Summary


The murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 shocked Dutch society. Soon after, debates emerged about the nature of Islam and whether Islam is compatible with ‘Dutch’ democracy and freedoms. There were those among Muslims who praised Mohammed Bouyeri’s actions for being, as he claimed, an expression of true faith, while others condemned the attack as being against the true nature of Islam. Such utterances can be seen as examples of debates surrounding the question of how to construct a Muslim identity, what kind of constructions are considered authoritative, on which basis would that be so, and why do these constructions emerge in certain contexts. Many of the discussions focus on Muslim youth and in particular Muslim youth of Moroccan descent. Given the fact that in the age category 10-19 they represent 20% of the Moroccan-Dutch migrant population and in the category 20-30 again 20%, it is clear that youth constitute an important part of the Moroccan-Dutch community in the Netherlands. Except for a few minor studies and one large survey very little research has been done on this group in relation to Muslim identity. Though that survey, as well as most of the other research, focuses in particular on norms and values among this group they pay little attention to the way people are religious and to the question as to how they construct their religious identity.

This study is an attempt to fill that gap and in this book I present the results of my research project conducted among Moroccan-Dutch boys and girls who visited a homework support project of the An Nour mosque in Gouda. Gouda is a middle-sized town of 70,000 inhabitants in the western part of the Netherlands (at equal distances from Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht). Almost 10 per cent of the population is of Muslim background: Moroccan-Dutch people with 6,000 constituting the largest group, Turks a distant second with 400. Moreover, there has been a history of conflict in several districts of the city.
In chapter two, I explain how religious identity should be understood. Islam is viewed as a complete repertoire of activities, a type of tool chest containing practices (such as prayer and fasting, the wearing of the headscarf), beliefs (such as halal and haram) and experiences. In constructing their identity people do a lot of ‘autobiographical work’; making choices from the available repertoires (and reflecting upon them) is an important aspect of the construction of an identity. This process of making choices and reflecting upon them is not a process of autonomous individuals (although it is often presented like that) but rather means a process of negotiation with others about the definition and interpretation of one’s identity. Reflexivity as well is the product of a cultural environment and the way this process evolves is dependent upon the changes in societies. Making choices and reflexivity are accordingly always socially and culturally embedded. Identity construction, therefore, also always occurs in interaction with others, inside and outside their own religious, ethnic, or peer-group. Within and between these divergent groups there is a balance of power. That is why the terms ‘identity politics’ or ‘Muslim politics’ are useful here. Identity politics, in my view, should be taken to mean the negotiations about the definition and interpretation of ideas, practices, and experiences that constitute a certain identity. These are continually negotiated, implicitly and explicitly, between people within one’s own group and with people outside this group.

The third chapter includes both an account of the methodology of the research and an exploration of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. The reason for combining the two issues is that together they make clear how the politicization of Islam in Dutch society has influenced the research. This politicization makes a reflection on the relationship between researcher and the research group necessary. Notions such as identity, religion, and culture are not only used by social scientists but also by the very ‘subject’ of study: the people who are studied by social scientists. These concepts are then used by scientists, politicians, opinion leaders, and so on to legitimize or to question marginalization or hegemonization. They are therefore, by definition, politicized. Besides being a researcher in the An Nour mosque I was also the coordinator of several youth activities in that mosque. While this enabled me to establish a reciprocal relationship with the research group it also meant that, unwittingly, I became part of the internal politics of the board and the visitors of the mosque. Accordingly, inclusion (even if it was on a low level) also meant that I, as a researcher, became embedded in an existing structure of power.
My presence, as well as that of other native Dutch volunteers, became, for some visitors to the mosque, a symbol of the negative Dutch attitude. In the eyes of some of the Muslims we represented the symbolic ‘other’ and our presence touched upon the issue of their relationship to non-Muslims. Different factions within the Muslim community of Gouda held different opinions about the meaning of our presence, which implied that we were part of an internal debate of what constitutes a mosque and who had the right to decide that. In a period of time when Muslims feel threatened by – what they perceive as – the intolerant or even hostile attitude of native Dutch people towards them, researchers entering a fieldwork site can count on more distrust and unwillingness. In such an environment, controversial issues (not only 9/11 and Fortuyn are controversial issues in themselves but also originally that of homo-sexuality) are more difficult to discuss and it becomes more difficult to find out what people ‘really’ think. Reflection on the subtle intricacies of these issues serves as an extra means of validating the research material and establishing its reliability.

Many of the processes I have analyzed in this study are not specific to Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth. One of the developments that stands out for this group is the huge amount of attention they receive in public debates. This is an important aspect with regard to the question of how Moroccan-Dutch youth construct an identity grounded in their experiences with non-Muslims. In chapter four I expose the process by which Moroccan-Dutch youth and native Dutch people mirror each other. Moroccan-Dutch youth increasingly experience how native Dutch people categorize them as Muslims and both the native Dutch and Moroccan-Dutch youth interpret perceived differences between them in religious terms. The search for a Muslim identity means, in relation to native Dutch people, the attempt to transcend the perceived dichotomy between ‘Moroccan’ and ‘Dutch’ while at the same time trying to maintain a certain distance towards Dutch society. According to Moroccan-Dutch youth, however, the nature of their categorization by the native Dutch people is usually negative; Islam is portrayed as suspicious, related to terrorism, intolerance, and oppression of women. During the period between 2001 and 2004, Moroccan-Dutch youth experienced a cumulative negative effect because of the sequence of events that took place during that period, in particular the ‘El Moumni affair, ‘9-11’; the election campaign with Fortuyn and his subsequent murder; the public statements by Hirsi Ali, Van Gogh, Wilders, and the film Submission; and finally the murder of Van Gogh. The actual experiences of Moroccan-Dutch youth with the Dutch Islam debate and native Dutch people con-
vey the idea that there is a struggle in Dutch society against Islam which, as a consequence, might lead to the conclusion that they have to choose between being either Muslim or ‘Dutch’. Evading conflicts is a means to stay away from that dilemma; but the negative experiences can also lead to a search for a strong identity. When people feel that the other is hostile, they need strong group boundaries in order protect their ‘own’ group. A strong identity can be seen as a strategy to distance oneself from society (without a complete break up) while, in some cases, it becomes a resistance identity.

Nevertheless, it is not only the way Moroccan-Dutch youth experience the Islam debate and the reactions by individual native Dutch people that influences the construction of their Muslim identity. Within every group there are competing definitions and interpretations of identities. These internal struggles are the focus of chapter five. The politics of identity is therefore not only based on the presence of an external other (which is most of the times the focus of ethnic studies), but also on the process of negotiation within a certain group. In the case of young Muslims their relationship to parents and significant others is very important. Young people are not only discovering who they are, but they have to deal with people who ‘tell’ them who they are; for example their parents and imams. Parents frame the behaviour of their children in terms of halal and haram, they tell stories about the life of the prophet Muhammad serving as an exemplary role model, and they teach youth how to pray.

In the beginning of puberty a paradox development occurs. Parents are adapting to the changing circumstances whereas this process does not exactly follow the same pattern as in the case of Moroccan-Dutch youth. For the parents, Morocco remains important as a continued frame of reference for their presence in Dutch society and also in their religious beliefs and practices. This is not the case for Moroccan-Dutch youth. Partly this is a normal process whereby the new generation tries to adapt an existing religious tradition to the challenges of modern times. Because of the inevitable changes that come with this re-interpretation many older people often experiences these developments with feelings of regret and nostalgia. The conflict that has been described between the younger generations and the first generation over an imam is the clearest example. This conflict resulted in a struggle over the question of who interprets Islam the right way and who represents ‘the truth’. The conflict also was about power over the mosque. Before, the mosque had been perceived by the young men as a
place for the first generation men. With this new imam more and more young boys visited the mosque and they wanted to see this reflected in the power structures of the mosque. The conflict therefore was not only about what ‘the truth’ was but also about who is allowed to decide what ‘the truth’ is.

Not everyone among the Moroccan-Dutch youth saw the imam as an important religious authority. In particular, many girls differed in their opinions. Although the imam enjoyed a certain degree of respect among the girls, his comments about the position of women raised the anger of many girls and women. According to them, the imam mixed ‘Moroccan’ cultural traditions with Islam and they claimed that true Islam empowers women to develop themselves in society. This clearly points to the importance of the issue of gender in the construction of Muslim identities, as I show in chapter six. Girls have an important position in the identity politics of young Muslims because they are held responsible for reproducing the culture of their parents and Islam. Girls, much more than boys, are frequently scrutinized by other Dutch Moroccans who focus on their behaviour and attire. Female behaviour and body, therefore, are important symbolic boundary markers not only for Muslims. The girls in my research also experienced their behaviour and attire as an important factor in the attention of native Dutch people which leads them to the perception that not only do other Muslims try to tell them how to behave and what to wear, but so also do the native Dutch. By politicizing gender in relation to Islam, young girls become the core of the struggle between Muslims and native Dutch people over the control of the Moroccan-Dutch Muslims in the Netherlands. They have become the embodiment of the Islam debate as well as many internal Muslim struggles.

However, girls are not passive victims of these struggles. On the contrary, by articulating their own construction of true Islam they try to accomplish gender equality. They do not do this by leaving Islam, but by arguing that most restrictions concerning virginity in Islam not only apply to girls but also to boys. Their arguments become stronger because they can argue that the idea that male virginity is perceived as less important is not Islamic but rather the result of ‘Moroccan’ traditions. In this power struggle, boys do give in but at the same time try to maintain their position by articulating ideas about masculinity. Sometimes the boys’ reaction results in macho behaviour that can also be perceived as a form of rebellion against discrimination and popular stereotypes in which they are depicted as oppressors of women. For the moment, they do succeed, to a
large extent, in maintaining their dominant position but not as completely since girls are becoming more powerful – because of their successes in education and by using Islamic references to defend themselves. With regard to native Dutch people, girls also use the discourse of true Islam to defend themselves and Islam and to criticize the stereotypes that native Dutch people make of them.

One of the aspects that play a role in the interplay between body and identity politics is the desired harmony between outward appearances and inner life. Girls wearing headscarves should not act too forward with boys, otherwise their intention of modesty is not sincere and the headscarf has no value. Girls state that they want to wear a headscarf because it is an expression of their inner conviction and not because other people demand it of them. According to the girls, Allah asks them to wear the headscarf, but most of them state that they will not do so before ‘they are ready’. This interchange between Islam as inner conviction, outward appearances, and the idea of Allah’s will, is the focus of chapter seven where I analyze how Moroccan-Dutch youth construct their identity through certain practices, beliefs, and experiences.

Moroccan-Dutch youth state that prayer and fasting constitute the main pillars of their religious convictions and practices. Nevertheless, we see many differences among youth with regard to praying and fasting. Joint prayer and fasting creates in their views a sense of communal belonging with other Muslims and Allah but this often competes with other, more worldly matters. In every day life, the emphasis is therefore not so much on practices such as prayer and fasting. In the discussions of Moroccan-Dutch youth on Islam they tend to talk a lot about the practices and go to great lengths to explain to each other in detail how to fulfil their religious obligations. Most of these discussions also increasingly pertain to Islam as an inward conviction. Islam has to be ‘from the heart’ and, in some cases, Allah is turning into a very personal god to whom they turn to for assistance in their daily affairs. The emphasis on outward appearances in attire (for girls, in particular, and boys) might seem to contradict that. This is not the case, however, since they perceive the outward (in behaviour and looks) as a reflection of the inner convictions. This reflection, however, should be based upon the true religious doctrines and not on ‘Moroccan’ or ‘Dutch’ customs.

The religious experiences of Moroccan-Dutch youth, for example, when reading the Quran, listening to cassette tapes, and watching videos stimulate and constitute a religious sensitivity, an awareness
of the presence of Allah and a sense of fear of Him (taqwa), as well as, activate the religious repertoire. The choices young people make from that repertoire are dependent on the way they interpret their environment. The questions of Moroccan-Dutch youth are brought about by their desire to fulfill their religious obligation but are, above all, based upon the social and political life at a global and local level. Moroccan-Dutch youth frequently engage with other ‘Dutch’ cultural repertoires such as fashion, nightlife, politics, and so on. This means that their idea of ‘true’ Islam and Allah’s will is partly derived from contemporary local and global realities. In this process of searching for a true Islam, they want to find strong moral benchmarks. This is shown, for example, in categorizing and evaluating one’s behaviour in terms of halal and haram (while other more grey categories are left out). This type of evaluation gives them a strong identity and a beacon in an environment full of contradicting demands. At the same time, it enhances the idea that there are no compromises and that they do indeed follow Allah’s true will.

For them to structure the available repertoires they have to gather knowledge about Islam. One of way of doing this is by orienting themselves to a universal Islam that is definitely not ‘Moroccan’ or ‘Dutch’. Looking for authoritative sources and persons is another way of structuring their repertoires; here they show a clear preference for people who apparently do not make compromises about Islam. Religious authorities who adjust their opinions to the wishes of Dutch politicians tend to lose authority. Their position as the embodiment of an untouchable, eternal, and universal truth is damaged and, therefore, they are no longer considered as suitable benchmarks for the convictions of the Moroccan-Dutch youth. This is not only about having the ‘right’ knowledge but also about the way young people experience these religious authorities and how they make them feel well about themselves. Young boys with a history of trouble-making or even crime can regain their status by becoming a born again Muslim and they even can acquire a certain authority. Not only because they are able to overcome the problems of the past but, also, because they have experienced both worlds: that of a trouble making ‘Moroccan’ boy and that of a pious Muslim.

In chapter seven it becomes clear that Moroccan-Dutch youth are not passive victims of negative categorizations by native Dutch people or internal politics of the first generation, but are actively contributing to the process of identity construction. Their agency allows them to connect their individual life stories and experiences
to the larger narratives of Islam as a worldwide tradition and to the umma in general. In particular, the emergence of the Salafi movements plays an important role in the creation of a sense of belonging to the umma. This loyalty towards Muslims worldwide does not mean however that their loyalty towards Dutch society or their parents is lost. This becomes clear when we look more closely at how they use the terms halal and haram. Although these categories seem to be straightforward and clear-cut, in practices young people continually negotiate about the definition and interpretation of these categories with other people, for example, when wearing a headscarf at school is not allowed.

The Internet is often seen as the place where youth do not have to take into account the interests of others and their loyalties to others. In the first stages of the research, the Internet was not included; but during the time of the project an awareness of its importance in the daily life of Moroccan-Dutch youth grew. Therefore I decided to include in this research an inquiry into how Moroccan-Dutch youth construct their religious identity on the basis of their virtual relations. The results are described and analyzed in chapter eight. I make clear that although the Internet gives youth a huge amount of freedom, the idea that it enables users to transcend existing ethnic, religious, and national boundaries should be adjusted. There is a huge proliferation in religious groups who fight against each other and Moroccan-Dutch youth prefer ‘Moroccan’ websites (and Salafi websites) to ‘Turkish’ or ‘Somali’ websites. In addition to new forms of production and consumption of religious knowledge (with an emphasis on text, messages that differ from the traditional mosque organizations and their imams) also new religious authorities emerge. These new authorities, often young men and women, who master both English and Arabic, create their own websites. An important feature of these authoritative figures is the physical distancing they have towards the consumers.

The different answers given by different groups with each professing its own claim on the absolute truth, raise questions about the relationship between online and offline. Although Moroccan-Dutch youth often base their convictions upon Salafi texts but that occurs within an offline discussion with peers. This inevitably leads to an offline re-interpretation. The proliferation into several Salafi groups increases the importance of offline discussions. The online construction of identity does not, therefore, replace offline identity politics, but both influence each other, stimulate each other, and change each other. The Internet also contributes to the identification with other Muslims. By spreading short films and the
abundance of texts about Jihad, conflicts that are fought far away appear to be close by. Moreover, the Internet contributes to the idea of being a Muslim because of the ‘Islamic legends’: stories, pictures, films that depict wonders of Allah. The images and films can be seen as constituting a visual environment stimulating the senses, activating and constituting religious orientations and repertoires that also influence how people experience offline realities. Searching for information on the Internet does not always mean that they have to find the answers; the practice of searching gives Moroccan-Dutch youth the idea of being active in becoming a better Muslim and taking matters into their own hands.

In chapter nine I summarize the results of my study and present my conclusion. By looking at the several dimensions (internal, external, gender, beliefs and virtual) and the relations and overlap between the dimensions, I show that the religious upbringing, the increasing amount of attention to Islam among native Dutch people, the emergence of the Salafi movements, and the individual experiences all contribute to make Islam the most important frame of reference for Moroccan-Dutch youth to reflect upon who they are and what they want to be. The questions young people ask about Islam, the different forms of attire, the religious texts, and many other developments are closely related to contemporary local and global religious, social, and political developments. The way young people construct their religious identity can best be described as a quest for a true or pure Islam. The idea of ones true self is combined with the idea of an authentic core of Islam that is neither ‘Moroccan’ nor ‘Dutch’. The idea of ‘purity’ and truth is very important. Firstly, it is an expression of their Muslim identity and a means of becoming a ‘good’ Muslim. Secondly, it is a way to be part of their ‘own’ group and Dutch society without compromising their idea of authenticity. Thirdly, it serves to strengthen their position in the negotiation with others: their idea of Islam is based on truth and purity.

Young Moroccan-Dutch Muslims do not create their identity alone. Their parents, peers, Dutch people also contribute to the process of identity construction in the processes of negotiation; and young people depend on their relationship with them in order to find recognition for their identity and authenticity. This means that, on the one hand, young people are seeking strong moral benchmarks but, on the other hand, are looking for a way to manage all their loyalties all of which inevitably leads to compromises. The result of the identity politics is a changing, multi-layered identity related to contemporary society that is at the same time em-
bodied and filled with emotional experiences. The fact that they have to make compromises is not a special phenomenon that only occurs in the case of Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth. Problems that arise are not the consequence of the contradiction between managing all those loyalties on the one hand and loyalty to their authentic self and their idea of Allah on the other hand. Problems arise because young people have the experience that they have to make clear to whom their loyalty belongs to and having to choose between loyalties instead of managing them all at the same time. It is then that the idea that they have to choose between being Muslim or ‘Dutch’ emerges. In this process, loyalties become absolute loyalties with absolute qualities because they are evaluated by young people and others in terms of right and wrong or good and evil. This limits the capability of Moroccan-Dutch Muslim youth to perform on different stages at the same time and to receive recognition from different audiences for their construction of a Muslim identity and their idea of authenticity.