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MIGRATION POLICY AS A LEARNING PROCESS – HOW THE NETHERLANDS DEALS WITH IMMIGRANTS

Hendrik M. Vroom

Issues related to migration constitute one of the main political problems in the Netherlands. Immigration issues have a profound effect on government policy, since the integration of people from other cultures touches all areas of life. Due to the low birth rate of the Dutch, economic forecasts predict a large number of job vacancies in the near future. Thus, the Netherlands require immigrants also for the purpose of maintaining the social benefit systems. However, cooperation, and the provision of social care in particular, require that people understand each other, are willing to help and to accept help themselves. This attitude cannot be regulated by legislation alone; migration policy cannot only be considered exclusively from a socio-economic perspective – it must be embedded within cultural policy.

The integration of former migrant workers, particularly of Muslims, occurs in a completely different manner from previous integration processes in North-West Europe. The problems of specific migrant groups range from unemployment and the suppression of women, to juvenile delinquency, especially among Moroccan and Antillean youths. The influx of more migrants into the country is the subject of heated debate. Political parties have been established both on the far left and in the right-wing, taking up positions to defend and protect Dutch culture. The right liberal Partij voor de Vrijheid (Party for Freedom) argues against allowing more Islamic migrants, against the integration of Muslims and against the public display of Islamic symbols. It opposes headscarves, minarets and the

establishment of new mosques. Geert Wilders, chairman of this nationalistic party, does not see Islam as a religion, but rather as a political ideology aimed at obtaining world domination.

Prior to the parliamentary elections held on June 9, 2010, the Liberals and the Christian Democrats in particular attempted in vain to circumvent the issue of immigration in order to reduce chances for the populist Party for Freedom. However, aside from financial policies, migration turned out to be the dominant issue during the election campaign – for obvious reasons: the economic and financial crisis made the population feel insecure, triggering questions concerning solidarity and national unity. Solidarity demands limitations – the solidarity-based legislation of a welfare state necessarily depends on limitation, and thus, the definition of a person’s nationality.¹

The problems of integration policy in Western Europe as a whole are essentially the same as those faced by the Netherlands. The same is true for the solutions to these problems. Since they affect all areas of life, many aspects of immigration-related issues require the implementation of corrective measures. These include, for example, the redevelopment of deteriorating neighborhoods, providing assistance in the search for employment, offering language courses, giving educational support to the elderly as well as providing youth welfare. There are, however, differences between the various countries, which do not depend on legal possibilities and impossibilities, but rather on political views of those in power. The new political issues are dominated by ideas and ideals as opposed to the issues for which a political *equilibrium* has been developed.

The failure of the former Dutch migration policy can be attributed to the misjudgment of the cultural and religious aspects of life. The multicultural policy pursued initially hampered integration in the long-term. Both the socialistic and liberal political philosophy ignore the deeper cultural

1 | In September 2010, while the article was being written, the Christian Democrats and the Liberals attempted to form a minority coalition government with the toleration support of the Party for Freedom.

dimensions, such as values, ideals and personal responsibility for the common good.² Therefore, the mission entrusted to Christian democracy is to find an answer to the question of how the fundamental dimensions of human existence can be afforded a place within the public arena – and within integration policies.

Historically, the development of migration and integration policies occurred in three distinct phases.

1. INTEGRATION POLICY AFTER WORLD WAR II

The Dutch army withdrew from the Dutch colony of Indonesia in the year 1948. After Indonesia's proclamation of independence, Indonesian soldiers of the Royal Netherlands-Indonesian Army (KNIL) followed the Dutch army to the Netherlands. Indonesia no longer wanted these citizens as they set up a government in exile within the Netherlands and claimed for an independent Republic of the Moluccan Islands within East Indonesia. They did not speak Dutch well and

their education was not much better. From

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then on, the Moluccan people live in various parts of the Netherlands in a kind of camps, from which they hoped to be able to return home. Until the present day, they are a fairly closed community, with their own church and a mosque community in the Province of Friesland. Politically, the government encouraged the Moluccan people to separate themselves by building districts for them in various smaller cities.³

2 | There was a lack of sensitivity for these matters in spite of the increasing existential insecurity within substantial parts of society due to the effects of globalisation as well as of the demographic developments. In The Netherlands, this growing insecurity caused growth in both left-wing and right-wing political parties. This was also to the benefit of the Party for Freedom and the Socialistic Party, that is left of the Party for Labour.

3 | Cf. summary in Alies Struijs, *Minderhedenbeleid en moraal, Erkenning van culturele identiteit in het perspectief van de liberale moraal*, doctoral thesis at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Assen, Van Gorcum: 1998), 7 et seq. Concerning religious policy within the integration process, cf. Ben Koolen. "Integratie en Religie. Godsdienst en levens-overtuiging in het integratiebeleid etnische minderheden." *Religie, Recht en Beleid* (January 2010) 5-26.

By the end of the 1950s, and particularly in the 1960s, there was a great demand for migrant workers. The government actively invited guest workers – from Turkey, from Northern Morocco and from the poor areas. The government was under the impression that the migrant workers would return home after a couple of years, to open businesses with their collected savings. The migrants lived as frugally as possible, sometimes with 32 men in two rooms with just one kitchen and shower. Each room contained four bunk beds utilized for a day-shift and a night-shift. In the seventies, the government wrote discussion papers concerning foreign workers, whom they wanted to be able to maintain their identity. Convinced of their future return to their home country, the government did nothing to support their integration.

2. INTEGRATION POLICY FROM THE SEVENTIES THROUGH THE NINETIES

The oil crisis, the recession and increasing automation put an end to the need for further hiring of foreign workers. In 1974, the government imposed a hiring freeze on migrant workers. Still it permitted a large number of migrants to come into the country based on legal arrangements for family reunification. It was also in 1974, still counting on the migrants' return to their native countries, that the government introduced education in the native language for school-age children from migrant families. The objective was to facilitate the identity-finding process of the children and to stimulate their participation in society.⁴ Policy-makers hoped that as the children further developed their own language, they would also better understand other school subjects. Moreover, some other subjects were offered in native languages.⁵ As late as 1998, this form of education was once again defined by law.

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4 | Report of the Dutch Education Commission, cf. Onderwijsraad, *Samen naar de taalschool. Nieuwe moderne vreemde talen in perspectief* (2001), 9.

5 | Struijs, 16.

The influx of a large number of people from the Central American part of The Kingdom of The Netherlands, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles, in the years prior to and following Surinam's independence constituted a new development. In 1975, approximately half of the Surinamese population settled in the Netherlands.⁶ The government, again convinced of the migrants' future repatriation, adopted a two-track policy. In part, it attempted to integrate the migrants, at the same time attempting to help them to return 'home' after a couple of years.⁷ The government also missed recognizing religion as a migration-policy factor. With the Surinamese, the Brethren Churches, the Hindu Mandirs and the World Islamic Mission also came to the Netherlands.

In the mid-1970s, the Dutch experienced a rude awakening. In 1975 and 1977, young Moluccans hijacked trains and occupied the Indonesian Consulate in Amsterdam. The government and the public began to understand that many migrants were set to stay in the country, and that, from that point onwards, more emphasis would have to be placed upon their integration. In 1980, the government adopted the term *minority policy* that has first been used by the Science Commission. This term took into account the weak economic and social position of the non-Western minorities. The government did not want to interfere with the individuality of the cultures, provided that the values of such cultures did not conflict with the norms fundamental to Dutch society.⁸

The country increasingly also became a safe haven for refugees. Since the refugees were often better educated, they were facing less integration problems than other migrant groups. These new migrants originated from many different countries and were referred to as *allochtonen*: people, whose parents were born not in

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6 | Struijs, 10. At the time of Surinam's independence, there were already 140,000 people from these areas living in the Netherlands – this number later grew to 250,000.

7 | Ibid.

8 | Struijs, 14. Cf. WRR report, *Nederland als Immigratiesamenleving* (2001), <http://www.worldconnectors.nl/pdf/29.pdf>, 167 (accessed September 10, 2010).

the Netherlands, but somewhere else (Greek: *allos*). Thus, the politicians attempted to rely less on ethnic identities. In view of the poor housing conditions, schools with practically no Dutch-speaking students at all, and youths with barely any prospects, public opinion became resigned to the idea that the situation would not change for the better all by itself.

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By the mid-1970s, the Islamic migrant workers for the first time received support in the exercise of their religion. This concerned the issues of ritual butchering, death rituals and questions regarding the transport of the deceased to their home countries, as well as demands for properties for religious communities. Both of the first mosques in Amsterdam and Utrecht were erected with the support of the churches.⁹ Muslims received support in the integration process from local authorities, private individuals and, as early as the 1970s, even from Christian organizations.¹⁰ Many of the somewhat larger mosques set up socio-cultural centers, which, with the support of the religious community, developed employment opportunities for women, language courses and other socio-cultural activities. In 1988, the first Islamic elementary school was founded – with students of different nationalities and Dutch as the common language.¹¹

3. INTEGRATION POLICY SINCE THE NINETIES

In the 1990s, the problems could no longer be concealed. Fewer than 40 percent of the Turks and Moroccans had

9 | Meetings of the author with members of the leadership of Moroccan mosques.

10 | Meeting of October 14, 1994 with member of parliament Nancy Dankers (CDA) who visited many mosques and Islamic social-cultural foundations in 1994 and 1995.

11 | Dutch law states that every citizen may establish a school and, provided the quality of education and the number of students meet government standards, that can obtain official recognition and government funding. By 2010 there are approximately 42 Islamic elementary schools and one school for secondary education. Moreover, there are five or six Hindu elementary schools. Two-thirds of the elementary schools are established private schools, of which approximately 60% are Christian. A third are public elementary schools. Three universities have religious origins. Cf. Koolen (2010), loc.cit.

a job.¹² Some groups had turned to crime. From 1994, politicians began to focus more attention on the issue of integration. Step by step, the criteria for admission were formulated increasingly more restrictively. In December 2001, the Education Commission recommended canceling education in the students' native language. In so doing, it followed the recommendation of the Academic Council for Governmental Policy. The council recommended that, in view of the migration from many different countries, the political strategy for migration and integration should no longer be based on ethnic identities.¹³

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The Netherlands is home to 3.4 million migrants, *allochtonen*, per 16.6 million inhabitants, of which 1.5 million are Western *allochtonen* and 1.9 million are from other regions of the world.¹⁴ The first and second generation of the last group are in total: 262,000 Surinamese and Antilleans; 341,000 Moroccans; 378,000 Turks, and 614,000 migrants from other non-Western regions, including many refugees from Central Africa.

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In 2009, the immigration surplus amounted to 92,000 individuals.¹⁵ The Netherlands is home to approximately 900,000 Muslims, 130,000 Hindus, and 160,000 Buddhists. It is estimated that over 700,000 non-Western *allochtonen* are Christians. All of these communities are heterogeneous, and for the most part are represented by weak organizations.

- 12 | Oikos, *Migratie: Uitwegen uit een vastgelopen debat*, draft version (Utrecht: Stichting Oikos, 2002), 18.
- 13 | Onderwijsraad, *Samen naar de taalschool. Nieuwe moderne vreemde talen in perspectief* (2001). WRR-report, *Nederland als immigratiesamenleving* (2001), 180 et seq.
- 14 | Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek: Bevolking per maand, leeftijd, geslacht, herkomst, generatie, <http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=71090ned> (accessed September 10, 2010).
- 15 | Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek: Allochtonen, geslacht, leeftijd en herkomstgroepering op 1 januari, <http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?VW=T&DM=SLNL&PA=70787NED&D1=1-2&D2=1-2&D3=0&D4=a&D5=8,18,28,35-l&HD=100108-1126&HDR=G3,G1&STB=G2,G4,T> (accessed September 10, 2010).

At present, migrants hoping to be allowed to live in the Netherlands, must pass a *naturalization* test. Naturalization legislation demands knowledge of the Dutch language and of Dutch society.¹⁶ Special courses are available for spiritual leaders. The influx of non-Western spouses is restricted by increasingly more stringent entry requirements. They must learn Dutch while still abroad, be able to demonstrate employment qualifications and the Dutch partner's financial status must be adequate. These conditions are based on the government's desire that women can live independently, families do not become overly-dependent on governmental support, and that children will not be growing up within a separate subculture.

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in the number of migrants from Central and Eastern Asia. In contrast, the percentage of marriage migrants has dropped rapidly, perhaps due to the more stringent requirements. It may, however, be due to the fact that the better integrated youths find a partner in the new country of residence. The percentage of children from migrant families opting for tertiary education has increased dramatically. Many of them have even set up their own businesses.

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Whereas migration policies have changed step by step as outlined above, restrictive measures limiting the influx of refugees and families are still contested by the political left wing. Their criticism focuses in particular on the protracted procedure for recognition of asylum seekers – criticism that is by no means unfounded. New migrants must live in separate camps for several years. They are not allowed to work and are given over to boredom with all the consequences that may ensue. If their children go to school, become integrated and make friends, the return to their native country can become a real nightmare.

In many cities, the mayors have established contacts with mosques and new churches. They attempt to reduce the tensions by finding out about the desires and wishes of these communities in good time. How to deal with Islam

16 | Cf. Wet inburgering, http://st-ab.nl/wetten/1070_Wet_inburgering_Wi.htm; Art. 7 (accessed September 10, 2010).

in particular is the subject of much debate. In Orthodox Christian communities it is still difficult to obtain a license for the construction of a mosque. On the other hand, the former socialist mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen (a non-practicing Jew), supported Islamic communities that were holding meetings in parking lots for instance, in their search for better accommodation. Appointed in July 2010, the city's new Mayor, Eberhard van der Laan – also a socialist and former Minister for "Living, Districts and Integration" – views religion as a private matter. As a Minister he focused on improving the conditions in disadvantaged areas and on security issues.

THE RIGHT TO CULTURAL IDENTITY AND LACK OF INTEGRATION

In 1991, the Chairman of the Liberal Party, Frits Bolkestein, who was later appointed EU Commissioner, expressed criticism concerning Muslim integration and underlined the importance of Western, liberal values.¹⁷ Since then, Islam has had a special position within the debate on integration and migrants. In the meantime, at a deeper level, there has been growing support for the rejection of cultural relativism and its main idea that everyone has the right to live his own culture.¹⁸

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In the past, the question of cultural differences was not formulated correctly and the inherent difficulties were systematically underestimated. This created problems rather than fixing them. For many years, it was possible for people to live in the Netherlands without ever being able to speak the language. Currently, the courts still keep interpreters available, even for people who have lived in the country for decades. Due

17 | Bolkestein wrote about this topic in the Dutch newspaper *NRC-Handelsblad*. Even Paul Scheffer has sounded the alarm several times, a.o. in Paul Scheffer. "Het multiculturele drama," in: *NRC-Handelsblad*, January 29, 2000. Cf. Scheffer, *Die Eingewanderten. Toleranz in einer grenzenlosen Welt* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2008).

18 | Cf. Hendrik Vroom. "Church-State relations in the public square: French laicism and Canadian multiculturalism," in: W.B.H.J. van de Donk et al. (eds.), *Geloven in het publieke domein*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 293-313.

to the counterfactual assumption of the essential equality of the moral codes of all religions, proponents have ignored the cultural differences and excluded these people to a greater or lesser degree from proper participation in society. Due to the blind prejudice of post-modern cultural relativism, proponents defended the individual's right to his own culture and language, adhering to the so-called "liberal image of mankind" as the central concept of the social order. According to this view, all of these individuals are "just like us" at a deeper level, with the same ideals and values.¹⁹

The mistakes within the Dutch integration policies can only be understood in view of the historical context of the late colonial period, with its post-modern understanding of the fallibility of Western culture and the progress

optimism of the secular-liberal image of mankind. The combination of the concept of the universal, general human equality on the one hand, and the equality of all cultures on the other, was possible only possible

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because of a restrictive perception of the term 'culture'. This inconsistent world view has resulted in detrimental consequences. The secularized liberal image of mankind prevented the recognition of cultural differences, so that many politicians viewed the migrants' problems only in terms of socio-economic and general educational problems. For decades, this liberal body of thought silenced open discussions concerning ideological concepts.

RELIGION

For many decades, the religious component of integration was more or less excluded from the debate and from the governance.²⁰ Since 1959, the country was generally governed by predominantly Christian Democratic prime ministers with a church background, who understandably did not overly emphasize the religious aspects nor focus on

19 | This notion was also popular among the secularized authors on the philosophy of religion and among many politicians. Essentially, it is a neo-colonial notion.

20 | Ben Koolen, former official for Religion in the Ministry of Integration, provides the details on the minimal role played by religion within integration policy, cf. Koolen (2010), loc. cit.

the ideological differences.²¹ The assumption of the equality of all men resulted in the expectation that religion could be ignored and set aside as a purely private matter without any complications. For the liberal-socialistic coalition government in power from 1994 until 2002, integration policies consisted mainly of efforts to boost employment.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, religion again returned to the top of the political agenda. The Netherlands, formerly renowned for its tolerance, voiced sharp criticism regarding Islam. Tensions increased when politician Pim Fortuyn was assassinated by an Islamic terrorist, nine days prior to the parliamentary elections, on May 2, 2002. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a former Muslim, who had been a member of parliament for several

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years and an outspoken critic of Islam, felt compelled to retreat into exile in the United States. Film-maker Theo van Gogh, with whom she had worked together, was also murdered by an islamist on November 2, 2004. Following these events, Geert Wilders, chairman of the Party for Freedom, and his party have taken on the role of Islam critics. He views Islam not as a religion, protected by the constitutional freedom of religion, but rather as an ideology harmful to the state. In his opinion, Muslims should decide between integration and repatriation. His party won 23 of the 150 seats in parliament in the elections on June 9, 2010.

The image of Islam that dominates the discussion has few nuances and, like all concepts of the enemy, is fraught with stereotypes. People often cite to the high percentage of aliens and *allochtonen* in the prisons, notwithstanding that the number of prisoners in the Netherlands is actually in decline. The causes of criminality are complex. In addition to socio-economic circumstances, cultural factors – purity, family honor – as well as traditional, religious factors, such as Islamic family law and the position of women, must also be taken into account. Again, the situation is complicated by the fact that religious convictions and accepted customs have consistently been neglected within integration policy

21 | There were only two Social Democratic prime ministers in the period between 1959 and 2010: one from 1973 through 1977 and one from 1994 through 2002.

in favor of a practically secularized division between the public arena and religion.

Consequently, the state fails to exploit the positive potential of religion for guiding the youths. People forget to search for common values and to bring to light the philosophical diversity and conflicts instead of continuing to cover these up under the disguise of the liberal image of mankind. Repressed conflicts inevitably only go from bad to worse. Islamic youths sense the Islamophobia and respond with indifference towards society.

CONCLUSION

Dutch migration and integration policies have changed dramatically over the years. The secular-liberal image of mankind with its semi-cultural relativism has become obsolete. It was founded on the hope that the migrants would return home and on efforts to enable these people to retain their own language and culture. This twofold short-sightedness has only exacerbated the problems. In the meantime, politicians have abandoned the notion of migrants' repatriation. What has persisted, though, is the secular view of mankind and the tendency to secularize the public arena. There is also a section of the population that wants their home country to be free of foreigners who are not adjusting to the current Dutch culture as quickly as hoped for. This also explains the distrust of Islam; while Islam may well, in principle, be compatible with the division between secular and religious authorities (the division between church and state, not the division between state and religion), it cannot be reconciled with a strict privatization of religion and the secularization of the public arena.

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Islam nevertheless is surely compatible with democracy and solidarity. Finally, Christianity has also had influence on the culture and the laws of the society. Tensions between cultures and religions can thus best be solved by an open dialogue about differences and contrary opinions.²²

22 | Council of Europe, *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue. Living together as equals in dignity*, Strasbourg, May 7, 2008.