Managing Mosques in the Netherlands
Constitutional versus Culturalist Secularism

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Abstract

This article engages with the emergent ethnographical study of secular practice by focusing on how local bureaucracies manage the Muslim public presence in the Netherlands, particularly the construction of new mosques and the amplifying of the Muslim call to prayer. We argue that what started as the 'Islam debate', itself provoked by growing populist articulations of the fear of Islam, has gradually developed into a conflict in the practice of local governance about the meaning of secularism. Whereas the public and political debate about mosque issues is often dominated by what we call a 'culturalist' or 'nativist' form of secularism, in practice bureaucrats are often led by a 'constitutional secularism' that protects the constitutional rights of Dutch Muslims. Thus, in its practical application, constitutional secularism is one way of tackling Islamophobia and protecting the rights of religious minorities in general. Moving beyond the genealogical study and the deconstructivist critique of secularism by such authors as Talal Asad and Wendy Brown, we show that the ethnographic study of actual secular practice remains crucially important to avoiding monolithic text-based understandings of the secular as inherently dominating the religious.

Keywords

What in the Netherlands is known as the 'Islam debate' or—more euphemistically—the question of religious diversity, has gradually developed into a conflict in the practice of local governance about the meaning of secularism. Take for instance the issue of new mosque construction. Few such projects are realised without fierce opposition from neighbourhood residents and local political activists arguing against the perceived foreignness of the mosque on native land. Many mosques, newly built or still under construction, have been vandalised in the wake of such disputes (Van der Valk 2012 & 2015). A national political party, like Geert Wilders's PVV, is generally supposed to support and inflame these protests through mediagenic provocations against Islam. And yet, a large number of mosques have been built in recent years, which would have been difficult to achieve without the active support of local bureaucrats who have developed and internalised in their daily practice an understanding of secularism that differs significantly from the notion of secularism that is implicit in much of the anti-Islam rhetoric. If the latter is 'culturalist' or 'nativist' in that it perceives secularism as a 'Western', 'liberal', or even 'Dutch' achievement now threatened by Islam, the former takes secularism as a constitutional arrangement that protects freedom of religion and sees it as the task of the state to guarantee this freedom.

In this article we argue that whereas culturalist secularism dominates public and academic debates, constitutional secularism is more effective in bureaucratic practice. Second, we argue that one of the consequences of the political noise created by culturalist secularism has been a growing awareness of constitutional secularism among local bureaucrats. Third, we assert that publicity is one of the most effective weapons of culturalist secularism. As a result, constitutional secularism tends to avoid publicity. The less media report on mosque projects, for instance, the greater the chance that the new building is erected with relatively little fuss. The more media coverage, however, the more local bureaucrats and politicians feel forced to shift to a culturalist notion of secularism.

We take culturalist secularism to be the political or ideological articulation of what Charles Taylor (2002) calls a "social imaginary" of the secular; that is, a historically formed common understanding of what the place and the role of the religious is, or ought to be, in a society which the dominant voices define as secular. This 'background' (ibid) against which contemporary secularist claims are formulated thus connect to local histories of governing religious subjectivities. In this we follow a nascent body of literature that, *pace* the Grand Genealogies of secularism as a European tradition as written by scholars like Taylor (2007) and Asad (2003), focuses on situated 'varieties of secularism' (Bowen 2009, Bowen, Bertossie, Duyvendak & Krook 2014, Casanova 1994,

McBrien & Pelkmans 2008, Modood 2014, Navaro-Yashin 2002, Warner, Van Antwerpen & Calhoun 2010, Weiner 2014). In the Netherlands, present-day culturalist secularism cannot be understood without the historical context of the post-war years in which affiliation with institutionalised religion declined and post-war key values like individualism and freedom were framed in opposition to religious dogma and community. What is so striking about Dutch culturalist secularism since the end of the short political career of Pim Fortuyn is how it defends secular progressive values like gay rights and gender equality against the 'return of religion', particularly Islam, and how this concern with progressive values has merged with a nativist campaign for 'Dutch norms and values'. In that sense it is possible to talk not only of culturalist secularism but even of nativist secularism. We will not analyse this discourse any further below, partly because we have done so elsewhere (Verkaaik 2009), but more importantly because we are primarily interested in how nativist secularism increasingly conflicts with constitutional secularism.

What we call constitutional secularism[1] differs from political secularism as defined by for instance Asad (2003) and Wendy Brown (2006) in that it questions the one-directionality of the power relation between the secular and the religious, as described by these authors. Both Asad and Brown are of course right in arguing that secularism is not a neutral position that permits a Habermasian public sphere in any ideal sense,[2] but a position of power that 'tolerates' (Brown 2006) or governs the religious in terms imposed on the religious from the secular position. In that sense, secularism can be called inherently oppressive. However, this argument needs to be nuanced for at least two reasons. First, it collapses the distinction between discipline and oppression or power and injustice. Charles Hirschkind (2006) makes the interesting observation that in the study of religion "discipline" (Foucault) and "deliberation" (Habermas) should not be thought of as mutually exclusive. Constitutional secularism is a very good example of how the state disciplines citizens into accepting the law, while allowing them to deliberate and hold meetings on

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1   What we call constitutional secularism is close to what Bader (2007) describes as liberal-democratic constitutionalism. Bader avoids the term secularism because it has become too cacophonous to use in a clear way (2012). In the Netherlands, secularism is currently often equated with 'the separation of church and state' (*de scheiding van kerk en staat*), which is in fact not mentioned in the Dutch Constitution.

2   We are aware that for Habermas (1989) the public sphere is not a given reality but a project, and therefore never fully public, which implies that it is only from an ideal position that one can claim that secularism does or does not permit a Habermasian public sphere.

mosques and so forth, within the boundaries of that law. Second, the critique of the secular as inherently oppressive, although to some extent true, fails to take into account how the discursive separation of the secular and the religious that undergirds the secular power position can work both ways. Especially in the context of growing culturalist secularism—but also at other times in history—this separation can also be put to work to defend the religious, so defined, against the 'colonising' (Dabashi 2013: 128) power of the secular state. What we call constitutional secularism is, in the Dutch situation, a discursive practice that draws on the Dutch Constitution, as well as on the dominant notion of secularism as the separation of the state and the church, to defend the right of religious subjects to express their religion publicly as citizens. This is not only done by people of faith, but also by others who believe in the relative autonomy of the religious from the state. Again, constitutional secularism, like nativist secularism, is coloured by local history. In the Netherlands it has a history rooted in the pre-war period of pillarisation when the secular mantra of the separation of church and state primarily meant the relative freedom of religious institutions and communities to manage their own affairs free from state interference. Hence, the 'Free University' in Amsterdam was established as a Reformed Protestant University independent from the state. Today, constitutional secularism is mostly defended politically by Christian-democratic politicians and other Christian parties against what they perceive as the aggressive secularism of progressive and liberal parties, for instance during the recent political issue of a proposed ban on ritual slaughter. As we will show, it also informs the practice of local bureaucrats and politicians not affiliated with Christian-democratic politics.

Scholars concerned about islamophobia in Europe have insufficiently pointed out the positive contributions of constitutional secularism, which are essential for tackling islamophobia and protecting the rights of religious minorities in general. This understanding of political and constitutional secularism as essentially about protecting the rights of religious minorities has been emphasised more in Indian debates on secularism and against secularism's critics (Bhargava 1999, Needham & Sunder Rajan 2007, Srinivasan 2009). On the other hand, secularism as a European cultural identification can and does regress into islamophobia and/or anti-Muslim racism. Even in the absence of ill intentions or behaviours, believers (Muslims and Christians) are forced to deal with a fast paced society that is not structured around their religious needs (Beekers 2015). In such a society, constitutional secularism enables basic rights to the city and to public forms of worship, without which religious worship for minorities would be in an even more precarious position than it is already.

With this article we seek to contribute to the ongoing debate on secularism by pointing out the importance of ethnographic research on secular *practice and performance* (Bangstad 2009: 195, Cannell 2010: 97). The deconstruction of ideas and discourses as written by pioneers like Taylor, Asad, and Brown has been an immensely important tool for ethnographers like us as we flesh out a conceptual framework to study secular practices. At the same time it is important to realise that these accounts are discursively constructed abstractions that cannot account for all the particulars of secular politics. Ethnography remains crucially important to ground these theories in actual situations, much like it has helped refute monolithic text-based understandings of, for instance, Islam. To do so, we present three empirical cases: the construction of a new mosque in Almere (near Amsterdam) and a political conflict about the funding of a new mosque in Amsterdam, both researched by Oskar Verkaaik; and the public and legal debates about the *azan* (or call to prayer) in the Netherlands, documented by Pooyan Tamimi Arab.

'The Municipality Wants Minarets'

Built since the 1970s on reclaimed land as a suburban town near Amsterdam, Almere has become the sixth largest city in the Netherlands. Since the municipal elections of 2010, when Geert Wilders's PVV became the biggest party in Almere, winning 20 per cent of the votes, it has been one of the strongholds of this neo-nationalist and anti-Islam party. At approximately the same time, the Moroccan-Dutch community in one of the neighbourhoods developed plans to build a new mosque. Since the start of the project, the municipal bureaucracy has been remarkably supportive of this project, with the full backing of all important political parties, apart from the PVV of course. This was made possible because, even though the PVV had gotten the most votes in the elections, it was left out of the ruling coalition formed after the elections.

Before 2010, the municipality had planned a so-called *Reli Boulevard* in one of the newly developed areas of Almere at the far east-end of the town (the furthest away from Amsterdam), where a number of religious denominations were expected to build new centres, including a number of churches (Catholic, Jehovah's Witnesses), a Vietnamese Buddhist temple, a Hindu centre, and a mosque. Although a suburban town, Almere has a highly diverse population due to the fact that it offers relatively cheap housing for families in the close vicinity of Amsterdam, whereas comparable housing in Amsterdam is too expensive for most families with a post-migrant family background. Likewise, the choice for a *Reli Boulevard* far away from the town's centre was

also motivated by financial reasons. The town's centre has become an extensive outdoor shopping mall with some public buildings including the city hall and a library. Scattered around the centre are some religious buildings like a Protestant church, a mosque, and a synagogue that is under construction. However, religious communities that have settled more recently find it too expensive to build near the centre. To nonetheless offer them a certain degree of visibility, the municipality decided to group them together on an affordable piece of land. The municipality appointed a project manager whose task it was to supervise the various projects and to assist the religious communities in realising their plans as swiftly as possible. The municipality's main motivation was to prevent projects from becoming a failure or lingering on for a long time, which would downgrade the area's liveability and reputation. After 2010, this practical concern would merge with the political objective to defend a constitutional secularist style of governance against the PVV's demand to ban the construction of new mosques.

The Moroccan-Dutch community initially preferred a plot closer to the neighbourhood where most of its members live but when this proved to be too costly, the mosque community happily accepted the offer to buy a lot at the *Reli Boulevard.* It hired an experienced architect who had already designed a number of mosques in the Netherlands. It began collecting money both within its own community and from other Muslim communities in nearby towns. Asking for money in other mosques, the mosque committee presented its case as a 'frontier battle' against the PVV. "The PVV gives us a lot of publicity," one of the committee members said, implicating that it boosted fundraising.

The first time the municipal agenda became clear to us was during the discussions about the design for the new mosque. As we have described elsewhere (Verkaaik 2012), there was internal debate within the mosque committee about the design. Some members wanted a 'modern' design, functional and affordable, that would resemble the first mosque of the Prophet and would not put off non-Muslim neighbourhood residents. These demands were countered, however, with the argument that the municipality wanted a 'recognisable' mosque. During the design negotiations the chairman of the committee said: "The municipality wants minarets," adding that its project manager was very critical of the PVV. The manager had implied that the mosque committee was allowed to build minarets as high as 40 meters. In return for a lot at the *Reli Boulevard*, he demanded a 'landmark' mosque that would look like a mosque. It could be a 'modern mosque' but he strongly preferred minarets.

In November 2010, when the mosque committee went to the Town Hall to discuss its draft design (with two minarets), the local bureaucrats turned out to be extremely helpful in assisting the project. They constantly stressed that

the Town Council had agreed on the conditions under which religious communities were allowed to build their centres at the *Reli Boulevard* and that any protest against the mosque, be if from neighbourhood residents or political parties, was bound to fail as long as the committee met these conditions. In that case there would be no legal grounds to stop the mosque project. It could be brought to court but the only thing a judge would do was to check whether the plan was in line with the conditions. The only option left to protestors would then be to dismiss the local government and ask the Town Council for a new political decision which would have to be applicable to all new centres at the *Reli Boulevard*. They deemed such a scenario very unlikely because there was no political majority for it. They also pointed out very meticulously which adjustments were needed for the plan to respond to the conditions. It had to make provisions for three extra parking places, for instance, and the architect should be careful to use the correct technical terms in his drawings. After the meeting, the architect, who had been involved in a dozen mosque projects already, said he had never before experienced such caring attention to minute details from bureaucrats.

In an interview we had with the project manager, he confirmed that the reasons for his careful assistance were both practical and political. When he was appointed in 2009, his main task was to get the various projects ready with as little delay as possible. After the elections, it was clear that the 'political situation' would become the main obstacle. The three parties which formed the local government, including the conservative VVD, the Labour Party, and the liberal-democratic D66, agreed not to give in to the PVV demand for a ban on mosque construction. They were supported in this by the mayor, a former minister of the national government from the VVD (Her husband runs a construction company and at some point his company indicated an interest in building the mosque, but the mosque committee wisely chose another contractor.) Since they feared that the PVV would gain a lot through publicity, it had been decided not to go public on the mosque case yet. In all municipal correspondence, the mosque project was officially known under the name *Kleurrijk Ontmoetingscentrum* (Colourful Meeting Centre). The project manager said he had recently talked to the communication department of the municipality about the ways in which the neighbourhood would have to be informed about the project. Anticipating a conflict, the man had suggested a 'shock and awe' tactic (he used the English phrase): make sure you have your plan ready and go public just before the building process starts.

Like many other bureaucrats who were at some point involved in the project, the project manager was also *personally* attracted to the project. He related how he had travelled to Andalusia to admire and learn about

Muslim architecture. He had bought a copy of the Qur'an just as he had read 'the book of the Hindus' to come prepared for the supervision of the Hindu temple project. He liked the architect's design which was a mixture of modern architecture and Islamic elements, which he thought brought the past into the present in a really nice way. "It is my ambition," he said, "that ten years from now, if someone asks for directions, people will say: turn right at the mosque."

Early 2012, when the mosque committee was ready to start building and the neighbourhood was finally informed, residents gathered in protest. They held a protest meeting for which they invited the local political leaders of the PVV and the VVD. Interestingly, the PVV was attacked for remaining silent about this matter whereas the party could and should have known about it for long (In fact, it had known about it for months and had put a small note about it on its website, but had not made a big issue out of it). The PVV spokesman defended himself by taking the offensive, encouraging the residents to put money together for a legal protest (Again, he knew that this would be a waste of money and would only win the PVV some publicity). In contrast, the VVD spokeswoman defended constitutional rights in front of an angry audience of predominantly right-wing voters fluctuating between the PVV and her own party. Explaining the Town Council's decision to facilitate a *Reli Boulevard*, she said: "That also includes a mosque. A mosque is allowed. (*Een moskee mag.*) The VVD does not distinguish between various religious buildings." To this, the PVV representative responded that the PVV was also in favour of freedom of religion, but since Islam was a political ideology and not a religion, mosques had to be banned. This, too, was met with criticism from the audience as one of the organisers of the meeting said that the PVV should not think the residents were bigots simply because they did not want a mosque in the neighbourhood.

On a sunny Saturday morning a few weeks later, a festive ceremony was held to formally begin construction. A VVD alderwoman—not the same person as the spokeswoman who addressed the protest meeting—was invited to give a speech on this occasion. She could have chosen to give a short and formal statement, but instead spoke at length about the importance of this occasion, which she said indicated that Muslims of Moroccan descent had made the decision to live in Almere, a decision that heartened her as the town's alder-woman. Since the mosque was the first to be built of the various buildings planned on *Reli Boulevard*, she also called the mosque committee 'courageous pioneers' who would pave the way for others.

Neighbourhood residents did start a legal procedure to prevent the mosque construction, but this proved to be a lost cause just like the project manager had predicted and it never slowed down the building process. That it took almost two years to complete the building was due to financial problems facing the

small committee, consisting of approximately 200 families, which had difficulties raising the needed sum of more than a million euro. Bureaucratic assistance continued during the prolonged process. For instance, the committee received a permit to place a prefab cabin on its premises to house a contemporary prayer room. After the final inspection, one civil servant said he was so impressed by the mosque building that he almost felt the urge to become a Muslim himself. When a mosque member responded that he was welcome to attend the Friday afternoon prayers, he politely declined. Never meant seriously, the remark rather indicated an implicit disapproval of the PVV. For the PVV, statements like these were reminiscent of the 'multi-culti nonsense' of bygone decades, but we interpret them differently. We see them as part of a wider defence of the constitutional freedom of religion against the anti-Islam rhetoric of the PVV.

'Discriminatory towards the Unfaithful'

It could be argued that the Almere mosque chapter is a special case because the PVV had become the biggest political party there, which brought other parties more closely together in their defence of constitutional secularism than in other places. To counter that argument, we now turn to the Dutch debate about the call to prayer. If the construction of new mosques almost invariably meets with nativist protest, the call to prayer is arguably even more of a sensitive issue. It is generally felt as even more of an intrusion into the private world of others than the mosque building itself. You can choose not to notice a building, but it takes time before you get used to the Islamic call to prayer. However, Dutch law does not prohibit the *azan*. In fact, a 1988 amendment to the constitutional right to publicly express one's religion ensures the right to amplify the *azan* because it interprets the *azan* as a religious expression akin to the ringing of church bells.

Until now, few mosques use loudspeakers to amplify the *azan*. Many Dutch Muslims receive the call at their cell phones and say that a public call is not necessary. In some new purpose-built mosques, it has been suggested to indicate the time for prayer by using light instead of sound, for instance by illuminating a glass minaret (Tamimi Arab 2015). However, there have been a few cases of mosques using loudspeakers, particularly for the Friday prayer, which has prompted some critical reactions that could be defined as examples of nativist secularism. Commenting on a mosque committee in the small town of Vlaardingen, near Rotterdam, that had expressed its wish to amplify the *azan*, Henk Kamp, who is a seasoned VVD politician and a four times minister in the

national government, said: "This is revealing an obtrusiveness that is not help-
ful for us. People will experience this as very disruptive, because those calls
are in a different language and at unusual times ... If the municipality cannot
[stop the *azan*], the law needs to be adjusted." Responding to the objections
that Muslims have the right to amplify the *azan* because Christians are allowed
to ring their church bells, he said: "Those [church bells] have already been part
of the Dutch culture for a very long time and will not be experienced by anyone
as disturbing."[3] He continued saying that "the obtrusive presence of Islam in
public spaces, as in Islamic countries, is not desired in the Netherlands. The
amplified call for prayer from mosques must therefore be banned."[4] Unlike his
fellow party-member in Almere who said the VVD did not distinguish between
religious buildings, Kamp clearly did make a distinction between Muslims and
Christians in terms of their right to public presence.

Leaving aside the fact that in the Netherlands some of the most vigorous
protests against the *azan* do not come from secular parties like the VVD or
the PVV, but from orthodox Calvinist groups who condemn the *azan* as 'blas-
phemous', we mention here the case of Deventer, a small town in the eastern
part of the country, where an active Turkish-Dutch mosque community began
amplifying the *azan* on a daily basis in 2012. Protest against this was neither ini-
tiated by the nationalist PVV nor the conservative VVD, although the PVV did
try to appropriate the protest once it emerged: Geert Wilders asked questions
in Parliament about the 'daily imperialist mosque call'. As for the VVD, as was
the case in Almere, the mosque organisation was assisted in its negotiations
with neighbourhood residents by the local VVD alderman who throughout the
controversy ruled out the idea of prohibiting the call. Instead, local criticism
primarily came from two small local parties, the Atheist Secular Party (ASP)
and the Humanist Alliance (HA). The ASP built its argument upon the equal-
ity principle, which is the first article of the Dutch constitution, saying that
the *azan* violated this principle.[5] Arguing against the municipality which, by
law, tolerated the *azan*, the ASP said: "You are privileging one specific religion
to pollute the public space with calls to pray to their greatest god, while other
religious people believe in other gods and for many others there is not even
such a thing as god." Arguing that religious people would be equally offended if
a group of atheists would "drive around with a sound wagon proclaiming that
God, Allah, Yahweh, Thor, and so forth, do not exist", the ASP called the *azan*
"discriminatory toward the unfaithful" and concluded that it did not fit in a

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3   Geen gebedsoproep via luidspreker. www.ad.nl, March 28, 2007.

4   Henk Kamp. Immigratie en Integratie. VVD Tweede Kamer-fractie, November 12, 2007.

5   ASP Kenmerk: Dagelijkse gebedsoproep Deventer Centrum Moskee. October 26, 2012.

"secular society such as the Dutch." Taking French laicism as its model, the ASP demanded the prohibition of all religious expressions in public spaces (but never asked for the ban of church bells).

The response to these demands has consistently pointed out that the right to the public expression of religion is protected by the constitution. Answering parliamentary questions from the VVD, the PVV, as well as the Calvinist SGP, regarding the *azan* in 2007, Minister Guusje ter Horst of the Labour Party said:

> The calling to professing a religion or conviction is protected by article 6 of the constitution . . . The law is capable of making rules for the exercise of this right outside buildings and closed spaces, for the protection of health, in the interest of traffic and to prevent disorderly conduct. It has been determined in article 10 of the Law for Public Manifestations that church bells on the occasion of religious ceremonies and funeral rites . . . are allowed. The municipal council is authorised to make rules on the duration and sound level.[6]

The minister added that amplifying calls for the profession of a religious faith, when directed at non-members, was not explicitly protected by article 6, which is the article on religious freedom, but by its connection to article 7, which is on freedom of speech. In addition, the minister referred to the *Decision on Environmental Management of Residence Buildings* (*Besluit Woon-of Verblijfgebouwen Milieubeheer*) that sets rules for interpreting noise pollution and allows sound levels up to seventy decibels from 7 am to 7 pm. Moreover, while religious sounds are regulated in practice they are also officially exempted from rules concerning noise pollution, making bans very unlikely. When the mosque in Deventer prompted Geert Wilders to again suggest banning the *azan* in 2012, Minister of Social Affairs Lodewijk Asscher replied that the Constitution protects the call to prayer.

Similarly, the state's handbook for municipalities regarding the management of religious diversity, published in 2009, emphasises that the *azan* is constitutionally permitted. It explains in detail that mosques have the right to amplify the call to prayer and that limitations of the call are subject to a number of regulations. Although the laws that protect the *azan* are not recent, it is nativist protest against the *azan* that has prompted the reinforcement of these laws. In fact, not only local bureaucrats but also many Dutch Muslims

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6 Antwoorden op kamervragen over islamtische gebedsoproepen via geluidsinstallaties en gemeentelijke autonomie hierbij. www.rijksoverheid.nl, May 11, 2007.

only recently learnt about the constitutional right to amplify the *azan*. It has not resulted in many more mosques amplifying the *azan*, but it has certainly led to a growing awareness among Muslims and local bureaucrats alike about the legal protection to do so.

'The Separation of Church and State'

If the constitution remains an important instrument against nativist secularism, it is publicity that forms nativist secularists' most effective weapon. To give an example of how publicity can put pressure on local politicians to adopt secularism as a rhetorical tool against mosques, we now turn to a poor Amsterdam neighbourhood with a large Muslim population where, with the assistance of the local bureaucracy and some financial support from the European Union, a rather prestigious building was constructed housing two mosque communities, one Moroccan-Dutch, the other Turkish-Dutch. Protest against this project emerged as a series of events: a publication in a secular progressive weekly magazine, which prompted the PVV-faction in the European Parliament to ask critical questions about the European subsidy, and led local politicians to discontinue working relationships with the mosque committees.

In the 1980s, the two Muslim communities hired some rooms in a rundown former school building in what was then one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods of Amsterdam. The school had left the building because it was in such a neglected state that it was no longer deemed safe to use as a school. In addition to the two mosques, left-wing activists, anarchists, and artists had their workshops in the building. In 1998, the city district government decided that the building had become too dangerous for anybody to use and had to be demolished. Built in the early 20th century style of the Amsterdam School, however, the building was remarkable from an architectural point of view. Besides, by that time the city spent a lot of money on prestigious building projects geared toward the financial and cultural elites of the city. The predominantly left-of-centre City District government decided that the poorer parts of the city should also benefit from this spirit of architectural renewal. Much in the tradition of the Amsterdam School, with its roots in social-democratic emancipation discourse, the City District hoped that a new building of good architectural quality would help uplift the neighbourhood and give the place a better reputation. It decided to build a new building in which the mosque committees would be given the option to rent space. It hired a prestigious architect (unfortunately one without any experience in mosque architecture)

and started looking for funds. All this happened just a few years before the sudden and unexpected rise of neo-nationalism and nativist secularism in the early 2000s.

At that time, the European Union offered grants for social projects in deprived neighbourhoods. This, however, did not include the funding of religious institutions. The City District decided to apply for a grant equal to one quarter of the total sum of the whole project, arguing that at least one quarter of the future activities in the building would have to be of a non-religious nature. Since the mosque committees already organised a lot of social activities—Dutch language courses, job interview training, homework support for schoolchildren, computer courses for the elderly, and so on, alongside more religiously-oriented activities like Arabic lessons and reading the Qur'an—the City District asked them to formally split into two bodies: a religious foundation that would rent the prayer rooms and a social organisation that would rent the remaining parts of the building. It so happened. The City District received a grant of approximately one million euro. The building was built, featuring a highly remarkable façade that soon attracted students of architecture from as far as Finland, and housing two small prayer rooms on the ground floor, and rooms for social activities on the first floor. An independent company specialised in social projects was hired to supervise the social activities and safeguard the non-religious profile of the first floor.

It seemed a clever construction at the time, but as it turned out it also had its weaknesses, which may not have been self-evident in the late 1990s. In 2011, however, the left-wing weekly *De Groene Amsterdammer*, a national secular-progressive magazine, published an article by a freelance journalist who had earlier published a critical book about Dutch Muslims, in which he consistently linked Islam to crime, poverty, gender inequality, and other social problems. The article criticised the construction on a number of points, but the main complaint was that the City District had willingly lied to the European Union about the religious nature of the building. To show that the social activities that were taking place on the first floor were nothing more than 'religious indoctrination', he participated in a lesson, given by an imam, on 'norms and values', which at that time were buzzwords in the debate on 'Dutch culture' and a compulsory part of integration courses. During that lesson the imam warned his male audience that according to religious dogma it was not allowed to spit on the street. It led the journalist to conclude that the building was, in fact, 'a madrasa'. The real point, not mentioned by the journalist, was that one of the mosque committees had received compensation from the City District administration to use one of the rooms on the first floor for religious

education outside office hours, an arrangement based on the perception that the EU would only insist on the separation between religious and non-religious activities from nine till five.

Within weeks, representatives of the PVV brought up the issue in the European Parliament, which compelled the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) to start an investigation. In turn, this triggered a political debate within the City District Council. Terrified by the prospect of having to return a substantial amount of money, all political parties, including those who had agreed to the deal in the past, distanced themselves from the whole issue, and they did so by framing the case not as a matter of potential fraud but as a violation of the secular principle of democratic politics. Secularism was consistently narrowed down to the rather simplistic catchphrase of 'the separation of church (sic) and state' (*de scheiding van kerk en staat*), which recurred in almost every other sentence during the debate to argue that any form of financial support for religious communities was a violation of this separation. There was only one dissenting voice in the whole discussion. While all other parties tried to clear themselves from any form of responsibility, the local representative of the Labour Party repeatedly said that 'the separation of church and state' had, in practice, never meant a complete ban on state funding of religious organisations. He mentioned the case of the Salvation Army, which receives hundreds of thousands of euros a year from the municipality, made possible by precisely the same construction of splitting up the organisation in two distinct foundations as was used for the mosque organisations. As he pointed out, the municipality had made this deal because the Salvation Army had proven to be better able to reach certain segments of the homeless, drug addicts, or other people in need, than government institutions had. The same might be true, he argued, for mosque organisations in the case of social work directed at the Muslim population. In any case, he concluded, 'the separation of church and state' could never be as simple a matter as his colleagues seemed to suggest, because "no one in his right mind wants secular organisations to do the work the Salvation Army does for us."

While the local Labour Party representative was making this point, Eberhard van der Laan, the city mayor who is also a member of Labour Party, commissioned an investigation to identify other instances of direct or indirect financial support for religious institutions with the explicit purpose of putting a stop to that practice. This seemed a clear departure from the municipal policy under his predecessor, Job Cohen (also a Labour Party member), which showed traces of an earlier social-democratic position on social emancipation and empowerment, and enabled the city government to financially support religious organisations in some contexts and under certain conditions.

This older social-democratic view can be compared to, for instance, Rajeev Bhargava's claim that secularism does not need to foreclose the possibility of affirmative action (Bhargava 2010). In Dutch public discourse of recent years, however, this notion has been widely criticised as a form of pampering minorities and even the majority of Dutch Muslims now support a rather rigid form of constitutional secularism that avoids any kind of affirmative action and enables them to claim their rights as equal citizens rather than from a minority position. Triggered directly by the publication in *De Groene Amsterdammer* and the PVV's reaction to it, the investigation commissioned by the present-day mayor promised to put an end to the policy of his predecessor. In doing so, he sought to transform the nativist sentiment that informed the journalist's critical article into a strict constitutional secularism that foreclosed any form of state subsidy for religious organisations. However, he did so only in public. When the public interest in the case declined, the need for an investigation was no longer felt. (The other investigation by the European Anti-Fraud Office, did take place and has come to its conclusion as we write. The City District has just been summoned to return the received funding.)

Conclusion

What exactly do these cases tell us? In our analysis, one of the most striking aspects is the degree to which secularism has become an issue of debate within secular circles, particularly within secular political parties in the Netherlands. What our cases indicate is that there is a considerable disagreement within both the liberal-conservative VVD and the Labour Party as to what secularism means, and how a secular government should manage mosque issues. The third case shows the various positions on the issue within the Labour Party, ranging from the local representative's point that the state can and should cooperate with religious organisations for practical reasons ('they do our job better than we can'), the former mayor's 20th century social-democratic ideals of empowerment ('citizenship assumes emancipation which comes with visibility which a social-democratic government should facilitate'), to the present-day mayor's insistence on non-interference ('the state should be neutral, meaning uninvolved, particularly financially'). Similarly, we have seen implicit disagreement within the liberal-conservative VVD, in which a local politician in Almere defends the constitutional equality of religious denominations before an agitated audience whereas a prominent national party-leader makes a distinction between Christianity and Islam on the basis of nativist arguments about culture and history. As we said right at the beginning of this

article, we believe this to be the result of an earlier debate about the presence of Islam in Dutch or European society. Increasingly, that debate is giving way to internal concerns within secular parties regarding the practical management of religious diversity. It is precisely parties like the VVD and the Labour Party that struggle with these questions the most because they are as yet undecided about the question of whether to support a constitutional or nativist form of secularism. Besides, their members are not only active in media politics, but are also involved in the everyday political and bureaucratic management of religious diversity that is considerably messier and more mundane (and ethnographically speaking more interesting) than current political discourse.

The second aspect that we want to highlight is that the rising local experience in managing mosque issues also leads to an increasing awareness among local bureaucrats and politicians that secularism is not, and cannot be, a position of neutrality in the sense that state-religion relations are totally absent (compare Modood 2014). Despite political slogans like 'the separation of church and state' that Dutch defenders of secularism discursively accept as a first principle of secularism, bureaucratic practice teaches practitioners of secular governance that this separation is indeed nothing more than that: a norm, not a reality. In practice, mosque issues tend to become so politicised that they allow for no neutral position. Since Muslims are by law entitled to build mosques, the common strategy of adversaries is to try to delay the procedure as much as possible and, because delay almost always costs money, to exhaust the mosque community financially. In such a situation, the bureaucratic decision *not* to assist a mosque committee in its plans is as much a form of engagement as the choice to help the committee in getting its applications ready in a formally correct manner. That is why, beyond the deconstructive critique of secularism, political theorists with a practical approach have insisted on normative guiding principles of 'relational religious neutrality', 'fairness as even-handedness', or 'principled distance' (Bader 2007, Bhargava 2010). In the Netherlands, as elsewhere in Europe and North America, where Islamophobia and the political articulations of these fears have produced a situation in which there is considerable political disagreement over what is 'fair', neutrality in the more decisive sense of constitutional protection of rights pushes toward the political and bureaucratic assistance of mosque construction and *azan* amplification. Local bureaucracies are increasingly aware of this, and since they often have no interest in delaying the process either, if only for practical reasons, there is a considerable willingness to support Muslim organisations in their constitutionally protected wish to publicly express their faith.

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