Political Conversion to Islam Among the European Right

GULNAZ SIBGATULLINA AND TAHIR ABBAS

Abstract

This paper introduces three cases of politicians from Western European countries who in the past have been affiliated with populist parties and recently converted to Islam. This article examines how an act of conversion to Islam enables these politicians to continue advancing their agendas. We argue that the public announcement of conversion allows these individuals to transmit their conservative political program directly to their audiences, circumventing the autocracy of leaders of their respective populist parties. In the converts' rhetoric, Islam—universalized and freed from ethnocultural associations with Muslim minority communities—fulfils social and ethical functions abandoned by a "secularized" Christianity and, thereby, wages a struggle against cultural liberalism. We posit that conversion to Islam among politicians who have been previously associated with populist parties does not necessarily mean a 180-degree turn from outspoken anti-Muslim sentiments to fully embracing the culture of "the Muslim Other." Instead, it manifests a movement within the right of the political spectrum: from open anti-multiculturalism to cultural conservatism, from defining European identity as exclusively secular and rational to seeing it as inherently spiritual yet compatible with the Enlightenment ideas on rationalism.

Introduction

There has been a pivotal shift in how far-right and Islam-inspired forms of extremism are analyzed in scholarly works; researchers increasingly treat them not so much as oppositional forces, but as reciprocal and correlative threats. Recent findings indicate that a degree of synergy and convergence between the two is not uncommon, especially in activities

Gulnaz Sibgatullina, Amsterdam School for Regional, Transnational and European Studies, The University of Amsterdam the Netherlands, Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, The George Washington University, USA
g.r.sibgatullina@uva.nl
Tahir Abbas, The Institute of Security and Global Affairs, Leiden University, the Netherlands
t.abbas@fgga.leidenuniv.nl

undertaken by fringe movements.[1] Moreover, European converts to Islam, sometimes with prior links to far-right movements, tend to be overrepresented in home-grown jihadism.[2] In parallel, research indicates that the right-wing landscape has been transforming, with sections of the right constantly modifying their ideological programs to defy direct associations with fascism and extremism, though without becoming *per se* more inclusive in the process. That is, while far-right and populist movements today by and large reject liberal internationalism and multiculturalism, some groups adopt and operate within center-left discourses and reach out to audiences that they essentially exclude in practice.[3]

This paper aims to further illuminate the complex connections between the European right-wing movements and Islam and discusses how the adoption of Muslim identity may function as a politically strategic opportunity for European conservative forces. The study is grounded in the analysis of three case studies of prominent former populist politicians who converted to Islam. In this paper, we posit that although these converts publicly emphasize the "liberalization" of their political views, they continue to participate in discourses of authoritarianism, exclusivism, and supremacism. Their post-conversion narratives, we argue, continue to feed into a broader array of voices calling for the protection of national identities from further disintegration, arguably caused by multiculturalism, and against the ever-expanding spectrum of sexual and gender norms in Western liberal democracies.

The analysis presented in this paper follows three steps. We first provide a biographical profile of the three politicians; then, we place their discourses in the broader context of European New Right movements; and finally, the paper offers an analysis of the converts' perspectives on three major topics: (1) an impasse of the populist right; (2) secularism; and (3) a new possible religious paradigm for Western Europe. We conclude by arguing that in the cases analyzed, the conversion to Islam is inherently politicized, as it enables the converts to gain public visibility and further advance their conservative agenda. These actors selectively adopt spiritual and community norms found within the Islamic tradition to frame their critique of secularism as an ideology that suppresses religious identity and to show their disapproval of liberal tendencies within Christian churches. The converts, however, do not demonstrate attempts to engage with the numerous discussions facing European Muslim minorities, such as Islamophobia, alienation, and securitization, nor do they make meaningful efforts to address the influence of authoritarian nativism still present in their discourse.

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1 Tahir Abbas, *Islamophobia and Radicalisation: A Vicious Cycle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190083410.001.0001; Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2017); Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Madeleine Blackman, "Fluidity of the Fringes: Prior Extremist Involvement as a Radicalization Pathway," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1531545 ; Daniel Koehler, *From Traitor to Zealot: Exploring the Phenomenon of Side-Switching in Extremism and Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108918626.

2 E.g., Bart Schuurman, Peter Grol, and Scott Flower, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism: An Introduction," *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism — The Hague* 7, no. 3 (2016): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.19165/2016.2.03.

3 Tamir Bar-On, "Transnationalism and the French Nouvelle Droite," *Patterns of Prejudice* 45, no. 3 (2011): 199–223, https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2011.585013.

Data and methods

Case selection and research question

The paper focuses on three cases of conversion: Joram van Klaveren, an ex-member of the Dutch Party for Freedom (*Partij voor de Vrijheid*, *PVV*); Maxence Buttey, a former member of the French National Front party (*Front Nationale*, *FN*); and Artur Wagner, a serving member (as of 2019) of the German party Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland*, *AfD*). The data selection process was performed in three steps. First, we traced online media postings that reported on European right-wing politicians who had recently embraced Islam. From the seven-year period 2012 to 2019, we identified five cases of conversion. Following this, we collected textual and video material created by the three most outspoken of these converts and analyzed this material using a discourse analysis approach. Finally, from June–November 2019, we succeeded in reaching out to two of the three converts, Maxence Buttey and Artur Wagner, and conducted standardized one-hour, semi-structured interviews with each of them.

The three case studies constitute a somewhat limited basis for analysis, and we acknowledge that this poses a problem for the representativeness of our data: that is, the extent to which the conclusions we draw from these three cases can be viewed as characteristic of broader processes taking place in Western Europe, rather than simply manifestations of a marginal phenomenon. However, it is important to note that our analysis focuses on the converts' rhetoric, which has gained significant media attention and which taps into widespread anxieties related to immigration, multiculturalism, and secularization in contemporary societies in their respective countries. In this way, our analysis situates these converts within an extensive spectrum of voices that pose a challenge to liberal democracies in Western Europe. The political agenda inherent in these cases of conversion means these politicians should not be considered simply as part of the larger community of European converts to Islam; however, due to their embedding in broader exclusivist streams, neither should these cases be side-lined as instances of eccentric behavior. Instead, we suggest analyzing them as part of the European conservative spectrum: the converts to Islam discussed in this paper embody a type of politician who provides what they see as solutions to present-day challenges while simultaneously seeking political power and public visibility. In our analysis, we offer evidence to support this argument and attempt to answer the question of how precisely an act of conversion to Islam enables these politicians to advance their agendas.

Case №1: Joram van Klaveren

The first case presented here is that of Dutchman, Joram van Klaveren. Born in Amsterdam in 1979, van Klaveren built his political career as a member of the PVV, a right-wing populist political party notorious for its outspoken anti-Muslim and anti-immigration stance. From 2006–2009, van Klaveren served as a PVV representative in the municipal council of the city of Almere in the Netherlands, and in 2010 was elected to the Dutch House of Representatives. During his term in parliament, van Klaveren became a confidant of the party leader Geert Wilders, assisting him in pushing forward the anti-immigration agenda of the PVV. Dutch media portrayed van Klaveren as the "crown prince" and as Wilders's "right hand", who fully supported the PVV's political course.[4]

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4 Sheila Kamerman and Hanina Ajarai, "Joram van Klaveren: 'Ik wil de islam met alle liefde uitleggen,'" *NRC*, February 4, 2019, https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/02/04/ik-wil-de-islam-met-alle-liefde-uitleggen-a3652823.

Van Klaveren reports that his conservative political outlook was shaped by his family: his grandfather identified with the ideals of the Dutch conservative Anti-Revolutionary Party (*Anti-Revolutionaire Partij*), which heavily opposed the ideals of the French revolution; meanwhile, van Klaveren's father was a staunch supporter of Israeli politics in the Middle East. During his years as a student in the Religious Studies program at the Free University of Amsterdam, van Klaveren states that he witnessed "the start of the Islam debate" in the Netherlands following the 9/11 attacks and the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh, two outspoken critics of multiculturalism in the Netherlands.[5]

Van Klaveren was motivated to join the PVV by Geert Wilders's promises to pursue a flat tax rate and press the government to increase investments in security programs. However, Wilders's actual political agenda turned out to be "too leftist" for van Klaveren in economic terms.[6] Having been disappointed with the PVV's profile, van Klaveren left the party in 2014 following an incident at a campaign rally. There, Wilders, while on stage, asked his supporters whether they wanted "more or fewer Moroccans" in the Netherlands; the crowd chanted "fewer, fewer." Van Klaveren found this to be a step too far.[7] Following his break with the PVV and in collaboration with two other politicians, he set up another party, *Voor Nederland* (VNL; For the Netherlands). This party was supposed to become "the right-wing brother of the PVV" in pursuit of smaller government and limiting the rights of the EU Commission.[8] The VNL, however, did not survive its first elections in 2017 and disappeared shortly afterwards.

According to van Klaveren, his drastic about-turn from being outspokenly anti-Muslim to embracing Islam happened while writing a book, which was initially intended as a critique of the Islamic faith. He began exchanging emails with a renowned academic from Cambridge University, Abdal Hakim Murad (Timothy John Winter),[9] himself a British convert to Islam.[10] Van Klaveren's at first negative image of the Prophet Muhammad was altered after reading a biography of the Prophet written by another convert to Islam, Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din, born Martin Lings (d. 2005).[11] Van Klaveren has described his discovery of Islam in the recently published book.[12]

Before van Klaveren, another ex-PVV affiliate, Arnoud van Doorn embraced Islam in 2013. After his conversion, van Doorn joined the small Dutch Islamic Party for Unity (*Partij van de Eenheid*). Similar to van Klaveren, at the time of his conversion, van

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5 Romana Abels, "Joram van Klaveren: 'De PVV is veel te links,'" *Trouw*, April 7, 2015, https://www.trouw.nl/gs-b217639b; Joram van Klaveren, *Afvallige: van christendom naar islam in tijden van secularisatie en terreur* [Joram van Klaveren, *Apostate: From Christianity to Islam in Times of Secularization and Terror*] (The Hague: Stichting 't Kennishuys, 2019), 9.

6 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

7 Toby Sterling, "Dutch Lawmaker Wilders Appeals 'Fewer Moroccans' Conviction," *Reuters*, June 25, 2019, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-netherlands-wilders/dutch-lawmaker-wilders-appeals-fewer-moroccans-conviction-idUSKCN1TQ0ZF.

8 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

9 Murad comments on van Klaveren's, as well as Wagner's conversions in his recent book; for him, precisely "national populist movements […] generate courageous dissidents able to transcend the narrow and often covertly racist narratives of their colleagues, to see Islam as a repository of timeless wisdom that enables them to lead lives that are genuinely in line with tradition." Abdal Hakim Murad, *Travelling Home: Essays on Islam in Europe* (The Quilliam Press, 2020), 55-56.

10 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 13.

11 Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge, MA: Islamic Texts Society, 1991); van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 13.

12 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*.

Doorn was no longer a member of the PVV, as he had been expelled from the party several years earlier following accusations of financial malpractice.[13]

Case №2: Maxence Buttey

Maxence Buttey is the youngest of the three politicians discussed in this paper. He was 22-years-old at the time of his appointment as a representative of the FN (since 2018 *Rassemblement National*, National Rally) in March 2014 in Noisy-le-Grande, a town of about 60,000 inhabitants on the outskirts of Paris. While campaigning for his party, Buttey claims to have met with members of the local Muslim community and held conversations with their imam, which eventually inspired his conversion to Islam. In October of the same year, Buttey announced his conversion via social media, stirring up controversy among FN officials. Amid the tumult caused by his announcement, Buttey sent his fellow party members an email containing a link to the video *Miracles of Islam*[14] in an attempt to explain his views. However, this action backfired as he was pressed to leave the party under accusations of "proselytism."[15]

Like van Klaveren, Buttey's initial choice to join an ultraconservative party was motivated by his family background. His parents are both members of the FN and practicing Catholics with outspoken conservative views. Buttey reports that when his family learned about his decision to embrace Islam, they saw it as "a double betrayal"—of both their religion and their party.[16] In Buttey's words, he developed an interest in Islam in his late teens while attending courses before enrolling in medical school. There, with the help of a fellow student, he claims to have discovered the inconsistencies of the Bible and the openness of Islam. He recalls his friend saying that, "Islam is like an upgrade of a computer program; it is the latest version [of a monotheistic/Abrahamic religion]."[17] *The Signs*, a film published on YouTube that promises to prove the existence of God in two hours,[18] was another crucial push for Buttey towards reconsidering Islam.

Today, Buttey has scaled back his media presence, only occasionally posting on Facebook. In hindsight, he regrets the way he communicated his conversion. In his opinion, his words and responses on social media were taken out of context and misunderstood (Buttey was accused of religious radicalization).[19] He sees himself returning to politics at some point, but not as a leader of an Islamic party. In his opinion, using religion, especially Islam, as a defining feature of a political program would result in the further polarization of French society, which he aspires to prevent. Nevertheless, he admits that his religious affiliation and the urgency of the

13 Eline Schaart, "Dutch Former Anti-Muslim Politician Converts to Islam," *POLITICO*, February 4, 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/former-dutch-anti-muslim-politician-converts-to-islam-joram-van-klaveren/.

14 Maxence Buttey, "Les Miracles Du Coran," YouTube, July 24, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-hcLt7S88w&ab_channel=RoadofParadise.

15 David Chazan, "Front National Councillor Urges French Far-Right Party to Convert to Islam," *The Telegraph*, October 25, 2014, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/11187632/Front-National-councillor-urges-French-far-Right-party-to-convert-to-Islam.html.

16 Reverts of the World, "Maxence Buttey," Facebook, September 25, 2016, https://www.facebook.com/revertsoftheworld/photos/a.382394905283274/514763578713072/?type=1&theater.

17 Maxence Buttey, interview by Gulnaz Sibgatullina, Skype, October 1, 2019.

18 "The Signs (Les Signes de l'existence de Dieu)," YouTube, September 2, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovKOUwn7TF4&ab_channel=FrIslam.

19 Nolwenn Le Blevennec, "Du FN à l'islam, Maxence Buttey cherche la vérité," *L'Obs*, November 21, 2016, https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-politique/20150609.RUE9392/du-fn-a-l-islam-maxence-buttey-cherche-la-verite.html.

"Muslim problem" in France would positively affect the visibility of his party if he decided to establish one.[20]

Case №3: Artur Ahmad Wagner

Artur Wagner, the third protagonist of this paper, changed his name to Ahmad after his conversion to Islam in 2015. He left the German ultraconservative party, AfD, after an open conflict between him and the party following his conversion.[21] German media repeatedly compared Wagner's case to the conversion in 2016 of another German politician, Werner (Ibrahim) Klawun, a former member of the right-wing National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD). While still with the NPD, Klawun gained notoriety for his fierce opposition to refugees coming to Germany.[22]

Artur Wagner was born in Russia in 1969 to descendants of Volga Germans. In 1993, escaping the post-Soviet chaos, he relocated to Germany under the legal right to return for ethnic Germans (*Spätaussiedler*). He converted to Lutheranism while staying in Dresden, and for half a year, attended courses in Christian theology. When Wagner moved to Berlin in the early 2000s, he became an active member of the local German-Russian community and fulfilled administrative tasks at an Evangelical church. He explains that the religious community helped him to cope with the failure of his business venture and his struggles with alcoholism. According to Wagner, membership of the AfD (from 2014 onwards), where he coordinated activities involving the German Christian youth, finally gave him a sense of belonging to German society. Wagner has stated that he himself carries some of the blame for his previous feelings of alienation: he neither made enough effort to integrate into German society nor learned to speak German fluently. For about 20 years, he claims he was "sick with nostalgia" for his life in the Soviet Union.[23]

Wagner acknowledges that he used to see Islam as a fairy tale, part of a distant and inherently foreign culture. He does not make a secret of his opposition to the multiculturalist policies of the German government.[24] In a video from 2017, he blames left-wing parties for "allying with Islamists" and betraying the interests of the majority population.[25] However, his initial respect for Christian churches has also diminished over time; he states that his main reason for abandoning Christianity was the liberal turn of the Church. He reports that he could not reconcile with his parish after seeing the pastors attending gay pride celebrations and supporting same-sex marriages.[26]

Since 2015, Wagner has been participating in projects assisting refugees settling into their new lives in Germany. In this role, he came into contact with Muslim Chechen

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20 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.

21 Nik Martin, "German Far-Right AfD Politician Resigns after Converting to Islam," *Deutsche Welle*, January 24, 2018, https://www.dw.com/en/german-far-right-afd-politician-resigns-after-converting-to-islam/a-42280561.

22 "Werner Klauner, former extremist now known as Ibrahim," *World Bulletin*, July 30, 2016, https://www.worldbulletin.net/europe/werner-klauner-former-extremist-now-known-as-ibrahim-h175606.html.

23 Vadim Sidorov, "Interv'iu s Arturom Vagnerom," Sidorov's personal Website, March 13, 2018, https://www.harunsidorov.info/2018/03/13/Интервью-Харуна-Сидорова-с-Артуром-Ва/.

24 OstWest, "Artur (Akhmad) Vagner: Interv'iu s chlenom AdG, kotoryi prinial islam," *OstWest*, February 6, 2018, https://ok.ru/video/539057457776.

25 Ibid.

26 Justin Huggler, "Far-Right AfD Member Converted to Islam in Protest at Acceptance of Gay Marriage in the Church," *The Telegraph*, January 31, 2018, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/31/far-right-afd-member-converted-islam-protest-gay-marriage-acceptance/.

immigrants from Russia who, according to Wagner, infused him with respect for what he thought to be "the Muslim community rules." While in Germany, he also maintained close ties with Russian-speaking Muslims in the Volga-Ural region of Russia.[27] In 2015, Wagner travelled to Ufa, the capital of the Muslim Republic of Bashkortostan in Russia, to deepen his knowledge of Islam and to "understand what [his party, AfD] was actually against."[28] After lengthy conversations with an imam of a local mosque, he converted to Islam. Wagner kept his new religious identity hidden for several years before publicly revealing his faith in 2018.[29]

Theoretical framework

In our analysis, we suggest viewing these three cases not so much as instances of religious conversion involving the adoption of a new religious identity (though we do not exclude the possibility of a genuine change in religious beliefs and practices), but as instances of political action. Close analysis shows that, even in the media, these three men have been profiled primarily as political converts (i.e., individuals who have made a drastic move from one political ideology to another). In taking this stance, we would like to stress the difference between well-studied cases of relatively apolitical conversion among Europeans, on the one hand, and individuals who have been active as members of established political parties and maintained their political activism after conversion, on the other hand. In defining political conversion, we draw on the observations of Tamir Bar-On, who, having studied the political program of the contemporary French right, concludes that their alleged democratic turn was not in ideas but appearances.[30] The political right in Europe has been mimicking and synthesizing the ideas of the left (primarily on inclusion and multiculturalism) to disassociate from the neo-fascist milieu. However, it has never abandoned "a political pantheon of conservative revolutionary ideas with roots largely in the 1920s and 1930s."[31]

The so-called New Left, which in the 1960s and 1970s campaigned for a broad range of social issues, such as civil and political rights, women's rights, and gay rights, has altered the spectrum of issues contested by political poles. The debates are currently fueled by disagreements on correct values and lifestyles, rather than by traditional distributional conflicts. The New Left has undergone significant transformations since the 1960s and today primarily stands as the vanguard for what Simon Bornschier defines as "libertarian-universalistic values" ("libertarian" denoting a culturally liberal position compatible with an interventionist state). [32] In response to the prominent ideas on cultural liberalism, Europe witnessed the rise of the new and populist right in the 1980s and 1990s (its roots can be traced back to the French *Nouvelle Droite* that developed in France in the late 1960s).[33] These right-wing parties, by and large, "practice an elaborate traditionalist-communitarian discourse that combines opposition against universalistic values with an exclusionist

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27 Arthur Ahmad Wagner, interview by Gulnaz Sibgatullina, FaceTime, July 26, 2019.

28 Ibid.

29 Jonathan Stock, "Arthur Wagner: AfD-Anhänger konvertiert zum Islam," *Spiegel*, February 18, 2018, https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/arthur-wagner-afd-anhaenger-konvertiert-zum-islam-a-1193940.html.

30 Tamir Bar-On, "Understanding Political Conversion and Mimetic Rivalry," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 3–4 (2009): 241–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760903396351.

31 Bar-On, 241.

32 Simon Bornschier, "The New Cultural Divide and the Two-Dimensional Political Space in Western Europe," *West European Politics* 33, no. 3 (May 1, 2010): 419–44, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402381003654387.

33 Roger Griffin, "Interregnum or Endgame? The Radical Right in the 'Post-Fascist' Era," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5, no. 2 (2000): 163–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/713682938.

conception of community."[34] That is, one of the core issues that lie at the heart of the conflict between the right and left today is the role of community. This debate is, in turn, inherently connected to divergent ideas on citizenship, immigration, race, and nationhood.

Depicting the political left and right in Western European countries today as a clear-cut dichotomy can be misleading. It is more productive to see them as parts of a broader spectrum. There is no single right or left, but a variety of parties, movements, and organizations that advocate different viewpoints on key socio-political and economic issues. The European right, in particular, is far from being homogeneous on questions related to multiculturalism, understood as a set of attitudes that embraces immigration and diversity of race, religion, culture, and identity. To lay the foundation for the discussion that follows, we first describe two distinct responses to the discourse of multiculturalism and the politics of identity, followed by a review of an array of right-wing standpoints on the role of religion and spirituality in defining European identity brought into the public agenda by the New Left.

Divergent responses to multiculturalism

Following Talshir[35] and Spektorowski,[36] who analyzed right-wing discourses in France and extrapolated their results to the broader European populist parties, we distinguish two broad camps that advocate different strategies in dealing with issues related to cultural variety in Europe. The first sees its central role as combating multiculturalism, which it perceives as an existential threat to national identities, with the accommodation of other cultures allegedly threatening the collective values of the respective societies. In this worldview, the nation is imagined as a natural unit based on historical and moral traditions. Integration, as the successful blending in of other historical and moral traditions, is seen as intrinsically unattainable. For this camp, the political arena manifests a fundamental struggle between "us and them" or "friends and foes," in which a "we" and a "they" are requirements for the construction of group identity. These parties tend to call for reversing the flood of immigration, as they see it, returning existing immigrants to their country of origin, and banning all future immigration.

The other camp, while still being embedded on the right of the political spectrum, does not reject multiculturalism outright. Instead, it employs a multiculturalist framework to create a new discourse to, in its view, legitimately exclude immigrants. Thus, the new dichotomy is not so much between supposed Europeans and non-Europeans, but rather between approaches in dealing with multiculturalism: a blindly homogenizing universalism that arguably atomizes individual is juxtaposed with a communitarian model that embraces the collective identity. This multiculturalism of the right, a view promoted initially by the French New Right and later embraced by other European right-wing parties, celebrates differences between ethnic and cultural groups, but uses the multiculturalism debate to claim the need to protect cultural variety and heritage through the exclusion of others. The multiculturalism of the right is thus anti-liberal and nationalist insofar as it subordinates autonomous individuals to a mythologized concept of the ethnic group.[37] In defending cultural

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34 Bornschier, "The New Cultural Divide," 424.

35 Gayil Talshir, "Knowing Right from Left: The Politics of Identity between the Radical Left and Far Right," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10, no. 3 (2005): 311–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/13569310500244339.

36 Alberto Spektorowski, "The French New Right: Multiculturalism of the Right and the Recognition/ Exclusionism Syndrome," *Journal of Global Ethics* 8, no. 1 (2012): 41–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/17449626 .2011.635688.

37 Ibid.

tradition and rejecting designs for a mixed, multicultural society, these right-wing populist parties practice an elaborate traditionalist-communitarian discourse that combines the opposition of universalist values with an exclusionist conception of community.

Spirituality and rationality in defining European identity

Alongside exclusive understandings of ethnic identity, another increasingly prominent instrument for forging tradition and a sense of community has been religion. One of the dominant tropes—the need to defend Europe as a bastion of Christian civilization—has become increasingly central, especially in the last five years.[38] Such discourse constructs a "true" European identity around shared spiritual, moral, and social values, which are arguably being challenged by the internal enemy. Muslims are depicted as endangering civil peace because of their supposedly oppressive, intolerant, authoritarian culture, which is presented as incompatible with Western values system. However, as Marzouki et al. have demonstrated, populist parties hijack Christianity for their purposes to gain authority and legitimacy and to construct in-group identity, despite often being in conflict with the institutionalized Church and many of its norms.[39] Parties such as the AfD, the FN, the Freedom Party of Austria (*Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs, FPÖ*) or the Italian Northern League (*Lega Nord, LN*) do not have religious roots, nor did they emphasize religious issues in the past; however, they have recently embraced religious rhetoric to reinforce group divisions and consequently legitimize the exclusion of certain groups.[40]

Göpffarth and Özyürek draw attention to the fact that the right is far from being homogeneous on the role of reason and spirituality in finding national identities.[41] In the case of Germany, scholars observed two self-understandings that are often seen as contradictory: Germanness-as-rationality and Germanness-as-spirituality. Both self-understandings have roots in shared European history, "the first being embedded in rationalist-modernist liberalism with origins in the French Revolution and the second in a spiritual-traditionalist illiberalism formed in reaction to Napoleonic imperialism and early capitalism."[42] Göpffarth and Özyürek emphasize the role of Muslims (both those born into the religion and converts) in these debates who promote a vision that is skeptical of modernity and secularism and who instead advocate a spiritual European identity. As our analysis in the following section will show, rather than being mutually exclusive, these two understandings of identity (spiritual and rational) can be interpreted as compatible and mutually reinforcing.

We argue, therefore, that recent cases of conversion to Islam among right-leaning politicians should be viewed against the broader socio-political transformations within the conservative forces and Western European societies, in general. As church-attendance in Western Europe continues to decline,[43] for some Islam – a

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38 E.g., Rosario Forlenza and Bryan S. Turner, "Das Abendland: The Politics of Europe's Religious Borders," *Critical Research on Religion* 7, no. 1 (2019): 6–23, https://doi.org/10.1177/2050303218774891.

39 Nadia Marzouki, Duncan McDonnel, and Olivier Roy, *Saving the People: How Populists Hijack Religion* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 2016).

40 Michael Minkenberg, "Religion and the Radical Right," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, ed. Jens Rydgren (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 366–93, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190274559.001.0001.

41 Julian Göpffarth and Esra Özyürek, "Spiritualizing Reason, Rationalizing Spirit: Muslim Public Intellectuals in the German Far Right," *Ethnicities* 21, no. 3 (2020), 498-520. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796820932443.

42 Göpffarth and Özyürek, 501.

43 E.g., Neha Sahgal, "Key Findings about Religion in Western Europe," *Pew Research Center*, May 29, 2018, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/05/29/10-key-findings-about-religion-in-western-europe/.

monotheistic religion that recognizes Jesus as a prophet – offers a viable alternative to Christianity. However, as in the cases analyzed in this paper, a conversion does not necessarily mean a 180-degree turn from outspoken, anti-Muslim sentiments to fully embracing the culture of the Other. In fact, for the three politicians there was no conversion from the right to the left, but rather a movement within the right: from open anti-multiculturalism to cultural conservatism, from defining European identity as exclusively secular and rational to seeing it as inherently spiritual yet compatible with the Enlightenment ideas on rationalism. In the analysis that follows, we focus on how converts instrumentalize their conversion to Islam to continue their participation in debates around immigration, multiculturalism, and secularization. It is important to note, however, that although van Klaveren, Buttey, and Wagner share common concerns, they are not necessarily aligned in their views on ideal solutions for current sociopolitical problems.

Analysis

Disappointment with the populist right

Analysis of the three converts' discourses shows that they were initially compelled to join their respective parties by their concerns about immigration, mutation of public values, and integration of minority communities. For the converts, these populist parties represented the only opposition to the ruling center-left forces, offering a powerful critique of current political systems: these parties named and discussed social problems that the converts saw as potentially disastrous for the future of their societies. Van Klaveren wished for the government to recognize security issues and invest more in policing;[44] Buttey distrusted the mainstream media (and continues to do so), which in his opinion shields the corruption of the ruling political elites;[45] Wagner blamed the political left for too-eagerly welcoming thousands of refugees into Germany.[46]

In recent years, however, the agendas of the PVV, AfD, and FN have become narrower as a sharper focus has been placed on the single issue of Islam in Europe. Emphasizing widespread fears of an imminent Islamization of Europe, anxieties about the apparent increased crime rate caused by Muslims and the view that religious violence could grow with the continued flow of immigrants, these parties hope to win the support of substantial populations in their countries. These political forces did manage to gain significant visibility with their openly anti-Islamic rhetoric, but this approach also resulted in schisms both within the parties themselves and within the far-right camp as a whole.[47] This was one of the main reasons for van Klaveren to part ways with the PVV[48] and a key aspect of Buttey's current critique of Marine Le Pen: "When in 2014 Marine Le Pen came into power, she was different from her father—with her, there was much hope....But if I had seen [her debate with Macron during the 2017 presidential elections], I would have never joined the FN."[49]

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44 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

45 Le Blevennec, "Du FN à l'islam."

46 Sidorov, "Interv'iu s Arturom Vagnerom."

47 Rasmus Fleischer, "Two Fascisms in Contemporary Europe? Understanding the Contemporary Split of the Radical Right," in *In the Tracks of Breivik: Far Right Networks in Northern and Eastern Europe*, eds. Mats Deland, Michael Minkenberg, and Christin Mays (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2014), 53–70, https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00402008; Andreas Önnerfors, "Between Breivik and PEGIDA: The Absence of Ideologues and Leaders on the Contemporary European Far Right," *Patterns of Prejudice* 51, no. 2 (2017): 159–75, https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2017.1302642.

48 Abels, "Joram van Klaveren."

49 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.

Wagner suggests that his former party should change its orientation to become more Islam-friendly.[50]

Against this background, conversion to Islam offers these politicians two tangible benefits. First, though the converts have undoubtedly forfeited any potential career in big politics in their respective countries, they have made significant gains in terms of public visibility and social impact. The AfD, FN, and PVV as populist right-wing parties constitute hierarchical, autocratic, and centralized organizations. Within these hierarchies, Wagner, van Klaveren, and Buttey used to operate in the shadow of charismatic party leaders, whereas conversion brought them into the media spotlight. Second, the converts were able to use this media attention to advocate their conservative agendas. Public conversion to Islam is intrinsically an act of protest against secular-rational values that tend to de-emphasize the importance of religion and promote a rational and logic-based worldview. The controversial nature of these conversions sparked public debate on maintaining and demonstrating religious identity in a secularized society.[51] Moreover, conversion from Christianity to Islam—a religion of much-maligned minorities in Europe—on the one hand, embodies an embrace of multiculturalism (at least exoterically), and, on the other hand, raises a powerful critique of dominant social institutions that have roots in the continent's Christian heritage. It is important to stress that all of these effects occur because the converts—being white, male, and socially privileged—represent and reflect hegemonic power structures. This position of power accords these individuals recognition and the possibility to participate in public discourses as converts, where their voices are regarded as having a degree of authority. The effect would have been different if the converts were women, people of color, and/or individuals from less advantaged backgrounds.

Critique of secularism

By and large, the converts' political agenda can be split into two principal parts: economic/security issues (i.e., division of wealth and social security programs, refugees and labor migration, and the overrepresentation of migrants in crime statistics) and moral-ethical questions (i.e., individualization and atheization of society). As for the first of these two aspects, the change in religious affiliation did not lead to the converts modifying their ideas on issues related to immigration and the reception of refugees. All three continue to argue for curbing the influx of refugees into Europe. Those fleeing from military conflicts should be sheltered and supported in the region of origin, argues van Klaveren, "unless it really cannot be [done that way]."[52] Both Wagner and Buttey continue to view immigration as a significant security threat.[53] Wagner, himself an immigrant from Russia, recognizes the controversy of his standpoint. He attempts to soften it by claiming that no immigrant leaves their home country of their own volition: "a healthy, strong man who leaves his country—it is wrong." In particular, he argues that measures should be taken to improve conditions in conflict-ridden regions so that men can remain with their families.[54]

50 OstWest, "Artur (Akhmad) Vagner."

51 Joram van Klaveren, "Islam, Europa en de liberale paradox," *Nieuw Wij*, September 17, 2020, https://www.nieuwwij.nl/opinie/islam-europa-en-de-liberale-paradox/; "Maréchal Le Pen: Islam et Catholicisme n'ont Pas 'Exactement Le Même Rang,'" *LCI*, November 21, 2015, https://www.lci.fr/politique/marechal-le-pen-islam-et-catholicisme-nont-pas-exactement-le-meme-rang-1536518.html.

52 BNNVARA, "Voormalig PVV'er Joram van Klaveren over zijn bekering tot de islam," *BNNVARA*, February 20, 2019, https://www.bnnvara.nl/artikelen/voormalig-pvver-joram-van-klaveren-over-zijn-bekering-tot-de-islam.

53 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019; Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

54 Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

In their elaboration of moral-ethical questions concerning faith, values, and tradition, the converts draw on the ambiguous position that populist parties typically occupy regarding the secular-religious divide. On the one hand, populist party leaders portray Muslim theocratic values as being incompatible with European secular principles; on the other hand, they join some Christian authorities in using ethnoreligious discourse to defend traditional values on gender, sexuality, and family. Wagner, van Klaveren, and Buttey benefit from this ambiguity: they argue for the absence of any clash between values promoted by Christianity and Islam; yet, because Christianity as a religion is often irrational (Buttey), illogical (van Klaveren), and has irreversibly mutated in recent decades (Wagner), it no longer constitutes a viable religious and moral framework. The converts specify what a viable religious framework is supposed to entail. Generally speaking, it can be argued that they see Islam as fulfilling four functions: 1) believing (looking for meaning and the Truth), 2) bonding (experiencing self-transcendent emotions), 3) behaving (exerting self-control to conduct oneself morally), and 4) belonging (being part of a transhistorical group that solidifies collective self-esteem and in-group identification).[55] The manner in which these functions are combined and interpreted, as well as the intensity of the emphasis, varies for each of the converts.

Notably, the issue of belonging—that is, being part of a community (in opposition to individualism)—has been propelled into the public debate particularly through the ethnonationalist rhetoric of populist right-wing parties in Europe. Perceived threats to national identity have taken the shape of nostalgia for the imagined past based on ethnic homogeneity. Wagner, for instance, is skeptical that any satisfying supranational identity can be created. He pours scorn on Western European democracies for not recognizing group idiosyncrasies and instead endorsing universalism, with its homogenizing effect. He explains his opposition to multiculturalism through the lens of his newly acquired religious identity, arguing that ethnic and cultural diversity is God's creation and thus ought to be maintained, which for him is not possible when Europe functions as a melting pot: "I am absolutely sure that when Allah created peoples, he also thought to preserve their cultures."[56] Wagner thus sides with proponents of ethnopluralism, who argue that ethnicities not merely different but essentially incommensurable, and, therefore, must be kept separate.[57]

Buttey, who also sees the nation-state as in danger of erosion, offers another way out. For him, religion provides societies with a framework to accommodate the urge for belonging, through membership in a religious community that has the potential to supersede narrow ethnonationalist boundaries. Before his conversion, Buttey identified himself primarily as a Frenchman. He reports that prior to his conversion, he never felt he belonged to his local community. He recalls instances when he travelled on public transport and was the only white passenger there. The feeling of being a minority in his own country arose, not out of "racism [connected] to skin color, but out of [his] perception of a nation," before the conversion.[58] For Buttey, the concept of nation was restricted to spatial, ethnic, racial, and linguistic specificities;

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55 For a detailed discussion of these functions, see Vassilis Saroglou, "Believing, Bonding, Behaving, and Belonging: The Big Four Religious Dimensions and Cultural Variation," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 42, no. 8 (2011): 1320–40, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022111412267.

56 Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

57 Cf. Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren, "Frames of Nostalgia and Belonging: The Resurgence of EthnoNationalism in Sweden," *European Societies* 21, no. 4 (2019): 583–602, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616696.2018.1494297.

58 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.

Islam, in contrast, offered him a genuinely supranational idea, a sense of belonging to a global *umma*.

The issue of believing, understood as belief in transcendence, is most present in van Klaveren's rhetoric. He argues that the natural outcome of secularization is widespread atheism. However, for him—and, he believes, for many others—atheism is not "a rationally satisfying alternative to religion." He states that, "when there is no absolute truth, and everything is relative and subjective—characteristics of the postmodern world—macro nihilism takes the lead."[59] He uses the concept of nihilism, as popularized through philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's work and adopted in the discourses of radical conservative German philosophers, who maintained a similarly critical position towards modernity and the unrestrained dominance of rationalism.[60] Van Klaveren also quotes Nietzsche's argument that "God is dead," but in the convert's eyes, this is true only for the secular Christians in the West, not for Muslims. Islam and Dutch society in particular, according to van Klaveren, can work well together if the Dutch adopt the *spirit* of Islam—that is, the faith and community model practiced by Muslims in the times of the Prophet Muhammad.[61] Also in Wagner's discourse, we find an argument in favor of religion as a mechanism for controlling public behavior through a system of core values. For him, this system of values, originating from God, becomes universal and immune to changes over time; deviations arise at the hands of humans. He blames the Christian Church in Germany for siding with liberalism and depriving the Germans of their rightful values that are arguably still preserved in Islam. In Wagner's words, he wants to regain trust in his compatriots and, most importantly, in politicians who rule his country, which is only possible if everyone obeys God's rules and not those imposed by humans.[62]

The converts' central argument, therefore, lies in the assumption that through reintroducing the multidimensional construct of religion into the public sphere, individuals will receive legitimate space for reconstructing their religiosity. They will be able to return to their traditional *Weltanschauung* and revive values that are currently in decline. Buttey argues that when public institutions remain not only uninterested but also hostile to a religious worldview, individuals struggle to consider religion as a viable alternative to dominant secular ideologies: "The problem is that it is difficult to talk about religion. We have a *laïcité* in France that refuses to discuss religious topics, except for the [controversial] issues of *niqab* [a garment worn by some Muslim women to cover the face] and *jilbāb* [long and loose-fitting outer garment worn by some Muslim women]."[63] According to the converts' arguments, the reintroduction of religion would enable social cohesion and supremacy of ethical norms and values that are universal and fixed in nature. Religion, for them, is a source of meaning that provides individuals with a purpose, preventing them from falling into existential dread and apathy. In this light, the converts' narratives fit within a broader spectrum of discourses that display a deep pessimism about the modern world. These discourses are grounded on the assumption that the rise of technology and secular culture deprives societies of vitality, cohesion, and

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59 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 17.

60 Cf. Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), http://doi.org/10.1093/0195152972.001.0001.

61 Floor De Booys, "Tien vragen aan voormalig PVV'er en moslim Joram van Klaveren," *Kennisplatform Integratie & Samenleving*, July 29, 2019, https://www.kis.nl/artikel/tien-vragen-aan-voormalig-pvver-en-moslim-joram-van-klaveren.

62 Wagner, Interview, July 26, 2019.

63 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019

meaning; yet, as many critics have already pointed out, in their tendency to view and portray the past as a period of fundamentally peaceful and meaningful coexistence, advocates of such discourses tend to perpetuate problematic assumptions about the premodern world. In the cases analyzed in this paper, conversion to Islam, at first sight, creates a radical break with the Christian past and identity. However, as further analysis shows, Islam in the converts' interpretation defies historical developments and appears as an essentialized and static system of belief, which is in its core compatible with Christian values, thus enabling a return to forgotten origins and a recovery of spirituality arguably lost to modern excessive reason, materialism, and individualism.

Constructing the new religion of the West

Why Islam? In itself, the phenomenon of European conservative forces holding fascination for Islam is not new, and the history of the twentieth century provides many examples. In some cases, political rapprochement to Muslim religious groups drew primarily on shared negative feelings and was not necessarily born out of ideological convergence: for instance, Nazi Germany saw Islam as a powerful force and sought to draw Muslims in the war against allegedly common enemies: Jews, Britain, and Bolshevism.[64] In other cases, the image of Islam was deeply rooted in Orientalist scholarship that invented not only the "backward" but also the "mystical" and "traditional" Muslim Other: in the 1920s, a few members of French and German bohemian circles embraced Islam, viewing it as a means of renewal for their countries, which were suffering from economic and identity crises after the First World War.[65] Often Islam was simply appropriated: in the Soviet Union, for instance, some conversvative groups developed an interest in esoteric Islam, for whom this religion offered a possible refuge from the dominant state ideology.[66] Also among the New Left in Europe, Islam—and especially Sufism—re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as an alternative to capitalist ideology and the consumerist lifestyle.[67]

Through their arguments in favour of Islam, Wagner, van Klaveren, and Buttey connect to some of these earlier groups and movements. Analyzing the three converts' discourses, we have identified two prominent tropes used to legitimize their conversion to Islam, in particular: 1) a return to genuine monotheism, also understood as a renewal of Christianity, and 2) a struggle against liberalism (seen as favoring an uncontrolled capitalist economic model) and secularization (viewed as the atheization and individualization of European societies).

Monotheism 2.0

All three converts embraced Islam after first practicing Christianity. Van Klaveren and Buttey grew up attending church regularly with their family members, and Wagner re-discovered Christianity after the relaxation of the atheist regime in Russia. It seems logical, therefore, that the converts explain their new religious convictions by comparing Islam to Christianity. Van Klaveren reports that his dissatisfaction

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64 David Motadel, *Islam and Nazi Germany's War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

65 Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World*.

66 Marlène Laruelle, "The Luzhinskii Circle: Far-Right Metaphysics in the Soviet Underground and Its Legacy Today," *Russian Review* 74, no. 4 (2015): 563–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12048; Gulnaz Sibgatullina and Michael Kemper, "Between Salafism and Eurasianism: Geidar Dzhemal and the Global Islamic Revolution in Russia," *Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations* 28, no. 2 (2017): 219–36, https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410 .2017.1287485.

67 Mark Sedgwick, *Western Sufism: From the Abbasids to the New Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), Part IV, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199977642.001.0001.

with Christian theology grew over the years, which brought his attention to the two other—in his opinion more consistent—monotheistic teachings: Judaism and Islam. Though Judaism was "the most obvious choice," its "limited appreciation for [Jesus Christ]" weighed strongly against it in van Klaveren's view. He argues that Islam, in contrast, was "the only religion [besides Christianity] where Jesus has a special status as an inspired figure and messenger of God."[68] For van Klaveren, conversion from Christianity to Islam does not mean believing in another "Muslim" God, but rather finding a better way to understand the version of God he knew as a child.[69]

In Buttey's view, Islam is the religion that is most compatible with the supremacy of rationalism upheld in the West. In the aforementioned video which Buttey sent to his fellow FN party members, he introduces the argument for Qur'anic scientific foreknowledge (also known as the scientific miracles of the Qur'an). He claims that the Qur'an accurately predicts scientific discoveries and knowledge, which, in his opinion, is clear proof of Islam's inherent rationality.[70] Buttey also argues that, as the Qur'an was revealed six centuries after Jesus's birth, Islam has corrected the defects of Christianity, and therefore represents an "upgraded" version—Christianity 2.0.[71]

Wagner, unlike van Klaveren and Buttey who have an *intellectual motif* for conversion, falls into the category of *mystical mode* in Lofland and Skonovd's classification of religious conversions.[72] Wagner explains his repeated changes of religious affiliation in the past—from Lutheranism to New Apostolic Church and later to Orthodox Christianity—by claiming that he was searching for the Truth, seeking a way of communicating with God that "felt right." He reports that he embraced Islam because he heard God calling for him.[73]

Islam as a tool against "hedonistic liberalism"

In their conversion narratives, these three politicians draw on prominent tropes relating to religion. While they allege that there is a clash between modernity and religious belief, they see this clash as having its roots in the teachings of Christianity, which predestined humanity to arrive in a post-secular, godless, consumerism-driven age. The three converts find common ground in the argument that the object of critique should not be religion as a whole, but Christianity specifically, which they see as a religion incompatible with modernity. The converts emphasize that Islam has the potential to exist in harmony with the scientific modes of thinking upheld in the West. They claim to defend and embody a progressive and modern Europe, as they do not reject the cultural, predominantly Christian heritage of the continent outright; yet simultaneously they yearn for a traditionalist spiritual re-rooting. Perspectives such as Buttey's argument for the need for Christianity 2.0, or Wagner's uneasiness with the new liberal Church agenda, suggests that the converts are voicing broader concerns of parts of society who feel discontented with the present-day role of the Christian Church and its shifting or undefined standpoints on sensitive issues, such as sexuality, family models, and minority rights.[74]

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68 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 42–43.

69 BNNVARA, "Voormalig PVV'er Joram van Klaveren."

70 Buttey, "Les Miracles Du Coran."

71 Buttey, Interview, October 1, 2019.

72 John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 4 (1981): 373–85, https://doi.org/10.2307/1386185.

73 OstWest, "Artur (Akhmad) Vagner"; Sidorov, "Interv'iu s Arturom Vagnerom."

74 Cf. Olivier Roy, *Is Europe Christian?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csab053.

In their discourses, the converts de-ethnicize Islam and essentialize it as an inherently peaceful religion. Van Klaveren, for instance, asserts that radical forms of Islam do not arise from Qur'anic teaching itself, but from its interpretation. The latter, in turn, is specific to the cultural and political contexts in which Muslims profess their religion.[75] Such a rhetorical tool enables the convert to decouple Islam as a belief system from its believers—specifically, Muslims born into the religion. In van Klaveren's opinion, if Muslims become overrepresented in crimes and terrorism, this has nothing to do with the belief system as such.[76] Van Klaveren does not develop his argument further to offer an alternative explanation for this overrepresentation; however, he implicitly suggests that the reasons lie in the ethnocultural and, to a lesser extent, in socio-economic characteristics of these communities.

Neither the strategy of elevating Islam through the refutation of Christianity, nor the defense of Islam's rationality and disdain of violence, constitute original lines of reasoning. The arguments made by these three politicians complement the discourses produced by other converts to Islam in Western Europe, extensively analyzed elsewhere.[77] In creating a safe discursive space for themselves, European converts to Islam, including van Klaveren, Wagner, and Buttey, tend to distance themselves from immigrant communities, simultaneously stigmatizing the cultural and traditional Islam associated with these communities. By claiming to adhere to pure and genuine Islam, that is, free of cultural peculiarities, the converts, even though not always voluntarily, promote an essentialist understanding of this religion and inevitably assume the position of cultural superiority.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the cases of conversion to Islam, such as those by van Klaveren, Wagner, and Buttey, all of whom previously occupied positions in the European right-wing landscape, should be viewed separately from other cases of conversion among Europeans. The reason for this distinction lies primarily in the public visibility enjoyed by the three politicians. Thanks to their previous status as members of populist anti-Islamic parties, van Klaveren, Wagner, and Buttey attracted broad media attention when they announced their embrace of Islam; this, in turn, provided them with an opportunity to circumvent the authority of their party leadership and to lend weight to their political agendas. We have shown that although both media and politicians themselves have presented the act of conversion as a culmination of radical transformation, in fact, there was no considerable ideological change. Even though these men are no longer active figures in populist political movements, their approach on many policy fronts remains conservative and broadly consistent with their previous narrative. In their praise for Islam, these politicians tend to cherry-pick a limited number of concepts from the Islamic faith to legitimize their rejection of Christianity, without a serious attempt to explore and address broader Muslim-related issues that numerous communities across Western Europe currently face.

The three cases analyzed in this paper constitute only a segment of all converts who have recently embraced Islam after or while being in affiliation with conservative and

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75 van Klaveren, *Afvallige*, 161.

76 Ibid.

77 To name just a few: Kate Zebiri, *British Muslim Converts: Choosing Alternative Lives* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); K. van Nieuwkerk, "'Conversion' to Islam and the Construction of a Pious Self," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, eds. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 667–86, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070544; Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

populist groups in Europe. This trend suggests that there is a shift, albeit subtle and gradual, on how Islam is being perceived within these forces. That is, Islam that has been previously essentialized as an oppressive, authoritarian, and profoundly anti-Western religion, evolves to become a system of belief that is capable of functioning as a guardian of values traditional for Europe. In contrast to Christianity, in this new interpretation, Islam possesses the vitality that enables it to oppose secularizing impulses. Such an embrace of the Other's religion also provides the political right with some tangible benefits, as it allows fringe movements to normalize and push forward exclusivist discourses, as well as to carve out a space for elaborating a spirituality-centered identity in otherwise predominantly secular populist rhetoric.