

Tradition and Future of Islamic Education

Religious Diversity and Education in Europe

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Volume 10

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Wilna A.J. Meijer

Tradition and Future of Islamic Education

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Editor's Preface

Hans-Günter Heimbrock

This book from the famous Dutch philosopher of education Wilna Meijer does not need any introduction or any recommendation. If it needs anything additionally from the editor's side, it certainly is a word of thanks and appreciation. Actually, I am very thankful to the author for having the courage to start this study. And particularly thankful that she made it possible to have it now appear in an English translation within our series. If the series' title *Religious Diversity and Education in Europe* ever was appropriate to something, it was to this book.

Despite the rather moderate and descriptive title of the book *Tradition and Future of Islamic Education*, the issue is a burning one all through European societies. During the last decades within many of these societies, no other issue aside from "Islam" released such a dynamic reaction to provoke the most power conflicts in many respects. Principles of liberal democracy like human rights and separation between state and religion seemed to get lost, society's capacity for tolerance seemed to be challenged and overly required by hostile minorities, national "western" collective identities were said to get undermined by fanatic minorities of Arabic immigrants, politicians mobilized collective forces of "civilization" against images like "fundamentalism" or even "terrorism", and at least until recently, won elections.

On the other side, among those who recommended faithfulness to their own Muslim roots, there grew heavy debate about the possibilities and limits of accommodating to the cultural, ethical and technical patterns of the western way of life. "Euro-Islam" to some appeared as a developmental chance, even as a need of Islam, to others simply as apostasy from the teachings of the Prophet and from the ummah and its age-old traditions.

After 9/11 each European society had and still has its own way of dealing with these polarizations. The public audience in the Netherlands, where the author lives and where the study intentionally has its starting point, was particularly shocked by the fact that extreme anti-immigration political groups obtained adherents. Right wing chauvinist politicians like Pim Fortuyn dominated public debates overnight within a country which was proud of three centuries of national history of tolerance towards ethnic and religious minority. And this country was additionally shocked by the fact that fanatics murdered this populist politician, as well as shocked by the murder of Theo van Gogh, a famous critical movie producer.

Beyond clichés and uninformed polarizations, the issue of "Islam" caused heavy conflicts and challenging questions which (re)appeared on the cultural, political, and academic scene. Questions to the object of research: what is the

nature of Islam compared to European political, philosophical and theological traditions? Is there any chance to harmonize western ideals and principles of enlightenment with the Koran, or is this religion by its very nature not able to adopt modernity and its rational principles? Is present day Islam capable of more than picking up only the instrumental side of modernity (Habermas), more than using a “short-cut way” to enlightenment?

And another series of questions relates to the subject of the researcher: If one mistrusts religiously loaded self-descriptions of Muslim people about Islam as pre-scientific according to western academic standards, then who is capable of providing serious and valid knowledge about Islam for western academic discourses? Who might in any way get appropriate knowledge, likewise not biased by Euro-centric and by a non-Islamic position? Is it possible to say anything meaningful about a religious tradition you do not adhere to as a believer, but rather as a western agnostic intellectual?

And thus a third range of questions which caused particular interest in most European societies: Is there in European multi-cultural and multi-religious societies any suitable educational answer to the conflict-loaded plurality of worldviews already within any primary school in your nearest vicinity? How to set up a model of religious education fitting to western principles of education as well as to the religious traditions so far held as being “non-western” in the sense of contradicting major convictions and values estimated as hallmarks of western secularity?

In the following pages a Dutch philosopher of education shares with her readers her intellectual exercise of two decades, her highly-committed personal adventurous tour through these questions and especially through a thousand years of traditions in Muslim education. From the very first page we recognize that for the author this issue is not about collecting facts and figures for an academic textbook or about making analytical assessments from a distance. It is rather a piece of research about the engagement of a scholar participating with vivid awareness and critical spirit in social and political conflicts of her own multi-religious context, and picking up the challenges by means of intellectual endeavor. It is a book which, based on the power of argument, risks stepping back from conventional western black-and-white assumptions about Islam, and passing Islamic traditions taken for granted in public debates of western societies; a book which de-constructs some wide-spread prejudices on the basis and in order to re-construct the history of Islamic education almost forgotten in western textbooks.

Following Meijer’s argument beyond Islamophobic and likewise beyond Islamophile positions, readers get detailed information about the inner plurality and development of what in the political struggles of our times is often subsumed under the simple label of a monolithic and inflexible Islam. Within Islamic traditions she reconstructs attempts and principles as to how different ages and different schools, as well as different Islamic scholars, elaborated their intellectual models to bridge original and faithful Islam with western philosophy, from medieval Al-Ghasali up to Mohammed Abduh and Abu Zayd.

Following Wilna Meijer's text the readers will get evidence that learning about and understanding the issue is not possible without taking a position. The ideal of a so-called neutral and objective Islamology, a scientific approach which was steeped in European post-colonialism, is only capable of reconstructing Islam as a historical fact, as a "dead something". The interest in reconstructing Islam as a "lived religion" asks for contextualizing and re-contextualizing the objective within social and mental history. And it asks for the awareness of one's own predetermined position: Before a white western citizen might think about taking a position he or she is already forced into the struggle between different positions, might they consist of hypocritical western judgment about the inflexibility and inferiority of what is held as "Muslim" fundamentalist patterns, might they favor reconstructing the "pure" and "original" Islam against its watering-down and westernization.

The book is a piece of pioneer work which deserves readers with a critical disposition against many current clichés. The study displays in an excellent way to what extent an intellectually engaged non-Muslim scholar, usually a so-called "outsider", is able to deal with the task of scientific hermeneutic reconstruction. Those who are interested in understanding Islam as well as dealing with its doctrines and traditions in western public schools education in an unbiased way will get inspiration and encouragement. They can learn to risk a behavior of theoretical curiosity putting open questions to an objective which is held to be all too well known. To me this direction seems to be a fruitful path to develop an appropriate model of Islamic education within the context of post-secular European societies. The focal point is the idea of "formation" in its classic meaning. In this respect, religious education dealing with Islam might be paradigmatic for any religious education, if it is about a reflexive adoption of one's own cultural and religious convictions directed towards the understanding of "the other".

Set up in best hermeneutic traditions of critical *ré-lecture* (Gadamer; Ricoeur), the appropriate answer to the book certainly will be critical *ré-lecture* by many others. It not only asks for follow-up studies, but for dialogue and critical commentaries on the issue to be provided especially by Muslim theological and educational scholars. Wilna Meijer, in any case, has formulated a brilliant invitation to this necessary dialogue.

Preface

In the course of the 1990s it began to bother me that discussions in the Netherlands on Islam and Islamic education seemed to be stuck in a repetition of moves. It disturbed me that discussions leading up to the thesis that Islam and the modern West form an unbridgeable opposition, not seldom had started out from that very same presupposition. In our society cultural and religious diversity is, however, a fact of life, regardless of whether multiculturalism as an ideology, is accepted or rejected. A fact that was also distinctly revealed in education: in the multicultural composition of the school population of larger cities, in problems like the ‘white flight’ and the increase of ‘black schools’ and also in the rise and growth of Islamic schools in the Netherlands. Against this background, I found a debate that continually ended up underlining the incompatibility of two worlds disappointing and, from a practical point of view, unacceptable.

As a modern philosopher of education, educated in the West, it seemed to me a worthwhile enterprise to search for the concept, the ideas and ideals, of education, schooling and learning within Islam itself, in the hope of promoting and perpetuating dialogue and the interchange of ideas. In search, therefore, of ‘Islamic education’: educational thought and practice, interwoven with Islam as a religion, and worded and justified in terms of this. Within the current multicultural societies of the West there has been little attention given to this aspect, although there has been research conducted into the educational views and practices to be found among Muslims in these current societies – which, contrary to the ‘Islamic concept of education’ that I have in mind, can be referred to as the concepts of education that Muslims at present hold.¹

My first exercise in getting to know Islamic education involved studying the publications which formed the proceedings of the first world conference on Islamic Education, held in 1977 in Mecca, the heart of the Islamic world – simply because I came across them in the library of my institute and was immediately intrigued. At a later date, I was to get to know the secretary of this conference, Syed Ali Ashraf, in his capacity as director of the Islamic Academy in Cambridge, where, from 1983 onwards, he continued the mission of the 1977 conference and several subsequent conferences. Terence McLaughlin, who, up until his death in 2006, was professor of Philosophy of Education in Cambridge and London respectively, introduced me to Ashraf, shortly before his death in 1998.²

1 For instance, research by anthropologists, religious theorists and educationists on Muslims and Muslim institutions within current Western societies. See in the case of the Netherlands for instance (a rather random selection): Rath et al. 1996, Nijsten 1998, Pels 1998, Strijp 1998, Pels 2004.

2 Since Ashraf’s death the leadership of the Islamic Academy – the name ‘academy’ is somewhat misleading, not merely on account of the modest size of the institute (two

Although I was looking for alternative perspectives to those presented in the Dutch Islam debate, I soon discovered that, according to the orthodox Islamic educational theory of Ashraf c.s., Islam and the modern West are also seen to be incompatible worlds. I shared my experiences in various lectures and articles.³ I was subsequently able to discuss my ideas with colleagues, for instance at the biannual conferences of ISREV, the International Seminar of Religious Education and Values. In particular, I learned a great deal from Abdullah Sahin, an Islamic theologian, educated in Ankara, who, at the time, was working on his thesis on the identity of young Muslims in England. It was he who warned me not to fall into the same pitfall as to regard orthodoxy, and even fundamentalism, as the standard of Islam, and he advised me to look further afield and to read other sources as well. And he gave me advice that proved to be important: read Makdisi, read Rahman. I am very grateful to him for these and many other eye-openers.

At this point I began my second exercise. I embarked on reading historical studies on education, learning and learnedness within classical medieval Islam, and did so from an educational perspective: which concepts of teaching and learning may be recognised in these educational practices? What was the structure of this education, the subject matter and the order in which it was to be acquired (the curriculum), what was the teacher-pupil relationship and the professor-student relationship like? What was, in short, the educational culture, part of the highly developed intellectual culture of classical Islam? The second part of this book shows the results of this cultural educational excursion.

Modernist Muslim intellectuals definitely do take inspiration from the rich intellectual history of Islam. The perspective on the future of Islamic education in the modern context, outlined in part three of this book, utilizes their ideas. Hermeneutics, the theory of the interpretation of texts, which is applied by modern day Muslim intellectuals to the rereading and reinterpretation of the source texts of Islam, also offers an inspiring perspective on a form of education aiming at striking the right educational balance between tradition and enlightenment.

The three parts of this book stand in the following relationship to each other. Part I demonstrates the polarisation between Islam and the West, both in the Dutch Islam debate – in which I focus on the period after 9/11 in 2001 – as in the aforementioned orthodox Islamic educational theory of Ashraf c.s. It proved impossible for me to merely describe the discussions without taking part, sooner or later. My dissatisfaction concerning the black-and-white thinking prompted me to go in search of detail and nuance in the history of Islam in part II. This provided inspiring ideas for the future-perspective I develop in part III. And so, the three parts of this book are interrelated, but the connections are not so tight and compelling that they cannot be read independently, or in a different order.

people), but also because it is in actual fact not an institute of education and schooling – is in the hands of Abdul Mabud, former secretary.

3 Meijer 1999, 1999a, 2000.

Introduction

In the last decade of the twentieth century the information revolution announced itself as the beginnings of a new world. The Internet was to make an end to the cultural hegemony of books and corresponding forms of traditional literacy and these changes were to bring about new social relations. When everyone is at the same time reader, writer and publisher, equality and democratisation, as far as information and knowledge are concerned, become a reality: individualisation as cultural levelling, the free circulation of ideas and hierarchy-free discussion, unbridled creativity. In the information society it is done with the authority of elders and those with superior knowledge – scholars and teachers, *ulema* and *shaykhs*: ‘school’s out, learning is in’.⁴ Can the virtual *ummah* which manifested itself in the first decade of the twenty-first century be considered an example?

The internet is teeming with web sites, created by Muslims about Muslims and Islam, and also with MSN groups and discussion forums where young Western Muslims ventilate their questions about life. Has the net taken over the role of schools when it comes to Islamic education? It is mostly highly educated Western Muslims, and newly converted youths, so-called born-again Muslims, who are launching and managing these web sites – in the Islamic world itself the ITC-infrastructure does not allow for participation on a large scale. The medium of communication is the national language, or else the English of a transnational, world-audience. It is larded with formulae written in the Arabic of the Qur’an, which function as identity marker and no longer as the language of communication, the *lingua franca* of Islamic scholars. There are no authoritative scholars, *ulema*, here. Everyone is equally learned as the next person and the students, the *taliban*, speak for themselves. The net is pre-eminently the place for the self-appointed *shaykh* and the self-taught man, as the French Islam scholar Olivier Roy puts it in his study on the globalisation of Islam.

Has it really been achieved here: the individualisation and equality that was predicted for the information era, the free exchange of thoughts and unbridled creativity?⁵ As far as unbridledness is concerned, this is certainly the case: there are an infinite number of sites, interconnected by links and mutual references, by infinite citing and recycling of the same body of ideas, together forming the virtual *ummah*,

4 According to Perelman (1992), cited by Faber and Schaareman (1999, 97) in a down-to-earth discussion of such visions of a new society; cf. also Lambeir 2001.

5 In his book on the globalisation of Islam Roy discusses the phenomenon of the virtual *ummah*. He makes use of Eickelman & Anderson to paint a picture of the information revolution, as an opening in chapter 7 on the virtual *ummah* on the Internet (Roy 2003, 153-172). Eickelman & Anderson are indeed rather optimistic about the possibilities of ICT when it comes to the renewal of Islam and the Islamic world by ‘re-intellectualising’ and an ‘emerging public sphere’, which is the undertitle of the volume they edited (Eickelman & Anderson 2003).

the community of Muslims. However, creativity is hard to find: instead of personal thoughts and original ideas we encounter that characteristic copy/paste style, which the web seems to facilitate. A new eclecticism, as Roy calls it: fast, easy and superficial; not critical demeanour and accountability, but defective anchoring, defective sources, and a poor referential system.⁶

According to Roy, this all boils down to a trivialisation of Islam: it sends out a generalised and uniform message, in which clichés have taken the place of original insight and judgement. Rather than supporting the predicted creative, free, new interplay of opinions, the net turns out to foster clichés and a distinct tendency towards orthodoxy. Or rather, *orthopraxis*: for neo-fundamentalists religion is a code of behaviour and a religious commitment, a code denoting what is allowed and what not, what is *halal* and *haram*. The Western context is no more than a new area to which the code is to be applied: may you eat a Big Mac? Are you allowed a credit card? According to the Dutch anthropologist, Martijn de Koning, these are often typical ‘teenage questions’ concerning sex, soft drugs and alcohol. For example: ‘When I think about sex during Ramadan, does this break my fast?’ The ‘key question’ being: ‘How far can you go and still be a Muslim in the Netherlands?’⁷

This does go to show that it is not all about radicalism, although that is the general concern about Muslim-sites on the Internet. It is however, true of neofundamentalism, and of radicalism as well, that they are ‘nice and simple’.⁸ Pure, universal Islam, which the born again Islamic youth of the West discover through the Internet, rejects the entire intellectual history of Islam, and simply wishes to base itself directly on the Qur’an and *hadith*. The Islam of the Internet is therefore fundamentalist in the strict sense of the word: directly anchored in fundamental texts of the religion, the Qur’an and the tradition of the Prophet. Their eternal truth, their universal context-free validity and their pureness, go hand in hand with striking simplicity and normative unambiguousness. One is looking ‘for a norm that can be applied to strongly diverging contexts, or rather, a norm that can ignore context: this explains why the “Salafi” doctrine is the most suitable to inform the virtual Ummah’.⁹ Salafism entails the wish to follow the *salaf*, in other words: the companions of the Prophet and devout Muslims of the first generations of Islam.

The orientation towards a code of behaviour makes the *born-again Muslim* a direct counterpart to the *born-again Christian*, also a common sight in the West at the current time. In addition, they are equally fundamentalistic in that they both apply a Holy Word of God to their lives in an individualistic and unhistorical manner, simply taking Holy Texts literally from cover to cover: what are the dos and don’ts of a

6 Roy 2003, 154/155.

7 De Koning was interviewed for the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* (Oostveen 2004).

8 ‘Radicalism is nice and simple’ (‘Radicalisme is lekker simpel’), was the title of an interview with Roy in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw* (Bessemers 2005).

9 Roy 2003, 162.

good Muslim or a good Christian? Individualisation, a marked feature of Westernisation, is therefore certainly not identical to creativity and originality.

What are we to make of this? There are various Dutch participants in the public Islam debate in the Netherlands who call for a 'short-cut to enlightenment' for the Muslims among us. The suggestion seems to be that Muslims should leave their religion behind them in order to integrate in Western society with a clean slate. Or, at least that they should leave their religion at home when they enter the public domain of society (the workplace, education, politics etcetera). I don't think this is the answer. From an educational perspective this is an ill-considered mirror image of the aforementioned attempt by young Muslims to discover pure, universal Islam. This too, as we have argued, is ultimately a 'short-cut': a direct, quick access to the sources of the religious tradition, without historical and cultural-educational detours. Neither a '*short-cut to tradition*', nor a '*short-cut to enlightenment*' are educationally realistic options. Education is about striking a *balance* between tradition and enlightenment: about transmitting culture in such a way as to stimulate critical reflection on that culture.

Discussions on Islamic education in the Netherlands are invariably set in the context of the continuous debate on the relation between Islam and the West, a relationship that seems to constitute an increasing cause for concern. In the first part of this book I discuss the persistent and perpetually self-affirming and reinforcing antitheses within the debate: of reason versus religion, of enlightenment versus tradition, and of education set in the light of these contradictions. This dichotomy clearly dominates the outlook of both the advocates of enlightenment in the Dutch debate, who oppose Islamic education, as that of orthodox Muslims who are in favour of it, for instance, the speakers at the 1977 World Conference on Islamic education in Mecca.

When it comes to charting this kind of discussion, the antithesis of Islam and the modern West keeps emerging. In the first part of this book I will demonstrate this. The conclusion is forced upon us, that the debate leads us nowhere and ultimately leaves us with a choice between two mutually exclusive worlds: the modern West with its enlightenment and science and accompanying secular education, or else Islam and Islamic education, characterised by orthodoxy and tradition. That I was not satisfied with this conclusion has to do, as said, with my background in educational thought and the corresponding idea that tradition and enlightenment ought to go hand in hand.

This inspired me to make a 'historical detour'. Instead of sinking my teeth into the current Islam-debate, so often stuck in a repetition of moves – thereby forcing other participants to do the same –, I started reading historical studies on the traditional Islamic intellectual culture of the Golden Age of classical medieval Islam: work of scholars in the fields of religious studies and Islamology, such as Rahman, Rosenthal, Makdisi and Hallaq. I anticipated that where knowledge and learning

had blossomed, education, schooling and teaching must also have flourished. Another consideration was that in the interest of a fair discussion, one ought not to compare apples and pears, for example the elementary memorisation of Qur'anic verses and cutting-edge Western science. It is precisely the medieval intellectual heyday of Islam that can serve as an illustration of what came after basic Qur'anic schooling in the way of years of study culminating in the truly accomplished Islamic scholar. This is what the second part of this book is about.

This proved to be an exciting and exacting undertaking for someone like me, who has been formed by modern Western educational thought – which as an academic discipline is a typical child of the enlightenment. Piecing together an image of traditional Islamic education also meant identifying and reconsidering the concepts and prejudices, hermeneutically speaking, the *Vorverständnis*, of the modern Western educational theorist. Does this frame of reference facilitate an understanding of medieval Islamic education and learnedness or is it more likely to hinder this? Take for instance the assumption that education, literacy, and erudition are inextricably tied to books, book culture and the era of the printing-press: the literacy myth. This myth feeds on the dichotomy of orality versus literacy – and the dichotomy between (religious) tradition and enlightenment can certainly be associated with this. In order to develop an understanding of education, learning and learnedness in a medieval manuscript culture, it was necessary to get rid of this dichotomy. Certainly, in manuscript culture the relationship between the text and the reader, the teacher and the pupil, was a different one, and the ideal of learnedness also differed, but: here too, education culminated in erudite expertise pre-eminently revealed through individual and original, well thought-out and underpinned, and therefore enlightened, judgement. The independent, individual judgement or *ijtihad* proved no less than tradition, to be a basic concept of traditional Islamic intellectual culture.

Precisely this concept of *ijtihad* plays a salient role once more in the current context. When the question of the relationship between Islam and modern Western culture is discussed by Muslims and Muslim intellectuals, this concept of independent individual judgement plays a determining role. While Muslim modernists, devoted to the modernisation and reform of Islam in and for the modern context ascribe a crucial role to *ijtihad*, Muslim fundamentalists as a rule limit themselves to literally reiterating verses and traditions from Qur'an and hadith. In the third part of this book I shall argue that, from an educational perspective, there is a conceivable and justifiable future for Islamic education in the current modern Western context: namely an education that aims at reflection and authentic individual judgement with regard to one's own religious tradition. In other words: a kind of education that achieves the educational balance between tradition and enlightenment.

Through the advancement of knowledge, insight and critical reflection, this kind of Islamic education might even provide the necessary antidote against the influence of the virtual ummah, outlined by Roy at the beginning of this intro-

duction. Whereas the Internet, contrary to the vision of the worldwide free interchange of ideas conjured up by the information revolution, seems to facilitate the creation of ghettos of like-mindedness and Muslim fundamentalism¹⁰, schools could concentrate on broadening student's horizons and cultivating a critical stance, particularly towards one's own tradition and history. But let us be careful not to substitute a new myth of literacy for the untenable vision of the information revolution: in the form of a culturally pessimistic rejection of the new media, accompanied by complaints about the decline of books and reading.¹¹ Irshad Manji may prevent us from this.

This Canadian is a striking advocate of Islamic reform. In her often translated book, written in the form of a letter with the salutation 'My fellow Muslims', she explains: 'I am a Muslim Refusenik. That doesn't mean I refuse to be a Muslim; it simply means I refuse to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah. I take this phrase from the original refuseniks – Soviet Jews who championed religious and personal freedom'.¹² She regards the Internet as the medium of communication par excellence in the struggle: 'Praise Allah for the Internet. With the Web making self-censorship irrelevant – someone else is bound to say what you won't – it became the place where intellectual risk-takers finally exhaled'.¹³ Her web site is the voice of the *Project Ijtihad*, 'her foundation, located in New York, which wished to bring about a renaissance of critical thinking in Islam'.¹⁴ A reform enabling current-day Muslims, and in the first place young women, to withstand authoritarian Muslim ways of thinking, and to restore the Islamic tradition of critical thinking.

The concept of *ijtihad*, originating from the classical hey-day of Islam, thus offers inspiration for a reform struggle which Manji thinks ought to be undertaken by the Muslims in the West. Muslims here have civil liberties, especially the freedom of speech, which may be used to change 'tribal tendencies'. Muslims in the West should use their freedom in order to pose questions, for example on the Qur'an. Contemporary Western Islam cannot only be about applying Qur'an and hadith to the new context of modern, Western society. In Manji's project exactly the opposite seems to hold, namely to read the Qur'an and other source texts of Islam from the new context, with new eyes, and especially to read them *critically*: 'to openly question the perfection of the Quran so that the stampede to reach a correct conclusion about what it "really" says will slow down and, over time, become an exercise in literacy instead of literalism. At this stage, reform isn't about telling ordinary

10 Cf. the article 'Ghettos on the web' ('Getto's op het web') in the Dutch paper *NRC Handelsblad* (Hulsman 2005).

11 Cf. Soetaert 2005.

12 Manji 2005, 22.

13 Manji 2005, 39. Her website is www.muslim-refusenik.com.

14 '[A]nd in particular, address the role of women', thus this passage proceeds in the interview by Ruth Gledhill with Irshad Manji, translated into Dutch and published in the evening paper *NRC Handelsblad*; originally the article was published in *The Times* (Gledhill 2005).

Muslims what not to think, but about giving Islam's one billion devotees permission to think. Since the Quran is a bundle of contradictions, at least when it comes to women, we have every reason to think'.¹⁵

Manji illustrates that tradition and enlightenment can go hand in hand. She is convinced, and I share this conviction, that this is the only path to an Islam that is viable and not a fossil. 'Thank God for the West', is the title of the last chapter of her book, for the freedom of thought which reigns in current Western world, and the accompanying pluralism of people and ideas, have 'so far saved my faith in Islam. Had I grown up in a Muslim country, I'd probably be an atheist in my heart. It's because I live in this corner of the world, where I can think, dispute and delve further into any topic, that I've learned why I shouldn't give up on Islam just yet'.¹⁶

15 Manji 2005, 48

16 Manji 2005, 232.

Part I
A PERSISTENT OPPOSITION

A New School Struggle

The Netherlands in Debate on Islamic Education

On February 14, 1989 the Iranian Islamic leader Khomeini issued a verdict:

In the name of God Almighty; there is only one God, to whom we shall all return; I would like to inform all the intrepid Muslims in the world that the author of the book entitled *The Satanic Verses* which has been compiled, printed and published against Islam, the Prophet and the Qur'an, as well as those publishers who were aware of its contents, have been sentenced to death. I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they find them, so that no one will dare to insult the Islamic sanctions. Whoever is killed on this path will be regarded as a martyr, God willing. In addition, anyone who has access to the author of the book, but does not possess the power to execute him, should refer him to the people so that he may be punished for his actions. May God's blessing be on you all.¹

The author of the contested novel, Salman Rushdie, is forced to go into hiding, for years. The public indignation is great, in the Netherlands as well as in other Western countries. Everywhere people stand up for Rushdie, along with the freedom of press and the freedom of opinion. The Rushdie affair is born. There is much debate on the nature of the conflict: is it a discord between revelation and literature, between the rigidity of dogma and imaginative freedom, between religion and reason, between Islam and the free West. It is not about a book, the Dutch author and poet Gerrit Komrij writes on March 22, 1989 in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, it's 'about a world against a world'.

Al-Azm is later on to reproach Western readers of Rushdie's novel for 'scholarly, critical and analytical laziness'. One has not even taken the trouble to study the novel within the tradition of the satanic verses in the exegesis of the Qur'an, 'in spite of all the jargon of authenticity, contextualization, intertextuality, foregrounding, back-grounding and deconstruction that we hear all around us' in Western literary criticism.² Al-Azm demonstrates that in the contested novel Rushdie, although in a varying and dramatising manner befitting a novelist, builds directly upon at-Tabari, the medieval source of the incident of the satanic verses. It concerns verses in which famous female gods of the Quraish, the tribe to which the

1 See al-Azm's article 'De duivelsverzen post festum' (The Satanic Verses Post Festum) in Mernissi et al. 2004, 111. In this article Al-Azm explains among other things why he thinks it was wrong to call this announcement a fatwah, a verdict in which a juridical consult results, which has become a standard indication for Khomeiny's verdict in the Western press through the actions of 'two young French Islamologists', Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel who are now both internationally well-known (ib. 113).

2 Al-Azm in Mernissi et al. 2004, 131, 124.

prophet Muhammad belonged, are acknowledged and included in the pantheon. At first they were included in the Qur'an, but later the Prophet restored monotheism, by removing them on the basis of the argument that the verses were not whispered to him by God, but by the devil. 'It is as if the Prophet had told himself, "What harm is there in mentioning their goddesses for, say, a year or so, and then retracting that acknowledgement at an appropriate moment, considering that revelation also changes with the change of circumstances". And so it was. Salman Rushdie was right and said nothing new on this matter'.³ At an earlier date al-Azm had already written that he considered it incomprehensible that it had never occurred to the Western intelligentsia who came to Rushdie's defence to consider him a *Muslim dissident*.⁴ In other words: to conceive the Rushdie affair as a conflict within Islam and not immediately as a conflict between Islam and the West.

At the time of the debate on the Rushdie affair, the first couple of Islamic primary schools in the Netherlands experience their first school year. Some time passes before their right of existence is questioned. But the Rushdie affair has set the tone for the mood of the debate: the, whether or not alleged, incompatibility of two worlds.

New Realism: A Rhetorical Device

In 1991 Frits Bolkestein, at the time leader of the liberal party VVD in Dutch parliament, opens the discussion on the question whether the presence of 'an Islamic socio-political block' is desirable or undesirable in the Netherlands. During the conference of the *Liberale Internationale* in Luzern he states: 'If everyone's cultural identity is allowed to exist integration will suffer as a result'. Muslims must adapt to Western society and endorse its fundamental principles, even if they are not part of their own heritage. In the autumn of 1991 Bolkestein evokes a lively debate in both Dutch parliament and the Dutch press. There are limits to the tolerance of cultural identity, he stresses. Every person in the Netherlands is able to say and do what he wishes, eat what he wants, dress as he pleases, practice the religion he pleases, but there are limits. The fact, for instance, that one in five Moroccan and Turkish girls do not go to school, in spite of compulsory education, cannot be tolerated, even if they have reached puberty and the rules of their culture no longer permit them to be together with boys in one space: in this case our law has to take precedence over their custom. Bolkestein does not welcome the new compartmentalisation that comes with the new Islamic schools: separate schools are the precursors of a compartmentalised society. Segregation is the result instead of the desired integration.

3 Al-Azm in Mernissi et al. 2004, 130.

4 By analogy with the 'critical literary dissidents from communist countries' (al-Azm 1996, 100).

Bolkestein did not remain unchallenged and he certainly raised discussion. Among opponents and supporters alike, however, he was praised for having broken a taboo and for having broached an issue cloaked in silence for too long.⁵ Ten years later many were to say the same of the populist right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn, who, in the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* of February 9, 2002 called Islam nothing short of backward. Following the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001 – *9/11: Nine-Eleven* –, the debate on the incompatibility of the worlds of Islam and the West has flared up in the Netherlands. At the same time, early in 2002, a report was published by the Internal Intelligence Service (BVD: Binnenlandse Veiligheidsdienst), the predecessor of the current AIVD (Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst), entitled *De democratische rechtsorde en islamitisch onderwijs* (The Democratic Legal Order and Islamic Education). This report was received with similar appreciation: it is a good thing this has become known and the problem has been recognised. For too long we have been ‘turning a blind eye’.

Incidentally, the main conclusion of the report is that the vast majority of Dutch Islamic schools do not present a threat to the democratic legal order. But what catches the public eye is rather the revelation that some of these Islamic schools receive financial support from foreign fundamentalist organisations such as the Saudi foundation Al-Waqf al-Islami and that in some cases sympathisers of radical political organisations such as the Egyptian Brotherhood and the Palestinian Hamas are seated in Islamic school councils. It is a case of ‘express involvement with the state of affairs of the school’ and sometimes of intimidating behaviour towards pupils, teaching staff and members of the school management. Their efforts are said to be directed against integration into Dutch society. Furthermore, the BVD has at its disposal ‘indications’ that teachers of religion in Islamic primary schools ‘hold political Islamic or even radical Islamic views and show themselves as fierce opponents of integration’.⁶

For the Dutch government this is ample reason to commission the Education Inspectorate to conduct an inquiry into religious education within Islamic schools, even though this is at odds with the principle of the ‘freedom of education’ laid down in article 23 of the Dutch Constitution. However, immediately in the spring of 2002, even before the inquiry gets underway, the argument ‘that Islamic schools slow down integration’ becomes the main issue of a new school struggle, aiming at abolishing article 23 of the constitution. This took place against the backdrop of the election campaign for Dutch Parliament which had taken a bizarre turn following the murder of Fortuyn on May 6 of that year. Although the BVD-report is men-

5 For instance by the philosopher Manenschijn and the Arabist Brugman in the Dutch paper *NRC Handelsblad*, resp. September the 21st and October the 26th 1991. Cf. Meijer et al. 1997, 79 ff., for an outline of the debate in the Dutch press at the end of 1991 and the beginning of 1992.

6 BVD 2002, 21, 22.

tioned in this context, this report does not justify the general assumption that Islamic education hinders integration.

And so, at the onset of the new century there came an end to the charitable attitude towards Islamic schools, which they could certainly count on, despite the debate launched by the liberal politician Bolkestein ten years earlier. In the meantime, their number had increased steadily, to 37 at the time of the 2002 inquiry by the Education Inspectorate into Islamic primary education. At the beginning of 2000 the debate on the multicultural society had already incidentally been stirred up once more following the publication of the newspaper article ‘The multicultural drama’ by publicist and opinion leader Paul Scheffer.⁷ So the debate had been going on for some time, but from 9/11 onwards the Islam theme is foregrounded. Again, as in the discussion on the Rushdie affair, the recurring motif is the notion of the incompatibility of two worlds, Islam and the free West. That problem, however, does seem to take on increasingly threatening proportions in the new millennium.

For, after the repeated attacks in New York and Washington in 2001, in Madrid in 2003 and in London in 2005, and in the Netherlands, following the shocking novelty of the political murder of Fortuyn in 2002, the murder of the political filmmaker Theo van Gogh, the producer of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s *Submission* in 2004, who in the West did not feel the threat of what was often called ‘Muslim terrorism’? The call for safety measures is becoming louder in the Netherlands. In the Dutch political and public debates oil is more often poured on the fire than on the waves. The opinionated piece for which, in the summer of 2005, Member of Parliament, Geert Wilders, is given space in the columns of a quality newspaper as *NRC Handelsblad*, following the attacks on London’s public transport system, is extreme but not untypical of the Dutch debate at that time. On the contrary, Wilders furnishes his piece with arguments which have been repeatedly used before by opinion leaders in the public debate on Islam: the division between church and state, and hence freedom being foreign to Islam; the enlightenment having passed by Islam; democracy and Islam being incompatible. Wilders champions to see things in a simple way: ‘The analysis is clear, we have a great problem with Islam, in the Netherlands too. The solution is not so complicated; what is missing are political guts and a feeling of urgency. Immigration from Islamic countries should be forbidden. We have to learn to be intolerant to towards the intolerant, in the streets,

7 The article was published on the 29th of January 2000 in the Dutch paper *NRC Handelsblad*. A useful collection of much discussed contributions with this article by Scheffer als the first and a number of articles on the separation between church and state (*laïcité*) from a later phase in the debate, and was published on the occasion of a conference organised by the Law Faculty of the University of Groningen, entitled *Het multiculturele debat (The multicultural debate)* (Rutgers & Molier 2004). The Dutch philosopher Baukje Prins uses the specification ‘the debate on the multicultural society’ in the first printing of *Vorbij de onschuld* (Beyond innocence) from 2000, her book to which I shall return shortly, and in the second printing in 2004, the specification: ‘the debate on integration in the Netherlands’ – and that is a telling shift.

in the mosque, in court. We must answer hatred and violence by terrorists with exclusion and intolerance and show who the boss in the Netherlands is'.⁸ How could this new simplicity have become socially acceptable?

The Dutch philosopher Baukje Prins has convincingly demonstrated to which degree *realism as rhetoric* has come to govern the debate on the multicultural society. She places Bolkestein at the start of the process:

In the summer of 1991 Frits Bolkestein advances the bold thesis that the current basic principle of Dutch minority policy, namely integration while simultaneously preserving one's own identity, undermines the achievements of Western culture. The cause: many migrants are followers of Islam, a religion which is hostile towards central liberal values such as the division between church and state and the freedom of opinion. Bolkestein speaks boldly: there can be no haggling with liberal principles, the integration of minorities should become less noncommittal and be dealt with 'with guts'.⁹

The rhetoric of 'new realism' is all about guts and daring, in other words, a constant appeal to virtues as courage and honesty. Saying what you think, plainly, matter-of-factly and in a down-to-earth way – these are typically Dutch virtues furthermore. This suggests that it is indeed about the simple truth: things are mentioned outright, just as they are. The tone makes the music: the suggestiveness of this no-nonsense style replaces further reasoned underpinning. Constant repetition has given the dogma of the incompatibility of Islam and the enlightened secular democratic free West a semblance of naturalness; the repetition in itself is then considered sufficient argument.

Those who dare argue that things are not quite that simple, and that, for example, tolerance of differences and pluriformity are the marks of a democratic and open society, and that the multicultural society can therefore not simply be declared bankrupt, can count on bold responses by bold realists. Unashamedly, they play the man, not the ball; this even applies to philosophers who ought to be overly familiar with the *ad hominem* argument as a form of fallacy. As an example I shall quote a statement by the Dutch philosopher Herman Philipse from his 'Open letter to Ayaan Hirsi Ali', published in 2005 and 'also addressed at Piet Hein Donner, Minister of Justice and co-ordinating minister in the fight against terror': 'The combat of Muslim terrorism in the spiritual sphere requires that we publicly endorse, explain and defend the basic principles of the enlightenment. We shouldn't be fiddling around at the moment, like the unworldly Donner, but be firm and principled'.¹⁰

8 Wilders 2005.

9 Prins 2000, 21/22. Cf. note 7.

10 Similar discourteous utterances are not shunned by other defenders of the Enlightenment in the 'multicultural debate' either. Cf. the collection of articles mentioned in note 7, for instance the tone adopted by Bolkestein towards the Amsterdam alderman Aboutaleb,