

*Women
Embracing
Islam*

GENDER AND CONVERSION IN THE WEST

Edited by Karin van Nieuwkerk

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Gender and Conversion to Islam in the West

Karin van Nieuwkerk

Conversion to Islam by women in the West may evoke a range of sensitive issues. Crossing religious and ethnic boundaries generally disturbs conventions and can engender hostility. Female conversions may raise even stronger reactions because traditions have often constructed women as symbols of ethnic and religious boundaries. Female conversion to Islam summons up particularly fierce battles because gender issues have been pivotal in the construction of Otherness between “Islam” and the “West.” Female converts are thus regularly treated with hostility. A Dutch convert said, “People stare at you because they see that you are white. Maybe that is the cause of the aggression; you are a traitor to the race.” By some Muslims, however, conversion by Western women is proclaimed and promoted. “Despite all the negative propaganda regarding Muslim women, female converts to Islam outnumber their male counterparts by an estimated ratio of 4:1!” Thus we are informed by “The True Religion,” a Web site with a clear missionary goal.¹

One contentious issue is the extent of the phenomenon. Is the number of converts increasing? Are more women attracted to Islam than men? In a videotape, Osama Bin Laden told his Saudi visitor that after the 9/11 “operation” more Dutch people had converted to Islam than in the previous eleven years.² Similar rumors regarding Americans were spreading in the United States.³ These claims, as well as the statement that women converts outnumber men “by an estimated ratio of 4:1,” are clearly part of an ideological struggle (see also Allievi 1998, 241). Some academic research indicates, however, that maybe not four-fifths, but still two-thirds, of converts to Islam are female (Wohlrab-Sahr 1999b; Wagtendonk 1994; Haleem 2003). Whether this is generally valid is not clear. At this point we must simply state that we do not know exactly, since for most countries no statistics are available or the statistics do not distinguish between second-generation-born Muslims and native converts. What is clear, though, is that gender issues are focal in the discussions of conversion to Islam, whether statistically, ideologically, or symbolically.

This book intends to go beyond the claims, competitions, and statistics, and to investigate why women are attracted to Islam. What are their motives and backgrounds and to what kind of Islam are they converting? To which messages are they attracted and in which ways? It will show the wealth of experiences behind conversion, as well as analyze the narratives that express this experience. Conversion is not only a momentary experience but an ongoing process of religious, social, and cultural transformation. How do converts create, embody, and transmit their new identity? What are the reactions and responses of society toward converts? What is the role converts play in society at large? What is their contribution to discourses on gender and Islam? This book will address these issues and provide empirical and comparative materials from Europe, the United States, and South Africa.

Despite the importance of conversion and gender to Islam, these topics have hardly been studied. The literature on conversion particularly deals with new religious movements in the United States (Bruce 1999; Aldridge 2000)⁴ and does not include conversion to Islam. Although the spread of Islam in historical perspective has received attention (Bulliet 1979; Dutton 1999), conversions in present-day Western countries are not widely covered. Within the existing literature on contemporary conversion to Islam, a gender focus is not yet well developed. Gender issues are crucial, however, for our understanding of conversion to Islam, a task this volume intends to undertake.

In this introduction, I will give an overview of the current state of research concerning gender and conversion to Islam. I will start with an examination of the conversion literature, followed by a discussion on what Islam has to “offer” converts. Next, I will examine what the literature has thus far mentioned about gender and conversion to Islam. Lastly, I will propose a tentative approach to the study of gender and conversion to Islam.

Conversion

There is a huge body of literature on conversion that is also relevant for the study of conversion to Islam. Historical developments noted by sociologists of religion, such as pluralism, secularization, and privatization of religion, are vital preconditions for the state of religion in general. As such, they are also important for conversion, including conversion to Islam (Luckmann 1999; Allievi 1998). In addition, the general process of modernization and individualization, which makes the individual agent the center of his or her biogra-

phy, has a direct bearing on conversion (Hofmann 1997). The changed place of religion and the process of individualization transformed religion and religious goods into matters of individual choice. Actors choose among several religious options the worldview that suits them best. Ideas of religion as a commodity on the expanding market of religious goods, picked and chosen by religious agents, are particularly applied to new religious movements (Bruce 1999; Iannaccone 1990; Finke and Stark 2000). Yet ideas of the religious market and rational choice can also be applied to Islam (Allievi 1998; Wohlrab-Sahr this volume). Islam has become one of the players on the religious market in the West, and its message makes sense to individual converts.

Besides analyses of these general sociohistorical developments, conversion theories developed within the body of anthropological, sociological, and religious studies clarify aspects of conversion to Islam. Poston (1992) deals with different forms of *da'wa*, calling to Islam, in the West. He applies Lofland and Stark's "predisposing factors" for conversion and Starbuck's list of "motivational factors" to his sample of seventy-two American and European converts to Islam and tries to present a profile of the "typical" convert to Islam. The material in the present volume, however, shows that it is difficult to assume any typicality among converts. They are a far too heterogeneous group. Köse (1996) studies native British Muslims and applies several psychological and religious theories to his sample of seventy converts. He critically assesses "crises" theories with regard to the preconversion life histories. He finds that commonly held ideas on conversion as being induced by moral and religious crises of adolescence or failed socialization do not apply in the case of Islam.

In addition to typologies of converts, diverse routes to conversion are analyzed (Rambo 1993). Allievi (1998, 1999, and 2002) develops a useful typology of conversion itineraries to Islam. He distinguishes relational from rational conversions. Relational conversions are further subdivided into instrumental and noninstrumental forms. Noninstrumental relational conversions are induced by relationships with Muslims either by way of marriage, family, meeting immigrants, or traveling. Instrumental conversions are usually related to marriage of a European male with a Muslim woman and do not necessarily entail a religious transformation. The rational conversions, in contrast, are not induced by personal contacts but rather by an intellectual search. This form is therefore more specifically Islamic in its discourse and rationalizations. Allievi further subdivides the rational itinerary according to intellectual, political, or mystically oriented paths.

Besides theories on the background and trajectories of converts to Islam, some analyses of testimonies and conversion narratives are available. A few books have been published that contain conversion stories or are descriptive in nature (Anway 1995; Crijnen 1999; Haleem 2003). Several Web sites have been created offering a great amount of testimonies. Hermansen has studied conversion narratives of European and Euro-American Muslims written between 1900 and 1980. Insights from postcolonial theory are applied to understanding the historical shifts that occur in converts' views of Islam and the Muslim world, as well as in their self-presentation (1999). Conversion testimonies are a specific genre with a particular narrative structure (Beckford 1978; Stromberg 1993; Luckmann 1986; Snow and Machalek 1983, 1984; Ulmer 1988). Conversion narratives are created backwards; that is, they are told after the conversion, and thus past events are reinterpreted in light of current convictions. This reconstructing process takes place not only at the individual level but also at the group level. In the process of telling and re-telling conversion experiences, a common model is created (Hofmann 1997; van Nieuwkerk this volume). Converts do not simply reproduce a rehearsed script but include elements of the new religion's ideological rationale into their narratives. It is thus important to analyze the goals and ideologies that are promoted by Islamic organizations and Web sites and the specific *da'wah* functions they perform (Haddad this volume).

Conversion is increasingly analyzed as an ongoing process. Rambo (1993) developed a dynamic and processual conversion theory, integrating research within various disciplines. Conversion takes place in several stages and is usually experienced as a substantial transformation of religious, social, and cultural aspects of daily life. Conversion to Islam is embodied through taking up new bodily practices pertaining to praying, fasting, and food. In addition, important markers of identity are often changed, such as the name and appearance, including *hijab* or occasionally *niqab*. Moreover, converting frequently leads to changing social and cultural practices, for instance, those related to celebrations or contacts with the opposite sex. These transformations regularly create problems with the family of origin (Bourque this volume; Allievi this volume; van Nieuwkerk 2004).

Whereas for some new Muslims conversion is radical, others slowly transform aspects of their identity and practice. Roald (this volume) describes a three-stage process for most European converts, the stages being "love," "disappointment," and "maturity." In the initial phase many converts tend to be emotionally obsessed with the new religion and want to practice every detail

of the Islamic precepts. The second stage is strongly linked to a disappointment with born-Muslim behavior and ideas, and here some converts tend to turn away from Islam. During the third stage many new Muslims search for new understandings of Islamic ideas and attitudes according to the particular cultural context they live in. Sultán (1999) observes that, paradoxically, the features that originally attracted the converts, in particular gender issues, are later seen as sources of conflict.

Converts play an important role in society and often function as cultural and political mediators between the state and Muslim communities. Some of them are engaged in the interpretation of the Islamic sources and developing new discourses (Allievi 1998; Wagtendonk 1994; Gerholm 1988; El Houari Setta 1999; Roald this volume). Allievi further maintains that converts are crucial in three fields. Converted intellectuals, in particular, offer legitimization in the eyes of society. Besides, converts can provide confirmation for immigrants of the rightness of their faith. Moreover, converts form an element of guarantee, since they are citizens who cannot, even if they act as militant Islamic leaders, be expelled from the country (1998, 2002). Female converts also play a role in the development of new discourses on gender and Islam (Roald this volume). Converts such as Amina Wadud (1999) are important in the Islamic feminist production of knowledge. Recent research indicates that Islamic feminism is also gaining ground among female converts in the Netherlands, England, and South Africa (Badran this volume).

Islam

Whereas the push factors have been reasonably studied, the pull factors have received less attention. With regard to the question of why people turn to Islam, that is, what is the specific appeal of Islam, less material is available. This raises immediately the question “which Islam?” There are many converts to Sufism, which has “religious goods” to offer that contrast with those of modernist or Islamist versions of Islam. Also the large differences within the group of converts with regard to gender and ethnicity, as for instance the differences between Euro-American or African American converts, make it difficult to assume a single appeal of Islam.

Several authors indicate that Sufism is the main agent for conversion to Islam in the West. A considerable number of people first convert to Sufism and then to Islam. While in the 1960s, Sufism was part of the “hippie” movement and divorced from its Islamic roots, in the 1990s, it was increasingly

known as Islamic mysticism (Jawad this volume; Köse 1996; Hofmann 1997; Allievi 1998). Jawad (this volume) highlights the Sufi appeal for women. She outlines how the Sufi emphasis upon feminine values pertaining to the family and the feminine element in spiritual life can be attractive to women in the West.

Alternatively, a modernist interpretation of Islam, with a message of rationality, is spreading and resonates in conversion stories on the Internet (van Nieuwkerk this volume). Köse shows that his informants interpret their conversion as a journey from the secular to the sacred. Islam offers them a practical way to direct the everyday life toward God. Since Islam is an encompassing religious worldview and does not compartmentalize religion, choosing Islam enables the converts to connect their daily life to their beliefs (1999). The religious discourse of converts on the attraction of Islam over Christianity converges at certain points. For instance, the absence of the concept of the Trinity and Jesus' prophethood is deemed more logical. Also, the encompassing ritual praxis and the direct accessibility of God without mediators make Islam seem a rational and undeniable truth (Allievi 1998; Anway 1995; Daynes 1999; Hofmann 1997; Van Nieuwkerk this volume).

Dannin (1996) investigates the appeal of Islam for a specific group of converts, the incarcerated African Americans in a New York prison. Using a Foucauldian approach, he analyzes Islam's attractiveness as a counterdisciplinary force in resistance to the prison's own stringent discipline. Islam offers the prisoners an activity structure including such features as prayers and lessons, and an alternative social space within the confinement of the walls. The new Islamic identity also means a fresh start. The Islamic counterculture is attractive because, according to Dannin, it has the power to transcend the material and often brutally inhuman conditions of the prison (1996, 144). McCloud understands the conversion of African Americans to Islam as a response to American racism (1991, 1995). Islam promises a new identity, a feeling of "somebodiness," denied by the dominant culture. Conversion brought liberation from Christian domination, perceived as the root of their oppression for its glorification of suffering and promise of redemption in the hereafter. The "somebodiness" partially achieved by conversion to Islam also results, however, in new forms of oppression. Simmons, for instance, shows that the Nation of Islam attracts women, while at the same time promoting a subordinated role for women (this volume).

Despite the different Islamic "offers," a common observation is that Islam appeals because it gives the convert the greatest possible contrast with the

culture he or she comes from (Allievi 1998; Hofmann 1997; Wohlrab-Sahr 1999b). In particular, converts who are critical of Western society are fascinated by and attracted to the Otherness of Islam. It becomes an ideological and political framework from which they criticize Western society. According to Wohlrab-Sahr conversion becomes “a means of articulating within one’s own social context one’s distance from this context and one’s conflictive relationship towards it” (1999a, 352). This conflictive relationship can be the result of a (politically) critical stance or the result of a sense of marginalization. Hofmann also relates Islam’s attraction to the converts’ possibility of provoking society at large (1997, 121). Yet, on the other hand, it is observed by Hofmann (1997) as well as Allievi (this volume) that many of Islam’s offers, particularly relating to gender issues, are close to what former generations in the West found self-evident. Islam can also appeal because it restores familiar notions on gender and the family (see below).

Allievi distinguishes different “offers” for the various conversion itineraries. Whereas the “relational converts” are attracted to general aspects such as belonging to a different culture and having a sense of community, “rational converts” adopt a more specific Islamic discourse. In their formulations Islam is perceived as clear, simple, and rational. It has sources that everyone can consult, without mediators. For the politically inclined converts, Islam provides a “spiritualization” of politics. For the mystically inclined the Sufi tradition in Islam has a wide appeal as well. It is precisely Islam’s broad spectrum of offers, religiously, ideologically, and in orthopraxy, that constitute its appeal to many converts. This warns us not to essentialize Islam, but to systematically analyze whatever elements of Islam have to offer diverse groups of converts at different times.

Gender

Gender is a crucial issue in conversion to Islam. Sultán (1999) mentions that female converts in Sweden are particularly attracted to Islamic conceptions of manhood and womanhood and to its clear moral boundaries and rules, an observation I can confirm for Dutch converts. Hofmann (1997) also theorizes the plausibility of Islamic notions of the family and construction of masculinity and femininity for German converts. Wohlrab-Sahr (1999a, 1999b, and this volume) did a comparative study of German and American male and female converts. I will summarize some ideas of the last two authors, as they provide important insights for the study of gender and conversion to Islam.

Wohlrab-Sahr connects conversion to biographical experiences. She defines conversion as the symbolic transformation of crisis experiences. In her research she found three different realms of problems that were transformed by conversion to Islam. The first type of conversion is related to issues of sexuality and gender relations. Converts report previously experiencing feelings of personal devaluation with regard to sexuality and gender norms. Female converts mention such problems as broken marriages, promiscuity, and sexual relationships with men from marginal groups. Male converts have often experienced problems with regard to transgression of the male gender identity, for example, loss of the dominant position in the family and shame inflicted by sexual conduct of female members of the family. Converts seek new boundaries, rules, and interpretations. Islam offers a clear model that articulates and solves the experience of transgressed sexual norms and uncertain relationships between the sexes. The second type of problems Wohlrab-Sahr distinguishes is related to social mobility. In case of a failed attempt at upward social mobility, e.g., due to drug addiction or criminality, conversion to Islam can provide an alternative and new career. Thirdly, she mentions problems related to nationality and ethnicity or problems of "belonging." Converting to Islam brings a new kind of belonging and community into existence. Islam thus offers converts the possibility of transforming experiences of devaluation, degradation, and disintegration.

Hofmann (1997) focuses on female converts and issues of gender in Germany. She illuminates female conversion against the background of the process of individualization. Individuals' possibilities to create their own biographies invoke feelings of freedom as well as risk. Failed life histories are experienced as personal failures. Hofmann argues that the process of female individualization shows ruptures and contradictions. Women are strongly connected to the family, which is associated with such values as belonging and connectedness. These community values contrast with dominant "modern" values such as rationality, individual performance, and personal perseverance. Women are confronted with conflicting expectations in different stages of their lives. They are brought up with ideals of individual autonomy but are expected to put these ideals aside at the moment they raise a family. If they decide to stay at home when they have small children, they experience the lack of esteem for this decision in society at large and as a result of their own socialization. According to Hofmann, the German-Islamic discourse offers a solution to these conflicting demands. The issues of family, marriage, and relationship between the sexes are given primacy in the

Islamic discourse. This articulation of Muslim values offers clear concepts of marriage and motherhood. The different and distinct natures of males and females, and particularly ideas on women's capacity as mothers and caretakers, are not only Islamically defined but also plausible in light of a deeply anchored German "cultural knowledge." This cultural knowledge about essential manhood and womanhood, however, is no longer uncontested. Today's German-Islamic discourse restores these ideas to their original position of "truth." Thus, women regain the possibility of living according to their "feminine nature." Contrary to Western socialization, Islam highly values motherhood and the nurturing qualities of women. Motherhood is not merely valued in Islam, but acknowledged as an important performance equal to labor and is also supported by men.

For converts in this society, German-Islamic discourse thus enables a critical stance toward German society. It uses aspects of feminist discourse, for example, in criticizing the prevalence of male norms and the devaluation of female norms. It also attacks the "Western exploitation of female sexuality and the marketing of the female body." These critiques hinge on ideas derived from radical feminism or differential feminism. Yet, whereas radical feminism tries to change patriarchal relationships, the German-Islamic discourse tries to restore the original "natural" order. In particular, the fact that German-Islamic discourse refers to a stock of common cultural knowledge that is contested and disparaged gives the Islamic reformulation an innovative and critical content. These critical yet familiar views on gender and sexuality make the Islamic discourse attractive and plausible to German female converts.

Hofmann's ideas are valuable in understanding Dutch female converts (van Nieuwkerk 2004) as well as Scandinavian converts (Roald this volume). The latter embrace the concept of "equity" because it includes the ideal of equal opportunities, but rejects the definition of women and men as "equal." Dutch female converts use a syncretic differential feminist discourse combining essentialist notions of womanhood and manhood with critical views on the prevalence of male norms and sexual exploitation of the female body. Yet I observed more variety of voices and also critical stances toward the essentialist discourse on women, gender, and Islam than Hofmann shows in the German case. It is therefore important to assess critically the "feminist" content of the gender discourses as developed by converts. In her contribution to this volume Badran analyzes the contribution of female converts to Islamic feminist discourses, which differs from the equity approach. Converts can

also shift position over time from an equity approach to a feminist understanding and critical reading of the Qur'an.

Discourses and Identities

Whereas Wohlrab-Sahr concentrates on functions of conversion in solving biographical problems, Hofmann focuses on the plausibility of Islamic discourse for individual converts. They represent two main approaches to gender and conversion to Islam. The first approach deals with conversion as creating or gaining a new identity. It analyzes biographies, the factors that can explain people's propensities to convert, and the experiences of crisis they have had. It focuses on the problems converts have encountered and how conversion has given them a new sense of self and helped them to create a new identity or a new form of belonging. It analyzes motives, routes, and themes in converts' life stories that make them susceptible to conversion. Whereas this approach highlights the meaningfulness of conversion in a person's life, the reason why individuals have opted for this particular solution, that is, conversion to Islam, is not always clear. What is meaningful in the message of Islam? Why Islam and which Islam? Which discourses are they themselves creating? This approach thus underestimates the different kinds of Islamic discourses that converts refer to.

The second approach deals with the diverse discourses and narratives produced in the communities of converts. It aims to critically deconstruct the discourse and warns us not to confuse conversion narratives with conversion motives. This approach focuses on how discourses and stories are created and re-created in converts' communities and how they become meaningful in communicating conversion experiences. It analyzes the message of Islam and how this can be attractive for individuals or groups. Whereas this approach analyzes how discourses of Islam are created and spread and become significant, the biographical aspects of the receivers are not clearly included in the perspective. How individuals come to be attracted to these discourses, how they make sense in converts' unfolding life stories, and how the discourses are turned into lived experiences are questions beyond the scope of this approach.

Both approaches are therefore important and valid in themselves. Yet, combining insights from both identity studies and discourse analyses generates a more complex understanding. We need to understand both the receivers and the messages. Conversion is a multilayered, continuous process

in which new identities and discourses are produced and reproduced. Some individuals can become susceptible to conversion through personal trajectories and biographical experiences. Yet the new message must be plausible. In my study on Dutch female converts it became clear that their biographies and chosen modes of Islamic discourse were intimately connected. Whereas for some women a psychological crisis and addiction to medications convinced them of the natural and healthy character of Islam, for others sexual harassment or divorced parents made them realize the importance of maintaining a certain distance between the sexes. What Islam meant to them and the discourse they constructed were directly connected to their life stories.

Islam and Islamic discourse can be plausible to individuals for different reasons, and individuals can be addressed by Islamic discourse in manifold aspects of their identities. People convert to Islam as persons with specific professional, religious, racial, or ethnic identities. Converts not only convert as individuals but also as males or females or as Europeans or African Americans. Various aspects of a person's identity inform discourses, and discourses appeal to different aspects of identities. Islam not only offers various religious discourses, it also offers a discourse on race and ethnicity and a gender discourse that can appeal to people.

In an approach that analyzes conversion as a continuous process of embodying social practice, it is particularly important to investigate both discourses and identities. Conversion does not stop at the moment of embracing Islam, and it is not solely a mental activity of accepting a new belief. It requires embodiment of new social and religious practices. Within this process of embodiment and learning new practices, new ideas and insights are created that can generate new discourses and receptivity to other voices of Islamic discourse. In different periods of converts' lives, a revised or novel discourse can make sense. The approach to studying conversion as a process of embodying new practices brings to the fore the realization that identities and discourses are implicated in each other. Converts live religious practices related to discourses that are meaningful to them in specific contexts. Experiences with the new practices will lead to renewed understandings, interpretations, and negotiations of existing discourses. It is a continuous interplay. While their biographies unfold, converts remake and negotiate discourses, and these in turn inform the process of identity construction.

We thus need a multilayered approach to conversion. It is important to understand the personal trajectories and biographies as well as the diverse Islamic discourses on gender, race, and ethnicity in order to understand the

plausibility of conversion to Islam for male and female converts in the West. We thus avoid an essentialist approach toward Islam and are able to investigate the diverse itineraries and discourses of various groups of converts in different countries. Inevitably this approach will not lead to any firm conclusions. The question of why women convert to Islam will not lead to a single and definite answer, but rather invoke a complex contextual picture of identities and discourses. It will sensitize us to the many ways in which these women make sensible choices, choices that can change over time.

On the Contributions

The essays in this collection are the outcome of a symposium, Gender and Conversion to Islam, which was organized by the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), the Netherlands, on the 16th and 17th of May 2003. Our purpose in this collection of essays is to further our understanding of gender and conversion to Islam. As the authors are historians, sociologists, anthropologists, and theologians, the outcome is an interdisciplinary volume. The contributions add to our theoretical as well as empirical understanding. This book provides case studies of the manifold convert trajectories and narratives, and of discourses of and about them. It covers different forms of Islam, such as Sunni, Salafi, and Sufi Islam, as well as the Nation of Islam. It deals with the creation, maintenance, and transmission of Muslim identities. Despite the diversity of the research materials, the focus on gender allows for many connections to emerge as well.

In the first section gender and conversion to Islam are contextualized. Yvonne Haddad provides an overview of the phenomenon of conversion of American women. She outlines the diverse Muslim missionary groups and their specific *da'wa* discourses and activities in the West. She tries to answer why white American women convert to Islam and what it is they convert to. She also deals with the relations between immigrants and white converts. She concludes that conversion serves the multiple ends of spiritual fulfillment, community belonging, a husband and family, and often a new sense of self-assurance.

Anne Sofie Roald shows the development of a transcultural Islam. She understands the transformations from the late 1990s onward as the latest stage in the development of a Scandinavian Islam. She observes a growing acceptance of cultural diversity in the Muslim community on both a global and local scale. Within a creolization of practice and discourse new converts

first tend to defend traditional gender systems. However, as they go through various stages in the conversion process they tend to incorporate Scandinavian ideals of gender relations into the Islamic framework. The new Muslims nonetheless diverge from the majority society in embracing concepts of gender equity rather than gender equality.

Monika Wohlrab-Sahr critically assesses the theoretical debates on rational-choice theory and concepts of the market that have been centrally important in the field of sociology of religion during the last years. She argues that we need to consider conversions as religious choices within a pluralistic market. Nevertheless we need to transcend the limitations of rational-choice theory. She introduces an approach that combines biographical analysis with a functional approach, illustrating her arguments with comparative material from Germany and the United States.

The second section focuses on conversion discourses and narratives. Karin van Nieuwkerk compares online and offline conversion narratives. She aims at understanding the different discourses that could help to explain why Islam can be attractive for women in the West. Besides the biographical narratives, the ethnic, religious, and gender discourses of new Muslimas are analyzed. Not only the content, but also the different contexts in which the narratives are produced—that is, fieldwork in the Netherlands versus self-written testimonies on the Internet—are compared.

Stefano Allievi discusses the shifting significance of boundary definitions, which he terms the *haram/halal* frontiers. He particularly focuses on narratives about wearing the *hijab*, an issue that is symbolically important both inside and outside the community of converts. He also suggests de-Islamizing approaches to conversion to Islam. The so-called “Islamic” discourses pertaining to gender that are attractive to converts are not distinctively Islamic, but very close to familiar European gender discourses of former generations.

In the third section, Islamic paradigms and trajectories are central. Haifaa Jawad brings forward the Sufi paradigm. Sufism has been and continues to be an important agent for conversion to Islam. She outlines how the Sufis’ theological emphasis upon feminine values pertaining to the family and the feminine element in spiritual life can be attractive to women in the West.

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons uses her own experiences to contextualize conversion to Islam in the United States amongst African Americans. She particularly focuses on the Nation of Islam (NOI). She traces the attraction of the NOI to black-nationalist sensibilities on the part of the converts,

which are a product of their exclusion from mainstream American life. She analyzes the gender discourse in the NOI and the subordination of women in the organization.

Margot Badran compares life stories of female converts from the Netherlands, England, and South Africa. During her research on Islamic feminism it became clear that converts are particularly important in articulating Islamic feminist discourses. She details women's trajectories toward a feminist understanding of Islam.

In the final section, transmission and creation of Islamic identities are examined. Nicole Bourque focuses on Scottish female converts to Islam and the way they re-create and renegotiate religious, national, and gender identities. She demonstrates that the creation of a new Muslim identity also entails the embodiment of this new identity by taking up new bodily practices.

Marcia Hermansen addresses the transmission of female Muslim identity by converts in the West. She focuses on mothers who converted between 1967 and 1980 and analyzes how they have tried to raise their daughters as Muslims. Her interviews with converted mothers suggest that despite the challenges of transmitting an identity that the mothers chose with great conviction but that daughters inherit, many, but not all, daughters absorb and retain a Muslim identity. The presence of a community of Muslims and a Muslim peer group, as well as a committed Muslim father, is influential in the converts' successful transmission of Muslim identities to the next generation.

Notes

1. <http://www.thetrue religion.org>.
2. *NRC Handelsblad*, December 14, 2001.
3. See Haddad this volume and articles at the Web site "The True Religion."
4. At the conference *Cultures of Conversion: Paradigms, Poetics and Politics* (held at Groningen University May 21–24, 2003, the Netherlands) it was concluded that the theme of conversion has generally been neglected. Only the theory of rational choice has made theoretical contributions to the theme of conversion in religious studies or the sociology of religion. This paradigm is critically assessed by Bruce (1999) and Wohlrab-Sahr (this volume).

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