Abstract

Since the beginning of this century, Muslim immigrants have become the subject of a heated debate in the Netherlands. This article examines and analyses this debate which is characterised by five distinctive elements: culturalisation, Islamisation, rejection of Islam, ‘new’ nationalism and the plea for assimilation. These characteristics relate to developments with regard to Muslims in the Netherlands and the Islamic World, to the rise of charismatic right-wing politicians like Pim Fortuyn and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and to mechanisms of ‘selfing’ and ‘othering’ within the Dutch population. These mechanisms are linked to factors of perceived threat and a lack of trust in the political elite to overcome such threats.

Key words: public discourse, Muslims, immigrants, Islam, the Netherlands

Introduction

The public debate on integration of immigrants in the Netherlands continues undiminished. In 1991 the debate was stirred up by Frits Bolkestein, the leader of the liberal party VVD, who declared in an address to the Liberal International Congress at Lucerne (September 6) and later in an article in de Volkskrant (September 12) that the Dutch government in applying its migration policy should follow, without restraint, only Western liberal values. In 1997, four years before he became the leader of a right-wing populist movement, Pim Fortuyn published a book entitled Against the Islamisation of our Culture: Dutch Identity as a Foundation (Tegen de islamiserings van onze cultuur: Nederlandse identiteit als fundament), in which he criticized the theory of cultural relativism and warned against the growing influence of a threatening Islam. In a seminal essay called The Multicultural Drama (Het multicultural drama), published in 2000 in the daily NCR Handelsblad (January 29), Paul Scheffer, a prominent member of the social democratic party PvdA, pleaded for a strengthening of Dutch nationalism to solve the problems surrounding integration. The events of ‘9/11’, the
rise and killing of Pim Fortuyn (May 6, 2002) and the murder of the film-maker Theo van Gogh (November 2, 2004) by Mohammed Bouyeri, who was raised in a Moroccan-Dutch family, resulted in an unprecedented polarisation of the debate. Although the anti-Islamic tone of the debate has softened a little since 2006, the debate still continues and has revealed a sharp division within Dutch society on issues of integration.

The aim of this article is to describe and analyse the development of the public debate on immigrants and integration in the Netherlands. What are the main characteristics of this debate? Why has this debate become so heated? What are the factors that have affected its course? Although this contribution focuses on the public debate on Muslims and Islam in the Netherlands, it has a wider relevance so far it resembles the public debate on these issues in other European countries, where anti-Islamic movements and parties are gaining power. Examples are the Flemish Bloc in Belgium, the British National Party (BNP) in the United Kingdom, and the Danish People’s Party in Denmark.

In order to answer the questions posed, I will first present my theoretical framework and define more precisely what this debate is about. Then I will make two preliminary remarks: one about the number of Muslims in the Netherlands and their backgrounds, and one about government policy regarding migrants and minorities until the late 1990s. Next, I will outline the debate and distil five interrelated elements: culturalisation, Islamisation, rejection of Islam, ‘new’ nationalism and a plea for assimilation. In explaining these elements, I will try to relate them to developments among Muslims in the Netherlands and in the Islamic World, to the rise of charismatic politicians such as the right-wing Pim Fortuyn and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and to mechanisms of ‘selfing’ and ‘othering’ within the Dutch population. These mechanisms are, in their turn, connected to a growing fear expressed by the Dutch population of the effects of processes of immigration and globalisation in combination with a lack of confidence in the political leaders to overcome the problems associated with these processes.

In the Dutch debate we can discern two opposing discourses: one pro-multicultural or pluralist, the other pro-assimilation. The pluralist discourse advocates a multicultural society, and the pro-assimilation discourse promotes a mono-cultural society (Landman 2002). The pluralist discourse is currently supported in the Dutch public arena by the writer Geert Mak, the sociologist J.A.A. van Doorn and the Mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen. However, the public integration debate has been dominated since the beginning of this century by a group of pro-assimilation intellectuals who have set the agenda for this debate. Among them are politicians, journalists, writers and academics. Many of them publish in the weekly magazines HP/De Tijd and Elsevier and the daily newspapers NCR Handelsblad, Parool, Volkskrant and Trouw. Although they do not agree on every detail and sometimes voice distinctive individual opinions, there is so much coherence and consistency in their views that we can speak of a more or less collective view on Islam. The focus of this article will be upon this vision.

This article is based mainly on a discourse analysis of primary literature about the integration of immigrants in the Netherlands since the late 1980s (see van Dijk 1997; Smith 2003). Firstly, I collected the most prominent publications in the public debate since that time, i.e. articles and books that are considered important by participants
involved in the debate other than the authors, and that have evoked a strong response in the previously mentioned national magazines and newspapers. I gathered these articles and responses mainly from the archives of the above dailies and weeklies available on the Internet. My selection corresponds to that of other scholars on the Dutch debate on Islam, such as Baukje Prins (2004), Thijl Sunier (2005) and Ian Buruma (2006). In addition, I examined secondary literature on the Dutch debate on integration. Within this body of literature, a distinction can be made between university-based studies and reports produced by governmental institutes and committees such as the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid, WRR) and the Parliamentary Inquiry Committee on Integration Policy (Parlementaire Commissie Onderzoek Integratiebeleid, PCOI). I studied literature derived from both these sources.

**Approach and demarcation of the debate**

Jürgen Habermas defines the concept of public debate in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit) (1962) primarily as a realm of rational and open debate, which is open to all and free from power. However, an ideal situation such as this does not exist in the real world. Public debate never takes place in a power-free vacuum, but always within a social and cultural context, pervasive with power. Moreover, people and parties involved in a debate, such as politicians and the media, generally use their power and influence to determine the content and rules of the debate. Habermas’ normative definition is therefore not a suitable framework for investigating the current public debate on Islam in the Netherlands (Calhoun 1992). This debate needs to be analysed as a forum of power struggles on issues of representation and identity in a multicultural and multi-religious setting.

It is useful to make a distinction between the public debate and the political debate. The most essential difference between the two is their focus: the main purpose of a public debate is to influence public opinion, while the main purpose of a political debate, or more particularly, a parliamentary debate, is to control and influence government policy. Nevertheless, these debates are interrelated. In the Dutch debate on the subject of Muslim immigrants, for instance, politicians are active in the public debate, and the public debate affects the parliamentary debate.

A public debate usually involves several different discourses. According to Maarten Hajer (1995:44) a discourse is: «(…) a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities». Competing discourses are in ‘a struggle for discursive dominance in which actors try to secure support for their definition of reality’ (Hajer 1995:59). We speak of dominance when the representatives of a particular discourse are able to set the agenda of the debate, and other participants are forced to respond to their contribution. In this sense, the Dutch debate on immigrants has been dominated since 2001 by the pro-assimilation discourse.
The key word in the public debate on immigrants in the Netherlands since the 1990s has been ‘integration’. What is meant by this term? The following is a general definition: integration refers to the process in which migrants become – individually and collectively – full-fledged members of the larger collectivity of the recipient society (cf. PCOI 2004:105–106). Analytically, we can distinguish between four interrelated forms or dimensions of integration: the socio-economic dimension of work, education and housing; the political dimension of becoming a citizen with rights and responsibilities; the social dimension of participation in civil society; and the cultural dimension of the command of the national language and respect for the core values and norms in the public sphere of the host society.

A review of the public debate on the integration of contemporary migrant groups in the Netherlands shows that there is very little discussion between ‘pluralists’ and ‘assimilationists’ about the first two dimensions. However, public opinion is strongly divided on issues connected with the social and cultural integration of minority groups. The principal question under discussion is how much freedom immigrant minorities may have, individually and collectively, to express their religious identity in the social and cultural fields of the public domain. Those with a pluralist approach regard cultural and religious diversity in essence as a positive value, and permit, or indeed encourage, cultural and religious individuals and communities to express their identities in public life and to establish their own organisations. In contrast, those who support the pro-assimilation approach assume that the cultural and religious backgrounds of migrants have a negative impact on integration. They therefore consider it undesirable that different cultural and religious groups should become organized in separate institutions. They also make it a requirement that immigrants assimilate into the Dutch public culture.

The aim of this article is to analyse the factors affecting the public debate on integration in the Netherlands during the last two decades. In this respect, I distinguish three factor groups: developments concerning Muslims, developments concerning the participants involved in a debate and developments concerning the public of a debate, viz. the Dutch population. These factors are strongly interwoven. The interpretation given by commentators in the media to the appearance of Pim Fortuyn on the Dutch political scene in 2001, for instance, affected public support for this populist politician and, conversely, his growing electoral popularity affected the way politicians representing the established parties responded in the media to Fortuyn’s rise. In this article, I will look at all three factor groups.

Facts and figures

The number of Muslims in the Netherlands is roughly estimated to be 900,000 or 5.8 percent of the total Dutch population (Douwes et al. 2005: 27). The vast majority is of Turkish and Moroccan origin (see Table 1). During the 1960s the first Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in the Netherlands were single male labourers who expected to return home after a short stay. By the mid-1970s, however, many of these workers had
decided to prolong their stay and the process of reuniting families started. The first Surinam Muslims came in the 1950s. Their numbers increased rapidly in the early 1970s, after the Dutch government announced that the colony of Suriname would become independent in 1975. At the end of the 1970s, a third category of Muslim immigrants started entering the Netherlands - political refugees and asylum seekers, most of whom came from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia.

Table 1. Ethnic profile of Muslims in the Netherlands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country of origin</th>
<th>Estimated number of Muslims</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>358,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
<td>315,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suriname</td>
<td>70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>29,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>44,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>37,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>22,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The government policies on immigration and integration from the 1970s until the 1990s, was characterized by the slogan: ‘Integration with preservation of identity’ (PCOI 2004). In the 1990s there was a shift from a policy focused on ethnic minority communities towards a policy focused on increasing the participation of individual immigrants in education and the labour market. Since the beginning of the current decade, the policy on immigrants has laid more stress on the ‘socio-cultural aspects’ of integration.

An outline of the debate

In the 1970s and 1980s, the subject of immigration and integration was not one of the principal topics dealt with in the media (Prins 2004). The policy adopted by the government was supported by almost all the political parties, except the extreme right-wing party of the Centre Democrats led by Hans Janmaat. This changed around 1990 when, on February 14, 1989, the Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed a religious edict (fatwa) of death declaring the writer Salman Rushdie guilty of blasphemy in his book *Satanic Verses*. This aroused a storm of indignation in the Dutch press and, when a large group of Muslims demonstrated in The Hague to support the *fatwa*, several public figures in the Netherlands for the first time pleaded in favour of the abolition of the government’s multicultural policy (Haleber 1989). The daily newspaper *Parool* wrote: «The Rushdie Affair has released strong feelings in the Netherlands; suddenly there is a public outcry against ‘Islamites’ which is not restricted to extreme right-wing
circles only. A taboo on talking scandal seems to have been lifted (March 18, 1989; translation by the author).

In the 1990s, Frits Bolkestein and Pim Fortuyn gave new impulses to the debate. In 1991 Bolkestein, leader of the liberal party, declared in an article in *de Volkskrant* that the official Dutch policy of ‘Integration with preservation of identity’ should be substituted by a policy of just integration. He perceived a wide gap between Western values and values in the Islamic world and demanded assimilation to fundamental principles such as the separation of church and state and tolerance from Muslim immigrants:

If integration is officially declared government policy, which cultural values must prevail: those of the non-Muslim majority or those of the Muslim minority? Here we must go back to our roots. Liberalism has produced some fundamental political principles, such as: the separation of church and state, the freedom of speech, tolerance and non-discrimination. We maintain that these principles hold well not only in Europe and North-America but all over the world as well. (...) In many parts of the Muslim world the principles I have mentioned are not honoured (...) I repeat that on these essential points there can be no compromise (Bolkestein 1991).

In 1997, Pim Fortuyn published a book entitled *Against the Islamisation of our Culture*. He feared that the original Dutch culture would be lost with the emergence of Islam and especially Islamic fundamentalism. In his opinion, the core values of the Islamic culture and the Judeo-Christian humanistic culture were incompatible. He highlighted three elements: the separation of church and state, the relationship between men and women and the relationship between children and parents. In order to resist the Islamic threat, he appealed to the Dutch population to be more aware and proud of their own national identity, and he required from new immigrants that they should conform to the essential values of the Dutch culture on penalty of leaving the country.

In my opinion, it is necessary to start in full clarity a political and public debate on these controversies (author’s note: separation of church and state, relationships between men and women, and relationships between parents and children) and to avoid any misconception about what is essential in our society. At this point I would not go as far as to require of every citizen to conform to these essential values, although I make an exception with regard to newcomers. They must conform, and if they do not, they will not be welcome (Fortuyn 1997:109; translation by the author).

In 2000, Paul Scheffer warned in a seminal essay against a ‘multicultural drama’ developing as a result of the emergence of a Muslim underclass. The division between this underclass and the rest of the population is, in his view, not only social and economic in nature, but also cultural. It was accentuated and broadened by the culture of Muslim immigrants which he defined as Islamic. One remedy he proposed was ‘Dutchification’, the strengthening of the Dutch identity within the Dutch populace, at the same time imposing the Dutch identity and values upon the Muslim newcomers. He wanted to keep the public space free from religious expressions.

There should be no place in public life for movements that wish to abolish the separation of church and state or dispense with equal rights for men and women. Religious symbols such as
headsscarves belong to the private sphere and do not go with a public function such as that of a police-officer (Scheffer, NRC Handelsblad, January 29, 2000; translation by the author).

Since 2000, the tone of the debate on the subject of immigrants has become increasingly harsh and unbending. In May 2001, El Moumni, a Moroccan imam, publicly declared that he regarded homosexuality as a dangerous disease (2001). Several Muslim organisations and many young Muslims supported this statement. This event caused a storm of public indignation. Politicians attacked the Imam and many individuals and organisations accused him of offending and promoting hate against homosexuals. The Imam had to stand trial, but was acquitted because of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of religious expression.6

The so-called El Moumni Affair was followed by the assaults of 9/11 in 2001 and the meteoric rise of the flamboyant Pim Fortuyn on the political firmament (Ellemers 2004; Margry 2003). Fortuyn claimed to be the real leader of the ‘ordinary people’ who had been abandoned by the established political parties. He promised to make every effort to defend Dutch sovereignty against the threat of the growing influence of the European Union and especially against the ‘Islamisation’ of Dutch society. On May 6, 2002, he was assassinated by an animal-rights activist. Despite this tragedy, his party, the List Pim Fortuyn (LPF), decided to sustain its candidacy for the elections. The elections proved to be a great success for the LPF. It won 26 of the 150 seats, becoming the second-largest party in parliament after the Christian Democrats.

Since 2002, Somali-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali has become a prominent figure in the debate. She called Islam a ‘backward religion’ and accused the Prophet Muhammad of being a ‘pervert’ (Trouw, January 25, 2003). With great zeal she criticized what she called ‘pure’ Islam and assailed Islam for oppressing women and homosexuals.

The true doctrine of pure Islam, as laid down in the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, calls believers to initiate violent actions against unbelievers, apostates and homosexuals, for example, while an oppressive stance on women is pointed out as standard (Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Trouw, October 8, 2005; translation by the author).

Together with the film-maker Theo van Gogh, she produced a short film with the title Submission on the mistreatment of Muslim women. This film was broadcast by Dutch public television on August 29, 2004 (Hirsi Ali 2004). A few months later, on November 2, Theo van Gogh was stabbed to death by a Dutch youth of Moroccan descent. This act bewildered the Dutch (Buruma 2006). Because of numerous threats, MP Hirsi Ali had to go into hiding. However, a few months later she returned to the public arena and resumed her criticism of Islam. In February 2005, she declared in connection with the publication of the cartoons about Muhammad in the Danish newspaper Jyllands Posten that she wanted to defend the right to freedom of speech as the right to offend hard-line Muslims (Hirsi Ali 2005). In the summer of 2006, she left the Netherlands to obtain a position with the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think-tank in Washington DC.

Hirsi Ali’s radical stance on Islam resonated in the work of many other opinion makers. In the same spirit Geert Wilders, a right-wing politician, declared that the poli-
The tisation of Islam was not a coincidence, but inherent to the Islamic doctrine. He stated that democracy and Islam are irreconcilable (Wilders 2004:65–66). The scientist and columnist Paul Cliteur criticized not only Islam, but religion in general. He considers himself an ‘Enlightenment critic’ and wrote:

He (author’s note: the ‘Enlightenment critic’) is convinced, or at least has strong indications, that much misery in the world has a cultural cause, and that this cultural cause resides in religion. If we succeed in liberating ourselves from religion, oppression should largely disappear. Thus Islam contributes to women’s position of inferiority and it is far from unsound to show that there is nothing good about Islam …

There are voices in the debate that counter these views. The anthropologist Peter van der Veer (2002) and the Dutch publicist Geert Mak (2005), for example, have stressed that the Islam debate in the Netherlands is to a large extent inspired by fear. Indeed, Mak called the prominent anti-Islamic participants in the debate ‘traders in fear’, implying that they were not only inspired by fear, but also wanted to spread fear in order to pave the way for repressive policies and legislation (Mak 2005:38). Politicians and administrators of the calibre of Minister of Justice, Piet Hein Donner, and the Mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, have emphasized the need for tolerance and moderation (Cohen 2002). The sociologist Van Doorn reproached the members of the anti-Islam camp for polarizing the debate and feeding societal unrest. His substantial criticism focused on two points: their view of Islam as an abstract system of values, a view that underestimates the capacity of common Muslims to assimilate, and the fact that criticism of religion was being introduced into politics, thereby jeopardizing the neutral core of Dutch democracy.

Two mistakes are being made here. The first mistake is confusing religion and life, norms and behaviour and law and reality. Of course, every religious community counts true believers, even fanatics, but the vast majority tends towards ‘moderation’ and is willing to conform to some degree to social reality. (…) Here we encounter the second mistake in the ongoing debate on Islam: many politicians started to theologise as in the old days and feel free to make the harshest statements about the Koran and the Prophet Muhammad, about free religious expression and about the capacity of the followers of a specific religion to integrate. In doing so, they broke with the Dutch democratic tradition (…). Religion within the boundaries of the law should be separate from politics. Any other approach is dangerous (Trouw, December 31, 2004; translation by the author).

However, these and other counter-voices could not prevent the tone of the debate from becoming determined by ‘assimilationists’. That this is still the case is demonstrated by the fact that in the Spring of 2007 the political and public debate on integration was dominated for several weeks by a statement made by Geert Wilders that immigrants should abandon their nationality of origin and that immigrants with two or more passports should not be allowed to become members of the Dutch national government or parliament. The quality newspaper Trouw, for example, devoted no fewer than four editorials to this topic in the first months of 2007.7
Five characteristics

In the public debate on integration I discovered five characteristics: an emphasis on the dimension of culture, Islamisation, a rejection of Islam, a plea for the enhancement of the awareness of the Dutch identity and a plea that immigrants should assimilate by adopting the core values of the Dutch culture.

Culturalisation

In the last fifteen years, the focus of the debate has moved from socio-economic integration to cultural integration (Prins 2004; Sunier 2005). Until the 1980s, the debate on integration had been focused entirely on issues such as housing and discrimination in the labour market, without touching on the cultural dimension of integration. This changed with the Rushdie Affair. This affair revealed the existence of a wide cultural gap between large parts of Muslim communities and the rest of Dutch society and for the first time drew attention to the significance of the religious dimension of integration. In the 1990s, and particularly after 2000, the issue of culture became one of the main topics in the debate. For Pim Fortuyn this issue was central to his approach.

In our so-called multicultural society we can observe daily encounters between the (fundamentalist) Islamic culture and our traditional Dutch culture. These encounters are threatening to destroy our way of life because we are ourselves disinterested in our own identity and in the essence of our society. We must fight this with might and main. (...) It is of vital importance to understand the difference between the (fundamentalist) Islam and the traditional Judeo-Christian humanistic culture (Fortuyn 1997:7–8; translation by the author).

In political terms, this ‘cultural turn’ of the debate is reflected in an increasing attention to such issues as the upholding of norms and values in society, the significance of Dutch history in school curricula, the introduction of a naturalisation ritual and the introduction of a New Newcomers Integration Act which came into effect on January 1, 2007.

Islamisation

In the public debate, immigrant cultures are increasingly being identified through their religion and in particular through Islam. The way of life of immigrants is not considered to represent a striving to build a meaningful life by combining elements from their cultures of origin with elements from the dominant Dutch culture, but is seen mainly as a product of their Islamic religion. We can speak of the Islamisation of the public debate (Cherribi 2003; Peters and Vellenga 2007; Sunier 2005).

In the public debate, Islam is often regarded as a rather static and homogenous system with a timeless essence. This essence can be found in the Koran and the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Ayaan Hirsi Ali said in response to scholars who stress the heterogeneity of Islam:
It has been shown with tiresome emphasis that there is no such thing as one Islam. There are as many Islams as there are Muslims. (…) But what all Muslims share is the conviction that the basic principles of Islam should not be criticised, revised or contradicted. It is against this background that I would ask if we have to fear Islam or not. What concerns me are the basic principles. The origin of Islam lies in the Koran and the Prophet's way of life (Suna), and it is the duty of all Muslims to copy this lifestyle in their moral and daily life (Trouw, March 16, 2002; translation by the author).

Rejection of Islam

As we have seen in the outline of the debate, many participants have not hesitated to decry Islam. In their opinion, there is a sharp contrast between Western culture and Islam: Western culture is enlightened, Islam is backward; Western culture advocates tolerance, Islam is intolerant; Western culture promotes freedom, Islam is oppressive; Western culture stands for equality, Islam propagates inequality; Western culture is democratic, Islam is essentially undemocratic; Western culture inclines towards secularism, Islam has a tendency to develop into fundamentalism. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is one of the most outspoken critics of Islam. In an interview in the Evening Standard she declared: «… Islam is the new fascism. Just like Nazism started with Hitler’s vision, the Islamic vision is a caliphate – a society ruled by Sharia law – in which women who have sex before marriage are stoned to death, homosexuals are beaten, and apostates like me are killed. Sharia law is as inimical to liberal democracy as Nazism» (February 7, 2007).

‘New’ nationalism

For a long time nationalism was not an issue in the Netherlands. In the period before 2000, it was absolutely not common for Dutch people to be proud of their national identity (Van Ginkel 1999:275 etc.). But this changed around the year 2000. From that moment on, many opinion leaders attacked theories of cultural relativism and advocated strengthening people’s awareness of their national identity and fortifying their feelings of national pride. Recently Geert Wilders, leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), declared in firm terms:

Cultural relativists consider the various cultures represented in the Netherlands to be equal. But this is nonsense of course. The Western – and thereby the Dutch – culture is light-years ahead of the Islamic culture in political, economic, military, scientific, social, cultural and moral respect. Our national pride is being replaced by a dangerous passiveness (…) I propose that, starting tomorrow, every public building and every school in the Netherlands should proudly raise our nation’s tricolour. On top of that, I believe - and we should start with this today - that our children should pledge allegiance to the flag as a symbol of the Netherlands and our free democracy at school every day. Let us revive our national pride in the Netherlands! (Wilders 2007; translation by the author).

In this plea for a ‘new’ nationalism, it is apparent that the national identity advocated is strongly contrasted to the identity of Muslim immigrants. A sharp distinction is made
within the Dutch population between ‘us’ and ‘them’, between ‘autochthones’ and ‘allochtones’, between ‘the Dutch’ and ‘the Muslims’. Furthermore, this new nationalism is given a profile by constructing a strong opposition between the Netherlands on the one hand and the European Union on the other hands. Thijl Sunier wrote: «Towards the end of the 1990s, a growing number of intellectuals started to argue for a deepening and wider dissemination of national awareness and the protection of Dutch cultural identity, both in opposition to the presence of minority ‘ethnic’ groups and the issue of European unification.» (Sunier 2005:93)

Assimilation

Many participants in the public debate have pleaded for assimilation. They require of immigrants that they should respect and internalise the core values of Dutch public culture. In essence they consider Islam to be irreconcilable with Western values such as democracy, freedom, equality and tolerance, and demand assimilation from the Muslims. One prominent supporter of the assimilation approach is Paul Schnabel, General Director of the Social and Cultural Planning Office of the Netherlands (SCP), who published an article on this issue in 2000 entitled The Multicultural Illusion (De multicultuurele illusie). In 2004, he said the following with regard to his contribution to the public debate: «(…) assimilation. In hindsight, I do not regret that I used that word, because it expressed what I had in mind. I meant that there is no choice: if you want to be well off here, you must be able to speak the language and fit in with the ways of the new country.» (PCOI 2004:66; translation by the author).

In order to stimulate assimilation, many ‘assimilationists’ use the weapon of criticism to strike out against Islam. Harsh criticism is supposed to open the Muslims’ eyes to the negative aspects of their religion and stimulate them to adopt Dutch or Western core values. Geert Wilders stated: «There is a battle going on and we have to defend ourselves. Before you know it, we will have more mosques than churches. If the Muslims want to stay here, they will have to tear out half the Koran and throw away the pages. They should not listen to the imam» (De Pers, February 13, 2007; translation by the author).

Notwithstanding the strategy of confrontation, many opinion makers do not take much stock in the transformation potential of Islam. In spite of many studies which give evidence of the ‘Europeanisation’ of Islam in Western Europe, they do not believe in the transformation of Islam and consider the secularisation of Islam as the only road to full assimilation (cf. Fadil 2005; Hunter 2002; Peter 2006; Roy 1999).

Developments in the Islamic world and among Muslims in the Netherlands

What are the main factors which have affected the development of the integration debate in the Netherlands since the late 1980s? In answering this complex question, I will distinguish three types of factor: factors connected to developments among
Muslims in the Netherlands and the Islamic World, factors regarding the media and the participants involved in the debate, and factors which are linked to processes of ‘selfing’ and ‘othering’ within the Dutch population.

The focus on Islam in the debate can be attributed to a large extent to the increasing visibility of Islam in the Netherlands, especially in the big cities (Sunier 2005). In just a few decades, the Muslim part of the total population of the Netherlands has increased to almost 6 per cent, which is the second-highest percentage in Western Europe after France. Muslims have set up mosque associations and have built mosques complete with minarets. In 1988 the first fully subsidized Islamic elementary schools were founded. Muslim customs, national dress and halal foods have become common (Douwes et al. 2005). The number of contacts between migrants and the host society has increased considerably. As a result, immigrants have become more aware of their own religious identity and started also to present themselves stronger in the public sphere as Muslims (cf. Nielsen 1992). In response to the growing visibility of Islam in the Netherlands, the Dutch people started to realise in the second part of the 1990s that their country now hosts a substantial number of Muslims.

The negative image of Islam in the public debate has been fed by several factors. One of them was the rise of political Islam in the Muslim world, exemplified by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the assassination in 1981 of the Egyptian president Anwar al-Sadat by an Islamist organisation. However, in the 1980s the Dutch media hardly made a connection between these developments in the Middle East and Muslims in Europe, including the Netherlands. This changed with the Rushdie Affair. From that moment on, the image of Islam present in the Netherlands also worsened (Haleber 1989).

Two elements are important in this context. On the one hand, reports on the mistreatment of women in Islamic families and figures on criminality and drop-outs among young people of Moroccan background fed the idea within the Dutch media and the Dutch population that Islam forms an obstacle to integration. On the other hands, the murder of Pim Fortuyn, but in particular the killing of Theo van Gogh by a Dutch youth of Moroccan origin, fuelled the fear that also Islam in the Netherlands is a source of extremist violence. In the debate both elements were brought together. It was claimed that partly as a result of the failure of the integration policy, Dutch society is now susceptible to Islamic extremism. In addition, Afshin Ellian, for instance, an Iran-born philosopher of law and columnist for the NCR Handelsblad, pleaded for a more forceful approach to integration in order to reduce the conditions promoting Islamic terrorism (Ellian 2006).

Media and actors

Until the year 2000, the pro-multicultural discourse dominated the debate in the Netherlands. This discourse was promoted, among other things, by the so-called ‘purple coalition’ led by the Social Democrat PM, Wim Kok, and comprised the (red) labour party (PvdA), the (blue) liberal party (VVD) and the (green) reformist party (D66).
This coalition was in power from 1994 to 2002 and during those years it was not usual to speak openly and without reservations about problems associated with Muslim immigrants, let alone blame them and their cultural and religious background for any kind of unease the Dutch public experienced. If you did, you ran a considerable risk of being accused of discrimination and intolerance (Pels 2003). Pim Fortuyn experienced this in the period of his growing popularity in the winter of 2001 and the spring of 2002. His growing popularity prompted counter-forces from the political and intellectual establishment into action. Because of his hard-hitting anti-immigrant and anti-Islam views, politicians and media-commentators started to stereotype and stigmatise him as belonging to the ‘extreme right’. He was compared to Mussolini and Hitler and regularly associated with far-right leaders like Jörg Haider, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Philip de Winter. Kees Lunshof, for example, editor for the daily Telegraaf, wrote: «Polder Mussolini. That sounds very harsh and will doubtless lead to countless responses, but believe me: I see a direct connection between Fortuyn, Mussolini and possibly Nietzsche» (October 30, 2001; translation by the author).

Due to his charismatic and flamboyant appearance, Pim Fortuyn nevertheless succeeded in breaking through the prevailing rules of correctness in politics and media (Ellemers 2004). His performance in two television debates with the leaders of other national parties instantly produced a major media-hype around him. This hype caused his popularity to increase even further. By the time of his assassination, the polls indicated that his party would win between 30 and 38 of the 150 seats in parliament, an unprecedented political upheaval. Notwithstanding his death on May 15, over 17 percent of the voters voted for the LPF, returning 26 seats. Overnight his party became the second largest party in the Netherlands and a partner in the new government (Margry 2003). Thanks to this success, the pro-assimilation discourse became the leading discourse in the public debate.

The Fortuyn movement was very unstable after the loss of its leader. The LPF took part in the new coalition government, but this government collapsed four months after it was formed. Support for the movement declined just as fast as it had gained momentum. Finally, in the national election of November 2006, the party lost all its seats in parliament. Despite this decline, however, the pro-assimilation and Islam critical discourse remained dominant in the public debate. The role of Pim Fortuyn was taken over by new charismatic figures such as Somali-born MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders, who, after leaving the VVD in 2004, formed the Party for Freedom (PVV), which returned nine seats in the 2006 elections.

Selfing and othering

The course taken by the public debate was affected by the way large sections of the Dutch population responded to developments in the field of migration and globalisation. Their approach to these processes created a climate in which the pro-assimilation discourse could flourish.
The anthropologist Gerd Baumann (2004) pointed out that collectivities, including national collectivities, can respond in different ways to ‘the other’ (2004; see Kelman 2005; Rex 1996). Every claim to a collective identity is inevitably tied to the exclusion of alterity, every ‘us’ excludes a ‘them’. Subsequently, he distinguishes four forms or ‘grammars’ of selfing and othering. The simplest form is the ‘grammar of polarisation’: the binary opposition of ‘us=good’ and ‘them=bad’. In addition, he mentions three more complex forms: a ‘grammar of orientalisation’ (‘us’ and ‘them’ are each other’s reversal, in a negative as well as a positive sense, e.g. the native Dutch are rational and the Muslims are irrational, but also the native Dutch are materialistic and the Muslims more spiritual); a ‘grammar of segmentation’ (under certain conditions ‘us’ and ‘them’ have things in common, e.g. Christians and Muslims both belong to the ‘religions of the book’); and a ‘grammar of encompassment’ (from a certain perspective ‘the other’ belongs to ‘us’, e.g. Muslims have to fight the same fight for cultural emancipation as the Dutch in the 1960s). I would add to these four grammars the ‘grammar of disregard’. Collectivities can also ignore the differences between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and act as if there were no major differences between the two categories, or at least refrain from attaching too much importance to them.

Reviewing the situation in the Netherlands, it can be noted that since the late 1990s, the grammar of disregard has been replaced here by the grammar of polarisation. This shift is especially visible as a change in the nature of national identity from ‘civic nationalism’ to ‘ethno-cultural nationalism’. The former refers to ‘membership in a political community and is primarily defined by reference to the state’, while the latter refers to ‘membership in a cultural historical community’ (Delanty 1996:3). Until the mid-1990s, national feelings were never, or hardly ever, articulated in the Netherlands. Every Dutch citizen was simply considered to be a member of the nation. In other words, civic nationalism was dominant. The Dutch identity was perceived as an open identity. It was neither profiled inside the Netherlands in contrast to migrant groups, nor outside the Netherlands in contrast to other nations.

In the first years of this century, however, this rather formal but at the same time open form of nationalism was overshadowed by a more emotionally charged and ‘closed’ ethno-cultural nationalism that focused on the Netherlands as a cultural-historical community. The upshot of this move was that a new ‘us/them’- distinction came to the forefront, in which ‘us’ was identified as those who shared a common history and common core values such as democracy, freedom, equality and tolerance, and ‘them’ was identified as Muslim immigrants who came from another culture and followed a religion which propagated submission, subordination and intolerance. Linked to this, the attitude towards Europe changed dramatically. In little more than ten years Dutch society shifted from a warm supporter of European integration into an opponent of further European unification. This became strikingly visible on June 1, 2005, when the Dutch population en masse rejected the European Constitution in a poll. The image of Europe had changed from an ideal into a bugbear. Europe was now seen as an expensive, bureaucratic and undemocratic Moloch that threatened Dutch sovereignty (Prast et al. 2005:45).
Why has the stance on ‘the other’ turned in the Netherlands from ‘disregard’ into ‘polarisation’ since the late 1990s? I believe that this change is linked to at least two major developments. In the first place, it is linked to the fact that large sections of the Dutch population did not know how to deal with processes of migration, Europeanisation and globalisation, and consequently perceived these trends as threats. Four points are important.

Firstly, many Dutch people did not know how to cope with the emergence of large immigrant communities from countries with which they were not familiar. The Netherlands does not share a colonial past with Turkey or Morocco. Most Dutch people do not know anything about the Turkish and Moroccan cultures; they experience immigrants from these countries primarily as strangers. The Dutch historian Piet de Rooy wrote: «There was a community of about one million people in Dutch society that actually did not fit in and possibly did not even want to fit in. The feeling widely prevailed that the old country had gone» (2005:11; translation by the author).

Secondly, the native Dutch population did not know how to deal with the rise of a large new ‘strong’ religion in their society. In the past, the Netherlands had counted several ‘strong’ world views and had found in the system of pillarisation a way to deal with the associated problem of religious diversity (Riis 1999). But starting in the early 1960s, the mainline religious communities have eroded and the system of pillarisation has collapsed. As a result, the Dutch did not know how to respond to the emergence of an organized and orthodox Islam and are now finding it difficult to cope with this ‘strong’ religion.

Thirdly, many Dutch people were shocked by the acts of politically and religiously legitimated violence in their country. These surprised the Dutch completely because they had no previous experience with this phenomenon, in contrast with, say, the British in Northern Ireland. The murder of Pim Fortuyn was the first political killing in the Netherlands since the country became a kingdom in 1813 (Margry 2003).

Finally, many Dutch people became uneasy about the expected impact that the formation of one large European Union and the process of globalisation would have on the Netherlands as a relatively small country. What would the role of the Netherlands be in a European Union of 24 countries? What will the globalisation of the economy mean for the Dutch social security system? Many people perceived these developments as a threat to Dutch sovereignty and the Dutch welfare state. As a result, an overwhelming majority of the Dutch population said ‘No’ to the European Constitution in 2005.12

In the second place, the switch in attitude to ‘the other’ is also linked to the fact that a large part of the Dutch population lost confidence in the political elite to overcome the perceived threats. Notably in the first five years of the new century, confidence in Dutch politics decreased drastically. Indeed, by 2002, the confidence of the population in the Dutch government had halved and since then only a little more than one third of the population has stated that the government functions well (Buijs et al. 2006:10). In 2005, 20 per cent of the population had no confidence in the Dutch parliament, four times the amount in 1999/2000. That same year no less than 45 per cent declared that they had little confidence in parliament (Prast et al. 2005:44).
The perceived threats with respect to the processes of migration, Europeanisation and globalisation as well as the lack of confidence the Dutch population had in the ability of the government and parliament to challenge these threats - stimulated a need to articulate a national identity that could offer a strong ‘sense of belonging’. The new ethno-cultural national identity very adequately fulfilled this need. It was characterized by markers of culture (for or against Western values such as democracy, equality and freedom), religion (for or against Islam) and Europe (for or against the European Union).

Conclusion
Since the early 1990s, the development of the Dutch public debate on migrants can be typified using five key concepts: ‘culturalisation’, ‘Islamisation’, ‘rejection of Islam’, ‘new nationalism’ and ‘assimilation’. On the one hand, the public debate has focused on the cultural dimension of integration, and on the other hand this cultural dimension is increasingly being defined within the framework of an assumed conflict between Islam and Western culture. In the debate we can distinguish two opposing discourses: pro-multicultural (pluralist) and pro-monocultural (pro-assimilation). Since 2001, the pro-assimilation discourse has become dominant and has set the agenda. This discourse is represented by predominantly right-wing intellectuals, politicians and opinion makers. They tend to reify and essentialise Islam, transforming it into a monolithic, allegedly ‘pure’ Islam (cf. Baumann 1999). This constructed ‘pure’ Islam is subsequently used to show that Islam is a serious threat to the democratic liberal state, an obstacle to the emancipation of women and homosexuals and a dangerous source of terrorism. Their statement is that the integration problem will be resolved when the native Dutch population starts to proudly propagate the core values of the Dutch culture, and when the Muslim immigrants leave pure Islam behind and adopt these values.

The course taken by the debate is the outcome of the interaction between three types of development. Firstly, it relates in part to the effect of events taking place in the Muslim World inside and outside the Netherlands. Important factors are: the rise of political Islam in the Muslim World, the Rushdie Affair, the increasing visibility of Muslims in the Netherlands, the El Moumni Affair, the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, violent actions committed in the name of Islam, reports of problems with young migrants at school and on the streets, the public showing of the film Submission and the killing of Theo van Gogh.

Secondly, it is the upshot of the rise of charismatic right-wing politicians like Pim Fortuyn in particular, followed by Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders, who broke through the dominance of the pluralistic discourse in the public debate. They strongly promoted a discourse that polarized and hardened the relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in Dutch society.

Finally, mechanisms of selfing and othering within the Dutch population have contributed to the increasing power of the pro-assimilation discourse. Many Dutch people feared the consequences of the processes of migration and globalisation and, at the
same time, were no longer confident that the political leaders could find solutions for the problems associated with these processes. Encouraged by the representatives of the pro-assimilation discourse, they drew a sharp line between ‘us’, the autochthonous Dutch and ‘them’, the Muslim migrants, and also between the Netherlands and Europe. The Dutch identity was articulated and its negative image was projected on Muslim immigrants and the European Union.

How the public debate in the Netherlands will develop in the near future is difficult to predict, since there are many significant influencing factors. Developments in the Islamic world are important. New attacks by Muslim terrorists will without doubt strengthen the pro-assimilation position. On the other hand, changes in politics and the media can be beneficial to a pluralist position. This position will be enhanced if, for example, the media will cover the Muslim voice more than they have done so far. For this to happen it is essential that Muslims and their associations become convinced that it is important to participate more assertively in the public debate than they have done so far. Also, the inclination of sections of the Dutch population to make an ‘us-them’ dichotomy is crucial, being based on a defensive response to the processes of migration, Europeanisation and globalisation. Increasing awareness of the long-term benefits for the Netherlands of an open response will serve to undermine the present dichotomy and create the conditions required for a more positive debate on Muslim immigrants.

Notes

1 In the early 1990s, Samuel Huntington posed the provocative and controversial thesis of a ‘clash of civilizations’. This thesis claims that there are sharp cultural differences between the core values common in societies sharing a Western Christian heritage and the beliefs common in the rest of the world, especially Islamic societies. These profound and long-standing differences based on predominant religious cultures will lead in the post-Cold War period to conflicts between as well as within nation states. (1993). The thesis has come under repeated and sustained attack. See: Kabuli (1994), Hunter (1998), Said (2001) and Norris, Inglehart (2004).
2 E.g. the MPs Ayaan Hirsi Ali (VVD, liberal party), Frits Bolkestein (VVD) and Geert Wilders (PVV, right-wing).
3 Sylvain Ephimenco, Paul Frentrop, Gerry van der List, Chris Rutenfrank, Jaffe Vink, Bart Jan Spruyt.
4 Leon de Winter, Wessel te Gussinklo.
5 Paul Cliteur, Afshin Ellian, Hans Jansen, Herman Philipse.
6 For the judgement, see: http://www.ivir.nl/rechtspraak/elmoumni.HTM
7 See Trouw on February 16, March 2 and 27 and April 4.
Despite the substantial variety between and within ethnic minorities, members of ethnic minorities in general are over-represented in rates of children with a language disadvantage, drop-outs and rates of unemployment. Several opinion makers, such as Paul Scheffer (2000) and the journalist Jaffe Vink (Trouw February 9, 2002) used these reports to criticize the multicultural policy of the sitting cabinet.

For more stigmatisations on Fortuyn see the databank Censuur in Nederland (Censorship in the Netherlands). Available from: http://www.burojeugdzorg.nl/281.htm

The first debate was on the public television network (Nova) on March 6, 2002, and the second on April 27, 2002, on the commercial television network RTL4. In the first of these in particular, Fortuyn emerged as the new leader of the country, and exposed the other party leaders as old fagies representing an ‘old’ style of politics.

A survey conducted by TNS NIPO in 2004 for the daily newspaper de Volkskrant, showed that 47 per cent of the Dutch population took a neutral stance on Muslims. The part of the population that judged Muslims negatively or very negatively (36 per cent) is more than twice as big as the part that judged positively or very positively (14 per cent) (Kanne 2004).

Approximately 62 per cent of Dutch voters rejected the proposed constitution. The turnout was about 63 per cent. The referendum was an initiative of the House of Representatives. See: http://www.government.nl/actueel/dossieroverzicht/europesegrondwet.jsp

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