Introduction

Europe has for a long time been perceived as exceptionally secular: the emergence of Enlightenment philosophy and culture led to the decentring of Christian ways of thinking and being in the world, and social processes of secularisation led to the decreased importance of Christian authorities in the lives of many. However, in recent decades, academics across the humanities and social sciences, but also policymakers, journalists, and artists, have observed a so-called return of religion. Scholars of religion and gender have similarly pointed at this come-back of religion, which would necessitate new approaches and reflections, especially regarding its gendered implications (Reilly 2011; Korte 2011). What does the ‘return of religion’ in the European dimension entail, and relatedly, what new approaches in the study of religion are needed?

In this chapter, I reflect on the state of the art in the study of religion and gender in Europe. First, I look at theoretical and conceptual developments in the study of religion and gender by means of a dialogue with a recent overview of the field by Linda Woodhead (2016). I connect this reflection to a review of the current politico-social situation in which the study of religion and gender in Europe takes place. This review reveals the meaning of the return of religion in European contexts, but also what is at stake in pushing the study of religion and gender further. While drawing on the return of religion narrative, I simultaneously question its underlying assumptions. Finally, I develop a short case study exploring representations of women leaving religion. I argue that an analysis of such representations reveals dominant expectations about women’s lives, in particular about women belonging to religious communities, which hold considerable sway especially in Western European contexts. Throughout the chapter, I argue that future discussions about religion and gender in Europe should be interdisciplinary, conceptual, comparative, and intersectional.

A partial perspective on the study of religion and gender in Europe

In this section, I explore the recent development of the study of religion and gender in Europe to provide a partial answer to questions about where the current study of religion and gender came from, and where it is currently located; while in the next section, I show where it might
be, or should be, going from here. The study of religion and gender is a thematic field, which means that topics pertaining to religion and gender are investigated in diverse disciplines such as gender studies, sociology, anthropology, political science and law, and religious studies and theology. As a thematic field, the study of religion and gender has both strengths and weaknesses. Its strength lies in its rich interdisciplinarity and cross-disciplinary dialogue and collaborations, while its weaknesses are the flip side of its strength and can be found in a lack of a shared methodology and fragmentation. Moreover, as religious studies scholar Dawn Llewellyn and sociologist of religion Marta Trzebiatowska (Llewellyn & Trzebiatowska 2013) observe, disciplinary boundaries may limit the ability of religion and gender scholars to have certain cross-disciplinary dialogues or to look in new ways at contemporary European developments regarding religion and gender. Additionally, some disciplinary locations in which the study of religion and gender takes places are vulnerable in particular ways: the next section will point at the rise of anti-gender discourses and movements that attack gender studies disciplines, centres, and programs in specific European contexts. Another example would be the vulnerability of religious studies and theology in secularised nation-states due to budget cuts in the contexts of neoliberalising governments and related university policies.

I will take stock of the current state of the study of religion and gender through a discussion of and critical dialogue with Linda Woodhead. In the volume *Contemporary Encounters in Gender and Religion: European Perspectives* (2016) edited by Lena Gemzöe, Marja–Lissa Keinänen, and Avril Maddrell, an afterword was written by sociologist of religion Linda Woodhead to reflect on the volume as well as on the current state of the art of religion and gender research in Europe. The author sketches the development of the field from the 1980s on and looks at what has been achieved, in order to argue that scholars of religion and gender have “changed the way in which religion is studied, and impacted on the study of gender as well” (2016: 335). According to Woodhead, including a sensitivity for women’s particular experiences in the study of religion changed the entire study of religion. The most obvious change is located in the subject of research: the so-called add women and stir approach meant a shift in focus in which women started to be the subject of investigation alongside men. Early often ethnographic studies of women in religion took place in the sociology of religion, religious studies, the study of new religious movements, and sometimes anthropology and theology (2016: 336). Woodhead additionally observes that the boundaries between these disciplines were in the 1980s perhaps more porous in relation to the study of religion and gender then they are now.

However, this ‘add women and stir’ approach led, Woodhead argues, to fundamental shifts in the study of religion which even reverberate up until now. A first shift lies in the retreat from grand theoretical projects that propose overarching schemes for understanding ‘religion’ and ‘society’ as bounded and relatively homogenous entities. Scholars of religion and gender provided critique, but also alternatives. Through case studies and smaller-scale projects, they destabilised the category of ‘religion’ by paying attention to its many dimensions and to the fact that religion is not only found in official religious structures, but also outside of it. This de-centring of the conversation about religion, and of the concept ‘religion’ itself, has been both difficult and useful. For one, “[w]e are neither sure what belongs in the religion box any more, or as clear about where that box is located in the social or disciplinary world” (Woodhead 2016: 341). But while “[t]he multitude of conversations about religion that have followed may not add up to a unified theory of anything”, scholars have in the process of such de-centring moves learned “a great deal more about social life and about religion” (Woodhead 2016: 341–342). As examples of new and more nuanced and modest theoretical and conceptual approaches, Woodhead points at the feminist revisiting of secularisation theory and the lived religion approach. These and other concepts and approaches were rapidly absorbed in religious studies and the
sociology of religion at large, “not least because they made such good sense of what was already underway” (2016: 343).

Woodhead observes a number of contemporary tendencies in the study of religion and gender as they take shape in the sociology of religion. First, the shift in attention away from official, organised religion to everyday lived religion is being continued. Moreover, focus is put on practices which do not fit neatly into a delimited sphere of religion or of delimited social domains, such as women’s relationship with angels or Marian devotion. As Woodhead puts it, “[o]f primary interest are neither beliefs nor institutions, but bodies, symbols, practices, emotions, healing work, self-care and the maintenance of relationships” (2016: 343–344). Second, pluralism is increasingly assumed to be part and parcel of religious and social life. This means a shift away from the original focus on women in religion in favour of an understanding of identity as multiple in terms of the intersections of gender, race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, and age, and the varieties of these identity categories and experiences. It also means a shift away from the original focus on Christian, Jewish, and post-Christian and post-Jewish subjects, mostly white and exclusively Western. Woodhead witnesses nowadays an increasing attention to many other religious traditions, identities, transnational networks, migration, and mobility, also due to contributions from anthropology and religious studies (2016: 344–345). Woodhead argues that the mainstreaming of the study of religion and gender has clearly gone furthest in the area of religious studies and the social scientific study of religion. While there is less evidence of much mainstreaming in gender studies, Woodhead observes that especially theology has proved resistant to integrating the insights of scholars of religion and gender. The latter claim is somewhat difficult to substantiate; however, I think it is indeed important to foreground the work being done in this context by feminist, postcolonial, and queer theologians (Isherwood and McEwan 2001; van Klinken and Pruiksma 2010; Decoene 2012; Stegeman 2017), since I agree with Woodhead’s mentioning of the various challenges faced by critical theologians. These challenges have come from many directions, including in some locations new generations of students who are less likely religious, and in other locations an increasingly conservative turn in mainstream theology as well as in a number of organised religious traditions. As a result, feminist theology was increasingly marginalised, with some of its energy having been channelled in other directions, such as applied, practical, and public theology (2016: 345–347). I find it important to add to these observations that when we talk about ‘theology’, what is most often referred to in the European context are exclusively Christian and to some extent Jewish theologies. Accounting for the situation of, for example, Islamic theology and education (Johansen 2007), and the specific place of feminist Islamic theology within and, of course, beyond that, would have to start from a totally different kind of history and related challenges (i.e. Aslan, Hermansen and Medeni 2013; Sirri 2020).

A first note to be made is that any overview on the current state of the study of religion and gender in Europe is necessarily situated and dependent on the nation-state and the discipline in which one is located. The aforementioned rendering of Woodhead’s perspective on the field is determined by her career especially in the sociology of religion in the UK, but it has implications beyond that since she describes a development that took place also in other national settings and disciplines, although perhaps to different degrees and with other emphases. Being at the moment of writing based in a religious studies department at Utrecht University in the Netherlands, I tend to agree with Woodhead’s claim that the study of religion and gender helped the decen-tering of older grand theories on religion, but also that postmodern and poststructuralist theories, postcolonial approaches, and critical secularism studies have been at least as important in this decen-tering move, albeit in different ways (Turner 1994; Nye 2004; Butler 1993; Chakrabarty 2000; van der Veer 2001; Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005; Fitzgerald 2007). The fact that religious studies is an interdisciplinary area par excellence means that not only the concept of lived religion emerging from the sociology of religion but also input from many other disciplines, especially...
anthropology, led to paying much more attention to cultural diversity, transnationality, mobility, migration, media and popular culture, and material religion (Bowen 2017; Meyer and Moors 2006; Plate 2015). A critical understanding of the plurality of identities and social locations has likely been pushed by Black and women of colour feminist theorisations of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Wekker and Lutz 2001), which was widely taken up and further developed across gender studies (Collins and Bilge 2016). Saying this is not to undermine Woodhead’s rendering of the development of the study of religion and gender, and its indebtedness to and reverberations in other disciplines; instead it is meant to underline the situatedness of any such account, including, of course, the caveats I just noted.

Other new approaches and topics being developed in the study of religion and gender in Europe that also deserve being mentioned here are, amongst others, the critical study of masculinity (Gemzöe et al. 2016), a focus on the lived experiences of religious LGBTQs (Nynäs and Yip 2012), theories of the body and religious embodiment (Pilcher and Page 2020; van den Berg, Schrijvers, Wiering and Korte 2020), the field of media, representation, and digital culture (Lövheim 2013), and the connection to critical race studies (Hawthorne 2017). Crisscrossing these themes, during the last decades research took place that in the wake of the important critical work of anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005) has focused on women’s religious agency (Bracke 2008; Longman 2008). Relatively, the secular as shaped in public debates and policymaking and experienced in everyday life has been deconstructed and analysed (Amir-Moazami 2016; Jouili 2015; Knibbe 2018; van den Brandt 2019).

Altogether, the prior acknowledgement of and critical dialogue with Woodhead’s overview of the study of religion and gender demonstrates that the sketching of many more of such stories starting from slightly different geopolitical and academic contexts—including Eastern and Southern European contexts, and including both relatively small and large European nation-states and regions—is highly important. Reading these stories and fragments together will enlarge our understanding of the study of religion and gender in the European context. In the next section, I explore contemporary political, social, and religious developments across Europe. This review will help to start answering the question about which new directions in the study of religion and gender are needed in order to understand present-day Europe.

Contemporary European political, social, and religious transformations and contestations

It is often said that religion has returned to the political and public arenas of Western secularised societies (Alcoff et al. 2011). In Europe, the notion of a comeback of religion needs to be situated in a context in which large-scale transformations recently took place. From a sociological and historical perspective, since World War II Western Europe has experienced important simultaneous religious, cultural, and ethnic transformations, namely social secularisation (in terms of de-churching and increasing religious individualism) and the emergence of mainstream non-religious culture and subjectivities, as well as pluralisation in terms of increasing religious and ethnic diversity. Moreover, significant shifts took place regarding women’s positions and the diversification of gender and sexuality: post-1960s’ women’s and LGBTQ movements demanded equality and acknowledgement of the specific marginalisation and needs of women and LGBTQ individuals. These struggles paid off in the establishment of emancipation policies and the legalisation of gay marriage in a number of European countries, as such leading to increased equal opportunities for women and men and an increased visibility of sexual diversity and lifestyles. From a Western European perspective, the return of religion includes various
specific elements and dynamics, which are connected to but cannot be understood as neatly reflecting sensibilities in Southern and Eastern Europe.

First, it is important to note that the notion of a comeback of religion needs to be nuanced. It creates the false impression that religion entirely disappeared from the societies being discussed, whereas religious traditions and communities have continued to play various roles. This raises the more specific questions of what exactly has been experienced as ‘gone’, and by whom? And next, what then has been experienced as ‘coming back’ or as having ‘returned’? Second, and relatedly, the notion of the comeback of religion has often been experienced especially in relation to the arrival of post–World War II guest workers and postcolonial migrants from North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and Indonesia, often, but not always, with Islamic backgrounds. While initially addressed as guest workers and postcolonial migrants and in terms of their national and cultural backgrounds (i.e. Turkish, Pakistani, Moroccan, Algerian), especially since 9/11, these communities are addressed in terms of their religious difference, that is, Islam.

In countries such as France, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium, Islam has become positioned as a postcolonial and post–Second World War minority religion (Cecari 2014). Political and public rhetoric across Western Europe increasingly questions the compatibility of Islam and Muslims with mainstream culture and its supposed embrace of gender equality and sexual freedom (Scott 2018). In such rhetoric, Christian tradition and heritage are sometimes aligned with liberal-secular discourses in the creation of national identities that exclude the Muslim Other (Roy 2016; Wagenvoorde 2020). A side note to be made here is that the hypervisibility of Islam and Muslims is underlined, or perhaps partly enabled, by the invisibility of other religious minoritised (gendered and sexual) identities and communities in public debates.

The aforementioned different religious, cultural, and ethnic post-1960s’ transformations, related to diverging but also overlapping constituencies, are nowadays unfortunately often represented as conflicting with each other: the equality and empowerment of women and LGBTQs is represented as threatened by religious and ethnic minoritised communities, especially Muslims, who are considered to be misogynist and homophobic (el Tayeb 2012; Bracke 2012; van den Brandt 2018). Such representation is problematic for various reasons. First, it establishes notions of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ in a clash of civilisations framework that portrays ‘them’ as an homogenous entity essentially determined by negative characteristics, and that does not take into account the power that is involved in marking ethnic and religious minorities as ‘them’, ‘different’, and ‘Other’. Second, related to the first, this representational framework creates a clear-cut ‘us’ that is presumably liberal and secular, which does not pay attention to uneven developments of social secularisation and cultural liberalisation, leading to a notion of conservative Christians as belonging to the past, but also of gender inequality and homophobia as predominantly problems of ‘others’ (communities of colour, Muslims, conservative Christians) and not ‘us’. Finally, a framework of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ denies an existing variety of the lives of women and queers belonging to religious and ethnic minoritised communities, as well as their intersectional locations and experiences with sexism, racism, and homophobia.

In current political populist rhetoric across Western European contexts, the prior described ‘us’ versus ‘them’ representational framework, which could be dubbed ‘civilisationalism’ (Burbaker 2017), is often constructed and reiterated for electoral gains, consequently reifying boundaries and polarising differences, erasing much more complex experiences, realities, and intersectional positions (i.e. Göle 2017). In other words, the simultaneous societal transformations of secularisation, equalisation, and pluralisation are arguably thought of as standing in a contentious relationship. While complex on-the-ground experiences and realities defy such a schematic representation, it must be said that conflicts have indeed also become part
of everyday experiences where individual subjects contribute to or subvert polarisation and stereotypes need to be negotiated especially by individuals belonging to minoritised communities (van Es 2016). These developments have been a central concern of many researchers in religious studies, gender studies, sexuality studies, anthropology, sociology, and migration studies. The references included in this and the following section already give an idea of some of the critical work that is currently being done to counter schematic representations and essentialisations.

**Women’s and LGBTQ bodies and the emergence of conservative anti-gender movements**

Given the fact that women’s bodies worldwide are often represented as symbolising national purity and the boundaries of the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997), one may expect nationalist populist rhetoric to oppose gender and sexual equality and to prioritise authoritarian family models and women’s biological-symbolic role as bearers of children. In Western European contexts, however, this is not always the case: notions of gender and sexual equality are instead more often formally integrated in, or even considered central to, national norms and values. These developments have been analysed through concepts such as homonationalism (Puar 2007), femonationalism (Fararris 2017), the culturalisation of citizenship (Mepschen et al. 2010), and ethnosexual boundary construction (Roodsaz and van den Brandt 2017). The nationalist formal embrace of gender and sexual equality which takes place across Western European contexts such as the Netherlands, Belgium, and France often stands in stark contrast to much more ambiguous institutional and everyday realities. Part of these realities are the undermining or even discontinuation of emancipation or equal opportunities policies and research centres, notwithstanding continuing inequalities between men and women in the political arena, the labour market, and the home, and the fact that acceptance of gender and sexual diversity in public life as well as the domain of community and family life is not at all a *fait accompli* (i.e. Redactioneel Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies, 2017).

The concept of homonationalism has been of use to understand some of the previously described dynamics but has also been criticised for reinforcing an unquestioned binary divide between a ‘progressive global North’ and a ‘conservative global South’. It is important to note that post-communist and post-Soviet countries in Central and Eastern Europe have different histories regarding the shaping of religious and secular traditions and the positions and experiences of women, LGBTQs, and religious minoritised communities within that (Spina 2016; Sremac and Ganzeyvoort 2015; Özyürek 2015). The political dichotomies of right wing and left wing or conservative and progressive that emerge from these histories diverge from Western European conceptions (Mishtal 2015).

While across Europe, religious authorities have for a long time been pushed to the margins or outside of public life, whether due to social secularisation, *laique* arrangements, or communist or Soviet oppression, a second important current element of the recent return of religion is precisely located in the increasing visibility of conservative Christian opposition regarding gender studies and policymaking that aims at enlarging and supporting the equal opportunities and empowerment of women and LGBTQ persons. Despite the nationalist secular-Christian alignment in some political rhetoric and public controversies, at other moments, Christian and liberal-secular discourses confront each other in matters of gender equality and sexual diversity. Especially influential in Central, Southern, and Eastern European nation-states and regions, conservative nationalist discourses have emerged that attack gender studies, feminist and LGBTQ rights, and progressive sex education (Kováts and Põim 2015; Kuhar and Paternotte 2017). In a 2016 special issue of *Religion and Gender*, Sarah Bracke and David Paternotte investigate the Roman Catholic
Religion and gender in Europe

Church and the role of the Vatican in the construction of this cultural and political moment, which has been driven, to a large extent, by theological developments within as well as mobilisation efforts by the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican’s discourse about the complementarity of the sexes, which, as Mary Anne Case (2016) demonstrates, needs to be seen as a theological innovation, has been crucial in the articulation of what is dubbed ‘gender ideology’. While the resistance to gender as an analytical category in general and the development of ‘gender ideology’ in particular cannot be ascribed to the Roman Catholic Church alone, Bracke and Paternotte argue, “the Church presents itself as a crucial protagonist” (2016: 146).

Whereas such conservative anti-gender movements are associated especially with Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe, recently the Netherlands also witnessed a conservative Christian backlash to women’s equality and sexual diversity. In January 2019, the Nashville Declaration was issued, in which prominent orthodox Calvinist voices spoke out about their concerns regarding gender and sexual diversity (Dupuy 2019, Nashvilleverklaring). The declaration was critiqued by Dutch politicians, public intellectuals, and LGBTQ movements and has led to various interpretations of what has been exactly at stake (i.e. Bos 2019; Treur 2019; Visser 2019). Dutch scholars in the study of religion, culture, gender, and sexuality are at the moment of writing grappling with questions such as: how should we think through the connections between the Nashville Declaration and the ensuing controversy, and religious freedoms, religious diversity, sexual diversity, sexual nationalism, and the rise of anti-gender movements across Europe? It must be noted that conservative Christian backlash, whether emerging from Catholic, Calvinist, Evangelical, or Orthodox authorities and movements, is contested from within by feminist and queer theologians and progressive Christian movements and intellectuals—such as the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR); the European Forum of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Christian Groups; and the Werkverband Queer Theologen (in English: the Dutch network for Queer Theologians). Of course, progressive movements for feminist and queer Muslims have likewise emerged across various European contexts, such as Karamah EU and Maruf Foundation. An example of collaboration across religious divides is the International Conference on Religion and Acceptance (ICRA) that provides a platform for an open debate about religion, sexual orientation, and gender identity/expression among scholars, activists, and professionals across disciplines and geographical contexts.

Against the background of these developments, it is important to note the complex and changing entanglements of anti-gender and anti-migration movements: anti-gender rhetoric often intersects with populist, nationalist, and right-wing rhetoric and its clash of civilisation representational frameworks. The rise of anti-gender movements also leads to urgent questions about the current and future consequences of ongoing threats against gender studies and to the necessity of further reflecting on possible responses and strategies. While in some European contexts, gender and diversity studies are becoming more entrenched (Longman and De Graeve 2014), in other European contexts, anti-gender discourses and movements will probably have an impact on gender studies as a discipline, the teaching of gender studies in other disciplines, the notion of academic freedom, and academic labour market precarity (Korolczuk and Graff 2018; Petö 2019). It is therefore important to continue mapping the current state of studying gender and sexuality in various European nation-states and regions, while paying special attention to feminist and queer scholars and activists in theology departments or within faith-based movements.

It remains to be seen in which way counter-voices and counter-movements will be further developed regarding what is in some places the problem of illiberal politicians and governments, while elsewhere the main threat lies with the efficiency and budget-cutting policies of neoliberal governments and universities, and finally, in some locations, a combination of both.
Moving on in the study of religion and gender

The sociological and historical transformations, and political and social divisions and polarisations, described earlier, are, I argue, partly mirrored in disciplinary arrangements of the study of ethnicity, religion, and gender and sexuality. Anthropologist Daan Beekers, for example, observes a disciplinary split in the location of the study of lived Islam and Christianity. Early migrants and subsequent generations, and their transnational networks, social mobility, ethnic identities, and citizenship and integration, have for a long time been the object of migration studies and anthropology (of Islam). The study of social secularisation has been taken up especially by sociologists of religion, while anthropologists of Christianity study contemporary Christian identities and movements (Beekers 2015; Kloos and Beekers 2017). I similarly witness a historical compartmentalisation of the study of migrants, Muslims, and Islam in migration studies, anthropology, and Islamic studies, versus the study of mainstream secularisation, church history, and Christian identities and experiences in theology and religious studies. This compartmentalisation explains an absence of more integrated comparative understandings of religiosity, secularity, diversity, and majority-minority relations as they take shape in contemporary Europe. It must be said, however, that in present-day religious studies departments, as I know them, this compartmentalisation is broken through especially in those locations with a focus on contemporary lived religion. Moreover, as Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska (2013) argued, issues of gender and sexuality have been pursued in gender and sexuality studies, where up until now little attention is paid to religious identities, movements, and experiences. Vice versa, the analytical insights generated by gender and sexuality studies are not often integrated in religious studies and theology. This additional historical and present-day compartmentalisation arguably results in a lack of a more integrated understanding of public discourses and controversies about religion, gender, and sexuality, and counter-voices and counter-movements, as well as comparative insights into the lives and experiences of religious women and LGBTQ persons.

While in some European national contexts, disciplinary boundaries are much more strict than in others, disciplinary compartmentalisation of various kinds still explains the need for more structural collaboration and exchange of research perspectives and understandings. Being situated myself in religious studies, but trained in anthropology, Arabic language and culture, and gender studies, and as a member of interdisciplinary networks in the study of religion, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, secularism, and race, I have started to learn the importance of de-compartmentalising our discussions in order to arrive at innovative and nuanced understandings of gender and religion. Recently established interdisciplinary initiatives, such as the journal Religion and Gender, the International Association for the Study of Religion and Gender, the Transforming Values: Gender, Religiosities and Secularities across the Globe network, and the Race-Religion-Secularism network, may help to push innovative and nuanced understandings of contemporary political and social divisions and polarisations across Europe.

Related to the aforementioned observations, I therefore argue for the academic and political relevance of research projects that are interdisciplinary, conceptual, comparative, and intersectional. Being interested in the construction of difference and experience, I believe it is in present-day Europe increasingly important to study different identities and communities, and representations of various traditions, and relate them to each other. Research questions to be posed are, for example: are the identities and perspectives of Christian, Muslim, and secular women (or youth, men, or LGBTQ’s) similar or divergent? How and why are representations of different religious traditions similar or divergent? Which histories and discourses underlie gendered, sexualised, and racialised constructions of religion and secularity? The results generated by this type of research may yield insights into unexpected complexities but also possibilities for political
solidarity. In the next section, I take a case study of recent movies about Orthodox Jewish and Orthodox Calvinist women and girls as a case in point.

**Case study: women moving away from religious orthodoxy**

In this section, I explore the theme of religious conversion, gender, and sexuality as a good example of thinking across various disciplines and religious traditions: the study of conversion is, similar to religion and gender, a thematic field that includes scholars from disciplines as varied as religious studies, theology, sociology of religion, anthropology of religion, psychology of religion, gender studies, and history, as well as scholars studying Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Rambo and Farhadian 2014). Conversion can be examined by investigating historical sources and holy scriptures, or exploring contemporary experiences of conversion through qualitative research methods and ethnography. Sometimes the particular experiences of women and the ways in which conversion touches upon gender and sexuality are thematised (Kent 2014). Less often is conversion studied in terms of representation: how does conversion get represented in literature, film, memoir, and theatre?

In what follows, I explore representations of *deconversion*, and the ways in which these representations rely on notions of gender and sexuality. While religious *conversion* is often understood as the process of changing one’s religious affiliation and becoming a new member of a particular religious community, *deconversion* can arguably be assessed in similar terms. What does it mean to *leave* a particular religious community to which one has belonged? What about those who leave behind a religious community but do not affiliate themselves with a new religious identity or community? What would it mean to become secular in Europe? How are stories about women leaving religion constructed in literature and film? I argue that approaching representations of women leaving religion as cultural practices reveals dominant expectations about women’s lives in particular religious communities. Negative attitudes to what are deemed to be conservative or orthodox religious traditions and communities, and related expectations about women’s well-being, seem to hold considerable sway especially in highly secularised Western European societies. The cultural practices I analyse in the following construct as well as reinforce existing expectations about particular religious communities and their constraints for the lives of women.

Next I investigate two movies: *Disobedience* (2018) and *Confetti on the Threshing Floor* (2014). The first is directed by Sebastián Lelio (2018) and is an adaptation of the British bestselling novel by Naomi Alderman (2006). *Confetti on the Threshing Floor* is directed by Tallulah Hazekamp Schwab (2014) and is an adaptation of the Dutch bestselling novel by Franca Treur (2009). The novels are semi-autobiographical and narrate the lives of girls and women in Orthodox Jewish and Orthodox Calvinist communities. Both movies are especially concerned with telling a deconversion story related to morality and community and much less in terms of a theological-intellectual struggle. I will analyse the two deconversion stories, as constructed by the movies, through their focus on women’s bodies.

**Female bodies in Disobedience and Confetti on the Threshing Floor**

*Disobedience* affords female embodied experiences a crucial role in women’s deconversion from Orthodox Judaism. The movie starts with the death of Rav Krushka, the religious leader of an Orthodox Jewish community in the London neighbourhood of Hendon. When his daughter Ronit returns from New York to mourn her father, she stays with her old friend Dovid, who was trained by the Rav to become the new religious leader and who married Ronit’s former best friend and lover Esti. Ronit and Esti fall in love again, which creates difficulties for Esti and Dovid’s marriage and their place in the community.
The movie tells about two different deconversions: Ronit had left the community years ago in order to build a life in New York. She emerges in the story as the one who left and is never able to return. The narration of Esti’s deconversion process is, however, central. She is the one taking the initiative to approach Ronit, while knowing it is forbidden. The affair of Esti and Ronit fuels gossip in the community and threatens Dovid’s religious authority. “But I have always been this way”, Esti exclaims when Dovid demands that she explain what happened. When Esti discovers she is pregnant, she plummets in a crisis of doubt and decides that her child should have freedom of choice, something she hardly or never had. She asks Dovid to divorce, and eventually he agrees. The final scenes display Ronit travelling home and Esti sleeping on the couch. As such, the movie conveys the notion that Esti will leave, not just her husband, but also the community at large, to start a new life. Disobedience tells a deconversion narrative in which female embodied experiences are central: same-sex desire and future motherhood are presented as the most important reasons for Esti to decide, or feel forced, to leave.

Confetti on the Threshing Floor presents a coming-of-age story. It is about the life of an Orthodox Calvinist family on a farm in the southern province of the Netherlands, and tells about the parents taking children to church and working at the farm, the children going to school, the death of the grandfather, and the marriage of one of the sons. The only girl among six brothers, Katelijne, is at the centre of the story. The movie focuses on her experiences and her place in the family. Katelijne struggles with some of the dictates of Orthodox Calvinism and its way of life. Confetti on the Threshing Floor affords female hair a specific role in the process of deconversion, but women’s hair is an important issue throughout the movie more generally. In Orthodox Calvinist thinking, girls and women should have long hair, which properly distinguishes them from boys and men. Hair is one of the mechanisms of gendered distinction, and as such helps to keep sexual difference in place. Women’s long hair should moreover be unadorned instead of beautified, as making oneself look pretty is focusing too much on the self and contradicts the notion of female modesty. These notions about female bodies emerge in the movie as a mechanism of boundary construction: the hair of girls and women conveys messages about who belongs to the community and who doesn’t. Women’s proper bodily appearance, and women’s hair as the marking of community boundaries, is something Katelijne negotiates and struggles with. Nearing the end of the movie, during her brother’s wedding, Katelijne cuts her long hair very short—an act of defiance and transgression. Her mother is astonished to see this but cannot make a scene at the wedding. After the wedding, Katelijne says goodbye to her mother and embarks on the school bus, taking her away to the city Goes, where Katelijne will go to high school for the first time. As such, the final scenes presenting a short-haired Katelijne cheerily starting her travels strongly reinforce the assumption that Katelijne is right on track in her moving away from orthodoxy.

**Becoming secular?**

The physical move, whether to the city of New York, away from the confines of marriage, or to school in Goes, marks the leaving behind of the religious enclave, the confines of farm life, and the conservative countryside. The movies present this physical move as related to a transformation at the level of subjectivity: an opening up to liberal, secularised, diverse, and modern environments. Interestingly, both movies adapted the original literary novels written by Naomi Alderman and Franca Treur in a way that emphasises women’s moving away from the orthodox religious communities in which they grew up, while the original novels are more ambiguous in this respect. In Alderman’s Disobedience, Esti does not leave her husband and community at all. Instead, she and Dovid find a way to transform the community from within in order for it
to adapt to a new style of religious authority through the down-to-earth leadership of Dovid and to make space for Esti to take up the position of a woman who is able to listen to and give advice to everyone, no matter how great the problem or concern. Lelio’s *Disobedience*, however, does not acknowledge possibilities for changes from within the religious community or the different types of choices that religious women and LGBTQs make on the basis of the priorities and desires they might need to combine. Writing in the *Guardian* on the occasion of the 2018 release of the movie version of *Disobedience*, Alderman reflects on the potential different endings a story about lesbian Orthodox Jewish women may have: “The ending of the romantic story is different in the movie from the book, which seems right to me. There is no single right answer for frum (in English, pious) LBGT+ people.” For Alderman, these different endings of the movie and the book are both legitimate, as this diversity in stories reflects the actual complex position in which lesbian Orthodox Jewish women find themselves. However, not all readers of Alderman’s novel agree with her rendering of Esti’s choice to remain in the Orthodox Jewish community. For example, *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies*’ reviewer Joel Streiker praises the author’s delicate dealing with the complex position of lesbian Orthodox Jewish women but seems to regret the fact that the literary character Esti did not become liberal Jewish or perhaps secular altogether (2008: 205).

Treur’s *Confetti on the Threshing Floor* mentions that Katelijné will soon go to high school, but does not make her leave her parents’ farm at the very end of the story; the novel ends with the marriage of Katelijné’s brother only. Another important difference is that in the novel Katelijné never cuts her hair short. The result of the movie’s adaptations to the story is that the movie emphasises Katelijné’s physical move away from her parents’ farm and village as well as her embodied transgression that symbolises rebellion. The novel instead focuses on Katelijné’s ‘coming of age’ trajectory in which her curiosity and wilfulness are not always put in opposition to her religious tradition and community, but are at least as much situated within Orthodox Calvinist frameworks. As such, the novel does not tell a univocal deconversion story, but leaves the option of diverse interpretations open to readers. A *Volkskrant* journalist’s presentation of her conversation with Franca Treur demonstrates this open-endedness and the simultaneous push to interpret the novel as questioning Calvinist tradition: “ ‘I really did not want to write a novel about apostacy’, says Treur. But she does not deny the fact that her literary character Katelijné asks questions, or at least evokes them” (Schöttelndreier 2010, translation mine). It must be said that notwithstanding the openness of the literary story itself, during various interviews and lectures, Franca Treur collides with the interpretation that Katelijné questions and slowly moves away from Orthodox Calvinism.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I argued for the academic and political relevance of research projects in studies of religion and gender in Europe that are interdisciplinary, conceptual, comparative, and intersectional, since I believe it is increasingly important to study different identities and communities, and representations of various traditions, and relate them to each other. The previous exploration of cultural representations of women leaving religion raises the question of whether such a comparative analysis indeed generates insights into the ways in which stories are told about different religious traditions, gender, and sexuality. Are orthodox religious communities envisioned as taking up similar positions in secularised Western European contexts, or are there important differences to be taken into account? What does the analysis tell us about the contemporary formation of secularity? Questions like these help us to deepen our understanding of narratives about religious women that circulate in present-day Europe and the effects such narratives might have.
While the case study is limited to two movies and their reception, the analysis suggests that both movie adaptations and their reception push the interpretation of women’s and LGBTQs’ freedom and emancipation as enabled by their resistance to and moving away from orthodox religious communities perceived as static and dogmatic. Both movie adaptations hardly allow the interpretation that diversity within orthodox religious traditions and communities is a lived reality and change from within very much a possibility—something the work of feminist and queer theologians and activists demonstrates. Both movie adaptations and their reception encourage binary thinking about the modes of critique and lives enabled by liberal and secular modernity versus religious orthodoxy, in this case Orthodox Judaism and Orthodox Calvinism, which cannot do justice to more complex realities. As Islam and Muslims have come to be imagined as the quintessential locations of patriarchy and homophobia, a celebratory liberal and secular self-understanding as encouraged by the movies may unfortunately indirectly buy into dominant racialised stereotypes of Islam and Muslims existing in Europe.

At the same time, orthodox religious communities of all kinds can indeed be understood as taking up a gendered and sexualised countercultural position in Western Europe since they often maintain the ideal of patriarchal marriage to the exclusion of ideas about the equality of women and LGBTQs. Moreover, such a countercultural positioning can become strengthened in a dynamic with a surrounding mainstream society that increasingly grows secularised, individualised, and liberal, as has been observed by researchers of contemporary Orthodox Judaism in Belgium (Longman 2007) and Orthodox Calvinism in the Netherlands (Derks et al. 2014). The anti-gender discourses and movements alluded to earlier may be understood as further examples of the construction and strengthening of religious-cultural and politico-social counter positionings.

This conclusion to the case study, in relation to the previous exploration of the study of religion and gender as well as of present-day religious and politico-social developments in Europe, therefore reveals complexity and raises new questions about how to research and tackle multilayered constructions of power and difference that criss-cross religious, secular, ethnic, gender, and sexual categories and experiences. It does indeed point at the need for interdisciplinary, conceptual, comparative, and intersectional research in the study of religion and gender. Thematic approaches may be most suited to investigate complex and multilayered constructions of power and difference as they relate to various religious traditions and communities, the experiences of women, ethnic minorities, and LGBTQs, and contemporary notions of religion, race, gender, and sexuality.

Notes

1 www.eswtr.org/en/
2 www.euroforumlgbtchristians.eu/
3 https://queertheologen.wordpress.com/
   http://www.karamah-eu.org/about-us/#historysection
5 www.maruf.eu/english.html
6 http://www.maruf.eu/icra2019.html
7 https://brill.com/view/journals/rag/rag-overview.xml
8 http://associationreligionandgender.com/
9 https://sites.google.com/view/spacesofresistance/network-transforming-values
10 https://racereligionresearch.org/research-network/about-the-network
Religion and gender in Europe

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Religion and gender in Europe


