3. A tolerant social climate?

Questioning the validity of an overly positive self-image

*Thijl Sunier*

Over the last few centuries, Amsterdam's tolerant social climate has enabled it to develop into a multicultural city. Amsterdam currently has approximately 800,000 inhabitants who come from over 180 different countries.

This is what is written on the website of the Municipality of Amsterdam. Tolerance is often considered a hallmark of this cosmopolitan trading city. Tolerance – the willingness to accept and incorporate people from very different religious or cultural backgrounds – has acquired an almost mythical status. There is good reason, however, to question the validity of this image of Amsterdam as a tolerant city, particularly if we look at the way in which houses of worship have been established in this city in the past 350 years. Temples, churches, mosques and synagogues are all visible signs of the permanent presence of people with a certain religious belief. Precisely because these houses of worship are in the public domain and give shape to it, their status is a good indicator of the social standing of religious minorities. The construction and use of such places of worship are subject to laws and regulations, but more importantly, houses of worship have great symbolic significance. Places of worship are often targets of hatred and intolerance, as we are now witnessing once again. At the same time, the external features of houses of worship say something about the way in which religious groups would like to manifest themselves. The establishment of houses of worship in Amsterdam did not proceed without a struggle, for in general, tolerance towards religious minorities was lacking.
Amsterdam as a safe haven

In the Golden Age, the Dutch Republic was one of the richest countries in the world and a place where many immigrants wanted to try their luck. It was also a refuge for people who were persecuted elsewhere in Europe on the basis of their religious background. In the Union of Utrecht – the treaty between the different provinces drawn up in 1579 and considered to be the founding document of the Republic of the United Netherlands – freedom of religion was quite explicitly mentioned as one of the new polity’s pillars. In the 16th century, thousands fled to the northern provinces of the Spanish kingdom, and it was among these refugees and dissidents that the uprising against the Spanish oppression began. In the late 16th century, Jewish refugees from Spain and Portugal also settled in Amsterdam. Almost one hundred years later, the Jews from East Europe came, having escaped pogroms. By the end of the 18th century, there were approximately 30,000 Jews in the Republic, most of whom lived in Amsterdam. When in 1685 the French king Louis XIV revoked the Edict of Nantes – which had stipulated that non-Catholics could practice their religion in the (Catholic) kingdom of France – the Dutch Republic became a place of refuge for the Huguenots, the French Protestants. Most of them fled to Amsterdam where they found work in the trade and crafts industries.

In the second half of the 20th century, this image of Amsterdam as the standard-bearer of a tolerant Dutch political culture and an open attitude towards religious newcomers became more widespread and common. The city became known as a place of refuge for anyone with a deviant lifestyle. The attitude towards Muslims who came to the Netherlands in the 1960s and 1970s was also in line with this picture. When Theo van Gogh was murdered in 2004 by a radical Muslim, the mayor of Amsterdam at the time – Job Cohen – also referred to this image of the city, stating that in his view, the murderer had violated this principle of tolerance.
Houses of worship as litmus test

Although Amsterdam is undeniably a tolerant city, I would place caveats to the special position that Amsterdam has ascribed to itself compared to other European cities. To begin with, it is difficult to describe a city’s attitude towards religious minorities over the centuries using a single term. The arrangements that Amsterdam made with specific religious minorities were the result of political and economic motives, and these motives differed over the centuries. Just as the policy of the Amsterdam regents in the 17th century cannot be directly compared with the policies of the 21st-century city government, we cannot put the same label on them. The policy pursued over the centuries was above all a pragmatic one. ‘Tolerance’ was indeed tolerance in the strict sense of the word: it meant a willingness to tolerate people of different religious backgrounds as long as the status quo was not affected. Religious newcomers were often seen as a Trojan horse. The central thread throughout history is not so much tolerance but rather concern about the possible impact of religious newcomers on society and politics.

The Republic of the United Netherlands came into existence as a result of the revolt against Spanish (i.e. Catholic) rule. From the middle of the 17th century, Protestantism was the dominant religion in the Republic. The public domain was regarded as a Protestant space. Among other things, this meant that the visible manifestations of any religion other than the official Protestantism were forbidden. There was freedom of conscience but no freedom of religion. The so-called clandestine churches in the capital city date from this time. Such churches made it impossible to see from the outside that there was a house of worship inside. The presence of people of other religious beliefs was condoned because it was economically advantageous to let them live in the city – and not because there was any understanding for their way of life. This is not to say that the other religions were always ‘invisible’. In some cases there was a deviation from the norm, mostly as a result of negotiation. One such case was the construction of the Portuguese synagogue.
New freedom of religion...

After the Batavian Revolution in 1795, there came an end to the domination of Protestantism, and freedom of belief was ‘formally’ introduced. Catholics and other religious minorities were allowed to establish their own seminaries and institutions. The inauguration in 1796 of the first visible Catholic church – De Duif on the Prinsengracht – was therefore symbolically very significant. It was only with the new Constitution of 1848 that this freedom of belief was enshrined in law. Nonetheless, the construction of Catholic churches continued to be marked by inter-religious tensions and endless legal battles over property rights into the 20th century.

Catholics had the reputation of being a fifth column as a result of the 1830 secession of Belgium, which was predominantly Catholic; the reintroduction in 1853 of the so-called episcopal hierarchy which made the Netherlands an ecclesiastical province once again; and more generally the loyalty expressed by Catholics to the pope in the Vatican, a foreign power. This in turn called into question the Catholics’ loyalty to the Dutch nation. The status of Jews, who by the turn of the century had been in the Netherlands already for hundreds of years, also became a matter of heated debate. For a significant part of the Dutch population, it was far from self-evident that Jews should be allowed to become members of Parliament, for example.

...but also obstacles

One hundred years later, we see that the social position of Muslims is also being put to the test. There are some noteworthy similarities between Catholics and Jews at the end of the 19th century and Muslims at the beginning of the 21st century, despite significant differences. Muslims, who began coming to the city from the 1960s, encountered quite a few problems in finding spaces for prayer. Attempts to create such spaces were often
rejected on formal grounds, and churches were often unwilling to make their space available to Muslims, despite the fact that fewer people were attending church services. In 1977, Turkish Muslims managed to open a mosque in a former church in the centre of Amsterdam. The negotiations went relatively smoothly because, as one official put it, the mosque was not really ‘in plain sight’.

In the 1980s, it was primarily social workers who opposed the establishment of mosques. Muslims were accused of having ties with far-right groups from their own country. Mosques were thought to be conducting espionage for regimes in their countries of origin. People also believed – and still believe – that the establishment of Islam stood in the way of the integration process of immigrants and that religious leaders were trying to expand their influence on Muslims. In the last fifteen years, the argument that mosques were breeding grounds for radicalisation became a reason to approach Muslim initiatives with suspicion. The process of establishing the Islamic religion is, moreover, still in full swing. While the process initially focused on improvised accommodation, this is now making way for the construction of new buildings, which has not been without its difficulties. Some projects were realised only after many years, while other initiatives never got off the ground due to widespread resistance.

Tolerance, at least the way in which the term is used, suggests a positive fundamental attitude towards religious and other forms of diversity. The historical overview I have given here shows that it is far from obvious what the position of religious minorities is and that religious diversity was not automatically considered something positive. Religious newcomers did not obtain their place in society just like that but have always had to fight for it. Their standing in society is far from self-evident; it is the result of a political struggle and it has little to do with tolerance as a kind of transhistorical quality of Amsterdammers.
The author

Thijl Sunier is Professor of Anthropology of Religion at VU University Amsterdam and holds the chair of ‘Islam in European Societies’. His specialism is Islamic movements and religious authority. He is president of the Netherlands Interuniversity School of Islamic Studies (NISIS) and editor of the Journal of Muslims in Europe (JOME).

Further reading