COMMITMENT, CONVERGENCE, ALTERITY

Muslim-Christian Comparison and the Politics of Distinction in the Netherlands

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Abstract: This contribution looks comparatively at the everyday pursuit of religious commitment among young, revivalist-oriented Sunni Muslims and Protestant Christians in the Netherlands. In both public debates and academic scholarship, the differences between these groups tend to be stressed, particularly through dichotomies such as migrant/native and minority/majority. This article, by contrast, takes their potential common ground as a starting point by examining the pursuit of religious aspirations under shared conditions of consumer capitalism and cultural pluralism. I argue that my Christian and Muslim interlocutors experienced a noticeably similar dynamic of constraint on and reinvigoration of their faith. Further, I note the different degrees to which they emphasized their moral distinctiveness, and discuss how this disparity is related to dominant public representations of these groups.

Keywords: comparative research, consumer capitalism, cultural pluralism, Netherlands, religious commitment, young Christians, young Muslims

Evangelical Christians and reformist Muslims constitute two of the most prominent religious groups in the Netherlands, as in much of Western Europe. While the public role of mainline Christian institutions and the degree of regular church attendance have declined sharply in the last 50 years or so, these religious groups—and especially the younger generations among them—manifest a revitalization of religious faith, community, and practice (Roeland et al. 2010). In this contribution I offer a comparative analytical sketch of these revivalist-oriented young adults based on ethnographic research I conducted on the everyday pursuit of religious commitment among Dutch Protestant Christians and Sunni Muslims, who were between 18 and 28 years old and mostly university

educated.¹ Focusing on how these young people relate to a predominantly secular world, I argue that they share a strikingly similar dynamic of constraint and reinvigoration when it comes to their everyday religious pursuits. I also point to subtle differences among them, particularly concerning the ways in which they represent themselves with regard to that secular world.

The Christians I worked with were predominantly of white Dutch descent. The Muslims were mostly of Moroccan descent (yet born and/or raised in the Netherlands), but also included people of other backgrounds. There has been a strong tendency in both public and scholarly debates to keep these groups apart and to take their differences for granted (Beekers 2014). In public debates and prevalent discourses, Muslim communities—even if they have resided in the Netherlands for two or three generations—often continue to be perceived as migrants, a religious minority whose belonging to the Dutch nation is regularly put to question (Sunier 2010). By contrast, Christians of white Dutch descent tend to be self-evidently seen as ‘Dutch’. While (especially orthodox) Christians are regularly perceived to clash with dominant secular norms (see, e.g., Borgman 2009), such divergence hardly provokes doubts about their national belonging. Further, although self-identified Christians today constitute a numerical minority (Bernts and Berghuijs 2016), they are commonly not categorized as a ‘religious minority’. To the contrary, notions of (Judeo-)Christian heritage are increasingly mobilized in attempts at demarcating and defending the perceived moral values and cultural distinctiveness of the Netherlands and of Europe more generally (Brubaker 2017; van den Hemel 2017). In the context of these identitarian politics, Muslims are often framed as the prime cultural ‘other’—an external force that threatens to disrupt national unity and peace (Sunier 2010: 125–126).

Qualitative social scientific research on Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe has largely been situated in separate fields. Scholarship on Muslims has been strongly shaped by the fields of migration studies and minority studies, which are characterized by concerns with social integration and identity formation. Work on Christians, by contrast, has been informed by the sociology of religion and has focused on questions of secularization and religious transformation (Beekers 2014: 79–82; cf. DeHanas 2016: 195). Muslims have often been overlooked in the latter field—a lacuna that is now increasingly addressed by sociologists of religion (see, e.g., Poulson and Campbell 2010). These academic divisions have resulted in a disregard of the potential convergences, as well as the situated differences, between Muslims and Christians who co-exist in the same European societies. What is more, they have contributed to distinct analytical frames in the study of these groups, which resonate with the minority/majority divide in public discourses. While Christians have generally been approached as part of the majority secularized cultures of the West, Muslims have commonly been studied as minority groups existing within—and in tension with—these secularized cultures.²

Influenced by the burgeoning anthropologies of Islam and Christianity, recent years have seen a rich and expanding body of ethnographic work on European Muslims and Christians, respectively. This literature often moves beyond the focus on integration or secularization and disrupts, at least in part, the minority/majority framing. Yet similarly to what Brian Larkin (2016: 633) has argued with regard to scholarship situated in Africa, because this work focuses on either Muslims or Christians, it is often written “as if [the other] did not exist in the same polity.” By extension, some of the religious experiences and struggles analyzed in this literature may not be unique to either Muslims or Christians, but more common to the endeavor of pursuing a religious path in particular circumstances (cf. Roy 2004: 26–27).

In my research, I have taken this potential common ground as a point of departure by approaching my Muslim and Christian interlocutors as young people who had grown up in the Netherlands and who navigated the same (urban) landscapes characterized by cultural pluralism and consumer capitalism. These shared conditions constitute the common quality that allows for a productive analysis of these religious subjects in a single comparative framework. I have, more specifically, looked at the ways in which the religious pursuits of my interlocutors related to the social dynamics of moral individualism, value pluralism, fast capitalism, and mass-mediatized popular culture. These were complex relations, which entailed not simply conflict or harmony, but rather a dialectical process resulting in particular and sometimes unexpected religious practices and experiences. Tracing this interconnectedness between religious aspirations and specific socio-historical conditions is a productive way of comparing Muslim and Christian pursuits in a shared setting, without reducing such religious endeavors to the contexts in which they take place—a recurrent criticism of comparative research (see, e.g., Peel 2016: 621).

A basic common feature of my Muslim and Christian interlocutors concerned their attempts at attaining a personal, self-reflective, and committed religious faith, which they often contrasted with what they considered to be the more unreflective religious cultures they had been raised in. For both, the orientation toward a committed religious life was shaped by transnational revivalist movements—Salafism and evangelicalism, respectively—with which they grew familiar during their adolescence. These movements also contributed to a notable difference in the religious engagement of these young Muslims and Christians: while the former strongly emphasized the acquisition of religious knowledge in order to learn about correct Islamic doctrines and practices, the latter put more weight on their personal, emotional relationship with God and their recognition of the importance of Christ’s redemption in their personal lives. These were, however, not absolute differences. Indeed, my Christian interlocutors often emphasized the importance of learning about and reading the Bible. In this regard, several of them criticized the evangelical movement for being too

preoccupied with subjective feelings. Conversely, my Muslim interlocutors' quest for knowledge went together with a desire for spiritual experiences of feeling close to God, especially—but not only—through *salat* (ritual prayer). Some of them also criticized Salafi teachings for being “too rigid.”

Yet in very similar ways, the young Muslims and Christians I worked with struggled to achieve these religious aspirations in a social context that hardly sustains such efforts. In a city like Rotterdam, where I conducted much of my fieldwork, they were constantly confronted with, and lured by, alternative modes of being in—and imagining—the world. At the same time, the incentives of (mediatized) consumer culture and the rhythms of fast capitalism tended to push their engagement with faith to the background of their daily lives (Beekers 2018). All this rendered their religious pursuits unstable and fragile (cf. Jouili 2015: 92). However, for both my Christian and Muslim interlocutors, these challenges and constraints did not merely result in experiences of failure or ambivalence, but also *reinvigorated* their religious commitments.³ The recurrent challenges stimulated them to deliberately make time for, invest in, and nourish their everyday practice of worship, their participation in religious gatherings, and their engagement with sources of religious pedagogy. So while, for example, these young Muslims and Christians felt that their regular consumption of ‘secular’ popular culture and modern media drew them away from God, it also motivated them to self-consciously invest in individual and collective worship practices in order—as it was often expressed by both groups—“to become closer to God” again.

The interplay between the constraint on and reinvigoration of religious pursuits was shaped by these young people's active participation in—rather than withdrawal from—today's predominantly secular and fast-capitalist society. It has struck me that this proximity to the secular world, which found expression in their interests, ambitions, and aspirations, tended to provoke more anxieties among the young Christians than it did among my Muslim interlocutors. These Christians occasionally worried whether they were sufficiently different from their non-Christian peers. This is similar to what Anna Strhan (2015: 169) has described for conservative evangelicals in London, who are at pains to “stake out symbolic moral boundaries of distinctiveness” in relation to prevailing secular norms. That my Muslim interlocutors worried less about their moral distinctiveness with respect to secular culture may be the result not only of visible markers (e.g., the *hijab*) and rituals (especially the *salat*) that more clearly set them apart as religious subjects, but also of the ways in which they were always already positioned as ‘different’ in prevalent discursive frames.

This disparity may explain why these young Muslims appeared to be less vocal than the young Christians about their moral distinctiveness with respect to dominant secular and liberal values (for a more detailed discussion on this point, see Beekers and Schrijvers 2020). Indeed, it has been shown that many

Muslims in Europe are concerned less with emphasizing their moral particularities than with countering prevalent representations of Muslims as ‘other’ (van Es 2016: 302). This points to the impact of the discourses on difference that dominate today’s public debates. Their effect may well be that some of the main dissimilarities between committed young Dutch Muslims and Christians pertain not so much to their everyday practices of religious self-cultivation and the concomitant dynamics of constraint and reinvigoration, as to the ways in which they talk about their beliefs and represent themselves in the wider world.

Acknowledgments

This text was written during a Postdoctoral Research Fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh. I thank David Kloos for valuable feedback and Shawn Kendrick for careful copyediting.

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Notes

1. My fieldwork took place between 2009 and 2012, mainly in Rotterdam, Ede, and The Hague. I conducted participant observation in evangelical and Islamic student associations, churches, mosques, youth organizations, social and outreach activities, and religious conferences and festivals. I also conducted in-depth interviews with 48 Muslim and Christian young adults, comprising equal numbers of men and women.
2. Exceptions include comparative work by Roeland et al. (2010), Yip and Page (2013), DeHanas (2016), Verkaaik (2017), and Dilger et al. (2018), as well as studies of female religious agency that look at both Muslim and Christian women (Bracke 2008; Franks 2001; Nyhagen and Halsaa 2016).

3. This argument builds on recent scholarship that analyzes the ambivalence and multiplicity of everyday religious lives, but also seeks to further it by focusing on the productive potential of self-perceived failure. For an elaboration on this point, see Kloos and Beekers (2018).

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