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The Netherlands: A Cultural Crisis about Tolerance

In diesem Artikel wird dargelegt, wie es gegenwärtig in den Niederlanden zu neuen Spannungen im Verhältnis Meinungsfreiheit – Religionsfreiheit – Aufklärung und Toleranz gekommen ist:

In einem weltoffenen, Pluralität in großer Breite akzeptierenden Umfeld, das besonders Amsterdam über Jahrhunderte zur Zufluchtsstätte von Religionsflüchtlingen ebenso wie von kritisch-aufgeklärten Denkern gemacht hat, haben die spektakulären Mordtaten an dem rechtspopulistischen Politiker Pim Fortuyn und dem religionskritischen Filmemacher Theo van Gogh sowie die Behandlung der schwarzen Abgeordneten Ayaan Hirsi Ali, die inzwischen in die USA ausgewandert ist, zu starken Polarisierungen geführt.

Es hat sich eine Front militanter Säkularisten heraus gebildet, die alles Unheil den Religionen (und dabei besonders dem Islam) unterschieben und deren Verbannung aus dem öffentlichen Leben fordern. Für Wim Westerman ist damit ein neuer Fundamentalismus virulent, der den Fundamentalismus-Erscheinungen in den Religionen gegenüber steht und sich nicht mehr der Religions-Offenheit der klassischen Aufklärer wie Spinoza und Kant bewusst ist. Gleichzeitig wird damit nicht nur die individuelle Religionsfreiheit attackiert, sondern auch das Potential an Versöhnungskraft, das den Religionsgemeinschaft in großer Breite inne wohnt, negiert, und es ist schwer, die für eine konstruktive Entwicklung gesellschaftlicher Pluralität erforderliche Koalition verantwortlicher religiöser wie nicht-religiöser Kräfte neu zu beleben. Dabei bieten gerade die Bemühungen um interkulturelle und interreligiöse Erziehung in den Niederlanden eigentlich die Ansatzpunkte, sich auch mit den neuen Erscheinungsformen von „Fundamentalisierung“ in verschiedenen gesellschaftlichen und religiösen Gruppierungen bewusst und kritisch auseinander zu setzen.

Amsterdam was always and still is an intercultural laboratory. More than 174 languages are actively spoken in the city. More than 55 percent of the school children have a non-Dutch background. The most common boys' name is Mohammed. Although the percentages of citizens with non-Dutch roots are higher than ever, since the end of the sixteenth century the city had always a substantial number of migrants from all over Europe. Sephardic Jews and Askenazim felt at home in Amsterdam and named it *Mokum* (= the City) or the *Jerusalem of the North*. Jewish thinkers enriched the intellectual climate of Mokum. One of them was the philosopher Baruch de Spinoza. An other was Menasseh Ben Israel, who strongly influenced the later German Enlightened Jewish philosopher Mendelssohn.

The early plural character of the city stimulated already in the seventeenth century, compared with other European cities, a relative freedom of press, expression, thought and religion. Publishers printed books that were not allowed in other countries. As a result foreign thinkers as René Descartes, Pierre Bayle, John Locke, Wilhelm Leibniz and Voltaire had their most ‘controversial’ books been published in Mokum. The cultural climate in that city was one of relative freedom in the public sphere for theological and philosophical discourses.

The Princeton University historian Jonathan Israel showed recently that in Amsterdam the roots can be located of the Enlightenment that has laid the foundations for the modern Western political and liberal world. A world based on human rights as equality, democracy, secular values and universality¹. Israel states that the seventeenth’s century intellectual climate is the most important contribution of The Netherlands to the West. Above all sophisticated theories of toleration and individual liberty grew in Mokum. For instance Bayle showed that: *‘toleration and individual freedom are extremely fragile, vulnerable and difficult things that are heavily dependent on an intellectual grasp of the interrelationship between personal freedom, equality and liberty of expression, on the one hand, and of religion, politics and tolerance, on the other’*².

Attacks on tolerance?

In a reaction to a recent cultural and political and social uproar in The Netherlands Jonathan Israel referred to De Spinoza and Bayle: *‘Since the killing of Theo van Gogh, one finds deep shock and abundant signs of distress on all sides. The feeling in The Netherlands at the moment is seemingly one of a deep cultural crises revolving around the question of toleration which until recently was a basic, unquestioned, token for granted pillar of the Dutch sense of identity ... Practically everyone in The Netherlands is now discussing whether the long-established familiar Dutch tolerance ... was in reality naïve, unthinking, complacent and blind to the social problems which is now seen to have created’*³.

The killing of Theo van Gogh in November 2004 in the streets of Amsterdam led to fierce discussions, in the media and in political circles. Discussions about the ‘typical’ Dutch constitutional freedoms of expression and religion, and to a lesser extent: education⁴. Van Gogh was a journalist and filmmaker, not afraid to blame religions as the sources of social injustice, backwardness, discrimination of women, aggression, etc. He especially attacked Judaism and Islam in extremely fierce disqualifications. So he

¹ J.I. Israel (2001) *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity. 1650-1750*. Oxford: OUP.

J.I. Israel (2006) *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man*. Oxford: OUP.

² J.I. Israel (11-12-2004) *Pierre Bayle Lecture*. www.nrc.nl/opinie/artikel/1102746588793.html.

³ See: 2.

⁴ G. Mak (2005) *Gedoemd tot kwetsbaarheid*. Amsterdam: Atlas.

repeatedly accused the Prophet Muhammed of paedophilia and qualified all Muslims as goat fuckers. Van Gogh followed the Somalian refugee Mrs. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who blamed the Prophet for marrying a young girl. But Van Gogh as well as Hirsi Ali forgot to say that Islamic Law includes certain conditions for child marriages, as: no sexual intercourse before puberty and not before the girl is emotionally developed.

Van Gogh always defended his rude language as the constitutional right of freedom of expression and freedom of publication. Just a few weeks before his murder he presented on one of the national television stations a short movie: *Submission*. It was a film about the oppression of women in Islamic societies and showing Koranic texts, projected on naked female bodies. Van Gogh had produced this movie in close co-operation with Hirsi Ali, then a member of the Dutch parliament. Ali was born in Somalia, grew up in a traditional Islamic family in Saudi-Arabia, Ethiopia and Kenya. She fled in 1992 to The Netherlands, because of a forced marriage. She apostated from Islam and profiled herself as a liberator for women oppressed by Islamic traditions⁵.

Mohammed B.⁶, Van Gogh's murderer, grew up in a Moroccan family, well integrated in Dutch society. The family spoke Dutch at home. Mohammed's former teachers saw him as a bright pupil, well adapted to the Dutch society. He studied commercial computer sciences and was active as a social worker in Amsterdam. It was only after the death of one of his parents that he changed his liberal Islamic attitudes into Islamic fundamentalism. According to the media Mohammed B. had murdered in reaction to *Submission* and Van Gogh's attack on Islam⁷.

Already a few hours after the killing many Muslims protested against the murder in the streets of Amsterdam. The general public interpreted the murder as a typical Islamic deed. Islam was seen as the source of aggression and nearly all Muslims were characterized as potential killers. Political commentators analysed Mohammed's action not only as an attack on an individual human life, but especially as an attack on the constitutional freedoms of thought and expression. Only a few commentators raised the question if the murder could be interpreted as a reaction in defence of the fundamental right of freedom of religion. Could it have been that Mohammed B. killed Van Gogh, while he saw him as an enemy of the human right of freedom of religion?

⁵ In 2006 she left The Netherlands as an Islam specialist for a conservative American think tank in Washington. This after a political conflict in the Dutch parliament where she lost her Dutch passport because she had misinformed the Dutch officials about her personal background.

⁶ In Holland the names of suspected criminals are not published in full in newspapers, till the court has proved them guilty. Even their portraits are not shown in public. These rules were for the first time broken, when the day after the murder of Van Gogh, Mohamed B's was shown on television by order of the Court of Investigation. Since the conviction of B. he is usually still named 'B', because his full Moroccan name is, for most Dutch people, too difficult to pronounce.

⁷ *Der Mord an dem Regisseur und Journalisten Theo van Gogh in den Niederlanden am 2. November 2004*. H. Schultze Interview mit W. Westerman 17-11-2004

Self proclaimed defenders of Enlightenment

A number of opinion leaders and other authorities, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali and a former Minister for Integration, Rita Verdonk, immediately came to the conclusion that in a democracy as The Netherlands the constitutional rights of thought and expression rank higher on the constitutional scale than the constitutional freedom of religion. They said openly, what since 11th September 2001 repeatedly was said in guarded terms. Some politicians and journalists referred to Pim Fortuyn, a populist who promoted himself as candidate prime minister and was murdered early May 2002, a few days before the national elections, by an activist fighting for animal rights⁸. Fortuyn's slogan was: '*I say what I think, I do what I say*'. He had attacked the political correctness and advocated nationalism and xenophobia. After the Twin Towers incident he had blamed the Islam as a backward and stupid religion. He agreed however with the French philosopher Voltaire, that you can disagree with an other and at the same time you can fight for the other so he can express his own ideas⁹.

It is remarkable that the commentators after the death of Van Gogh referred only partly to Fortuyn's ideas. They did not quote his agreement with Voltaire and deprived religiously affiliated people to defend the constitutional right of freedom of education in the public sphere. They banned religion completely to the private sectors. They were anti-religious in any sense and spoke with disgust about the ideas of the mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, a man with a secularized Jewish background, who after the 11th September introduced the idea that religion can be a central uniting force in a culturally and religiously divided city. This idea was elaborated to educational projects all over the city.

The religion-fighters felt themselves comfortable at home with the *Atheist Manifest* of the Utrecht philosopher Herman Philipse: an anthology of essays about the unreasonable character of religion¹⁰. They sketched only dogmatic and fundamentalistic variants of religions. For them religions were only stages of dogmatism, not influenced by any Enlightenment¹¹. They reduced simultaneously all problems with the cultural integration of ethnic minority groups to religious, mainly Islamic, problems¹². They tried to ban multiculturalism as well as religious life from the public spheres to the private sectors. They preferred not to see any turban or head scarf in the streets¹³. They advocated freedom of expression, but not for those who want to show religious symbols as

⁸ J. Chorus & M. de Galan (2002). *In de ban van Fortuyn. Reconstructie van een politieke aard-schok*. Amsterdam: Olympus.

⁹ P. Cliteur (220). De onzichtbare religie. In: P Dekkers (ed.) *Nederland na Fortuyn*. Amsterdam: Trouw. 113-118.

¹⁰ H. Philipse (2204-6). *De onredelijkheid van religie*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

¹¹ J.A.A. van Doorn (5-3-2005). Toen het katholicisme, nu de islam. In: *Trouw*.

¹² G. Pama. (22-06-2002). We islamiseren alle minderheidsproblemen. In: *NRC Handelsblad*.

¹³ H.E.S. Woldring (16-10-2002). Tulband en keppeltje horen op straat. In: *Trouw*.

the cross, a star of David, a crescent, etc. in classrooms and in courtrooms, etc.¹⁴. For the critics religious education in public schools and the religiously affiliated schools, in The Netherlands two third of all schools: the religiously affiliated schools, are pre-historic relics.

These critics of religion profiled themselves as the defenders of Enlightenment and the freedom of thought and expression, at the expense of the freedom of religion¹⁵. They put, in the traditions of De Spinoza's radical Enlightenment, the free individual before the freedom of religion¹⁶. But in contrast to De Spinoza and his followers, they ignored the distinction between reason and faith. De Spinoza kept distance from good and evil only in a theological sense, but not in the social sense of the concepts. Of course, he was not a post-modern cultural relativist, and he was aware of the human nature that seeks next to reason religious feelings. As Jonathan Israel says: '*Most thinkers in the tradition of Enlightenment were aware of the weakness of reason. They thought that superstition and ignorance always would have more adherents than pure reasons. This is why the followers of De Spinoza supported a state religion that could teach people the basic principles of justice and charity. They thought, that most people cannot simply live without any religion and only with reason*'¹⁷.

Other philosophers of the Enlightenment, as Voltaire and Immanuel Kant, blamed intellectual tyrants, who frustrated the freedom of thought, as the sources of much trouble in the world. They saw the Enlightenment as the courage to think and speak freely. They believed however in religion within the borders of common sense¹⁸. In this way of thinking the title of John Locke's book *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1694) is revealing¹⁹. Of course, one cannot understand the Enlightenment when one is blind for its roots as reactions to the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But authors as Voltaire were not enlightened because of their disputes with religions, but because of the means they used on the religious battlefields.

The reigning Dutch critics of religion, who see themselves as neo-liberals in the tradition of the Enlightenment, make the courage of expression absolute and diminish the human need for religion. Their political correct idea is that everyone always and everywhere may stand up for his opinion, irrespective of any consequences for offences to certain groups or persons or the whole society²⁰. For some of them the freedom of expression is narrowed to the total freedom to blame religions for everything that is

¹⁴ A. van Egmond (24-11-2004). Neoliberalisme als nieuwe religie. In: *Centraal Weekblad*.

¹⁵ So, immediately after the death of Van Gogh, Ayaan Hirsi Ali announced the publication of a book *Shortcut to Enlightenment*, to denounce Islamic principles in conflict with the enlightened liberal democracy. See: J. Vos (21-10-2005). Verlichting maakt soms blind. In: *Trouw*.

¹⁶ Y. Stein ((6-5-2005). Verlichting is de moed vrijuit te durven denken. In: *Trouw*.

¹⁷ See: 40.

¹⁸ See: 40.

¹⁹ C. Offermans (1-5-2004). Gedweep met de Verlichting slaat nieuw-rechts met blindheid. In: *NRC Handelsblad*.

²⁰ H. van der Ven (4-11-2004). In: *NRC Handelsblad*

wrong is society. They force an exile to the private domain for them who want to express their religious feelings. They ignore that all world views, even enlightened world views, have their subjective truths. They seem to handle the enlightened concept of 'reason' as fundamentalists.

Of course it is debatable if enlightened thinkers can be fundamentalists. At least some go on the defensive to the accusation of being fundamentalists, and declare that fundamentalism is only present in the so-called 'Western book-religions', and while the Enlightenment has no 'holy book', enlightened thinkers can never be fundamentalists²¹. They forget that the possession of a holy book is not the only criteria for fundamentalism. Fundamentalism can for instance also be observed in the use of the book, in the methods of thinking, ethics and rituals. Fundamentalism is also the religious or secular doctrine that a religious or philosophical core is to be presented literally and must be seen as the absolute truth. Because of this truth character, it can only be interpreted in one way, the way the fundamentalist does²². The usual reaction of a fundamentalist meeting other fundamentalism, is the repetition of his own doctrines and the prevention of dialogue²³. Often fundamentalism intensifies in situations of social change, especially when the plural character of a society grows²⁴.

²¹ See: R. Dawkins (2006). *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam Press.

²² W.E. Westerman (1997) Religious Fundamentalism as a Challenge to Educational Situations. In: N.G. Holm (ed.), *The Familiar and the Unfamiliar in the World Religions. Challenges for Religious Education Today*. Åbo: Åbo Akademi University. 140-155.

²³ J.J.E. van Lin (1974). *Protestantse theologie der godsdiensten. Van Edinburgh naar Tambarin*. Assen: Van Gorcum.

²⁴ See: 46, where examples are given, as the growth of fundamentalism in the Middle-East, described by: M. Tworuschka (1992) Islamische Geschichte. In: M. & U. Tworuschka, *Bertelsmann Handbuch Religionen der Welt*. München: Bertelmann Lexikon Verlag. 179-182.