

Discussion with Mayor Van Veldhuizen, Hacı Karacaer, Josien Folbert and Truus Menger

Report on the forum afternoon on 4 November 2004: How can we achieve the commemoration and liberty days of 2005 to have a more intercultural character?

Opening

Pim Ligtvoet:

We gather here two days after the murder of Theo van Gogh by a fundamentalist. Debate was smothered in blood. Learning to know what the Second World War and the Liberation for freedom, freedom of speech and tolerance means doesn't make this less important.

Multiple Choice started this project because the celebration of 60 years since the end of the Second World War. I head the idea after the 4th of May commemoration of 2003 in Zaandam, in memory of the co-workers of the former multinational Polak & Schwarz, a Jewish factory. There was a lot of interest, but almost nobody from the Turkish, Moroccan, Surinam, Antillian and Indonesian community – who I do know well and invited by letter – was there. In the same year in Amsterdam, Moroccan youth played with wreaths and wished the Jews to die. Hacı Karacaer of the Amsterdam Wester Mosque (Aya Sofya) reacted by showing on the 4th of May a videofilm about the commemoration of the Moroccan military who defended Holland in 1940 and died. Therefore I understood that just an invitation of immigrants to 4 and 5 May isn't sufficient. The Dutch commemoration and liberty days need to be set in an international and intercultural perspective. A small step in achieving this is telling about the heroes and the victims during the years 1940-1945 in and from Morocco, Turkey, Netherlands Indies, Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles.

Forum

Mayor G.O. van Veldhuizen of Hoorn:

It's not so much the question whether these days CAN have a more intercultural character, but more so if these days MUSTN'T have a more intercultural character. In the newspaper NRC van 9 October 2004 Mischa de Winter wrote an article titled: "Democracy is something you have to learn". So: "When do we start?". We're talking about the basic values of democracy. Freedom of speech includes. That's more than 'saying anything you like'. Liberty, equality and fraternity belong together. Children must learn this through their parents and through school. This is the way to maintain and strengthen the fundamentals of democracy.

Holland changes more rapidly than it used to do, which can make people frightened and can bring them an identity crisis. On one hand there's already for years a secularization of society going on, while on the other hand there's an influx of new religions. This leads to a feeling of insecurity.

Commemoration and Liberty therefor are a gift. A stage to learn the democratic values of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

As the mayor of Hoorn I invited about fifty religions and philosophies of life to my home to talk with each other. After all it's the duty of authorities to bring people together and keep them together. It's better to talk with each other at home, as people of flesh and blood, than to have unbridled opinions in the press. It's about convincing others without offending. Offending leads to exclusion. My mother is German and therefore it's perhaps easier for me to know what this means. 'Multiple Choice' means pluralism, not exclusion. Therefore we must arm ourselves against fascism and fundamentalism, which do exclude, and pass this on to our children.

Hacı Karacaer, director of Milli Görüş Holland:

For the fifth time now, there's a 4 May commemoration in the Aya Sofya mosque. The cause wasn't a conference or so, but the war monument on the other side of the fence which borders the mosque terrain. On the street side people were having two minutes of silence, while on the mosque side Turkish men just kept on talking. The visitors of the mosque hardly had a clue about what this commemoration was for. Aya Sofya then went to the community council and offered its room to the

visitors of the 4th of May commemoration to meet there. This is how a support act was brought about and later on also a follow-up program in the mosque. Initially not many mosque visitors came, but mostly members of the board. Every year there were more, because people got used to the preparations and the organisation. Commemoration now is a permanent part of the Aya Sofya mosque.

When the commemoration of 2003 was disturbed by boys who shouted " Hamas, Hamas, Jews to the gas" and in Amsterdam-West football was played with wreaths and Jews were called names, Aya Sofya also participated in the counteraction. At that time maroc.nl wrote that Islamics couldn't participate and weren't allowed to lay down wreaths. Many of the mosques from the Baarsjes then on 25 February 2004 went in protest to the commemoration of the February strike to the Daniël Meijer Square and also had it known publicly by a press release.

The idea about this all is that the average man and woman meet in the street. No conferences with big shots. At the celebration of Good Friday, there's an imam in the church as well as with the birthday of the prophet Jesus. Aya Sofya also went to an exposition in the Biblical Museum to celebrate there the ascension of the prophet Mohammed te vieren. In itself an exposition in a museum like that doesn't mean much to people, but when they find out there's a model with the Temple Mountain (the prophet ascended from the Temple Mountain), then there's interest. The threshold is always the most difficult obstacle. After that it's more easy. Also we went to the Mozes and Aäron church, with an imam as minister. First people were uneasy about this. But when he started to sing the mood really changed. Today the visitors of the Aya Sofya mosque consider this place as 'our church'.

It's necessary to have build a collective memory to have a mutual commemoration. In itself the 4th of May doesn't mean that much and neither does dragging in immigrants. If we experience things collectively we also can commemorate collectively.

Josien Folbert, project interreligious dialogue PKN:

My experiences are a bit different from the others. In Utrecht we spoke with imams and members of the board from a church community about what commemoration means and about cooperation. The imams were asked to announce the 4th of May in their mosques. At the commemoration then, only 3 people were present (imam, interpreter and member of the board). At another occasion, native citizens and immigrants were absorbed in their collective history, they started to tell each other stories. A Turkish man told his grandfather fought the French and the English. Therefore he had terrible ideas about the Europeans. When he came to Holland his world view completely collapsed: they weren't that bad! In reverse, we Dutch hardly know anything about the war of the French and the British in Turkey (battle of Gallipoli 1915).

Concerning 4/5 May it would be a good idea to use some evenings as a preparation. There have been many wars since WWII. That is our common history. Guilt, forgiving, reconciliation, searching for peace. Especially religions know about this. It's about the inner self, about who we are, how we relate to life, to death. In every religion the assignment is: build up the earth, care for peace and justice.

To give a positive example: in Zwolle every first Sunday in the new year, there's a multi-religious meeting and also a couple of times a year a meeting on an current topic. Also 4/5 May is celebrated together.

Discussion

Tahsin Onur, city council member of Haarlem (CDA):

My grandfather also fought the British and the Greek in Gallipoli and in Izmir. He honestly told about his experiences, the good ones and the bad ones. He never ridiculed or deminished the enemy; maybe that's why I didn't have terrible ideas about Europeans.

Onno Van Veldhuizen:

We must move on, from the national commemoration of WW II, which is mostly celebrated by elderly people and churches, to a common collective memory. The emphasis has to move to senseless violence, youngsters should be able to recognize themselves in this. In Nieuwkoop we went from the church to the streets.

Truus Menger, resistance fighter:

In Holland we're diluted. We only remember. Instead we should learn more about the backgrounds of immigrants. Schools should show more interest. In Grootebroek a new monument will be erected. The youth is involved in this, to make it relevant. The youth should be better informed. Muslim people have been received in Holland in the wrong way, that's insulting. During the German occupation I've experienced myself you can resist together with dissenters. There always was a great mutual respect.

Goos Blok, newspaper Stem in de Stad (Haarlem)

We must be freed from prejudice. (Distributes copies with an outline of how prejudice starts and what it leads to: Insufficient information and lack of knowledge lead to poor or faulty views. Poor views lead to generalizing and judging about people and situations. Poor views lead to stereotyping. Stereotyping leads to prejudice. Prejudice + ignorance + fear lead to discrimination.) It would be a nice idea to have actors performing an act to draw attention, as a starting point for the commemoration. It must be taken out of this conference atmosphere.

Mildred Braam, city council member of Hoorn:

An uncle of mine fought from Suriname in the KNIL (Royal Dutch Colonial Army). Therefore I know a little about that time. It's about informing your own rank and file. Only then people will participate.

Mayor Jan Baas, Enkhuizen:

In Holland there are two commemorations, but from a different (political) background: the war in Europe (4/5 May) and the war in Asia (15 August). In Enkhuizen is applied for a plaque for the veterans of Indonesia (1947-1962). This brings about a lot of discussion. There's a conflict between the principles to fight the occupying German Nazis and the principles to defend the own colonial occupation of Indonesia.

Haci Karacaer:

It's not enough to think that, while telling the history, you'll get there. You must share experiences.

Truus Menger:

Indeed. If you only stay in the past, you won't get there. The 4th of May and the 15th of August commemorations must stay though to remember how we recovered our freedom. To many young people died for this.

Onno Van Veldhuizen:

Maybe I'm telling something dangerous, but I think we should leave 'sectarism' on these days. Commemorations shouldn't be monopolized by one special group. The roots are in World War II but the future is different. We must achieve a collective memory based on recent events (like the war in Iraq, the murder on Theo van Gogh, the attacks on mosques, Islamic schools and on churches), however hard it can be.

Mr. P. R. Wouters and Mr. J. Moens, Den Helder:

The put forward the commemoration in Den Helder arose by the 850 victims on the Java Sea (27 February 1942), and in fact was an addition to the general commemoration on the 4th of May. Also other military and civilian victims in the Netherlands Indies are commemorated, also those who died after 15 August 1945. Seen from the Netherlands Indies situation the end of the Second World War is a symbolic moment. The battle for decolonisation until 1949 caused a lot of victims, Dutch and Indonesian. The foundation in Den Helder isn't working on interculturalisation. Everybody should feel welcome. But the remembrance of the victims in the Netherlands Indies is in itself already an intercultural factor, because of the focus on the war in Europe.

Mr. Pondag (during the interval):

I think it's hypocrite to open a website which stops two days before the proclamation of the independence of Indonesia (17 August 1945). Holland never recognized this independence, and never apologised for 350 years of colonialism (*foreign minister Bot did so on 15 August 2005 in The Hague and went afterwards to Indonesia to do the same – see his speech at the Netherlands Indies section on this website – ed.*).

Pim Ligtvoet (during the interval):

Indeed Holland initially didn't want to recognize the battle for independence in Indonesia. But our theme is the 'Second World War' and the values that came from the victory on fascism. For Holland this war ended on 15 August 1945. The process of decolonisation had just started. The site doesn't go into that matter, but writes about the fate of the Dutch and Indonesian Dutch in the colony at that time and about the fate of 70 million Indonesians during the Japanese occupation,

After that Truus Menger recited her poem 'Syndrome 40-45' and she officially opened the website. The guests then could have a look for themselves.