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### Citation

Berger, M. S. (2023). The year 2004: historiographical issues concerning Islam in The Netherlands. *Journal Of Muslims In Europe*, 12, 1-22. doi:10.1163/22117954-bja10079

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



BRILL

# The Year 2004: Historiographical Issues Concerning Islam in The Netherlands

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## Abstract

This article aims to take a new approach to the study of Islam in Europe today by adopting a historiographical method with particular emphasis on the concept of temporality. The case-study will be The Netherlands, where it will be shown that a convergence of events in the year 2004 has contributed to the shaping of the national experience of 'Islam'. It will be argued that these events, and the manner in which they took place, have created a national traumatic experience that has fossilised the way the Dutch have talked and thought about Islam since then.

## Keywords

Islam – Netherlands – historiography – temporality – collective memory – national trauma

## 1 Introduction

This article argues that Dutch policy makers, and Dutch society at large for that matter, have become stuck in time when it comes to Islam-related matters. The 'stick-moment', as will be demonstrated, is the year 2004. The creativity that was so typical of the way that Islam-related issues were approached between 2001 and 2004 seems to have disappeared in the years after 2004. The ways such issues were discussed, analysed and handled became similar and repetitive. It was very much like a treadmill, which may explain a widespread sense in Dutch society that things do not seem to move ahead when it comes to

Islam. This article will explain why 2004 is such a pivotal year when it comes to Islam in the Netherlands and analyse the reasons why it has become the frame of reference for all the years to come. But first a brief introduction is needed to contextualise this article.

In September 2014, a special meeting was convened in a stately building opposite the Houses of Parliament in The Hague. Seated around the oval table were the Dutch Ministers of Interior, Justice and Social Affairs, the Directors from the National Intelligence Service, the Military Intelligence Service, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and the National Coordinator of Terrorism and Security, several mayors from large cities, and some experts. The author was one of those experts.

The reason for this 'crisis meeting', as it was called, stemmed from a cocktail of domestic and international events that had caused national outrage and a deep concern of a foreign threat. But the main topic of discussion on that September day was the worrying appeal of ISIS to Dutch Muslims. Nearly 160 Dutch Muslims had already left for Syria (NCTV, 2014). The Dutch government considered the situation critical and felt the need to act. The talk at that oval table therefore focused on 'radicalised Muslim youth' and 'foreign fighters'. What moved them, how could they be stopped, and what should be done with those returning from war zones? What measures and legislation should be put in place? How should one define 'jihad'? And how many radicalised young people were we talking about? Could a profile be drawn up so that the police knew what to look out for?

All these questions seemed justified and logical at that moment in the late summer of 2014. But they also created a sense of *déjà-vu*: the same questions had been raised exactly ten years earlier, in September 2004, after the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh by a Dutch Muslim extremist. Van Gogh was known for his scorching criticism and satire of Islam (and other religions, for that matter), and his killer justified his action by claiming he was 'defending Islam'. Many will remember 2004 for that assassination, but much more had happened in that year: court cases about blasphemy and freedom of opinion; legislation on citizenship and blasphemy; government reports on integration, Muslims in the Netherlands, fundamental rights and Salafism; discussions in parliament about sharia courts, Islamic schools and headscarves; government reports about Dutch Muslims, integration and radical Islam; the establishment of Geert Wilders's political party, the National Coordinator for Combatting Terrorism, and the national Dutch Muslim representative organisation. And this is just a sample. Of course, similar Islam-related incidents had also

happened in other years. But 2004 was exceptional, as will be demonstrated demonstrated below.

In the years after 2004, nation-wide efforts were made to address tensions relating to Islam: municipalities, police forces, lawyers, mosque personnel, Islamic youth organisations, schools – everyone, Muslim as well as non-Muslim was involved. Plans were made, policies developed, meetings organised, courses held, public debates staged, articles written. But ten years later, in 2014, all this work seemed to be obsolete and forgotten. This amnesia was not only present at that table in September 2014 but also appeared to be shared by Dutch society at large. And that would remain so in the following years, up to the moment of writing. There would still be Islam-related incidents in the years after 2004, but they had one feature in common: they were all discussed, analysed and handled in ways very similar to 2004. A few examples:

The concerns regarding the foreign funding of mosques led to a parliamentary committee of inquiry in 2020 and were not much different from the concerns about the foreign influence of imams that led to the 2004 bill on imam training. The French cartoon crisis of 2020 led to debates and commotion in the Netherlands not unlike those prompted by the court case and political debates of 2004 regarding the offending against religious feelings. The government accusation in 2019 of an Islamic secondary school in Amsterdam for having ‘Salafist’ sympathies was very similar to the considerations of the Ministry of Education in 2004 when ordering Islamic grammar schools to adapt their religious education programme. The list goes on and on.

Moreover, the Dutch still use terminology that dates back to 2004. Terms such as ‘anti-integrationism’, ‘radicalism’ and ‘Salafism’ were introduced in 2004 and have remained freeze-framed in that time-setting, no longer reflecting the reality on the ground as it has evolved over the years (Berger et al., 2018). The same applies to conceptions and imagery that the public may have of Islam. For instance, headscarves are still considered by many to be symbols of patriarchal oppression, even though studies and surveys have shown that more than ninety percent of Dutch Muslim women who wear the headscarf do so by choice, sometimes even against the wishes of their husband or father (e.g., Motivaction, 2011).

What caused this amnesia and repetition? It will be argued that the Islam-related events of the year 2004 instigated a roller coaster sensation among the Dutch public that impacted their experience of Islam. For this, I shall use the concept of temporality, which will be explained below. But let us first have a quick look at the Islam-related events that took place in 2004 as

that will give us a sense of the high-paced sequence of the events and provide us with the material to work with.

## 2 The Year 2004

The year 2004 kicked off in January with a parliamentary commission presenting its report on Dutch integration policy (Commissie Blok, 2004). The commission's findings were quite positive: 'the integration of many immigrants [has] been fully or partially successful and that is a major achievement, both for the immigrant citizens concerned and for the society receiving them' (ibid., 520), but received fierce criticism from politicians, the media and the public for reaching that conclusion. According to them, the integration of non-Western migrants, particularly Muslims, had failed and this verdict was to dominate public and political debate in the coming months.

In February, the city of Rotterdam, the second largest city in the Netherlands with Muslims representing ten percent of its inhabitants, launched a project of city-wide, year-long debates about 'Islam and citizenship' (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2004). The city council thought the best way to ease tensions among its citizens was to address the issue of Islam head-on.

In March, the Minister of Interior issued a warning that unabated criticism of Islam by politicians, columnists and public figures was one of the reasons why Muslim youth was being radicalised (Minister BZK, 2004). He received a hailstorm of scornful responses from the same Islam-critics claiming he was trying to restrict freedom of speech. One day after the Minister's warning, Al Qaeda supporters blew up trains in Madrid, the first attack by Muslim extremists in Europe. One week later, Members of Parliament debated the wearing of the headscarf by public servants (Parliament, 2004). It was a debate that involved raw emotions, analyses of the separation of state and church, and discussions on the extent of freedom of religion in the Dutch public domain.

In April, the Ministry of Education instructed the 41 Islamic grammar schools to come up with a new religious education programme that would fit the goal of integration (Minister of Education, 2004). It was the first time that the Ministry had given an instruction to a cluster of schools, having previously always made a point of approaching schools individually (Budak, 2021). It was also the first time that any instruction was given regarding the content of the religious education programme. (Orthodox Jewish and Christian schools in the Netherlands were known to offer similar non-integrative religious education but never received such instructions.)

In May, a bill was passed that revised the conditions foreigners needed to fulfil in order to become Dutch nationals (Dutch Cabinet, 2004a). Although phrased in general terms, it was clearly focused on people from Muslim majority societies, with emphasis on the requirement for test questions about 'Dutch values'. (It became a matter of ridicule that so many Dutch 'natives' themselves failed these tests.) Also in May, a report was published by the government about fundamental rights (Dutch Cabinet, 2004b). It was a lucidly phrased document about rights and tolerance in a demographically mixed society, and a clear effort was made to draft it in accessible language. However, it gained little traction in the public and political debate.

In June, an otherwise unknown Dutch Muslim rap group achieved instant national celebrity when a prime-time television news show discussed their rap about Hirsi Ali, a member of the Dutch Parliament.<sup>1</sup> She filed charges, and when the court condemned the rappers, Muslims were up in arms about the use of double standards when it came to free speech.

In July, a team of researchers from the national agency Social Cultural Planning Bureau (SCP) published a voluminous report titled *Muslim in The Netherlands* (Phalet and ter Wal, 2004). One of its conclusions was that Muslims in the Netherlands were 'secularising'. This made the headlines, but the researchers had miscalculated. They had based their notion of secularisation on a decrease in mosque attendance, overlooking the fact that the younger generation of Muslims was not less religious but actually more so than their parents and merely refrained from going to the mosque because they disagreed by their parents' practices and beliefs (Heuts, Klaver, and van der Welle, 2012).

The summer vacation brought no relief. The month of August was shaken up by three issues. The first was the headlines of 6 August screaming 'Sharia court in Canada!', which prompted political and public debates about whether such a situation could possibly arise in The Netherlands. Parliament immediately commissioned research on this topic: the report in 2010 concluded that such 'courts' did not exist in The Netherlands (Bakker et al., 2010), but by then the debate about sharia courts had gained its own momentum. The next event in August was the publication of MP Hirsi Ali's book *Maagdenkooi* ('Virgin Cage'), in which she called the Prophet Mohammed a paedophile and equated Islamic marriage with institutionalised rape. Two weeks later, the same Hirsi Ali, together with Theo van Gogh, aired their 10-minute film titled 'Submission': it showed a naked woman whose body was covered in Qur'anic calligraphy and shrouded in a transparent black gauze, and who was moving to the sound of an

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1 The news was aired on prime-time by the TV programme NOVA on 29 June 2004.

Arab flute and a voice recounting the oppression of women (van Gogh, 2004). National TV aired the film in prime time.

Immediately after the summer break, on 3 September, the infamous Islam-critic Geert Wilders announced the establishment of his own political party, *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom), which would serve as his platform for constant criticism of Islam. The party quickly became one of the larger political parties. A few days later, another known Dutch Islam-critic, Frits Bolkestein, acting in his capacity as Commissioner of the European Union, mentioned during a speech in Vienna that if Turkey were to be allowed as member of the European Union, 'the liberation of Vienna would have been for naught' (Gow and MacAskill, 2004). The implicit reference he made was of course to the Ottoman sieges of Vienna in 1529 and 1683. On 10 September, it was made public that the National Coordinator for Combatting Terrorism that was under preparation (it would officially start in 2005) was equipped with 80 staff members who would start to work right away (NCTb 2005). Ten days later, the Dutch national statistics agency (CBS) announced the latest population counts under the headline 'Nearly 1 million Muslims' (Tas, 2004). This number, in a population of nearly 18 million, was to have a significant impact on the Dutch psyche, even though the agency admitted three years later that the methodology used had led to a false result and corrected its figure to 825,000 Muslims (van Herten and Otten, 2007).

The Dutch could catch their breath during the month of October, but then the 'Islam' events picked up speed again. On 1 November, the 'Contact Body Muslims and Government' (CMO) was established, an organisation that was recognised by the Dutch government as the representative of the Dutch Muslim community. Not all Dutch Muslims felt represented by this body, but for the government at least it was a relief that they had a means to communicate with 'the Muslims' in the Netherlands. And that communication was very much needed because one day later, on 2 November, Theo van Gogh was murdered on an Amsterdam street. After the train attacks in Madrid, this was the second attack perpetrated in name of Islam in Europe, and it heightened the existing sense of a Europe under siege (see e.g., Boukhars, 2009: 299). On 7 November, the police arrested a man for hanging a poster in his window overlooking the street with the text 'Stop the cancer called Islam!'. He was charged with the criminal offence of insulting Muslims (but was ultimately acquitted by the Court of Cassation in 2009<sup>2</sup>). Three days later, on 10 November, the Ministers of Justice and Interior announced their intention to amend existing blasphemy laws and to implement severe measures against 'violent radicalism',

<sup>2</sup> Court of Cassation, 10 March 2009, Nr.01509/07.

including the option of closing mosques and extraditing 'radical imams' (Ministers of Justice and BZK, 2004).

On 16 November, Amsterdam, the largest city in The Netherlands, issued a municipal plan of action titled 'We Amsterdammers' (Amsterdam, 2004). Unlike the city of Rotterdam several months earlier, Amsterdam made a point of indicating that its citizens were to be viewed or treated on the basis of what united them rather than what divided them. While the city of Amsterdam tried to rally its citizens around the flag of social cohesion, another incident made headlines: when the (female) Minister of Justice and Integration was meeting a gathering of imams on 22 November, one of them refused to shake her outstretched hand. The presence of photographers guaranteed headlines.

The last month of the year brought the 2004 Islam-events to a crescendo. On 10 December, a bill was tabled to finance imam training at Dutch universities and colleges (Minister of Foreigners and Integration, 2004). With this programme of 'home grown imams' the government hoped to make a start on cutting off foreign influences. That same day, a prime-time evening news programme discussed a survey showing that half of all Dutch Muslims, if they were given the choice, would vote for an Islamic political party (Foqz Etnomarketing, 2004). Finally, two days before Christmas, the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service (AIVD) published a detailed report introducing the notions of 'radicalism' and 'Salafism', and the dangers they posed to Dutch society (AIVD, 2004). The report was the first of its kind, even for European standards, because never before had an intelligence service been so open in its analysis of threats to national security. The report was taken up by the media and politicians and would provide the jargon for policies and public debate for the coming years.

### 3 A Preliminary Analysis: Temporality

The chain of Islam-related events in 2004 is noteworthy for two reasons. First, it encompassed all the issues and themes that were part of the ongoing debates about Islam in The Netherlands. Second, these events took place in a condensed time span and in such quick succession that people had little time to process what was happening. This article argues that this experience of the events, more than the events themselves, is relevant to understanding how the Dutch have been dealing with 'Islam' since 2004.

The concept that is helpful in this approach is temporality, which denotes the entanglement of time and action. The study of temporality can be undertaken as an empirical measurement of time, or as an experience of it (Russell,



1915; Hoy, 2012: 1–2). The discussion of time as an experience has been the domain of philosophers since Antiquity and has been rekindled by quantum physicists (see e.g., Canales, 2015). Our interest here is of a historical nature but, surprisingly, the historians' theoretical interest in time is of recent date, and has mostly been used to criticize previous practices of historiography (Champion, 2019). One of the main critiques is the distinction made by historians between pre-modern societies that have an allegedly stagnant and uncertain conception of time as opposed to modern societies that have a conception of time that is supposedly 'progressive', implying an improvement from the past into the present (Korner, 2011: 2–3; Withrow, 1989: 177–84).

This criticism has led historians to re-think their notion of temporality. However, no comprehensive theories have yet emerged, regardless of efforts by theoreticians such as William Sewell (2005). What is relevant for the Dutch case study of 2004, however, is the attempts of various historians to move away from a normative framework of time and to focus on the understandings and experiences that the subjects of research have of their time (Paulin-Booth and Kerry, 2021). This is also the approach taken in this article, whereby events of 2004 constitute so-called 'eventful temporalities', that is, events or happenings that have significance for the time in which they took place (Sewell, 2005: 8).

The notion of temporality is, admittedly, still a work in progress but '2004' provides a case study that will allow us to elaborate this concept. When analysing the chain of events in 2004, we can identify various dimensions of temporality. Four come up as important. First, there is the dimension of the actors in this narrative: whose temporality are we speaking of? The next dimension is the experience of time during that year. The third dimension is the hidden role of past national experiences. And the fourth dimension concerns the future, meaning the effects that the events of 2004 have had on the years thereafter.

#### 4 The First Dimension: Whose Temporality?

The events of 2004 were not isolated incidents experienced by a few. They were part of a nation-wide experience that, while oftentimes set in motion by the act of an individual politician, journalist or citizen, was reiterated and discussed by all strata of civil society and watched on television by the wider public. This created a nation-wide involvement that may be considered a form of national ownership and agency: everyone had an opinion, and all these opinions mattered as they shaped the ongoing discussions on 'Islam' and put policy makers, journalists, researchers and social media activists into action,

which, in turn, generated new discussions – in short, a booming echo chamber of the ‘public sphere’.

However, upon closer inspection, we may argue that 2004 was the year of and for the non-Muslim majority alone: the commotion was mostly *their* response to the Islam-related events of that year. Moreover, except for the murder of Theo van Gogh, none of these events was directly instigated by Muslims. Responses by non-Muslims were amplified in politics and the media, which were also dominated by non-Muslim Dutch (in 2004 there were few if any Muslim journalists, and only six of the 150 Members of Parliament were of Turkish, Somali or Moroccan origin, of whom none identified as religious Muslims). This gives the impression that the experience of Islam in the Netherlands, when viewed in its condensed form in the year 2004, is mostly *about* Muslims and Islam, and lived *by* non-Muslims.

Why was the experience of Dutch Muslims hardly seen or heard? This has not yet been researched, but two possible reasons present themselves: they did not speak out, or they were not listened to. Both of these appear to have taken place. Muslims were not heard, partly because they were not represented in political, academic and media forums. They were also not heard simply because their voice was often overlooked. For example, after the attacks of 9/11 and after the establishment of a ‘caliphate’ by ISIS in 2014, multiple Muslim scholars, both individually and collectively, expressed their condemnation of these actions, often in English,<sup>3</sup> but the Dutch media made no mention of this. This lack of attention to other voices is not new: women, subalterns, aboriginal populations, to name but a few, experience the same, and present-day scholarship is working hard to remedy this (Maza, 2017: 35–40).

Dutch Muslims were also reluctant to speak out, as many journalists and researchers discovered. The 2004 report *Muslim in the Netherlands* noted that the number of Muslims willing to cooperate were so few that the researchers were unable to conduct a comprehensive study and had to settle for extrapolating from existing research (SCP, 2004: 2). This reluctance of Muslims can be attributed to a general sense of suspicion: they felt ill-represented in journalistic and academic productions, as well as discriminated against in general by Dutch society, and this sentiment had grown stronger over the years since the late 1990s.<sup>4</sup>

3 See, for instance the *Open Letter to Al-Baghdadi*, which was signed by over 100 Muslim scholars worldwide (<https://rissc.jo/open-letter-to-al-baghdadi/>).

4 Compare the Executive summaries of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance *Second Report on the Netherlands: ‘Problems of racism, xenophobia and discrimination persist’* (ECRI, 2000: 4) and *Third Report on the Netherlands [2007]: ‘the tone of Dutch political and public debate around integration and other issues relevant to ethnic minorities*

This does not mean that Muslim communities in the Netherlands have been inactive. On the contrary: since the late 1990s, significant developments have been taking place in Dutch Muslim communities, as has been observed among Muslim women (see e.g., Ghorashi, 2010; Ozyurt 2013), Islamic education (e.g., Merry and Driessen, 2016; Budak, 2021), and among Dutch Muslims in general (Sunier, 2021). But these developments have remained mostly invisible to the Dutch non-Muslim majority. We can therefore speak of parallel temporalities: that of the Muslims, and that of non-Muslims. But the temporality of non-Muslims, because of their majority position at all levels of Dutch society, was dominant and would determine the narrative of 'Islam'. This situation was not limited to 2004 but must be kept in mind when we study that year.

## 5 The Second Dimension: The Experience of Time

When we try to understand the notion of temporality, or the entanglement of time and action in 2004, three concepts need elaboration: the context, acceleration, and coincidence of time.

### 5.1 *Global Context*

The events of 2004 were not isolated in time, of course, nor was the Netherlands isolated in place. Two global issues since the 1990s had a significant impact on developments in Western European countries, including The Netherlands. One was the increase in worldwide Muslim radicalism and terrorism. The other was the ending of the Cold War. They coincided and the two developments energised Dutch society in opposite ways.

Muslim militancy caught the public eye with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1980, but gained full attention when it targeted the West in the 1990s: the Rushdie affair in 1989; the new organisation called Al Qaeda attacking Western targets such as Aden (1992), the World Trade Center (1993), Khobar (1996) and the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (1998); the civil war in Algeria that spilled over into France in 1995; the Taliban emerging victorious from an Afghan civil war in 1996. The culmination of all this was, of course, the Al Qaeda attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States. In The Netherlands, as in most Western European countries,

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has experienced a dramatic deterioration since ECRI's second report, resulting in a worrying polarisation between majority and minority communities' (ECRI, 2008: 4).

these events put the spotlight on Muslim citizens, who were already the subject of an on-going debate about their alleged lack of 'integration' in Western societies.

While this development was rife with concerns and fears, another global development had a distinctly optimistic note, especially for the 'West': the ending of the Cold War in the early 1990s, symbolised by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This boosted the Western expectation of a worldwide spread of democratic reform, a hope that seemed justified by numerous pro-democracy revolts all over the world in 1989 in countries such as Poland, the three Baltic States, Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Romania, China, and Mongolia. And in 1989 and 1990, several African and Central and South American countries made the shift to a more democratic state system. The sense that a chapter in world history had been closed and a new future was beginning (Fukuyama, 1992) was widely shared by Dutch policymakers, media and public.

### 5.2 *The Acceleration and Sudden Halt of Time*

In the years leading up to 2004, these two developments resulted in an experience of 'accelerated time' (Nora, 1989: 7–8; Rosa, 2005; Sewell, 2005: 8). Indeed, the Dutch appeared to live in an 'accelerated time, i.e., our history abbreviated the space of experiences, robbed them of their constancy, and continually brought into play new, unknown factors, so that even the actuality or complexity of these unknown quantities could not be ascertained' (Koselleck, 2004: 22).

It must be remarked, however, that historians generally do not use this concept of 'acceleration' in the meaning of experience of time but as a marker of modernity. Nevertheless, the concept of a sense of time speeding up is useful to the Dutch case, and we shall add its logical counterpart: the slowing down of time. The image that comes to mind is of The Netherlands as an island in the sea, with history passing by like ocean currents, with the events of the 1990s represented by a far-away swell rising and gaining speed while heading for that island. It built up to a wave that in 2004 crashed on the rocks of the island and then lay quietly in a pool behind the rocks: the experience of an 'accelerated time' came to an almost complete stop after that crash, starting a long period of what I suggest calling 'time stillness' after 2004. This, then, was the series of temporalities the Dutch experienced during that period: an energizing rush of events leading up to 2004, culminating in a roller-coaster of Islam-related events in 2004, and the period that followed, when many Islam-related events continued to take place but were now met by automated responses.

### 5.3 *The Coincidence of Time*

In the experience of many Dutch people, the series of Islam-related incidents in 2004 were unexpected and haphazard and therefore created a sense of utter chaos. While it is tempting to elaborate this notion in a historical context (see e.g., Prigogine and Stengers, 1984), closer inspection shows that Dutch society in 2004 was experiencing not chaos, meaning a randomness of events, but a perception of chaos. Most of that year's reports, court rulings, laws, emergence of new organisations, and the like, were the result of processes that had already been initiated earlier, often several years before 2004. If we trace back the origin of these events, they are not chaotic at all. The year 2004 merely witnessed a converging series of events that had different points of origin and genealogies but that happened purely by chance to intersect in that same moment in time, that is, 2004. It was the short time span within which these events intersected and the rapid sequence in which this occurred that prompted the sense of chaos. But most of these events had originated much earlier and it was pure coincidence that their end results all happened in the same year.

This coincidence had a distinct effect on the experience of time itself. The events of 2004 may chronologically have been the consequence of things set in motion much earlier but, for many Dutch in 2004, these events were novel. To them, these events were not the effects of something that originated in the past, but rather were perceived as something that originated in the present and that was to have consequences in the future. This reversal in cause and effect prompted a cut-off point in the continuity of developments regarding Muslims and Islam in the Netherlands, and this cut-off moment was 2004. As a result, the developments before that year were largely forgotten, and 2004 had become the starting point for the way the Dutch would view and deal with Islam in subsequent years. This is the metaphor of that stagnant water pool behind the rocks. We shall see later what the implications of this particular form of temporality were to be.

## 6 **The Third Dimension: That Which is Hidden**

Much can be said about the national and international events that formed the prelude to and context for the year 2004. A historian will regard that as obvious when writing any historical narrative. What is less obvious, however, are viewpoints and traditions shared by the researched society that are so blatantly self-evident to members of that society that they remain unmentioned and unseen while they may have a crucial impact on the experience of any particular time. As such, they constitute the hidden dimension of temporality. Two of

those hidden dimensions are crucial for the temporality of 2004: the views of the Dutch non-Muslim majority on Islam and on religion.

### 6.1 *Virtual Islam*

One might argue that the Dutch have a long history with Islam and Muslims, given their academic interests since the sixteenth century and their colonial past in Indonesia since the nineteenth century. But in terms of the personal experiences of most Dutch people at the time, this history was something that took place far away. While the Dutch have a century-old history of 'virtual' Islam, that is the imagery and study and narratives of Islam and Muslims, their 'physical' interaction with Muslims and Islam dates only from the late 1960s (Berger, 2013). But it appears that virtual Islam continued to play a considerable role even then. This was also evident in 2004, when pre-conceived notions of Islam and Muslims resonated with the Islam-related events of that year.

Four of these notions deserve mention. The first is that of Muhammad as a false prophet. Since the Middle Ages, Europe has had a strong tradition of satirical and polemic stories about Muhammad (Daniel, 1960: 27–39; Tolan, 2002: 140–42). In today's Europe, many critical comments about Islam still focus on the person of Muhammad. Among the many Dutch examples of this is Hirsi Ali's description in 2004 of Muhammad as a paedophile.

The second notion is the depiction of Muslim believers as gullible and passive people who easily follow any agitator. This view has been popular in Europe since the nineteenth century, and was quite apparent in 2004 when Dutch media, government and intelligence services held imams responsible for inciting and radicalising Muslim youth. The implication of this viewpoint was that Muslim youth could only become resentful or radicalised when whipped up by others.

The third notion is the idea of Muslim women as oppressed beings. This, too, is an image that can be traced back to the Middle Ages (Daniel, 1960: 27–39), and has persisted ever since, to the extent that scholars have called it a Western obsession (Abu-Lughod, 2015). In The Netherlands, this was clear in public debates about the headscarf, which was in 2004 elevated to a debate in Parliament and was the focus of the short film *Submission* by Theo van Gogh.

The fourth image is that of Islam as an aggressive religion (Daniel, 1960: 27–39). The increase of the number of Muslims in Western European societies resonated with the notion of Islam as an 'expansive religion' (Schwanitz, 2004; Savage, 2004: 28). In 2004, this image was yet again evoked in the Netherlands by the 'Vienna for naught' remark by the (Dutch) European commissioner Bolkestein in response to Turkish accession to the European Union, and the 'almost 1 million' Muslims count of the Dutch CBS (Tas, 2004).

Although some historians have expressed their criticism of the term ‘collective memory’ (e.g., Confino, 1977; Gedi and Elam, 1996), it can be argued that these four notions and the imagery they generate are typical examples of such memory. Such imagery of Islam and Muslims has been persistently present in the Dutch subconsciousness for centuries and still serves as an intuitive frame of reference to explain the behaviour of Muslims (Berger, 2014: 239–50). The collective memory of a nation should therefore not be underestimated as a contributing factor to the temporality of any period.

## 6.2 *The Things One Believes*

Another hidden dimension of temporality that is relevant for ‘2004’ is Dutch society’s relation to religion. Successive surveys in past decades have shown that a large majority of the Dutch population do not consider themselves religious (e.g., SCP, 2006; CBS, 2009). The same surveys show that Dutch Muslims, by contrast, are becoming increasingly religious. This has had – and still has – two effects on the issue of Islam in The Netherlands. First, the religiosity of many Muslims is often perceived as being at odds with the a-religious or not-so-religious direction that the majority of Dutch society has taken. Second, Islam itself is considered by many to be contrary to what are increasingly referred to as ‘Christian-Jewish’ values. Both effects need some elaboration.

From the late 1960s onwards, Dutch society has witnessed a sharp decrease in church membership and a decline in religiosity among many Dutch Catholics and Protestants (SCP, 2006; CBS, 2009). The disappearance of religion from the public and social domain has been accompanied by the perception of religion as backward and an obstacle to modern life with all its freedoms. A growing number of (especially young) Muslims challenged this perception from the 1990s onwards (Huijnk, 2018). In response, several politicians and opinion makers initiated a public discourse in which Islam was said to be anathema to Dutch values. This was first argued in terms of integration and, since the 1990s, also in terms of values (Berger, 2004). Some politicians took this a step further by equating ‘Dutch’ values with Judeo-Christian values,<sup>5</sup> which tapped into a broader European discussion on the subject (Heyward, 2005). These discussions were as public as they were extensive, and took place in parliament, the media and in numerous publications.

As in the case of collective memory, we see that national developments can create a subconsciousness of how things are, or should be. This has an impact on the temporality of any specific time. In the case of 2004, religiosity was

5 At the time of writing, three Dutch political parties (VVD, PVV, SGP) have made this the official position of their political programme.

considered by most of Dutch society as 'backward' and therefore against modern values. Criticism of Islam was part of this paradigm. At the same time a secular notion of 'Judeo-Christian culture' was introduced to reassert a historical foundation of these same Dutch values. Both default positions in Dutch society greatly affected the experiences of Islam-related events in 2004.

## 7 The Fourth Dimension: The Effects of the 2004 Events

As indicated in the introduction, the diagnoses, analyses and responses of non-Muslim Dutch society to Islam-related events have remained relatively similar since 2004. Little had changed during the years after 2004: no new insights had been gained, no new viewpoints or methods developed. It was the period of the still pool behind the rocks, and this period has remained until the time of writing.

We may conclude from this that the year 2004 has had an enormous impact on the Dutch psyche that still reverberates in the social, cultural and political dynamics of Dutch society. What is remarkable about that impact, however, is that it is not recognised. With the exception of the murder of Theo van Gogh, most Dutch people are not even aware of all the events that took place in 2004. This is not a case of 'amnesia' or 'forgetting' that may have a particular function for a nation in creating its history (Nora, 1989: 8; Burke, 1997: 56–7). Neither is the year 2004 a dark page in Dutch history that the Dutch want to overlook, as might be the case with slavery or colonialism, nor is it a blank page with so little significance that it is considered of little relevance. So, how can we understand this particular feature of temporality?

### 7.1 *National Trauma*

To describe such situations, theoretical historians have developed notions such as 'transformational events' or 'crisis' (Kosseleck and Richter, 2006). However, the concept of national or cultural 'trauma' appears to do more justice to the Dutch situation. A trauma is the physical or psychological response to sudden and shocking events and usually pertains to individual experiences, but it has gradually been taken up by social scientists and historians to describe collective experiences as well (Caruth, 1996; Neal, 1998). Examples of such collective experiences of trauma are wars, genocides, the Holocaust, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the extermination of aboriginal populations. Of course, such catastrophic events dwarf any comparison with the Dutch situation of 2004, but the point made here is to assess not the severity of the events, but their impact. And in that respect the events of 2004 had all the



characteristics of a national trauma: a short and sudden period of events that shocked a nation into a state of automated responses to subsequent events of the same nature.

What is different in the Dutch case, however, is that the events of 2004 are hardly remembered, let alone recognised as particularly impactful. The literature about national trauma either discusses events that have always been publicly recognised, such as economic crises (Elder, 1974), natural disasters (Erikson, 1976), wars and genocides (Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper, 2017), or events that have been initially suppressed and only gradually gained recognition, such as the Holocaust (LaCapra, 1996), the extermination of the American indigenous population (Evans-Campbell, 2008), and dictatorships like those in Latin America (Jelin and Kaufman, 2017). In all these cases, the traumatic experiences have become objects of national commemorative rituals (Connerton, 2010; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 2014). That is not the situation in the Dutch case, however, where there seems to be something in play like national memory suppression or collective amnesia. Such a situation is hardly addressed by sociologists and historians working on issues of national trauma and collective memory. However, valuable insights are offered by the theoretical framework developed by the cultural sociologist Jeffrey Alexander (2004).

Alexander postulates that the shock-effect of an event can only be considered truly traumatic if it has an impact on the collective's identity, more so than an impact in the material and behavioural sense: 'Trauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity' (ibid.: 10). This was the case in Dutch society, where the public and political debate about 'Islam' was not unlike a debate about national identity. Before 2004, the Dutch discussion about Islam focused on political, economic and legal values (as became apparent in the governmental reports on integration and fundamental rights: Dutch Cabinet, 2004a, 2004b), but the negative responses to these reports in 2004 marked a shift in these discussions towards the assertion of Dutch culture and traditions (Peters and Vellenga, 2007). According to Alexander, such a 're-remembering of the collective past' is a typical response to a national trauma (Alexander, 2004: 22).

This is not exclusive to the Netherlands. The recent discussions and politics regarding Islam in Western Europe are unmistakably discussions and politics about collective identity, that is: the identity of the non-Muslim collectives who make claims to national identity and, on that basis, reject foreign elements, Islam being one of them (e.g., Asad, 2009; Modood, 2010; Yilmaz and Aykac, 2012). In doing so, it is the non-Muslim collective rather than the Muslims that lay claim to the traumatic experience. They are what Alexander (2004: 11) refers to as 'carrier groups', or 'the collective agents of the trauma process'.

## 7.2 *The Effects of the Trauma*

The acceleration before 2004 and the sudden stop of time after that year (the wave and the pool) had two distinct effects on Dutch society: fatigue and repetitiveness. Whereas the period preceding 2004 was energetic, whether pessimistic (combatting terrorism and the perceived loss of cultural identity) or optimistic (building multicultural societies), in the years after 2004 Dutch society seemed to have lost its energy – with the exception, as we have seen, of the new generation of Muslims. In the metaphor of the wave crashing over the rock and then lying still in a pool behind it, this pool represents the Islam-fatigue that set in after 2004, with most non-Muslims having become weary of Islam in Dutch life and society. In these years after 2004, the pessimists succumbed to a resentful preservation of what they considered essential to Dutch culture and society, while the optimists lost their energy and drive to build a society that could accommodate a mixture of cultures and ideas. For both sides, the future was no longer an exciting prospect, but a void that they were stumbling into. And both sides shared a feeling of disappointment because – to put it in Augustinian terms of time experience – the ‘expectation’ of better times that had energized the public attention in the few years prior to 2004, had not been realised (Ricoeur, 1979: 19–22).

The second consequence of the 2004 year was the repetitious way the non-Muslim Dutch were dealing with Islam-related issues. Such issues were responded to in a manner that was very similar to the responses of 2004. This happened in public and political debates, but perhaps even more so on an administrative level: certain terminology that had found its way in policy terminology in 2004 – salafism, Wahhabism, sharia, jihad, radicalism, anti-integrationism – remained there, creating its own *paper trail*, thereby gradually gaining its own meaning, often unrelated to the rapidly changing realities on the ground (Collins and Glover, 2002: 4).

At the time of writing, nearly 20 years after 2004, there is still very little development to be detected in the notions, interpretations, analyses or conclusions that emerge with each newly recurring Islam-related incident. Dutch society still seems to be stuck in 2004.

## 8 Conclusion

This article is an attempt to conceptualise the recent history of Islam in The Netherlands and to explain how events in 2004 have locked this history into a particular time frame. Reconstructing the historiography of this period has resulted in a journey through a variety of historical and sociological disciplinary theories and methods, with the notion of temporality – that is, the

entanglement of time and action – at its centre. The outcome is quite insightful, not only for the people who lived during those times, and for those who must deal with their consequences, but also for academics who are in the process of writing histories of Muslim communities in European societies.

The key notion used in this article is that of temporality, that is the entanglement of time and action. While much debated by philosophers, it is a nascent notion among historians. In analysing the case of Muslims and Islam in The Netherlands, this article has contributed to further develop this concept by adding four additional dimensions: the actors (whereby it was shown that Dutch Muslims and non-Muslims experienced parallel temporalities), the impact of time experience (whereby the ‘acceleration’ of time has been complemented by the ‘stillness’ of time), the role of collective subconscious experiences and memory, and the notion of national trauma.

The analysis of ‘2004’ based on this augmented concept of temporality has revealed a mechanism that, in the case of issues related to Islam and Muslims, explains how Dutch society became trapped in a freeze-frame situation dating back to 2004. The volume and speed of the events of that year have created a national experience that may be called traumatic. This, in turn, has fossilised the way many non-Muslim Dutch have talked and thought about Islam since that year. It explains why the Islam-related incidents that have taken place since 2004 are still being addressed using approaches and terminology reminiscent of 2004. Given the fact that the Muslim Dutch have undergone quite some developments in terms of Islam and their position in Dutch society, the contrast between their reality and the non-Muslim perception only seems to widen. This is particularly happening in policy-making institutions.

This article is therefore more than an attempt to outline some of the contemporary historiographical issues of Muslims and Islam in a Europe country. It provides a framework for thinking about Europe’s recent history of Islam and Muslims. Because if we want to move forward, we have to re-think and re-remember what has happened not so long ago.

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