Working against many grains: Rethinking difference, emancipation and agency in the counter-discourse of an ethnic minority women’s organisation in Belgium

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Abstract
In this article, we aim to contribute to feminist academic debates about multiculturalism and secularism/religion by drawing upon an analysis of an ethnic minority women’s organisation in Belgium that has been active since 1999: ella. The analysis focuses upon the way in which ella constructs notions of empowerment and emancipation by discussing structural inequalities, cultural-ethnic values and religious authority and identity. First, we look at how ella formulates its ideas about the emancipation trajectories of minoritised women and the potential role of religious belonging. Second, we look at ella’s discussion of religious interpretation and gender/sexual diversity. Here, we explore assumptions about the relationship between religious authority and minoritised women’s and LGBTQs’ desires and pursuit for knowledge. We conclude by considering ella as an affirmative-critical actor of multiculturalism, and an implicit agent of religious reform.

Keywords
agency, difference, emancipation, ethnic minority women’s organisation, multiculturalism, religion

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Résumé
Cet article vise à contribuer aux débats académiques féministes relatifs à la diversité culturelle et au rapport laïcité/religion par l’analyse d’une organisation de femmes de minorité ethnique en Belgique, connue sous le nom d’ella. Cette analyse se concentre sur la manière dont ella développe des notions de responsabilisation et d’émancipation en discutant des inégalités structurelles, des valeurs ethniques et culturelles et de l’autorité et de l’identité religieuse. Dans un premier temps, nous examinons comment ella formule ses idées sur les trajectoires d’émancipation des femmes mises en minorité et du rôle potentiel de leur appartenance religieuse. Dans un deuxième temps, nous analysons la manière dont ella envisage l’interprétation religieuse et la diversité des genres/diversité sexuelle. Nous concluons en considérant ella comme un acteur critique et affirmé du multiculturalisme et un agent implicite de la réforme religieuse.

Mots-clés
agentivité, différence, émancipation, ethnique, multiculturalisme, organisation des femmes de minorité, religion

Introduction
Whereas political and public debates about ethnic and religious diversity in relation to gender and sexual inequalities in the Global North have been critically investigated, research is much less often focused upon the critical perspectives of ethnic minority women’s organisations themselves working within European societies. This article therefore aims to contribute to current feminist academic debates about multiculturalism and secularism/religion by drawing on an analysis of a particular ethnic minority women’s organisation in Belgium that has been active since 1999: ella. The analysis will focus on the way in which ella constructs notions of empowerment and emancipation by discussing structural inequalities, cultural-ethnic values and religious authority and identity.

The article first addresses current political and public debates in Western Europe, and the local Belgian-Flemish context in which ella operates. It then focuses upon ella as a feminist counter-voice to the dominant political and public positioning against multiculturalism and religion in-the-name-of-women’s-emancipation. The case study first looks at the way in which ella formulates its ideas and activities about the emancipation trajectories of ethnic minority women and the potential role of religious belonging. Second, it looks at its position on religious interpretation and gender/sexual diversity. This second and more elaborate focus ends with an exploration of assumptions about the relationship between religious authority and ethnic minority women’s and LGBTQs’ desires and pursuit for knowledge. The paper concludes by considering ella as an affirmative/critical actor of multiculturalism, and an implicit agent of religious reform.

Engaging with political-analytical debates I: The case against multiculturalism in the name of women’s emancipation

In the history of academic debates among feminist scholars about multiculturalism and women’s emancipation in Western contexts, the publication of Susan Moller Okin’s
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essay ‘Is multiculturalism bad for women?’ (1999) provoked much critical attention, and has often been perceived as pivotal for launching debates about feminism and multiculturalism. In the present article, multiculturalism is conceptualised as a political and/or social-cultural discourse that acknowledges, affirms and promotes respect for ethnic and religious difference, and aims to make ethnic and religious minorities part of society (Parekh, 2006). This understanding of multiculturalism embraces a notion of difference that regards difference as constructed in the power dynamic between minority communities and society at large. Differences are always in-the-making in processes in which assumptions about ethnicity, religion, culture, gender and sexuality intersect (Roodsaz and Van den Brandt, forthcoming).

In Western Europe, feminist scholarship has a long tradition of rethinking ethnicity, religion and gender, which was reformulated in terms of multiculturalism after the publication of Okin’s essay. British, Dutch and Belgian thinkers such as Nira Yuval-Davis (1994), Floya Anthias (2002), Anne Phillips (2010), Philemona Essed (1991), Sawitri Saharso (2004), Gloria Wekker and Helma Lutz (2001), Gily Coene and Chia Longman (2004a), and Karen Celis and Silvia Erzeel (2013) have over the past decades similarly addressed the question of how to think through the (dis)connections between ethnic and religious diversity and gender equality in politics, policy-making, critical scholarship and women’s movements. These and other feminist thinkers have contributed to international and local developments of intersectionality studies (Cho et al., 2013), and its discussions about gender, ethnicity and religion framed in terms of difference, human/women’s rights, citizenship and representation. Theoretical considerations about multiculturalism and women’s emancipation cannot be separated from developments and discussions in women’s movements due to the on-going critical conversations between scholars and civil society actors and activists since the very start of academic women’s/gender studies. For example, Okin’s essay not only triggered renewed debate and responses among feminist scholars, but also among women’s movements and activists in Dutch-speaking civil society in Belgium (S’Jegers, 2005).

The subject of ethnic and religious diversity and women’s equality has also been taken up in political-public debates throughout Western Europe. This, however, predominantly took place in terms of questioning the reconcilability of ethnic and religious minority communities and women’s emancipation. In the Netherlands and Flanders, in this public questioning of multiculturalism, ethnic and religious ‘difference’ became perceived as threatening both, although in different ways, the emancipation of ethnic minority and ethnic majority women. Ethnic minority women, and their positionalities, experiences and assumed lack of emancipation, have become the focus of attention of politicians and policy-makers (Ghorashi, 2010; Prins and Saharso, 2008; Coene and Longman, 2006; 2015; Withaeckx, 2014). A more recent development of this public focus on women’s emancipation is the shift towards considering ethnic minorities as threatening the equality, positions and safety of ethnic majority women and non-heterosexual individuals. In Flanders (the Dutch-speaking northern region/community of Belgium), the year 2012 witnessed two moments of public controversy that set the tone for further discussions about ethnic diversity, women’s emancipation and sexual freedoms. These two public controversies that dealt with street sexism and homophobic intimidation and violence perpetrated by ethnic minority young men were
a result of the broadcasting of two documentaries on Flemish public television (‘Femme de la Rue’ and ‘Homme de la Rue’). Both controversies reinforced simplistic understandings of ethnic minority communities and the Islamic tradition as oppressive and liberal-secular values as facilitating freedom and equality. Arguably partly as a result of these 2012 controversies, continuous attention has been paid to the problem of sexism. Despite much controversy on its necessity and effectiveness, the then-federal minister of Interior Affairs and Equal Opportunities Joëlle Milquet passed a new ‘law against sexism in public spaces’ in 2014.

The start of the year 2016 witnessed another moment of controversy in which refugees and asylum seekers were associated with sexual violence and harassment. After New Year’s Eve celebrations in various major German and Swedish cities, women spoke out publicly about their experiences of robbery and sexual violence. The perpetrators were assumed to be refugee and asylum-seeking men. Feminist voices critiqued the public debates that erupted in Flanders after the events, as well as suggestions by politicians to create special courses for asylum seekers ‘to teach them how to deal with women’, for reinforcing the understanding of majority men as respectful of women’s rights and equality and that of men belonging to ethnic minorities and refugee or asylum-seeking communities as sexist and sexually violent. According to feminist critiques, such responses build upon familiar colonialist and racist tropes of the Arab man as sexually conservative and oppressive and the Black man as sexually violent, and function to shift the responsibility for violence against women from a collective issue to the problem of men belonging to ethnic and religious minorities and refugee and asylum-seeking communities (Bracke et al., 2016; Geerts et al., 2016). As such, ‘other men’ become figured as a site of ‘social tension’, a site ‘saturated’ with fear, shame and disgust (Ahmed, 2004: 11). In these 2012 and 2016 controversies, discourses on sexual and gender equality tended to be entwined with a process of ‘othering’ of ethnic and religious minorities. Critical scholars have suggested this process can be understood as contributing to the ‘racialisation’ of Muslim communities (El Tayeb, 2011) or the ‘ethnicisation’ of minority groups (Krebbekx et al., 2017). While these conceptualisations are different in their preference for ‘race’ or ‘ethnicity’ as critical tools, they share an emphasis on gender and sexuality as key to understanding current processes of articulating ‘difference’ and constructing ‘Others’.

**Engaging with political-analytical debates 2: The case against religion/Islam in the name of women’s emancipation**

Because public controversies about ethnic and religious diversity, gender equality and sexual freedom often focus on Islam, these debates cannot be separated from European histories of secularism/religion. We therefore suggest that ‘the case against multiculturalism’ must be considered as influenced by the historical and current relationship between religious (mainly Christian) traditions and feminism in Western-European contexts. This relationship can be called ambivalent and tense from the perspective of secular feminist scholars and women’s movements, but complex and multiple from the perspective of religious feminist scholars and women’s movements. Especially in Catholic majority contexts with histories of oppositional struggles of
secular-progressive movements against the influence of Catholic institutions, struggling against or rejecting religious traditions is considered to enable, or even to be crucial for, women’s emancipation and sexual freedom (Van den Brandt, 2014). However, by now, feminist scholars in various disciplines have questioned the assumption that ‘religion is bad for women’ (and relatedly, that ‘secularism/secularity is good for women’), starting their analysis from the perspectives, desires and experiences of religious women of various backgrounds (Aune et al., 2008). They demonstrate that secularism/secularity as a political-social structure and socio-theological reality, may enable and shape religious women’s perspectives and voices but also marginalise, exclude or trivialize them, especially those of religious ethnic minority women.

Today, especially in Catholic majority contexts, the ‘Muslim question’ (Selby and Beaman, 2016) seems to frame both the public case against multiculturalism and the one against religion, in the name of women’s emancipation and sexual freedoms. Historical and contemporary debates about religion and feminism in post-colonial settings influence the current focus on Islam and Muslim migrant communities (Fadil, 2014). ‘The Muslim question’ is aptly situated and defined by Gianni as ‘a conglomerate of discourses, attitudes, and practices that call into question the agency, subjectivity and moral equality of Muslims as individuals, as bearers of religious values, and as citizens’ (2016: 23). Concerns and anxieties about ‘the Muslim other’ holding a contentious relationship with Western-European liberal values brought religion back into and simultaneously transformed the debate about the place of religion in society in general, and about religion as enabling/constraining women’s emancipation in particular. The headscarf as a visible marker became the symbol of the religious otherness of Islam, and came to have formative influence over political discourses on citizenship, liberalism, European identity and gender equality (Kilic et al., 2008), which made Islamic veiling in Europe prone to becoming subject of polarization, disciplinary practices and regulation. The headscarf debates became one of the arenas in which the increasingly difficult and power-invested relationship between ethnic majority populations and Muslim communities in the global post-9/11 context is played out. Despite the differences in political and institutional histories between and often even within European states, in Belgium Islamic veiling has been on and off the public and political agenda for almost two decades. Heralded as a ‘multicultural’ nation in terms of its dealings with linguistic-ethnic diversity among its dominant Dutch-French-German regions and populations, the current dominant political climate tends more to Flemish-ethnic nationalism and is increasingly exclusionary vis-à-vis what are perceived as non-European minorities. Despite the educational and institutional diversity that impedes central and general legislation with regards to bans on veiling, in practice today the headscarf is effectively banned from most schools in the country (Bracke and Fadil, 2012; Coene and Longman, 2008), followed by general bans of the burqua and face veil in public spaces (Ouald Chaib and Brems, 2013).

Due to increasing religious diversity and Muslim women’s activism, ethnic majority protagonists in political-public debates, including feminists, encounter religion, female religiosity and religious feminists in new ways. Bracke and Fadil (2009) show how in Flemish political-public debates, ‘secularist’ views increasingly play a role. Voices from socialist and liberal politicians, and humanist, socialist and liberal civil society actors, question the religiosity of some young Muslim men and women. Young
Muslims’ visibility and claim-making seems to confront white secular/liberal/socialist/progressive actors with a collective memory of former anticlerical struggles against Catholic authorities, traditions and morality. Secularist discourses that assume an inevitable clash between religion, and emancipation and freedom, neglect recent histories of progressive and dissident Christians, among them feminists, as well as current narratives about negotiations of religiosity and feminist commitments by Christian, Jewish and Muslim women (Decoene and Lambelin, 2009; Longman, 2008; Van den Brandt, 2012).

In Flanders, secular feminists felt forced to rethink their viewpoint about religion, primarily in relation to Islam. However, ethnic majority women’s movements and individual feminists have never reached a consensus about religion generally, and attitudes towards Islam and Muslims particularly, nor about the possibility of feminism or women’s emancipation within Islamic frameworks (Bracke, 2007; S’Jegers, 2005; Van den Brandt, 2014). The various feminist positions taken up in the debates concerning the Islamic headscarf and its current regulation in Flanders within schools, public offices and the labour market, reveal a lack of agreement, and convey negative attitudes towards religion and particularly Islam. Individual self-expression and emancipation, and religiosity, are dominantly perceived as a *contradictio in terminis*. Gender and sexuality became key in the construction of the ‘Muslim question’ and its questioning of Muslim women’s agency and citizenship.

**Rethinking difference, emancipation and agency: a feminist civil society actor in Belgium**

ella is a non-profit organisation with a head office situated in Brussels, catering to the Dutch-speaking region in Belgium (in Flanders and Brussels). ella was founded in 1999 by women belonging to minority groups (especially of Turkish and Moroccan migratory origins) as an organisation committed to the needs and emancipation of minority women and girls. Throughout the years, ella increasingly developed from a primary support organisation to taking up the task of sharing community-based expertise with and developing tools and projects for counsellors, educators and policy-makers working with minorities. ella also aims to increase awareness among the general public of the specific issues and inequalities minority women and girls in Belgium face. In 2010, ella officially became an expertise centre in gender and ethnicity. Today, it is run by both staff and volunteers, and primarily draws on funding from the Flemish Ministry of Equal Opportunities for basic infrastructure, administration and limited numbers of paid staff.1 Although it has predominantly worked with women belonging to Muslim communities, next to non-religious women, it has also targeted and worked with women from Christian (for example, of Kurdish, Latin-American and Sub-Saharan African backgrounds), Hindu, Sikh and Jewish backgrounds. Below, we focus on ella as a feminist counter-voice to the dominant political and public positioning against multiculturalism and religion in-the-name-of-women’s-emancipation. As a civil society actor, ella creates ideas and practices through projects that work against multiple grains and aim at enlarging the discussion and space for the building of various ethnic and religious/secular identities and subjectivities. As such, ella will be approached as a
counter-voice in terms of creating different ideas and practices as marking its critical distance vis-à-vis political-public discourse.

**Reclaiming ‘difference’ as a starting point for emancipation**

In this section, we look at how ella, in its recent activities and brochures resulting from short-term projects, both critiques and affirms the specific social locations of minoritised women in Belgium. On the one hand, it critiques political-social structures of racism and sexism that minoritise and marginalise women belonging to communities with recent migration histories. On the other hand, ella regards minoritised women’s self-understanding as equally defined by their Belgian citizenship and their belonging to ethnic and/or religious minority communities. The intersectional belonging of ethnic minority women is affirmed as providing particular trajectories for emancipation that may be informed by a positive attitude towards one’s own ethnic and/or religious tradition, identity or background. By affirming the specific locations of minoritised women and recognising and reclaiming difference (Rich, 2003; Lorde, 2007), ella positions itself as a critical-affirmative voice for multiculturalism. This way, ella attempts to find a more pragmatic approach and a middle ground in the ‘feminism versus multiculturalism’ debate.

ella critiques the invisibility of minoritised women and girls in minority and equal opportunities policy-making and feminist and antiracist claims that result in disempowerment and political dilemmas for this particular group of women and girls. The U.S. Black American lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw (Crenshaw 1991, Cho et al., 2013) captured this as the problem of political intersectionality, or in other words, the problem of politics based exclusively on the struggle against either the subordination of women or the oppression of ethnicised or racialised minorities. The U.S. Black feminist writer Audre Lorde speaks of ‘ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences’ (2007: 117) as a threat for women’s mobilisation across differences. Criticising difference in terms of power inequalities, and reclaiming difference in terms of sources for constructing identity and agency, ella found a way to criticise-affirm difference.

ellea experiences that the ‘double’ struggle of women and girls of minority communities at times causes conflicting loyalties. Criticising inequality within minorities is not always welcomed by members of their own community as it may have contradictory outcomes when narratives of inequality and oppression are used by white politicians or feminists in racist discourses about the supposed backwardness of minorities. According to ella, supporting the emancipation of minoritised women and girls involves working on two fronts simultaneously – ‘internal’ and ‘external’. Internal emancipation is conceptualised as taking place within and vis-à-vis the own family and community, while external emancipation refers to emancipation vis-à-vis the majority population (Perneel and Babazia in: Coene and Longman, 2004b: 130–131).

In the organisation’s experience, the path towards emancipation of minoritised women is specific because of their situatedness in terms of ‘ethnicity and gender’ as well as secular or religious backgrounds that often divert from those of white women (S’Jegers, 2005: 85). It aims to stimulate the discussion within minoritised communities about internal
inequalities and critically addresses challenging topics such as violence, mixed relationships, marriage migration and sexual orientation. It also aims to draw from women’s cultural and religious backgrounds to find possibilities for positive self-image and emancipation that are geared towards women’s own needs and ambitions. ella ‘redefines difference’ (Lorde, 2007) by considering the ethnic and religious backgrounds of minoritised communities as potential and positive sources for identity and agency in the face of a society that often defines those ethnic and religious particularities as other, deviant and inferior.

Although ella does not primarily focus on religion as a field of oppression, negotiation or emancipation (as religion is not primary in the building of identities, subjectivities and practices of all women belonging to ethnic minority and/or Muslim backgrounds), religion is included in ella’s antiracist agenda. It regards religion as one of the potential axes of identity and social positioning that should be taken into account in intersectional perspectives. This means that religion is seen as an important part of the lives and belongings of particular individuals and social groups, but also as a means through which groups and individuals become seen and positioned in society by others. The way in which an individual constructs her religiosity/secularity at times does not overlap with the assumptions others make regarding her religious faith, practice or background. ella criticises the limitations especially Muslim women and girls experience in expressing their faith freely. ella critiques the impact of negative representations of Muslim women as oppressed by Muslim men and subordinated by Islam. It denounces the exclusion of Muslim girls wearing the headscarf from education and the discrimination of Muslim women wearing the headscarf in the labour market. ella also proactively published a brochure (Babazia and Perneel, 2006) offering methods for dealing with and discussing the headscarf in the classroom. In 2004, ella revoked her membership of the umbrella women’s organisation the Dutch-speaking Women’s Council (Nederlandstalige Vrouwen Raad – NVR) due to, among other issues, the organisation’s unwillingness to take a clear position in the headscarf debate in favour of Muslim’s women’s ‘freedom of choice’ (S’Jegers, 2005: 87–95). Feeling ‘misrecognised’ (Fraser, 2003) as an equal partner in discussions about women’s emancipation, it declined further collaboration with the NVR. Insisting on minoritised women’s equality and particularity, ella thus reclaims minoritised women’s ‘difference’ as a site for building political practice and subjectivity.

Conveying religious knowledge as a space for religious agency

In the following section, we analyse how ella encourages the creation of more possibilities for a positive relationship between religious identities, and gender and sexual diversity. We look at the ways in which the organisation opens up discussion about religious authority and interpretation, while refraining from taking up an explicit progressive religious point of view. In the context of Flanders, this position may seem, from both a feminist secularist and a progressive religious perspective, a not-so-radical one. A feminist secularist perspective would claim that the influence of religion on society and individuals should decrease, or even be erased, for women’s equality and sexual freedoms
to flourish (Van den Brandt, 2014). A progressive religious perspective would argue for the necessity of engaging in religious critique (Van den Brandt, 2017) by building religious interpretations that affirm women’s equality and sexual freedoms, together with the claim that such religious interpretations are more ‘true’ than others (Kim, 2013). To understand ella’s position, towards the end of this paper, we explore underlying assumptions about women’s/LGBTQs’ religious agency.

**Engaging with religious traditions and affirming religious feminism**

To date, ella does not engage in developing a theological or confessional perspective and can therefore not be considered a faith-based organisation. This may have to do with the fact that it’s employees and volunteers have various religious/secular backgrounds and therefore cannot claim a shared confessional outlook, nor are (most) employees and volunteers able to claim expertise in religious doctrine or theology. However, the question of religion as a possible vehicle of oppression, or conversely, emancipation, is taken up in some of ella’s projects. Although Belgium’s minority populations of a migratory background since the post-war period are highly diverse in terms of their ethnic, religious and secular identifications, a number of third and fourth generation Muslims are actively questioning and engaging with questions of Islamic identity and faith. Therefore, in a few projects, ella engages in informing its ‘target’ communities (women, but at times also youth and LGBTQs belonging to minoritised communities) about religious traditions and interpretations.

An example of ella’s engagement with religion, in this case Islam, and religious interpretations is demonstrated by the brochure ‘Lifting the Veil: Girls With and Without a Headscarf in the Classroom: Tools for Teachers and School Boards’ (Babazia and Perneel, 2006). This brochure aims to inform school boards and teachers about the Islamic headscarf and providing methods and suggestions for starting conversations in class about the headscarf (Babazia and Perneel, 2006: 8–9). In order to give elaborate and nuanced information, the brochure deals with issues such as identity, the role of parents, religion, the context of education and the impact of banning the headscarf at school for the future opportunities of Muslim girls. The brochure dedicates one section to the question ‘What Does Islam Say About It?’. This section mentions the Quranic verses that are often invoked to argue for Muslim women’s religious obligation to wear the headscarf (Sura al-Ahzab 33: 59 and Sura an-Nur 24:31). Here, ella also brings the reader’s attention to different religious interpretations and the less well known religious perspectives that argue that veiling is not an obligation. It points at Islamic feminism that ‘claims equal rights for women on the basis of Quranic texts about women’ (Babazia and Perneel, 2006: 19), and refers to the work of Islamic feminist researchers such as Riffat Hassan (2001) and Amina Wadud (2009). ella finds approaching Islamic texts from a women’s or women’s rights perspective important:

Not only because it makes women aware of their rights, but also because it enlarges women’s knowledge of texts. This means they are given an instrument in a discourse that is dominated by men and that is sometimes in its male formulation used against them. Finally, this approach
recognises the important role of culture and religion in identity formations. Feminism, the reinterpretation of the Qur’an and the headscarf do not necessarily conflict with each other. On the contrary, there are many women who consciously read the Qur’an, are aware of male interpretations and strive towards reinterpretation, while maintaining the headscarf (Babazia and Perneel, 2006: 19, translation ours).

This quote demonstrates that ella takes a stance against the dominant public opinion that religion, especially Islam and the headscarf, are incompatible with feminism, women’s rights and emancipation. It does so by explicitly arguing that there is not necessarily a conflict between feminism, religious reinterpretation and the headscarf. The argument remains nuanced and as such provides information and tools for conversation. It does not claim a certain religious interpretation or practice to be more valid or ‘true’ than others. ‘What Does Islam Say About It?’ ends by arguing that while many religious interpretations of the headscarf exist, the majority of Muslims understands the headscarf as a religious obligation for women. However, that does not mean that the Qur’an provides the right to compel women and girls to wear the headscarf. The authors underline this argument by pointing at Quranic injunctions against coercion and violence (Sura 2:256, Sura 88: 22-23, Sura 27: 91).

Several of ella’s projects inform about a diversity of religious interpretations of gender and sexual diversity, including progressive religious perspectives. As shown above, ella pays attention to religious feminists and assumes that they provide viable religious interpretations, and calls for a critical attitude vis-à-vis religious authority, power and legitimisation. However, as alluded to above, it does not proactively argue against conservative religious interpretations, nor does it provide its own liberatory readings, in the way a progressive faith-based organisation might do. We might understand this choice to not proactively argue against conservative religious perspectives as due to its tasks that include providing workshops for different kind of audiences, such as professional counsellors, who are often members of the ethnic majority, but also groups of women or youth belonging to various minoritised groups. This means that ella employees and volunteers need to take up an attitude of opening up conversation and dialogue with individuals holding various secular or religious points of view. At the same time, ella supports existing progressive religious understandings and feels that giving a voice to a diversity of religious interpretations – progressive, moderate and conservative – enlarges women’s (and/or youth’s and LGBTQs’) knowledge of religion and provides them with more options and the arguments for choosing to abide by the interpretations that suit them best. This attitude affirms diversity, and refuses to put to the fore specific religious interpretations as more preferable than others. Of course, this requires a balancing act between affirming different forms of religious identity and life, and implicitly criticising religious worldviews that claim to have privileged or even sole access to religious truth.

**Constructing religious space for ‘sexual diversity’**

In the ‘A Right to Love’ project developed in 2012-2013, ella and Merhaba (an organisation that supports the emancipation of LGBTQs belonging to ethnic minorities) employed a critical-but-affirmative attitude towards religious authorities and interpretations. In close
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collaboration, the two organisations developed a training manual for discussing non-heterosexual identities and practices among minoritised communities in, for example, workshops or classrooms. The issue of religious interpretations was part of the project from the start as it anticipated existing religious sensibilities regarding the topic. It wanted to reckon with negative attitudes regarding non-heterosexuality, which employees and volunteers at times encountered in other projects, for example, among youth, attitudes that are often linked to assumptions of Islamic proscriptions. The manual claimed to distinguish itself from already existing methods for discussing sexual diversity; first, it put intersectional thinking central stage. Second, the frameworks and experiences of minority groups are central. Finally, it engages explicitly with religious traditions (Aftab et al., 2013: 57). The training manual consists of five chapters, the final one dealing with various perspectives on sexual diversity existing within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The authors write that paying attention to the role of religion is necessary in showing respect for the potential religious backgrounds of the participants in the conversation, but also in dealing with ‘the issue of religious authority’ (Aftab et al., 2013: 9). The manual insists that the comment ‘it is forbidden by religion’ can be dealt with through respecting religious convictions but at the same time trying to re-situate the question of whether non-heterosexuality is allowed or forbidden within a rich field of religious interpretations:

It is important to show respect and understanding for the convictions of the participants. Do not attack religion but instead provide a broader perspective on the ‘religious’. This can be achieved through turning around the question asking: in which religion is homosexuality or sexual diversity allowed? The answer is that originally, in the three monotheist religions, negative visions were developed regarding sexual diversity. This can be connected to and elaborated through established religious understandings about the position of women. This broadening of the discussion immediately makes clear that within religious traditions a lively debate exists about the position of women, as well as women-friendly reinterpretations of the original texts, resulting in a high level of diversity within religious traditions regarding these matters. And if this is possible for women, then why not for homosexuals? The message is: various interpretations of age-old traditions are possible regarding all kinds of relevant themes in our current society (Aftab et al., 2013: 13, emphasis original, translation ours).

This quote demonstrates that the authors of the manual do not disconnect gender and sexuality. They argue for discussing the inequalities of men and women, and of heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals, simultaneously and on the basis of a perspective on gender and sexuality as intrinsically connected. The chapter entitled ‘Religion’ starts by mentioning that while traditional, conservative and orthodox religious viewpoints often disapprove of homosexuality, Jewish, Christian and Islamic liberal viewpoints exist as well. It emphasises that believing therefore does not mean that homosexuality is always rejected, and also that non-believing does not always mean acceptance of homosexuality (Aftab et al., 2013: 50). The exercises described in this chapter for the trainer and the participants in conversations about sexual diversity aim at creating space for speaking about religion in relation to sexual diversity, to encourage participants to rethink their own statements or judgements, and to explore the religious, societal and individual positionings on sexual diversity (Aftab et al., 2013: 51). The manual is
accompanied by interviews with imams, theologians and rabbis that refer to diversity within religious traditions and emphasise liberal perspectives on sexual diversity.

Including the voices of religious authorities (religious leaders and theologians), the authors of the training manual reckon with the important role they play today in matters of family life, intimacy and sexuality (Cady and Fessenden, 2013). As the authors did not want to and cannot claim religious authority of their own, they cooperated with those who do claim authority and knowledge and who are willing and able to provide a view on diversity regarding interpretations of holy texts, and religious traditions. These authoritative voices refer to the centrality of the Biblical and Quranic narratives on the history of the cities Sodom and Gomorrah, which were, according to conservative interpretations, destroyed by God as a punishment for the practice of homosexuality. All respond to these conservative understandings by contextualising the story and rethinking it in terms of bringing to the forefront the elements of the violation of the value of hospitality, and of bodily integrity through rape, as those violations that generated God’s wrath, and not homosexuality as such. Doing the work of what David Kyuman Kim calls ‘religious imaginations’, they engage in the ‘difficult effort to synthesize the political and moral claims of gender equality and sexual difference with the discourse and ways of life within religious traditions’ (Kim, 2013: 271). As imam Hendricks puts it: ‘The Qur’an sets things right, namely that in Sodom and Gomorrah, […] the inhabitants were punished because they used sex as an instrument for exercising power’ (Aftab et al., 2013: 63).

ella and Merhaba assume that connecting to religious arguments and interpretations can be important to increase general acceptance of non-heterosexuality among religious communities. Moreover, they assume that conveying religious knowledge may support the emancipation of religious LGBTQs through providing more possibilities for personal religious interpretation and identification. The latter assumption is backed with research by Andrew K.T. Yip, who points at the centrality of religious discourse for non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims. Yip argues that:

non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims [construct] sexuality-affirming hermeneutics of religious texts to legitimize their sexuality theologically and also ‘uncover’ queer meanings in such texts for their own consumption and spiritual nourishment. […] Individual non-heterosexual Christians and Muslims demonstrate varying degrees of competence in the employment of this strategy, depending significantly on their theological knowledge (Yip, 2005: 49).

Rethinking the relationship between religious knowledge and gendered and sexual agency

ella does not present itself as a faith-based organisation with theological expertise or religious authority, and posits that it merely wishes to make people more aware of diversity within religion. At the same time, we argue that this is not a neutral position, as it argues against any understanding that there is only one possible interpretation of holy texts and tradition that is valid once and for all. Also, by pointing out the dominance of men in the field of theological interpretation and the importance of Islamic feminist researchers in formulating new perspectives, ella connects religious diversity to the issue of power and puts marginalised liberal voices to the fore. As such, it aims to enable
discussion within religious minority communities, without closing the door on dialogue with a more conservative public. As we see it, ella’s position regarding religious authority and interpretation calls for engaging in critical acts of judgement about authority, power and legitimation. ella can therefore be regarded as an implicit agent of reform.

It could be argued that ella points to alternative claims for authority based on understandings of gender and sexual equality as a moral starting point for religious judgement and value. Or, as David Kyuman Kim similarly argues:

[...] [T]he dual challenges for feminists of resisting authority and making alternative claims for authority converge in a common purpose. Feminists who challenge patriarchy are not seeking to abandon all claims to authority. If anything, feminists are posing one set of claims about judgements and values, often centered on determinations of gender and sexual equality, as superior – more authoritative – than assertions that argue the world should be oriented otherwise (Kim, 2013: 274).

By now we have argued that conveying religious knowledge may indeed support religious women’s/LGBTQs’ agency as it provides increased possibilities for personal religious interpretation and identification. However, the question could be asked why ella is not more radical in explicitly foregrounding progressive-liberatory religious interpretations – as Kyuman Kim might envision it. As mentioned, the fact that it has to deal with different kinds of audiences certainly plays a role. However, we suggest that also more substantial considerations about the relationship between religious women and LGBTQs and religious authority might be an equally important factor. A 2006 study by Jouili and Amir-Moazami gives insight into this relationship, which provides a convincing explanation of ella’s not-too-radicality. In this article, Jouili and Amir-Moazami focus on the relationship between subjectivity and religious authority in the context of Muslim women’s pursuit for religious knowledge. On the basis of qualitative research in France and Germany, the authors demonstrate that women’s engagements with religious authorities, conceptualised both as religious leadership and religious authoritative discourse, as on the one hand critical and reflexive, and on the other, affirmative. Women accord weight to religious authorities, and stress the importance of staying part of established religious orthodox frameworks, and not ‘stretching the boundaries’ of individual interpretation too far. Going beyond established frameworks is considered too radical, or too feminist, and places one outside the religious tradition. This reflexive-affirmative engagement with religious authorities can be explained by paying attention to women’s desire that is not primarily directed at individual empowerment. Instead, Jouili and Schirin argue, it’s foremost directed at the formation of a pious self through the acquisition and diffusion of religious knowledge. The authors conclude that:

At first glance, the women’s engagement with and their reaffirmation of established forms of religious authority can be read as contradictory to their struggle for empowerment. It can even be read as a new form of submission or domination, yet, in the second regard, a more complex picture has been revealed. [...] This becomes particularly clear when we take into account that the women’s engagement with established forms of authority turned out to be a necessary condition for both becoming pious selves and for justifications of social change within the Muslim community (Jouili and Schirin, 2006: 638).
A 2002 study by Tony Watling about the growing involvement and importance of women in Protestant and Catholic communities in the Netherlands focuses on the relationship between power, change and women’s experiences. Albeit understood from the angle of individualisation and fragmentation, he similarly argues to think beyond binary understandings, such as issues of empowerment versus disempowerment, or innovation versus tradition (2002: 535). Such conceptualisations of the relationship between religious authority, knowledge and emancipation might explain ella’s engagement with religious authorities as well. ella employees and volunteers might assume, or know from experience, that religious women and LGBTQs want to be informed about various religious interpretations and possibilities, but do not want to stretch the boundaries of established religious frameworks and communities too far. The critical-affirmative relationship with religious authorities embraced by ella might very well be the result of its familiarity with religious women’s/LGBTQs’ similar critical-affirmative engagement with religious traditions. As such, ella remains faithful to its goal of supporting minoritised women in their pursuit for emancipation—in-own-ethnic-or-religious-terms, and without defining beforehand how women’s agency, desires and empowerment should look.

**Conclusion**

In Western-European public and academic debates, both ideologies of multiculturalism and secularism, and related political and policy-making practices, have been scrutinised and critiqued by starting from the perspectives and desires of women belonging to minoritised communities. This article contributes to these discussions an analysis of a feminist civil society organisation in Belgium, ella, whose main goal is the emancipation of women of ethnic-cultural minorities. We demonstrated that ella’s position vis-à-vis multiculturalism and religion must be seen as critical-affirmative and strategic-pragmatic in light of its main goal within the context of Belgium and its civil society; the position of ethnic and religious minorities; and its current political-public tendencies and debates with regards to women’s equality and sexual freedoms, and ethnic and religious diversity. ella’s position of critical affirmation comes into being through assumptions about the political-social and ethnic-religious ‘difference’ of female subjects belonging to minorities, and through notions about the specificity of the religious agency of female and LGBTQ subjects belonging to minoritised communities.

Rethinking ella within a setting of secularism/secularity means asking if and how ella intervenes in secularism/secularity as a political and socio-theological ethnicised, gendered and sexualised reality. Within a ‘Latin-Catholic’ setting of secularism/secularity that is marked by a) a recent history of liberal-socialist-laic versus clerical antagonistic dynamics (Casanova, 2010) conditioned and enabled by a ‘pillarized’ context (Witte et al., 2005); b) a notion of ‘religion’ that locates religious identities and practices, especially those of Muslim minorities, as ideally outside the political and inside individual consciousness and the private sphere (Scott, 2007); and c) that assumes that religious traditions are predominantly ‘bad’ for women (Cady and Fessenden, 2013), ella can be considered subversive in two distinct ways. First, being an implicit agent of religious reform, ella challenges the idea that religious authorities, interpretations and practices
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necessarily conflict with feminism, or progressive and egalitarian points of view on gender and sexuality. It implicitly reformulates ‘authority’ as not solely lying in mainstream religious interpretations, but also in less-known religious interpretations, and moreover in an ethical stance that prioritises gender and sexual equality/inclusion.

Second, discussing religious (minority) traditions in a critical, nuanced and interreligious manner in civil society, while not being an explicit faith-based organisation, makes ella an implicit agent in reshaping religious-secular binaries. Bringing religious traditions into civil society, the space in-between and linking the public and the private, as an issue to be discussed, destabilises secular assumptions about religion being solely an unspoken cultural identity or background and properly located in individual consciousness and the realms of families and religious communities.

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Note

1. See: http://www.ellavzw.be/.
2. See: http://www.ellavzw.be/over-ella.

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