

## Religion, gender, race, and conversion

*Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq and *Onderworpen* by Johan Simons and Chokri Ben Chikha

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TVGEND 22 (2): 191–207

DOI: 10.5117/TVGN2019.2.006.BRAN

### Abstract

In this article, I aim to contribute to discussions about the intersections between religion/secularity, gender, and race by drawing upon an analysis of contemporary cultural production in Western Europe: Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission* (*Submission*) and the 2017 theatre play *Onderworpen* (*Submission*). The analysis focuses upon the way in which the novel and the theatre play construct understandings of the Islamic State and Muslims, secular modernity, and femininity and masculinity. First, I look at how the novel responds to discussions, and anxiety, about the place of religion in contemporary public life, as well as the place of postcolonial racialised subjects. Second, I look at how the theatre play symbolically stages conversion. Here, I explore the notion of conversion as submission to the Islamic State, not just of the individual male character, but also of Western secular modernity at large. I argue that both the novel and the theatre play contribute to, and reinforce, the so-called Muslim Question. I conclude by considering cultural production as potentially an agent of secular feelings.

**Keywords:** representation, Islam/Muslims, religion, gender, race, conversion, secular feelings

*Hilarious and disturbing. Both in the novel and in real life, danger creeps in unnoticed.* – Ingrid Vancraynest<sup>1</sup>

Between April 2017 and April 2018, the theatre play *Onderworpen* (*Submission*) was staged throughout Flanders and the Netherlands. The play is an adaptation of the novel *Soumission* (2015) by the French author Michel Houellebecq, and was directed by the Flemish and Dutch theatre makers Chokri Ben Chikha (*Action Zoo Humain*) and Johan Simons (NTGent), both based in Gent, Belgium.<sup>2</sup> *Onderworpen* could be attended as a separate performance, or together with the play *Platform* in a four-hour long theatre visit. *Platform* was directed by Johan Simons already in 2005, and is also an adaptation of one of Houellebecq's novels (*Platform*, 2001).

Both the novel and the theatre play are situated in France, 2022, and tell the story of the French presidential elections that result in a struggle between the extreme right Marine Le Pen of the *Front National* and Muhammad Ben Abbas of the Muslim Brotherhood. France becomes the scene of violent riots, and the French population is gripped by fear for an upcoming civil war. Ben Abbas is elected as president. He restores order, and introduces Islamic law. *Soumission* and *Onderworpen* present a new political, societal, and intellectual structure, in which universities are Islamised, women are barred from education and the labour market, and conversion and polygamy are encouraged. The story is told from the perspective of François, a middle-aged Sorbonne professor, presented as a selfish, sexist, and weak character. François's everyday life is highly individualistic and hedonist/abusive: François's parents, in whom he has had little interest, die (the theatre play does not mention the parents), he has no friends, he lacks any intellectual ambition nor does he embrace any higher goal in life, and at the start of each academic year, he seduces another female student, whom he uses to satisfy his sexual needs. At the end of the novel and theatre play, François decides to convert to Islam. This will enable him to continue working at the Sorbonne, and marry several women.

Both Dutch and Flemish high-quality newspapers and magazines wrote positive reviews about the theatre play (i.e. Hiskemuller, 2017; Kouters, 2017; Tielens, 2017). I attended the play a first time in July 2017, when it was staged in the playhouse of Utrecht, the Netherlands, and a second time in February 2018, in cultural centre De Vooruit in Gent, Belgium. At both moments, the theatre was filled up until its maximum capacity with audience. The above quote reveals how at least some readers and theatre visitors understood the plot of the novel and theatre play – as referring to some kind of danger creeping in. In what follows, I demonstrate that the danger referred to here is Islam, which the novel and theatre play thematise through the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the establishment of an

Islamic State in France, but also to the resistance of minoritised subjects. In this article, I draw upon current critical theories in order to analyse the representation of the Islamic State, Muslims, secular modernity, femininity and masculinity, and conversion in the novel *Soumission* and the theatre play *Onderworpen*. My main argument is that both cultural representations neatly contribute to, and reinforce, the so-called Muslim Question.

I understand 'representation' not as mere portrayal, but as participating in the production and construction of meaning (Hall, 1997). In the first part of the article, I engage with Michel Houellebecq's 2015 novel *Soumission* (*Submission*). I explore the controversy about the novel, and the arguments involved. Inspired by current literature on the secular, postcoloniality, and race, I show how the novel responds to discussions, and anxiety, about the place of religion in contemporary public life, as well as the place of postcolonial racialised subjects. In the second part, I focus on the 2017 theatre play *Onderworpen* (*Submission*), and pay special attention to the play's final scene, wherein François converts to Islam. Departing from critical thinking about the politics of conversion, I show how this conversion symbolically represents submission to the Islamic State, not just of the individual male character, but also of Western secular modernity at large. In conclusion, I build upon the analysis to think through the emergence of 'secular feelings' in cultural production (Pellegrini, 2009).

### ***Soumission*: The controversy**

The novel *Soumission* stages the political, religious, and social takeover of France by the Muslim Brotherhood. Houellebecq presents this change from the perspectives and the experiences of predominantly male characters who are working at the Sorbonne in Paris – and especially one amongst them, François. The Islamic theocracy imagined by Houellebecq is an imperialistic and ultraconservative one, and has major consequences for religious freedoms and the position and opportunities of women and sexual minorities. The author and his work are widely considered to be controversial. In 2002, Houellebecq was sued by French Muslim organisations and the French Ligue for Human Rights because of what they considered his anti-Islamic statements (Van den Blink, 2002). Also, the publication of *Soumission* triggered debate (Brandhorst, 2015) between those celebrating the novel, and those accusing it of racism and sexism. It could be argued that, during these discussions, a distinction emerges between what can be called 'societal critique' versus 'stereotyping Islam/Muslims'. Those who

are enthusiastic about *Soumission*, and the oeuvre of Houellebecq at large, argue that what is at stake is a critique of Western culture. According to them, Houellebecq makes readers think critically about materialism and individualism, and the lack of higher meaning.<sup>3</sup> The NTGent dramaturge Koen Haagdorens, for example, wrote about the novel that ‘*Soumission* is not a book about Islam. It is – just like Houellebecq’s other work – a book about the Western individual, and how it tries to find his place in a changing world’ (2017, p. 3, translation mine). In other words, Haagdorens argues that *Soumission* is involved in societal critique, and does not engage in critique of Islam or Muslims. In this line of reasoning, the fact that Houellebecq imagines France as an Islamic theocracy is merely instrumental. Others, however, criticise *Soumission* for its stereotypical imagination of Islam and Muslims. They argue that the novel may play a role in generating support for extreme right-wing politics in France – and beyond. This perspective can be understood as ‘stereotyping Islam/Muslims’: these critics argue that what is at stake is *Soumission*’s problematic rendering of Islam and Muslims. Some of these critics also point at the portrayal of women as objects of pleasure for men. *Soumission* has thus been rejected as Islamophobic, racist, and sexist.

Many reviews by journalists in high-quality newspapers mention the debate that *Soumission* raises without themselves taking a clear stance. However, at times, journalists do pose critical questions, to which Houellebecq responds by claiming that his work is not Islamophobic, nor racist or sexist (Bourmeau, 2015; Chrisafis, 2015). The discussion raises the question whether the novel’s presentation of the disintegration of Western culture/French society can at all be disconnected from the way it presents Islam and Muslims. If representation is understood as participating in the production and construction of meaning (Hall, 1997), then representation does political and ethical work (Buikema, 2007) since it has effects and consequences. The work being done in the ‘societal critique’ argument is that of separating Western/French society from Islam and Muslims, as if the latter are not intrinsically part of the first.

Importantly, representations of Islam and Muslims in West-European contexts are connected to broader political and public discourses about Islam and Muslims that already circulate within those contexts – and they can hardly escape such discourses. According to Matteo Gianni (2016), public debates across Europe perform the so-called Muslim Question, which is linked to notions of Muslims’ integration and political subjectivity. He defines the Muslim Question as constructed by representations relying on a conglomerate of social discourses, normative stances, and empirical

statements that perform and construct Muslims as figures of otherness and danger that must be securitised and assimilated in order to protect democratic values, procedures, and institutions (2016, p. 22). In what follows, I analyse the way in which *Soumission*, as a cultural representation, and some of the discussions about it, neatly contribute to, and reinforce, the Muslim Question. I will proceed by looking into constructions of the secular and postcoloniality/race as backgrounds to the emergence of the Muslim Question, as well as aspects to which *Soumission* relates. Both the secular and postcoloniality/race are intrinsically gendered constructions.

### The construction of secular modernity as sexist-light

In this section, I draw upon current critical reflections on the secular to think through the way in which *Soumission* relates to French *laïcité* in its narration of the establishment of the Islamic State as the downfall of Western secular modern society. As I will show, this narration is intrinsically gendered in terms of its representation of male and female characters.

Especially in the post-9/11 context, the idea that women's emancipation and rights, and their engagements with and belonging to monotheistic traditions, are fundamentally conflicting, has regained plausibility (Aune, 2011; Cady & Fessenden, 2013). A dominant assumption is that the secular – a multi-layered term that includes various interconnected meanings and processes, namely political secularism, historical-social secularisation, and cultural secularity – foregrounds moral individual autonomy and equality and that monotheistic traditions create hierarchical differences between men and women, and divinely sanction women's subordinate roles (Bracke, 2008; Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2008). As Joan Scott puts it succinctly in her *Sex and Secularism*, the story that the secular is beneficial for women's equality and sexual emancipation (and the religious is not) has 'enormous staying power' (2018, p. 14). *Soumission* does not contradict this story about the secular. While it portrays François as extremely sexist, a male character that considers women to exist mainly to satisfy his sexual needs, it represents the Muslim Brotherhood, and the Islamic State it establishes, as legitimating and strictly regulating sex inequality. While former secular and modern France is conveyed as a place where women, notwithstanding their status as sexual objects, at least have access to the labour market, education, and sexual satisfaction, the current Islamic State is stereotypically imagined as setting up rigorous sex inequality in law, policy making, and everyday life. The male characters of the novel all seem to be rather satisfied with this

new situation – at least none of them resists it. Secular modernity never solved the problem of sex difference and inequality, according to Joan Scott (2018; 2007), and often developed new paradigms and discourses to explain and regulate difference. *Soumission* agrees with that, one could argue, since it flaunts the sexism of its male characters. However, this sexism almost fades when the reader is confronted with the institutionalised sexism of the Islamic State. The sex difference and inequalities of secular modernity becomes sexism-light.

The secular, as a multi-layered and multifaceted phenomenon, emerges differently according to geopolitical and cultural location. How does *Soumission* relate to French *laïcité* in particular? France is known for its strict separation of church and state on the basis of its Republican principle *laïcité*, which means that the state and public life (including education) should be neutral, and religious expressions and practices are relegated to the private sphere (Bowen, 2007). Keeping this strict distinction and division in mind, the representation of the rise of an Islamic State in France can be interpreted as bizarre or grotesque. Or, one could interpret it the other way around: separating and banning religion from public life to the private sphere creates the possibility of a conflictual ‘come-back’ of religion (Casanova, 1994) and this is exactly what *Soumission* envisions. From this perspective, one could argue that *Soumission* responds to the fear of the unknown of a potential conflictual come-back, or new rise, of religion in public life. This argument about the way in which *Soumission* functions psychologically is strengthened by the observation that the story is set in a recognisable near future: 2022. Houellebecq refers to politicians and public figures who were prominent during the time of writing the novel, such as federal president Hollande, Marine Le Pen, the president of *Le Front National*, and David Pujadas, a well-known and influential journalist. This politico-temporal situatedness of the novel generates a feeling amongst readers of a story that ‘comes close’. Some reviewers of the theatre play mention this experience, such as Kester Freriks of the Dutch quality newspaper NRC: ‘*Onderworpen* is highly topical. As a spectator, you get the impression that right in front of you an important change taking place in Western history is being written’ (2017).

Crucially, the legal-political doctrine of *laïcité* has historically affected Jews and Muslims especially, who have been encouraged, or forced, to assimilate to an unquestioned majority (Modood, Alouane, Topolski, & Jansen, 2015; Jansen, 2014). From that angle, Yolande Jansen questions the secular-religious framework and its taken for grantedness when dealing with ethno-religious minorities in Europe. She argues that the secular-religious

framework presents us with a limited perspective to understand the complex and multi-layered position and experience of Jews and Muslims in Europe. Jewishness and Muslimness today are not just about beliefs and practices, but also about 'a very complex historical interaction of these minorities in the context of the relations between Europe, the U.S. and the Middle East, for which neither the concept of religion, nor any kind of secularism, seems adequate' (2015, p. 15). Moreover, the secular-religious dichotomy currently stimulates a securitising perspective. Today, 'especially Islam fits the liberal interpretation of religion as dangerous by nature' (2015, p. 15). Therefore, Jansen argues, multiculturalism is worth saving because institutional religious and cultural pluralism is indispensable for the protection and empowerment of minorities today. She suggests a historicising multiculturalism that fears and opposes politics of assimilation, and in which majorities turn the focus on themselves and the histories of their privileges (2015, pp. 15–16).

As referred to in the above section, some would argue that *Soumission* indeed turns the focus on Western culture and society, and therefore on the 'majority', and for that reason needs to be understood as auto-critique. At the same time, *Soumission* does not contradict the interpretation of religion, and especially Islam, as dangerous – on the contrary. The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the establishment of the Islamic State are not mere details to the novel, but are envisioned as the downfall of Western secular modern society. Houellebecq leaves the answer to the question 'who is to blame?' to the reader, but allows several interpretations: those to be blamed are precisely the apolitical and materialist middle-class intellectuals the story focuses on. Portraying the male characters as corrupted and pathetic, they can be read as too weak to defend Western culture. Instead, they easily give in and convert to Islam in order not to lose their status, or to gain new privileges as Muslim men and at the detriment of women's liberties and equality. Again, this interpretation explains the reading that *Soumission* is foremost engaged in critiquing the racially unmarked cultural-religious majority. The other possible answer to the 'who is to blame' question is of course: Muslims. The representation of the Muslim Brotherhood as taking over at a time when France and its (male) population are corrupted and weak allows reading the Muslim male movement as cunning, rational, and decisive. A feminised France cannot stand up against masculine Islam. *Soumission* seems to encourage the interpretation that Muslims take over, as soon as this religious minority is not forced to assimilate through privatising its beliefs and practices. As soon as Muslims are not submitted, they will submit others. So, even if we concede to the argument that

*Soumission* is auto-critique, it does so by representing Islam and Muslims as not part of Western secular modernity, and as a deviant and potentially dangerous religious minority.

## Rethinking the postcolonial and racialised position of Muslims in Europe

Separating the secular from a discussion of race and postcoloniality is somewhat artificial, as several authors have pointed at the ways in which notions of secularity, religion, race, and postcoloniality have influenced each other or converged in particular constellations (i.e. Hernández Aguilar & Ahmad, 2017; Anidjar, 2008; Meer, 2013). In her doctoral thesis, Matthea Westerduin (2019) demonstrates that, in the formation of multi-layered secular-religious distinctions, racial/religious hierarchies are always at work. Throughout European histories, religious (and often racialised) others have been associated with the past, as not yet 'tamed' by modernity. But they have also, and sometimes simultaneously, been considered as too modern, engendering associations with excesses of modernity and globalisation, such as uprootedness and cosmopolitanism (Jansen, 2014). Looking from this perspective at *Soumission*, one could argue that Muslims are represented as excessive: instead of privatising their belief and practices, and making themselves harmless through withdrawal or assimilation, they do the opposite. Through using the available democratic system, and violence, Muslims take over France. The analysis of the representation of 'Muslims', however, needs to be further gendered. And, here lies another challenge to be taken much more seriously than it has been so far: how to think the *gendered* connections between secularity, religion, race, postcoloniality? Some scholars indeed have already attempted to bring together gender, race, and religion in their operations. For example, in her analysis of the French laws, policies, and debates about the Islamic headscarf, Joan Scott noted that 'racism was the subtext of the headscarf controversy' (2007, p. 90). *Soumission* is basically a story about the perspectives and experiences of male characters. The few female characters are marginal to the story: they function as sexual objects or appear in traditional gendered roles. In *Soumission*, the Muslim Brothers, the initiators of the Islamic State, and those who follow, are men. Muslim masculinity is stereotypically presented: Muslim men institutionalise sex difference and inequality, and marry women of various ages as to attend to all their needs. As such, *Soumission* reinforces gendered and racialised discourses about Muslim men and women. In France, as well as in many

other European locations, the oppression of Muslim women by Muslim men and Islamic tradition is 'framed as the specific way in which Muslim backwardness and alienness reveal itself' (Farris, 2014, p. 304). This observation makes Sara Farris question the relation between religion, gender, and race: 'Arguably, it is not the "Muslim Question" that is feminized but the "Woman Question," as it were, that is culturalized (or racialized)' (2014, p. 304).

Taking histories of colonialism into account pushes us to rethink this 'come-back of religion', or the 'takeover by Muslims', in terms of the position of Muslims as postcolonial subjects. The relationship between France and much of its Muslim citizens is shaped by the violent colonial history of Algeria and a violent struggle for independence. In the French postcolonial context, *Soumission's* representation of an Islamic State is therefore a reference to a fear for a 'come-back of religion' necessarily intermingled with a fear for violent resistance and political-societal takeover by oppressed and marginalised postcolonial subjects. According to John Bowen (2007), French politicians, intellectuals, and journalists associate Islam and Muslims with communitarianism, political Islam, and violence against women. The Islamic State *Soumission* envisions follows after a period of civil unrest and violence. The representation of the rise of resisting and violent postcolonial subjects could be related to broader French (and other former colonial powers') sentiments and anxieties about the loss of imperial might and decreasing importance in a globalising area (Fadil, 2011). A postcolonial attitude towards Islam and Muslims is a common denominator of many European locations. In Flanders and the Netherlands, for example, the full participation and right-claiming of young self-confident Muslims, the children and grandchildren of former guest workers or postcolonial migrants, is often not welcomed (Douwes, De Koning, & Boender, 2005). In Flanders, a French *laïcité* discourse has become increasingly utilised, and radicalised, in order to counter the visible public presence of Muslims (Bracke & Fadil, 2009). But, not only histories of the secular infuse the postcolonial context, also Christianity provides a long European legacy of representations of Islam and Muslims. In Christian discourses, Islam has often been represented as a deceitful religion, and Muslims as infidels. However, throughout the middle ages up until the Ottoman empire, Muslims were not considered as inferior when it came to political and military might, but instead as competitors to be feared. As Edward Said put it, 'so far as the West is concerned, Islam represents not only a formidable [military] competitor but also a late-coming challenge to Christianity' (1998, p. 2).

In interviews, Houellebecq has repeatedly talked about Muslims in a way that adds to the above reading of *Soumission's* representation of

Muslims as potentially subversive or even dangerous religious and postcolonial subjects, and Islam as a potential powerful religious competitor. In the so-called ‘Last Interview’ by the German *Der Spiegel*, the interviewer and Houellebecq discuss the revival of Catholicism in France, nationalism, independence struggles, and right-wing neoliberal systems, but also the arrival and growth of Muslim communities across Europe. Houellebecq here reinforces the perception of Muslims as fundamentally different:

Maybe integration will be successful, even though a kind of segregation needs to take place first. But also a civil war is a possibility, as I have described in my novel *Soumission*. In fact, I think that the integration of Muslims would run more smoothly if Catholicism was the state religion. Muslims would more easily accept a second place as a respectable minority within an officially Catholic state than the unclear situation we have now. Now of course they have difficulties with the secularised society and the *laïque* state, which stand for a form of religious freedom they cannot understand and experience as an attack to the religion – which is historically in France indeed the case (Houellebecq in: Leick, 2017, p. 14, translation mine).

In the above narrative, Muslims are categorised and essentialised through the notion that ‘they’ share the same opinions and experience – that is, they share a lack of understanding about religious freedom, and they share a perception of religious freedom as an attack on Islam. Furthermore, Houellebecq suggests that a clear hierarchy between religious communities is better for a society at large, as well as Muslim minorities in particular, who, after all, have ‘difficulties’ with the secularised society and *laïcité*. This categorisation and essentialisation points at broader discourses in which Muslims are culturalised/racialised. Moreover, the suggestion about a ‘second place’ for Muslims can be interpreted as a religious-racist notion of citizenship. This demonstrates the convergence of the categories of religion and race. Houellebecq, however, denies any such convergence, arguing that religion and race are conceptually different and therefore cannot be conflated or merged (Houellebecq in: Bourmeau, 2015).

### **On stage: Revolution, veiling and conversion**

In the above section, I demonstrated the ways in which the novel *Soumission* represents the Islamic State, Muslims, secular modernity, femininity, and masculinity. I argued that it responds to discussions, and anxiety, about the

place of religion in public life, as well as the place of postcolonial racialised subjects. In this section, I shift the focus to the theatre play *Onderworpen*. While staging *Soumission* allows for a critical reinterpretation or reworking of the original narrative, which I was looking forward to, this is not what *Onderworpen* does. The analysis of the novel's characters and plot in the former sections can be kept in mind while thinking through the theatre play, which follows the novel's characters and plot. At the same time, adapting *Soumission* to a theatre play means that a literary product needs to be mediated through a script and visualised through performing bodies and the materials of the decor and objects chosen to convey the story. The genres of literary and theatre production cannot be entirely conflated, even if they tell a similar story. In what follows, I analyse *Onderworpen*'s political-symbolic performance of conversion as the crux of the narratives told by both novel and theatre play.

The theatre play is organised in three parts, which are separated by a noisy change of scene. *Onderworpen* starts with opening scenes that foreground the political-societal revolution of France: François talks about the violent riots and the deaths he witnessed; a white veil is put on the head of Myriam, François's student and lover; and Steven, François's colleague, learns how to perform the ritual ablution and articulates the *shahada*, the Islamic creed. As such, the opening scenes portray the political, religious, and societal upheavals and transformations France endured. The notion of revolution, the gendered object of the Islamic headscarf, and the converting male body represent the establishment of the new Islamic State.

In *Onderworpen*'s first part, François returns to Paris from the south of France, where he hoped to escape the civil war. In Paris, he meets his colleague Marie-Françoise, who got fired, and she informs him about the new situation after the takeover by the Muslim Brotherhood. Furthermore, two encounters between François and Myriam are staged: during the first, Myriam resists François's macho ideas, and they have a fight; during the second meeting, they have sex, after which Myriam tells François she plans to emigrate with her Jewish family to Israel and she says goodbye. In *Onderworpen*'s second part, François tries to get a grip on his life in the post-revolution Islamic State. He was fired after the takeover of the Sorbonne by Saudi-Arabia. The scenes proceed towards the important moment of the dinner of François and Robert Rediger, the chairman of the university board, at Rediger's home. Rediger wants to convince François to convert to Islam, and return to the university to teach. Rediger's two wives are mentioned, the first a middle-aged woman who, François is told, is a great cook, and the second a beautiful 15-year old girl. François is deeply

impressed. Marie-Françoise enters this scene to tell about the mysticism and poetry she sees represented in Islam and the Qur'an. François starts thinking about God, and he becomes anxious. This part ends with François falling down on a couch, from where he is silent and apathetically stares ahead. *Onderworpen's* third part is a short conclusion to the play. François gets up from the couch, strips to his underwear, climbs over the mattresses that are part of the decor, rolls down, and repeats this climbing up and rolling down. Then he stands up straight, standing behind a folded mattress, directs himself to the audience, and tells the audience about his plans to convert. He will become Muslim, and make a new start. He dresses himself in elegant blouse and trousers, and seems to be a transformed man. That is the final scene of the play.

In her book on conversion, modernity, and belief, Gauri Viswanathan conceptualises conversion as an important political event, a destabilising activity in modern society, located at the nexus of spiritual and material interests, and to which a wide range of meanings are attached (1998, pp. xi–xvii). Esra Özyürek, in her book about German converts to Islam, also emphasises the social and political power of religious conversion. Voluntary religious conversion is, as she puts it, 'one of the few acts that grants individuals, regardless of their intentions, the power to break through established social, cultural, and political boundaries' (2015, p. 5). This understanding of conversion seems to apply well to the representation of François's conversion to Islam. His conversion is indeed a political move that will enable him to escape from the marginalised position of the non-Muslim, and to become part of the new dominant identity position. This new religious identity provides him with social, material, and gendered privileges in the new Islamic State. The final scenes of the play – the climbing up and rolling down from the mattresses – seem to convey a notion of struggle and doubt, after which François comes to terms with his decision to become Muslim. This decision will, the spectator assumes, fulfil his spiritual, material, and bodily needs.

Viswanathan (1998), moreover, considers conversion to be potentially a position of resistance, from where counternarratives to dominant notions of the nation, community, and subjectivity can be envisioned. François's conversion to Islam is, however, represented as rather the opposite: his conversion enables him to become part of the fold again, instead of being outside of the fold or at its resistant margins. Additionally, his conversion is represented as the result of his weakness, apathy, and sexist selfishness. François's conversion symbolically represents submission to the Islamic

State, not just of the individual male character, but it arguably represents the selling out of Western secular modernity. This interpretation is shared by reviewers of the book as well as the theatre play. NRC reviewer Kersten Freriks, for example, writes about *Onderworpen* that ‘the moment during which [François] considers Islam as his salvation is rendered as a classic tragedy. In one single scene, Western Christian culture is declared bankrupt’ (2017).

The play’s female characters are presented as having the same religious choices as men, while being subject to specific gendered conditions. Marie-Françoise is the one who converts, and she claims to find spiritual fulfilment in Islam, and argues that the believer’s submission to God resembles women’s submission to men. While the theatre makers afford Marie-Françoise a more prominent role than Houellebecq does, she is an ambivalent character: a former Sorbonne professor, Marie-Françoise now seemingly submits to her new marginalised subject-position without reluctance or protest. The spectator is left guessing whether her new position as a Muslim woman in the Islamic State offers her anything else besides spirituality. Myriam is the one who leaves France altogether, as such rejecting both conversion and a doubly marginalised status in the Islamic State as a woman and belonging to a religious minority. She is represented as the only character resisting the conditions she finds herself in, although her resistance is ambiguous: she fiercely disagrees with François’s patriarchal attitude, but also adores him, and she reluctantly decides to follow her parents leaving the country where they do not feel safe anymore. After the scenes of Myriam’s resistance, the actress sits naked during the rest of the play at a corner of the stage, where she seems to represent François’s nostalgic-erotic memories. Both female characters are presented as intelligent and insightful, but they remain at the margin of the story that revolves around François, serving to symbolise François’s mystical fascination and erotic obsession.

## Conclusion: Secular feelings

In the above, I explored religion/secularity, gender, race, and conversion in contemporary cultural productions in Western Europe by focusing on Michel Houellebecq’s 2015 novel *Soumission* and the 2017 theatre play *Onderworpen*. First, I showed the ways in which the novel responds to discussions, and anxiety, about the place of religion in contemporary public life, as well as the place of postcolonial racialised subjects. Second, I

demonstrated how the theatre play symbolically represents conversion as submission to the Islamic State, not just of the individual male character, but also of Western secular modernity at large. As such, I claimed that both cultural representations, and some of the discussions about it, contribute to, and reinforce, the Muslim Question. Theoretically, I argue that the challenge of thinking through the complex and multi-layered gendered connections between secularity, religion, race, and postcoloniality – as all informing the emergence of the Muslim Question – needs more attention than it has received so far.

In this conclusion, I build upon this analysis to think through the emergence of ‘secular feelings’. In her 2009 article, Ann Pellegrini suggests to consider the secular as ‘a structure of feeling that constructs and privileges particular forms of subjectivity, social belonging and social knowledge’ and therefore able to ‘transmit and codify relations of dominance’ (2009, p. 212). *Soumission* and *Onderworpen* are, I suggest, cases of preaching to the secular converted. If we, following Pellegrini’s suggestion, consider both the novel and the theatre play as functioning in the realm of secular enchantment and the making or reiteration of community, then the secular affects they mobilise can be recognised for what they accomplish. Both narratives of submission generate, or reinforce, amongst its audience fear and anxiety vis-à-vis Islam as threatening Western European culture. These feelings of fear and anxiety, however, imply a secular(ised) subjectivity and belonging that excludes Muslims. *Soumission* and *Onderworpen*, moreover, invoke a critical distance with the negatively portrayed converting male characters. This feeling of disidentification, I suggest, functions to trivialise contemporary structural and implicit forms of gender inequality, since the ‘common knowledge’ being reinforced is that these can never be as bad as the institutionalised inequality of the imagined Islamic State.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank *Tijdschrift voor Gender Studies* for its support, and editors Sophie Withaecx and José van Santen, as well as the anonymous peer reviewers, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article. I also give thanks to NTGent, who provided me access to their recording of the staging of the theatre play *Onderworpen*.

## Notes

1. Retrieved from <https://www.wijlezenonderworpen.be/ingrid-vancraeynest/>
2. *Onderworpen* premiered on Sunday, 23 April in the Amsterdam Playhouse, and was staged in playhouses, theatres, and cultural centres in various Flemish and Dutch cities. The last performance took place on 24 April in *Theater aan het Vrijthof*, Maastricht, the Netherlands. <https://www.ntgent.be/nl/productie/onderworpen#productie-algemeen>
3. See for further examples: the review by Christiaan Weijts (2015) in *De Groene Amsterdammer*; the review by Mark Lilla (2015) in the *New York Review of Books*; and responses by participants of the book club *Wij Lezen Onderworpen* (We Read Submission), organised in 2017 by NTGent and the well-known Gent bookshop *Paard van Troje*. [www.wijlezenonderworpen.be](http://www.wijlezenonderworpen.be)

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