AGAINST THE CURRENT: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAM IN THE NETHERLANDS

ABSTRACT

With the arrival of immigrants from Turkey, Morocco, Surinam and other countries, the number of Muslims in the Netherlands has also increased. During the last decades, they have set up numerous organizations and institutions. Jan Rath says the way in which Muslims have attempted to create a place for themselves in society is the result of the interaction of many factors. While the initiatives of Muslims themselves are important driving forces behind the process of institutionalization, Dutch society intervenes in various ways by stipulating conditions and building in limitations. The recent 'neo-realism' turn in the Netherlands interferes in this. It nourishes the distrust of Muslims and further governmental interference in the lives of Muslims.

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The Netherlands has long been noted for its progressive, humanistic stance. Although it remains to be seen whether this image is accurate, many people inside and outside the Netherlands have regarded its relatively lenient multicultural minorities policy as a hallmark of tolerance. Yet the Dutch approach to immigrant ethnic minorities has come under increasing attack since the late 1980s, especially in recent years. Slowly but surely, many ethnic Dutch natives have grown uncomfortable with the prevailing approach and are showing a marked impatience with the pace of 'integration'. The smouldering discontent with the last social democratic and liberal government coalition (1994-2002) was fuelled by populist politicians, notably Pim Fortuyn, when they revolted against the unspoken agreement to refrain from mobilising the anti-immigrant vote to gain political support at the expense of ethnic minorities. Since the 2002 parliamentary elections, the Dutch government has shifted gears to embark on a tougher 'integration policy', placing increasing emphasis on native norms, values and behaviour and on disciplining the Other. The 'neo-realism' that has informed this shift has been accompanied by fierce criticism of Islam and, what many people believe to be, the Muslim way of life. The terrorist actions in various places in the world, the war against terror, the slaying of the maverick moviemaker Theo van Gogh and so forth have nourished the distrust of Muslims on the one hand and further governmental interference in the lives of Muslims.

Similar developments can be observed in many other countries in Europe. The fact that Muslims in the Netherlands are taking the heat has nonetheless surprised many observers, because it concerns a country which has been familiar for centuries with religious diversity. Before the Second World War and in the 1950s the forces of 'pillarization' produced a society in which religion and ideology were among the central social determinants, and in which citizens organized themselves accordingly. The social groupings based on religion or a philosophy of life formed 'pillars'; these were more or less closed communities, within which all social life took place from the cradle to the grave. Each pillar had its own institutions, including hospitals, daily and weekly newspapers, broadcasting networks, schools, universities, housing associations, trade unions, small business associations, political parties, and even sports clubs and choirs. There was virtually no interaction between the pillars, except right at the top, where accommodation between them was arranged and where the political leaders were in close consultation with each other, settled imminent conflicts and protected their own interests. In the developing welfare state, pillarized organizations were closely involved in the formulation and implementation of government policy, not least in the allocation of social goods and services to the citizens, which justified their existence. This state of affairs was firmly anchored not only in social and political practice, but also in legislation. Although counter-forces of 'depillarization' were present during the development of this pillarized system, they had limited influence. Not until the mid 1960s, simultaneously with the churches' loss of influence and the growth of secularization, did the pillarized organizations lose their dominant position and did their 'natural' involvement with policy recede. Things no longer revolved mainly around religious or ideological collectives, but more around the individual.

Although the advancement of Islam and the decline of pillarization were more or less coincidental in time, in a certain sense they pulled in opposite directions. To be sure, there is a suggestion that Muslims have been unlucky in their timing: that they settled in the Netherlands 'too late'—at least too late to take advantage of the pillarized structure. On the other hand there is the fact that the pillarized system is far from completely dismantled. Many of the social, political, and legal practices and structures are still wholly or partly intact. In this particular arena, to what extent have Muslims demanded and obtained opportunities to give form to their identity and institutions according to their own agenda?

The Making of an Established Religion

The settlement of immigrants from North Africa, Asia and elsewhere has brought with it a massive influx of Islam into the Netherlands. Very rough estimates suggest that there are today approximately a million Muslims living in the country (out of a total of 16 million inhabitants). At first Muslims led a rather 'concealed' existence, but they have gradually pressed for the establishment of institutions that—among other things — would enable them to practice their religion.

Muslims have so far mainly been active in the sphere of religion. Almost immediately after their arrival in the Netherlands they sought opportunities for the observance of collective prayer, and established places of worship. At first these were unofficial (in residential or business premises) but gradually dedicated foundations or associations were set up to develop 'real' mosques. By now there are almost 400 places of worship or mosques in the Netherlands, to which must be added that many organizations are still struggling with problems of accommodation.

In the political sphere little happened at first: contacts between Muslim organizations and the government were limited to practical problems, such as ritual slaughter, or the establishment or financing of places of worship. This began to change in the course of the 1980s when contacts became less occasional and informal. Separate Muslim political parties or trade unions did not appear to be viable. In some places, and also nationally, federal leagues of Muslim associations and foundations were set up to represent their constituents in discussions with the government on specific policy matters.

Instruction in the Qur'an has been provided for many years in almost all local Muslim organizations, but there was no real breakthrough in the sphere of education until the 1980s. That is when the Muslim broadcasting network began transmitting, when training courses were arranged for imams, and the first Muslim primary schools were opened. Today, there are already more than thirty such schools (fully funded by the government, but required to comply with the official curriculum—only a few per cent of Muslim kids are sent to these schools) as well as a Muslim school board organization. Initiatives have been taken in various municipalities for Muslim religious instruction to be offered in state primary schools; this, however, has actually been achieved only on a very limited scale. A (highly contested) imam training programme is now being offered by a Dutch educational institute.

In the sphere of law, the socio-economic and socio-cultural spheres, and in that of social welfare, very little has in fact happened. To a limited extent there has been recognition of Muslim law in international private law, particularly in family law. Dutch society only recognizes some parts of Muslim family law, in so far as they are part of the national law of the country of origin and are not in conflict with Dutch law. There are also Muslim butchers, mosques run teahouses and shops, and there is a Muslim architectural office, all on a limited scale.

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In summary, generally the formation of Muslim institutions has been a rather selective process. A great deal has happened, but at the same time a great deal has not. Being aware of the ideal-typical model of Dutch pillarization, one would have expected a Muslim daily and weekly press, maternity clinics, hospitals, care homes, swimming clubs, trade unions, pressure groups, housing associations, political parties, and so on and so forth, but in practice there are none of these. We can conclude from all this simply that in the Netherlands, in terms of institutional arrangements, there is no question of a Muslim pillar, or at least of one in any way comparable with the Roman Catholic or Protestant pillars in the past.

Interestingly, few claims have been categorically rejected. Typical exceptions are polygamy and female circumcision, in so far as Muslims have advanced such claims (which is rarely the case). Having said that, only in exceptional cases has the surrounding society chosen to recognize Muslim institutions as a matter of course and unconditionally. Usually obstacles have been put forward from one quarter or other, and in most cases recognition has only been achieved after long pleading. All this, however, means that Muslims in the long run have achieved most of what they wanted.

In by far the majority of cases the key to the process of recognition lies with the national and local government or with particular sections of it. However, this role is by no means played out unequivocally or consistently. At certain times government can actively encourage the formation of Muslim institutions, while at others they can adopt a neutral, legalistic point of view, delay the opening of some institutions, or put a direct block on things. Often, it is a question of differences between individuals; some officials interpret the rules to the letter, while others are more amenable. There is one category of officials in the government very emphatically involved with Muslims; it consists

of those whose directorates, departments or services are responsible for developing and implementing the integration policy. Leaving aside exceptional cases, such as Utrecht, where Muslim organizations were excluded in principle from the consultation arrangements for ethnic minorities, the integration policy appears to have acted as a catalyst for the recognition of Islam. However, the institutionalization is being steered in a specific direction, because it has to serve the purposes of this integration policy.

The government and the political world want Muslims to organize themselves in a manner considered acceptable and efficient in the Netherlands, that is to say with representative organizations or in coordinating bodies with approachable spokesmen, as if the Muslims in the Netherlands form a coherent community. In this way the administrators hope to avoid becoming ensnared in mutual bickering, or having to deal with an amorphous mass with constantly changing leaders. At the same time they want to increase the legitimacy of their political actions. In the knowledge that Muslims have no proper representation, or can only achieve it with great difficulty; this principle is sometimes applied elastically. That was the case in the regulation of ritual slaughter, training for those carrying out circumcisions, and providing access for imams to prisons. But at other times it was regarded as a non-negotiable condition, as in regulations on the access of imams to the armed forces and the allocation of transmission time to the Muslim broadcasting network. In these cases the requirement for representativeness acquired the nature of a blocking activity, and sometimes that was the intention.

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It may appear that reactions to the development of Muslim institutions are first and foremost determined within a 'religious' political or administrative context, and that they are directly concerned with religion, in this instance Islam. That is not, however, the case. All kinds of more general policy considerations, which have nothing to do with the advent of Muslims, sometimes seem to play a crucial role. The revision of the Constitution (in 1983), to quote a major example, had in itself little to do with Islam or its followers, though its consequences for them were certainly important. The faci-lities which churches had enjoyed up till then (including free postage and exemption from taxes), were removed with the stroke of a pen. Paradoxically the revision also offered new opportunities to Muslims. The government had to revise their arrangements with the churches about, for example, spiritual guidance in the armed forces, or the ringing of church bells, and they recognized Muslims as one of the dialogue partners in such matters. This finally turned to the advantage of Muslims in the sense that they acquired certain facilities without too many problems. Other general policy considerations which played a role were the decentralization of welfare policy, urban redevelopment in inner-city areas, economies of scale in education and—last but not least—the integration policy.

Muslims and the Modern Social Imaginary

It is clear that *individual* Muslims (like all other residents in the state of the Netherlands, and like the adherents of other religions or ideologies) can make claims on the government for all kinds of rights and provisions. However, opinions differ widely about the practical applications of those provisions. In particular, the *collective* pronouncements of Islam provoke a great deal of deliberation.

Muslims, according to the prevailing opinion, have an excessive tendency to cling together; they resist joining modern Dutch society and will not or cannot integrate into it; they have an irrational preference for traditional, that is to say non-democratic, forms of political leadership; they do not treat women on an equal basis with men; they hold old-fashioned views on the education of children; they are extremely susceptible to influence by international powers, particularly arch-conservative ones; and in the Netherlands they undermine the separation of church and state. In these views Islam is an extraordinary conglomeration of pre-modern and culturally alien elements. Whether or not there is any truth in this is irrelevant for us. These are ideological opinions about Islam and its believers which can condition actions.

Take, for example, the separation of church and state. In a country which observes Sunday as a day of rest, in which the speech from the throne has always ended with a prayer, where in parliament and in courts of law oaths can be sworn on the Bible, and the words *God met ons* (God with us) are inscribed on the rim of coins, opinions about the separation of church and state have oddly enough acquired the status of canon law. The idea exists that non-Muslims strictly respect this separation without exception, yet that Muslims take absolutely no notice of it, and indeed think that it is fundamentally incompatible with their religion. In practice, things are obviously more complicated. Rotterdam is a case in point: today, the city council intended to withhold planning permission to mosques that confine themselves to religious matters and would not engage in social and political activities. In other words, the council was planning to rebuke Muslims for complying with the separation of state from church. In so doing, the city violated the separation of state from church.

In summary we can conclude that from an ideological point of view Islam has had to develop under a rather unfavorable star in the Netherlands. That in spite

of this it has been possible for a range of Muslim institutions to emerge and gain recognition appears, when seen in this light, to be a miracle. Nonetheless the explanation for it must be sought in sublunary circles. The fact that the current legislation and regulation, political conventions and ethics do not permit unequal treatment of comparable cases is a major factor in this. (In the heyday of pillarization that would have been the equi-valent of swearing in church, a major assault on the truce reigning between the various religious denominations). For that reason claims for equal treatment in political practice have given rise to fewer objections than have claims for special treatment.

In practice equal treatment often implies being absorbed into an existing routine. It is partly for this reason that male circumcision could be recognized relatively easily; doctors and insurance companies regarded it as an everyday medical operation. Moreover, this institution had been practiced for years by another religious minority group: Jews. Various rights and facilities were granted to Muslims because the principle of equality did not permit them to be treated differently from members of the Jewish community.

Conclusions

Although the development of Muslim institutions in the Netherlands is relatively far advanced in comparison with other countries, it is far from being a 'European Mecca' for Muslims. Indeed, we should not close our eyes to the fact that in the Netherlands the predominant emotions among the settled population are fear and unfamiliarity. The fear that existing traditions, arrangements and power positions, or newly acquired liberties, will be brought into jeopardy, works against the recognition of Muslim institutions. It is particularly the nature of the institutionalization and the positive recognition of religious pluriformity established in legislation and regulation that matters here: Dutch society is steering a course—in part with the help of the instruments of the integration policy—strongly towards an Islam oriented towards Dutch society, regardless of whether that course is one supported by the Muslims themselves.

In recent years fierce debates have flared up about the place of Islam in Dutch society. But if we review the process of institutionalization, we must soberly conclude that in fact such debates have come rather late in the day. The national public debates only took place after many institutions were already established and recognized. In many cases, too, they are only indirectly relevant to what is in fact happening, not least because they are dominated by abstract and ideological views, but also because they take little account of the limitations on the power of society to oppose the establishment of Muslim institutions, assuming that it wanted to. The fact is that Muslims only make use of common, hence universally valid, constitutional rights—including freedom of religion and the principle of equality—which rightly are held to be of the highest importance in the Netherlands. Anyone questioning these rights encroaches on the foundations of their own society. Worrisome, however, is that the number of supporters of such an extreme position seem to be growing rapidly?

Reference

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