

Facing up to Islam in the Netherlands

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As the Dutch parliament considers banning the burka from all public spaces, a measure that would apply to fifty or so women in total, Markha Valenta explores how a piece of clothing is disturbing the Netherlands' tradition of tolerance.

Once again, the Netherlands surprises. Flying in the face of a centuries-old commitment to freedom of religion, of conscience, and of expression, it is about to prohibit Muslim women from covering their faces in public. Should this legislation pass, and apply to the whole of the public sphere as the Dutch parliament desires, it will constitute one of the most restrictive responses to Islamic clothing both in Europe and beyond.

Only one other western country, France, has passed legislation aimed at restricting Islamic dress at the national level. But the French law has some significant differences: it is more limited in the spaces it targets – schools and other public buildings; and it applies to all forms of "ostentatious" religious dress, not just Islamic ones (though, of course, it was the Islamic veil that generated the legislation in the first place). Other countries, such as Germany, Belgium and Denmark have also seen legislation enabling the restriction of Islamic dress, but only at either the local level or in the realm of private business. The Dutch legislation, by contrast, would entirely remove the niqab and the burka from the public space. This is the Islamic facial veil's eradication rather than privatisation, to the extent that the veil only has a function in public and not in private.

Proposed some months ago by the populist anti-Islamic MP Geert Wilders, the idea was immediately taken up by Rita Verdonk, the Dutch minister of integration and immigration. Her first step was to commission a report on the legislation's legal feasibility, analyzing whether or not it would constitute religious discrimination and to what extent it would overlap with current laws that already require all people to be identifiable when in public (therefore prohibiting the wearing of balaclavas, carnival masks, and so forth). Her report is due any day now.

Late last December, however, well in advance of the report's publication, the Liberal and the Christian Democratic parties in Parliament had already expressed their support for such a ban. Reasons given by Geert Wilders and other politicians included those of defending women's equality, ensuring public safety and security, and asserting the need for Muslims to integrate into Dutch society.

Does this heavy-handed approach seal the "failure" of Dutch tolerance? The paradoxes of the situation suggest that such a surface analysis cannot capture the very modern aspects of the Netherlands' – and indeed Europe's – dilemma.

Through Dutch eyes

One million of Holland's sixteen million citizens are Muslim, roughly six percent. This is the second-highest percentage in Europe after France's, at ten percent. Of these million, only a handful of women, fifty or so, wear a burka. That is, fewer than a dozen per major city. Probably less.

In light of this, the legislation constitutes little more than a bit of symbolic politics in what is, according to a recent Pew Global Attitudes study, the most anti-Islamic country in the west. Though others may be more concerned than the Dutch about Islamic extremism or the entry of Turkey into the European Union, the Netherlands is the only country in the west where a majority actually views Muslims unfavorably (51%, followed by the Germans at 47%). By contrast, majorities of the French, British, and Americans view Muslims favorably, and even very favorably.

Correspondingly, while ethnically Dutch opponents of the ban oppose it on the grounds of freedom of expression and freedom of religion, many and perhaps most Muslims, whatever their dress, see in the ban yet one more expression of a Dutch aversion to Islam. It is not so much the ban itself troubles them, since so few of them cover their faces or have mothers and wives who do so, but rather the way it would seem to confirm and strengthen the Dutch rejection of Islam and, by extension, of Dutch Muslims.

In this sense, while specifically targeting only a minute proportion of Dutch Muslims, the legislation actually touches the whole of Dutch Muslim citizenry. Women with veils wonder if they will be next; women without are reminded that however integrated they are, however "modern" they may look, the Dutch will not let them forget that they are not quite Dutch; and all Muslims recognize in this legislation the assumption of Islamic inferiority.

Influence and enlightenment

Whatever the reasons given for supporting or contesting the legislation, the logic driving it is the widespread conviction in and beyond the Netherlands that neither Islam nor Muslims have within themselves the resources and the will to tackle the challenges facing them. Instead, it is overwhelmingly believed that they are more likely to be liberated and enlightened – the main task non-Muslims have set Muslims – through pressure applied from outside, by a western world that is implicitly or explicitly assumed to be more advanced, more modern, and more just.

This is precisely the argument made by figures such as the Somali-Dutch MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and the basis for their popularity within the Netherlands, throughout Europe and in the United States. So, while according to a recent survey the vast majority of Dutch Muslim women neither identify with her nor feel that she advances their interests, she was feted in 2005 by *Time* magazine as one of the year's one hundred most influential people, is being given the *Reader's Digest* "European of the Year 2006" award for "her courage in putting the fate of oppressed Muslim women on the political agenda of the Netherlands and Europe" and has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Most analyses of these developments have tended to place them in the context of increasing Dutch conservatism following the shocking political murders of the flamboyantly gay populist and anti-Islamic politician Pim Fortuyn by an animal rights activist in 2002 and, more recently, the public butchery of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a radical Moroccan-Dutch Islamicist.

The most common argument made by both Dutch and outside observers is that these murders, particularly the last one, mark the failure of Dutch tolerance and of Dutch multiculturalism in the face of Islamicist violence. As a result the Dutch are both facing an identity crisis, needing to reconsider their society's essential principles, and are turning to less tolerant, more authoritarian and more nationalist means of addressing the challenges created by the diversity in their midst.

Within this framework, the possible Dutch ban on Islamic facial veiling constitutes first and foremost yet one more sign of this new Dutch ethos. And the proposal by Verdonk and Wilders is clearly an attempt to once again to make political capital, as they have in the past, by seeming to heroically challenge Islamic "backwardness" even when it entails a miniscule group of women with no lobby and no (international) collectivity to effectively, much less disruptively, challenge others' interpretations of facial veiling.

All this is very true. And yet such readings miss a number of crucial points, which I only have room to suggest here rather than fully analyze, but that are nevertheless important to note. These have to do, on the one hand, with the specificity of the Dutch situation and, on the other hand, the extent to which it is much more generally representative of crises in the institution of democracy today.

The Dutch experience of tolerance

In contrast to countries such as France, the Dutch aversion to Islam is shaped much more clearly by the specific nature of its tradition of religious tolerance and only more subtly its colonial history, a history it has largely repressed rather than debated. This tradition has two distinctive aspects. Until the twentieth century, this was a tolerance that accepted diversity and divergence, but only to the extent that divergent elements accepted the privileging of Dutch mainstream Protestantism in the public sphere. It was a hierarchical egalitarianism, an acceptance of the divergent as long as it knew and accepted its place.

The second aspect derives from the Dutch tradition of "pillarisation", the late nineteenth-century institutionalisation of separate socio-political-religious worlds in the interests of egalitarian social relations. The country was divided along essentially four "pillars" – Protestant, Catholic, Socialist, Liberal – that lived radically segregated lives from each other, deeply loyal to their community, and subject to its norms and values.

The 1960s marked not only the end of this system, but the Dutch break with religious beliefs and identities, communal norms, and Christian sexual repression of not only women but of many men as well. This break with religious tradition, authoritarian regimes of collective identity, and sexual alienation is viscerally understood by many Dutch as a foundational national moment. It is the moment at which a truly national culture began to be formed, no longer fragmented into separate life-worlds along religious and political lines, and at which the Dutch commitment to modernity rather than tradition, a modernity understood as secular and liberal, was collectively affirmed.

Correspondingly, for many Dutch people, Islam is read as precisely that which they not only have left behind – dogmatic religious authoritarianism and unquestioning collectivity – but that which, within living memory, they had to actively struggle to overcome in order to achieve their current way of life. This leads to the paradoxical situation we have today, where the Dutch are turning to conservative arguments in the interests of protecting their recent secular "modernity" from what they perceive to be an onslaught of Islamic and non-western "tradition"; are seeking to deploy authoritarian state practices in the interest of promoting individualism, sexual liberation, and self-expression among Muslim immigrants and their descendants; and are attempting to create a new nationalism in the interest at least as much of integration as of exclusion.

Under these conditions, the Islamic facial veil, much more than simply constituting an easy Islamic target, at the same time can be taken as fundamentally embodying and (re)enacting all that from which contemporary Dutch society liberated itself not so long ago: authoritarian cultural-religious tradition, the devaluation and privatisation of the sexual, the restriction of individual self-expression, and the fragmentation of society into cut-off communities of belief and practice.

The shape of a nation

At the same time, it is important to note that Dutch critiques of Muslims actually consist of a coalition of interests, rather than one coherent collectivity. In broad, general terms, there are the inhabitants of traditionally working-class neighbourhoods who are most directly affected by immigration; the socio-cultural "elite", generally least likely to encounter immigrants in their daily life but most likely to shape public discourse and government practice; and finally, those living outside the major cities in more ethnically homogeneous areas, at once drawn to and inclined to fear the cities as sites of restless danger and corruption.

That is to say, one of the reasons that Dutch anti-Islamism is so powerful is that it cuts through all layers of society. Just as remarkable is that politically it runs the gamut from left to right. Rather than that some on the left continue to forcefully advocate multiculturalism, as is the case in Britain and a number of other countries for example, the inclination of Dutch progressives under conditions where multiculturalism has become nationally discredited, is to offer a qualified, nuanced, gentler version of more conservative and reactionary calls for Islamic assimilation. Leftist politicians have not gone so far as to support the call for banning facial veiling, but do emphasize the need for integration and for challenging Muslim social relations that are considered oppressive or undemocratic. In other words, the Dutch critique of Islam and Muslims emerges not only *out of* a condition of national unity, but has become one of the preeminent means *to* national unity.

Simultaneously, Dutch aversion to Islam is complemented by at least as strong a sense of simple but deeply vested disinterest. To this day, Dutch elite culture – its scholars, museum directors, public intellectuals – is predominantly a white male affair, subtly but firmly indifferent to feminist visions as much as to immigrant intellectuals. It is a culture that remains largely centred on European modernity, and American post-war culture, out of the implicit assumption that the rest is either irrelevant,

uninteresting, or backward – not worth seriously attending to, though this is never said aloud. The important point, however, is that while immigrants transform the actual neighbourhoods and workplaces of the Dutch working classes, they simultaneously pose a serious and disruptive threat to the authority of the cultural elite insofar as it is based on an assumption of western superiority. Should that elite have to account for and engage the critiques of its immigrant intellectuals, the assumptions and mores sustaining that culture would come to be under profound pressure. As a result, for the moment this elite fails by and large to fundamentally engage, much less challenge, the anti-Islamic tide sweeping the Netherlands – in contrast to public intellectuals, writers and artists in countries such as the US, Britain, and France.

Finally, one of the most important of these elite values is in fact Dutch fascination with and loyalty to America, perhaps the strongest in all of western

Europe. Hence the big shock of 11 September 2001 was not only the attack on the American buildings themselves, but the fact that a sizeable number of Dutch Muslims said they "understood" the reasons for the attack, some, young boys, to the point of dancing in the street afterwards. This, more than anything else, clearly revealed to the Dutch for the first time, in a sharp, tangible way, the divides between Dutch non-Muslim and Muslim sensibilities, and the fact that the nation was not immune to the import of global conflicts. It is precisely fear of such globalisation, in turn, that drives much of Dutch reactionary politics. How else to read Verdonk's call to ban the Islamic facial veil from Dutch public spaces and, more recently, to speak only Dutch on the country's streets, than as a yearning to provincialise what was so richly, but also challengingly cosmopolitan? A desire to hide from eye and ear the evidence of the Netherlands' lost sovereignty and the impossibility of a return of the nation it never was.

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