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Current Debate essay



“Page after Page I Thought, That’s the Way It Is”

Academic Knowledge and the Making of the ‘Islam Debate’ in the Netherlands

Martijn de Koning | ORCID: 0000-0001-7343-529X

Faculty of Philosophy, Theology and Religious Studies, Department
of Religious Studies, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
m.dekoning@ftr.ru.nl

Thijl Sunier | ORCID: 0000-0002-4295-6065

Faculty of Social Science, Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology,
Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
j.t.sunier@vu.nl

Abstract

In this ‘Current Debate’ article, we discuss the entanglement of academic discourse and public debates on Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands. Academic output is a crucial but complex constituent of that debate. Many academics write policy reports, or take part in the debate through the media, and, whether they like it or not, their regular work is often co-opted by one of the discursive communities that take part in the debate. Research on Islam and Muslims is thus entangled with predominating knowledge regimes and policy priorities. We discuss several Dutch publications of the last three decades, and three recent books in particular, in order to show this entanglement.

Keywords

Muslim question – counterpublics – the Netherlands – regimes of knowledge – policy principles

1 Introduction¹

Muslims and Islam are topics of heated debate in politics, the media and, not least, in academia. In this article we address the role of scholarly work in this so-called ‘Islam debate’. Schirin Amir-Moazami (2018: 10) asks how the representation of Muslims in Europe is entangled with underlying regimes of knowledge and what kind of techniques of governance they produce. Amir-Moazami and the other authors have analysed how the assumptions and conditions under which gathering and producing particular forms of knowledge about Muslims in Europe are created, and how they relate to political interpellations and therefore how this knowledge is a political intervention in and of itself.

Thijl Sunier (2012, 2014) has addressed the question of how the national domestication of Islam by European nation-states, especially after the terrorist attacks in New York in September 2001, has generated particular strands of knowledge production. A shift occurred in the research focus, and research agendas were increasingly formulated around this national policy goal. This resulted in a gradual narrowing down of the research focus to the governance of security, deviant behaviour, the clash of cultures and the ways in which nation-states deal with the challenges of an increasingly vocal and transnational religious constituency (Sunier, 2014: 1142).

Nadia Fadil (2019) states that scholarship on Islam in Europe currently finds itself in a double epistemological impasse. On the one hand, Muslims in Europe are assessed primarily as ‘Europe’s Other’ while, on the other, religious claim-making by Muslims causes unease and discomfort among those scholars who implicitly or explicitly assess Muslim activity through the lens of secularism.

This ‘Current Debate’ article builds on these insights. We shall analyse the entanglement of the dominant knowledge regimes, policy principles and research priorities by asking how academic work is related to, embedded in or conducive to public and political debates about Islam in the Netherlands. The *JOME* ‘Current Debate’ section deals with publications about ongoing public, political or academic debates in European languages that are not accessible to

1 The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the authors and do not represent the opinion of *JOME*.

many European academics. There is a wide range of books in Dutch on Islam, including work on specific Islamic traditions and practices (e.g. Buitelaar, 1993); broad overviews of Islamic traditions and its contemporary relevance to Dutch society (e.g. Driessen, 1997); accounts on Islamophobia (e.g. van der Valk, 2015); studies on everyday life of Muslims (e.g. Wagemakers and de Koning, 2015); inter-communal relations (e.g. Berger, 2020); and books written from a more religious perspective (e.g. Abdus Sattar, 2018).

We have selected three recent Dutch publications that have specific relevance to the ongoing debate about Islam in Dutch society. The first, titled *Wordt het nog wat met het islamdebat?* (Whither the Islam Debate?) edited by Gert Jan Geling and Jan Jaap de Ruiter (2019), is a collection of essays in which the authors were asked to reflect on the ongoing debate on Islam in the Netherlands since 9/11. The other two books are academic publications. In 2019, Ruud Koopmans published *Het vervallen huis van de islam: Over de crisis van de islamitische wereld* (The Derelict House of Islam: On the Crisis of the Islamic World), in which he seeks to answer the question of why ‘the Islamic world’ is in crisis, and, in 2016, Machteld Zee published *Heilige identiteiten: Op weg naar een shariastaat?* (Sacred Identities. Toward a Sharia state?), based on her dissertation about Sharia-councils in the UK (Zee, 2015). In addition, we discuss a number of other relevant publications that have appeared in Dutch.

We have chosen these books for a number of reasons. *Whither the Islam Debate?* is the latest addition to a series of edited volumes published since the early 1990s about the Dutch ‘Islam debate’, with the aim of gauging the political climate of the time. The editors state that the debate has been strongly polarised in the Netherlands in the past decades, and they identify four distinct positions: leftist pro-Islam, Islam critical, secular-humanist, and Islamic. The contributions to the volume provide a good starting point from which to explore the constituent elements of the Dutch debate.

The reason for choosing the books by Zee and Koopmans were threefold. Koopmans originally published his book in Dutch, while Zee translated her dissertation into Dutch and published a popularised version. These authors clearly intend to reach out to a Dutch-speaking readership. Although they formulate their arguments in general terms, the reader who is familiar with the Dutch debate on Islam will also recognise specific Dutch elements.

The resonance and reactions that the books engendered in society account for much of the media attention they received, which has certainly been more than that raised by the other publications mentioned above. The books apparently struck a chord and received more than average, predominantly positive, media attention and the authors were accredited as important and influential scholars in reviews in the media: ‘Koopmans is an empirical sociologist and a

great comparator and this makes this book a milestone in contemporary sociology' (Fennema, 2019); 'Zee's investigation into British Sharia councils, which predictably handle mainly divorce cases, is an important warning' (Withuis, 2016). The authors have used the publication of their books and the reactions to them as an avenue for engaging with the public debate, each in his or her own way.

A third reason for selecting these books is that, in our view, the authors position themselves as 'critical of Islam' and/or secularist according to Geling and de Ruiter's (2019) categorisation. The interplay between these three characteristics motivates our choice.

We shall first set out our theoretical approach with regard to the embeddedness of academic knowledge production and its relevance to the political and public debate on Islam. Then we shall provide a historical analysis of how 'Muslim' has developed into a policy category in the Netherlands over the past four decades and how that has fed into the debate. And, finally, we shall discuss the three works in greater detail, and more specifically how the authors' arguments connect with the current debate.

2 Knowledge Production and Reaching Out

There is a general image of academic output as relatively detached from everyday public moods and the nitty gritty of policy-making. Authors of academic works often tend to state that they 'simply provide facts and information' without any specific aim or audience in mind. We question that point of view because it is an oversimplified understanding of academic knowledge production and dissemination. Authors and audiences sometimes meet fortuitously but, in most cases, authors and readers are part of an already existing and constantly evolving discursive community in which modern mass media play a decisive role. A text must appeal to and capture an existing concern, and propose new explanations. Messages must resonate, they must refer to recognisable situations and be linked to an explanatory discourse and, as Lester Olson (2007) argues, authors are also discursively constructed as part of a wider process of power and knowledge construction.

As Dennis Grube argues, politicians and opinion leaders are caught between the desire to embark on new ideas and the need to remain trustworthy and solid. Rhetorical choices made at critical junctures can define the range of future available options. He calls this 'rhetorical path dependency' (Grube, 2016: 530). Rhetoric, and also texts with a mission, must build on previous concerns, but at the same time present a new angle, or new information. According to Alan Finlayson (2012: 759), the persuasive quality of a text depends on its containing

the right mix of logos, pathos and ethos. Logos refers to the author’s authority based on proof and evidence to be found, for example, in scientific text. Pathos refers to the quality of being able to affect the reader emotionally, and to tap into his or her concerns. Ethos refers to the authoritative status of the author in general terms. Here, academic output plays a crucial role and this, we argue, is applicable to the books by Zee and by Koopmans.

However, one text does not create an addressable public or a new audience; nor can it instantly change the direction of thinking. According to Michael Warner (2002: 62), a public must be part of an ongoing reflexive circulation of discourse.

[...] Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public. Between the discourse that comes before and the discourse that comes after, one must postulate some kind of link. And the link has a social character; it is not mere consecutiveness in time, but a context of interaction.

In short, text and readership are mutually constitutive. Producers of texts and messages do not only give voice to an already existing public concern; a discursive community is also actually being (re)constituted.

A very effective strategy by which a discursive community is shaped is to constitute itself as a ‘counterpublic’. As Warner (2002: 86) argues: ‘A counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one.’ The two academic works discussed here were reviewed and presented in the media as scholarly work ‘against the grain’. The authors raised a pressing issue that is allegedly ignored by many academics and mainstream (read: dominant) media. The authors intend to break through what they consider to be mainstream paradigms, assumptions and outlines of the debate. In this way the books by Zee and Koopmans are drawn into the Dutch discursive arena.

The volume edited by Geling and de Ruiter (2019) consists of essays by fifteen Dutch journalists, academics, politicians and opinion-makers with the aim of reflecting on the current Islam debate in the country. In 2017, a public debate was organised in *De Balie*, a well-known debating centre in Amsterdam. Most of the participants were very critical of Islam and were politically right-wing. The event aroused a lot of criticism in the media because the debate culminated in a discussion about how to get less of Islam and fewer Muslims. Geling and de Ruiter, who took part, did not agree with the course the debate in *De Balie* took, believing that it would only lead to further polarisation and make dialogue between different opinions almost impossible.

Whither the Islam Debate? was intended to be an attempt to counter this polarisation, stimulate a dialogue, and present the diversity of positions in the debate. Geling and de Ruiter claim to take a secular-humanist 'in the middle' stance, between anti-Islam and pro-Islam discursive communities, which is, according to them, the only reasonable position to take in order to overcome polarisation. A middle position, or the 'radical centre' is a popular political stance in the Netherlands among a considerable number of political parties across the entire spectrum. It is often a guiding principle in Dutch consensus democracy, the so-called 'Polder Model'. This consensus democracy is also attacked by many Islam critics, who claim it would ignore, even condone unacceptable Islamic practices and opinions.

There is an imbalance in the composition of the contributors to the volume as most articles are written by well-known opinion-makers who are very critical of Islam and the presence of Muslims in the Netherlands. According to Geling and de Ruiter, they had invited other ('pro-Islam', as they put it) contributors, but most had refused for a variety of reasons. Despite this imbalance, the volume provides an adequate state-of-the-art picture of the Islam-critical arguments most often used in the public debate on Islam. The contributions in general oscillate between reflections about other sides in the debates and the authors' own positions and perspectives on Islam in relation to societal problems. As one of the authors, Ewoud Butter (2019: 257), argues, the debate is not about Islam but about what is considered undesirable about the presence of Muslims in the country.

Whether 'the Muslim' is referred to as a heathen, fanatic, Turk, Arab, pan-Islamist, guest worker, member of an ethnic minority, an assimilated citizen or a potential radical, depends on political, religious and intellectual elites and the political climate in a particular period of time. In these debates and policies, a distinction is drawn between 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' Muslim, or as Mahmood Mamdani (2005) puts it, 'good Muslims' and 'bad Muslims'. Both are predicated on a racialising vision of 'Muslim Otherness' whereby the population is divided into 'us' vs (migrant) Muslims, and a cultural-religious rationalisation is imposed combined with a sense that Dutchness is incompatible with (certain strands of) Islam, with a prescription of how to act. While the 'acceptable Muslim' needs to be redeemed and integrated (increasingly meaning assimilated), the 'unacceptable Muslim' is regarded as a threat to social cohesion and national security and as somebody who refuses to insert him or herself into white middle-class norms and the so-called Dutch cultural achievements or core values.

Several studies have shown that this racialisation of Muslims produces anti-Muslim sentiment or Islamophobia in the Netherlands. Forms of Islamophobia

(such as prejudice and hostile attitudes towards Muslims, institutionalised discrimination and scapegoating of Muslims in political rhetoric) have influenced Muslims’ lives considerably and also impacted on their social and political participation in the Netherlands (van der Valk, 2015; Vieten, 2016; van Es, 2019). Yet, even though some research shows very high levels of anti-Muslim prejudice and sentiment in Dutch society (Velasco González et al., 2008; Savelkoul et al., 2011; de Bruijn et al., 2020), Muslims have managed to build a strong infrastructure in the Netherlands, with over 400 mosques, Islamic burial places, permission for ritual slaughter without stunning and state funded Islamic schools. To date, the secular arrangements, although perhaps not always up to date for a pluralistic society, do give Muslims protection against infringements of their rights and allow them religious freedom within the boundaries of the law.

On the other hand, laws such as the ban on face coverings and debates about ritual slaughter and foreign funding do show that this protection and freedom cannot be taken for granted. In many of these debates the central idea revolves around the question ‘What went wrong with Islam?’, to paraphrase Bernard Lewis (2002). This implicit rhetorical question captures the major stakes in the current public debate on Islam and it is this question the books discussed here address.

3 From the ‘Muslim Question’ to the ‘Islam Debate’ (and Back)

Rogers Brubaker observes a massive shift in the image about Islam and Muslims in Europe in the past decade. Although this discursive shift received enormous impetus from the terrorist attacks in New York in September 2001, according to Brubaker (2013: 3), this shift started much earlier. Tracking ‘the Islam debate’ over a number of years is an adequate method for tracing the development the evolving image of Islam and Muslims and identifying the roots of these images.

Doing this in a general way does not yield much, however; it must be embedded in a specific national and temporal context.² We shall show that specific national aspects of this debate become manifest first and foremost in reflections, opinions and advice about how to govern Muslims. The Dutch debate actually started in the early 1980s, when the Dutch government developed integration policies for migrants, but its pedigree is older. The ‘Islam issue’ in the Netherlands is inextricably entangled with the broader public discussion over the past four decades about multiculturalism and the integration of

² For debates in other European countries, see e.g. Lyon and Spini, 2004; Schiffauer et al., 2004; Allievi, 2006; Spielhaus, 2010; Halm, 2013.

migrants with an Islamic background, but also with the history of religious pillarisation, which originated at the beginning of the twentieth century. The public and political debate revolved around a number of evolving key events, key moments and key issues. We contend that these elements have shaped the construction of 'Muslim' and the semantic field around the term in a typically Dutch way. This in turn constitutes specific discourses of Dutchness and Europeanness and the challenges to them, which circulate in policies, public debates and private interactions in Dutch society, culminating in policy proposals.

Interestingly, the Dutch colonial encounter with Islam, mainly in Indonesia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is almost erased from this debate (de Koning, 2020). The debates usually pertain to the so-called guest workers and their descendants. Thus, in the 1970s and early 1980s 'Muslim' (if the term was used at all) first and foremost referred to labour migrants, mainly from Turkey and Morocco, who arrived from the early 1960s onwards. Until well into the 1970s, the cultural and religious background of these migrants did not play a decisive role in policy agendas, or in public images of migrants. Migrants were defined in terms of class position or nationality, and were primarily seen as members of a temporary labour force who would eventually return to their countries of origin. Policies across Europe were based on this idea of temporariness (Castles, 1984; Sunier, 1996; Rath et al., 2001; Nielsen, 2004).

A crucial factor contributing to the evolving image of Islam and Muslims was the publication of a number of texts by academics, politicians and opinion-makers in which they reflected on the situation and gave a new impetus to the public debate. This was not the case in the 1970s, however. Only a small number of studies published in the Netherlands in those years referred to the religious background of migrants (see e.g. Waardenburg 1964; Joemman and Lokhorst 1977; Theunis 1979). Aside from these publications, several theological reflections were published about relations between Muslims and Christians, or the relationship between 'The West' and Islam in general. Some of these early studies had an inclusive message and called upon governments to take religious background into account and to facilitate religious accommodation (Klop, 1982; Metze, 1982; Peters, 1982), while others pointed to the religious/cultural gap between Islam and the West/Christianity (see e.g. Sierksma, 1974; van Baaren, 1979). Nevertheless, the focus on the religious background of these migrants hardly resonated in the public perception.

In legal terms, inequality between religious denominations existed until 1983, and the Protestant Church was privileged. In the early 1960s secular parties successfully amended legislation that had initially been designed exclusively for Christian denominations to include 'Mohammedans', by invoking

the equality principle (Hampsink and Roosblad, 1992; Rath et al., 2001; Brand, 2005; van Sasse van Ysselt, 2013).³

In 1983, a change in the Constitution was effected, resulting in the abolition of the formal ties between church and state that remained, and consequently of the final remnants of the dominant position of the Protestant Church. Formally, all financial relations between the state and the church were broken off (Hampsink and Roosblad, 1992: 9). Combined with an increasing cultural de-pillarisation (Bracke, 2013), this meant that Muslims now lacked the resources the churches had had in the past, and they slowly but gradually stood out as ‘still’ being religious in a society that was increasingly defined as secular.

But this change also provided Muslims with opportunities to participate in society as Muslims. From then on, all religions were considered equal in law (including ‘new’ religions such as Islam and Hinduism). The Netherlands do not define religious denominations and communities in legal terms, or register individuals’ religious affiliation. Together with the articles that stipulate freedom of conscience and expression, the Constitution provides a legal basis for a specific mode of religious equality, which can be understood as a ‘non-recognition’ principle. Since religious denominations are not mentioned in the Constitution explicitly, there is no legal ground for recognition. Consequently, all religious denominations are equal on those grounds (Szumigalska, 2015).

In practice, however, the principle is malleable and applied situation by situation by administrative authorities, ranging from non-intervention (citing the separation of religion and state) to exclusion (on the grounds that Muslim communities do not exist in legal terms). This has had a variety of effects on the position of religious communities, depending on political preferences and temporal and situational conditions. The place of Islam in Dutch society depends to a large extent on political decision-making, and the bargaining position of Muslim actors.

In the early 1980s, the number of migrants with an Islamic background had increased considerably, mainly as a result of family reunion, and they became more visible in society. In 1985, four public lectures about Islam and Muslims held in 1984 in Amsterdam, and were published under the title *Islam in Paradiso*.⁴ The speakers were well-known Dutch scholars of Islam and their

3 One of the first purpose-built mosques in the Netherlands, in the city of Almelo, was partly financed with this money.

4 Paradiso is the name of a famous pop concert hall in Amsterdam, where public lectures and debates were occasionally held.

lectures were general scholarly introductions. The book addressed the need of the public to learn more about this 'unknown and foreign' religion.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the government gradually acknowledged that the idea of temporariness was unrealistic. The majority of the migrants were set to stay in the Netherlands permanently. In 1983, the Ministry of the Interior issued a report in which the outline of a new policy was formulated (BiZa, 1983). Migrants were granted basic rights to practise their own culture, while at the same time being expected to integrate into society. This became the typical Dutch trajectory to full citizenship. Integration was shorthand for 'participation' in the central sectors of society: labour, housing and education (Engbersen and Gabriëls, 1995). Along with this concept of integration, the term *achterstand* (best translated as deprivation) made its way into the discourse. A lack of integration was equated with *achterstand* and vice versa.

Equality, a central concept in integration policies in the early 1980s, should be understood here as meaning equal opportunities and equal rights (of migrants and the indigenous population), in order to create a level playing field. Equality did not refer to the equal validation of cultures, often associated with multiculturalism. However, during the 1980s, the government adopted a lenient attitude towards migrants' cultural and religious activities. First, there was a general notion of culture and religion as basic aspects of being human. This principle reflected the strong influence of Christian politics in Dutch governments during most of the twentieth century up to 1994 and the prevailing heritage of pillarisation.⁵ On the pathway to full citizenship, the relevance of culture and religion for the people concerned was thus recognised as a psychological concession, not as a formal right. Immigrants need time to adapt to new circumstances and this could best be accomplished in 'their own cultural and religious environment'.

Organisations of migrants would function as a bridge between the individual migrant and society in order to ensure a smooth integration process. These organisations were politically and ideologically incorporated into the government's integration policies (Rath and Sunier, 1994). It was expected that, once integration has succeeded, these organisations would become obsolete and gradually disappear.

5 It is important to emphasise that, although recognition of the importance of religious and cultural background was indeed also the basis of the pillarisation arrangements developed from 1917 onward, it in no way implied an equal validation of differences. On the contrary, pillarisation was basically a political compromise between parties who had completely opposing worldviews.

With regard to migrants with an Islamic background, two intriguing and seemingly opposing developments took place: 'migrantisation' and 'Islamisation'. On the one hand, Muslim organisations were perceived as temporary migrant organisations, and Islam was depicted as a 'foreign' religion brought in by these migrants. This discursive process has been described as the 'migrantisation' of Muslim organisations (Sunier, 1996).

On the other hand, events in the Middle East, such as the revolution in Iran in 1979 and the assassination of the Egypt's President Sadat in 1981, contributed to the 'Islamisation' of migrants: over-emphasis on migrants' religious background as their decisive characteristic at the expense of others. In 1979, Sjeff Theunis (1979: 179) pleaded for more attention to be given to the 'moods and motivations' of Muslim migrants and a quest for the 'sensitive points that concern the Muslim migrant', but this was a non-issue for policy makers. Less than a decade later, the situation was reversed. Toward the end of the 1980s, cultural/religious features had become a crucial factor in integration policies in the Netherlands. Although the position of migrants with an Islamic background was the result of a complex interplay of economic, social, political and ideological issues, the assumed nature of Islam became a dominant explanatory factor.⁶ Migrants with completely different backgrounds and situations, were lumped together as 'Muslims' and Islam also gradually became a prime topic of public and political debate.

The image of Muslims in policy documents throughout the 1980s was strongly informed by rural characteristics. A majority of first-generation Muslim migrants had a rural background and it was they who represented the archetypal 'Muslim' in those years. Rural customs and Islamic prescriptions were constructed into an amalgam to denote 'the Islam'.

Despite the derogatory undertone in the image of the 'pre-modern Muslim struggling with modernity', the boundaries between 'them' and 'us' were not conceived as impermeable. The undertone was inclusive, compassionate and redemptive: Muslims constitute an extraordinary category and their faith and their rural origin enforce rules upon them, but these problems can be solved through systematic socialization and the boundaries are temporary, provided certain conditions are fulfilled (Rath, Meyer and Sunier, 1997: 59).

Within the Christian Democrat Party (CDA), the biggest political party in the 1980s, and in other Christian parties as well, strong support existed for an

6 There is a considerable body of literature that addresses this discursive transformation from different perspectives in various European countries. See e.g. Rath and Sunier, 1994; Sunier, 1996; Göle, 2002; Bowen 2004; van der Veer 2006; Spielhaus, 2010; Brubaker 2013; Amir-Moazami, 2018; Mattes, 2018.

integration trajectory for Muslims through pillarisation, comparable to the emancipation of Christians a century earlier.⁷ When Muslims were able to unite and organise on the basis of religion into an 'Islamic pillar', it would facilitate their incorporation into Dutch society (Klop, 1982). Other parties did not have elaborate ideas about Muslims, but endorsed the 'migrantisation' paradigm and the 'ethnic groups' approach in policy (Rath et al., 2001; Halm, 2013).⁸

Throughout the 1980s, the image of 'Muslim' was largely shaped by policies related to the integration of outsiders and minorities into society, as described above but, around the turn of the decade, a shift took place in the perceptions about Muslims. A dramatic event, certainly for those years, was the 'Rushdie Affair'. In 1988, the British-Indian author Salman Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses*, which sparked protest among Muslims around the world. In 1989, the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeiny issued a *fatwa* against Rushdie in which he condemned him to death. In Europe, Muslims protested against Rushdie in the streets and burnt his book. For many people this was completely unexpected and it came as a shock to see 'how these guestworkers behaved'.

In the Netherlands, the affair ignited a heated debate in the media about Islam and freedom. In 1990, an author under the pseudonym of Mohamed Rasool published a booklet titled *De Ondergang van Nederland: Land der naïeve Dwazen* (The Demise of the Netherlands: Country of Naïve Fools). The identity of the author and his provocative and overheated rhetoric became the subject of speculation and aroused hot debates, but the underlying message fitted well with the changing public sentiment and concern: 'What did we start when we brought in those Muslims?'

The Rushdie Affair coincided with a change in integration policies. In the 1990s, an individualised integration trajectory gradually replaced the 'ethnic groups' approach of the 1980s. With respect to appreciation of cultural and religious background, governments dominated by Christian parties were ambiguous. Despite the shock caused by the Rushdie Affair, after which an increasing number of Christians became more critical of Islam, Christian parties still included Islam when they pleaded for a society consisting of collective religious identities. Social democrats endorsed a religious and cultural rights

7 Pillarisation was the relatively stable political system that existed in the Netherlands from 1917 until the early 1960s; it was based on confessional communities with considerable autonomy with regard to family issues. The system gradually ceased to function in the 1960s. For Christians, pillarisation was the outcome of an emancipation struggle in the nineteenth century. Today, we find remnants of pillarisation, in the Dutch school system for example (see Sunier, 2004).

8 This is one of the origins of the unfounded but widely held perception that the Netherlands implemented multicultural policies in the 1980s.

and anti-discrimination agenda. Most important, however, was the general consensus among politicians that Muslims still performed poorly (SCP, 1996). Instead of primarily fighting poverty, poor housing, labour market discrimination and low education enrolment, the government stepped up its ‘civilising’ mission: Muslims should be re-socialised in order to be able to become decent citizens. This discourse was already being applied in the 1980s, but the Rushdie Affair added a more compelling imperative to that civilising mission. It was claimed that the affair, particularly the public burning of books, had demonstrated that Muslims did not know how a democratic society should function or how to act in a proper way.

For liberal and right-wing politicians, the Rushdie Affair also marked a turning point in their thinking about the position of Islam and Muslims in society. Integration is not just a matter of civilisation with a particular pedagogical programme; it is also an issue that touches on the very roots of the Dutch nation, it was claimed. The first politician who explicitly raised this issue was Frits Bolkestein of the right-wing liberal party. In a speech in 1991 at the International Liberal Conference in Lucerne, he called on European societies to be aware of the presence of Muslims and to think about how ‘we’ should relate to Islam and to ‘our’ own liberal roots (Bolkestein, 1991). He referred not so much to the assumed effects of Islam on the individual migrant’s attitudes, but more to the place of Islam as a religion in Western societies.

Bolkestein explicitly referred to Islam as a cultural complex that cannot be validated equally with ‘our’ Western civilisation. This idea in itself was not new, but it was the first time that it had been articulated publicly by a leader of a mainstream political party. The presence of Islam and Muslims was not only a matter of the cultural accommodation of a group of religious newcomers; the very character of the Dutch nation was at stake. Compared with Islamic societies, Western European nations had reached a higher level in the trajectory to modernity. Stressing the universality of these accomplishments, Bolkestein urged European liberal politicians not to give in to some sort of multicultural idea of endorsing cultural equality. By relating religion to citizenship, civilisation and nation-building, he opened up a new field in the debate that was soon to be taken up by others.

In the 1990s, the debate about Islam and Muslims was also increasingly influenced by Samuel Huntington’s polemical and much-debated ‘clash of civilisations’ concept, published for the first time in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, and as a book in 1996. His main argument was that the source of future conflicts between nations and regions in the world would be cultural rather than economic or political (Huntington 1996: 22). This aligned with the emerging sentiment and concerns in the 1990s, in which the image of the Muslim as a

'pre-modern' victim of rapid change was increasingly replaced by the idea that Muslims pose a challenge to 'our own' civilisation and security. Huntington's thesis served as an appropriate argument in support of this line of thinking. The civilising mission of the 1980s was stepped up, but was increasingly accompanied by a quest for loyalty: 'Young migrants may successfully integrate socially and economically but, as Muslims, are they to be trusted?'

The trope 'Islamisation' made its way into the public debate. It should not be confused with Islamisation as a discursive process, which we discussed earlier. Islamisation, as used here, is a vague term denoting a process of increasing influence of Muslim actors and institutions in a realm where this influence was hitherto absent (Berger, 2020). It may refer to institutional growth and to the presence of Muslims in new institutions such as universities. But it also refers to their much more elusive influence on public life. One of the connotations of Islamisation is a way of life under threat and this idea became particularly salient in the course of the 1990s. In 1997, the public intellectual and social scientist Pim Fortuyn published *Tegen de islamisering van onze cultuur* (Against the Islamisation of our Culture). In this much-read pamphlet, he warned that culture relativism was still dominating Dutch politics. He stated that 'Islamic cultures' are not equal to 'our liberal culture'. Fortuyn emphasised the libertarian attitude, which he regarded as characteristic of Dutch society and discussed a number of issues where this would become critical. One is sexual morals. Fortuyn was gay and stated in the book and in numerous public speeches that his sexual identity would come under threat if Islam were to gain influence. It would undermine the very foundations and accomplishments of the 'Judeo-Christian Humanist' bedrock of 'our' society. Fortuyn's call to society to take these achievements seriously, resonated widely.

The shifting perception of Muslims influenced the broader discussion on multiculturalism in Europe. Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf (2010) trace the backlash against multiculturalism back to the Rushdie Affair. The idea of multiculturalism as the alleged source of societal problems gained support. As Alana Lentin and Gavan Titley (2012: 123) argue: 'the narrative of multicultural backlash, which purports that "parallel societies" and "intolerable subjects" and practices have been allowed to flourish within European societies', resonated in many European countries. However, they go on to point out that the particular way in which an anti-multiculturalist discourse has taken shape and post-multicultural corrective measures are being formulated, differs from country to country.

In the 1990s, the image of the pre-modern rural Muslim that had shaped the debate until then made way for an image with a more alarmist undertone, which would become manifest to its full extent after the terrorist attacks in

September 2001. While integration policies had already established a strongly conditional link between Islam and danger, during the 1990s a securitisation of Islam and migration emerged. In 1991, the *Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst* (BVD, Dutch Security Service) published a report stating that the ‘communist threat’ was over but a new threat was imminent. This had to do with a potential side effect of migration from Southern European and North African countries, namely the ‘progressive radicalisation or fundamentalisation of Muslim communities in foreign parts’. Conflicts in the countries of origin could be transferred to the Netherlands with ‘bloodshed, obstruction of the freedom of speech or other constitutional rights [and] severe disturbances of the public order’ as possible consequences.⁹

This was followed by a report in the late 1990s against the rise of a form of political Islam that would gain increasing influence through mosques and through funding from Islamic foundations abroad. Here, the distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Islam as a mode of governance was invoked again (de Koning, 2020). The intertwining of Islamisation, migrantisation, and now securitisation of Islam, became stronger after 9/11, and subsequently after the murder of Pim Fortuyn in 2002, the attacks in Madrid in 2004, and the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh in 2004. Shortly after 9/11, Fortuyn published the second edition of his book, but changed the title to *De islamisering van onze cultuur* (The Islamisation of our Culture) (Fortuyn, 2001), to make his argument even more compelling.

The Madrid attacks, the murder of van Gogh and a failed and fatal attempt by young Dutch Muslims to travel to Kashmir in 2002, provided politicians and policy makers with a rationalisation and legitimisation for expressing their concerns about so-called ‘home-grown radicalisation’. This resulted in a broad preventive and repressive approach to counter radicalisation and violent extremism. This approach particularly focused on unacceptable modes of Islam that were labelled Salafism and Jihadism, especially during the war in Syria and the departure of Dutch volunteers to join Al Qaeda affiliated factions, ISIS and other insurgents (de Koning, Becker, and Roex, 2020). In 2006, a study was published that received much media attention about the alleged origins of this process of radicalisation (Buijs et al., 2006).

With this policy, successive governments in the 2000s and 2010s also wanted to differentiate themselves from those who oppose Islam altogether and call

9 Verslag van de Vaste Commissie voor de inlichtingen- en veiligheidsdiensten over haar werkzaamheden (juli 1990–juli 1991). Letter from the Minister of the Interior to the president of the House of Representatives, 12 February 1992, p. 19. Available at <http://resolver.kb.nl/resolve?urn=sgd%3Ampg21%3A1991992%3A0006610>. See also Fadil and de Koning (2019: 31).

for a curtailing of Muslims' civil rights and the closing of the border to new Muslim migrants. Thus the Freedom Party (PVV) led by Geert Wilders, founded in 2005, attacked Islam with unprecedented aggression by, for example, referring to the hijab as 'head-rags' (*kopvodden*) and stating that Islam was the biggest disease to hit the Netherlands in 100 years.¹⁰ But they were not the only politicians who tended to use a warlike rhetoric when discussing Islam. In the course of the 2000s, this aggressive tone became commonplace in the debate.

In 2009 a collection of critical essays was published titled *Eindstrijd. De finale Clash tussen het liberale Westen en een traditionele islam* (Last Battle: The Final Clash between the Liberal West and a Traditional Islam), edited by the Islam critics Hans Jansen (an Arabist) and Bert Snel (a sociologist), which included contributions from a large number of Dutch and foreign authors, including longstanding Islam critics such as Bernard Lewis, Bat Ye'or, Robert Spencer and Daniel Pipes, some political figures of Dutch right-wing parties, including Paul Cliteur, the supervisor of Zee's PhD research. The contributions were very diverse, but the common denominator was the claim that Islam is a 'wolf in sheep clothing' that can only be unmasked by thorough investigation. The essays captured the war rhetoric that had gained ground during that period.

In 2016, another collection of essays was published titled *Waarom haten ze ons eigenlijk?* (Why do they really hate us?) (Bosch, 2016). Geling, de Ruiter and some authors with chapters in *Whither the Islam Debate?* contributed essays. The title of the book reveals a slightly different approach and discursive strategy from *Last Battle*. Apparently, there was no need to address the question of whether Muslims really hate us. By that time, hate and hate speech, together with 'hate preacher' or 'hate imam' had become integral parts of the anti-Islam rhetoric. The focus on security and danger had turned the problematisation of Islam into an almost normalised and routinised aspect of policies and debates.

4 'Fundamentalist Islam' and the 'Islamisation' of Society

Reaching a relatively wide readership with a popularised piece of academic work is more than the result of an effective media strategy, or of utilising institutional networks and political channels. What accounts for it more than average media attention and what does that mean in terms of knowledge regimes and knowledge dissemination? The attention the books by Koopmans and Zee received is the result of the dynamic interplay of academic, political and media

10 NOS Nieuws Interview with PVV leader Geert Wilders <https://nos.nl/video/455679-gehele-interview-met-pvv-leider-wilders.html>, last accessed 27-8-2020.

discourses about ‘what went wrong with Islam’. In the preceding pages, we have given an account of how ‘Muslim’ became a policy category and how this has shifted over the years and became increasingly negative and compelling. We have shown that the image of Muslims seriously deteriorated after 9/11 and the assumption that something is wrong with Islam became more widespread.

Two things should be kept in mind. First, although the Islam-critical discourse has become dominant in the public debate, it does not mean that counter voices do not exist. We can find some of these voices in the volume edited by Geling and de Ruiter (2019)¹¹ and we have mentioned a number of books at the beginning of this article. These voices are, of course, also part of the debate. Second, we should bear in mind that the image of Islam and Muslims is not the only factor that determines their position in society. Despite the deteriorating image of Muslims, at a structural level, Islam has been legally incorporated and has become part of society. Religious equality is a rather strong element of the Dutch Constitution, and it includes Islam. Parallel to the development of the construction of ‘Muslim’, Islam has also been absorbed bureaucratically (Sunier, 2021a). The emergence of several anti-Islamophobia initiatives among Muslims, particularly *Meld Islamofobie* (Report Islamophobia) and *Collectief tegen Islamofobie en Discriminatie* (Collective against Islamophobia and Discrimination), shows that there is also a stronger awareness of the real inequality between Muslims and other citizens than in the 1990s and early 2000s, despite legal provisions. There is an awareness that discrimination should be taken very seriously and that the strong influence of negative imaginaries on political decision-making should not be ignored.

In this article, we focus on the public image of Islam and Muslims, not on their structural position in society. We explore the role of academic literature in shaping this image. We focus on publications that are explicitly Islam-critical and we seek to understand how the assumption that there is ‘something wrong with Islam’ is being substantiated by underlying argumentation. Most of the essays in the book edited by Geling and de Ruiter are outspokenly critical of Islam, and so are the books by Zee and Koopmans. We shall now discuss them in more detail.

Koopmans, Zee, and Geling and de Ruiter published their books at a time when the media storm after 2012/2013 following the rise and fall of IS had diminished somewhat, to be replaced by a period of reflection and a need for deeper understanding of mechanisms, backgrounds and processes. *Sacred Identities*, by lawyer and political scientist Zee (2016), is the popularised

11 See the chapters by Ewoud Butter, Ewout Klei, Walter Palm and Joram van Klaveren, which critically reflect on the negative tone in the debate.

Dutch version of her dissertation *Choosing Sharia? Multiculturalism, Islamic Fundamentalism and British Sharia Councils* (Zee, 2015) based on her research on Sharia councils in the UK. The author contends that the growth of Sharia councils in Europe is the result of emerging 'Islamic fundamentalism' among Muslims, facilitated by the multicultural policies of European governments. Sharia councils operate in a parallel quasi-legal system without much control, and prevent Muslims, especially women, from benefiting from secular state legislation. The hidden aim of the increasing influence of these courts among Muslims in Europe, says Zee, is to bring them under the jurisdiction of a Sharia state. Zee's book addressed the need to understand Muslim practices and the intentions behind them.

Koopmans published *The Derelict House of Islam: On the Crisis of the Islamic World* in 2019 in Dutch.¹² An important reason for Koopmans to write the book pertains to 'the causes of the lagging integration of migrant groups who have migrated to Western Europe from Islamic countries such as Turkey, Morocco and Pakistan' (Koopmans, 2019: 7). In seven chapters, he presents his analysis of 'the spell of fundamentalism' Why did democratisation pass over the Islamic world? What are the religious roots of unfreedom? What about the Islamic wars of religion, the economic stagnation of the Islamic world, the lagging integration of Muslim migrants? Can Islam liberate itself from fundamentalism? Koopmans's book addressed the felt need among the public to piece the fragmented elements together and to get a comprehensive historical picture of the origins, causes and future prospects of the current tensions. Or, as one Dutch politician said in a conversation with Koopmans: 'Page after page I thought, that's the way it is.'¹³

A common theme to be found in all of these publications is the distinction between Islam and 'political Islam', 'fundamentalist Islam', or 'extreme Islam'. As Koopmans (2019: 7) states: 'Not Islam itself, but the fundamentalist interpretation of it is the root of the crisis into which the Islamic world has sunk in the last fifty years'. Koopmans particularly focuses on the issue of what he calls fundamentalism and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, which he uses as a catch-all term for regimes, local insurgencies against authoritarian

12 The book has been translated into German in 2020 (*Das verfallene Haus des Islam: Die religiösen Ursachen von Unfreiheit, Stagnation und Gewalt*). The subtitle here translates as 'the religious causes of lack of freedom, stagnation and violence'.

13 Frank Hendrickx, Martin Sommer (13 September 2019 vrijdag). Ruud Koopmans en Gert-Jan Segers in gesprek over islamitisch fundamentalisme: 'Jij legt de grens ergens anders dan ik'. De Volkskrant.nl. Retrieved from <https://advance-lexis-com.ru.idm.oclc.org/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:5XiW-V241-JBHV-K1K8-0000-00&context=1516831>.

governments, political parties, and so on. Koopmans bases his idea of fundamentalism on the *World Values Survey* and his own research in which fundamentalism is defined by conformity with three theses: Christians (Muslims) must return to the roots of their faith; There is only one interpretation of the Bible (Qur’an) and all Christians (Muslims) must accept it; The laws of the Bible (Qur’an) is more important to me than the laws of the Netherlands (Koopmans, 2019: 34).

Koopmans (2019: 32) presents his work as an analysis of Islam as it exists today by looking at democracy, human rights, political and religious violence and economic progress in countries where Islam is the most important religion. His analysis leads him to the conclusion that there are three key problems causing what he calls ‘the Islamic malaise’ (2019: 157): the absence of separation between religion and state; the subjugated position of women and the disparaging view of secular knowledge. These are all causes that lie within the realm of Islam and the solution too must come out of Islam, he concludes. Zee (2016: 23) uses the term ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ to denote the political ideology of the Sharia state, a rather abstract description of the origins of Sharia as a system of rules that dominates the lives of Muslims.

Neither Koopmans nor Zee is very clear about the alleged difference between Islam and ‘fundamentalist Islam’ and they leave the boundary between the two variants rather vague and open-ended. Neither of them gives any attention to the abundance of theoretical literature about the subject. As a result, fundamentalism remains a term ‘up for grabs’. This is a serious flaw in both studies, and it can also be found in *Whither the Islam Debate?*. Youssef Azghari (2019: 51) points to the increasing influence of ‘Wahhabi Islam’ from Saudi-Arabia on Muslims in Europe. Halim El Madkouri (2019: 120) observes an increasing influence of ‘fundamentalist Islam’ and the gradual marginalisation of ‘ordinary’ Muslims. Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2019: 63) does not address different views among Muslims, but rather warns of the increasing availability of facilities and arrangements for Muslims that provide ‘radicals’ with tools. Afshin Ellian (2019: 197) questions the anti-essentialist idea that ‘the’ Islam does not exist. He criticises views on Islam that stress the importance of the human factor in everyday Islam. Carel Brendel (2019: 227) criticises the naivety of scholars, politicians and the media over the growing influence of ‘political Islam’ and the rapid increase of the Islamisation of society.

Both Zee and Koopmans critically engage with the scholarly field of Islamic studies. Zee (2016: 138) points to the allegedly growing tendency of many scholars to turn a blind eye to the ‘dark sides of Islam’ and to whitewash the misdeeds Muslim leaders and spokespersons commit. The general public, many politicians and many media already sense that ‘things are wrong’; only a number of

academics remain persistent and stick to delusory assumptions and theories, according to Zee. Koopmans (2019: 156) states that the debate on Islam is being dominated by people speaking from two seemingly opposing positions, that oppression, intolerance and violence have either everything or nothing to do with Islam. Koopmans (2019: 164) predominantly takes issue with the latter, who allegedly claim that negative ideas about Islam are a cause of the rise of fundamentalism and the radicalisation of Muslim youth.

5 'What Went Wrong with Islam and How to Fix It?'

The issues we have addressed above are not unique to the Netherlands. The rhetorical question, 'What went wrong with Islam?', appeals to anxieties everywhere in the world, but the question of what accounts for the allegedly increasing influence of so-called 'Islamic fundamentalism' and what to do about it unfolds differently in different political and historical contexts. It has specific national features, historical precursors, decisive moments and turning points, which largely shape the contours of the national Islam debate.

We wanted to explore to what extent we can discern a Dutch (historical) context in these concerns and anxieties about Islam. Only a few Islam-critical publications intended for a wider readership deal with historical-doctrinal issues. The majority of these publications take 'what went wrong with Islam' as a fact and focus predominantly on issues of governance, monitoring and containment. A recurring issue in these Islam-critical texts is the alleged limp and lenient attitude of policy makers towards these developments, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. This is certainly true of the essays in *Whither the Islam Debate?* and of the book by Zee. Koopmans tends to address fellow scholars rather than politicians, but comes back to the same basic argument.

Many of the texts we have discussed engage with the criticism – rather dominant in the Netherlands – of multiculturalism. Zee's central argument points to the facilitating role 'multiculturalists', notably politicians, academics and opinion-makers, played in the growth and institutionalisation of Sharia councils, and in the process of the gradual 'Islamisation' of Europe. Hence the subtitle of the book: *Toward a Sharia-state?*

As we have shown, the idea gradually took hold in the Netherlands in the 1990s that the problems and challenges the country faced with regard to Islam could be attributed to the outspoken multiculturalist government policies of the 1980s. Although the Dutch government never adopted any consistent multicultural programme, the assumption of its existence was widespread toward the end of the 1990s (Sunier, 2021b). In 2000, historian and publicist

Paul Scheffer, a member of the Labour Party, published an opinion article in a mainstream newspaper entitled *Het multiculturele drama* (The Multicultural Drama), in which he evaluated the preceding years and the way in which Dutch politicians had dealt with multiculturalism. Scheffer’s argument was broader than the ‘Muslim issue’. His main point of concern was the lenient attitude of respective Dutch governments towards migrants’ cultural backgrounds in the previous two decades. Although he mainly referred to migrants from Turkey and Morocco (who constitute the majority of migrants in the Netherlands), Islam was the ‘elephant in the room’. He mentioned a number of characteristics of Islam that, in his view, should be taken into consideration: its pre-modern character, resistance to the separation of religion and state, and the moral attitudes of Muslims based on a strong legalist understanding of Islam (Scheffer, 2000).

Discussions in the Netherlands about ‘what went wrong with Islam and how to fix it’ have a particularly strong pedagogic undertone. Although securitisation and containment are dominant aspects of contemporary policies, just as in other countries, measures to prevent radicalisation, for example, relatively often focus on the psychological make-up of the radical and his or her allegedly isolated position in society. This means that the ‘radical’ can be ‘fixed’ and redeemed. Since 2015, at the time when young Muslims went to IS-dominated areas to fight for the califate, state-sponsored de-radicalisation programmes have rapidly emerged, in which social workers, psychologists, pedagogic experts, youth workers and teachers, rather than only the police, intelligence services and the army, play a central role. The programmes also intend to reach out to Muslim communities and representatives as allies monitoring and deradicalizing ‘their’ youth. The idea behind these programmes is to trace the personality-related origins of radicalisation and to find ways to re-socialise radicals and re-integrate them into ‘normal’ society. Psychological and ortho-pedagogical treatments and remedial teaching in de-radicalisation programmes often come close to the work of re-integration and probation services for criminals.

But in less controversial issues we also find a pedagogical twist, as in the discussion about what emancipation entails and how to attain it. As Sarah Bracke and Nadia Fadil (2012) show in connection with the so-called headscarf debate in Belgium, the emancipation of Muslim women is articulated primarily in a language of neutrality and secularity and perceived as a process that liberates them from religious and cultural constraints (see also Okin, 1999; Noor, 2018).¹⁴ The idea of emancipation as a form of ‘civil elevation’ is particularly strong

14 This is also what Zee argues.

in the Netherlands (Roggeband and Verloo, 2007). The trajectory towards the complete emancipation of Muslim women is a learning process and has to be taught. Dutch women have successfully followed this road. Those who resist that road are ignorant, so society must guide them.

In this 'Current Debate' essay, we have shown first how an analysis of the public debate about Islam and Muslims in the Netherlands over a longer period of time constitutes a fruitful way not only to understand how the image of Muslims developed and what specific roots this image has, but also what ideas exist about how to manage the presence of Muslims. We have particularly focused on Islam-critical views because the current Islam debate is predominantly critical. The view that 'something went wrong with Islam' is almost taken for granted as a point of departure in these critical views.

Second, we have analysed the intertwining of the dominant knowledge regimes, policy principles and research priorities by asking how academic work is related to, embedded in or conducive to public and political debates about Islam in the Netherlands. For that purpose, we have focused on two recently published academic studies. We have shown that academic knowledge production, in particular circumstances, sustains and even enhances particular views on Islam because they appeal to concerns in society.

In addition, we have given an account of the evolving Islam debate in the Netherlands based on publications intended for a broad readership, focusing in particular on the most recent of these publications, edited by Geling and de Ruiter. We contend that there are good reasons to be concerned about this taken-for-granted Islam-critical climate. Without in any way ignoring very serious crimes committed in the name of Islam, we argue that constructing the debate about Islam as a debate about what went wrong with Islam erases the current and past modes of racism in the Netherlands, and reinforces mistrust and suspicion of the real intentions of Muslims. It conceals the varieties of Islam as lived and expressed by Dutch citizens and continues to overgeneralise and reduce these varieties to only two categories: 'good' and 'bad' Islam, and 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, making a debate with rather than about Muslims very difficult.

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