

A photograph of a couple standing together. The woman on the left is wearing a long, flowing white dress with a white sash and a white headscarf. The man on the right is wearing a long, flowing brown robe with gold embroidery on the collar and cuffs. They are standing close together, with the woman's hands resting on the man's chest. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

# One Bed, Two Beliefs

Societal Influences in Everyday Life of  
Muslim-(post)Christian Couples  
in the Netherlands

*One Bed Two Beliefs*

*Societal Influences in Every-Day Life of Muslim-(post)Christian Couples in the Netherlands*

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“Qualitative data suggest [...] that religious difference in families might be a valuable growing ground for precisely those skills required for meaningful participation in an increasingly diverse society”

(McCarthy, 2007, p.1).

# Abstract

Religious differences and (the impossibilities of) interreligious co-existence seem to be a central theme to the public discourse in the Netherlands today. These tensions in society resulted in a segregation between Muslim and the non-Muslim/(post)Christian communities. While debates continue in the public realm, on a grassroots level Muslims and (post)Christians intermarry and establish interreligious families. This research examines how the public discourse enters the relationship of Muslim-(post)Christian couples in the Netherlands, in which situations these influences 'pop up' and how couples deal with these situations. The results of interviews with eleven couples show that societal segregation manifests itself as negative stigmas in the public discourse, which reach the couples mainly through the daily ritual of watching the news. During these broadcasts, Islam critical public figures and their messages enter the living rooms of the couples, causing discussion with friend and family, leading to unification and sometimes to segregation between the partners. To deal with these influences, the couples actively distance themselves from the public discourse. First, they 'reshape' Islam, by attaching new spiritual, cultural and social notions to it, which manifests itself on a practical level in practicing 'PolderIslam'. Secondly, they actively step away from religion, finding a common language outside of religious discourses.

# Preface

At the Musical Theater in Amsterdam, Nasdrin Dchar, a Dutch-Moroccan and Muslim actor, performed his solo show called DAD. During the show, Dchar firstly spoke of his father, who grew up in Morocco and came to the Netherlands as a guest worker in the seventies with high hopes for the future. Secondly, about his marriage to a Dutch, non-religious woman, and the birth of their daughter. Thirdly, about his wish to raise his daughter as a Muslima. And finally, about the Dutch media and about his best friend's fear of Islam. He asked himself out loud "What does it mean to be a Muslima in the Netherlands today?" As a young Muslim man in the Netherlands, for Dchar the word *Muslima* is connected to a burka, fear and terrorism. Is that what he wants for his daughter?

During the interviews I held with eleven Muslim-(post)Christian couples<sup>1</sup> I felt that interreligious marriages reach beyond research disciplines. With a Bachelor in Sociology, a Master in Law and now finishing my master in Theology and Religious studies, this interdisciplinary topic suits me. It is within interreligious marriages that all my interests are embodied. It is a topic in which family life and society, conflict and fear, hopes for the future, cultures and traditions, inner spirituality and global developments all come together. Dchar's performance shows how all aspects of his life, his father's struggles during his journey to the Netherlands, his wife's ideas about religion and their future, his best friend's fear of Islam and his personal ideas about how to raise his daughter, are concentrated in his marriage. It was while watching this show, that I felt this is the field in which I can contribute to research and to society at large. Especially in today's society, there is much to learn from these couples, from the way they overcome, respect and manage their differences, understand and celebrate their similarities and create acceptance. Until now, much research has focused on how interreligious relationships fail. With this research, I want to focus on what makes these couples successful, in a world where tensions around interreligious co-existence rise high. As Gé Speelman told me: "*These are pioneers, they are professionals. Let's take them serious.*" I hope that this research will contribute to expertise about interreligious marriages, and will show how the inner workings of such a relationship can open up learning possibilities for problems we face today in our society.

It has been my great pleasure to talk to all the couples, and I am first and foremost grateful for their openness and warm welcome into their homes. I would like to thank Professor Marianne Moyaert for her guidance and energy, my friends for proofreading the text and Ilyes Machkor for all his love and support.

Britt Bakker

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<sup>1</sup> Muslim-(post)Christian couples are defined as couples of which one partner is Muslim, and one partner is Christian or was raised with Christian traditions, who either live together or are married in the Netherlands.

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**Appendix I: Call for Couples**

# 1. Introduction

30 Years ago, interreligious dialogue became more visible. [...] In the beginning, it was all happy and hurray; all people are the same and we can learn from our differences. This joy of discovery made place for a new realization; when sitting around the table together there are many practical objections that stand in the way. (Speelman in Trouw, 2001, p. 1)

In an interview with a Dutch newspaper Speelman explains that three quarters of mixed marriages fail within the first seven years. Why? Because these couples are challenged to negotiate different faiths and rituals, deal with their inherited traditional backgrounds, and deal with tensions around interreligious relations from society at large. The intriguing question is how couples that do have a successful relationship manage these challenges? In pursuit of learning from and about Dutch interreligious couples, Speelman (2001) and Hondius (2000) have researched interreligious couples in the Netherlands. However, their research ended before 2001 which to their acknowledgment, has been a turning point for interreligious relations, considering 9/11 and its aftermath (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017; D. Hondius, personal communication, April 19, 2017).

This chapter introduces the central question to this research, namely; *How do influences from society enter the relationship of Muslim-(post)Christian couples, in which situations do they 'pop up' and how do the couples deal with these situations?* To understand the background against which this question is posed, this chapter first provides a brief introduction to the history and definition of interreligious marriages. Second, it delineates the context and sub questions, after which the readers guide introduces the subsequent structure of this research.

## 1.1 A Brief History of Interreligious Marriages

In previous generations, the Church, Synagogue, Mosque and temple stood central to people's lives. Around them, people met, married and build their lives together. Families were adamant to pass their traditions on to next generations. Throughout history, during the Middle Ages (Goldwyn, 2012)<sup>2</sup>, and the World Wars (Rose, 2001)<sup>3</sup>, marriages between people of different faiths did occur, but were uncommon practices. Even historical and modern artifacts, such as the stories of Jane Austen's 'Pride and Prejudice' and children movies, as 'Pocahontas', are reminders that endogamous unions, have been promoted

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<sup>2</sup> In his work about interfaith marriage in medieval times, Goldwyn (2012) introduces his work by stating that "borders in general, and the Christian/Muslim border in the Middle Age in particular, [...] are at once places of extreme hostility and irresistible seduction" (p. 2). He analyzed several eleventh-century Greek *digenes*, stating that all these stories "feature interfaith lovers who [...] must overcome problems of race and faith in order to fall in love and get married" (Goldwyn, 2012, p.1).

<sup>3</sup> In her book 'Beloved Strangers' Rose (2001) describes the stories of Jewish-Christian interfaith families between the war of 1812 and World War I in America. She states that "these religious communities were not equal; Catholics and Jews could not mistake prejudices against themselves. But there was tolerance too, enough to permit mixed marriages" (Rose, 2001, p. 1).



socially over these (be it in race, ethnicity, social class or religion) sometimes forbidden mixed relationships (Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015). Marriages between people of different faiths became more commonplace when people moved away from the strict communal life, which made interreligious marriages more accepted (Bystydzienski, 2011). The rise of secularization, individualization, globalization, suburbanization, the declining status gap between religious groups and the decreased influence of parents on children, are processes that have contributed to an increase in the occurrence and acceptance of interreligious marriages in the West since 1920 (Kalmijn, 1991). As Collet (2015) explains, “globalization produces transnational living and also transnational marriages” (p. 140). Throughout history, marriages between people from different faith traditions were largely disfavored by couple’s families, communities and religious authorities. Even though modern processes have impacted attitudes towards the phenomenon, religious homogeneity in marriage is still considered the favored norm (Kalmijn, 1991). As addressed in the following section, next to the slight increase in occurrence and acceptance of interreligious marriages, the definition of what constitutes an interreligious marriage is too, subjected to change in a different time and context.

## 1.2 Defining Interreligious Marriages

The words ‘interreligious’ and ‘mixed’ are often used interchangeably in studies about marriages between people of different faiths (Collet, 2015; Arweck & Nesbitt, 2010). However, ‘mixedness’ is used to cover a variety of factors in marriages such as, ethnicity, culture, nationality or faith traditions. For example, the Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek (CBS) (2017) defines a *mixed marriage* as a marriage that consists out of one native Dutch person and one non-Dutch born person. In that case, nationality is the determinative factor. However, in the field of interreligious marriages, research expands to diverse distinguishing features in determining what constitutes mixedness in a relationship. Five conceptualizations from western countries are briefly discussed here, stemming from fieldwork in France, the UK, the US and the Netherlands.

In her research about marriages between people of different faiths in France, Collet (2015) addresses the couples as *transnational* or *mixed couples*, but prefers to speak of *conjugal mixedness*. Adopting the term conjugal mixedness covers the intersectional quality, such as marital norms, inequality between partners and social disapproval within the marriage. The complexity of such marriages is often underestimated; gender perspectives and the difference between first and second generation immigrants are often not considered. Defining the concept as conjugal mixedness provides a more full and layered description of the phenomenon, covering the complexity of the various dimensions of difference in a marriage between people from different faiths. Other than Collet (2015), Arweck and Nesbitt’s (2010) research narrows the definition of what constitutes mixedness in a marriage, focusing more on the religious backgrounds of the partners involved. In their study about multi-cultural and multi-faith marriages in the UK, they define the phenomenon as *mixed faith families*. Much in line with the work of Arweck & Nesbitt (2010), McCarthy (2007) stresses the issue of religious pluralism in American society as a mirror of what she calls ‘interfaith families’ or ‘pluralist families’. In the Netherlands two studies are completed in the field of interreligious marriages. In her research, Hondius (2000) explains that a marriage between people of different faiths is

the moment where the private meets the public; different laws, families, generations, Churches, and social classes meet each other. In what she defines as *mixed marriages*, partners manage their cultural, ethnical and religious differences for love, family ties and friendship. Her colleague, Speelman (2001), examined the communication within religiously mixed couples in the Netherlands. She focused on Dutch/Egyptian-Dutch marriages. All of them concerned Muslim men, and Dutch (post)Christian women, highlighting the importance of gender dynamics in the relationship.

The five abovementioned scholars have developed different understandings of what might constitute an interreligious marriage. Even though religion is the central theme to all these studies, mixedness in a relationship encompasses more than religious traditions; it involves matters that stretch out over the entire collective and personal background of the partners involved, therefore bringing a range of characteristics into the relationship. Among others, these involve nationality, immigrational background, ethnicity, gender and religion itself. What Collet (2015), McCarthy (2007), Arweck & Nesbitt (2010), Hondius (2000) and Speelman (2001) demonstrate, is that the meaning of 'being mixed' in a relationship, can be perceived in various ways and depends on the history and structure of the society the couple resides in. As elaborated upon in the next section, attention should be given to the Dutch history and context, in which two aspects of interreligious marriages have transformed in terms of their meaning and perception.

### 1.3 Interreligious Marriages in the Netherlands

According to Hondius (2000), the type of interreligious marriage that was much frowned upon in the Netherlands around 1960 were marriages between Catholics and Protestants. During personal interviews with both Speelman and Hondius, they emphasized that with the coming of Islamic migrant workers from Turkey and Morocco, this focus shifted from Catholic-Protestant marriages, towards Muslim-(post)Christian marriages as the more disfavored form of intermarriage. Much in line with this shift, there was turning point in research, which around this time stopped focusing on the relationship between Catholic-Protestant partners, and started focusing on Muslim-Christian relations. Today, the Islamic tradition is a central part to the study of interreligious marriages. Concerning the societal *perception* of these marriages, both Hondius and Speelman emphasize that Muslim-(post)Christian marriages in the Netherlands are facing a growing challenge in terms of coping with their religious difference and with how they are perceived as a couple by a society. (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017; D. Hondius, personal communication, April 19, 2017). During these years, Dutch society changed from a previously open, society known for celebrating diversity, towards an increasingly closed and reserved society regarding religious differences (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> During the interview Speelman stated that "during those times [of her research] there was a push factor to get married, because after three years you could get a residence permit. Now that is different, because now we usually speak about second- or third-generation immigrants. There is a huge pressure not to do it" (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017).

The turning point Speelman en Hondius refer to, is visible in different ways in the Netherlands of which perhaps the most notorious is the rise of the right-wing populist discourse witnessed in the Netherlands after 2001/2004. This discourse focuses strongly on themes such as freedom of speech, immigration and integration (Schollaardt, 2016). Recently, debates on the extent of space that religion should hold in the Dutch public sphere and how specifically Islam influences, interferes or even conflicts with Dutch society, have become heightened (Maussen, 2007; Schollaardt, 2016). These debates are not only growing in the Netherlands, but occur throughout Europe and the United States of America. Take for example the rise of Donald Trump in the U.S., Marine le Penn in France and Norbert Hofer in Austria (Masquelier, 2017). Religious differences and (the impossibilities of) interreligious co-existence seem to be a central theme to their populist discourse (Morgan, 2016). Populism is influencing citizens now more than ever in the Netherlands (Hameleers et al., 2017). Because of populist messages, the population increasingly perceives immigrants and Islam as negative, creating an 'us versus them' discourse. This pressure can manifest itself as islamophobia, cultivating religious discrimination and racism, furthering segregation in society (Berkel, 2016).

While debates about the fear of Islam continue in the public realm, on a grassroots level people with different religious backgrounds continue to intermarry and establish interreligious families (Hooghiemstra, 2003). To create a successful relationship, these couples seek to balance both practices and beliefs of their cultural and religious traditions (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2010). Regarding today's times in which social tensions around migration, assimilation and religious diversity are so prevalent, Collet (2015) explains that researching these couples in the present day context can be the key towards understanding societal challenges concerning interreligious co-existence.

The couples concerned represent a double challenge: they have to deal with the ways their choice is perceived by society at large and with endogamous norms in their enlarged family circle on the one hand, and they need to find intercultural solutions in their daily life on the other. Furthermore, they are a test for the notions of integration and cohesion in a democratic society. (Collet, 2015, p. 2)

Collet explains that interreligious marriages are the exact place where the private meets the public and where complexities witnessed in society are embodied in a private relationship.

[...] intermarriage lies at the intersection between the private sphere—mate selection, conjugal relations, and family transmissions—and the public domain, where ethnic, racial, and religious diversity defines our contemporary societies. In fact, intermarriage expresses globalization in our private lives. (Collet, 2015, p. 2)

#### **1.4 Research Questions**

Building onto Collet's (2015) findings and to take on where Hondius (2000) and Speelman (2001) left off (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017; D. Hondius, personal communication, April 19,

2017), this research attempts to understand how couples deal with the interference of the public in the private life. It sets out to increase our understanding of how interreligious couples nowadays deal specifically with the influences from society at large in the Netherlands. The guiding research question is:

***How do influences from society enter the relationship of Muslim-(post)Christian couples, in which situations do they ‘pop up’ and how do the couples deal with these situations?***

It is attempted to answer this question through qualitative fieldwork, consisting out of in-depth face to face interviews with eleven Muslim-(post)Christian couples. By answering this question, the aim of this research is to create more understanding about interreligious co-existence by focusing on two aspects. First, how issues such as segregation, populism and islamophobia are experienced by interreligious couples, and second, which strategies (cognizant or not) couples apply to deal with these influences. Thus, the sub questions are:

1. *How do interreligious couples experience influences from society within their relationship?*
2. *Which strategies do the couples apply to deal with these influences?*

This research primarily serves the academic debate 1) by partially filling the research gap and continuing research into interreligious marriages since 2001 in the Netherlands, and 2) by examining Collet’s suggestion that modern society has a large impact on interreligious marriages. Her data was obtained in France, respectively, this research tests this assumption in a Dutch context. Furthermore, the results will increase our understanding of strategies that are applied by interreligious couples in order to deal with these influences. The outcomes are relevant on a societal level, by providing insight into experience based, micro level interreligious co-existence. “Qualitative data suggest [...] that religious difference in families might be a valuable growing ground for precisely those skills required for meaningful participation in an increasingly diverse society” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 189). Following McCarthy’s (2007) findings, results can serve as an initial research into how micro strategies can be translated and adapted for the purpose of solving meso and macro level interreligious co-existence challenges we face today on different levels in our society. As Ata and Furlong add “Moslem–Christian marriage can be seen as a kind of ‘testing place’ for examining and appreciating the practices of difference” (Ata & Furlong, 2005, p. 1)

### **1.5 Readers Guide**

In order to gain a grip on the novel character of Muslim-(post)Christian relations, Chapter 2 discusses the global and national context in which this research is situated in relation the perception Islam, Muslims and interreligious marriages. Subsequently, Chapter 3 introduces the specific challenges the couples must deal with in their relationship in modern day times. Chapter 4 describes the used methodology, introducing the qualitative nature of this research. Chapter 5 describes where and how society makes an entrée in interreligious households based on the results of the fieldwork. Chapter 6 continues the delineation of fieldwork results, focusing on the strategies used by the couples to deal with their challenges regarding societal influences. Chapter 7 concerns the conclusion and discusses recommendations for further research.

## 2. Approaching Islam in a Global and National Context

As previously stated, before 1970 an interreligious marriage in the Netherlands was considered a marriage between a Protestant Christian and a Catholic Christian. Nowadays, literature is focused on interreligious marriages that consist of one Muslim partner and one non-Muslim partner. Dutch society has changed and coincidentally, so did interreligious marriages (D. Hondius, personal communication, April 19, 2017). Understanding the way Islam is approached in the Netherlands is crucial when trying to understand this type of interreligious marriages and the way they are influenced by Dutch society. This chapter delineates the shift that global and national society went through, focusing on how Dutch society gradually changed from celebrating the 'multicultural dream' towards deploring its failure, often described as the 'multicultural drama' (Scheffer, 2011).

### 2.1 A Global Paradigm Shift

Huntington (1993) once famously stated that the religious and cultural identity of Islam will always remain irreconcilable with 'western' values. This 'clash of civilizations' hypothesis is in line with the fact that before 2001, the general perception of Islam in the West was one inclined to an orientalist perspective (Omar, 2001). It fostered the idea that Islam was different from the West, regarding it as a fascinating, eccentric phenomenon, inferior to Western society (Powell, 2011). Relatively speaking, after 2001 this changed into the idea that Islam is not only different, but also threatening to the West (Marranci, 2004). The 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks are referred to as the turning point of this paradigm shift by different scholars (Powell, 2011); some even refer to a 'pre-9/11 era' in their research about Islam in the West (Elver, 2012). This change became predominately visible through media, which through framing and stereotyping sustained a climate of fear of terrorism, which was repeatedly linked to Islam, the Arab world and Muslims. Islam became associated with barbarism, evil and a lack of freedom (Powell, 2011). Another example of the practical ramifications of 9/11 are the changing laws. During the aftermath of the attacks, an increase in the adoption of special laws that aim to prevent (Islamic) terrorist attacks was announced. It was keenly argued by politicians that these laws were not against Islam, but were installed only to prevent future terrorist attacks. However, the language that was used and the actions that were undertaken by legal representatives, led many Muslims (among others) to believe that these were anti-Islamic, rather than anti-terrorist laws (Marranci, 2004). The change in media coverage and the adoption of special laws are only two examples of the ramifications (and/or initiators) of the paradigm shift witnessed after 2001. International relations, public policy and community leaders were influenced by the event and its aftermath, putting Islam in an increasingly negative light (Powell, 2011). These are behaviors that can be found all over the western world, but bear different ramifications in different contexts. The following section delineates how this global event, complexified interreligious relations in the Netherlands between Muslim and (post)Christian communities.

## 2.2 From the Integration Debate to the Assimilation Debate

The global paradigm shift (Scheffer, 2011), had its effects on the Netherlands too, which caused the Dutch *integration debate*, to change towards an *assimilation debate* after 2001 (Sterckx, 2014). This started with the coming migrants, mainly consisting of Moroccan and Turkish workers in 1970, who are now the biggest Islamic groups in the Netherlands<sup>5</sup>. Almost all migrants at that time were men, who had the intention to return to Morocco or Turkey when they felt they had earned enough money for their families back in their homelands. However, many stayed and their families joined them in the Netherlands. This was called family reunification (CBS, 2017). Around this time, migrants were largely welcomed and the ‘multicultural society’ was celebrated (Speelman, 2001). From 1980 onwards, marriage migration increased. This meant that Moroccans and Turks living in the Netherlands chose to be married with a partner from their homeland; they arranged a marriage through family or friends and brought a bride from overseas. Since 1990, marriage migration decreased and the number of interreligious marriages increased. However, the amount was small; there is only a slight increase in the amount of interreligious marriages within the group of second-generation migrants as opposed to first-generation migrants. Overall, migrants living in the Netherlands still marry a partner with a similar immigrational background as themselves (Hooghiemstra, 2003).

The partner choice of Moroccans and Turks was (and often still is) used as criteria to measure the level of integration, for instance by the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics (van Huizen, 2007; Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015).<sup>6</sup> It was expected that children from migrant couples grow up in families where little to no Dutch is spoken, which would lead integration levels to remain low (Hooghiemstra, 2003). After Hooghiemstra’s research about the partner choices of Moroccans and Turks was published in 2003, it spurred a debate on the partner choice of the groups in question, in which marriage migration and marriage between migrants were undesired; it would stagnate the much-desired integration (van Huizen, 2007). Next to integration, public debate heightened over the fact that Dutch first- and second generation Moroccan and Turkish immigrant generally adhere to Islam, and prefer a marriage with a similar religious partner. Public opinion formed around the idea that migrant marriages were inseparably connected to Islam and traditionalism, and coincidingly, became associated with suppression of women and domestic violence (Sterckx, 2014). Even though the coming of migrant workers was welcomed at first, this mode of thought changed into the idea that an ‘ethnic underclass’ was forming, consisting of Islamic migrants that fostered social inequality and lacked the willingness to emancipate (Scheffer, 2011). In that light, the cultural and religious preferences in marriage of the Islamic Moroccans and Turks was perceived as undesired. Even though Islam had negatives notion attached to it, interreligious marriages between one Islamic partner

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<sup>5</sup> CBS reports that 168.000 first-generation, and 217.000 second-generation Moroccans, and 191.000 first-generation and 207.000 Turks, live in the Netherlands in 2017. All immigrants from Morocco and Turkey are considered Muslims by the CBS. The subsequent largest non-western immigrant group are immigrants from Suriname, consisting of 178.000 first-generation and 171.000 second-generation immigrants (CBS, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> CBS publishes an ‘integration map’ of the Netherlands on a yearly basis. They estimate the percentage of marriages between non-western immigrants and native Dutch people and derive a measure of integration from these percentages; the higher the percentage of mixed marriages, the higher the integration level.

and one native Dutch non-Islamic partner, were at that time positively perceived as a sign of multicultural 'melting', in other words, as a positive sign of growing integration. The theory held that the more Moroccans and Turks married outside of their faith, the more integrated these groups would become (Elver, 2012).

Since 1990, among other European countries, the Dutch government started to encourage immigrants to adapt to the culture of the host society. The Netherlands changed their policies from a cultural pluralist approach towards an assimilationist approach in which immigrant 'must do their share'. Their share could consist of removing their headscarf's in public spaces or taking mandatory integration and language courses (Korteweg, 2005). The intensity of public debate about integration and assimilation increased after the 9/11 terror attacks, which incited a rise in right-wing populism, racism and islamophobia. Moreover, a few events specific to the Dutch context took place, which furthered this negative image. This includes, among other events, the political presence of Pim Fortuyn, who attracted by far the most media attention compared to other politicians in the 2002 elections. He publicly criticized Islam by stating that it is a 'backward' religion and advocated his proposals for anti-immigration policies. He was murdered by an environmental and animal activist six days before the elections (Koopmans & Muis, 2009). Another murder which gained public attention, was the that of the Dutch film maker Theo van Gogh, who published a movie that criticized the treatment of women in Islam. He was murdered by the Dutch-Moroccan Mohamed B. in 2004, who admitted after the murder that his main motivation to commit the murder was to protect the values of Islam. In the weeks after the murder, Mosques and to a certain extent also Churches, were targets of violence (Gautier, Siegmann & van Vuuren, 2009). Three reactions were reported consequential to these events among Dutch citizens. First, society was shocked. Second, Dutch citizens felt dismay and rage that quickly focused on Muslim migrants, especially those of Moroccan descent. Third, people started to find ways to 'protect the Netherlands' against such acts of terror and against the feared 'islamization' of the Netherlands (Korteweg, 2005). With the rapid growth of the Muslim community, the fear that 'Muslim culture' would take over 'Dutch culture' grew, especially the fear of decreasing liberty in the field of gender and sexuality. In some cases, this led to the classification of all Muslims as potentially threatening. Lines of separation became more visible in society; those who supported the multicultural society and those who advocated a monocultural vision (Lubbers en Coenders, 2011). Later, in 2006, the rise of the extreme right-wing political party under the name of 'the Freedom Party' led by Geert Wilders was installed politically. His party focuses on the dangers of the Islamization of the Netherlands and advocates to close all Mosques and ban the Quran. Furthermore, he advocates for the establishment of educational programs that warn children against the dangers of Islam (Lubbers & Coenders, 2011). His party is now the second largest party in the Dutch parliament (Kiesraad, 2017).

Over the years, the orientalist perspective towards Islam in the Netherlands increased, furthering the dislike, antipathy and aversion to Islam. What previously was an integration debate turned into an assimilation debate; all generations of immigrants, particularly Moroccans and Turks, should not only adapt to Dutch society, but must leave their own culture, heritage and religion behind and absorb the dominant secular traditions of the Netherlands (Korteweg, 2005). It must be noted that timewise, the alteration point at which the societal perspective towards Islam changed is not a solid point in time. The idea that Islamic values are different from the Judeo-Christian or (post)Christian values existed long before

2001 (Marranci, 2004). However, for the purpose of this research, the attitude towards Islam in the Netherlands is illustrated by the 2001 paradigm shift which indicates a growth in the negative tensions between the Muslim and (post)Christian communities in the Netherlands.

### **2.3 Conclusion**

Globally and nationally, Islamic and Judeo-Christian values are argued to oppose each other. With the coming of Islamic migrant workers, the public debate heightened over the way Islam does or does not fit in the Dutch context, and how the Netherlands might be threatened by the process of Islamization. Islam is perceived as negative, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims as Islamization, and marriages between Muslims and (post)Christians are viewed as displeasing. In the Dutch context, the overall shift has been exceptional. Dutch society went from a celebrative approach regarding cultural and religious diversity during the seventies, towards enforcing restrictive integration measures during the nineties and later, became a segregated society in which discriminatory practices towards religious diversity involving Islam are evident. As addressed in the next chapter, this shift causes Muslim –(post)Christian couples to be increasingly confronted with their segregated society and become challenged by global and national processes.



## 3. Interreligious Marriages and Changing Challenges

Interreligious marriages differ from religiously homogenous marriages in the sense that they face several more challenges than homogenous marriages, ranging from overcoming personal obstacles, to dealing with global influences (Collet, 2015). Much like the changing character of interreligious marriages as described in the previous chapter, today, the challenges the couples face are different from the ones they faced a few decades ago. Drawing further on the work of Speelman (2001) and Hondius (2000), and including the personal interviews conducted with them for this research, this chapter describes how the nature of the challenges faced by interreligious couples have changed from 1970 towards 2017 in the Netherlands.

### 3.1 Changing Challenges

Interreligious couples often find themselves at the focus point of interreligious affairs. Figure 1 depicts different challenges (many) interreligious couples are confronted with, based on the works of Sterckx (2014), McCarthy (2007), Marranci (2004) and Collet (2015). Imagine the red circle as the couple, and the blue circles as different aspects that influence their relationship. Firstly, the couple must deal with their personal (religious) differences. They shape their relationship in accordance with the way they both experience and practice their beliefs which are inspired and shaped by their collective histories. This is sometimes referred to as their personal *religious identities* (Hoffman-Hussain, 2015). These do not only differ in terms of (historical) religious traditions, but also in cultural and social aspects that shaped their current beliefs and practices. The couples must navigate their relationship, by understanding and allowing space for both beliefs, practices and traditions and choose to perform/ritualize them together or separately in their household (Collet, 2015). This is labeled 'Personal challenge'.

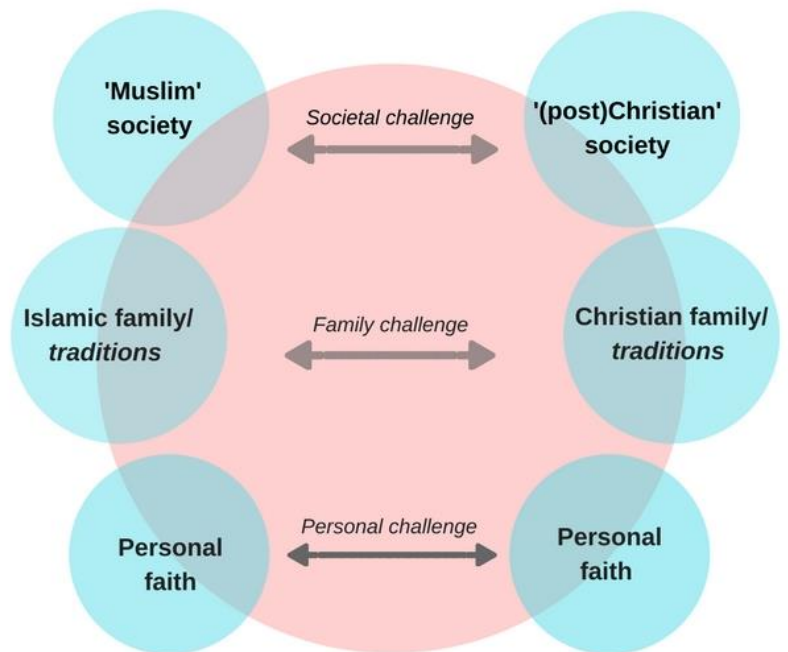


Figure 1. Different challenges faced by interreligious couples

Additionally, the couples must deal with their direct surroundings, such as influence from their families. Parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles interfere in the marriage choice of their relatives. Often,

a negative or disapproving reaction can be expected of these direct surroundings (Sterckx, 2014). Striving for acceptance, the couples must balance different opinions and perspectives within their relationship. This is labeled 'Family challenge'. Generally, both families involved do not only want their (religious) traditions to be transferred to next generations, but are also increasingly influenced by societal tensions and segregation between the communities. This increases the challenge for the couples to balance both points of view and attitudes of the families involved. The latter brings us to the third level at which the couple is challenged, namely, the pressure stemming from society at large. This includes social disapproval, dislike or a rejection of interreligious relations which is often based on, and influenced by, the dominant societal attitude towards religion (McCarthy, 2007). In other words, the couple is influenced by the way interreligious relations are viewed at regional, national and global level. As Collet sums up:

Studying mixed couples entangles us in the intricate fabric of modern society. It turns out that individual, conjugal, and family choices are still made with respect to collective rationales, first, at an intermediary level thanks to community ties—ethnic, religious, regional, or social—that govern daily life to a greater or lesser extent depending on the moment in history and the political context; and then in turn to the logics of the State and the Nation, or even, at a supranational level, to those of the European community. (Collet 2015, p. 140)

She describes that when modern day interreligious couples are studied, one must consider the connection between the couple and what Collet labels 'the fabric of modern society'. This fabric of modern society consists of the communities both partners originate from and more importantly, which social position these communities hold in the society the couple resides in. The social status of these communities is dependent on the social and political context, be it on national or international levels (Collet, 2015). Collet (2015) explains that "how a mixed couple is perceived, changes depending on the historical period and national context" (p. 130). Hereby, she highlights the importance of taking into account the differences between countries and communities. For example, to understand the dynamics in an interreligious marriage in the Netherlands of which one partner is a Turkish Muslim man and one partner is a Dutch Christian woman, it must be understood what the general status of Turkish Muslim men is in the Netherlands, as well as the status of Dutch Christian women in the Netherlands and how their communities relate to each other. In other words, understanding a private love-relation requires the study of modern-day society.

### **3.2 The Dutch Challenges**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, scholars identify the context of the Netherlands as particularly interesting, because social structures and societal norms have changed in the past decades. To gain a grip on the novelty of how Islam is perceived in the Netherlands in relation to interreligious marriages, one cannot skip the transformation the Netherlands went through regarding Christianity. Since the foundation of the Netherlands in 1648, Christianity was the dominant religion; it was unlikely to find an unchurched person during that time (Need & Graaf, 1996). Where around 1930, the number of Church attendance

even increased due to the *verzuiling* (pillarization),<sup>7</sup> secularization increased due to the *ontzuiling* (depillarization) around 1960, giving rise to the idea that Christianity, and religion all together, would disappear as the Netherlands continued to modernize ((Knippenberg, 1998). However, in 2015 half of the Dutch population considered themselves Christian or religious, which negates the ‘theory of secularization’ (CBS, 2016). The significance of this ‘post-Christian spirituality’ is important to consider, as religion seems not to have disappeared from the Netherlands, but rather took a more a spiritual/private role, than a practical/collective role in society (Houtman, 2008).

In the Dutch context, Moroccans and Turks, or more specifically, Muslims, are mentioned as the changemakers. Today, Muslims marrying (post)Christians are considered as ‘swimming against the stream’. Their coming to the Netherlands created a new version of interreligious marriages which does not only concerns a ‘new’ religion, but also concerns a religion that is at the center of political debates and religious tensions. On a societal level, Islam is connected to negative stigmas, concerning among other things, the public debate that heightens over visible Islamic symbols in public spaces, such as the ‘Burka debate’, the ramifications of the 9/11 terror attacks and the presence of Islamic critical public figures. As noted in Chapter 1, in the past, couples faced an enlarged challenge in dealing with the influence from their direct surroundings. Parents used to have more control over their children and had a relatively dominant role in their marriage choice. Today, couples are less dependent on their family ties when it comes to their marriage choice; conventional traditions make way for more dissident marital practices (Kalmijn, 1991). Another challenge has become more prominent; social segregation between Muslim and secular and (post)Christian communities were increasing and a growth in negative tensions between these groups in the Netherlands became more evident (Marranci, 2004). The couples face an enlarged challenge, balancing different and sometimes opposing societal perspectives within their relationship. As Collet (2015) describes: “[...] the choices operated in the private sphere go against the grain of existing global social relations” (p. 142).

When bringing these societal attitudes in relation to the challenges described in this chapter, and following Collet’s (2015) suggestion that interreligious marriages are more and more influenced and affected by societal issues, one could argue that the biggest challenge for Dutch Muslim-(post)Christian couples would be to deal with the societal tensions created through the segregation between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the Netherlands and, balancing a post-Christian spiritual notion and a traditional Islamic notion.

### 3.3 Conclusion

Though always context depended, there are some general trends to establishing what constitutes an interreligious marriage. Scholars tend to connect diversity as witnessed in society with the diversity within an interreligious marriage. Additionally, scholars emphasize the complexity and multiplicity of aspects

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<sup>7</sup> *Verzuiling* is the segmentation of Dutch society in different pillars; the Roman-Catholics, the (orthodox) Protestants, the socialists and the liberalists. Due to this strict division, contact between groups was limited and secularization diminished.

involved in the marriage. Besides faith traditions, couples can be diverse in their ethnicity, culture, nationality, gender, education and migrational backgrounds. In relation to these two points, interreligious marriages can be viewed as reflecting society, mirroring its diversity. They embody societal issues, such as cultural inequality, racial differences and socio-economic status.

Concerning the challenges they face, interreligious couples in the Netherlands consisting of one Muslim and one (post)Christian partner, face a complex trifold challenge; they must deal with their personal religious differences, balance the (sometimes opposing) traditions from their direct surroundings and manage the influences from the broader society. Perception seems to play a key role in this challenge; the way interreligious relations are viewed by the public, trickles down into the relationship. It is in this context that Muslims- (post)Christian couples manage their relationship, dealing with the growing gap between the communities they are rooted in and often still feel strong connections to. In sum, an interreligious couple in the Netherlands in 2017 is a Muslim-(post)Christian couple, that is initially approached with suspicion by their direct surroundings and must deal with influences from society at large, specifically with the rising of populism and islamophobia. The role of society in the couple's relationship is seemingly growing, and they are challenged by the impact of the broader context which regards interreligious relations between Muslims and (post)Christians, and such interreligious marriages, as discordant.

## 4. Methodology

Dutch society has changed over the past decades and coincidingly, the definition and perception of interreligious marriages in the Netherlands changed along with it. As discussed in previous chapters, public debates influence what is perceived as an interreligious relationship, but also what is considered as unconventional or undesired in this relationship. These concurrent changes demonstrate the strong connection between the public and the private; between society and interreligious marriages. To answer the question how interreligious couples deal with influences from society in the Netherlands in 2017, the questions that need to be answered are how Dutch society enters the relationship of the couple, how they feel -if at all- current societal tensions influence their relationship and how they deal with these issues. As Speelman stated, “it would be better if we started to talk with people, instead of about them” (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017). This chapter discusses which methods are used to answer these questions, how these are implemented within the research, and why these choices are made.

### 4.1 Description of Research Domain and Demarcation

The research domain is demarcated to the Netherlands. The Netherlands provide a context which changed rapidly, which lead to a new definition of interreligious marriages and new challenges for the couples to arise. In addition, literature about Muslim-(post)Christian interreligious couples are carried out outside of the EU and in some European countries, but the Dutch context is only limitedly represented in research (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017; D. Hondius, personal communication, April 19, 2017). Therefore, this research is situated in the Netherlands.

### 4.2 Methods and Instruments

This research focusses on experiences of interreligious couples and has a descriptive nature. Because attitudes and behaviors of the couples are analyzed, qualitative research methods are best suited for this research (Mahoney en Goertz, 2006). To bring to light these personal experiences, semi structured face to face, in depth interviews are carried out with eleven interreligious couples. According to O’reilly (2012), this qualitative method provides a comprehensive overview of the target group, but leaves enough space to move towards other individual topics addressed by the couple. Next to the interviews with the couples, four expert interviews were carried, of which the details are delineated in table 1.

#### Summary of method

**Who:** 11 Muslim-(post)Christian couples that are either married or live together in the Netherlands.

**How:** literature study and qualitative field-research, semi-structured interviews

**What:** Verbal data about how Dutch society influences the couple’s relationship and how they deal with these effects in their households.

**When:** Between May – June 2017

**Where:** Leiden, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht and Den Haag.

	Name and profession	Interviewed
1	<b>Gé Speelman</b> <i>Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at the PThU</i>	3 April 2017

2	<b>Dienke Hondius</b> <i>Associate Professor of Contemporary History at de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam</i>	19 April 2017
3	<b>Ebubekir Ozturk</b> <i>Director Contact Orgaan Moslims en Overheid (CMO)</i>	16 May 2017
4	<b>Debbie Bachrach</b> <i>Chairman Mo&amp;Moos (Dialogue platform Jewish – Muslim encounters)</i>	14 April 2017
5	<b>Manuela Kalsky</b> <i>Extraordinary Professor – Edward Schillebeeckx Chair for Theology and Society, research on question concerning multiple religious belonging</i>	11 April 2017

**Table 1. Overview of Interviewed Experts**

Concerning the data gathered from literature about interreligious marriages, it is important to note that statistics in America and Europe are difficult to obtain, since, due to the separation of Church and state, religious convictions are not demographically registered when people get married (Kalmijn, 1991). Furthermore, because interreligious marriages are at higher risk of being dissolved than religiously homogenous marriages, statistics about these marriages are subjected to the *duration effect*; sometimes the marriage is already dissolved before data is released (Kalmijn, 1991). Next, data on interreligious marriages will not always represent the actual situation, since conversion -one individual adopts the religion of the partner- is a relatively common phenomenon within interreligious marriages (Kalmijn, 1991). These facts demonstrate that statistical results from research in this area should be approached with caution.

#### 4.3 Target Group and Participants

The CBS (2017) shows that 3,5 million married couples resided in the Netherlands in 2001. Thirteen percent of them are *mixed marriages* according to the CBS. The latest rates of the CBS (2017) show that the biggest ethnic groups in the Netherlands, namely the Turks and Moroccans, engage relatively seldom in mixed marriages. Only twelve percent of the Turkish-Dutch people have a mixed marriage (which constitutes around 10.000 couples) and for Moroccan-Dutch people this is also twelve percent (which constitutes around 9.000 couples). Numbers have decreased over the years, not specifically because less interreligious marriages are celebrated in the Netherlands, but because the marriage rates in general are dropping; living together instead of getting married has gained popularity in Dutch society among both religiously endogamous and homogenous couples. Mainly because, couples that live together enjoy (almost) the same rights as married couples (CBS, 2017). Based on the fact that living together gains popularity in the Netherlands, the target groups consist out of Muslim-(post)Christian couples that are either married or live together in the Netherlands.

The participants have been approached through a call via the online platform for religious and cultural differences *NieuwWij*, based in the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> The content of the call is attached in Appendix I.

<sup>8</sup> Website NieuwWij: <https://www.nieuwwij.nl/>

Seventeen reactions were received through this call, of which eleven couples were selected base on the following criteria;

- the couple is either married or lives together;
- the couple consists out of one Islamic (raised) partner, and one (post)Christian partner;
- the couple lives in the Netherlands.

Ten of the interviews were carried out either in the houses of the participants around the kitchen table or during a shared dinner, and one in a nearby coffee place in the city the participant resides in. Some couples were interviewed together, others separately or only one partner, in accordance with the wishes of the participants. Table 2 provides an overview of the couple's pseudonyms, their religious affiliation, (immigrational) background, their marital status, the number of years they are together and the amount of children they have.

	<b>Names(pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Status</b>
1	<i>Anne en Samir</i>	Dutch (post)Christian woman Moroccan Muslim man	Married (± 10 years) 1 child
2	<i>Stefani &amp; Adil</i>	Iraqi-Dutch Muslim man Dutch (post)Christian woman	Married (± 5 years) 2 children
3	<i>Senna &amp; Ashraf</i>	Dutch (post)Christian woman Bangladeshi Muslim man	Unmarried (± 3 years)
4	<i>Sabir</i>	Iraqi Muslim man	Now separated
5	<i>Wilma &amp; Omar</i>	Moroccan Muslim man Dutch Christian woman	Married (± 13 years) 3 children
6	<i>Suzanna &amp; Nessim</i>	Dutch Christian woman Tunisian Muslim man	Married (± 2 years) 2 children from previous marriage
7	<i>Lena &amp; Hamid</i>	Dutch (post)Christian woman Moroccan non-religious but practicing man	Married (± 17 years) 4 children
8	<i>Meis &amp; Umair</i>	Dutch Christian woman Turkish Muslim man	Married (± ) 1 child from previous marriage
9	<i>Tessa &amp; Yasser</i>	Dutch Christian woman Guinee Muslim man	Married (± 1 years) 1 child
10	<i>Daisy &amp; Yassine</i>	Dutch Christian woman Iraqi Muslim man	Unmarried (± 6 months)
11	<i>Anne-Marie &amp; Taalim</i>	Dutch Christian woman Turkish Muslim man	Unmarried (± 7 years)

**Table 2. Overview of Interviewed Couples.<sup>9</sup>**

<sup>9</sup> \* '(post)Christian' can be described as secularized/detraditionalized (Boeve, 2005), and means that one of the partners is either raised Christian, but does not believe in the dogmas of Christianity. However, oftentimes this person still practices the Christian traditions such as Christmas, Easter and baptism.

The interviewed couples all consist out of an Islamic (or raised with Islamic traditions) male partner and a Dutch female (post)Christian partner. Five men adhere to the Sunni tradition of Islam, two to Shia Islam<sup>10</sup> and the remaining three men either define their religion as simply Islam. One man expressed to be raised Islamic and to practice Islamic tradition, but does not believe in the doctrines of Islam. Six women express to be raised in communal Christian surroundings which adhere to orthodox Christianity, but have chosen to adhere to a less strict version of Christianity today. They state not to adhere to a specific Christian tradition. One women adheres to the Mennonite tradition. One women was not raised Christian, but converted to Christianity later in life. One women was not raised religious and does not define herself as Christian, but rather religious. One women was raised Christian but rejected Christianity. The latter two do celebrate the Christian traditions, this is considered (post)Christian. The immigrational backgrounds of the male partners are diverse, consisting out of Iraqi, Moroccan, Turkish, Bangladeshi, Guinean and Tunisian men. Ten women are born in the Netherlands and have a Dutch background. One women was adopted, but was raised in the Netherlands by a Dutch family. Seven couples are married, three are unmarried and one male is now separated. He is included due to his recent relationship with a Christian women and his experiences therewith. Seven couples have one or more children. All couples live in urban areas in the Netherlands, namely Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Utrecht, Leiden and Den Haag.

#### 4.4 Operationalization and Data Analyses

To answer the question; *'how do influences from society enter the relationship of Muslim-(post)Christian couples, in which situations do they 'pop up' and how do the couples deal with these situations?'* relevant literature was used to create a topic list for the interview format, which was also used in Chapter 1,2 and 3. Part one of the topic list focusses on experiences, and the second part on the strategies the couples employ. In more detail, the couples were asked how they manage their interreligious household, how they introduce their partners to their families and friends and how they celebrate their different faiths. Each respondent was asked corresponding questions about the spouse's religious preference and the religion in which he or she was raised. In addition, the couples were asked about how they view changes in society relating to religion and religious co-existence, how they experience influences from society within their relationship and how their daily religious or traditional rituals might have changed due to these influences. Lastly, the couples were asked how they cope with these influences in terms of strategies they use. All interviews are recorded with permission of the participants. Three couples were asked to provide more detailed information about their experiences with media usage and its effect on their relationship. They received an extra questionnaire via email. The interviews are transcribed and analyzed through the process of coding (Mahoney & Goertz, 2006). Frequently used codes are: Islam, Christianity, rituals, adapting, PVV, reactions, stereotyping, children, Fortuyn, parents, family, colleagues, media, headscarf and discrimination. Quotes that are used in the text are translated from Dutch to English. All interviews are anonymous and pseudonymized.

While analyzing the data, Firstly, three patterns in the experiences of the couple stood out: 1) receiving (negative) questions and reactions concerning their relation, 2) experiencing discrimination based on religion and race and 3) the role of media and television. To provide an in-depth understanding of these

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<sup>10</sup> Sunni and Shia are two Islamic denomination. The majority of the world's Muslim population follows the Sunni branch of Islam, and around 10-15% follow the Shiite branch (Blanchard, 2009).



experiences additional literature regarding these topics is gathered and delineated along with the results in chapter five. Second, the strategies were analyzed. These are more concealed within the data than the experiences and were found by looking at patterns, repeating theme's in several interviews and unique testimonies. Two strategies and several pragmatic methods used by the couples are delineated in chapter six.

## 5. Dutch Society in your Living Room

The title of this chapter symbolizes the core question that is answered in this chapter; *How do interreligious couples experience influences from society within their relationship?* Based on the results of interviews with eleven couples and four expert interviews as shown in the previous chapter in table 1 and 2, this chapter delineates three issues regarding how the couples experience societal influences within their relationship. First, couples mention that the initial reactions they receive in regard to their introduction as a couple, are often shaped by (un)intentional negative attitudes and uneasy questions, which stand symbolic for the way in which tensions in the Dutch society gains entrée in their relationship. It is discussed what kind of reactions the couples can and do receive and how they internalize them in their family. Second, some couples mention discrimination -be it the discrimination of themselves, their partners or their children- as a pivotal way that societies embroilment make an entrance into the homes of the couples. It is discussed in which manner discrimination is experienced, particularly by Dutch (post)Christian women, focusing on cultural and religious discrimination, considering the notion of *race* in interreligious marriages. Third, couples refer to the practice of watching television as a confronting moment through which the Dutch public anti-Islam rhetoric, enters the living rooms of the couples. This one-sided encounter with public opinions is an issue that influences all interviewed couples. It is explained which media images provoke conversation within the relationship or with their family, friends or colleagues.

### 5.1 Initial Reactions and Concerned Questions

For many couples, it is an exciting time when they introduce their new girlfriend or boyfriend to their family, and it continues to be exciting to introduce their husband or wife to new friends and colleagues. For interreligious couples these meetings have an added degree of tenseness, as they do not only introduce a new person into the community, but bring along a new religion and often an unfamiliar culture.

#### 5.1.1 How are Interreligious Relations Received by Couple's Surroundings?

In her research about intermarriage between Moroccans, Turks and native Dutch people in the Netherlands, Sterckx (2014) found that the way family reacts to the fact that their sons or daughters marry outside of the faith community, is a big challenge for the couples. These reactions are often negative expressions from both sides of the family. Most of the Dutch interreligious marriages that are formed consist of Muslim men and Christian women. The Dutch side of the family tends to have a consistent negative approach towards the marriage choice. Which mainly concerns a fear of gender inequality regarding the position of women. It is assumed that the patriarchic structure of the Islamic family and

their traditions might hold back, or even suppress, a young, emancipated Dutch woman (Mulia, 2009). The Muslim side of the family reacts in different ways. To survive as a minority in a non-Muslim majority, Islamic families are often not keen on ‘outsiders’ entering the family; they might not understand the culture, and will make their children and perhaps the family stray from their culture and traditions (Sterckx, 2014). Depending on the educational level of the Dutch person (the higher the better) and the structure of the family they come from (the more traditional the better), they will find it easier to accept the relationship. It should be noted that in Islamic Sharia law, a Muslim man is allowed to marry Jewish or Christian women. Muslim women do not have the right to marry outside Islam (Çiğdem, 2015). Therefore, a relationship between a Muslim man, and a Christian woman will be accepted more easily. While oppositely, a marriage between a Muslim woman and a man from outside Islam is often considered a shameful and intolerable act. Research shows that the general trend among both the ‘Dutch side’ and the ‘Islamic side’ of the family and acquaintances, is to feel and express an uneasiness about gender issues that stem from stereotypes in society about Western women, and Muslim men. As Sterckx explains; “[when asked about their challenges, the couples] unavoidably refer to the factors of stereotypes that ‘predicts’ trouble; the men-women relationship” (Sterckx, 2014, p. 41).

### 5.1.2 How do Couples Experience the First Introduction?

Regardless of the extra nerves, a large segment of the interviewed couples explain that introducing their partner to direct friends and family is a pleasant experience; they are warmly welcomed into the houses of the both sides or the family. However, next to this positive note, the eleven couples almost unanimously explain that they have encountered difficulties concerning the first reactions they receive from their surroundings when they introduce their partner. Couples describe that after this introductory moment, the difficulties usually discontinue as the surroundings get to know the partner in question. However, the initial reactions do impact the couples, as these are in some cases the most disturbing reactions they face throughout their relationship. They are often based on stereotypes from society as depicted in table 3, which provides an overview of the associations mentioned by the couples that are expressed by their surroundings about their new additions to the family. Usually these are assumptions that come up before they met the person in question, or have just met them briefly.

<b>Muslim men</b> (according to ‘Dutch’ surroundings)	<b>Christian women</b> (according to ‘Islamic’ surroundings)	<b>Dutch women</b> (according to ‘Islamic’ surroundings)
<i>Are suppressor of women</i>	<i>Are influenced by Dutch society</i>	<i>Are unfaithful in a relationship</i>
<i>Seek a visa</i>	<i>Will cause the Muslim man to stray from his faith; for instance, the husband will celebrate Christmas and praise Jesus or go to Church</i>	<i>Lack a sense of caring (for family values)</i>
<i>Are associated with Syria and refugees</i>	<i>* Is someone ‘from the book’, meaning, she is a monotheistic person</i>	<i>Will cause the Muslim man to stray from his faith.</i>
<i>Are orthodox strict believers</i>	<i>Will keep the children from being brought up with Islamic values</i>	<i>Are connected to capitalism and put their carrier success before their marriage</i>
<i>Perform many (strict) ritual practices</i>		<i>Don’t cover their body, and dress inappropriately</i>

<i>Will force the wife and children to wear a headscarf</i>		<i>Are associated with high divorce rates</i>
<i>Will force children to practice Islam</i>		<i>Will keep the children from being raised with Islamic values</i>
<i>Are associated with terrorism</i>		
<i>*Can be a 'cultural Muslim' or a Westernized Muslim</i>		
<i>Will lead the wife to lose her own identity</i>		

**Table 3. Associations with Muslim, Christian and Post-Christian Partners Expressed by Direct and Indirect Surroundings**  
*\*Positive association*

*Reactions from the (post)Christian side*

When couples tell their family, friends or colleagues about the background of their (new) partner, their reactions can suggest strong stereotypes and prejudices about the partner’s religion and culture. Table 3 demonstrates that the couples address three categories; Muslim men, Christian women and Dutch women. The notion that ‘the wife will lose her own identity’ is associated with the fear that the Dutch women must adhere to Islamic practices, against her will. This is not associated with the idea that the (post)Christian women will convert to Islam. Regarding the later, it is not mentioned in the interviews that there is a fear from the (post)Christian partner’s surroundings, that the woman will convert to Islam. There is only mentioning of a fear of manipulation and loss of free will for the (post)Christian partner. This connects to the assumption that Muslim partners are orthodox in their religion and will demand certain praxis from the women which are perceived as Islamic. For instance, when Anna told her parents about her plan to marry a Moroccan man, her parents strongly disapproved to that idea.

Well, then I had to tell my family that I wanted to marry a Moroccan guy. No one was happy about that I can tell you, no one thought it was a good idea, except for me. It was very bad, they were shocked, they already saw me living somewhere as a maid. (Anna)

Anna’s parents were especially worried for the social position their daughter would be in, when stepping into a marriage with a Moroccan man. Anna explains that her parent’s concern that their daughter would have to lower herself to the position of a maid, stems from the stereotypes her parents held about women who have a relationship with Muslim men. These initial reactions often concern the idea that the partner has ‘fallen victim to the trap of the other world’. In some cases, the women’s surroundings express their concern, fear and pity for the (post)Christian woman, who in their eyes is manipulated into a relationship with an Islamic partner. Speelman illustrates this with an example of a Dutch women marrying an Egyptian man and how the choice of the woman is perceived with melancholy.

The moment a girl enters a relationship with an Egyptians man, you will get a number of stereotypical reactions. One of them is that the girl is trapped; the poor gullible girl doesn’t understand that they want to use her. [...] Those women were flabbergasted that they were depicted as naïve. Dumb Dutch girls that fall for beautiful brown eyes of a foreigner. They fall in love and omit their self-regard. So, they were seen as stupid idiots by their surroundings, as

victims, and not as intelligent women that made a conscious decision, that is rough. (G. Speelman, personal communication, April 3, 2017)

Other women explain that the intensification of the public debate about headscarf's and burkas in the past decade in the Netherlands, caused a raised concern for parents and family when their daughter announces her relationship with a Muslim man. Often, one of the first questions Dutch women receive is whether they will now have to wear a veil. Other questions that come up are in some way negatively related to the amount of prayers that Muslims should pray throughout the day, which concerns five prayers. These prayers are perceived as a lot, and the surroundings of the couples perceive this ritual as an orthodox form of practicing one's faith. For instance, Suzanna explains how she is often confronted by her Christian friends who ask her whether her husband, "really has to pray five times a day?", and express that if so, he must therefore be a strict, doctrinal believer. As a reaction she defends her husband by reminding her Christians friends about their Christian prayer duties.

Yes, these people that, kind of are Bible Belt people they use to tell me at work 'ahh yes and they have to pray five times a day per se' and then I told them, if you are a good Christian your pray eight times a day, when you wake up, before and after three meals a day and when you go to bed, a Muslim only five times. (Suzanna)

Regarding the prayer ritual, it is interesting to note that there seems to exist a discrepancy between what Dutch (post)Christians and their surroundings perceive as orthodox Islam, and what Muslims perceive as orthodox Islam. During several of the interviews it became clear that Dutch (post)Christians perceive rituals, such as doing Ramadan and especially performing the five prayers, as a strict, sometimes too orthodox (disliked) form of Islam. While on the other hand, Muslim partners generally perceive these Islamic rituals as the minimum requirement of practicing the Islamic faith and calling oneself a Muslim. For instance, Yassine describes how he does not consider himself to be a Muslim because he does not pray five times a day.

Would you describe yourself as a Muslim? (Interviewer). No actually I wouldn't. That's just it, I'm really about the rules. If you call yourself a Muslims then there are certain conditions you have to meet. One of them is that you at least pray 5 times a day. And I don't even do that... I won't call myself a Muslim then [...] I am religious, and secretly also Muslim, Muslim light (Yassine)

What it means for a (post)Christian person to be (an orthodox) Muslim, differs from what it means to be a strict Muslim for a Muslim. This discrepancy in perception and meaning, is what the partners address as relating closely to the stereotypical idea of Islam. It is this discrepancy and the assumed connection between rituals and orthodoxy, that raises many questions for the Dutch (post)Christian surroundings of the couple, which manifest considerably around visible Islamic practices as the prayers, Ramadan and the wearing of the headscarf or Burka. In other words, the degree of orthodoxy can be misunderstood between Muslims and non-Muslims. Consequently, this 'perceived orthodoxy' and its connection to stereotypes and prejudices seems to be a source of tensions. Closely related to this point, is the positive association depicted in table 3: 'Can be a 'cultural Muslim or a Westernized Muslim'. This implies that Muslim men, that are less orthodox and practice a more cultural form of Islam are more positively received. This association seems to be linked to a degree, namely, the less religious a Muslim partner is,

hence the more cultural his practiced traditions are, the more accepted his practices will be by the (post)Christian partner's surroundings. In other words, a moderate Islamic religious lifestyle, often allows more acceptance, in which cultural differences are more easily accepted than religious differences.

### *Reactions from Islamic side*

More negative initial reactions are not only visible from the (post)Christian side of the family, but are also visible from the family of the Islamic partner. These reactions mainly stem from direct family members, usually partners, siblings, aunts and uncles, and less from more distant Islamic surroundings. Most of the women explain that they are accepted into their husband's family, but have struggled at the beginning of their relationship. These struggles mainly concern the following aspects; the lack of acceptance of the relationship itself, the fact that the woman is not Muslim, the fact that the woman is not from an Arabic country and moreover, that the woman is 'Western'. As Omar explains, his mother would have rather had him marry a Moroccan woman, because they would share the same value system.

Especially my mother, would have rather see me marry a Moroccan woman, then things would be alright for her [...] that is a prejudice, because within the Moroccan community the divorce rate is huge. [...] that is something people don't see, that that is no guarantee for a successful relationship or marriage. (Omar)

The Islamic family express their concerns for their sons and their contempt for what in some cases can be described as *free women*. This free woman is described as a Western, (capitalist) woman who has had previous relationships and does not take the relationship serious. This concerns non-religious women as well as Christian women. For example, Yassine describes how his family reacted to his relationship with a young Christian woman by warning him for high divorce rates and the customs of Dutch women.

Yes, that's my family saying, yes maybe you will break up again soon, it's maybe temporary, Dutch women this and that, very denigrating [...] Yes she really Omar, It's a Dutch woman, and it's just a relationship [...] It's about the stories they hear, so many divorces in the Netherlands and so on. (Yassine)

One often found positive association as depicted in table 3 concerns Christian women to be 'someone 'from the book', meaning, she is a monotheistic person'. For instance, Senna explains how she does not define herself as Christian, but was automatically defined by the Islamic side of her boyfriend's family as Christian.

His family thinks, because I'm from Europe, that I'm Christian. And if you are Christian then you also have one God. And apparently, that is so similar to each other, that they seem to accept it way more. (Senna)

The surroundings of the Muslim partner seem to like the woman better, when she is Christian, because her value system will overlap with the Islamic one. Again, this seems to be related to certain degrees; the more religious the woman is, the more accepted she is by the Muslim community.

The values that are stereotypically ascribed to Dutch women, cause the Islamic side of the family to initially resist the relationship. There seems to be a connection between the level of acceptance from the Islamic side of the family and two aspects of the relationship. Three unmarried couples are interviewed, who report resistance from the Islamic side of the family, and seven married couples are interviewed whom report that they had felt some resistance, but now that they are married, don't feel that resistance anymore. One married couple is still struggling with the acceptance of the Islamic side of the family, this however concerns a couple in which the Dutch woman is not Christian, but considers herself openly atheist. The reactions from the Islamic side of the relationship usually changes when two requirements for the Dutch woman are met; first, she must become Muslim or at least be Christian, and most importantly, they should be married before they continue their relationship. These two conditions seem to provide enough assurance for the Islamic side of the family to accept a Dutch (post)Christian woman.

During the interviews, couples note that their surroundings express themselves in a variety of ways in response the new relationship. Some couples express how lovingly and respectfully they felt welcomed into the new family and community. However, some of the reactions are negative in the sense that they can be based on harmful stereotypes. In accordance with the literature, gender issues seem to play the largest role during the introductory moment. The biggest issue discussed by the couples is the way the Dutch family fears for suppression of the woman, her position and her status. This often manifests itself in the fear for the forced wearing of the headscarf or burka. Be that as it may, it should be noted that none of the ten interviewed women thus far wear either. Furthermore, the couples tend to struggle with the way the Islamic family fears that the woman lacks a set of values that is in accordance with their religion, but also with their traditions and culture. This mainly manifests itself in a fear of assumed western values, such as a lack of care for piousness and fidelity. In addition, it should be noted that reactions next to and in accordance with gender issues, often concern visible aspects of the customs, particularly the manner of dress and further outer appearances.

## **5.2 Experiencing Discrimination**

Nine out of the eleven couples describe that they struggle with cases of intolerance or discriminatory practices, all relating to the Islamic religion or Arabic traditions. This can take the form of negative comments, stares, rejection or hostile outings, mainly expressed by further removed relations and weaker ties, such as coworkers or people in the street.

### **5.2.1 Racialization of Religion**

In their research about mixed marriages and their risk of divorce in the UK, Milewski and Kulu (2014) found that partners in mixed marriages have a high likelihood of attracting open discrimination in their daily lives, particularly in cases where the partners stem from different racial groups. Race seems to connect interreligious marriages with (open) discrimination. This is in accordance with the findings of Qian (2005), who in his study about interracial marriage in the US found that the 'darker' the skin tone of the partner, the more the couple will experience discrimination. The spread of anti-Islam sentiments has grown in the

twenty-first century, causing discrimination towards Islam and especially towards Moroccans to heighten (Hondius, 2014). In the Netherlands Hondius (2014) urges academics and politicians to focus on the link between mixed marriages, racism and discrimination.

The study of racism appears to have entered a new stage in the 21st century. A new element in the debate about the appropriate terminology, about the categorizations, about the relevance of “race” is the anti-Muslim sentiment and activity in and outside Europe. One effect of the terrorist attacks in New York, Casablanca, Bali, Madrid, and London appears to have been the growth or spread of anti-Islam sentiment, and of fear and anger against Muslims, because they are perceived as terrorists. Several of the interviewees spontaneously commented on a shift they had experienced in their own lives. As these developments are very much fluid and ongoing, these individual observations and remarks deserve academic attention. Quite a few respondents noted they had recently seen that discrimination and aggression was increasingly directed against “the Moroccans” or “the Muslims.” (Hondius 2014, p. 287)

### 5.2.2 Experiencing Discrimination for the First Time

A noteworthy aspect to experiencing discrimination is how white (post)Christian women experience the discrimination of their family. Four couples explain that before they were in the relationship, they hardly -if ever- experienced discrimination on terms of religion or culture. Now that they are married or live together with a partner from a minority group in Dutch society and in some cases have children, discrimination reaches them for the first time in their lives. This experience is received with initial disbelief and is described as shocking and stressful. For instance, Tessa explains that she never experienced problems when she goes to the city hall to sort out her paperwork. However, each time she goes with her African/Muslim partner, she feels it always takes longer because the employees don’t trust her partner, as much as they trust her as a white Dutch woman.

I do notice it yes, when we go to the city hall, with him it always takes us much longer than when I go. With him they want to see everything and not once, but multiple times and I can’t stand it but my husband is really calm and he just waits. He says he is used to it. (Tessa)

This experience takes place in multiple contexts, such as waiting at the security check in the airport or at other official sites. Through their relationship, the women seem to become familiar with the assumed discrimination of their Muslim/Arabic looking partner. Next to the woman’s partner, the prospect of her children being discriminated against creates a fearful tension. As Anna explains, her daughter carries a typical Moroccan last name, which makes her worry about her daughter’s chances on the job market in the Netherlands when her daughter is older.

I am afraid for my daughter sometimes. Her name is Nina, she has light hair. But how will it go later, is she going to find a job or is she going to be discriminated at the job market? I am afraid of that. I have a kid, she doesn’t look Moroccan, but her name does. And the idea that she would have less chances just because she has the wrong name, I would really be hurt by that. (Anna)



Especially the mothers express these concerns for their children, notably more than the fathers. These concerns mainly relate to their children's last names, which are often Arabic, and their outer approaches, which may show typical characteristics of Arab people, such as their eye, hair and skin color. Another example that is illustrative to experiencing discrimination is the experience of Lena. She tried to subscribe her son to the local football club in the neighborhood. She explains that when she had send a letter with the name and last name of her son, which are typically Arabic, the club send her a letter back, stating they were full and could not accommodate her son. Her Moroccan husband didn't believe that the football club was full, and told her that this was a case of discrimination because their son carried an Arabic name. Lena felt her husband was overreacting but to prove her point she wrote another letter, subscribing a nonexistent boy under a typical Dutch name. The club replied that the fictive boy was welcome to join the club next Wednesday. Lena couldn't believe it, and tried it again. And again, the same process repeated itself.

When Isa was 5, I signed him up for a football club. And I got a letter back saying they were full and they advised me to pick another club. And my husband Omar, I don't believe it. And I thought, right... he is going to talk about discrimination now. And he Omar, well, try to register a Dutch child. So, I did that, exactly the same age, and yes, welcome to the club. I thought, this is coincidence, that just can't be possible. So, I wrote a letter to the club, stating what happened, and I got no reaction. And later I thought, I'm going to try it again. So again, I registered my son, and again they were full. And again, I also registered a boy named Patrick, and they Omar you can start Wednesday. (Lena)

Regardless of the reasons behind this incident, it had a large impact on Lena. Her first reactions were disbelief and surprise, which later turned into an anger over the supposed discrimination of her son. She never experienced a case of discrimination, and generally thought that non-western immigrants were usually overreacting about their supposed victimhood of discrimination.

And I kept hearing around me, oh I also went through that. And my family in law, oh I also went through that. [...] For me that was heavy. Because I always thought when my husband talked about discrimination; ah you are poseur, you are turning to the victim role. But now it was about my child. (Lena)

Even though this experience did not involve Lena herself, because it came so close, it leads her to reconsider her presupposed ideas about the discrimination of nonwestern-immigrants. She continues by explaining what shocked her the most about this incident; that her Islamic surrounding reacted somewhat indifferent to the event.

My family in law reacted indifferent and apathetic to it, and that also shocked me. Yes, for them its normal [...] Yes what does worry me, is for my children. I think my daughters will find their way, but my son does have a brand. (Lena)

Discrimination is experienced by both partners, but the difference is the manner of being accustomed to these occurrences. The Dutch/(post)-Christian partners seem to reacted significantly different to cases of supposed discrimination. In close relation to discrimination and implicit to their stories, and in accordance

with the literature, couples address a constant connection that is made between race and religion in the public discourses about Islam and Christianity. The fact that one partner is often 'white' and one partner is 'darker', often leads the couple's surroundings to form presumptions about the way the person in question is functioning religiously and how orthodox their faith might be. This becomes most evident in the life story of Lena and her husband Hamid, who are both raised religious, but both do not adhere to a religion. Even though they rejected religion, they still struggle with the religious stereotypes that are mainly linked to their physical appearances. In the eyes of the Dutch public, Hamid is Muslim, because he has a Moroccan physique, and he mentions he still suffers from discrimination that concerns the public image of Islam. Where for the Muslim partners, this issue is negative, for the Dutch women that do not necessarily consider themselves Christian, their white skin color is often connected by the Islamic family and surroundings with Christianity. In some cases, this connection creates acceptance of the white woman, because she is supposedly Christian, which is more accepted than an atheist partner for their Muslim sons. As discussed in section 5.1.2, when Senna was introduced to the Islamic family of her back then husband to be, his family automatically assumed she was Christian, which caused the Islamic family to accept her easily. Similar experiences were reported by other women, such as Senna, who could marry her boyfriend, solely because her boyfriend's family thought she was Christian, as she came from the Netherlands. In sum, religion seems closely linked to ideas of race, which is beneficial for Dutch women, and mostly injurious for man with an immigrational background from nonwestern countries.

### **5.3 Watching Television**

As recognized in previous sections, media plays a crucial role in how the couples experience the influences from Dutch society within their relationship. The role of media and above all television, are consistently brought up by the couples as a dominant factor in the connection between their private love-relationship and the broader society. The seemingly ordinary practice of *watching the news*, appears to have a large impact on interreligious relations, as through this practice, they are directly confronted with societies constructs which concern them, their partner and/or their children. Two things stand out. 1) The practice of watching television (news broadcasts) influences the couples by either segregating or uniting them. 2) The couple's surroundings seem mostly influenced in their ideas about Islam and Muslims, through these news broadcasts.

#### **5.3.1 What it Means to Watch Television**

Bollen and Phillip's (1982) influential research about the effects of television news broadcasts, demonstrated that suicides increased significantly, in months of highly published suicide stories. Daily news influences viewers, inciting imitation and provoke certain behaviors. Multiple research shows that television is consistently of more impact than printed media on viewers. It overcomes time and distance by providing the viewer, due to technological abilities of television such as slow motion, zoom in and sounds, with a feeling of 'being present in the moment' (Cho et al. 2003). This sense of presence, is also notable in news coverage about the 9/11 terror attacks and its effects on viewers. Concerning Islam in

relation to 9/11, Dayan and Katz explains that “They [television coverage of terrorist attacks] turn news events into occasions for collective experiences of emotions” (Dayan and Katz 1992 in Cho et al., p. 3), indicating that news broadcasts instigate emotions and influence behavior. Cho et al. (2003) concluded their research by stating that watching television news is a predictor for negative emotional responses towards Islam and Muslims. In the Netherlands, research has been conducted about the effects of news coverage of Islam and Islam critical public figures such as Pim Fortuyn, Ayaan Hirshi Ali and Geert Wilders. They found that for instance, “Fortuyn repeatedly expressed his aversion to Islamic culture and religion, as oppressive of homosexuals and women, and appealed to the Dutch public to close its borders to immigrants of Muslim countries” (Vintges, 2016, p. 154). Concerning Geert Wilders, research shows that Wilder’s stark visual image provokes responses from viewers (Poole, 2012), and his unusual but still authoritative appearance creates his political success (Bos et al. 2010). Vintges (2016) suggests that these public figures are received by the audience as celebrities, which create thought provoking ideas which the viewers can follow.

In our television age, politics and show business are intermingled in the West to the extent that politicians become pop stars and pop stars become politicians [...] The media, especially television, play a prominent role in the construction of political “celebrities,” or “political personae. (Vintges, 2016, p. 154)

Bollen and Phillips (1982), Cho et al. (2003), Bos et al (2010), Poole, (2012) and Vintges (2016) underscore the importance of television above all other media as the most important medium through which events are portrayed without historical, economic or social contexts, pushing certain aspects of reality to the forefront and others to the background, which suggests certain judgements and attributes to the viewers. Specifically, media news coverage relating to Islam, provoke negative emotions (Cho et al. 2003), contrasting Islam with gender equality and democracy (Vintges, 2016).

### **5.3.2 Couples Watching Televisions Together**

One of the curious moments occur when the couples watch television together. Especially the news; it’s the moment when they are confronted with societal affairs from global to regional scale, while sitting on the couch in the comfort of their own homes, surrounded by their partner and sometimes their children. Through the past years, statements from Pim Fortyn, Theo van Gogh en Geert Wilders, but also coverage about the War on Terror, refugees and Islamic State entered the living rooms through the television, both in the homes of the couples themselves, their families, friends and colleagues. The couples explain that the images shown on television, specifically during the daily news broadcasts which concern Islam and public figures who are critical of Islam, influence the relationship in two ways; it either drives a wedge between them and causes segregation, or it unites them and strengthens their band as a couple.

#### *Segregating effects*

The couples unanimously agree that news broadcasts in the Netherlands depict a negative image of Islam and Muslims, but also shed a negative light on Morocco, Turkey and other Arabic countries. They are

depicted in a context of crime, radicalization, conflict, war and terrorism. Because watching the news for many couples is a daily ritual, they are confronted with these negative images almost on a daily basis.

One of the effects of this ritual is that it changes the way the couples converse with each other. Due to the critical depiction of Islam on television, religious differences become a more prominent theme within the relationship. It can spur debates about what Islam is, what it can lead to and gives rise to questions regarding the nature of Islam, which is sometimes thought to be intolerant and violent. It especially provokes discussion in regard to the way Islamic tradition does or does not fit in the lives of Dutch (post)Christian people. For instance, Sabir explains that when he entered a relationship with a Dutch Christian woman, religion never played a prominent role in their relationship, neither was it a topic of conversation. Both partners respected their differences, and didn't give much thought to it. However, Sabir explains that the differences between their religions started to play a role, the moment that tensions surrounding Islam in the Netherlands became more visible in society, and reached their relationship through the news.

First, we never really talked about religion, but bit by bit, yes you start taking. It's just what happens in society, and you sit on the couch, you just start talking because you just saw on television that Wilder's just screamed 'less Moroccans less Moroccans'. Then you start talking about it, period. (Sabir)

Sabir explains that because public figures, such as Geert Wilders, are critical of Islam on television, the conversations he had with his partner started to change. Particularly about the way he practices Islam. They often got caught up in discussions about how strict of a believer he is, or might become. His partner got increasingly suspicious of Islam and the role it might play in her life. These conversations usually did not end on a positive note.

You start asking how do you feel about this, what if I do this, what if I do that, [...] I would ask then, what would you think if I would be become a strict believer? Or what if I am that? How would you handle that? Would you accept it? Would you let me free in that or would you leave me?" [...] and those evening would then end in her saying it wouldn't work between us. (Sabir)

The depiction of Islam on television creates certain tensions in the household. It can be assumed that what is shown, considers the Muslim partner or creates a fear that he might become 'such a person'. It raises questions for the non-Muslim partner such as "is this what Islam is, and what does this mean for me and my future?". Naturally, these questions can pop up at any stage in the relationships, also without the influence of television. However, the daily confrontation during this ordinary ritual, seems to influence the relationship to the extent that it changes conversations and attitudes and sometimes eventually results in a wedge between the partners which damages the relationship.

### *Unification*

Next to segregation, other couples explain that being confronted with this type of media doesn't necessarily lead to separation; the stigmas about Islam provided through the media, especially by politicians, is burden they bear together. For the (post)Christian women, the news items are topics of

conversations, but do not drive them away from their Islamic partner. Rather, they feel involved and causes the couple to band together against negative critiques about Islam. As Anne-Marie explains,

For me these people don't influence our relationship. I think the ideas of those people about Muslims and people that think differently are always 'guests' in the Netherlands, are outdated. Now, I think that we have to starts dealing with each other's differences, they have no influence on our relationship. (Anne-Marie)

Lena explains how the negative images shown on television are often discussed in her household, at the kitchen table with her children present. Especially Geert Wilders and his statement about his wish to have less Moroccans in the Netherlands had a great impact on her and her children. She explains that one of her (half Dutch – half Moroccan) daughters was afraid they now had to leave the Netherlands, due to the statements made by Geert Wilders on television.

Also that statement of less less less, my daughter told me mom, do we have to go now? (Lena)

Couples explain that stereotypes are of all times. Many of the interviewed couples started their relationship after 2001, which made them unable to elaborate on the suggested change from before and after 2001. However, some couples explain that the tensions in the public realm around Islam in the Netherlands have impacted the way people approach their interreligious relationship. For instance, Senna explains that she thinks the questions that her father asked about her new relationship with someone from an Islamic country, were incited by what is shown in the media concerning Islam.

My dad did asks me those questions to check [...] and I noticed that indeed, those kind of images you get from the media and what you hear in society are yes... there. (Senna)

Even though the 9/11 rhetoric is well known to the couples as well as the current issues around Islam and ISIS, the couples explain they experienced much more effect from the national processes, rather than global issues. Much like Pim Fortuyn, the presence of Geert Wilders in the media is addressed by nine couples as influencing their relationship. For instance, Anna explains how the political presence of Geert Wilders strongly impacts her husband, herself and their daughter.

That Geert Wilders, he [my husband] is really troubled by that. That there are so many people that vote for him. It doesn't surprise him, but it touches him, and me too. Because who are they? Are they our neighbors from across the street? Are they my friends? That would mean that they hate my husband. That hurts us allot [...]“It might sound silly, but the idea that we need an escape route, that gets to me. (Anna)

The couples explain that the 9/11 terror attacks, or the current debates about ISIS in Syria and Iraq are less influential to the question people around them ask them about their relationship. The increase in negative reactions that the couple report are less related to global tensions, but mainly revolve around Dutch public figures that criticized Islam. For instance, Omar explains how for him, the political presence of Pim Fortuyn was a changing point.

Yes you can say that it was allot less polarizing. Allot less issues and tensions than now. 2001, was not that I thought of this is an Islam before and an Islam after, but I really had it with Fortuyn.

There it started to live. Their politics started saying, Islam is a retarded religion. and the Riff is a ridiculous clan. [...] he was really cutting me short with that. (Omar)

Not only the couples themselves are watching television. Their surroundings view the different opinions and public debates on television. Lena explains that she is most bothered by people that have seen something on television that is negative, and in some way relation to either Islam, Muslims or even an Arabic country. For instance, when she came to work and visited a client that had watched a program about a Turkish man that kidnapped his children, the client talked to her about this program, which made Lena feel as if the client was referring to her husband, trying to warn her for the sake of her children.

I was with a client and she Omar, 'Oh I had to think of you, I was watching a program about a Turkish man that kidnaped his children', and I thought, oh yes, of course. (Lena)

Other couples agree that television is one of the strongest instigators of fear for Islam, which the couples deal with in terms of questions and reactions from people whom have watched the news or certain programs in which Islam is portrayed negatively. According to Daisy, the problem is not that there is little positive to share about Islam, but that these items never reach the news. Most people that ask insulting questions, have hardly ever met a Muslim, and get all their information from programs on television. In sum, television seems the most prominent way in which the public debates enter the household of the interreligious couple. It is a confronting moment, at which what is shown oftentimes leads to discussion which either unites or divides the couples.

In sum, television news broadcasts are seemingly the place where religion and culture are framed, stereotypes are created and provides the means through which these stereotypes are presented to the public. Literature suggests that these broadcasts create 'a sense of presence', which seems to be illustrated by the experiences of Sabir, as he and his partner were influenced by media images about Islam to such an extent, that it drove them apart; the media depictions 'entered' their lives, giving the idea that the negative way Muslims are depicted, can consider their personal relationship. However, where literature focused on the influence of global events such as Islamic State and the War on Terror, couples seem not to be influenced by these matters as much as national event concerning Dutch public figures. In addition, literature suggests that news broadcasts are a predictor for negative attitudes towards Islam. This can be so for some couples, but the majority of them seem to move in the opposite direction; they start to actively disagree with media depiction and defend Islam. If anything, it seems to generate a more overt positive reaction towards Islam, Muslims and the Arabic peninsula.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter set out to answer the question how interreligious couples experience influences from Dutch society within their relationship. Couples refer to the attitudes and questions they receive from their surroundings and the more severe experience of discrimination in relation to the Islamic background of the male partner and children. Both experiences shed light on the close relation between ethnicity, race,

gender and religion; all are connected and embodied by the relationship, but seem only to surface when being confronted with social constructs of Islam and Muslims and their prevailing stereotypes.

Literature suggests that television (in particular news broadcasts) are most influential towards creating and spreading these stereotypes, along with attitudes, judgements and negative behavior towards Islam. In accordance with these findings, media seems the central way through which the public discourse enters the relationship and effects the relationship between them and their surroundings. The visibility of the Dutch Islam-debate on television between 2004 and 2017, especially the visibility of Dutch political figures such as Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders were mentioned as most influential, either segregating or uniting the couples.

## 6. Dealing with Change

Managing an interreligious relationship is a challenge, especially in times at which societies embroilments gain increased access to the private lives of the couples (Collet, 2015). As described in Chapter five, Dutch public debates have ramifications for the relationship and advance the challenges the couples have to deal with. This chapter brings to light how interreligious couples manage to create a successful relationship by answering the question; Which strategies do the couples apply to deal with these influences? During the interviews, the couples were asked about which strategies they apply to deal with their religious differences and how they adapt practices to deal with the influences from society as experienced in their relationship. First, this chapter provides different strategies that couples can use in order to deal their religious differences in relation to societies influences, suggested by Sterckx (2014), McCarthy (2007) and Collet (2015). Second, this chapter delineates three trends that are distinguished in the interviews. First, couples take matters into their own hands; to deal with prevailing negative stereotypes about Islam, they create an individualized meaning of the phenomenon, which disconnects Islam from the public discourse. It is discussed how the couples practice this process of meaning giving. Second, some couples have created their own form of Islam, called PolderIslam. It is discussed what this concept entails and how this contemporary form of Islam is practiced in the domestic sphere. Third, several couples express that even though they are religiously mixed, solving their religious struggles is less related to religion than one might expect. It is discussed how the couples navigate through their religiously related challenges, often without addressing any aspect of religion. Last, with ups and downs the couples have developed new rituals or identified practices that foster the creation of acceptance or can diminish the segregation between their communities. It is discussed how the couples reinvent the marriage rituals, use food to cross the language barrier, emphasize their partners 'western' habits and how the social status of the women can be used to negate stereotypes.

### 6.1 Strategies to Overcoming Societal Influences

Literature suggests a variety of ways in which mixed couples -be it religiously, culturally or ethnically- deal with their differences. Although literature does not provide specific navigation strategies focused on interreligious marriage in relation to handling influences from society, strategies explored by Sterckx (2014), McCarthy (2007) and Collet (2015), do to a certain extent focus on interreligious couples and dealing with influences from society as delineated in table 4.

Theme and scholar	Suggested strategies
<b>Creating acceptance within the couples surroundings through 'emancipation strategies'</b> (Sterckx, 2014)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ <i>Erasing differences</i> Overlook differences and find similarities, or to downplay inequalities and focus on equalities.</li> <li>▲ <i>Flatten-out of inequalities</i> For instance, by conversion, gaining more education or revise the task division between men and women. This fosters acceptance, but doesn't foster cultural integration.</li> <li>▲ <i>Network trait theory</i></li> </ul>



	Lower the dependency on family, and/or exchange the family network for a network of friends which are supportive of the relationship.
<p><b>Domestic strategies in dealing with a pluralist society</b> (McCarthy, 2007)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ <i>Deep tolerance</i> Deep levels of engagement with the other tradition, welcoming those moments of creativity, recognition, and social joy that such struggle allows.</li> <li>▲ <i>Flexible code-switching</i> Learning about each other's religions in considerable depth is central to the success of code-switching: reinterpretation of traditions and being religiously literate in multiple traditions</li> <li>▲ <i>Creative recombination of religious belief, practice, and identity</i> Couples dismantle and reconstruct their inherited ritual, symbolic, and doctrinal traditions, as well as their personal religious identities. Like in wedding traditions, transforming rituals into hybrid events.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Conjugal modes of adjustment</b> (Collet, 2015)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▲ Adopting the dominant culture The couple can adopt the culture of the majority/dominant culture while keeping the attributes and practices of the other partner's original culture down to a minimum.</li> <li>▲ Adopting the minority culture The couple can adopt the minority partner's culture, while keeping the attributes and practices of the other partner's original culture down to a minimum.</li> <li>▲ Balance and reciprocal exchange The couple seeks to balance the relationship that combines various elements of both cultures in a reciprocal exchange. The three modes of conjugal adjustment take into account the cultural, religious, and social attributes of each partner.</li> </ul>

**Table 4. Strategies to Overcoming Influences from Society in Interreligious Marriages**

In her research, Sterckx (2014) suggests three what she calls ‘emancipation strategies’, to deal with religious differences and create acceptance from surroundings. She highlights the strategy of seeking and showing of the common ground that exists between the partners as the best way to create a happy marriage, as well as acceptance from the couple’s surrounding. As Sterckx states: “Mixed marriages come into existence and maintain to exist when the partners succeed to convince themselves and their surroundings that there is enough common ground for a successful marriage” (Sterckx, 2014, p. 233). McCarthy (2007) suggests three strategies that will foster abilities of interreligious couples to navigate in a pluralist society. She focusses on the adaption and reinvention of language, identity and rituals. As McCarthy states: “As microcosms of pluralist society, interfaith families reveal distinctive strategies for managing religious difference with respect, integrity, and creative problem-solving” (McCarthy, 2007, p. 1). Collet (2015) describes how conjugal modes of adjustments provide the right balance for interreligious marriages in today’s influential environment where religious tensions run high. She reflects specifically on the segregation between the two involved communities in society at large, of which one belongs to the dominant majority and holds a higher social status, and one partner belongs to the minority culture. Choosing to conform to either one side, either the majority or the minority culture, could foster the increase of acceptance from one community, however, will create a distance towards the other community involved. The third option Collet (2015) proposes is to find a balance between the two ‘sides’, equalizing both identities of the partners involved. As Collet states, “the marriage market in a given country articulates endogamous or exogamous transnational strategies which combine socioeconomic and family rationales, not forgetting love” (Collet, 2015, p. 140).

## 6.2 Reshaping Religion

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Islam, Christianity and (post)Christianity are often linked to certain stereotypes or prejudices in the public discourse. For instance, 'Islam' is often linked to the idea that women are being suppressed, and '(post)Christianity' in Dutch society can be connected to the idea that the values of the West are wasteful and careless. Couples explain that these social constructs of Islam and post Christianity provide an oversimplified, and distorted image of both lifestyles, specifically in relation to Islam. The public discourse does not represent the way the couple perceives Islam themselves. The question is, how do couples deal with such negative stigma's and the essentialization of Islam in their relationship? One of the strategies couples employ is that they consciously do not embrace the social construct of Islam as provided by the public discourse; they purposefully distance themselves from this formulation of Islam and Muslims. Rather, they construct a new, personalized definition of what Islam constitutes. This process of 'looking beyond the label' provides a more positive, in-depth and complex definition of Islam, and excludes the stigmatized characterizations that are ascribed to the phenomenon. In other words, the couples develop individualized definitions of their religion, and in a sense, individualize, reestablish or 'reshape' Islam. This process becomes visible when the couples are asked to define Islam in their relationship; the meaning given to Islam by the couples is significantly different than the public discourse concerning Islam, as depicted in table 5.

Society's ideas of Islam	Couple's ideas of Islam
<b>Dutch public discourse</b>	<i>Means finding meaning in life</i>
<i>Linked to terrorism, violence and a lack of freedom</i>	
<i>Linked to suppression of women</i> <i>Islam is restrictive in its nature by its many rules</i>	<i>Islam means finding peace and tranquility within oneself</i>
<b>Islamic community discourse</b>	<i>Islam is spiritual and personal</i>
<i>Islam is praying and fasting</i>	<i>Islam is an important part of the partners or children's heritage</i>
<i>Islam is a certain dress code</i>	<i>Understanding Islam provides a knowledge which is useful in today's world.</i>
<i>Islam is collective</i>	<i>Islam is guidance</i>

**Table 5. Differences Between the Societal Discourse of Islam and the Individualized Notions of Islam by Couples.**

This practice is given shape by the couples by actively discussing the stereotypes and prejudices they come across, and dismantle them. Lena explains in her household, stereotypes, but also different forms of discrimination are regularly discussed at the kitchen table.

Yes, we really have conversations about this. [...] we talk about the war in Syria, and the refugees that can come here. [...] actually, the news items are good items to start the conversation, especially during the elections. (Lena)

Stereotypes are not ignored or overlooked, but are actively dealt with in the household. Conversations cover religious differences, but also ethnic and gender issues. Assumptions are challenged by partners through educating themselves, each other and their children, showing and explaining that these stereotypes need to be battled, and do not represent their family, their friends or other Muslims.

Next to this 'stepping away' from the public discourse surrounding Islam from a western perspective, the couples use this technique to distance themselves from the public discourse surrounding Islam in Islamic communities. When defining what Islam is, or what it constitutes to be a Muslim, the latter often tend to put less emphasis on the spiritual aspects of Islam, and are more focused on the performance of ritual practices of Islam. One can think of prayers, fasting, a certain style of dress and specifically, Islamic wedding traditions.

Much like the conceptualization of Islam in the Dutch public discourse, the couples step away from the traditional meanings attached to Islam provided by the Islamic community. As depicted in table 4, couples relate Islam to spiritual notions of rest, tranquility, finding peace and being oneself. As Anna explains: "Look, he gets energy from it, he becomes peaceful and he feels happy with it, yes then everything is good." In addition, learning about Islam is actively connected by the couples to more cultural rather than religious notions, such as emphasizing the importance of heritage and the importance for children to know where they come from. Next to these spiritual and cultural associations, learning and gaining knowledge about Islam is not only done to increase religious piety, but is encouraged, by partners to each other and parents to their children, to become educated and skilled. For instance, learning the Arabic language is perceived as an expertise, which increases people's cross-cultural sensitivity or employability, which seems unrelated to religious motivations. Emphasizing and promoting these interpretations of Islam can foster the creation of acceptance of the relationship.

### 6.2.1 PolderIslam

In the process of creating an individualized meaning of Islam, two couples named a specific adaptation they made in their life and their marriage; they practice *PolderIslam*. A *polder* is a typical Dutch landscape, shaped by a piece of low-lying land which is reclaimed from the sea or a river and protected by dykes. This is a typical Dutch phenomenon. One could therefore loosely translate *PolderIslam* as a *Dutch form of Islam*. The Netherlands are recognized as a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, in which Muslims will have to develop their own understanding of their religiosity (Rietveld-van Wingerden et al., 2009). To accommodate Islamic heritage in Dutch society, particularly educated, young second and third generation Muslims practice different forms of *PolderIslam*. They balance their Islamic background, and cultivate their own religious identity, by focusing on individualization of religiosity and self-realization (Buitelaar, 2010). This style of practicing Islam is in accordance with the 'discussion-culture' of the Netherlands (Pels et al., 2009). On a practical level, a *Polder-Mosque* was founded in Amsterdam where men and women sit in one room. In addition, a new Muslim group is founded in 2008 called *Zenit*, which explicitly emphasizes Dutch citizenship among Muslims and recognizes the importance of creating a bond between Dutch secularists and Dutch Muslims (van Oudenhoven, 2009).

### 6.2.2 What can PolderIslam Mean in an Interreligious Marriage?

Adapting one's religious lifestyle to Dutch culture in the public sphere is one thing, but how does this play out in a domestic sphere? Omar is one of the Muslim partners who practices what he calls PolderIslam in his interreligious household.

But don't forget, through my experiences here, I also have my adaptations to Islam. They don't call it PolderIslam for nothing. (Omar)

Omar frames PolderIslam as a contemporary way of practicing Islam, that is in sync with his Dutch context. He explains that in his marriage to a Dutch Christian woman, he practices PolderIslam in his household. For him, it is about letting go of the strict interpretations of Islam, and critically adapting your faith to Dutch society.

So PolderIslam for me is, that you let go of the orthodox Islam, so how the prophet lived. Because he as well, for his time, was living progressively. He came there with a religion, that tried to fix the problems he saw in Judaism and Christianity. At that moment in time, it was a supplementary, constructive addition to society there to mend the gaps in society. (Omar)

For Omar, this does not mean that he does not follow the Islamic traditions or in any way compromises this faith in his family. He is practicing Islam the way it should be practiced in his eyes; by following the Prophets Muhammed's progressive lifestyle, complimenting the environmental context, rather than changing it. For instance, to practice Islam one should not copy of Islamic practices of Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia. Islam should be a practice through which you discover for yourself in relation to your significant other.

Especially now, that Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism is feeling like they are starting to lose influence and are really trying to attract those wondering youth, is it so important to show them what Islam is, what it contains. Not because what they do in Saudi is wrong, but that's there. There it works well. We shouldn't change that. But here in the Netherlands and here in Europe, you have to understand that if you want to participate in a good manner, with the norms and values here in the Netherlands, that you understand really well, that you are living in a country where Islam is not the dominant religion. That's where I lose a lot of my fellow believers, they go back to the original teachings. While I say, no, dare to swim. Dare to let go of the brink, swim, don't go back to the side you came from but continue. It's all unfamiliar and scary, I came loose from God, that feeling you know. But that's not the case. Have faith in your faith. (Omar)

Not all couples address their interpretations and practices of Islam in the Netherlands as PolderIslam, but there are some similarities among the couples that refer to this concept. One example is that almost all the couples celebrate Christmas, and adapt this ritual to an extent in which both the Christian, as the Islamic traditions are to a certain extent celebrated. For instance, couples do have a Christmas tree in December, which is framed by the Muslim partner as a non-religious ritual. On the other hand, the couple won't have a Christmas stall, because this is related to the celebration of Jesus as the son of God, which would compromise the Islamic faith too much for the Muslim partners.

In sum, PolderIslam is a Dutch type of Islam, which allows Muslims to practice their religion in a Dutch context. It is a practice of constant rediscovery and reinvention of rituals and meanings behind dogma's. This practice is incited by the interreligious marriage, and helps the couple navigate their religious differences in their household and in relation to their children who did not grow up in a typical Islamic household, but still have to make sense of their family's Islamic religious practices. PolderIslam is seemingly used as a practical tool to maneuver between Dutch/secularist/Christian and Islamic culture and religion. The process redefining Islam, seems to develop by first, distancing oneself from public discourses and negative stereotypes from both the (post)Christian and the Islamic communities. And second, by reshaping the meaning of Islam on three levels; a spiritual level (focus on finding peace and tranquility in oneself), a cultural level (recognizing and supporting the importance of one's heritage), and on a self-enhancement level (encouraging literacy in Islamic traditions to develop a set of skills related to cultural sensitivity). In practice, this can take the form of PolderIslam, in which Islam is reinterpreted and adapted to the Dutch context.

### 6.3 Stepping Away from Religion

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the couples experience the societal embroilments about interreligious co-existence, and the supposed (in)possibilities thereof in their relationship. Curiously, when it comes to dealing with religious differences in their relationship, the couples don't necessarily discuss this as a religious issue. Rather, couples tend to stay away from religious argumentation when discussing religious issues.

For instance, when Sabir feels that the dress of his girlfriend is too short, and in Islam, he feels this is inappropriate, he will not tell his girlfriend that the Quran tells her not to dress that way, he keeps it personal, and explains to her why he himself finds it nicer if she would wear more clothes.

If I think my girlfriend is wearing too short of a dress... I would just say I don't like it. I wouldn't tell her what the Quran says about it, I will just tell her I like a longer dress, just because I like it. (Sabir)

Or when Adil wanted to have his son circumcised and his wife didn't, he did not provide any religious arguments to his wife, but instead argued that it is more hygienic for boys to be circumcised. The latter leads to the understanding, that the couples generally do not talk about religion, when they talk about religious issues. Next to the limited religious argumentation in religiously related quarrels, some couples explain that they don't focus on religion at all in their relationship. For instance, Omar describes how his marriage with a Christian woman made him able to look further than the stereotypes about religion. In his case, this is especially the case for the stereotypes about Muslims and non-Muslims.

When people meet, they immediately ask, why can't you shake hand with women? They immediately label the person as Muslim, and the Muslims labels the other as not Muslim. From that point the conversation starts. They don't see the person behind it. And I notice, that because I'm in an interreligious marriage, that I don't do that anymore. It's the same as when you live alongside a highway, and you don't hear the traffic anymore. So, I don't have trouble shifting

between people, because that's how I live at home too. And I wish people could feel that too.  
(Omar)

Omar describes that he has become accustomed to interreligious differences through his marriage. The fact that this interreligious difference is now a part of his daily life, allowed him stop focusing on religious differences and look beyond the initial labels ascribed to Christian or moreover non-Muslims. In others words; see the person behind the religion. Omar's example is symbolic for the way other couples frame religious differences in their relationship. Most of the couples explain that their marriage allowed them to see the person first, and the religion second, not only in their marriage, but also in their surroundings. As Omar describes; "Because I'm married to Wilma, I notice that I like people, and respect them because of who they are. Religion or no religion, it doesn't play a role."

Putting these strategies in relation to the strategies proposed in the literature, it seems there are a few overlaps, and some dissimilarities. Both strategies 1) reshaping Islam and 2) stepping away from religion are slightly different from the strategies proposed by Sterckx (2014), McCharthy (2007) and Collet, (2015). There are signs that indicate that the couples emphasize their similarities to the outside world, and to some extent of couples that 'flatten out' their inequalities as suggested by Sterckx (2014). However, during the interviews there were no cases found in which couples applied the network trait theory. Every couple seemingly maintains their relations to their families. The strategies suggested by Collet (2015) couldn't be identified, except for the process of balancing and seeking for reciprocal exchange. None of the couples seem to have chosen to either adopt the dominant majority or the culture of the minority partner. The strategies that best represent the results from the interviews are those of McCarthy (2007). First, the couples seemingly, practice a deep sense of tolerance for their partners religious and cultural traditions, by learning about each other's religious backgrounds and sharing positive discussions and debates on the matter. Second, both the strategies 'flexible code switching' and 'creative recombination of religious belief', seems to find most commonalities with the results from the interviews. Couples debate and reinvent their religious language, beliefs and rituals. However, the results from the interviews partially fall outside of the scope of the suggested strategies. Namely, McCarthy's (2007) strategy of 'flexible code switching' is limited to the partners educating themselves in the religious jargon of the partner's convictions. However, the results show that couples do not only adopt the religious jargons of the partner, but in addition, together create their own individualized meanings of the religion in question. They distance themselves from the public discourse and associate, specifically Islam, with a new spiritual, cultural and social meanings. Secondly, what is not considered by McCarthy (2007), but what the results do show, is that the couples intentionally move away from religious jargon and find another common language outside of religious argumentation, as a strategy to defy the negative stigma's related to Islam.

#### **6.4 Other Practical Strategies**

Next to creating new meanings for religion, adapting practices and stepping away from religion, the couples employ a number of other methods to overcome their challenges relating to how their relationship is perceived in society at large.

*Marriage as a seal*

As an interreligious couple, the biggest ritual both partners have to reinvent is their marriage. This is a great endeavor, but at the same time provides an opportunity to accommodate their families and friends and at the same time gain their acceptance. The form, the dress code and the formal ritual are well thought through and planned, to do justice to both religions, but above all, family traditions. As mentioned in the previous chapter, interreligious relationships are sometimes perceived as temporary, here-today-gone-tomorrow type of relationships that are not to be taken serious. Next to the religious requirement to be married before entering a relationship, the desire of the couple for their relationship to be taken serious builds onto the wish to be married. The marriage ritual is mentioned as one of the most important rituals that embodies the gravity of the relationship, and communicates this to the surroundings of the couple. The marriage can be compared with a seal, which symbolizes the assurance to the surroundings of the couple that the relationship is serious, genuine and is spent with the intention to last a lifetime. When this message is communicated, acceptance and trust can grow more easily, and the willingness to 'like' the new partner increases. For instance, Suzanna explained that she was seen as a 'hooker', by the Islamic family of her partner, before they were married. It was not until she married her husband, that she was accepted into the family, and stereotypes about Dutch women started to fade away. The trick is, as the couples explain, to accommodate both religions into one marriage ritual. Some couples could do that with the help of religious clerisy. For instance, Tessa and Hamid got married in a Church with the blessings of both an Imam and a priest, who worked together creating one marriage ritual which accommodated both Islam and Christianity's traditions. Suzanna and Mo did the same thing, and held a Christian wedding ritual as well as an Islamic ritual in a Mosque, and do add up to it, they invited a Jewish singer to perform there.

In sum, couples can use the marriage ritual to demonstrate their intentions and to express their seriousness. The marriage is a message to the couple's environment that they are going to stick together. This seriousness sometimes leads surroundings to feel the need to look beyond certain stereotypes and accept the new partner. Some couples express that their marriage ritual itself is constructed to embody both religions. The interreligious marriage ritual is then the moment at which the public is introduced to the private. The marriage ritual shows the couple's environment how the couple's themselves practice their differences in their private relationship. It is a chance to openly demonstrate how interreligious relationships can accommodate both religions and foster consideration and understanding from both sides of the family.

*Food as a universal language*

Sometimes, in-laws do not speak the same language as the new partner or one of them experiences trouble expressing themselves correctly. This can hinder the creation of a connection or the process of gaining acceptance and trust. Some couples explain that a simple but effective method to overcome difference or distrust, is to jointly eat a meal. For example, Lena explains that her family in law do speak any Dutch, and during family meetings, women sit away from men in accord with Islamic tradition. Her husband cannot translate for them and she sits with the women that do not speak her language. Lena

explains that even though she often feels like a 'vase', because she cannot say anything and just sits in a corner of the room, she feels she does take part in the meeting and gains respect for the family simply by participating in the meal. In this sense, food is a universal language and sharing a meal is cross culturally understood as a domestic and intimate tradition. Participation in this tradition seems to lead to an increased acceptance, without speaking a word.

#### Emphasize *the 'westernness'*

To compensate for the images that are provided through the media about Muslims, the couples, especially the women, tend to emphasize the 'westernness' of the Muslim partner. As Senna explains,

Yes I don't really think about it, but I know there are images in the media and then I think like, yes, just to provide an image of how he is, I just give a few typical things. And yes, I think that I do that because people usually have this image when it comes to Islam, and yes, I then say, [...] he does drink and does eat pork. (Senna)

Senna explains that because there are Islam-critical images in Dutch media, she feels a pressure to emphasize to her surroundings that her partner is not an orthodox Muslim, and does not practice Islam 'that much' either. Senna explains that when she introduces her partner, she almost immediately provides a few stereotypical Islamic traditions that her partner does not adhere to, such as the fact that he does drink alcohol and does eat pork.

Yes, they like ask, Is he Muslim? And then I say well he was raised Muslim but he doesn't believe anymore. And he just eats pork meat. I do say things like that a lot, I always say it immediately. (Senna)

Senna's experiences illustrate what is addressed by other women, they feel a need to justify their choice for being with a Muslim partner. They attempt to accentuate the non-Islamic characteristic of their Muslim partners and at the same time understate his Islamic habits and practices.

#### *The exemplarity status*

To fight the stereotypes about Muslims, two women provide a solution that is related to their own status in society. Lena works at a neonatology department at a hospital, which is generally a respected job. She explains that when she has the chance, she informs her conversation partner about her relationship with a Muslim partner, to demonstrate to her conversation partner that women in her position consciously make the choice to be with a Muslim partner, that she is a well-respected woman and that people shouldn't prejudge their relationship.

When I was working at neonatology, when relatively a lot of Moroccan-Dutch parents came, I took every chance to tell people that I have a Moroccan Berber man. I did that consciously to 'plant a seed'. To open their frame of mind. That the world won't seize to exist when their child marries outside of the community. And I used (not misused I feel), my position as a neonatologist, the status. (Lena)

In another example, Lena explains that she was asked by some members from the Muslim community to address the issue of discrimination in the media, as mentioned in section 4.3. She was asked to notify the



Dutch population through the media, because her position in society and her appearance as a white Dutch woman who addresses Muslim discrimination, would have more effect and impact than when people from the Muslim community themselves would address the issue.

I reported the case with the police, and people around me asked me, would you please go to the news and television with this because you are white and you are not wearing a veil. They will listen to you. (Lena)

The example that Lena provides demonstrates how women use their position as a respected role model in society, first, to incite a more nuanced image of her relationship with a Muslim partner and second, to address instances of discrimination.

Putting these four practical strategies in relation to the strategies proposed in the literature, there seems to be a partial overlap of findings. First, the use of the marriage ritual as a demonstration of the possibility to combine religious practices, overlaps with McCarthy's (2007) strategy 'creative recombination of belief, practices and identity'. Findings show that both religions are represented in the marriage ritual to communicate the achievability of living in a religiously 'hybrid' condition to the surroundings of the couple. However, it is left unaddressed by McCarthy (2007) that the ritual can also be used to indicate and communicate the seriousness of the relationship. Couples use the marriage to express the sincerity and earnest of their relationship, by entering the marital bond, in the hope to receive more acknowledgement for and acceptance of their relationship. Second, in relation food, McCarthy (2007) and Collet (2015) do not address the issue of eating together as a ritual to further acceptance. Sterckx (2014) does address the preparation of meals together as an event through which friendships can develop between different communities. However, she does not describe it as a separate strategy to further acceptance as was found in the results of the interviews. However, the ritual of eating food together has been researched by anthropologists (Mintz & Du Bios, 2002), however seemingly not yet in the context of interreligious marriages to further acceptance. Third, emphasizing western traits of the Muslim partner is addressed by Sterckx (2014) under the 'erasing difference' strategy. Here, both the findings and literature overlap, particularly indicating the idea of the 'performance' the couples give, to assure to the outside world that the partner is not a 'bad' Muslim. Finally, the usage of the high(er) status of one of the partners involved in an interreligious marriage as a way to gain trust, recognition and respect, partially falls under Sterckx's (2014) 'flatten out of inequalities' strategy. However, where Sterckx refers to the intention to create equality between the partners themselves, the findings show that couples don't try to create equality among themselves, but rather use this technique to enhance the status of their relationship in regard to their surroundings. They demonstrate through promoting the higher social status of one of the partners involved, that their relation is serious and willful; it is not transient 'puppy-love', but a well thought through relationship, which earns respect.

## 6.5 Conclusion

Literature suggests several strategies interreligious couples apply to deal with their religious differences. However, it does not provide specific strategies applied to deal with societal influences. Results delineate

two main 'coping' strategies, which are focused on combatting stereotypes and the essentialization of religion. First, couples reinvent or reshape the notion of Islam by distancing themselves from the public discourse and actively ascribing more in depth characteristics to the notion of Islam. In that regard, couples adapt their domestic situations and their manner of practicing Islam to the Dutch context by practicing PolderIslam. Second, couples do not only intentionally step away from the public discourse, but also from the entire religious discourse, leaving interreligious marriages to concern 'religion' less than expected.

## 7. Conclusion & Discussion

2017, the Netherlands; religious differences and (the impossibilities of) interreligious co-existence seem to be a central theme to the public discourse. It is linked to a strong split in society, with on the one hand, Muslim communities, and on the other the (post)Christian/non-Muslim communities. Issues such as islamophobia, populism and segregation increase the wedge between the communities and are potentially threatening social cohesion. In addition, society's embroilments are likely to find their way to the private sphere, influencing micro level relationships between Muslim-(post)Christian interreligious love relations. Research generally focused on how religion -as a private matter- influences the public realm. This research turns this question around, and examines how the public influences the private; how influences from society enter the relationship of Muslim-(post)Christian couples, in which situations they 'pop up' and how the couples deal with these situations.

### *Why the Netherlands?*

Interreligious marriages in the Netherlands have been researched before, but times changed and so did interreligious marriages. Where in other countries research quickly picked up on the focus-shift from Catholic-Protestant marriages towards Muslim- (post)Christian marriages, in the Netherlands little to no research is conducted in this area after 2001. This, while the twenty-first century brought about new challenges for the couples in question. They are confronted with a changing environment in which Muslim-(post)Christian relations are increasingly under pressure. In addition, in comparison with other European countries, the Netherlands used to have an outstanding reputation as a hospitable nation concerning cultural and religious diversity. However, due to the rise of right-wing populism and islamophobia, society hardened and Dutch hospitality is no longer a given. This transformation has been unparalleled within the EU, and makes a Dutch interreligious marriage a test case for tolerance.

### *How do couples navigate through Dutch society?*

To understand how interreligious couples in the Netherlands deal with their circumstances, eleven Muslim-(post)Christian couples were interviewed, of which all men were Muslims, and women were (post)Christians. They were asked how they experience Dutch society, and whether and how they noticed changes in their direct and indirect communities in the way they are approached as a couple. They were asked how society reaches them and through which means, and which strategies they employ to deal with these influences.

- *Experience*

The bigger part of the controversy of entering an interreligious marriage, can't be found in the (simple) practicalities such as drinking or not drinking alcohol, or the amounts of Church or Mosque attendance. Rather, they are situated around issues concerning gender equality. Most reactions and questions from surroundings arise around the social status and the position of men and women in the family. About norms and values related to presupposed male/Muslim authoritarian or patriarchal behavior and around assumed female/(post)Christian submissiveness and her passive position in the family. And from the Islamic community's side; about the assumption of female carelessness and disregard of religious pioussness.

A more severe experience than being exposed to questions and remarks is undergoing or being confronted with discrimination. Particularly Dutch (post)Christian women seem shocked to experience forms of cultural or religious discrimination concerning their (Islamic) partner or children. The question of race seems related to interreligious marriages; when it comes to how couples experience society's embroilments in their relationship, interreligious marriages are difficult to separate from intercultural, or interethnic marriages; they characterize society in all its complexity.

These are issues that concern presumptions, based on negative prejudices and stereotypes present in the public discourse. Literature suggests that media plays a large role in establishing these stereotypes, and likewise would embody the manner through which interreligious couples are confronted with these stereotypes. In that regard, Islam, Muslims and the Arab world are at the center of attention on the world's stage. Particularly during the last sixteen years, global media covered stories about the 9/11 terror attacks, the war on terror and lately about Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. All these events have had their ramifications onto how Muslims are perceived, particularly in the West. The Netherlands are no exception. Even though the Netherlands had their own events which found their way to national media, such as the murder of Theo van Gogh, and the political presence of Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders, one clear trend can be identified: the framing of Islam is mostly negative.

Results show that, media appears to be the largest transmitter through which societies embroilments enter the interreligious households. Especially through the daily ritual of watching the news broadcasts on television. The news items that are most impactful primarily consider national public figures, rather than international affairs. In other words, broadcasts about Pim Fortuyn and Geert Wilders leave a bigger impression on the couples and their surroundings than newscasts about the War on Terror or Islamic State. Seemingly, proximity matters. Couples tend to either unite (use against the world), or segregate (the differences seem too great to overcome), as effects of watching the news together.

- *Strategies*

As couples are exposed to stereotypical prejudices, specifically concerning the Islamic/Arabic background of the male partner and its supposed incompatibility with the West, couples find different ways to deal with these issues. Two main (in)cognizant strategies are identified; redefining/reshaping Islam (inventing

new forms of practicing religion) and stepping away from religion (adopting a new discourse, separated from religion) Their details are delineated in table 6.

<b>Strategies to navigate an interreligious relation in Dutch society</b>		
<i>What</i>	<i>Why</i>	<i>How</i>
<b>1. Reshaping Islam</b>	<p>1) The social construction of Islam in the public discourse does not represent the meaning Islam had in an interreligious marriage. Couples create a more in-depth and layered definition and related practices of Islam than the mainstream conceptualities of Islam in society at large. In practice this manifests itself in adapted forms of homemaking.</p> <p>This reshaped definition seems to foster acceptance and understanding from both the non-Muslim partner as their surroundings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ By distancing oneself from the public discourse.</li> <li>▪ By associating Islam with 1) a spiritual meaning of Islam related to finding peace and tranquility in oneself through Islam, 2) a cultural meaning of Islam related to the ones cultural heritage, and 3) a meaning related to self enhancement through creating skills such as cross-cultural sensitivity.</li> <li>▪ Practicing PolderIslam; adapting Islamic thought and practices to the Dutch (secular/post-Christian) context.</li> </ul>
<b>2. Stepping away from religion</b>	<p>1) Consummating an interreligious marriage demonstrates that discourses in interreligious situations concern a variety of issues, of which religious difference is only a relatively small part.</p> <p>2) Within an interreligious marriage, partners practice varied activities, many of which are unrelated to faith traditions. This allows them to look beyond religion and experience the person instead of a religious label.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <u>Creating a common language</u> outside of theological or religious discourses.</li> <li>▪ <u>Undertake activities</u> outside of faith related issues. In a marriage, its love that motivates, in a neighborhood it's the common goal of cleaning up the street.</li> </ul>

**Table 6. Overview of Applied Strategies by the Interviewed Couples**

The challenges the couples face are largely created through the framing of Islam in (national) media. Where the media provides society at large with a simplified and (oftentimes) negative image and meaning of Islam, the couples create their individualized meaning for both spiritual and practical Islam. They do not only use this remodeled discourse within their own households, but attempt (as far as possible) to expand the knowledge of this 'different' approach towards Islam to their families and their broader surroundings. It seems that the direct surroundings of the couples (their direct family and close friends) take over or share the 'reinvented' approach towards Islam and accept and cherish the interreligious relationship. It seems more difficult for the couples to reach weaker ties (such as distant family and colleagues) with this message.

### *Limitations*

Outcomes show that the results are specific to the Dutch context, relating mainly to Dutch public figures and their depiction on national news broadcasts. Results will therefore be difficult to generalize towards other Western countries and moreover to a non-western context. Next, most participants who were interviewed established their relationships after 2001. This makes it difficult to truly grasp the pre/post 2001 comparison.

### *Contributions to research*

By creating an understanding of how public dilemmas reach the private sphere of interreligious marriages and shapes their relationships, the academic debate is enriched in four ways. First, by instead of on focusing on Catholic-Protestant marriages, this research introduces an understanding of Muslim-(post)Christian marriages in the Netherlands, which has not been researched in this context since 2001. Second, by providing a contemporary overview of how interreligious couples navigate (both discursively as practically) their relationship. This resulted in two additional strategies interreligious couples apply to deal with the negative public discourse surrounding Islam in the Netherlands, namely, 'reshaping Islam' and 'stepping away from the religious discourse'. Both aspects partially fill the research gap that came to existence since 2001 in the Netherlands. Third, where research has generally focused on cultural or immigrational differences between marriage partners in the Netherlands, this research is new in the sense that its primary focus is religious difference and explores the uniqueness of this variable in a relationship. Fourth, the results show that the practice of viewing televisions together is an influential aspect in an interreligious marriage. This praxis has not yet been researched in the context of interreligious-relationships and therewith provides a preliminary inquiry into this seemingly influential aspect in a relationship. The outcomes are relevant on a societal level, first, because it demonstrates how particularly national media and public figures influence private settings. This highlights the power and influence of public figures and shines a critical light onto the responsibility the people in question regarding their position as role models in society. Second, because it provides an overview of hands-on interreligious negotiation experiences, which can serve as reference material to assist policy development in the field of interreligious co-existence in society.

### *Recommendations*

The boundary breaking position of interreligious couples hold much know-how on how to function in an interreligious setting and how to navigate through a society as a mixed couple. After the completion of this research the following recommendations can be made:

- Results show that it matters whether the couple is married or unmarried, or does or doesn't have children, for the way they are approached/accepted by their surroundings. Further research in this area should therefore take these factors into account, and preferably follow couples

throughout different stages in their relationship to effectively compare the impact of such landmarks in a relationship.

- Practicing PolderIslam is mentioned as one of the strategies to cope with controversies around Islam in an interreligious household. Although research has focused on PolderIslam, its function in an interreligious relationship is not researched yet. Studying his practice could provide new insight in how to navigate particularly stigma's around Islam, in an interreligious household. Further research should focus on researching PolderIslam, its specific traits and its effects on the practice of *homemaking* in interreligious relations.
- Statistically, all immigrants from Morocco and Turkey are registered in the Netherlands as Muslims. However, when considering the categories Christian (adhering to Christianity) and Post-Christian (being brought up in a country with Judeo-Christian roots and adhering to a more spiritual notion of religion) one should consider the possibility of 'Dutch Post-Muslim-hood'; being raised in an Islamic setting, but not/partially believe in Islamic dogma or adhere to Islamic traditions. Further research should focus on exploring the possibility of this (new) phenomenon and the extent to which mixed relationships influence or possibly create this 'posterior' form of Islam.
- Although contentious, experiencing discrimination based on religious grounds, can lead to some more positive outcomes; it incites knowledge seeking, discussion and critical reflection. It provokes couples to talk and create an understanding of each other's religious devotions and their traditional backgrounds. Seemingly, this is a more well thought through process than the romantic idea of 'us against the world'; it developed through making an effort and taking critical considerations. This relates to the idea that Islamic State and the horrific acts carried out in the name of Islam by this terrorist organization, is 'one the best things' that could happen to Islam and the world wide Muslim community; it motivates many (young) Muslims read the Quranic sources for the first time in their lives, as they became curious to know whether 'their religion really says that', creating a well thought through, personal reflection on both Islamic and cultural practices. Controversially, this is also a dangerous process, since it also leads some young Muslims towards the path of radicalization. As for the interreligious marriages, for some couples, being motivated by the critical public discourse, talking about the religious differences can lead to unification, but can also lead towards the process segregation since after scrutinizing, differences seem too big to be overcome. Little research has focused on the positive outcomes of experiencing discrimination in interreligious marriages. This can be a subject to further research, exploring the dynamics that create unification between religious others.

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# Appendix I

Call for Couples

3 mei 2017

2 reacties

Het interreligieus samenleven in Nederland staat soms onder spanning. Dat moet volgens Bakker beter kunnen. Zij ziet gemixte stelletjes als een soort *on the ground experts* van het interreligieus samen-zijn. Britt Bakker wil beschrijven hoe gemixte stelletjes (misschien met vallen en opstaan) hun eigen 'strategieën' ontwikkelen, en of de bredere samenleving hiervan kan leren.

Bakker wil naar aanleiding van haar onderzoek later de resultaten breder delen in bijvoorbeeld een debat of lezing. Ze doet op Nieuw Wij de volgende oproep:

"Sta jij ervoor open om (het mag ook anoniem) je ervaringen te delen? Dan nodig ik je bij dezen uit (met partner of alleen) voor een kopje koffie en een goed gesprek! Ben je gewoon geïnteresseerd of ken je mensen die wellicht open staan om ervaringen te delen, neem dan ook gerust per mail contact met me op.

Hartelijke groet,  
Britt Bakker.