Producing Authenticity, Difference and Extremism: The Framing of Religious Converts in Dutch and Flemish Newspapers

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the framing of religious converts by Dutch and Flemish newspapers in the period 1991–2017. We focus on the differences and commonalities in ways of talking about religious conversions to Christianity and Islam. Our approach is to probe the 'figure' of the convert: How is the religious convert framed and understood? We present a typology of figures of the religious convert emerging from our material, including the 'authentic seeker', the 'exemplary believer', the 'cultural other', the 'victim', the 'opportunist' and the 'extremist'. This approach allows us to explore how newspapers promote particular notions of conversion, and to show that the framing of religious converts is mediated by religion, gender, race and citizenship.

1 Introduction

What do Bob Dylan, Cat Stevens, George W. Bush, the Dutch singing duo Elly and Rikkert, Jane Fonda, Jejoen Bontinck, Madonna, Jihad Jane and Malcolm x have in common? They have all at one point in their life experienced religious conversion, or are at least perceived as converts by Dutch and Flemish media. Yet the appreciation of these conversions and the extent to which they have been understood as genuine, ridiculous, threatening or opportune, has been very different and depends on the religion and the social position of the convert, something as hard to grasp as *Zeitgeist* and a range of other factors that beg further explanation.

In this article we therefore pose the question: how is religious conversion represented in written media, and what does this tell us about broadly shared understandings of individual religious change? At a time when religious participation in Western Europe is declining yet the public visibility and influence of religions seems to be increasing, newspapers remain a key source of popular information about religion (Knott and Poole 2016). The presence in media of religious conversion provides, we argue, an interesting entrance into discussing notions of religion and individual religious transformation as they are shaped in contemporary public debate.

In this article, we provide insight into the representation of religious conversion in written media. Particularly, we explore discourses on religious conversion in Dutch and Flemish newspapers in the years 1991–2017. Away from a sole focus on a single religious tradition, ours is on the ways of writing about, and presenting, religious conversions to Christianity and Islam. Our approach is tailored to gain insight into how the religious convert is framed and understood, and what notions of religion, gender, race and citizenship play a role in this.

Previous research on recent trends in media representations of religious conversion across Western contexts demonstrates that conversion is not only a religious, but always also a sociopolitical manifestation. Pennarola, for instance, analyses narrative and linguistic aspects of the representation of converts to Christianity and Islam in British newspapers (Pennarola 2019). She identifies a similarity in the representation of Christian and Muslim converts in terms of a focus on the material rather than spiritual benefits of conversion (Pennarola 2019, 87). Nevertheless, in line with other studies about media representation of religion as intersecting with race, ethnicity and migration (King and Wood 2001; Poole 2002; Richardson 2004), Pennarola identifies linguistic strategies underlining negative characteristics associated with Islam, such as traditionalism and women's submission, which result in the representation of Islam as incompatible with British identity. Alternatively, stories on conversion

to Christianity are mostly about refugees and underwrite what are considered to be positive Christian values through their focus on, for example, church officials giving aid to refugees (Pennarola 2019, 87–88).

Other studies about the representation of converts have mainly focused on converts to Islam in British newspapers (Amer and Howarth 2018; Brice 2010; Poole 2002; Sealy 2017). These studies have identified the prominent role afforded to converts in news reports about the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims (Poole 2002, 69–70, 110) and terrorism (Amer and Howarth 2018; Brice 2010, 14; Sealy 2017, 198). Regarding the perceived connection between converts and terrorism, scholars have argued that Muslim converts (Brice 2010) or white Muslim converts specifically (Amer and Howarth 2018) are more often linked to terrorism than other Muslims and are therefore represented as more threatening. Sealy analyses the linkages made between conversion and terrorism in British news reports, for example through the implied "causal chain" in which conversion is often portrayed as a distinct feature of a "path to radicalization" (Sealy 2017, 199). According to Sealy, news reports about converts, and white converts in particular, often emphasise cultural contrasts between British identity and Islam, for example by foregrounding the converts' Christian background and what is considered a "normal" and "caring" upbringing (Sealy 2017, 200). According to Sealy this notion of a cultural threat also occurs in stories about non-white converts in which their conversion figures as a "failure of integration into British life" (Sealy 2017, 200). In studies that primarily focus on the representation of other figures such as female terrorists, conversion is also often mentioned as an explanatory frame (Auer, Sutcliffe and Lee 2018; Brown 2011).

There has also been some attention for the representation of Christian converts, especially in the context of migration. Randell-Moon argues that converted refugees have been represented as a threat in Australian news media because they destabilise essentialised ideas about Australian national identity as white and 'Judeo-Christian' (Randell-Moon 2006). Perreault and Paul (2019) analyse the representation of Syrian refugees in British newspapers, one of them Christian, the other Muslim, and show that conversion to Christianity sometimes leads to a more favourable representation of such refugees in Christian news media. Although the Christian newspaper generally used a "dehumanizing frame" to represent refugees, it was more compassionate when refugees were Christian converts (Perreault and Paul 2019, 292). However, overall, studies about the representation of converts in English-language newspapers have mostly focused on conversion to Islam.

Although there are no previous studies on the representation of converts in Dutch and Flemish news media specifically—and our study fills this gap—

there are numerous studies on the representation of ethnic and/or religious minorities generally and Muslims particularly. These studies show that Muslims are often represented negatively, because they are, for example, associated with stereotypical topics like crime or fundamentalism (Devroe 2007; D'Haenens and Bink 2006; ter Wal, D'Haenens, et al. 2005). While differences between Dutch and Flemish newspapers in terms of the representation of Islam and Muslims are not clear-cut (Mertens 2016), variances may nevertheless exist regarding what is considered 'newsworthy'. However, we suggest that instead of assuming stark differences between the Netherlands and Flanders, what appears to be a more significant indicator of different interests and approaches in the representation of religious converts by Dutch-language newspapers is the binary of secular versus Christian newspapers. This distinction will be further detailed when we discuss our methodological approach.

Overall, existing analyses on religious conversion suggest that the increased attention for conversion points to an instrumentalisation of this phenomenon. In written media, the exploration of conversion is far from neutral, but rather seems to be often a rhetoric means to convey implicit and sometimes explicit messages about the desired role and place of religion, in particular Islam but also Christianity, in modern Western societies. In this article, we aim to investigate the particularities of the representation of religious converts in Dutch-language media, exploring the terminology and rhetoric techniques by which individual converts have been made into intelligible personae. We will do so by distinguishing several available framings through which convert 'figures' emerge. The question we raise is whether the emergence of religious converts in Dutch-language newspapers can be seen as reinforcing, questioning or re-envisioning dominant narratives about religion, race, citizenship and gender. Such an exploration is important because representations in the media contribute to the Dutch and Flemish collective imagination of different religious communities and traditions and the boundaries between them. We will argue and demonstrate that the current written coverage of religious converts simultaneously enables and restricts a variety of convert subjectivities. The article is structured as follows: first, we outline our theoretical and methodological approach in studying the framing of religious converts by Dutch-language newspapers. Second, our analysis of the framing of religious converts, resulting in the exploration of a number of convert figures, will be the main body of the article. Finally, we conclude with an analysis of how the diverse convert figures are valued, and how the religious and sociopolitical position of converts is related to the convert figure they tend to be associated with.

2 Framing Religious Converts in Dutch and Flemish Newspapers

2.1 *Discourse, Frames, Figures*

In our analysis of Dutch-language newspapers, following scholars such as Viswanathan (1997), Özyürek (2015), Gallonier (2015) and Anidjar (2009), we first of all assume that religious conversion is often considered to be a crossing of boundaries that is not only a religious transformation, but also a crossing of sociopolitical divides. As scholar of comparative literature Gauri Viswanathan puts it insightfully, "conversion is primarily an interpretative act, and index of material and social conflicts" (1997, 4). Secondly, we assume that media discourses frame those who become religious and/or change their religious affiliation in various particular ways. We understand Dutch-language news reports as not only mirroring and representing contemporary existing phenomena in society, but also as shaping the way readers think about religious conversion and converts. We understand media discourses thus in a Foucauldian manner as productive of knowledge, experience, positions and sociopolitical relations (Foucault 1990).

As we will demonstrate, knowledge about religious converts is produced by a multitude of discourses, including those pertaining to religion, race, culture, gender, citizenship and security. These categories of knowledge production are always intersecting with and informing one another (see also Auga 2020). Newspaper reporting rarely presents a monolithic frame on religious conversion and converts. Instead, it provides a platform for multiple voices and interests, and thus the articulation of various, and sometimes contesting discourses on religious conversion and converts. Moreover, as we will show, it makes a difference which religious tradition is embraced by the convert, as differentiating discourses stick to various religious traditions. Additionally, converts' sociopolitical positions in terms of gender, race and citizenship make a difference in the way they are spoken about and/or spoken to. We thus posit that exploring media discourses reveals the context in which, and sometimes against which, religious and sociopolitical differences are being made and negotiated.

In newspaper reporting, converts are generally more often spoken about than engaged with in a dialogue. This leaves us often unable to retrieve the motives and desires of individual converts and make them part of the analysis. Viswanathan (1997) reflects on the limits of text-based analysis through the problem of the self-representation of converts as they appear in colonial legal and literary texts. In the context of the British Empire and the British nation-state, in both British historical and legal records and English novels, converts are the ground rather than the subject or even object on which questions of rights, inclusion and exclusion are worked out (Viswanathan 1997, 18–19). In

a similar vein, we suggest that in Dutch-language media discourse, converts are the ground on which questions of religion, citizenship, race and gender are articulated and regulated. While there are moments in which converts speak for themselves, often an "account of their own spiritual and material needs is virtually refined out of existence, rendering their religious identity hollow and insubstantial." (Viswanathan 1997, 18)

We draw on the notion of framing to explore the frames often invoked in reporting on religious converts. Frames enable readers to see and recognise religious converts, who are thus made intelligible. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler conceptualises intelligibility as "the general historical schema or schemas that establish domains of the knowable" (2009, 6). Butler theorises frames as conveying, containing and determining what is seen—and therefore, also what is not seen, or not recognised (2009, 8–10). Frames moreover depend on the conditions of reproducibility, which means they need to be repeated, but in this repetition lies both its efficacy and its vulnerability. Frames are performed, and are thus vulnerable to "breaking apart", reversal and subversion (2009, 10–12). In our study, we found moments of subversion when different framings in reporting on religious converts are pitted against one another, as such contesting one another.

As conversion, according to scholar of comparative literature and religion Gil Anidjar, can be considered not only a turn, but also a trope and a figure (2009, 2), we analyse the framing of religious converts in terms of six main figures that emerged from our newspaper samples. We thus introduce the notion of the convert as a figure to explore how converts function as archetypical characters in media narratives of conversion. These convert figures, which can be valued more positively or more negatively, are involved in producing and shaping knowledge about religious conversion and converts.

2.2   *Methodology*

For our study, we initially set out to explore representations of conversion to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We have used the digital media archives of Nexis Uni (the Netherlands) and Go Press (Belgium). These data sets include a wide range of daily newspapers, both national and local, in the Netherlands and Flanders, as well as a (much smaller) selection of magazines. Using broad search terms such as 'conversion and Islam', we retrieved all articles related to conversion to the tradition of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the time frame of 1991, which is the starting date of the Nexis Uni archive, to July 2017. After removing double and irrelevant articles[1], our data set consisted of 766 newspa-

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1   It is noteworthy that the Dutch term for conversion, '*bekering*' is often used metaphori-

per articles in total. We first conducted a close reading of a blind sample of 100 articles. Based on the recurring patterns that we detected in this phase of close reading, we formulated an archetypical description of types of converts. This step in our method was informed by the formulation of patterns as 'scripts' in research by Van den Berg and Marinus (2017) on the representation of trans people in the media. We refer to these recurring scripts as 'convert figures' and distinguish six such figures: that of the *authentic seeker* who seeks religion for intrinsic reasons, the *exemplary convert* who is a model to born believers, the *cultural other* whose conversion is ascribed more to a cultural shift than a religious one, the *victim* who was tricked into conversion against their will, the *opportunist* who converts for personal gain, and the *extremist* whose strict religious observance is potentially harmful. As said, these are archetypical figures, that is, exaggerations of recurring trends, which do not necessarily appear 'literally' in the newspaper articles. Moreover, already in this stage we noted that several figures may appear in one and the same newspaper article. We then labelled all articles, noting factual information: country, medium, date, author, title, the religion to which those discussed in the article turn, and the gender[2] of the convert(s) mentioned. Moreover, regarding the medium we made a distinction between Christian and secular media, because we wanted to be able to indicate whether in our sample, as previously researched (Perreault and Paul 2019), Christian media reports differently on converts to Christianity (and Islam) than does secular media.[3] Next, we noted the most important themes of the article (with a maximum of two), and the convert figures appear-

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cally rather than descriptive. Articles which exclusively used the term metaphorically were removed from the data set, since our initial goal was to explore the ways in which Jewish, Christian and Muslim converts appear in Dutch and Flemish written media.

2   We have registered whether the articles relate to men, women, or do not comment on gender identity at all. We acknowledge that this bears the risk of reaffirming a male-female binary that does not do justice to the fluidity of gender and the wide range of possible gender identities, including gender queer or non-binary identities. However, in our material we found this binary firmly in place, and as is shown from our analysis, male and female converts are sometimes addressed in significantly differing ways, which is of importance for our analysis: gender is used as one of the categories through which to understand conversion.

3   As Christian media we have selected *Trouw* (a daily newspaper with the largest readership of the three and a mainstream Christian profile), *Nederlands Dagblad* (a Reformed daily newspaper with also a considerable Roman Catholic readership), and *Reformatorisch Dagblad* (directed toward an orthodox protestant readership). All of these are daily newspapers from the Netherlands. In our Belgian sample, no Christian media were included since there are no Christian daily newspapers, while *Tertio*, the most important Roman Catholic weekly magazine, is not available on GoPress. Neither NexisUni nor GoPress give access to Muslim or Jewish media.

ing in the article (with a maximum of the two most prominent figures), as well as some exemplary quotes. Finally, we noted whether converts are talked with, or about. We then performed a first, overall analysis of our data-set. Questions we asked were: which convert figures are prominent, and is there a change over time? Is there a relation between a given convert figure and conversion to a certain religion? Are there differences between the occurrence of certain figures in secular and Christian media? Do women, men, or both, figure prominently in each convert figure? Second, based on recurring themes, we fleshed out our initial archetypical description of convert figures, paying attention to the ways in which different notions of religion, gender, race and national identity/belonging constitute the different figures. Additionally, we were interested in the agency ascribed to converts through the different figures.

During this phase, we found that the number of articles related to conversion to Judaism, unfortunately, were insufficient in number to include in our detailed analysis of convert figures. In what follows, we include statistical information about articles referring to Judaism. The investigation of the convert figures, however, will focus only on Christian and Muslims converts.

3   Convert Figures: From Authentic Seekers to Extremists

We start here with a brief discussion of general trends we observed in our data. From the 766 articles in total, 38% referred to Christian converts, 54% to Muslim converts, and 8% to Jewish converts. As the time frame covered by our material spans 27 years it is impossible to give an overview of all possible developments regarding religion in the Netherlands and Flanders and how that may have influenced the writing on conversion. This, however, is not our goal, and in fact, we work the other way around: we start by observing the emergence of convert figures as archetypes and from there investigate prominent ways of framing religion. It *is* possible to observe a general interest in conversion between 1991 and 2017, with peaks in 2004, 2010 and 2014. These peaks are caused by an increased interest in conversion to Islam, demonstrated for instance in reporting on the conversion (which actually happened already in 1978) of Yusuf Islam/Cat Stevens at the occasion of his return to performing as a pop artist and receiving the *Man for Peace Prize* in 2004, concerns over terrorist attacks in the Netherlands and Belgium in 2010, and concerns over Dutch and Flemish fighters in Syria in 2014.

The distinguished convert figures are distributed quite evenly over the data set, with that of the cultural other (appearing in 34% of the articles) and the
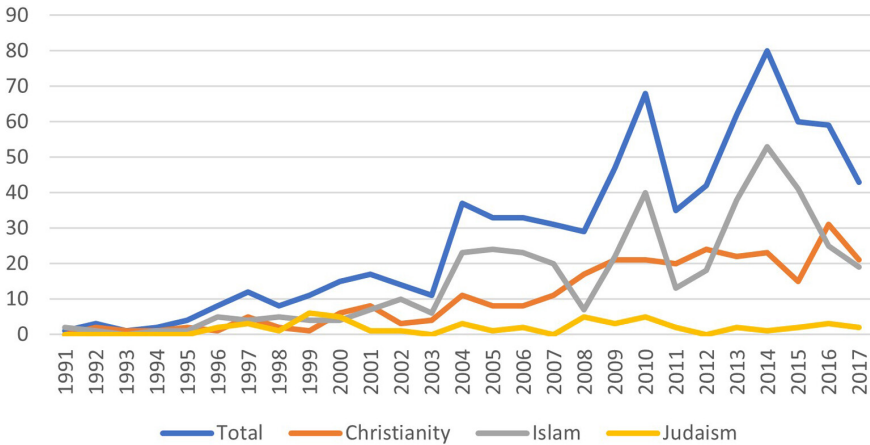
FIGURE 1   Reporting on conversion in Dutch and Flemish media, 1991–2017

exemplary convert (appearing in 34% of the articles) a bit more prominent than that of the authentic seeker (23%), the extremist (25%), the opportunist (24%) and the victim (24%). When zooming in on Christianity and Islam specifically, as can be seen in figure 2 and figure 3, it becomes clear that different figures are prominent in the descriptions of different religious converts. While in reporting on Christian converts the figures of the exemplary convert and the opportunist are most prominent, for Islam these are the figures of the extremist and the cultural other.

Finally, a difference to note is the reporting in secular and Christian media. In our data set, 33% of the newspaper articles comes from Christian media, and 67% from secular media. Within Christian media, much more attention is paid to conversion to Christianity (79%) than to Islam (13%) and Judaism (9%). In secular press, conversion to Islam is discussed much more often (74%) than is conversion to Christianity (20%) or to Judaism (6%). This indicates that conversion to Islam is largely a secular fascination, while conversion to Christianity predominantly interests Christian journalists and readers. In what follows, we discuss the six convert figures that emerged from the analysis of our material in detail.

3.1   *The Authentic Seeker*

Authentic seekers, as the term indicates, articulate their conversion as the authentic outcome of a genuine search for deeper meaning and truth. Striking is that the authentic seeker is much more often talked with (67%) than about (33%), which indicates that this figure is created often—far more often than any other figure—in dialogue with individual converts. In the case of Christian
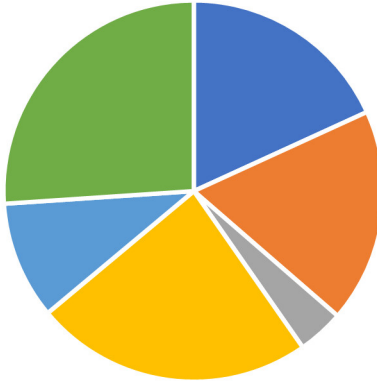
FIGURE 2   Distribution convert figures in reporting on new Christians

FIGURE 3   Distribution convert figures in reporting on new Muslims

converts, the authentic seeker is more often male (41%) than female (14%), in the case of Muslim converts, this figure is distributed more equally among men and women.

3.1.1   Christianity

> My conversion was the result of an intense, inner experience. A mystical experience, if you like. Many people have experienced something like that, but I have never read an adequate description. It was suddenly there, a clear insight.
>
> Convert MIKHAIL KATSNELSON, quoted in ELMA DRAYER, 14 April 2015, Trouw

When the figure of the authentic seeker converted to Christianity, a particular denomination is often mentioned or implied and is of importance for how authenticity is narrated. When people convert to Evangelical or Reformed Christianity, the emphasis is on finding truth: the truth of the Bible, of Jesus Christ being the Son of God and one's saviour. Conversion to Evangelical Christianity is often framed as resulting from an intervention by God, who speaks to people directly, or indirectly through friends or a Bible verse. The Bible is one of the most important instruments of conversion, it will sometimes (for instance) miraculously appear where it should not be, or a specific verse will speak to a person in an unexpected way. A clear signal of a true conversion is a drive to evangelise. Many of the converts in this group are either formerly Muslim citizens, or have recently arrived in the Netherlands and Belgium as refugees from a Muslim majority country.

When people convert to Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, or Christianity outside of a denomination, frequently used terms belong to a 'spirituality' framework: soul, peace, spirit, quest. Converts got interested in Christianity through its aesthetics: art, music, a beautiful chapel. Their new religion is not so much about a truth they now accept, but about experiences they now have. They describe their religiosity in terms of mystique and inspiration, being healed, surrendering to God. They often state that they are at a loss for words and are reluctant to describe the experience of conversion in detail—the above quote is a good illustration of this. They are open to the possibility of multiple religious belonging or syncretism, and state that their conversion may not be their final destination. Sometimes, they came to Christianity via 'trying out' other religions and philosophies.

3.1.2 Islam

> Mabrouka was 14 when she first became interested in Islam. "It is a part of
> me. But I also started to read about other religions. You need to know what
> else is out there, before you can choose what fits best." Islam appeared to
> be the most attractive.
>
> Convert MABROUKA, quoted in SHEILA KAMERMAN, 2 February 2010, NRC

A recurring feature in interviews with Muslim converts is a strong emphasis
on reading and study. Often, converts explain that their interest in Islam is the
result of a broader search for meaning and truth, which is why they did research
on several religious traditions. After weighing the arguments of each, Islam sur-
faced as the true religion. The reading is not restricted to the Qur'an, but also
(or even primarily) to secondary literature. The Qur'an therefore does not func-
tion, as in the discourses of Evangelical converts, as a direct intervention from
God that is miraculously placed on their laps, but as a source they have come
to know gradually. Often, this period of study is conducted individually and
Muslim converts talk about their conversion as a steady process.

Muslim and Christian converts both come across as quite agentic: they often
get a fair amount of 'speaking time', which allows them to disclose their con-
version in ways which are to be expected to be convincing to modern Western
readers, namely by referring to authentic experiences and rational choices.

3.2 *The Exemplary Convert*

The figure of the exemplary convert is evoked to describe converts who, by
virtue of their conversion, have become better believers than born Christians
and Muslims and, in some cases, also model citizens to secular citizens. Exem-
plary converts are just about as often Christian converts (47%) as they are
Muslim converts (44%). Likewise, exemplary converts are just about equally
talked with (46%) as they are talked about (54%), and when gender is speci-
fied, exemplary converts tend to be more often men (55%) than women (21%).

3.2.1 Christianity

> Just like Zacchaeus was called down from his tree and was put on a new
> track, Charles Colson founded the organisation Prison Fellowship Min-
> istries, to bring the Gospel to inmates. [...] Colson, who died on April 21,
> was not merely interested in conversion, but also in the Christian life that
> was to follow, on the level of the individual and that of society.
>
> HARINCK, 14 June 2008, Nederlands Dagblad

Among Christian converts, 'exemplary' takes different forms, depending on where the convert came from in terms of social status, ethnicity and previous convictions. Within Evangelical discourse famous exemplary converts, such as Billy Graham and George Bush, are those who were already Christians 'in name', but have then "radically accepted Jesus into their hearts" and become *real* Christians. Most exemplary new Christians, however, can be recognised by their strong commitment to their new faith in the sight of adversity. Converts from non-Western countries are often portrayed as modern martyrs who are or who would be willing to face violence, exclusion and the death penalty for their convictions. Exemplary Christian converts are characterised by a devoted lifestyle and strong commitment to their new community, for instance in steady attendance of Bible study groups. Sometimes they will become 'bridge builders' between cultural contexts. Exemplary new Christians often make a career switch (which may very well be why they were interviewed in the first place). Once they were (for instance) successful business people, but now they have become 'professional Christians' who work for mission oriented organisations, sometimes they even founded these organisations themselves.

3.2.2   Islam

> I am a peaceful man and I denounce any form of terrorism or injustice. It is a disgrace that the American authorities suggest otherwise. I have dedicated my life to promoting peace around the world. It would be devastating if the charity of my humanitarian aid organisation, Small Kindness, which helps numerous children and families […] suffers from what is happening.
> YUSUF/CAT STEVENS, quoted in De Standaard, 4 October 2004

A common theme in the framing of exemplary Muslim converts is that of the move from petty criminal to virtuous civilian. Finding Islam will lead to a new life within (and not on the margins of) Western society. Like with Christian converts, exemplary Muslim converts often become a 'professional Muslim' (and, again, may be interviewed or noticed for that reason). They have become a spokesperson or lecturer, or found an organisation, for instance for converts, Muslim women, or young Muslims. These converts, too, are 'bridge builders', aiming for vulnerable youth and keeping them away from religious extremism or poverty. Characteristic of exemplary converts to Islam, especially in the case of male converts, is that they are being portrayed as being against extremism and radicalisation, condemning violence and terrorism. Yusuf/Cat Stevens, often quoted as denouncing Islamic violence, is a case in point. A difference

should be made between the exemplary convert from the perspective of the journalist, and from the perspective of Islam. Sometimes these conflate, sometimes they do not. From the perspective of the journalist, 'exemplary' seems to mean "harmless, socially engaged, timid". From the perspective of converts, as inferred from interviews, it rather means: following the five pillars, deepening faith, becoming a better Muslim in general.

The exemplary convert, whether Christian or Muslim, is portrayed as a convert with quite some agency: this is a figure who can make a change where religion is expected to be a problem, or who is an entrepreneur, energised by religion to found, build, and expand an organisation that will benefit not only believers, but society at large.

3.3   *The Cultural Other*

A basic notion in the construction of the figure of the cultural other is an understanding of conversion as not only a transformation in the domain of faith, but equally a transformation in terms of identity, family and community, and values and norms. But while exemplary believers are often considered ideal 'bridge builders', cultural others are assumed to not be able to bridge different worlds. The cultural other is usually a convert to Islam (59%) and tend to be more often men (47%) than women (27%). Both Christian and Muslim cultural others are almost equally talked about than talked with.

3.3.1   Christianity

> And when you find out you are the only Christian at your work, will you then be open about it? Or will you withdraw, are you ashamed, and will you become a submarine Christian?
>
> MACHTELD MEERKERK, 23 February 2015, Nederlands Dagblad

The religious background of the Christian cultural other is regularly explicitly mentioned: they often used to be Muslim. There is a concern with the (real or imagined) resistance or sensitivity of family members or the social environment broadly regarding the conversion. Negative responses from Muslim environments are predominantly explained by an assumed intrinsic hostility towards Christianity. Converts with Muslim backgrounds are often Iranian refugees/asylum seekers. There are also converts to Christianity whose religious background is not mentioned. They are presented as having to negotiate negative responses to their conversion in the social settings they are part of, including colleagues in science, literary criticism, and artistic professions. Saturated as these domains presumably are by secular values and expec-

tations, it may reasonable to suggest that these converts moved from what might be considered a secular worldview and life style to what is presumed a Christian one. Negative responses thus assume that becoming Christian cannot be combined with the domains of rational thought and creative expression, to which science, literature and arts belong. The above quote raises the question as to how such responses should be dealt with by individual converts.

The agency of the Christian cultural other is shaped by their liminal position. The cultural other has either a Muslim background and is materially and socially excluded from their family or former community, or has a secular background and is now discursively excluded from rationality and creativity. Stories regularly focus on well-known public figures who became Christians, such as the author and poet Willem Jan Otten.

3.3.2   Islam

> Much more difficult were the responses of my own family and friends. What struck me was that I was not considered someone who converted to a specific faith but a renegade, from now on part of the migrant community.
>
> Interview with convert OMAR LUC VAN DEN BROECK by KOEN VIDAL, 18 March 2002, De Morgen

The subject position of the Muslim cultural other is implicitly or explicitly inhabited by white converts. They have to negotiate responses from family members, friends, colleagues and journalists who assume that white converts need to create an impossible bridge between different worlds. Female converts have to deal with additional negative stereotypes about Muslim women, often condensed in perceptions on the veil. Male converts also sometimes encounter negative reactions regarding their beard or clothing. Cultural differences are often emphasised, sometimes explicitly ('between cultures'), but more often implicitly by drawing attention to changing sartorial and food practices. Terminology such as 'blue eyes', 'cheese head' (*kaaskop*) and 'foreigner' are regularly used to describe these converts. Such language reveals the connections between religion and race: Islam is associated with people of colour, who are from 'elsewhere', while Christianity and secularity are associated with whiteness, people from 'here'. White converts thus call for racialising responses, while converts of colour escape such racialised scrutiny. References to Vroon-Najem's PhD research (2014) also emerge from media reports, which introduces the same terminology, albeit from a critical perspective.

The Muslim cultural other's agency is considered bound to liminality shaped by the culturalised and racialised boundaries of different worlds. White converts are sometimes explicitly accused of the crime of betrayal and defection. Sometimes, stories point at the difficulty of Muslims to include converts in their communities, which strengthens the convert's liminal position.

3.4   *The Victim*

While the figures of the authentic seeker and the exemplary believer are endowed with ample agency in terms of a capacity for making positive change in the world, the agency of the figure of the cultural other is severely restrained by the construction of a liminal position. The figures discussed so far are thus considered agentic to various extents. In contrast, the figure of the victim is assumed to lack any capacity for autonomous action or decision making.

The victim emerges when the convert is repressed and victimised by others; and/or when the conversion itself is presumably the result of the convert's conformation to mechanisms outside of her/his control. The convert's desires and choices are completely determined by others. The figure of the victim is usually a convert to Islam (63%) and gender is most often not specified (41%). Both Christian and Muslim victims are predominantly talked about instead of talked with, which is especially so for Muslim victims.

3.4.1   Christianity

> The majority of the Iranian asylum seekers, about 800 per year, are immediately sent out on the streets. There they meet Christian evangelists, who offer food and help. […] The behaviour of desperate asylum seekers […] is hard to predict.
>
> Editorial, 10 November 2000, Trouw

Christian victims are regularly refugees/asylum seekers with Muslim backgrounds. Christian victims lack a capacity to act, because they suffer from violence, persecution, aggression and danger often from the part of non-Western states or regimes. Agentic and repressive actors in these stories are alternately 'the sharia', 'the Islam', 'the Muslims' or the convert's social environment. Iran is often mentioned as a (real or imagined) repressive regime, but also other Muslim majority countries are referred to. The victim has little voice of her/his own, because other authorities decide about her/his fate, such as the Dutch immigration service. Due to this weak position, others raise their voices on their behalf, such as Christian Union (*ChristenUnie*) politicians, Protestant church

and administration officials, and refugee organisations. Sometimes, converts are referred to as passive, as if they did not themselves decide actively about their conversion. This means that the conversion is narrated as forced, and the convert is represented as 'convinced', 'manipulated' or 'indoctrinated', thus as having been converted by others.

3.4.2   Islam

> "I feel connection with people of the same age with a Moroccan background because they are Islamic too", says the social worker laughing. And no, she did not have a Moroccan boyfriend who persuaded her. "That is the prejudice you always hear."
>
> <div align="right">EVELIEN, quoted in FRANK HERMANS, 16 November 2006, De Gelderlander</div>

The former religious background of the Muslim victim is seldom mentioned. Regarding female converts, the (presumed) role and influence of Muslim boyfriends or husbands is regularly referred to. This is only sometimes the case for male converts. When interviewed, female converts often refute this assumption. Muslim victims are considered to have no autonomous capacity to act. Individuals' conversion is regularly explained by emphasising (presumably) emotional, psychological or relational/familial problems and/or a (presumably) unstable and weak character. In such stories, the convert is typically considered to feel attracted to Islam as a possible solution to problems and a starting point for a new life. Sometimes it is assumed that misery and weakness made the convert impressionable and without a defence against manipulation or indoctrination. The latter is often said about 'radicalised' converts. Phrases such as "in the throes of" or "under the spell of" extremism, Salafism or fundamentalism are regularly used. The Muslim victim thus has become a mere tool used by others for their own benefits. An actor often blamed for the conversion/radicalisation of others is the group Sharia4Belgium with spokesperson Fouad Belkacem. Sometimes Islam itself is presented as an actor capturing and converting non-Muslims. Unsurprisingly, the victim is often simultaneously framed as an extremist. Several times, victims are reported to have travelled to Syria, including the well-known convert Jejoen Bontinck.

3.5   *The Opportunist*

The figure of the opportunist does not live up to the expectations of a sincere and authentic conversion, because they are presumably driven by other motives than the intrinsic value of religion or spirituality. The opportunist is only slightly more present among Christians (48%) than Muslims (41%) and is

usually male (43%) or ungendered (36%), rather than female (20%). Opportunists are far more often talked about (82%) than talked to (18%).

3.5.1   Christianity

> It once happened that even after a long process of education we had to say: we are sorry, but we miss something. What that 'something' is, is hard to put into words.
>
> Minister MARCO BUITENHUIS, quoted in GERRIT-JAN KLEINJAN, 3 July 2014, *Trouw*

For the Christian opportunist, conversion is usually a means of gaining certain benefits or privileges. A dominant theme is that of refugees who are assumed to feign conversion in order to obtain a residence permit. News reports often stage authorities such as the Dutch immigration service, scholars, missionary organisations and ministers to debate the sincerity of their conversions. These authorities generally have different stakes in the debate and have different expectations of a sincere conversion, which may for example be judged on the basis of factual knowledge, a coherent conversion narrative or "something" that is "hard to put into words", as the above quote shows. Refugees are often collectively portrayed as opportunists by default, for whom conversion to Christianity is only one possible strategy to obtain a residence permit. News reports on other topics also focus on individual opportunist figures like the politicians Donald Trump and Desi Bouterse, whose conversions are questioned because their politics do not align with their presumed convictions, or convicted felons who are assumed to have converted in order to influence their prison sentence or to escape death row.

Christian opportunists are considered to have agency in their potential ability to use conversion for their own benefit. Nevertheless, they simultaneously often depend on authorities who have the power to provide or deny converts access to religious and national communities and the benefits they might provide. The religious, social and gendered identities of converts as well as the denomination they convert to largely determine the expectations surrounding their conversion, and their ability to freely cross religious and sometimes also national boundaries. For example, while converted refugees are subjected to a burden of proof by churches and nation states, more privileged Christian opportunistic converts such as politicians are not. The citizenship and social standing of the convert thus determines the manner and the extent to which the motivations and behaviours of converts are interrogated.

3.5.2   Islam

> Lesley knew important and special dates from the top of her head, but in her heart she was not a Muslima. She just felt she got attention that way.
>
> Lesley Deckers' friend WENDY, quoted in SASKIA CASTELYNS, 13 August 2009, Gazet van Antwerpen

Conversion to Islam also affords benefits and privileges such as access to Mecca or a marriage, but it is less often associated with a rise in social status or political power. Marriage is often presented as a dominant opportunistic motive for conversion, which is nevertheless challenged in interviews with female converts, who feel that their motivations for conversion are often misattributed to the influence of their male partners. Besides ulterior motives, Muslim converts are sometimes framed as at best inconsistent and at worst suspect when their conversion is discussed in direct or indirect relation to for example drinking, smoking, or involvement in criminality. An example is the Belgian convert Lesley Deckers who became well-known for her involvement in facilitating a prison escape, or the right-wing politician Arnoud van Doorn, whose conversion to Islam is repeatedly discussed in proximity to his past criminal activities.

In general, Islam is often portrayed as relatively easily accessible and the agency of the Muslim opportunist is not necessarily represented as limited by religious or other authorities. The dominant focus on marriage, criminality and other unexpected behaviour suggests that the motivations and behaviours of Muslim converts are nevertheless under close scrutiny in the media, especially in the case of female Muslim converts.

3.6   *The Extremist*

The conversion of the figure of the extremist is a radical and sudden turn to a conservative form of religion that is characterised by strict rules and beliefs. The framing of extremists seems close to that of the exemplary convert in terms of devotion, but extremists are understood to have taken their religious observance so far as to be shocking and potentially harmful. The figure of the extremist usually refers to a convert to Islam (90%) and is dominantly male (64%). Muslim extremist converts are far more often talked about (83%) than talked to (17%), while Christian extremists are evenly often talked about (50%) and talked to (50%).

3.6.1 Christianity

> The determination with which Ruitenberg proclaims his views does not leave any room for other opinions. Even more so, according to him there are no other truths.
>
> HENK STOUWDAM, 7 April 2004, NRC

News reports about Christian extremists almost exclusively focus on well-known public figures, such as the Dutch ice-skater René Ruitenberg or the Dutch singing couple Elly and Rikkert. In in-depth interviews, these converts get to speak elaborately about their radical life transformations and changed beliefs. Some extremist converts are politicians like George W. Bush and Scott Lively, whose conversions are linked to conservative politics with regard to abortion and LGBTIQ-rights. In some cases it is mentioned that extremist converts also formerly had a Christian background. The Christian extremist is portrayed as a figure with much agency whose conversion is an individualistic and autonomous transformation. An extremist turn to Christianity can entail a change in lifestyle, such as keeping Sunday rest or leaving behind an alcohol or drug addiction, but mainly manifests itself in a turn to conservative beliefs or politics which may be used to exclude others.

3.6.2 Islam

> In two years' time he changed from a promising soccer-player and outspoken Catholic to an Islamic jihad warrior. Brian became Ibrahim. He exchanged the FC Barcelona t-shirts of Lionel Messi for the costume of the prophet Muhammed.
>
> PIETER STOCKMANS and MONTASSER ALDE'EMEH, 19 March 2014, Knack

Muslim extremists can be well-known individuals who took a radical turn in their lives, such as the singer Yusuf Islam. More often, the stories focus on individuals who attained a celebrity status because they got involved in terrorism as so-called "ordinary" citizens. Elaborate stories about young extremist converts like Brian De Mulder or Lesley Deckers often stage family members, neighbours, friends and co-workers as authoritative interpreters of the convert's life and the changes they went through. In stories about such extremist converts, their conversion is presented as a radical break with their past, which is presented as troubled, or on the contrary as "ordinary" or "promising." Presumed cultural contrasts between the convert's Dutch or Belgian national identity and Islam are sometimes foregrounded, and in a few cases a former Christian back-

ground is explicitly mentioned. Besides a turn to conservative beliefs, extremist conversions are usually portrayed as combined with material transformations in terms of physical appearance, such as clothing or a beard, or the adoption of ritual practices. Family members often speak about the disruptive influence of the extremist convert on the family environment, for example with regard to food practices or watching television. There is sometimes a potential threat of violence in stories about Muslim extremists and in some cases the conversions of Muslim extremists are narrated as leading up to a decision to fight in Syria or involvement in terrorism.

The Muslim extremist is generally represented as a figure with too much agency, as they radically and overzealously dedicate themselves to a new religion and even take it so far that they might become harmful to their environment. In some cases, the agency of Muslim extremists is nevertheless questioned, as they are often simultaneously framed as victims who have been "brainwashed" by their partner, friends, or groups like Sharia4Belgium. Whereas Muslim male extremists are often framed in proximity to cultural others who stand out from their environment due to their physical appearance or radical beliefs, female Muslim extremists are more often framed as victims whose conversions are portrayed as influenced by male Muslim partners.

4   Final Reflections

In our above typology of convert figures, we uncovered some of the recurring and differentiating patterns in media discourses on religious conversion. In this section we take the next step, providing an analysis of how the different convert figures are valued, and how the converts' religious and sociopolitical position influences the convert figure they tend to be associated with.

First, we suggest that the order in which we presented the six convert figures reflects a continuum of 'good' and 'bad' conversions, revealing a difference in the kinds of religious conversions that are generally valued in a more positive or a more negative way. Figure 4 shows what this continuum looks like.

Underlying the convert figures and their placement on the continuum, we suggest, is a set of (post-)modern values that enables and simultaneously restricts the telling of stories about conversion in secularised societies like the Netherlands and Flanders. By this we mean that converts, by turning to religion, undergo a transformation that in light of ongoing social secularisation (and its persistent public narrative), for many will be experienced as counter-intuitive. In order for religious conversion to be intelligible, its framing thus needs to pertain to shared social values. Conversions, then, tend to be valued positively
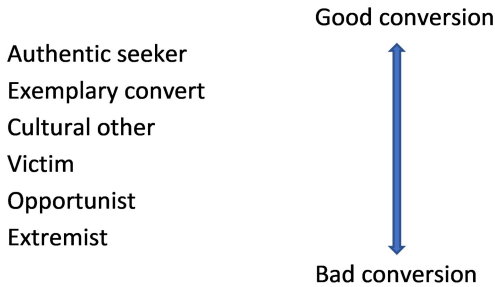
Good conversion

Authentic seeker
Exemplary convert
Cultural other
Victim
Opportunist
Extremist

FIGURE 4
Continuum of good and bad conver-
sions

Bad conversion

when their framings tie in with notions of authenticity, free will and modera-
tion. They tend to be valued negatively when their framings tie in with notions
such as inauthenticity, coercion, and exaggeration. Finally, the construction of
the continuum of 'good' and 'bad' converts is accomplished by the differenti-
ated allocation of agency. Our discussion of six convert figures reveals that the
representation of a lack of agency in the case of the victim and to a lesser extent
that of the cultural other is central to assigning the convert a position of oppres-
sion or liminality. In contrast, the expectation of ample agency in the case of
the extremist and the authentic seeker enables positioning converts as either
unacceptable or desired.

Second, we explore how the religious and sociopolitical position of converts
influences where they tend to be placed on the continuum of good and bad
conversion. Which figures or positionalities are accessible to whom? First, our
analysis of the general data demonstrates that what matters in the discursive
construction of the convert figures is the religious tradition embraced by the
convert: conversion to a majority religious tradition is evaluated in a different
manner than conversion to minority religious traditions, such as Islam. This
becomes clear when we outline which figures are most prominent in relation
to Christianity and Islam, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 in fact presents us with a complex picture. Regarding conversion
to Christianity, the most prominent figure emerging from our data is a pos-
itive one (exemplary convert), while the least common figure is a negative
one (extremist). The second most common figure, however, is a negative one
(opportunist), while the most valued figure according to the continuum, the
authentic seeker, only comes third. In the case of Islam, it is striking that
the most negative figure, the extremist, is most prominent. The figure of the
opportunist, however, who is also perceived negatively, comes last. Overall,
based on the prominence of the various figures, conversion to Christianity
seems to be more often valued positively than conversion to Islam. This can
be argued more strongly when we look at the reasons why the figures of the
extremist and the opportunist are portrayed as particularly negative charac-

TABLE 1   Prominence of convert figures distinguished by religion

Continuum	Christianity	Islam
Authentic seeker	Exemplary convert	Extremist
Exemplary convert	Opportunist	Cultural other
Cultural other	Authentic seeker	Exemplary convert
Victim	Cultural other	Victim
Opportunist	Victim	Authentic seeker
Extremist	Extremist	Opportunist

ters. While the extremist (most prominent in the discourse on conversion to Islam) is portrayed as exaggerating and potentially violent *because of religion* (Islam), the opportunist is presented as aspiring for *something else* than religion (Christianity). The virtue of Christianity is not questioned by the framing of the opportunist (on the contrary, the opportunist confirms that Christianity is something to aspire to), while the extremist does confirm a negative image of Islam.

Additionally, converts' sociopolitical positions in terms of gender, race and citizenship partly explain the ways in which they are spoken about and/or spoken to. Men tend to dominate all convert figures, except that of the victim, where women become equally prominent. This reinforces the idea of religion as necessarily oppressive to women, and prevents women from appearing as active agents or seekers in media discourses on conversion. Next, the religious or secular background, racial positionality or social status of converts to Christianity is regularly not mentioned. Christian converts' backgrounds and status are indeed made explicit when they used to be Muslim, and/or when they are refugees or asylum-seekers. A belonging to the white and secular(ised) majority of citizens is, on the contrary, not mentioned. This is the case, for example, for Christian converts who are represented as spiritual seekers, on the path of an authentic search for meaning in life. This, we suggest, points at whiteness and secularity as invisible normative positions. Thus, the fact that authentic seekers often have no background considered worth mentioning points to their privileged positionality: the authentic seeker as a category of knowledge production inhabited predominantly by white, secular(ised), middle class male citizens. In contrast, a refugee convert to Christianity is assessed in terms of authenticity and credibility, as s/he becomes framed as a potential opportunist, converting for material instead of spiritual reasons. And in the case of conversion to Islam, the majority belonging of the convert *is* underlined, but this belonging is imme-

diately questioned: the white secular/Christian convert to Islam often evokes explicit racialising responses and fear of victimization and radicalisation.

These observations in fact allude to two major fault lines emerging from our material, namely the assumed irreconcilability of 'true' (non-opportunistic) conversion to Christianity for refugeed individuals with a Muslim background, and the assumed unintelligibility of the conversion of white and secular/Christian citizens to Islam. The discursive construction of various convert figures can be understood, we suggest, as a way of negotiating and policing these fault lines. However, it should be emphasised that the frames producing these figures are not static: moments of subversion can be found when different framings in reporting on religious converts are pitted against one another, as such contesting one another. This happens, for example, when different authoritative voices speak about refugees who converted to Christianity, such as the Dutch immigration and naturalisation service and Protestant church officials, contesting one another in their assessment of the credibility and authenticity of an individual refugee's conversion. Sometimes, journalists' expectations are disrupted by converts' own voices, such as when female converts to Islam laugh away the assumption of them being lured into Islam by Muslim men. In this way, female converts question the frame that positions them as victims.

We conclude with a comment on the reach of our analysis. We hope that our typology, while obviously reducing complicated and layered stories to exaggerated 'figures' of conversion, clarifies some of the gendered and racialised tendencies of media coverage on religion in the Netherlands and Flanders. We are aware, however, of the limitations of our project. The research design allows us to explore how converts are framed, and to some extent, how they themselves speak within written media. It does not allow, however, for an investigation of the complicated ways in which individuals negotiate media discourses, as such acquiring convert subjectivities in complex ways. This would require a whole new study, which we hope will be conducted in the near future.

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