

European Islam - Threat and Challenge for the Reformed Churches in Europe

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Lucius W. De Graaff

The call of the minaret in European history

At various moments in history Islam has tried to gain a foothold in Western Europe. I mention one or two of these moments.

In 711 Spain to a large extent came under Islamic authority. From Spain the Muslims made an attempt to move up towards France. In 732 they were stopped in their advance by Charles Martel at Poitiers.

Centuries later the Muslims make a new attempt. The Ottomans advance to Central Europe. The battle of Mohács in 1526 has become a household word for the Hungarians.

In 1529 the Ottoman armies are lying before Vienna. However, they do not manage to push on.

We take long steps through history and arrive at the year 1683. Again the Turkish Muslims are lying before Vienna. And again they do not succeed in pushing on.

On the contrary.

From that moment onwards Islam is going downhill in Europe. The Ottoman border in Europe is shifted further and further backwards¹. This development continues in the course of the next two centuries. It is especially Napoleon's invasion into Egypt in 1798 that made the power of the west felt in the Ottoman empire.

The third invasion

In a few months' time the book *The Third Islamic Invasion of Europe* by Raphael Israeli will be published. In his book he writes that Europe at the moment has to do with a third invasion of Muslims. And he shows that the third invasion follows an entirely different course. Nowadays Islam does no longer spread by means of arms as at the above-mentioned moments in history. Islam nowadays advances through penetration, propaganda, conversion, and demographic changes. Raphael Israeli uses the Arabic word *dawa* for it which can be translated by 'mission'. He sustains his argument with various numbers. At the moment there are about 30 million Muslims within the borders of the EU. If Turkey is admitted there will be 105 million at one stroke.

Islam scholar Bernard Lewis wrote in the Israeli paper *Jerusalem Post* : "Muslims are in the process of taking over Europe". According to him Islam will soon be the most dominant power in Europe. The continent has given up the struggle for its own culture and religion. Another quotation from his article in *Jerusalem Post*:

"The Europeans are taking leave of their own history and are losing their self-confidence. They do not show respect for their own culture."

¹ W.Montgomery Watt, *Invloeden van het Westen en moslimse reacties* (bijdrage in *Islam Norm, ideaal en werkelijkheid*); *Western Influences and Muslim Reactions* (contribution in *Islam Norm, Ideal and Reality*), Houten: Fibula, 2000, p. 308

Now Raphael Israeli and Bernard Lewis are two Jewish scholars with an outspoken negative view of Islam. And to one who is no 'stranger in Jerusalem' it may be known that their view of Islam has everything to do with the state of Israel and its Muslim neighbours. Of many other leading Islam scholars it must be said that they give their view of Islam from a non-Islamic background. And I think it justified that Muslims find this hard to take. Non-Muslims sometimes seem to know better what Islam implies than the Muslims themselves.

Therefore I think it important also to listen to of Islam scholars who are Muslims themselves and who know Islam from the inside. How do they look upon the presence of Islam in Western Europe? To answer this question we can find excellent help with Dr. Tariq Ramadan.

Islam and the globalising of the world.

Tariq Ramadan was born in Geneva in 1962. He is a philosopher, (an authority on Nietzsche) and an Arabist. At the moment Dr. Ramadan is also attached to the Erasmus University or Rotterdam as professor of 'identity and citizenship'. The American weekly *Time* counted Ramadan amongst the one hundred most influential people for the world of 2004.

This Tariq Ramadan has written a book entitled 'Western Muslims and the Future of Islam'.² The title of his book already makes it clear that as a Muslim he is engaged on the question of Islam within the western democracies. Hence the importance of his book for our subject.

Tariq Ramadan emphasises that the globalising of the world entails great changes also for the Muslims as to their view of life.

From of old orthodox Muslims divide the world into the *daar al-islam* and the *daar al-harb*. The *daar al-islam* is the area in which the Muslims are in the majority and in control. This, according to them is the area of peace. *Daar al-harb* is the denotation of the area where Muslims form a minority; this is the area of war. In this area Muslims are allowed to adapt to the political and social circumstances of the society in which they live.

The effect of the globalising of the world is that this division has become very relative. Tariq Ramadan states that not a single country in the world is completely governed according to Islam. Moreover he states that Muslims - as concerns free practice of religion - feel much safer in the west than in certain countries that are Islamic in name only.³

Ramadan even goes one step further by postulating that globalising has made the distinction between *daar al-islam* and *daar al-harb* outdated.

Nowadays such clear-cut distinctions can no longer be made. The situation is no longer so, that Turkey is only inhabited by Muslims and France by non-Muslims. The western countries, too, harbour large groups of Muslims within their borders, who have found a home in these countries.

The west as the 'home' of *al-da'wa*

It is for this reason that Muslim scholars point out a third notion besides *daar al-islam* and *daar al-harb*. This third concept is *daar al-ahd*, 'house of the covenant'. This designation

² Tariq Ramadan, *Westerse moslims en de toekomst van de islam, (Western Muslims and the future of Islam)*, Amsterdam: Bulaaq, 2005

³ Tariq Ramadan, op.cit. p. 92.

rouses the supposition that there are countries that, it is true, are not Islamic from a political point of view, but that have nonetheless entered into an alliance of peace and cooperation with one or more Islamic countries. Many people regard this concept as an interesting opportunity to be applied to the present political situation in the international context. Tariq Ramadan⁴ points to the existence of institutions like the United Nations or the Organisation of African Unity, and numerous treaties made between states. His objection against the application of this concept is that it will only function against the background of the division of the world into various 'homes', and this division does not match the present situation in the world. As he writes: "In our world relations between two separate 'homes' is out of the question. The point is far more a matter of relations between people who belong to a diversity of civilisations, religions, cultures and moral systems, and who refer to them."⁵

Tariq Ramadan's concern is to make clear that as a Muslim he wants to be able to live as a full citizen in any country. In fact his book is a strong appeal to Muslims in the west to participate in social and political life as full citizens. This attitude has made him very popular among (young) Muslims.

As to theology he goes back to the situation of Mohammed in Mecca in the days before his flight to Medina. There was no talk then of a division of the world into *daar al-islam* and *daar al-harb*. Mohammed stood at the beginning of his mission. To him the whole world was still *daar ad-da'wa*, which means something like 'house of appeal to God' or 'house of witness'. According to Ramadan Muslims find themselves in the same position as Mohammed at the time. The whole world is 'mission field' again now that the Muslims are scattered all over the world.⁶ Likewise in the west their task is especially a missionary one. And it is a fine thing that in the west they are also given room to pray, to demonstrate Islam, and to pass their message on.

When Ramadan compares the situation in Europe (and that includes the Netherlands) with that of Mecca before the *hidjra* (Mohammed's migration from Mecca to Medina) we should understand that this declares Europe a mission field.⁷ Ramadan's missionary drive aims at finally changing Europe into *daar al-islam*, home of Islam.⁸

Islamising Europe

What does Ramadan's recommended attitude mean in practice for Muslims in Europe? Tariq Ramadan pleads emphatically for commitment of Islamic citizens who are no longer oriented towards their home country. They can feel at home within the western democracies because their fundamental rights are guaranteed there (p. 97). This holds out prospects of a harmonious living-together in Europe.

At the same time I get the very strong impression that Ramadan considers this period as an *interim* only. I can illustrate this by means of the Islamic ban on giving and taking interest

⁴ Tariq Ramadan, op.cit., p. 93

⁵ Tariq Ramadan, op.cit., p. 104

⁶ Tariq Ramadan, op.cit., p. 103

⁷ Tariq Ramadan, op.cit., p.100

⁸ Info-bulletin Evangelie en Moslims, (The Gospel and Muslims), no. 85- Feb. 2006

(*riba*). This ban is of course very difficult to practice within the western economy. Hence Ramadan writes that Muslims in Europe temporarily do not have to comply with this rule in order to do it all the better at a later time.

It is typical of Ramadan that he does not really call on people to compromise for life in the west, but instead instigates the design of alternative economic concepts. Muslims must free themselves of the current economic system by stages (p. 259). Thus he writes on p. 260 that ‘we must not come to terms with the system, except with the intention and the specific commitment to obtain the (strategic and temporary) means to escape from it. Contrary to the old theories there are no longer two separate worlds, and whether it is here or there our rejection of the ruling system is a radical one’.

I cannot interpret this otherwise than as an appeal to islamise life in Europe step by step. It is Tariq Ramadan’s ambition to change Europe into ‘the home of Islam’. As to that, professor Raphael Israeli is right when he writes that the spreading of Islam in Europe will take place along the lines of *dawa*.

Islam as a threat

I need not explain to you, members of European Reformed churches, that Islam implies a threat for the Christian church. Numerous examples can be given both from the past and the present that clearly show up this threat. This does not alter the fact that it is necessary for us as European Christians to look at ourselves critically. And then to ask ourselves the question: isn’t it partly our own doing that Islam could become a real threat? What do the Muslims who migrate to Western Europe find here? Vivaly living churches or churches that are more like museums?

Do they encounter societies here that are characterised by Christian values, norms and virtues? There is no denying the fact that the European culture is stamped by Christianity. The ringing of church bells, the celebration of Christian feast-days and Sunday as a day off are proof of that.

And what else? Must not we admit that the culture of Western Europe has got into the embrace of a hedonism that is just about second to the culture of ‘bread and circuses’ as we know it from the decline of the Roman Empire?

In short, that Islam is a real threat has also to do with the weakening of Christianity in Europe. Muslims seem to have every right to say that it is necessary for them to come and restore social and religious life in Europe. This means that humiliation for us is not out of place.

Islam as a challenge

The arrival of millions of Muslims in Europe has especially faced us with a challenge. What I mean to indicate especially is the possibility to reach them now with the gospel and to confront them with a really Christian style of living. In the former church book of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands one of its prayers contained the following passage:

We pray for the mission among Jews, Muslims, and heathen (...). In the current version this has been changed into:

We pray for the spreading of the gospel among Jews and heathen (...). Muslims have

disappeared from our official prayers.

This is typical of the limited attention that has been paid these last decades to the mission among Muslims. And I presume that the situation is not much different in the other Reformed churches in Europe. And so the Lord God faces us with a clear challenge to dedicate ourselves to the spreading of the gospel among the Muslims in our countries.

Reformed doctrine in answer to the call of the minaret

I will make clear that the Reformed doctrine has an answer to the call of the minaret by means of three themes:

a. The doctrine of the Trinity

Muslims think the creed that God is a triune God unacceptable. One who acknowledges this commits an unforgivable sin. Liberal theologians cannot answer this. They meet the Muslims halfway by confessing Jesus as a prophet and the Holy Spirit as the Divine power (and not as a Person). Actually this means throwing the centre of the Christian confession overboard.

Practice teaches us that many Christians have problems giving account for themselves where it concerns the Trinity. When they are asked questions about it, the answer often is: Yes, I do find the doctrine of the Trinity very hard to explain. This excusing tone is not necessary at all. In a discussion with Muslims the best thing to do is to refer to their own confession *Allahu Akbar*. These Arabic words are often translated *God is great*. Translated more accurately it should be *God is greater*.

Now this is exactly the praise that the confession of the Trinity induces us to. It befits us to praise the triune God who is above us (the Father), who is with us (the Son), and who is within us (the Holy Spirit). Praise to this God befits us who is greater and more glorious than we can imagine. Muslims pronounce the words *Allahu Akbar* several times a day. It is especially on account of this profession that we can appeal to them with our Christian confession. And at the same time we must not forget also to live on the basis of this confession by praising the triune God.

b. Infant baptism and the promise of the land

Within the reformatory churches more and more room is given to the rejection of infant baptism and the acknowledgment of re-baptism. I am firmly convinced that this is an alarming development. I cannot help but see this as going hand-in-hand with a different view of the covenant. This has its consequences for the encounter with Muslims. I will try to give a short exposition of this statement.

If one denies that baptism has replaced circumcision he separates the new covenant from the old. That makes the old and the new covenant two different entities. Each covenant with its own promises. As to the old covenant, this implies among other things that there is still a land promise for the people of Israel. And so there are Christians in the Netherlands who take the view that the state of Israel has a divine right to its territory. This opinion will in the first place cause difficulties for the Christians among the Arabians (think of the Palestinian Christians). Also this opinion will impede the mission among Muslims, because in this way the state of Israel receives divine legitimacy. The reformed doctrine spares the mission among

Muslims this difficulty. However special the Jewish nation is to us - the state of Israel is a state like any other state that has to adhere to international treaties.

c. Life is one.

Last January I cooperated in a 7-day conference on Cyprus. This conference was meant to equip Dutch ministers for the confrontation with Islam. The conference was held in Larnaca, in the building of the MERF (Middle East Reformed Fellowship). Dr. Victor Atallah, manager of the MERF, showed us another characteristic yet of the Reformed approach to mission work. He stated that the Reformed creed has a 'holistic' view of life. Remember the statement by Dr. A. Kuyper: *There is no inch of which Christ does not say: It is mine!* Here the Reformed faith distinguishes itself from the evangelical-charismatic movement. The latter focuses far more on the individual and pays less attention to society as a whole. Therefore the evangelical-charismatic movement fails in the confrontation with Islam. Islam is a religion that determines every aspect of life. Islam wants to stamp social and political life as well. In this respect, too, the Reformed faith is far more capable of answering the challenge of Islam. So it is more than worth the trouble to keep Reformed theology up-to-date.

Islam as a threat and a challenge

In the current discussions about the spread of Islam in Europe discussion partners often force the following dilemma on each other: Islam is a threat *or* a challenge. The one camp will enlarge on the dangers of Islam. And the other camp will depict the multi-cultural society as an ideal. As Christians we must not allow this dilemma to be imposed upon us. That is why I speak about Islam as a threat *and* a challenge.

There is no denying the fact that the islamising of Europe entails a spiritual threat for the church of Christ. As Christians in Europe we must not put a full stop here. We want to see God's guidance also in the coming of Muslims to Europe. He uses it as a challenge to us. And this challenge is, brief and to the point:

Preach the gospel of grace to the Muslims!

Hattem, 8. February 2007 Lucius W. de Graaff