

Article

“Speaking Out Would Be a Step Beyond Just Not Believing”¹—On the Performativity of Testimony When Moving Out of Islam

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Abstract: This article investigates the narratives of people moving out of Islam in contemporary Europe. In particular, it focusses on the potential performance of non-belief in the form of speech. By critically examining the function of testimony in conversion and deconversion narratives, this article problematises the assumed boundaries of belief, non-belief, and the function of the performance of identity. It does so by investigating contemplations over private and public performances, since the performance of speech was thought to have different effects in both spheres. Whilst public discourses on leaving Islam and speaking freely were always weighed, in private these were related to familial bonds, love, and belonging. On the other hand, considering speaking out in public was often contextualised with reference to potential secularist appropriation of their stories as ‘native testimonial’. As such, my interlocutors show that testifying of one’s religious transformation in the case of moving out of Islam was neither central nor conditional. Speech was mostly considered a ‘step beyond’ not believing.

Keywords: religious deconversion; Islam in Europe; testimony; narrative; conversion; deconversion; ex-Muslim

1. Introduction

At the start of my fieldwork in the winter of 2017, I met with one of my friends in my old university town of Groningen. Sipping coffee, we discussed how I could find people with Islamic backgrounds, who no longer believe in Allah and had not converted to another religion—the subject of my study. She gave me one or two names, but we concluded that perhaps it was not going to be as easy as I had initially thought, and perhaps I could place an ad somewhere? To dampen my optimism further, one of our former colleagues walked in, himself from Iraq, raised in an Islamic family. Discussing my difficulties, he said: “Maria, you are not going to find people easily, because your idea of the importance of ‘belief’ does not apply here. I can behave in any way I want: eat pork, drink alcohol, don’t pray, which factually means I don’t qualify as a Muslim. For the community, however, I have just strayed. But it is no way near as bad as saying I don’t believe! And let’s be honest, it *actually really* doesn’t matter what my inner belief is, let alone speak my mind on such matters.”² What he meant to say was that even though there may be many ‘unbelieving Muslims’, he reckoned I would struggle to find anyone because no one would *speak* about it. Although I eventually managed to find over 50 individuals in both the Netherlands and Britain who were willing to talk to me

¹ Personal interview with Ilyas, London, 8 November 2017. All names have been anonymised, unless indicated otherwise.

² Anecdote taken from my field notes from 8 February 2017.

extensively about their experiences,³ and many more during formal and informal meetings, his words were, one way or the other, applicable to all my interlocutors.

Apostasy—a religious term for leaving one's faith—is a contested topic within religious traditions, and Islam is no exception. Moreover, the debate on freedom of (or from) religion and Islam has especially in Europe become intertwined with often reductionist discussions over Islam's compatibility with democratic values. One side of this debate argues that Islam is a religion of peace and endorses modern concepts of 'freedom of religion' and 'freedom of speech'. This position is often taken by self-proclaimed 'moderate Muslims', and Left-wing political parties. On the other side, there are secularist politicians such as Geert Wilders (and more recently Thierry Baudet) in the Netherlands, or Nigel Farage in Britain, who claim Islam is intolerant and therefore there is no freedom, neither of consciousness nor of speech.⁴ Those wishing to leave or speak out against it are considered victims of this oppressive authority. Both these stances find evidence in Islamic texts of the Qur'an and Hadith, whilst neither come close to lived realities (Larsson 2018).

In the study of (de)conversion experiences, the phenomenon of testimony and autobiographical narratives has fascinated scholars for centuries (i.a. Hindmarsh 2014; Hodder 2017; Oliver 2014). The transformation that people undergo when finding new existential convictions, be it in belief or unbelief, captures something in our minds that we can relate to, admire, or abhor. These narratives can provide insight into the unknown and the known, as well as often describe a journey from bad to good, from darkness to light (Hodder 2017). One example of a deconversion narrative that particularly captured the minds of the European politics and public was Somali born, Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali. In her autobiography as well as in public performances, she routinely testified of her suffering at the hands of Islam to emphasise the incompatibility of backward religion with the freedom of the West.

Speech and performance are key here. In both (de)conversion literature as well as in religious and secular visions of the freedom of speech, especially when opposed with religious—i.e., Islamic—sensibilities, some who move out of religion have narrated this journey, and thereby to performed their non-religious secular identity. These voices have often been critical of religion and hailed presumed liberal values. In response, this article will present my interlocutors experiences of moving out of Islam in contemporary Europe, and the meaning ascribed to testimony and speaking out about their non-belief. The people I conducted fieldwork with for this study were all born and/or raised in the Netherlands or Britain with Islamic backgrounds and no longer believed in Allah.⁵ Whilst some

³ This article is part of a larger PhD project which aims to shed light on the experiences of moving out of Islam in Europe, as well as complications of 'speaking out' and 'being out'. Fieldwork has been conducted over 18 months, during which 44 people, both male and female between the ages of 18 and 60, have been interviewed, 22 in the Netherlands, and 22 in Britain, on their experiences of leaving faith behind.

⁴ Also see Ismail and Mat (2016) for an examination of the different interpretations given by scholars on the issue of freedom of religion according to the scriptures.

⁵ It was estimated in 2015 by the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, CBS) that there were approximately 850,000 Muslims above the age of 15 in the Netherlands, about 4.9% of the population based on survey research (Schmeets 2016). The vast majority of this populace is of Turkish or Moroccan origin or descent. There are no data available on this, since the CBS does not register people on their 'country of origin' once naturalised. According to the most recent survey by the Office of National Statistics [ONS] (2017), there were around 3.2 million people in England and Wales who identified as Muslim, constituting around 5.7 percent of the population in 2017. This survey also indicated an increase of 1 percent between 2011 and 2017 of those affiliating with Islam. The most recent data on the ethnic composition of British Muslims dates from 2011, when 60.1% were of South Asian descent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh). 10 per cent of the Muslim population identified as Black, including Black African, Caribbean, British or 'other Black'. 7.1 percent as 'other Asian', and 7.7 percent as White, including English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, Irish, British, Gypsy or Irish traveler, and 'other White', and last, about 6.5 per cent identified as Arab (Office of National Statistics [ONS] 2011). My own interlocutor group roughly represented such ethnic composition, and consisted of 11 men and 11 women in the Netherlands where the average age was 35, and 13 men and nine women in the UK with the average age of 28. In the UK, 12 participants were of South Asian descent one was Egyptian/British, one Moroccan, one from the West Indies, one 'white'

of them would speak out publicly about their non-belief, the majority would not, thereby subverting certain expectations and discourses of moving out of Islam in contemporary Europe. In what is to follow, I will explore those considerations on speaking out.

The central aim of this article is to show that moving out of Islam did not necessarily elicit the performance of testimony, because as opposed to for example certain conversion narratives, the religious transformation was not always experienced as rupture of a before and after. Therefore, I wish to present how my interlocutors' decisions over 'speaking out' and 'coming out'⁶ were often intricate negotiations over belonging and belief, as well as the performance of self. This means that not only did they consider their options of disclosure towards their immediate surroundings or in public in the context of behaviours, knowledges, and questions of belonging, but also their intrinsic need to narrate their non-religious identity was weighed against the effects this could elicit with both religious as well as secular others. Rather than having experienced a linear move from religion to the secular, my interlocutors' stories showed that they were often continuously negotiating both sides of this presumed divide.

This study thereby engages with questions raised by, among others, Lois Lee (2015) about what defines being 'non-religious' or secular. Are people that do not—or no longer—subscribe to religion defined by that absence, an unrelated presence, or is it something to be performed in relation to religion or religious others? This article argues that my interlocutors related differently to such questions of performance and identity, especially when it would concern public or private spheres. Whilst for some 'being non-religious' was a matter of being able to live a certain life rather than having to speak out, for others it turned out to be crucially important to (publically) define oneself in relation to religion in order to be 'non-religious'.

In order to do so, I will firstly explore the category of testimony in relation to conversion, religious transformation, and secular expectations over modern subjectivity especially with regards to freedom of speech. Secondly, I will present some of my interlocutors' reflections on publicly and privately 'coming out' or 'speaking out' and their experiences of their potential performance of their non-belief in the form of speech. I will do so to modestly contribute to our understanding of moving out of Islam and specifically the role of speech as a potential performative act of drawing boundaries between self and other. Finally, I will relate these experiences of my interlocutors of the performativity of speech to secular expectations of what it means to be a modern subject. Before doing so, a note on my methodology and interlocutor recruitment is warranted.

This study is based on fieldwork in both the Netherlands and the UK, and is part of a larger project focusing on various aspects of moving out of Islam. In response to studies into Muslim minorities which have often taken one single country as its vantage point, I wished to incorporate a comparative element in this project since I believe that it is in comparison that we can discover different national trajectories and specificities, as well as how this may or may not influence personal experiences of religious transformation. In the preliminary design phase, I conducted extensive online searches and noted the vast differences online and in public between the Netherlands, where the attention to 'former Muslims' was scant in the last decade, whilst in Britain there was a plethora of organisations and public interest toward 'moving out of Islam'. These contextual differences made these two countries fit for a comparative analysis. In this article, I will refer to such contextual differences where relevant, however, my interlocutors' considerations relating to them were remarkably similar. Whilst platforms were often more readily available to my interlocutors in the UK than they were in the Netherlands, the vast majority of them had little desire to 'speak out'. For an extensive comparison between relative presence or absence of 'secularist ex-Muslim voices' in either country, see Vlieg (2018).

British, two from the UAE, one Yemeni, one Somali, one Kenyan-Asian, and one of Gambian descent. In the Netherlands, nine participants were of Moroccan descent, six Turkish, two Iranian, two Pakistani, one Afghan, one Kurdish, and one of Egyptian descent. Racial and ethnic concerns especially in comparative perspective in each country have been addressed elsewhere (Vlieg forthcoming). Lastly, in the group that I have interviewed, three 'new Brits', and three 'new Dutch' have been included.

⁶ See: Cottee (2018) for an elaboration on language of 'coming out' or 'staying in the closet'.

Lastly, a note on how I recruited my interlocutors is warranted. In both countries, about half of my interlocutors were found through ‘groups’. In the Netherlands, these were informal online groups, in the UK these were online and real-life groups attached to formal organisations, such as Faith to Faithless, or the Council for Ex-Muslims in Britain. The other half of my interlocutors were found through my own (secondary) network and snowball effect. Since in the Netherlands there are less formal structures present, it took about eight months to find people willing to talk to me extensively about their experiences, whilst in the UK, the formal interview part of my fieldwork was finished within eight weeks. I explore the consequences of these methods of recruitment extensively elsewhere (Vlieg 2019). It suffices to note here that for the current analysis, these factors have been carefully considered and that for example membership of or affiliation with an organisation and its consequences has been noted where relevant.

2. Testimony and (De)Conversion

Testimony and religious transformation, especially the prototypical form of conversion, have long been studied in tandem. Especially in confessional religions such as Christianity (e.g., Hodder 2017) but also Islam,⁷ the speech act of testifying of one’s religious change and the simultaneous reconstruction of the self-narrative in light of newly found convictions has captured academic but also popular attention since Augustine’s *Confessions* (Hindmarsh 2014). In such cases, (de)conversion is generally conceived as ‘radical change’ and transformation of a new identity (Giordan 2009). With regard to the performativity of speech to achieve religious change, Susan F. Harding (1987) examined the ‘rhetoric of conversion’ in fundamentalist Baptist conversion strategies. Her focus on witnessing as a performance towards the prospect convert as both argument for self-transformation as well as a method of actually bringing about change in the individual, showed the far-reaching effects speech can have in religious conversion.

Furthermore, Lewis R. Rambo (1993), in his influential work on religious conversion, considered testimony to have a dual character of both language transformation and biographical reconstruction. Additionally, testimony can be central in displaying commitment to a new group, according to Rambo. In similar vein, Peter G. Stromberg (1993) studied the specific link between language and self-transformation in Christian conversion narratives and that it is: “through the use of language in the conversion narrative that the processes of increased commitment and self-transformation take place” (p. 188). According to Stromberg, testimony functions in self-transformation as performative act to cultivate one’s faith. Thereby, a conversion narrative is not only a simple recollection of events passed, but “it is a creation of a particular situation in the moment of its telling” (p. 3). In his intriguing book, Stromberg analysed this dual process of strengthening faith and transformation of lives when a conversion testimony is uttered.

In his study into recovering drug addicts’ conversion testimonies, Srdjan Sremac (2013) reckoned that testimony “can be understood as the discursive practice of self-performance in which converts give evidence of their spiritual transformation through public confessions (testimony) of their past life and their present situation” (p. 77). Furthermore, Sremac noted that testimony may “help individuals construe a new religious identity that enables them to cope with the past as something that can be both overcome and redeemed” (p. 77). What these studies have in common, is their emphasis on the presence of testimony and speech in the context of religious conversion. Testimony, then, has the power to change an individual’s conviction, reaffirm one’s faith, as well as provide tools for coping with or retelling one’s past in light of new convictions. It may function ‘to make sense’ of the transformation of the self (also see Bourque 2006).

With regards to deconversion, Rosemary Avance (2013), in her study into online conversion and deconversion narratives from the Mormon faith considers their respective testimonies to be parallel to one another: they are in both cases rituals of sharing in a binding spiritual community, be it the presently or formerly religious. Indeed, in certain protestant Christian faiths where one’s testimony

⁷ Pronouncing the *shahada* is considered one’s testimony to entering the Ummah and the first step to becoming Muslim. I will elaborate on testimony in Christian traditions below.

is central to one's confessed beliefs and performance of piety, testimony has in turn been inherently seen as part of the deconversion narrative. In these studies, the testimonial is often considered a sneak peek into the psychological identity formation (Payne 2013; Avance 2013). Eric Chalfant (2011) for example, analysed online deconversion narratives of Christians in the United States. He understood these testimonies as Foucauldian 'technologies of the self': produced by and in certain discourses, they represent and aid a form of moral self-fashioning in times of transition. E. Marshall Brooks (2018) has argued in his study into 'apostates' from the Mormon faith, that deconversion testimony functions as more than that: he analysed it as an element of ongoing politics of identity making specifically in response to Mormon discourses about so-called apostates. In all these studies, a pivotal character is assigned to (de)conversion and the function of testimony therein: it is a linguistic performance of a first-hand experience which functions to make sense of a past life and reaffirm one's faith or lack thereof to both self and others.

With regard to deconversion from Islam, considering the relative inaccessibility of interlocutors, especially in the Middle East and North Africa region, in recent years, various studies have opted to consider the online presence of 'apostates'. Katarzyna Sidło (2016) recruited her Jordanian respondents through Facebook to whom she posed surveys and open-ended questionnaires, ensuring their anonymity. Pauha and Aghaee (2018) collected online narratives from Iranian atheists to which they applied content analysis. Whilst these are valuable contributions to our understanding of unbelief in contested regions, they generally are uncritical of the specific genre they consider their data. Illustratively, barely half of my interlocutors were members of some form of an online group, and only three of them actually had produced an online testimonial in the past. It should also be noted that if a testimony was expressed, such a spoken or written statement of non-belief did not carry the same symbolic meaning of identity formation as it did to a 'confessional' religion such as the Mormon faith. However, the performative act of testimony in the form of speaking about non-belief to others was an ever-present option that had to be considered. But contemplations were always contextual.

In the Netherlands, for example, one such deconversion narrative has had a particular societal impact, which was often referenced by my interlocutors. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali born Dutch politician, utilised her 'deconversion narrative' or native testimonial for political and activist ends. In her autobiography, she posited the 'Darkness' of Somalia and Islam against the Enlightened West. Her motivation to publish her book was, in her own words: "a subjective record of my own personal memories, as close to accurate as I can make them (...) It is the story of what I have experienced what I've seen, and why I think the way I do" (Hirsi Ali 2007, p. xii). Hirsi Ali posited her narrative as trustworthy by claiming authority through inside knowledge and victimhood, which emphasised the veracity that is pre-eminently suggested in the genre of autobiographical novel. Mineke Bosch (2008) noted in her analysis of the book that this emphasis on telling the truth, veracity, and recording reality from Hirsi Ali's perspective gained another dimension in light of the 'enlightened person' that she had come to be. Her rejection of faith and religion, her turn and dedication to facts and reason, her mission to break with all the taboos and to increase the public's awareness of the 'terrors' of Islam and its threat to Dutch society, all affirmed her "commitment to freedom" (Hirsi Ali 2007, p. 240). Bosch further noted that it is precisely the promise of 'telling the truth' that has made the autobiographical genre so popular: "it gives readers the illusion that they are looking over someone else's shoulders and vicariously undergoing the narrator's experience" (p. 141).

Relatedly, Saba Mahmood (2009) focussed on the specific genre that is the 'feminist native testimonial' which aims to represent Muslim women who have suffered personally at the hands of Islam. This particular autobiographical genre, according to Mahmood, has played a pivotal role in securing the Western judgement that Islam systematically mistreats women and is specifically after 9/11 the source of all evil now haunting the West: "Calls for the reformation of Islam, now issued from progressive, liberal, and conservative podiums alike, are ineluctably tied to [Islam's] oppression of women" (p. 194). Mahmood noted that the power of these narratives lies specifically in the Muslim woman author to embody both the character of 'insider' and 'victim' simultaneously whilst claiming high levels of veracity.

De Leeuw and van Wichelen (2005) argued that the particular power of Hirsi Ali's testimonial came from the authority she could claim through victimhood and the simultaneous positioning as now being 'one of us'. As will become clear, my interlocutors often (implicitly) referred to this genre of native testimonial and its potential to secure Western judgement of Islam, when considering speaking out about their non-belief. In addition, Simon Cottee (2015), in his pioneering sociological work on Muslims leaving Islam in Britain and Canada, similarly reflected on this 'apostate narrative' as an 'atrocity narrative'. Such a narrative is socially constructed *against* the former in-group, and often in close collaboration with the rival out-group. He quoted Anson Shupe, who stated: "Their testimony is that of the insider and as such provides an apparently irrefutable confirmation for the propaganda of a group's opponents" (In Cottee 2015, p. 27). Indeed, in the case of Muslims leaving Islam in Europe, these social workings become particularly relevant in this construction of the Islamic religious, versus the Enlightened Modern West dichotomy.

Simon Cottee (2018) later complained about how ill-equipped the sociology of religion was to theoretically approach those moving out of religion. He reckoned that in the existing literature, the emphasis has primarily been on those who are 'career leavers' or 'native informants' who use their special status as 'formerly religious' to castigate their former religion. In response, he noted that most of his informants, however, were "in their own terminology, 'in the closet,' and had not disclosed their apostasy" (p. 282). His chapter further investigated these experiences of concealment of 'apostasy' among people leaving Islam in Britain and Canada. During my own fieldwork in Britain and the Netherlands, I also encountered a plethora of considerations, contemplations, and negotiations when it came to expressing inner belief or lack thereof to the outside world. From hiding one's convictions entirely and performing a fully embodied Islamic identity (Vliek forthcoming) to publicly performed 'ex-Muslim' identities (Vliek 2018), and anything in between, all my interlocutors considered the power of speaking out about moving out of Islam and the far-reaching effects this may or may not have. Whilst Cottee explored the world of stigma in relation to loss of faith and community, I will consider the relative importance of testifying and its potency to demarcate categorical divides on the basis of religious conviction.

When analysing speaking out about religious transformation in contemporary Europe, the concepts of 'freedom of speech' or 'freedom of expression' should be briefly considered. They are two terms pointing to the same political right in the contemporary Western world (Snel 2013). They do not only include the right to communicate freely, but also the right to search for information and ideas, to disseminate and receive it. It has been considered one of the main 'canonical rights', a central issue in current European public debates, and it has been included in international human rights laws (Snel 2013, p. 125). However, in the Netherlands specifically, but also in broader Europe including Britain, it has come to stand for something more: it is identified with a specific secular set of Western values, as opposed to religious ones. Johan Snel analysed the cultural turn from 'freedom of expression' as a legal matter, to it having to come to represent "the core of liberal democracy, modern values, even Western civilization at large" (p. 131). After 9/11 and other Islam-related violent attacks world-wide including the Danish Cartoon Affair and Charlie Hebdo, the public role of religion and specifically Islam had become diametrically opposed with this alleged freedom. Quoting cultural anthropologist Oskar Verkaaik, Snel noted: "More than a mere symbol, the freedom of expression had come to be identified with this recent liberation of the individual from the bonds of religion" (p. 132). Rather than providing an extensive analysis of how such a dichotomy has come to be,⁸ it is relevant here to note the emphatically secular Western expectations of liberation from religion, and the assumed core value of freedom of expression; a core right that in the past has also been exercised by individuals who left religion behind. This has created a particular discourse for both religious as well as secular expectations that those who leave Islam, also automatically (publically) critique their former religion.

To underscore the relevance of these observations, I refer to Webb Keane (2007), who, in his influential work *Christian Moderns*, opened one of his chapters by stating: "The purposeful effort to

⁸ See: Vliek (2018) for a brief comparison on 'freedom of speech' and Islam between the Netherlands and Britain.

become ‘modern’ as a moral project, can resemble that of religious conversion in certain respects. Both projects often propose to transform people by disabusing them of earlier errors and abstracting them from the constraints of former social entanglements” (p. 197). In my understanding, Keane was pointing at specific norms and values that accompany modernity, and indeed the secular: to be free from the shackles that may threaten the individual’s autonomy is part of the conversion or modernity project. Whilst in the colonial project this partly centred around religious conversion to Christianity in one form or another, in contemporary Europe to become modern is to become secular. These so-called secular expectations of what it means to be modern (i.e., to have the right to express oneself freely and unlimitedly) did not go unnoticed by my interlocutors and these influences and their consequences will be reflected on below.

In what is to follow, I will draw out some of my interlocutors’ contemplations over disclosing their non-belief to friends and family as well as their considerations over speaking out publicly on such matters. I make an analytical distinction between public and private, since the performance of speech was thought to have different effects in both spheres. Whilst public discourses on leaving Islam and speaking freely were always weighed, in private these were related to familial bonds, love, and belonging, whilst when considering speaking out in public this was contextualised with reference to potential secularist appropriation of their stories as ‘native testimonial’. As such, my interlocutors will show that testifying of one’s religious transformation in the case of moving out of Islam was neither central nor conditional. Speech was mostly considered a ‘step beyond’ not believing.

3. Concealment of Convictions and Speech as Performance

When my interlocutors experienced change in conviction and the lifestyle that may accompany that, certain differences sometimes had to be negotiated with the direct surroundings of friends and family. The ways in which this was experienced differed greatly. Sometimes change was entirely concealed: one would not speak about it, nor would changes in lifestyle be openly lived. Karim, a young Londoner, reckoned it could bring unwanted attention: “people phoning me up, knocking on my door, (...) saying I should go and speak to this scholar, that scholar” at best, and threats from “crazy people out there”⁹ at worst. Laila, who I met in Paddington, London in the winter of 2018 for a cup of coffee ‘could not imagine’ what would happen if they were to find out. For her it was more about the concealment of her entire lifestyle which had ruined relationships for her, even without not showing it to her relatives.¹⁰ Concealment of desired lifestyles and inner convictions can become intensely mentally taxing (May 2017).

Others explained that concealment of conviction or behaviour was not necessarily problematic. This was particularly the case when my interlocutors could behave and live the way they pleased; inner conviction was considered to be less relevant, like my Iraqi friend suggested to me in Groningen. Their friends and family for example also ‘broke religious rules’, or would not live perfectly pious lives. Zehra, a Dutch-Turkish woman I met on a warm day in August on the terrace explained that in her community and family, conforming to a certain Muslim or ethnic identity was all that really mattered. When growing up, everybody around her was Muslim and her family conformed to the religious practices and holidays. However, many of them also drank alcohol and did not regularly pray, yet they called themselves Muslim: “sometimes I think, that is the only difference, you say you are [Muslim], and I say that I’m not”. Therefore, she had never really discussed these issues with her family, rather, her struggles had been about leaving her parental home and pursuing a different lifestyle. When I asked her about telling her family about her non-belief, she replied: “the way that you ask me now, ‘did you tell’, it’s not like coming out of the closet, no. You don’t necessarily feel different because of it”. Later she concluded on the matter: “I think the

⁹ Personal interview, London, 21 November 2017.

¹⁰ Also see: Vlieg (forthcoming) on the particulars over the contestations of what is (non-)negotiable behaviour in light of religious transformation.

form was very important. You can drink and do everything, as long as you say you are Muslim, I think that is what is in the Turkish community”.¹¹ Note how despite knowing that her family may treat her differently if she were to speak out about non-belief, she did not ‘feel different’ herself. There was no need to speak, since it may have provoked unwanted and unnecessary animosity between her and her family.

For Elea, also from a Turkish family in the Netherlands, breaking certain social stigmas had been a bigger issue than religion or faith. She explained to me that it all revolved about ‘liveability’: which battles needed to be fought for her to live a life that she desired? A big issue was the fact that she had a ‘Dutch’ partner:

“At a certain point, it became clear to my family I had a Dutch partner, which gave me a certain freedom. I didn’t have to explain myself constantly (...) And if you have that [a Dutch partner] the rest of it doesn’t matter. For the community, it is the worst thing you can do. I’m not going to announce: ‘I’m an unbeliever! I’m an unbeliever!’ Because that is not visible. But that Dutch partner is visible. That means you don’t choose for them.”¹²

She elaborated on other visible matters, such as the *hijab* or fasting which are only problematic when others contest your behaviour. That which is on the inside therefore ‘doesn’t matter’ and does not need to be spoken of since it does not have to be visible until you actually testify to it. It should be stressed, that when these visible matters are key to one’s belonging to family and community, concealment of change in knowledges, practices, or behaviours can become highly problematic, and can cause severe issues of identity and even depression (Cottee 2015, 2018; Vlieg forthcoming).

Khalida, a confident and sharp-witted woman from the south of the Netherlands, similarly explained to me: “I never said: ‘I’m not a Muslim’ to people that would judge that. Because it doesn’t feel necessary to do that. As long as I can live my life the way I want to, and stand for what I believe in, then that’s it”. She further concluded on behaviour and non-belief: “People know I don’t practice, but they also have deep respect and admiration for me because they know I am a good person”.¹³ Rabia, a young teacher, emphasised her family relations and values over the importance of talking about non-belief in a similar manner: “I think we share those common values we were raised with. How you treat people, how you treat the world. And when it comes down to it, it doesn’t really matter what you believe or don’t believe, even though someone might say it is, when it comes down to it, we are family”.¹⁴ Rabia, like Zehra and Elea, had never spoken explicitly about inner convictions to her family, but had not found it necessary to do so either.

The above examples show that the differences between perceiving concealment of change in conviction and lifestyle, hinges on the relative performance of religion and the value that is attached to performing conviction. Whilst for some, differences were perceived but felt like it could not be performed, such as for Laila, others could perform their new convictions and lifestyle without having to explicate those in terms of belief in God or ‘being Muslim’. Therefore, the lines between self and others were not really noticeable or experienced, and therefore less relevant to be discussed with one’s surroundings.

However, those who did perceive difference between self and religious others, explained to me that it was precisely because they did not want to emphasise or materialise this divide that they would not testify to their non-belief to others, and particularly family. I met Naveed in Camden in London for a drink. He explained the difficulties with non-belief and moving out of Islam: “It is hard, because to renounce Islam, also means to renounce your culture, and your family (...) You know your whole family is a Muslim, and to deny that would be to deny them”. Even though he was ‘quite confident’ his sister was in the same place as him with regards to religion, he reckoned: “I’d be cautious about outright saying I don’t believe in God. (...) It’s like admitting. You cross like a barrier,

¹¹ All quotes from personal interview, Leiden, 7 August 2017.

¹² Personal interview, Amsterdam, 22 September 2017.

¹³ Personal interview, Breda, 18 August, 2017.

¹⁴ Personal interview, Rotterdam, 13 July 2017.

in terms of family".¹⁵ Naveed had therefore never openly spoken about his atheism with his family or community.

Aarini, a British-Bangladeshi girl, explained this as the intertwinement of religion and cultural norms. When I asked her about talking to her parents about her non-belief, she replied: "I would never say to my mother: 'I'm an atheist'. (...) It feels almost offensive. It is more like an affront than a stigma (...) It would feel like saying to a group of people like, 'I'm out! I don't want what you have'". She stressed that it was not so much about her family rejecting her if she were to announce her lack of belief, rather it would be her family thinking that she would not want to be a part of them: "It would be like I'm saying 'no' to my roots".¹⁶ For Aarini, it was noteworthy that throughout her teenage years, she had attempted to subvert the socio-religiously imposed rules and tried to perform a non-Islamic lifestyle (also see: Vlieg forthcoming), however, like Ilyas said in the title of this chapter: saying out loud one does not believe would have been a step beyond all that.

Indeed, Ilyas similarly considered his parents' feelings and the categorical divide *they* would perceive if he were to tell them. He had seen his parents' disappointment when he would come home drunk or smoke weed. He explained:

"I think over the years, it's not about that I don't believe in God, but it [non-belief] just kept that distance. And that kind of works for both of us. That's that. I don't really feel the need to tell them that. I don't feel like it's kind of hiding something from them. Because I feel like that they know it on some level, but they're not ready to really engage with that. They are not ready to engage with *me*. So why would I tell them?"¹⁷

Testimony in conversion literature has primarily been analysed as a means for the (de)convert him or herself to perform and confirm a new self, in front of self and others. However, in the case of Ilyas and others I spoke to, it appeared to be perceived as reversed. Instead of speech or testifying to unbelief to be a confirmation of difference for them, it was actually the 'other' that would assign that label on the basis of their testimony, if they were to speak explicitly about non-belief.

In my interlocutors' considerations to not speak about their non-belief towards others in the private sphere various factors were at stake. First, there were those who actively hid their non-belief in both behaviour and speech. The consideration would be that if they were to testify to their religious change, it could ruin relationships or trigger threats. Second, others reckoned that they themselves did not experience any difference between them and their loved ones, and therefore, the topic could remain untouched. There was no need to testify to one's non-belief or change in lifestyle since it would only provoke unnecessary animosity. Last, some reckoned that even though they desired to testify to one's change in convictions, they emphasised the affront it would cause since they would be perceived as to openly reject not only religion, but also one's family and values one was raised with. In the concealment of some of my interlocutors' religious transformations, we see considerations over testimony that are about its perception and consequences for relationships, rather than what it could mean for them in their personal development.

4. Private Disclosure: Speech as Demarcation

Those who did explicitly inform their loved ones about their desires for a different lifestyle or new existential convictions received vastly different responses. Some told their family or friends intentionally, they made a statement or started the conversation, others 'were found out' and had to cope with the unintended consequences. For some this was problematic, others (gradually) received ample support from their religious surroundings, but mostly it was a constant negotiation in flux, rather than a fixed reality.

Haroon grew up in a Muslim majority community in the north of Britain: "Eventually I called my best friend and told her I'm not really a Muslim, (...) but it wasn't that big of an issue, because I didn't really need to tell anyone. As a male person, what I wear and stuff is going to be the same [as]

¹⁵ Personal interview, London, 16 November 2017.

¹⁶ Personal interview, London, 14 November 2017.

¹⁷ Personal interview, London, 8 November 2017.

before I become an apostate". Note how Haroon gendered his experience: nothing much on the outside changes for boys, so what is believed does not make much of a difference. The response he received was that he "was going through a phase", and therefore "they were not so outraged". Again, this resonates my Iraqi friend who described a similar discourse of 'straying'. In Haroon's teens and the first years after he had become an 'apostate' he had not felt the need to tell anyone about his unbelief, but as he grew older, went to university, and searched online more, he realised that: "that made me more comfortable in thinking that I'm not the only one, and there's people who've gone through much more hardship than me". Having told a few people, and having become more active online, his family eventually found out 'he was no longer Muslim'. He recalled: "At the time I'll be quite honest, I didn't mind that much. [My dad] pried, but I just, I never spoke to him at university. It was difficult for me [to tell him] but in hindsight not the best thing. And then my mum found out. That was harder. (...) I wish I hadn't told them. They were very upset". When at university just after he had told his family about his non-belief, his mother was diagnosed with cancer: "so a lot of people in my community said that that was a consequence of me turning ex-Muslim". Haroon reflected on explicating his non-belief to his family as something he would not do again. Furthermore: "I decided not to talk about my religious stuff after that (...) Since my mum, I've made an effort not to talk about it and no one asks me about it. But I think it is one of those things that people kind of know. They don't want to know the truth I suppose, and I don't want to have that question aimed at me. So that's how it is at the moment".¹⁸

These experiences of friends' responding that one was just 'going through a phase', being blamed for the family's misfortunes, and non-conformism being the elephant in the room were exemplary for others too. Mahira did not know that she 'was' something until she came to Britain for her studies. From a Pakistani family, she had always felt she was different from her family, but had not been able to perform or even identify that difference:

"I have been living in a closet. I was practicing. I used to get away with it when nobody is watching me. (...) I just knew: because I opened my eyes in a Muslim family, this is what I have to do for the rest of my life (...) I didn't refuse them. Initially I was afraid of losing them as well, because I knew my parents would not accept me the way I am. "

Note how she connects the continued performance of a Muslim identity with 'not refusing them', and the open performance of a non-believing self as being refused: "It actually happened that they didn't [accept me], when they found out that I have lost my faith in God (...) they broke all ties with me. They don't really talk to me, they don't want to see my face". It was not until she went to university where she learned about the term and identity of 'ex-Muslim' that she was able to perform her inner convictions. However, to her great sadness, this was why she could not move back to her family: "I know for a fact my parents love me. (...) But when they think about my lifestyle, or when they think about the transformation in my personality, that makes them hate me. (...) Everything has changed. Just because my ideology changed, their love for me has changed".¹⁹

When considering speaking about perceived differences, others explained to me that although family may have been quite shocked to start, from the moment that there was disclosure it became a journey together to develop, build, and create new spaces of belonging without believing, growing up, and for parents to let go. I met Maya in a quiet coffee house in central London. We sat downstairs in some comfortable armchairs and her stories came out quickly and fluently, but always reflexively:

"When I've been saying I'm an ex-Muslim, [they think] that I've been siding with the Westerners, and with the enemy. (...) I understand that there are very real grievances there. People in the UK, especially Muslims, people can feel like they are under attack from the West in a lot of ways. And for you to be seen as to be kind of rejecting that identity that is already stigmatised (...) [you are] a traitor to your identity. "

However, for Maya herself it was not that clear cut: "I am an ex-Muslim, I was a Muslim for 18 years of my life (...) It's there and it's part of me, and just because I don't believe in the religion, I can't really pretend that it hasn't influenced me". She contemplated on the matters of performing a

¹⁸ All quotes from personal interview, Leeds, 1 February 2018.

¹⁹ All quotes from personal interview, London, 5 February 2018.

non-believing identity, such as ex-Muslim: “No one will say: ‘this is Maya, she is an ex-Muslim’. (...) No, nobody talks about her. (...) It’s those people, we [Muslims] just pretend they never existed. (...) Although my family know I’m an ex-Muslim, it’s that what it’s going to be like? Am I just going to disappear from the narrative?”²⁰ In Maya’s experience, people who pronounce their unbelief are perceived to be so radically different and to have crossed enemy lines, that ties can be unilaterally cut or narratives entirely ignored.

Having explained this discourse of potential rejection of those who are ‘ex-Muslim’, Maya continued that despite these worries, she had told her mother that she no longer believed. This had been a very emotional conversation, which her mother actively tried to ‘sweep under the rug’: “there was a lot of crying involved, a lot of being seen as a traitor (...) But difficult as it would be, there is always that level of acceptance between me and my family, my immediate family, which is my mom and my brother. So I feel safe at home, to speak out against things”. For Maya and her family it has become possible and important to talk about thorny issues especially when it would concern religion, women’s rights, and gender equality:

“It is important for me to push back (...) If I don’t, then who will? I do challenge things all the time, (...) and I’ll get a backlash. But luckily, it’s becoming like, ‘Oh, Maya has her opinions, we don’t agree with them, but we’re going to let her have them’. That’s one aspect of it, and that’s fantastic, that I can have that discussion, and speak my mind. I have the freedom of thought and expression in my house. “

But this ends at the front door: “I can talk about not believing in God inside my home, but I cannot leave my house in a pair of shorts”.²¹

Maya had experienced the gradual change in attitudes from loved ones when it would concern the explication of religious differences between self and others. She was not the only one: the continuous struggle of reconciling the need for belonging to family with the desire to talk about issues that had previously been taboo—i.e., unbelief, leaving the parental home, relationships, lifestyle—was often in constant development. Zehra, for example, explained that it was difficult to tell her parents that she had a Dutch boyfriend, but that that had made ‘the other stuff’ easier: “They responded relatively calm. That’s because they transformed along with me slowly. So that I stopped believing, or that I drank alcohol, they gradually got accustomed to that, so it was not such a big deal. So, I think it is very important that you share this stuff”.²² Throughout our conversation, Zehra emphasised the need for personal striving and breaking of taboos within the family.

Intertwined with the above, where people experienced development with their surroundings over newly found convictions and/or lifestyle, my interlocutors also changed their own attitudes towards religion and Islam as time went on. It was quite common for people to develop strong anti-religious sentiments in the early days, whilst these would often soften later in life. These considerations were strongly entangled with the desire for testifying of those newly found convictions and perceived differences with others.

Haroon, for example, elaborated on his initial shock having lost his faith: “Initially I didn’t have the motivation to get up. You feel like you’ve been lied to. (...) What people are preaching... hypocrisy becomes much more obvious. You just start to see flaws. And although they’re human, you see them as religious faults”. For Haroon, it was the initial couple of years that he saw these faults which he discussed with his friend: “that’s all we talked about: ‘oh the community is a mess, look what they do! Look how they treat this girl!’ That kind of talk. Ideally, you don’t want to be like that. Obviously, that needs to happen because of that big step you’ve taken. But now... I don’t really talk about it much. I mean, sure we make jokes, and I might make a subtle statement here or there, but I think I’m in a more healthy state”. When contemplating speaking out for change in that community, he responded: “Some of the things are screwed up, but my voice is unfortunately not going to make

²⁰ All quotes from personal interview, London, 23 January 2018.

²¹ Personal interview, London, 23 January 2018.

²² Personal interview, Leiden, 7 August 2017.

much of an impact. I'm selfish in the sense that if I want to move out, live my life, and hopefully bring my kids up, I can do that in a good way".²³

Haroon's experiences of first having strong opinions about religion, Islam, and community resonated with many of my interlocutors. For example, Miray tried for much of her adult life to convince her mother of the fallacies of religion. She recalled the final conversation on the matter:

"Always we fought, and always she left. Until at some point I just said to her: 'Mum I just don't believe anymore'. And then she said to me: 'that is your business (...) I just don't want to talk about this with you anymore. Don't believe, I don't care. But just leave me be. I'm an old woman, I don't know any better. Leave me be.' And I tried so hard to make my mother think the same way as me. So stupid in hind sight! I regret it so much, just leave her be! So much stress, so many fights, not worth it."

I met Kadin in his flat in Amsterdam-West in the summer of 2017. A 45-year-old teacher, he reflected on his relatively recent journey out of faith. After explaining his long intellectual struggle, he concluded: "I lost my basis really, and that is how God died in my head (...) Emptiness had come where God used to be". For quite some time he still practiced and pretended to be religious, to believe, but slowly he also let go of these performances: "First I was very critical talking to people about faith. I could be very harsh, very critical, very dismissive". These discussions came to the fore especially when he was confronted with his non-conformism: "When my sister would be: 'why are you not praying?' or someone sends me a message with prayers and stuff. Before I could get really annoyed, but now, I see it as a token that [someone] thinks of me I guess. But initially, you are not neutral towards that. You want to get rid of it, but it keeps coming back to you". Kadin complained about how Muslims used to assume he was not well informed about Islam, which made him even angrier at the time. However, now: "I understand that people need that (...) I am much less dismissive, if people want to tell me why they believe in God? Fine. I'm not going to tell them otherwise. (...) I only debate them when they try to convince me".²⁴ Despite his claims that he was more relaxed towards religion now, after this he continued to outline at length his arguments to me which to him proved Islam false.

Indeed, the most common form of speaking out about religion and testifying to one's unbelief was geared towards immediate surroundings which was often considered to be more important in the beginning than later on in life. Especially when newly found convictions would be perceived to create difference between self and loved ones, it could become pertinent to discuss these matters in order to overcome feeling 'on the outside' and wanting to perform one's true non-believing identity to those who knew them best. This was often paired with the desire to speak about issues they had with religion or socio-religious rules. Like Kadin, some mentioned that they would argue with their surroundings if or when it would become relevant. For Elea, for example, this point would be reached when her parents or siblings would suggest Islamic rituals or practices, such as circumcision or attending *madrassa*, to her own children. Otherwise, she and her family would not discuss religious matters anymore. Khalida similarly elaborated that whilst generally not debating religion anymore: "At a party, my uncles hid my shoes that I had left in the hall. [They did that] because they were heels, and heels are supposedly sensual and sexual. I was pissed off! I said to them: 'You know what? This is your sick mind! These are shoes, and you are perverts!' They won't debate me, because they know I'm right. (...) Man, I can't stand the hypocrisy!"²⁵

5. New Identities? Claiming Space through Public Performance

Whilst the previous sections elaborated on speaking about non-belief or non-conformism to one's immediate surroundings, this section will explore the realm of publically speaking out. I will firstly introduce Hassan [real name], who has been active on social media in discussing with Muslims and non-Muslims matters of faith, religion, and doubt. Second, I will briefly touch upon online

²³ Personal interview, Leeds, 1 February 2018.

²⁴ All quotes from personal interview, Amsterdam, 23 June 2017.

²⁵ Personal interview, Breda, 18 August 2017.

testimonials as part of the performance of new identities. Third, I will share some of the contemplations to *not* speak out. The vast majority of my interlocutors would not aspire any form of public presence for either private reasons, or in consideration of dominant public discourses. Lastly, I will briefly explore what happened when identities were formed specifically not in relation to religion.

In British online circles of ‘ex-Muslims’ Hassan Radwan is quite well-known. Having co-founded the online forum for the Council for Ex-Muslims in Britain (CEMB), he had since taken some distance from the organisation and was particularly active on Facebook, posting his doubts and questions about religion and in particular Islam. He was a scholar of Islam and fluent in Arabic, and his YouTube videos were therefore considered to be a legitimate authority on explaining or analysing Quranic scripture and Hadith by his (sceptical) followers. After having come out in private to some ‘quite religious’ friends and family, he realised:

Actually, nobody is going to kill me, so I’m going to be upfront about it. And you know, soon after that I decided. Because people were asking me on the forum about it. So, I changed my name to Hassan Radwan, I put my picture as my icon, and I said ‘Look, I’m me. This is who I am’. And I actually wrote my story on the forum. And I decided, I said: ‘I’m making a conscious effort now. (...) I want to be open, I don’t want to hide anymore.

Rather than critiquing Islam or religion, Hassan said to strive to open up discussions on sensitive matters between Muslims and non-believers: “If you look at my videos, I never attack Muslims, I never am nasty. And even when I’m criticising, I always try to make it really balanced and fair. And I always leave people to think for themselves”.²⁶

For a time, he was actively making videos: “and then I got tired, because it kind of, it’s like I was flogging a dead horse. Same old questions kept coming up again and again. And I said: ‘I don’t really want to be part of the Council [CEMB] anymore, I don’t like the label. It was a useful label, (...) But I don’t want to be known as ex-Muslim anymore’”. Reflecting on his motivations for speaking out about religion and Islam the way he had done, Hassan shared some of his emotions: “I wanted to have a say in maybe trying to influence the reform of Islam. (...) And I felt maybe, because I know the majority of Muslims are good decent people, they are my family, they are my friends, and I don’t want to leave them in the hands of the extremists. I want them to be able to use their humanity, and pick and choose as they feel, without feeling they have to do ‘all or nothing’”. He continued: “In the long run, we would be better off without religion. (...) Now I’m tired. I don’t care anymore. I’m done with trying to be a hero. I’m done with trying to solve the world’s problems. I’m done.”²⁷ At the time of the conversation I had with Hassan, he had recently experienced a period of convinced non-belief, and he was quite dejected by it all. Hassan’s speaking out, his initiation of the dialogue, was founded in a desire for performance of a ‘real’ self, as well as a desire for reform of Islam and bringing about change for those who move out of Islam. This was often by the means of attempting to subvert certain Islamic discourses about ‘ex-Muslims’, by stressing humanity and the plight of those who moved away from religion.

Tariq had similar motivations for his online presence and speaking out about Islam and religion. When first realising he no longer believed, he uploaded an online testimonial to the CEMB forum. It tells his story from his 16-year old perspective on what it was like to ‘lose his faith’ and ‘coming out’ to his high school. In this testimonial, he seeks advice on the matter that he had not yet told his parents. Upon reflection as to why he wrote it he said: “I thought the world needed to read, and other people on the forum would write things”, emphasising both the urge to perform his identity as well as pointing to the creation of a narrative genre (also see Van Nieuwkerk 2006). During that time, he also posted controversial posts on Facebook: “It was kind of one of those things where I wasn’t really mature to sort of let people be. I wanted to express myself, I wanted to be... I have always been making jokes, and it is not going to stop me, I’m not going to hide my identity”. Furthermore, he wanted to claim a space, thereby defending his beliefs and identity:

²⁶ All quotes from personal interview, London, 4 November 2017.

²⁷ Personal interview, London, 4 November 2017.

"I was kind of like: 'if you are going to talk amongst yourselves how I'm going to hell, then I'm going to poke through your religion. I also, I wanted people to know, I don't want to hide, this is what I am. (...) I needed to be vocal about it, because you kind of need to form your own place, your own identity.'" ²⁸

After having 'come out' towards his peers, his speaking out was now geared towards the defence of his own space. Instead of his peers taking over or reclaiming Tariq and his convictions, Tariq defended his own identity by engaging in the debate, often online. His standpoint was simultaneously the performance and defence of his identity as 'ex-Muslim'. In line with the above described 'curve', at the time of our conversation Tariq was much less preoccupied with these matters and focusing on his university degree and music.

Anthropologist E. Marshall Brooks (2018) noted in his study into ex-Mormons in the United States how exit stories and testimonials can be "a constitutive element of an ongoing politics of identity making for those transitioning into the social category of nonbeliever" (p. 189). He analysed these stories not only as constitutive of identity formation in relation to the formerly religious selves, but also as a "strategic counter-hegemonic discourse" by which ex-Mormons try to "strategically inhabit their new social positions" (p. 189) on the margins of their former in-group. They attempt not only to build a space for oneself, but moreover, they wish to strategically challenge stereotypes. In the above examples, we see similar strategies come to the fore. On the one hand, in private debates people attempted to claim a space, whilst intellectually challenging convictions and stereotyped judgements. On the other hand, through public testimonies, or in online debate people tried to perform a new self—testifying 'here I am'—whilst aiming for some sort of reform and more acceptance of non-belief.

There is a nuance between these public performances and the private debates as forms of speaking out. Although change, or 'reform' of people's attitudes was generally the goal, and all these expressions of identity were in one way or another about claiming a space for oneself outside of religion, the difference between Hassan and Tariq's stories, and those private challenges, was that they had a more public audience in mind rather than their private surroundings. Hassan, at some point, wanted to 'change the world', whilst Tariq felt that his story should be out there for people to read: "some people even cried". Furthermore, Tariq never told his parents explicitly about his non-belief. 'Coming out' towards his parents was a private matter, whilst speaking out towards his peers was a public performance. Both Tariq and Hassan wished to subvert certain discourses about 'ex-Muslims'—a stereotype that paints those who have left Islam as 'Islam bashing', angry, sexually promiscuous, drinking, and taking drugs. Rather, by engaging in conversation, telling one's story, or critically engaging with Islamic dogmas, they wished to establish change where Muslims would not be acceptant of those leaving Islam behind.

Although Tariq had initially found it desirable to express his non-belief to the outside world, either anonymously via a testimonial or later openly to his peers through expressing his opinions on religion and Islam, others felt less inclined to do so. Reasons for this were both private and public concerns. When I asked Naveed about speaking about his non-belief publically, he replied:

"The question is, why would you, say it out loud. Why does it have to be such an extroverted thing? So I guess for some people it is. (...) Kind of like me buying pork, that was an internal thing, a statement. Some people do need to make that statement publicly (...) But in that case they would come up against a lot of backlash from family and friends. And it would, things would just become more and more difficult. So like first of all, why would you do that. Say you do that, then it is difficult, definitely. I can imagine it being difficult for me (...) from a very liberal Muslim family, so I can really imagine that it can be bad." ²⁹

As Naveed explained earlier as well, to him Islam was still in many ways part of his life, speaking out against it was like crossing another barrier, which could not be undone. Like he explained his concealment towards his family, he reckoned there was little need for expressing these things publicly neither. The above quote showed how to him, it would become particularly difficult to move

²⁸ All quotes from personal interview, Manchester, 31 January 2018.

²⁹ Personal interview, Manchester, 31 January 2018.

out of Islam *if one would say it out loud in public* but chiefly for private concerns. The performance of non-belief to others in the form of speech was perceived as a particular affront that was best avoided.

There were also people who were concerned with politics when considering speaking out, and not wanting to ‘feed into a narrative of islamophobia’ and thereby conform to certain expectations of speaking out against one’s former religion. This can be considered to be the other side of the coin of critiquing Islam or Muslims, or speaking out for the freedom of religion, that is, the freedom to leave religion. The main concern was that one’s narrative or testimony of leaving Islam would be seen as a ‘native testimonial’ to be hijacked by ‘secular crusaders’. Eymen explained how ‘social-right’ (i.e., Geert Wilders and his Party for Freedom) would interfere with a message for the plight of ex-Muslims: “They can present themselves as the good guys: ‘we can support those poor people [ex-Muslims]. See, we have no issue with foreigners, it is Islam which is the problem!’”.³⁰ When I asked Yedder, a public figure for Amazigh activism,³¹ about speaking publicly about his non-belief he replied: “The media wants the odd one, they have no stake in you saying that it is a growing phenomenon, or you saying: ‘look there is also a lot of acceptance for people who are not religious’”. He added: “Currently the climate around the debate on religion and politics, it is mostly Islam-bashing, and I don’t feel like that. I don’t want to be used as gunpowder for that”.³²

Sara, a British student who had spent some of her childhood in the UAE, explained trying to balance critique of Islam with being accused of Islamophobia: “I try my best as possible to try and separate those [critique Islam vs critiquing Muslims]. Because people might misconstrue it, think I’m being negative towards Muslims and that someone might use it. Whereas I did not want that. I want people to stand up and question ideas”.³³ Maya resonated this, but also emphasised the need to reform communities, not just dogma. She was particularly critical of the people claiming Islam is peaceful and accepting:

“If you are such a peaceful and feminist religion, why am I as an ex-Muslim woman (...) silenced for speaking out about things? (...) But it’s tough because I feel like Islam is under attack, we see that all the time (...) But women, we stay quiet, because it would feel like it is how we protect our religion. But I don’t feel there is enough room for criticism of Islam. (...) So when you start to criticise or challenge or question, you’re immediately just thrown out of the group.”³⁴

Zehra summarised her position on speaking out and critiquing Islam: “I used to want to kick against it all. But now I notice my attitude has changed (...) Because it has an adverse effect. Before, it was personal, that I had to free myself from the community. But now, the danger is coming from the right-wing extremist politics, more than from Muslim fundamentalism. I find that scarier.” In line with others she reckoned the current political climate in the Netherlands did not allow for prominent critique of Muslims or Islam, or public testimony of her journey out of religion, due to the risk of such narratives being appropriated as a native informant. Later, she elaborated: “That dude Ehsan Jami, I mean I really thought, it is also some common sense here, ok?”³⁵

³⁰ Personal interview, Nijmegen, 20 February 2018.

³¹ The Berber (Tamazight) speaking areas of Morocco have historically been culturally neglected by the State, which has a nationalist discourse of emphasizing the links to ‘high-culture’ Arab-Islamic civilization. Hereby the cultural heritage of the Amazigh has been seen as a threat to Moroccan national unity. Whilst there have been significant reforms, such as the allowance of Tamazight being taught in the Berber regions to students in 2004 and the recognition of the status of the language as co-official in 2011, structural neglect and social injustices have not been overcome. Yedder was actively involved in the Dutch Amazigh activist movement at the time of our interview.

³² All quotes from personal interview, Utrecht, 18 July 2017.

³³ Personal interview, London, 21 November 2017.

³⁴ Personal interview, London, 23 January 2018.

³⁵ Personal interview, Leiden, 7 August 2017; Ehsan Jami was the founder of the briefly existing Dutch Committee for Ex-Muslims in 2007. At the time, he advocated for the recognition of the supposedly suppressed ‘ex-Muslims’ in the Netherlands by the Islamic community, and for others to stand up and claim a space and voice by joining him. The committee, however, was dissolved the next year due to a lack of interest. According to Jami, this was due to the fact that it was considered too dangerous for ‘ex-Muslims’ to

It is important to note a couple of things in the above examples. First, speaking out against Islam was sometimes perceived to be related to stigmatisation of Muslims in Europe. This was considered something not only to be avoided, but also not intended. Some of my interlocutors made a clear distinction between wanting reform and question ideas, rather than being intolerant towards Muslims. This position was often construed in opposition to ‘the social right’, or other anti-Islamic voices. Second, there were people who differentiated between wanting to carve out a space for themselves in relation to their former religion on the one hand, and unreflectively critiquing Islam in light of their religious transformation on the other. The latter was perceived to be conforming to secular expectations of now speaking freely against Islam after religion is lost in aid of anti-Islamic sentiments and secularist politics, as mirrored by references to for example Jami or Hirsi Ali.

Lastly, there were those to whom it was (no longer) relevant to speak about religion or non-belief: there was no barrier to be crossed or non-religious identity to be performed. This was particularly relevant for those who developed their identities emphatically *not* in relation to religion (also see Vlieg 2019). They also referred to wanting to speak out about other issues and performing other identities, both publicly and privately. Eymen, for example, had joined the Dutch Antifa movement, speaking out across cultural and religious boundaries against inequality and injustice: “[Leaving religion] is not relevant for my activism. (...) I would however like to speak about leaving [Turkish] nationalism, but being Muslim? No.”³⁶ Elea thought that if she were to speak out about anything, it would not be about religion per se, rather: “I don’t want to jump on the barricades. If I do feel an urge, it would be about women’s rights, not because I want to push against religion, but because I feel that women and children need protection. But that would be somewhere else than the Netherlands”.³⁷ Others said that they had embraced their ethnic identity or that religion was simply not important anymore, like Amina explained: “I never talk about it, it’s like eating bread every day, it is just a way of life”.³⁸

6. Conclusions

Within the study of conversion, testimony has previously been analysed as both cultivating and reaffirming one’s piety, as well as a tool or technique for making sense of an old and new self in light of newly found convictions. The act of speaking, especially in front of others as performance, has often taken a central role in the study of religious transition. Also in the case of deconversion, testimonials have been analysed as such. In the above, my interlocutors, on the other hand, showed that testifying of one’s unbelief did not necessarily function in aid of their formation of selfhood, nor was it required to reaffirm one’s non-belief. This does not mean that they did not have to make sense and negotiate over past selves and new convictions, behaviours, and knowledges, rather this process was often done privately.³⁹ In the above I have tried to show that testimony as performative speech, i.e., speaking out loud about religious change, was considered to have the potential to trigger the experience of categorical division in the other: you no longer belong to us by saying it out loud. First, then, concealment of change in knowledges, practices, and/or behaviours towards one’s surroundings was common, and was sometimes hard and problematic. For others, it was about those expectations that people had of their families and immediate surroundings and the fact that some of my interlocutors themselves did not ‘feel different’: there was no direct motivation to address the matter, since it could provoke unwanted animosity between self and loved ones.

speak out, whilst according to other Dutch former Muslims it was due to the fact it was not so much an issue in the Netherlands and that Jami’s approach was considered counter-productive (e.g., Jafari and Taebi 2007).

³⁶ Personal interview, Nijmegen, 20 February 2018.

³⁷ Personal interview, Amsterdam, 22 September 2017.

³⁸ Personal interview, Utrecht, 27 July 2017.

³⁹ I do not contest that narrative formation can aid the creation and maintenance of identity and self. For example, sometimes, the interviews I conducted with my interlocutors were perceived as technique of ‘making sense’, since they had not previously spoken about these matters openly or it was the first time they were asked to reflect on their experiences.

Furthermore, there were different nuances in considering either privately or publically ‘speaking out’ or testifying of one’s religious transformation. Privately, there were concerns over being perceived and accused by loved ones as having crossed enemy lines. Many people who disclosed their change in knowledges, behaviours, or practices to their private surroundings often thought that it was more important ‘in the beginning’ than it was later on in life. In practice, the experience of such a curve meant that many people found it necessary to speak about issues of religion early on in their transformation than later on.⁴⁰

Whilst contemplations over speaking out publically also related to not wanting to draw lines between self and loved ones, there were other issues at stake here too. First, in the context of dominant secularist discourses in modern day Europe with regards to the contested status of Islam in the public spheres, these considerations were also often about not wanting to pledge allegiance to the other side of the ‘incommensurable divide’. Most of my interlocutors, in fact, found themselves straddling both sides. In addition, the feared appropriation of their narratives by ‘the social right’, or the ‘secularist crusaders’ as my interlocutors called them, should be addressed.

The expectations of speaking out as being part of a secular modern constitution, as perceived by my interlocutors, become particularly evident in the popular reception of so-called native testimonials, or the embracing of ‘ex-Muslim’ narratives in the media as well as the discourse they have created that my interlocutors regularly referred to. These native testimonials are highly scripted, often presenting Islam as oppressive, backward, and pre-modern, whilst the newly found convictions of non-religion are presented as Enlightened, free, and modern. However, as the above has shown, presenting such a narrative was rarely desired. Lived realities did not necessarily reflect the native testimonial which dictates a linear journey from Islamic darkness to secular modernity. Rather, the religious transformations my interlocutors experienced were coloured by ambiguity and blurriness over the lines between what was considered religious or secular.

What my interlocutors thus showed, is that when moving out of Islam testifying of change in convictions would be considered almost as an expression of conversion to secularism. To be clear, these are expectations that my interlocutors ascribed to their own families and communities. Contrastively, the above has attempted to outline that difference between self and religious other was rarely perceived as dramatically as a ‘conversion to secularity’. When considering speaking out about change in knowledges, practices, and behaviours, their contemplations mostly concerned the boundaries that may be crossed, the alienation that one would risk, and the potential perception of shifting allegiance in light of religious-political discourses. More significantly, the presumption that accompanies ‘freedom of speech’ as being a flagship of the secular modern, and therefore a trait that the former Muslim may now be expected to possess, was weighed carefully in light of a desire for familial belonging and the lack of need of performing what could potentially be perceived as differences between self and others.⁴¹ Additionally, when speaking out was considered ‘a step beyond not believing’ which may cause affront, and seen as a general change of allegiance which was not always desired, freedom of speech was no longer a secular modern value to aspire to, but a (violent) performative act which may cause to alienate the self from others.

Lastly, when people would speak out or testify towards friends and family, or publically, change or emancipation of familial practices or religious dogma was generally aspired. Whilst this particular genre of both speaking out as activism—as differentiated from the native testimonial—warrants further elaboration, those who actively engaged in conversations about non-belief or breaking socio-

⁴⁰ This is also related to growing up, coming of age, and being able to carve out a (non-religious) space and life for oneself, in which difference with surroundings becomes less of a daily issue. Also see Vlieg (forthcoming).

⁴¹ I wish to note here that these contemplations that I have presented are relevant to the majority of my direct interlocutors. Indeed, there are of course also narratives and public voices which do wish to explicitly, publically, and loudly embrace secular values of freedom of speech and freedom from religion. For an extensive elaboration on these ‘secularist ex-Muslim voices’ in both the Netherlands and the UK see Vlieg (2018).

religious rules with either the public or in private, mostly did so with careful consideration of the risk of discursive appropriation of their narrative, as well as their familial relationships.

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