

Muslims go Dutch: While churches thrive

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

For many American Christians, the religious experience of modern Western Europe offers a dire warning. European church membership has been in free fall for a generation. Each new survey shows ever-growing numbers willing to proclaim themselves totally nonreligious. Meanwhile, burgeoning Muslim populations lead some observers to warn grimly of a coming Eurabia, a continent dominated by the most reactionary forms of Islamic fundamentalism. While native Christian populations have extraordinarily low fertility rates, immigrant Muslims continue to raise large families.

For conservatives, the triumph of Islam would offer proper retribution for societies that tried to live without God. “So you didn’t like Christian concepts of morality and family? Well, try living under Shari’a law!”

But a reality check is in order. While nobody can seriously claim that mainstream Western European churches are flourishing, the picture is nothing like as bleak as it is often portrayed. And that is true even in the country most commonly used as exhibit A for the process of total secularization: the Netherlands.

Beyond argument, the Netherlands has moved away from organized religion. Despite the country’s dazzlingly rich Christian history, all of its churches began a steep decline in the 1960s, by whatever measures of belief or practice we may use. Today, barely half of all Dutch people claim any allegiance to a Christian denomination, while over 40 percent overtly deny any religious loyalty. Many of Amsterdam’s historic Protestant churches are effectively museums that occasionally make their premises available for thinly attended services. Islam, however, grows apace. The Netherlands today has a million Muslims—around 6 percent of the population. By some projections that proportion could grow to 15 or 20 percent by the end of the century.

So are we, in fact, living in the preliminary stages of the Islamic Republic of the Netherlands?

Actually, the Islamic presence is very different from what we might think if we went solely on the basis of the xenophobic rants that regularly appear from U.S. publishers. For one thing, the Muslim demographic invasion is far less startling than it appears. All immigrant communities have higher birth rates than the native populations, but these rates decline sharply in the second and third generations. Dutch Muslims, moreover, mainly come from countries like Morocco and Turkey, where fertility rates are plunging as women play a much more active role in the economy.

Perhaps Europe and the Middle East will indeed come to share similar cultural and demographic patterns, but that will be because the Muslim world comes to look more European, rather than the other way round. As populations stagnate around the Mediterranean, European countries will have to look further afield for essential labor, and that means dipping ever deeper into Christian Africa.

These demographic changes have far-reaching religious implications. Yes, the Netherlands may come to be a more mixed society, albeit with a degree of ethnic diversity much smaller than anything Americans are used to. But that is a far cry from a conquest by Muslim extremism. Only by using the most egregious kind of stereotyping can we assume that all people of Middle Eastern origin are religiously inclined, or that all Muslims are fundamentalist or extremist.

A prime source of tension within the Dutch Muslim communities is the growing assertiveness of women and the desire of girls and women to play a full part in the wider society, however much that violates traditional religious assumptions. Such female aspirations are a prime detonator for Islamist extremism, which is in large part a young male revolt against women's progress. As fertility rates decline, Dutch Muslims will increasingly assimilate to their host society, including in their religious forms.

And yes, the Netherlands still has a Christian life. Even if only half the population identifies with a church, that is a very sizable share of the population, and churches play a larger role in life the further we look outside Amsterdam. Even in the metropolis, new churches thrive, buoyed by an influx of Christian immigrants—from Africa and from the former colony of Surinam.

The limitations of the secular dream become obvious in the sprawling landscapes of the area of Amsterdam known as Zuidoost, a working-class zone that tourists never penetrate. When these streets and apartment complexes were laid out in the 1960s, Dutch planners envisioned a wholly godless future and assumed that the section would have no need for a church. But then the African Christian immigrants arrived by the thousands. Today, Zuidoost has perhaps a hundred booming churches. None has anything like the architectural glories of the medieval buildings in Amsterdam Centrum. A number of the new churches are in converted garages and back rooms. Even so, the humble circumstances do little to cool the enthusiasm.

The time may eventually come to write the obituary for the Christian Netherlands—but it won't be in this century.