

The Low Countries and Islam

Historical Relations and Present Debates

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[K A R E L S T E E N B R I N K]

Mohammed was born in 570, and he first heard the voices of divine revelation in about 605. After a difficult period in Mecca, from 622 on he was the religious and political leader of the city of Medina in North-West Arabia. By the time of his death, in 632, almost all the tribal chiefs of the Arabian peninsula had accepted him as both prophet and political leader. 79 years later, in 711, the Islamic army entered Europe, having crossed near Gibraltar (Gabal Tarik: the Mountain of Tariq, named after the leader of the Islamic army). This was to be the beginning of a long relationship between Islam and Europe, which would influence the Low Countries in a number of ways. Three periods can be distinguished in this relationship: 1) from 700 to 1600 when the Islamic world was far away but also much superior; 2) the period between 1600 and 1945 when parts of the Islamic world were subject to Dutch colonial power; 3) the period from 1965 to the present day, when for the first time there has been an increasing Muslim presence in the Low Countries.

Powerful but far-off foreigners

According to the opera *Bonifacius* (libretto by Peter te Nuyl, score by Henk Alkema), first performed in September 2004, the pagan Frisian King Redbad asked Charles Martel for the return of his abducted daughter (stanza 719), and he in turn wanted Redbad to help him in the fight against the Muslims. Charles Martel then sings (in French -11 languages are used in this Frisian opera!): *'The Muslim army is marching on France. I can see minarets in Dokkum, veiled women in Stavoren.'* He also offers Redbad the choice between Boniface and Abd-er-Rahman, between Christendom and Islam. Redbad asks if he will get his daughter back in return? But without success. It is suggested that by now she is already in Islamic hands and out of reach, so he does not convert. But the seamen and the missionaries continue to insist and eventually the Frisians are obliged *'to swallow Christendom'* (*'Fill the Frisians with their Saviour Jesus Christ'* sing the missionaries - in English; they come from England!).

That Muslims had an indirect influence on the Northern countries so early, not long after their conquest of Spain, is no mere random invention by this

Pieter Paul Rubens, *Portrait of Nicolas de Respaigne*. 1616-1618. Oil on canvas, 206 x 120 cm. Staatliche Museen, Kassel.



somewhat nationalistic Frisian opera. As early as the 1920s the great Belgian historian Henri Pirenne created a furore with a theory that was later called 'the Pirenne thesis', which he expressed most clearly in *Mahomet et Charlemagne*, published a few months before his death in 1935. In Pirenne's opinion, it was not the tribal migrations of around 400 that put an end to the Roman Empire and its powerful culture. These continued to exist until around 650, when the Muslims of Arabia began their unparalleled conquest of the eastern and southern shores of the Mediterranean. By about 720 they had conquered all the core countries of the Roman Empire, which made it possible for a Carolingian Empire to come into being in the more northerly reaches of Europe – an empire without cities, based on agricultural self-sufficiency, without extensive international trade, without gold coins (because that supply was also cut off). Without Mohammed, no Charlemagne! That is the somewhat simplistic slogan that sums up Pirenne's thesis.

All kinds of arguments have been employed against Pirenne: on the one hand, the Roman Empire was already in serious decline between 400 and 600. On the other hand, in the time of Charlemagne there was substantial trade with the Byzantines, and via them with parts of the Mediterranean. But for the time being the Muslims remained a very long way from the Low Countries. Actually they only really come into the picture with the Crusades, in the margins of the glorification of the warrior deeds of their heroes and via the romantic accounts of kidnapped youths and maidens. The principal witness of this tradition is Jacob van Maerlant. He is the first person to sketch a negative portrait of Mohammed in Dutch: a violent character with an excessive taste for women. A few years before the ignominious end of the Crusading adventure which had begun with such exaggerated optimism in 1096, namely between 1283 and 1288, this great translator-poet wrote about the First Crusade as a provisional climax

Advertising for Turmac
(Turkish-Macedonian
Tobacco Company, founded
in the Netherlands, 1912).



of the whole story, probably also as an appeal to Count Floris to take the Cross himself. But in his last work, *Of the Land Across the Sea* (Vanden lande van oversee), written a few years later, after the fall of Acre, the last crusader castle in 1291, Van Maerlant had to admit that it had all ended in failure.

The Middle Dutch love stories such as *Floris ende Blancefloer*, *Esmoreit* and *Gloriant* are quite different. In the first tale Floris, the son of a Spanish Muslim king, grows up with a kidnapped Christian maiden, Blancefloer. A secret romance develops between them, which provokes a cruel intervention by the king but despite that comes to a happy ending. A striking feature of this text is the refinement and high level of civilisation of the Muslim court, even in the Dutch text. In the plays *Esmoreit* and *Gloriant* too we are shown the rich and highly esteemed Islamic variant of international court culture. Indeed this seems to be a main theme: as far as religion is concerned Muslims are mainly regarded fairly negatively, but in many other respects they are seen as excellent and to be admired. This may tell us something about Muslims and Islam, but of course it also says something about the mechanism by which religions like to differentiate themselves from each other. Turks, Moors, Indonesians; the challenge of other far-away Muslims

Only in the 16th century new contacts with the world of Islam were established and therefore new images. The first were the Turks of the Ottoman Empire that had conquered Constantinople in 1453 and expanded rapidly in the Balkans. In 1529 they besieged Vienna, unsuccessfully; they repeated the attempt in 1683, but at its greatest extent the Ottoman Empire reached no further West than the Hungarian border. But Turkey did become an important trading

partner. Ambassadors of the Northern Netherlands were appointed to various places in the Turkish Empire. Among the earliest Turkish products to be found in the Low Countries are tulips, first imported in the second half of the 16th century. The famous Tulip Mania, when huge prices were paid for the bulbs, raged from 1634 until the price collapsed completely in February 1637.

In the late medieval period Arabic geographical, mathematical and medical works were translated into Latin, and initially interest in the study of Arabic was also focussed not on the Islamic religion but rather on those same exact sciences. From 1642 until his death in 1665 Levinus Warner worked for Leiden University in Istanbul and Smyrna, his main concern being the acquisition of manuscripts. He managed to despatch over a thousand of them to Leiden, chiefly relating to the exact sciences.



Logo Islamic University Rotterdam.

For a long time the Turks were trendsetters in fashion and lifestyle. Great painters like Rembrandt and Rubens delighted their clients by painting them attired in Turkish costume, complete with an impressive turban. See, for instance, the portrait of Nicolas de Respaigne that Peter Paul Rubens painted around 1616. For ladies the opposite was the case: until late into our prudish and Victorian 19th century the Muslim countries with their baths and harems were seen as bold and wanton. Curious, too, is the advertisement produced around 1930 by the cigarette brand Turmac (Turkish-Macedonian Tobacco Company), which still conjures up an image of the mysterious, sensual and uninhibited eastern woman.

Morocco's connections with the Netherlands are totally different. Here the earliest images are of *Barbary and its Pirates* (Barbaryen en des zelfs zee-rovers), from a book of 1684. Moreover, just like the Dutch (Piet Hein and his kind) the Moroccans were notorious privateers. Ransoms for slaves could bring in a lot of money. There are numerous documents printed later by those who had been ransomed to thank the families and citizens who had donated the money for their release. A constant factor in all these documents is the pressure to convert to Islam, together with the resistance shown to it. They even became a specialised kind of literary genre, with people avidly cribbing from each other.

The most comprehensive relations with Islamic countries were operated from the Low Countries between 1600 and 1800 by the first true multinational in history, the United East Indies Company (Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC). VOC established factories or trading posts throughout almost the entire Muslim world. Their purpose was trade, not missionary activities, although

Central Mosque,
Jubilee Park, Brussels.



the latter are also referred to in the VOC charters. VOC agreed contracts locally with many sultans and Muslim rulers, and these did often include a religious clause promising to abstain from proselytising, even mutual return of converts. After all, the first priority was that trade should be made safe. On 1 January 1614 Jan-Pieterszoon Coen, who would later become Governor-General, writes of predominantly Islamic Ternate, capital of the Moluccan archipelago: *'In the Moluccas religion should by all means be left alone. We must maintain our right to export cloves – by force even – but in respect of other matters we should turn a blind eye.'* (Steenbrink 1993:61)

With the Dutch East Indies the Dutch gained control over a significant segment of the Muslim world. At the end of the 1930s the Kingdom of the Netherlands had some 70 million inhabitants, of which only 9 million were in its European territory. Of the more than 60 million Dutch subjects in the East Indies around 45 million, more than three quarters, were Muslim. But they were scarcely regarded as such. They were first and foremost subjects of a conquered land from which raw materials were taken for the textile industry, the tobacco trade, and the rubber and sugar industries. They also provided an outlet for the European clothing industry, oil extraction and the bicycle trade. The Muslim leaders (known as 'priests' or *paderi* from the long white garments of the hajjis, those who had made the pilgrimage to Mecca) were kept under close observation, because these were the people considered most likely to attempt an uprising. However, a Muslim who drank wine was considered to be a 'good' Muslim. In 1885 the head of the mosque in Tjiandjoer, who also advised the lower court on Islamic law, refused to drink wine at a reception given by the Dutch Resident. His nose was pinched shut while a handful of local planters held him fast and poured wine into his mouth. When he failed to appear at subsequent official receptions he was labelled a 'drunken zealot' and dismissed. This is just one example of the kind of foolish actions ignorance and apprehension can lead to.

To control such idiocies, in 1889 the eminent scholar Christiaan Snoek Hurgronje was appointed 'advisor on indigenous affairs', in other words as chief



Plan for the West Mosque,
Amsterdam.

advisor on Islam to the colonial government. He developed policies for dealing with Islam which can also serve as an example to present-day western governments. First and foremost, fanatical Islam and its political expression must be strictly forbidden: prayers in the mosque, yes, but no politics, even though in Islamic doctrine it is not always easy to distinguish between the two. Then: non-political Islam should be given complete freedom, because it will disappear of its own accord as a result of liberal Western education. Back in his home country after a career in politics, Snouck gave a lecture to prospective colonial civil servants and told them to provide good neutral education, because this was the means by which the government could 'emancipate' the Muslims from their religion: *'Education is the best means for achieving that end. Even in countries of a much older Muslim culture than our archipelago, we see them working effectively to relieve the Mohammedans of some of the medieval rubbish which Islam has been dragging along in its wake for too long'* (Steenbrink 1993:89). But what Snouck expected totally failed to happen. After returning to their own country the students he had taught at his house in Batavia, and later in Leiden, were open and well-informed, but they were still stricter Muslims than the government advisor had hoped. *La Revanche de Dieu*, God's Revenge, the Frenchman Gilles Kepel was to call it in a book published in 1991. Western governments left strong secular governments behind in many Muslim countries as the legacy of colonialism. The Dutch did the same in Indonesia, just as the English did with Nasser in Egypt and the French with Hoari Boumedienne in Tunisia. But the expected attenuation of religion failed to materialise.

From guest worker to alien and Muslim

In the 1950s only a few Muslims came to the Netherlands from the East Indies. Only a handful of Muslims from the colonial army came to chilly Europe. There were hardly any Muslims in the Belgian Congo. They only went there from the mid-1990s on after the intense battle around the great lakes. The much

larger groups who came to the Low Countries from Turkey and Morocco were initially regarded simply as migrant workers, or, in a nice phrase, 'guest workers'. After 1980 there came a third group, the asylum-seekers from countries such as Iraq, Iran, Somalia and Pakistan. When they failed to return home as expected, they were referred to as aliens; not until after 1990 was there an increasing emphasis on their Muslim identity. They themselves began more and more to take their identity from their religion. Research in the Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool* provided statistical proof of this. Between 1947 and 1976 the paper published 68 articles about Islam, scarcely more than two per year. Up to 1990 there had been some ten to twenty per year. But when the Secretary-General of NATO, the Belgian Willy Claes, declared in the early 1990s that Islam was NATO's new enemy – then, and only then, the storm really broke.

Cover *Eindstrijd*
(Final Battle) by Hans
Jansen, Bert Snel et al.



A good example of these developments is the Central Mosque in the Brussels' Jubilee Park. This was built for the World Exhibition held in Brussels in 1897 and had as its main attraction 'The panorama of Cairo'. At that time Egypt was seen primarily as an exotic country. The building (which was never actually intended as a mosque) remained empty, fell into ruin and as early as 1906 was referred to as a '*disgraceful wart*'. In 1978 the structure was restored and today the Muslims in Brussels have a magnificent building on a prime site, something those in Amsterdam with their plans for a West Mosque can only dream about.

In the 1980s, as a result of the worsening economic climate, the Muslim migrant workers became more and more of an economic problem. When the economy picked up again in the 1990s the Muslims became a security problem, if a somewhat abstract one, because it had become increasingly important to create a new enemy for the West: from Huntington's *Clash of Civilisations* (1993) to the attacks of 11 September 2001. But in the last decade the emphasis has been less and less on economic or security problems. The national debate is increasingly concerned with religion and culture. While the Low Countries used to be so secularised, now, suddenly, an Islamic identity is clamouring for attention. It also appears that the cultural identity of Dutch and Flemings is once more going to play a role in a Europe of ever-decreasing political independence. And so right-wing politicians like Geert Wilders in the Netherlands and Filip Dewinter in Flanders have begun to preach the threatened destruction of their culture by a 'tsunami' of Islamisation. This is a somewhat cynical variant on the colonial ideology. Then the policy-makers still preached a simple leadership by Western culture. In 1909, when colonialism was at its height, Dr Douwe Rinkes appended the following proposition to an academic dissertation at Leiden University: '*For the continuing world hegemony of the Caucasian race, it is to be regretted that Alfonso d'Albuquerque was unable to carry out his plan to conquer Mecca [1530]*'. This mythical image of an eternal conflict also forms the background for a book published a century later by right-wing politicians, in which 'guidelines' are given for a final battle between the West and Islam (Jansen, Snel et al. 2009). Clearly it is still difficult to look at Muslims realistically, as fellow-citizens in a heterogeneous world. ■

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

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