

Abstract In a new departure for *Sexualities*, this article focuses on a topical issue. It describes a growing conflict between Muslims and gays in the Netherlands, which is currently being mirrored in many places throughout the world. Highlighting the denunciations of gays by the Rotterdam-based imam Khalil El Mounni in May 2001, the article examines how the issue appeared and the key elements of the debate it generated. Just how this debate fits into the wider contexts of modernity and postmodernity is also examined.

Keywords emancipation, gays, imams, Muslims, the Netherlands

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Imams and Homosexuality: A Post-gay Debate in The Netherlands

Introduction

On the 3 May 2001, the Rotterdam-based imam Khalil El Mounni declared on public television that homosexuality was a sin, a disease and a danger for Dutch society as it jeopardized reproduction. His remarks had a big impact on Dutch society. Media and politicians hurried to defend 'our faggots' – as best their statements could be summarized. The minister of urban politics and the Prime Minister came to the rescue of gays and warned the imam in extensive declarations not to abuse Dutch tolerance. What Dutch tolerance could mean in the case of the imam of Moroccan nationality, was made clear in the official request by a Labour and a Liberal member of parliament: they asked the government to send the imam back home. The imam reiterated, apologized but kept to his opinion and asserted that he was strongly opposed to anti-gay violence. And he was not sent home as he had not done anything criminal. The debate on imams, Muslims and homosexuality in the Dutch media between May and August 2001 and its social context will be the topic of the present article.¹

Context

Since the 1960s the Netherlands has seen immigration of large groups of Surinamese, Turkish and Moroccan descent. Most Surinamese came in the 1970s after the independence of Surinam in 1975. Adult male Turks and Moroccans came in the second half of the 1960s at a time of labour shortage as 'gastarbeiders' (guest workers), who in the 1980s brought their families to the Netherlands. These three main groups of recent immigrants make up each nearly 2 percent, and with other recent non-white immigrant groups together a little more than 9 percent of the Dutch population. Most Moroccans and Turks are Muslim, like many Surinamese and like most members of smaller immigrant groups such as Somali's, Kurds and Iraqi's. They mainly live in urban centres where today some 50 percent of the population of primary schools is non-Dutch (Vermeulen and Penninx, 2000: 9).²

As elsewhere, there have been continuous worries about the integration of ethnic minority groups in Dutch society. For a long time, the feeling was that the Netherlands would in due time become a multicultural society where non-Dutch groups would find their own place. But since the early 1990s, the so-called 'new realists' found several social problems that were by and large attributed to ethnic minorities, not to the white majority (Prins, 2000). The problems were explained by a lack of integration and an insufficient knowledge of the Dutch language by ethnic minorities. Problems included high levels of unemployment and criminality, low levels of education and participation and bad housing. In the field of sexuality, circumcision of women by some Muslim groups and the rape of Dutch girls by Arab youth became highly publicized topics. There was a growing feeling in Dutch society that the multicultural society had failed, and that more efforts should be undertaken for the integration, or even assimilation, of ethnic minorities.

For the 'new realists', the culture and the language of the ethnic minorities created the social problems, while their various religions fitted quite well in the system of religious pillarization that has been the hallmark of Dutch society in the 20th century. This system may have lost its central place in social life due to the secularization of Dutch society since the 1960s, but in some fields it still survives, most evidently in the field of education. While formerly politics, media, welfare, sports, schools and even economics were organized according to religious denomination, pillarization continues to exist on a nominal basis or as a historic legacy in most fields, but is still strong in education.

This pillar-system is nowadays used more and more by Muslims, to such a degree that the Netherlands not only has many mosques, but also a growing number of Islamic schools. Apart from the traditional but fading

pillars of protestants, Roman-Catholics, socialists and liberals, Dutch society now sees a growing pillar of Muslims who have their own mosques, schools, social organizations and shops. Multiculturalism may be out of favour, but a multireligious society is budding. A remarkable 50 percent consists of non-religious people. It can be expected that the Muslim pillar will extend beyond mosque and school to politics, media and welfare, and will in political terms be close to the tiny fundamentalist Christian right (5–6% of the Dutch population) that in contrast to the Muslims is largely non-urban. Both groups have quite similar aims when it comes to the social organization of churches and schools and also about sexuality.

Not all people of Muslim origin will become part of this new pillar for all kinds of reasons, perhaps because they are secularized or have lost their faith. For a long time, the majority of Turkish and Moroccan Dutch who had the right to vote, did so for secular leftist parties who were more supportive of ethnic minorities than liberal or Christian parties. But recently, a growing group-consciousness has led young men and women of Moroccan and Turkish descent to rediscover Islam and the Qur'an and to follow religious obligations. They show more piety than their parents or most youngsters in Turkey or Morocco.

The gay angle

Homosexual emancipation has a long tradition in the Netherlands. In the late 19th century, the first apologies for homosexuals were written and in 1912, the first homosexual rights movement was founded. This was in reaction to the special criminalization of homosexual acts of adults with minors, meaning that while the age of consent was 16 for heterosexuals, it was 21 for homosexual acts. Until the 1960s, most Dutch considered homosexuality to be a sin, a disease and a crime, very much as El Moumni thinks today. The abolition of the anti-gay article in 1971 was a first step in giving equal rights to gays and lesbians. In 1973, the gay movement was legally recognized and gays and lesbians were allowed to enter the army. In 1993, a not very binding equal rights law was enacted after 15 years of debates and in 1998, straight, gay and lesbian couples could enter 'registered partnerships', a shallow version of marriage. Just before the imam-case, marriage and adoption rights had been given to same-sex couples after another decade of discussions. On 1 April 2001, four gay and lesbian couples married in the Amsterdam City Hall. This event of global importance attracted international attention, but the reaction in the Netherlands itself was insubstantial. Half of the 200 people who attended this event were foreign journalists and television crews. Holland itself was mesmerized by the announcement of the crown prince's engagement, not by the first official gay marriages of modern times.

The attitudes regarding homosexual emancipation in the Netherlands are very low key. Most people consider this struggle to have ended as there is no legal discrimination any more after the opening of marriage for same-sex couples. The fact that homosexuality is largely invisible in public life, from schools and streets to politics, is irrelevant to most Dutch, gay, straight and lesbian alike, while many people should like to keep it that way. A clear example of the continuing invisibility is that members of the royal family, although much beloved among gay men, have never assisted at any public gay or lesbian event.³ Most kids with homosexual interests still grow up in environments that are utterly straight, and often learn through insults that their preferences are not well regarded. Straight still equals public and gay private, which means that gay expressions are considered private affairs while heterosexuality remains a public matter, very much like the relationship between the white majority and ethnic minorities. The legal struggle for gay and lesbian rights may have ended but the much more difficult social battle for queer visibility has yet to begin. The Netherlands has become multicultural, but is far from becoming multi-sexual, that is, open to sexual diversity.

Not only are anti-gay slurs and queer bashing still quite common in the Netherlands, right-wing Christians are allowed to offend gays and lesbians. Several cases have been reported over the last five years, including the cardinal of Utrecht, a bishop and a Calvinist member of parliament. Their statements were quite similar to those of the imam, the Catholic clergy denouncing homosexuality as unnatural and neurotic, and the politician equating homosexuality to theft. Although these significant leaders were brought to justice, they all got off the hook because of the freedom of religious expression (*NRC*, 12 May).⁴

The trigger

On 7 March 2001, the daily newspaper *De Volkskrant* reported on anti-homosexual violence in Rotterdam, the city of the national gay pride celebration in June of the same year. Under the ominous heading 'No gay man dares to go out party in Rotterdam in latex', it was reported that ethnic minorities especially would be prone to queer bashing. A gay man told the reporter that he had been chased out of his apartment by Turkish neighbours who had not only threatened, but actually beaten him up. They objected to his walking naked in his home and to his gayness. The police had recommended that he move to another part of town. Professor of sociology Han Entzinger, specialist on ethnic minorities and advisor to the government, suggested in the same article that gay men should restrain themselves and make their sexuality not too public.

After this article was published, editors of the daily television news

programme *Nova* wanted to pick up the issue. Due to other priorities, they only broadcast their item on the 3 May, the day before the national commemoration of those who died in the Second World War. The opening was a gay man telling about being harassed by Moroccan youngsters. Members of this group then expressed their abhorrence of homosexuality. Interviews with gay Muslims were cut out of the programme. The central place was for imam El Moumni who made his statements against homosexuality. Later, it would become known that he had also opposed queer bashing, but that part was again left out by the editors of the programme. This editing policy made the statements of the imam more explosive as it gave the impression that he could have inspired the violence against gay men (*NRC*, 31 May). But it is certain that the imam had at much greater length deplored homosexuality and stated in a book of his that Europeans were less than dogs or pigs because these animals at least do not know same-sex marriages (*Vrij Nederland*, 26 May; *Parool*, 15 June).

The debate

The editors had not expected that this item would cause a storm in Holland. The day after, the gay movement reacted with indignation and a gay member of parliament suggested investing more in citizenship lessons for imams. The next day, 4 May 2001, being a Friday, El Moumni discussed the issue in his sermon and clearly stated his opposition to anti-gay violence. But he remained unrepenting in his rejection of homosexuality (*AD*, 5 May). This position was supported by four other imams of various mosques. Some even went so far as to show their lack of interest in a culture of tolerance (*NRC*, 9 May). Half a year later, an imam once more created great commotion with the statement that public homosexuality deserved the death-penalty (*AD*, 2 and 5 November).

Several gay people filed a complaint against the first imam's comments and the prosecuting attorney announced he would take up the case (*NRC*, 5 May). In October, the case was still pending, to the disappointment of most concerned (*Gay Krant*, 27 October). It can be expected that there may be a prosecution but no conviction because of the freedom of religious expression. It is highly improbable that the imam will be condemned, while Christian leaders have been acquitted for similar comments.

The minister of urban affairs reacted on television on 4 May. He rejected the intolerance of the imam, and wanted to talk to him and his colleagues (*AD*, 5 and 7 May). This meeting, held on 23 May, was disappointing as El Moumni regretted his remarks, according to the minister, while the imam, immediately after the meeting, repeated again in front of the cameras his beliefs about homosexuality (*Parool*, 21 May; *AD*, 25 May).

The stern speech of the minister of urban affairs in support of tolerance and homosexuality, was repeated by the prime minister who used the full 10 minutes of his weekly interview on the 11 May to tell Muslims to respect Dutch tolerance of homosexuality (*NRC*, 12 May). Although the topic was high on the political agenda, no politician came up with concrete proposals for amelioration of the situation, for example for the safety of gays and lesbians or for an enhanced public visibility of homosexuality. It was the sermons of imams against the pontifications of politicians.

Gay and Muslim organizations, including the gay Muslim Foundation Yoesuf, met on 22 May 2001. In a joint declaration, they regretted the remarks of El Moumni and spoke out in favour of continued discussion among all concerned groups, in the best Dutch tradition. They also urged politicians and police to combat violence and discrimination, and demanded more attention for sexual diversity in schools and social work (*AD*, 23 May). Shortly after the scandal, Omar Nahas of Yoesuf published his 'Islam and Homosexuality', which offers a more liberal Islamic view.

Panels were organized on the topic (*Alloctonenkrant*, 13 June; *Parool*, 11, 16 and 27 June). People flooded newspapers and websites with their letters and comments. Many journalists and most essayists contributed to the debate while the ethnic minority and gay press abounded with articles. The major Dutch gay paper, the biweekly *De Gay Krant*, offered a broad range of articles. Some were horror stories of anti-homosexual violence by ethnic minority youth, others included racist remarks by readers but there was also a balanced interview with one of the leaders of the Turkish Milli Görüs organization (*Gay Krant*, 26 May, 23 June). Some of the responses from ethnic minority members denounced the unbalanced reaction of Dutch politics to the remarks of the imam. The prime minister never spoke out against the anti-gay remarks of Christians and the minister of urban affairs never invited the Catholic clergy to discuss the concepts of liberal tolerance and gay emancipation (*Parool*, 9 June).

The *NRC* (19 May) and *Trouw* (26 May) published long articles on the abundant homosexual but closeted life in Muslim countries. Several authors referred to the rich tradition of gay poetry in Arabic (*AD*, 21 May). The Foundation Yoesuf was often asked for comments and made clear that Muslim and gay are not oppositions, but may be combined in persons and groups. The day after the imam spoke out against homosexuality, the first gay Arab bar Habibi Ana (My Beloved) in Amsterdam was opened, the owner being an Egyptian Christian Copt. (The leaders of Yoesuf are exiles from Syria and Sudan, while the gay Turkish spokesman is Christian and the Arab one an Algerian exile; second generation Muslim Turkish and Moroccan gays and lesbians being quite invisible in the movement). After some hesitation, Habibi Ana took part in the annual Gay Canal Parade with an Arabian '1001 Nights' boat that

was a big hit in the media (*NRC*, 3 August; *AD*, 6 August; *Parool*, 6 August; *Volkskrant*, 6 August).

Themes in the debate

A major trope in the debate on Islam and homosexuality was the interpretation of the Qur'an. Most imams stated that homosexuality is indeed forbidden in the Qur'an while some started to question what exactly was forbidden and how strictly (compare Jamal, 2001). The Foundation Yoesuf is well aware that the dominant reading of the Qur'an is that homosexuality is a sin. But this reading does not extend to lesbian sexuality and may only imply anal sex between men in public situations while the sin of homosexuality may not be worse than adultery (Nahas, 2001). Some imams said indeed that homosexual acts were no problem as long as they were kept private. Professor of Islamic studies, Mohammed Arkoun, was of a different opinion. As Christian theology has re-analysed the Sodom-story as being about hospitality, he re-analysed the same story as being about a lack of faith in God. He spoke out in favour of secularization of Islamic religion and modernization of Arab culture (*Parool*, 11 June). According to Nahas (2001) the story dealt with sexual abuse, not homosexuality.

Another theme concerned queer-bashing by Muslim youth (see *Parool*, 25 June). Although many Dutch would like to believe it is nowadays a particularity of ethnic minority groups, anti-homosexual attitudes are probably nearly as prevalent among the white majority as among ethnic minority male youth (see Brugman, 1995; De Vries, 1998) Both groups sometimes even strengthen each other's homophobic attitudes. The idea that the sermons of the imam would promote anti-gay violence among Moroccan youth was generally refuted. These young men do not visit the mosque and are often not able to understand the imam's Arabic as they speak Dutch or their parents' native Berber (*Parool*, 26 May). Some Moroccans preferred the explanation that queer-bashing was a justified revenge to paedophile abuse of Arab youth by Dutch gay men. The post-modern scholar of religion, Peter van der Veer, joined this homophobic line by suggesting that the anti-homosexual violence could well be explained by gay interest in Moroccan youth, continuing the tradition of sex-tourism of gay and paedophile men to Morocco (*NRC*, 16 May).

Racism of the Dutch was a theme brought forward by ethnic minority authors, but not very often. They complained that the Dutch reacted much more strongly to the remarks by the imam than to similar ones by Catholic clergy or Calvinist politicians. El Moumni wrote a defence of his position and asked if the Dutch politicians wanted to have a debate among equals, or to impose their morals on Muslims (*NRC*, 25 May). Most

Moroccan spokespersons are too much integrated into Dutch society to produce the racist argument, and showed surprise at the vehemence of the debate that largely concerned subgroups they did not like to identify with (see for example *Parool*, 23 June). The strong reaction by politicians also amazed queer activists who had rarely seen such an outpouring of support for gay men and lesbian women, from the prime minister, the general population and imams who declared their respect for sexual diversity.

White people often came with the argument that 'we' should not surrender 'our' liberties to barbaric Muslims, playing once again the theme of Islamophobia, of enlightenment and rationalism versus tradition and superstition. A century ago, the pederasty of the Muslims was a sign of their ferocity, nowadays their anti-gay attitudes are a sign of unenlightened prejudices. Opinions on homosexuality have changed, while the image of Islam has remained barbarous in both cases. Many gay men are changing their opinion parallel to the general population and see Morocco no longer as paradise, but as a source of homophobia and queer bashing. Instead of joining the outcast, as they did in the past (and some continue to do in the present), they join the straight majority in their rejection of Moroccans.

My explanation for the outrage of the Dutch goes in two directions. On one hand, the remarks of the imam fit well in a series of Dutch concerns about the sexual ideas and practices of Muslims while they have not the faintest idea which part of the Turkish and Moroccan population sustains conservative views on sexuality. They know, however, that the Roman-Catholic clergy stands for a diminishing group of elderly Catholics while the Calvinist fundamentalists are contained in their own institutions on the Dutch bible belt, at a distance from the heart of Dutch politics and media. On the other hand, the imam struck a nerve in Dutch sexual politics. While by far the majority of straight people like to believe there is no need any longer for gay emancipation after the opening of marriage for gay and lesbian couples, the imam and the anti-gay violence that preceded his interview, made clear that the social emancipation of gays and lesbians still has a long way to go. Dutch fake-tolerance hides ignorance and lack of interest. Drag queens and leather guys are nice at a distance, like ethnic food tastes excellent in the neutral terrain of a restaurant.

Modernization and postmodernization

A major theme among progressive people such as Arkoun concerns modernization. Muslims should modernize as the Dutch already did. Several authors referred to the situation that most Dutch also thought that homosexuality was a sin, a crime and a disease up until the 1960s (*Parool*, 12 May). As the native Dutch changed their traditional opinion after

decades of debate, the new Dutch will probably do the same but this will take perhaps another generation. More liberal Muslims support a Dutch imam-school to promote a Dutch modern and secular Islam (*NRC*, 11 May). The theme of tradition and modernity also permeates liberal author Abdelhak Serhane's *L'amour circoncis* (2000) on sexuality in Morocco. He sees a struggle between tradition and modernity, group pressure and individual autonomy, male dominance and women's emancipation, an endemic male homosexuality socialized in Qur'an-schools and sexual self-determination. Most modernizers do not see, however, that the 'progressive' turn to modernity also meant a strict heterosexualization of society in European history, and this already means the same in Morocco. On the other hand, traditional homosexual relations often included the abuse of boys (Serhane, 2000: 42–3). Censure in traditional Moroccan society is directed mainly to those men who enjoy the passive roles. For them, Moroccan Arabic has several words such as *zamel*, *m'haoui*, *hassas* and *attay* but none for the active partners who do not lose their honour for fucking men or boys (p. 152). Some Moroccans may have embraced modernity, but others resist it and some turn to Muslim fundamentalism which provokes anxieties among both whites and secular Muslims.

The traditionality of Moroccan culture and its ubiquitous but hidden homosexuality have very much contributed to the sexual pleasures of white gay (Green, 1992) and local men in Morocco to this day. It may also explain why the discussion on homosexuality is much more explosive in the Moroccan than in the Turkish case, because Turkey has been involved in a process of modernization including sexuality and gender since the 1920s. It started in Morocco under the new King Mohammed VI who succeeded his father Hassan II in 1999.

The pervasive homosexuality of Moroccan culture has another interesting result. Due to their sexual socialization, Moroccan youth are so much aware of homosexual signs that many of them recognize the hidden gay radar of Dutch gays. Gay men and Moroccan male youngsters resemble each other closely in their street behaviour, sexual alertness and fashion hunger. Between them, it is the fetishism of small differences that might lead to violence as well as to shared sexual desires. One would suggest that Moroccans forget about straight, homophobic modernity and pass over to a multisexual postmodernity, to immediately enter queer culture with their 'traditional' corporal versatility and forget about the bodily stiffness of modern times and its sexual verbosity that is not very conducive to an 'ars erotica'.

The reversal of 'homosexual' attributions is remarkable. Since the medieval crusades, Christians equated Islam and pederasty, and now Muslims, quite similar to Subsaharan African leaders, attribute homosexuality to the modern Western world. None saw homosexuality,

regrettably, ever as an enrichment of their sexual cultures. In both Europe and the Arab world, modernization means heterosexualization while both traditional and high-modern societies have a gayer reputation. But nowhere and never, has the straight norm been broken.

Conclusion

Dutch society is, not unlike other Occidental countries, in various ways racist (Prins, 2000). The Moroccans form the group that has the most negative image among white Dutch. They face all kinds of discrimination while their visibility does not extend far beyond crime reports and messages about their backwardness, as in the above-mentioned news items. The eagerness of the media to report the imam's views on homosexuality, and of politicians and other people to discuss them, has certainly to do with a lack of knowledge on Moroccans and Muslims and feelings of white superiority vis-a-vis the unenlightened statements of the imam. But nobody should have been surprised by the imam's views as they are standard in Islam, very much like in Christianity and Judaism (Nahas, 2001).

The main theme was, according to me, uncertainty among white straight Dutch about Muslims and gays. It was a way for Dutch people to discuss race and sex. It took an obvious effort for the prime minister to pronounce the word homosexual in public. The most important result was the possibility to discuss homosexuality in Moroccan and Turkish communities. In the Dutch context, the youth of ethnic minority descent are increasingly coming out as gay or lesbian and they often have to face animosity or naivete in their own group. The various initiatives such as the gay Arab bar and the Foundation Yoesuf offer protection and information to them.

The debate on Muslims and gays could also be read as a struggle to discover who belongs to Dutch society and who does not. Muslims were on the losing side because of their presumed unenlightened views. Although gay and Muslim organizations came together to denounce violence and to ask for more safety and visibility, such demands remained as marginal as the groups themselves. They never made a politician or police-officer react to such sensible requests. The debate consisted largely of dogmatic proclamations, unobliging pontifications and moral indignation from all sides on intolerance, homophobia and racism. Enforcing concepts such as sexual and ethnic citizenship could help all groups, including straight and white, to learn about and practice sexuality in its various forms, and to do the same with ethnicity.

The debate on Muslims and gays is very much a queer debate as it shows that the space for gays or Moroccans in Dutch society is quite limited, notwithstanding all legal changes. The 'new realists' have turned to

assimilation, and to labour as the major solution to all social problems, with education in second position. But this education is still largely white and straight, as are the presumptions of Dutch society. The queer question of the future is how to give this debate on tolerance a context that will go beyond white straight Dutch and will include lesbian Muslims as well as Catholic monks, and all hybrid forms of ethnicity, gender and desire. Liberal democracy as it remains imprisoned in the worn ideals of modernity and enlightenment seems to bring no answer to that important question.

Notes

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1. See Hekma (2000a) for a prehistory with a focus on schools, ethnic minorities and sexual education.
2. The most general definition of ethnic group refers to the non-Western place of birth of the person or one of his parents. This definition, of course, raises more problems.
3. In February 2001, the public relations offices of the queen and prime minister took great effort to deny rumours that the queen's second son was gay.
4. The dates of newspaper articles regarding the affair are marked without the year, which is always 2001. All mentioned newspapers are centre/left. *Vrij Nederland* is a weekly. For an overview of Dutch gay history, see Hekma (2000b).

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