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FROM THE DARKNESS INTO THE LIGHT: NARRATIVES OF CONVERSION IN JIHADI VIDEOS*

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Introduction

Instructing people as to who they are, how they are related to others, and how they should act in certain situations is a central function of Jihadi-Salafi media activities. Jihadi-Salafi actors assess and classify individual and collective action as well as social and political processes and events along clear-cut, often binary lines. They have, just as any other social collective, a keen interest in establishing and substantiating collective identities that help them to create senses of belonging and construct boundaries with 'the Other'. At the same time, such collective identities offer an epistemic and ontological framework, helping people to set their individual biography in relation to one or more social collective.

In this chapter, I will examine a specific format used by Jihadi-Salafi groups to make such an offer. I trace the (re-)creation of two autobiographical

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narratives of religious conversion as they are presented in two videos authored and issued by the Jihadi-Salafi groups *al-Muhajirūn* and the Islamic State (*al-dawlat al-islāmīya*) between 2016 and 2017. Testimonies of the missionary activities (*daʿwa*) of Jihadi-Salafi actors, these videos render the stories of their protagonists remarkable and meaningful examples of religious conversion to Islam. The authors do not only present individual narratives, that is autobiographical recollections of a series of events and personal experiences of two young men, but also interweave them with allusions to Islamic history and the ideological framework of the Jihadi-Salafi current. They create needs among (potential) followers, show them what conversion to 'pristine' Islam according to the Jihadi-Salafi interpretation is, help people to convert, and demonstrate the consequences of such an individual transformation. As such, the recollections articulated in these videos are instrumental in religious appeals of Jihadi-Salafis to (potential) followers, help to construct faith-based social identities, and offer a religious justification for thinking and action.

The epistemological interest of this chapter is to reconstruct the appropriation of key concepts from Islamic intellectual history and the teleological strategies employed in the audiovisual processing of these personal narrations. I will show the ways in which the videos' authors use audiovisual means to construct and enhance the authenticity and plausibility of these individuals' personal stories and their spiritual experiences. I assume that they are well aware of the inherent logic of conversion processes in general, as well as the ensuing narratives that often (but not always) evolve around experiences of crisis and the functionalisation of the 'new' belief system in order to stigmatise one's past vis-à-vis a glorified present and future. On the basis of this premise, I argue that the videos' authors offer specific configurations of roles and social identities that draw on shared systems of knowledge about patterns of narratives of conversion to Islam in general. They also connect these offers with the self-conceptualisation of Jihadi-Salafi actors so as to provide an intellectual framework for a broad range of (potential) followers.

To scrutinise how such knowledge figures in the composition of these videos, I structure my endeavour along four thematic lines. First, I examine the conceptualisation of religious conversion to Islam as a consequence of a natural inclination of mankind. Second, I draw attention to the crisis-induced nature of religious conversion, be it an existential crisis of the protagonist or a

moral crisis of his social framework. Third, I show how the videos and the protagonists' narratives address the tension between individual agency and divine predetermination. Fourth, I look at the ways in which the videos' authors seek to establish social and symbolic boundaries through conversion to Islam.

Data and Methodology

The leaderships of major Jihadi-Salafi groups and movements have always used their media apparatus to appeal to (potential) followers and call them to join. Although it is imperative for them to incite commitment in order to 'recruit' others to their ranks, it proved difficult to provide an intellectual framework with which as many people as possible could identify and which could also be suitable for non-Muslims. Despite the fact that former 'outsiders' confessing their belief in Islam are part of many textual and audiovisual publications belonging to the Jihadi-Salafi current, accounts that offer a detailed biographical perspective on the individual are rare across all media formats. In creating such accounts, Jihadi-Salafis arguably took inspiration from a number of Sunni Muslim *daʿwa* groups whose media regularly give prominence to individual stories around conversions to Islam.

I have selected two examples from this this scarce category of Jihadi-Salafi videos[1] which had been issued by al-Muhājirūn[2] and the Islamic State (*al-dawlat al-islāmīya*). The first is a nine-minute video published by Islamic State's al-Furāt province media centre[3] on 2 September 2016 under the title of *Min al-ẓulamāt ilā-l-nūr* (*Aus der Finsternis ins Licht*). Second, I have selected *Fiṭra – The West behind the Mask* (*fiṭra – al-gharb min khalaf al-qināʿ*), a 35-minute video released by al-Muhājirūn in June 2017. Both videos are

[1] Among the videos compiled by our research group, I have found four in which the process of individual transformation to 'genuine' Muslimness is a major element of the story. Two of them, however, centre primarily on other aspects of the individual's biography, which is why I have not considered them for examination here.

[2] Al-Muhājirūn was a Jihadi-Salafi group that mainly operated in the Syrian civil war between 2015 and 2017, and is not to be confused with groups with the same name, one of which has been active in the UK. The group produced audiovisual material in several languages, including videos of *Jaysh al-Fatḥ* in Syria (see Joscelyn 2015).

[3] The Islamic State established several local and regional branches of its media apparatus. Among them, the maktab al-iʿlāmī li-wilāyat al-Furāt had been active between February 2015 and April 2018.

Figure 6.1 Video stills from *Fitrah – The West behind the Mask* (2017) (left) and *Min al-Ẓulamāt ilā-l-Nūr* (2016) (right).

notable examples of Jihadi-Salafi video production in several respects. First, an autobiographical perspective on religious conversion is of primary importance to the authors, who put the protagonists in an interview situation with more than one camera on set. Their narrations are juxtaposed with moving images (at times in picture-in-picture scenery: Figure 6.1), which undergird, reinforce or simply illustrate the verbal narrative. Second, and related to the former, they feature a German male who converted to Islam and joined one of the groups some time prior to the publication of the videos. However, only 'Christian', the protagonist of *Min al-Ẓulamāt*, speaks German with Arabic subtitles, while *Fitrah*'s central character 'Andreas Müller' (alias ʿAbd al-Salām al-Muhājir) chooses Arabic with English subtitles. Nevertheless, both videos were widely disseminated on various (German-language) social media channels and were even received in mainstream media as examples for the persuasive power of Jihadi-Salafi videos (see, inter alia, Reuter 2017).

Both videos present the post-hoc recollections of these young men about their experiences of life, being and spirituality as an autobiographical narrative in which their conversion to Islam and the ensuing consequences play a central role. This is not least because 'the narrative itself [is] the constitutive process of how converts are "made"' (Rambo and Farhadian 2014: 8). Primarily, however, both videos are embedded in a communication strategy that functionalises these narratives in order to further the Jihadi-Salafi cause. This means that the people appearing as first-person orators are chiefly personages whose narratives are subject to and shaped by the values, norms, beliefs and practices advocated by al-Muhājirūn and the Islamic State. Being the videos' authors, these groups skilfully create an audiovisuality of 'pristine' religious conversion so as to refashion the biographies of the protagonists in

conformity with their ideological meta-narrative and specific regimes of truth to show others how they could fit into the same story. Thus, we have to be aware that the affective potential of the narratives unfolding in these videos is built upon a strong blend of 'real' persons and the partly fictionalised personages of 'Christian' and 'Andreas' who appear as protagonists. This synthesis is first and foremost commissioned by the authors who script and realise the cinematographic processing. For this reason, the narratives presented here are an artefact of Jihadi-Salafi ideology that figures in the ways in which the protagonists apprehend and describe their experience of a radical change in the significance of their lives.

To address this inextricable audiovisual interdigitation of 'the pious construction of self' (van Nieuwkerk 2014: 680) and the group narrative, I use a hermeneutic approach to reconstruct the appropriation of key concepts from Islamic intellectual history as well as the teleological strategies employed in the audiovisual processing of these personal narrations. Because these are all used by the videos' authors to offer specific collective identities and link them to the life-world of (potential) followers in 'Western' countries, I also set them in relation to research on religious conversions to Islam, particularly in Europe and the USA. This allows me to link the narrative structures of my case studies to patterns of the inherent logic of conversion narratives in specific socio-cultural contexts.

'The Natural Constitution': Conceptualising Conversion to Islam from a Jihadi-Salafi Perspective

> But in the end, I realised that only Islam with the miracle of the unaltered and uncorrupted Quran is God's true religion.

This statement by Christian, the protagonist of *Min al-Ẓulamāt*, points to one of the key frames of the videos examined in this chapter. An individual's pursuit of 'the truth' and a genuine system of meaning is completed by turning to the One God and his ordinances as given in the Quran. His call for a purified Islam not only echoes the central tenets of the Jihadi-Salafi agenda, but also addresses sentiments shared by some young Muslims – second-generation and converts – in Western Europe (van Nieuwkerk 2016: 344). In the same vein, the voice-over in *Fitrah* presents the film as a bibliographical showcase in

accordance with Quranic verse 17:81: {And say, 'Truth has come, and falsehood has departed. Indeed, is falsehood ever bound to depart.' } The motif of truthfulness figures strongly in the autobiographical narratives in the videos. Moreover, it helps the authors to inextricably link this symbolic system of a purified Islam with the protagonists' configuration of their individual change as a radical, incisive and meaningful break with their past that bears severe consequences for their lives. As with many processes of religious conversion, their change is charged by an individual pursuit of truth that affects concepts of the self and one's biography. It also entails universalistic claims that set the individual in relation to symbolic systems of meaning and several wider discourses. Arguably, the videos' authors are well-aware of both the inherent logic of narratives of religious conversion and corresponding systems of knowledge.

The authors use these patterns to structure both the visual narration accordingly, and the language used by the protagonists to describe the transformation they have experienced. Neither 'Christian' nor 'Andreas' refer to these changes using the term 'conversion'. Instead, they say they have 'become Muslim', or that God had 'guided me to the true religion'. Their terminology demonstrates a field of tension between individual activeness and divine predetermination, which I will further elaborate on below. But at first it is noticeable that, on a semantic level, the protagonists connect to terminologies that we find in long-term empirical studies of conversions to Islam in different parts of the globe, where people use similar concepts to articulate and affirm belonging to a social collective in the process of their religious conversion, highlight group boundaries and symbolise their distance from other social groups (see inter alia van Nieuwkerk 2014: 668–9; Scharrer 2014: 129–30).

The protagonists' nomenclature furthermore connects to an ontological dimension of religious conversion that figures in the way in which many people, particularly in Western Europe, conceptualise their transformation as well as the language they use to speak about it. Hermansen (2014: 633) proposes that 'many English-speaking converts to Islam prefer the term "revert", since Islamic theology features the idea that all souls have recognised God in pre-eternity in an episode known as the Primordial Covenant'.[4] This idea

[4] This refers to Quran 7:172–3: {And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying

might be related to the way in which some converts conceive of their conversion, that is as a process of gradual realisation expressing that 'they already feel Muslim but did not know that their ideas were Islamic' (van Nieuwkerk 2014: 669).

Other perspectives support this notion but prioritise a different epistemological angle. In her study of online and offline conversion narratives, van Nieuwkerk (2014: 669; 2006b: 109) found that people extrapolate from an individual-centric notion to a generic perspective, where the idea 'I was Muslim but just wasn't aware of it' slides into the ideology of 'all people are born Muslim', that is, in a 'state of Islam'. This aspect cannot be underestimated in light of an Islamic missiology in particular that sets the stage for a common Muslim appeal positing that 'in choosing to follow Islam one is not "converting", but rather "reverting" to the world-view and state of being that is innate in every person' (Poston 1992: 135). People, particularly in Europe and the USA, are not simply invited to any other religion on the 'market', but rather 'to the oldest religion, indeed to their "own" religion, the religion of living in total surrender to their Creator, in accordance with the guidance brought by *all* His Messengers' (Murad 1986: 18).

Conceiving of individual transformation under religious premises as a return to humankind's natural state links the conversion process presented in both videos to the idea of *fiṭra*. This concept, which signifies the innate nature of mankind created by God as Muslims, is a key code in the framework of the protagonists' self-representation. Consequently, it is in the film *Fitrah* that we find the concept most explicitly linked to the biographical story of its protagonist, 'Andreas Müller'. His personal development towards Islam is identified as a step towards the authentic state to which man is destined. Again, the videos' authors connect the protagonist's change to the narratives of many converts to Islam, who do not understand their conversion as a transformation to something new, but as a return to a natural, God-given and pristine disposition (see inter alia Scharrer 2014: 129–30). The Quranic idea that

to them], 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we have testified.' [This] – lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, 'Indeed, we were of this unaware.' | Or [lest] you say, 'It was only that our fathers associated [others in worship] with Allah before, and we were but descendants after them. Then would You destroy us for what the falsifiers have done?'.} See also Al-Qadi (2003).

God had, in order for humans to recognise Him by themselves, created all people with a natural inclination towards a primordial form of monotheism (*ḥanīfīya*) that is equivalent to Islam is related to this (van Ess 1975: 103–7).[5] The notion that Islam and *fiṭra* are identical has further been reinforced by the principal *ḥadīth* on *fiṭra*, implying that Islam is the universal religion of every newborn child (Hoover 2016: 104).[6]

It hardly comes as a surprise that the epistemology supporting the identification of *fiṭra* and Islam also figured in the theology of the Ḥanbalī reformer Ibn Taymīya (d. 728/1328), who is held in high regard among Jihadi-Salafi theorists and who developed an understanding of *fiṭra* as a 'positive and instinctual disposition towards Islam [which] is widespread in modern activist circles' (Hoover 2016: 106). Adding to this notion, some modern Sunni reformers sought to render 'pristine' Islam – devoid of all customs and blameworthy innovations – discernible to the people, making them able to discover and follow the 'right' path. In this regard, Abū 'l-ʿAlāʾ al-Mawdūdī, for instance, emphasised the importance of 'a moral vanguard, so important to reviving Islam and raising its head against foreign and un-Islamic tutelage', whereas Sayyid Quṭb gave priority to the idea that 'the true human nature, had to be reacquired through an austere path and a complete method (*manhaj*) including belief, conduct, and morals of the righteous predecessors, not to be deviated from' (Malik 2018: 231). The concept of *fiṭra* has since been used by Muslim scholars of various backgrounds 'to mount an apologetic for Islam as the most suitable and naturally fitting religious system for humankind' (Hoover 2016).

Equally, Jihadi-Salafi scholars have appropriated the concept, which becomes particularly apparent in the way the idea defines the ontological framework for the autobiographical narrative presented in *Fitrah*. The

[5] Quran 30:30: {So set your face toward the religion, being upright, the natural constitution (*fitra*) of God, according to which He constituted (*fatara*) humanity. No change should there be in the creation of God. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know.}

[6] 'Every newborn is born with the natural constitution (*fitra*). Then, his parents make him a Jew, Christian, or Zoroastrian. This is like an animal that bears another that is perfect of limb. Do you sense any mutilation in it?' (Muslim, *Kitāb al-qadar*, 4803). On the hadith, its variations and interpretations, see Hoover (2016).

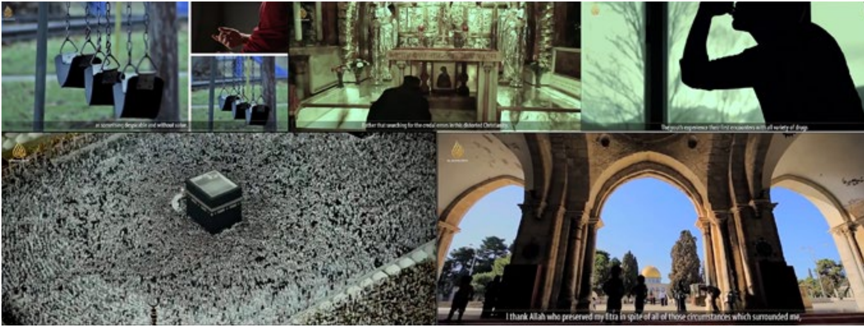

Figure 6.2 Video stills from *Fitrah – The West behind the Mask* (2017).

authors develop the protagonist's story as an example of how an individual recognises and enacts his *fiṭra*. He does not only discover his natural inclination to 'genuine' Islam, but also sets his self in relation to the binary opposition between the good forces of monotheism and its evil antagonists. In the introduction, they parallel his biography with that of Moses,[7] stating that the protagonist 'was born in the house of Pharaoh and lived among them for many years. However, God fortified his *fiṭra*' so that he was able to debunk the deceiving nature of Western societies and report about it. Hence, the authors suggest temporal continuity and present Andreas as a role model for the enactment of the primordial covenant, and, besides, also render his story an authoritative account of the 'true' nature of Western societies. This scheme ultimately sets the tone for the boundaries in which the protagonist's story is arranged and presented.

This Manichean scheme is over-articulated in both videos. As the protagonist debunks 'the West' by listing the many ways in which people in Western societies voluntarily or involuntarily distance themselves from their natural disposition, we see grey and greenish pictures desaturated from the colour red (Figure 6.2). These images do not only contrast the brightly shining impression of sites of European cities presented in the beginning to demonstrate

[7] Adducing the biblical prophet, they emphasise that he had liberated the Israelites from captivity in Egypt and the deceiving magic of Pharaoh by 'the light of Islam [that] came in Moses' right hand' (*jāʾa nūr al-Islām bi-yamīn Mūsā*). With this, the authors refer to Quran 20:11–23, which reports on the signs of prophecy with which God has equipped Moses, among them a stick in his right hand.

'the mask' of Western societies. They are also set in opposition to the bright and colourful pictures of Muslim communities, places of Muslim religious practices and Muslim majority societies in the moment when the protagonist thanks God for 'preserving my fiṭra'.

Beyond the visual juxtaposition of Western societies and the Muslim community, visualisations and the protagonist's narrative alike introduce the moral and ethical constitution of these social collectives as a framework for the interpretation of the protagonist's personal development. They demonstrate a severe moral degeneration in European societies, which, as an epistemological background, helps the viewer to understand the external factors that render the protagonist's orientation towards Islam inevitable. The authors offer the audience a blueprint for interpreting the protagonist's individual transformation and for understanding who he is and how he is related to Western societies and the larger Muslim community. In doing so, they effectively offer a blueprint that potentially helps viewers to put themselves in the place of the protagonist and relate to his 'awakening'.

Conversion to Islam as a Crisis-induced Process

The protagonist's realisation of living in a faulty environment does not only promise positive prospects for his future. It also entails the recognition of states of crisis affecting the larger society, certain social collectives and the individual. In fact, such states of crisis play an important role in both videos. Moreover, critical moments and the recognition of states of crisis constitute important watersheds that shape the protagonists' transformation and help them adopting a different social identity. As will be detailed below, they also help the authors to portray the transformation as a 'rebirth', which not only reinforces expressions of dissociation from former patterns of identification. Incorporating such an idea, in their self-representation also enables them to gain feelings of strength, firmness, conviction, consciousness and ontological security throughout their very process of conversion and joining a specific community.

Research focusing on psychosocial dynamics in conversion processes shows no clear picture of whether the correlation between an experience of crisis or conflict and conversion to specific religious groups is empirically relevant (cf. Murken and Namini 2004: 147–53; Pargament et al. 2005;

Gooren 2007). Reviewing previous research on conversions in general, Pollack (2009: 309) concludes that, although states of crisis and deprivation affect conversion processes, it is unclear to what extent these factors have an influence. Based on her research on conversions to Islam in Germany and the USA, Wohlrab-Sahr (1999, 2006) argues that individual processes of religious transformation are often recollected as coping strategies for problems of affiliation, distinction, recognition and discrediting. By contrast, Köse (1994) critically assesses crises theories and the role the experience of a moral crisis plays with regard to the pre-conversion life histories of converts to Islam in Great Britain. He strongly argues against an understanding of conversion as a coping strategy for specific realms of problems, be they religious crises of adolescence, failed socialisation, sexuality and gender relations, social mobility, or problems related to nationality and ethnicity.

As outlined above, we find that, in the audiovisual narratives scrutinised in this chapter, experiences of crisis are part of the protagonist's reasoning about their conversion or reversion to Islam. Most explicitly, *Min al-Ẓulamāt* presents its protagonist's decision to accept Islam as being shaped by both a prolonged experience of moral uncertainty and an urgent existential threat. He introduces his religious background as having grown up with religious education in Christianity. He states that, although 'I learned much about this religion and its history [. . .] [I was confronted with] many absurd things that I could not comprehend'. To underline the insinuated incomprehensibility of the Christian dogma and practice and present it as incompatible with the needs of an ordinary person, the video shows a male person flipping through a medieval Latin manuscript. The authors thus link his individual ontological crisis to the perceived failure of Christian theology, institutions and practices in providing a framework for his 'thoughts about God and the afterlife', which speaks to widely known effects of de-traditionalisation and liberalisation in Western societies. The video presents these sequences (Figure 6.3) in greyish, dimmed images that give the impression of a confused and depressed state of mind, a subject helplessly admitting 'I had lost myself and saw no alternative. I did not know what to believe.'

The authors then insert a text slide framing the following sequence as a tribulation wrought on the protagonist by God. Using Quranic vocabulary that indicates the protagonist's weak-minded nature in relation to the divine,

Figure 6.3 Video stills from *Min al-Ẓulamāt ilā-l-Nūr* (2016).

the text has it that God tries (*ibtilāhu*) Christian with a disease, so that 'this disease and the tribulation be a reason for his guidance'.[8] The protagonist describes how, in this existentially threatening situation, he begged his Creator: 'Save me! And if there is true religion, guide me rightly and I will serve you as best I can.' Christian's narrative manifests the logic of his conversion experience, connecting it to established patterns of autobiographical narrations wherein individual transformation is identified as a coping strategy. The biographical development over a longer period of time is characterised as a state of limbo and the moment of acute existential insecurity presents itself as catharsis, providing the impulse for reorientation. However, the protagonist connects this reorientation to specific expectations so as to (re-)gain certainty and clarity vis-à-vis the previous state of ontological and existential insecurity, hence to find a religious system that offers truth and meaning. As will be detailed below, the video creates a tension between divine forces of predetermination and the agency of the protagonist, who places his destiny in the hands of God, but, at the same time, presents himself as an active individual who determines his further path.

In *Fitrah*, Andreas recollects that during his adolescence he had developed an inner sense of imbalance of the society he lived in, which rendered his personal state uneasy in terms of his social environment. He recalls that 'at first it was simply feelings [. . .] that soon turned into realisation and conviction'. Although it does not figure explicitly in his narration, the conceptualisation of a recognition process as involving an inner voice and inward perception is

[8] *Ibtilāḥ* references Quran 89:15–16, hence some people's weak-minded understanding of (and trust in) God's power addressed in this early Meccan sura. Congruent with the presentation in the video, in an interview with *Deutsche Welle* Christian's mother accounted for the emergency surgery, and that her son had afterwards been diagnosed with Crohn's disease (Felden 2018).

Figure 6.4 Video stills from *Fitrah – The West behind the Mask* (2017).

closely linked to the concept of a natural predisposition of humanity towards monotheism that is *fiṭra*. He denounces the moral and ethical degeneration of Western societies, which he attributes to the remoteness of people from God, that is, from their natural predisposition to monotheism. On a visual rather than on the textual level, the authors identify institutionalised Christianity and the European Enlightenment in particular as a root cause of this development (Figure 6.4). *Fitrah* thus wittingly posits the Enlightenment discourse – often advanced to highlight alleged cultural clashes between European and predominantly Muslim societies – as one of the main sources of people's remoteness from God. The proposition of the video's authors is that the ideas advanced by prominent figures in the German tradition of *Aufklärung* such as Lessing and Kant only purportedly contributed to liberating people from the compulsion of ecclesiastical offers of meaning. Rather, their ideas had paved the way for the work of new idols and increased a lack of orientation on part of the people.

Contrary to other converts who consciously inscribe their interpretation of Islam in the discourse of enlightenment and modernity (Özyürek 2015), the film portrays this very discourse as a symptom of those evil forces that further people's separation from the One God. Being per se antipodal to a 'genuine' Muslim identity, the ideas of modernity and enlightenment are tangible in many spheres of society, and hence affect people's lives in a negative way. In particular, the realms of media and education, the misuse of alcohol and drugs and consumerism are interpreted as instruments of Satan to 'turn people into his slaves instead of slaves of Allah'. Debunking the West is therefore not only a paradigmatic way to investigate the failures of Western societies, but rather helps recognising the forces of evil against which the protagonist stands as one of few who enact 'pristine' monotheism.

The film thus creates a biographical narrative that contrasts the sheltered, well-educated protagonist with the moral degeneration of his environment. These authors thus not only render the story appealing and potentially compatible with all who perceive these or similar problems in Western societies. They also establish a background for rendering the protagonist's experience, decision and firmness an extraordinary example, because his biography would hardly have given him any reason to change his life so drastically, thus putting him in opposition to mainstream society.

Although allusions to the protagonists' strength and firmness dominate their narratives, we also find glimpses of yet another, post-conversion crisis. In addition to coping with individual states of crisis through conversion, the process as such, and in particular the habitual changes it entails, which are clearly articulated vis-à-vis one's social environment, also involve potentially crisis-like moments. Karin van Nieuwkerk (2014: 672–3) emphasises this in her study of female converts where she finds that conversion to Islam as such might trigger feelings of crisis among such a person 'not knowing how to give this new conviction a practical place in her life: in her work, in her family, and in her choice of clothing'. Wohlrab-Sahr (2006: 74) adds that, in contradistinction to assumptions made by the human-capital approach, conversion to Islam in Europe and the USA in particular 'produces enormous conflicts and costs. The life that they have been living, the social relationships that have been relevant, the places that they have been going, cannot be referred to easily after conversion.' Both videos point to such potential moments of crisis. Most notably, the protagonists distinctly highlight their post-conversional vulnerability in relation to their social environment, that treats them with suspicion or is generally perceived as discriminating against Muslims.[9] Connecting to generalisable patterns experienced by religious converts, the authors then reframe these parts of the narration. They link it with their meta-narrative that portrays Muslims as victims of 'Western' sociopolitics to emphasise the protagonists' inner stability in light of such stressors, as well as to highlight the even greater need among Muslim communities to close ranks against their adversaries and put their trust in God.

[9] In *Fitrah*, around twelve minutes (i.e. one third of the whole video) are used to document systematic discrimination against Muslims in European societies.

Agency and Predetermination

The conversion processes portrayed in these videos are characterised by an individual's search for a change in the significance of his life. These individuals and their views of the self, others and their environment at large form the centre of their journey. Both videos relate the protagonists' thoughts and actions to specific collective identities that include a strong reference to numinous powers. However, in doing so, they create a tension between predetermination and individual agency. This is particularly discernible in the ways in which they portray the protagonists' biography as being determined by transcendent forces that may 'make' them Muslims, and in the way they frame their change as a spiritual journey.

Most explicitly, *Fitrah* presents its protagonist as the subject of divine guidance and predetermination. At several points in the video, Andreas affirms that he thanks God who has 'preserved my *fiṭra* [. . .] and guided me to the true religion and favoured me greatly over much of his creation'. His trajectory towards embracing Islam is not rendered as a deliberate, rational choice but rather as a consequence of the work of transcendental forces. The environment he experiences as chaotic and traumatic is neither portrayed as 'the subtle handiwork of a benevolent God' (Buckser and Glazier 2003: xii) nor as the work of human agents. Rather, it is 'Satan [who] has deviated these societies away from Allah'. Since God had allowed the protagonist to realise the faults of his own society, there is no option available other than to begin 'living for what I was created for'. Consequently, he reconstructs his conversion as the experience of a cathartic moment verbalised with such terms as guidance, being chosen, being born anew, liberty, and awaking from a nightmare. As discussed above, the verbal articulation of this experience is impressively underlined with images and sounds. The portrayal of the fault-lines of Western societies through highly desaturated, greyish and greenish pictures is contrasted with pictures of Muslims and places of Muslim religious practices presented in bright, rich and highly saturated colours. In addition, a prayer call creates an aural atmosphere that strongly contrasts with the scenes before.

Particularly remarkable is the way visualisations are used to fill in for experiences that cannot be expressed verbally. Both *Fitrah* and *Min al-Ẓulamāt* use exactly the same imagery, which was probably taken from stock footage. It

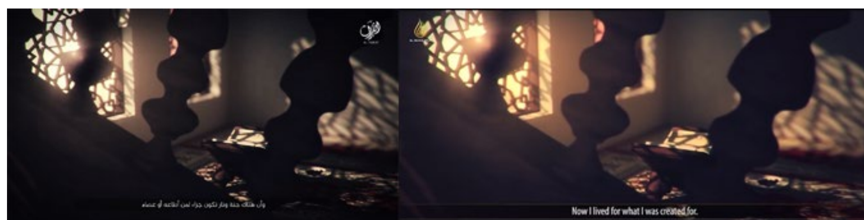

Figure 6.5 Video stills from *Fitrah – The West behind the Mask* (2017) and *Min al-Ẓulamāt ilā-l-Nūr* (2016).

conveys the obviously unspeakable multi-sensual experience of being touched and spiritually connecting to the divine (Figure 6.5).

The visual metaphor is abundantly clear. The viewer beholds a warm room, with, lying at its centre on a reading desk, an open book, probably the Quran, which is illuminated by sun rays. Looking through the slots of the banister, the viewer's gaze is distant and very closely involved in this intimate scenery at the same time. Concurrently, the light refracted by the grids of the *mashrabīya* window, illuminating the book and symbolically enlightening the reader, points to the presence of the unrepresentable God and elucidates the protagonists' guidance from the darkness into light.

In *Fitrah* in particular, the terminology used and the way in which the conversion process is visualised demonstrate a high degree of predetermination and divine guidance of the protagonist, who marks Western modernity and individualisation as hideous consequences of people's separation from God. The narrative in *Fitrah* thus rejects, albeit implicitly, the idea that the protagonist as an individual agent is the centre of his biography – a notion that is key to the discourse of modernisation and individualisation, and hence significant for processes of conversion (Hofmann 1997). Karin van Nieuwkerk (2006a: 3) further argues that '[t]he changed place of religion and the process of individualization transformed religion and religious goods into matters of individual choice. Actors choose among several religious options the worldview that suits them best.'

As Allievi (1998) and Wohlrab-Sahr (2006) have shown, the ideas of individuals who pick and choose rationally among religious systems of meaning on the religious market also apply to conversions to Islam in Europe and the USA to a certain extent, where religious behaviour more often than

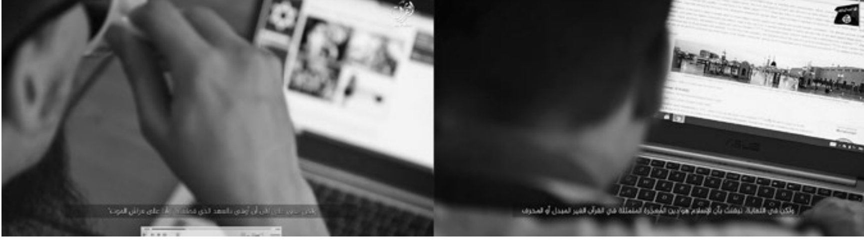

Figure 6.6 Video stills from *Min al-Ẓulamāt ilā-l-Nūr* (2016).

not is 'influenced by individual choice rather than by tradition and social constraint' (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006: 72). This idea significantly lingers in the protagonist's narrative in *Min al-Ẓulamāt*. The video frames his decision to embrace Islam as not driven primarily by supernatural forces or beliefs regarded as 'irrational' in the discourse of modernity. Rather, the authors of the video strongly accentuate the idea of the protagonist's individual agency, rendering his conversion freely chosen and 'rational', yet authentic, and stressing the autonomy of the person to whom Islam's message is meaningful. Here, Christian asserts agency by going against the grain of his social background and culture in selecting something new and strange.

Although his decision to embrace Islam is shaped by an intervention of the divine during life-threatening surgery, the video's authors do not allow the viewers to grasp the protagonist's spiritual journey. After he has promised God to search for the truth we see him searching the internet, looking for information about the creeds of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Figure 6.6) before he acknowledges that the decisive criterion for the truthfulness of religious messages is the extent to which they are devoid of customs and human interest.

Following this logic, he highlights the pristine and unchanged character of the Quranic text and recognises Islam as 'God's true religion'. He is portrayed as choosing Islam as if it were one commodity among others on the market of religious goods. This market is – of course – a priori limited to 'those who claim being monotheist like Judaism and Christianity',[10] and like Islam, whose religious traditions and dogmas the individual agent rationally

[10] The Arabic subtitles (02:34) give the spoken text as *al-baḥth bayna al-diyānāt ka-l-yahūd wa-l-naṣrānīya*, which does not reflect the insinuation articulated in the German voiceover.

comprehends and selects accordingly. Embracing Islam here is not 'a recognition of the heart (the seat of the "intellect" [*ʿaql*] in Quranic terminology)' (Dutton 1999: 163), but rather becomes a matter of choice, though presented as the 'natural way'. The protagonist's decision for Islam thus seems inevitable, because it is the logical consequence of both the way predetermined by God and his self-determined search.

In both videos, the factor of self-determination becomes even more important, because the influence of religious authorities and the receiving religious community before and during the conversion process are hardly noticeable as a social and ideational framework for the protagonists' personal and spiritual development. The authors of *Min al-Ẓulamāt* and *Fitrah* use visual means to make clear that the protagonists do not first seek the advice of local religious authorities and do not even consult peers. Rather, they are portrayed as seekers who have pursued an individualist's path under the guidance of God. This undoubtedly represents a moment of empowerment and elevation of the self of converts over both traditional Muslims and non-Muslims alike – a recurrent theme in studies of conversions to Islam in Europe (Özyürek 2015). At the same time, this approach, which emphasises the individual and its agency in actively choosing his/her path through life, is symptomatic of the ways in which Salafi and jihadi teachings further far-reaching transformations of structures of religious authority that have 'fragmented' Sunni Islam on a global level for more than thirty years (Robinson 2009; Eickelman and Piscatori 2004). Bypassing traditional religious hierarchies and institutes of learning, the protagonists' conversion biographies become role models for the renunciation of long-established schemes of interpretation of the Quran and Sunna. Furthermore, the autobiographical narratives showcase another dimension of the Jihadi-Salafi 'liberation theology', because they offer a 'way out' of a society that is, on the one hand, morally degenerate and hostile to Muslims. On the other hand, many Sunni Muslim scholars have come to terms with this and advocate an integration of Muslim life in Western societies.

Establishing Boundaries and Symbolising Distance

The videos make it abundantly clear that the protagonists' lives in Germany had been characterised, among other things, by problems of belonging. These

were caused by the perceived irreconcilability of their natural inclination to a specific set of norms, values and beliefs based, on the one hand, on the Jihadi-Salafi interpretation of Islam and, on the other hand, on a social environment that is morally corrupt and distant from God. This set of norms, values and beliefs helps to structure the post-hoc recollections and to image the Muslim *umma* in general and specific Jihadi groups in particular as communities meeting the protagonists' needs for belonging, safety and ontological security. They yearn for a social and religious affiliation that is both a matter of individual choice and an expression of divine guidance. They enter into the Muslim *umma* as a community that transcends geopolitical, ethnic, racial and class boundaries and into the framework of Jihadi-Salafi ideas that offers belonging to a vanguard of believers in 'pristine' Islam. What is more, this set of principles also helps to establish 'a contrasting principle and ideology enabling the person to leave the conflicting symbolic frame [so that] the problem of precarious belonging is turned against the system that makes belonging problematic' (Wohlrab-Sahr 2006: 87).

The videos depict how the protagonists find and form new social identities, which provide shortcuts to potentially complex systems of beliefs, normative appeals and orientations, and help them to gain a different understanding of who they are, how they are related to others, and how they should behave in certain situations. This dimension of the conversion process is developed on two distinguishable yet interrelated levels. First, a transformation in their own conception of the self and their relation to their social environment is effectively narrowed down to a mental process on part of the protagonists, who contemplate, search, choose and decide on their own.

The change of roles, which is mainly mentally processed, however, requires a second level of identity formation. It means external recognition or misrecognition through the reactions and responses of the receiving community and society at large towards the protagonists. In this regard, the authors of the videos put a premium on conceptualising conversion as a transformation of the protagonists' relationship with their socio-political environment. Conversion is accompanied by specific religious beliefs, that is, the belief in one God, the recognition of his power, and the acknowledgement of his antagonists. Once these specific religious beliefs have become part of the protagonists' self-concept, they form the framework in relation to which they

mainly assess social and political facts and events. By way of their narrations, the protagonists do not only fit a certain framework; they also carefully interweave social and political facts and events into their conversion narratives, thus potentially enhancing the plausibility and authenticity of their experiences, the radical change to their selves, and the ideological meta-narrative of the videos' producers. Moral, ethical and socio-political elements form the narrative and ontological structure against which the appropriateness of the protagonists' decision for Islam is presented.

Moreover, in the light of this prioritisation, it is conspicuous that neither the implications of the social act that is conversion nor the ways in which the protagonists enact these transformations prominently figure in the visual narration. The videos recognise the protagonists' embeddedness in social relationships, but focus mainly on an individual transition rather than conceiving conversion as a complex social phenomenon with various implications and consequences for an individual, the concerned religious communities and the larger society. Also, despite indexical images showing ablution and prayer and mentioning the protagonists' changed names,[11] the videos hardly reflect the ways in which (or the practices with which) these people created, embodied and transmitted their new identity while they were still in Germany.

The videos clearly highlight, however, the ways in which the protagonists establish spatial boundaries as a compelling consequence of the change of social identities and the switch from one social collective to another. For them, becoming Muslim is incommensurate with living in their home countries. Contrary to the findings of research on European converts to Islam,[12] it is not an option for them to stay and enhance their status of being a good citizen by becoming Muslim. They reach far beyond pure ideas and habitual elements and identify the establishment of boundaries with an escape from the hostile environment.

[11] The change of name is a practice that serves the anonymisation of followers of jihadi groups. More importantly, this practice dates back to the time of the prophet Muhammad, who would change people's names if they overtly signified unacceptable pre-Islamic beliefs or practices. Thus it is a meaningful element to reflect a religious conversion to the outside world.

[12] On the discourse on conversion to Islam as a way of establishing feelings of being a good citizen of European societies, see Özyürek (2015) and van Nieuwkerk (2006c, 2016).

Their departure, declared *hijra*, becomes the ultimate consequence of their conversion to Islam and symbolises their distancing from their former environment. The audiovisual arrangement of this issue provides manifold allusions to the prophet Muhammad's role model, as it references the first *hijra* in Islamic history with connotations of emotional and spatial separation and the subsequent endurance of psycho-social hardships. By making such a fateful decision, it is implied, the protagonists will neither follow the 'simple' path of *alternation* (Travisano 1986) nor pursue a *conversion career* (Richardson 1980) in the sense that they might switch back and forth between different religious and non-religious systems of interpretation of meaning.[13] In fact, they are very clear about the consequences of the drastic change in their life under religious premises.

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[13] This model is equivalent to what Gooren (2007) has proposed as cycles of religious behaviour, i.e. pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession and disaffiliation.

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