vliek 2019), various non-chronological stages were laid bare. These were inspired by Ebaugh’s (1988) model of ‘role-exit’ as well as by the extensive analysis of voices and positions people described: ‘doubt’, ‘seeking alternatives’, ‘move to “the other side”’, ‘defining the new me’ and ‘negotiating difference’. These stages were formulated not only to include ‘exit roles’, but also to describe phases of self in transition that engage with other discourses than the religious alone. For example, the stage of ‘doubt’ may be about the existence of God or about matters of identity. What does it mean to be a Muslim, a daughter or a humanist? Who am I in relation to others, and how do I negotiate conflicting discourses from these different positions? Dialogically, this was expressed, for example, in self-dialogue between the I-position of I-as-Muslim and the internalized external voice of Allah, or perhaps in (imagined) I-positions such as I-as-atheist and external parental voices (‘how would my father respond if I were to say I am an atheist?’). Similarly, ‘seeking alternatives’ may be about existential belief or about other parts of one’s identity, such as being a woman, an activist or a professional. Seeking alternatives may happen even before one has doubts and may be a conscious or entirely sub-conscious process only evident upon reflection. It may happen simultaneously with doubt and new self-definitions.

The ‘moving out of Islam’ question is marked by the stage ‘move to “the other side”’, denoting the transformation of belief and non-belief, but also, after having identified as Muslim, being or becoming something else. This ‘move’ may take place at one moment in time or may be a more continuous struggle between rational knowledge and emotional attachment. Closely related is the stage of ‘defining a new me’, which refers to comparing the alternatives one finds with who one considered oneself to be: it is a positive process of (re-)identification, which often follows the search for alternatives. This may happen before the realization that one does not believe in God. Does one construct an ex-role, an atheist worldview, a political identity or all of these at once? Which identities are finite or singular and which are continuous? Lastly, ‘negotiating difference’ relates to how one copes with one’s surroundings. Relevant factors may be differences with religious friends and
family and potential withdrawal from community, but also negotiating the secular environment and its prejudices, when, for example, 'being brown' supposedly equates to 'being Muslim'. This stage may be experienced from a very young age ('I always felt different'), or one may have been happy to conform for most of one's life but now has to renegotiate one's roles in relation to family and former in-group members. All these stages were often expressed dialogically.

These non-chronological stages manifested differently in my interlocutors’ narratives. Through the examination of these various manifestations and the relative weight of discursive and personal voices and identities, four themes surfaced: ‘religious break’, ‘social break-away’, ‘entrance’ and ‘unconscious secularization’. I shall illustrate these ideal types and how the various non-chronological stages surface in these narratives by presenting four case studies. In order to illustrate both the relative weight of the religious voice and how narrative themes are often plural, I shall present a fifth case in which all four themes surface.

**The religious break**

It is like switching between extremes every day: ‘I don’t think it’s true, but what if it is? Am I going to hell?’ So it was really tough to be able to say: ‘I’m not a Muslim anymore, I’m an atheist.’

Amin lived in Manchester, where he was attending university. He was born in a tight-knit Muslim community: ‘in a really small town, with at least eight mosques (…) and my high school was, I’d say, 90 per cent Asian Muslim’. His father was ‘like real, proper religious (…) prays five times a day, reads the Qur’an every night before he goes to bed. Been on pilgrimage a few times’. His mother suffered from ‘really bad depression and OCD [obsessive compulsive disorder] and things like that’. From the age of 5 until he was 14, he was sent to madrasa every day after school:

I hated it. Absolutely hated it. (…) I just found it boring as fuck. (…) And I don’t really agree with a lot of the things that were told. Like, we were told some pretty messed up stuff. When I look back it was like: ‘Woah. You shouldn’t have been telling that to kids.’ (…) I think the reason Islam is such a powerful religion, it’s because they sort of knock it into you, the fear of God, and the fear of hell. It gets quite descriptive and explicit, when they talk about the punishments of hell. (…) It’s metal shoes that get heated up so much, when you step into them, your head explodes. (…) Being told that at such a susceptible age, it really knocks it into you. You do get scared.

The fear of hell and God was passed on to Amin from a young age at the madrasa, and at home: strict religious adherence was observed. His father worked as a manual labourer and his mother was at home because of her mental illness. As a child, he felt his little brother received most of the attention, whilst he was ‘a really hyper, happy dumb kid (…) getting the beatings and shoutings’. He reckoned that his hyperactivity frustrated his mother, and he concluded about his childhood ‘[I’ve] never really been comfortable or happy in that house’.

From a young age, Amin had had questions about religion, but no answers were provided, and he was told that questions or doubts are the devil whispering in your ear: ‘And one thing I was taught in mosque, was: “Don’t question Islam. (…) If you having these doubts, that’s not critical thinking, that’s not human analysis, that’s the literal devil
whispering in your ear.” But his home life was breaking him up and he was also very aware of the world news: ‘see lots of fucked up shit happening’. He therefore started doubting the omnibenevolence of God, but overcoming the idea of the devil was not easy: ‘Giving into the thought (...) switching between the extremes every day. Like, right Ok. This is for sure, not true. And then: WOAH! I was thinking like that! I probably committed a sin by doing that!’ However, eventually he could say to himself: ‘Right, this is obviously bullshit’, and then the dominoes started to fall:

If God is this omnibenevolent all loving being, then there doesn’t have to be any of this violence, any wrongdoings (...) One thing we’re told is that life is a test for the hereafter. But if God is really all-knowing, he’d know what’s going to happen before he even made this planet. (...) So that made me think that: ‘Right, that means that free will doesn’t exist. Because, if free will does exist, that means God doesn’t know everything.’ So I just started spotting these contradictions everywhere.

He continued to seek alternatives, reading about philosophy ‘and the bigger picture just opened up for me’. The more he read, the more he ‘sort of fell off’. During this period, he had a best friend who lived around the corner whom he could talk to about these matters.

We just used to meet up every day and smoke weed, and we used to talk a lot about these sorts of things. And he started to agree with me a bit, and (...) we both came to the conclusion, I just said to him: (...) ‘You know, I’ve decided I’m not a Muslim anymore’, and he was like: ‘Really?’ ‘Yeah.’ ‘Same to be fair.’ And that was it. It just felt really liberating.

Reflecting on these considerations of actually ‘not being a Muslim anymore’ – his ‘move to “the other side”’ – after he had ‘fallen off’, as well as the potential consequences of openly admitting to that fact he no longer believed, he pondered:

Considering it was like the equivalent of (...) murder or something (...) such a massive deal. The option is there, but it’s like, ‘Do I go for it? Is it worth the risk?’ And after months on months of thinking and deciding, of putting pieces together, it was like: ‘I might as well take the risk, might as well see what happens, because I don’t want to live this life anymore.’

But the sacrifice he had to make was considerable. His father would have preferred him to leave the house and his extended family only saw the shame he brought on the family. He was blamed for his mother’s illnesses, and he experienced general isolation which, among other things, had an impact on his mental health.

The theme of ‘losing one’s religion’ was dominant in Amin’s story, which is an example of a religious break. Typical is the sense that ‘being Muslim’ used to be central to one’s identity and sense of self, as well as to one’s surroundings. Religious doubt is often prompted by an emotional event or trauma. For Amin, this was the ‘shitness of life’; his life at home was harsh and he was generally unhappy. He was physically abused at a young age, felt ignored by his parents and had a keen interest in the world, where he saw a lot of misery. Others who present a dominant theme of religious break may never stop doubting, or it may continue for a long time. Amin deliberately defined a ‘new me’: he went to his friend and told him, ‘I’ve decided I’m not a Muslim anymore.’ It is common in this type of narrative, at least initially, that one’s new self is defined in relation to one’s former religion (e.g. atheist, ex-Muslim, agnostic). After having moved to the other side, the next stage that religious breakers find themselves in is to renegotiate
their new-found beliefs and identity with their surroundings. This may be an arduous process of self-definition, denial or concealment. Characteristic of this group is that they often feel a need to share with others their newly found identities in relation to their former religion.

**The social break-away**

It was almost like you were Muslim by default. Like you are born Muslim. (...) [But] I don’t think I ever said it in terms of: ‘I am not a Muslim anymore.’ It was more like how Islam featured in my life in terms of it being the habits and rules that governed my life.

The daughter of two doctors, Aarini grew up in Birmingham in a middle-class neighbourhood. She described her father as quite liberal and her mother as more observant of religious and cultural customs. However, religion in and of itself did not play a major role when she was growing up. She did not attend a madrasa, nor was she taught how to pray or recite the Qur’an. Elaborating on what sort of role religion had in her life as a child she said:

Very much a back seat. (...) my parents [both] do things religious in their conception. (...) Blessing you and saying ‘Bismillah’ before you eat and stuff. (...) But I never considered them religious. I always considered them like ‘this is just what parents do’.

The problems started for Aarini when she turned ‘12 or 13’, looking at her friends who mostly had liberal Western life-styles. Her parents, however, ‘governed’ her life, and she therefore ‘confused Islam with cultural rules, which are bound in relation to Islam’. These rules included her parents’ focus on dress, leaving the house, drinking, smoking and a particular emphasis on ‘different rules for men and women’. Her rebellion, as she called it, lasted throughout her teenage years. There was always a compromise to be fought over or, rather, difference to be negotiated. Whether it was about leaving the house or the clothes she was wearing, everything turned into a fight. She described this period as often resulting in situations that spiralled out of control. If her parents forbade her to go to town, she would respond by going out drinking.

It was a lot to do [with] the assumption: ‘You are a girl. Girls don’t do this.’ Men have more freedom than women do, and yeah, it was like: ‘You are behaving outside what girls ought to do’, and that’s associated with Islam as well.

Negotiations and struggles over where boundaries were drawn ceased after her teenage years, more specifically after her attempted suicide: ‘It was like: “everyone should just calm down”’. From here on, her parents were less engaged in Aarini’s whereabouts, nor did she engage with them over her activities outside of the house and school. When she was a teenager, she would lie about the gender or names of her friends in order to hide the fact that she had male friends. These tensions gradually resolved after her suicide attempt. At the time of the interview, she was still concealing the fact she had a boyfriend:

Even though now my parents could not do anything about me living with someone, I am still so indoctrinated to, I am so into the habit of it being easy to lie and that it is easier to withhold information. I just do that because I have been doing it forever. My parents (...) if they thought about it, if they were really honest, they know that I do [have a boyfriend] (...) They probably know I do a lot of things. We don’t talk about it.
When turning to the topic of faith and her current existential beliefs, she was less clear on ‘what happened’. Aarini dissociated religion and God:

I don’t know how much I thought about God having anything to do with religion. Religion was all of these things that you did in your life. Whereas God was like, an idea. So they were separate, always. (...) God was like, someone who was looking out for me.

The relationship with God she had as a child, but also as a teenager, was a personal one. The religious rules did not come from Him, but from her parents’ religion and culture: ‘God and Islam were divorced. Logically speaking, they couldn’t be married’, because God was supposed to be the ‘good guy’. Her doubts about her personal God, although not very clearly remembered, were initiated by her struggles in life:

Maria: Did you ever consciously doubt the existence of God?

Aarini: I think probably when I was a teenager. I must have at some point have thought like: ‘If God exists, then how can I be living this life?’ I think it was a mix of like: ‘God cannot be looking out for me, [so] there cannot be a God.’

These thoughts derived from her assumption that God was a personal God who was supposed to look out for her, but instead she felt abandoned. ‘Being Muslim’ for Aarini was never about belief in God per se; it was about religion and specifically its restrictive, gendered rules that were imposed on her.

For a social break-away like Aarini, the main issues experienced throughout life are the socio-religious impositions and limitations that are enforced. Difference from one’s environment is often negotiated from a young age and may remain a constant factor throughout life. This difference is predominantly a social one, which in turn may prompt doubt about the existence of God. As in Aarini’s case, there is a search for alternatives, which is marked by a search for freedom that one lacks in one’s own environment. What is particular about this group is that leaving the parental home creates distance and can be a determining factor in the development of self and identity in relation to religion, culture and gender norms: one has the physical space to define a ‘new me’, away from social, cultural and religious impositions.

**The entrance**

More and more I came to the conclusion that I shouldn’t be bothering myself with what I am not, because that has its limits. I wanted to see what I am.

Born in Morocco, Yedder moved with his parents to the Netherlands at the age of 11. As a ‘new’ immigrant, he initially struggled with the neighbourhood kids who called him an ‘illegal’ or: ‘illi, someone without paperwork, even though I had permanent status’. Finding friends and his place at school took some time, since he was ‘the new guy’. He felt like the outsider, especially among the Moroccan children in his school:

Not that I wasn’t religious or anything but I think it was just because I had experienced migration, that must have played a role. I was very aware that with regard to Morocco, I knew so much more than they (...) So to be accepted by that group or not, was not my priority. I don’t think I was that aware at the time, but it makes you stronger.
Religion had played a central role when he was growing up in Morocco, but according to Yedder this was less so in the Netherlands because of the religious and secular surroundings, respectively. His parents raised him relatively religiously according to Moroccan customs, but in the Netherlands religion was not necessarily central to his upbringing or sense of self. Feeling different on the basis of his migration status was more prominent.

In 2004, when Yedder was about 17, an earthquake hit the region around Yedder's home city of Al Hoceima. Over 500 people died and many more were internally displaced: ‘And a year later there were still no proper supplies or services, even though much aid went into the area.’ There were protests in Morocco, which were forcefully dispersed, and then a protest was organized in The Hague:

And I went to that. And that made me even more aware of the marginalization of the area. That’s how the ball started rolling. You attend more activities, debates and you shape yourself more and more. And it became part of my identity. But you quickly notice (…) that religion has always been sort of a liability.

By going to activities, Yedder explored the world of Moroccan activism and Amazigh cultural pride, unconsciously ‘seeking alternatives’. By doing so, he found information about certain periods in the Amazigh history online. Under these pages of information there would be discussion threads: ‘[Religion] would go against certain cultural customs, against certain norms and unwritten rules in the Amazigh culture. That was around when I was 19 (…) It woke me up as it were.’

Yedder explained that the activist world gave him ample space and support to explore his thoughts and doubts about the compatibility of religion and ethnic culture. The people he mostly spent his time with at this point were Amazigh activists, some of whom were religious, while others were not. They talked about anything, ‘also about religion if we had to, but not all the time, so it wasn’t forced (…) So that support, that security to discuss religion, to think about it differently was there.’ Finding this new space forced him to think about the place of religion in his life and his convictions. He gave an example of how his cultural heritage and identity clashed with the religious values he was raised with:

Look at the woman for example. She has a rather important position within our culture. She was, the woman is always the person who would transfer culture. Whether it was language or rituals. And then automatically you search for the position of women within religion, and you notice that it has been a rather subservient position. Sometimes when you read between the lines, and sometimes very obviously. (…) And it makes you think.

This is when he eventually came to the conclusion: ‘I do not believe in a God.’ But to Yedder, this was unsatisfying because he saw the limits of negative definitions of identity. He elaborated:

I do not believe in a God, so how does doing the right thing come about? I believe that it is about taking responsibility. And I came to that conclusion before I even knew about humanism. So you start searching (…) and you realize that many human rights activists are humanists, and things start to fall into place, you know, that your point of departure is people’s responsibility. (…) It is about creating your own vision. It was not like: ‘I am not religious I have to figure out what I am’ so that I thought: ‘humanism can fill that gap’, no. It was much more a process of gradually, how do I feel about these things?
His narrative of identity development and self-reflection was centred around positive thought processes. His aversion to negative identity became clear when he considered the media and so-called atheist Muslims: ‘Perhaps there should be a programme that focused on what we are rather than what we are not.’ Later in our conversation, he reiterated the downside of negative identities when debating with Muslims about religion:

I notice in discussions, in conversations that when you start with what you are (…) I don’t say that I am not Muslim, I say: ‘I’m a humanist.’ (…) Instead of saying why you are not a Muslim, or why you are not religious, you only have to explain what you are, and that is much easier, a much stronger position as well. Because when you explain why you are not something, you are on the defensive.

With regard to his family, at the time of the interview he fasted during Ramadan when he was at home, although he was pretty sure his parents knew about his unbelief, ‘after ten years they know how I work’. His mother sometimes still urged him to pray, fast and observe Islam, but there was no compulsion or any particular need to discuss the matter.

For ‘the entrance’, entering one or multiple new identities is dominant. Exit from the Muslim identity and loss of faith does occur, but only after one has familiarized oneself with a different identity, as Yedder did with his Amazigh heritage, activism and humanism. Negotiating difference with the new and old in-groups is often a constant factor throughout this process, but it is often considered to aid one’s development of self and identity, rather than hampering it. For Yedder, his new group of friends were different from him; they had different views, but through active discussion and negotiations he was given the space to develop his own ideas and worldview. What is characteristic of ‘the entrance’ is that the new-found identity makes one doubt the Muslim identity and God: are these compatible? Of course, these processes may go hand in hand. Although new identities may be in relation to religion, they are often about matters outside of religion, such as ethnicity, politics or work.

Unconscious secularization

It’s just a way of life. It’s not like: ‘Look at me! I am this or that. I did it!’ No.

Amina was also born in Morocco where she spent the first half of her childhood. In Morocco, she received an Islamic education, since it was part of the curriculum, but: ‘I wasn’t raised very heavily religiously (…) It was cultural religion.’ She came to the Netherlands at the age of 13 with her parents, four brothers and one oldest sister. Upon arrival, her religious devotion increased: ‘I was 13 and it was a new environment, I had no friends, I didn’t speak the language, so I struggled. So for the first two years or so, I started praying, you know.’ She explained this as being due to feeling lonely and out of place. Although her brothers were around, she was the only daughter in the house since her oldest sister had already married: ‘Because of that loneliness, you return to faith a bit I guess.’ Friends she made at school were multicultural but mostly Dutch. Like Yedder, she noticed differences between those who had grown up in Morocco and Moroccans who were born in the Netherlands: she thought the latter were quite ignorant of the privileged position they enjoyed growing up in the Netherlands, whilst the former had experienced struggles in Morocco. She also noticed that Dutch-Moroccans were more traditional in their experience and expression of religion than she and her family were.
Amina had Dutch-Moroccan and Dutch friends, although she had less contact with the Dutch-Moroccan group. As she learned the language and entered puberty, her life ‘naturally’ developed:

I think at some point you start doing your daily things (…) which is why I simply wasn’t pre-occupied with religion anymore, and the distance grew. Faith is also about practical things, your fasting, your praying. Yes, I actually started to roll, which is why the life that I chose became further removed from faith, from Islam. (…) Actually it just made sense that it grew this way. It’s not like I was thinking: ‘I don’t want to have anything to do with Islam, I’m taking some distance’, no. It’s like when you are young, you don’t like smoked salmon. And at some point, you develop [and] you will eat certain things. Yeah. It just happened.

She never delved into theology, nor did she ever have to convince herself that something did not actually exist. There was no struggle with God or the voice of the Devil, or with her family. Despite not defining herself as religiously devout since puberty, she continued to participate in fasting during Ramadan until she was about 28 or 29, when the days of fasting started to become quite long ‘which was kind of the trigger to start thinking about it’:

[Fasting] was just out of habit (…) At a certain point I started thinking: ‘Who are you doing this for? Is this a part of who I am? Do I want this? How do I think about this?’ (…) And then yes, of course I knew it, but: ‘I do these things because you should, and it is sociable, you feed the poor.’ But I didn’t really feel any of these things. And when I decided not to participate in Ramadan, that was a sort of breaking point, that other people know this.

For Amina, not participating during Ramadan (i.e. ceasing certain ritual practices), and for friends, family and colleagues to witness her embodied move to ‘the other side’, was a big deal. The responses she received varied. Her father had already passed away but her mother’s reaction surprised her:

So my mother [‘s reaction] was very striking. At the beginning of the Ramadan, the first one I didn’t participate, and I was home in the evening (…) So I said to my mother: ‘I have decided, I won’t fast.’ Then she said: ‘Yeah, it’s your life, I completely understand.’ The next day she was in the kitchen and she was making breakfast for me! [laughs] (…) It was so sweet. If you see her, you’re like: ‘that’s a traditional little lady’, but she is very open-minded.

Other physical aspects of her upbringing that were hard to renegotiate related to sex before marriage. She tried to stay a virgin, but realized:

‘That’s not going to happen’ [laughs]. But for a long time, I struggled with someone sitting on my shoulder, who says: ‘What are you doing!’ (…) because it’s what they teach you from a very young age, and then that is gone, and then you have to decide for yourself.

She explained that the sexual morality she was raised with was no longer applicable, but it was not easily overcome. She had to argue internally (and dialogically) with the external voices of her upbringing.

Her identifications at the time of the interview were not in relation to religion: ‘I don’t look at people’s religion as something that matters (…) I have become a citizen of the world instead of a church-goer (…) mosque-goer?’ Why her life turned out the way it did, she related back to her friends, family and, most of all, her older brothers.

[Brothers] have everything to say about the baby sister, raise her protectively, and I had nothing of the sort. The first time I went out was with my brothers. And they kind of showed me the other side. (…) So I wasn’t raised protected, which is why I had to go out,
discover things, get to know people, and not get stuck in one group. (…) I have friends from every walk of life. Young, old, any religion, non-religious, which is why I think I had to develop this way, because otherwise you can’t deal with different people.

She described this process as quite passive. The phrase ‘I think I had to develop this way’ showed her relative unawareness at the time; her surroundings allowed and almost forced her to develop into the ‘world citizen’ she is today.

As the term implies, ‘unconscious secularization’ is marked by a lack of conscious doubt in the existence of God or (de-)identification as Muslim. Although religion plays a role in one’s life, it is not central to one’s sense of identity. For Amina, being Moroccan, especially in relation to second generation migrants, took precedence. Though considering herself to be Muslim for a long time, her faith had declined or rather, had stopped playing a role in her life. The move to ‘the other side’ is then a gradual process that has few religious connotations for one’s self-understanding, since one is often unaware. It is mostly an adolescent move, and shaping of one’s worldview is not primarily related to one’s parents’ religion. As Amina explained, religion simply stopped playing a role at some point; she had other things on her mind, such as learning the language, making friends and going out with her brothers. It should be noted that this theme is common among those who were raised in relatively secular environments, as well as those who migrated just before puberty (roughly between the ages 7 and 14). For them, religion is often something cultural from ‘home’, rather than something that needs to be cultivated in the new environment. Although matters of believing are overcome without any significant inner struggles, as in the other trajectories, certain (religious) values may have to be (re)negotiated over time; these are values that are often embodied, such as in sexual morality or eating certain foods (Vliek forthcoming).

**Combination of themes**

The themes discussed above do not solely rest on chronological stages. Rather, they describe how the themes of ‘religious breaking’, ‘social breaking’, ‘entering’ or ‘unconscious secularization’ may be dominant in a narrative of moving out of Islam. The following case study will illustrate how these themes are related and may overlap in narratives, although one theme is generally dominant. Eléa’s narrative follows the pattern of a religious break, infused with themes of experiencing social pressure, entering a new identity at university and losing religion more gradually and unconsciously.

Eléa was raised in a town in the east of the Netherlands where she had a ‘very Islamic upbringing’. Of Turkish descent, her parents wanted her to attend mosque every week and take Qur’an lessons:

> After school, I had to go to [the Qur’an teacher] to attend classes, how you pray, all the ins and outs of religion. The five pillars. And the Qur’an, learn it by heart. I did it for a long time, I went alone. (…) But Saturday and Sunday, we all had to go to mosque.

She explained how she ‘really believed it, I really prayed (…) five times a day. I was very pious for a child.’ Her image of God was a split one:

> I had a positive image of God. I kind of assumed that God had to be nice and friendly. But in the mosque and my surroundings, God was a punishing entity, and God obviously saw everything, but always in a negative way.
These images of a punishing God, as well as the vivid descriptions of hell she heard, stuck with her and made her scared of the afterlife:

I thought everything was terrifying. Yes, not only God, everything was scary. They told us in detail what would happen if you would go to heaven, but more importantly, if you would go to hell. Hell was really a topic. That you had to walk across a wire, and snakes that slithered under it. A lot of stories like that.

Furthermore, from a young age she struggled with moral dilemmas that religion posed to her: ‘If you go to heaven because you lived well, you can take two people. “But who should I bring? My father and mother, but what about my little sister?”’ Retrospectively, she was unsure of how scared of hell she was in day to day life; rather, it was something that was mentioned all the time, ‘so that there is an authority outside my parents’. However, the religious rules that were imposed regarding her dress and behaviour did impact her: ‘My mother did not allow me to wear trousers (…) and no short skirts, really long ones.’ As pious and well-behaved as she was as a child:

The older I got the more I fought against it. Because I rebelled more. Because I really felt like an idiot at school. And at some point, I started to buy baggy trousers, not tight jeans or anything, that would be the worst I could wear. (…) every step was a small victory. (…) and at some point you think: ‘I’m stronger than you, you can’t do anything to me but scream and shout, it doesn’t hurt me anymore.’ (…) So at some point, no more scarf and no more skirts.

This part of Eléa’s story resonated strongly with social break-away themes, which eventually culminated in her wanting to go to university. Her negotiations over where to attend were fierce; if her parents were to let her go, they wished her to move to a certain town where they knew the community so they could keep an indirect eye on her, which Eléa protested against loudly. She picked a university in a city where her parents did not know anyone, but where she remained ‘undercover’ for quite some time, avoiding the Turkish community, fearing they might know her family and report back about her behaviour. However, at this time: ‘I was still really religious. I remember having discussions with [a friend], conversations, and (…) I really believed in God and in Islam. I had stopped praying, I was not wearing the scarf, but I still believed.’

At university, she met new people with whom she discussed religion, people who were ‘anti-religious’, as well as a Protestant Christian friend. These conversations made her doubt the role of religion and God in her own life. She conducted ‘thought experiments’, as she called them, concerning what religion meant to her and what difference it would make if she did not believe anymore.

At some point I thought: ‘You know, God (…) plays less and less a role in my life (…) if I say now that God doesn’t exist, I won’t get struck by lightning (…) The world won’t stop moving, I won’t change, my life won’t change, the world won’t change.’ (…) I could not find the value of believing in God. And I had discussions with my anti-theist friend. And at a certain point I thought it was such bullshit [laughs] what idiot still believes in God!

This thought experiment made her rethink the point of believing. She elaborated on feelings of betrayal that also contributed to her loss of faith:

[If I didn’t believe] I would go to hell. According to Islam. According to believers. According to my own family. I would burn in hell. I thought: ‘You can’t wish that upon your own child, can you? Just because I don’t believe in your God I have to burn in hell?’ (…) Put mildly,
that’s not very nice! And I thought: ‘Why? I didn’t kill anyone. I didn’t rape anyone.’ (…) That they wish you the worst possible, just because you stopped believing in their God. And I think because I was very religious, you respond very emotionally, to break away from it. So I needed the fierceness to shed my faith.

This ‘fierceness’ expressed itself in tense discussions with her religious relatives, especially her sisters: ‘I wanted them to explain (…) I constantly felt I had to explain myself, and perhaps I thought: “Why do I have to explain myself, why don’t you explain yourself?”’

After having ‘socially broken away’ from her family and community by dressing the way she wanted and moving out of her parental home to a city without social control, Eléa entered a new life, with new people around her. However, she did not clearly describe this as a new identity (yet). New insights made her doubt her already fading faith. This is where her religious break went hand in hand with unconscious secularization (‘It played less and less a role in my life’). By having moved away from a religious environment, other things like university and her new friends became more important, and religion faded. However, at this point in her narrative, she was still to come to terms with her unbelief and, more specifically, her ‘new me’ in relation to her family.

**Discussion**

The ‘religious break’ and ‘social break-away’ themes were more dominant in Britain, whilst ‘the entrance’ and ‘unconscious secularization’ were more dominant in the Netherlands. There were circumstantial differences between the respective countries that may help explain this. First, in Britain there are various organizations for those moving out of Islam, such as the Council for Ex-Muslims in Britain (CEMB), Faith to Faithless, a London-based social group, various Facebook pages and so on and so forth. Events are regularly organized. In contrast, such groups and activities are relatively absent in the Netherlands. Although the Humanist Society (Humanistisch Verbond) initiated a meet-up group for ‘new freethinkers’, the interest was limited and meetings have been suspended for the time being. Private initiatives to meet other former Muslims are sometimes undertaken, but no organization is currently doing this. Furthermore, Facebook-groups dedicated to the subject, whilst in Britain they would refer to ‘ex-Muslims’ in their names, in the Netherlands the terminology would be, for example, ‘Moroccan’s without religion’ or ‘freethinkers’.

I suggest that the dominance of the social break-away and religious break in Britain on the one hand, and the dominance of unconscious secularization and the entrance in the Netherlands on the other, has to do with the relative centrality of religion to one’s (former) identity and, relatedly, the presence of and need for support groups – or the lack thereof. This has directly affected how the majority of interlocutors were found for this research. First, people who have little or no issues with their loss of religion or for whom religion was not central to their identity (as often found in unconscious secularization or entrance narratives) are less likely to search for support. In the Netherlands, whilst some reckoned they had had some need for support in the past, most concluded that other ‘freethinking’ groups had sufficed and that identification in relation to religion or Islam was not beneficial for their personal development. Furthermore, they argued that they did not want to identify as ‘ex-Muslim’ because of its political connotations with the secularist right (Vliek 2018). In addition, such groups were not widely available, so affiliation
would be less of ‘a thing to do’. In Britain, on the other hand, more support groups were present, and so a search for (temporary) support would lead to specific ‘apostasy’ groups, such as the CEMB or Faith to Faithless. Furthermore, those who experience more psychologically taxing religious breaks or social breakaways are more likely to search for support. These differences in affiliation to support networks lead to a second reason for the differences in dominance of themes.

Among affiliates of such groups, standardization of narrative may occur. In meet-ups I attended, this became evident in the way people discussed matters of moving out of Islam. For example, ‘How long have you been an ex-Muslim?’ and ‘Are you out?’ were common questions one would ask one another. Another indication of this potential standardization of narrative would be how some of the affiliated people that I interviewed, would be so at one with their identity as ‘ex-Muslim’, that they could no longer say ‘I’, but only narrated their story in the ‘we’ form, so as to tell ‘the ex-Muslim story’. Although religious breaks and social break-away themes were, of course, also present in the Netherlands, and unconscious secularization and entrance themes were not absent from the British stories either, these particular phenomena regarding an emerging group narrative in which religion took centre stage were exclusive to Britain.

A final methodological observation that emphasizes these differences is that Simon Cottee (2015) found his interlocutors exclusively through the online CEMB forum. In his thoughtful study, most narratives resemble the social-breakaway and religious break themes described here. I suggest that this is because, first, those who experience religious breaks or social break-away themes are more likely to search for support and, second, standardization of narrative may subsequently occur. In a similar fashion, the majority of my group of interlocutors in the Netherlands were found through snowballing, and a minority through Facebook groups and the Humanist Society. In Britain on the other hand, about half were found through organizations and online forums, whilst the other half were found through snowballing. This, along with the above discussion, may explain the differences between dominant themes in the countries in this particular data set.11

Conclusion

Studies of ‘losing faith’ have, understandably, so far primarily focused on the negative (losing) and religious (faith) sides of changes in existential beliefs. In response, since my interlocutors’ narratives were ‘not just about faith’, I have proposed adopting a broader consideration of what constitutes self-making in times of religious change. My critique of the approaches to the subject taken so far was threefold. First, previous academic terminology did not resonate with my data with regard to either semantics or the self-definitions I encountered. Second, in the available descriptions of so-called exit-trajectories, little attention has been given to the life-worlds of people outside religion: its focus has chiefly been negative (exit) and religiously centred. Third, narrative descriptions did not apply to my interlocutors’ experiences for similar reasons: the focus has hitherto been on a negative approach to religion when it concerned moving out of religion. In contrast, the narratives I encountered included, besides religion, a plethora of social, political, ethnic and gendered discourses.

I have therefore proposed approaching the changing self not only in relation to religion, but rather as a ‘society of mind’. Dialogical Self Theory assumes the self is inhabited by
external voices and different roles or identities that one assumes in different situations (I-positions), between which dialogue occurs in the negotiation of a changing life-world, especially upon self-reflection. This approach allows for the recognition of a self in transition in an ever-changing world, responsive to a multiplicity of discourses and roles one has to negotiate, and moves beyond the religious–secular, belief–non-belief, Muslim–non-Muslim dichotomies. It recognizes the relative weight of the religious voice in narratives, rather than presuming the centrality of religion to one’s identity. I have presented four themes that emerged after dialogical analysis.

For the ‘religious break’, ‘being Muslim’ and religion used to be central to one’s identity. Religious doubt is often prompted by an emotional event or trauma. It is common for this type of narrative to define one’s new self in relation to one’s former religion. Second, for the ‘social break-away’, the main issues are the socio-religious impositions and limitations that are enforced. Difference from one’s environment is often negotiated from a young age, which in turn may prompt doubt about the existence of God. Third, for the ‘entrance’, exit from the Muslim identity does occur, but only after one has familiarized oneself with a different identity. Negotiating difference is often considered to aid the development of self and identity, rather than hampering it. Characteristic of the entrance is that the new-found identity makes one doubt the Muslim identity and faith in God. Lastly, ‘unconscious secularization’ is marked by a lack of conscious doubt about the existence of God or (de-)identification as Muslim. Although religion does play a role, it is not central to one’s sense of identity and therefore not key in self-development. I have presented a fifth narrative to illustrate the potential intertwinements of these themes.

In describing these themes, I have not necessarily aimed to direct the focus away from religion all together when studying ‘losing faith’. Rather, I argue that we should be considerate of things besides ‘the negative’ and ‘what is missing’, and move beyond the assumption that people may exist or be described merely in relation to religion. Perhaps we may give a little more attention to the realities and discourses that people find themselves in besides religion, as well as to the ways in which people respond to them and reshape their sense of self. In Yedder’s words: ‘Perhaps there should be [a focus] on what we are rather than what we are not.’ The field of moving out of religion, especially in a post-migration context, is still relatively unexplored and the approach I propose opens up questions beyond what is left behind.

Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 16th Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR) in Bern, 19 June 2018, as part of the panel ‘Debating, expressing and organizing non-belief among Muslims in Europe and the Middle East’.
2. Translated from Dutch. Throughout this article, the interviews conducted with Dutch interlocutors have all been transcribed in Dutch and translated into English by the author. The interviews conducted with British interlocutors have been transcribed and all quotations are presented here verbatim.
3. In response, Fadil and Fernando (2015) warn against the exclusion of piety altogether from the anthropology of Islam by redirecting our focus to the ‘every day’. An extensive overview of these debates is beyond the scope of this article; however, their importance is noted.
4. Over a period of 18 months during 2017 and 2018, I conducted 22 in-depth interviews in the Netherlands, and 22 in Britain. The interlocutors roughly represented the ethnic composition of Muslims with migrant backgrounds in each country. There were no age restrictions and both genders were included. Furthermore, I attended numerous meetings and activities,
during which I had many informal talks with participants. The people I met came from all over each country and no selection criteria were based on socio-economic status, education, profession, online presence or activity. Rather, about half of my interlocutors were found via social media such as (closed) Facebook groups; the other half were found through my own (secondary) network and snowballing.

5. It should be noted that Streib et al. (2009) do extensively discuss biographical and developmental perspectives of ‘deconversion’, shedding light on complexities that may also include ‘finding a new frame of reference’. I shall discuss this below.

6. It is for similar reasons that the term ‘religious disaffiliation’ (see, for example, Bromley and Shupe 1986; Gooren 2010) is inappropriate, since: (1) within Islam, official affiliation is neither possible nor required, (2) it is a negative description of transition presented as a counterpart to conversion, and (3) the terminology is predominantly related to ‘religion’. For an extended overview of pro-religious hegemony in terminology in the sociology of religion, see Cragun and Hammer (2011).

7. Statushouder, or someone with ‘permanent status’, in Dutch refers to immigrants who hold a permit that allows them to work or go to school.

8. The Berber (Tamazight)-speaking areas of Morocco have historically been culturally neglected by the state, which has a nationalist discourse emphasizing the links to a ‘high-culture’ Arab-Islamic civilization. The cultural heritage of the Amazigh has thus been seen as a threat to Moroccan national unity (Silverstein and Crawford 2004). Whilst there have been significant reforms, such as Tamazight being allowed to be taught in the Berber regions to students in 2004, and the recognition of the status of the language as co-official in 2011 (Silverstein 2011), structural neglect and social injustices have not been overcome. In this discourse, Amazigh cultural pride and activism is associated with an anti-Arabization and anti-Islam discourse, since, so the reasoning goes, the Amazigh culture predates the introduction of Arab religion. Whilst some activists pursue an inclusive agenda stating that ‘personal religion is not an issue’ when fighting for social justice, in other milieus the separation between Muslims and non-believing activists is heavily debated (Ben-Layashi 2007).

9. The literal English translation of the Dutch kerkganger is ‘church-goer’, which is more commonly translated as worshipper. For Amina, it was a slip of the tongue though, since it is a Christian expression. She corrects herself by inventing the word moskeeganger – ‘mosque-goer’.

10. See Vliek (2018) for an in-depth analysis of the presence of ‘secularist ex-Muslim voices’ in Britain and their relative absence in the Netherlands.

11. Since this is not a study of Islamic communities in either country, I hesitate to speculate on the centrality of religion to identity being causally related to the composition of communities (e.g. ethnic, orthodox, secular, Shia, Sunni, socio-economic status, etc.). Further study is needed for conclusions to be drawn regarding these matters.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Prof. Dr Karin van Nieuwkerk and Prof. Dr Gert-Jan van der Heiden for their guidance, support and advice, as well as for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

References


