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European Muslim Women in Dubai:
Religious Conversion, Migration and Belonging in a
Global City

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Abstract

This thesis explores the complex and diverse ways in which European Muslim converts create and negotiate a sense of belonging as migrants in Dubai. Drawing on ethnographic work conducted in the fall of 2015, it provides an intimate account of the lives of European Muslim women in Dubai. By addressing the intersection between migration and religious conversion, this thesis seeks to add to existing research on the way religion plays an important role in migration experiences in a globalized world. I show that for European Muslim converts, their religious identification is essential to understanding how they experience their migration. I argue that their belonging spans multiple locations and peoples, but that their implication in multiple environments also creates a sense of not fully belonging anywhere. While religious conversion to a controversial religion on the one hand problematizes their belonging in Europe, simultaneously as migrants, their belonging in Dubai is also partial and temporary. Belonging to the *ummah*, as the global Muslim community, provides converts with an alternative belonging; a belonging that transcends localized notions of belonging. This belonging takes on important meanings in their lives as they create a sense of belonging in and to Dubai, a global city with a culturally and ethnically diverse Muslim population.

Keywords: *migration, belonging, Muslim converts, women, Europe, Dubai.*

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1. Introduction

In Dubai, every Sunday evening the large sandy parking lot in front of *Al Taqwa* Center for Islamic Learning fills up with the cars of women who come to learn more about their religion. On Sundays Ikram, the Qatari teacher, gives class entitled "Come let's refresh our faith". Although a range of different classes are given at this center throughout the week, this evening lecture is specifically busy, because women who work during the day are also able to attend this class. The seats of the spacious lecture room, which accommodates over a hundred people, easily fill up and after the lecture most women stay in the adjacent cafeteria to socialize, eat and drink until the center closes. The *Al Taqwa* Center for Islamic Learning, simply referred to as *Al Taqwa* by its students, is situated in a villa in one of the upper-class residential neighborhoods of Dubai. The villa itself is surrounded by a wall and the visitor enters through decorated metal gates, a sign reads: "Welcome to our Garden of Knowledge". *Al Taqwa* is only accessible for women, or "sisters" as they call each other.¹ The women who attend originate from a wide range of nationalities and backgrounds; a few of them are Emirati, the others are expatriates from Somalia, Russia, Indonesia, Canada, The Netherlands and many more countries. While most are born-Muslims, there is also a considerable group of converts among whom many Europeans.

As I moved from Sweden to Dubai myself in the fall of 2015, being a Muslim convert myself, I was excited to go to a place where I thought it would be easier to practice my religion. Having easy access to places to pray, to mosques and not always being the odd one out as a Muslim. Once there, I started attending lectures at *Al Taqwa* and soon I came in touch with several other European Muslim converts, some of whom attended lectures at the center daily. For them, *Al Taqwa* functioned as an important place to come together, socialize and experience a sense of community with other Muslim women in a city where they live as migrants. Our conversations often turned to their lives in Dubai. More than for me, as I only moved temporarily to Dubai, their conversion to Islam was central to their experiences, both for those women who converted after migrating to Dubai as well as for those who had already become Muslims while living in Europe. While they saw Dubai as a positive place where they could "be themselves", contrariwise Europe featured as a problematic place after their conversion. Their decision to convert to Islam had led to conflict with family and friends at home and they also expressed that

¹ With the exception of boys under 8 years old.

after donning the veil in Dubai, they felt uncomfortable or even afraid wearing it in Europe. Conversion complicated their relationship to the places they come from. Yet there is a tension as well in their positive notions of Dubai. As migrants they remain outside of the national framework and therefore cannot fully belong, even if they do not want to move back to Europe again.

The experiences of these women must be understood within a context of increasing globalization and the expansion of the flows of people, ideas and goods over the world. As these European women encounter Muslims from a variety of cultural, ethnic and social backgrounds, both in Europe as well as in Dubai, they are confronted with different worldviews and different modes of being. This encounter changes them and their notions of who they are and where they belong. Although the interaction and exchange between people of different cultural, ethnic and religious environments is of all times, the intensified movement of people (as well as of goods and ideas) increasingly problematizes notions about the world as divided into a mosaic of bounded societies, cultures and religions (Gupta and Ferguson 1992). Dubai, as a city that is rapidly changing under the influence of globalization, is one such site which offers itself as a place to study the ways in which human diversity and global life give rise to new ways of living and giving meaning to questions about who we are and why we are here. The opening passage raises questions about how these women understand themselves as Europeans, migrants in a particular locality and members of a global *ummah*; a Muslim faith community.

Much of the debate on the relation between Europe and the Middle East focuses on conflict, incompatibility or difference. Debates about European converts tend to focus on radicalism, with at present as its prime focus converts who travel to Syria to join ISIS. When we speak about the encounter with Muslims in the Middle East, we most often look at the movement of Muslims towards Europe. Either literally: through migration from the Middle East to Europe, or symbolically: through the dispersion of European politics, values, ideas and modes of being. There is much less attention for the ways in which the Middle East also affects Europeans, let alone for the positive encounters and exchanges that take place in countries in the Middle East. These encounters “do not fit in our prevailing categories and conceptual imaginations”, in the words of Asef Bayat (2010: 3). Nevertheless, they are important and without paying attention to them, we miss a lot of what is going on in our contemporary world.

It is with these reflections in mind that in this thesis I travel a road less traveled. In this thesis I explore how European Muslim converts make sense out of their own position in the world, as Europeans, Muslims and migrants. I explore what it means to move to Dubai from Europe and what the role of religion is in the ability to create a sense of home somewhere else. Does religious conversion take on a different meaning as a migrant than it does “at home”? In order to explore this case, I pose the following research question:

How do European Muslim converts create and negotiate a sense of belonging in and to Dubai on the intersection between religious, national, ethnic and cultural identification?

1.1 Research Purpose

In the broadest sense, this thesis seeks to address what it means to “belong” in a complex globalized world. More concretely, it explores the ways in which European Muslim converts construct a sense of belonging as migrants in a particular global city. I explore the intersection between migration and religion and ask how migration can take on different meanings for converts.

In this thesis I draw on theory about belonging in the context of migration and conversion. I argue that European Muslim converts belonging spans across multiple locations, as they are attached both to the places they come from as well as to Dubai, where they have migrated to (and sometimes also to other countries where they have lived before). Moreover, engaging with the theory about belonging and migration, I argue in this thesis that we also need to look beyond forms of belonging that are attached to particular localities. I show that for European Muslim converts the notion of belonging to a global *ummah*, that transcends cultural, ethnic and national identifications, takes on an important meaning in their lives. This global attachment does not negate other forms of belonging, but emerges from the experience of being Muslim in multiple places and engaging with Muslims from multiple locations.

This thesis insists on focusing not merely on the boundaries between different groups of migrants in the city, but also on the creative encounter between them. As such, I am in dialogue with the literature about migrants’ lives in Dubai, which mainly focuses on the structural boundaries between different migrant groups. I show that European Muslim converts use religious spaces in the city to engage in contact across national, ethnic and cultural boundaries. I

show that exchange, cooperation and sharing does take place among different groups in Dubai. Nevertheless I do not argue against the literature as such, as I also identify other boundaries along religious and class lines. I show that although conversion may be the outcome of the encounter with diversity, European converts in Dubai also to a great extent disengage from contact with non-Muslims and thus create new boundaries.

Finally, this thesis also adds to the literature about the intersection between migration, religion and belonging. I add to this literature the question if religion might take on different meanings for the migration experiences of converts. By exploring how European Muslim converts understand their own position vis-à-vis the places they come from as well as to Dubai, I inquire into the ways their conversion influences their notions of belonging in both places. Moreover by looking at how their religious conversion influences their position in Dubai as migrants, I explore their relationship with Emirati society and Dubai's city space. I show that being Muslim enables converts to create a sense of attachment to Dubai through religious spaces. Moreover, I argue that in some cases, namely when European women marry UAE nationals, religious conversion moreover goes together with becoming part of and accepted into Emirati society.

1.2 Disposition

The first chapter of this thesis is the literature review. The literature review is divided into three main topics. These topics are: migrants' lives in Dubai, the intersection between religion, migration and belonging and the work on contemporary European conversion to Islam. Bringing these three bodies of literature together I lay the context in which we may begin to understand European converts' belonging in Dubai. I argue that presently there are noticeable gaps between the research on religious conversion and migration. Moreover, the literature on migrants in Dubai so far has mostly focused on the boundaries and segmentation between groups along ethnic, class and cultural lines. This thesis nuances these views, by focusing on how migrants in Dubai also transcend these boundaries and the necessity to look at religious space to identify such processes.

Following upon the literature review, in the theoretical framework I present the lens through which I approach the study of European converts in Dubai. I elaborate on *belonging* as a conceptual tool against other more static theories about identity. I discuss what belonging means

within a context of globalization and increased migration flows. Moreover, stressing that belonging is multiple and performative, I argue that we should look at belonging as continually produced, performed and embodied. Finally, I argue that we may think about the *ummah*, as the global Muslim community, as an alternative imagination to other more localized forms of belonging.

In the methodology I discuss in-depth the practical aspects of my fieldwork. I go into detail about my methodological choices: where and how I conducted participant observation; how and with whom I conducted interviews; access; reliability and validity; ethical considerations and data analysis. This chapter provides insight into the underpinnings of the research. Of particular interest is the discussion about my own position in the field as a researcher and partial insider.

The following chapter is the findings chapter, in which I present the main results of my fieldwork. I open this chapter with a short profile of each of the eight women I interviewed. Consequently I discuss the five main themes that are important in answering my research question. The themes are as following: *Europe: a Place of Anxiety*; *Living in a Global City*; *Islamic Sisterhood*; *Identification with Emirati society* and *European Muslim Sisters*. Through quotes from the interviews and material from my participant observation, I address the ways in which European Muslim converts construct a sense of belonging on the intersection between religious, cultural and ethnic identification.

In the analysis I look at my findings through the lens of the theory and place it within the wider context such as discussed in the literature review. The analysis is divided into three parts. In the first part *Multiple Belongings: Local and Global* I discuss how European Muslim converts understand their belonging as implicated between multiple locations, as a consequence of the uprooting experience of migration. As converts construct a sense of belonging along multiple localities, this also gives rise to a sense of being in-between and belonging to neither one fully. These notions are intensified as converts feel excluded in Europe after they become Muslim. The *ummah*, as a notion that puts a global religious community at the center of ones belonging, provides an alternative imagination that transcends localized notions of belonging. In the second section: *Belonging and Religious Space in the City*, I discuss how religious spaces in Dubai provide European Muslim converts with a sense of belonging. I show how these spaces, marker by cultural, ethnic and national diversity, furthermore enable European Muslim converts to

realize the notion of belonging to the *ummah*, by engaging with Muslims from diverse backgrounds in their everyday lives. Moreover, I also show how their position as well-off expatriates enable them to live comfortable and privileged lives in Dubai. This means that they are little affected by their status as migrants. Finally, in *Conversion, Marriage and Changing Belongings* I discuss the intersection between conversion to Islam and the interaction with Emirati society. In this last part of the analysis I focus primarily on those of my respondents who have married UAE citizens and discuss how for them religious conversion and marriage function as a pathway to becoming accepted in Emirati society.

In the final chapter of this thesis, the conclusion, I first summarize the main arguments derived from the thesis in its entirety. The second part of the conclusion exists of suggestions for further research.

2. Literature Review

European Muslim converts are one example of the ways in which the complex and multi-faceted encounters between people of different backgrounds can create, constitute and change subjects. For the women in this study, their encounter with Muslims from a myriad of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds both in Europe and in Dubai leads them to rethink and redirect the way they give meaning to the world around them and their place in it. These processes must be understood within a wider context of the way religion figures as a dynamic force in migrants' lives. The existing literature on this topic provides ways in which to understand the intersection between migration, religion and belonging, yet the literature is overwhelmingly focused on Europe and North America and the work on religious conversion and migration is highly limited.

Hence, in this literature review I bring together the literature on Dubai as a site of immigration, on the intersection between religion, migration and belonging, and on conversion to Islam in Europe. I firstly discuss what has been written about migrants' lives in Dubai and suggest how a focus on migrant's notions about religious belonging in the city might contribute to a wider view that incorporates migrants' contact and solidarity across other boundaries. In what follows I discuss how religion functions as an important component in migrant belongings. Finally, I argue that the relation between religion and migration may take on different meanings for converts and discuss conversion of Europeans to Islam in the contemporary world.

2.1 Migrant's Lives in Dubai

Dubai, the second largest emirate of the seven United Arab Emirates (UAE), is the product of the extremely rapid development of a very young country. The discovery of oil in 1966 enabled an, until then, impoverished area to revolutionize its economy and society (Pacione 2005: 256). The extraordinarily rapid development of the city, along with the wider Gulf region, mean that "the flows of capital, people, technology, images and ideas associated with the process of globalization have penetrated every aspect of life in the GCC countries" (Abdelhady 2013: 1). These developments were dependent in large part on foreign workers and therefore the presence of migrants took on radically different dimensions. Currently 83.3% of the total population in the UAE consists of "non-nationals" (UN Data 2015).

Dubai's population, with its influx of migrants from diverse regions of the world, is ethnically, culturally, nationally and religiously diverse. Despite this diversity the contact across

boundaries appears to be limited; the literature emphasizes the segregation between different migrant groups along cultural, ethnic, class and religious barriers (Bayat 2010; cooke 2014; Coles and Walsh 2010; Kanna 2013; Kathiravelu 2016; Masad 2008; Rhys 2010). Migrants are usually divided between the low-income South Asian worker and the high-income expatriates. These groups are divided from each other in city space physically, in terms of the places they live and move. But also symbolically, in the ways that they are imagined and treated by the Emirati state (Rhys 2010). Migrants from North America and Europe, falling into the category expatriates, are a privileged group. Although the United Arab Emirates have never been colonized, the British and later also Europeans from other countries and Americans have played an important part in the development of the country and therefore have and still do find Dubai a welcoming place (Kanna 2013). Walsh (2006, 2007, 2012), who has elaborately written on British expatriates' lives in Dubai, shows how they live primarily within social environments circumscribed by cultural and ethnic identification; moving within English pubs, expatriate clubs and societies and so on and minimizing their contact across ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Migrant groups are thus internally segmented, but separation from Emirati society is even more significant. As cooke writes: "No matter how long they have lived there, the vast majority of foreigners remain physically and socially apart from the citizen community" (2014: 23). Immigrants cannot obtain citizenship and remain non-nationals (and so do their children), their entitlement to stay in the country is dependent upon having work (cooke 2014; Longva 2005). As the political, economic and symbolic elite in Dubai, UAE citizens claim ownership over the nation. They distinguish themselves from migrants by clearly demarcating the borders between what is Emirati and what is not. Borders are not only maintained through segregation, as Emiratis do interact with migrants in public space and at work, but also through for example overt cultural markers such as national dress (cooke 2014: 24). As Khatiravelu (2016) points out, the way that migrants are imagined as permanent outsiders neglects their contribution to the city, even though they have been crucial to Dubai's development (12). Moreover, if migrants are excluded from claiming belonging to Dubai culturally and legally, this raises questions about how migrants do create a sense of belonging in and to the city.

Research shows however that migrants do manage to create forms of belonging in and to Dubai. Several authors stress the ways in which migrants recreate national and cultural belonging, by creating a "home away from home" (Coles and Walsh 2010; Kanna 2013; Walsh

2007, 2009). It is however necessary to read between the lines, and to also pay attention to how people do cross national, cultural and ethnic boundaries, even if this is limited. Masad (2008), as an exception, does look at interaction between different migrant groups. He highlights the neighborly encounters between expatriates from different parts of the world in parks, schools, gyms, at the beach, places of business and government offices that serve the needs of migrants. As such, he carefully identifies a “growing sense of harmonious cosmopolitan living” in Dubai’s city space (11). Masad does not mention religious spaces as places for meaningful interaction between people from different ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds, but these should also be included. While Emirati national identity draws heavily also on a shared Islamic identification, Emirati’s share their city with Muslims from a variety of other backgrounds, among whom European Muslim converts. Therefore we should pay attention to how shared religious identification, among Emirati and European Muslims and Muslims from elsewhere, can give way for alternative means of belonging and solidarity across boundaries. In the following section of this literature review I discuss how religious identification can function as a means of creating a sense of belonging in the context of migration.

2.2 Religion, Migration, Belonging

Migration is an uprooting experience, which challenges and changes migrants’ conceptions of to what and where they belong (Kivisto 2014; Werbner and Hall 2008). It entails negotiating new environments and determining ones place within them; between the place one comes from and the place one has migrated to. Religion functions as one essential way in which people give meaning to who they are, where they are and why they are there. As migrants rethink their belonging in the wake of migration, it thus follows that ideas about religious belonging are also transformed when people move to new territories (Hirschmann 2004; Guest 2003; Levitt 2003). Religion then, has a transformative quality, in the ways that it “is used, shaped and utilized as transnational migration takes place within the globalization process” (Bonifacio and Angeles 2010: 4). Indeed, the work at the intersection between migration and religion have shown how, in diverse ways, religious belonging can take a central place within the ways migrants (re)create and negotiate a sense of belonging to the host society, their place of origin and beyond.

Religious identification, alongside and together with other markers of identity such as culture and ethnicity, is one of the ways which we must take into consideration to understand the

way migrants relate to their host societies. Scholars have asked the question whether religious identity is a means of adapting and becoming part of a host society, or perhaps a barrier to it (Bonifacio and Angeles 2010; Yazbeck Haddad, Smith and Esposito 2003; Guest 2003; Kivisto 2014; Pace 2014; van der Veer 2002). The answer to this question is not straightforward, but is dependent on the particular local, historical and political context and must be understood within this light. Migrants who for example belong to a minority religion in the host society, are sometimes seen as incapable of integrating. Religious differences are then used as a way of constructing difference between the one who belongs and the one who does not, alongside other markers of difference such as ethnicity or race (Pace 2014: 16). In other cases, migrants familiarize themselves with the new cultural and social environment of the host society through religious communities. Kim (2014) for example argues that for Korean immigrants in the U.S.A the Protestant church can even function as a means of getting to “understand, interpret and confront the challenges of becoming American” (196). Also when religious identification doesn’t directly aid migrants to “become American”, or acknowledged members of whatever society they may be in, religious communities may still be an important means of creating a sense of home (Connor 2014; Hirschmann 2004; Guest 2003). They can function as places of emotional and spiritual refuge, give migrants access to a social network and create a sense of community.

Religious identification can also function as a means of alternative belonging that surpasses other more localized forms of belonging. When migrants are marginalized or excluded, religion may be an alternative way of imaging oneself as part of a system of meaning (Guest 2003; Levitt 2003). Levitt (2003) suggests that increasing global interconnectedness also gives rise to more globally-oriented theologies (865). In this vein, Roy (2004) discusses that as Muslims increasingly live as minorities in Europe and North America, but also become in some sense minoritized in Muslim majority countries as a consequence of globalization, Muslims are forced to rethink what it means to be a Muslim (18). One outcome is that a “globalized Islam” emerges; an Islam which claims not to be linked to a given location but can be defined beyond the notions of culture, society and locality (23). The notion of the *ummah*, as the global community of Muslims, has become more stressed Roy argues, as Islam has become less linked to a specific territory. As a consequence, “increasing numbers of believers think of themselves as belonging to a faith community, and not to a society in which religion is more a cultural marker than an actual practice” (37). This is significant, as also Karim (2009) shows for example in the

context of the U.S.A, that young Muslim Americans employ their notion of the *ummah* in order to carefully cross ethnic boundaries and establish relationships with Muslims of other ethnic backgrounds. In line with Karim (2009) and Levitt's (2003) suggestion to shift the focus from nation as organizing principle to faith, more work on how migrants actually practice the multi-cultural, -national and -ethnic *ummah* would provide insight into the possibilities and limitations of the concept as an alternative place of belonging.

The work on the intersection between religion and migration gives important insights into the ways migrants negotiate and rethink their religious belonging within a wider national, but also global, social and political context. Yet, I suggest that for converts the relation between migration and religion may take on different meanings. While converts are often welcomed into a new religion, conversion is generally met with hostility by the wider community of the convert as it may disrupt political and social notions about the proper place and meaning of religion (Jansen 2006: x; Marzouki 2013: 3; Roy 2013: 186). Converts then challenge notions about the interrelation between culture and religion and have to navigate the boundaries between the two realms (Roy 2013). We might ask how converts make sense and give meaning to such experiences being migrants and living outside of their home countries. The literature on religious conversion and migration is very limited (Kivisto 2014: 25) and although conversion to Islam in Europe has been quite elaborately written about, literature about European converts who migrate and live outside of Europe lacks. In what follows I introduce what has been written on European Muslim converts, in order to provide a background in which to understand the ways religious identification may take on meaning in their specific case.

2.3 Perceptions of Islam and of Muslim converts in Europe

While the construction of Muslims as the ultimate “Other” to “Europeanness” are nothing new (Said 1979), the debate about Muslims as a threat in Europe has been highly exacerbated over the past fifteen years. Currently, the rise of terrorist group ISIS and its attacks in Paris and Brussels, fuel notions about Islam as a violent and irrational religion. Moreover, the arrival of thousands of refugees on the European shores, many of whom Muslims, feeds fear about the presence of outsiders who are a threat to society economically and ideologically. In the wake of such developments, in many European countries right-wing populist parties that voice a strong Islamophobic rhetoric have garnered increasing support. The debate about the Muslim presence

in Europe is racialized, fueled by a fear of foreigners and strangers. While the word Islamophobia seems to indicate a fear of the religion, Özyürek (2015) argues in an elaborate discussion on the topic that more than that it indicates patterns of exclusion based in cultural explanations (20). Muslims are imagined as being fundamentally different than Europeans and the oppression of Muslim women is perhaps the most pervasive theme in the construction of difference. Women who wear the veil are easily identifiable as Muslim and are imagined “as a hallmark of the incompatibility of Islam with European values as well as of the unwillingness of Muslims to assimilate and become truly part of European nation-states” (Moors and Salih 2009: 376).

In this context it is not surprising that the conversion of Europeans to Islam raises a range of sensitivities. Converts challenge the constructed boundaries between “Europeanness” and “Islam” by belonging to both at the same time (Roald 2004; Suleiman 2013; van Nieuwkerk 2006; Vroon Najem 2014; Özyürek 2015; Zebiri 2008). Especially when the convert is a woman she challenges these boundaries, in which gender boundaries take up a pivotal role (van Nieuwkerk 2006: 1). Studies on the conversion of European women to Islam in contemporary society show that the conversion to Islam and the attached life-changes, for example in ways of dressing, eating, socializing and interacting with the opposite sex, often mean that converts’ belonging come under question and that they become perceived as immigrants and sometimes they are even regarded as traitors (Gudrun Jensen 2008; Roald 2004; Vroon Najem 2014; Zebiri 2008). This is especially the case for white female converts who adopt the veil. Where their national, cultural and ethnic belonging and loyalty were previously taken for granted, now they come under question. They are made to feel “other” in public and their conversion may have extensive social consequences, such as potentially losing their jobs. Visibly identifiable as Muslim, the convert who dons the *hijab* “loses the prestige her Whiteness bestows on her” (Suleiman 2013: 4); and experiences “an unexpected sudden fall in social status” (Özyürek 2015: 19). The social penalties that conversion to Islam leads to, often have as a consequence that converts feel alienated from their own societies (Roald 2004; Vroon Najem 2014; Zebiri 2008).

2.4 Conversion to Islam: Negotiating Belonging and Identity

While those around Muslim converts often see a contradiction between their religious and national, cultural or ethnic identifications, converts themselves don't necessarily do. Conversion does not entail a radical break with the past, but should rather be understood as an ambivalent and ongoing process, as converts are continuously engaged in negotiating and recreating their religious, cultural and social identities in relation to their societies and to other Muslims (Marzouki 2013; van Nieuwkerk 2006: 2). Conversion thus does not necessarily mean a move away from one's own cultural or social identification and although women make profound changes as a consequence of conversion, converts also emphasize continuity in their experience of the self (Mansson McGinty 2006; Vroon Najem 2014).

With few exceptions, conversion does almost always follow interaction with Muslims. Many women convert following a romantic relationship with a Muslim, others convert after learning about the religion from Muslim friends, or actively seek out Muslims in order to learn about Islam in a search for meaning (Roald 2004: 111; Vroon Najem 2014: 70). In many cases these Muslims have different cultural and/or ethnic backgrounds than converts themselves. This contact may be guiding in the ways that converts understand the religion. However as several scholars have shown in line with Roy's (2004) notion of globalized Islam, European Muslim converts also often appeal to an Islam from what they perceive as cultural aberrations and influences, in the quest to reconcile their new religious identity with their own cultural and ethnic background (Rogozen-Soltar 2004; Roald 2004; Özyürek 2015; Vroon Najem 2014).

Within a diverse faith, it is not surprising that converts also come to diverse understandings and interpretations of the religion. Conversion is thus not a uniform experience. While perhaps most European converts adopt a *sunni* interpretation of Islam, others convert to *sufism* (Jawad 2006; Stjernholm 2011) or *shiism* (Roald 2004; Zebiri 2008), a minor fraction of converts also adopt a violent understanding of their new religion (Khosrokhavar 2010: 240; Peresin and Cervone 2015). Conversion to Islam should thus not be generalized; it can entail adopting a wide spectrum of different ways of embodying, practicing and understanding the religion. It is grounded within specific local, historical and political contexts and it is along these lines that we must try to understand women's choices to embrace another religion.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

In this thesis I explore the intersection between religious conversion, migration and belonging within a particular local context. The existing literature provides useful pathways that can guide this research. However, I have identified several gaps between the different fields of literature discussed in this chapter. What needs to be done is a serious engagement between these fields. As such, this thesis contributes to the understanding of how religion can take on different meanings in the migration experience of religious converts. Studying European Muslim converts outside of Europe, provides a means to explore how converts negotiate their belonging outside of the structural constraints of their societies. I look at the encounter of European women with Emirati Muslims and other Muslims from multiple cultural and ethnic backgrounds in Dubai and explore how religion functions as an essential way in which, at the intersection with other nodes of identification, these women negotiate and (re)create a sense of belonging.

3. Theoretical Perspectives

In order to answer the question where and to what European Muslim converts “belong”, a range of questions need to be taken into consideration. These questions relate to how they make sense of where they are and who they are after migration and after conversion. Following Hall (Hall and Werbner 2008) we may ask: what position do they take up in relation to Dubai, in relation to their home countries and how do they make sense of themselves and who they are (347)? In this chapter I present the theoretical concepts that are the tools with which I will address these questions in this thesis. I firstly introduce the concept *belonging*, which enables me to address European Muslims converts’ multiple, complex and changing identifications, against other more static theories. *Belonging* addresses the emotional attachments and enables me to address how converts make sense of who they are. Discussing in particular convert- and migrant belongings, I argue that we should look at how their belonging spans across multiple locations and notions. Coupling belonging with Butler's *performativity*, I suggest that we should look at how belongings are continuously (re)produced, embodied and performed. Focusing on belonging as performative, moreover, enables us to be attentive not only to people’s agency in (re)creating and belongings, but also to the structural boundaries which restrict this process. This thus addresses what position they take up in Dubai and their home countries and to what extent their notions of themselves are accepted and legitimated. Finally then, I discuss how globally oriented belongings can function as an alternative imagination to more localized notions such as culture and ethnicity.

3.1 Belonging in a Complex Global World

Moving away from identity as something which is “out there”, post-structural theory has critically engaged with the ways in which notions about locality, community and solidarity are socially and historically produced (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 4). Identities, as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within the narrative of the past", are not fixed entities possessed by their bearers (Hall 1990: 225). They are subject to constant change, complex, relational and multilayered. Using the more fluid concept "belonging" rather than the reifying term “identity”, enables us to address how multiple different identifications come together within one person. Rather than focusing on be-ing, be-longing

denotes the tenacious, fragile and perhaps impossible desire to really and truly belong (Probyn 1996: 8). Denoting the affective aspects of feeling at home, belonging is about the "longing to belong"; "the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being and the ways in which the individual and groups are caught up within wanting to belong, wanting to become" (19). Belonging thus deals with people's emotional attachments in all their complexity (Yuval Davis 2011: 10). People can belong to many different things (people, places, objects) at the same time, in different ways and to different degrees (Ibid. 12). Instead of reducing people to a national, cultural or religious identity, we might thus move beyond these categories. Thus, rather than speaking of "European", "Muslim", "Emirati" and so on as predefined categories, through belonging we can look at how and why the women in my study identify with such categories and what they mean to them.

Migrants' belongings have been described as fragmented, ambivalent, in-between and hybrid; belonging neither fully here nor there, implicated between multiple national and cultural alliances (Bhabha 1994; Abdelhady 2011; Salih 2003). As a problematic category to the ideology of the contemporary nation state, which promises the overlap between a culture, society and territory, the migrant is a being that is inherently out of place. Much current writing focuses on migrants' transnational belonging (Al-Ali and Khoser 2001; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007; Salih 2003). The transnational perspective draws attention to the ways in which migrants can be attached to multiple countries simultaneously and create a sense of home both in the society they come from as well as in the host society. Thus rather than taking a singular approach that looks at migrants' assimilation or integration in the host society or sees migrants as displaced and uprooted, a transnational perspective incorporates how migrants' belongings span across multiple locations (Salih 2003). It takes into account the dynamicity of belonging and the ways in which migrants give new meanings to their place in the world as a consequence of their migration experience. We should however also think about belonging beyond the category of the nation-state and ask how the migration experience may give rise to new forms of identification (Abdelhady 2011). This takes up particular salience as we are looking at migrating religious converts. In a different way than migrants, converts belongings have also been described as ambivalent and in-between. As religious conversion is generally seen as conflicting with converts' cultural and social background by their environments. Yet, as religion cannot be equated with a particular locality or nation, conversion also does not simply mean belonging

elsewhere. Rather than imagining converts' belonging simply as to multiple nations therefore, we should also take into account how religious belonging intersects with other notions of belonging. The concept of belonging then, can be employed to open up the analytical space "to address the complex interplay between ethnicity, nationality, and religion, in a globalized world" (Vroon Najem 2014: 20).

3.2 Performative Belongings

As we do not "simply or ontologically "belong" to the world or any group in it", belonging is not simply a feeling, but an achievement and an investment (Bell 1999: 3). It is the consequence of (inter-)action. Performativity, following Judith Butler (1993), provides a framework to understand how belongings are continuously being produced, embodied and performed. Instead of seeing identity as *the cause* for certain actions, we should see them as *the effect* of them. This also means that belongings are never stable, as they constantly needs to be reinforced by the enactment and investment of those who want to belong and want to become. Although the performativity of belonging means that there is room for change through the process of rethinking and giving new meaning to one's belonging, it doesn't mean that identity is "free play" (Butler 1993: 134). As Butler shows, categories of identity become perceived as real, through the constant reiteration of them across time and space, going beyond individual people. Simultaneously through the exclusion of those who threaten the boundaries of identity categories, identities are also maintained. It is within this framework that we may understand the relation between structure and agency in the process of identity formation.

The emphasis on the performative aspect of belongings necessarily engages with how different belongings intersect with each other. As people embody multiple belongings simultaneously, these belongings do not exist independently of each other, but are interwoven and converge with one another. It is at the intersection of European Muslim converts' identifications as white Europeans from certain countries, as Muslims, migrants and as women that their particular experiences take shape and must be understood. It is also at the intersection of these identifications that tension arises. That the women in my study may unite these different identifications within themselves, does not mean that these are readily accepted. As European Muslims, they challenge ideas about the interrelation between culture, ethnicity and religion and as migrants, they challenge ideas about the overlap between culture, society and place. By

looking at how European Muslim converts confront and engage with these boundaries, by challenging and negotiating them as well as adapting to them, gives us insight into the way they give meaning to their own belonging against the structural constraints of society.

3.3 Imagining a Global Belonging

The global city has been described both as a place of conflict, struggle and segmentation, but also as a place of diversity, cooperation and sharing (Bayat 2010; Keith 2005; Vertovec 2007). As such, they are places of creative encounters that can give rise to alternative modes of being. Looking at migration and belonging in such a place moreover implies the need not only to look at how migrants construct a sense of belonging in relation to the host society, but also to and with other migrants. It is particularly this aspect of Dubai, a global and diverse city, that will prove important in converts' everyday lives and practices in the city. Above I already suggested that we also need to look beyond the category of the nation state when we want to understand migrant belongings. Here I elaborate on that notion, by arguing that the creative and diverse encounter between people in the global city, also gives rise to notions of belonging that are not rooted in locality, but rather are globally oriented. I discuss how work on cosmopolitanism has shown how such global belongings can emerge and ask if we can also apply this to a globally oriented religious identification.

Abdelhady (2011) employs a notion of cosmopolitan identifications as a means of belonging to different societies at once. She shows how these identifications can enable migrants to challenge the more traditional ethnic and national forms of belonging (2008: 193). The cosmopolitan then serves as an alternative imagination (Ibid.: 194). This alternative imagination does not exclude local attachments to the places migrants are from or where they are living now, Abdelhady shows, instead their multiple belongings are at the center of "their awareness of their global presence and reality" (195). Similarly, Werbner (2008) speaks of the cosmopolitan not as the ideology of elite travelers about the rootless identity, as it has often been understood, but instead as the competence to be at home within multiple cultural and ethnic environments (2). Cosmopolitanism, in this understanding, is not an individual endeavor, but is understood socially. It is "a product of creativity and communication in the context of diversity" and therefore "collective, relational and thus historically located", like any other identification is for that matter (Ibid.). Being cosmopolitan thus doesn't refer to the absence of belonging, but to "the

possibility of belonging to more than one ethnic and cultural localism simultaneously" (Werbner 1999: 34). In the diversity of the city cosmopolitan identifications emerge from below, they rise from experiences of living in diverse social and cultural environments (Werbner and Hall 2008: 347).

Cosmopolitan identities imply openness to strangerhood and difference across all boundaries, yet as Werbner also indicates, a globally oriented group that crosses boundaries is not by definition cosmopolitan (2008: 11). We may however employ the way cosmopolitanism is theorized as an alternative imagination for other global belongings. In the literature review I have referred to religion as an alternative form of belonging. The notion of the *ummah*, as the global community of Muslims, has become increasingly popular as a means of identifying beyond that transcends more localized notions of belonging (Roy 2004). We may employ the notion of the *ummah* in a similar vein to that of the cosmopolitan; as an alternative imagination to other forms of belonging, that emerges from below; from the diverse encounters between different people. As such, we might look at how globalization actually takes on meaning in people's everyday lives and gives rise to alternative ways of being in the world and simultaneously how this is practiced and takes on meaning locally. Thus in Dubai, where there is a culturally, nationally and ethnically diverse Muslim population, how do converts see themselves within this diversity as Muslims?

3.4 Concluding Remarks

In order to make sense out of the ways in which European Muslim converts engage with Dubai as a place of immigration and make sense out of being simultaneously Muslim and European, we need instead to look at the complex and multi-faceted encounters between people and how these encounters create, constitute and change subjects. In this chapter I have set out the theoretical framework on which I build this thesis and which enables me to address their changing notions of home and belonging. Insisting that belonging is continually (re)produced, I open up the theoretical conceptualization of identity change. Moreover, Butler's (1995) performativity enables me to discuss agency and structure within this process. Finally then, I look at how global notions of belonging can serve as alternative imagination to localized notions of belonging, such as culture, nation and ethnicity.

4. Methodology

Al Taqwa Center for Islamic Learning, which I described in the introductory passage of this thesis, is the place where I spent the most time with European Muslim converts from September to January 2015. *Al Taqwa* was my entry into the field, but my fieldwork is based on a wider range of places for observation, as well as eight in-depth interviews. In this chapter I will discuss the process of conducting fieldwork that undergirds the findings of this thesis. The chapter is divided into several parts, in which I discuss consequently the design of the study; how I identify my research group and why I made these choices; the interviews; my access to the field; the reliability and validity that the fieldwork rests on; ethical considerations and finally the process of transcribing interviews and analyzing data. In its totality, this chapter provides an overview of the methodological foundations of my fieldwork among European Muslim converts in Dubai.

4.1 Design of the Study

In the theory chapter above I elaborately discussed the complexity, performativity and multiplicity of belonging. In order to address such complicated notions they need to be taken under careful scrutiny. Using "hand, brain and heart", the craft of anthropology enables the researcher to address these notions holistically and in all its complexity (Okely 1999: 78). Practically this means that my study is based on ethnographic observations, as well as on in-depth interviews, both marked by intensive engagement with the respondents. The process of acquiring understanding is understood as developing over a period of time as a result of careful observations, experiences and conversations. Participating in the lifeworlds of my respondents moreover enabled me to experience their everyday lives not only on a cognitive level, but also on an experiential level.

My participant observation was divided over several Islamic centers in Dubai that provide Islamic lectures and classes in English. The main location, as stated above, was *Al Taqwa* Center for Islamic Learning. In *Al Taqwa* a range of English lessons were provided throughout the week, except Fridays. The *Belal* Islamic Center also holds lectures on Thursday nights for both men and women as well as introductory classes to Islam on Monday nights, which I both regularly attended with women whom I knew from *Al Taqwa*. In a similar vein the *Al Nour* Center was another location for occasional lectures. Although there are more Islamic

centers in Dubai I chose to focus on *Al Taqwa*, where a group of European converts regularly attended. I also attended several social gatherings, including converts as well as born-Muslims from a range of nationalities. A final place for observations was online: on *Facebook* and *WhatsApp*. Islamic Centers generally had a *WhatsApp*-group in which regular attendees took part, but women also created such groups themselves.

I also conducted in-depth interviews with eight female European Muslim converts. While participating and observing is a great method to gain an understanding of the intimate world of other people, in interviews respondents can clarify and elaborate on things the researcher has observed, they can speak about things that do not necessarily come up in everyday interaction and go more in depth about it than they would normally (Seidman 2006: 7). The combination of interviews with participant observation thus makes way for an understanding of the way converts relate to their social environment, as well as how they see and interpret it.

Through my interviews I wanted to gain in-depth and detailed descriptions of those experiences that were crucial to understand my respondents' notions of belonging. The phenomenological interview approach uses open questions that center around a particular phenomenon under investigation (Roulston 2010: 16). This approach enabled me to elicit such descriptions in my interviews. I asked my respondents to speak describe particular experiences that are related to their notions of belonging and home, in order to see the meaning of such notions through their eyes. In each interview I discussed a specific set of topics, but remained flexible regarding the order of the questions and open towards discussing other topics that my respondents wanted to bring up themselves.²

4.2 A Note on Terminology

Some elaboration on my definition of "European Muslim converts" is necessary. Both my use of the category "convert" as well as "European", need justification.

The concept conversion can denote different types of religious reorientation, from intensifying religious beliefs and practices within a tradition to the conversion to another religion. Vroon-Najem (2014) conceptualizes it as an "existential reorientation", a definition that includes the conversion of people who were not religious before (60). In this study I employ the

² My interviewguide can be found in the appendix.

term Muslim convert, like Vroon-Najem, to denote women who have made a religious reorientation to Islam from a Christian or non-religious starting point.

Several scholars employ the term “new Muslims” rather than convert (Badran 2006; Özyürek 2015; Roald 2004). Badran (Ibid.) indicates that she finds this term specifically useful as opposed to born-Muslim, because it stresses the fact that the faith is not inherited (198). I had a different experience. I found that for women who have been Muslims for many years the term new-Muslim didn’t capture their conception of themselves. Sumayyah, for example, told me: “I am a veteran (laughs). I am [a Muslim for] ten years already. I can’t say I am a new Muslim anymore, ten years already!” Staying close to the terms my participants themselves most often used, in this thesis I use the term “convert”. My respondents furthermore also often referred to the conversion process in terms of “becoming Muslim” and “embracing Islam”, which will also return in my writing. For similar reasons I chose the term “born-Muslim”, rather than “heritage Muslim” (Suleiman 2013); “original Muslim” (Badran 2006) or “old Muslim” (Ibid.).

The category “European” also needs clarification. Different countries throughout Europe have different histories regarding the presence of Muslims and cannot be mindlessly lumped together. However, what the European countries share is a biased attitude versus Islam, based on a West versus East opposition. In this light it is useful to study European Muslim converts in Dubai as a category. I do so without losing sight of the differences between the respective national backgrounds. Furthermore, Vroon-Najem (2014), Suleiman (2013) and Zebiri (2008), to name a few, have demonstrated the differences between white European converts’ experiences and the experiences of European converts of color. The participants in my study are all “white” Europeans. I am aware of the problematic connotations of this term, yet their categorization as such by others is specific to their experiences as Muslim, which is why in this research I choose to focus on this particular group.

4.3 The Interviews

Of the eight women I interviewed, six I already knew personally through *Al Taqwa* or *Belal* Islamic Center. With the other two I got in touch via other European converts. I chose the women that I interviewed based on where they were from, as my aim was to get women from several countries throughout Europe. This simple form of snowball sampling has as a danger that it generates a skewed sample of the research population (Cohen&Arieli 2011: 432). Yet in

situations where it is difficult to locate respondents or trust is needed in order to convince them to participate, which are both the case with European converts in Dubai, snowball sampling can be the only viable option (I will return to the issue of trust under 4.4). Interviews were conducted in English, with the exception of two interviews in Dutch. Communicating in our shared mother tongue with these respondents felt more natural.

The women's age at the time of the interview ranged from 23 to 47, with all but two of them in their twenties. All eight respondents converted to Islam in their twenties and all identify with a Sunni interpretation of Islam. They all have a Christian background, although they weren't all practicing or believing Christians prior to conversion. The time they have been living in Dubai ranges from less than one to 23 years and the time since conversion ranges from less than one to fifteen. Five respondents converted to Islam in Dubai, two in their home-country and one in Lebanon. Finally, three of the women were married to an Emirati, one engaged to one and three were married to Arab men of other nationalities. Only one was single. While most are regular attendees of *Al Taqwa*, two are not.

4.4 Access

Access to the field was made easier through several factors: me being a Muslim, a convert and a woman. Being a woman was a prerequisite for conducting this fieldwork successfully. The social spheres of men and women are strictly segregated in Islamic centers in Dubai and the female spaces are not accessible for men. Moreover, not all women would deem it appropriate to talk to a strange man alone for a considerable time, as would be needed for an interview. As a man it would thus not be possible to conduct participant observation in the places where I did, similarly it would be difficult to conduct a study that includes male converts to Islam as a woman in Dubai.

Being a Muslim convert was no prerequisite to this study, yet made it easier to establish trust. Many participants knew me before I decided to pursue this research project as a regular attendee of *Al Taqwa*. Attending lectures, praying together and exchanging ideas about Islam or conversion all reinforced the idea that I was trustworthy. Relying on personal contact and establishing relations of mutual investment with respondents was essential to gain trust. Following Oakley (1981) in her famous essay on feminist methods, I feel that doing otherwise is not only counterproductive to the objective of retrieving meaningful information but also

unethical. Still there were two women who did not want to be interviewed. It is possible that they were suspicious of my motives, given that Muslim women (and converts in particular) are often negatively portrayed by journalists and researchers.

4.5 Validity and Reliability

The specific research design, based on a small sample size and an intensive personal engagement of the researcher with the respondents, has several risks. Firstly, by keeping records of my research material, I secure the reliability of the material presented in this thesis. In a field-diary I recorded my observations, online data I stored and saved and all interviews I recorded and consequently transcribed.³ The interviews conducted in Dutch were transcribed and consequently translated into English. I furthermore take into account the probability of having a skewed sample size and its implications for drawing conclusions from my data. I thus do not claim to generate objective or general knowledge about European Muslim converts in Dubai. Rather, I look at the experiences of specific women in a specific socio-cultural location and discuss what it means to them to “belong” in a complex social world.

Accepting that the knowledge I as a person produce is a reflection of my own social location in time and space, reflexivity is key (Bryman 2012: 393). This concerns both introspective reflexivity about my own biases, as well as reflexivity concerning the influence I as a person had on the field. Above I discussed how being a female European Muslim convert facilitated my access to the field and how it enabled me to establish trust with my participants. On the other hand, there are undoubtedly limitations to what they told me. Because female Muslim converts face so many prejudices regarding their new religion and their assumed inferior position as Muslim women, they might overemphasize their own agency and downplay negative experiences. Moreover, as Van Nieuwkerk (2006) points out, conversion narratives are constructed backwards, which means that converts reflect on their experiences and understand events from their present notions and convictions about religion (4). The fact that I do not focus on their conversion narratives, but rather on their present experiences of being Muslim converts in Dubai, makes this less problematic.

³ Transcriptions are available upon request.

Although I am an insider among my participants in many ways, there are also things that set me apart from them. Moreover, the insider-outsider dichotomy is problematic in itself (Al-Kholy and Al-Ali 1991). The researcher is always *also* part of a “social science community” (Anderson 2006: 380). He or she is present in order to document the social world and to share this information with a wider public. This inevitably influences the interaction with participants. Sometimes language was a barrier. Although all of my respondents speak English, a few had difficulty expressing complicated feelings and notions in English. This affected the richness of my data. Furthermore, the fact that I am not veiled distinguishes me from all my respondents. The problems my respondents faced upon donning the veil was an essential part of their conversion experiences, of the way in which they perform their religion whilst in public and of their own understanding of being Muslim. Although they never asked me why I didn’t wear the veil, the important place veiling takes in their narratives sets our experiences apart.

My own biases must also be discussed. As a European convert myself I feel invested in making conversion comprehensible to outsiders. My own motivations to do research on European Muslim converts is not apolitical, but is grounded within a current social and political European context, where Muslims converts are generally regarded as odd at best and threatening at worst. My personal motivations thus lie within the broadening of the categories and frameworks in which we analyze the social world. The danger of my insider status is that it might lead me not to take enough analytical distance and be critical, I compensate for this by using the existing literature and theory to critically reflect on my findings.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

In order to protect the anonymity of my respondents, their names have been changed as well as other basic information that would make them easily identifiable, such as nationality, the neighborhoods in which they live and so on. In order to stay as true as possible to reality, for example those women who changed their names after conversion have been given another Islamic name, while those who didn’t change their name have a pseudonym in line with their cultural background. Where I do use the names of countries and places, I have changed them yet sought to choose alternatives that do not harm the information we need in order to understand what I discuss in this thesis. Furthermore, in order to ensure that all respondents were aware of the ways in which I would use the interviews and observations, I initiated each interview with a

brief and standard introduction about the purpose and goals of the research. All respondents gave their consent for the material to be used in this thesis.

4.7 Interview Transcription and Data Analysis

I tried to keep the main task of analyzing for after I returned from the field so as to prevent preliminary ideas, gathered from limited material, from taking over the direction of the research. Nevertheless, as O'Reilly (2005) points out, when doing ethnography the process of data collection and data analysis cannot be strictly separated, as the researcher will automatically process what he or she has observed, in order to understand what is going on (180). I thus had to reflect on the data I was gathering during the process. The process of collecting data and analyzing them, was therefore a balancing act.

The transcription of the interviews was one of the first steps in the analysis process. As also Roulston (2010) points out, the process of transcribing entails familiarizing oneself with the data that was gathered and thus means a preliminary reflection and analysis (105). I transcribed each interview within a short time frame from the moment when it was conducted, in order to be able to reflect on the interview questions and my own performance as an interviewer. Therefore, the process of gathering data was to some extent inductive, as I reflected on the research process as the fieldwork progressed. In addition, I recorded notes in my fieldwork diary within the same day of participant observations, in order to be as precise as possible. The writing of notes is in itself also a process of reflection, it also enabled me to identify what essential data was still missing and where I wanted to focus as my fieldwork progressed.

Upon return from Dubai I started the main process of analysis. I firstly coded the research material: transcriptions; fieldwork diary; and online material, according to the most often recurring topics, inspired by the directions for identifying themes of Ryan and Bernard (2003). I undertook this process by ascribing different colors to the subsequent themes, which showed me which recurred most often and how the different data within a given topic related to each other. Consequently I divided the many themes I found into a limited amount of main themes that I found most relevant in the context of this thesis. I looked for similarities and those topics that respondents most stressed on in their stories. Through this method I finally identified five main themes: *Europe: a Place of Anxiety*; *Living in a Global City*; *Islamic Sisterhood*;

Identification with Emirati society and European Muslim Sisters. In the following chapter I discuss these themes in depth.

5. Findings

5.1 Respondents' Profiles

I begin this chapter with a short profile of each interviewee. The eight women I interviewed have several important things in common with each other, yet each woman also has a personal story that is impossible to do justice in a few words. In these profiles I highlight the most important details of their stories that we need in order to understand their trajectories to Islam and Dubai.

Sumayyah was my very first interviewee. She grew up in a small city in the Netherlands, after high school she moved to the city to study social sciences. By the time she finished her studies and started her career, she was in a serious relationship, lived together with her partner and had a comfortable life. Yet she felt that something essential was still missing. At work she met many Muslims and during one *Ramadan* she decided to learn more about Islam. She inquired with a Muslim colleague of Moroccan origins, who provided her with books and a *Qur'an*. Sumayyah decided to convert to Islam not long after. This is now ten years ago. Quickly after her conversion she and the colleague, who she had developed feelings for, decided to get married. Sumayyah and her husband lived in the Netherlands together for one year, after which her husband got offered a job in Dubai by a friend who lived there. They decided to move. They recently had their first child and they wanted him to grow up in what they considered to be a more positive environment for Muslims than the Netherlands. They have now been living in Dubai for seven years, they have two children and a third is on the way.

Fatima is, with 23 years, my youngest respondent. After finishing a bachelor in education at 21, Fatima left England to start work at an Islamic school in Dubai. She moved together with her boyfriend, whom she married before leaving to Dubai. For Fatima, leaving England was also a way of leaving the influence of her mother, of whom she felt she was a shadow until then. In Dubai, she started reading books about Islam, given to her by an Emirati friend. She did so initially out of an interest in Emirati culture and religion. In the same period her marriage took a bad turn and within one year after moving to Dubai she divorced her husband. Because of these events Fatima went through a rough time. During this period she met Adam, a young Emirati man, in a grocery store near her apartment. They started meeting

regularly and often spoke about Islam. Eighteen months before our interview Fatima converted to Islam. She recently got married to Adam and has no wish to return to England.

Amal is 26 years old, she grew up in a village in Belgium. During college Amal met Muslim classmates and developed an interest in Islam because of their interaction. She participated in the fast during *Ramadan* and started reading books, all the while hiding this interest from her parents. Finally, she spoke to the *sheikh* of a Belgian mosque, at the end of that conversation she decided to say her *shahada*: the Islamic declaration of faith. This is now five years ago. At that time Amal still lived with her parents and this was difficult for her, as she couldn't practice her new religion in her parent's home. As a consequence, she soon moved out and started living with a Muslim friend. One year after her conversion Amal married a Syrian man, introduced to her by a friend. She moved to Dubai, which is where he lived. They lived together in Dubai for three years, after which Amal returned to Belgium for a year, because of a problem between her husband and her. After one year she came back to Dubai. She now lives with her husband and is a housewife. She does not know if she and her husband will be able to stay in Dubai permanently, but knows that she does not want to move back to Belgium.

Husna was born as Alexa in a conservative town in Scandinavia, she didn't meet a foreigner until she was about eight years old. Her family however is well-traveled and on her father's side, way back, she has Moroccan roots. Husna always questioned religion; when she was fourteen she decided to convert to Judaism. After she finished high school she got engaged to a German man. Living with him in Berlin, she met Moroccans and she became interested in this part of her heritage as well as in Islam. In her early twenties her engagement was broken off and following the break-up she applied for and was accepted in a job located in Dubai. She decided to take the job and moved. In the beginning Husna did not feel at home in Dubai, when she felt lonely she would listen to recitations of the *Qur'an* on the radio. This and the conversations with her Muslim friends motivated her to learn more about Islam, in the end she realized that Islam made more sense to her than Judaism. In 2010 she officially converted. She is now married to an Emirati man; an arranged marriage through the *sheikh* of an Islamic center where she also helps out other new Muslims getting to know their religion. Husna and her husband have a daughter together of one and a half years old, after her marriage Husna quit her job and is now a stay-at-home mother.

Yasmina has been living in Dubai for 23 years: half of her life. She grew up in England. When she was thirteen her parents got separated, she lived with her father for several years and later with her mother in another part of the country, while working a range of different jobs. One day, when she visited her father, she met Ahmed. Ahmed was from the UAE and worked in her father's shop. The two fell in love and spent two years together in England, but Ahmed went back to the UAE as his family initially did not accept him to marry a foreign woman. After five years Ahmed's father agreed and Yasmina moved to Dubai, she married Ahmed and settled in the house of his family. Yasmina said her *shahada* after moving to Dubai, but says that she didn't really become a Muslim until eight years later, when something clicked in her heart. The simple life of her family-in-law and the gratefulness they show God were her greatest inspiration. Now, she and her husband have three children, who are all three in their teenage years. For the last eight years Yasmina has been working as a presenter in a mosque where tourists come to learn about Islam. She loves her job and wants to continue for as long as she can.

Marta spent the first years of her life in Poland. Her father moved to Italy when she was ten years old, her mother and brother soon followed and Marta lived with her grandmother in Poland until she was fourteen, when she also moved to Italy. Marta, now 27 years old, grew up in a conservative Christian-Orthodox family. Her father was very strict, therefore when she was eighteen years old she wanted to move out of her parent's home and started her studies in Rome. Later on, she wanted to move away from the European financial crisis and her family's influence. After spending a month in Dubai with her cousin (who already lived there) she knew this is where she wanted to be, she got a modelling job in Dubai and moved. Not long after that she met Mahmoud, an Emirati. They started dating and would often speak about religion. Marta quite quickly felt Islam was the religion she should follow, yet didn't take action right away. During a vacation in Asia she had three consecutive dream which convinced her that she needed to say the *shahada*. She converted to Islam upon returning to Dubai. Not long after that she and Mahmoud got engaged. Currently she is finishing an MBA and preparing her documents to get married. She sees her future in Dubai, living with Mahmoud and starting a family together.

Karolina is 29 years old, she is from Estonia and has studied art. She learned about Islam while living in London, where she moved after her studies in order to find a good job. In London she had several Muslim colleagues and their religious practices got her interested. During a

vacation in Dubai, Karolina decided she would like to live there and during that same vacation she already found a job in Abu Dhabi at a company that sells luxury products. She moved to Abu Dhabi, there she had Muslim friends and spoke with them about Islam regularly. She also started driving to Dubai every Sunday after work to attend classes at *Al Taqwa* Center for Islamic Learning. In 2014 Karolina converted to Islam at *Al Taqwa*. She also moved to Dubai not long after, which she prefers to Abu Dhabi, as the life for a single is better there she says. Karolina would like to get married, but has not yet found a partner. Feeling torn between Dubai and Estonia, she is trying to decide where she wants to build her future.

Joanna only moved to Dubai several months prior to our interview. She is originally from Estonia, where she grew up in a Christian family. During her studies in international business, she went on an exchange program to Germany. In her student-corridor in Munich she met Muslims for the first time. She also became close friends with a Muslim classmate and learned about Islam from her. Upon returning to Estonia, Joanna kept on reading and watching videos about Islam on *YouTube*. When she went to Lebanon for an internship not long after, she felt inspired again by the Muslims around there and she converted to Islam there. After her conversion Joanna lived in Scandinavia with her father and was very involved in the local Muslim community of the town where she lived. Joanna met her Lebanese husband through a mutual friend, he lived in Dubai and she moved there to be with him. Currently she is trying to find a job and is building her life in Dubai.

My point of departure in what follows is my respondent's problematic relationship with the places they come from as a result of their religious conversion. In what follows I discuss how they construct a sense of belonging in and to Dubai. This process is however neither straightforward nor simple. In a global city, where different migrant groups nevertheless live quite segregated lives, converts often transgress cultural, national and ethnic boundaries in their daily lives. I identify four social environments in which European converts move and on which they draw for identification: the global city, an international Muslim environment, Emirati society and a European Muslim environment. As we will see, their religious identification enables European Muslim converts to move between different social environments in Dubai.

5.2 Europe: a Place of Anxiety

After living in Dubai for three years, Amal returned to Belgium because of complications in her marriage. She told me how horrible she had found it to live there again and how relieved she had been when, after a year, the problems were resolved and she could come back to Dubai. When I asked her why living in Dubai was so much better for her than living in Belgium, she answered:

I feel more at ease here, that's the point, that's feeling at home: that you feel at ease that you can be who you want to be. In Belgium that's hard.

Negative associations with the country of origin, or Europe more generally, is a shared sentiment among my respondents. Although not all of them feel as strongly as Amal, they invariably express that they feel anxious about being in Europe since their conversion. In the interviews, three main reasons for this come to the fore: the response of the family and friends to their conversion; the negative attitude they receive from European society as veiled women; and certain social problems they associate with European society.

The choice to convert to Islam and the related life-changes converts make, are often difficult to accept for their parents, family and friends in Europe. For several of my respondents the relationship with their parents was severely compromised after their conversion. These conflicts that take place within the most intimate circles of converts' lives are experienced as painful and sometimes as traumatic.

Converts are also afraid of the responses they will receive from people in Europe they do not know. Those who have lived in Europe as Muslims had experienced forms of discrimination after donning the veil. Those women who converted in Dubai and have not lived in Europe as Muslims, are self-conscious about wearing the veil in Europe. Sumayyah and Amal, who wear the *nikab* in Dubai, wear the *hijab* when they visit Europe. They would also wear more colorful clothes, rather than the black they prefer to wear in Dubai, and smile at passersby in the street, in order to appear less threatening or "oppressed", as some would articulate it. Most other women who wear *hijab* in Dubai wear a turban or a hat in Europe; abiding by their understanding of Islamic rules, yet avoiding to be identified as a Muslim. The most important reason they'd list for this was the fear to be attacked by *Islamophobes*, they would relate incidents to me about veiled women who had been stabbed, beaten or pushed in front of metros. Although unsure whether this is a realistic threat, they do not feel comfortable being recognizably Muslim in Europe. They also

worry about negative responses they or their family would be confronted with if people would see that they converted to Islam. Husna is illustrative for how my respondents deal with this problem. The summer of 2016 was the first time in the six years that she is a Muslim that she covered her hair while she was in Europe. In Dubai however, Husna wears the *abaya* and *shayla*. The *abaya* is the long robe covering from the chest until the hands and feet, which is both the national clothing for Emirati women as well as a form of Islamic clothing, as it conforms to ideas about the modesty of the Muslim woman. The *shayla* refers to the headscarf that is worn with it. Yet, Husna was afraid to cover her hair when she would go to Europe. I asked her how it made her feel when she wouldn't cover her hair in Europe, her answer reveals an inner struggle. She wants to fulfill her religious ideals, but simultaneously wishes to be accepted in the community where she was born and where her family lives:

Oh yeah it made me sad, it made me sad because it is part of my personality, it is part of who I am. So it is not a small thing for me, it was a huge thing for me. People thought that I enjoy it or don't care. It is not that I don't care, I cared a lot, but I was unsure and not confident enough to wear the *hijab*, it was really struggling for me.

Moreover, my respondents also voice a critical attitude about several aspects of European society. The problems they identified, in the interviews but also in informal conversations amongst each other, were all issues that would also come up when they would visit Europe and which they would have conflict over with their family and friends. Some of my respondents for example would refuse to sit with their family when they would drink alcohol, to attend the celebration of non-Islamic holidays, or to greet their male family members by kissing them on the cheek or shaking their hand. Although these things had been taken for granted before their conversion to Islam, after their conversion they refrained from these practices from their religious viewpoint. While for some these decisions incite conflict with their family, other women express that they want to avoid hurting their family members by confronting them with their new behavior, and still others prefer to be away so that they won't be put in the position where they would have to choose to either do something they regard against Islam or something that would show they are different. By living away they avoid the confrontation.

It is important to make the point that only one of my respondents, Sumayyah, actually left Europe because she converted to Islam. Even for Sumayyah, her reasons for moving were complex and she didn't intend on emigrating until her husband got offered in Dubai from a Moroccan friend who was setting up a company there. Their reasons for migrating were mostly economic. Six of my respondents moved either for a job or because their husband had a job in Dubai, these jobs were much better paid than their jobs in Europe. Other motivations for moving were the wish to explore new places, several women indicated that they were most attracted to Dubai because of its wealth, the weather and the beaches. Moreover, more than half of my respondents converted in Dubai and never lived in Europe as Muslims. They all refer to their countries of origin as "home", or at least one of their homes. Although some don't want to go there even for a vacation, most do enjoy spending holidays at "home". They are all in touch with family and friends in Europe through the internet, often daily. Most of them refer to the things in Europe they miss fondly and stay up to date about news and events in Europe. Several are very proud of their nationality and origins. However it is often difficult for converts to unite their new religious ideas with their lives in Europe. Simultaneously they also overtly reject several aspects of the way they were living before. This makes that Europe represents a place of anxiety to them, a place where they do not feel as much at ease as in Dubai.

5.3 Living in a Global City

Malls, restaurants and cafés, the beach and parks in the more expensive areas of Dubai are among my respondents' most often frequented places, they both indicated this in the interviews but it also corresponds with my own observations. They share these public spaces with other expatriates from a variety of backgrounds as well as with Emiratis. They also interact with people of different nationalities at work, as well as in their neighborhoods. As women with middle to upper-class incomes, my respondents live, work and move comfortably through Dubai's city space. Their lives take place mostly in the privileged rich areas of Dubai and as such they have little to no interaction with lower-class migrants.

Throughout the interviews my respondents stressed that they find Dubai's diverse population very desirable. Not only do they praise this aspect of the city, they also have a strong sense of Dubai as wealthy, safe and clean. In Dubai they are able to live their lives in high-standard and comfort, generally even more comfortably than in Europe. On top of that, what makes Dubai particularly attractive for European Muslim converts is the dominance of Muslims

in society. Islam is the religion of the state as well as of the local population. Unlike in Europe, Muslims are associated with prestige and wealth in Dubai. There are prayer rooms and mosques everywhere, you can hear the *adhan* when it is time for prayer (also in the most luxurious shopping malls) and it is not controversial to wear Islamic dress. Where in Europe their conversion is generally experienced as something problematic when they move around in public space as we have seen above, in Dubai converts experience a certain privilege and status from being Muslim. As my respondents live in Dubai they all adopted Islamic dress, or different types of Islamic dress than they wore before. Sumayyah and Amal for example both started wearing the *nikab* after moving to Dubai. Those women who converted to Islam in Dubai started wearing the *abaya* and *shayla* after their conversion, or in the case of Fatima even before officially converting to Islam. Their motivations for doing so were multiple, but included their religious convictions about the necessity of modesty expressed through covering the body; a feeling of safety that is offered by the wearing of Islamic dress; the wish of their husbands for them to do so; but also because the *abaya* is practical and they find it beautiful.

Overall the women's positive impressions of Dubai were motivated by its diversity, the comfortable life they live there and the prominence of Islam in public space. This view is summarized by Yasmina, when she explains to me what it is she likes about Dubai:

Nowadays the biggest number one thing I love about living here is that you're living Islam. Beautiful mosques you have here. You are safe. The government they look after you more than they have to. I just love it. All the different... Dubai is such an example to the rest of the world. No matter what religion, nationality, culture you are... we can all live together peacefully. The number one key is about respecting each other.

Like Yasmina, my respondents express very positive, sometimes naïve, ideas about Dubai's openness and the treatment of different groups of immigrants by the government. Not being in contact with the lower class workers or with migrants of other faiths, they are mostly focused on their own positive experiences versus what they experience in Europe.

The diverse environment also impacts European converts in another way. It means that they sometimes find themselves in situations where being Muslim is not the norm. Especially right after conversion, women often struggle to bring to terms their new religious ideals with their environment. Marta worked as a model when she converted, at this time she says she led a

“double-life”. As a model she wasn’t able to veil and had to wear revealing clothes at work, yet in her private life she wore the *abaya* and *shayla*. “It was very hard for me, because I was very confused and I didn’t know what I want. I knew the kind of life I prefer, of course I prefer the life that I am in now”, she told me. She resolved her problem by quitting her modelling work as soon as she didn’t depend anymore on the money. She also stopped socializing with the European friends with who she used to go nights out, to dance and drink. Like Marta, most of my respondents told me that after their conversion they would start avoiding these encounters, by socializing less with non-Muslims and generally by quitting their jobs. Most of my respondents have some non-Muslim friends in Dubai, but they are few. They do engage in intensive contact across cultural, national and ethnic boundaries, but this contact takes place within an Islamic framework.

5.4 Islamic Sisterhood

My participant-observation at the Islamic centers like *Al Taqwa* Center for Islamic learning, made me aware of the ways in which they offer opportunities for converts to meet Muslim women from a range of backgrounds. Especially when women have recently converted or moved to Dubai, it can give a sense of community and an opportunity to meet like-minded people. In the introduction I described *Al Taqwa* and the broad range of women that attend classes there. Not only the attendees of these centers are from a range of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the teachers are as well. The popular *ustadh*’s and *ustadha*’s that my respondents would attend lectures of in the different Islamic centers range from an English convert, to a Jamaican-Canadian convert, to born-Muslims from Kuwait to India to Zimbabwe.⁴

In the interviews my respondents told me that the contact with “sisters” from around the world is important to them. Karolina put what this contact means to her into words when she told me about the moment that she said her *shahada*, two years ago after one of the Sunday lectures at *Al Taqwa*:

I said it [the shahada] and all this beautiful feeling when you feel the part of the community as well, a big sisterhood, a big brotherhood. It doesn't matter.... what age doesn't matter, what country, what color, what status in life, you know? They

⁴ *Ustadh*: honorific title, used to refer to a male teacher. *Ustadha*: honorific title, used to refer to a female teacher.

all came to hug me. We all share the same values, we all share the same religion, that's what unifies us really: the love for God.

Karolina's words furthermore express an ideal that all women expressed: that shared religious identification is a more legitimate basis for solidarity than any other. This notion is given extra force by using terms like "brother" and "sister" that denote kinship and a sense of closeness. Many of my respondents told me that at *Al Taqwa* they found a place where they could feel a sense of community either as recently converted Muslims looking for Muslim friends, or as new migrants in Dubai. By learning, praying and fasting together, but not unimportantly, also by socializing and celebrating religious feasts and even having the occasional wedding party there, at the Islamic centers European Muslim converts participate in a diverse religious community. I observed how this community also extends beyond the actual space and attendants of the centers, as the attendees communicate with each other over the internet, establish friendships there, but also help each other find suitable marriage partners. Moreover, by participating in this community they would learn how to practice their religion. Some of these teachings were very practical, for example how to use Islamic religious terminology, like *Insha 'Allah* and *Subhan 'Allah*, in everyday speech.⁵ By frequenting the Islamic centers, the converts thus not merely find a community, but also learn how to practice Islam in a certain way.

More than simply meeting with Muslim women from all over the world in the religious spaces, my respondents also framed their belonging primarily in religious terms. As I would ask them what being Muslim meant to them, they would insist that being Muslim is more important than belonging to a particular nation, culture or ethnicity. They for example would refer to being Muslim as "my life", or "my identity". Or, as Amal expresses it adequately:

Islam is not for, as many people think, only for Arabs. Absolutely not. Islam is for everyone and that's also written in the *Qur'an*. And that's so beautiful, it's not connected to any sort.

Even though many would be closer to European women, or women of their own nationality, they also participate in social gatherings of a more international outside of religious centers.

Sumayyah invited me to come to one such gathering: a picnic in *Zabeel Park* with a group of her

⁵ *Insha 'Allah*: God willing, *Subhan 'Allah*: glory be to God.

friends on a public holiday. I travelled together with Joanna to the park, at the entrance we coincidentally met two Moroccan Dutch women with their children whom I also knew from *Al Taqwa*. They were on their way to the same gathering. When we arrived a group of six women, among whom Sumayyah, was already seated on blankets in the grass. They were surrounded by plates of food, boxes with donuts and bottles with water and juice. The women were all from different nationalities: Morocco, Egypt, Kosovo, The Netherlands, Belgium and the UAE. They knew each other either from *Al Taqwa* or through the school of their children. Sumayyah's children are enrolled in an Islamic school, she tells me in our interview, and she is in touch with many of the mothers of other children, they are of different nationalities but mainly Indian and Pakistani. Sometimes they meet together in a park, but they mostly keep in touch through a common *WhatsApp*-group. They share thoughts about the school, the children and about their religion. At Islamic centers, but also at work, their children's schools, or with neighbors, European converts establish friendships based on a shared religious identification.

Marriage furthermore is another essential way in which European converts become part of a network beyond cultural and ethnic boundaries. All but one of my respondents are (about to be) married to Arab men. Through marriage women also become part of their husbands' family and social network, which is often made up primarily of his nationality. For women who marry Emirati men, it also means becoming part of the Emirati society in Dubai.

5.5 Identification with Emirati Society

Like all other immigrants in the UAE, European Muslim converts cannot obtain UAE citizenship and thus legally attain belonging to the country or secure permanent settlement there. The exception to this rule is for those women who have married "a local" (a UAE citizen). These women do have a permanent entitlement to stay in the country (or at least as long as they remain married). Obtaining citizenship however is still complicated and you have to be married to a UAE citizen for at least ten years to be considered for it. Only Yasmina, who has been married and living in the UAE for 23 years, is in the possession of an Emirati passport.

The absence of citizenship does not mean that European converts do not engage in meaningful exchange with Emiratis or with Emirati social and cultural practices. Through marriage, some converts become deeply immersed in Emirati society, as became clear from the interviews. They partake in the family life and in the traditions of the families. They also all

lived in the house of their family-in-law for a considerable period of time. When they have children, like Husna and Yasmina, these children have Emirati citizenship and go to local schools. Becoming part of a local family means being part of a community, but also abiding by new social restrictions regarding dress codes, their demeanor in public and interaction with men. Husna and Fatima for example had to adjust to the dress codes of their family-in-law: Husna by wearing the *abaya* and *shayla* rather than the *nikab* and Fatima by wearing only dark colors *abaya*, rather than colorful ones.

Of the four women among my interviewees who have an Emirati partner, all but Husna converted to Islam after meeting their future husbands. For Fatima, Yasmina and Marta, their conversion to Islam was very much related to their romantic relationships. In all three cases their conversion moreover was a precondition to their acceptance into the Emirati family. As both Fatima and Marta told me, they hadn't realized before they converted, yet found out afterwards that their partners would not have married them or introduced them to their families had they not become Muslims. For Yasmina, her conversion upon marriage was more or less a practical step. What she consider her real conversion, when she accepted Islam in her heart, came years later. For all three of these women the process of conversion was very much linked to becoming part of their family-in-law and much of what they learn about Islam they learn from their partners and his family.

For converts who are not married to a UAE citizen, immersion in the Emirati society usually remains limited. Although some have Emirati friends or even an "aunty", as Karolina calls the older Emirati woman whom she often visits, they are not part of an Emirati community in the way those married to Emiratis are. They do, as did all my respondents, embrace more superficial local practices. Most of my respondents were also taking Arabic classes, for religious reasons, but also for practical everyday use. Only two of them however also had a good command of the language. Other things they would do were learning how to paint henna, or camping in the desert on the weekends with friends. Joumana, a German convert, picked me up around the Emirati national day in her *Landrover* and proudly revealed to me a bumper sticker she had made herself to celebrate this holiday: a camel enveloped by a heart. Not unimportantly as well is the local clothing style for women: the *abaya* and *shayla* or the *nikab*. My respondents enthusiastically embrace these local types of Islamic fashion.

The extent to which European Muslim converts are accepted as part of Emirati society has its limits. The most instructive example occurred during my interview with Marta:

I interviewed Marta at Kite Beach. She was wearing a blue *abaya* and *shayla* with fringes on the shoulders and back, she wore sneakers and a black legging underneath, very in line with the style of the local women. I was wearing a grey *abaya* with a print on the back, my hair not covered. Marta walked with the recorder in her hand and answered my questions while walking. Then a group of young local women passed by and one of them, just after passing, said loudly: “cultural appropriation!”. I expressed my surprise, but Marta just laughed. After the interview I asked her about the incident. She said she wasn’t surprised, such incidents were the reason that at first she had not felt very confident wearing these clothes.

This anecdote indicates how my respondents remained identified as foreign, because of their skin color and how consequently their sincerity in adopting local forms of religious dress is questioned. Similarly, several respondents told me stories of how other Muslims would attribute their choice of clothing and other religious expressions as forced on them by their husbands. This is much to their frustration, as they emphasize their own agency in the choice for Islam and their religious practices. Most women however emphasize the curiosity and questions they would receive from Emirati’s and other Muslims about where they are from and why they are Muslims, rather than these negative experiences.

Although my respondents identify with Emirati society to greater or lesser extends, they don’t consider themselves locals. Even Yasmina, who holds an Emirati passport, says: “I always tell them [people]: I am a British citizen, but I hold an Emirati passport”. Only Husna expresses an exceptional sense of being part of Emirati society:

I always say maybe, maybe my blood is not from here, but my soul is from here.
 (...) Because people from here they can see that I am not Emirati. So some people judge me for that. When I go to Europe they can see I am not one-hundred percent European because of the way I dress, because of the way I speak, because of the

way I eat, because of the way I do things. So it is like you never belong anywhere, you are kind of like floating in the middle.

5.6 European Muslim Sisters

Even if the women engage intensively in contact across cultural and ethnic boundaries and attached great value to that, this does not mean that they cease to be attached or invested in their cultural or ethnic background. In fact, the women are often closest with European Muslim women, both converts as well as European Muslims of immigrant origin.⁶ The shared nationality and Muslim identity is essential to these relationships. Joanna, who lived in Scandinavia prior to moving to Dubai and not in her home-country Estonia, even specifically looked forward to meeting Estonian Muslims upon moving to Dubai:

Oh, I was excited, because I have some girls from my country here. (...) So I was really happy to meet Muslims and they are from my country (...) And all the Muslims [that were my friends in Scandinavia] were not from my country, so I missed my language and... Yeah, I just wanted to reconnect with someone.

Joanna indicates language as an important reason for wanting contact with fellow Estonians. A *WhatsApp*-group of Dutch Muslim women living in Dubai reveals other reasons as well. This group, made up of thirteen women, was created by several friends who meet regularly at *Al Taqwa*. Gradually the group expanded as women added other Dutch Muslim women they knew in Dubai, including myself. Initially it was created to organize a gathering, but it quickly became used to exchange Dutch recipes, knowledge about where to buy Dutch products in Dubai, Islamic information (often in Dutch) and also just to share stories and socialize. Language is an important part of such a group, but the women also draw on a shared set of knowledge and experiences from the Netherlands. They also draw on a shared understanding of being Muslim.

⁶ Children or grandchildren of people who migrated to Europe, who have now migrated from Europe to Dubai.

6. Analysis

In the analysis of this thesis I bring together the findings of my fieldworks with the existing literature and the theoretical framework that I have discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis. The analysis is built up out of three parts. In the first part *Local and Global Belongings* I discuss how European Muslim converts understand their belonging as implicated between multiple locations, which creates a sense of belonging neither here nor there. I also discuss how a global religious identification functions as an alternative imagination, which transcends a localized belonging. In the second part *Belonging and Religious Space in the City* I discuss how European Muslim converts construct a sense of belonging to Dubai. I argue that religious spaces offer converts a place where they can find a sense of community among other Muslims from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, I show how my respondent's notions of belonging in the city are also implicated within their particular understanding of their religion and their position as well-off expatriates. Finally, in *Conversion, Marriage and Changing Belongings* I discuss the intersection between conversion to Islam and the interaction with Emirati society. Here I focus mainly on those converts that married Emirati men and ask how their acceptance into Emirati communities is related to their religious conversion.

6.1 Local and Global Belongings

In the findings chapter of this thesis I have shown how the women's notions of belonging stretch across multiple places and peoples. As migrants, their lives are shaped by movement and the experience of living in at least two places: their homelands and Dubai. For Karolina, Marta, Husna and Joanna, who also migrated within Europe before moving to Dubai, this also includes other countries. Their notions of belonging are ambivalent, as articulated by Husna who describes her belonging as "floating in the middle". As I have argued in the findings, Husna expresses her belonging to Dubai more strongly than the other women, yet her words express a sense of in-betweenness that all of the women express. I argue therefore that their belonging must be understood as in-between multiple localities. Moreover, their conversion to Islam adds another aspect to their experiences of being in-between. Conversion problematizes their previously unquestioned belonging in their homelands. As the women convert to Islam, their relationships to their homelands also change and going "home" becomes experienced as

problematic. In order to address these ambivalent feelings, I discuss the intersection between religious belonging and local belonging. I show how the embodiment and performance of converts' religious belonging conflicts with their "Europeanness". Belonging to a global *ummah* can provide an alternative imagination that transcends belongings that are attached to particular localities.

Conversion to Islam entailed great life-changes for all of my respondents. Becoming Muslim meant a new way of understanding life and their place in it and consequently significant changes in the ways they lead their everyday lives. In line with the literature on European conversion to Islam, my findings show that converts struggle to bring to terms their new religious identification with their cultural and national belonging in Europe. Their significant changes in identity are not readily accepted by the societies where they are from, nor by the people closest to them. Building on the literature about the perceptions of Islam in Europe and of Muslim converts in particular, brings us further into understanding the ways in which converts challenge the boundaries of what it means to be European versus other. Again, it is specifically the adoption of the veil that poses a problem to converts' acceptance in European society. As they are visibly Muslim they become prone to discrimination and exclusion in public. Converts adapt to these situations, for example by downplaying their religious performance; thus by covering their hair in a way that does not identify them as Muslims or trying to appear less threatening as Muslims. When they are with non-Muslim family or friends they try to avoid situations where they stand out as different. They also negotiate their belonging as both European and Muslim simultaneously by insisting simply on being Muslim and participating in their everyday lives with family and friends. However, these solutions do not provide converts with satisfying alternatives of how to embody or perform their religiosity, as they understand their religious values, the wearing of the veil and the ways they relate to those around them, as essential to who they are. The downplaying of their religious identification creates inner tension, while challenging notions that they cannot be both European and Muslim simultaneously lead to conflict with others. Therefore, being away from the situation where they constantly have to negotiate being both attached to their national and cultural belonging and being Muslim at the same time, provides them with a sense of relief and the feeling that they can be their "true selves". The positive notions about living in Dubai therefore

do not spring simply from their positive experiences there, but in large part also from the problematic aspects of converting to Islam as a European woman.

This however does not mean that converts actually cease to feel attached to their home countries. On the contrary, their national and cultural backgrounds remain important ways in which they see and define themselves. Moreover, many of my respondents also emphasized their attachment to their home countries. The belonging to their home countries moreover takes on meaning in their lives in Dubai as they establish friendships with other European Muslims there, but also as they continue to visit their families and friends in Europe and to invest in their relationship through daily contact over the internet. Even if some of the women very strongly related to me that they did not want to live in Europe again, their home countries remain an important part of their lives. Their belonging to their home countries moreover takes on meaning as their belonging in and to Dubai also remains temporary, partial and provisional. As migrants, they are culturally and ethnically different than the national population and remain categorized as outsiders. With the exception of those women who marry UAE nationals, they remain both physically and symbolically far from the host society.

Belonging neither fully in Dubai nor in Europe, European Muslim converts are both as migrants and as converts implicated in between ethnic, cultural and national belongings. Religious identification provides them with an alternative belonging that is not tied to a particular locality. As the personal trajectory of each of my interviewees shows, their conversion to Islam followed interaction with Muslims from a variety of different backgrounds. Conversion itself then is the outcome of the encounter with diversity and the way this gives rise to new ways of imagining the world and one's place in it. Being a Muslim in Europe and in Dubai entails engaging with other Muslims of different cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds. As I have shown in the findings, all converts were married to men of different cultural and ethnic (and mostly also national) backgrounds, their friend-groups consists of women from multiple places in the world and when they attend mosques and religious centers they worship together with Muslims from diverse backgrounds. Becoming Muslim and migrating to Dubai thus entailed both negotiating diverse social environments, but also enables the women to feel part of something that transcends locality. It is as such that the *ummah* can provide European Muslim converts with an alternative global belonging. A belonging that nevertheless is not detached from social reality, but emerges

from the movement between multiple cultural, ethnic and national environment and the concrete everyday experiences of coming together as Muslims in diversity. Moreover, although it puts at the center of converts' imagination a global presence of Muslims, this does not negate their attachment to particular localities, but rather emerges from them. Dubai, as a global city, plays an important part in the way my respondents perform and create their belonging to the global *ummah* in their everyday lives. Moreover, I discuss further how European Muslim converts create a sense of belonging in and to Dubai.

6.2 Belonging and Religious Space in the City

The literature on migrant's lives in Dubai indicate that sharp divisions and physical and symbolical segmentation between groups along lines of class, nationality and ethnicity are determinative to understanding the city. Nevertheless, I insist on focusing on the ways diversity also gives rise to the creative and positive encounters between people across boundaries. Focusing specifically on religious spaces as places for ethnic, cultural and national diversity, my findings show that these encounters are indeed also significant and worth exploring. In the following section I discuss how my respondents create a sense of belonging in and to the city. I show that religious spaces in the city offer converts a place of community and a space where they meet Muslim migrants of diverse cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds. However, I also show how converts' belonging in Dubai is the consequence of their privileged position as well-off expatriates and their adherence to an understanding of Islam that complies with the state's notions of proper religion.

Religious spaces, such as religious learning centers, mosques and public prayer halls, are essential for European converts' notions of belonging in and to the city. Specifically the Islamic centers play a big role in my respondents' notions of belonging in the city. Although they are primarily set up as places of learning about religion, my interviewees indicated that they attended specifically to meet like-minded women and that attending these centers gave them a sense of belonging to a wider community. The Islamic spaces in Dubai bring together Muslim women in diversity and as such they create a space where converts can experience a sense of belonging to a global *ummah*. Meeting Muslim women originating from places as far as Indonesia to Iran to Canada to Kenya, the religious centers are spaces where the global *ummah* is performed and

produced locally. Moreover, these locations also extend beyond the actual Islamic centers as women who meet each other there also socialize and meet outside of the religious centers and even employ each other in order to find husbands, thus drawing upon a wider community that also includes Muslim men. As such, by participating intensively in these environments, European Muslim converts' can imagine themselves as part of a global faith community, rather than as members of a particular state, culture or ethnicity. The diversity of the global city, enables them to create and practice in their everyday lives their belonging to the *ummah*.

The diverse Muslim community on the one hand indicates that the women who attend experience a religious identification that transcends the notion of culture or rootedness. On the other hand it is rooted in a local tradition. All the Islamic centers, as well as the mosques and public prayer rooms are established, funded and maintained by the Emirati state. They teach a conservative *Sunni* interpretation of Islam, which for example practices a strict separation of the realms of men and women. As such, specific and locally rooted ways of understanding, practicing and embodying the religion are taught and transmitted in these spaces. It is within these specific religious understandings that these Muslim women come together in these spaces and from which they draw on a sense of belonging in the city.

While the work of Walsh (2006, 2007, 2012), Coles and Walsh (2010) and also that of Kanna (2013), show that many European expatriates primarily socialize and work within environments with other European expatriates, the converts in this study contrarily avoid these environments of non-Muslim European expatriates. Although some, like Marta who worked as a model in Dubai before she converted, were very involved within these environments before they converted to Islam, their conversion would lead them to largely withdraw from them. They generally see them as conflicting with their new religious values, mainly because of the consumption of alcohol and the modes of interaction between men and women. The ways in which converts understand, perform and embody their new religion, thus become perceived as incompatible with the social environments of European expatriates. Thus contrariwise to what has been written about European expatriates in Dubai, European Muslim expatriates do not draw primarily on ethnic and cultural identification to (re)create their notions of belonging. Instead, European converts seek out different social environments that they do view as compatible with their new religious ideals. As converts on the one hand find comfort in the notion of living in a city that is

religiously, culturally and ethnically diverse, as I have argue in the findings chapter, simultaneously they confine their social lives to a limited sphere of Muslims only. Their confinement of their social lives to a Muslim social sphere is possible in Dubai, while this is much more difficult in Europe where they still have non-Muslim family and friends.

Religious identification is thus very important to European Muslim converts' notions of belonging in the city. Their belonging in the city is also to a very large extent facilitated by class. Having comfortable and wealthy lives, their everyday lives are not very much affected by marginalization or their status as migrants. As European expatriates, as I have shown in the finding chapters, my respondents move within the privileged spaces of the city. While their religious practices in the city space transcend cultural and ethnic boundaries, they do not transcend class boundaries. The large group of low-income South-Asian workers, many of which are also Muslim, do not attend the same religious spaces as European converts. Although theoretically the mosques, religious centers and so on are accessible to everyone, practically they are not. They are located inside rich neighborhoods that can only be reached by private transportation; moreover attending classes there requires a good command of the English language. Moreover, the women's lives beyond religious spaces also take place within the privileged areas of Dubai. Like other expatriates in Dubai, their lives are thus embedded within privilege and comfort.

6.3 Conversion, Marriage and Changing Belongings

Religious spaces provide converts with a sense of belonging in and to the city, yet their welcoming into city space must still be understood as temporary and partial. The physical and symbolic separation between migrants and UAE citizens imply that migrants do not fundamentally belong and as such remain guests in the country. In this final section I explore the way that conversion to Islam relates to interaction with Emirati society. I show here how for European Muslim converts who marry Emirati men, conversion and marriage can go together with becoming accepted into Emirati society. I argue that for this group, conversion goes together with becoming implicated into specific a cultural environment as well. I also indicate the boundaries that prohibit European Muslim converts from fully becoming Emirati.

My findings show that European converts, to different extents, do interact with Emirati's. They establish friendships and relationships with Emirati's, both before and after their

conversion. For several women, the encounter with Emirati men and women was one of their incentives for learning more about Islam, leading eventually to their conversion. Nevertheless, for women who do not marry an Emirati man, the interaction with Emirati's remains highly limited and their lives in Dubai are shaped by the interaction with other migrants. The picture is completely different for the women who do marry a UAE citizen. For them, their conversion to Islam is also a pathway to becoming part of Emirati society. For four of the five women in my study that are married or engaged to a UAE citizen their conversion to Islam followed upon their relationship with their partners, who also played an important part in their conversion process. This does not mean that their conversion is not authentic or sincere, but it does mean that their religious identification and their acceptance into an Emirati family and social environment are intricately interwoven. Learning about Islam in this sense simultaneously means learning about being Emirati. For example, the women start wearing the *abaya* and *shayla* because they have become Muslims, but also because this is the normative way of dressing for the women in their family-in-law. Also for Husna, who had converted to Islam before meeting her Emirati husband, marriage meant adjustments to the religious, social and cultural practices of her husband's family. Moreover, as Muslim wives of UAE citizens, they are eligible for getting UAE citizenship themselves, be it only after a period of ten year. What this indicates is that although there is no direct relationship between religious identification and national or cultural belonging, they do intersect in complicated ways and religious identification may in particular cases function as a pathway to the other two.

The ways in which these women embody and perform their religion become implicated within a wider Emirati tradition, this belonging requires considerable investment and effort to learn and adjust to. Simultaneously with this process of adjustment and change, the women also become deeply attached to what they see as the Emirati culture. This process of becoming, negotiating and changing belonging manifests itself as a process of investment, which takes place at the nexus of longing to belong and being accepted as a part of a particular group. However, even if they are largely accepted as part of the community, their belonging in Dubai is still not undisputed. Their skin color means that they stand out as ethnically different to Emiratis. Being identified as white women moreover, the adoption of the local ways of dressing are sometimes interpreted as mindless imitation or crude appropriation. Notions about the incompatibility of being European and Muslim, thus also confront converts in Dubai. Becoming

Muslim then, can entail the construction of belonging also belonging to Emirati society, yet cannot be equated with it.

7. Conclusion

The endeavor of this thesis has been to provide insight into the ways that European Muslim converts construct and negotiate a sense of belonging in and to Dubai as migrants. Providing an intimate account of the lives of women who convert to a religion that is often regarded as controversial and incompatible with their identities as European women, I have shown how these women make sense of their multiple, sometimes conflicting notions of belonging as migrants and as religious converts. This thesis is positioned within a wider debate about the ways the increasing flows of people, goods and ideas, affect the ways people imagine themselves and their position versus others. These processes are not only the effect of conflict between people along cultural, religious or civilizational lines, but also of the positive encounters between them. Both the construction of difference and the movement across boundaries are essential to understanding the ways that the complex and multi-faceted encounters between people of different backgrounds can create, constitute and change subjects. This thesis provides insight into questions of identity and globalization in a particular context.

This thesis has drawn attention to the important role that religion can play in migrants' belongings. European Muslim converts experience their migration to Dubai as particularly shaped by their conversion to Islam. Their conversion problematizes their feelings of being at home in their home-countries and simultaneously it enables them to create a sense of belonging in and to Dubai. Although European Muslim converts do not cease to be attached to their cultural and national backgrounds, but actually remain very invested in them, their migration and conversion also lead them to create new attachments to different peoples and places. Their belongings therefore must be understood as implicated within multiple localities; including both the places they came from and the place they have migrated to. What this indicates is that for religious converts, religion can take on a particularly important role in their migration experience. As conversion may invoke hostility from a converts' home society, this can change the way converts feel about their relationship to home. It can also change the way they relate to the host society and to migrants in the place of immigration. Yet, we need to understand European Muslim converts' experiences in Dubai as the consequence of a particular local, historical and political context. Further inquiry into the ways that religious conversion shapes

migrant's experiences in different contexts may provide more insight into the intersection between religious conversion and migration in other contexts.

This thesis also argues that we must look at the ways in which religious belonging can function as an alternative imagination to other forms of belonging that are rooted in particular localities. As a consequence of globalization and the increased intensity of the movement of people, goods and ideas across the world, we must look at how this process also transforms religions and their believers. The experiences of European Muslim converts show that as their lives are shaped by the experience of movement and the encounter with Muslims from diverse parts of the world, they come to understand themselves as part of a global *ummah*. Moreover, European Muslim converts perform and produce their belonging to the global *ummah* in their everyday lives, by marrying, establishing friendships and interacting in places of worship with Muslims from diverse national, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. As such, the *ummah* can be experienced as a reality rather than as an abstract ideal. Although we have to remain critical of the ways in which boundaries like class, ethnicity and culture still can and do prevent the realization of the *ummah*, this thesis indicates how such a global form of belonging can take on meaning in people's everyday lives.

Finally, by looking at the migration, religious conversion and belonging in Dubai, my aim was to contribute to a wider understanding of these notions outside of the prevailing categories of research. As a global city that continues to change, develop and transform as a consequence of increasing globalization, Dubai provides fruitful grounds on which to examine the ways globalization actually affects the ways we live. This thesis moreover indicates that it is necessary to look at these processes in global sites beyond Europe and North-America, such as Dubai, since there are similarities, but there are also large differences. Without expanding our conceptual imaginations, we thus miss a lot of what is going on in our contemporary world.

7.1 Suggestions for Further Research

This thesis has provided insight into important questions, yet it inevitably also leaves many questions unanswered and it calls up new questions. In the final section of this thesis I therefore indicate several fields of further inquiry that build upon the work in this thesis.

A first topic that comes to mind is the experiences of male Muslim converts. How do European men who convert to Islam make sense out of their belonging as migrants in Dubai?

There are many reasons to assume that men's experiences will be different from those of women, to begin with the different ways in which they embody and perform their religion. As the practice of veiling is so important to the female converts in this study, both in the ways they see themselves and in relation to European society, how do men's different ways of embodying their religion play out? How are male converts received and regarded differently in Dubai and in their home countries than female converts are?

Not only Europeans convert to Islam. An increasing number of migrants in Dubai from other localities also convert to Islam. Many of these converts are from very different social and class backgrounds than European women. Moreover, as they do not necessarily speak English, many of them also move within different religious spaces in Dubai. Research with a wider scope would thus also look at the migration of converts from other places in the world. How does religious conversion and migration to Dubai for example play out for Pilipino women? To what extent do the experiences of religious conversion and migration to Dubai show similarities to those of European women and in what ways do they differ?

While further research on that lies very close to this topic, such as the suggestions above, would provide fruitful, we may also think how this thesis gives rise to wider topics of inquiry. As I have also suggested above, we may also look at how religious conversion shapes the migration experience of people migrating and converting in other places, from other places and to other religions. Up to date, research that inquires into these topics is very limited. More research on this ground can provide deeper insight into the complex ways that changing religious identification intersects with cultural, ethnic and national belonging. Moreover, ethnographic fieldwork building on a longer time frame and a wider base of respondents could provide more extensive insight into these issues.

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9. Appendix: Interview Guide

* Would you first tell me a bit about yourself and your background? (Age/ occupation/ education/ family status/ where you live in Dubai) – elaborate

* What was it like to grow up in (*insert country of origin*)?

Conversion

* Can you tell me how you first got interested in Islam?

* What motivated you to learn about Islam?

* What inspired you about Islam? Were there certain people who inspired you?

* Do you remember the moment you decided to become a Muslim? Can you tell me about it?

* Can you tell me about when you said the *shahada*? How did it go and how did you feel?

* Did things change after your conversion? In what way and why?

* How do you feel about these changes?

* What does being Muslim mean to you?

* What, in your opinion, are the major concerns for Muslims right now?

Life in Dubai

* When and why did you decide to move to Dubai?

* How do you feel about living in Dubai?

* Are there things that you can do here that you couldn't do in your country? What are they?

* Are there things you could do in your country that you can't do here? What are they?

* What are your favorite places in Dubai? Where do you like to go?

* Can you tell me what you usually do in a day?

* Is Dubai as you expected before you came here? Why/why not?

* Who are the most important people to you here? Can you tell me about your relationship with them?

* Can you tell me about your friends in Dubai?

* What do you usually do when you meet your friends?

* Do you attend any activities specifically organized for new Muslims/converts, or did you do so before?

Country of Origin

* How often do you visit (*insert country of origin*)?

* What is it like when you visit (*insert country of origin*)?

* With whom from your country do you keep in touch?

* Can you tell me more about the kind of contact you have? (*How often do you speak, how do you communicate?*)

* How important is this contact to you?

* Do you keep up to date about what happens in (*insert country of origin*)? If yes, how?

* What do you miss the most about (*insert country of origin*)?

* Would you consider moving back to (*insert country of origin*)?

“Home”

* Can you tell me what the most important things in your life are right now?

* What does being (*insert nationality*) mean to you?

* What does being European mean to you?

* Can you explain what ‘home’ means to you?

* When, where and with whom do you feel most at home?

* Has this changed since you converted to Islam?

* Where do you see yourself in ten years from now?