

## **Blog post report on AAR for Catharina Halkes Fonds**

After a 14-hour journey and in a haze of timezone disorientation, I arrived in San Diego on the 21st November 2019. The next morning, after a hearty American breakfast of a bagel and coffee, I joined my mentors, supervisors and colleagues from the NWO research group “Beyond Religion vs. Emancipation” (Prof. Anne-Marie Korte, Dr Mariecke van den Berg, Dr Nella van den Brandt, Lieke Schrijvers, and Jerrold Cuperus) for a further coffee before heading to our pre-AAR roundtable workshop on the theme of “Contested Conversions: Authentic Stories and Public Responses”. It was a very fruitful session, in which eight papers were discussed, exploring “contested conversions” in relation to a range of religious traditions and national and cultural contexts and with a great spirit of collaboration. Much of the research presented was based on ethnographic fieldwork, but some papers (including my own) engaged with the theme through the lens of discourse analysis. At the workshop, I presented a paper entitled “Documenting Conversion: Contested Framings of Female Converts to Islam as Family Troublemakers in British and Swiss Documentaries”, in which I discussed the ways in which the documentaries *Les Converties d’Allah* (2014) and *Make Me a Muslim* (2017) frame converts to Islam as stirring up trouble with their families - and how this framing is problematised. I underlined the idea that, while conversion is often deemed disruptive to female converts’ relationships with family, this is *not* how some of the converts and families interviewed seem to present conversion to Islam. This workshop was a wonderful opportunity to explore my growing interest in thinking further through how humour acts as an affective mode through which converts contest the pervasive framing of conversion to Islam in “serious” or negative terms. Raising this idea as a discussion point, I was delighted that it generated fruitful, encouraging reflections on this approach. In particular, I was prompted to reflect further on the role generational and national differences make in the formulation and reception of humour. The day culminated in a discussion of the convergent points between the papers presented, in which questions of legitimacy and the role of emotions in contested conversions played a prominent role. I think I can speak for all those involved in the workshop when I say that it was an inspiring day of sharing ideas and thinking collaboratively.

From the 23rd to 25th November, I attended a wide variety of panels as part of the AAR conference itself. Having looked through the 171-page programme book in advance, I had some idea of the scale of the event that I was going to, but nothing quite prepared me for the dizzying variety of events on offer throughout the conference, which I navigated thanks in considerable part to the support of the members of the “Beyond Religion vs. Emancipation” group throughout the conference, offering advice and suggestions about which panels to attend, and a friendly face for a coffee when one was needed. Over the course of the conference, I attended a range of sessions, from a panel on the “theopoetics” of Audre Lorde (featuring an inspiring discussion of Lorde’s model of “confounded identities” and the significance of writing as a creative process of “becoming”) to a session on emotion and ritual, which featured a rather unexpected “show and tell” presentation on ritual hugging! I also enjoyed being in the audience of Dr Adriaan van Klinken’s *Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* book launch, in which a close circle of colleagues engaged enthusiastically with the text and praised van Klinken for his courage and creativity in bringing his own biography into dialogue with those of his interlocutors in the process of writing the book.

Given my own research interests, I made an effort to attend several sessions related to the themes of religion, humour and popular culture. In one panel on religion, popular culture and masculinity, I was

inspired by a paper entitled “American Muslim Humour, Colonial Masculinity and the Racialization of Religion”, in which Samah Choudhury noted the operation of the expression of humour as a key signifier of being a “modern” secular subject, and considered the complex ways in which this plays out in the case of Aziz Ansari, an American stand-up comedian recently embroiled in the #MeToo movement. In another lively panel on “Irony, Play and the (Serious?) Study of Religion”, speakers asked more general questions about the place of humour in religious studies, and what it means to “take religion seriously”. Challenging the idea of seriousness as the polar opposite of playfulness, speakers suggested, using a variety of case studies and methodological tools, both that humour can coexist with academic rigour in religious studies and that interlocutors who present themselves playfully or humorously may do so to make their religious and/or sociopolitical message more impactful and memorable. Two themes that stuck with me from the discussion of this panel were the following; the idea of *liminality* in humour (enabling individuals or groups to enter into - and reformulate - contested spaces) and the question of *authenticity* (both in terms of the status of scholars using humour as a research lens and with regard to the status of humorous interlocutors). I found this panel especially helpful in corroborating my own curiosity about humour as a mode of contestation in the context of narratives on women’s conversion to islam. I was also struck by the parallels between the themes explored here and the thematic approaches emerging out of the “Contested Conversions” pre-AAR workshop, and hope to explore these complex intersections further.

Following the conference (and a few days of jet lag!), I feel more inspired than ever to continue engaging with the themes that I discussed and reflected on there. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the NWO “Beyond Religion vs. Emancipation” research group for their kindness in including me in the “Contested Conversions” workshop and their supportiveness throughout the conference. Additionally, I am very grateful to the Catharina Halkes Fonds for their financial support, without which it would not have been possible for me to attend. I now return to my own research with renewed energy, excited at the prospect of developing my ideas further and hoping to attend many more fruitful conferences in the future.

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