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Discursive Study on Centrality of Dutch Society, Religiosity, and Female Body: How Five Women Reflect, on Faith, on Embodiment, and on Dutchness.

Mollie Rachel Garber
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Discursive Study on Centrality of Dutch Society, Religiosity, and Female Body:

How Five Women Reflect, on Faith, on Embodiment, and on Dutchness.

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Abstract

My research examines the personal narratives of five (5) women living in Northern Netherlands, in and around Amsterdam. The focus of these narratives is on the diversity of national and religious backgrounds as these bear on body-image in Dutch culture. My purpose is to bridge the gap of knowledge between modern female body image, religiosity, and the conflicting messages of modernity and traditionalism. These five personal narratives begin to unpack my informants' "Dutch" identity, their social and personal views concerning the female body, and how religion conflicts, combines and in some cases complements the modern, secular female body message communicated through media and other social influences. Only in political Islamic discourse has sexuality, female embodiment, and modern lifestyles with religion and religious women been linked thus far. Most contemporary literature ignores the voices of religious women entirely.

The present narratives suggest that women from different religious backgrounds can combine the false binary in Dutch society of modernity versus religiosity, albeit enduring a variety of hardships. I combine academic and first-hand sources to address the important question of how religion and modern culture conflict and combine in public and private spheres of women in the Northern Netherlands. Future research on these matters should include interviews with women not only in the northern province of the Netherlands, but should include women in the Dutch "Bible Belt" and other areas where religion is common yet voiceless as part of the Dutch national ideology, (Haandrikman, & Sobotka, 2002).

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank the five women who participated in my research. They have inspired me to look more within myself and look at life from different perspectives. I hope that they find this summary respectful, valid, and perhaps a source of growth. I know that these five special women will continue to amaze other women and men much as they did me. Thank you for teaching me and contributing to my academic and life learning.

I would like to express my gratitude to my independent study project advisor, Yvette Kopyn, who has helped me with everything from interviewing skills to pushing my writing technique, all the while finishing her own PhD thesis and raising a family. I treasure the time I have with her and I hope this paper makes her proud.

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And last, to my loved ones in the United States. Thank you for all your support through Skype, email, packages, cards, and phone calls. I could not have survived this semester without each and every one of you. תודה רבה. אני אוהב אותך.

Table of Contents

Title page.....	1
Consent to use.....	2
Abstract.....	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
Introduction.....	6
Literature Review.....	13
Assumptions.....	18
Methodology.....	20
Biographies.....	23
Analysis.....	25
Conclusion.....	41
Bibliography.....	45
Appendix.....	49

Introduction

That's Dutch: the tendency to disclose and open up and show who you are. Religion is not Dutch. There are no rules in Dutch.

(Wilhelmina van Ravenswade)

Amsterdam is known around the world as the utopia for tolerance and sexual freedom. It has led almost every other country in introducing gay rights and tolerating public sexuality. But this same avante garde leadership has created its own problems. Amsterdam's tolerance for public sexuality has led to a demand for women's open display of their bodies, an institution that has been supported by the mainstream second-wave feminist movement as a sign of emancipation (Feminism, 2010; Gatens, 1996). In short, women's renewed control of their own bodies in Dutch culture (including abortion rights, male gaze emancipation, etc.) opened the door to enable representation of their public body and self-expression of their own embodiment. Second-wave feminists and the modern world see the "emancipated" woman's choice to expose herself publicly as the next logical step inherent in emancipation and sexual freedom.

By contrast, most religious regulations prohibit this specific sexual emancipation and therefore seem to be adamantly opposed to second-wave feminism, in general, and to public exhibitionism, specifically. (Gaylor, 1993). The mainstream second-wave feminists made sure to stake claim to the female sexual emancipated image and has caught on as the norm. Out of this evolves the questions to be addressed herein: Is it possible to be religious and modern/emancipated and represent this through self-embodiment? How does the national female representation relate or conflict with religious female embodiment discourses?

The tension between politically endorsed feminism and religious sexual prohibition brings with it an undercurrent of physical self-consciousness. The freedom of women to publicly display their bodies has amplified the pressure on women to shape and display their bodies in

ways that are seen by men as sexually attractive. Ironically, although the second-wave feminists have tried to free women from the male gaze, present-day, or “post-feminist,” women face the pressure to live up to the hegemonic norm of female sexual attractiveness. This can be seen throughout the media and public advertisements, where the female form is pictured in unrealistic, Photoshopped® shapes, creating near impossible and unhealthy ideals for the next generation. For example, a female writer asserts in an interview with Dutch filmmaker, Sunny Bergman, “We have standards of beauty not even found in nature. We are supposed to have breasts that look like fake breasts. It’s not like we are looking up to a rare person. It is a creation. Science-fiction really,” (Bergman, 2007). The resulting unattainable, unnatural body image expectations have had an unnerving affect on women’s emotional state and body image due to media, public female role models, and fashion/body fads.

In the context of the present-day Dutch multicultural society, this is even more problematic. A binary opposition is being created by the Dutch public between the ‘modern’, secular women who is willing to disclose her body publicly, which is read as a sign of her emancipation, and the ‘traditional’ religious woman, who covers her body, which is read as much as a sign of backwardness, and her being dominated by men and/or a higher force (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). What is more, it is through the construction of the female body of religious¹ women that they are excluded from ‘Dutchness’: a national identity that centers on sexual freedom, and abandons every link with religion and views religious constructions of the female body as “other,” (see Minh-ha, 1991). After all, “The country most commonly used as exhibit A for the process of total secularization: The Netherlands,” (Jenkins, 2009).

¹The worked definition for “religion” in this paper is a person’s particular stated beliefs and behaviors with a perceived closeness to a G-d, (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Also, my writing of G-d, instead of G-d with an “o,” is a conscious decision as part of my Jewish religious practices of not writing G-d’s name in vain.

Feminists don't look at women wearing a hijab², for example, and say, "She's choosing to do this, she's thought about it, she is expressing herself in this practice." Rather, by defining the veil-wearing woman as different, modern feminists maintain their own identities as "sameness" and keep veil-wearing women as "other." Women wearing a hijab, modest clothing, or other religious dress also live in the modern world where sex, nudity, thinness, and secularism reign supreme.

Religious and non-religious women alike are being pressured into Photoshop-like bodies, impossible binary sexual lifestyles, and body-centered mindsets. The naïve-schoolgirl/sexually-knowledgeable standard is impossible to obtain yet continues to be prevalent in even the "emancipated" Netherlands. The present study seeks to understand through informants' qualitative accounts how religious women living in the secular, Dutch province in the northern Netherlands manage the pressures of these cultural lessons on their faith, family, and body image. Specifically:

- How do my participants relate to the omnipresence of sexuality in Dutch society?
- How do women with different faith backgrounds and current religious lifestyles relate to the prevalent discourse that constructs the way that they relate to their bodies as backward and oppressed?
- How do religious women see non-religious women as they relate to their bodies as a sign of progression/emancipation?

The present study of women's self-narratives confronts the larger myth of the Netherlands as the sexually free, ideal society. Discursive research methods illustrate both to study participants

² There are different religious and cultural Muslim coverings for women. The hijab is a head, hair, and neck covering leaving the face exposed.

and readers, alike, that identity is a very personal and dynamic amalgam of the surrounding cultural, religious, and societal structures, and how identity is constantly being reconstructed through reflexology. This is illustrated plainly in an examination of my informants' views of religious women and themselves and their experiences of being labeled backward and oppressed.

The present research shows us how women who try to bring together two discourses of religiosity and modernity are stigmatized and excluded from 'Dutch' national identity (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). The confusion and frustration of these women's voices are clear.

The present study answers previous researchers' call for greater attention to women's perceptions of themselves in this post-feminist ideology. For example, Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen in *Headscarves and Porno-Chic: Disciplining Girls' Bodies in the European Multicultural Society* state for even their own research, "The voices of girls hardly ever enter these struggles themselves," (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). Kate Gleeson and Hannah Frith in their health psychology research say, "Being reflective about research processes opens up issues," (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). The women I interviewed continually reshaped their presentation of self and of body while sharing their life stories and their perceptions of societal questions on media, politics, and religion. Perhaps most valuable are the insights afforded by these narratives on the implicit Dutch intolerance and exclusion of women who are seen as marginalized, alien, and religious.

Due to the ever-growing sexualization of Dutch society, women constantly walk the fine line between sexual freedoms on the one hand and exploitation on the other. The challenge is how to protect themselves from becoming a sexualized object of their culture. This continual sexual

evolution pushes women to discipline their bodies so as to form new idealized states aimed at dissociating from the omnipresent sexual dictation from the Dutch patriarchal society. As a woman, one must dress with decency yet still express identity and how emancipated one is. Who draws the line of what decent and modest are? It is certainly somewhere in the milieu of oppression, objectification, and overt disclosure of body.

Two stereotyped extremes have been conflicting since the 1960s: Dutch sexual revolution versus conservative and traditional religious lifestyles. Philip Jenkins, professor at Penn State University, writes:

Beyond argument, the Netherlands has moved away from organized religion. Despite the country's dazzlingly rich Christian history, all of its churches began a steep decline in the 1960s, by whatever measures of belief or practice we may use. Today, barely half of all Dutch people claim any allegiance to a Christian denomination, while over 40 percent overtly deny any religious loyalty. Many of Amsterdam's historic Protestant churches are effectively museums that occasionally make their premises available for thinly attended services, (Jenkins, 2009).

With the increase of sexual freedom, female emancipation, and the introduction of “body politic³,” religion became associated with ancient methods of education and living. All of my interviewees have lived through this drastic change of secularization and the accompanying shift toward open sexuality, second-wave feminism, and the eradication of the Dutch pillarization of educational institutions (see Avest et. al., 2007). One Jewish interviewee reflects that, “Here, for maybe thirty years, we had a culture where everything had to be changed and renewed. It became a regimen. Taboos had to be broken down [...]. Religion has gone down in the past thirty years.” A Christian interviewee summarizes the affects of this secularization in the world around her: “I got married in Amsterdam when sexuality became more open. They tried to make you believe

³ Body Politic refers to the policies through which powers of society regulate the body, as well as the struggle over the degree of individual and social control of the body.

that people who go to bed before marriage, they could learn to love and be a match. And then they said there will be less divorces. Well. Look around! There are more and more! So that was a lie.” Across disparate faith backgrounds, these two Dutch-born interviewees couldn’t make sense of the secularization happening around them. In response, each turned back to religion as the sensible option.

The Netherlands is renowned for its reformed social infrastructure that aims to support the equality of its citizens to the highest degree. From its infamous legalization of prostitution to its tolerance of homosexuality, Dutch identity has become synonymous with sexual egalitarianism. But how tolerant are the Dutch really? Are sexuality and body image even discussed beyond the garish limits of the red light district and the hypersexualized media? Traditional religions, such as Islam and Judaism, find blatant sexual display and discussion contrary to their ideology of life. The concept of the hijab or burqa⁴, for example, means, “to be covered” or “veil,” representing to many the opposite of body and sexuality openness. I argue that the hijab is not a symbol of sexual oppression, but instead a symbol of the Muslim woman’s wish to separate the public and private spheres of her life. The Muslim participant informs me, even in Holland, “My family is private and like Morocco in the house and hold the same values but is open to other people in the outside.” This is modesty or respect, not prudishness or repression. To public opinion, however, wearing such a veil is often mistaken as an overt religious and political statement about womanhood. This is just one visible example of how religion appears to be outside of Dutch society. This is described as “otherness,” according to Geert Wilders, a Dutch politician taking a stand towards liberalism and feminism while being completely against Islam. Washington Post reports a quote by Wilders saying, “Islam and democracy are fully

⁴ A burqa is a full-length outer garment with no shape which covers head, arms, and usually, the face.

incompatible,” (Richburg, 2005) noting Islam as the “other” and opposing democracy and the current state of the Netherlands.

Open sexual display and practice is often taken as contradictory with a modest lifestyle and a source of inevitable conflict. The media have staked religion as the cause of such conflict, neglecting the complimentary view, that progressive post-feminism can be at least as intolerant. William Cavanaugh, for example, brutally argues the inseparable association between religion, violence and intolerance, (Cavanaugh, 2007). What do people with faith-based backgrounds have to say about their evolving sexualized surroundings, about the female body, and about their own embodiment of the tension among these forces? The purpose of this study is to understand how sexuality, faith, and body image are constructed in the Dutch culture by analyzing five women’s first-hand accounts of life in the Netherlands.

Literature Review

I believe in believing. I don't want to pack it in one word or group.

(Susana Jaspers)

My main source of reference is Duits and van Zoonen's *Headscarves and Porno-Chic*. Their research published in the *European Journal of Women's Studies* compares the female body debate and as it presents in two extremely different modes of dress: in porno-chic and in religious, namely Islamic, headscarves. These authors contend that Islamic female dress effectively erases women's sexuality, identity, body, and autonomy. Ironically, the Netherlands has marked boundaries on women's presentations of the self, stigmatizing not only headscarves but g-strings as too extreme. Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali has gone so far as to refer to the headscarf as a medieval practice (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). Does this mean showing one's g-string is closer to modernity and progressive embodiment than wearing a hijab?

Thus, both dressing up and dressing down are out of the question. Dutch women are left to find a very personal balance of religious, sexual and political positions between these two feared extremes. Duit and van Zoonen say, "Current societal issues, such as decency and feminism, are discussed over the bodies of girls," (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). I plan on bringing the voices of these women back into political and public spheres on the topic of bodies. This will bring increased autonomy, identity, and independence for these women when discussing their own body image and identities.

What does society want? According to many body researchers, specifically Duits and van Zoonen, society is seeking to portray the, "nice girl," that is, "A girl who manages to balance her sexuality on the decency continuum; neither showing too much of it or denying it," (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006).

Who regulates what is decency and who is decent? How do these body regulations change with the changing norms of society, media, and sexuality? Kate Gleeson and Hannah Frith, in *(De)Constructing*

Body Image, say that identity derives significance not just from individual meaning but from the situation(s) from which they emerge (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). This supports Duits and van Zoonen's research on the societal impact on female body regulation lays the foundation for my interest in how women manage the real societal pressures concerning body presentation and religious practice. Gleeson and Frith theorize that body imaging and imagery is a process and an activity rather than a static, unchanging, and uninfluenced measurement of self. The present research builds upon Gleeson and Frith's work to incorporate female embodiment as a new dimension within the discursive study of women and their voices. I agree that, "Body imaging is one of the tasks that individuals might engage in while participating in research, and also while reflectively working on their own identity," (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). This is why I invited my informants reflect on their personal narratives as solid research as example of how women construct their identity at the intersection of their religion, nation, age, gender, and body.

Sunny Bergman included interviews in her Dutch documentary *Beperkt Houdbaar*⁵. Filmmaker Bergman, unveils the beauty and embodiment insecurities within Dutch women and the way (Western, white) women are pressed by society to live up to an unnatural, Photoshopped 'ideal' image of the female body. Bergman interviewed women who indulge in plastic surgeries in an effort to achieve Photoshop® ideals and describes how they, and other women, are negatively affected by it all. By living in Amsterdam, religious Dutch females' prohibitions against plastic surgery, nudity, and maybe even sex in general, are thus harshly against utopian pro-sexual tolerance and freedoms. This is the boiling cauldron in which these women must construct their identity. It would seem they have three choices: To reject their religious heritage and beliefs and embrace the encompassing culture, to embrace their religious beliefs and eschew the encompassing culture, or to create an alloy of the two.

⁵ *Beperkt Houdbaar*: translated as, "Over the Hill" by Bergman, and, "Expired By," by one of my interviewees.

There is no present way of constructing a definition of self within these pressures without using societal discourses to compare and contrast your own actions and characteristics.

Given these various constructions of self, wearing a hijab or sheitel⁶ for example, could be an acceptance of and submission to male dominance. Yet, it may equally well be an expression of resistance of male dominance, especially to the extent that a covering is a barrier to the male gaze and a way to gain freedom from heteronormative modern standards. Ultimately, we must ask how women, in a religious context, discipline their bodies to assimilate, protest, or feel comfortable in their present culture.

Perceiving the headscarf in this way, another question comes to the fore, namely: do non-Western, middle class, and religious women suffer in the same way from the male gaze and the female beauty standard as the white women do that are represented in Bergman's documentary? I applaud Bergman's efforts to bring the business behind beauty to the forefront, yet her research is limited to secular, Caucasian women who are able to afford body changes like Botox® and labiaplasty. This excludes beauty and embodiment discourses for women identifying with other races, nations, classes, and religions, (see Botman & Jouwe, 2001). Would women who consider themselves religious even identify with the messages and opinions from Bergman's documentary and her interviewees? Is the focus on wrinkles, hairlessness, thinness, and skin perfection just as large, the same, or less important in religious women's lives? I explore these gaps in Bergman's presentation with all my informants across the range from non-identified religious to orthodoxy.

In general, the contemporary literature examining the relationship between body image and religious belief focuses on Islamic women's bodies. Alexander J. Mussap, Trisha M. Dunkel et. al., Naseem Akhter Hussain, for instance, post research about religion and body in solely an Islamic

⁶ *shay-tul*, wig for married Orthodox Jewish women.

framework. Hussain's *Religion and modernity: gender and identity politics in Bangladesh* delves into similar binaries where she, "Explores how women negotiate modernist and Islamist discourses and thereby engages in the politics of everyday living," (Hussain, 2010). Yet this question is only discussed in the newly researched Islamic female body politic. The rise of Islam in the Dutch public has increased the debate and the anxiety concerning women's bodies' representations and the changes in religiosity, modest body politics, and covered sexuality.

There is a large gap in knowledge between religion and women's bodies outside of Islam. This may be due in part to implicit political, gendered and religious prohibitions associated with discussion of body and faith practices. The public's curiosity about the apparent contradiction of modern progressivism and traditional, religious practices within Islam has opened the subject for further exploration. It is my premise that individual, cultural and even empirical assertions that forward-thinking liberalism is mutually exclusive with backward-behaving, religious "otherness" are incorrect and even risk doing harm. The present research seeks to shed light on the women who "defy" this standard and live with both religion and modernity in Dutch culture. Religion need no longer be feared, but can be embraced and embodied within the post-feminist woman. The female body has been presented as modern or traditional, emancipated or oppressed, sexually free or repressed. Women's historical fear of integrating all of these aspects of self, often highlighted by religion, is manifest in the discussion of how women should discipline their body.

In fact, studies have shown that religious lifestyles can improve women's body image. Kristin J. Homan and Chris J. Boyatzis' *Body image in older adults: links with religion and gender*, among other quantitative studies, show how religion can be a positive aspect in the modern culture of negative self-embodiment. With intrinsic belief in a G-d and "religious well-being," men and women have reported greater personal satisfaction in self identity and body image, (Homan, & Boyatzis, 2009). Davis-

Quirarte and Lesley R.'s *The role of spirituality in self-objectification and body-image dissatisfaction in women* introduces Self-Objectification Theory (SOT). SOT, founded in 1997, is in direct opposition to spirituality and humanness which state that body objectification separates body parts as instruments/tools from the actual person, (Davis-Quirarte & R., 2009). Therefore, those women connected to G-d, spirit⁷, and religions oppose and separate themselves from the aspect of self-objectification, not needing external influences to reinforce or augment their beauty as society dictates. However Davis-Quirarte's and Homan's studies focus on body image and religion as if they are static entities within a woman's identity. The women in my study have shifted the intensity of their religious practices, the focus of their prayers, and their religious affiliations in their lifetime. Even religion is not static. In the pages to follow, I demonstrate how these women have changed their bodies and their body images along with personal and social shifts in what is normal for public female embodiment. On this basis, I recommend that multifaceted personal narratives be included in future studies of female identity relating not only body image and gender, but of religion and nation.

⁷ A definition I am using for spirituality is, "The acknowledgment of and relationship with a Supreme Being... which is an inherent quality among all humans that involves a belief in something greater than the self and a faith that positively affirms life," (Musgrave, Allen, & Allen, 2002).

Assumptions

My interest in researching how religion plays a role in female identity came from an application I filled out for an Orthodox Jewish educational trip to Israel in 2008 through the Aish Hatorah⁸ organization. The multiple choice question that engrained itself into my brain pitched my national identity against my religious identity. The question asked how I identify myself (see Appendix C): more Jewish or more American? The question seemed to force me to choose between being American and being Jewish and prompted me to wonder how I fit both in one body at one time?

I come from a reform Jewish background in the northeastern United States. I grew up in a middle-class, white household surrounded by a very Christian community. My parents placed me in a conservative Jewish educational program after public school hours. I was exposed to many different religious paths through studies, travels, and friendships. Before my own religious exploration in earnest, I assumed that the more religious you are, the more constrained your life is. In the present, I consider myself to be a traditional Jewish woman working hard to find my place in both my desired traditional Jewish heritage *and* modern, liberal lifestyle. In the process, I have begun to find religious practice freeing rather than constraining. The present work is motivated by my interest in determining how various religions and religious practices influence the lifestyles, opinions, and views, and integrate with societal influences on body. From the outset, I see women with more religious beliefs and practices as having a different framework in viewing the body than those who do not. I cannot accept, however, the common public assumption that one is better than the other or –as I found implicit in the Aish Hatorah questionnaire- that the two are mutually exclusive.

⁸ Aish Hatorah is the largest Orthodox Jewish educational program and Yeshiva based in Jerusalem. Contact at www.aishhatorah.org.

In fact, given that post-feminism discourse and over-secularization now dominates most of western culture, religion's implicit association with backwardness, de-progressivism, and medieval practices is being reified by consensus. I believe that the present work can take one brick out of the growing wall needlessly bifurcating modernism from faith, toward the greater goal of debunking the assumption placed upon all religious persons living in the secular world. In particular, I hope to communicate to contemporary women that modernity, faith and a healthy body can go hand-in-hand.

I bring with me to my interviews my Jewish faith, my female outlook, and my willingness to learn of others' stories. Rather than limiting me, I take this non-objectivity as a bridge that can better connect me to my subjects and thereby a tool with which to mine richer data from my informants. I believe that, "The influence of culture is complex with women actively engaged in identity projects and contributing to their own and each other's embodiment," (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). By expressing my own religious and cultural background, I can build trust and find more depth in my subjects' recollections. Rather than pretend objectivity, I embrace my subjectivity and understand these data more fully through comparing and sharing with me. I believe that my self-disclosure highlights cultural and religious differences which can motivate my interviewees to discuss topics in an inter-faith space, to engage in constructive religious debate, and to divulge cultural and personal issues specific to our respective affiliations, nations and bodies. In short, I believe that carefully reined subjectivity benefits this research by promoting personal connections, trust, and intimate conversations that are vital to my purpose. I need to share myself and my situation to gain acceptance and prove my trusting, honest motivation behind my research inquiry.

Methodology

I hope my story can help you. All I have is what I know; my story and my religion is what I can offer.
(Mies Kiuper)

My method is to conduct personal narrative interviews with women of different faith backgrounds living as permanent residents in the Northern provinces of the Netherlands. I have chosen this method in order to obtain a holistic picture of the life stories and experiences of my participants. By contrast, I believe that questionnaires and surveys seldom extract full facts, personal truths, and memories that have the depth and emotional power that can be obtained through face-to-face interview.

There are, of course, a number of problems associated with this methodology, (Steinar, 1994, Thompson, 2000). First and foremost is the concern that informants' memories and recounted experiences can lack the reliability and validity conventionally required of data collection. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that the reciprocity of this process and the subjectivity of my informants' reports create an invaluable starting point (Perks & Thompson, 1990). Interviews allow for analysis both of what informants say and what they don't say. They are, "Privileged access to a linguistically constituted social world," (Steinar, 1994). My methodology allows these women to share themselves as informants- a unique opportunity to bring their stories together and thereby dissect the identity variables of gender, religion, and body.

I have selected the five women portrayed here from among women over the age of thirty-five (35) living as a Dutch citizen presently with some faith background. I have located my participants through my host in Holland, Jacqueline Jacob. I recognize that this is a non-random sample, at least to the extent that their shared relationship with Ms. Jacob may distinguish them from the population in general. However, the reader should be aware that I am not collecting quantitative data or postulating a general conclusion that might be applicable to any religious woman. I recognize these five women of

different religious background for their individuality without presuming any to be representative of a larger group. My hope is that my portrayal of the particular women I captured in these pages might prompt others to find their own means of reconciling the otherwise conflicted pressures of faith, culture and body image.

I interviewed each informant in the comfort and familiarity of their own home. I put myself in their environment so they might feel more comfortable and so as to allow myself a more authentic experience of each. Given this option, I note that two among my interviewees preferred to be interviewed in my host's home in the belief that my host would serve as translator, support and friend. One informant said, "I benefit from having space from my kids. This is good and I feel comfortable."

Each informant completed an informed consent form (see Appendix A). By signing this release, each informant agreed to be recorded and asked questions about their life story relating to body, religion, nation, and sexuality. Each informant furthermore understood and allowed that her words would contribute to the substance of this thesis.

The five women interviewed here represent Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity and non-identifying. Given the benefit of time and the generous support of interviewees, I would have also brought the group together to discuss the same content in an effort to see how each responds to the others' idiosyncratic resolution to the balancing act they all share.

Analysis of the dialogues thus obtained seeks to make explicit each woman's otherwise implicit –and perhaps unconscious- model in which they operate in both discourses and tensions between religious prohibition and feminist freedoms. The focus, therefore, is on understanding each participant's view of religion (including history, practices and beliefs) and each participant's body image, and identifying the means with which these forces are reconciled to create each participant's identity. I am going to analyze the dimension of the narratives by focusing on how my interviewees

develop their identity and coping tools to live with two cultures of religion and liberal nationality. The main question, therefore, is how does each of these five women construct an identity and talk about these topics while reflecting on their personal narratives? I want to see different ways in which they present themselves to me and if they define themselves in certain or multiple discourses in their present age and their past.

Reviewing all the collected life stories of these women, patterns strike me within their concepts of religion, body, and Dutchness. Each informant discusses themselves in comparison to others creating for themselves a box outside a norm they perceive to be surrounding them. What is interesting is how each informant differs in how they relate to this otherness. This variety in perspective, memory, and opinion show how identity and embodiment are continually constructed in their pasts and up until their present age (Lindgren, & Wahlin, 2001). My research is here to show how adult women have constructed, and still continue to construct, their identity while discussing nationality, religion, and body image. Also, how each woman positions themselves towards or against the modern, mainstream discourse on these seemingly separate ideologies of modernity and religiosity.

Biographies

I don't deal with the terminology "liberal" and "orthodoxy." I pray regularly. It gives me breaks in my day and trust in tomorrow. But I don't identify with those words. I am who I am
(Hafida Bachir)

Following are brief biographies of my participants:

Wilhemina "Willy" van Ravenswade, fifty-nine (59) years old, is a Dutch-born Orthodox Jew with three grown children in Amstelveen. Her parents consisted of opposing religious beliefs and therefore Willy felt she must choose for herself and her family what religious identity to take on. She describes converting from the religiously unknown to Orthodox Judaism as "coming out," very similar connotations and repercussions of "coming out" for homosexuals. Willy had to identify her choice of religion and lifestyle to family, friends, and herself. For Willy, religious identity emerged through exploring what she was most comfortable doing sexually and culturally.

Vesna Marolt, sixty (60) years old, is a practicing Buddhist living outside the city of Amsterdam. She is originally from Slovenia, however is a world traveler and has partaken in many cultures. She has lived in the Netherlands for more than ten years but does not associate with being Dutch. She has always liked her body, and continues to love it with, "[her] new phase of life: menopause." Going with her to one of her weekly Japanese Buddhist chanting meetings, I have observed her as a very religious woman with the discipline of one who is dedicated to her practice yet not needing to dress how she views other religious women to dress.

Mies Kuiper, eighty (80) years old, is a loving and devoted Christian woman living alone in Amstelveen. She is Dutch-born and "has [had] Jesus in [her] heart," since she was about

five years old. Kuiper is not so connected to the secular, urban culture that seems to be one root in where the Western female embodiment thrives. However she has lived through the feminist movements, secular shift, and Muslim migrant influx on which she has many comments. She is content with body and religion which we discussed after Mies' reflection on her life-changing car accident.

Susana Jaspers, forty-four (44) years old, is a wife and mother living in Amstelveen. She somewhat identifies as being a Dutch woman, but grew up in East Germany under communist rule in the 1970s. She says, "Coming from Eastern Germany, a dictatorial state, I didn't have a strong tie to religion myself. I respect religion but I don't feel like I need to belong to a group. But religion does play a role in life." She especially felt this when her first child with her Dutch husband passed away after three months. She also comments on her strong dissatisfaction with her body through her life from puberty to dating to motherhood and up until the present. Her violin has kept her in peace. She now plays in Amsterdam Concert Gebouw where I heard her play Mayr compositions. She discusses body, Dutch society, and religion from an outsider's point of view with the feelings of exclusion.

Hafida Bachir, forty-two (42) years old, is a dedicated Muslim Moroccan migrant who came to the Netherlands when she was about thirty years old. She has three children with her Moroccan husband and two of which are severely mentally handicapped. Even with this situation, she is satisfied with her life, her body, and her two national identities. By "taking the reins in [her] own hands" in discovering her religious and gender identity since childhood, she has become a strong and devoted religious woman untainted by modern, secular society in both Moroccan and Dutch societies: "I am who I am."

Analysis

My mother told that religion was shame like sex. It was forbidden. There's anger still for me. Religion was placing obstacles from the natural way of evolving yourself. Like girls are supposed to do this and not supposed to do that, they would feel stuck, you know?

(Vesna Marolt)

Each of the five participant's transcribed interviews were reviewed in detail. Dutch-English translations were validated with my host's generous assistance. Statements were assigned by informants to one or more of the following substantive categories after organizing the transcriptions around the interview guide (Appendix B):

- Religious faith/practices: all of my informants grew up with strong opinions about religion and religiosity in their families either for religion or against it. Each of my informants have expressed to me a time in their life in which religion/prayer was needed as well as a formative time where they chose how to live, or not live, religiously around post-puberty age.
- Cultural, National & Familial origins: The interviewees have come from varied backgrounds of nation and cultural regulations (e.g. communist rule in Germany, post-Holocaust trauma in Holland, isolated Moroccan village life, etc.) which proves insightful in comparing these women's' stories and evolution into their current religious beliefs and self-image. Each informant comes from a heteronormative familial structure with siblings and both positive and negative family memories in relation to structuring identity and religion.
- Body image/presentation and practices: All of my informants have had, more or less, unsatisfying thoughts about their bodies in the past and present. It is interesting to note

the four women who are more religious presently are happier with their bodies than the one who does not affiliate with a religion.

- Rationale/Explanation: Every woman has thought hard about Dutch culture and has rationalized ways it fits into their own body-image, lifestyle, and religiosity either in comparison to another culture they are exposed to or another time in Dutch society they were used to. Each woman has reflected both positive and negative experiences when relating their life to modern Dutch society. The women believed the negative experiences made for learning and growth in their own spirit, religion, and lifestyle.

In this way, comparisons within subject area and hypotheses as to causal effects of each variable and interactions among these variables could be generated. This process yielded five substantive and interlaced themes.

1. The desire to be both

Willy is now an Orthodox Jew, yet it was a hard road for her to discover her true religious identity. Growing up in a Dutch 1950's family with a Jewish, Holocaust survivor father and devout Christian mother was torturous for her at times. She grew up celebrating both religions, but during post-puberty, she realized she was a religious Jew. Willy completed her education in a Christian school system with her two siblings, always feeling inadequate physically compared to her slim older sister and fellow Dutch classmates. In the present, Willy lives and believes that being Dutch and being Orthodox are opposite parts framing her identity within conflicting binaries. Willy has always known that her body was most comfortable in a modest presentation consistent with her religious upbringing. By contrast, she recalls her less religiously observant girlfriends in grade school as having been "more open."

How do you relate to sexuality and religion. To Judaism?

Willy: I didn't follow the rules. I lived the life of a spirited, modern, feminist student. I had my split in religious identity around fourteen or fifteen I think. [My sister and I] weren't popular. We were odd because we were the Jews in the Christian school. There were three others like us, but we weren't Jews for them, but we weren't Christian for the school and other youngsters! [...] I had one friend who wasn't Jewish and fell in love with a nice Israeli guy. She was very liberal and free. Told me all her sexy stories. And now she is married, orthodox, a mother, and living in Israel. She 'came out' before me. She told me all about the phases she went through from sexually free to converting to a Jew⁹. All kind of religious and sexual developments happened around me. Being orthodox and being liberal is interesting to handle. Some orthodox are cold and distant. I had an appointment once with a rabbi in Israel. I saw him coming out of the elevator. He was like an arch bishop, just without his staff. I ran away. The difficulty was not about becoming Jewish. It was entering a world of strict rules. I didn't mind Shabbat and kashrut¹⁰. But I wasn't very happy about the idea of mikvah¹¹ and the restrictions on sexuality. And the distance between men and women. And I was definitely not happy about covering my head at first. That was my favorite part of my body!

Here Willy explains an important shift in her religious practices and body awareness as a function of age coincident with the move from a very liberal, non-Jewish environment toward a very conservative, Jewish environment. She gives voice to the conflict between her dual identities as an orthodox Jew and a liberal Dutch woman. Growing up in an Amsterdam household with a Jewish, World War II survivor father and an Orthodox Christian mother, religion itself was a source of conflict for her. Willy's account is cast against the Judaism's historically documented movement in the 1960's post-World War II generation toward second-wave feminist and Dutch liberalism (Umansky, 1988). Willy's family, like so many other Jewish, second generation feminists of that era, especially strived for equality and separation from religion because of the Holocaust's impact. It was only with the arrival of the labor

⁹ Here, Willy implicitly confirms my earlier observation that to some, sexual expression and religious observance are mutually exclusive.

¹⁰ Kashrut are the dietary regulations in Judaism (www.yourdictionary.com)

¹¹ Mikvah is a bath in which Orthodox Jews immerse themselves for ritual purification. It is most important for women to bathe following menstruation, during which you cannot touch any men or your husband until purified in this bath.

migrants, including a large population of Muslim-Moroccans, that Willy's generation started to redefine their religious identity (Jenkins, 2009). Thus, not only did Willy have to choose a religion, she had to choose how orthodox in a very non-religious culture. For Willy this already difficult, existential choice was further burdened by the feeling that she was implicitly choosing between her parents.

Willy overtly constructs her thoughts and history as divided between liberalism and religion. For example, her memory of the liberal friend who converted to Orthodox Judaism is phrased as a change from a liberal to a religious woman. This sets the stage for how she proceeds to organize her own double-consciousness¹² and divided loyalties (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Today, Willy, "feel[s] very liberal as an Orthodox woman" But this was not always the case. Growing up, Willy constantly struggled to define her position in certain situations. In the Christian school of her childhood, for example, Willy attributed her own unpopularity to her more religious and modest behavior and to her body image. She emphasizes that her sister who was more popular than she due to her slimness. The same associations and attributions persist into her present thinking. In Willy's current circle of adult friends, she describes the neckline of her clothes as always be higher than others' even if it is not in fashion. Thus, it appears that Willy mediates her memories and thoughts through the binary discourse of religion/modernity where religion is the "other," even in Willy's orthodox lifestyle. She talks about her Dutch culture versus religious modesty here:

Willy: There is a controversy of disclosing the body which is the culture versus being modest. And being modest is now only positioned in the Islamic context. But there's a Bible Belt. There's a Jewish group. But I think through Islam, some ideas of being modest are being brought back into the Dutch society. It's a strange

¹² Double-consciousness to LaFramboise et. al. describes, "The simultaneous awareness of oneself as being a member and an alien of two or more cultures, (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

angle, but now there's a small idea that it's better to be modest. [...]The Dutch seem to not bother about things that are delicate. [pause] Hard to explain. So in their speech or in their humor, they're kind of rude. They are just, "this or that." They are very black and white. It relates to religion and sexuality here too.

In this statement, Willy describes her binary "black and white" thinking as common in Dutch culture. She reflexively casts religion (and specifically Islam), and modesty as opposed to Dutch culture and sexual expression.

Willy is not alone in discussing Islamic women's coverings as impacting the larger Dutch culture. Hafida shares why she wears a headscarf as a Muslim woman:

Hafida: I'm used to it. I see in my family all the women wear the headscarves. But it is also a part of me and has a religious connotation. It says so in the Koran. I feel better doing it because I feel more to myself and get less attention from men because I'm married. You see those women who completely covering their whole bodies and face... the Koran and Islam doesn't say to do that. For me, it puts me at ease in my religion and culture to wear just a headscarf. I started wearing it about 20 years ago. [...] I don't feel any more or less pressure to wear my headscarf here in Amsterdam than in Morocco. I am who I am in Morocco and Holland. I don't need to make a certain statement here. It's just a part of me. That's my motivation to wear it.

Hafida clearly does not wear a headscarf to make a religious or political statement. It is more for her comfort and familiarity as a woman brought up in Muslim tradition. She actively interprets the Koran to suit her desires for a certain religious meaning in her life. Hafida's choice in wearing a headscarf, studying the Koran, and moving to the Netherlands proves her power and feminist ideals in a religion that is not known for any female emancipation. In fact, Hafida recognizes those women who choose to follow the Koran by wearing a burqa as extreme and inappropriate for her personal outlook on religion and dress code.

Willy and Hafida see female Muslim dress in a positive light. Susana does not.

2. The separation from Dutchness

Susana identifies herself as neither a religious person nor as completely Dutch.

Nevertheless, after more than two decades living in Amstelveen, Susana holds strong opinions on the state of female emancipation and media imagery of female embodiment, particularly as these impact her children. Susana believes that all women –herself included- have a “normative discontent” (Rodin et. al., 1985) with their bodies, but that others whom she refers to disparagingly as “Dutch,” give in to the pressures of the media.

Susana and my other interviewees have each separated themselves from the Dutch identity when discussing sexuality and female body image, regardless of their national and political origins. To these women, to be “Dutch” is to accede to the mainstream media’s corrupted views of sexuality and body image. Each has made a point of showing me that they do not give into the oversexualized culture that the younger generation does, despite the fact that all five show signs of some negative impacts of the cultural body image change in their secular surroundings. Susana perceives that,

Susana: The Netherlands is a Western country always influenced by the media and audience and public speakers. Everyone believes it’s very open but it’s not true. Dutch women are not much more emancipated than other European women. I think that Dutch women look emancipated in public life- in public, everyone is talking about everything, but in private life it’s still closed. When it comes one to one, it’s not open and Netherlands it’s not more emancipated than anywhere else. Well of course we are not stoned to death and we don’t wear burqas. In that respect we are emancipated. But it’s not as emancipated as anywhere else in the world.

What about how you feel in this culture and in your body?

Susana: I don’t feel beautiful. There are always parts that you don’t like. It’s still something within me and won’t go away. I can understand how people have anorexia that when you are told as a little child that you are chubby or see yourself that way, even if you’re a stick [pause]. Whenever someone gave me a compliment like if I had beautiful breasts or something, I’d turn it around right away to be something negative. For my feelings, I never got any positive compliments. [pause] In the end it’s not possible to make choices about anything because of the endless amount of possibilities for women here. Surface-meaning

though. But with all these choices, how do women decide to do what is right and how to look?

Susana separates herself from negative Dutch media messages and the state of “fake emancipation” for women. She recognizes the “look” of public emancipation, and sees that there is more to a woman than the size of her breasts. Nevertheless, she fails to look beneath the burqa. In her view, Muslim women who choose to wear the religious head covering are more backward and repressed by men and the male gaze than their Dutch peers. She thus appears to see the people in her world along a continuum of modernity, rather than in the black-white binary opposition illustrated by Willy.

At one extreme of Susana’s spectrum, female religious garb equates to oppression, backwardness, and non-emancipation. At the other extreme, anorexia equates to feminist freedoms. She eschews media imagery but still feels closer with anorexia than those women, Dutch or German, content with their bodies in public and private. Susana’s longstanding ambivalence about body, faith and culture are perhaps reflected in her self-deprecating manner. She did not feel beautiful in her childhood in East Germany and she does not feel beautiful presently in Holland. Never genuinely finding her place along this spectrum, she likely feels criticized and rejected on all sides.

Vesna’s background is similar to Susana’s. She grew up in Slovenia with emotionally distant parents and had to discover what becoming a woman meant for herself. However, unlike Susana, Vesna has the benefit of a solid anchor in religion and culture resulting today in a far more positive image of herself. Vesna describes Dutch body image issues, along with her own national identification, in this way:

Vesna: The body image, people have problems. Some maybe have problem about being too tall or too strong. Not me. I go to sports and work out. I am not Dutch. I

am Slovenian. But since I live here, I think they- the country- has helped me and giving me chances and tools and money also to find myself like a woman free of pressure from men. Free free here! I have lived here for twenty-five years. Longest I lived anywhere, but I still identify as Slovenian. Interesting. I guess it has to do with government, you know, with passports and identifying yourself that way. The media bombard us with all this stuff though. With the female body. With sex. I think girls can take what they need from it, but stay themselves. I combine too. I don't need everything though. I don't give in to the media image of body. I don't agree with it. It's people who are weak who give to it. I wear clothes that are kind of open. Men may say I'm easy but I'm not easy. I'm just open. And strong.

How should women, in your opinion, relate to sexuality and body?

Vesna: They can be open, but no tits or anything. One Dutch woman here in my Buddhist meeting, wears so little clothes, one time her nipple popped out and she laughed, 'It's looking for a man.' That's terrible. You can wear short clothes to be aesthetic or sexy, but not shorts to see your vagina. If Dutch girls want to wear clothes like models, that's ok. For sure it's partly for men. To maybe tease them. But if you have a big charisma, you don't need to show tits.

Vesna's narrative is that of a dedicated, religious, adult woman who has found a way to combine and feel content in a modern, secular world. Her social media literacy is impressive, allowing her to acknowledge the media's impact without being corrupted by it. Her view of Dutch female emancipation is opposite of what Susana says as describing the Netherlands to be, "free free here." Vesna has more experience with the Dutch culture of feminism, embodiment, and emancipation since she has lived here longer than any other location she resided¹³, yet the Dutch government constantly reminds Vesna of her not belonging by preventing her from obtaining a Dutch passport. This leaves her with no option but to conclude that she is therefore "not Dutch."

It is interesting to note that Vesna wore tight sweatpants and a tank top to our interview. This does not fit the conventional view of a religious woman. Nevertheless, this woman's inner strength, dedication to knowledge, and sharp opinions revealed how her Buddhism has positively

¹³ It is reasonable to wonder if Vesna's experience of other cultures has contributed to her maturity, but this variable is beyond the scope of the present research.

affected her identity. Vesna seems to be the incarnation of Mussap's theory that, "Strength of religious faith was inversely related to body dissatisfaction" (Mussap, 2009). Vesna is confident in herself and her body regardless of media exposure or choice of wardrobe. To her, she does not need to wear the message of Dedicated Buddhist. She acknowledges that she dresses more openly than others. At sixty years old as a devout Buddhist, Vesna understands how young Dutch girls' identities can be corrupted by media messages. She shrugs off the Dutch media with a nonchalant attitude even though she judges those who give in to the media as "weak." It appears that Vesna's solid anchor in her religious is the foundation of this impressive strength.

3. Religion versus Nation

Willy speaks to the Dutch disassociation of sexuality, body image, and modern female actions:

Willy: I think Dutch women give it away too soon. I was raised in a modest way. I tried to be more open myself and wore a bikini sometimes, but that was it. In this respect, Orthodoxy was good for me. It was an area that I could live without the pressure of these issues. My friends would disclose their bodies all over. [...] that's what I think of about Dutch society and I think that's what motivated me into being religious and Jewish. I wanted my own liberal life, but I didn't want to be [pause] disclosed to everyone. It's hard when the girls do disclose their bodies and get the guys... and I don't. But that's not how I want to do it. Nowadays young people act like this all the time. Sex! In this respect, I see myself more Jewish than Dutch. I don't like this aspect of Dutch.

Describing how Dutch women expose their bodies openly in this way shows how separated Willy feels from this action and identity as well as her disdain for it. She does not openly condone others' choices as "weak" like Vesna. Willy clearly finds comfort in her identity as a liberal, orthodox woman. She has successfully found her way to have her own liberal life within, but apart from, the Dutch pressure for female public body disclosure, but at an acknowledged cost. She still has strong feelings about having been unsuccessful with boys as compared to the

Dutch school friends of her childhood. It is always challenging when one's moral rules preclude choices that seem to be rewarded in theirs. In this case, Willy recalls that others, without these religious regulations, were rewarded with attention from the opposite sex. To not be rewarded for what you feel is right and see others get rewards for something you see as immoral can tear a girl or woman in two or polarize the choices. Willy's mounting religious strength led her to side with her morals instead of the practices of her Dutch friends which makes Willy feel content. However, with this pull to side with religion or her Dutch friends pit religiosity and Dutchness against each other yet again. That is why Willy concludes with her identification with Judaism over her identification as Dutch.

Hafida, on the other hand, celebrates the diversity of religion and culture/nationality. From an early age she realized within herself what both religion and culture have meant to her:

Hafida: I raised questions about religion about the age I was going to get married-around nineteen. For instance arranged marriages aren't part of Islam religion at all, it was a part of my culture. I felt relieved about that fact that many things I questioned were about culture and not religion. That helped me become more drawn into Islamic belief; I saw it as more pure. [...] I experience my religion in such a way that is not limiting. You can make mistakes. You can try out things. It is liberating and not limiting. Particular culture patterns can cause limitations but not religions. I have two cultures now I can pick and choose what I want from.

Here, Hafida recognizes how culture and religion separately affect her identity. From this culture literacy, she grows stronger in religious ties. Her example of arranged marriages as a purely cultural phenomenon and not associated with Islamic regulation shows how she has integrated her culture and religion in a satisfying package while knowing how to compartmentalize and analyze her cultural and religious experiences. From Morocco to Northern Netherlands, she observes and actively participates in the public, cultural sphere not letting it affect her sacred, private sphere: "Live in the house and on the inside being religious and like I

lived in Morocco. [pause] But the difference living in the Netherlands, of course, is the outside world.”

4. Beauty, Body, and Botox

Mies Kuiper is a traditional, Dutch-born Christian woman. Her interview was different than those of the other four women who participated in this research. Mies does not see a conflict between religion and her Dutch identity. She is proud to be Dutch and does not disassociate from this label in the slightest. Mies says, “I am eighty. I am Dutch. And I have Jesus in my heart.” Mies’ unconflicted, cemented beliefs in Jesus, country, and body-image helped her live through a tragic car accident in which she witnessed her husband’s, her three sons’ injuries, and her own facial impairments. In this context, we discussed the impact of self-image and religion in her life:

Mies: My nose was broken. There’s metal now all under my face. I looked completely different. That was the most frustrating thing. My choir I sang in didn’t recognize me when I first came back after the accident. I hated the mirror. You cannot be you anymore. But... it was so long ago. But frustrating. My husband was a math teacher so you have a lot of people around you in the same class. But when you have to live on a widow pension, they leave you. I couldn’t live like them with holidays and concerts. These were things I had to fight. My looks and class changed because of this. It was a huge change, but when you believe that G-d helps you, you’ve already won ninety percent. When you know that G-d doesn’t allow things to happen to harm you forever, you know you have strength to get through whatever happens! [...] If people who don’t have religion and had the same situation I had, I would be in shock. How would you survive? Religion is not the norm these days, you’re right. It was prophesized in the New Testament even. It says when Jesus comes back the second time, will there still be faith on Earth?

It is impossible to know how Mies managed the pressures of religion and Dutch identity through adolescence, marriage, and motherhood. What’s clear is that a single, traumatic event forced her to coalesce a new self in every regard. She described to me multiple times how much she does not even think about body image. She actively eschews modern culture which she refers to as “Satan’s world.” These factors are simply not a (conscious) part of her construction of self.

Instead, she clung to the anchor of Christianity through trauma and has resolutely rejected all else ever since. Thus, Mies speaks of Dutch culture as the workings of evil (e.g. homosexuality and “sex without love”). The vehicle in which she navigates her adulthood is Christianity and Christianity alone.

Curiously, this woman whose life depended on facial reconstruction condemns those “Dutch women who change their bodies” with Botox and other cosmetic surgeries. She sees cosmetic surgery as an insult to G-d. Even makeup is something for those who do not work on their inner-self. When asked about her thoughts on physical appearance, Mies says:

Mies: Well I make mistakes like everybody [...] If you get Botox, G-d didn't do his job in creating you right, you are saying. If you are so busy with thoughts about just your body, you lose sight of what is inside. I think it's sad if some people only think of the outside and not inside. Black girls spend lots of money to make their hair straight. People here spend lots of money for curls! Isn't that silly! I realize I am not a beauty, but I accept it.

It is interesting to note that Mies' implicitly speaks of “black girls” exclusive of the Dutch. In fact, all of my interviewees implicitly ignore apparent racial distinctions within Dutch culture. Race, like religion, is ignored framing these identifiers as un-Dutch, according to my interviewee's transcription analysis. *Beperkt Houdbaar*, the defining Dutch documentary, similarly ignores both race and religion. Mies' condemnation of those women who utilize cosmetics is similar to Vesna's but is grounded in entirely different reasoning. To Mies, G-d demands this: “You feel a bit responsible to tell people to keep up faith and ask what they are going to choose in life.” In Mies' disregard of all things superficial, she has no intention or motivation to change what she sees as her own lack of beauty. So what then is beauty to Mies? All she replied when I asked was, “Beauty to me isn't like looking like a statue.”

Hafida knows she is beautiful inside and out. She is the epitome of Duits and van Zoonen's message of identifying between the stereotyped "porno-chic" and the headscarf. She comments:

Hafida: I won't appreciate it if someone said for me to cover up more or expose more. I want to be respected for my choices. It is the woman's choice if she wants to wear a bikini or a full-body Islamic covering. Culture, not religion, seems to dictate these choices- but as long as they're happy. Islam says cover your body, but it doesn't say to walk around like a ghost [laughter]. I dress the way that pleases me. I enjoy looking good in the mirror. I love my body the way it is and love beautiful clothes.

It is a woman's choice to wear a bikini and/or a headscarf. Many in Dutch society, including some of my interviewees, judge how women dress in exposing miniskirts and in formless burqas. Yet, they disregard the choice and the individual behind this exterior. Within these debates, Hafida has personally experienced, "Girls denied their agency and autonomy," (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). Hafida does not live by the second-wave feminist slogan that the "personal is political" by keeping her home and body to herself under religious beliefs, privacy, and modesty. This way, she disciplines her body to emancipate herself from the mainstream binary of religiosity/liberalism. Religion has helped her do this with confidence in her body and public display of body: denim jeans, sweater, and a headscarf.

Hafida chooses what she wants out of Islam, Moroccan culture, and Dutch society creating who she is and how she presents herself. These morals are collectively multi-cultural, educated, and thought-out. The stereotype Susana and others have implicitly placed upon Muslim and Moroccan migrants are debunked with Hafida's story, beliefs, and voice.

Hafida too is knowledgeable about cosmetic surgeries and the importance of appearance to others, however does not judge them like Mies does: "If surgery is needed for wounds or babies with cleft palates, I accept, but I would never get a boob augmentation myself. I know Moroccans who have and are happy with their choice and that makes me happy." To Hafida,

getting a breast augmentation is just as much of a choice for women as wearing a bikini or burqa to celebrate the self, self-embodiment, and life.

5. Separate, but Tolerated

Mies perceives the morals that guide her life as constructed by G-d. It was important to Mies to make me understand her devotion to Christ because she was aware of traditional Jewish values. When asked if she would participate in a group discussion with other women about body from different faith backgrounds, she politely declined. Her body language suggested intimidation or worry which I presume to be associated with anticipation of conflict. In fact, it would be grossly unfair to put this woman in a situation which might shake the religion which she clings to. Here she discusses LaFromboise et. al.'s theory of gaining acceptance of dual identities in her own words:

What helps one become accepted as Dutch or Christian or being a woman do you think?

Mies: I think it has to do a bit with dressing. I think it's about belonging to a group. It's not so long ago you hadn't seen Islamic women with cloths on their head. And now they're everywhere and can recognize each other. It's good they have each other. Like in South Africa for example, Dutch people living there find other Dutch people. You want to recognize your own. I don't need a group, but I see Muslims do and Jews do to feel good and accepted.

Although Mies denies her own need for affiliation, she recognizes the importance of connections based on appearance for those who feel they have conflicting and difficult identity structures and labels. For most people, such affiliations are one important means with which to gain confidence in one's beliefs and practices (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Mies references the historical increase of the Muslim presence in the Netherlands and recognizes that Muslim women benefit from recognizing one another on the basis of common dress representing common religious beliefs. She views the Muslim women's congregation in Holland as a further

means with which Muslim women reinforce their sense of belonging. Just as the Dutch in other countries establish means of affiliating with others who share similar backgrounds. In fact, minorities have historically sought the physical and social protections of affiliation through shared dress, customs and gathering places.

By contrast, Susana offers another view of these groups:

Susana: Dutch, they look tolerant from the outside. So many kinds of people here these days you can see. But not really. It's just groups of people living next to each other not learning or wanting to be a part of other groups. I guess the best group out there is the stereotype of Dutch: tall, blonde, strong, and [pause] yea. Coming from Eastern Germany, a dictatorial state, I didn't have a strong tie to a religion then myself. I respect religion but I believe I am social but I don't feel like I need to belong to a group.

Susana expresses what she sees as inequality and hierarchy separating racial, national, and religious groupings in Northern Holland. LaFromboise et. al. discuss the importance of communal support and strong individual definitions for their multicultural situation, yet they do not discuss how these group integrate, collide, and cohabitate. Mies sees the positive in such groupings but Susana sees the negative in groups living side-by-side and mutually exclusive. Mies' Christian identity gives her joy and satisfaction with herself and the visible signs of affiliation with similar others: Mies wears a cross necklace and modest clothing on her body. Susana claims that she does not belong to any certain religious or national grouping, so her outside perspective is vital yet unsatisfying for her own construction of self. Belonging and believing are important to happiness. Sunny Bergman confirms this perspective. When cosmetic surgery clients are asked what women should look to be accepted among other women they reply: "Um, like in the Playboy!" Society has a view of how women should look like. And if you don't look like that, you're different," (Bergman, 2007).

In opposition to the “Dutch” black-and-white discourse Willy discusses previously, Hafida lives as both Moroccan-Muslim and Dutch considering both sides of herself equal. But they are certainly “sides” and mutually exclusive in her reflexive discourse:

Hafida: I don't see a difference between a Moroccan and Dutch woman. Here, I live like a Dutch woman. I got Dutch friends. I have Moroccan friends. I live as both Dutch and Moroccan. Living here in the country where religion doesn't have a big role doesn't affect my own identity and religion. I can't see living without it. What society does around me doesn't affect me. Religion is certainly a power and strength when dealing with culture and societies. I still act like a Moroccan but I am also more westernized like eating from separate plates at different people's houses.

Hafida shows no judgment of cultural labeling, yet she discusses them side-by-side and not simultaneous, even with her perception as living as one Dutch/Moroccan woman. The Dutch society surrounding her does not affect how she chooses to dress in Moroccan style with Muslim influences. Hafida lives happily as both Dutch and Moroccan holding on to Moroccan customs and adds “Westernized” traditions atop her Moroccan base. She has Dutch and Moroccan alliances as well as other Dutch-Moroccan identifying friends. Hafida lives in a separated yet tolerated identity and feels content with her body as representing her Moroccan, Muslim, and Dutch parts of herself.

Conclusion

I feel very liberal as an Orthodox woman. There's a lot of good in Orthodoxy. Not for everyone. Many feel happy about disclosing their body. Makes them happy. It is all choice. We communicate with our dress code.

(Wilhelmina van Ravenswade)

The present study has collected and analyzed the spoken, one-on-one narratives of five women residing in the Northern Netherlands with regard to their personal construction of identity around the concepts of religious affiliation, cultural affiliation, and body image. The five women interviewed represent a broad spectrum histories, experiences and attitudes, but are not taken as representative of any given populations. Instead, their idiosyncratic stories are taken as a foundation upon which to build hypotheses about how women's identity can be constructed at the intersection of these sometimes conflicted, sometimes complementary forces.

Having reviewed the transcripts of the interviews, I have found that self-image and self-embodiment is where religion and sexual expression collide. My interviewees have varied experiences and opinions on how religiosity and modernity, along with liberal sexuality, conflict. The second-wave feminist female body image and the "sexually free" ideal are upheld in the Northern Netherlands culture (the desire to be thin, hairless, etc.) continuing today. It impacts this oversecularized culture, including religious women.

Interviewees separate themselves from "the Dutch" identity, whether they identify as Dutch or not, and see themselves as rebellions of the "ideal body image," which causes repercussions of how they view and present their body, yet still struggle with the overwhelming exposure to this ideal. To my informants, modernity and liberalism is to Dutch as religion, modesty, and traditionalism is to non-Dutchness. The intersection of religious, national, sexual, and gender identity continues to evolve

through narrative and all are discussed as mainly separate entities, sometimes conflicting causing emotional disturbance that LaFramboise et. al. discuss could happen with individuals who have seemingly conflicting identity structures, (LaFramboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993).

Everyone needs a vehicle with which to navigate adulthood. These vehicles may be religion, feminism, or other methods of self-actualization. This is how the public views the construction of these vehicles. Yet, my interviewees have chosen a difficult path of intersecting religion and modern lifestyle due to their spiritual and cultural beliefs. Tension between religiosity and modernity is dealt with in a variety of ways. Vesna, for example, combines what she wants from media influences and Buddhist practices and feels that Amsterdam provides a safe space to do so. Willy defines herself as a liberal Dutch, Orthodox Jew who sides more with Judaism because Dutch discourses on female embodiment are, “Not [her] cup of tea.” Susana gives up religious identity to live as a new Dutch citizen, but holds personal spirituality close when she needs comfort. Mies clings to her religion and defines and sees Dutch to the way she pleases. And Hafida navigates life with an Islamic cornerstone building on it Dutch openness towards others’ religions and situations without judgment. She does not use the terminology, “liberalism,” and “orthodoxy,” functioning as an individual not swayed by the secularized Dutchness surrounding her.

What is researched here is how these women construct their religious and national identity through narrative. And self-image and embodiment are the places where these two issues collide publicly and privately for religious and non-religious women alike, (Duits & van Zoonen, 2006). By collecting their life stories having my informants reflect how they have constructed their religious and national identities through memories and experiences, we gain a deeper knowledge and appreciation for women in different faiths and levels of religiosity and how they relate to the secular world surrounding them. Men and women need to reshape how they see “others” not as subjects, but of “selves” thinking about

what the practice of wearing the headscarf, for example, means for those Islamic women, and not just what it means to Western feminists and political figures, (Trinh-ha, 1991). To view religious regulations as a choice, and not an oppressor, may give a new frame of thinking about religious persons in contemporary societies.

Religion is the alien variable making these women feel alien having to juggle two separate forms of cultures: religion and tradition with modernity and secularism. Media has posed religion as the cause for new Dutch intolerance, but what about tolerance towards publicly modest/religious, *modern* women? All my interviewees talk about what it means to be a “Dutch Woman.” This includes what they think a Dutch woman should look like, act like, and feel like. Both religious and non-religious women in my study compare themselves to this standard either being excluded from the group and/or dissociating from this group reaping varied emotional and national attitudes.

What is needed is increased discussion of the importance of religion in cross-cultural and intersectional identities. Religion and culture are intertwined causing and affecting factors within each other, (Tarakeshwar, Stanton, & Pargament, 2003). Voices of women need to be heard on how they perceive religion and culture as debated on their own bodies and public-embodiment.

I focus on the Northern provinces of the Netherlands due to my own geographical location and financial funds to travel. What is being presented in the media as Dutch is from this area including Amsterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, Amstelveen called The Randstad, (Randstad, 2010). What is being excluded from this national and religious debate on women’s bodies is the Southern provinces and Holland’s Bible Belt, De Bijbelgordel. This encompasses areas like Zeeland, Veluwe, Urk and Overijssel forming a northwest, diagonal “belt” where right-wing Christians, Catholics, and Calvinists live, (Haandrikman, & Sobotka, 2002). These areas are not considered “Dutch” and put in a separate, “other” category when discussed in media and in academia. In future research, collecting personal

narratives from women in these areas would be helpful in further exposing how Dutch women think about being Dutch.

A further question to consider is who eschews religion to follow the feminist path versus who eschews feminism to follow religious restriction and who defies these differences by living as a religious feminist? Voices from those identifying as such would show how feminism is shaped and redefined in different cultures of religion bringing “double-consciousness” into a singular and satisfying identity.

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Appendix A:

Consent Form

You are being asked to take part in a research study of how one constructs identity involving gender, body image, faith, and Dutch identity. The researcher is asking you to take part because you agreed to meet with her for an interview. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to take part in the study.

What the study is about: The purpose of this study is to learn how the omnipresence (*alomtegenwoordigheid*) of sexuality in Dutch culture affects women and how they may discipline their bodies to fit or disassociate with the rising open sexuality. Interview questions examine participants' life stories and personal narratives focusing on growing up, identifying as a woman, faith, sexuality, and body-image.

What you will be asked to do: If you agree to be in this study, we will conduct an interview with you. The interview will include questions about your faith, gender, sexuality, childhood, and perspectives as a woman. The interview will take about 60 minutes minimum. It is up to you if we have the time to continue. It would be very helpful to record the interview with your permission.

Risks and Benefits: There is no apparent risk or direct benefit to the participant. If you do find any question or setting of the interview uncomfortable you may stop or leave at any time. You can also ask any question about the research, interview, or publication. If you find it beneficial for you to view the final copy of the report, please mention below.

Your answers will be confidential. The records of this study will be kept within the SIT school. We can give you a false name so it will not make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a safe location. If you would like a copy of the research, transcription of your interview, or final report, please contact Mollie Garber.

Taking part is voluntary: Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You may skip any questions that you do not want to answer. If you decide not to take part or to skip some of the questions, it will not affect the research. If you decide to take part, you are free to withdraw at any time.

If you have questions: The researcher conducting this study is Mollie Garber. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Mollie Garber at mg5525a@american.edu or at 06-22292272. You can reach Yvette Kopijn at her email address: kopij005@planet.nl. You may also contact SIT: Netherlands at (020) 420 2572 or at Herengracht 513 Amsterdam.

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study. And in addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview recorded.

Your Signature _____ Date _____

Your Name (printed) _____

May the researcher include the transcript of the interview in her final report? Yes No

If you would like a pseudonym for the public records please circle here: Yes Not needed

Appendix B:
Interview Guide

Family

- Where were you born?
- In what kind of family did you grow up?
- What relationship did you have with your mother/father/siblings/etc.?
- What was it like for you to grow up in _____ (city, country)?
- Remember your first days in school?
- Who were your best friends growing up?
- How important was religion in your family?
- Do you remember when you first came to think about God or religion?

Sexuality in childhood and adolescence

- Did you like being a girl?
- How did you relate to your body as a child? Was there any part of your body that you particularly liked? And was there any body part that you did not like? Why?
- When did you have your first crush? How was it for you being attracted to someone and being attracted to someone?
- Remember your first day of secondary school?
- Remember your first period?
- How was it for you changing from a girl into a woman?
- Did you like the idea of becoming a woman?
- How did you relate to your body during adolescence? Did the way you appreciated your body change? What did you like about your body? And what didn't you like? Did you consider yourself sexually attractive?
- How did you appreciate the fact that other people around you started seeing your body as sexually attractive? How did that make you feel? How did you respond to that? Was it important for you to be sexually attractive?
- Was sex discussed with your mother/friends/etc.?
- How did you feel about sexuality? What do you think about sex before marriage?
- How do you relate to sexuality with respect to the teachings about sexuality in your religion? What rules do you follow?
- It is sometimes said that boys have more sexual freedom during adolescence than girls. How do you feel about that? [Only ask when it seems relevant in the interview]

Religion

- What did religion tell you about sexuality?
- Did you choose to adhere to these rules? Why?

Body image

- It strikes me that sexuality is everywhere in Holland. How do you feel about that?

How do you feel about/what do you think about the way society portrays women's sexuality? For example, in the media?

Appendix C

Survey from Aishhatorah.org

Survey	
* Are you a practicing Jew:	--None--
* Comp to others, Jewish causes are:	--None--
* Desire to be close to Jewish people:	--None--
* Has Aish attributed to your growth:	--None--
* How do you identify yourself?:	--None--
* How is Torah relevant to you?:	--None--
* How often do you help fellow Jews:	Primarily American
* How often do you learn Torah?:	More American than Jewish
* What is your attitude to marriage:	Equally American & Jewish
	More Jewish than American