

# Celebrations of four hundred years relations between Turkey and the Netherlands

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*Turkish figures on sixteenth century Dutch paintings symbolize tolerance and the tolerance of the new Dutch Republic. Gerrit Berckheyde: The Town Hall in Amsterdam, 1673. (Rijksmuseum)*

In 2012, the Netherlands and Turkey will celebrate 400 years of diplomatic relations. Anti-Islam party leader Geert Wilders spoke out against celebrating relations with the Muslim nation, which he portrayed as cruel and suppressive.<sup>1</sup> He was not aware that his noise about Dutch-Turkish relations would draw attention to the fact that the very foundations of the Netherlands and its free religious policy are historically connected to the Muslim Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> *Wilders slams Dutch-Turkish celebrations*, RNW, November 18, 2011

### **Persecution of Christian sects in Sixteenth Century Europe**

The celebrated diplomatic relations are the coming of the first official ambassador to Istanbul in 1612. But the earliest relations go back another 46 years and are much more interesting. These relations are at the roots of the struggle for independence of the united provinces of the Netherlands against the Catholic Empire of Spain of which they were part. When the Protestant sects emerged within the Catholic world, their followers were ruthlessly prosecuted, many burned at the stake.

### **Support from the Sultans**

In October of 1566, two years before the first military confrontation with the Catholic Empire, the Netherlands received a letter promising political and financial support for their struggle from Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent, who was at that time perhaps the most powerful ruler on the planet, presiding over a multicultural world where different religions flourished. The support of the Sultan for the Dutch had been arranged by Joseph Nasi, an old friend of the leader of the Dutch struggle for independence, William of Orange. Joseph Nasi had fled Antwerp in anticipation of the dreaded Spanish Inquisition, and had settled in Istanbul as an advisor of the Sultan. After the initial letter of support, Suleyman the Magnificent passed away. William of Orange sent delegations to the succeeding Sultans to continue the initiated support.

### **The Dutch-Ottoman Alliance**

In 1574, Sultan Selim II sent a secret agent who established contact between the emerging Dutch Republic, the pirates of Algiers and the Morisco's, the Spanish Muslims who had progressively been forced to profess Christianity after the final occupation of Muslim Spain by the Catholics in 1492. The plan was to attack different parts of the Spanish Empire at the same time. In October of 1574, the Sultan sent a giant fleet into the Mediterranean, which conquered Tunis. At the same time, the Dutch attacked the city of Leiden. The Dutch freedom fighters were flying Ottoman flags on their ships, wore silver Crescents with pro-Turkish slogans and were even wearing Turkish moustaches to fool the Spanish into thinking the feared Turks had come all the way North.<sup>2</sup>

The count of Anjou who governed Flanders (the Southern part of the Netherlands) between 1581 and 1584, cooperated with Sultan Murat III for an exchange project which hosted an Ottoman community in Antwerp and a Dutch community in Istanbul between 1582 and 1584.<sup>3</sup> Some say the Ottoman fleet attacked the Armada, the Spanish fleet which was to strike down the Dutch uprising forever, crippling it before it could even leave the Mediterranean.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Spain and the Netherlands 1559-1659*. Fontana/Collins, Glasgow 1979; also A.H. de Groot, *The Ottoman Empire and the Dutch Republic; a History of the Earliest Diplomatic Relations*. Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut, Leiden/Istanbul 1978

<sup>3</sup> Alastair Hamilton, *Arabic Culture and Ottoman Magnificence in Antwerp's Golden Age*. Museum Plantin-Moretus, Antwerp 2001

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Brotton, 'Why we should thank the Turks for defeating the Armada' [The Guardian](#), 1 June 2004

Even after a treaty was signed between the Netherlands and the Spanish Empire in 1609, a negotiation took place between Prince Maurice, successor to William of Orange, and Al-Hajari, ambassador of Morocco. It was discussed how Morocco, the Netherlands and the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed I could jointly attack and retake Spain for the Muslims. King Philip III of the Spanish Empire refers to the military alliance between the Morisco's, the Ottomans, the Dutch and the English in his Edict of the Expulsion of the Morisco's of 1609.<sup>5</sup>

### Religious Freedom as a theme in the historical relationship

In 1574, the leader of the Dutch struggle for Independence, William of Orange, was asked his thoughts about religious freedom. Most people at the time held the opinion that tolerating other faiths than that of the ruler, would undermine his authority. A small number of progressive thinkers, of whom William of Orange was one, were convinced that tolerance would result in prosperity and referred to the Ottoman Empire to substantiate their claim. The Sultans tolerated different religions but were at the same time the most powerful rulers in the world. So, when asked his opinion on the matter, William of Orange answered that 'the Turk ... permits all kinds of religion'.<sup>6</sup>



*Silver crescents worn by the Dutch from 1566 to 1574, reading 'Rather Turk than Pope' (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam).*

Louis of Nassau, the brother of William of Orange, in 1565 provoked Philips II with a request for tolerance, in which he explains why the Ottoman model is better than that of the King of Spain, and states that 'it is no wonder that many from the Provence, during the persecutions in France, for the sake of religion have become tributary to the Turk'.<sup>7</sup> The 'Geuzen' (from the French 'gueux': 'beggars'), the Dutch freedom fighters, saw a link between their leader William of Orange and the Turkish tolerance in different songs. These songs include the famous but ill-understood proverb 'Rather Turk than Pope':

<sup>5</sup> Nabil Matar (ed. and tr.) *In the Lands of the Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century*. Routledge, New York / London 2003

<sup>6</sup> A.A. van Schelven, *Willem van Oranje*. Amsterdam: Ten Have 1943; p. 231

<sup>7</sup> Lodewijk van Nassau en Francis Junius, *Brief discours envoyé au Roy Philippe* (dec. 1565). In: *Memoires de Condé*, London/The Hague: Claude du Bosc & Guillome Darrés 1743; vol. V, p. 400.

*The Prince of Orange triumphant  
God will make him wise and understand  
That Gods Word from this moment  
May be preached to every corner  
Rather Turk than Pope he has become  
Although the Turk is not called Christian  
He did not burn anyone for the faith  
As the Papists do, every single day.<sup>8</sup>*

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More research about influences of Islam in the development of tolerance in Europe has been published in Alislam eGazette, january 2010: <https://www.alislam.org/egazette/egazette/january-2010-egazette-europes-debt-to-the-muslim-empire/>

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<sup>8</sup> P. Leendertz jr. (ed.), *Het geuzenliedboek*. Zutphen 1924-1925, p. 245. For a comprehensive analysis of the role of the Turk in sixteenth century literature, see Marianne Mout, *Turken in het nieuws*, Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis 1984; 362-381