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## The development of a Dutch Islam *The case of Ali Eddaoudi*

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When I told my neighbour that I was invited to speak here about the development of a Dutch Islam –for which I want to thank the organisers very much-, she asked me: *what's that: a Dutch Islam?* I responded to her that "it depends on how you want to define it" -and at that moment my format of today's presentation was born. The answers to the question *What is a Dutch Islam* are revealing how Islam has developed in the past 40 years (the time focus of this conference) until now. There are at least three possible answering categories. We can trace these back in the *many* public and political discussions about Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands.

### *First answering category*

There are people -for example social scientists- who would answer: ***Dutch Islam is the Islam as it has developed and institutionalised in the Dutch context.***

Dutch Islam is in essence *diverse*: there are many Muslims from many backgrounds (Moroccans, Turks, Surinamese, Afghans, Bosnians, Somalians, ...) and from various denominations (Sunni, Shi'a, Ahmadiyyah, Alevi, Salafi). They have organised themselves along ethnic lines, particularly by establishing mosques since the 1970s. There are puritans and free-thinkers, orthodox and reformists. There are even Muslims who are not believing.

Through their interaction of especially the young generations and through the influence of the approximately 12.000 converts, Islam in the Netherlands is growingly *interethnic*.

Muslims question each other why someone explains Islam in a certain way. Just as an example: I met a group of Turkish women who had 'prayer lessons' in their mosque. Those women had met Moroccan women who attended the Friday prayer in the mosque and wondered if the Moroccan women were following *real Islam* or whether this was cultural, a *Moroccan* custom. They asked their imam who answered that it was perfectly fine according to Islam, as long as their responsibilities at home were safeguarded.

There is a growing emphasis on *individual* choices and responsibilities of the believer -a process of religious individualization, whereas there is a need for religious authorities to authoritatively explain the sources of Islam to the individual believers. The outcome of these discussions cannot be phrased in one sentence. Because many answers are proposed, "Dutch Islam" does not give *one* answer to religious and social questions. However, it often concerns the search for knowledge about the *real Islam*. Islam in the Netherlands offers the possibility to discuss this question of "What does Islam say?" In their peer groups, Muslims discuss how they can relate those rules to the options they have in Dutch society. Particularly young, practicing Muslims use this discourse of distinguishing between

“real Islam” and “culture”. It enables them to identify with the religion of their parents, but not with the culture of their parents.

Dutch is the language of the young, At Internet, in student platforms, lectures, women’s groups, youth associations and in mosques, there are many discussions about what it means to be a Muslim in Dutch society. Questions are raised, like: “I have an important football match, but it is Ramadan. Am I allowed to break the fast?” Or: “My neighbor passed away, am I allowed to go to his Christian funeral? What does Islam say about this?” Or: “After a long search, I finally found a job, but I am not allowed to wear my headscarf. What shall I do?”

There is a large influence of transnational networks through modern communication media, most importantly internet, amongst other’s of the *salafyyah* or the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin*.

In Dutch Islam, men and women play a role. For example, next to the male religious leaders in the mosque, there are female socio-religious leaders in the mosque and outside.

A process of institutionalization of Islam has continuously taken place. Almost 50 Islamic schools were established. *Halal* food came to be served in canteens at schools and in hospitals. And several Islamic broadcasting companies were founded. In Rotterdam, we have the Islamic University Rotterdam, a private initiative which has strived for obtaining governmental accreditation for more than 10 years. Since a few years, one can follow an MA in Islamic Theology at two Dutch universities. And a few months ago, the first Muslim mayor was sworn into office in Rotterdam, the Moroccan-Dutch Ahmed Aboutaleb.

### ***Second answering category***

Then, there are also people who would answer: ***Dutch Islam is a Islam which is tolerant and moderate, and compatible with Dutch society, congruent with Dutch norms and values.***

Dutch Islam recognizes dissenters and dissidents, both within as well as outside the religious community. In this discourse Islam as such would *not* automatically be compatible or congruent with central Dutch values, such as the separation between Church and State, equality of men and women, and the acceptance of homosexuality. A Dutch Islam is peaceful and moderate and dissociates itself from radical and extremist forms of Islam.

In a “Dutch Islam”, ethnicity is de-linked from religion; it is also disconnected from political and ideological influences, for instance of the country of origin; it stands in a certain relationship with Dutch liberal values.

A Dutch Islam should *bridge* the apparent gap between ‘the East’ and ‘the West’. The idea of such a gap between East and West is an essential part of Orientalism, as we know.

Only this compatible Islam might play a role in the emancipation of Muslims, particularly of women.

Often, the focus is put on the importance of a Dutch imam training, an issue of public and political debate since the beginning of the 1980s. An ideal “Dutch imam” does not only have knowledge about Dutch language and customs, but also subscribes to the central values of Dutch society and shows his *loyalty*.

In this view, Islam must go through a process of reformation and the Netherlands forms the appropriate place to do so. According to the spokesmen in this debate, like the publicist Paul Scheffer or the politician Frits Bolkestein, it still has a long road ahead.

It is interesting to look at the ideas, actions and attitudes of the Dutch government and politicians in this, since successive governments are clearly in favour of a 'liberal Islam'. They try to stimulate this, for example by putting pressure on Muslim groups to form a Dutch imam training. However, in its attempts, the government is clearly bound by the principle of the separation between Church and State.

### ***Third answering category***

And there are people who would answer: ***No, there is only one Islam. Muslims interpret the sources differently.***

Some pious Muslims in the Netherlands would give this answer: Islam is singular, not plural. The group of 'searching' young Muslims which I already mentioned, might very well give this answer. But also *salafists*, of whom there is only a small group active in the Netherlands, would definitely give this answer.

But not only pious Muslims fall under this answering category; also the major -and influential- Islam critics would answer this, like the Somalian-Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Islamologist Hans Jansen and the populist politician Geert Wilders. They have also only one image of "the real Islam": Islam is in essence an intolerant and violent religion.

Geert Wilders has as member of Parliament the opportunity to express his Islamophobic views and as populist politician he gains much support. According to Geert Wilders, there is no place at all for Islam in The Netherlands. Interestingly enough, according to a recent opinion poll, his potential voters do often *not* agree with this fierce standpoint against Islam. They do not have problems with Islam and Muslims as such, only with criminal behavior of some allochthonous people –the young Moroccans. But, problems with a part of the Moroccan-Dutch youth are often mentioned in one sentence with Islam.

Adherents of this view consider Islam as counterproductive in the emancipation of Muslims in present-day society. They consider Islamic culture as backward (Pim Fortuyn), antidemocratic, and nourished by the political ideologies of Muslim countries, particularly by Wahhabi Islam.

The second and third answer categories are strongly influenced by international *and* national events through which an age-old fear for Islam has become manifest. Of course there is "9/11" and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The terrorist attacks in Madrid and London. There is the Danish cartoon affair and the hysteric responses of Muslims in Pakistan and Egypt. But there is also the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by the young Moroccan-Dutch Mohammed B. on 2 November 2004. And there is the anti-Islamic internet film "Fitna the Movie" made by Geert Wilders.

### ***An illustrative case***

I think that these positions or answering categories need to be illustrated with a example. I have chosen a very recent case. It concerns someone of Moroccan decent: Ali Eddaoudi.

### 1. The Case

In the beginning of April 2009, the first two Muslim spiritual caretakers (aûmoniers, in French) were about to be appointed by the Ministry of Defence to join the already existing group of spiritual caretakers from Protestant, Catholic, Hindu and Humanist origin. One of Turkish descent, the other of Moroccan descent. However, at the last moment, doubt arose about the suitability of one of them, the Moroccan-Dutch Ali Eddaoudi.

Ali Eddaoudi, age 35, seemed to be the perfect candidate. He is trained at *two* (!) Dutch Islam trainings, the Islamic Teacher's Training at the Hogeschool InHolland and he has an MA in Islamic Spiritual Care Training at the Free University, so he definitely had the right diplomas. He speaks fluently Dutch, he has worked as a teacher of religion and society at primary and secondary schools, as a spiritual caretaker in a prison and as spiritual caretaker in several hospitals. In his youth, he had been "a Moroccan street urchin" himself, so he knows this world from the inside. He was born in Morocco (Metalsa, the Rif area) and arrived in the Netherlands in 1981, at age 7.

He was the perfect candidate who was proposed for appointment by the Contact Organ Muslims and Government. The Ministry of Defence had no objection, since the man had a clean record. The Military Intelligence Service had done two screenings. So nothing would stand in the way of the appointment.

However, he was also as a publicist, and in this role Ali Eddaoudi was not uncontroversial. In several of his columns of the last three years, he had made rather nasty, offensive or at least provocative remarks about the Dutch military mission in Afghanistan. He publicly doubted the sense of the mission and called Prime-Minister Balkenende a 'hypocrite', a 'mad crusader' and other names ['nog geen deurmat waardig']. He wrote that a brotherhood between Muslims and Christians is out of the question and that the Dutch mission in Afghanistan is meant to terrorise Afghans in their own countries. In his new position as an army "chaplain", he would have to support the soldiers who take part in this very mission.

Of course, these opinions were noted by the Ministry of Defence prior to his appointment: that was the reason why he was screened twice instead of once. Eddaoudi dissociated himself from the contested statements he made as a columnist.

The day before Eddaoudi's intended appointment, several politicians in Dutch Parliament raised the alarm, saying that this imam was unsuitable for the job –because of the above mentioned utterances. The State Secretary of the Ministry of Defence, Jack de Vries, was put under severe pressure to withdraw the appointment. De Vries –himself member of the Christian Democrat Party- hesitated and decided to postpone his decision and two weeks later, after a good talk with State Secretary Jack de Vries in which Eddaoudi again dissociated himself from his utterances, the air seemed to have cleared, and Eddaoudi was appointed at last.

### 2. Analysis

The appointment of this imam reveals how Islam is being treated in the Netherlands. I will analyse this using the gridlines of the three answering categories.

#### **Category 1**

In the first category, the appointment of an army-imam is part of Islam as it has institutionalized within the Netherlands.

A remnant of the Dutch history of religious pluralism is that the government regards it its duty to provide the necessary prerequisites for religious groups, such as pastoral caretaking in hospitals, prisons and also the army. This rests on a long history of religious pluralism, which took the shape of a ‘pillar model’ in the twentieth century. ‘Pillars’ formed along the lines of religious and secular denominations became power blocks for socio-religious groups and contributed greatly to the emancipation of their members into Dutch society as a whole. Despite a strong process of secularization since the 1970s, the state still finances spiritual caretakers in these public institutions.

Each denomination has a body, called “zendende instantie” which proposes a functionary for this position. The government does not interfere with this choice because of the separation between Church and State. So there is *sovereignty* of the confessional group. Only since 2004, Muslims have such body and with the appointment of the two “army-imams”, this episode in the institutionalisation of Islam could be finalised.

One of the ideas behind the confessional spiritual caretaking is that –in this case- a Muslim spiritual caretaker can better counsel people from the same religion, because he or she knows the cultural and religious background. Besides, he or she can also support colleagues from other denominations in intercultural and interreligious matters and need for explanation of ethics and morality.

Eddaoudi himself can be regarded as an example of an intellectual, Dutch emancipated Muslim, who has contributed in a much more nuanced way to the debate about the integration of Muslims than is visible from the few statements that were used in this row.

## **Category 2**

It was clear that Eddaoudi’s expressions were not really showing confidence in the mission of the soldiers –the very same people he is supposed to counsel. But in contributions in the newspaper, people wondered if it wasn’t *more* than this that caused so much moral commotion, namely the fact that he was a Muslim. Then we enter the second category, Dutch Islam is a tolerant, moderate Islam.

Core here is that people in this second category doubt the loyalty of people like Ali Eddaoudi to the Dutch norms and values. The public row was about the question: is he an extremist with a hidden agenda, or is he building bridges between Moroccans and Dutch? Should he be mistrusted or cherished?

I could give you many more examples of the moral commotion or even moral panic that emerges when a Muslim in a responsible position does not answer to the demands of a “Dutch Islam”.<sup>1</sup>

Politicians from the PVV (Wilder’s party), Rita Verdonk (another populist politician), VVD (the liberal party), SGP (a very conservative Christian party) and the Christian Democrats (CDA) were very angry about the news. For the populist, anti-Islamic politicians it was clear enough: there should be no imams in the army at all. But the reactions of especially the Christian Democrats fall under the second category.

What is striking in this case is the attitude of the Christian Democrats members of Parliament (not the State Secretary). They are the “natural guardians” of the unique Dutch elaboration of the principle of separation between Church and state. This involves a) no interference of the state with

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<sup>1</sup> Imam Khalil El-Moumni, the Turkish Rector of the IUR, and Tariq Ramadan, to mention a few.

internal religious affairs; b) the government must provide equally for the prerequisites of all religious groups; and c) sovereignty in the own circle, meaning that the choice of the public functionaries are the authority of the religious group. But by its request to withdraw the appointment of this person, it looked as if the Christian Democrat politicians violated this guiding principle of sovereignty within a religious circle.

### **Category 3**

Here I have a cartoon [powerpoint slide] of cartoonist Shock, published in NRC Handelsblad, that refers to him being called a *hate-imam*.

The whole issue was of course grist to the mill of the populist politicians of PVV (Wilders' party) and TON (Rita Verdonk). They are against the appointment of any imam in the army. I think it does not need explanation anymore that they belong to the third answering category.

### **As a conclusion**

- ➔ Eddaoudi is the exponent of an emancipated Moroccan-Dutch man, who is not afraid to raise his voice, express his opinion, and show a clear self-confident identity.
- ➔ Eddaoudi is the first person to have passed and completed all Dutch “imam trainings”, that have been created to stimulate the development of a “Dutch Islam”.
- ➔ Dutch Islam is the result of a process of accommodation, negotiation, and emancipation. This goes along with conflicts on matters which are important to both the dominant majority as well as the religious minority. However, the dominant majority should not *force* the minority into a compromise in which the dominant group has set the terms.
- ➔ Freedom of speech, freedom of religion, anti-discrimination, equal justice, democracy, have to be highly valued and cherished. But all these principles *also* imply that space must be given to religious orthodoxy (not religious violence of course). These principles also mean (and I myself am often unhappy with the tone of voice) that columnists have a platform to bring in controversial opinions. *Politicians* however, have as their first and primary task to protect the weak in society against forces that try to dominate or overrule the weak. There are many principles to guide politicians in this task. Those principles are at the core of democracy. Fortunately, the State Secretary, Jack de Vries, did *not* interfere in the decision of the Contact Organ to propose Ali Eddaoudi as their sovereign choice.