

Rethinking Women's Religious Lives

A Critique of European Cultural Narratives

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Abstract

This book review focuses on the way in which van den Brandt offers a more multi-dimensional understanding of how religious and racialised subjects are perceived by, and navigate their identities in Western Europe. Utilising autoethnography, women's stories and an array of Western European cultural media illustrations, she questions and holds to account the problematic persistence of 'religious' stories being told in the form of a one-dimensional narrative. I will argue that she convincingly persuades the reader to rethink what we know about these normative cultural tropes and the way in which gender simultaneously implicates them and is implicated by them.

Keywords

women – representation – culture/AI – relationship – religion

Nella van den Brandt's comprehensive book weaves together the representation of women's religious lives through various Western European / secular cultural and artistic media. She suggests that these women's stories and the way in which they are told, "on the one hand ... play an important role in reproducing existing values and points of view ... on the other hand, they produce critical perspectives and new ideas" (p. 5). Utilizing autoethnography, women's stories, and an array of Western European cultural media illustrations, she questions and holds to account the problematic persistence of "religious" stories being

told in the form of a one-dimensional narrative, which she describes as “a linear path from a stifled youth born into a narrow-minded community towards liberation” (p. 4), and instead seeks to argue that individual stories are “*a particularly useful entry point* to study the construction of religion, gender and race in literature and culture” (p. 5; original emphasis). I was particularly interested in and moved by van den Brandt’s comment that there might be “types of solidarity possible between women with diverging histories and personalities,” with regard to their “passion for social justice” (p. 19). Although not the foremost theme of the book, I nevertheless saw it as a recurrent and notable thread that linked each chapter.

In chapter 1 van den Brandt begins by telling her own religious journey (from growing up in a strictly Catholic household to her current choice of lifestyle) in four versions, each through a different analytical lens (religious, socio-economic, etc.) all the time claiming the narrowness of these pre-existing frameworks, and demonstrating how “all versions are equally true” (p. 41). This was a very useful introduction to the work of the book, evidence of the traducing nature and form of cultural or political tropes about religion, race, and gender, most specifically and problematically in the religious lives and choices of women.

Chapter 2 examines the conversion of four women to both Judaism and Islam, in contradistinction to chapters 3 and 4 that explore several cultural representations of women leaving traditional religious lifestyles entirely. In van den Brandt’s own words, she describes these representations as using “syncretism and symbolic” methods to, “shed light on converts’ articulation of former and present life-words and selves, without assuming an experience of crisis in converts’ biographies” (p. 55). More specifically, in chapter 2, van den Brandt refers to differences in the responses of two converts to the breakdown of their personal relationships. For one, this results in the opportunity to “intensify her relation [*sic*] with God,” whereas for the other, it “led her away from strictly orthodox practice” (p. 71). This comparison complicates assumed notions of religious life as homogeneous and prescriptive, as often expressed through the Western cultural media representations van den Brandt employs. She demonstrates well that not every individual woman’s experience of patriarchal control represents the totality of any specific religion’s values, and therefore does not necessarily result in women leaving their religious lives or communities, nor does it result in them forsaking their commitment to religious obligations or their relationship with God. Thus, van den Brandt argues convincingly that, in chapter 2, “the cultural work these memoirs *individually* accomplish is deepening the readers’ understanding of the role of gender and sexuality in women’s religious conversions trajectories,” and in chapters 3 and 4, the “narratives con-

sider leaving religion to be a gendered experience" (p. 251; original emphasis). What van den Brandt does very well in these two chapters is examine the media representations of religious individuals (some converting, others abandoning a religious life) as a complex web of experiences, emotions, the impact of social situations and political locations, all the time insisting and demonstrating that these are "liberal-secular perceptions projected on the lives of orthodox Calvinist and Jewish women" (p. 107).

In chapter 5 van den Brandt focuses on questions of post-coloniality, questioning the relevance of both the individual story and the collective narrative. She mobilizes both Dutch and German films bringing visibility to Black, Creole, and African women and girls, arguing that their lives impact on modern "European constructions of religion and race" (p. 252) given their ongoing relationship to Europe through their emergence from its historic colonization. I found that throughout the book, van den Brandt uses beautiful quotes from her research participants, that speak not only of their personal feelings, but also of a communal / cultural / religious / racial experience, which open up the reader to a far more nuanced and reflective understanding of how people experience navigating geographic shifts as well as shifts in cultural and racial locations. In this chapter she quotes African-Dutch filmmaker Mosese, who contemplates his experience of filmmaking in his hometown: "I left Lesotho eight years ago but I am still back and forth. Lesotho is my mother, it is everything to me. That is why I do films there because I am connected to the place, I am the place. I am Lesotho" (p. 150).

I found both chapters 6 and 7 particularly germane. Chapter 6 navigates questions of religion and the state, and choosing France as her contemporary location, van den Brandt asks the meaning of "secular feelings" with regard its religious and racialized citizens. She explores and analyses Michel Houellebecq's novel *Soumission* (and its theater production, *Onderworpen*) and Bruno Dumont's film *Hafewijch*, concluding that Muslims are both, "framed as a fifth column in Western European societies, where they ultimately do not belong" alongside a tendency toward, "'fantasies of colonial reversal' in which Muslims are staged as taking over Europe" (p. 252). Here, van den Brandt is able to successfully argue the cultural articulation of these apparent competing narratives, which nevertheless coexist, and to some extent, are coproductive. Furthermore, it is in this chapter that she finds herself most troubled: "While I as a reader and spectator felt addressed as forcefully [*sic*] included in the category of elite secular/Christian, the novel, the theater play and the film simultaneously made me feel troubled and nauseous as I did not want to participate in their renderings [*sic*] of Europe and its Others. Arguably, they made me feel being [*sic*] part of the problem that is Europe" (p. 202). Again, responding as

the researcher, in superb autoethnographic style, van den Brandt brings to the fore the many complications of watching, hearing, or reading a secular / Christian / Western European conceptualization of the “Muslim problem,” whilst her “belonging to Europe is never questioned” (p. 202). And it is in this chapter that her reading of Sara Ahmed is really useful, mobilizing Ahmed’s concept of, “emotions as sticky, and as accumulating through time” to start considering how audiences both as individuals and as communities, “encounter the ‘Muslim Question’ discursively, materially and affectively” (p. 202).

Chapter 7 then shifts toward the contemporary relationships between Muslims and Jews in Europe by utilizing both Dutch and French modern literature, and focuses on the similarities between the communities, rather than the differences. Here, I would argue, the book makes its definitive contribution, by highlighting the relevance and robustness of women’s (and girls’) interfaith relationships, often cultivated through the sharing of similar experiences as minority communities in Western Europe. Indeed, van den Brandt argues that the focus of the creative industry toward these relationships is on, “friendship, love and solidarity” (p. 259). She quotes Moroccan-Dutch playwright Soufiane Moussouli, who remarks, “when members of the audience become aware of the need to share certain stories, then I think the show has been really successful” (p. 229)—a position I not only wholeheartedly concur with, and in which I find encouragement, but one needing broader traction and further research. Throughout this chapter van den Brandt teases out the emotional relevance of friendship, leading her to make conclusive remarks about the entire work through the framework of, “normative affect, aliveness and revolutionary love” (see pp. 254–261). These conclusive remarks are grounded in her analysis of her own research positionality, the research participants’ personal and communal experiences, as well as her understanding and critique of the numerous media representations of these racialized religious lives to which she has referred throughout the book. She suggests “affective *contours* and framings” (p. 253; original emphasis) as a way of structuring her findings: she argues that not only is a racialized and gendered subject constructed as Other through the cultural works of the Western European / white / Christian, but that its “literature and culture ... construct their audience” (p. 254). Furthermore, van den Brandt suggests that this othering is a product of arrogance, stemming from fear, anxiety, and subsequently, fragility, and that both the subjects’ self-identity as well as their perceived identity are always, “on the move ... always in the *process of being claimed and owned*” (pp. 254–256; original emphasis). Her focus on the *feelings* of the media-makers and their audiences, as well as the subjects themselves, makes her ideas compelling, as well as moving—and thus, all the more credible.

Nevertheless, despite the book's fascinating, persuasive, and often novel insights, and its contribution to the fields of religion, gender, culture, European history, and political race theories, it might be a significantly easier read were the publishers to take a more meticulous and thorough look at the translation. I do not know whether van den Brandt wrote the English herself (she writes that the translations from research participants are often her own), or if the work was translated (no translator is mentioned), but the English is at times very dense, often taxing, and the sentences long—resulting in the obfuscation of the thread, substance, and subtleties of van den Brandt's arguments. There are some instances where words are not translated at all, and the work is peppered with words and phrases that do not translate well into English (see, for example, “she took the pill since ages” [p. 43]). Additionally, the use of Hebrew terms is not always consistent or correct—for example, van den Brandt describes the “Motivations for Conversion” stating that, “Van Bokhoven converts to Judaism coming from a non-Jewish family and background, which is in Hebrew called *giyur*.” (p. 57). In fact, the convert is a *giyur*, the process of conversion, *gerut*. Similarly, she uses the Modern Hebrew pronunciation for some Hebrew words, for example, *ba'alat tshuva* (female returnee to religious observance), but then refers to the Sabbath as *Shabbes* (the Ashkenazi Eastern European pronunciation), and not *Shabbat* (the Modern Hebrew pronunciation). Likewise, the appellation *Rav* (p. 95) is not translated into its English “rabbi,” forgoing a clearer understanding of the story being told. I am aware of the pedantry of these latter issues, but they impact on the readability of the book and call into question its sensitivity to cultural particularities—a factor that plays a significant role in her research.

Fastidiousness aside, I was delighted to have been asked to read and review van den Brandt's innovative and wide-ranging book, and have been exposed to the work of Western European media methodologies and publications new to me. The book brings to our attention the underlying perceptions and assumptions that the eclectic variety of media outlets both perpetuate and question, giving the reader a far deeper, more multidimensional and better developed understanding of the way in which religious and racialized subjects are perceived by, and how they navigate their identities through secular / Christian Western Europe. She convincingly persuades the reader to rethink what we knew (and know) about these normative (and normalized) cultural tropes and the way in which gender is both implicated by them and simultaneously implicates them.