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## Respect, freedom, citizenship: Muslim women's secularities and perspectives on wellbeing

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### ABSTRACT

The religiosity of people migrating into secular European countries has posed many questions for policymakers and scholars alike, particularly where it concerns Islam. Rather than opposing migrants' religious identities with secular values, this article examines shifts and tensions between the 'multiple secularities' of Muslim women and integration policy alike, through an ethnography of wellbeing. Set in the Netherlands, it demonstrates that Muslim women of Pakistani background embrace a secularity characterised by respect and religious liberty but that despite a 'modernisation' of values, their religion remains the source of their secularity. Dutch integration policy, however, has shifted from a secularity accommodating religious diversity to one characterised by individual liberty (placed in opposition to religion), and, increasingly, towards the progress of a culturally homogeneous nation. By thus failing to recognise religious sources and alternative social dimensions of human wellbeing, Dutch policy risks undermining secular values generally and alienating Dutch Muslims specifically.

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## Introduction

The religiosity of people migrating into secular European countries has posed many questions for policymakers and scholars alike, particularly where it concerns Islam. For policymakers, religion appears to be foremost an obstacle. Scholarly work on Islam, however, seems divided between that which reproduces a 'domestication' agenda (Sunier 2014) and that which critiques institutionalised secularism as a power structure hostile to a more natural or benign religion (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 879). To avoid a polarising secularism versus religion binary, this article examines shifts in the ideological undercurrents and ethical frameworks that inform the secularity of policy on the one hand and the secularity of Muslim women on the other hand, and critically reflects on the tensions between them.

I apply the conceptual idea of 'multiple secularities' (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012). Where secularism denotes a particular type of institutionalised relationship between religion and politics, secularity refers to the lived reality of symbols, attitudes, imaginaries, and practices (Asad 2003). 'Cultures of secularity' (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012) reflect symbolic and practical differentiations between religion and other spheres, which are

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reflected in policy, but also in the values and choices of citizens, including religious citizens. As such, the multiple secularities framework is analytically useful to examine historical transformations of both political regimes and world religions.

Within this framework, I explore the perspectives of Pakistani-Dutch Muslim women in The Netherlands on wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Wellbeing, and the perceived obstacles to achieving wellbeing, can be a lens through which to explore questions such as: What kind of secularity prevails in Dutch policy discourse, and what kind of secularity would align with the ethical life-worlds of Pakistani-Dutch women and would benefit their wellbeing? How do generational differences in perspectives on wellbeing and the obstacles identified reflect shifting secularities? And instead of only looking at where Muslims 'fit' or 'don't fit', I also ask how Muslims' moral reflections can contribute to a healthy and harmonious Dutch society for all people.

Connecting the ethnographic exploration of wellbeing to the theory of secularity shifts the focus away from an alleged tension between religion and secularism towards a tension between different kinds of secularity. I demonstrate that Pakistani Muslim women embrace a secularity characterised by respect, non-discrimination, and religious liberty. But Dutch secularity itself has shifted to a variant characterised by individual liberty (placed in opposition to religion), and, increasingly, towards the progress of a culturally homogeneous nation. It nowadays fails to recognise religious sources and alternative social dimensions of human wellbeing and risks increasingly alienating Dutch Muslims. As other studies have suggested, migrants do not arrive with completely fixed values, and second- or third-generation migrants in particular have adapted sociocultural values (Maliepaard, Lubbers, and Gijsberts 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2012). This is especially the case for the second-generation Muslim women among my participants, many of whom believed their own embrace of freedom, democracy, and progress made them 'modern' compared to their parents' cultural traditions. They are committed to the principles of the Dutch democratic constitutional system, and their values resonate more with traditional liberal-egalitarian ideas than with some of the current Dutch policy discourse. But they feel that, as Muslims, they are excluded from the Dutch national project, so these values find expression in an emphasis on a progressive *religion* that can better answer to their holistic aspirations for wellbeing. Rather than positioning themselves outside the secular, the women remain committed to a secularity characterised by tolerance and religious liberty, for the sake of balancing religious diversity *and* individual liberty; a secularity that they embed in Islam.

Theoretically, these findings complicate the meaning of secularity: whereas on a sociocultural level, religion can be differentiated from other spheres, on a deeper, ontological level, religion remains for my interlocutors the overarching source of values, including of secularity itself. Empirically, these findings are relevant beyond Islam and beyond the compatibility between particular policy paradigms and substantial minorities. The findings offer insights into whether any mismatches might point to ways in which the secularity of Dutch policy forecloses the full flourishing of any life – including perhaps a secular liberal one.

### **Theory and context: multiple secularities in Dutch policy and discourse**

The conceptual framework of Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt (2012) identifies four types of secularity. Each one responds to different reference problems in society, such as religious heterogeneity or how to balance individual freedom in the context of

dominant groups. Each type is moreover accompanied by different core values. These are Weberian ideal-types and elements of each can exist alongside and often in tension with one another.

1. Secularity for the sake of religious diversity (guiding ideas: toleration, respect, non-interference).

2. Secularity for the sake of individual rights and liberties (guiding ideas: freedom, individuality).

3. Secularity for the sake of national integration and development (guiding ideas: progress, enlightenment, modernity)

4. Secularity for the sake of the independent development of functional domains of society (guiding ideas: rationality, efficiency, autonomy).

This conceptual framework has been explored in the Netherlands (Shuh, Burchart and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012) and I bring it into dialogue with critical reflections on Dutch integration discourse and policy.

Historically, secularity emerged in the Netherlands for the sake of accommodating religious diversity, and ideas of tolerance and non-interference were institutionalised in the so-called pillar-structure (the segregation of Dutch society by religious and political ‘pillars’). But after the Second World War, and particularly during the ‘long 1960s’, secularity for the sake of individual liberties gradually took priority, especially in the realm of gender relations, sexuality, and free speech; values of freedom and individuality took precedence over values of tolerance and respect (Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Van der Veer 2006). In the multicultural eighties, migrant culture and religion were still considered relevant to migrants’ wellbeing, and cultural and religious institutions were seen as a bridge to integration into Dutch society, but by the nineties a majority view emerged that multiculturalism had failed.<sup>2</sup> Islam was increasingly depicted as a problematic ‘culture’ that hampers the integration of migrants, and presented as an explanation for migrant deprivation in housing, labour, and education. This clearly reflected the shift in regimes of secularity from respect for religious diversity to the prioritising of individual liberties and the promotion of Dutch culture and economy (as reflected in Koopmans 2019; see also Sunier 2010).

Especially in the wake of the murders of right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn and television director and author Theo van Gogh, secularity acquired an increasingly progressivist notion. Secular progressivism is ‘the idea that within an “immanent frame” in which the secular ontologically embodies the “real” and constitutes the ground for normative universalism, religion turns into a historical vestige whose protection must be subordinated to universalistic notions of civic liberties’ (Shuh, Burchart, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 351). This backlash informed a shift in emphasis from the emancipation of ethnic minorities to integration and citizenship (the so-called civic integration turn) (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018; Goodman 2011). One element is the pressure for less targeted spending on migrant communities, resulting in the ‘impartial mainstreaming’ of integration policy by the mid-2010s (Van Breugel and Scholten 2017).<sup>3</sup> Assimilationism became an increasing tacit expectation of full adaptation to the dominant culture.

In recent years, populist political parties, such as the Forum voor Democratie, became the main vocalist of secular progressivism. One of FvD’s main demands is the introduction of the ‘Wet Bescherming Nederlandse Waarden’ (Protection of Dutch Values bill), which would require all institutions to endorse five ‘core values’, the first of which reads that in

cases of conflict, Dutch law always trumps religious norms.<sup>4</sup> But more mainstream politicians, including Prime Minister Mark Rutte (*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie*, VVD), express similar sentiments. Rutte's open letter published during the 2017 campaign proclaimed that people should 'act normal or go away'. This is explicitly directed at 'people who do not want to adapt, who disapprove of our customs and who reject our values. Who harass homosexuals, jeer at women in short skirts or call ordinary Dutch people racists'.<sup>5</sup>

Two dominant tendencies in discourse and policy have been particularly pertinent to this secular progressivist turn: the culturalisation of citizenship and the idea of 'responsibilisation'.

Firstly, the culturalisation of citizenship denotes a new kind of nationalism that emphasises a sense of belonging through shared norms, cultural values, and traditions over civic or political rights (Geschiere 2009, 130–168; Tonkens and Duyvendak 2016). Integration policy betrays a separation of formal and moral citizenship, where formal citizenship is a bundle of rights and duties and moral citizenship is a culturalised, moralised ideal (Schinkel 2008). This policy became a means to protect the native Dutch moral community and is therefore not aimed at *enabling* citizenship for immigrants, but at *imposing conditions* on membership (Goodman 2015). Two of the three main points of the Agenda Integratie 2013 are: participation and self-reliance; and social contact and the internalisation of values, placing 'Dutch core values' explicitly at the heart of the integration process (Minister of Social Affairs and Employment 2013). The culturalisation of citizenship creates a discursive division between 'normal', white, middle-class, hard-working, 'deserving' Dutch versus the non-white, supposedly backward, unenlightened, illiberal, paternalistic, authoritarian 'allochtonen'<sup>6</sup>; a "discourse of alterity" that amounts to cultural racism (Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010), and in which Islam is seen as the great divider. Blaming unsurmountable cultural barriers for migrants' 'failed integration' (Boersma and Schinkel 2018) moreover diminishes the responsibility of Dutch policymakers to ensure social inclusion and equal opportunities (Roggeband and Verloo 2007).

Secondly, responsibilisation, in policy, refers to the 'broader process of making individuals, private sector and community responsible for public tasks' (Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010, 699) and marks the shift from emancipation to integration and citizenship.<sup>7</sup> For instance, a parliamentary paper of 2018 reads: 'The person integrating is the owner of his own integration and that ownership comes with responsibilities. The person integrating is responsible for doing everything in his power to participate in society as quickly as possible, by learning the language, getting a job and actively participating in our society' (Minister of Social Affairs and Employment 2018). A perceived lack of effort will be met with sanctions. Or, as Rutte put it (in response to alleged discrimination on the work floor as a cause of lower employment levels): 'youths with a migrant background have to step up and work harder to fight themselves in' (De Volkskrant 2016).

With responsibilisation emerges the idea of active citizenship and 'neo-liberal communitarianism' (Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010): the neo-liberal emphasis on, on the one hand, the individual responsibility to integrate (which implies to culturally assimilate to Dutch norms and values, appreciate its liberties and become a liberal subject), and on the other hand, individual responsibility for a safe and virtuous national community founded on

progressive ideals and individual liberties (also on the side of ‘autochthons’).<sup>8</sup> Neo-liberal communitarianism is strongly reflected in the 2011 policy note ‘Integratie, binding, burgerschap’ (‘Integration, connection, citizenship’) (Rem and Gasper 2018).

Migrant women in particular are suspected of lacking the right cultural repository and skills to actively participate in Dutch society (Ghorashi 2010). Even though secularism does not necessarily imply gender equality, discursive hierarchical oppositions of secularism/gender equality/sexual liberation versus religion/women’s oppression allows for the framing of Europe as the ‘avatar of both freedom and modernity’ (Butler 2008, 2) and the marginalisation of Islam, seen as the reverse (Scott 2018; Van Den Brandt 2018). In the Netherlands in particular, women’s liberation and sexual emancipation are flagship concerns (Bracke 2011; Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010, 963; Van der Veer 2006). The formal versus moral citizenship distinction intersects with class and gender to project an image of the ‘vulnerable, un-emancipated migrant woman secluded at home’ (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018, 895; Rem and Gasper 2018; Van Es 2016).

In sum, the recent emphasis on civic integration, the culturalisation of citizenship, and responsabilisation discourse reflects a secularity for the sake of national integration and development, underpinned by values of progress and enlightenment, and ‘liberal individual autonomy as the basic societal ideology’ (Shuh, Burchart, and Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 360). In this scenario, migrants’ religion is a threat to the ‘nativist’ sense of home (Duyvendak 2011) and sense of belonging (Geschiere 2009).<sup>9</sup> There is a tacit assumption that only when Muslim migrants escape the trappings of religious tradition, can they embrace liberal values. As my data will demonstrate, this assumption is based on the misconception that religion cannot be the source of secularity, liberty, and progress. Therefore, this discourse, if not the actual policy practice, is in tension with the secularity of my Muslim interlocutors, and is a threat to their wellbeing, to which religion is foundational.

## Setting

Between June 2018 and September 2019 I conducted individual, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation in The Hague and Almere with in total 39 Muslim women of Pakistani background.<sup>10</sup> Most conversations were in Dutch, some in English. The research focused on women of two movements in particular, both of which originated in South Asia and have an organised women’s group.

The Minhaj ul Quran (Path of the Quran) is an international ‘reform Sufi’ organisation founded in 1980 in Pakistan under the charismatic leadership of Dr Tahir-ul-Qadri (Morgahi 2018; Werbner 2013). The movement has a variety of influences: from Sufism (which can refer to a living tradition, or to the mystical aspect of Islam), from Barelwi Islam (a school of Islam that combines mysticism with scholarly teaching), and from Reformist Islam (a movement within Islam that aims to reform the self and the world according to a literalist interpretation of the Islamic scriptures). But the leadership places the movement above and outside such sectarian divides, and explicitly draws on universalist values.<sup>11</sup> In its local manifestation in the Netherlands, in three mosques and a prayer room, Minhaj ul Quran has been particularly well able to reach out to a younger generation of Muslims, transmitting a ‘European Islam’ (Morgahi 2011) through services in both Urdu and Dutch. Most followers are of Pakistani background, but the mosques have also been able to attract some youth from across ethnic boundaries. My interlocutors would

very regularly attend Friday evening programmes (a sermon and prayer followed by communal dinner) at the mosques and occasional cultural-religious programmes organised by the Minhaj Sisters League, such as the monthly evening of *dhikr* and *durood* (both devotional rituals of prayer and the repeated invocation of phrases and names of the Prophet – a reflection of the movement's Sufi inclination). Older women would often attend Wednesday afternoon Arabic and Quran classes, while many younger women were enrolled in an Islamic Studies course organised by the Minhaj Institute. Several women were involved in the Minhaj Education Society: teaching Arabic and Quranic lessons to young children. I very regularly attended the Friday programme, have observed (and where possible participated in) all other activities mentioned, and met some of the women for informal chats over tea.

The second group I worked with is the Ahmadiyya Muslim community. The Ahmadiyya community originated in late nineteenth century British India amidst various reformist Islamic movements which aimed to strengthen Islam and Indian Muslims against external challenges from the Hindu majority and Christian missionaries (Khan 2015). Due to the prophetic claim of its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, to embody the second coming of the Messiah, the movement faces hostility and severe persecution from the mainstream Islamic community. This hostility is especially severe in Pakistan where, in 1974, Ahmadiyyas were officially declared non-Muslims.<sup>12</sup> As other scholars have noted and I have observed among my interlocutors, Ahmadiyya Islam combines aspects of Sufi mysticism with a modernist outlook (Khan 2015). Practices combine orthodox and innovative elements, and followers tend to display a high religiosity in both private and public life (Lathan 2008). Characteristic for the movement is their slogan 'Love for all, hatred for none' and a strong commitment to humanitarian work.

As a result of their precarious status, my Ahmadiyya interlocutors had either arrived in the Netherlands as refugees, or their parents had left Pakistan pre-1974 in a move of 'voluntary exile', or missionary work to convert members of the Dutch population to Islam. Therefore, the Ahmadiyya community is relatively dispersed and I expanded my field site from The Hague (where members of the Ahmadiyya community built the first purpose-built mosque in the Netherlands in 1955) to include Almere, as well as women from elsewhere whom I met at gatherings and included in focus group discussions. The women's group, Ladjna Ima'illah, organises several regular events I participated in, such as the annual Peace Conference and National Meeting, a gathering on International Women's Day, and the civic interfaith initiative 'Dialogue Tables'. In addition, I met some of the women for informal tea and meals.

To present my findings both concisely and vividly, I focus here on two women from Minhaj ul Quran, Afreen and Dina,<sup>13</sup> and one focus group discussion with women from the Ahmadiyya community. I have chosen to focus on Afreen and Dina because they reflect positions held by others in the movement; positions illustrative of the generational differences I observed. Afreen is in her early thirties. She was born in the Netherlands; her parents were of the early 'guest-worker' generation.<sup>14</sup> Her husband migrated from Pakistan to the United Kingdom in his early twenties and moved to the Netherlands after their marriage. They have two young children, and both have a full-time job. Dina is in her early fifties. She migrated to the United Kingdom at twelve to move in with her kin. She moved to the Netherlands because at the time it was easier for her Pakistani husband to move to the Netherlands than to the UK, given the



relatively strict British immigration policy. They have three children, one at secondary school and two enrolled at university. While her husband runs a business, Dina dedicates much of her time to voluntary work. Both Afreen and Dina engage in regular but not strict observance. Both have a strong commitment to Minhaj ul Quran. Both their relationships to Islam changed in adulthood, and both started veiling only in recent years.

The focus group discussion with the Ahmadiyya community included seven women aged between 28 and 43. All women except one have children, ranging in age from a few months old to adults. Their professional lives vary widely, from housewife to surgeon. I have chosen to focus on this group of women as the reflections expressed here tend to represent the views of most Ahmadiyya women that I spoke to in either interviews, focus groups or informal conversation. Rather than generation as the most obvious qualifier of difference, the Ahmadiyya women are better divided into more quietist and more vocal proponents of the views they tend to have in common. One of the most vocal women is Sajida, a dentist in her late thirties, who came to the Netherlands as a refugee in her early teens and spent two years in asylum centres. She is politically active and speaks in public debates on, for instance, the relationship between feminism and Islam. She is married to a white Dutch convert and has two children. Other vocal women quoted here are Zahra, a successful lawyer in her late twenties, born and bred in the Netherlands, who still lives with her parents in a provincial town; and Khadija, a mother and housewife in her thirties, who is the charismatic national leader of Ladjna Ima'illah. Representative of the more quietist end is Leila, who joined her father in the Netherlands at 18, when he had been assigned refugee status. After a year in asylum centres, and a year of studying Dutch, she married, discontinued her studies, and became a mother and housewife.

## Methodology

Dimensions of wellbeing formed the key analytical tool framing interviews and focus group discussions. Wellbeing has had increasing use in theory and in policy since the 1970s, following a turn away from purely economic ways of measuring progress and quality of life (Gasper 2007). The establishment of the Institute of Social Research (*Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau*, SCP) in 1973 marked the conception of the so-called social indicators movement in the Netherlands (Boelhouwer 2010). Social indicator lists, including the SCP's Life Situation Index, tend to agglomerate data on many aspects of life so as to assess citizens' wellbeing and comprehensively inform social policy. Nevertheless, such lists have still tended to impose a secular, utilitarian understanding of happiness that may not be translatable across cultural contexts (Jawad 2012; Mathews and Izquierdo 2008). Insufficient attention has been paid to relational forms of wellbeing (White 2015) and the role of religion, despite efforts to draw attention to such forms of wellbeing in social policy (Dinham and Francis 2015) and development studies (Deneulin and Rakodi 2011; Pool 2019). My exploration of integration policy paradigms above demonstrates that whereas policy informed by secularity for the sake of religious diversity, prominent in the eighties, was still attentive to culturally divergent pursuits of wellbeing (see Swinkels



2019), a technocratic secular progressivism comes at the expense of facilitating processes of listening to and learning from migrant communities and understanding the potential role of religion in their wellbeing.

Of the many possible conceptualisations of wellbeing (e.g. Griffin 1988), I follow a eudaimonic conception of wellbeing, which goes beyond a utilitarian list of welfare indicators or hedonic wellbeing and looks more broadly at the subjective and objective dimensions of human flourishing (e.g. Nussbaum 2000). Since wellbeing in this Aristotelian tradition is essentially about what constitutes the ‘good life’, it serves here as a lens to reveal the underlying ethics and social theory people live with (see Corsín Jiménez 2008, 11). In other words, it is not an exploration of wellbeing as an end in itself, but rather a step towards exploring the potential gaps between policymakers’ and migrants’ lists of wellbeing indicators, or the gaps between what those indicators actually mean. Using wellbeing as an analytical tool allows me to address the tension between the secular immigration policy of the Netherlands and the religious lives of immigrants, without reifying a religious/secular binary.

During interviews and focus group discussions, I asked all women in the project to create their own list of what they considered essential for wellbeing, not only for themselves, but what ideally every person in the world should have access to. I first asked them to write the various dimensions of wellbeing on individual bits of paper (between three and ten), and then asked them to place these pieces of paper in hierarchical order, and explain their choices both of the dimensions of wellbeing, and the order in which they placed them. We would then discuss how far they felt they had achieved wellbeing, and if not, what the obstacles were. During this process, we would address the meaning of many of the key concepts that feature in the literature on wellbeing and on integration policy, such as freedom and justice, as they would organically come up in discussions, either as part of the list of indicators, or when addressing the obstacles faced.

What follows is an analysis of key findings, with a focus on my participants’ understanding of – in this order – respect, freedom, and citizenship.

### **Respect: ‘anderen in hun waarde laten’**

Respect and dignity. These are key words that often appear on top of the women’s lists of the most important dimensions of wellbeing. ‘Respecting others for who they are’ (in Dutch, ‘anderen in hun waarde laten’) is a central phrase throughout most interviews, but there are different kinds of respect, different sources of dignity. Dina migrated in the eighties to the Netherlands as an adult during the era of multiculturalism, whereas all the other women involved in the project were either born in the Netherlands or arrived there at a young age and, as adults, have been mainly confronted with the civic integration discourse as discussed earlier. This difference may account for the differences in response to my question.

As is the case with several older women, for Dina respect seems to have elements of a traditional reciprocal kind, as something conferred to one another by virtue of status and age or of virtuous behaviour. However, these ideas do not necessarily imply an illiberal stance towards society. Instead, having grown up in a multicultural Europe, the women of the first generation of immigrants seem to unproblematically juggle

competing moral narratives: measuring respect within the community according to both traditional symbols of status (e.g. a mother who can transfer religious values to her children) as well as 'modern' symbols of status (like a good education, a good job). More strikingly, on some issues they reproduce a multicultural approach to secularity, distinguishing between their expectations of behaviour within the community and their expectations of society as a whole. Dina gives homosexuality as an example of something explicitly condemned by her religion and within her community, which she nevertheless deems acceptable in wider society.

The younger generation embodies a stance more familiar to a secularity for the sake of individual rights and liberties. Afreen is a young woman who grew up in the Netherlands, and whose cultural and religious identity took shape less under the tutelage of her parents and more in a process of adolescent self-discovery in the Netherlands, under the public pressure of the era in which right-wing populism first took centre stage in the figure of Pim Fortuyn around 1997–2002 (which she herself mentions as a reference point). Her notion of dignity is of the Kantian kind: every human person has dignity by virtue of their status as a living being. The same is true for the Ahmadiyya women of a similar age. But, perhaps *contra* modern, secular interpretations of egalitarianism, they, as Afreen, find the value of egalitarian human dignity in Islam because humans are each equally the creation of Allah, and, more precisely, as the Prophet Muhammad said in his final sermon: 'no Arab is superior to a non-Arab'.

For Afreen respect is also linked to love, a modern idea of self-love, and love for fellow humans. (Dina, on the other hand, does not like at all this contemporary talk about 'love love'). Afreen had a gay friend whom she supported in his disappointing love life, 'showing empathy from a human perspective' instead of telling him off from a Muslim position for being gay, and holding back her beliefs in order to 'respect him as he is' ('om hem in zijn waarde te laten'). Her religion is a source of inclusive love, not of boundaries, and sometimes specific religious dogma needs to make way for universal values, even when the latter may be rooted in Islam. Yet because Afreen is much more a product of secular modernity, she gets very confused when she has to position religion in relation to her list of wellbeing dimensions. The first three on her list are self-love, love for others, and peace and harmony in society. And, she says, 'on the one hand, religion comes forth from peace, but it is already in those first three aspects too, but an atheist can also have those three things, but at the same time, for them it is perhaps some kind of spirituality ... or maybe not ... or ...'<sup>15</sup> This confusion reflects the particular conundrums of a secular modernity that denies transcendental sources to ideals of love and peace.

The Ahmadiyya women were not of one mind when it comes to prioritising religion or other wellbeing dimensions. Some of the Ahmadiyya women declared that religion is so important that it trumps even food, water, and shelter. Religion is a source of solidarity and connection, which is crucial to survive hardship and ensures people act in favour of the group. They do agree, however, as do almost all other women I spoke to, that religion can hardly be named a separate category, because it is implicit in wellbeing overall. Religion is also most explicitly the source of norms, values, and virtue – of becoming a morally righteous person. There is no distinction between being a good Muslim and being a good person. But even though Islam is for them the source of values, there may be other sources, and non-Muslims can be good persons too. Atheism, in their eyes, is also a religion offering a source of values, or what Stacey

has called a ‘transcendent frame’ (2018, 77). Morality revolves around respecting others as they are (‘anderen in hun waarde laten’), and this includes respecting others’ ethical framework. They lament, however, what they perceive as the degradation of morality in Dutch society, as exemplified in swearing, hate-mongering politicians and bullying kids, neither of whom are respecting others for who they are. Perhaps this has something to do with the problematisation of religion and spirituality as a source of morality in Dutch society, rather than an open reflection and deliberation on the possibly nonreligious but nevertheless transcendental or ideological sources of wellbeing and values. Secular progressivism may not offer proper space for such reflections since universal individual liberties trump respect for other, religious interpretations of morality – and religiously rooted modes of secularity.

Most women explicitly link respect to tolerance, to a liberal idea of non-discrimination and justice. Justice, as they explain it, is fairness, ‘one rule for everybody’, and respect in the more political sense is explicitly the fair and equal treatment of all religions – and this may imply in fact allowing for different rules for minority groups. The centrality of the phrase ‘iemand in zijn waarde laten’ – respect others for who they are – across generational differences in interpretations of respect and love, demonstrates that these women would defend a model of secularity for the sake of religious diversity. Dutch policy, however, has tended to prioritise national integration and individual liberties, and in the era of mainstreaming, targets minority groups less than in the era of multiculturalism. So how does respect relate to liberty for these women?

### **Freedom: finding liberty in religion**

The Ahmadiyya women may not appear to hold a comprehensive, liberal view of freedom, but only when interpreted from a religious/secular binary perspective. Freedom, in the first instance, is interpreted by most to mean freedom of religious expression. What this means, however, is the freedom to seek fulfilment in their own way, without being judged, to be respected as a human being (‘in hun waarde gelaten’), for instance regardless of whether they wear a headscarf. As already mentioned before, religion should not be narrowly understood, but denotes rather an ontological and moral position, and atheism can be such a position. So, in that sense, the religious freedom the women appeal to is a comprehensive freedom of living according to one’s ontology and moral conviction, limited by respect for others for who they are. This kind of freedom is more germane to an Aristotelian approach to wellbeing and ethics (that is, the freedom to live virtuously and seek human flourishing [*eudaimonia*] through embodied acts and practices [Mahmood 2005]) and is substantially different to ‘that primary value lauded in liberal conceptions of wellbeing as freedom of choice, whether at the ballot box or the market’ (Lambek 2008, 116). In other words, there may be a gap between the kind of freedom valued by these women, and the kind of freedom implicitly valued in conceptions of active and moral citizenship as conceived by Dutch policymakers and politicians. The latter’s secular freedom risks perceiving religious Muslim women as oppressed or unfree, in need of liberation, whereas the women themselves see the practice of religion as their most important freedom and that a failure to see this is an affront to their dignity, and thus, to their wellbeing.

Afreen appears more of an exemplary liberal. She believes that every human is essentially a free individual: one is born free and dies alone. To paraphrase Afreen: if the human is essentially a lone individual, there are no *natural* obstructions or barriers to his or her freedom, or expectations one has to live up to. She suggests imagining the person to be alone in the world, without external restrictions – this person will then place restrictions upon herself. And then imagine placing this person back into society. Apart from constitutional laws that people ought to respect, this person should now still have the same space to figure out life by herself as when she was alone in the world. This includes one's relationship with religion. It follows that Afreen conceives someone's freedom being interfered with as the biggest injustice. This is because everyone develops in their own way, and that's what makes every individual unique. Importantly, however, in Afreen's interpretation, this is also the anthropology of Islam, and all people should have this freedom because each and every person is created by God with equal human dignity. Again, Afreen, confronted with the conundrums of modern differentiation, takes a paradoxical position: on the one hand she conceives of a human being as essentially autonomous from religion (as practice and value system) but holds that this idea is itself rooted in religion (as ontology).

An attachment to freedom is not pertinent only to one particular kind of secularity but can appear in different guises in all kinds of secularity (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 905). Individual liberty can be in tension with religion (as in France, Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 895ff, and increasingly in the Netherlands) but can also collude with religious freedom, in the sense of freedom of choice and individual human flourishing (as in the US, Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 892ff). For most of my research participants, freedom is foremost immunity from state interference in their religious beliefs and practices. But increasingly, younger women like Afreen value freedom as individual liberty, as autonomy, which also entails respect for others' paths to human flourishing, not unlike the perspective shared by Ahmadiyya women. The shifting value of freedom does not reflect a decrease in religiosity, but rather reflects changes within the religion, and demonstrate shifts in what practices, beliefs, and symbols count as religion.

A powerful symbol among Muslim women is the veil. Dina started veiling three years ago because even after decades of volunteer work at a local primary school the teachers were surprised to find out she was a Muslim. She probably did not conform to the stereotype of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' as she is independent, hard-working, and smart, and then wore fashionable hair with a short fringe, short-sleeves shirts, and jeans. Others clearly did not expect her to be culturally well integrated and a Muslim at the same time. Dina had found this very upsetting. At the same time, her study in Minhaj ul Quran made her a more self-reflective Muslim, and she wanted to express her religious agency. In response, much against her husband's preference, she started to wear Pakistani clothes and a hijab: she actively engaged in 'ethical self-fashioning' (Mahmood 2005) to blur the symbolic boundaries between the 'oppressed Muslim woman' and the 'emancipated Dutch woman' (see Ghorashi 2010; Van Es 2016). Whereas Van Es (2017) mainly writes about Muslim women who struggle to demonstrate that they are emancipated women despite their piety, Dina wanted to demonstrate that she could be a pious Muslim despite her emancipated lifestyle. But like the women described by Van Es, she juggled two moral identifiers, symbolising female piety and female emancipation respectively, and united these in her own personification of an 'ambassador' of Islam. Interestingly, Dina strongly

condemns women wearing the fully covering niqab in the Netherlands. Muslims are subject to a high degree of culturalism (the idea that minority cultures are homogenous, bounded wholes that determine each member's behaviour, Ghorashi, Eriksen, and Alghasi 2009) and Dina might have thought that the niqab would not reflect well on the Muslim community as a whole.

Each of these women view their religious lives as the result of their individual responsibility and labour, a perspective that is linked to a strong distinction of culture (which they problematise) and religion (which they reform). Core to the narrative of both movements is the claim to profess the 'true' Islam: a pure Islam freed from both corrupting cultural influences and extremist aberrations (Morgahi 2018; Sheikh 2018). This narrative is particularly helpful for migrants adopting the national or cultural identity of their country of residence. Despite their 'Dutchness', they can still claim to be 'authentically Muslim' while distancing themselves from unwanted 'bad Muslims' (Mamdani 2004). In the eyes of the (mostly younger) women, previous generations (and many Muslims today) have practiced habitually, without asking questions, reading Arabic without understanding. But these women read in Urdu and Dutch, they take classes, they talk about their religion in discussion groups. Their reformist notion of religion shapes a modern model of personhood, to which inner conviction and individual self-making are central. 'Allah helps those who help themselves', Dina says, and her embrace of the hijab reflects values that tend to be associated with secular agency (free choice, autonomous will, Van Den Brandt 2019). Afreen says that her relationship with religion is something that she herself figured out. Obviously, she grew up with Islam, but still her own place in the world, in her religion, is very personal, and different from, say, her sister's. She thinks that some encouraging, positive guidance is good, as long as one can make one's own choices.

These women's attitudes would appear to resonate with policy expectations of individualisation and responsabilisation, and while the Dutch discursive context may have had some impact, these are most likely parallel developments reflecting dominant trends of late modernity. Like other international, contemporary religious movements, both Minhaj ul Quran and Ahmadiyya embody an alternative modernity: there is a combination of key 'modern' values such as future-oriented progress, conviction, and individual emancipation together with alternative perceptions of the sacred, the person, and social relationships (cf. Pool 2020 on the Tablighi Jamaat; Euben 1997). The individualisation of Islam concerns in particular the individual relationship to God, decreased faith in intermediary authority, and an emphasis on autonomous learning and discovery (Robinson 2008). Community and family ties remain very important, but in the reformed Islam I observed in the Netherlands, the nature of sociality and engagements appears to shift from traditionally hierarchical bonds towards more egalitarian connections of learning and charity work, and for which tropes of progress, love, and inclusion replace traditional tropes of status and respect. So, whereas the Dutch policy discourse appears to expect an individual emancipation that moves from religion to integration into enlightened secular liberalism,<sup>16</sup> in the view of these women, their emancipation is from a backward culture towards an enlightened religion. Indeed, their emancipation is enabled by religion; a religion that itself emancipates. Moreover, a differentiation between culture and religion paves the way for a positive articulation of secularity (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt 2012, 882); in this case a secularity for the sake of balancing religious diversity but also for the sake of liberty.

## Citizenship: 'is this integration?'

Reflections on respect and freedom have demonstrated that the women embrace a culture of secularity in which individual freedom and emancipation are increasingly important, and of which Islam is the source. Reflections on citizenship further demonstrate that undermining that source is not only a betrayal of the women's dignity, but also counterproductive to the professed intention of integration because it alienates them from Dutch society.

Dina refers to herself as 'non-Nederlander', and she claims to not be upset about being called a foreigner ('buitenlander'). 'It's a fact', she says, and instead of denying it one should be an example of a 'good foreigner'. Dina often uses the word citizen: how as a citizen you have a duty to follow the law, just like any Dutch citizen. She says that the Minhaj ul Quran leader also emphasises that people have to live according to the rules of the country they live in. Dina is angry about those she calls 'extremists', who think that even a mortgage is forbidden, and she and Afreen dislike even more those Muslims who supposedly came to the Netherlands for a better future but spoil it for the rest by simply taking advantage of the benefits of the welfare system while getting involved in criminality or worse, terrorism. Dina and Afreen themselves have a work ethic similar to a hard-working, 'deserving' Dutch person: work hard for your money, save and invest, and build up a middle-class life. But, at the same time, Dina seems to have seamlessly inculcated the distinction of formal and moral citizenship: her formal citizenship is no guarantee of inclusion and she has to engage in the daily labour of becoming the 'good citizen' (Horst, Erdal, and Noor 2019) while her ethnicity and religion continue to exclude her from cultural citizenship.

The young Ahmadiyya women, in contrast, do expect full moral citizenship. Although they talk about 'Nederlanders' as others, they do call themselves 'Hollanders' too, and they expect to be treated as such. But younger women especially, who were born as Dutch citizens and feel they actively live up the image of the 'deserving Dutch', are confronted with the exclusion of moral citizenship, for instance when Zahra, a successful lawyer, was asked to take her headscarf off so she could 'get on in the job'.

Representative of most women's views, Leila relates her experience of the changing attitude of Dutch society towards migrants which neatly reflects the changes in policy. Her parents, arrived in the Netherlands as adult refugees, and were the first Muslim immigrants in the town or neighbourhood. They were stared at and asked questions, but their Pakistani dress was a fun curiosity rather than a problem, and they were rather easily accepted 'as they were'. On Islamic holidays children were given the day off, or the celebration became part of the curriculum. Leila, and others including Zahra (who now experiences discrimination), claim to have had a relatively problem-free, happy childhood.

How stark is the difference with the struggles they and their children face these days. 'I can't remember ever being bullied for my belief, but my children are', Khadija said. Then 'religion didn't play a role', but now their children are constantly confronted with questions and jokes about videos seen on YouTube, and they feel that they have something to answer for. If children need a day off for a Muslim holiday, they now need written proof beforehand. Swimming lessons present a major hurdle: they want their girls to have access to an individual shower and changing room, separate from other girls. Whereas in the past such requests were easily granted, it now involves painful discussions and

possible refusals. The women are stupefied because they feel it's the reverse of what they would have expected: they and their children speak Dutch fluently, and participate in traditions such as Sinterklaas.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Sajida says that those women of the community who grew up in the Netherlands, especially, transmit a 'style' of belief and Islamic norms and values to their children that fit together seamlessly with Dutch law. She advocates, in other words, for a secularity based on a Rawlsian overlapping consensus: people from different ontological positions may subscribe to shared political values and laws (see Nussbaum 2000).

The women assign most responsibility for the increased questioning and bullying to the media's circulation of a distorted image of Islam, but they also claim that official school or municipal policy has changed. Now, the policy is apparently to impose one rule for everyone – their interpretation of what I have earlier referred to as 'mainstreaming'. One example given was a traumatic occasion on which a girl was forced to change in a shared changing room against her will. 'Is this respect', asked the mother, 'is this freedom?' Sajida asks how this doing 'everything together' contributes to integration, exactly? She contrasts cultural homogeneity with respect as she states that her children know Dutch and know how to respect others, and asks, 'so what's the goal of this?' They feel that policies that force them to assimilate to the mainstream is in contradiction with Dutch constitutional values such as equality and freedom of religious belief – values they also find in the Quran. But the secular progressivism that underpins contemporary integration policies tends to exclude religion from the public sphere, since it is seen as a threat to universal civic liberties. So instead of being respected for who they are, the women feel that they are either forced to let go of their identity, or be excluded from the Dutch national project.

## Conclusion

The distinction between formal and moral citizenship is based on the preference for certain ways of being over others, and on the idea that the culture and religion of the immigrant will sort of 'wear off' with time – an example of classic faith in secularisation. But it also betrays a pessimism about whether this secularisation, and thus integration, will indeed be successful, hence the 'virtualisation of citizenship' altogether (Schinkel and Van Houdt 2010). And indeed, since for most women religion appears as an integral part of their ontology, it remains foundational to their conceptions of wellbeing, freedom, and virtue, and genuine inclusion in the presently hegemonic interpretation of cultural citizenship remains out of reach.

The ontological primacy of religion does not mean that immigrants are 'stuck in a backward tradition' or that they entirely fail to differentiate religion and other spheres of life on a sociocultural level. What religion is to them is in flux as its practices and beliefs are being reformed and modernised, purified from what is now considered erroneous culture and tradition. Indeed, the younger generation of women holds values that have emancipated them from their cultural background to 'modern' egalitarian values and ideas of freedom and individuality, and progress and emancipation that they embed in Islam. In principle, these values do not jar with secular liberal-egalitarian values, in fact they support secularity for the sake of religious diversity and to some extent secularity for the sake of individual rights and liberties and development. Yet they might become more



strongly embedded in Islam the more the women feel excluded from moral citizenship at a time when they have come to expect inclusion especially because of the rapprochement of values.

Since respect and religious freedom are fundamental to wellbeing, the shift in modes of secularity, from a secularity underpinned by tolerance and respect for pluralism to one prioritising individual liberties and national culture, at best leads to a jarring gap with, and at worst has detrimental effects on, the wellbeing of these women. Secular progressivism faces the problem of national integration and development but can come at the expense of respect for religious diversity and thus does so at the exclusion of the Dutch citizens for whom religion plays an important role.

As such, these women's experiences exemplify the counterproductive, exclusionary consequences of the Dutch policy shift from a secular liberalism founded on respect for diversity towards a secular progressivist neoliberalism focused on excessive individuality but also cultural homogenisation. There is not necessarily a tension between secularity for the sake of individual liberty and national progress, but there is in this case because, for the women, secularity is embedded in Islam, whereas national progress comes at the exclusion of Islam.

Not only can Muslim newcomers never be fully included in the moral community when Islam is seen as an unsurmountable obstacle, but they are not regarded as potentially contributing anything original or positive to the Dutch moral community. Secular progressivism is not only limiting Muslim moral and cultural lives, but also limiting conceptions of what it means to be a virtuous citizen.

## Notes

1. The Netherlands counts 23,866 people of Pakistani background on 1 January 2019 (i.e. people born in Pakistan or with at least one parent born in Pakistan. All my interviewees fall in this category) (CBS 2019).
2. Whether there ever was a coherent multicultural policy model is in fact being questioned. Even if there was a secularity for the sake of religious diversity, pillarisation was already contested for decades. Perhaps policy was more determined by a pragmatic 'keeping things together', and reflected elements of assimilationism, and of liberal-egalitarianism (Duyvendak and Scholten 2010; Sunier 2010). But the very idea that there was such a model, and that it failed, justifies the more assimilationist discourses that were adopted later on.
3. 'Mainstreaming' means that integration is no longer a separate policy domain on the national level. This has also been caused by the increasing challenge of 'superdiversity' (Vertovec 2007). Westerveen and Adam (2019) argue that 'mainstreaming' in practice means 'doing nothing' in combination with heavy ethnic monitoring.
4. FvD Website: [https://www.fvd.nl/wet\\_bescherming\\_nederlandse\\_waarden](https://www.fvd.nl/wet_bescherming_nederlandse_waarden)
5. Open letter to main Dutch newspapers, directed 'To all Dutch people'. The original reads: 'Mensen die zich niet willen aanpassen, afgeven op onze gewoontes en onze waarden afwijzen. Die homo's lastigvallen, vrouwen in korte rokjes uitjouwen of gewone Nederlanders uitmaken voor racisten' (Verstraete and Fiers 2017). Translation by the author.
6. 'Allochtonen' is derived from Greek and means 'those from another soil' (as opposed to the 'autochtonen' who 'emerge from this soil'). It is a term that was widely used both formally and informally to refer to immigrants and their descendants. Since 2016, the term has been banned from formal use due to its stigmatising character.
7. The term 'responsibilisation' was first coined by Michel Foucault and popularised in sociology by Rose (1992).

8. This national community is remarkably culturally homogeneous, with a large majority supporting secular, progressive ideals, and rights to freedom of speech and expression (Duyvendak 2011, 88).
9. That said, constitutional secularism continues to protect religion against the secularist bias against religious minorities (Tamimi Arab 2017, 109).
10. Before starting the research, ethics approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, at which I was based at the time of research. Written informed consent has been obtained from all participants.
11. A look at the website of Minhaj ul Quran gives a good sense of the way the movement aims to relate to the outside world: it claims to promote interfaith harmony, counter extremism and terrorism, preach religious moderation among young Muslims, promote peace, human rights, including women's rights, provide education, social welfare, and empowerment. A term that might most aptly describe Minhaj ul Quran is 'reform Sufism' (Werbner 2013). This term denotes that the followers practice a kind of Islam that is less spiritual than traditional Sufism, and more activist. Both its neo-Sufi yet universalist character and its rapid geographical expansion must be seen in the global geographic context (it must appeal to a global diaspora) and the local context (Sufism was embraced as the 'benign Islam' as opposed to Wahhabism). In some respects, there are resonances with Islamism (a political version of Islam), hence the neologism 'sufislamism' (Philippon 2009), but these remain on the organisational level (Morgahi 2018).
12. Their current leader is the fifth Khalifa (that is, the fifth successor of the founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad) and is based in London, in exile.
13. All names are pseudonyms.
14. While migrants have come to the Netherlands for at least five centuries (Lucassen and Lucassen 2018), the term 'guest labourers' ('gastarbeiders') tends to refer to migrant workers first came to the Netherlands to help rebuild the country after the Second World War, and were called 'guests' because they were expected to return to their home country rather than settle in the Netherlands.
15. Translations from Dutch to English by the author.
16. I recognise that there is not one coherent national model of policy or a single underlying view. I base this general observation on reflections on policy notes, e.g. Rem and Gasper (2018), while individual Christen-Democratisch Appèl policymakers, for instance, might not expect a trivialisation of religion.
17. Sinterklaas is a controversial national holiday somewhat like Christmas (but celebrated on 5 December), where the elves are replaced by black helpers called Zwarte Piet (performed by blacked up white Dutch). Anti-racist organisations and concerned citizens have lobbied and protested for at least a decade to abolish the figure of Zwarte Piet. The Ahmadiyya women mention this festival specifically because it is both one of the most typically Dutch traditions and very controversial: they are willing to engage in Dutch traditions and even put up with its racist connotations just so their children can feel included and accepted as part of the Dutch nation.

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