

# **Muslim narratives of desistance among Norwegian street criminals: Stories of reconciliation, purification and exclusion**

## **Abstract**

Stories about sin, regret and forgiveness are fundamental in Islam and other world religions. Islamic revivalism mediates a redemption narrative tailored to street criminals who want to break with the cycle of stigmatisation, imprisonment and violence. Drawing on so-called conversion narratives, this article examines the repertoire of such stories among street criminal men in Norway who turn, or ‘return’, to Islam. I have identified three narrative types: reconciliation, purification and exclusion. I explore the content of these stories and the work they do for tellers and their audiences. Arguably, these narrative types represents forms of desistance that open up and restrain particular paths into Islam and out of street crime.

**Keywords:** desistance, conversion narrative, radicalisation, street crime, redemption

**Word count:** 9027 excluding abstract and keywords

## **Introduction: Islamic paths out of street crime**

The radicalisation of street criminals in European cities and prisons is well documented (e.g. Kupatadze and Argomaniz, 2019). Scholars and journalists report on ‘Europe’s angry Muslims’ who turn to Islam to make up for their sins and to peruse violence in the name of Allah (e.g. Leiken, 2012). Mainstream society perceives street crime and Islam as a dangerous combination. Street criminal jihadists, however, comprise a relatively small group that overshadows a diverse and complex social phenomenon: Islamic paths out of street crime. Sociologists argue that Muslim beliefs and behaviour reduce crime (e.g. Qasim, 2018). The

narratives of street criminals who become practising Muslims shed light on the cognitive dimension of this change. Such stories are means of constructing a new ‘narrative identity’ (McAdams, 2018).

Conversion narratives, or tales about transforming from ‘sinner to saint’, are meta-stories that are fundamental in world religions like Islam (Maruna et al., 2006: 161). The Islamic tradition portrays Omar, the second caliph, as a violent enemy of the Prophet Muhammad before he converted to Islam and became the ‘best of Muslims’ (Eggen, 2002: 46-47). In his autobiography, Malcolm X (1965) describes himself as a ‘hustler’ before turning into a pious Muslim. On YouTube, the American gangster rapper Loon preaches about his path from street crime to Islam (IslamNet, 24. april 2014). These stories are not merely myths but socially recognised scripts for street criminals who start to practise Islam as a means of ‘going straight’ (Calverley, 2013: 103).

Mainstream society view the stories of Muslims with a criminal record as untrustworthy or even dangerous. However, conversion narratives should not be accepted at face value (Maruna et al., 2006: 162). Rather, they should be interpreted as means of constructing a new identity. Narratives are not merely accounts of past events; they are also socially and contextually embedded stories that shape individual and collective action (e.g. Presser and Sandberg, 2015). Criminologists describe narratives of religious transformation as a form of desistance that allow street criminals to reconstruct their identity and realign themselves with mainstream society (Maruna et al., 2006; Calverley, 2013; Weaver, 2016; Mohammed, 2019). Desistance research seeks to understand “how and why individuals who had formerly been involved in criminal behaviour” are able to abstain from crime (Maruna and Liem, 2021: 140). Maruna and Liem (2021) argue that such abstention presupposes the ‘creation of a coherent and sustainable narrative’ of desistance (131). The potential of Islam to help street criminals ‘desist

from offending behaviours' has been missed in previous research (Qasim, 2018: 132). This paper sheds light on Muslim narratives of desistance.

The aim of this paper is to analyse how Norwegian street criminals construct Muslim narratives of desistance and what such stories do for the storytellers and their audiences. Scholarship on Islam as a form of desistance is scarce (Qasim, 2018), so this paper also seeks to contribute new theoretical insights. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 25 practising Muslim men with a street criminal background, I have identified three types of narrative desistance: reconciliation, purification and exclusion. Together, these three ideal types represent a narrative repertoire that street criminals draw on to construct a specific Islamic path out of street crime.

### **The conversion narrative: A means of identity reconstruction**

The conversion narrative is an autobiographical account about the religious transformation experienced by those who convert to a religion or who reassert their religious faith (e.g. Hindmarsh, 2014). Through its particular structure – with temporality, causality, actors and plot – that together make a normative point familiar to large audiences, the storyline of the conversion narrative is a typical manifestation of the narrative form (e.g. Riessman, 2008). The conversion narrative, which exists across different religious traditions (Gooren, 2010; Hindmarsh, 2014), generally tells a tale of 'radical change' in religious beliefs and behaviour in social life (Maruna et al., 2006: 162). Conversion narratives have proliferated in contemporary Islamic revivalism (Hermann, 1999; Lindgren, 2004; Dannin, 2002; Allievi, 1998).

In line with the conversion narrative, sociologists and scholars of religion have traditionally regarded conversion as a sudden and decisive change from one religious tradition to another (e.g. James, 1985). In light of the current shifts in the global religious landscape, such as the growth of Christian and Islamic revivalism (Allievi, 1998), scholars of religion now

conceptualise conversion more flexibly as an individual's gradual religious change or transformation within a religious tradition, or from one religious tradition to another (Rambo and Farhadian, 2014a). Accordingly, scholars of Islam describe non-practising Muslims who start to practise Islam as 'reconverts' or 'born again' Muslims (Marranchi, 2009: 89). From a theoretical perspective, both those who turn and 'return' to Islam construct conversion narratives, or stories of personal religious change.

Conversion narratives are not stories that converts merely tell; they are also means of identity reconstruction. The word conversion reflects the idea of 'cognitive reversal' (Maruna et al., 2006: 166). After the so-called 'narrative turn' in social sciences of the 1980s, sociologists increasingly characterised narratives as a central aspect of cognition (McAdams, 2018). In a constructivist sense, scholars thereafter described narratives as contextually embedded social performances that groups and individuals construct in interaction with others. McAdams (2018) argues that individuals construct a 'narrative identity' through their autobiographical stories. For conversion studies, the narrative turn implied a renewed and constructivist understanding of conversion and identity reconstruction (Hindmarsh, 2014: 4).

Instead of understanding conversion narratives as unproblematic accounts of 'conversion events', scholars of religion started to analyse stories of religious transformation as 'self-narratives' or 'personal myths' (Maruna et al., 2006: 162). They perceived the 'narrative itself as the constitutive process of how converts are "made"' (Rambo and Farhadian, 2014a: 8; Allievi, 1998). Critics of this approach argue that 'core experiences' trigger conversion and that the conversion narrative is 'supplementary' rather than 'central' to the 'conversion process' (Laws, 2020: 6). The point is not to dismiss the impact of 'feelings' or 'emotions', but rather to show that (re-) converts reconstruct such 'conversion events'. Conversion evokes a socially constructed conversion narrative (McGinty, 2006: 34; Gooren, 2010: 93). The narrative 'gives witness' to converts' religious transformation (Maruna et al., 2006: 163). Consequently, the

language of conversion narratives is strongly connected to the religious community converts move into (Rambo and Farhadian, 2014b: 8). Converts construct common ‘narrative elements’ in their stories and create shared models of conversion (van Nieuwkerk, 2014: 2).

The social construction of the conversion narrative does not exclude biographical continuity. Converts construct their narratives retrospectively, which means they reconstruct and tell these stories after their conversion. They narrate and interpret events in light of new beliefs and convictions (van Nieuwkerk, 2014: 2). Traditionally, sociologists argued that a rupture in the ‘subjective biography’, in terms of ‘pre- and post-conversion’ (McGinty, 2006: 33), was a prerequisite for such reinterpretations. McGinty (2006) views the conversion narrative as a vehicle of ‘cognitive reconciliation’ that ‘create[s] self-coherence and continuity by negotiating meaning between past and present’ (12,33). Converts seek to align a rupture in worldview with a ‘coherent life-story’ (34). This type of identity reconstruction is also relevant to street criminals who seek to reconcile their deviant and stigmatised past with a socially recognised, pious future.

### **Street crime and Islamic redemption**

Sociologists and criminologists generally argue that religious beliefs and behaviour deter crime (McCullough and Willoughby, 2009; Stark, 1996; Akers, 2010; Adamczyk et al., 2017; Johnson, 2011), including in regard to Islam (Sandberg, 2011; Spalek, 2002; Khosrokhavar, 2013; Calverley, 2013: 102; Olsen, 2008; Qasim, 2018; Hallett et al., 2017; de Galembert, 2020; Mohammed, 2019). In recent years, several studies have documented a correlation between street-crime, Islam and radicalization, notably in prisons (Basra and Neumann, 2016). For most street-criminals who become Muslims however, Islam functions as an ethical framework or a moral compass (Khosrokhavar, 2016: 222; Calverley, 2013). Olsen (2008) describes conversations between Muslim prisoners and prison imams as a form of ‘therapy’ (13).

Narratives of religious transformation help bridge the gap between criminal lifestyles and the ethics of Islam.

According to Maruna et al. (2006), the conversion narrative provides prisoners who become Christians with a ‘new social identity,’ a ‘language and framework for forgiveness’ and ‘purpose and meaning’ (174). This self-perception of radical change also applies to street criminals who start to practise Islam (Khosrokhavar, 2004; Truong, 2018). The seminal notion of *tauba* – which, according to Islamic terminology, means repentance (Khalil, 2018: 14-15) – provides street criminals with a tool for dealing with past crimes, regret and forgiveness. Street criminals who are born as Muslims identify with redemption narratives rather than conversion narratives (Tahir, 2017), which, strictly speaking, concern only those who convert to Islam. With regard to the structure of redemption narratives however, they are identical to conversion narratives (Truong, 2018). Muslim narratives of redemption are socially recognised stories that enable street criminals who either turn or return to Islam to challenge stigmatising labels and construct new Islamic identities.

Narrative criminology, which concerns ‘stories as instigating, sustaining, or effecting desistance from harmful action’ (Presser and Sandberg, 2015: 1), can shed new light on how street-criminal men construct Muslim redemption narratives as a means of ‘going straight’. Since Islamic law and ethics strongly oppose street crime such as theft, drugs and street fighting, a major theme in street criminals’ Muslim redemption narratives is to break with such ‘sins’ (Khosrokhavar, 2016: 222). In that light, their stories can be understood as forms of desistance, or a ‘process by which people come to cease and sustain cessation of offending behaviour’ (Weaver, 2016: 8). Desistance is a particularly useful term because it means that quitting crime is a gradual and often zig-zagging process that does not exclude minor offences or a ‘change in criminality’ (Weaver, 2016: 9). From a narrative perspective, desistance means a cognitive reorientation, or the way offenders reinterpret their lives and identities (Maruna, 2001: 32). For

street criminals, Muslim redemption narratives work as a means for such a ‘cognitive reversal’ (Maruna et al., 2006: 166).

Critics argue that narrative desistance is difficult to measure and that variables such as maturity explains desistance rather the narrative itself (Laws, 2020). Narrative researchers acknowledge the challenge of ‘reliably accessing a self-narrative’. However, narrative psychologists like McAdams (McAdams, 2018) claim that people create personal myths, or psychological structures that researchers can access and analyse (Maruna and Liem, 2021: 139). Maruna points out that ‘to desist from crime, ex-offenders must create a coherent prosocial identity in story form’ (Presser and Sandberg, 2015). In addition to human agency, narrative scholars highlight social and cultural determinacy in their analysis of such stories. Both agency and structure shape Muslim narratives of desistance (Mohammed, 2019). In this light, Maruna and Liem (Maruna and Liem, 2021) perceive desistance as a model of ‘codeterminacy’ in which cause and outcome are ‘interrelated and overlapping’ (143). For street-criminals who start to practise Islam, variables like age and social relations play into their conversion narratives and their capacity of desistance.

Maruna et al. (2006) argue that conversion narratives work as ‘shame management’ and a socially accepted ‘coping strategy’ for offenders and prisoners (161). Traditionally, researchers viewed the narrative of being ‘born again’, or a complete ‘replacement of an old, failed self-identity for a new and improved one’ (Maruna and Ramsen, 2004: 138), as a prerequisite for change. For mutual aid groups, offender rehabilitators and religious groups, this ‘approved narrative’ was the only remedy against neutralisations, or narratives that justify deviance (Matza and Sykes, 1957). However, considering recent conversion studies that foreground stories of continuity as well as change, street criminals also construct redemption scripts that negotiate between the past and present (Maruna and Ramsen, 2004).

In that light, narrative researchers also view the classical conversion narrative of radical transformation as a metaphor of change. Dramatic turning points are interpreted as biographical reconstruction (van Nieuwkerk, 2014; Weaver, 2016) or as ‘evidences of crisis’ that converts reconstruct after their conversion (Maruna et al., 2006: 170). Maruna et al. (2006) perceive the ‘hitting rock bottom crisis’ as a metaphor of a more profound identity crisis, or a process of ‘being forced to question who one really is’ (171). Marginal situations like the prison environment (Khosrokhavar, 2004; Qasim, 2018) trigger a ‘crisis of self-narrative’ (Maruna et al., 2006: 168), which means that a person’s narrative identity is deeply unsettled. Scholars like Marranchi (2009) criticizes such ‘constructivist views’ of culture by claiming that Islamic reconversions in prison are primarily reactions to ‘biological emotions’ like fear (93). In Marranchi’s view, ‘moral shocks trigger ‘cognitive openings’ make individuals ‘receptive of new ideas and worldviews’ (Wiktorowicz, 2005; Olsen, 2008; Marranchi, 2009). The point in this paper is not do dismiss the impact of specific events, but rather to show how street-criminals who turn or return to Islam reconstruct different events and emotions into socially significant narratives of religious transformation. Research identifies at least three different Islamic narratives of redemption.

The narrative of reconciliation allows street criminals to deal with strain by reconciling their deviant past with the ethics of Islam (Khosrokhavar, 2016). This narrative is common among adult Muslims who adjust their juvenile narrative of being born again to a more reconciling approach of gradual personal reform (Truong, 2018: 87; Qasim, 2018: 130). With regard to new conversion studies, however, narratives of reconciliation are not only a way for adults to readjust their biography retrospectively but also a tool of ‘cognitive reconciliation’ that enables converts or reconverts more generally to reconcile past, present and future (McGinty, 2006). By ascribing meaning to past wrongdoings, the narrative allows street criminals to come to terms with their deviant lifestyle and to fill it with new purpose.

In the narrative of purification, street criminals deal with strain by highlighting past sins, breaking radically with their criminal lifestyle and by asking God for forgiveness (Truong, 2018: 87). Because of its religious content, Marranchi (2009) coins this narrative an ‘act of faith’ (107). This narrative resembles the classical conversion narrative of being born again and dominates research about the ‘reislamisation’ of young Muslims in poor European suburbs or inner cities (Benslama, 2016). Symbolically, this narrative manifests as a ‘promise of transformation’, notably through Islamic clothing, rituals and language (Truong, 2018: 87). Maruna (2006) coins this public testimony a ‘rite of passage’ or a ‘ritual of redemption’ (21).

In the narrative of exclusion, street criminals draw parallels between their own sense of marginalisation as Muslims locally and the oppression of an imagined global Islamic community, the so-called *umma* (Roy, 2008: 4). Because of its strong identification with Muslims as a group, Marranchi characterises this narrative as an ‘act of identity’ (Marranchi, 2009: 107). In this narrative, the construction of social boundaries work as a means of strengthening Islamic identity (Khosrokhavar, 1997). Historically, the Palestinian cause represents a ‘symbolic heart’ of this social imaginary (Jacobsen and Anderson, 2012). In addition to ‘critical transnational events’ (Vestel, 2016: 158), different conspiracy theories underpin the idea of a ‘war against Islam’ (Rickenbacher, 2019: 173). Truong (2018) coins this patchwork of grievances a ‘floating political imaginary’ (87). In the social imaginary of the *umma*, Islam gives a powerful framework to a collective and decontextualised cause (Roy, 2008: 7).

### **Fear of street crime and Islam**

As in other European countries (e.g. Qasim, 2018), the associations between Islam and crime have been negative in Norwegian public debate. Journalists and researchers have claimed that there are important cultural links between Islam and street crime (Sandberg, 2011; Prieur, 2004). In the shadow of so-called homegrown terrorism, there has also been a growing concern

in Europe that street criminals who become practising Muslims legitimise violence in the name of Islam. In Norway, this fear appeared as more reasonable when jihadist and street criminal milieus merged during the 2010s (Ilan and Sandberg, 2019). The Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) reported that 68 percent of the men in the jihadist milieu had been ‘suspected, charged or sentenced for criminal acts prior to radicalisation’ (PST, 2016: 8).

Meanwhile, a series of street demonstrations against Israel’s bombing of Gaza in 2009 mobilised thousands of Norwegians onto the streets of Oslo. The so-called Gaza riots, which the media compared to the 2005 French riots (Dikec, 2017), primarily mobilised young Muslim activists and left wing radicals, but also well-known gang members ‘looking for trouble’ (Jacobsen and Anderson, 2012: 835). Researchers from the Ministry of Defence (FFI) ‘expressed fears that militant Islamist groups would use the occasion to recruit frustrated minority youth’ (Jacobsen and Anderson, 2012: 133). In later studies, FFI traced the jihadist milieu back to the Gaza riots (Lia and Nesser, 2016).

Fears of radicalisation overshadowed a much broader and more diverse social phenomenon: Islamic paths out of street crime. During the 2010s, several high-profile Norwegian-Pakistani gang members claimed they had started a new and better life with the help of Islam (e.g. Minhaj, 2020). Like in other contexts, such as Britain, the stories of these former antiheroes functioned as ‘urban legends’ (Qasim, 2018: 128), or socially recognised scripts that worked as role models for other street criminals. The stories were not exceptional, but rather powerful narrative symbols of a broader multi-ethnic Islamic revival among street criminals who turned to Islam as a means of going straight (Qasim, 2018; Khosrokhavar, 2004).

The aim of this paper is to examine and analyse different Islamic narrative pathways out of street crime. I analyse what Muslim narratives of desistance do for the storytellers and their audiences. I have identified three types of narratives: reconciliation, purification and exclusion.

Together, these ideal types represent a narrative repertoire that street criminals draw on to construct their Islamic path out of street crime.

## **Methodology**

The participants of this study were 25 Norwegian men aged between 18 and 56 years old. The main criteria for participation was that the participants had a street criminal background – meaning they had committed crimes such as drug dealing, robbery and fighting – and that they identified as practising Muslims. Since the street criminal milieu is male dominated, all participants were men. Eight had been key figures of notorious Norwegian street gangs, or were part of such gangs. All participants were either converts or so-called reconverts. Twenty-one of them were born and raised as Muslims but became practising Muslims as teenagers or adults. Four were born and raised in either Christian or non-religious homes and had converted to Islam as young adults. I selected these participants in order to focus on stories about their narrative paths from street crime to Islam.

I met the participants in the centre of Oslo or in its eastern suburbs, where all but one of the participants lived. All participants were Norwegian citizens but their origins were in twelve different countries, the most common being Pakistan (nine participants). Three had a Norwegian background, meaning that both of their parents were born in Norway. All but two participants identified as Sunni Muslims; the others identified as Shia Muslims. Three of the participants had frequented the Norwegian jihadist milieu. One had travelled to Syria and joined a Salafi-jihadi militia.

The data for the study consist of 25 semi-structured and biographical qualitative interviews lasting approximately one to two hours each. I asked the participants wide and open questions about their criminal lifestyle, why they became practising Muslims and how they practised Islam. To recruit participants and to describe the contextual intersection between street crime and Islam, I spent time in various mosques, at different Islamic events and on social

media regularly from August 2018 to August 2019. Four participants were recruited from three high security prisons near Oslo. The interviews were conducted in mosques, taxis, cars, cafes and prisons. I chose semi-structured interviews to elicit storytelling about the participants' paths from street crime to Islam.

I chose an inductive methodology in order to shed new empirical and theoretical light on street criminals who start to practise Islam. The interviews were transcribed and the entire transcriptions were used to analyse the participants' life stories. In line with the Norwegian Centre for Research Data's (NSD) ethical standards for treating sensitive data, the participants gave their consent to participate in the research project and were anonymised.

### **Three narratives of desistance**

Based on the existing literature and my data, I describe three Muslim narratives of desistance: reconciliation, purification and exclusion. Together, they represent a narrative repertoire that the participants drew on to reconstruct non-offending Islamic identities. Some participants adopted one narrative, while others drew on two or even three.

#### *The narrative of reconciliation*

This story represents a narrative of reconciliation in the sense that the participants told a tale about reconciling their past criminal lifestyle with the ethics of Islam. In this narrative, the participants neutralised their past sins, toned down their Islamic turning point and emphasised a flexible type of Islamic piety. The narrative of reconciliation was low in intensity. This means the storyline was undramatic and driven by the participants' rationality and pragmatism rather than their emotions (Smith, 2006: 39).

Participants who had often been part of street criminal gangs downplayed their crimes and their feelings of regret in different ways. Like in many other criminal narratives, Davud (44) made serious crime appear as mere juvenile behaviour. He said, 'I should never have been part of the gang milieu and I have thrown away years of my life on silliness.' But 'eaten is

eaten,' he concluded, quoting a famous Norwegian fairy tale. Amir (44) downplayed past crimes by emphasising his abstinence from Islamic sins. He said, 'I have never used drugs or drunk alcohol, but I've taken part in other things.' Peter (33) justified past crimes on moral grounds, saying, 'I feel that I've apologised to those I have been really mean to; others may have deserved it.' These reflections appear as neutralisations of or justifications for deviance (Matza and Sykes, 1957).

In line with the notion of cognitive reconciliation, however (McGinty, 2006), it is possible to view the reflections as part of a conversion narrative that makes it possible for street criminals to bridge their criminal lifestyle with their new identity as righteous Muslims. Accordingly, Davud said, 'Today I feel that I don't want to think about the silly things I've done. I just want life to go on smoothly.' Rather than breaking radically with past sins, Davud downplayed the crimes by describing them as mere silliness. Peter even described his criminal past as a positive and useful life lesson that 'formed me well and made me self-confident.' This biographical reconstruction corresponds with Maruna et al.'s (Maruna et al., 2006) findings that the conversion narrative of Christian converts in prison provided new meaning to past wrongdoings.

In line with the participants' downplaying of past crimes, they described an Islamic turning period rather than a clear-cut Islamic turning point. Like converts to Islam, who do not necessarily highlight the formal conversion ceremony in their conversion narratives (McGinty, 2006), the participants did not emphasise a particular trigger event. Hamid (34) snapped his finger and said, 'it wasn't like "bam!" It evolved gradually.' Many of the participants started to practice Islam in prison, a so-called 'marginal situation' (Maruna et al., 2006: 163). It is well documented that Muslims often rediscover Islam within prison (Weaver, 2016; Qasim, 2018; Khosrokhavar, 2004). For Hamid, the prison sentence forced an ultimatum upon him. He said, 'You're inside and there are many hours, days and nights alone. You look around and your

friends are either dead or in prison. You ruin your life.’ Like Hamid, Peter said it was either ‘all in, go to prison, or do something with your life.’ In this narrative, the participants presented Islam as an important means of achieving this change.

Confronted with long prison sentences, Hamid, Uday (41), Davud and Peter presented Islam as a pragmatic means of dealing with isolation and a way to regain control over broken social relations. Davud said, ‘As the years passed by, I had fewer and fewer visitors and finally I was alone. That’s when I started to think differently.’ After being put in custody and confronted with the possibility of several years in prison, Uday asked rhetorically, ‘Am I supposed to be a man who looks after his family first?’ Hamid said, ‘I was in prison a fair bit and married when I got out. You get new thoughts.’ Peter explained that he met his wife, then one of his friends ‘pulled out’ from the street-criminal milieu. He said: ‘He asked me if I wanted to become a Muslim and I replied why not. It was no hocus pocus [...] I was already on the way out.’ The participants presented Islam as a supplemental way of breaking with crime, rather than the cause itself.

In the narrative of reconciliation, repentance played an important but different role than in the classical conversion narrative, in which repentance implies a strong sense of regret. Participants like Davud described repentance as a mere formality in the face of a forgiving God:

I don’t I have a longer way to paradise. I feel that when you ask Allah for forgiveness, he will listen to everyone. I chose to believe that if you ask for that with a pure heart, he’ll listen [...]. That this lad has turned his back on the silly lifestyle [...]. So ok, ‘then we wash away all of it and make it clean again.’

Regarding the serious crimes these participants had engaged in, it is possible to interpret this understanding of repentance as the central aspect of their ‘cognitive reconciliation’ (McGinty, 2006). This language of repentance can be interpreted as the only way to forgive oneself, live on and break with the criminal lifestyle.

The participants were also relaxed regarding Islamic piety. Hamid smoked cigarettes and wore street wear rather than traditional Islamic clothes. Irfan (43) described himself as 'flexible'. Uday was far from following 'Islam 100%.' Amir said that 'the Islam I've learned is easy.' These accounts contradict previous studies that argue that street criminals generally chose puritan forms of Islam as a means of salvation (e.g. Marranchi, 2009; Benslama, 2016). In contrast, many of the participants in this study described Islamic rituals as a flexible and a practical tool for restructuring their life.

The participants described Islamic texts and rituals as tools for dealing with concrete problems in this world rather than an abstract means of redemption. For them, Islam served as an 'ethical framework' for change (Khosrokhavar, 2004). Uday stressed that in prison, 'you've problems with money, with your wife, with your cellmate and your thoughts.' To deal with these problems, 'I started to read the Quran and it started to give me answers', he explained. Previous research shows that Islamic rituals structure the daily life of Muslim prisoners (Olsen, 2008: 14). Accordingly, Hamid described prayer as a disciplining ritual: 'You shall meet your God and you have to make yourself ready, that's why you clean yourself, stand upright with your eyes lowered.' In contrast to the impure, messy and immoral image of street life, Islamic rituals such as prayer represent purity, order and respect. In this sense, Islam is a powerful tool for 're-aestheticizing' your place in the world (Truong, 2018: 95).

In the narrative of reconciliation, Islam had a very concrete function of forgiveness, notably as a means of reconciling with majority society and with former enemies. Because of his long prison sentence, Davud said he had been 'bitter towards the society, the court, the police, the snitches, the offended, the witnesses and the prosecutor.' However, unlike other Norwegian gang members who used Islam as a language of hostility towards majority society (Larsen, 1992), Davud claimed that he 'had to learn to forgive', thanks to a reconciling form of Islam. According to Irfan, 'Islam says that you should forgive everyone, even every night before

you go to sleep.’ For him, these ethics represented a huge and important change ‘that was unthinkable in the past.’ In line with scholars who emphasize the significance of religious emotions (e.g. Laws, 2020), Islam probably provided the participants with strong feelings of relief. In the narrative of reconciliation however, Islam primarily provided the participants with a practical language of forgiveness that made it possible to break with cycle of violence and revenge.

The narrative of reconciliation is a story in which the participants used Islam to bridge their sinful street criminal past with their present as righteous Muslims. Rather than breaking radically with their criminal lifestyle, the participants downplayed their past sins and highlighted God’s grace towards everyone. This kind of biographical reconstruction help convert or reconvert to create self-coherence and a sense of continuity in their lives (McGinty, 2006). For the participants, the narrative of reconciliation served as a pragmatic and reciprocal means of forgiveness towards themselves, former enemies and majority society.

### *The narrative of purification*

This story represents a classical conversion narrative about being ‘born again’ because the participants told a story of ‘radical change’ in belief and behaviour (Maruna et al., 2006: 162). In this ‘act of faith’ (Marranchi, 2009: 107), the participants amplified their sinful street criminal lifestyle, highlighted a dramatic and miraculous turning point and emphasised puritanism in terms of rituals, clothing and language. The narrative of purification was high in intensity and the storyline was romantic and emotional (Smith, 2006), in the sense that it was driven by participants’ emotions and miraculous dealing with insurmountable obstacles.

In contrast with the narrative of reconciliation, the participants highlighted the gravity of their crimes and their deep feelings of regret. In line with classical conversion narratives (Maruna et al., 2006), the participants told of hitting ‘rock bottom.’ Tariq (37) described his former career as ‘fulltime criminal.’ Christian (36) told about spending several years in custody

and living in constant fear of being shot. Aman (29) said he had ‘friends who died from overdoses and/or from being shot at.’ Raja (28) said, ‘I beat up friends who owed me money. I rotted, I turned empty and lost myself.’ Aman described the street criminal lifestyle as the ‘time of *jahiliyya*’, and his return to Islam was a way of leaving this lifestyle behind. According to Aman, it is common to compare street life with *jahiliyya*. In Islam, *jahiliyya* means the pre-Islamic period of barbarism and ignorance (Halverson et al., 2011: 37-48). In the context of street life, Aman’s use of *jahiliyya* is a powerful way of constructing a divide between his pre- and post-conversion period.

In the narrative of purification, the hitting of ‘rock bottom’ played an important role in triggering an abrupt and miraculous turning point. This dramaturgy seems to have an explicit social function. In conversion literature, converts and reconverts ‘give witness to their experiences’ in groups or in more formal gatherings (Maruna et al., 2006: 163) so that a shared model is created (van Nieuwkerk, 2014: 2). In order to give a powerful witness of transformation, the storyline must be dramatic. According to the participants, their miraculous turning points often occurred during specific rituals. The link between essential rituals – such as prayer and miracles – is a typical ingredient in conversion narratives across different religious traditions, including Islam (Hermann, 1999: 76). Kemal (38), Raja and Aman told stories about how their lives suddenly changed after a particular prayer. When Kemal prayed, ‘light appeared.’ Aman prayed to God to sort out his life and suddenly became more ‘fortunate’. Such experiences may represent real and decisive turning points. Like in other religious traditions however, the appearance of light and change in fortune are central ingredient in Islamic conversion narratives. By using well-known elements from such stories, the participants made their transformation from street criminals to pious Muslims universal and valid.

The participants also told about more dramatic and miraculous turning points. While dramatic events are common in conversion narratives, the participants’ accounts from the street

resulted in a particular type of narrative. Similar to narratives among street criminals who become Christians (Weaver, 2016: 166), violence and near-death experiences triggered change. Tariq and Christian told about miraculous near-death experiences. Tariq ‘returned’ to Islam after a strange force prevented a drug addict from stabbing his best friend. Arguably, such dramatic stories ‘give witness’ (Maruna et al., 2006) to other Muslims but also to oneself. Christian, who had recently converted to Islam in prison, told about how he miraculously survived a shootout several years earlier. A Muslim friend had assured him, ‘Allah protected you.’ In line with other conversion narratives (van Nieuwkerk, 2014: 2), Christian’s story is a typical example of narrative reconstruction. After his conversion to Islam, Christian provided the shootout with a new miraculous meaning, notably as a means of reconstructing his life in a meaningful way.

In the narrative of purification, a sense of regret and a desire to make up for past sins played a major role in the participants’ quests for redemption. With regard to the criminal lifestyle, Aman said: ‘There are many conflicts, especially with oneself with regard to what you actually want, who you are and who you really want to be.’ Repentance in Islam means to return to God by regretting one’s sins (Khalil, 2018). Tariq stressed that he ‘had so much to make up for.’ Christian said, ‘I’m struggling to look at myself in the mirror. After many years of crime, empathy and sympathy disappear and I perceived myself as a dirty human being.’ In line with the concept of being born again, these participants expressed their regret in terms of hitting ‘rock bottom’.

As a means of achieving forgiveness, the participants told about their personal quest for purification. This quest corresponds with research about so-called Muslim ‘reconverts’, ‘born again’ or ‘*overmuslims*’ (Marranchi, 2009; Benslama, 2016; Roy, 2016). In this narrative, the participants described acts of piety as a way of obtaining forgiveness from Allah. To Tariq, Aman and Raja, repentance implied a continuous process of practising Islam to the letter. Aman

said, ‘When I first started to practice, I took things by the letter.’ Raja hoped that Allah forgave him and eased the heavy burden through prayer, fasting, and good deeds. He explained his motivation: ‘You’re filled up with a lot of shit that you want God to forgive.’

The acts of piety also had a social function. In light of the participants’ past sins, these acts can also be interpreted as a way to obtain forgiveness from oneself and others. The ‘bookkeeping of good and bad deeds’ suits street criminals who seek redemption (Truong, 2018: 98). Raja said, while ‘God is forgiving, I continuously felt that I couldn’t thank him enough. I constantly measured myself on that at that weighing scale.’ Tariq said that after a bit ‘back and forth, I went all in with the practising. I focused on myself, I went to the mosque, I prayed a lot, I attempted to respect all the Islamic obligations and I grew a big beard.’ These forms of piety enact the narrative in the sense that they represent a ‘promise of transformation’ (Truong, 2018: 87).

The narrative of purification is a story in which the participants used Islam to break with their criminal lifestyles, repent to Allah and become pious Muslims. In this narrative, the participants highlighted the gravity of their past sins, the miraculous turning points they experienced and their continuous quest for Islamic purification. Like in Christian revivalism (Weaver, 2016: 166), the story of sin and salvation provided the participants with a narrative framework for dealing with emotions like fear and regret. Second, the story of being ‘born again’ as Muslim provided the participants with a narrative and symbolic framework to deal with a profound identity crisis and break completely with the past.

### *The narrative of exclusion*

In the narrative of exclusion, the participants told a story of how they turned or ‘returned’ to Islam by connecting their own sense of marginality to the suffering of Muslims worldwide. In this narrative, the participants described exclusion as triggers for their Islamic awakening, a basis of their new Muslim identity and a motivation for activism. The narrative of exclusion

functioned as an ‘act of identity’ (Marranchi, 2009: 103), or as a means for the participants to replace their street criminal label with a new Muslim group identity. The narrative tone was high in intensity. The storyline was tragic and driven by images of good and evil and the participants’ sense of moral responsibility for dealing with such dichotomies (Smith, 2006: 42).

Like in the narrative of purification, the participants talked very graphically about the brutality of the streets. In line with criminological research (Sandberg, 2008), they highlighted how ethnic and religious stigmatisation played into the strains of street life. Fahad (32) and Azzam (27) said that they were bullied a lot in school. Tariq was constantly fighting neo-Nazis and the authorities singled him out as a ‘troublemaker’. Yassin (27) said that his teachers ignored his positive qualities. Raja described an ‘us and them atmosphere’ in which the media portrayed ‘foreigners as himself as “violent rapists”’. Maruna (2006) shows how prisoners construct conversion narratives by reinterpreting past events. Accordingly, the participants reimagined experiences of marginalisation to make them fit into a larger Islamic narrative of exclusion.

Roy (2008) likens Muslim narratives of exclusion to the ‘suffering of the ummah’ (7), as narrative constructions. The participants drew on a combination of Islamic, political and cultural tropes to construct such narratives. This kind of ‘religious bricolage’ is common in the narratives of street criminals who turn or return to Islam (Khosrokhavar, 2004: 45). Raja drew parallels between the racial and religious discrimination that his group of friends experienced as teenagers and the struggle of marginalised groups elsewhere in the world:

We unconsciously drew parallels with the things that happened to African-Americans. We identified with them and the things they said in their music: that the white man was on the top and us at the bottom. It was about the whole media thing that dominated at that time. We felt particularly vulnerable and suspected after 9/11.

Raja identified with African American identity politics, rap music and Islam. For him, the narrative of exclusion shed new light on his criminal lifestyle and worked as a way to ‘reidentify’ (Benslama, 2016: 101) with an imagined global Islamic community.

In the narrative of exclusion, the participants described the suffering of other Muslims as the main trigger for turning or ‘returning’ to Islam. For them, ‘critical transnational events’ (Vestel, 2016: 158) underpinned their narrative and reinforced their new identity as Muslims. Many participants highlighted classical causes of Islamic contention, such as the Palestinian question. For Azzam (27), the Gaza War in 2009 represented a turning point. He explained that he ‘started to practise Islam after the Gaza demonstration’. The so-called ‘Gaza riots’ mobilised Muslim activists, left wing radicals and well-known gang members onto the streets of Oslo. The mix of actors and causes generated new social imaginaries and narratives. For instance, the demonstrators attacked McDonald’s restaurants because – according to rumours spread via SMS – they provided financial support to Israel (Jacobsen and Anderson, 2012). Such imaginaries cemented the participants’ narratives of exclusion and reinforced their group identity as Muslims.

Other participants described conspiracy theories as important turning points. During the 2000s, conspiracy theories against Islam circulated on social media and were popular among young Norwegian Muslims (Vestel, 2016). An important function of conspiracy theories is the construction of in-groups (Dyrendal and Emberland, 2019: 43), or, in this context, the drawing of boundaries between the oppressed Muslims and the non-Muslim oppressors. Like Azzam, Fahad started to practise Islam in the wake of the Gaza bombings in 2009. For him, *Arrivals*, an antisemitic movie about a hidden world order, shed new light on the Israeli bombings. Corresponding to other narratives of young Muslims who turn or return to Islam (e.g. Vestel, 2016), the movie confirmed a prewritten script about a war against Islam. The conspiracy theories also played into the participants’ narratives of religious change. Fahad, who spread

*Arrivals* on social media, said that other Muslims admired his newfound piety. For the participants who watched such movies with their friends or told others about them, conspiracies theories ‘gave witness’ to their religious transformation.

According to Benslama (2016), the quest for a new Muslim identity often leads to an ‘overidentification’ with Islam and Muslims (102). In the narrative of exclusion, the participants identified with the suffering of Muslims elsewhere in the world. According to Roy (2016), such narrative constructions enable young Muslims to imagine the oppression of other Muslims as their own suffering . For Azzam, who was not Palestinian himself, the Palestinian cause played such a role. As a Muslim, Azzam internalised the pain of Palestinians and imagined their cause as his own struggle. According to him, ‘even those who don’t practise Islam suffer when other Muslims in other parts of the world suffer.’ By sympathising with the suffering of other Muslims, the narrative of exclusion provided the participants with a new identity and a ‘sacred legitimacy’ (Khosrokhavar, 2015: 88).

For other participants, Islamic activism represented the only solution to their strong identification with the suffering of other Muslims. For a few of the participants, jihad represented the only means of redemption. According to Raja, his spiritual awakening led to an awakening of his consciousness. Because of the ‘slaughtering on the screen, I couldn’t sleep’, he said. The sense of guilt inspired Raja to leave Norway and ‘take up arms’ on the Syrian battlefield. For Raja and some of the other participants who ‘overidentified’ with the suffering of other Muslims, jihad represented an ultimate proof of their Islamic piety and sincerity. For other participants, like Tariq and Azzam, their sense of guilt made them engage in Islamic relief work. Many of the participants, like Christian, described those who engaged in such work as important role models.

In the narrative of exclusion, the participants told a story that aligned their troubled pasts with the suffering of an imagined global Islamic community. In this narrative, ‘transnational

critical events' (Vestel, 2016: 158), like Israel's bombing of Gaza in 2009, triggered their Islamic awakening. In light of their own sense of marginalisation, the participants' identification with the suffering of other Muslims provided them with a new Islamic identity and purpose in life (Khosrokhavar, 2015: 89). Some of the participants 'overidentified' (Benslama, 2016: 102) with the suffering of other Muslims and felt obliged to defend them by engaging in jihad.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Studies on street-crime, Islam and radicalisation overshadow a diverse social phenomenon, Islam as a means of 'going straight'. Dramatic events and traumatic emotions play into such transformations (Laws, 2020), particularly among street-criminals who struggle with feelings of fear, shame and regret (Marranchi, 2009). In this paper, I argue that Islamic narratives types channel such events and emotions in specific ways. I have identified a narrative repertoire of desistance that the participants draw on to construct non-offending Muslim identities. They generally drew more heavily on one narrative type than another.

In the narrative of reconciliation, the participants neutralised their past sins, toned down Islamic turning points and downplayed the need to repent. The undramatic storyline, the lack of emotions, and the storytellers' pragmatic use of Islam as a means to a 'straight' end does not correspond with the traditional way of 'giving witness' to religious change. While a set of emotions play into (re-) conversion (Laws, 2020), notably in prison (Marranchi, 2009), the participants downplayed them as a means of reconciliation. In the face of fear, shame and regret, the narrative provided the participants with Islamic redemption without requiring a total identity transformation.

In the narrative of purification, the participants amplified their sinful lifestyle, highlighted dramatic and miraculous turning points and emphasised a puritanical form of Islamic piety. The dramatic storyline, the central role of emotions and the storytellers' quest for

purification corresponds with the traditional way of ‘giving witness’ to religious change. In contrast to the narrative of reconciliation, the participants highlighted a set of strong emotions in their construction of a credible narrative of purification. For the participants, this narrative was indeed a powerful display of breaking completely with the vicious cycle of violence and prison.

In the narrative of exclusion, the participants associated their own feelings of exclusion with the oppression of a so-called imagined global Islamic community (Roy, 2008). The narrative’s tragic storyline and the participants’ idealistic responses to it (Smith, 2006) represents a powerful way to ‘give witness’ of replacing a selfish street life with a new Islamic identity, purpose and meaning (Khosrokhavar, 2015). Arguably, this narrative represents a source of radicalisation rather than a means of desistance (Akers, 2010; Topalli et al., 2013: 53). Indeed, three of the participants described jihad as a means of redemption in the face of the war in Syria. However, none of them legitimised street crime in the name of Islam or justified terrorist violence against non-Muslims. For most of the participants, the narrative of exclusion generally meant to make up for past sins by ‘making good’ (Maruna, 2001), notably by engaging in Islamic relief work and only exceptionally by participating in a jihad they characterized as a ‘just war’.

In contrast to the stereotypes of radicalised or ‘born-again’ Muslim street criminals, the way the narrative repertoire worked for the participants reflects a greater narrative diversity, complexity and change than the literature on Islam and crime so far has accounted for. The stories were also interconnected and dynamic. Some of the participants told tales of purification, exclusion and reconciliation. Their stories changed over time, especially the narratives that appear as processes of radicalization. Raja for instance, told a life-story that included an initial quest for purification, a growing sense of exclusion and a future hope for reconciliation. This reorientation adds an important element to the Islamic repertoire of desistance and to the debate

about street crime and Islam. Religious change, identity transformation and desistance are long-term, non-linear and individual processes (See: Truong, 2018). The narrative repertoire in this paper accounts for the social canalization of this complexity.

This paper shows that Muslim narratives of desistance work as socially recognised means of autobiographical reconstruction. In line with narrative studies, which highlight that events, emotions and narratives are closely related (Maruna and Liem, 2021), the aim of this paper is to show that street-criminals provide specific events and feelings with new and socially significant meaning through a set of Islamic redemption narratives. For street criminals who wish to end a cycle of violence, imprisonment and stigmatisation, Islam represents a powerful resource of change (de Galembert, 2020; Mohammed, 2019). This insight may inform public policy and strengthen future research, particularly towards Muslims in prison. Most street criminals turn or return to Islam as a way of ‘going straight’. While (re-) conversions are not automatically leading to desistance, this paper shows that Islamic redemption narratives are important means for street-criminals to rework their past, to redefine their autobiography and to reintegrate into mainstream society. As a means to assess Islam and desistance more rigorously, comparative studies with samples on Christianity and crime represents a possible step for future research.

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