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POLICY DISCOURSES ON MOSQUES IN THE NETHERLANDS 1980–2002: CONTESTED CONSTRUCTIONS

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ABSTRACT. The establishment of mosques is an incentive for public discussions on Islam and the presence of Muslims in Western European societies. This article critically reconstructs Public Policy discourses on mosque establishment in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. It shows how urban-planning discourses, and their specific frames, which came to dominate mosque establishment as a policy issue in Rotterdam from the 1980s onwards, created their own set of meanings. The article analyses these discourses in terms of their enabling and constraining roles during a period in which local authorities became more involved in the improvement and placement of new mosques in the Rotterdam area. On the one hand, the urban renewal framework allowed for a substantial improvement in the housing of Islamic religious and cultural practice. On the other hand, urban planning policy discursive practices gave less attention to issues such as visibility and presence that are now at the heart of the heated debates about Muslim populations in Dutch society. More recent discussions on the aesthetics and location of mosques in Rotterdam illustrate how these dominant discourses are not only contestable but are also being contested from all quarters.

KEY WORDS: equal treatment, Islam, mosques, the Netherlands, policy discourse, Rotterdam

1. Introduction

Western European societies have been becoming more culturally diverse, mainly as a result of immigration. Islam and Islamic religious practices have been at the centre of the ensuing public discussions on the nature and implications of multiculturalism. Over the last 30 years, a prominent theme that has emerged in these public debates about the place of Muslim communities in western European societies has been the establishment of mosques. Since the late 1980s, many of the early mosques established in France, the Netherlands or Germany, once improvised and largely invisible houses of worship have evolved into larger, purpose-built constructions housing Islamic centres of learning and worship. By virtue of their function, size and increasingly visible and audible presence, these mosques have come to symbolise Muslim communities' desire to participate in the social and physical spaces of urban Europe (cf. Eade, 1996; Gale and Naylor, 2002).

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In ethical theory, a contextual approach posits that in a multicultural society the interpretation of moral principles and of social norms requires that one always takes into account the significance of broader socio-economic and power inequalities and the meaning of specific cultural practices for individuals or groups (Parekh, 2000; Bader, 2003). This approach also acknowledges that various moral principles exist in tension to each other as well as alongside other considerations such as feasibility, policy aims or collective social goals deemed worthwhile. The implication for analysis is a clearer focus on the "real dilemmas multicultural societies have faced and the way they have sought to deal with them" (Parekh, 2000: 242) as opposed to one on abstract ideal models.

This article reconstructs public debates and local policy-making discourses on mosques in Rotterdam, the second largest city of the Netherlands over a period of 20 years. It does so by looking at the ways policy-making processes and policy discourses have "framed" mosques and their establishment, how shifts have occurred over time and the implications of these shifts for the way mosques have become established in the Netherlands.

This article focuses on policy discourses first and foremost. Broader socio-cultural, political and economic developments in the Netherlands will only be alluded to in the course of this reconstruction. Policy discourses are understood here as ensembles of ideas, concepts, norms and categorisations that contribute to converting situations that are seen as problematic into policy-related problems. These can then be acted upon. Frames are an important aspect to such discourses. They operate by separating out certain aspects of the problem from others. In so doing, these frames both lend coherence to policy-makers' and public perceptions and guide the decision-making processes (Rein and Schön, 1993: 153). The frame works in both enabling and constraining ways. Whilst frames allow the various actors to see, talk and act in productive ways at the same time they also restrict the points of view, vocabulary and the scope for plausible or legitimate courses of action (Hajer, 1995: 48). In this article I look at how the frames of these policy discourses work in both enabling and constraining ways. This understanding of frames is crucial to understanding how policy-making (as discourse and practice) and public debates do not occur in a power-neutral social vacuum. Policy discourses on mosque establishment in Rotterdam in this period show how socio-economic inequalities and cultural biases get produced, reproduced and contested as key actors ascribe various meanings to the presence of Muslim communities in the city. I argue that these discourses are not the exclusive domain of politicians or policy-makers. They also emerge from interactions between individuals, local lobbies, broader social movements and institutions (Rein and Schön, 1993: 145). Policy discourses are produced through a process of social and political struggle in which different actors try to impose their meanings and definitions of

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a particular issue within contesting sets of social and political practices. The following reconstruction of policy discourses about mosques and their communities in the Netherlands will trace these contested constructions in terms of where different normative considerations and principles, about equal treatment of minority groups and rights to religious freedom and cultural identity, are to be found in public interactions about the establishment of mosques in the Rotterdam cityscape.

2. Policy Discourses on the Establishment of Mosques in Rotterdam[1]

In the prelude of the final report on Rotterdam mosque policy Herman Meijer, member of the Green Party and alderman for Urban Renewal, wrote:

> "Everything comes to an end. The present report on Rotterdam mosque policy marks the closing of a period. There was a mosque policy in our city because there was urban renewal. Urban renewal means in the first place the improvement of housing conditions. In Rotterdam urban renewal has also always meant the improvement of provisions. Together with the residents the housing conditions of shops, commercial provisions, neighbourhood and community centres, provisions for medical and social practices, and schools were improved, wherever that was possible. And therefore the mosques too!" (GR, 2002: 5, my translation M.M.)

After this brief reconstruction of the history of mosques in Rotterdam, Meijer goes on to explain that whilst the City's policy on mosques was "normal routine" it was also a "special task." This special character was down to the fact that mosques are religious buildings and their establishment is related to immigrants' basic rights to "visibility, dignity and presence" (*idem*). The cliché "everything comes to an end" implies that the various issues around the establishment of mosques have been essentially resolved. This statement presents the establishment of a municipal mosque policy as a consequence of urban renewal initiatives in the city where extant facilities have been improved. Meijer's contention that these improvements were achieved "together with the residents" leads the reader to infer that Muslim communities in Rotterdam have, at least to some extent, acquired equal access to participation in urban renewal projects.

[1] At this time some 86 000 people with a Muslim background live in Rotterdam on a total population of about 600 000 people, of whom 41 000 of Turkish, 32 000 of Moroccan and 5000 of Surinamese descent (GR, 2002: 28). There is one purpose built mosque in the city and two others will be built in the near future. The total number of Islamic houses of worship in Rotterdam in 2002 was 36.

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2.1. *A Brief History of Mosques in Rotterdam*

Islamic houses of worship in Rotterdam were first established in the early 1970s by first generation Turkish and Moroccan "guest workers" (*gastarbeiders*), sometimes with some small public subventions or with the help of local officials or Christian caretakers. The City Council initially supported the idea of creating one or two larger, general-purpose mosques. However, at the time the emergent Mosque Committees, organised along various religious or ethnic lines (Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese), preferred small houses of worship. In the late 1970s these temporary guest workers were gradually accepted as permanent residents. Local government authorities took a hands-off approach, however. The various Mosque Committees were regarded as conservative groups with close ties to their respective countries of origin. The Rotterdam City Council's refusal to subsidise the setting up of these houses of worship was based on the precept that "the State bears no responsibility for churches—financial or otherwise" (cited in Rath et al., 2001: 109).

This stance changed in the early 1980s as houses of worship came to occupy a central role in immigrant communities' efforts to provide for their particular socio-cultural, educational and religious needs, especially as first generation immigrants brought their spouses and children to settle in the Netherlands. Mosque Committees thereby became the most important form of self-organisation for these communities. The number of houses of worship increased rapidly and mosques began catering for a range of activities, such as religious instructions and cultural events.[2] The Rotterdam Migrants Office started to see Mosque Committees as "social partners" in the formation of "immigrant integration policy" and the municipality duly decided to sponsor selected socio-cultural activities being organised by these associations (cf. Rath et al., 2001: 110–113).

Another reason for this increased interest in Mosque Committees was the deplorable situation of the existing houses of worship. Their location, in residential areas, was seen as an environmental problem in some neighbourhoods; amongst other things, many of the buildings used did not comply with fire and safety regulations (GR, 1987, 1992: 74). In the late 1980s officials from the Urban Renewal and Cultural Minorities Departments started to deal with the most pressing cases (Rath et al., 2001: 113–114). A special policy for the housing of mosques was developed between 1988 and 1991 and presented in a policy memorandum called *Faith in the Future*. Urban renewal funds were made available for the relocation or renovation of houses of worship and support in finding adequate housing

[2]In 1981 about 13 houses of worship existed in Rotterdam, by 1988 their number had increased up to 29. In 1988 about 48 000 Muslims lived in the city (cf. Rath et al., 2001).

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was given to Mosque Committees. For, the more numerous, Turkish and Moroccan populations, plans were made to establish larger mosques on strategic locations. The other side of the coin, though, was less leniency towards unlawful and dangerous housing of houses of worship (Rath et al., 2001: 116–117). And, still invoking the separation of state and church, the municipality continued to refrain from directly subsidising the establishment of new houses of worship.

Faith in the Future was an important moment of closure in Rotterdam policy discourse on mosques. In the 1980s, this discourse had grown out of an urban development approach that combined general efforts to improve the city (symbolised by the notion of urban renewal) with the more specific aim to accommodate the presence of Muslim communities in the city. Two frames for looking at mosques can be located in this process. The first frame presented mosques as simply any other house of worship. The second frame introduced the idea of planning for large prayer halls, situated on major thoroughfares. More importantly, urban development procedures and priorities were regarded as the most appropriate setting for public discussions about mosque-establishment.

Let us now examine more closely these frames within this urban planning approach.

2.2. *Mosques as an Urban Planning Issue*

Basically, urban renewal in Rotterdam was about the improvement of housing and provisions in the city. Its symbolic meaning was far wider however. Urban and social renewal projects were efforts to recreate the city by improving the built environment, as well as the social cohesion and opportunities for residents in the different city districts. To achieve these social goals urban planners, residents associations and policy makers tried to reach consensual decisions at the city district level in the so-called Urban Renewal Project Groups. Mosques being set up in older, more run-down neighbourhoods soon became a cause of concern for these Project Groups. The problems of chronic lack of space, the structural inadequacy of many houses of worship or objections from local residents were not the only issue though. Mosques were also becoming symbols of the (perceived) overconcentration of immigrant populations in relatively poor neighbourhoods. The establishment of a mosque was to become a catalyst for the manifestation of latent social and ethnic tensions between various communities in the area (cf. Buijs, 1998).

With the mosque policy implemented and coordinated by the Town Planning and Housing Department the municipality opted for "a pragmatic approach within an urban planning perspective" (GR, 2002: 13). Problems were defined in terms of safety, security, limiting bother for the

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surroundings, creating adequate parking provisions and developing an overall vision on mosque locations in the several city districts. When it came to the establishment of new mosques, the "location study" became a key trope—and practice—through which all affected groups (residents associations, public servants, mosque committees, urban planners) were required to choose between specific locations. In this sense, urban renewal was the rubric under which the interests of residents associations (largely dominated by indigenous Dutch residents) and Muslim associations were to be reconciled. Policy was, by now, a way of taking responsibility for the physical environment of religious observance. The aforementioned "temporary special policy" for Muslims was also firmly embedded within initiatives aiming to combat socio-economic inequalities and encourage equal participation by disadvantaged groups in various socio-cultural activities. In response to those who argued that Muslim communities were thereby getting special treatment, public servants systematically explained that, first, on the basis of the separation between state and church Mosque Committees did not receive direct subsidies and, second, that Muslim residents had equal rights in neighbourhood facilities.

The first enabling element to this urban planning perspective was the recognition of the long-term presence and therefore rights of Muslim residents in Dutch cities. The Platform for Islamic Associations in Rotterdam, founded in 1988 and sponsored by the City Council, welcomed this stance when arguing that mosques were necessary to allow Muslims not to feel "as strangers" any longer.[3] Mosques became "one of the many different kinds of provisions that need a place in the scarce space" (GR, 2002: 13). In that light equal treatment meant, for example, the inclusion of mosques in zoning plans. By implication, protesters against mosque establishment could only argue against plans to build mosques on specific locations or against the number of mosques in a city district, they could no longer meaningfully argue against mosque establishment as such. A second enabling aspect was its opening up of opportunities for considerable direct and indirect municipal support for Mosque Committees. In a period of some 15 years the municipality invested time and money in finding suitable locations for about twenty mosques. It was active in helping Mosque Committees looking to improve their accommodation or move to a new location. It worked closely with the Platform for Islamic Associations and also helped Mosque Committees find their way through complex urban planning procedures. Finally, through the co-ordination of citizens participation evenings and information dissemination, the municipality

[3]Reaction of the Platform for Islamic Associations in Rotterdam (*Stichting Platform Islamitische Organisaties Rotterdam*) on the draft policy memorandum *Faith in the Future*, 1991, without exact date.

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built up a great deal of expertise in interacting with protesting residents in the often sensitive issue-area of mosque establishment.

Urban planning discourses also had a constraining role though. First, public responsibility for minority groups' houses of worship was framed almost exclusively in these terms. By limiting financial support to urban renewal criteria, further discussion on direct subsidies for minority houses of worship were circumvented. This was not a minor issue as special Dutch Government grants had been given for Muslim guest workers' houses of worship between 1976 and 1984. In 1983 and 1988 a continuation of subsidy regulations for houses of worship of cultural minorities was advocated by two national advisory committees. These advisory committees,[4] as well as the Platform for Islamic Associations in its reaction to the 1991 Rotterdam policy paper *Faith in the Future*, defined "equal treatment of religions" in a long-term historical perspective. In that perspective the fact that the Dutch state had given financial support for the establishment of churches in the past was invoked to justify a temporary subsidy regulation. By the end of the 1980s, however, both the national government and Rotterdam public authorities claimed that this kind of special treatment violated the separation of state and church as well as the principle of equal treatment.

Despite providing openings for all concerned groups to think about mosque establishment as a shared concern for the whole neighbourhood, a second limitation to the urban planning "lens" was its downplaying of struggle, opposition and discrimination in the history of Muslim communities' presence in Rotterdam. The Platform for Islamic Associations objected to this tendency. For many Mosque Committees the history of mosque establishment in Rotterdam should at least in part be told as a narrative of struggle, in which the efforts and sacrifices of Muslims had been met with suspicion and opposition of public authorities and powerful residents associations dominated by Dutch residents. Third, privileging the housing aspects of mosque establishment came at the cost of attention paid to the social role of Mosque Committees. The municipality had created the image that Islamic practice primarily had to be housed adequately, whereas municipal policy in regard to the societal role of Islamic associations could be postponed to a later period. Even though mosques participated in all kinds of platforms and activities related to "immigrant integration" or social activities, it was not until 2001 that the municipality started to develop a more encompassing vision on the societal role of mosques arguing that "the baton

[4]The two advisory committees were the Working Party Waardenburg that published a report in 1983 and the Hirsch Ballin State Committee that published a report in 1988 (see Shadid and van Koningsveld, 1995: 28–30, and Rath et al., 2001). In total national subsidies were given that covered part of the costs of the establishment of about 100 mosques between 1976 and 1984.

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of the 'builders' (*sic*)" could now be passed on to "the more content focussed policy makers in the city" (GR, 2002: 11, see also Canatan et al., 2003).

2.3. *All Places of Worship are Equal*

An important policy frame presented mosques as the first and foremost of the modest provision for religious practice. The "Rotterdam Mosque Policy" also included Hindu Mandirs in its more general effort to improve minority groups' houses of worship[5]. In the Muslim case, it also bears mentioning that the municipality argued that "all places that are permanently in use for regular prayer are considered mosques" (GR, 1992: 11). Even though the municipality acknowledged that one could make distinctions between houses of worship and "real" or "Friday" mosques it preferred this more general definition that helped to see mosques as essentially a provision for Islamic prayer.

Stressing the ways in which Islamic houses of worship were similar to churches, temples or synagogues was an important step in accommodating mosques—and thereby Islam—into Dutch traditions of equal treatment. Instead of singling out Muslim religious places of worship as essentially different or special, Dutch discourses came to place them as no different from other religions and their respective houses of worship. Likewise for the idea that provisions for mosques should be seen as comparable to any other local amenities. Neighbourhood mosques are still, by and large, small, invisible places in both Islamic and Western societies. Moreover, in the early days of immigrant settlement, both Muslim communities and urban planners were content to see the ideal mosque as essentially a safe and clean house of prayer; nothing more. On this scale, "mosques" could be incorporated into the built environment without too much discussion on the implications of visible change in the cityscape. In this way, Rotterdam also managed to avoid discussions on the establishment of a Grand Mosque as a symbolic representation of "the Muslim community." In Rotterdam, all mosques were seen as accommodations that provided for Islamic religious practice and there was to be no preferential or differential treatment between "grand mosques" and "less important mosques." This is in stark contrast to other European cities, especially in France, where the very idea of establishing a symbolic Grand Mosque in the city has been at the heart of heated public discussions and intense conflicts over who represent "the Islamic community" (cf. Frégosi, 2001; Geisser, 2001).

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[5] With some 18 000 worshippers the Hindu population in Rotterdam was far smaller than the Muslim population and its presence was less mediatised. Most Hindu associations were satisfied with their current accommodations and rare initiatives to establish a purpose-built construction never reached the stage of a real project (GR, 2002: 31).

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Nevertheless, treating mosques like any other house of worship made it more difficult to argue that Muslim communities and/or mosques needed any sort of special treatment. It is useful here to pause and imagine, counterfactually, the framing of mosque establishment around issues such as discrimination, opposition, struggle or fear of Islam. Within such a framing, one could justify special treatment and support for Muslims by arguing that, in the West, Islam is "on the defensive," more than for instance Hinduism or Buddhism are (Nederveen-Pietersen, 1997: 186). In recent post- September 11 discussions, for example in France, there are voices urging for public grants to improve the conditions of Islamic religious observance and related activities in order to mitigate feelings of rejection and discrimination amongst (young) Muslim communities.

Another constraining aspect of speaking about mosques as provisions for religious practice can be illustrated by looking at a project of 1977 for a Rotterdam mosque in the centre of the city. One of the ideas behind this mosque, was to have a minaret of 33 metres and room for about 3000 Muslims, was described as follows: "A mosque in Rotterdam will be a clear manifestation of the obvious presence of tens of thousands of Muslims in this city."[6] The project, set up by a few pioneers of Islam in Rotterdam, lacked support among the emerging Mosque Committees at that time. In the late 1970s and early 1980s mosques committees were involved in a kind of "competition for worshippers," and many groups created their own house of worship along lines of nationality, ethnicity, religious denomination or kinship. The establishment of a highly visible, central symbol of presence was not the first thing that came to mind for either the host society or Muslim populations who, seeing mosques mainly as modest spaces for immigrants in a strange land, still framed any support for their establishment in terms of kindness and gratitude. Many of the ideas behind the 1977 mosque project, which linked mosque establishment to concerns about visibility and the will to create symbols of Islam in the built environment, only reemerged in the 1990s, when second and third generation Muslims entered the boards of mosque committees. Under the impetus of these new generations that, as Thijl Sunier has shown, are far more oriented towards being Muslim in Dutch society than their parents, Mosque Committees started to formulate demands for recognition and visibility (cf. Sunier, 1996).

2.4. *Large Prayer Halls on Thoroughfares*

The central goal of the municipal policy was the establishment of four large mosques in Rotterdam. These larger mosques, that could be located within existing building or be purpose-built constructions, should replace some

[6] "Moskee Rotterdam," brochure of the *Foundation Islamic Centre Rotterdam*, 1977.

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of the existing houses of worship and function as prayer halls for Muslims from different neighbourhoods. To make sure that these large mosques would be open to different Muslim communities they should be "neutral," by which public authorities meant that they should not be dominated by any specific group. Therefore socio-cultural or commercial activities were to be housed elsewhere and organisations that wanted "to express an ideology" should be "located clearly next to the mosque" (GR, 1992: 39). Although the municipality acknowledged that collaboration across national differences, especially between Turks and Moroccans, would be impossible, it wanted to stimulate Mosque Committees to "unite their forces" so as to create the financial and organisational strength needed to establish a larger mosque (GR, 1992: 36–37).

The main enabling aspect of the concept of large prayer halls was the availability of real estate on which larger mosques could be built. These locations were chosen on the basis of criteria such as available parking space, visibility or distance to the worshippers. Two locations for purpose-built constructions are near the railway line. The first one to be built, the Turkish Mevlana mosque, is clearly visible from the Amsterdam–The Hague–Rotterdam train. The larger mosques situated in the centre of neighbourhoods are located in existing buildings.[7]

With the idea of stripping these larger mosques of all but their "praying function" policy-makers managed to ignore the activities and role of Mosque Committees in Rotterdam. In the 1980s many mosques in Rotterdam had become multi-functional centres providing a community infrastructure within specific districts. Municipal authorities, however, had come to fear that these sorts of multipurpose mosques for one ethnic/religious group would become symbols of cultural segregation. In return, Islamic associations objected to what they perceived as illegitimate interference by public authorities with religious organisations. The municipality proved sensitive to these criticisms and quickly gave up the idea of mosques without side-activities, acknowledging that "The mosque is much more part of a society that is not so individualistic, as little as religion is. Besides the religious function the mosque has a function as meeting place and as the place where one can go for relief, advice and support" (GR, 2002: 26, my translation, M.M.).

Another constraining aspect can be illustrated by looking at the ways mosque buildings were thought of in regard to visibility and presence.[8]

[7]For instance, the Turkish Kocatepe mosque is located in a former school building to which a dome has been added. The Mosque Committee will be building a neighbouring minaret in the near future.

[8]A more elaborate account of recent discussions cannot be given here due to lack of space (see for similar discussions in the United Kingdom Gale and Naylor, 2002).

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Policy documents from the early 1990s spoke very hesitantly about large mosques in words such as their being "more notable," "having future value" or being "more beautiful." Location studies at this time mentioned that some locations allowed for "a mosque with style" or a "mosque-to-be-proud-of" on "remarkable" sites. Nevertheless the dominant frame was that the mosque policy was about tackling the inadequacy of existing houses of worship in terms of safety and space. But by the mid-1990s this framing became increasingly constraining. Assumptions about what "adequacy" entails changed within Muslim organisations as emancipated Mosque Committees, that also had more financial means, looked to establish not only larger centres of worship but also visible symbols of presence in the urban environment. Inevitably this shift in the significance and meaning of mosque establishment begged a whole set of questions about how Muslim as a whole belonged to and participated in the broader society. It also called-up issues about the kind of multicultural diversity sought for in a large city.

At first, policy-makers and public opinion were quite receptive to these new demands and supportive of "beautiful mosques" being built. The appearance of any new mosque was seen as a matter of taste, best left to the respective Mosque Committee, architects and urban planning experts. Purpose-built mosques were regarded as "funny buildings" or "exotic" contributions to the Rotterdam city skyline. Recently, however, this celebration of diversity has come under increasing pressure from several quarters. First, many of the mosques built in the Netherlands in the late 1990s have been criticised for being mere imitations of traditional mosque architecture from the "home country." When anti-Islam discourses became more prominent in public debate in the Netherlands (not only after the events of 11 September 2001, but also as a result of the electoral success of the late Pim Fortuyn's Liveable Rotterdam party that won 16 out of 45 seats in the Rotterdam Local Elections in March 2002), the symbolism of large, purpose-built mosques became subject to increasingly heated debate. In dismissing the so-called "multicultural illusion," these critics saw newly-built mosques as symbols of homesickness and nonintegration.

Second, a group of Muslims architecture students also entered the fray when they presented an alternative Moroccan mosque design. Their argument was that the approved design was "massive and closed" whereas their was "transparent" and "took the urban environment into account" so that it could also "add something to the living environment of non-Muslims."[9] The students were also highly critical of a society that wanted to simply incorporate mosques as a kind of curiosity built at the edges of town. But they were also challenging architects and Mosque Committees to think about the nature of Muslim populations' presence, and thereby mosque

[9]"Moderne moskee kan best zonder minaret" in *Trouw* 7 April 2003.

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architecture, in Dutch society as home in itself. Much of the current critique of mosque designs is far less nuanced than this though. In the summer of 2003, City Councillors from the Liveable Rotterdam Party used the "traditional" and "provocative" design of the same Moroccan mosque as a focus to question the "dominant presence of Islam" in the city. They also made links between this sort of mosque establishment and Islamic "radicalism and terrorism."[10] Political leaders of the Liveable Rotterdam party have even asked for a ban on new minarets and have argued that large mosques contribute to social tensions and to the fear for Islam. The mayor of Rotterdam declared that mosques buildings should be built in a more modest style, so that they would express "respect" for a host society in which religion had become less important.

2.5. *Mosques and Urban Planning Procedures*

The above shows where mosques can become a focal point for wider discussions and conflicts over the presence of ethnic, racial or religious minorities. In Rotterdam the frames of urban planning discourses combined with a pragmatic approach embedded discussions on the establishment of mosques in discursive practices that were, and are linked to specific settings (information evenings for residents for instance) as well as specific sorts of argumentations. To illustrate, let us look at the way the key aspect of contemporary mosque policy, building mosques on thoroughfares, is justified:

> "To avoid, as much as possible, the stigmatisation of neighbourhoods as 'Turkish' or 'Moroccan' the policy aims to build mosques as much as possible on thoroughfares rather than in the centre of neighbourhoods. In this way the bother for the surroundings will be limited... " (GR, 1992: 35–37, my translation, M.M.).

The preference for placing mosques on thoroughfares is a pragmatic urban planning response to concrete problems. Significantly, claims that mosques attract too many immigrants and so create Turkish or Moroccan "ghettos" is closely followed by another objection; one that has far more legitimacy in urban planning discourses. Namely, that large mosques in neighbourhoods lead to *bother*. Whereas one often reads in studies on mosque conflicts that protesting residents "hide" their racist prejudices behind complaints about parking space or noise pollution (e.g. Beck, 2002), it is sometimes more correct to say that the setting of urban planning procedures invites protesters to argue in those terms. Thus at an information evening on a Moroccan mosque the mosque policy project leader stated:

[10]Ronald Sørensen "Leefbaar Rotterdam vraagt om moskee met 'enige ingetogenheid"' in *Rotterdams Dagblad* 28 August 2003.

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> "A large mosque also means a large place of worship. That is an important issue in the planning process on mosques. What is often related to it are parking facilities. For residents the parking facilities are an important aspect."[11]

An opening statement such as this privileges a specific set of arguments by promising that legitimate objections—such as those concerning parking facilities—will be taken seriously. The setting for discussions on mosques, thus created, is supported by the Dutch political culture that strongly disapproves of overt racist or xenophobic statements when opposing a prospective planning decision. This is an important enabling aspect of this setting. Whilst planners acknowledge that "emotions . . . can be aroused by mosque establishment" (GR, 2002: 34) they seek to address objections by creating a space for understanding for mosques, placing planning discussion within the institutional setting of urban planning procedures. Even though this is a lengthy process, there has been some success in ensuring that debates do not become too politicised. For example, in the case of protest against a new Surinamese mosque, the municipality argued: "continuous talks and more precise information during the next steps and the process of decision making will possibly create more knowledge and more understanding for this new provision. . . " (GR, 2002: 21).

The constraining features of this approach become clear if we look once again at the arguments invoked for mosques on thoroughfares.. In the urban planning discourse, the "attraction power of mosques" on immigrants along with the assumption that high concentrations of immigrant populations lead to neighbourhoods becoming "stigmatised" are practical issues, problems to be solved. In this frame, the very notion of stigmatisation could be called in to question or the argument put forward that a mosque signifies an improvement for Muslim residents. Whilst policy makers noted in 1991 that mosques were sometimes targets of "hatred of foreigners," the main municipal strategy for dealing with this was threefold: limit the "bother" caused by mosques, invite protesters to concentrate on "legitimate" complaints and hope for a gradual increase in not only a general acceptance of mosques but also of Islam in a multicultural society. The recent and dramatic decrease of support for multiculturalism in Dutch public opinion, something that has surprised many observers, may arguably be related to this strategy of depoliticisation if not avoidance.

Another, related constraining aspect to this setting is the difficulty of discussing wider societal change within the narrow setting of urban planning procedures. When one analyses local residents' objections to mosque establishment in their neighbourhood, several narratives about social or local

[11] Transcript of information evening on the design of the Essalam mosque in city–district Feijenoord on 16 October 2001.

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change can be seen at work. For example; one of the protesters against the establishment of a new Moroccan mosque wrote in a letter of complaint: "Where shall we walk our pets if it will be forbidden to walk them on the usual location because it is unclean in regard to the mosque" (*sic*).[12] Such a complaint can be interpreted in several ways. One way is to see it as a barely camouflaged expression of anti-Muslim prejudice. Another is seeing it as a typical example of a far-fetched argument or as part of an ongoing discourse about "them" taking over the local space so that "we and our pets" have no place in it anymore. In Rotterdam this complaint was countered by arguing that the location in question is not a "designated dog-walking spot" in any case. This is but one small example in how formal, technical frames are inadequate for addressing broader discussion over the social implications and symbolic dimensions of mosques in the Netherlands. As Frank Buijs argues, these proceedings also turn what should be open-ended public discussions into antagonistic exchanges between Mosque Committees and protesting residents, arbitrated by municipal authorities. Such discursive practices ultimately block the way to more deliberative processes that can facilitate the creation of some common ground for all parties (cf. Buijs, 1998).

3. Conclusion

In the Netherlands the steady establishment and development of mosques has become an important public event in which the presence of Muslim communities becomes a focus for public discussion. In policy-making discourses mosques are linked to the right to religious freedom but also to the freedom of expression of cultural identity. Mosques are also linked to issues around "integration," public civic responsibilities, the separation between state and church and to the implication of demographic changes at the neighbourhood and city level. The majority of actors in Rotterdam acknowledge whilst Muslims have an equal right to freely exercise their religion they are nevertheless often exercising that freedom in disadvantaged circumstances. A major issue in the 1970s and 1980s was the definition of public responsibility and the outer limits of direct financial support for mosque establishment. In Rotterdam municipal authorities invoked the separation of state and religion to refrain from directly subsidising of mosque committees and instead let mosque establishment be taken up under urban renewal policies. The immediate outcome was the substantial improvement of the housing situation of Islamic house of worship.

[12] "Rapport inzake bedenkingen zienswijzen Essalam moskee," Town Planning and Housing Department, 13 June 2002.

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Analysing how and where normative principles are embedded within policy discourses reveals their enabling and constraining aspects. In this way the complexity of discursive practices and practical measure can be taken into account without abstracting these "worthwhile collective goals" from their socio-economic, economic or political context. A few final observations are given by way of conclusion.

If one looks closely at the meanings ascribed to mosque establishment in the policy discourses of Rotterdam, what is striking is how little attention was initially given to the visual and symbolic expressions of Islamic presence in the city as an issue worthy of discussion in itself. The lack of interest in visible symbols of presence is directly related to the framing of mosque establishment in terms of providing adequate local amenities. Public authorities, Muslim associations and residents associations managed to reach agreements within that perspective. However, the socio-cultural and political implications of a permanent Islamic presence in—and on—the urban landscape were more difficult to address within these local discourses. This became abundantly clear when newly built mosques, and their minarets, started to be built in the late 1990s. These mosques—and hence their populations—are still kept at a distance in Rotterdam's cityscape. This is either through being located on forlorn terrains on the edge of town or by being designated as a cultural—architectural curiosity in the city. Recent discussions on mosques in Rotterdam might constitute an opportunity to think about other ways of including Islamic presence in the local public space. Unfortunately the loudest voices in current debates draw on feelings of fear to oppose the full inclusion of Islam, and Muslim communities, in Rotterdam. Instead they ask Muslim Dutch populations to remain silent and invisible.

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