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# Managing affects and sensibilities: The case of not-handshaking and not-fasting

This paper examines how a number of pious and non-practising Belgian Maghrebi women *who do not shake hands* with the opposite sex and *do not fast* manage the sensitivity and transgressive potential of these practices. Whereas all interlocutors were prone to adjust their conducts to avoid controversies, these adaptations were nevertheless assessed differently. Adopting a flexible stand in the case of not-handshaking was viewed as normal by the pious women, while the impossibility of eating in front of other Muslims was problematised by the non-practising women. I suggest that these different assessments display the *unequal* ethical importance attributed to conducts in a liberal-secular regime.

**Key words** affects, secularism, governmentality, transgression, subjectivity

## Introduction

In November 2004, a nation-wide controversy erupted in the Netherlands after Imam Ahmad Salam from the small town of Tilburg refused to shake hands with Rita Verdonk, the then Minister of Immigration and Integration. After explaining that his Islamic confession did not allow him to shake hands with women, Rita Verdonk, offended by this attitude, wondered whether she wasn't 'equal' to him and stated that this incident was food for further discussion. Verdonk's spokesman clarified her position explaining that the Minister wanted to underline the conventionality of shaking hands in the Netherlands and the importance for Imams to be familiar with Dutch customs and values.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, during Ramadan of September 2008, another incident erupted, in the UK this time, around the well-known and widely acclaimed British soap opera *EastEnders*. Hundreds of Muslims were infuriated after the popular TV-show featured one of its Muslim characters, Masood, secretly eating a chapatti in daytime during Ramadan. The BBC received over a hundred email complaints, angry reactions were posted on websites and blogs, and some security officials even feared the possibility of violent reactions.<sup>2</sup> The BBC issued a public statement, defending the episode, yet also

1 'Verdonk boos na weigeren Imam' [*Verdonk mad after Imam refusal*], in *Trouw*, 22/11/2004.

2 BBC News, 'EastEnders scene defended', 2/10/08, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/7647965.stm>; Katie Begley, 'EastEnders fear bomb madman revenge', *Daily Star*, 3/10/08.

insisting that it wasn't its intention 'to insult Muslims or Islamic values' and stressing that Masood's action should rather be read as an illustration of 'his own fallibilities as a human being'.<sup>3</sup>

While these two events seemingly have nothing in common and occurred in different contexts, they both *transgressed* two different moral imaginaries which resulted in emotional reactions.<sup>4</sup> The Imam's refusal to shake hands touched upon two principles which were presented by Verdonk and her spokesman as kernels of the Dutch – and by extension: the Western-European – public. By refusing to shake hands, Imam Ahmad Salam firstly violated the primary loyalty to 'Dutch customs' that is expected from those who are considered as the object of integration: i.e. Muslim immigrants (see Hage 2000). Yet besides expressing a nationalist longing for a homogeneous cultural space, Verdonk's sensitivity was also linked with the Imam's explicit reference to gender.<sup>5</sup> His insistence upon sexual difference contradicts the way a 'universal' and 'abstract' subject is fostered in a liberal-secular imaginary by denying sexual (ethnic, class or other) differences rather than rendering them explicit, a position Joan Scott has also described as a *psychology of denial* in her analysis of the headscarf ban in France (Scott 2007: 170).

The controversy around the chapatti-eating Masood in *EastEnders* brings us, on the other hand, to a Muslim moral imaginary that is actively enacted and invigorated during the month of Ramadan in Islamic countries, as well as also among the 15 million Muslims that are estimated to live in Western-Europe (Hunter 2002). During this month, practising Muslims not only abstain from eating, drinking, smoking or having sexual relationships in daytime, but this month is also one of '*feasting*' – to paraphrase Marjo Buitelaar (1993). Families and friends gather for *Iftar*, Arabic satellite channels broadcast special Ramadan TV-shows and series, and festival and cultural events colour this holy month. More than only being a religious practice, Ramadan thus acts as a collective ritual which installs the affective and material contours of the Muslim moral imaginary in and outside Europe.<sup>6</sup> The fact that a Muslim character was featured eating in plain day during Ramadan, even if only fictional, touched upon the

3 'EastEnders, Masood Ahmed breaking his Ramadan fast, BBC One, 11th September 2008', Response by the BBC, issued on September, 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008; [http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/response/2008/09/080924\\_res\\_eastenders\\_masood\\_ramadan\\_jf.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/complaints/response/2008/09/080924_res_eastenders_masood_ramadan_jf.shtml).

4 The concept of transgression is understood here in a Foucaultian manner. In '*A Preface to Transgression*' (Foucault 2003 [1963]), Foucault defines transgression as an event that informs us about the limits of a particular order. Concomitant with Bataille's conceptualisation, he views transgression as a violence yet one that goes beyond particular limits while remaining within those limits, and hence confirming them (Libertson 1977: 1013). Foucault's interest in this concept is thus not primarily stirred by the subversive potential of transgressive experiences, but rather by their informative potential. He takes them as an affirmation, yet a non-positive affirmation which also allows the limits to arise, in their blank nakedness, while simultaneously being transgressed (Foucault 2002: 446–447). Rather than placing it outside a web of power, transgressive experiences are thus taken as an entrance point to examine and analyse the operation of disciplinary regimes, and more particularly the manner in which behaviours and practices are classified, normalised or individualised in specific way (see also Foucault 1998 [1976]).

5 Talal Asad notes in *Formation of the Secular* that secularism operates through the delineation and cultivation of a social sphere which seeks to transcend specific particularities such as 'class', 'gender' and 'religious identities' which are simultaneously performed throughout this (Asad 2003:45).

6 For an account of how Islamic affects are revitalized in social life see Charles Hirschkind's (2006) analysis of cassette sermons and how the latter play a key role in the dissemination and sedimentation of Muslim ethics and affects in daily life.

moral imaginary cultivated during that month. Yet besides illustrating how particular religious or secular conducts ‘affect’ distinctive moral imaginaries, these two cases also raise the question how these sensibilities are to affect and regulate the conduct of the concerned ‘offenders’ – i.e. the Imam or the BBC. How does one deal with the difficulty handshaking poses to some pious Muslims, or watching a Muslim character eat in plain day during Ramadan? And conversely: how does one relate to the sensibilities of those who take offense at the refusal to shake hands, or the request not to eat in public during Ramadan?

This paper examines the way surrounding affects structure and regulate the conduct of non-handshaking and non-fasting women of Muslim background in Belgium.<sup>7</sup> The women interviewed are practising and non-practising second generation Maghrebi, born from parents who emigrated to Belgium in the early sixties or seventies, and live and work in Brussels or Antwerp.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the Belgian context cannot simply be compared with the countries cited above, the contentious potential of some facets of their religious or non-religious orientation – i.e. not-handshaking or not-fasting – was a source of concern. They all expressed their awareness over the potentially offensive consequences of their conduct, and developed strategies to overcome them. In analysing their accounts, I seek to understand to what extent these sensibilities guide and regulate the women’s conduct, and how this is assessed. My primary aim is not to offer a Goffmanian (1964) analysis of different strategies of management.<sup>9</sup> This paper rather inscribes itself in the recent ‘*affective turn*’ in sociological and anthropological scholarship (Halley and Ticineto Clough 2007), which seeks to understand how emotions – framed as socio-cultural constructs<sup>10</sup> – co-constitute a wide array of social and cultural phenomena. A prevailing question in this regard has been to understand how (individual and collective) emotions are *generated*, *regulated* and *structured* in particular contexts, and how these in turn are linked with the sustenance, reproduction and/or contestation of a particular

- 7 The interviews analysed here were gathered in the framework of a fieldwork in Brussels and Antwerp between 2004 and 2006. Sixty-five interviews were conducted with practising and non-practising second-generation Maghrebi who were involved in socio-cultural or Islamic organisations. The analysis of the interviews sought to identify and unpack embodied and discursive self-techniques or self-practices implied in this process of shaping oneself into an orthodox, non-orthodox or secular Muslim.
- 8 Both cities harbour an important and visible Muslim community. Whereas Brussels Capital Region has the highest proportion of the Muslim community of Belgium: 39% of the Belgian Muslims are estimated to live in the capital and the total number of Muslims is estimated at around 17% of the 1,048,500 residents in Brussels, Antwerp has the second largest Muslim population which is estimated at around 9–10% of its 470,000 inhabitants. They are mostly concentrated in specific neighbourhoods in both cities, and have well developed commercial networks and organisations.
- 9 In *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1986 [1963]), Erving Goffmann examines different strategies for dealing with ‘spoiled’ identities, taking the voluntary display of one’s ‘spoiled’ identity as one of the possible *strategies* to ‘manage’ discreditable information about stigmatised identities (1986: 123). Goffman distinguishes between discredited stigmatised identities and discreditable identities. In the case where the information cannot be hidden (e.g. scars), the ‘stigmatised’ individuals will be engaged in strategies of tension management. In cases where the information can be covered, strategies of information management will be deployed (1963: 14, 57).
- 10 This scholarship distinguishes itself from the essentialist understanding of emotions, which takes them as a pre-programmed repertoire of responses to stimuli from the outside world. For a further critique see Ahmed (2004), Lutz & Abu-Lughod (1990), Hochschild (1984).

order.<sup>11</sup> This has explicitly been the case in the kind of scholarship which has looked at the operation of liberal and secular orders on an emotional and visceral level (see Asad 2008; Brown 2006; Butler 2002). One of the most influential works in this respect has been that of Talal Asad, whose seminal *Formation of the Secular* explores the question of 'what an anthropology of secularism might look like' (Asad 2003: 1). Secularisation is, in this perspective, not only understood as a process which describes the differentiation of religion from other social spheres (Dobbelaere 2002; Casanova 1994), but it is approached as a governmentality (Foucault) which views this differentiation between the 'religious' and 'the social' as the product of a distinct epistemological realm (a specific understanding of the religious and the social), institutional arrangements and a particular economy of pain and pleasure. The latter is particularly interesting for our purpose. Rather than simply positing that the secular opposes pain and suffering, Asad examines the kinds of sufferings that are problematised (such as religious pain) or normalised (such as the pain for civilizational purposes) in a secular context, and how the latter relates to the cultivation of a particular kind of moral subject (Asad 2003: 79–85, 101, 123; see also Goldstone 2007).

The same reasoning can also be applied to morally offending events. Rather than simply positing that a liberal and secular context authorises all kinds of moral offences, what should be examined is the kind of moral offences that are deemed problematic and the kinds of offences which are normalised. The Danish cartoon riots of February 2006 have for instance provided a fruitful ground for analysis not only of the contours of the moral injuries experienced by millions of Muslims, but also the *unintelligibility* of these injuries to many Western-Europeans (see for instance Mahmood 2009). Yet the cases analysed in this paper aren't offending images or injurious speeches, but conducts with potentially unsettling effects performed in daily interactions. The perspective that is furthermore analysed isn't that of the 'offended', but of the 'offenders': i.e. Muslim women who do not shake hands, and non-practising women who do not fast. By analysing these two cases, I am interested in the way these women assess the marginality of their own position as well as the necessity of considering 'the other's' affects' in their conduct. The examples provided in this paper will show a difference in assessment between the two cases. A difference which is not incidental, I argue, but which reflects the *unequal* ethical importance of both conducts in the formation of an 'autonomous' and 'sovereign' self in a liberal-secular regime.

## **(Not)-handshaking and liberal sensibilities**

Lara Deeb describes in *An Enchanted Modern* (2006) how (not)-handshaking figured as a contested practice among pious Shi'i Muslim she encountered in Beirut. While the

11 Two perspectives can be discerned in this regard. A first perspective looks at the emotional labour implied or engendered in particular professional, political or social settings – the 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1984; see also Pupavac 2004; Flam 2004 & 2005). Whereas this first approach accords a considerable importance to the disciplinary process, it nevertheless presupposes a 'deeper' layer of emotions which exist independently. A second perspective, which departs from Foucaultian anti-humanist premises, takes these regulatory processes on the other hand to be co-constitutive for one's affective household. This implies that there is no pre-social understanding of affects, but the latter are viewed as the product of regulative powers and their reiteration (see Ahmed 2004; Butler 1993).

majority of her male interlocutors abstained from shaking hands with the opposite sex, viewing it as a sign of moral decay; this abstinence was problematised by a smaller group who stressed the necessity of being modern (2006: 110). The practice of not shaking hands with the *non-mabram* opposite sex was equally controversial among the pious Muslims I encountered during my fieldwork in Brussels and Antwerp.<sup>12</sup> While it by no means featured as a generalised practice, several did abide by it, and I gradually learned throughout my fieldwork to decode the reluctance to offer one's hand as a sign that one was not shaking hands.<sup>13</sup> Yet several also did contest it, such as Loubna, who discarded it as futile: '*I don't care at all, but I adapt myself. This means that those who don't shake hands, well I don't shake theirs. Those who give me their hands, I shake it*'.

The question of shaking hands or not shaking hands did, however, not depend only on the pious orientation of my respondents, but also on the context of its performance and the opportunity to do so. Whereas the refusal to shake hands did not lead to the same public outcry as in the Dutch case, it did engender a public incident in Belgium when in July 2005 the then head of the senate, Anne-Marie Lizin, expressed her refusal to meet with Iranian Parliamentary delegates after being informed of their desire not to shake hands with any female official. This refusal was interpreted as an intolerable violation of 'our habits', where 'men and women live in equal terms'.<sup>14</sup> Belgium is characterised by a very distinctive secular model, the *neutrality model*, wherein the state actively recognises and finances religious confessions and their ramifications in social life, rather than separating itself from it. This principle finds its translation in the financial support the state offers to officially recognised cults, as well as in the way the civil infrastructures (healthcare, education, syndicate, civil society) as well as political life are structured – or *pillarised* – along confessional and ideological lines (Post 1989; Laermans 1992; Hellemaans & Verduyck 1990). Yet despite this 'open' approach to religion in public life, the increasing visibility of Islam in the public sphere has in the past few years been the object of numerous controversies. Successive hijab debates have dominated the Flemish and French-speaking media since 2003 (see Fadil 2004; Longman 2003), schools and administrative bodies have increasingly adopted restrictive dress codes which ban the hijab and other 'ostentatious' religious signs, and despite Islam's official recognition as a cult since 1974, the quest for an administrative body of representatives has been at the source of numerous political tensions (Panafit 1999; Kanmaz & Zemni 2007). Practising one's Islamic faith outside one's home or mosque was therefore found by many to be a difficult and sensitive experience.

12 *Mabram* is a general Islamic category used to refer to related and unmarried persons from the opposite sex. Considered as *Mabram* are [in the case of women]: brothers, fathers, uncles, sons and people who have not yet attained the age of puberty. This category is important within Islamic jurisprudence as it is used to delineate the application of certain gender-related rules and practices. The religious prescription of wearing the *hijab* is for instance only of application in a context where non-Mahram persons of the opposite sex are present. While the case of not shaking hands does not carry the same theological weight, several scholars like the well-known Yousof Al-Qaradawi, do not advise it. See, for instance, <http://www.islamonline.net>, Question: 'Shaking hands with women: an Islamic perspective' in Fatwa-bank 24/07/2006.

13 At the start of my fieldwork, I was unfamiliar with this practice. It is only gradually that I learned to refrain from shaking hands with certain men, which I often had to implicitly deduce from their body language. Only once, at the start of my research, did one devout young man I had known for a longer period explicitly address this practice and explain that he would rather avoid shaking hands in the future.

14 My translation, Alain Lallemand "Pas de main, pas de vin, pas de Lizin", *Le Soir*, 01/07/06.

Soha, a young woman in her mid-twenties, worked as an employee for the city of Antwerp at the time of our interview. Islam was a central guideline in her life, and she tried to fulfil religious duties she considered important as diligently and accurately as possible. Abstaining from shaking hands with the opposite *non-mahram* sex was one of them:

I try to limit this. I try to limit it. I will for instance never shake hands with someone spontaneously (...) but if someone reaches out his hand, I will take it. I, I... I won't say: 'huh, no, I won't shake hand'. But I try to do it occasionally. I generally shake hands, but sometimes I think: I could as well say that I'm not shaking hands. But its not something you can easily say to someone you don't know. You need to have a certain relationship with that person in order to say so.

In the first sentences of this quote, Soha reiterates the importance she attaches to not handshaking with the opposite sex. Yet in the further sentences, she expresses her *awareness* of the potentially transgressive nature of this conduct, and how the latter affects this practice. Soha does not simply expect others – i.e. those who shake hands – to accept this practice, but she rather tries to apply it 'occasionally', when possible. A central part of her argument is the desire not to disrupt nor transgress the dominant sensitivities, and a continuous effort to accommodate them. This appears most clearly in the distinction she draws between *acquaintances* and *strangers*. Familiarity seems to act here as an important condition, a position which also confirms handshaking in its status of 'exceptionality' that can only be negotiated when a minimum degree of trust is achieved. In the following quote, she continues explaining how she gradually started introducing this practice to her colleagues at work:

At a certain point, I started talking about it (...) saying: 'yes actually I have some difficulties with shaking hands'... (...) actually, I would prefer not to shake hands anymore. I mean, in Islam it is not allowed and this and that. It's like the Chinese. They also don't shake hands. I don't know whether you have ever shaken hands with a Chinese, but he gives such a flabby hand because he doesn't want to. They greet by bowing. And eh (...) I told them. And since then, nobody ever shakes hands with me. They respect that. Really, my boss also, he does not shake hands with me, nor does the rest. When he bows, as a way of joking, I bow back. But it's difficult. I think you need to take it step by step. At first, I will just shake hands, also if you don't know them well. You know? But if you know the person well, you can gradually introduce it, you see?

In the first part of the argumentation, Soha refers to the importance of Islam and her pious conduct to justify why she doesn't shake hands. Yet this argument is quickly complemented by a second, more central, justification which insists on cultural variations in greeting patterns. By drawing an analogy between not handshaking and bowing, Soha domesticates the potentially disruptive effects of these practices by *neutralising* their religious character and *culturalising* them. This position reflects what Michel De Certeau (1984) described as *tactics*. In *The Practices of Everyday Life* he distinguishes *tactics* from *strategies* to underscore the different ways actors in different structural positions exercise or use power. Whereas 'strategies' refer to the use of power in a position of dominance and visibility in a particular social field, tactics are rather performed by the 'invisible' others, the 'consumers', those who do not have a clear

position in the social field (De Certeau 1984: xix). Tactics describe the way in which individuals try to enhance their agency without overturning the structural circumstances of their conditions, but by using them as an opportunity. It serves to analyse the 'poetics of consumption', the manner in which one actively reproduces an imposed order while simultaneously refashioning it (1984: 34). Downplaying the religious nature of handshaking, and altering the reason for which these practices are performed, seems to open up the possibility for Soha to cultivate a particular aspect of her orthodox pious lifestyle at work, yet without affecting the liberal sensibilities around her. Her prioritisation of a cultural framework, which is consonant with multicultural and tolerance-discourses of liberal democracies, equally restates the idea that unauthorised religious interventions are highly problematic. Rather than contesting the impossibility of not-handshaking, Soha's case hence illustrates how potentially transgressive practices are performed in a liberal-secular context by reproducing the dominant rationality and making use of it to cautiously create new spaces of articulation.

Zeina was another respondent who didn't shake hands with men. Islam was something she tried to live integrally, and to which she adapted her daily activities if necessary: interrupting meetings in order to pray on time, leaving work earlier for the taraweeh prayers during Ramadan etc. Yet like Soha, not-handshaking was conditioned by the context. The vocabulary she deploys in her argumentation shows however a complex interaction between the Islamic ethical tradition that informs her ethical agency and liberal secularism. A language which not only underlines the predominance of liberal affects, but which equally frames shaking hands as an *act of virtue*:

For me, it is the middle-way that I am looking for, as there is such a thing as *the middle-way*. God leads us to this middle-way. (...) A silly thing: shaking hands. I mean, honestly, shaking hands is not that terrible, I mean ... (...) What is important is what will bring some people to shake hands and others not to shake hands. Maybe this changes the relationship to religion, *Allahoe-A'alam*. But I, for instance, do not shake hands. And if I were to be somewhere where everybody would shake hands, and the act of refusing to shake hands would cause some sort of *fitna*, then I will shake hands. Because for me, I will understand that this refusal to shake hands will *disserve* rather than *serve*. And my prime objective is to serve, not to dissuade. But I just make sure not to make a habit of it, that's all. (...) I try to put things in perspective that way.

Zeina expresses her flexibility towards this practice, yet a flexibility that is not only informed by a desire to respect liberal sensitivities – as in the case of Soha, but which is also justified through an Islamic rationale. The first argument she uses is that of the '*middle way*'. Islam is often depicted as the religion of the '*the middle way*', referring to a similar verse from the Qur'an.<sup>15</sup> Leaving aside this practice becomes an alternative which allows her to avoid falling into extremes, hence remaining in line with this Islamic

15 Surat al Baqara, verse 143; translation by Muhammad Asad: 'And thus have we willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all mankind, and the Apostle might bear witness to it before you'. This idea of the *community of the middle way* [ummat-al-wassat] knows different significations, but is also often used by liberal and progressive Muslims to argue for Islam's tolerant nature and rejection of acts of extremism and terrorism.

principle. A second important element in Zeina's argumentation is the hierarchy she constructs between important and less-important practices. Shaking hands is presented here as 'not that terrible', hence downplaying its importance in her economy of pious bodily practices. This argument is furthermore linked with a third Islamic category that allows her to justify her flexibility. The controversy which could follow upon her refusal to shake hands is framed as *fitna*, a category that describes a general state of chaos and social discord which has a powerful and negative connotation within the Muslim tradition.<sup>16</sup> While a diligent application and adherence to Islamic rules generally figures as a way to avoid *fitna*, an interesting inversion appears here, where not abiding by particular religious conducts becomes a way to achieve this same Islamic virtue. Zeina's case illustrates how potentially transgressive religious practices can be regulated *without* resorting to a liberal-secular rationale. Her flexible stand is not only informed by an awareness of the marginality of this practice, or a desire to avoid offending liberal sensitivities, it is also above all grounded on a desire to cultivate a pious conduct. It thus shows how cultivating a non-liberal and non-secular ethical agency, primarily centred on the desire to serve God (Mahmood 2005; Bracke 2008), can coincide with a liberal-secular mode of governance, or to put it differently: how apparently 'docile' religious subjects are shaped through a non-secular and non-liberal rationale.

Both Soha and Zeina's cases illustrate the difficulty orthodox and pious Muslims encounter in the maintenance of certain facets of their religious conduct. Their accounts display different strategies as well as languages in managing this difficulty, which simultaneously also highlight the complex manner throughout which a liberal-secular power structure can be reproduced and negotiated by individuals whose subject position is not entirely structured along similar liberal and secular ethical grids. For both women restated the ethical value of not handshaking, tried to uphold it when possible, and developed *tactics* – as the case of Soha illustrated. Yet the performance of this practice was also conditional to the extent that it didn't *affect* liberal sensitivities. It would, however, be misleading to observe Zeina and Soha's flexible stand solely as a functional management of the liberal, non-Muslim, affects surrounding them. The cautiousness both women display also highlights, I suggest, their own intertwinement with this liberal and secular order.<sup>17</sup> This becomes observable in the *obviousness* they displayed towards the necessity to manage liberal sensitivities. Neither Soha nor Zeina were outraged over the little space they had to fulfil this religious prescription, and both insisted on the importance of not offending others. More than their cautiousness, it is the *self-evident nature of this cautiousness* which is revealing here. It not only highlights the complex ethical *and* affective tracks that inform Soha and Zeina's ethical agency (cf. also *infra*), but it also differs from the position of the women in the next section.

## Muslim sensibilities and secular practices

The month of Ramadan comes with its own temporality that is strongly felt in Muslim countries where the majority of the population abides by it. Yet this rhythm doesn't pass totally unnoticed in a Western-European country like Belgium, especially in

16 Fatima Mernissi (1975) argues that this concept of *Fitna* carries a sexist articulation in several Islamic theological scriptures as it is often associated with the idea of an uncontrollable and threatening female sexuality, which needs to be controlled through practices such as veiling.

17 I explore this intersection of liberal and non-liberal and non-secular traditions in the ethical agency of orthodox Muslim respondents in my dissertation (Fadil 2008).

neighbourhoods in Brussels or Antwerp which have a high proportion of Muslim residents. The relative calmness that reigns in daytime contrasts with the thriving activities shortly before and after sunset: local bakeries and groceries get crowded with customers shopping for *iftar*, mosques are packed for the evening *taraweeh* and *'isha* prayers and snackbars and cafés are filled with night-time visitors. This moral imaginary was also strongly felt by my non-practising respondents who had fasted earlier in their life, yet had come to abandon this practice, mostly during their adolescence.

Faiza was a woman in her forties, married, with a son, who worked as a legal advisor in a public office in Brussels at the time of our interview. With an Algerian mother and a Moroccan father, Faiza was nurtured in ideals of resistance, Pan-Arabism and solidarity with the Algerian liberation struggle and Palestine from early on: '*Before claiming and affirming any Muslim cultural identity, it was like: we are Arabs*'. The importance of her Arab identity also largely influenced her further trajectory, since her identity was primarily fostered around notions of Arabness rather than Islam. Yet during her childhood, she witnessed a shift in her family's religious orientation, with Islam gaining a larger prominence after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. She described how her mother gradually developed a radical Islamist discourse, which also profoundly affected her own religious trajectory and turned her off from the religious discourse. This shift from a religious to a secular self-conception was a gradual and laborious process, which took time and implied an ethical work upon herself, her senses and sensibilities.<sup>18</sup> In the following quote, she explains this process and how eating in front of other Muslims during Ramadan figured as a key practice in this self-transformation:

Faiza: It was hidden, but as years passed I started affirming it, but not in my family sphere, more in my social sphere.

*Nadia: With your friends?*

Faiza: Yes, with my friends – which isn't obvious either.

*Nadia: Muslim friends?*

Faiza: yes, Muslims. So ehm, I arrived at the university and I wasn't fasting anymore by then. I had friends, who did fast, and I respected them and all, but I would take my sandwich, I didn't. . . For instance, [one told me] 'you could at least respect me'. I told him: 'no, it's your choice'. Voila. It was really hard for me. In fact . . .

*Nadia: In what way?*

Faiza: It was difficult to have my sandwich in front of practising Muslims. How would they judge me?

*Nadia: Guilt?*

Faiza: Guilt. But I also felt that I had to do it, else I wouldn't be in line with myself. Voila.

18 The notion of ethical work or self-technique is used here in a Foucaultian manner and refers to 'a certain number of operations on their bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on' (Foucault 1980: 203; see also Foucault 1984: 27). For a further utilisation of this concept in the case of not/unveiling, see Fadil, N. 'On not/unveiling as a practice' in *Feminist Review*, forthcoming.

Eating during Ramadan wasn't experienced as an easy endeavour. It is rather something she had to force herself to do – *'I had to go to the end of it'* – to be coherent with the doubts and interrogations which tormented her. The 'social sphere' refers here to her Muslim friends, from whom she used to keep her secular orientation hidden. In these sentences, Faiza expresses her awareness of the transgressive potential of eating in front of others, yet we can also read a strong opposition to the secrecy she had to maintain for so long. I would like to pause briefly at two elements in her account: the significance of eating in front of other Muslims in her ethical self-formation, and the distinction she draws between friends and family. The conscious decision to eat in front of Muslim friends should not only be read as an act of subversion or resistance, I suggest, but as an intrinsic part of her self-fashioning process. Faiza explains that she *'had'* to eat in front of other Muslims in order to be *'in line with herself'*. Affirming her non-practice, i.e. the fact that she didn't fast, was central to her secular trajectory. In his essay *'About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self'* (1993 [1980]) Michel Foucault describes the practice of discovering and telling the truth about oneself as a major *technique of the self* in liberal and Western modernity.<sup>19</sup> He traces it back to the Christian confessional model, which institutionalised 'introspection' and 'verbalisation' as ways to achieve salvation. In its secularised and modern versions, the teleology of confession was substituted by a positive self-foundation: expressing one's 'inner truth' became a way to live 'truthfully', and in line with who one really 'is'. The importance Faiza accords to eating in front of other fasting Muslims can be situated in the line of this modern and liberal ethical requirement wherein living in accordance with one's 'convictions' and 'beliefs' is considered to be crucial to live as a self-fulfilled subject.<sup>20</sup> The latter becomes even more explicit in the following quote, where she uses the term 'therapeutic' to describe this activity: *'I also drink during Ramadan (...). It's not provocation, for me it's really ... it's almost therapeutic. I'm not saying that (...) but voila. I'm coherent with myself.'* Expressing her secular orientation is for Faiza thus not only a moral act, but also essential to her own well-being.

A second significant element in Faiza's account is the manner in which she 'manages' the disruptive effects of her conduct. To a friend who expresses the moral offence he felt by seeing her eat, Faiza replies that it is his 'choice' to fast, and he should equally respect her own choice not to do so. Religious practices like fasting are primarily framed here throughout the liberal maxim of *freedom* and *choice*.<sup>21</sup> This enables her to place both conducts, i.e. fasting and not-fasting, in a position of behavioural symmetry, and justify the emotionality and sensitivity her conduct might cause. Yet it is also significant to note how she makes a difference between her 'family' and 'friends'. Whereas she

19 Foucault's oeuvre can be read as a genealogy of the *subject*, wherein he tries to situate the way subjectivity has been conceptualised, materialised and embodied against the background of distinct regimes of truth or knowledge/power axes. Whereas his early work is mostly geared at how subjectivities are formed throughout bodily techniques, institutions, scientific knowledge; he shifts his analytical focus in the last part of his work to the *practices of the self* and the various ways in which individuals turn themselves into meaningful subjects.

20 Mark Blasius (1992) has examined practices of outing among LGTB movements as an aesthetic in the ethical self-fashioning of non-heterosexual subjectivities.

21 This liberal conception of framing religion as a 'choice', Saba Mahmood notes, tends to draw on a particular semantics of religion which reduces it into matters of 'beliefs' and disregards the Aristotelian ethical model wherein pious conduct consists of a programmatic set of conducts and habits (Mahmood 2009; see also Mahmood 2005).

displays her secular conduct to her friends, it remains 'hidden' from her relatives. Erving Goffmann argues in *Stigma* that strategies of managing the information about one's identity are especially cultivated towards intimate acquaintances (1963: 71). Yet more than indicating an intensified management of 'sensitive information' vis-à-vis one's family, this observation also illustrates that Faiza's ethical self-formation as a liberal and secular subject isn't completely detached from Muslim sensibilities. The extent to which she allows this sensitivity to structure her conduct seems however to be clearly conditioned: while she authorises in the case of her family, she doesn't allow it with her friends.

The latter observation brings us to the ambiguity which characterised the accounts of many non-practising respondents. Several of them expanded on the different strategies they deployed to consider the sensibilities of their acquaintances and family towards (certain facets of) their secular identity, whether it was the fact that they didn't fast, that they drank alcohol or upheld atheist or agnostic convictions. These observations seem to be comparable with the case of not-handshaking explored above, where liberal sensibilities structured Zeina and Soha's greeting patterns. Yet once one looks beyond this similarity, a difference in *vocabulary* appears in the manner in which these ambiguities are framed. While Zeina and Soha normalised the necessity of managing the surrounding liberal affects in the specific case of not-handshaking, this was less the case regarding the impossibility of eating during Ramadan. This ambiguity was more often experienced as a tension, or even strongly condemned, as Halima's following account shows.

At the time of our interview Halima, in her forties, married with a young daughter, was working as a cosmetician in a Moroccan-owned beauty salon in Brussels. After having temporarily broken all ties with her family at the age of 22, tired of coping with a 'strict' religious education, she renewed contacts with her parents after years of absence. While she deplored their lack of understanding of her convictions and non-practice, she nevertheless opted for a strategy of concealment towards her family: '*when I returned, I told to myself: 'no, I need to change my tactic now, but without changing who I am*'. One of these changes was to keep certain facets of her secularity hidden, such as the fact that she didn't fast: '*The only thing I respect and I pretend/act [je joue la comédie], even though I swore to myself I would never do so... – but I saw that it was, that it would be too much for them – is Ramadan. I won't go to there [and eat] or whatever, no. I pretend I do it, even though I don't. That's all.*' As in the case of Zeina or Soha, the surrounding affects and sensibilities act as an important structuring element in her behaviour. Yet in contrast with Zeina or Soha, this secrecy is framed negatively as '*pretending*' or '*acting*', as something which contradicts the ethical requirement of living 'truthfully'. While Halima was highly sensitive to the moral offense she could cause to her parents by eating in front of them, this sensibility sat in tension with the liberal ethical grids that equally structured her subject position.

Halima furthermore not only hid her secular conviction and conduct from her parents, but also from her Muslim clientele. Yet with respect to her professional context, she was less cautious in denouncing what she experienced as an illegitimate impediment upon her freedom. Most of her customers consisted of Muslim women. In the following quotes she explains why she rarely engages in discussions with them about Islam, and keeps secular convictions and practices to herself:

I think that . . . for instance I don't see myself ehm . . . and this is where I think we achieved a degree of intolerance – I don't see myself arrive in the association during Ramadan, and have my sandwich at lunchtime. They will ask: 'so, you have your periods?' I don't feel that I can practice my way of life freely. You see. It will lead to . . . there will be consequences to it.

The only possibility of eating during Ramadan during her work is one which follows – and thus sustains – an Islamic rationale: i.e. not fasting when one has her monthly periods. We can see here how she strongly condemns this impossibility: it is framed as 'intolerant', and viewed as a violation of her autonomy. Yet in contrast to Faiza, Halima did not try to challenge the marginality of her position:

There was a time where I would have ehm (. . .) I would have felt hypocritical, not to express my ideas. But with time I learned that silence can be good sometimes. I let them discuss amongst themselves, and they never ask about my opinion on things, you see (. . .). This is what I'm aware of now, because I've learned silence, because I've come to realise that expressing yourself doesn't lead you anywhere.

We saw earlier how coming out with one's convictions figured as a central predicament for modern and liberal subjects. In *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972) Lionel Trilling argues that this principle of sincerity, epitomised by literary figures like the villain, gradually lost its ethical prominence in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, to be supplanted by the principle of authenticity. Being sincere was only valued to the extent that it served the primacy of authenticity (i.e. being sincere towards oneself). Sincerity as a social value, he contends, was even negatively assessed if it limited the capacity to live in accordance with one's inner principle: 'If one is true to one's own self for the purpose of avoiding falsehood to others, is one being truly true to one's own self?' (Trilling 1972: 9).

Rather than discarding the principle of sincerity, Halima's account illustrates the continuous tension between authenticity and sincerity. This tension becomes observable in the manner in which she initially framed her conduct as '*hypocrite*', which highlights the ethical importance that is accorded to telling the truth about oneself. Yet we can also read how she gradually overcame this tension by acquiring a new language: that of *silence*. Hiding the truth about herself was no longer an insincerity, it rather became a different way to relate to herself and to others. It is a language she had to learn, for it didn't correspond with the dominant liberal imaginary which takes the act of telling the truth about oneself as an essential marker for one's self-fulfilment. Yet it became a language which allowed her to cultivate her secular subjectivity, without offending 'other's' sensibilities.

## **Different subjectivities, different (ab)normalities**

This paper has examined how second generation Maghrebi women in Belgium with different religious profiles – orthodox Muslim and non-practising – manage and assess the transgressiveness of certain facets of their ethical conduct. Taking the cases of not-handshaking and not-fasting allowed us to explore this question in relation to two distinct ethical realms: liberal sensibilities that take offence at the maintenance of sexual difference on religious grounds, and Muslim ethical sensibilities which are actively invigorated during the month of Ramadan. A first observation was the 'impression

management' (Goffmann 1964) deployed in both cases. While non-handshaking pious women tried to avoid offending liberal sensibilities by either abstaining themselves from doing so (Soha and Zeina), or by translating this practice into 'audible' cultural registers (Soha), the non-fasting women tried not to shock their Muslim relatives by not eating in front of them during Ramadan, although distinctions were made between friends and family.

Yet besides examining these different strategies of management, I also looked at the evaluation of this necessity to contain their conduct. A striking difference appeared with this respect: whereas Soha and Zeina didn't problematise the fact that they had to be cautious when avoiding handshaking, Faiza and Halima deplored the marginality of their position, especially towards non-relatives and friends. The incapacity to eat freely during Ramadan was viewed as an obstruction to their freedom, and Faiza consciously challenged this limited space, despite its potentially disruptive effects. In highlighting these points, my aim is not to suggest that pious Muslims adopt a more flexible stand towards their own marginality than non-practising Muslims. Nor am I trying to downplay the distinction that exists between the impossibility of not-handshaking and the impossibility of eating in public during Ramadan. Rather, I am interested in what these apparent differences tell us about the manner in which the process of secularisation implies the sedimentation of *certain* ethical conducts as a 'human entitlement' (see also Asad 2003, 1993).

One of the major insights in Foucault's disciplinary model is to show how people's conduct is regulated by differentiating between what counts as 'normal' and 'abnormal' conduct: 'the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm' (Foucault 1978: 57).<sup>22</sup> Applied to our cases, it means that certain conducts will be recasted as 'normal' or essential for the development of a 'free' or 'sovereign' subject, whereas others will be marginalised or abnormalised. This is observable in the different evaluation of the impossibility of shaking hands or of not being able to eat during Ramadan. This difference reflects, I suggest, the *unequal ethical weight* attributed to both conducts in a liberal-secular regime. While the orthodox Islamic practice of not-handshaking does not conform to the liberal-secular ethos, eating during Ramadan does. These observations can however also be expanded to the way the freedom to *practice* or *not-practice* are maybe conceived as 'human rights', yet not associated with notions of bodily integrity in the same manner. Not *all* religious practices – this is especially the case for non-Christian ones – are conceived as an entitlement in the same way as non-practising is. The impossibility of declaring one's unbelief or abstaining from practising is quickly branded as a violation of one's freedom (see also Goldstone 2007), in a way that the impossibility of veiling or praying at the workplace is not. Turning religious practices into a human 'entitlement', seems rather to be the object of daily negotiations, contestations and struggle in many Western-European countries.<sup>23</sup>

22 In the first volume of *The history of sexuality*, Foucault offers for instance a genealogy of the modern *dispositif* of sex, which came along with a specific knowledge on what counts as 'normal' sexual behaviour and sexual deviance, a medical apparatus in treating sexual pathologies and cultivating proper sexual conduct and institutional and legislative instruments to regulate sexual conduct.

23 The opposition to the hijab-ban by Muslim and liberal groups using the liberal language of human rights can equally be read, I suggest, as a continuous effort to inscribe veiling into the set of practices that count as an individual entitlement within a liberal and secular imaginary.

A final observation I would like to pause at pertains to the susceptibility of all interlocutors to the disruptive effects of their conduct. The fact that their ethical practices could cause moral harm didn't leave *any* of my interlocutors 'unaffected' and was a source of concern for all. I suggest that the latter invites us to explore the way subjectivities, religious and secular, are traversed by multiple affective tracks which are reflective of different economies of affect. I borrow this formulation from Sara Ahmed, who uses it to clarify how 'feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation' (Ahmed 2004: 8; see also Hirschkind 2006).<sup>24</sup> This perspective on emotions, which takes them as ingrained in knowledge and cultural representations, allows us to explore how *multiple affective layers* work upon the self, which also enables them to be affected by 'other's' moral injuries (i.e. those who are shaped by a different ethical tradition). Whereas my respondents inscribed themselves in specific ethical regimes, i.e. orthodox Islamic vs. liberal-secular, their behaviour seemed to be 'affected' by 'other' ethical realms too. Raised as Muslims, the non-practicing respondents had chosen to undo themselves from their religious upbringing. Yet their bodies remained marked by traces of their Islamic background: whether it was the incapacity to eat pork, the guilt experienced after losing one's virginity before marriage, or – as the in case of Faiza or Halima: the difficulty of eating in front of other Muslims during Ramadan. Similarly, the orthodox pious respondents couldn't be placed outside a liberal and secular imaginary either. The moral offense felt towards cases of forced veiling was equally theirs, and several expressed a discomfort at the condemnations of homosexuals or non-believers in Islamic theological scriptures. The presupposition that different economies of affect, pertaining to distinct ethical regimes, interact, can co-exist (and conflict) within one and the same subject position, opens the possibility of understanding not only how one can be touched by 'others' moral injuries, but equally 'moved' by them.

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24 Charles Hirschkind has also noted in his compelling ethnography on pious Muslims in Egypt how religious traditions are not only co-constituted by a set of ideas or beliefs, but equally sit on 'a common substrate of embodied dispositions' (Hirschkind 2006: 88).

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