

## ISLAM IN THE NETHERLANDS: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAMIC INSTITUTIONS IN A DE-PILLARIZING SOCIETY

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### INTRODUCTION

Islam is a fast-growing religion in the Netherlands. Although this growth is of fairly recent origin, neither Islam nor its followers are strangers to Dutch society. As a trading nation and colonial power, the Netherlands became acquainted with Islam centuries ago. Before the Second World War, a handful of Indonesian students paid a brief visit to their colonial mother country and in the 1950s, a few Islamic Moluccans and 'Hindustan' Surinamese (i.e. from Indian descent) decided to settle. The number of Muslims really increased however after 1965, due to the arrival of foreign workers and their families from North Africa and Turkey. The estimated number of Muslims in 1971 was circa 50.000; in 1975 about 100.000 and in 1994 almost 628.000. According to this estimation, Islam has become, within a few decades, the largest non-Christian religion in the Netherlands. This sounds, however, more spectacular than it really is: in fact, we are talking about less than four percent of the Dutch population and this does include non-practising Muslims and those from Islamic countries who are not Muslim.<sup>2</sup>

The first (formal) Islamic organization in the Netherlands dates from 1932 (Landman 1992, pp. 20ff). Since then, numerous Islamic institutions have been set-up and slowly but surely the contours of Islamic religious communities are becoming visible. Almost at the same time, another fundamental social process took place: the breaking down of traditional religious and socio-political barriers: de-pillarization. During an earlier historic period, the Netherlands had become a society in which religion and philosophies of life were the most important social determinants. The social groupings which were formed on the basis of religion or philosophy of life constituted so-called 'pillars': these were more or less closed communities within which all social life – from the cradle to the grave – took place. Each group had its own institutions, varying from hospitals, daily and weekly newspapers, broadcasting systems, schools, universities, (trade)unions and political parties. There was very little social interaction between them, with the exception of those at the top responsible for the accommodation between pillars. Political leaders consulted and debated amongst themselves, settled possible conflicts and looked after the interests of their pillar well.<sup>3</sup> In the developing welfare-state the 'pillarized' organizations were closely involved with the formation and implementation of government policy and, not in the least, with the distribution of social goods and services to citizens – an activity which sanctioned their *raison d'être*. These activities were not only firmly anchored in social and political practice, but also in law and rules and regulations.

Although de-pillarizing forces were present while these religious and socio-political barriers were being created, their influence was minimal. It was during the 1960s, with general secularization and the declining number of churchgoers, that the pillarized organizations lost their dominant position and their natural involvement in the policy-making process. Accordingly, the law and regulations were adapted on a number of issues, with as milestone the revision of the Constitution in 1983. A large number of the financial obligations of government towards religious denominations were hereby withdrawn and the separation of church and state entered a new phase. The individual acquired a more central position at the expense of the religious or ideological collective.

Although these two processes more or less coincide with each other as far as timing is concerned, they are in some ways contrary to one another. This historical coincidence was to the disadvantage of Muslims, not in the least due to the fact that the self-evident place of religions in society had been affected. On the other hand, the process of de-pillarization was by no means complete, were this possible. Numerous social, political and legal practices and

structures remained wholly or partially intact. The question is, to what extent in this field of tension the Muslims have been able to make claims for and receive the space to give form to their identity and to their institutions.

The way in which Islam develops in the Netherlands is not a simple transformation of 'the' Islam from Turkey or Morocco, but rather the product of the interaction between Muslims and their surrounding society. In this interaction numerous factors play a role (including factors which on their own have little to do with Islam as such). In the first place, the law, rules and regulations form the legal framework within which the establishment of a religious communities can take place. As far as this is concerned, the constitutional freedom of religion and philosophies of life is of major importance. This principle stipulates that religious or ideological groups have equal rights to make use of the possibilities and facilities which are provided for by law. Should it be necessary, they have the right to appeal to the judiciary. The government is, as far as its attitude and activities are concerned, bound to follow the existing law and mandates, although it does claim its discretionary freedom. Although it is a central player on the field, it is not so that the government has the freedom to regulate everything as it sees fit. Numerous other parties concerned involve themselves, both in word and deed, with the establishment of Islamic institutions and thus influence the government's attitude: interest groups, political parties or trade unions, as well as resident's organizations, enterprises or organizations for the protection of animals. Let us now examine how the establishment of Islamic communities has developed

### **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES**

Until the beginning of the 1980s Islam led, as it were, a hidden existence. This is illustrated by the fact that government documents relating to immigrants, such as the *Memorandum on Foreign Workers* (1970), scarcely mention Islam or its followers. However, initiatives on the part of Muslims to set up their own institutions did exist. This was certainly the case during the 1970s when increasingly Turks and Moroccans allowed their families to join them in the Netherlands. The need for places of worship increased proportionally and Muslims began to organize in order to establish these.

From the very beginning, there were clear differences between the different categories of Muslims. The Surinamese Muslims were extremely active and quickly began to co-ordinate local initiatives on a national level. Turkish and Moroccan foreign workers, who considered their stay as temporary, had neither the means nor the necessary organization. Their initiatives were mostly local and of a temporary nature. Various Dutch and non-Islamic self-appointed spokesmen, and in particular church representatives, played a prominent role during this period.

Earlier initiatives had mostly been taken by co-operating Muslims of various ethnic or national backgrounds. Communication amongst them was often difficult. The arrival of *imams* (religious leaders) from the countries of origin, and the interference of various movements and governments from these countries with the 'diaspora' on the North Sea, took their toll on the co-operation. Internal conflicts led to the establishment of nationality-based Islamic splinter organizations which sprouted like mushrooms out of the ground during the 1970s. Such organizations did not limit their activities to prayer, but gave Koran lessons to children. Furthermore, many mosques acquired a tea-house and sometimes also a shop.

During this period, the government still maintained its familiar point of departure, namely, that the (Islamic) immigrants' stay in the Netherlands was a temporary one, although the Ministry of Culture, Recreation and Social Affairs (CRM) did carry out research on the needs of Muslims and took a few temporary measures (Werkgroep Waardenburg 1983, pp. 137-183). This changed around 1980. The government dropped the idea of temporariness and developed a coherent policy aimed at the integration of what, from then on, was called 'ethnic minorities'.<sup>4</sup> It was in the *Memorandum on Ethnic Minorities* (1983) that, for the first time in the Netherlands, new and less widely known religions were taken into account. Within the framework of Ethnic Minorities Policy, the Working Group Waardenburg was set-up – a non-official Working Group named after its chairman – which issued advice on the need for government support for facilities for religious minorities. The Working Group advised that religious organizations should be viewed as organizations specific to, and for, ethnic minorities, whereby Islam was considered as one of the cultural expressions in this category. Furthermore, it argued in favour of a number of facilities and regulations covering diverse areas (Werkgroep Waardenburg 1983). Following this,

changes in statutory regulations which had hitherto been obstructive were heralded. The religious experience of Muslims was to be facilitated by the creation of various services and the admittance of their religious leaders to schools, prisons and the armed forces. Finally, religious organizations were to be recognized as possible partners in the implementation of policy on minorities.

All in all, attention for Islam increased. This was also partly a result of international incidents, such as the upheavals in Iran. In the Netherlands, Islamic organizations and self-appointed leaders from Muslim circles increasingly voiced their interests. They argued in favour of the realization of facilities such as more – and better – places of worship, Islamic schools, burial ground and for spiritual care in hospitals and the army. They emphasized that Muslims were in fact 'ethnic minorities', that Islam belonged to their cultural identity and that they occupied a disadvantaged social position. They thus hoped, by using 'the force of argument', to compel the government to make regulations and to set up certain facilities.

The suggestions of the Working Group Waardenburg were not always that easy to put into practice. Especially the proposed subsidies for places of worship met with political protest. This was partly due to the changes in the Constitution made in 1983. In Article 1 the principle of equality was recognized and emphasized, while in Article 6 religion and philosophies of life were granted equal protection. Most important was that the new Constitution laid down the separation of church and state. The (financial) provisions that certain religious denominations had previously enjoyed were hereby withheld without being replaced. As a result of this, a possible separate subsidy scheme for Islamic places of worship was suddenly in dispute.

However, even under the new Constitution, the government was to maintain relations with religious denominations and other similar institutions. In order to decide how the government could make further provisions for religious experience, it consulted in 1983 with representatives from Christian denominations and with humanist, Hindu and Islamic groupings. The participation of Muslims in this dialogue can be considered without doubt as an important milestone for the recognition of Islam. As a result of the dialogue, the government set up – at the beginning of 1986 – a committee, which was to advise on possible support for religious groups after the constitutional changes. Two years later, this committee suggested, amongst others, that the care for Muslims (and Hindus) in public establishments should be facilitated and that places of worship be subsidized (Commissie Hirsch Ballin 1988). However, a new subsidy scheme on the national level was not realized.

The period after the end of the 1980s until now is distinctive due to the increasing diversification on the Islamic landscape. Organizations for the youth and for women increased in numbers, and organizations became increasingly free from religious movements in the country of origin. Associations for Islamic students were set up alongside special foundations to deal with the integration issue or the formation of political power amongst Muslims.

The so-called Rushdie-affair brought Islam to the centre of public interest and led to a stream of anti-Islam feelings. In Muslim circles this led to the establishment of national umbrella organizations and to a discussion on the place of Muslims in Western Europe and on the position of its leadership. Youth in particular was of the opinion that the first generation had solely concerned itself with places of worship and other institutions. In contrast with their parents, Islamic youth was more orientated to Dutch society. They became prominent within local organizations (especially those of the Turks and Surinamese), taking leadership positions. This new generation of leaders lobbied for social problems – viewed from Islamic perspective – to receive more attention, and for a stronger orientation towards the Dutch society. This often led to internal conflicts and competition regarding the strategies to be followed, the type of activities and the external contacts to be made.

How far advanced is the establishment of Islamic institutions in the Netherlands? At this moment there are almost 400 places of worship and, especially in the fields of religion and education, numerous matters have been organized, such as the arrival of *imams* from abroad, ritual slaughtering and the assignment of burial ground. Furthermore, there is an Islamic broadcasting organization; 29 primary schools – completely government financed – have opened their doors and an organization for school administrators and an educational advisory college have been set up. Earlier on, there was little systematic contact between Islamic organizations and governments in the political arena. Now many of these organizations have become recognized participants in the policy-making process. In contrast, in the (family-)judicial, socio-economic and

socio-cultural areas as well as that of social-care, there has been little change. On a small scale there are Islamic butchers, shops within mosques and there is an Islamic architects' bureau.<sup>5</sup>

In general, it is apparent that the establishment of Islamic institutions has been a selective process. Taking into consideration the model of the 'pillarization process' in the Netherlands, we would expect Islamic daily and weekly newspapers, Islamic secondary schools, a university, hospitals, old-peoples homes, swimming clubs, trade unions, political parties, emigration organizations as well as the proverbial goat breeding associations, but in fact we see none of these. So, despite what some people claim, there is no question of an Islamic pillar, at least not on a scale comparable to that of the Roman Catholic or Protestant-Christian pillars of the past.

The establishment of Islamic religious communities has, certainly since the 1980s, always caused debate. However, these discussions were mostly carried out in select circles, by directly concerned politicians, civil servants and other organizations. The subjects were seldom directly placed on the agenda of political parties. Meanwhile, it became practice for ministers and civil servants to acknowledge religious organizations *de facto* as participants in the policy making. A widespread and more principal discussion on Islam took place for the first time at the end of the 1980s and at the beginning of the 1990s. International events, such as the Rushdie affair and the Gulf War, made a large part of the population realize that an extensive group of Muslims were resident in the Netherlands. Some, such as the prominent politician Bolkestein, questioned whether practising Islamic belief was compatible with being a member of the Dutch community.<sup>6</sup> Others, such as the former Christian-democrat prime minister, Lubbers, have speculated on the creation of a new pillar as a gateway for the emancipation of Islamic immigrants. While such public discussions were taking place, the actual consolidation and expansion of the institutionalization of Islam continued, undaunted.

## **POLITICAL PRACTICE**

The discrepancy between the factual institutionalizing process on the one hand and the public issue on the other, raises the question of the reaction – in specific cases – to the Muslims' claims. In fact, we observe that individuals, organizations and institutions – sometimes in coalition – either on grounds of principle or depending on the occasion, gave either support or resistance and opposition to the Muslims' initiatives. The first 'real' mosque (with minarets) was built in the town of Almelo in 1975, thanks to the co-operative efforts of a committee in which people from all walks of life had a place, including the Mayor's wife. However, in many other places the non-Islam (Dutch) neighbours protested against the arrival of a mosque in their street. In the same way, the request to set up an Islamic school triggered many strong discussions and in some cases led to obstruction. Still, in general it can be concluded that only a few of the Muslims' claims were rejected outright. In general Muslims were given space and in certain cases also support for their institutions, albeit after long negotiation. In incidental cases the recognition of Islamic institutions went smoothly. This was the case, for example, when the law governing the electronic prayer-call was being handled.

Claims based on the equal treatment of existing groups seemed to induce less objections than claims which required special group-specific measures or reactions.

In the medical profession, the ritual circumcision (of boys) was considered (routine) medical practice. With equal rights, Muslims had more opportunity to form coalitions. Likewise, in Rotterdam, Islamic organizations collaborated with Protestant-Christian and humanist organizations with the aim of organizing religious education in state schools. The fact that, for decades, these other organizations had already enjoyed financial support from the local government, definitely facilitated the realization of Islamic religious education. In Utrecht, the position of Muslims in this area was weak from the very start, because in this municipality, religious education was not formally organized (Rath & Meyer 1994).

The difference between these two cities was also manifest in other sectors. The municipal council of Rotterdam subsidized certain activities of Islamic organizations and recognized them as a political partner. This was certainly not the case in Utrecht (Feirabend & Rath 1996). So, what was tolerated, supported or even stimulated in the one city was obviously definitely out of the question in the other. Generally speaking, it can be concluded that local authorities differed greatly amongst themselves; one need not be surprised that their decisions also differed. They made use of the powers allocated to them. In the Dutch

constitutional state, various powers and responsibilities have been decentralized to local authorities in order that they respond to and take local circumstances into consideration. For Muslims, however, such differences were sometimes hard to accept, all the more so since to them, the justification for these differences was often unclear.

In the usual administrative tradition, it was preferred that business be conducted with representatives of interest groups who had been democratically mandated by their supporters. This demand for representation was used rather selectively however. In the case of ritual slaughtering and the Islam broadcasting organization, a pragmatic solution was sought while the formal arrangement of other issues (such as the spiritual care of those in penitentiary institutions and the armed forces) met with opposition. The impression exists that the demand for representation was sometimes used to sabotage the realization of the Muslims' claims.

In contrast to what seems most obvious, reaction to the establishment of Islamic institutions was not always formed within a 'religious', political or administrative framework. Sometimes, general policy processes, such as the revision of the Constitution, policy on ethnic minorities, urban renewal in core areas or the decentralization of welfare policy were of greater influence for the space given to Islamic institutions. All these policy areas provided Muslims at times with uncommon chances and at other times with obstructions.

Especially at the beginning of the 1990s, the claims of the Muslims gave rise to ideologically-orientated discussions. These heated discussions came too late in the day, for the institutionalizing process had already made progress – especially at the local level. That local politicians had formulated answers to Islam is understandable; they were in close proximity to the claims made and were expected to find practical solutions to the problems. Ivory tower philosophizing over the construction of society was, under such circumstances, a luxury they could not permit themselves.

### **THE IDEOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM AND MUSLIMS**

Political convention did not stand alone, but was influenced by the way in which those concerned viewed Islam. Their ideological representations were often negatively evaluated: the religious fanaticism of the Muslims, their collectivism, rigid male-female relations, their old-fashioned pedagogics, their lack of feeling for democratic relations, their traditional leadership, their susceptibility to (political) extremism and influence by foreign powers and their nonchalance regarding the separation of church and state. In general, Islam was associated with the past: with backwardness and pre-modernism. These notions were reflected to some extent by the positive manner in which people viewed themselves and their own society. Generally, the fear arose that Islam would frustrate the enlightened and modernist societal developments.

These ideological notions were, in turn, influenced by opinions which mainly concerned disadvantaged categories of the population (among them immigrants) which, moreover, exhibited social or ethno-cultural distinctive features. We found examples of these notions in policy on ethnic minorities (Rath 1991, 1993a and 1993b). Being culturally 'different' was a factor that promoted the isolation and threatened the integration of the policy target-groups.

During the processes of the institutionalization and recognition of Islam, these ideological lines merged repeatedly in a specific manner. In some cases – when those involved were regarded as 'ethnic minorities' rather than as 'Muslims' – they thwarted the recognition of institutions such as Islamic schools when they were viewed as an expression of 'ethnic' segregation. In other cases they encouraged the recognition of institutions. Due to the separation of church and state Muslims could expect no government intervention, but as 'ethnic minorities' they justly deserved support and recognition in the framework of Ethnic Minorities Policy.

The convergence of the different ideological lines was apparent from the attempts to steer the development of the Islamic religious community in a more liberal 'Dutch' direction: against orthodoxism, aimed at dialogue and integration, and organized in a manner that the Dutch were accustomed to. On occasions when this steering was not immediately successful, attempts were made by some policy-makers and administrators to delay the Muslims' initiatives for an unnecessarily long period. The impression exists that time was needed to 'get used to' these claims before honouring them *à contrecœur*.

However, it was not political convention that the (negative) representations of Islam determined exclusively the establishment of Islamic institutions. The current law and regulations impeded this, since all religions were given equal rights and protection. Granting rights to one religious group and withholding these from others, was considered during the heyday of pillarization as reprehensible, and this is still the case today. Most likely, such behaviour would greatly harm the foundations of the social system in which the principle of freedom of religion is held high.

## CONCLUSION

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. The way in which Muslims have attempted to create a place for themselves in society is the result of the interaction of many factors. An important driving force behind the institutionalization are the initiatives of the Muslims themselves. The way in which they organize their interests has been subject to change in recent years. The youth, who are becoming more prominent, see their future in the Netherlands and are more orientated than their parents towards Dutch society. The latter, in turn, intervenes in various ways with the establishment of Islamic institutions by stipulating conditions and building in limitations. These conditions are partially linked with the manner in which freedom of religion is organized in the Netherlands and with various other laws, regulations, policy processes and administrative routines, and partially with the specific combination of ideological views on the place of Islamic immigrants in society with which they are intermingled.

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## NOTES

1. Jan Rath and Astrid Meyer are working at the Institute for Migration and Ethnic Studies (IMES) of the University of Amsterdam; Thijl Sunier is involved in the research group 'Religion and Society' at the same university.
2. CBS (1996, p.53). Knippenberg (1992a and 1992b) estimate the number of Muslims in the Netherlands in 1992 at 414.000, circa 2.7 percent of the population, while the Statistical Yearbook 1994 of the CBS determines for January 1992, 483.000 or 3,2 percent of the population (CBS 1994, p. 49). See also Beets and Oudhof 1982. This concerns mainly Turks and Moroccans and smaller groups of Surinamese, Pakistanis, Indonesians, Tunisians and Egyptians.
3. See for analyses of the 'pillarization model' Lijphart 1975 and van Schendelen 1984.
4. This process is well described as 'migrantization' (Sunier 1966) or with a more specific meaning as 'minorization' (Rath 1991, 1993a and 1993b.). See also Rath & Sunier 1993.
5. For an exhaustive account of the institutionalization of Islam, see Landman 1992, Sunier 1996, and Rath *et al.* 1966 and 1997.
6. See Husbands 1994.