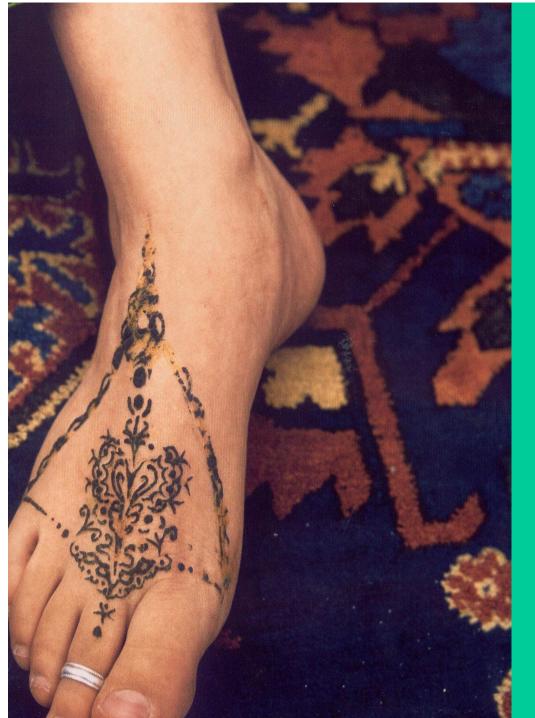International Metropolis Conference, Lisboa
2-6 october 2006

Workshop

Religion and Migration: Promoting New Religious Practices, Reorganising Social Identities

Religious and life stance symbols in public office

Gily Coene

Debate on state-neutrality?

French debate and ban

in public schools

&

multiculturalism

Belgium: a federal state

- Belgian Constitution
- Federal Government
- Regional governments

- **three communities**, based on language and related to population groups: the Flemish-, French- and German-speaking Communities.

- **three regions** corresponding to geographical entities: the Flemish Region (or Flanders), the Brussels Capital Region and the Walloon Region (or Wallonia).

A federal state

- Flanders: The Flemish Community & Region
- Wallonia: the French and the German-speaking Community.
- Brussels: French- and Flemish-speaking population.

Policy-levels

- Immigration, nationality: federal level
- Social Integration: regional level
- Flemish policies inspired by the (formerly Dutch) multicultural model – ethnic minorities + inburgering
- French-speaking part: french-republican tradition

- Cultural issues: community level
- Socio-economic issues: regional level
- Religious issues/combat of racism: constitutional – federal

Belgium: a secular state?

- Constitution (1831): freedom of religion and conscience

- Positive freedom - art. 19: "Freedom of worship, public practice of the latter, as well as freedom to demonstrate one's opinions on all matters, are guaranteed (…)"

- Negative freedom - art 20: "No one can be obliged to contribute in any way whatsoever to the acts and ceremonies of a religion, nor to observe the days of rest"

Belguim: a secular state?

- Mutual independence - art 21: "The State does not have the right to intervene either in the nomination or in the installation of ministers of any religion …"
- Offically recognized religions: Roman Catholic, Protestant, Anglican, Orhodox Church, Judaism, Islam) + (non religious) secular humanists
- Art. 181: § 1. The State awards remuneration and pensions to religious leaders; (…) § 2. (…) [and] to representatives of organizations recognized by the law as providing moral assistance according to a non-religious philosophical concept (…)
- La laïcité (vrijzinnig humanisten – mouvement laïque) – a 'religion' (1981-1993) among others

Islam in Belgium

- Recognition 1974 = a representative body, e.g. the Muslim Executive
- Dotation: 80% Roman Catholic Church, 13% secular humanists and 7% others (Protestant, Anglican, Orhodox, Judaism, Islam)
- Only 'one' Islam
- Non–recognized religions: e.g. Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism
- Accomodation of religious practices – holidays, mosques, ..

Muslims in Belgium

- 250,000 - 400,000
- labour-migration in the 1960s: Morocco, Turkey – Algeria & Tunisia
- family reunion – marriage migration
- refugee populations: Bosnië, Pakistan, ...
- OECD: educational achievement of population with "ancestry from predominately Muslim countries" is very low
- labour-market segregation and exclusion

The hijab in education

- "affaires" – pupils and (Islamic) teachers
- "Active neutrality" - 1842 -1959 school "battles"
- Constitution art. 24 "(...) The community organizes neutral education. Neutrality implies notably the respect of the philosophical, ideological or religious conceptions of parents and pupils. The schools organized by the public authorities offer (…) the choice between the teaching of one of the recognized religions and non-denominational moral teaching. (…) All pupils of school age have the right to moral or religious education at the community's expense."

A secular state?

- Public calendar: only Catholic holidays
- Monarchy = Catholic
- "Pillarization"
- State-public institutions as alternatives to 'pillarized' institutions
- Secularisation: privatisation of religion & individualization - not 'de-pillarisation'
- Islamic pillar?

The "headscarf" debate

- Headscarf affaires in schools (1989)
- French ban 2004
- Gendered debate: "forced veiling"
- Proposal bans in schools
- Commission Intercultural Dialogue
- Public services: different interpretations of 'neutrality'

Mobilisation of Muslim women

- platforms and petitions: "not over our heads" – "hands off my headscarf"
- migrant women & religious identity:

  * Universalist feminism: privatisation of religion

  * Muslim feminism: gender equality through Islam

  * Genderactivism: Islamic wordview (AEL)

(white) Women's organizations

- *Nederlandstalige Vrouwenraad*:

- No consensus
- Gender equality first
- Incl. many (pillarized) women's organisations

- *Vrouwen Overleg Komité*:

- "Inclusive neutrality"
- Multicultural feminism?
- Incl. Muslim feminists

Belgian neutrality revisited?

- Neutrality of public spaces
- Public sphere: personal freedom
- Civil servants: divergent but "acceptable" interpretations:

1) Inclusive neutrality: no-limits approach
2) Restraint in direct contact/authority relation
3) Exclusive neutrality: absence of any sign for all

Inclusive neutrality?

- Neutrality: not *appearance* but *performance*.
- Cf. Guideline adopted by the VDAB: "members of the personnel have the right to wear external religious and philosophical signs and symbols [&] have the duty to take up a neutral and objective position in the fulfilment of the employment, in contact with clients and citizens and colleagues"

Ceci n'est pas une voile?

Religious and life stance symbols in public office

Ethnocentrism - xenophobia –> political extremism (Vlaams Belang)

Gendered Racism (Muslim women) – cf. Naïma Amzil

Exclusion of immigrant women from labour market

diversity policies – 'kansengroepen' -> religious diversity?

Intersecting

perspectives

& policy-

domains

1. diversity policies labour market – public services

2. multiculturalism, tolerance, antiracism

3. state-religion & non-religious world-views

4. gender equality