WHAT POLICIES TOWARDS ISLAM?

If we think about Islam today, we think about Cairo, Tripoli, Yemen, and we realise how decisive present developments are for the future of the world and the EU. Our esteemed chair, Wilfried Martens, has addressed those developments. From my own experiences in meetings with Muslim leaders and Islam Conferences in Morocco and Cairo, I would stress that there is much more openness in leading Islamic circles than the media reports—I should say: than what we remember from the media. I have heard about the freedom of conversion—no use of force in religion!—greater gender equality, democratic developments from leading Muslims all over the world as well as in leading circles in Rabat and Cairo. I would like to add two remarks:

1. First, one, if not the most important factor, in policy on Islam in Islamic states is the fear of radicalisation. This is one reason why Islamic states are so interested in the developments of Islam in Europe—they do not want radical imams in Europe to produce unrest that could be transported to their countries.
   On the one hand, this interest stimulates interest in the development of a sound, healthy Islam in the European Union. On the other hand, they think that the state should develop a policy in relation to Islam: not everything goes; religion has to be the subject of reflection.
2. Democracy depends on social conditions such as education, the quality of the media, social security for people who cannot help themselves, and a high level of social cohesion. This implies, I think, that Muslims in the EU can assist in these developments by developing Islamic universal ethics and the idea of the dignity of each human being into an Islamic theory of democracy. However, the implementation of this is not that easy.

Islam in Europe

We speak about Islam in Europe; it is not correct to speak about Islam as a monolithic entity. Just as the inheritance of Confucian social structures varies in Korea, China, and Japan, so Islam has several different groups, widely varying developments, backward and modern situations (Karachi, Jakarta, and Istanbul). Muslims in the EU also have widely varying statuses: fourth- or even fifth-generation Muslims in Paris and London, guest workers in Berlin, Dusseldorf, Lille, Antwerp, Malmö, and Rotterdam, refugees in all countries from different cultures. There is not only one Islam in Europe, and a European Islam still needs to develop. That is in the common interest of young Muslims, foreign Islamic states, and European governments. Therefore, this ideal is a possibility but it requires that we—politicians, scholars, and educators—work together and facilitate this needy development.

In this presentation, I would like to stress four points: diversity, education, social cohesion, and the equal treatment of different traditions.

1. The Acceptance of Difference

First, two quotes—I will just quote them:

"In ... we are accepted as Moroccans but not as Muslims." The speaker here is someone who had fought for independence, was later sent into exile, and had just returned in 1995 to Morocco. This comment was made at a conference in a program on European-Arab Dialogue.

"In this country I have to leave my religion at home to be accepted." The speaker here is an African from Nigeria or Ghana during a conference of the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies, Birmingham, 2007. The full quote: "In this country I have to leave my religion at home to be accepted. But if I have to leave my religion at home, I cannot come because my religion, that's me."

This may be difficult to accept from a laic point of view, but it is nevertheless how the large majority of the world's population think and live. "Europe, the Exception"—that is the title one scholar (Grace Davie) chose for her sociological book on religion in different parts of the world. There is more to say about this matter, but this much is true: Muslims are Muslims first; that is their identity, and one cannot leave one's home and enter the public sphere without one's identity. Therefore, Muslims have to be accepted as Muslims in the state and by the state. Even a state that privatises religion 100% has to compromise. Moreover, it is clear they do: cemeteries, law on slaughtering animals, rules for clothing and buildings, and subsidies for sociocultural work. Every government deals with Muslims as Muslims. I would say: Be transparent. Bring it out into the open!

2. Islamic Education

To develop a contextualized Islam, Muslims need education. To fight islamophobia (and prevent hate language and discrimination) all schools should teach religious studies—which will also include secular worldview traditions. For Muslims, that has to be information about Islam. An example: our Qur'an and *tafsir* expert held public lectures in the university; afterwards, one Muslim young person said "Thank you!" and added: "I really did not know that we believe in God; I thought we believe in Mohammed." It is because the level of knowledge of real Islam is so low that people are open to more radical forms of Salafism.

Information is needed, but religious studies is not enough. The speaker should have the authority to develop the Islamic tradition. A non-Muslim scholar can say to Muslims—as I have heard somebody say, "You may think so, but in other parts of the world are Muslims who think otherwise." I could say: "Our fiqh scholar stresses that it is the intentions of Islamic laws that are decisive; he is an acknowledged authority, and I think that he is right." Muslims have to develop their tradition themselves. This implies that knowledgeable Muslims should teach Muslim children and students.

In turn, this also requires that institutions of higher education be involved in the training of Islamic teachers of Islam and imams. Muslim ethics and laws have to be applied to new circumstances. Islamic theology has a field of studies concerned with new ethical questions: *fiqh al-waqi'*. In the more secular parts of Europe Muslims have to be able to explain their religion and develop their religion in exchange with others. This requires tough theology, but theology does not develop in private institutions but needs an academic environment: a university setting in which Muslims—and, with all due respect, not islamologists—study their own tradition and dialogue with people from other areas of expertise and other worldview traditions. I like religious studies, but it is not enough. Universities should study and teach theologies and train

leaders of humanists, Buddhists, Hindus, Islam, churches: not in isolation but authentically in their tradition and in dialogue with one another.

3. Social Cohesion, Diversity, and Fundamental Values

The reason for establishing institutions for various traditions is twofold. First, we have to grant freedom for diversity in worldviews, not only individually but also as groups. Worldviews are about one's values and ideals, both for oneself and for society at large. To live according to one's own (secular or religious) beliefs, one needs some structures: channels to deepen one's insight (like zendos, Freemasons' houses, mosques, synagogues, or churches; documentaries on different worldview traditions; publications; we also need groups and other people to advise us on how to live and to support us in difficult circumstances. Value traditions have infrastructures—in very different ways. Thinking about diversity and human rights on freedom of religion/worldview, assembly, and conscience, we cannot just say: government, it's none of your business!—as they say on the other side of the Atlantic.

Second, however, our lives are intertwined in our modern and complex societies. Only together can we reach high standards of living. Only when most people feel at home in society, we can feel safe. We need police officers who are honest and just—but these values are bound up with our cultures, as we see that in many countries these virtues are needed but are not present. If there is one thing that is personal, it is virtue. However, we depend on virtues. We depend on the willingness to cooperate, to listen to one another, to answer questions, and sometimes to give way to others and to help one another. Rules are not enough: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who will guard the guards?*—as the question was put to Socrates. Wisdom and honesty are not learned by rules. Therefore, the state is empty-handed in relation to the social cohesion on which our societies rest. Governments can facilitate others to do the job. The ground for policy in relation to worldview organisations and media coverage of worldview traditions in documentaries, arts, etc. is that people have to live and work together in one society. In the end we are not only responsible for ourselves and the people we like, but for all.

I do not think that the state is able to inspire people to help others and find meaning in their lives. Therefore, governments have to facilitate institutions that do help people to live meaningful lives in our midst—and for Muslims. On the one hand, the modern state has to grant freedom and give way to diversity; on the other hand, the modern state has to stimulate social cohesion and cooperation.

Therefore, the state should work together with Muslim organisations for three reasons:

- to help them become members of the EU states in their own right
- for social cohesion
- and for the security reasons I mentioned earlier.

In this way, the state has the obligation to defend and propagate the fundamental values of the modern social and just state. In the research paper you will find a section on the realistic but troublesome issue of *Leitkultur, identité française*, etc.: the search for common values—that are not innate by birth but the results of historical processes.

The solution for (secular/religious) worldview diversity is dialogue, and not privatisation. Therefore, religious education should be part of the normal educational system. Neutral religious studies are helpful but enough.

4. Equal Treatment of Unequal Traditions

This implies a different solution for equal treatment from privatisation of religion and a laic public domain. It requires equal treatment. However, the various traditions have different structures. The laws of EU states presuppose the structures of Christian churches. The churches have rules; most apply canonical or church law. Law acknowledges these old organisations with their rules and representatives, but other religious traditions have completely different structures. In the research paper, I describe how the French, German and Dutch governments have dealt with this problem. All three have taken the initiative in coming to an Islamic umbrella organisation. Of course, also France collaborates with Christian and Islamic organisations. In Germany, culture (and religion) is *Landeshoheit* (the responsibility of the federal states); nevertheless, the national government started an Islam Konferenz—and I would say: rightly so. The Dutch government has a double policy, one side of which is laicism, and the other of collaboration. In 2004 the Minister of Integration at the time urged the mosques to form an umbrella organisation. However, this organisation is more or less a lame duck. Let me tell you why, and in the background we can see the recent resistance movements in Tunisia and Egypt.

The Egyptian (former?) Minister of Religion (Professor Mahmoud Zarzouk) is a sincere defender of collaboration between Islam and Christianity. He studied in Munich and speaks fluent German. He organises dialogue meetings with Islam scholars and people from abroad. His office is responsible for Islam. I think the Egyptian and the Moroccan government officials would not find it a good idea for every local mosque community to choose its own imam. Therefore, the offices of the ministers of religious affairs appoint 30-50,000 imams. That is not freedom of religion, of course. But freedom of religion presupposes a degree self-criticism within the church or mosque, and a public domain in which people can ask critical questions too. That is lacking. Maybe they should have done more to build more and better schools and to form such a public domain, but my point is that Islamic education in North Africa is very traditional: students learn a great deal by rote, are not acquainted with plurality, and therefore not forced to be truly self-conscious as Islamic leaders. The Islamic University in Cairo is probably the most international university in the world, but it is mono-religious.

Guest workers from North Africa and Turkey are often simple but honest people. The Turkish people had it easy. The official Turkish agency for religion sends and pays imams; the Turkish communities in Western Europe have to pay increasingly for their own mosques. Other Turks used the freedom of religion to organise themselves: Milli Görüs and the Suleymanis. They are forbidden in Turkey—although the Turkish policy is moving on. However, in the EU these Turkish Islamic organisations are allowed to be active. Turkish Islamic organisations usually are well-organised. I do not know if official Turkish Islam fully trusts what they do. In Western Europe the official national organisations are rather independent from Turkey, but important decisions have to be made in Ankara—which also provides sermons that can or ought to be used in Holland now with summaries in Dutch.

The other Muslims, North African, Iraqi or Pakistani, organised their mosques themselves without a minister of religious affairs. The boards of the local mosques appoint the imams themselves—sometimes imams who were not given a place in Morocco but are welcome to

help in Western Europe. The Chambers of Commerce list these umbrella organisations, but in the end, they lack anything that resembles canonical law. The solution is the most modern model of organisation: the network. And this is the instrument: the mobile phone. If one asks what the equivalent of church law the answer would be, it is the mobile phone. That sounds funnier than it is. What do politicians do if they want to legislate something? How are majorities found in parliament? By networking—with one's mobile phone, having a meal together during the breaks, maybe an *iftar* or other meal. I just want to say: Muslims are human.

The serious point is that our governments find it difficult to collaborate with Muslims organisations with a few loose rules for representation. My advice is: do it nevertheless.

The equal treatment of diverse organisations is not equal for those organisations that do not fit in the system of another. Equal treatment has to respect diversity and find solutions that respect the history and the nature of those other traditions. My advice is: work towards the ideal of making sure Muslims receive a high-quality education, of finding imams who are at home in Western society *and* are authentically Muslim. If that happens, then Islam will not be a *Fremdkörper* in Europe anymore and we can learn from each other, and I think that Western Muslims will stimulate collaboration with colleagues in Islamic countries. From our perspective, that could help the development of democracies elsewhere. Such contacts are very interesting, as we have experienced with our Centre of Islamic Theology in Amsterdam in a conference on medical ethics with the Medical Faculty and colleagues from Cairo (November 2010). We have much more in common than people think. Colleagues from Cairo wanted to have another conference on principles of democracy, gender, and economic ethics. Politicians can talk about such subjects as well. From our perspective, we will talk about human dignity (and what it means), democracy (and what it means practically), equality (and what it implies)—and why should we not speak about banking, economy, individual autonomy, etc.? We cannot dictate what other people should believe, but we can talk and study and sometimes we even learn from the other—that is not fully impossible, isn't it?

My advice is: take Muslims seriously as Muslims, and talk, ask, answer, and accept different traditions in their own right. If necessary, ask critical questions. Whoever does not ask and listen cannot learn.

Hendrik M. Vroom

Coordinator Centre for Islamic Theology
Prof. Em Philosophy of Religion
VU University Amsterdam