

ISLAM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF WESTERN VIEWS

**Lecture by Dr. Nikolaos van Dam, Ambassador of the Netherlands in
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Salam sejahtera bagi kita semua

Excellency Dr. Purnomo Yusgiantoro, Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources

Professor Dr. Subroto, Chairman of the Board of BIMASENA,

Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests,

I consider it a great honor to have been invited to speak to you tonight on the subject of “*Islam from the Perspective of Western Views*”. I should immediately add the rhetoric question, however: am I really the right person to deal with this subject? Let me explain by shortly introducing myself.

During my working life I have lived longer in the Islamic world than in the West. I was posted to Lebanon and Libya, studied in Syria, and served as ambassador to Iraq, Egypt and Turkey and am very happy to be now in Indonesia. I served only once in a non-Islamic country, notably in Germany, be it that Berlin is considered in Ankara to be “the largest Turkish city outside Turkey”.

At the University of Amsterdam I studied the Arabic language and did Islamic studies, going into the depth of many well-known subjects, including the *Qur’an*, the *Tafsir al-Qur’an* of al-Baydawi, the *Hadith* compiled by al-Bukhari, the *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din* of al-Ghazzali (which was one of the main topics of my doctoral examinations), and many other works.

My views of Islam have therefore been shaped in a different manner than is generally the case among Europeans. For this reason I suggest that I shall make an effort to explain the perspectives existing among people in the West towards Islam, and the Islamic world, which is not necessarily my personal perspective.

Western perspectives of Islam

Not many people from the West have had the privilege of having a similar experience of coming into such an intensive and direct contact with the Islamic world and its rich civilizations as I did. Many have never even been to the Arab or Islamic world but have only obtained their impressions of Islam and Muslims through the mass media, or through their

contacts with poorly educated Muslim immigrants, living in their countries. Or they obtained their ideas about Islam through extreme events, such as the 11th of September terrorist attacks in the United States, or those elsewhere. Often such experiences or impressions have been more negative than positive.

It is not Islam as such which is being perceived, but the acts of individual Muslims who pretend to act “in the name of Islam” but do not in any way represent any substantial Muslim majority. Or it is about contacts with people from other parts of the world having a different culture and different civilization, people who at the same time just happen to be Muslims as well.

Having said this, I should add that the combination of Islam with different cultures and civilizations also implies dealing with Muslim people who can have completely different backgrounds.

Muslims from Indonesia may be, or better said: *are* quite different from Moroccan Muslims, even if the main principles of their religion are the same. Something similar may apply to Muslims within the Indonesian Archipelago itself, when taking the different cultural backgrounds into consideration between, for instance, the Minangkabau people of Sumatra or Javanese Muslims.

Some have noted that “*the* Islam” does not really exist, because there are so many different forms of Islam. I would argue, rather, that although Islam does have so many varieties and there is such a rich diversity in Islamic communities, this does not exclude “*the* Islam” from existing. It merely means that there are many different interpretations of it. Certain basic principles of Islam, however, remain the same everywhere. What is different are the regional and cultural, (and sometimes theological) diversities amongst Islamic communities, both within Indonesia and elsewhere.

The view from Europe

The perception amongst the general population in Europe, or the West in general, is these days often shaped at least as much by what happens close at home, just next door, as by more abstract developments far away, let alone by theological arguments.

In Europe, the view towards Muslims and Islam was in the further past heavily influenced by the stereotype thinking which emanated from the conflicts between Christian and Muslim rulers: from the Arab Muslim conquests of the Middle East, North Africa and the Iberian

Peninsula, to the Crusades and the reconquering (*Reconquista*) of the same Peninsula by the Christian kings who expelled the Arab rulers from Cordoba, Granada and the rest of what today is Spain and Portugal. Next to that came the hostilities between the Christian rulers of Europe and the Muslim Ottoman Empire whose Sultans tried to conquer Europe as far as Vienna. Furthermore there was, of course, the religious animosity between Christians and Muslims who contested each other's influence wherever in the world, as far as the Indonesian Archipelago. The formation and development of Western attitudes about Islam from medieval times to the 20th century has been very well described in the classical study of Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*.

But today's situation in the West has developed further and is somewhat different. Although some of the traditionally preconceived ideas and biases still persist, new elements have come into play. New conflicts have arisen which, although they have little to do with religion or Islam as such, nevertheless strongly reflect upon relations between the West and the Islamic world and Muslims in general.

Of course, the colonial rule of Western countries over the Middle East and elsewhere has left its traces amongst the formerly colonized populations.

As far as the period afterwards is concerned, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been an important factor affecting relations. At its beginning it was a kind of nationalist conflict about the disputed territory of Palestine. In the course of time, however, it obtained an additional dimension, notably that of a conflict between Jews and Muslims instead of only Arabs.¹ The Israeli occupation of Jerusalem has added a religious dimension to the conflict as well.

Continuous strong Western support for Israel, and the Western application of - what is often seen by Arabs and Muslims as - double standards in its policies towards the Middle East, also have resulted in hostility within the Arab and Islamic world towards the West. This, originally nationalist hostility, later on gained the additional dimension of Muslim hostility towards the West, resulting in various terrorist operations and other violent outbursts by organizations like al-Qa'idah, Hizballah, Hamas and others. Western interventions in Islamic countries like Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as Western presence in the Muslim heartland of the Arabian Peninsula further added to these animosities and conflicts.

Muslims in Europe

Another new element today is the strong presence of many Muslim immigrants in Europe. Their presence has had a strong influence on the opinion amongst some Western people

towards Islam and Muslims in general. It is a type of relationship which is completely different from that with Muslims in Islamic countries themselves.

At this time there are more than 13 million Muslims living in Europe. They are divided over a large number of European countries. And although Islam is now one of the major religions in Europe, it is impossible to talk about a single European Islamic community. This is because the Muslim communities there all have their own specific backgrounds. The different *ethnic* groups also have their own closed *religious* communities. All these groups bring in their own cultures, as well as their specific interpretations of Islam and ways of life.

Muslims in the Netherlands are mainly from Morocco and Turkey (next to a much smaller group of Surinamese of Javanese origin), those in the UK are mainly from Pakistan and India, those in France mainly from North Africa, and so on.

Many of these immigrants are from the poorer if not poorest rural sectors of their countries and therefore have generally a much lower educational level than that of the country they have immigrated into. Often they are not in an economically competitive position. In the Netherlands the rate of unemployment is much higher among the Moroccans, than among other immigrant groups, just as is their rate of criminality. For that reason they have triggered a strongly negative attitude towards them within sectors of the Dutch population. The Mayor of Rotterdam, Mr Ahmed Abou Taleb, himself of Moroccan origin, recently stated that the high criminality statistics of these people damage the image of all those other immigrant people who do respect the values of Dutch society: "As long as there are people, wherever in the world, who misbehave and enact crimes in the name of Islam, also the Muslims in Rotterdam will carry the burden of it", Mr. Abou Taleb said.

Over the past years, Islam itself has increasingly become a subject of debate in Europe. The attacks by Muslim terrorists on targets in the United States, London and Spain, the pressure on young girls to wear the headscarf, the recruitment of young men for the international jihad, the discovery in particular mosques of books denouncing the equality of men and women and homosexuals, the implicit condoning of domestic violence and honour-related crimes with reference to the religion of Islam.

On 2 November 2004, the Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh was murdered. The extremist Muslim perpetrator left a written message stating that he had committed the murder because Van Gogh had openly criticised Islam. This brought about a change in the Netherlands: politicians and other participants in the public debate were threatened and there were even sporadic incidents in which mosques, churches and schools were attacked.

These events have raised the question to what extent Islam, in its present forms, is compatible with the democratic core-values and practices in the Netherlands. Combined with concerns about integration, such as the continued low levels of mastery of the Dutch language, low rates of inter-ethnic marriage (more than 70% of the Turkish and Moroccan youth marry a partner from their country of origin), high numbers of school drop-outs and relatively poor school results among the Muslim population, these issues have led to heated societal and parliamentary discussions.

But it is important to keep in mind that the core of the discussions does not relate to religion as such, but to the way people identify themselves and to the way their expectations of their place in society are met.

Most young Moroccans or Turks identify themselves in the first place with their *ethnic* background, more than with their religion. It is interesting to note that in the public debate in the Netherlands it is often just the other way around: many talk about Muslims, when in fact they mean people from Morocco or Turkey.

Young people from the larger ethnic groups, mostly from Morocco, have difficulties in finding their place in society. There is a backlog in social-economic status, a negative climate about Islam and people feel discriminated. Often, young people feel misunderstood by their parents and society and wonder what their place and role in Dutch society really is: they don't feel completely Moroccan, but they don't feel completely Dutch either.

Although the Dutch government and civil society organisations are making efforts to implement integration policy, one point remains problematic: the split which threatens to develop between Muslims and non-Muslims. This threat is fuelled by Muslim fundamentalists who take advantage of dissatisfaction among second and third generation immigrants with the slow progress of integration. These Muslim fundamentalists do not want to be a part of the society in its present form, but place themselves outside of it and even reject the Dutch standards concerning democracy and rule of law. They are prepared to use violence, just like the man who killed Theo van Gogh. Fortunately, however, this group is still just marginal and most Dutch Moroccans and people from other ethnic groups in fact do accept our shared values. But, as is well known, individuals can cause a lot of harm.

Finally, there are Dutch political parties which play upon the theme of Islam and violence. Their identification of Islam with violence has been strongly condemned by the Dutch Government. Nevertheless, a party like that of Parliamentarian Geert Wilders has gained in strength in Dutch society.

Actually it may have little to do with Islam as such, but much more with feelings of discontent towards immigrants from Muslim countries and their behavior in the Netherlands.

Usually, discussions about Islam deal mainly with some outward or visible phenomena or symbols. Only rarely is there a discussion about religious principles themselves.

Discussions deal with, for instance, women *wearing the veil* in public life. In the past the veil was supposed to be something having an element of mystery and perhaps even romanticism, as long as it was being used by women in the 1001 Nights or in faraway places with other cultures. But it being used in the Netherlands or Europe is met with opposition, also because it is being seen as limiting the freedom of women.

Topics of Islam which attract particular attention and usually have a negative connotation in the West are:

- The carrying out of Shari'ah regulations such as beheading, cutting off hands, stoning to death or caning.
- Polygamy (men allowed to marry up to four women).
- Marrying girls at a very young age.
- Violent Jihad.
- The issue of having 60 or more virgins in Paradise after men have been “martyred” during a jihad operation.
- Phenomena which are not necessarily Islamic, but are nevertheless often being portrayed as such, such as female circumcision (which also is very common in non-Islamic parts of Africa), honor killings, condoning violence against women at home (which occurs even stronger in non-Muslim parts elsewhere in the world like South America), etcetera.

If such practices are being propagated or carried out in certain parts of the Islamic world, even if they are exceptional, they may in Western public opinion have a negative side effect on the perception of those parts of the Islamic world where such practices are not carried out, or where they are even rejected. For instance, the proposed stoning to death (*rajam*) in Aceh may negatively affect the image existing abroad of Indonesia, even if all other Indonesian provinces would reject this practice.

Many people in the West have a lack of knowledge of Islam, but nevertheless – or perhaps just because of that - have a negative association with Islam. On the other hand, the concept of Hinduism, of which Western people often are equally ignorant, brings up positive associations, such as Gurus, the Nirwana and a rich spiritual life, whereas it is not directly associated with the harsh cast system or the burning of widows.ⁱⁱ

What is Islamic and what not?

Because of all of this it is not only important to explain what Islam really is, but it is also important to make a distinction between what, in fact, involves Islam and what people have incorrectly associated with and attributed to it.

What is the relation between Islam and the actions of people that practice the Muslim faith? In my opinion there are various issues which have little or nothing to do with Islam as a religion, but are nevertheless ascribed to it because the persons who are linked to it happen to be Muslims.

And it should be stressed that what was considered as normal or acceptable in the past is not always acceptable anymore by 21st century standards, neither by a majority of Muslims nor by non-Muslims.

It should also be taken into account that certain radical actions have been carried out by Muslim individuals or groups “in the name of Islam”, but that those actions are not supported by the majority of Muslims, and are generally disapproved of by them, although sometimes the position of their disapproval is not explicit enough to create the impression that these radical Muslims who carry out these actions do not in any way represent any Muslim majority.

All this has contributed a lot to existing misunderstandings.

Nevertheless, one cannot simply blame those in the West who perceive Islam as a religion which encourages extremist actions and violence. One of the simple reasons is that Islamist extremist actions and statements are often perceived much more clearly than are moderate actions and statements. This phenomenon is generally only strengthened through the media, which pay more attention to “bad news” than to “good news”, if only because they know that this will attract the attention of their readers or viewers much stronger and easier. In addition to that there are politicians and other people who on purpose try to even further stimulate hostile views of Islam and of Muslims and Muslim countries, simply because this suits their political aims.

Therefore, it is very important for the more moderate Islamic parties to let their voices and views being heard much clearer and louder, so as to help correct the false image of Islam which presently prevails among some people and in some parts of the world.

Thank you for your attention.

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ⁱ This, by the way, ignores the fact that a substantial part of the Palestinian population happens to be Christian, just as is the case with the other Arab countries neighboring Israel.

ⁱⁱ Maurits Berger, *Kruistocht en jihad*, Amsterdam, 2001, p. 76.