Help! Muslims Everywhere

Ton van den Beld[1]

Beweging Editor's summary of essay: A vision on national identity and integration in the context of growing number of Muslims, inspired by the Czech philosopher and statesman Thomas Garrigue Masaryk (1850-1937).

The citizens of Western European countries are worried about the constantly growing number of Muslims amongst them. The problems that accompany their integration into Western society and culture only serve to deepen those concerns.

Recently, an article in the Dutch daily *Trouw* written by Mirjam Sterk, a Member of Parliament under the auspices of the Christian Democratic Party, focused on this concern.[2] She points out that immigrants in The Netherlands—Sterk is not exclusively thinking about Muslims—do not enter a value-free society so much as one with a whole set of values. They are joining a society that is shaped by the Jewish-Christian-Humanist tradition, to which all have their obligation. This "all" includes the Muslims: "Even those who do not regard themselves Christian, cannot avoid what this tradition has produced."

Sterk's article reminded me of the famous *Trouw* interview a few years ago with the then Cabinet member Vogelaar about Muslim integration in The Netherlands.[3] She thought it possible that, via a process of mutual influencing each other, a Jewish-Christian-Islamic culture could develop. This concept drew a lot of criticism that also touches the more recent article of Sterk. The kernel of the Vogelaar article was skepticism with respect to the idea of a shared culture and identity at national level.

Skepticism

This skepticism is not without foundation. Centuries ago, at the time of the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, the Reformed Church had a privileged

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[1]*Beweging,* Fall 2010, pp. 5-9. Translator: Jan H. Boer. The translator calls the readers' attention to a critical question he poses in the footnote at the end of this essay.
[2]April 17, 2010.
[3]July 14, 2007.

position in this country. Other church denominations were merely tolerated. In 1878, a time when all religions in the country had equal rights, Abraham Kuyper declared that Protestantism formed the identity of the nation.[4] This opinion had great support among Protestants well into the middle of the twentieth century. In those years no word was uttered about a Jewish-Christian identity.

Justification of skepticism with respect to a national identity is defended in a study by the British scholar Linda Colley, who emphasizes that national identity is not a mere historical given or development so much as it is *formed or created* at a specific time for political reasons. The current British Protestant national identity, according to Colley, harks back to the necessity for eighteenth-century Britain—England, Scotland and Wales—to regard themselves as citizens of one political unit, one nation. The components of this unified entity were limited government, free global trade and, above all, Protestantism.[5]

So, though skepticism regarding a specific idea of national identity may be legitimate, this does not exclude the possibility of an adequate conception of it. The adjective "adequate" in the above sentence indicates that the term "national identity" is a functional concept. Whether or not a specific version of this concept is adequate, depends on the political goal for which it is used. Kuyper, for example, used very different versions for different purposes. In 1878, he emphasized the Protestant identity of his country in order to put the Protestant majority at ease in the face of the growing number of Roman Catholics and their increasing political, economic and cultural power. But a few decades later, he formed a coalition of the two groups in order to make it possible to achieve legal equality between religious and public schools. What was adequate in his earlier conception of Dutch identity would have been an obstacle in the second scenario, and thus inadequate.

Similarly, it can be argued that in 2007 Minister Vogelaar proposed an adequate conception of a Dutch identity when she spoke of the possibility of a future Jewish-Christian-Muslim culture. Its acceptability or function was her political goal of integration of Muslims into Dutch society, but not first of all to put at ease

[4]Abraham Kuyper, *Ons Programme.* Amsterdam, 1879, p. 24.
[5]See David Miller, *On Nationality.* Oxford: Clarendon, pp. 166, 169-170.

that segment of the population that worried over the fast increase of the number of Muslims in the country.

A Functional Approach

This functional approach to the concept of national identity calls up a few critical questions. In the first place, if the identity of a nation is a construction the adequacy of which depends on the political goal of those who promote it, can that goal be any arbitrary one? Secondly, can any such arbitrary goal then be considered constitutive or part constitutive for the identity of a nation? More especially, can the religion of a section of the population be promoted as a more or less central part of a legitimate conception of national identity?

Let me begin with the second question. First of all, I observe that the word "can" in that formulation is ambiguous. We are here dealing with the meaning of an actual possibility and with that of normative political appropriateness. My concern here is primarily with the latter. However, that normative question loses its relevance when it is divorced from the real or, at least, conceivable conceptions of national identity. In the professional literature there is a list of a number of possible characteristics of a population group that claims to be a nation. In addition to language, ethnicity, communal history and life sharing specific institutions, this list includes religion. Each of these characteristics can constitute or partly constitute the identity of a nation.

The religious factor, which is central to the discussion about Muslim immigration and integration in Europe, can thus apparently be a genuine component of the identity of a nation. But is it also an acceptable or even positive component? This is precisely what is often denied in the debate. Religion, it is argued, does not unite people; it brings disunity and violence in its wake. Think, for example, of the religious wars in Europe. For this reason, it is said, it is better not to associate religion with the identity of a nation, unless the entire nation consists of a people that adheres to one religion.

Positive Role of Religion

Nevertheless, I am inclined to distance myself from this perspective. In fact, I dare propose the thesis that the Dutch identity, for example, must not be conceived of without the recognition of the positive role that religion has played in the

political and cultural history of the nation. I restrict my defence of this thesis to a few major points that I borrow from the political and moral-religious thoughts of the Czech philosopher and statesman Thomas Masaryk.

To begin with, there is the relevance of crucial episodes in the history of a nation for its self-understanding, not only of the individual citizen, but especially also for the nation as a whole. For Masaryk that was the Czech Protestant Reformation with its impressive list of cultural leaders like Jan Hus, Peter Chelchicky and Jan Amos Comenius from the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, along with the Enlightenment in so far as it was not anti-religious.

Secondly, in this context we must not overlook that Masaryk's vision of the Czech national identity, which was strongly influenced by the nation's cultural and religious history, was not nationalistic in nature, but had a universal reach. The political ideals that he associated with the Czech religious and cultural history and that were to determine the Czech identity together, that is, democracy, social justice and lack of violence, have universal normative-political and normative-ethical validity. They are expressions of and exemplify humanity, love for people.

This brings me to a third component of Masaryks' exemplary vision for Czech national identity. I posited earlier that the identity of a nation must be constructed with an eye on a political goal. A similar construction can be more or less adequate for achieving the chosen goal. The question arose whether the quality of the goal does not make a difference. If religion is part of the core of the identity of a nation or it completely constitutes that identity, is it acceptable to appeal to that religion for the achievement of whatever political goal has been set? Masaryks' answer to this question is negative. Religion is not to be used in politics to achieve goals that have nothing to do with religion or are "independent" of religion. Because religion—at least, true religion—is essentially moral in character and implies humanity and love for people, it cannot be associated with or used for goals that contradict this humanity.

Maseryk was convinced that Czech Protestantism was closer to true humane religion than the Roman Catholicism of his day. That is why he dared to point to it in political debate. The motto of Jan Hus—"The truth will prevail"—was directly opposite the position of the nationalists in the struggle about manuscripts, just as it also undermined the anti-semitic position of nationalists and Roman Catholics

in the Hilsner trial.[6] In both affairs Masaryk and his supporters had true religion and, by implication, humanity on their side.

It is time to return to the point where we left the Dutch discussion about national identity. The background of this discussion was based on the issue of government policy concerning the Muslim minority. I have already indicated my disagreement with those who want to exclude the theme of religion from the discussion. I also dared to field the proposition that it is impossible to consider Dutch national identity without bringing in the positive role that religion has played in the political and cultural history of the nation.

A number of questions present themselves. In the first place, with an eye towards the integration of the Muslim minority into the society, if religion divides a nation rather than unifies it, would it not be better to exclude it from the concept of national identity?

Now the historical fact that religion throughout Europe has led to disputes and war cannot be denied. However, *that does not mean that disunity or worse are inherent to religion.*[7]

More important in the context of this essay is that religion is a significant factor in the life of the average Muslim immigrant. It gives meaning and direction to their lives. Faith or religion is a significant element in both personal and group identity of Muslims.

If then the goal of the government is the integration of Muslims into their host society, it would be wise to keep an eye open to the religious dimension of integration.

The above conditional sentence—"If…."—takes us directly to a second question: What then precisely is the goal of the Dutch government? We have previously indicated that officially it is the integration of the Muslim minority into the society. However, this does not have nation-wide support. A new right-wing political party, that continues to gain increasing support, rejects integration and insists on Muslim assimilation. Its leader systematically advocates putting a stop to Muslim immigration as well as a prohibition on the Qur'an and the

[6]For details regarding this trial, google "Hilsner trial" and you will find several relevant entries.
[7]Italics are the translator's.

construction of mosques. For the time being, however, it can safely be assumed that the policy of the government remains integration and not assimilation.

To all appearances it looks like including the religious identity of the nation fits the goal of integration better than that assimilation. Whether this is really the case—and it must be that if reference to that identity is to be meaningful—depends on the answer to a final question: What then is the religious identity of the Dutch nation? The answer is: a tolerant and enlightened Protestantism.

Religious Tolerance

In the Netherlands, the Protestantism I have in view harks back to William of Orange, the Father of the fatherland, and to the Erasmian Humanists of the time who supported the House of Orange's promotion of freedom of conscience and religious toleration. It was the Protestantism of the seventeenth-century Orange regents who granted asylum to Comenius, Descartes, Spinoza, Pierre Bayle and hundreds of others who had to flee their country for religious reasons. It is the enlightened Protestantism, the moderately enlightened rather than the more radical type, of Dutch theologians since the seventeenth century, who were prepared to apply critical methods to the study of the Bible and who made it possible to resist superstition and religious fundamentalism.[8] And to make a long story short, it is the Protestantism of contemporary Dutch Catholics, the majority of which seems to be more protestant than Catholic.

Just like Masaryk's conception of 19th-century Czech identity, my conception of the 21st-century identity of The Netherlands is that of an enlightened, theistic Protestantism that implies humaneness. It cannot be referenced in support of inhumane political goals or means.

It is my conviction that we can now affirm that the political goal of the integration of Muslims into the nation is not in tension with this conception of Dutch identity, but, to the contrary, in distinction from assimilation, is supported by it. We no longer need to speak here of appearances, but can truly speak of reality.

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[8]Think, among others, about the Reformed preacher Balthasar Bekker and his *De Betoverde Wereld (The Enchanted World)* of 1692, in which he combated belief in witchcraft and sorcery, evil spirits and demons. In 1668 he had already proposed that opposition between revelation and science or scholarship is a mirage. God does not deny through Scripture what He teaches through reason.

This may then be so, but we must not overlook that, as it takes two to tango, it also takes two parties for integration to succeed. If the government, mandated by the majority of the population, respects and promotes the equality of human rights of the Muslim minority, then those same Muslims from their side have to respect those same human rights of their fellow citizens, Muslim or not. And it is here that we run into a problem.

The Qur'an and Muslim traditions do not unambiguously support these human rights and the moral obligations that they imply. It is difficult to deny the reality of this problem. However, a solution can be found in the Christian tradition in its Protestant form. The moderate Enlightenment it embraced enabled leading theologians and believers to understand their Scripture and tradition anew, along with the associated morality. It is no baseless speculation that Muslims in Europe can and will learn from this religio-cultural tradition.[9]

[9]Translator: A critical question-- The Reformational tradition that is the foundation of this magazine, *Beweging,* holds to a wide definition of religion that would include secularism. Van den Beld's essay appears to me to exclude secularism from that definition, though he does not explicitly state that. If we assume its inclusion would that change his argument at all? Would the question whether religion should be included in the identity of a (Western) nation arise at all? Would it not come down to this: Of course religion would be included; it is only a question of which religion(s)?