

INTRODUCTION

Johanna M. Lems and Ana I. Planet Contreras



Faith is also a really important thing, right? Like, knowing and trusting that there is also a level of justice that will, that we can and do aspire to ... Anything that is manmade is, in my opinion, resistible and so I believe that Islamophobia has a beginning and therefore can have an end.

—Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, interviewed by Kazim Ukka
on 11 December 2023, Community Policy Forum,
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pACEZWfr36k>

According to writer and spoken-word poet Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, one strategy of resistance to racist discrimination is questioning the questions that reinforce constraining narratives about identity. In this way, one not only bypasses the burden of answering stigmatizing questions but also reveals the power dynamics upon which they rely (Manzoor-Khan 2018: 192). As a visibly Muslim woman, she explains, and as the result of existing at the intersection of multiple dehumanizing narratives, resistance is the only remaining action she can take if she wants to exist on her own terms (2018: 193).

Indeed, the capacity to act – or agency – of an individual or group is always already informed by the terms in which a subject is addressed (Bracke 2011; Butler 1997). These terms of adscription often involve the marking of difference through which people are identified and classified. Processes of classification can be functional to creating categories of those who are *different-from* and worth *less-than* (Braidotti 2018), such as racialized – including religious – minorities, LGBTQ+ or those who

are discriminated against because of their age or illness. As pointed out by González-Sobrino and Goss (2019), racialization is born out of social dominance and power, involving change and ongoing practices that attach racial meanings to people.

The making and imposition of separate categories of persons through narratives or other practices can be contested in many ways. The reactions to stigmatization depend on a myriad of factors. These factors may relate to the type of negative adscription, the specific context in which it takes place and to the interpellated persons themselves: their gender and sexuality, education level, socioeconomic position, age, citizen status and so on. In this connection, scholarship has identified diverse forms of responses employed by those who are discriminated against, which can correspond to both individual and collective strategies (Lamont, Welburn and Fleming 2016).

Among the variety of possible reactions to discriminatory discourse, and in line with Manzoor-Khan's words above, is the refusal of the terms in which one is being addressed, through talking back. This reaction has also been defined by hooks (2015) as 'daring to disagree' and implies challenging the authority of the interpellator (Bracke 2011). Bracke also identified a divergent response that consists of assuming – or embracing – the position of the 'other', feeling less inclined to talk back (2011: 41). Yet another mode for responding to stigmatization is to ignore, or pretend to ignore, the adscription, refusing to put any effort into negotiating the hegemonic discourse (Bracke 2011; Fassin 2011). In certain circumstances, the only viable reaction seems to be remaining silent. Sometimes, the decision by marginalized minorities not to speak up can be motivated out of fear of punitive measures or to avoid other problems with authorities (Lems 2020).

Considering that subjectivities are formed at the intersection of interpellations coming from different discursive and non-discursive contexts (Bracke 2011; Lems 2020), this book aims to explore religion as a source of agency. As Manzoor-Khan points out in the interview mentioned above, for her, faith plays an important role when it comes to resistance and the aspiration to justice. This volume seeks to deepen our understanding of how religious beliefs and/or bodily practices affect the – material and immaterial – conditions available to members of stigmatized groups to respond to situations of exclusion. Do interpellations coming from the religious field – in its multiple forms and interpretations – impact the individual and/or collective agentic options to react to racist discourse or any other type of discrimination in the contemporary European context? How do these 'religious interpellations' interfere in or relate to the recognition or rejection of imposed categories? Do they contribute to possibilities for change in situations of subordination? Do they encourage and foster alternative projects and contribute to the imagining of other possible worlds?

We are aware that the concepts of religion and religiosity or the meaning of ‘the religious field’ are not easy to grasp and therefore, drawing on social anthropologist Mónica Cornejo (2016), the chapters of this volume approach these notions from a non-essentialist perspective, relating them to ‘a polysemic reality that affects any of the possible combinations of beliefs and the supernatural, ritual attitudes, emotions regarding transcendence, and the institutions that in each context have assumed the regulation of the previous phenomena’ (Cornejo 2016: 86).

Building on the extensive literature that studies the mechanisms of racial differentiation and other forms of discrimination and how structures and social practices are reproduced and informed, this volume seeks to provide an insight into the dynamics of religious beliefs and bodily practices of people who are discriminated against and how religion as a source of agency interacts with processes of marginalization involving different – racializing – elements such as gender, sexuality, ethnic origin or socioeconomic class. The connections between discrimination, agency and religion are of course not new. Among well-known cases in which religious life informed and was shaped by political involvement are, for example, those related to the struggle against apartheid in South Africa (Macqueen 2016) or the Liberation theology in Latin America (Morales-Franceschini 2018). This edited volume, however, focuses on discriminated minorities in contemporary Europe at the micro level. It aims to delve into similarities and differences of six case studies in Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands by exploring how religion, in its widest sense, impacts the agency of members of stigmatized groups such as Muslim minorities, LGTBQ+ or Black communities.

While the histories of Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands are different, these three European states share similarities in the way that, as former colonial powers, the law was used to legitimize abuses and dehumanize racialized minorities in Europe, with a lasting impact on systemic inequalities in their national contexts (ENAR 2024: 4). The three countries have been members of the European Union for decades, the Netherlands being one of its founding member states, with Spain and Portugal joining in 1986. In general, becoming a member state of the European Union triggers incoming migration flows from non-EU countries. In this connection, in addition to migration to the Netherlands from its former colonies (Indonesia and Surinam), in the 1960s and 1970s ‘guest workers’ from Morocco and Turkey increased the Muslim communities in said country (De Koning 2024: 426). Historically a country of emigration, Spain became the destination of migrants during the 1990s, especially those coming from Romania and former colonies in Latin America. In the same period, the increase in Muslim populations on the Spanish mainland was largely driven by migrations from North Africa (Lems 2024: 593). Portugal also became a country of arrival in the

1990s, mostly for migrants from Eastern European countries and to a lesser extent Morocco, Senegal, Bangladesh and Pakistan, while immigration from Portuguese-speaking African countries and Brazil continued (Soares and Mapril 2024: 495). According to the 2023 report 'Being Black in the EU', published by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights, discrimination against people of African descent has been on the rise since 2018 (FRA 2024: 5).

As regards the religious composition of these three states, estimates from the Pew Research Center (2022)¹ indicate divergent situations. In the year 2020, 48% of the total population in the Netherlands self-identified as Christian (Roman Catholic and Protestant), 6.8% as Muslim and 45% were religiously unaffiliated. The religious composition of Spain in that same year was 75.5%² Christian (mainly Roman Catholic), 3.3% Muslim and 21.2% unaffiliated, while in Portugal 90% of the total population self-identified as Christian (primarily Roman Catholic), 0.4% as Muslim and 8.6% as religiously unaffiliated.

The political climate in these countries shows similar trends, with Islamophobic, xenophobic and anti-immigrant discourse increasingly present in public and political debates as well as policies. However, different stages can be distinguished. In the Netherlands, in 2024 a far-right coalition government was formed after the far-right anti-Islam, anti-immigrant Freedom Party won the national elections of November 2023 (De Koning 2025). According to a survey by a Dutch government think tank, many children of immigrants in the Netherlands experience discrimination and do not find the country welcoming for people with different backgrounds (De Koning 2024). In Spain, state-level far-right party Vox doubled its seats in the municipal and autonomous elections of May 2023 with an overtly anti-Islam and anti-migrant discourse, while at regional level Catalan nationalist, anti-Spain, anti-Islam, racist party Aliança Catalana defends the Great Replacement theory and considers Islamophobia to be an obligation (Gil-Benumeya and Lems 2025). Also in Portugal, the political tide has been changing during recent years and elections, with the growth of popular radical right party Chega and its anti-Islam agenda (Carvalho et al. 2025).

The objective of this edited volume, *Facing Discrimination: Religion and Agency in Contemporary European Contexts*, is to increase our knowledge about the relation between religious involvement and the capacity to act in situations of discrimination. It seeks to do so from an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective, with each chapter based on qualitative research and combining contributions authored by scholars from different disciplines – anthropology, sociology, religious studies and so on – and at different stages in their research career – junior, postdoc and established researchers. The idea for this collection originated in a panel session titled

'Facing Discrimination: Religion and Agency', held at the 18th international conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion, 30 August–3 September 2021, in Pisa, Italy, and chaired by this volume's editors. Five of the six chapters of this book are based on communications presented at this panel.

Summary of Chapters

The first chapter, titled 'Between Presence and a Non-presence: Visibility, Transparency and Practices of Opacity among Dutch Muslims in the Public Sphere', addresses the ways in which Muslims in the Netherlands have responded to government-imposed demands for transparency. Drawing on the work of Édouard Glissant (1997), who coined the expression 'a right to opacity', Martijn de Koning analyses the ways in which Muslims who wish to be publicly active and to take part in Dutch societal debate as Muslims engage with the space afforded to them to create a presence in the public sphere. De Koning explains that opacity here refers to regulating one's presence in response to a gaze that constructs a person as an object of knowledge and a potential object of risk. The author distinguishes between three practices of opacity: protective, dis-associative and subversive opacity, referring to alternative ways to evade the gaze of others and to participate on one's own terms. The research is based on observations, analysis of texts, interviews and informal conversations over the last ten years with anti-Islamophobia activists, militant groups and representatives of mosque organizations in the Netherlands who have presented themselves in public debates on Islam. With this chapter, de Koning enriches current conversations on activism, public presence and racialization, by addressing how people navigate ongoing racializations and how these racializations shape and inform their subjectivities, and their ways of (not) responding.

In chapter 2, 'Alternative Standpoint Religion: Producing Religious Agencies in the LGBT+ Christian Association of Madrid', José Barrera-Blanco points out that despite the global advance of sexual and gender rights in the last decades and the increasing number of Christian LGBT+-affirming communities and individuals, the Catholic Church stands by its traditional position of moral condemnation towards sexual diversity. However, the decline of the 'parish model' and clerical power (Hervieu-Léger 2019) has opened the Catholic field to new actors who oppose the official doctrine. In Spain, while 95% of the religious population declare themselves as Catholics, the support for equal rights for LGBT+ people is one of the highest in the European Union. This decalage on sexual morality between the Church establishment and the laity explains the existence of Catholic

LGBT+ communities that promote the coexistence and compatibility of religious and sexual identity. LGTBI+H Christian Association of Madrid (CRISMHOM) is the country's largest association. Located in Madrid's LGBT+-friendly neighbourhood Chueca, its members regularly organize masses, prayers, theology workshops and many other activities where queer Christians get the resources to perform their dissident religiousness. The chapter describes how these resources produce new subjectivities that change the way the faithful relate to each other and to the sacred. From data collected during fieldwork and inspired by Harding's standpoint theory approach (2004), Barrera-Blanco examines the 'situated [religious] knowledges' that allow queer Christians to move from guilt to agency, distinguishing three types: ritual, pastoral and theological knowledge.

Concerned with the civic engagement of Muslims in Portugal's public sphere, in chapter 3, 'Modern Charity: Citizenship, Gender and Islam in Portugal', Raquel Carvalheira reflects on the role played by the Portuguese association Noor'Fatima in the production of citizenship in Lisbon and on how its members challenge the alterity imposed on Muslims in present-day Europe. In her contribution, which is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2019 participating in Noor'Fatima as a volunteer, Carvalheira analyses how this association, led by a well-established Muslim woman of Indo-Mozambican origin, uses cosmopolitanism and emotions as central to its activity and accommodates forms of charity that are mainstream in Portugal but also globally enacted by imagined communities of giving. Carvalheira shows that this emotional circuit is powerful as it creates sentiments of belonging for volunteers while, at the same time, it inscribes Islam as a caring and universalist religion in a field that in Portugal has predominantly lain in the hands of the Catholic Church.

Chapter 4, titled 'Sexuality, Migration and Religion: Migrated Gay Men Living in Madrid', addresses the life experiences of four gay men who have migrated to Spain from different geographic origins and with different religious backgrounds. In his contribution, Rafael Camarero Montesinos explores the relationship between religious and sexual identities among gay men who migrated to Madrid hoping for a more open environment in this city to freely develop their sexual identity. Drawing on Lee's push-pull theory (1966), Camarero Montesinos considers the immediate religious environment, in which friends and family reject sexual dissent, as a potential push factor for migrants with non-heteronormative sexual identities (Duggan 1994; Warner 1991), consequently affecting their religiosity in terms of belonging and practices. Based on interviews and participant observation carried out during four months in 2018, the chapter examines whether these gay men feel obliged to give up on their religion in order to freely develop their sexuality, or if religion can also become a refuge that enables them to

feel part of a religious collective, and a tool to respond to the stigmatization of non-heteronormative sexualities.

Turning to an African neo-Pentecostal church in Madrid, in chapter 5 Michele Cunico explores how young women who migrated from Nigeria to Spain deploy their communicative resources to develop a complex process of socialization in the context of an ethnic church. The chapter, titled “‘Life Is a Battlefield’: Spiritual Warfare as a Trans-Semiotic and Trans-Sensory Negotiation in an African Neo-Pentecostal Church in Madrid’, is based on extensive fieldwork (September 2019–May 2022) conducted in a Nigerian church community in the city of Fuenlabrada. In his contribution, Cunico aims to understand the impact of the rhetoric of Spiritual Warfare on a group of young women who attend a neo-Pentecostal church on the outskirts of Madrid and who are, as Black migrant women, subject to multiple forms of oppression and discrimination in their daily lives. Spiritual Warfare refers to the idea of a continuous struggle between the forces of good and evil, that is fought both in a material and in a spiritual dimension. Drawing on the concepts of ‘semiotic repertoires’ (Kusters 2021) and ‘semiotic assemblages’ (Canagarajah 2021; Pennycook 2017), Cunico analyses Spiritual Warfare as a strategy of communication that can be adapted to the contexts and objectives of the individuals who engage with it. While its practice may lead to a strengthening of daily life resistance, it can also contribute to the perpetuation of the different forms of oppression the members of the neo-Pentecostal church community are subject to.

The last chapter of this volume, chapter 6, is titled ‘Creating Change from Within: Young Muslim Women and Agency in Transformation’. In her contribution, Johanna M. Lems reflects on how a group of young Muslim women in Madrid have grown tired of always ‘reacting to’ hegemonic discourse and to questions imposed by others. Forming part of the founding team of an association for young Muslimas, and after many years of work largely dedicated to showing the compatibility of their Muslimness and their Spanish citizenship, they decided to dedicate their time and energy to create their own subject matters and to rethink the initial objectives of their common project. Through a period of group reflection and a process of internal and external training, they have come to reset the foundations, aims and activities of their organization. No longer mainly focused on seeking recognition from third parties of their (political) subjectivity, these young women wish to construe an ethical sensitivity and to contribute, both collectively and individually, to a better world. Based on material obtained with participant observation and semi-structured interviews, this chapter seeks to explore how religion affects both the desire for transformation of their association and the way these changes have taken place, as well as its relationship with feelings of belonging.

As these chapter descriptions show, each study refers to a micro context in contemporary Spain, Portugal or the Netherlands. The chapters explore different situations of minority groups and individuals who experience discrimination in their daily life, with the objective to broaden our knowledge about the intersection of religion and other factors – such as socioeconomic position, citizen status, sexuality and so on – that are involved in the processes of subjectivation and agency building.

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Notes

1. According to Pew Research Center's 2022 report, figures for 2020 and all future years are demographic projections based on 2010 baseline estimates. This may explain the different percentage encountered in the 2024 report published by the Spanish Sociological Research Center (CIS 2024: 40) as regards the estimated portion of the total population in Spain who self-identify as being Catholic (75.5% vs 54.5%).
2. As explained in footnote 1, the 2024 report by the Spanish Sociological Research Center shows a percentage of 54.5% (CIS 2024: 40) instead of 75.5% (Pew Research Center 2022).

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