

Review: *Religion, Gender and Race in Western European Arts and Culture: Thinking Through Religious Transformation*, by Nella van den Brandt

Nella van den Brandt, *Religion, Gender and Race in Western European Arts and Culture: Thinking Through Religious Transformation*, London: Routledge, 2024. 286 pp. £31.99. ISBN: 9781032459226. E-ISBN: 9781003852063.

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The intersection of religion, gender, and race has long been a central theme in Western European arts and culture, where literary and artistic expressions often mirror societal debates and tensions. However, this crucial topic has not yet received sufficient attention from the academic world. In her book *Religion, Gender, and Race in Western European Arts and Culture: Thinking Through Religious Transformation*, Nella van den Brandt builds on the individual religious transformation approach to address the gendering of the race-religion-secularity nexus. She also examines cultural dynamics through detailed case studies from Dutch, British, Flemish, German, and French literature. Spanning 286 pages, this book integrates feminist, queer, postcolonial, and critical race perspectives into nine chapters to enrich the discourse on religious transformation and amplify its appeal.

In the introductory chapter, van den Brandt places significant emphasis on “a variety of examples of literature and culture—some famous, others less well-known—to understand how they relate to existing discourses about religion, gender, and race” (4). She analyses the role of literature in shaping societal views while asserting the deep interconnection of religion, gender, and race in Western European narratives. She also shows that sociopolitical and cultural norms and expectations shape individual religious transformations. This explains why van den Brandt incorporates autoethnographic reflections in the first chapter, “Leaving. . . What Exactly? A Cultural and Autoethnographic Account,” to identify knowledge production within the researcher’s specific national, political, social, and religious background. Similar to the concept of

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“situated knowledge” (Haraway 590-91), personal experiences and life stories here inform scholarly work within these contextual frameworks.

To support this claim, the next chapter, “Women’s Stories of Becoming Jewish and Muslim,” explores religion, storytelling, identity, subject formation, and conversion through four memoirs and novels by women who transitioned from Judaism to Islam (50). Meanwhile, Chapter 3, “Women from Calvinist and Jewish Folds: Negotiating Religious/Secular Demarcations,” and Chapter 4, “Women Leaving Calvinist and Jewish Folds: Rethinking Gender, and Religion-Race in Dutch Novels about Zeeland,” discuss the challenges women face in navigating or leaving orthodox Calvinist and Jewish communities. Through these narratives, the author underscores the experiences of women and minority groups, highlighting their struggles against societal expectations and rigid religious traditions (79).

The fifth chapter, titled “Creole and Indigenous Women: Rethinking Europe and Religion,” examines “the works of two Black male filmmakers” (145) based in Western Europe to offer a critical perspective on the religious transformations experienced by girls and women in postcolonial and post-slavery contexts. By analyzing these works, chapter five reveals how the historical legacies of colonialism continue to shape contemporary religious and cultural identities. The sixth chapter, “Constructing the Muslim Question through Gender and Religion-Race,” was fulfilled by using “current critical theories in order to analyze the representation of the Islamic State, Muslims, secular modernity, femininity and masculinity, and conversion in the novel *Soumission* and the theatre play *Onderworpen*” (177). Here, the “Muslim Question” is framed as a systematic process that problematizes Islam and Muslims, shedding light on the pervasive influence of systemic Islamophobia and racism in Europe.

Together, these chapters interrogate how religious narratives are politicized to reinforce exclusionary European secular and Christian identities. Van den Brandt critiques white secular/Christian subjectivity and argues that secular ideals often mask their own exclusivity. Literature and art emerge as powerful instruments for both reflecting and shaping societal attitudes, while restrictive migration policies targeting Muslim women illustrate the conditional acceptance of minority identities. She emphasizes how religious dynamics are deeply shaped by gender and race. European policies, she argues, marginalize

minority communities and reinforce systemic inequality. This critique challenges the professed ideals of inclusivity and equality in these policies.

In the final two chapters, masculinity, race, and postcoloniality take priority over religious transformation within the frameworks of religion and secularity, race, gender, and sexuality. The seventh chapter, “Jews, Muslims, Moroccans: Re-membling and Re-imagining Complicated Relationships,” investigates the rethinking of Jewish-Muslim relations to review religious transformation as “a potentiality enclosed in the rethinking of interfaith relations” (213). In “Conclusion: A Reflection on Normative Affect, Aliveness and Revolutionary Love,” van den Brandt embraces the issue of cultural work, applying the idea that “[f]lying fish don’t drown” (261) to the lives of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic men and women. She advocates for revolutionary love and solidarity and envisions a future beyond the constraints of secular dominance. By the end, van den Brandt leaves readers with the belief that even when women come from very different backgrounds, they can still find ways to connect and support one another, united by their commitment to a fairer world.

As such, this book offers a profound exploration of the intersection between religion, gender, and race, as reflected in diverse forms of Western European literature and culture. Its success in unpacking these complex dynamics is rooted in several key characteristics.

Firstly, this book establishes a working definition of religion through an intersectional lens, demonstrating the intertwined nature of gender and race. Such a framework serves both as a conventional label for specific traditions and as an analytical framework for understanding transcendent human activities (7). The complexity of this dual function shapes how religion is culturally represented in literature, particularly in relation to individual and communal religious experiences. The discussion of religious transformation—whether as a substantial change or a process—is crucial for examining how personal religious transformations are represented across various traditions and contexts. Van den Brandt highlights that while contemporary studies often engage with gender and sexuality, they frequently neglect the racial dimensions of religious life. Thus, she aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of how empowering dynamics shape individual experiences of religion, and how these experiences are narrated in literature and culture by integrating gender and race into the analysis. Van den Brandt also references scholars such as David

Chidester, Joan W. Scott, and Geraldine Heng to illustrate that religious narratives reflect broader societal power relations and constructions of identity. In this way, her book positions itself as a critical intervention in the fields of religious studies, gender studies, and race studies, seeking to illuminate the complex dynamics at play in Western European cultural narratives of transformation.

Secondly, the main research methodology of this book is autoethnography, which systematically describes and interprets (graphy) personal experiences (auto) to gain insight into cultural experiences (ethno) (25). By blending elements of autobiography and ethnography, this method serves as both a process and an outcome of exploring individual and cultural connections. It provides individuals with a platform from which to reflect on their lives in ways that resonate with larger sociopolitical realities. Indeed, personal experiences (e.g., television series) and cultural artifacts (e.g., literary non-fiction) serve as bridges between individual worlds and broader societal structures. For instance, the journey of leaving religion is shaped by race and gender in the Dutch TV series *Freethinkers* (29). Similarly, a Ghanaian-Dutch character's questioning of Jesus' whiteness illustrates how racialized experiences influence religious departure (31). As a result, personal transformations are revealed not as isolated incidents but as intricately intertwined with gender roles, racial identity, and socioeconomic conditions.

Thirdly, the exaltation of societal norms creates a space for marginalized voices to articulate their experiences. These narratives reveal the complexities of identity and the interplay of various factors, allowing readers to engage more deeply and meaningfully with themes of faith, gender, and racial identity. Feminist philosopher Judith Butler argues that our self-narratives are deeply influenced by the social contexts in which we live (van den Brandt 25).¹ Because the reflexive nature of religion promotes self-awareness and critical thinking about how individuals construct and communicate their life stories, narratives about leaving religion can either reinforce or challenge existing social structures. By moving beyond the binary of religious adherence versus critical autonomy, this book uncovers the multidimensional factors shaping religious identity, such as domestic violence in patriarchal communities and class-based struggles for autonomy.

¹ The citation refers to Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). The argument about self-narratives being influenced by social contexts can be found in Chapter 1.

Another particularly striking aspect of this book is its focus on the role of communication in both personal and shared stories of religious transformation. While traditional views often portray leaving religion as a simple journey from belief to skepticism, Judith van Koelemeijer's memoir *Het zwijgen van Maria Zachea: een ware familiegeschiedenis* (*The Silence of Maria Zachea*, 2001) uses silence to reveal the complex family dynamics and religious identities involved (van den Brandt 41). Recognizing silence as an important part of personal stories helps uncover the hidden tensions and conflicts that often come with leaving religion. In doing so, the book positions communication—both verbal and nonverbal—as a light spot, as it expresses the emotional and psychological aspects of religious transformation and the painful struggles individuals face during this process. By focusing on personal experiences, the book sheds light on the intimate and emotional sides of these changes, offering a deeper understanding beyond just theoretical or sociological analysis.

Despite its valuable insights, this book is not without its limitations. One notable challenge is the portrayal of religious transformation as a linear journey from oppression to freedom. The perspective risks oversimplifying the multifaceted realities of individual and collective experiences, presenting religious communities as inherently oppressive and secular societies as inherently liberating. Such a framework reduces the complexity of religious life and perpetuates the notion that secularism is the only viable path to societal progress. In doing so, it may alienate those who seek to navigate their faith in progressive ways, thereby overlooking the diverse and empowering experiences that can exist within religious communities.

Furthermore, this framework can unintentionally reinforce Islamophobia and racial stereotyping. In many Western contexts, particularly in Europe, Islam is often portrayed as the “Other,” associated with backwardness, misogyny, and resistance to modernity. By focusing predominantly on the struggles of Muslim women, this book risks painting entire communities with a broad brush. It not only perpetuates harmful stereotypes but also deepens societal divides, positioning Muslims as outsiders who must abandon their faith to be fully accepted within secular Western norms. Such narratives contribute to a climate of exclusion, where the rich diversity and agency within Muslim communities are overshadowed by generalized assumptions.

Likewise, the subjective nature of autoethnographic research poses challenges to maintaining academic rigor. Although this method provides

valuable personal insights, it relies heavily on the researcher's interpretation, which can introduce bias. This book offers a critical analysis of European policies on marriage migration, headscarf bans, and anti-radicalization programs, exposing their restrictive and discriminatory impacts in literature. That said, its exploration of religion, gender, and race could be more comprehensive. For instance, while it addresses gender and racial dynamics, it overlooks the influence of economic class and regional differences. These factors often intersect with religious and racial identities, profoundly shaping lived experiences. Without fully integrating them, the analysis risks missing key aspects of how oppression and marginalization manifest in Western European arts and culture.

However, it can't be denied that the work offers a thought-provoking exploration of personal narratives, illustrating how individual experiences both reflect and challenge the complex societal structures that shape Western European arts and culture. In a word, van den Brandt clarifies the deep connections between religion, gender, and race, demonstrating how these elements influence personal and collective identities while shaping broader cultural and political landscapes. This dual perspective deepens academic discourse and amplifies marginalized voices. At the same time, it reinforces a vital platform for perspectives often silenced or overlooked in mainstream conversations. Through this lens, the critical role of literature and art is affirmed in their capacity to reinforce or challenge societal norms and inspire change.

In doing so, this work effectively bridges the gap between theoretical frameworks and lived experiences, making it an essential resource for scholars, students, and practitioners in fields such as Religious Studies, Gender Studies, Cultural Studies, and Sociology. Its exploration of identity, belonging, resistance, and solidarity ensures its relevance beyond academic audiences, resonating with readers interested in the complexities of personal transformation. As part of the critical studies in religion, gender, and sexuality series, the significance of this book transcends a simple analysis of intersecting domains. It invites reflection on the fluidity of religious identity and the potential for solidarity in resisting systemic oppression and exclusion. Moreover, it serves as a vital contribution to contemporary discussions on culture, social justice, and the pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable society by emphasizing the transformative power of personal and collective resilience.

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