

Documenting Conversion: Framings of Female Converts to Islam in British and Swiss documentaries

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Documenting conversion: Framings of female converts to Islam in British and Swiss documentaries

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw**Lucy Spoliar**

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Abstract

In response to the phenomenon of women converting to Islam, a body of research has emerged, engaging with the question, ‘Why are Western women, raised in liberal contexts, converting to Islam?’ This line of enquiry is not limited to academic literature. In recent years, converts to Islam have faced intense scrutiny in mainstream media across Europe. This article contributes an analysis of documentaries to the study of representations of female converts to Islam, focusing particularly on the British documentary *Make Me a Muslim* (2014) and the Swiss documentary *Les Converties d’Allah* (2017). We suggest that comparing these two documentaries illuminates certain common narrative threads in media representations of female converts to Islam across different European contexts. In this article, we firstly situate this research within existing literature on gender and conversion to Islam and outline our approach to the study of documentaries on women’s conversion to Islam. Secondly, we analyse the two documentaries, focusing on their shared concerns, namely gender equality and women’s oppression, and the familial environment of the female convert. We argue that paying attention to how female converts are represented illuminates some of the ways in which European framings of the ‘in-betweenness’ of female converts to Islam create notions of female converts as ‘vulnerable-fanatics’ prone to ‘radicalisation’, and threatened by ‘oppressive’ Islam. We demonstrate how female converts participating in documentaries at times complicate and talk back to apprehensions regarding equality, oppression and radicalisation. Finally, we focus in a similar way on understandings of female converts as ‘troublemakers’ within their family environments. Throughout the analysis, we show

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how the figure of the female convert as vulnerable-fanatic and as family troublemaker is gendered and interlaced with concerns about essentialised cultural difference and radicalisation.

Keywords

Conversion, documentaries, Europe, gender, Islam, representation

Since the turn of the millennium, an unexpected pattern has caught the interest of researchers and students across various disciplines. Contrary to forecasts of secularisation in the European context, and against the grain of the contemporary stigmatisation of Islam and Muslims in European public debates, a number of formerly non-Muslim men and women convert to Islam. In response to the phenomenon of women converting to Islam, a body of research has emerged, engaging with the question, 'Why are Western women, raised in liberal contexts, converting to Islam?' (McGinty, 2007; Van Nieuwkerk, 2006). This line of enquiry is not limited to academic literature, however. In recent years, converts to Islam have also faced intense scrutiny in mainstream media across Europe (Sealy, 2017), with newspaper headlines such as 'Swapping Raving for Praying' (La, *Grazia Daily*, 2015) and 'Why ARE so many modern British career women converting to Islam?' (*Daily Mail*, 2010) abounding. At the same time, this discussion has begun to appear in documentaries across Europe. While framings of Muslims in print media and news reporting have begun to be scrutinised, little literature exists on portrayals of formerly non-Muslim converts to Islam generally and none on representations in documentaries specifically.¹

This article contributes an analysis of documentaries to the study of representations of converts to Islam, focusing particularly on the British documentary *Make Me a Muslim* (henceforth MMM) (2014) and the Swiss documentary *Les Converties d'Allah* (henceforth LCA) (2017). We have chosen these two documentaries for comparison for a number of reasons. Firstly, the two documentaries share certain structural similarities: both are hour-long documentaries produced for TV broadcasting, and intercut footage of interviews within private, domestic settings with clips of political or public events. Both documentaries focus on the biographical narratives of five individual female converts. Furthermore, the comparison proves interesting because, although the British and Swiss contexts are not entirely socio-politically analogous, certain narrative threads concerning female conversion feature in both. While there is a considerable body of literature on conversion to Islam in the British context, the Swiss context remains largely unexamined. Rather than asking why Western women are converting to Islam, we find LCA and MMM useful analytical sources for 'turning the lens back' on Western narratives, asking why certain questions are posed, and not others. However, this article also recognises the potential of documentaries to deconstruct such narratives, and give a voice to misunderstood or marginalised members of society.

The article is structured as follows. Firstly, we situate this research within existing literature on gender and conversion to Islam and outline our approach to the study of documentaries on women's conversion to Islam. Secondly, we analyse MMM and LCA, focusing on two of their shared concerns, namely gender equality and women's

oppression, and the familial environment of the female convert. Based on our analysis, we argue that paying attention to how female converts are represented illuminates some of the ways in which European framings of the ‘in-betweenness’ of female converts to Islam create notions of female converts as ‘vulnerable-fanatics’ prone to ‘radicalisation’, and threatened by ‘oppressive’ Islam. We then demonstrate how female converts participating in documentaries at times complicate and talk back to apprehensions regarding equality, oppression and radicalisation. Finally, we focus in a similar way on understandings of female converts as ‘troublemakers’ within their family environments. Throughout the analysis, we show how the figure of the female convert as vulnerable-fanatic and as family troublemaker is gendered and interlaced with concerns about essentialised cultural difference and radicalisation.

Studying gender and conversion to Islam in documentaries

According to conversion studies scholars Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian, conversion is rarely, if ever, framed as a ‘neutral act’. Instead, it tends to be imagined as establishing new boundaries, and transgressing pre-existing religious, political, social and cultural boundaries (Rambo and Farhadian, 2014). While this is the case across a range of religious traditions (Davidman, 1991; Klaver, 2011), conversion seems to be of particular interest for journalists and scholars alike ‘when the religion is Islam and the convert is female’ (Soutar, 2010: 4). This fascination with women converting to Islam can be explained in terms of a broad tendency to imagine Islam as a religion that oppresses women and thus stands in tension with ‘Western culture’ as a driving force in the emancipation of women. This model of Western, secular society as ‘emancipatory’ and religion (particularly Islam) as ‘oppressive’ has been extensively contested (Cady and Fessenden, 2013). Additionally, women are often characterised as ‘symbolic repositories of national identity’ in public discourse (Vom Bruck, 2008: 53). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that European media as well as academic research should be concerned by their ‘national symbols’ converting to a religion seen as contradicting the Western norm of gender equality.

There are three prevailing strands of explanation for the phenomenon of women converting to Islam in both media narratives and academic discourse on women’s conversion to Islam. Firstly, women’s conversion to Islam is framed in terms of the danger of potential ‘radicalisation’² (Bartoszewicz, 2013). Secondly, conversion to Islam is often explained in terms of individual biographies related to family ties (Hermansen, 2006). Thirdly, scholars seek to clarify how female converts might find, in Islam, a distinct form of gender equality (Van Nieuwkerk, 2006).

We approach the two documentaries by means of a critical discourse analysis. Discourse can be characterised as a system of representation that establishes tacit knowledge and delimits identity construction (Foucault, 1970), while subjectivity is best understood as formed through its interaction with ‘outside’ normativities shaped by culture and gender. Sociologist Sarah Bracke makes a compelling case for applying an Althusserian–Butlerian methodological approach to framings of Muslim women in contemporary public discourse. In this article, we are informed by the emphasis on *framings*, a concept first introduced by social theorist Erving Goffman, who coined the term ‘frame analysis’

(1974) as a way of understanding how life is organised. In 2003, media and communication scholars Stout and Buddenbaum picked up this thread, indicating that framing serves as a useful research lens when exploring 'the types of information that ultimately contribute to public opinion about particular religions' (Stout and Buddenbaum, 2003: 1). In recent years, this emphasis on framings in critical discourse analysis has generated fruitful analyses of the representation and regulation of religion and gender (especially in the case of Muslim women) in the European context (see Rosenberger and Sauer, 2011). In her research, Bracke explores the idea of a 'particular arrangement of secularization' that precludes Islam, by constructing a discursive dichotomy between the 'secular, emancipated us' and the 'religious, backward them' (Bracke, 2011: 30). Our analysis of the documentaries will demonstrate that, in a transgression of this dichotomy, converts are often framed as 'liminal' or 'in-between'; neither 'us' nor 'them' (Jensen, 2006; Turner, 1967). We will investigate this representation of liminality through exploring both linguistic and visual representations of converts, in order to reflect on the potential interplay between framings of converts' experiences and individual convert subjectivities.

Researchers in critical discourse studies (CDS) have already begun to recognise the potential of documentaries as analytical sources. Bateman, for example, points out that documentaries always make certain 'truth claims', while featuring 'potentially misleading or misdirecting... (audio)-visual representations' (Bateman, 2017: 613). This potential tension between visual representations and narrated framing renders documentaries a particularly useful source when exploring tacit knowledge. An additional layer of insight is provided by individual participants in the documentaries, who sometimes explicitly contest both visual and narrative truth claims. Somewhere at the 'border between information and entertainment', documentaries walk a fine line between telling an interesting story and representing a set of truth claims that correspond with, and inform, the viewer's accepted reality (Russell, 1999: 97). In this article, through a detailed transcription and close viewing of the two documentaries, we pay attention to presuppositions, indirect speech, and the distinctions between scripted and unscripted interactions (Flowerdew, 1999: 167). In what follows, our focus is twofold: we will explore both the discrepancies between language and visuals and the interplay between framings of converts and converts' responses to these framings. As such, our analysis will illuminate implicit assumptions in discourse on female conversion to Islam, and draw out the ways in which converts 'talk back' (Van den Brandt, 2019).

Documentaries on women's conversion to Islam in the European context

Before analysing *Make Me a Muslim* (2014) and *Les Converties d'Allah* (2017) in detail, let us first briefly examine the broader field in which these two documentaries are situated. Since 2000, there has been a proliferation of documentaries across Europe exploring conversion to Islam generally, and at times women's experiences specifically. In the French context alone, at least 15 documentaries, televised interviews and reportages have been produced examining Islam, conversion and gender. Titles such as *Voile Interdit* (Forbidden Veil) (2017), *Voile sur la République* (The Veiled Republic) (2009)

and *Identités Voilées* (Veiled Identities)³ (2004) reflect the preoccupation of French cultural productions with the issue of veiling. Documentaries in the French context also tend to focus on the broader themes of radicalisation and freedom, rather than converts' individual biographies.

In the German context, several recent documentaries engage with – and problematise – a particular model of 'Germanness', which precludes the conversion of native German women to Islam. For example, in *The Changing Face of Germany* (original title in English) (2014), convert Isabelle Wachter describes her conversion to Islam and explains how she experiences her identity as a Muslim woman in German society. In this documentary, the narrator is the convert herself, and her goal is to deconstruct binary framings of 'German' and 'Muslim'. Other productions in the German context are not so sympathetic to the convert, however. A short reportage entitled *Die Rolle der Frau im Islam* (The Role of Women in Islam) poses the deliberately provocative question 'Is man woman's superior?' While the author may intend to satirise framings of Islam as oppressive towards women, she nonetheless reiterates them. The Netherlands has generated an abundance of documentaries and reportages, such as the TV series *Van Hagelslag naar Halal* (2015) (From Chocolate Sprinkles to Halal), and the documentary *Ik en Mijn Moeder* (2011) (Me and My Mother), which also exemplify this model of Islam as contradicting 'Dutchness' and as potentially oppressive for women. The three prevailing trends of explaining and situating women's conversion to Islam – radicalisation, gender in/equality and family ties – also emerge in these documentaries. As we shall see in the case studies to follow, these motifs are not always mutually exclusive.

From here we turn to the British documentary *Make Me a Muslim* and the Swiss documentary *Les Converties d'Allah*. In *LCA*, a documentary first broadcast in 2017 on the Swiss TV channel Radio Télévision Suisse, we see a range of French and French-speaking Swiss converts to Islam tell their stories.⁴ At the beginning of *LCA*, the narrator (who remains anonymous, behind the camera), notes that, in the aftermath of 9/11, when the expectation of loyalty to the nation was stronger than ever, 'thousands of Swiss people (and especially women) converted to Islam'. With its multilingualism and regional, cultural and religious plurality, Switzerland is often seen as the 'prototype of the political nation' (Eugster and Strijbis, 2011). This being the case, it is notable that the Swiss people passed a ban on the construction of minarets by direct democratic vote in 2009 (Dodd, 2015). According to a survey, citizens voted for the ban on the bases that Islam was expansionist, intolerant of Christianity and 'out of place' in Swiss culture in its treatment of women (Dodd, 2015: 52). Across a range of French Swiss media sources, this gendered concern emerges in the context of conversion, summarised in the headline, 'Swiss women are converting to Islam more than Swiss men' (*Tribune de Genève*, 2016). The author of this article implies that this pattern of conversion is a troubling one, but readers may be 'mollified' by the fact that most female Swiss converts are educated and employed (*Tribune de Genève*, 2016), therefore still conforming, in a sense, to the Western model of female emancipation.

While in *LCA*, the interviewer remains invisible, an ostensibly neutral arbitrator, in *MMM* (2014), British-born Muslim model and entertainment figure Shanna Bukhari travels around the UK, interviewing young women who have converted to Islam, and sharing her own story. The documentary was produced and broadcast on the BBC, which

has, in recent years, produced a number of programmes representing British Muslims including a 'reality TV show' entitled *Muslims Like Us* (2017–present), in which 10 British Muslims with different world views struggle to live together and discuss how their faith interacts with their 'Britishness'. In British mainstream media, there is a tendency to focus almost exclusively on the possible negative repercussions of conversion, rather than acknowledging the nuances of differing conversion narratives. This is exemplified in media coverage of the 2013 report 'Narratives of Conversion to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives' by the Modern Arabic Studies scholar Yasir Suleiman. The report engages with various challenges experienced by female converts, with regard to polygamy, cultural integration, and changing sartorial practices. However, Suleiman also notes that the demonisation of Muslim converts and disproportionate focus on 'a stereotypical group of white middle class, well-educated women' (Suleiman, 2013: 16) in media coverage increase the sense of social exclusion of those both inside and beyond this demographic. It is ironic, then, that media coverage of Suleiman's report, featuring headlines such as 'Converting to Islam "not for the faint-hearted", report says' (Este, *The Conversation*, 2013) and 'Women converts to Islam risk rejection and abuse' (Gledhill, *The Times*, 2013), exemplify precisely the kind of negative portrayal of conversion to Islam criticised by Suleiman. While Christianity historically held a cultural monopoly in the British context (Martin, 2005), contemporary British society is increasingly religiously diverse and 'inclusive' (Woodhead and Catto, 2012). However, as Suleiman's account reflects, Islamophobia has also become a common feature in media and political discourse in Britain (Jackson, 2018).

Following the above critique, it is important to recognise that the conversion of white women to Islam seems to be disproportionately discussed in the British and Swiss contexts (and across Europe), while conversion to Islam is, in fact, a highly diverse phenomenon (Vroon-Najem, 2014). This overemphasis on the plight of white women has long been a problem within feminist and gender studies (bell hooks, 2000). In our analysis in the sections that follow, we keep in mind that MMM and LCA are indeed mediated by, and (almost exclusively) limited to, the experiences of white middle-class women.

Framings of vulnerable-fanatic in-betweenness

In the opening minutes of both documentaries, conversion to Islam and a young woman's freedom are framed as diametrically opposed. Bukhari sets up MMM with the following monologue: 'You're a young, British female. You can wear what you want, you can have a crazy night out... why are you choosing to leave all this fun and excitement?' Alongside this narration, we see the image, typical of documentaries on this subject,⁵ of the white girl looking at her own reflection in the mirror as she puts on the *hijab*. Here, the narration and footage of the embodied act of sartorial transformation work together to construct a tacit dissonance between the 'normal' identity of a British woman (who 'wears what she wants') and the convert herself. Later in the documentary, we see a more explicit example of the expression of tacit knowledge when convert Lisa explains that she is a co-wife. Bukhari is shocked and states that, although Lisa claims to have 'accepted' it, it is 'just not right' and 'makes [her] sick'. Bukhari also states, however,

that ‘you have gotta be one hell of a strong woman to take that’. Here, Bukhari seems, in a sense, to contest the idea of Lisa’s status as co-wife as a sign of ‘weakness’, while at the same time affirming that her ‘submission’ is not the ‘normal’ practice of a free, Western woman. The documentary also follows the story of convert Anya, who is struggling to find a Muslim man to marry. While Bukhari does ask Anya about her conversion, the main topic here is rather her quest for a Muslim husband, and Anya’s experience of Islam is treated somewhat reductively. She and Bukhari scour several Muslim dating websites, which Bukhari compares to various secular dating sites. Anya describes her past experiences of blind dating, explaining that she has been dismissed by the parents of potential partners on the basis that she is ‘too old, too tall, and . . . might change back to how she was before’. This is ironic given that many narratives regarding female conversion to Islam presuppose that it is the result of oppressive male influences or falling in love with a Muslim man. In *LCA*, researcher Mallory Schneuwly Purdie states that different types of Islam will ‘seduce’ different women. This sexualised construction of female conversion as a process of ‘seduction’ seems to correlate with the more specific motif of the woman who converts for love.

Likewise, in *LCA*, we see convert Miriam walking through a Genevan market square, as the narrator asks why ‘an older woman with blue eyes, an outre-Sarine⁶ accent, and aware of the emancipation of women’, would cover her ‘long blonde’ hair. In *LCA* the preoccupation with women’s equality and embodied appearance intersects from the start with the concern with converts’ potential susceptibility to radicalisation and terrorism. While the documentary tells the biographical stories of women from various backgrounds embracing different types of Islamic practice, their stories are interlaced with images of the 2001 New York attacks and the 2004 Madrid bombings, footage of Daesh and Islamic State in Syria, and interviews with experts on radicalisation and terrorism. While the female converts’ biographies seem to have very little to do with radicalisation and terrorism (with Lydia, who will be discussed in the next section, as the sole exception), the radicalisation frame creates the overwhelming impression that (female) converts are potentially dangerous subjects. The essentialist portrayal of Islam as a ‘radical’ religion situates female converts as willingly inscribing themselves within a tradition that is not only culturally incompatible with, but also as a potential security issue to, the majority population (Fadil et al., 2019). Moreover, unlike the narrative of conversion that emphasises women’s vulnerability and passivity in the face of their oppression by Islam, the radicalisation frame ascribes to female converts an excessive, threatening agency. As such, female converts are caught within what the sociologist of education Tania Saeed calls ‘the spectrum of the vulnerable-fanatic’ (2016: 2), in which they are always perceived to be ‘at risk’ of radicalisation. Formerly non-Muslim women become presumably ‘too religious’ through conversion to Islam, and thereby ‘have to prove their innocence, lest they are thought to be extremists’ (Saeed, 2016: 66).

In *MMM*, we see a similar paradigm of the ‘too religious’ convert through the discursive framework of Bukhari’s sense of inadequacy in her religious practice as a ‘born Muslim’. While this documentary is unusual in showing a Muslim in dialogue with fellow Muslims, it is worth noting that Bukhari, while an ‘insider’ in terms of the Islamic discursive tradition, does not veil and appears (at least initially) critical of the ways in which these young women are ‘sacrificing’ the hallmarks of growing up as an

'emancipated Western woman' (drinking, going out, dating).⁷ The Althusserian–Butlerian model of subject interpellation helps to make sense of Bukhari's positioning as an interpellated subject who 'relies on or points back to' the dominant discourse (Bracke, 2011: 43), even as she seeks to help converts 'respond'. Over the course of the documentary, however, Bukhari simultaneously seems to be interpellated by the Islamic discursive tradition (Bracke, 2011: 43) when she becomes concerned that the converts she meets are practising Islam more rigorously than her, and that she feels, as she puts it, 'judged' to be a 'bad Muslim'. She defends herself by stating, 'I'm British. Yes, I'm a Muslim, but we live in such a Western society.' The use of the word 'but' here suggests a dichotomy between being a Muslim woman and living in Western society, and that Islam has to 'adapt' to this Western model of gender equality. Anthropologist Vanessa Vroon-Najem notes the prevalence of this tendency towards 'polarized conceptualisations' of Muslim and Western identities as constituting mutually exclusive 'cultural repertoires' (2014: 200–201).

This process of negotiating 'conflicting' identities is a recurrent theme in both LCA and MMM. In LCA, convert Sophie describes an Islamophobic attack, in which a man threatened to remove her headscarf and 'force her to eat it'. The narrator here seems to defend the aggressor, explaining that it was '*sans doute trop, une jeune femme à l'accent bien de chez nous sous un voile*' ('doubtless too much, a young women with our accent under a veil'). Here, an accent '*de chez nous*' is seen as inconsistent with this embodiment of conversion to Islam. When the narrator later asks, '*qui aurait pu prédire une telle destinée?*' ('who could have predicted such a fate?'), this further reinforces the notion of the incongruity of a native Swiss woman converting to Islam and submitting to its sartorial practices. Later, as we see convert Sophie teaching her daughters how to make the traditional Germanic dish strudel, the narrator explains that, after divorcing her abusive ex-husband, Sophie has worked hard to reconcile '*la Suisse et l'Islam*'. This scene exhibits an interesting duality, in which this comfortable, domestic scene familiarises the audience with the cultural context of Sophie and her daughters, even as they tell shocking stories about Sophie's ex-husband. The narrator explains that Sophie is now able to 'pass without mishap from making strudel to Qur'anic verses'. This idea of 'passing' from 'Western' to 'Islamic' cultural practice underlines the liminality of the convert (Jensen, 2006; Turner, 1967), who must move constantly between their different identities. The implication is clear: while we might imagine studying the Qur'an and baking strudel to be culturally incompatible, Sophie has found a way to 'unite' them in the privacy of her own home. It is ironic, however, that it is the placement of Sophie and her daughters in the domestic sphere that renders them familiar to a mainstream audience. This seems to echo a persistent Western discursive model of gender relations, in which women dominate the private sphere and men the public (Scott, 2013) – an observation that will be further developed in the following section on framings of women's conversion as family troublemaking.

The converts' responses: Complicating the narratives of in-betweenness and suspicion

In both MMM and LCA, converts offer some answers to the question of why they have converted to Islam and how they can be both 'free' and 'Muslim'. When asked about her

experience of Islam as a woman, Sofia responds that ‘All this stuff about women being oppressed . . . is complete codswallop.’ There is something endearing about Sofia’s use of the vernacular ‘codswallop’ here, which breaks through the usual moroseness of discourse on oppressive Islam. Similarly, in LCA, Miriam, described by the narrator as a ‘furiously independent’ woman, is asked if marrying a Muslim man has ‘helped her’ learn about Islam. Miriam seems taken aback by the question, and after clarifying it, bursts out laughing. She responds, still smiling, that she wants to ‘stop with the clichés’ and that her husband has not compelled her in any way in her religious practices. Miriam’s response to this question again breaks the mould of conversion to Islam as a serious matter of oppression and runs in contrast with the narrative of brainwashed female converts embracing Islam for their husbands. This narrative of marrying into Islam plays a relatively small role in both documentaries; while several women converted after marrying, most ascribe their ongoing commitment to Islam to factors such as liberation from Western norms or a new kind of intellectual freedom. Later in the documentary, Miriam voices a sense of ostracisation at work, where she sees people talking amongst themselves about terrorist attacks, and changing the subject when she arrives, instead of speaking to her directly and asking what she thinks. She explains that she finds this hurtful because it suggests that she is ‘*pas digne de confiance*’ (‘not trustworthy’) and puts her in the same category as terrorists. This seems to correlate with the narrative that female converts to Islam do not think for themselves and are susceptible to radicalisation. The problem with the ‘female convert as vulnerable-fanatic’ stereotype is that, in the above case, ‘instead of promoting debate, it aims at silencing discussion’ (Saeed, 2016: 65).

It is not only in terms of their marital statuses and experiences of dating that some of these converts invert normative stereotypes. In MMM, the narrator explains that, for convert Sofia, ‘partying didn’t have the same appeal . . . as to most girls in their twenties’. While the word ‘most’ here carries the implication that Sofia’s experience is ‘abnormal’, Sofia herself contrasts her conservatism with the ‘loose’ behaviour of ‘most’ British women who like to go out, get drunk and dress ‘provocatively’. Along similar lines, convert Lisa explains that she was a ‘wild thing’ before converting, and Islam has ‘definitely calmed [her] down’ and given her a new sense of purpose. In LCA, Miriam explains that her conversion to Islam has encouraged her to abandon Western ideals of beauty and youth, and focus instead on learning and reading ‘until her last breath’. This corresponds with Kent’s claim that the ‘modesty expectations of Islam’ may be experienced by converts as a mode of emancipation from the ‘alienating aesthetic norms’ imposed by Western fashion (Kent, 2014: 310). Likewise, McGinty suggests that Muslim identity might constitute for women ‘a space in which resistance against patriarchal ideas can take form’ (McGinty, 2007: 474). This reframing, in which Western culture is no longer the guardian of gender equality and freedom, resonates with a broader reconceptualisation of agency as something that can be expressed in a range of ways, beyond the Western model (Mahmood, 2005). In her discussion of women ‘turning to Islam’, Jouili takes a similar approach, arguing that women’s ‘conscious turn to Islam’ constitutes an act of agency (Jouili, 2011: 48).

Framings of women's conversion as family troublemaking

Another central motif that emerges in the documentaries MMM and LCA is the ways in which converts' families and friends respond to their conversion. This emphasis is near to absent in documentaries, reportages and articles concerning male converts, which tend to represent conversion to Islam as a political and/or intellectual act, perhaps reflecting the cultural norm that women govern the domestic sphere, while men act as the breadwinners in the public sphere (Scott, 2013).

In MMM, the effect of conversion on converts' relationships with family members is framed as a 'problem'. As we see convert Sofia's mother, Jill, cleaning the kitchen, the narrator informs us that 'one of the toughest hurdles converts have to face is the reaction of their families'. This statement exemplifies a model of tacit knowledge, in which conversion is assumed to pose problems for harmonious family relations. This assumption is immediately contested, however, when Bukhari asks Jill what she thinks about her daughter's conversion to Islam, and Jill responds that she finds her daughter's 'conservatism' as a Muslim convert much like 'the old-fashioned Christian way'. Here, we can see Sofia's mother making sense of Islam with reference to Christianity, a religion culturally embedded and accepted within the British secular context. From the way in which Jill speaks about her daughter's conversion, her ongoing love, acceptance and support for Sofia become clear. Similarly, later in the documentary, Glaswegian convert Alana likens her 'coming out' as Muslim to 'telling [my parents] I was gay or something'. She explains, laughing heartily, that her dad responded by saying that he 'thought she already was a Muslim' and that neither of her parents saw it as a 'big deal'. Furthermore, when asked how her conversion to Islam has affected her family life, Lisa states, with a smile, that her mum calls her a 'nun on the run' and one of her neighbours describes her as a 'ninja'. While, at face value, these comments might appear disparaging (Saeed, 2016: 71), Lisa characterises them as affectionate 'banter' that marks her continued inclusion in the community. There seems to be a disparity here between the way in which the narrator characterises converts' 'coming out' about their conversions as a 'hurdle' that can create relational problems, and the experiences described by many of the converts featured in the documentary. Similarly, earlier in MMM, the narrator claims that 'being accepted into Islam is nerve-racking for converts'. This is juxtaposed with footage of convert Sofia being welcomed into the women's prayer rooms, and receiving a gift of prayer clothes and a mat. Once again, there is a sense of dissonance here between the narrator's words and visual representations of converts' experiences.

Admittedly, these examples might represent the exception rather than the rule: according to Ramahi and Suleiman, family members do not tend to be interested in the content of Islam or the converts' reason for converting (Ramahi and Suleiman, 2017: 33). There is also some evidence of this in our two documentaries. In MMM, when Bukhari asks Jill how the rest of the family is 'coping' with Sofia's conversion, Jill answers, as the camera cuts to Sofia's father, that 'they're not very happy'. When Sofia's father, Brian, is interviewed, he states that he associates Islam with a 'different culture' and reminds Sofia that 'you know, she is Welsh', echoing the idea of 'Muslim' and 'Western' as incongruent. He concedes that his daughter is '24 years of age, she's got her own mind to make up'. However, he goes on to state that there is 'no need' for Sofia to

‘wear their clothes’ because ‘she’s got her own clothes’ and ‘pretty hair so there’s no need to hide it’. Brian’s wording ‘their clothes’ assigns a ‘them’ (a ‘cultural Other’) that is then distinguished from ‘us’ (Welsh). When Sofia herself is asked whether converting has limited her in any way, she admits that it has been constrictive in that ‘people think that I’m like a traitor’. This reflects the confinement of Islam within narrow boundaries of culturalised difference (Vroon-Najem, 2014). Rather than investigating this tension, Bukhari expresses pity for Brian, imagining that when he goes to the pub, people will make comments like, ‘how’s your daughter doing? She still got that thing on her head?’ Bukhari’s sympathy implicitly seems to give credibility to this chauvinistic stance to Sofia’s embodied practices of conversion.

Towards the end of LCA, the model of female domestic intersubjectivity is refashioned through an unexpected discursive turn. We are introduced to Isabelle, the mother of Lydia, a teenager who converted to Islam and very quickly became ‘radicalised’. While Lydia’s relationship with a Muslim man is framed as the trigger of her conversion and radicalisation, Lydia’s mother describes her daughter as a headstrong woman who, after converting, dropped out of school and did not get a job, her sole objective being to convert her mother to Islam. Ultimately, Isabelle’s status as mother was overtaken by her status as ‘*mécréant*’ (‘unbeliever’). Up to this point, mother and daughter had been ‘*très complices*’ (‘partners in crime’). Here, a moving juxtaposition emerges between the mother–daughter relationship before and after Lydia’s conversion. Thus, where radicalisation appears as related to the biography of a female convert in LCA, it does so in the affective context of a painfully altered mother–daughter relationship, which arguably humanises the radicalised convert. Given the various framings of female converts as familial relational and vulnerable-fanatic subjects, the representation of female conversion can be understood as both typifying and remodelling certain gender normativities.

Conclusions

In this article, we have demonstrated the value of researching documentaries to better understand discourses about women’s conversion to Islam, which female converts have to negotiate on an everyday basis. More concretely, we have grappled with representations of conversion in *Make Me a Muslim* (MMM) and *Les Converties d’Allah* (LCA), in which female converts in the British and Swiss contexts are framed as situated in a position of gendered and cultural in-betweenness. By paying attention to the questions posed in these documentaries, and the apparent tension between visual and discursive representations of converts and the narratives expressed by the converts themselves, we unpacked the tacit presuppositions underlying discourses about female converts to Islam.

While some of the voices in MMM and LCA seem to cry out for a more nuanced approach, both documentaries, as well as many other documentaries across European contexts, repeatedly return to certain prevailing motifs concerning women’s conversion to Islam. Conversion is imagined as, at best, ‘anomalous’ and, at worst, ‘dangerous’. While MMM and LCA construct framings of conversion that rest on notions of women’s oppression and cultural incompatibility, the Swiss documentary underlines the ‘threat of

terrorism' more than the British one, perhaps reflecting the differences between the British multiculturalism model (Modood, 2019) and the Swiss model of an ethnic conception of citizenship (Gianni, 2016) combined with a French republican fear of communalism, political Islam and violence (Bowen, 2007). Having said this, since documentaries afford us the opportunity to hear from converts directly (if in edited sound bites), our analysis also illuminated the ways in which the narrator's framing can be contested. Both documentaries seem torn between received Western narratives and the aim of 'balanced reporting'. The resulting impression is one of paradox and tension, in which the voices of narrator, converts, family of converts and born Muslims diverge at various points. This is perhaps fitting if we are to understand conversion itself as a 'dynamic and complicated concept' (Klaver, 2011: 63), which can be experienced in limitless ways. However, since documentaries are cultural productions it is worth considering the repercussions of framings of female converts to Islam. To conclude, let it suffice to say that the portrayal of female conversion in the documentaries discussed echoes the prevailing view of Islam as oppressive, culturally 'other' and potentially dangerous, and constructs an understanding of female conversion as a source of family trouble. In her discussion of 'turning towards Islam', anthropologist Jeanette Jouili argues that because of Western understandings of Muslim women's piety in terms of oppression or 'false consciousness', Muslim women have difficulty 'being heard' (Jouili, 2011: 62). In both MMM and LCA, even as we become conscious of the gendered and culturalised narratives that tend to be imposed on female converts to Islam, we can, if we pay attention, begin to hear converts speak for themselves.

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Notes

1. But see Sealy (2017) for a discussion of British newspaper framings of converts to Islam, and Herbert and Hansen (2018) for an exploration of discussions on conversion to Islam on social media. See Mertens and de Smaele (2016) for broader analyses of representations of Islam and Muslims in the media across European contexts.

2. We recognise that ‘radicalisation’ is not an unproblematic category, but one that operates within the particular discursive framework of the securitisation of Islam (Fadil et al., 2019).
3. All translations from French, German and Dutch are our own.
4. The documentary begins in Geneva before later looking at converts in the French city of Lyon.
5. See, for example: *Delft Blauw Meets Hijab* (2010), *Ik en Mijn Moeder* (2011) and *The Changing Face of Germany* (2014).
6. A region in Switzerland, at the border between the French and German parts of the country.
7. There is a trace here of a European discursive technique of legitimising criticism of the treatment of women in Islam by foregrounding ‘inside’ voices. This motif has been picked up, in particular, by scholars examining the status of Ayaan Hirsi Ali as a ‘spokesperson’ in the Dutch context (see O’Gorman, 2018).

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