This article discusses the emergence of Islamic fashion as a concept and how this category unsettles some of the established truths of fashion theory. It examines the move toward “Islamic fashion” in the global South. There it is part of both the wider Islamic revival movement and a turn toward more fashionable styles as part of the proliferation of consumer culture. Developments in Western Europe also point to a reflexive approach to religion and to a quest for upward social mobility expressed through consumption. But there young Muslim women also need to take into account that they operate in an environment that has become increasingly hostile to the presence of Islam.

The main section of the article discusses how fashionable styles of Islamic dress have emerged in the Netherlands in recent times. Combining observations of changing styles of dress with extensive conversations with women who follow such fashion, the article examines the various ways in which the women concerned bring the worlds of religion and fashion together. Focusing on the narratives of three young women, a number of theoretical issues central to the religion–fashion nexus are discussed: the relations between communities of convictions and those based on a shared aesthetics, the ways in which consumers become co-producers of fashion, and how the visual presence of these Muslim women in public relates to public debate about the place of Islam in contemporary Europe.
Annelies Moors encounters

Parts of the Dutch visual landscape of open-air markets, shopping malls, immigrant neighborhoods, public parks, high school grounds, and places of entertainment have seen some striking changes in the course of the last decade. Market stalls display dummies wearing leopard-print headscarves and similarly patterned jellabas are shown at women-only dance and music parties. Young girls in skinny jeans combined with tunics and wide belts, or wearing long-sleeved T-shirts under low-cut summer dresses with straps, go on shopping sprees in chain stores such as H&M, Zara, and Mango. Adult women accompanied by small children frequent popular markets or lower-end department stores to buy the full-length skirts, long-sleeved blouses, and long coats they prefer to wear. A few women in black all-enveloping gowns and long veils visit small Islamic stores in urban immigrant neighborhoods where such items of dress are sold next to Islamic books, *onasheed* (Islamic vocal music) cassettes, and other Islamic products.

These women are all recognizably Muslim as they wear headscarves that cover their hair completely, yet they display a wide variety of styles in terms of the materials used, the ways in which the scarves are knotted and pinned, the styles of layering used, and the variety of head-shapes produced. Skinny jeans go well with a black headscarf pulled tightly toward the back of the head and wrapped around a low knot; the long-skirted girls wear several layers of colorful and flowing headscarves; elegant women wear skirt suits, with their headscarves tucked into the collar of their jackets; and older women wear their headscarves covering their shoulders and chest. Although some combinations are far more prevalent than others, they are, however, never predictable. Depending upon the general fashion trends and the styles with which they feel at ease, these women wear tight items clinging to the body or loose and flowing garments, tops with three-quarter sleeves, skirts that reach just under the knee, or long, all-covering gowns, in bright, heavily patterned materials (be it geometrical forms, flowers, animal-skin prints) or solid, plain, and subdued colors.

The proliferation of such a variety of fashionable styles of Islamic dress and the creative endeavors that young Muslim women engage in stand in stark contrast to the tone and substance of public debates about women wearing Islamic headscarves in public. In this article, I set out to investigate how such fashionable, yet Islamic styles of dress have emerged in the Netherlands. Combining observations of changing styles of dress with extensive conversations with women wearing such fashions, I am particularly interested in the various ways in which the women concerned bring the worlds of religion and fashion together. By focusing on the narratives of three young women, I will also address a number of theoretical issues central to the religion–fashion nexus: the relations between communities based on convictions and communities based on a shared aesthetics, the ways in which consumers become co-producers of fashion, and how their visual presence in public relates to public debate about the place of Islam in Europe. Before turning to the significance of Islamic fashion in the Netherlands, I will first discuss the emergence of Islamic fashion as a concept and how this category unsettles some of the established principles or tenets of fashion theory.¹

1. THE TEMPORALITY OF FASHION

In the course of the last decade, the term Islamic fashion has become increasingly popular.² It is used widely to refer to a broad range of activities, varying from fashion shows and design contests to Web stores and streetwear. Such a use of the term fashion builds on trends in fashion theory that no longer restrict this term to the avant-garde styles of high fashion presented on the catwalks of the great fashion houses of London, Paris, and Milan. Fashion studies have been extended to include forms of popular street-wear and, more generally, what people wear when they go about their everyday lives. In spite of the trend toward more inclusive approaches, one particular bias in fashion studies is still prevalent: the location of fashion in the West. In Barnard’s *Fashion Theory: A Reader*, for instance, the argument is made that fashion is more specific than dress and that it denotes a particular system of dress “that is found in western modernity.” (Barnard 2007: 3) This prompts the question what, then, counts as Western and modern. The answer that “the existence of fashion in a society is a good test of whether that society is modern, or western” (Barnard 2007: 4) only confirms a circularity of argument.³

Indeed, attempts at locating fashion in Western modernity have a long history. For Simmel (1971 [1904]), fashion emerged in the modern industrial city. This is so because fashion is only present where people simultaneously feel the need to belong to a community (“the socializing impulse”) and aspire to some sense of individuality (“the differentiating impulse”). In what Simmel calls simple societies, there is no such force to individualization and hence no perceived need to differentiate; there people do not wear fashion, but dress or clothing. Flügel (1930) differentiates between fixed and modish (fashionable) types of clothing. Fixed costume changes slowly in time but varies greatly in space, while modish costume or fashion changes very rapidly in time but varies comparatively little in space. Wilson (1985) further highlights the crucial importance of temporality, as this is what turns dress into fashion. She argues that it is only with industrial capitalism that both fashion and modernity become generalized. While this does not mean that previously there were no shifts in styles of dress, fashion, however, is something qualitatively different. Wilson writes: “Fashion is dress in which the key feature is rapid and continual changing of styles. Fashion, in a sense, is change, and in modern western societies no clothes are outside fashion; fashion sets the terms of *all* sartorial behavior—even uniforms have been designed by Paris dressmakers; . . . .) Even the determinedly unfashionable wear clothes that manifestly represent a reaction against what is in fashion” (Wilson 1985: 3–4).

If it is the element of continuous change rather than a particular style or
The development of modern fashion took place in the late nineteenth century, with the industrialization of textiles and the introduction of the sewing machine, which led to a rapid dissemination of new styles across the world. This was facilitated by the rise of mass production and the development of marketing strategies that allowed for the rapid spread of new fashion trends (MacLeod 1991). The net result was the emergence of a truly global fashion industry, which was characterized by a speedier change of styles than ever before. The increased commodification of clothes, particularly in labor-intensive parts of the production process, resulted in a more rapid change of styles than in the past. Once fashion had become an industry, it actively encouraged women to change their style in order to increase sales (Jirousek 2000: 234). A century later, when the production of dress had become further globalized, with the labor-intensive parts of the production process outsourced on a worldwide scale, and with circuits of circulation becoming increasingly complex, fashion had become a truly global phenomenon. Nevertheless, this still raises the question of how more or less fashionable styles of dress travel. Whereas the globalization of fashion has been equated with the increased circulation of Western styles of dress, it has become evident that new fashion centers have emerged in places such as Beirut, Cairo, Dubai, Dakar, Kuala Lumpur, and Jakarta (Moors and Tarlo 2007). In tracing the development of Islamic fashion, it turns out that in this field Europe is actually a latecomer.

2. “ISLAMIC FASHION” IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

From the early twentieth century on, European styles of dress have gradually spread to parts of the Muslim world, often initiated by the new professional middle classes expressing their desire for modernity, and, in some cases, such as in Turkey and Iran, also as part of a government-led campaign of modernization. The early 1970s were, however, a turning point. With the emergence of the Islamic revivalist movement, an increasing number of women began to wear a style of covered dress that some have referred to as the “new veiling” (MacLeod 1991). This practice was labelled as new because it was a style of dress that was visibly different from the covered styles of dress of the older generation as well as from what poorer urban and rural women were wearing. Moreover, these new styles of covered dress were first worn by young, well-educated urban women, the very same women who would have been expected to wear Western styles of fashion (El-Guindi 1981; Göle 1996).

This veiling movement was to a large extent a grass-roots, oppositional movement. Some women started wearing this style of dress as part of the piety movement that had emerged in response to the increased secularization of everyday life (Mahmood 2005; Deeb 2006). For others, wearing such a style of Islamic dress was also a means of expressing their affinity to Islamist movements and their cultural politics, which entailed not only a form of resistance to Western dominance, but also a critical stance vis-à-vis local authoritarian regimes and an increasingly materialist culture (El-Guindi 1999; Göle 1996). As part of such movements, a uniform and sober style of covered dress emerged. Many of those involved in this shift expressed a desire that the new veiling would do away with fashion and, in particular, with sartorial distinctions between the wealthy and the poor (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sandikçi and Ger 2007). The establishment of an Islamic state in Iran (1979), where the state imposed the wearing of Islamic dress, gave these developments a further impetus.

However, it did not take long for more fashionable styles to emerge out of such simple, austere, and distinctly non-fashionable forms of Islamic dress. In the later 1980s and 1990s, the Islamic revival movement became more heterogeneous when it began to transform itself from an anti-consumerist radical movement to a more individualized and fragmented reformist trend with identities increasingly produced through consumption (Navaro-Yashin 2002). The development of such an Islamic consumer culture led to a greater heterogeneity of Islamic dressing styles and to an increased fashion consciousness among younger, more affluent Islamic women (Kiliçbay and Binark 2002; Sandikçi and Ger 2007; Abaza 2007). Aesthetic judgments, taste dispositions, cultural capital, and financial means assumed a greater significance in the ways in which Muslim women went about wearing Islamic dress and turning it into fashion (Sandikçi and Ger 2005).

Trendy, fashionable, yet recognizably Islamic styles of dress did not, however, only emerge out of these more austere forms of Islamic dress. It is important to realize that also where there had not first been a shift to Western fashion and then to austere styles of Islamic dress, a move toward Islamic fashion is discernable. In settings where covered outerwear has remained firmly established, for instance, in Sana, the capital of Yemen, the increased commodification of the production and distribution of all-covering outerwear has led to more rapid changes of style (Moors 2007). Although outsiders may perceive such styles of dress as uniform, those familiar with the society are well aware of the increased importance of temporality. While all women wear long gowns, usually in black, the width of the shoulders and the cut of the dress or outfit, the nature and quality of the material, and the particularities of the stitching and decorations may determine whether such a gown is seen as fashionable or outdated. Indonesia is a particularly interesting case in a discussion about the emergence of Islamic fashion as there both trends—the Islamization of fashion and the turn toward fashion in Islamic dress—have occurred simultaneously. Fashionable young women who never covered their hair have started wearing Islamic head coverings, while girls who grew up wearing a headscarf (often when attending Islamic boarding schools) have turned to more fashionable styles of covered dress (Smith-Hefner 2007).

The net result is that a new global market for Islamic fashion has come into being. If in the early 1970s women interested in wearing Islamic dress
had their clothes made to order, it did not take long for Islamic garment producers, often ideologically committed, to enter this field. If at first this entailed producing uniform long coats aimed at the lower end of the market, with the turn toward increasingly fashionable styles catering to consumers with more disposal income, Islamic fashion has become a lucrative, normalized (not overtly ideological) commercial field of enterprise. By the early 1990s, Islamic fashion shows had started spreading globally, with Turkey being an early trendsetter in this field (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sandikçi and Ger 2007). If the first fashion shows in Turkey were still in some ways controversial, more recently Islamic fashion shows have become mainstream and increasingly sophisticated. In Iran, for instance, the government itself has become involved in organizing fashion shows. Elsewhere, such as in Dubai, Indonesia, and Malaysia, avant garde designers (Muslims as well as non-Muslims) have come together to participate in a variety of fashion contests and fashion shows. Catalogs of Islamic fashion can be found everywhere, and a host of new women’s magazines catering specifically to those looking for fashionable styles of Islamic dress has emerged. Moreover, cyberspace is another site where desires for Islamic fashion are created and disseminated. The development of the Internet has done much to further support the popularity of Islamic fashion. From the late 1990s onward, Web stores selling Islamic fashion started proliferating. These are especially popular amongst those who do not have Islamic shopping centers around the corner, hence new Muslims and, more generally, Muslims in Europe are one of their target groups. In the meantime, Islamic fashion has also established a presence on fashion blogs and on social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace.

3. THE EMERGENCE OF “ISLAMIC FASHION” IN WESTERN EUROPE

3.1. A NEW GENERATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Europe was a relative latecomer to the field of Islamic fashion. The way in which Islamic fashion emerged in Western Europe ties in with the history of the Muslim presence in the region. In some settings, this present-day Muslim presence is the result of European colonial rule over countries with large Muslim populations, such as in the case of South Asians in the United Kingdom and North Africans in France. Elsewhere, it was the demand for cheap labor organized through guest-worker regimes that brought it, for instance, Turks to Germany and Moroccans to Belgium and the Netherlands. Whereas at first mainly young men were recruited as temporary labor, ensuing processes of family reunification grounded their presence in Europe. Moreover, many of the refugees who have arrived more recently from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Somalia, as well as Kurds and Palestinians, are Muslim.

From the 1980s onward, many countries in Western Europe came to realize that these labor migrants had come to stay as new citizens of Europe. The hyphenation of nation and state produces the notion that each territorial state is populated by a people with their own distinct national culture. In practice, however, nation-states are far from homogeneous and have generally privileged some groups and marginalized others (Baumann 1999). The presence of people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds further highlighted the tensions inherent in the concept of the nation-state. This was more so because concomitantly economic conditions were changing rapidly under pressure from the forces of globalization. With the economy moving away from production to the service sector, unemployment amongst immigrants grew rapidly and they came to be defined as a social problem. Simultaneously, the global religious landscape was thoroughly in flux. While Western Europe was experiencing a rapid process of de-confessionalization, in the Muslim world Islamic revivalist movements emerged (the Islamic Republic of Iran was established in 1979). After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, references to the green (Islamic) danger replacing the red (communist) threat became increasingly common. After 9/11, this attitude or perception turned into a global war on terrorism.

Migrants who had earlier been defined with respect to their ethnic or national backgrounds, as Pakistani, Turkish, or Moroccan, now increasingly came to define themselves as Muslim in an environment where others had already started defining them as such. Yet to the majority society, Islam was not a neutral category. In spite of differences between countries, it has become common to link a wide range of social problems, such as low educational achievement, forced marriage, and domestic violence, to the Muslim background of these new citizens. With the growth of right-wing populist movements that use Muslims as scapegoats for the growing sense of insecurity among majority populations, particular forms of Islam (or even Islam generally) have come to be seen as incompatible with European values. This is the context in which Islamic fashion has emerged in countries such as the Netherlands. Young women, often the daughters of guest workers, have moved toward wearing fashionable styles of dress that are easily recognizable as Islamic. Usually far better educated than their mothers, increasingly interested in their own religion, if only because they are continually addressed as Muslims, having an income of their own (even if still in school), these girls have taken (and continue to take) an active interest in engaging with fashionable styles of Islamic dress.4

It needs to be stressed here that many young Muslim women do not wear a headscarf, and hence are not easily recognizable as Muslim. Some of them would consider positing a relation between religion and particular styles of dress as problematic in itself. Defining religion as a question of private belief, these women consider dressing styles as only a matter of outward appearance. Whereas they would generally agree with the importance of modesty as an Islamic virtue, modesty can be expressed in many different ways; to them covering one’s hair is neither necessary nor sufficient to being a good Muslim. Others, in contrast, consider modest styles of dressing the body a religious obligation, which they themselves may or may not practice
consistently. They may also hold different points of view about the relationship between inner states of being and external appearance. To some, dressing styles function as an expression of a particular identity, while others see covered styles of dress as a means of producing a pious self (compare Mahmood 2005). Lastly, there are those who consider the concept of Islamic fashion as oxymoronic. According to such a point of view, Islam as the realm of the spiritual and the sacred, of eternal values and virtues, is incompatible with the mundane, wasteful concerns of ever-changing fashion. In spite of such a variety of perspectives on the religion–dress nexus, the growing presence of producers, designers, and women wearing fashionable styles of Islamic dress indicates that a considerable number of actors in the field do not find it overtly problematic to combine Islam and fashion.

3.2. THREE WOMEN AND THEIR PUBLIC STYLES OF DRESS

Before analyzing how the fields of Islam and fashion relate to each other, I will first present three case studies of women whose narratives foreground their sartorial enactments of particular Islamic aesthetic styles. These three cases should not be read as representative of women wearing Islamic fashion in the Netherlands; nor for that matter should they be seen as standing for specific ethnic categories. For one, the women whose sartorial choices are presented here are older and better educated than the average wearer of Islamic fashion. More important, they are highly competent in reflecting on their life trajectories. Their remarks about enacting religion, sartorial practices, and public presence show their skills in analyzing their multiple positionalities. While these women cannot be considered to be average in any statistical sense, these case studies enable a better understanding of the multiple ways in which women combine Islam and fashion.

Feride, Malika, and Lisa all grew up in the Netherlands, but did so at different historical moments. Feride, who is in her mid-thirties, came around 1975 to the Netherlands from eastern Turkey when she was four years old. Her family lived the life common amongst guest workers, with her father working double shifts and saving everything he could for the time when they would return to Turkey. “Life was on hold. Everything was postponed,” Feride recalls. When she was about twelve years old, her mother became bedridden. Feride as the eldest daughter had to take her mother’s place in a household in which male relatives were hosted to save as much money as possible. Moreover, she found her ambitions stifled by Dutch teachers who assumed that young immigrant girls would be married young anyway. The net result of all these factors was that after completing primary school, Feride had to stay home for a year to take care of the household. It was only when her father faced problems with his family in Turkey in the mid-1980s that things began to change. “He started to spend on us,” Feride says. “We moved to a better house with light and sunshine, living as a family without other relatives and in a neighborhood with less social control.” Her mother’s health started to improve. Feride pushed her way back into school, did very well, and started to climb the social ladder. She succeeded in graduating from university, and is currently working as a successful independent professional.

Malika and Lisa did not face such heavy burdens when they were growing up. Malika, 24 years old and a college student, was born in the Netherlands. Not only her father, but also her grandfather had worked in Europe. In the early 1980s, her mother left the Rif in northern Morocco along with her five children and joined her husband in the Netherlands. Malika was born soon thereafter. Although her father had also come as a guest worker to the Netherlands, the fact that Malika was born over a decade later, in the 1980s, made a big difference. Her family had by now come to direct itself more to life in the Netherlands. Moreover, in contrast to Feride, Malika was the youngest in the family, with older sisters who supported her financially.

Lisa, 22 years old and also a college student, is the daughter of, in her words, “a mixed marriage.” Her father is from Pakistan and her mother is a Hindustani woman from Suriname who converted to Islam. Whereas the family also lived in an immigrant neighborhood, Lisa grew up in a small lower-middle-class family, which had good relations with their Dutch neighbors. Defining herself as a “Dutch Muslim with Pakistani culture,” Lisa also pointed out that she was raised with what she called “Dutch values,” especially with respect to discipline and education.

While all three women are immediately recognizable as Muslim, wearing a headscarf that covers the hair completely, the outfits that they currently wear are strikingly different. Feride is most comfortable in elegant suits, combinations of floor-length skirts and well-cut jackets of high-quality materials, often brought from Turkey. She pays much attention to wearing matching headscarves, but does not like the style that many younger Turkish girls have adopted, who use underscarves and other materials to produce a high and voluminous head shape. Her style is more personal, playing with the various ways that are common in eastern Turkey. Lisa, in contrast, is not interested in elegance, sophistication, or, for that matter, high-heeled shoes. She describes her style as casual, sporty, urban, and cool. She usually wears jeans with a tunic or a blouse over it, and “always a hoodie, combined with a cool bag and Nike.” It is only on special occasions amongst Pakistanis that she can be spotted wearing shalwar qamiz, often brought from Pakistan. Malika wears an outfit that shows the least variety. She wears a long, loose, all-covering dress, made by a seamstress who specializes in such outfits, and combines this with a three-quarter-length, all-enveloping veil (khimar); sometimes she also wears gloves. Underneath, however, she wears very fashionable styles, including brand-name jeans.

How have the styles of dress of these three women changed over time? How did these changes relate to their religious commitment?

Feride began her narrative about her changing styles of dress with the moment of her family’s migration from eastern Turkey to the Netherlands. “We had no idea what to wear. At first I think I wore the same as in the village, a long skirt with trousers underneath.” When she was about nine
years old, she was no longer allowed to wear short sleeves. A few years later, she also started wearing the headscarf because “that was what the family wanted. It was the normal thing to do. It was clothing according to the rules of our culture, eastern Turkey.” Her mother, a religious village woman, who had worn chador in Turkey, “started to wear a small headscarf with a knot under her chin and her skirts and coats were longish, but not full length.” Indeed, it was only after Feride started becoming more strict with her own clothing that her mother also did the same.

The central theme of Feride’s childhood was poverty. This also strongly affected her engagements with clothes. “Very little money was spent on clothing. We were always wearing old rags at home. My mother made some attempts at sewing because that was cheaper, but what she made never fit well. It was poverty. There was just enough to wear so that when one thing was being washed, you had something else to wear.” It is true that when they went to visit the family in Turkey, she was given some nice items, but then these were given away to her cousins and other relatives there, “so we came back in our old rags.”

After moving, the family started spending a bit more on clothing. When Feride went to school again, her father started buying her some nice things because he did not want people “to laugh at her.” Still, Feride herself did not pay much attention to what she looked like. “I had no feel for fashion. I do not even know how to take good care of myself. I did not know any of these women’s things, how to remove hair, do your eyebrows, and that sort of thing.” At school she wore long skirts. “I went for safe colors, black or dark blue with a white blouse, for instance. In those days, I had only two headscarves, one white and one black. I wore them tied to the back. I wore my long hair in a ponytail and some of my hair would show. I really still looked like a village girl. I wasn’t well groomed at all.”

Things started to change when her cousin from Germany came to visit. This girl’s mother scolded Feride’s father for spending too much money on his family and so little on his daughter. But for Feride something else was also important. “It was my cousin who opened my eyes. She knew about these things, how to look good, and she was more assertive to her parents. She opened the door for me.” Feride started changing her style of wearing the headscarf. “My cousin had lots of friends who were not “eastern Turkish” but “religiously Turkish” . . . She wore her headscarf in a different way, with all the hair covered, and also her throat and her neck.” Feride started wearing her hair in a bun and covering her head more completely with a larger scarf. “Then we started to wear a small cotton scarf underneath, such as the one we usually wear at home, so the larger scarf would stay better in place. We also started to close some of the long splits in our skirts and to wear T-shirts underneath our blouses. When I was about twenty, I was wearing a full-length coat and a large headscarf that also covered my shoulders. The coat was made of very thin material that you could also wear comfortably during lectures. It was also easy because you did not need to think about what to wear underneath.”

Although Feride considers herself very much a religious person, she also explained that she had to grow into wearing these styles of covered dress. “You have your own personal taste, and also fashion plays a role. If long splits are fashionable, you buy skirts with long splits . . . Covering is a form of worship, and you are not really supposed to draw attention to yourself or to make yourself beautiful. That is a thin line . . .” Feride is outspoken about why she wears covered dress. “For me, covering is a form of worshipping the Creator, a form of devotion. Some would say that you need to cover to avoid arousing sexual feelings in men, but I do not do it for that reason. If they have a problem with their feelings, that is their problem, not mine. It says something about them, not about me. I really do it for myself, for my relation with God. I feel that I need to cover my hair, that I need to wear long skirts, but sometimes I wear them with splits. I wear long sleeves, but I also wear shoes with high heels. There are those who say that women should not wear high heels because the clicking sounds attract attention . . . That may be so, but I do what I feel like doing.”

At present, Feride has cupboards full of fashionable Islamic styles of dress and at least fifty matching headscarves. Whereas she never considered giving up wearing a headscarf when she entered professional employment, her outfits did change. “My clothing style has really changed—from rags, to nicer clothes, to really chic. I like women’s suits very much, with floor-length skirts. It is really important that everything matches. If the suit is made of patterned material, then I wear a unicolor headscarf. If I wear a darker suit, I might combine it with a very colorful scarf.”

She also sometimes wears her headscarf tucked inside the collar of her blouse or jacket: “You wrap the headscarf tightly around the head and then make sure that everything goes inside the collar in the front and the back. Otherwise, your jacket is not really visible.” The transformation of her life is visible in the suitcases filled with clothing that she takes with her when she travels to Turkey. “I am bringing what I am no longer wearing. It is all in good condition, but I feel it is no longer my style. So I give it to my aunt, who distributes it amongst the family. I hate to throw things away.” Her narrative is also very much one of a particular historical moment. “My mother always says I was never able to spend money on you. My sister is twenty and she never experienced this. She is allowed to go shopping and choose for herself. I was never given the option to choose. She grew up as a Dutch Turkish girl. I grew up as a Turkish girl.”

Malika became interested in clothes when she was about fourteen. “Together with a close friend, we tried out very different styles. Sometimes we were nicely dressed, but we also had a “gangsta period.” We were wearing those trousers with braces, trailing from the waist, hoodies, and heavy working boots. And we had a time when we were wearing tight low trousers so that you could see our bellies. At school, they called us all sorts of names.
But my friend and I, we always said we do not care what people think about us, as long as it feels right to us.” Malika gradually became more fashion conscious. “Perhaps because I started to work at H&M. Before I started wearing this long dress and veil, I was wearing all sorts of styles, sometimes trousers, everything in black, with my hair tied to the back. At other times, baggy pants, a jacket, and sneakers. But mainly brand names—G-Star, Diesel, and so on.”

Her father did not say much about her various styles of dress, but her mother did not like them at all. “We were living in a small town with a large Moroccan community. I also had very curly hair. My mother always said, “Do you really need to attract more attention? Why don’t you tie your hair?” Or “Do you need to wear such a low neck? People will talk.” And then I said, “Mother, I am not interested in what some Ahmad or Muhammad says. I wear what feels good to me.”

Malika began wearing her veil almost a year ago. Although to an outsider this shift in clothing may look like a huge change, she said: “I do not think it is that much of a change. I still love fashion, but now it is halal. I simply wear a long dress over my jeans. Sometimes people who know me from before say what a pity, all those curls, what happened, you were always so free. Then I say that was my appearance, but what you see is not the same as what is inside. I had always been practicing. I used to pray off and on, but I started to do this more consistently during the last three years, especially last year during Ramadan. Now I fast extra days, do not listen to music, and do not shake hands with men. For me, this has become normal, but people around me find it rather extreme. I first wanted to change my behavior and only when I had done that, to start to veil. My veil has made it [the transition] complete.

She sees her religious change as gradual. “Also, others in the family started to practice more. My sister started to wear a headscarf after my parents went to Mecca and did the hajj. And one of my friends who was just like me, very modern, also started to wear a headscarf. I started to think who am I? What does my religion mean to me? I say that I am a Muslim, but what does Islam mean? That was, of course, also after the murder of Theo van Gogh. People came up with questions that I could not answer.”

Although, as she said, “I went from one day to the next, from skinny jeans to my long dress,” her change of dress was also, in a way, gradual. “I had already started to cover the shape of my body, for instance, [by wearing] tunics over tight pants and a scarf around my neck if this was a low-cut [dress].” But there was also continuity in a different sense. “I still like to look at the Internet for fashion and at designer Web sites, Roberto Cavalli, Dolce and Gabbana, Armani. I love fashion, but I wear that now underneath.” Moreover, also the overdress had elements of fashion. “I know a seamstress who makes these dresses, with nice buttons and stitching to cheer it up. I also combine colors, a long black dress and a light-blue veil, for instance. Although I wear a veil, I like to look nice, but Islamically acceptable. Colors are all right, but they should not be too bright. I wear earth colors, or blue, purple, but not red.”

Her decision to wear a long veil (khimar) rather than a headscarf was also linked to the way that she wanted to incorporate Islamic dress into her everyday life. “I wear a veil also because it is easy to put on and take off. My sister is a civil servant. She wears skirts, sweaters, and a headscarf. I am the only one wearing a veil. I had started with headscarves, large ones, but that was such a hassle, with those pins. I like to take things easy. It is true that wearing a veil does attract attention. People associate it with extremism. Well, my dressing style, I was extreme in not practicing, and now I am extreme in practicing . . . Before I started to wear hijab, I did not care what others thought about me, and that is the same now.” People told me, can’t you do it more gradually, trousers with a tunic, not such a long dress till the ground, and a scarf instead of a veil. But I do not like that. When I do something, I go for it. That’s me. But I do realize that in the eyes of others I may look extreme. They prefer a girl in jeans, with a scarf and a shorter dress.” Malika finds it important to wear her style “because you are not supposed to seduce men. You should not be seen as an object in the meat market to be inspected. The Muslim woman is a pearl. The less people see her, the more radiant she is. The more you show, the less special you are. Beauty is for me and my partner, not for everybody.” And wearing hijab is to her also a precaution, a protective measure against doing the wrong things. “It does not feel right to dress this way and then sit and have a drink outside a café.”

Malika really wants to return to “pure Islam” and follow in the footsteps of the best women in Islam, that is, the women who lived in the days of the Prophet. She might wear the face-veil if she were to live in a Muslim country, but does not think that she will do so in the Netherlands. “I am looking for the middle road and we are not living in a Muslim country here.” Another reason is that she really likes to communicate and interact with people. “I like to tell people why I have chosen to wear what I wear.” She underlines that what counts is the correct intention. “Belief starts with conviction in the heart, speaking with the tongue, and practicing with the limbs. If my intention is not pure, my deeds are not pure. That is very important to me. Everything you do in life is for the sake of God, not because of what people think.”

Lisa grew up with two distinct styles of dress: “Western and Pakistani, that is, shalwar qamiz.” The latter she wore only “when we were amongst Pakistani people, at the mosque, at parties, and at dinners. It was a long top till your knees, long, loose pants, and a scarf, with matching earrings, bags, and shoes.” In everyday life, she was wearing “what everyone else was wearing, but always a bit longer, no short skirts. My mother had always wanted me to cover the shape of the body, nor to wear very tight clothes. And it had to be neat. That was different from Dutch kids that age.” She did not really think much about clothing until she was sixteen, had started to work part time, and had begun buying her own clothes. “Then I started to wear a more casual and sporty style. High heels and nice jackets are not my thing. I was wearing what they called boys’ clothing—a hoodie and jeans.”
Her mother had by then passed away and her father had always treated her “as if I were his son.”

The big change came when she started wearing a headscarf, more than three years ago. That was when she went to college. “In primary school, after classes we always went to the mosque for an hour to learn about religion. There we always wore shalwar qamiz and a small headscarf. It was a sort of uniform. After my mother had passed away, nobody told me to go. First I was happy, but then I started to miss it and I made the choice to go. I wanted to learn. And then, when I was sixteen, I had a Moroccan girlfriend who was wearing a headscarf in a very nice-looking way, and another friend also wore a headscarf. I asked her, you are still so young, why do you wear it? Then I started to learn about Islam. It is true that I always went to the mosque, but I did not really learn about what Islam means for women. And there was a lot of discussion about the headscarf, about problems of finding an internship if you wore one . . . I started to think, what is this all about?”

She also became a member of a multicultural student organization. “At the meetings I was wearing a headscarf, but not when I was going home. I really do not know why I did that. When I started to do some public work, I began to feel uncomfortable. I had the feeling that I was pretending to be something I really was not. At that time, caps became popular and I started to wear those, but, of course, you could still see a lot of hair. Then in the summer of 2004, I finally felt that I had understood the meaning of the headscarf. You wear it because of your love for God. So then I started to wear the headscarf. Now I always wear a headscarf, and I am myself.” When she worked at a lawyer’s office, she also continued doing so. “I had said to myself I want to show that you can do everything while wearing a headscarf. So I was a student representative, and I worked in a lawyer’s office. I got comments, but I did not want to turn that into a problem. If you say you are discriminated against, then it becomes a problem. I did not like it, but I did my work very well and they could not get rid of me.”

Lisa’s favorite style is combining “jeans and a hoodie.” She likes brand names: “G-Star, for instance. The quality is much better.” She often goes to the smaller stores where they have different brands. “But for simple things, I go to Vero Moda or H&M.” Thinking about what she finds Islamically acceptable, she says: “I would not say everything except the face and the hands, but I do cover my chest and the section between my waist and my knees. Also, it should not be too tight or too short. If I wear skirts, it is a long skirt, or I wear trousers underneath. With skinny jeans, I make sure that they do not fit too tightly around my legs. I wear such styles with my headscarf, because of [my] love for God. It is not that it makes you less attractive, because your eyes or your face can also do that.” Lisa stresses that in the first place it is “a personal relation with God.” At the same time, it is an attempt not to attract attention “so that men do not look [at you] twice. But nowadays they also think that the headscarf is beautiful and they make comments about that. But I do feel better. It is clear that I have committed myself and that is visible to all.” Elaborating further she explains: “If you say you are a Muslim, you have to behave like one. For me, it is only positive. Not drinking alcohol is, for instance, also good for your health, but that is my own opinion. Others do not need to agree. Some refuse to shake hands. But God said I like to make it easier for you, so if you want to shake hands, you can do that.” Lisa has her own style. “Sporty is really my style. I wanted to combine that with my headscarf. Neat trousers or a neat dress with heels—that I do not like at all. I am also not the stereotypical Muslim, dressed in black. Sometimes I do wear black, but that is because I do not feel like making a combination that day.”

But Lisa also takes her environment into account when dressing. “If necessary, I do wear clothes that are a bit more dressy because when you become a student, you need to talk to the parents of pupils. When I did my internship last year, they thought I was only sixteen . . . Then it is better not to wear jeans with a Palestinian scarf, but trousers with a nice pashmina shawl, for instance. You need to look more serious. You can be cool, but when you are a teacher you need to adapt your clothing style.” For Lisa, “The essence of covering is modesty . . . Sometimes I see things I like, those three-quarter pants, but you cannot wear everything. I liked those, but also when I was not yet wearing a headscarf, my mother would not have allowed that. She did not like uncovered legs. In her family, that was also not allowed.

While all three women combine their religious convictions with wearing fashionable styles of dress, they do not only wear different styles of dress—varying from “smart, elegant suits” to “cool hoodies” and “fashion underneath”—but their life trajectories are also in part divergent. Feride’s narrative is a story about escaping poverty and how that has influenced her dressing style, which is accompanied by a shift from a habitual eastern Turkish cultural Islam to becoming “religiously Turkish.” Malika’s quite dramatic shift, from gangsta style and belly shirts to khimar and long overdresses, followed a somewhat more gradual turn from “off and on practicing” toward a highly committed search for “true Islam.” For Lisa, her increased competence in combining her inner feelings of love for God with an appropriate style of dress was a very gradual, step-by-step process that resulted in a covered yet sporty, urban style.

4. ISLAMIC FASHION REVISITED

These narratives provide not only a vivid picture of how young Muslim women move from wearing fashionable clothes toward adopting more Islamic styles of dress and/or from wearing Islamic dress toward more fashionable styles of covering, but they are also a useful starting point for further theorizing these trends. Their narratives point to the multiple ways in which they relate to religion (Muslim piety), aesthetics (visibility and styles), the market (processes of commodification), and politics (claims for recognition). What are the main issues raised in these narratives? How do they help us to think through these issues?
4.1. CONVICTION AND STYLE

From the narratives it is evident that we cannot simply see the emergence of fashionable styles of Islamic dress as a move from conviction to style. It is true that styles have become a central element in youth cultures as well as in attempts at theorizing about youth cultures. Early studies of youth cultures have often labelled youth styles in terms of subcultures or countercultures. Hebdige (1979), for instance, argued that working-class youth styles could be considered an expression of working-class culture, underlining the homology of values and styles. Later studies, in contrast, no longer considered youth cultures as the expression of particular values or ideological convictions. Instead, they highlighted the aestheticization of everyday life (de la Fuente 2000) and pointed out that in the absence of shared values, taste communities have emerged, with the aesthetic taking on the function of sociality. Maffesoli (1996), for instance, developed the concept of pseudo- or neo-tribes, with sociality based on such shared aesthetics.

It might be tempting to consider the turn to more fashionable styles of Islamic dress as yet another case where conviction and religious commitment have given way to a shared, yet flexible and fluid aesthetic style of being in and presenting oneself to the world. Indeed, this may to some extent be the case in Muslim-majority countries, that is, in those circles where strong ideological convictions have turned into more mainstream, sometimes fragmented, engagements with religion. Wearing fashionable styles of Islamic dress may, then, be taken as a form of aesthetic consumption that is only weakly related to religious convictions. Such a matter-of-fact way of dealing with religion is, however, far more difficult in a European setting, where Muslims are faced with questions about the legitimacy of their presence on a regular basis.

While the women concerned speak in different ways about religion, and, more specifically, about the relations between religious convictions and styles of dress, all three strongly link the wearing of covered styles of dress to religion. For Feride, who hails from a religious village family, the presence of her cousin meant not only the opening up of a new world of fashion, but it also entailed the shift from habitual forms of covering as part of eastern Turkish culture to covering as a conscious religious practice. Having redefined herself as “religiously Turkish,” it is to cosmopolitan Istanbul rather than to eastern Turkey that she feels a sense of belonging. For a long time, she did not even visit her relatives in eastern Turkey because she felt “so different.” Malika, in her narrative, highlighted how to her the wearing of covered dress was part and parcel of her growing religious commitment, the last step in a process of self-fashioning that included other embodied forms of piety, such as daily prayers, not shaking hands with men, and refraining from listening to music. She also puts some distance between herself and her ethnic background. In her words, “I am not the typical Moroccan girl. I never liked the competition that you see so often between Moroccan women. They spend so much time

on their appearance.” Lisa explains how her move toward covering was the result of a longer mental journey in search of what Islam really means for women, something she did not really learn during the Pakistani mosque lessons she attended. Nevertheless, the fact that the three women all directly link the wearing of covered dress to their religious convictions does not mean that they followed the same lines of argumentation. Malika, who aims to follow the example set by the first generations of Muslim women, refers to her sense of social responsibility in avoiding behavior that may arouse men’s sexual feelings. For Feride, covering is a “form of worshiping the Creator, a form of devotion” in itself. She does not consider herself responsible for men’s feelings. Lisa understands covering as a form of expressing one’s love for God. In her view, it is rather futile to take men’s feelings into consideration in this regard.

In other words, to these women, wearing covered dress is an embodied religious practice par excellence. When they speak about this form of religious enactment, they employ a strongly reflexive language in which they distance themselves from habitual forms of being religious, and instead stress that they have made a well-informed choice to do so. While they refer to others who had some influence—Feride mentions her cousin, Lisa her friends, and Malika both family members and friends—they all highlight their own agency in becoming more practicing or their decision to practice more consciously, and, as part of this process, to start wearing covered dress. In doing so, they bring together two discursive traditions—a liberal tradition and a religious tradition—that are often seen as incommensurable. Their narratives indicate how their subjectivities are shaped by the particular form of governmentality that is central to liberal democracies. With freedom as a key term, these forms of governance do not work through disciplining their subjects, but rather by turning them into responsible citizens who freely and autonomously (“by their own choice”) are involved in processes of self-fashioning (Rose 1999). The women concerned do not find it problematic to combine a liberal tradition with an Islamic tradition, because they emphasize the importance of intentionality as a central concept in Islam and the belief that submission to God only “works” if it is done voluntarily. Following such a line of argumentation, Islamic and liberal traditions are brought together in their emphasis on choice and conviction.

Turning from the discussion of the significance of wearing “covered dress” as a generic category to a consideration of the particular styles that the women choose to wear, is it, then, perhaps at this level of analysis that there is a shift from communities of conviction to “taste communities.” The ways in which women link religious convictions and styles of wearing hijab vary. Malika, for instance, sees a very close relation between her style of Islamic dress (khimar and long overdress) and her religious convictions. The style that she wears (all-enveloping, subdued colors, not showing the shape of the body) is the consequence of what she considers a Koranic obligation. The styles worn by Feride and Lisa relate to religion in different ways. Feride
is well aware that not everything she wears ("clicking heels," a split skirt) is Islamically acceptable, but she does not consider this a major issue. In the case of Lisa, her convictions allow for a wider range of styles of Islamic dress.

In addition, when there is a wide range of Islamically acceptable styles of dress, the ways in which individuals then opt for particular styles may well be structured by other forces at work. Individuals do not simply fashion themselves in line with one particular mode of subjectification (say, a particular religious one). Rather, they are imbricated in multiple modes of self-fashioning that may overlap and strengthen each other, but may also jar against each other and produce ambiguities and inconsistencies. By wearing particular styles of dress these women, then, fashion not only a religious self, but also simultaneously perform and produce other subjectivities, such as those pertaining to aspirations of class mobility, ethnic identification, and professional achievement, many of which, in one way or another, are linked to a discourse of modernity.

If in opting for covered dress, agency and autonomy are key concepts, when discussing particular styles of Islamic dress, the notion of authenticity takes center stage. Rather than conceptualizing styling as a signifying practice, the women themselves refer to styling as somehow linked to a deep structure. Their main concern is to produce a "fit" between a particular style of dress and their personality or inner self. In explaining why they have opted for a particular style of Islamic dress—be it elegant, sporty, or whatever—they argued for a personal aesthetics, using terms or phrases such as "it fits my personality," "that's me," and so on. This, however, does not mean that their styles of dress are given once and for all. On the contrary, they are continuously involved in searching for and producing some form of coherence, even if only "for the moment." It is often in the course of such a search that they opt for a particular style of "Islamic fashion." As to turns out, authenticity can be claimed in multiple ways. Malika, for instance, changed her style of dress substantially, but simultaneously emphasized that her personality and her approach to dressing had not changed: "When I do something, I go for it." Before she started wearing hijab, she did not care what others thought about her, "and that is the same now." Moreover, there is also a continuity in her attachment to fashion, but it is now "worn underneath." Central to Feride's narrative is how her style has evolved continuously. Using phrases such as "it is no longer my style," she presents her trajectory as one of gradual change, while also acknowledging how fashion affects what she likes to wear. Lisa, in turn, underlined the continuities in her choosing to wear a sporty, urban style, but she also explained how the context in which she operates influences what she wears. When she is in the position of a teacher, she dresses in a more classy style, as looking "too young" in her sporty-style clothes makes it difficult to claim authority. This stance already hints at the ways in which opting for particular styles needs to be linked to trends in the market of Islamic fashion and to the ways in which women's styles of dress are seen as an intervention in the public sphere.

### 4.2. CREATIVE USERS OF MASS CULTURE

An issue often raised is whether the move from "Islamic dress" to "Islamic fashion" is simply yet another instance of a new form of mass consumer culture that turns people from active participants in society into distracted and passive consumers. Some Muslim women would agree with this view as they consider engaging with fashion a wasteful and distracting activity that prevents them from pursuing what really matters—religious commitment. Yet, as it turns out, and as Wilson (1985) has already argued, it is hard to reject fashion altogether. Whereas Malika, for instance, emphatically stated that she does not like to spend much time on her appearance, fashion is in more than one way part of her life, be it in terms of what she wears underneath her long overdress, or in her careful consideration of how her long outer dress should be decorated. This is not to say that there are no differences in the temporalities of fashion. It is certainly true that the turnover of khimars is, on average, considerably slower than that of headscarves marketed as fashionable.

One question that this discussion about women as consumers of fashion raises is the extent to which there is a trendsetting "Islamic fashion" industry present in Europe. There is no doubt that a sector is developing in Europe that caters to and produces a demand for fashionable styles of Islamic dress, varying from large shawls and headscarves, bonnets, underscarfs, and headscarf pins, to a wide variety of long skirts and dresses. Small Islamic shops that also store other Islamic items, such as books, home decorations, and prayer rugs, also sell Islamic dress items, but usually not the more fashionable styles, and their turnover is often slow. In the last decade, some larger specialized stores have emerged that cater specifically to a clientele that looks for more fashionable styles of Islamic dress. One example is Tekbir, a large Turkish multinational with subsidiaries in the Middle East, Asia, and also in Europe. In the Netherlands, a notable example is the smaller chain of Manzaram stores whose owners are also from Turkey. These stores sell both items that Muslim women are specifically looking for, such as longish skirts and coats, and products that can be found in any fashion chain, such as sleeveless dresses. The most striking item in these stores is, however, the enormous variety of headscarves, available in every possible color, which are neither available in the small Islamic stores nor in the large mainstream chains. Next, a small service sector is developing to cater to the Islamic fashion scene, yet this is still on a very small scale, with, for instance, a few women specializing in pinning wedding scarves that are spectacularly beautiful and Islamically acceptable. Islamic fashion shows in the Netherlands are still usually organized by volunteers at local Muslim organizations; they are a far cry from the highly professional and lucrative events organized by producers of Moroccan festive and wedding dresses. Insofar as there is
Comparing the popularity of particular styles of Islamic dress, the number of women who have started wearing an outfit similar to that of Malika, that is, combining a khimar and a long overdress, is very small. The number of women who wear a style of Islamic fashion similar to that of Feride, that is, items especially produced for an Islamic market or clientele, is also limited. Moreover, these women often bring their dresses from the Middle East and elsewhere. The ways in which Lisa puts together her wardrobe are by far the most common. Most young Muslim women frequent stores such as H&M, Zara, Mango, and Vero Moda, where they combine various items of dress to look both up-to-date and Islamic.

Returning to the question about consumption, fashion is interesting as it is one of those fields in which consumers can be considered co-producers. Particular items of dress can be used in a variety of ways and can be adapted easily to particular needs. Selecting and wearing items of dress/fashion, and presenting a certain style and image, is a form of consumption that allows for a great deal of creativity. To understand how this works, de Certeau’s (1984) notion of poaching can be employed productively as a way of recombining rules and products that is influenced but never wholly determined by these rules and products. Bricolage is an apt and often used term employed for pointing to the ways in which consumers “put together” their wardrobes. The everyday practices of young Muslim women such as Lisa, who frequent mainstream fashion chains to come up with an Islamic fashion style, is a convincing example of bricolage, combining elements of existing styles to produce new meanings. Not all young women interested in fashionable yet Islamically acceptable forms of dress would prefer Lisa’s sporty and cool style; others shop in the same stores but put together more feminine outfits. Yet in all cases, they use mainstream items and turn these into a new Islamic style through their act of assemblage.

The fact that most young Muslim women shop at the very same locations where their non-Muslim peers also put their wardrobes together has its own effects. These are typically shops with very short product life cycles, inducing customers to make regular repeat visits, which in turn contribute to a heightened fashion consciousness amongst these young women. Moreover, the branding of both these chains as well as that of particular producers places them squarely in the center of the arena of fashion consumption. With branding increasingly important as a marketing strategy, consumers are encouraged to distinguish themselves from the conformist mainstream by buying brand items that produce imaginaries of originality, authenticity, and freedom (Frank 1998). G-Star, for instance, the brand name often mentioned by the women, presents itself as “a distinctive, innovative and unorthodox style.” Hence, authenticity is not only a key term in the narratives of the three women when they discuss the particular styles of Islamic fashion they wear, but it is also central to the ways in which the fashion industry and the urban fashion chains market their merchandise and address consumers.^{14}

### 4.3. PUBLIC DEBATE AND PUBLIC PRESENCE

Beginning in the 1980s, in many Western European countries, the Islamic headscarf has become a topic of often highly politicized public debate. Such debates have been shaped by the ways in which nation-states structure the relations between state institutions and religion. For instance, whereas in France, girls are not allowed to wear headscarves in state schools because the headscarf is considered an ostentatious religious symbol, in the Netherlands, in contrast, girls in state schools are allowed to wear headscarves because doing so may be considered a religious practice, and hence is covered under the constitutional right to freedom of religion. Nevertheless, in spite of such differences, debates about wearing the Islamic headscarf have come to exhibit major convergences. In various settings, the headscarf has been referred to as a symbol of women’s oppression, as a sign of an allegiance to fundamentalist Islam, and as an indication of the desire to develop a parallel society. Hence, the headscarf has come to be defined as a threat to social cohesion and is seen as incommensurable with European heritage, whether defined as Judeo-Christian, secular humanist, or a mix of both.^{15}

The argument that wearing hijab is a symbol of women’s subordination— independent of whether the wearer herself would agree with this view or not—makes it very difficult for covered Muslim women to be heard. Hence, other forms of interaction in the public sphere—in this case through a visual, corporeal presence—become a means of presenting an alternative position to the public, one that, moreover, a far larger number of women are able to participate in. As wearers of fashionable styles of Islamic dress, young Muslim women in Europe create a presence that can be the ground from which some of the entrenched positions in the public debate can be destabilized.

Covered Muslim women themselves emphasize that they are involved in “telling through showing.” They are generally hyperconscious of the fact that as a marked category, they can never escape the burden of representation. Because they are immediately recognizable as Muslims, they feel a strong responsibility to counter negative stereotypes about Islam by presenting a positive image. This is the more so in the case of those with a strong public presence, be it because of their employment or because of other public activities in which they are engaged (see also Jouili forthcoming). Whereas Malika does not want to compromise her stand by wearing a different style of Islamic dress, she nonetheless takes into consideration how the public perceives her, adding lighter colors to her outfit; the importance that she attaches to being able to communicate is one reason why she would not wear a face-veil. This heightened visibility of covered Muslim women is also the reason why wearing Islamic styles of dress can have such a disciplinary effect,
which, as mentioned before, helps them to avoid engaging in activities that they themselves consider “un-Islamic.” And this burden of representation has only become heavier, as in the aftermath of 9/11 the words and deeds of Muslims have come under increasing scrutiny.

What, then, do these women communicate through the aesthetics of their embodied presence? Wearing fashionable styles of dress, first and foremost, works against the image of Muslim women as dull, downtrodden, oppressed, and out of sync with modernity. Precisely because fashion has historically been linked so strongly to modernity, as made evident in Simmel’s writings, it is through such embodied aesthetics that they are able to distance themselves from the stereotypical image of an older generation of poor, illiterate women from backward rural areas who live in isolation from Dutch society. Their styles of wearing hijab do not only define them as Muslim, but also simultaneously present them as participants in the world of fashion, and, more specifically, as belonging to particular style groups, varying from “beautiful, elegant, and sophisticated” to “sporty, urban, and cool.” In their careful selection and putting together of items of dress, they are part of a world of creative consumers. This is most evident in the case of young women who shop in stores like H&M and who wear the very same items of dress as their non-Muslim peers.

Indeed, their public aesthetics has an effect on debates about wearing hijab. Some Muslim publics would point to dissonances between showing and telling. Women wearing fashionable styles of Islamic dress take up a variety of positions with respect to “Islamic requirements.” This is so both in terms of the substance of these requirements (what is permitted and what is forbidden) and of their willingness and ability to fulfill these requirements. Whereas those in favor of wearing covered dress tend to refrain from criticizing others too harshly and argue that also less successful attempts at covering may be seen as a step in the right direction, there is a concern about some of the more “extreme” aesthetic choices, such as combinations of flashy headscarves with increasingly tight T-shirts and jeans, skirts that only just cover the knees, and sleeves that are far from full length. To some, the dissonances between the headscarf as a marker of Islamic modesty and the lack of modesty that some of these styles display are painful to bear.

The turn to more fashionable styles of Islamic dress has also affected the non-Muslim majority public, but in a different way. It is precisely the almost celebratory tone about highly fashionable styles of Islamic dress that turns women who opt not to wear those styles into a negatively marked category. Women wearing more fully covering dress have started complaining that they have to face employers who argue that they do not object if a woman wears a headscarf, but that they object to particular styles of wearing headscarves (and styles of dress) that are too covering and too dark, that are insufficiently “up-to-date” and not “fashionable” enough. It is true that the presence of women wearing fashionable styles of Islamic dress is a strong counterpoint to the ways in which they are imagined in the public debate about Islam in Europe. Yet for women who wear a long veil and a full-length overdress, such as Malika, the emergence of highly fashionable styles has created other problems. How the majority public perceives the public presence of Muslim women seems to depend on how aesthetically pleasing Islamic styles of dress are to the majority gaze.

In short, on a global level, the ways in which women have started to wear fashionable yet recognizable Islamic styles of dress can be seen as the effect of two developments. On the one hand, the turn toward Islamic dress is part of the wider Islamic revival movement, a term covering a considerable variety of trends, but generally characterized by a heightened reflexivity. On the other hand, the move toward more fashionable styles of dress ties in with processes of commodification of clothing production and the ensuing more rapid turnover or change of styles as part of a highly self-conscious consumer culture. Developments in Western Europe relate to both trends in the sense that they point to a reflexive approach to religion and to the quest for upward social mobility expressed through consumption, but they also have their own dynamics. By wearing fashionable styles of Islamic dress, many young Muslim women simultaneously engage in a religious practice and take into account that they do so in an environment that has become increasingly hostile to the presence of Islam. In the Netherlands, young, well-educated Muslim women employ a politics of (visual) presence that brings together their religious convictions with styles of dress that are highly fashionable and hence bear the sign of modernity.

NOTES

1 This article is based on fieldwork conducted within the framework of the NORFACE [New Opportunities for Research Funding Agency Cooperation]-funded international research project “The emergence of Islamic fashion as a social force in Europe.” I thank the researchers involved in this project for sharing their ideas: Annika Rabo, Leila Karin Österlind, and Degla Salim in Stockholm, Connie Carøe Christiansen in Copenhagen, Sigrid Nökel in Germany, Arzu Ünal in the Netherlands, and especially Emma Tarlo in London, without whom this project would not have materialized (see also Tarlo 2009 forthcoming).

2 A Google search for “Islamic fashion” produced 71,300 hits on April 7, 2009. This article focuses on the modern fashion system and hence does not deal with the far longer history of interactions in dress design between Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, the term Islamic is used rather than Muslim not only because it is an emic term, but also to underline a reflexive rather than habitual approach to religion.

3 There is an increasing body of writing on fashion in other parts of the world. See, for instance, The Global Fashion series published by Berg Publishers. An interesting example is Niessen et al. (2003).

4 The term “young” is used in this article to refer to those women of immigrant background who have been born or who have grown up in the Netherlands. This does not mean that the styles of dress worn by their mothers have remained the same. On
the contrary, influenced by their daughters’ sartorial practices, mothers have also often started adopting more fashionable dressing styles.

5 Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of the women concerned.

6 Shalwar qamiz refers to a set consisting of a long shirt or tunic and a pair of loose trousers.

7 The narratives in this section are constructed on the basis of conversations that focused on changes in dress styles and the ways in which these did (or did not) relate to religion. They are heavily edited, as they are not presented for the sake of a narrative analysis in itself, but rather to provide insights into the nature of such trends.

8 In Turkey, chador refers to a one- or two-piece all-enveloping outer garment or cloak, usually black or dark blue in color.

9 Theo van Gogh was an actor, newspaper columnist, and film producer (together with Ayaan Hirshi Ali) he produced a highly controversial film on women and Islam called Submission. He was murdered on November 2, 2004 by a Dutch-Moroccan man, who claimed to have done so for religious reasons.

10 The term hijab refers to covered dress (in this article, these terms are used interchangeably), including a head covering.

11 In the Dutch context, it has been argued that the notion of authenticity that was at the heart of the counterculture of the 1960s has become normative. The slogan “being yourself” can be found everywhere, in the worlds of religion and politics, as well as in the world of commerce and advertising (Houtman 2008).

12 Some items cater to customers of particular ethnic backgrounds. Whereas Moroccan women can make do with rectangular shawls for the styles they like to wear, Turkish women mostly look for large, square, satin-like headscarves.


14 This fits also very well with recent developments in marketing, with the trend toward “co-creation,” which “works through the freedom of the consumer subject with the objective of encouraging and capturing the know-how of this creative common.” (Zwick et al. 2008: 184).


16 Mitchell (2002) points to the possible lack of suturing between showing and telling.

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