

EUI WORKING PAPERS

RSCAS No. 2006/39



'A Dangerous Book'

Dutch Public Intellectuals and the Koran

Rudolph Peters



EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

Mediterranean Programme Series

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE
ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
MEDITERRANEAN PROGRAMME

'A Dangerous Book'
Dutch Public Intellectuals and the Koran

RUDOLPH PETERS

EUI Working Paper **RSCAS** No. 2006/39
BADIA FIESOLANA, SAN DOMENICO DI FIESOLE (FI)

© 2006 Rudolph Peters

This text may be downloaded only for personal research purposes. Additional reproduction for other purposes, whether in hard copies or electronically, requires the consent of the author(s), editor(s).

Requests should be addressed directly to the author(s).

If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the working paper, or other series, the year and the publisher.

The author(s)/editor(s) should inform the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies at the EUI if the paper will be published elsewhere and also take responsibility for any consequential obligation(s).

ISSN 1028-3625

Printed in Italy in December 2006
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50016 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/>
<http://cadmus.eui.eu>

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

The Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (RSCAS), directed by Stefano Bartolini since September 2006, is home to a large post-doctoral programme. Created in 1992, it aims to develop inter-disciplinary and comparative research and to promote work on the major issues facing the process of integration and European society.

The Centre hosts major research programmes and projects, and a range of working groups and ad hoc initiatives. The research agenda is organised around a set of core themes and is continuously evolving, reflecting the changing agenda of European integration and the expanding membership of the European Union.

Details of this and the other research of the Centre can be found on:

<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Research/>

Research publications take the form of Working Papers, Policy Papers, Distinguished Lectures and books. Most of these are also available on the RSCAS website:

<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Publications/>

The EUI and the RSCAS are not responsible for the opinion expressed by the author(s).

Mediterranean Programme

The Mediterranean Programme was set up at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies of the European University Institute in 1998. It focuses on the Mediterranean region.

The Mediterranean Programme engages in research with the twin aims of: a) generating intellectually excellent scholarly work; and b) contributing to the general policy debate relating to the flows of persons, goods and ideas between and within the Northern, Eastern, Southern and Western Mediterranean areas.

The Mediterranean Programme and its activities have been financed by: Capitalia, Compagnia di San Paolo, Eni spa, Ente Cassa di Risparmio di Firenze, European Commission, European Investment Bank, Fondazione Monte dei Paschi di Siena, and Regione Toscana.

The Annual Mediterranean Research Meeting brings together scholars from across the region.

<http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/Research/Mediterranean/Meetings.shtml>

For further information:

Mediterranean Programme

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

European University Institute

Via delle Fontanelle, 19

50016 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI), Italy

Fax: + 39 055 4685 770

E-mail: MedProgSecretary@eui.eu

<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/Research/Mediterranean/Index.shtml>

Abstract

This article analyses the way the Koran is represented in the present-day Dutch public debate on Islam. Since the early 1990s the debate on migration began to focus on the cultural differences. The notion of multiculturalism came increasingly under attack and was replaced by the ideal of cultural adaptation. The culture of migrants was equated with Islam, although Muslims constitute no more than 60% of the migrants from non-Western countries. Problems connected with immigration were more and more explained by referring to Islam. In order to support such explanations, recourse was had to negative and stereotyped representations of Islam that went back to colonial times. The anti-Islamic discourse that developed in the Netherlands is based on a monolithic, essentialist, constructed Islam that has little relationship with the actual religious experiences of Muslims. In this constructed Islam the Koran has a special position since Islam is equated with the literal text of the Koran, which allegedly resists interpretation. This underscores the idea that Islam is fixed and unchangeable, which is used to support the claim that Islam and therefore Muslims, are incapable of modernization.

Keywords

Islam, Netherlands, Islamophobia, Koran

Introduction¹

On 29 August 2004 Dutch public television broadcast a short film with the title *Submission*, produced by the Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali and the film maker Theo van Gogh. The film, set in a fictive country called Islamistan, depicted in four short scenes the sorry plight of four Muslim women: the first is caned for fornication, the second, married out against her will, experiences intercourse with her husband as rape and keeps him at bay as long as possible by pretending to be menstruating, the third is beaten by her husband for disobedience and the fourth was raped and impregnated by her uncle and is now unable to denounce him because that would call his honour into question. The film's title is based on a *double-entendre*: the Arabic word *islâm* means submission, but the title also refers to the submission of women. The makers suggest that Islam and the oppression of women are identical. This basic notion is emphasized by showing relevant Koranic verses (K. 24:2; 2:222; 4:34 and 24:31), suggesting that there is a direct relationship between the wording of these texts and the oppression of women.² The message was clear: the Koran is a dangerous book as it justifies, or enjoins, the maltreatment of women by men. That the texts were projected on the almost naked bodies of the women was meant to be felt by Muslims as a sacrilege, justified, as Ms Hirsi Ali repeatedly stated, as a means to provoke discussion. The film is illustrative of the Islam debate that nowadays rages in the Dutch media and of the ways the Koran is used in it. This will be the topic of my paper.

After giving a succinct survey of the various Muslim groups in the Netherlands and their backgrounds, I will first discuss the phenomenon of the 'Islamization of migrants' and briefly point out its political implications. As a result of this development, speaking about Islam became in many ways speaking about migration. Next I will discuss the nature and dimensions of the Dutch public debate on Islam, focusing on the small but influential group of anti-Islamic public intellectuals who set the agenda of the debate. Among them are politicians,³ journalists,⁴ writers⁵ and academics.⁶ Their political views are close to those of the American neo-cons, except that most of them, unlike the neo-cons, are staunchly unreligious and, often, opposed to religion. Many of them publish in the weekly magazines *HP/De Tijd* and *Elsevier* and in the weekly supplement *Letter&Geest* of the daily newspaper *Trouw*. Although they do not agree on every detail and sometimes voice distinctive individual opinions, there is so much coherence and consistency in their views that we can speak of a collective vision of Islam. This coherence is reinforced by the fact that they often quote or refer to one another. After discussing the general characteristics of the Dutch Islam debate and especially the anti-Islamic discourse, I will analyse the views on the Koran presented in this discourse, since these are used to bolster certain opinions about Islam in general.

Since the Dutch registry offices do not register religion, the number of Muslims residing in the Netherlands is not exactly known but based on rough estimates derived from nationality and countries of birth (including countries of birth of parents). Dutch converts are, therefore, not included and those who have abandoned Islam are not excluded. According to government statistics, there are now ca. 1 million Muslims (i.e. ca. 6% of the population). Their migration histories and their ethnic backgrounds

1 The first draft of this paper was read in workshop 10 (Public Debates on Islam in Europe) of the Seventh Mediterranean Social and Political Research Meeting, Florence & Montecatini Terme, 22–26 March 2006. I am grateful for the critical remarks and suggestions for improvement made by the participants.

2 For the texts of the dialogues see Ali, 2005.

3 E.g. the MPs Ayaan Hirsi Ali (Partij voor Vrijheid en Democratie, VVD, i.e. the conservative liberal party), F. Bolkestein (VVD) and G. Wilders (independent, right wing).

4 Sylvain Ephimenco, Paul Frentrop, Gerry van der List, Chris Rutenfrank, Jaffe Vink, B.J. Spruyt

5 Leon de Winter, Wessel te Gussinklo

6 Paul Cliteur, Afshin Ellian, Hans Jansen, Herman Philipson

are very diverse and they do not form one single community. We can distinguish the following principal categories:

- *Labour migrants and their families* (ca. 650.000, i.e. ca. 4% of the total population) Turks (ca. 350.000) and Moroccans (ca. 300.000)
- *Migrants from the former colonies*, i.e. Surinam Muslims (ethnic Indian and Javanese) (ca. 70.000, i.e. ca. less than 0,5% of the population))
- *Refugees*, mainly Iranians, Iraqis, Afghans, Somalis (ca. 200.000, i.e. 1,3% of the population)

The distribution of Muslims over the country is unequal: in the large cities there is a substantially higher proportion of Muslims than elsewhere: In Amsterdam, for instance, Muslims constitute about 17% of the population.

The Islamization of migrants

Migration always causes frictions in the host societies. In the initial stages of the recent Dutch history of labour migration, when workers from the South of Europe came to the Netherlands, these frictions were relatively small. Their stay was meant to be temporary. Social contacts with the rest of the population were minimal: the predominantly male migrants lived in separate communities and they hardly mixed with the rest of the population. By the end of the 1960s most of these Southern Europeans went back. Their places were gradually taken by workers from Morocco and Turkey. These, however, did not return to their countries. Most of them were here to stay and their integration in society became a political issue. Initially the problem was seen mainly as a social and economic one: policies were to be developed in order to help the migrant communities overcome their underprivileged position in society, without affecting their cultural identity. Such policies were aimed at ‘integration with the preservation of cultural identity (*integratie met behoud van culturele identiteit*)’. This meant that the government did not aim at influencing or changing the culture of the migrants, but, to the contrary, developed policies to reinforce this cultural identity, e.g. by introducing, for the children of migrants, lessons in Arabic and Turkish language and culture into the regular school system. A powerful idea behind this policy was that they should be prepared for repatriation, for Dutch politics was slow in recognizing that the ‘guest workers’ had become immigrants. This, however, was not the only reason. The prevailing political climate at the time was more in favour of cultural diversity, which also underlay the ‘pillarization system (*verzuiling*)’, (i.e. the social and political organization of religious and other ideological groups in vertical ‘pillars’ with little or no contacts between one another), that until the 1950s had dominated Dutch society. However, with the increasing secularization and the gradual disappearance of the pillarization system, Dutch society became culturally more homogenous and acceptance of alien cultures and religions lessened.

When it became clear that a massive return of the Moroccan and Turkish migrants was illusory, the concept of integration with the preservation of cultural identity came increasingly under attack. Politicians and public intellectuals began pointing out that cultural differences between the migrants and the majority of the populations played a major role in causing the problems connected with migration. They emphasized that for integration the migrants had to adapt themselves also culturally. Gradually the definition of integration changed from an essentially social and economic process, to be facilitated in the first place by Dutch society and the state, to a process of cultural adaptation, which the state, of course, could promote but essentially depended on the efforts of migrants themselves.⁷ In a seminal essay published in 2000, Scheffer warned against social disintegration due to the emergence of an Muslim underclass that was not only social and economic in nature, but also cultural (which he defined as Islamic) since Muslims did not share some of the basic values of Dutch society. The divide between this underclass and the rest of the population was, in his view, accentuated and, indeed,

7 For a survey of the changes in government policies regarding the migrant communities, see Prins 2004, pp. 13-18.

broadened by the difference in culture. The remedy he proposed was 'Dutchification', the imposition of Dutch identity and values upon the newcomers.⁸ His ideas were widely accepted and as a result of this emphasis on cultural adaptation of the Muslim migrant communities, serious topics like discrimination on the labour market and the shortcomings of the Dutch educational system in accommodating large groups of migrants became underexposed.

Thus the migrants' culture was problematized and prominently put on the political agenda. In addition this culture was increasingly identified as Islam, rather than the rural culture of the Moroccan Rif or Anatolia from where most of the migrants hailed. There were various causes for it. One of these was the rise of political Islam in the Muslim world, exemplified by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the assassination, in 1981, of the Egyptian president Sadat by an Islamist organisation. This made the European and American public – and the Dutch among them -- more aware of the significance of Islam. The awareness may have been enhanced by the attempts of certain politicians to present Islam, after the termination of the Cold War, as the new enemy of the West. However, more important was the increased visibility of Islam in the Netherlands, and especially in the big cities. This was more than a matter of numbers. When, from the late 1970s, migrants began to realize that their stay would be of longer duration than expected, they made their families come. Instead of groups of men, living in special hostels, more or less isolated from the rest of the population, Muslim migrants moved into the popular quarters of the big cities. Their wives and daughters, often wearing the attire of the countries of origins, were seen in the streets while shopping or collecting their children from school. The men started to organize their religious life. Whereas previously they would informally gather on Fridays in such places as happened to be available, they now set up mosque associations, imported imams from abroad and built mosques that were designed as such, with minarets and all. They demanded from the government that legislation be adapted to accommodate Islamic prescriptions, e.g. those regarding burial and the slaughtering of animals. At the same time, shops, especially *halal* butchers, emerged, catering in the first place for the migrant population. In 1988 the first fully subsidized Islamic elementary school was founded. All these factors contributed not only to the sudden realization of the Dutch that their country now hosted a substantial number of Muslims, but also to the identification of these migrants in religious, rather than ethnic terms. As a result, their culture also was understood and defined as essentially Islamic.

Around the turn of the last century, talking about culture as a factor in the process of integration of Muslim migrants meant talking about Islam. Since by then, notwithstanding research reports with a more nuanced conclusion,⁹ the prevailing mood was that the integration of Muslim migrants had failed, the causes of failure were directly associated with Islam. Muslims were regarded as being imprisoned in their religion, which prevented them from becoming modern, autonomous individuals and active citizens. The public debate on Islam during the last years contributed to and reinforced these ideas by constructing an Islam and a stereotype of Muslims that were fit to explain the failure of integration.

The acts of violence committed in the name of Islam and the rise of Muslim militance, not only in the Islamic world, but also among the Muslim communities of Europe, gave the debate a special twist. The 9-11 attacks, the suicide bombings in Palestine, the bombings in Bali and Casablanca, the acts of violence against the civilian population of Iraq committed by Sunni resistance groups, they all contributed to the association of Islam and Muslims with terrorism and violence. After the Madrid bombings and the murder of the Dutch film maker and publicist Theo van Gogh by a Dutch youth of Moroccan descent, Islam was identified in the Dutch public debate not only with the failure of integration but also with extremist violence. Some even saw a causal connection: As a result of the failure of integration, they claimed, Dutch society now had to cope with Islamic extremism. Those

8 Scheffer, 2000

9 See e.g. the report 'Bruggen bouwen' prepared by the Tijdelijke Commissie Onderzoek Integratiebeleid (a parliamentary fact-finding committee) published in 2004. Tweede Kamer, vergaderjaar 2003–2004, 28 689, nrs. 8–9.

who, like the Amsterdam mayor Job Cohen, warned against the exclusion of Muslim migrants and advocated dialogue, were branded as naïve. The prevailing mood in politics was that firm measures were required in order to restrict immigration and impose the cultural adaptation of Muslim immigrants, as well as to combat terrorism. And such measures were indeed proposed and introduced, often regardless of their efficacy, and mainly as a token of the vigilance of the government.

The political atmosphere with regard to foreigners and Muslims hardened and became polarized. Politicians and officials vied with one another in proposing anti-Islamic measures and statements. Coming from ministers, important politicians and local councillors, these proposals were authoritative and widely reported. Therefore they had a great impact. Here are some examples from the last two years. The government announced new regulations to curb the establishment of new Islamic schools.¹⁰ On November 12, 2004, in the wake of the murder of van Gogh, the Second Chamber of the Dutch parliament passed a motion inviting the government to introduce legislation making it impossible, after 2008, to bring in trained imams from abroad, and to investigate the possibilities of barring foreign radio and television stations sowing hatred and inciting to violence. This clearly aimed at banning certain Arabic and Islamic news stations such as *al-Jazira*. Anti-terrorism legislation was introduced, targeting mainly Muslims. Recently the Municipal Executive of Rotterdam proposed a bylaw forbidding to build religious buildings over a maximum height. This was directed against plans to build a mosque with tall minarets.¹¹ The face veil was also an issue: By the end of 2005 a majority of the Second Chamber demanded that the government introduce legislation banning the wearing of face veils in public.¹² Individual ministers also put their oar in with generalizing and pejorative statements: Minister Rita Verdonk (immigration and integration) declared on November 12, 2004 that the Muslim community could not take criticism very well and Minister Hoogervorst (national health) criticized Muslims for not donating organs for religious reasons (which, according to most religious authorities do not exist) , while accepting organ transplantation for themselves and suggested that organ transplantation should only be available for those willing to donate organs.¹³

The critical attitude of politicians towards Islam is widely shared among the autochthonous population. This is mainly a result of feelings of fear, enhanced and oriented towards Islam by politicians and public intellectuals. The Dutch publicist Mak actually called the prominent anti-Islamic intellectuals and the politicians embracing their views ‘traders in fear’, implying that they stirred up anxieties about Islam and Muslims in order to pave the way for repressive policies and legislation.¹⁴ These wide-spread feelings of fear stemmed in first instance from apprehensions for dangers threatening Dutch identity and culture.¹⁵ These apprehensions were fed by the deep transformations that Dutch society experienced during the last decades. Dutch society has undergone immense changes as a result of globalisation, of the greater impact of the European Union and of the growth of migrant communities. Resentment against these changes was then projected against Islam, blaming Muslim migrants for the changes in Dutch society and the Dutch way of life.¹⁶ In addition, many Dutch regard the growing number of Muslims, because of their religion, as a danger to the achievements of modern society: liberal democracy, secular politics and the general acceptance of the principle of equality regardless of gender, sexual orientation or religion.¹⁷

10 Letter of the Minister of Education to the Second Chamber, 23-4 2004.

11 Gemeente Rotterdam, Overlegdocument t.b.v. Raad en Commissie: Het voorstel m.b.t. ruimtelijk gebedshuizenbeleid, d.d. 29-11-2005

12 NRC-Handelsblad, 21-12 2005

13 De Volkskrant, 4-3 2005

14 Mak, 2005

15 van der Veer, 2001b

16 van der Veer, 2001b

17 A text that eminently illustrates these fears is Fortuyn's pamphlet ‘Against the Islamization of Dutch culture.’ Fortuyn, 1997.

The 'Islamization of migration' made it possible to express xenophobia in a different, socially more accepted way. Whereas in the 1980s resentment against foreigners was expressed with slogans like 'our own people first!' and 'the Netherlands are full!' nowadays this is done by pointing out that Islam is a backward religion prone to violence and that, therefore, Muslims cannot modernize and peacefully participate in Dutch society and politics. These feelings are shared by a large proportion of the Dutch population.¹⁸

The public debate on Islam

As we have seen, the anti-Islamic intellectuals can ride on a wave of Islamophobic sentiments, and are aware of the fact that their ideas are widely accepted by politicians. This gives them a sense of power. They can determine the agenda of the Islam debate and their opponents just have to follow. These opponents, however, are mainly autochthonous Dutch. The discussion has a distinctly one-sided and asymmetrical character: it is less a debate with Muslims than a debate among non-Muslim Dutch about Islam. Muslims are the objects of the debate rather than active subjects. The anti-Islamic critics do not address Muslims, but rather the Dutch public in order to convince them of their views on Islam. Muslim opponents capable of responding at that level are still scarce and often meet difficulties in having access to the media.

Criticism against Islam is often presented and justified as criticism of religion, which, the critics claim, is part of modernity. The anti-Islamic hardliners argue that Christianity was subjected to criticism and that that contributed to the reform and modernization of Christianity. Why, they ask, should such criticism not have the same effect on Islam? What they overlook is the differences in the power relationship between the critics and the object of their criticism. When in the nineteenth century Christianity began to be criticized, those who voiced criticism were confronted with the institutional and disciplinary powers of the powerful churches and, often, those of the state. These critics had the courage to persist in their criticism and to challenge the ecclesiastical powers. And it took some time before the criticisms had an impact upon these churches. The present-day context of criticism of European intellectuals against Islam is entirely different: First, unlike the nineteenth century critics of Christianity, they are outsiders. Second, also unlike the erstwhile critics of Christianity, they express their criticism from a position of power: they have access to the media and their views are well received by the public and by many politicians. The result is that Muslims adopt a defensive stand in the face of this criticism and are unwilling to enter into a dialogue. This contextually determined attitude, however, is essentialized by the critics, who claim that Islam does not allow any form of criticism.

The critics of Islam assert that the debate about immigration and Islam has for a long time been censored by political correctness. The 'real facts' were suppressed and the authentic voices of the autochthonous Dutch population were not heard. As a result, they say, the problems were left to fester so that now they must be addressed by effective and, if necessary, drastic measures. This discursive strategy was quite successful in influencing public opinion and was adopted by many politicians from different political parties. As a result immigration laws and policies were tightened and measures were discussed to impose Western values of the non-Western immigrants (a term that usually refers to Muslims although they constitute only 60% of the total) in order to enhance their integration. Muslims were required to adopt the values of modernity, regardless of whether or not they consider them to be compatible with their religion. The Dutch politician Bolkestein,¹⁹ who, in the early 1990s, was one of the first to raise the alarm for what he regarded as the danger posed by the influx of large groups of Muslims, expresses this as follows:

18 According to an opinion poll held during the spring of 2006, 63% of the Dutch population regarded Islam as incompatible with modern life in Europe and 43% believed that Islam was not a religion of peace. *Het Parool*, 3 June 2006.

19 Influential Dutch VVD politicians, member of several cabinets, member of the European Commission.

Some amongst you will perhaps say: isn't it wrong to impose upon others something that goes against their deepest felt convictions? And if there really are principles that, even in a dialogue with these others, cannot be discussed, hasn't this dialogue then become meaningless? I would like to deny this. It is not wrong to present the principles I just mentioned as not negotiable. For this is the best and the most valuable that has been produced by our culture, something that I, as a liberal, hold to be universal. One cannot call these issues into question, because in doing so one calls free society itself into question. It is only possible to offer this free society as a new home to newcomers if we are prepared to defend these fundamental values.²⁰

The tactics that the Islam critics seem to have adopted is one of 'shock and awe.' They express harsh criticism, and voice negative judgements and insults against Islam, and expect that as a result Muslims will reform their religion. and become modern and 'enlightened'. It is interesting to see the shift in position of the conservative liberals. Whereas they used to embrace the principle of '*laisser faire, laisser aller*', both in the social economic and in the cultural domain, they now seem to have abandoned it as far as culture is concerned. This zeal for spreading and imposing the blessings of Enlightenment reminds us on the one hand of the colonial past and, on the other, of traditional social democracy. The anti-Islamic intellectuals want to take on, once again, 'the white man's burden' by spreading the light of civilization and Enlightenment among those still living in the darkness of religion. Hirsi Ali is quite outspoken about it:

It is illuminating to understand the notion of 'integration' as a process of civilization of specific groups of Muslim migrants with the receiving Western society. Doing so renders unnecessary the sham debate about the equivalence of cultures.²¹

The Dutch sociologist van Doorn has convincingly argued that the present-day conservative liberals in certain aspects have now become like the classical social democrats of the recent past because both groups believed in the 'makeability' of society, i.e. the notion that the state can structurally change society.²² However, whereas the social democrats wanted to change social and economic structures in order to realize a more just society, the liberal conservatives are bent on changing the culture and religion of certain groups in society, in order to form a homogenous society, whose members all embrace the Enlightenment and the liberal democratic values. It is doubtful whether such aims can be achieved at all. Deliberately and consciously imposing values and culture may well prove to be an impossible project, at least as a short time political solution. Further, it is highly questionable whether the tactics of 'shock and awe' will work. It is more plausible that Muslims will feel excluded and marginalised by it and that they will take a defensive stand instead of being open for discussions and debates about reforming Islam.

An analysis of the contents of the criticism of Islam raised by the anti-Islamic publicists must address two aspects: the construction of a Dutch (or European) identity and, secondly, the representation of Islam as the opposite of this identity. In this representation the Koran plays an important role, which will be analysed in the next section. Let us first try to identify what the anti-Islam intellectuals regard as the essence of Dutch identity. Central to that identity is a strong belief in a special type of liberal democracy, which they equate with the universal values of the Enlightenment. A second point is their secularism, not so much as an explanatory model of what happened in the past, but rather as a norm, i.e. the desirability of the withdrawal of religion. Whereas some of them are of the opinion that it suffices if religion withdraws from the public sphere, others are adamantly opposed to religion in whatever form.

The anti-Islamic hardliners consider these foundations as universal and exclusive and do not want to compromise them. The defence of these foundation is flanked with attacks on cultural relativism and on the recognition of cultural minority rights. They are opposed to multi-culturalism, because, as

20 NRC-Handelsblad 20-5 2000

21 Ali, 2002: 84

22 NRC-Handelsblad, 10-12 2005

they time and again assert, this implies cultural relativism and the acceptance of cultural practices that cannot be tolerated such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and honour killings. As will be evident from these examples, their notion of multiculturalism is caricature. They accept a certain extent of cultural diversity, but only insofar as the values of other cultures agree with the principles of Enlightenment.²³ But in practice this cultural diversity is rather limited. Even a diversity in dress is hardly acceptable for them since they are inclined to regard it as an undesirable expression of cultural resistance, as demonstrated by their attitude vis-à-vis the Islamic headscarf.

The other butt of their attacks is the recognition of collective cultural rights. If large groups in society, original inhabitants or immigrants, have a specific cultural background, the question arises of whether such collective cultural identities must be officially recognized. Such a recognition may consist in e.g. subsidizing or otherwise promoting schools or social and cultural organisations and activities based on this identity. From the end of the nineteenth century to the 1960s the Dutch system of 'pillarization' (*verzuiling*) operated upon these principles. Although remnants of this system still exist, e.g. in the system of education and health services, they have come increasingly under attack, especially by anti-Islamic hardliners, who are opposed to the idea that Muslims make use of the opportunities offered by the system. Rejecting the idea of emancipation within one's own cultural group, one of the leading notions of the pillarization, they see individual emancipation as the only road to integration. Therefore they are opposed to all policies and regulations that recognize the right to and reinforce a collective identity of Muslims in Dutch society, such as the right to establish Islamic schools.

Islam, as represented by the Islam critics, is a constructed stereotype. Islam, they claim, is incompatible with the core values of Enlightenment such as democratic government, separation of church and state, rule of law, human rights (freedom of expression, of association etc.) and the principle of equality of citizens. These allegations against Islam are rooted in old colonial stereotypes that associated Islam with despotism and the lack of freedom.²⁴ Objections that there exist an enormous doctrinal, political and cultural diversity among Muslims, are met with the assertion that under this superficial diversity there exists, at a deeper level, an Islamic essence, which is on many scores in conflict with modernity. The Koran, as we shall see, is used to prove this point: Islam, is their implicit argument, is identical with the contents of the Koran. They try to corroborate their allegations by quoting, without historical contextualization, examples of political and cultural practices from all over the Muslim world and dating from any historical period. I will here briefly present the three points of critique that figure most prominently in the Dutch anti-Islamic writings: the oppression of women, the lack of acceptance of homosexuality and the failure to recognize the separation between church and state.

One of the main arguments used in Western colonial discourse to prove the inferiority of the Islamic civilization was the position of women. Colonial administrators and authors propagated a type of 'colonial feminism' (i.e. denouncing the oppression of Muslim women by Islam, with a blind eye for the unequal position of women in the metropolis), not so much in order to improve the position of Muslim women, but rather to show the backwardness of Islam. As a consequence, feminism became suspect in the Islamic world, because it was too much associated with colonial attacks on Islam. The colonist criticism of the position of Muslim women actually became an obstacle for the improvement of the position of women in Islamic societies.²⁵ On this issue the present-day critics of Islam have followed in the footsteps of their colonial predecessors. In fact, it is one of the spearheads of their attacks. Their mantra that Islam oppresses women and therefore is in conflict with Dutch identity, leaves out of sight the fact that gender equality in Dutch society is still far from complete. This is precisely the reason why this idea has such a strong appeal on white men: They can, without any

23 For a clear exposé of this position, see Cliteur, 'Niet alle culturen zijn gelijkwaardig' in Cliteur, 2002, pp. 26-64)

24 Peters, 1982

25 Ahmed, 1992

qualms, dedicate themselves to fighting of the oppression of Muslim women, since they are not oppressed by white men, but by Islam.

Another issue in the debate, without colonial antecedents however, is the accusation that Islam does not accept homosexuality. Medieval legal texts are quoted to show that Islamic law imposes draconic punishments on homosexuals. When, a few years ago, a Moroccan imam from Rotterdam publicly said that he regarded homosexuality as a dangerous disease (something which was received wisdom in Western psychiatric textbooks as recently as thirty years ago), the whole country fell over him and he had to stand trial (but was acquitted). Openness about and acceptance of homosexuality appear to have become the most recent element of the Dutch identity. Muslim criticism of e.g. the gay parade is sometimes construed by the anti-Islamic publicists as a threat to the core values of Dutch society.

The third prominent point of criticism is that Islam does not recognize the separation between Church and the State.²⁶ It is a strange reproach, since there are no Islamic churches or comparable institutions. What seems to be meant is that Islam does not recognize a separation between politics and religion. But this is not a central principle of Western democracy either. The Netherlands as well as most Western European countries (perhaps with the exclusion of France with her principle of *laïcité*) allow some form of mixing between the two. Yet the absence of a separation between Church and State in Islam is often used as an argument to demonstrate that it is difficult for Muslims to be citizens of a democratic state. The Dutch politician Bolkestein, whom I quoted before, uses strong terms to emphasize this:

It will be clear that on the issue of separation of Church and State Islam has a difficult relationship with Western liberal and democratic thought and with the Enlightenment. Therefore dialogue ends here and a stand has to be taken. The aforementioned principles are not negotiable and cannot be subject to bargaining. Not even for a small part.²⁷

The quotation is interesting as it shows that the author, like the other Islam critics, views Islam as a homogenous and unchangeable body of thought and claims that a dialogue with Muslims on certain essential principles of liberal democracy is impossible, and, indeed, undesirable. Moreover, his words imply that Western liberal democracy is in danger and under attack and that a firm stand must be taken against the enemies. Bolkestein first brought this point up in 1991 and since then it has become a cliché in anti-Islamic discourse, repeated uncritically time and again.²⁸

The Koran in the public debate

Within Islam there exists a great diversity and variety of opinions on ritual, legal and theological issues. This is the result of the absence of a central authority that could impose a single religious truth. The production and distribution of religious knowledge was and is in the first place the collective responsibility of individual religious scholars. They are not organized in bodies like church councils that can issue authoritative statements on doctrinal issues. They interpret the textual sources, viz. the Koran and the *hadith*, a collection of reports on the exemplary behaviour (*sunna*) of the Prophet Mohammed. These textual sources can be understood in different ways and the diversity of legal opinions that has existed from the earliest periods of Islam was fully accepted and even gave rise to a special genre of books listing and explaining the controversies on ritual and legal matters. The relationship between a Koranic text and the rules of the religious law derived from it is therefore a complicated one. I will give two examples to illustrate this point.

Koran 9:5 contains the following injunction:

26 For a critical discussion of this issue, see Peters, 2003

27 NRC-Handelsblad, 20-5 2000

28 See e.g. Fortuyn, 1997; Scheffer, 2000

Then, when the sacred months have passed, slay the idolaters wherever ye find them, and take them (captive), and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then leave their way free. Lo! Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. (Translation M.M. Pickthall)

This is one of the central texts on which the jihad doctrine is based. However, must this verse be read as a license for Muslims to kill non-Muslims as the literal meaning seems to suggest and as a 'clear example of religion and terror'?²⁹ This is not the case. According to most classical exegetes, the permission to kill non-Muslims is only operative with regard to potential combatants (i.e. adult males) if their lives are not legally protected. That means: only during warfare or in the case that such a non-Muslim has entered Islamic territory without a contract of protection (which can be granted by any adult male Muslim). The underlying notions of jihad are that there exist a collective duty for Muslims to expand the territory of Islam as well as an individual one to defend this territory against attacks from the outside. However, in most modern interpretations jihad is restricted to defensive warfare and Muslims are only allowed to kill non-Muslims in self-defence, since many Koranic verses permit warfare only against aggression.³⁰ In short, the meaning suggested by the texts is to a great extent restricted by interpretation.

Another example is Koran 4:34:

Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then if they obey you, seek not a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great. (Translation M.M. Pickthall)

The text is usually read as permitting Muslim men to physically chastise their wives in cases of disobedience. This is also the standard interpretation in classical Islam, although all authors point out that beating may only be resorted to as a last remedy after other means (admonition or withholding affection) have failed and that the beating may not be severe. One of the Islam critics, clearly not familiar with the flexibility of religious exegesis, exclaims rhetorically *a propos* of this verse: 'How can such a text be understood symbolically?'³¹ But this text can be interpreted and there exists a body of Muslim feminist literature critiquing the standard interpretation.³² Two lines of reasoning are used to give the text a new meaning, one based on a semantic comparison of certain words in the Koran, and the other on an historical interpretation. The first one focuses on the meaning of the word *daraba*, to hit, to strike ('scourging' in Pickthall's Koran translation). Some exegetes point out, after analyzing the meaning of this verb in other Koranic verses, that here it must be understood as denoting a symbolical rather than a punitive act. The other interpretation uses a more sophisticated historical argument. According to the classical interpretation this verse must be read not as a permission to beat a wife, but rather as a limitation of the sanctions that a husband may impose on a disobedient wife and, thus, as a prohibition of wife abuse. Modern authors argue that wife abuse is a notion determined by the historical context. When the verse was revealed, it forbade a husband to resort immediately to violence in case his wife was disobedient and imposed restrictions on the severity chastisement. Nowadays, these authors argue, the norms about the relationship between spouses have changed and violence by husbands against their wives is not accepted anymore. Beating in any form must now be regarded as abuse forbidden by the implied meaning of the verse.

That such interpretations are not generally accepted among Muslims is no argument against their soundness. Variety of opinions is normal in Islamic legal and theological literature. Some opinions,

29 Jansen, HP/deTijd 7-5 2004; Ellian, 2005: 237

30 Peters 1979; Peters 2005

31 Cliteur, Trouw, 25-9 2004

32 Barlas 2003: 188-9

however, are more wide-spread or more authoritative than other ones, which is the outcome of struggles for power and authority among the men of religion. That sometimes those who propagate certain interpretations of the source texts are prosecuted and punished by the state, is neither an argument against their soundness. It only proves that some regimes in the Muslims world, for political reasons, impose specific beliefs on the population and repress other ones by force.

Ignoring modern exegetical literature, the anti-Islamic intellectuals use the Koran to construct a homogenous and uniform, but fictitious Islam. This Islam they call 'pure' Islam'. The idea behind it is that sometimes Islam may seem diverse, but that that is only appearance, since under the surface there is the genuine and pure Islam which is identical with the contents of the Koran and may come to the surface at any time. Those few of them that are aware of the position of the *hadith* in Islam, use it in the same way. Pure Islam can be known by all, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, just by consulting the Koran (and, according to some, the collections of *hadith*). In this way non-Muslim outsiders can also determine whether doctrines or practices are genuinely Islamic, without having to peruse the complicated commentaries or works of Islamic jurisprudence. Certain beliefs and practices are held to be inherently Islamic, because there are mentioned in the Koran, whereas other ones (e.g. the obligation for women to wear a headscarf or a *burqa`*)³³ are regarded as un-Islamic because not clearly prescribed by a Koranic text. The inference is that such practices may be prohibited by law, without being in conflict with freedom of religion.

I will discuss here by way of example two assertions about the Koran that are found in the writings of most anti-Islamic critics: the impossibility of interpreting the Koran owing to the sacrosanct and unassailable character of its text and the allegation that Islam cannot recognize the separation between Church and State because the Koran is a political document and contains legislation. The anti-Islamic hard-liners correctly assert that Muslims regard the Koran as God's literal word, but draw the incorrect inference that therefore the Koran is resistant against interpretation or symbolical exegesis.³⁴ Some would add that its unassailable character is enhanced by the notion of the uncreatedness of the Koran, which became the prevailing theological doctrine in the ninth century C.E. after the Abbasid caliphs had failed to impose the Mu'tazilite dogma of the createdness of the Koran.³⁵ Such allegations only show that those who make them are ignorant of the difference between the canonization of a text and its interpretation.

This sacrosanct authority of the Koran over the thinking and acting of Muslims explains, according to the anti-Islam publicists, several characteristics of Islam and Muslims. One implication of this view is that Islam is essentially immutable and that Muslims have no agency in formulating their religious doctrines. Moreover, Muslims are portrayed as a one-dimensional *homines islamici*, whose life and behaviour are entirely determined by his religion. This then means that Muslims are presented as puppets, carrying out the agenda set for them by their holy book. Such a constructed person is clearly light-years away from the autonomous individual and intellectually independent hero of modernity. Seen from this perspective, modernization or liberalization of Islam appears difficult, if not impossible, since this could only be done by rewriting the Koran. Objections that modernist interpretations of the Koran do exist are refuted by pointing out that that is no more than a fantasy Islam, whose inventors live in exile, having been expelled from the Islamic world for their ideas or worse, have been put to death for apostasy, as the example of the Sudanese Mahmud Taha³⁶ can tell us.³⁷ Such refutations are, of course, spurious: they do not prove that Islam does not allow pluralism

33 See e.g. Wilders, Elsevier, 14-9 2005

34 v.d. List, Elsevier 18-6-05; Cliteur, Trouw, 25-9 2004

35 Vervaet, Volkskrant, 20-4 2004

36 Mahmud Taha was the leader of a Sudanese religious-political group, the Republican Brothers. In 1986 he was sentenced to death for apostasy and executed by the Nimeiri regime.

37 Cliteur, Trouw, 25-9-04; v.d. List, Elsevier 18-6-05

and modernist interpretations, but only that certain states favour traditional interpretations and use their political power to suppress opposing views.

Often an essential difference is constructed between Islam and other religions with regard to the interpretability of their holy books: Whereas Judaism and Christianity allegedly have become more open and latitudinarian, it is claimed that Islam is a very scriptural and sticks to the letter of the Koran.³⁸ Islam, they argue, is an obstacle to the development and progress of science since scientific and scholarly texts are subordinate to and cannot deviate from the Koran.³⁹ Moreover, the high authority conferred on the text of the Koran makes it difficult for Muslims to accept criticism of their religion, because Islam is, in the view of the Islam critics, identical with the Koran and the Koran contains the words of God. Muslims, therefore, are in a deadlock: if they want to be modern they must read the Koran metaphorically, but because of the sacrosanct position of the Koran in their religion, they can't. It is a match, then, that they cannot win.

As we have seen, one of the most prominent points of criticism against Islam is the absence of a separation between Church and State. According to this criticism, Islam is a political religion, proclaiming a political system based on the Koran. This is allegedly because the Koran contains legislation which Muslims regard as divine.⁴⁰ Since the Koran, it is claimed, is an immutable guidebook for the behaviour of Muslims with an absolute monopoly of the truth with regard to the public domain, Church and State or religion and politics cannot be separated in Islam. As a consequence, the Islam critics infer, the political system of Islam is regarded by Muslims as of a higher order than the Dutch, secular constitution and incompatible with it.⁴¹ Many of these critics are therefore of the opinion that there is sufficient reason to doubt the loyalty of Muslims to the Dutch democratic and constitutional order.

Conclusions

From the early 1990s the Dutch political climate vis-à-vis immigrants has begun to change. The public discourse on migration focused more and more on cultural differences between the 'old Dutch' and the newcomers and on the urgency of cultural adaptation of the latter. The emphasis was now on the migrant's own responsibility. Problems were attributed not so much to structural, societal circumstances (the system of education, discrimination on the labour market, for instance), but rather to the migrants themselves and their culture. Cultural adaptation was presented as the key for successful integration. Hand in hand with the culturalization of the problems connected with migration went their 'Islamization': The migrants' culture was more and more equated with Islam and problems connected with migration were blamed on Islam.

Within this context, an anti-Islamic discourse developed in the Netherlands, created and supported by a number of conservative publicists and public intellectuals and supported by politicians. In it, migrants from Muslim regions are primarily identified as Muslims, whose behaviour can be explained from their religion. Islam is represented as uniform, monolithic and unchangeable and embodying the opposite of what are considered as the Dutch or European identity and core values. An important element in this construction is the notion that Islam is identical with the contents of the Koran, thus underscoring its unchangeable nature. Since the discourse appealed to very different segments of the population and fitted well in the political climate, it soon began to dominate the public debate. The anti-Islamic discourse provided an facile explanation for problems connected with migration, which in the first place put the blame on the migrants themselves. Politically, it was used to underscore the need

38 Cliteur, NRC-Handelsblad 7-7 2004

39 Vervaet, Volkskrant, 20-4 2004

40 Spruyt, Parool, 22-10-04, Volkskrant, 20-11-04; Trouw, 9-11-04

41 Ellian, 2005: 199-200

for restrictive immigration policies and for political measures to promote cultural assimilation. In addition it became for many an easy and acceptable way to express xenophobic sentiments.

This discourse bears a close resemblance to classical Orientalism as defined by Edward Said. The main similarity is that Islam is seen not as the product of the minds of Muslim believers, but rather as a set of ideas and prescriptions embodied in texts and determining the behaviour of Muslims. However, the Dutch discourse is a simplified brand of Orientalism: the only text that is regarded as relevant is the Koran. The *hadith* is rarely taken into account, and if it is done, it is treated in the same way as the Koran. Islam, it is argued, unlike contemporary Christianity and Judaism, is scriptural and does not allow the text of the Koran to be interpreted, the more so as the Koran contains *verbatim* God's words. Muslims, usually presented as having only one identity, namely Islam, cannot modernize because their religion has imprisoned them in tradition. Thus, the alleged failure of the integration process of Muslim migrants is blamed on their religious background. The logical consequences of this way of looking at Islam and Muslims are obvious: Muslim migrants are in a diabolical dilemma. If they want to become 'modern' and thereby eligible for full citizenship, they have either to abandon Islam or reform it. But since Islam is, in this perception, fixed in the literal words of the Koran, reform is impossible and the only viable option is to leave Islam. The message, then is clear: in modern Western societies there is no place for Muslims.

References

- Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam*. New Haven, 1992.
- Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. 2004. *Submission: De tekst, de reacties en de achtergronden*. Amsterdam: Augustus.
- Barlas, Asma. 2002. *'Believing women' in Islam: Unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an*. Austin, University of Texas Press.
- Cliteur, Paul. 2002. *Moderne Papoea's: Dilemma's van een multiculturele samenleving*. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers.
- Ellian, Afshin. 2005. *Brieven van een Pers: Over Nederlands en islamitisch kannibalisme*. Amsterdam: Meulenhof.
- Fortuyn, W.S.P. 1997. *Tegen de Islamisering van onze cultuur: Nederlandse Identiteit als Fundament*. Utrecht: A.W. Bruna.
- Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. 2002. *De zoontjesfabriek: Over vrouwen, Islam en integratie*. Amsterdam: Augustus.
- Mak, Geert. 2005. *Gedoemd tot kwetsbaarheid*. Amsterdam: Atlas.
- Peters, Rudolph. 1979.. *Islam and Colonialism: The Doctrine of Jihad in Modern History*. The Hague etc.: Mouton.
- Peters, Rudolph. 1982. 'The Mysteries of the Oriental Mind: Some Remarks on the Development of Western Stereotypes of Arabs.' In *The Challenge of the Middle East: Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Amsterdam*, edited by I.A. El-Sheikh, C.A. van de Koppel and R. Peters. Amsterdam: Institute of Modern Near Eastern Studies, pp. 73-91.
- Peters, Ruud. 2003. 'Regerende bij de Gratie Gods en Gebonden aan Zijn Wetten?' *Godsdienst en Politiek in Islam en Christendom*. In *Vreemde Verwanten: Overeenkomsten Tussen Islam en Christendom*, edited by Paul van Tongeren and Gerrit Steunebrink. Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers, pp. 129-51.
- Peters, Rudolph. 2005. *Jihad in Classical and Modern Islam*. 2nd updated ed. Princeton: Markus Wiener.
- Prins, Baukje. 2002. 'Het Lef Om Taboes Te Doorbreken: Nieuw Realisme in Het Nederlandse Discours over Multiculturalisme.' *Migrantenstudies* 18: 241-54.
- Prins, Baukje. 2004. *Voorbij de onschuld: Het debat over Integratie in Nederland*. 2e herz. ed. Amsterdam: van Gennep.
- Scheffer, Paul. 2000. 'Het Multiculturele Drama.' *NRC-Handelsblad*, 29-1.
- Veer, Peter van der. 1995. *Islam en het 'Beschaafde' Westen: Essays over de 'Achterlijkheid' van Religies*. Amsterdam: Meulenhof.
- Veer, Peter van der. 2001a. *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Veer, Peter van der. 2001b. 'Nederland Bestaat Niet Meer.' In *Naar Een Europese Islam? Essays*, edited by Dick Douwes. Amsterdam: Mets & Schilt , pp. 117-34.

Rudolph Peters
University of Amsterdam
e-mail: r.peters@uva.nl