

# **The myth of the orientalist mosque: Towards an iconography of Islamic architecture in the Netherlands**

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Prominent mosques in the Netherlands figure repeatedly in international discussions of modern Islamic architecture. Increasingly frequently, they are adduced as proof of the extent to which socially disadvantaged Muslims in the diaspora make use of exotic stereotypes in order to emphasize their own identity in an environment which is foreign to them and in which they are considered as foreigners. The few Dutch examples which do not appear to refer back to historical mosques are then usually presented as proof that some communities have been able to move away from this kind of 'self-orientalism'. In this article I first give a chronological overview of the relevant literature on the subject, and demonstrate that any causal connection between orientalism and oriental-looking mosques in the west is based less on empirical investigation than on critical projections. I then present an alternative approach, originally developed in Leiden to study Christian architecture in the Low Countries, which allows scholars to penetrate deeper into the nature of a religious building as a multifaceted collection of meaningful elements. Using previous research into design processes around mosques in the Netherlands, I show that in most cases of mosques which are internationally considered as examples of either orientalist or innovative design, the sponsors of the projects in reality often had completely different objectives. A close consideration of the intentions and actions involved in the design and creation of the buildings rather suggests that the sponsors intended to create a purposeful combination of prototypical examples from Islamic architectural history, whether actually occurring or idealized. Their goal in doing this was not to position themselves as 'oriental' or 'western' vis-à-vis Dutch society, which would in any case be unable to interpret the subtleties involved in such complex configurations. Rather, they sought to position themselves amongst the distinct Muslim communities, as competing leaders with mutually exclusive religious interpretations and power bases, in an internal struggle much like that which has already been recognized in the study of Christian architectural history.

Key terms: Orientalism; Architecture; Mosque design; Iconography.

## Introduction

Mosques in the Netherlands, perhaps due to the prominence usually attributed to the innovativeness of Dutch design, have come to find themselves at the forefront of a growing international discourse on modern Islamic architecture by critical architects and architecture critics. Thus, prominent examples of Dutch mosques have not only been formally categorized according to the customary opposition between the ‘historicist’ and the ‘innovative’, but they have also come to play an important role as evidence of a causal relationship between western orientalism and a need for exoticist imagery among western Muslims, supposedly looking to identify themselves as ‘the other’ vis-à-vis their non-Islamic surroundings. Recently, however, in my own studies of mosque design in the Netherlands, I have argued that the forms chosen by Dutch Muslim patrons generally were not an unequivocal mass of eastern bells and whistles, but intricate recombinations of elements from venerated Islamic buildings that were only understandable to small groups of Muslim insiders. If it were true that the recognizability of these complex forms to westerners was never a consideration at the time they were being produced, then what would be left of the idea that they were meant to represent an orientalist mode of Muslim self-identification vis-à-vis the West?

In order to bring clarity to the matter, I will first present the reader with a chronological outline of the literature in which the relationship between western architectural orientalism and Islamic architecture in the West came to be assumed. I will show how it grew from a mere associative connection in the critical minds of the authors themselves, to the scholarly hypothesis that orientalism might have historically caused western mosques to look oriental through the thoughts and actions of the actual design producers. I will then discuss the literature that subsequently, but without further empirical research, changed this hypothesis into the ‘fact’ that Muslim building patrons in the West, with the Netherlands as a prominent example, either closely followed imperialist stereotypes or liberated themselves from it. As an empirically grounded alternative, I will present the reader with a less critical and more historical methodology, particularly developed for studying churches in the Low Countries but arguably more suited to analyze religious buildings in general as amalgamated iconographies. Drawing on an iconographic study of Dutch mosques that I conducted and published earlier, I will then briefly revisit those particular examples from the Netherlands that were used in the international discourse as evidence either of a self-imposed orientalism or of its long-awaited

demise. In the end, I hope to show that the idea of the orientalist mosque, as well as its complement, the western mosque, may be as much a product of critical fiction now as it was in the beginning.

### **Mosques from Thousand and One Nights**

The first and most prominent author to make a connection between modern mosques and orientalism was the Pakistani-Canadian architect Gulzar Haider. In 1980, he presented a paper during the seminar directly leading up to the first round of awards given by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. Haider formulated a list of guiding principles for other architects, stating that “[i]n the choice of architectural motifs it should in no way reinforce the erroneous mythology of Near Eastern “Islamic” exotica of the Thousand and One Nights” (Haider 1980, 123). Subsequently, in the Aga Khan volume reporting on the Awards, the architect Nader Ardalan commented on a comparative survey of 113 historical mosques by region, analyzing their pre-Islamic origins and subsequent transformations (Ardalan 1983). This resulted in a catalogue of a limited number of formal types, varying with circumscribed ecological zones and each representing a circumscribed cultural identity. Ardalan advocated for a complete inventory of major Islamic buildings, in order to come to “a useful road map to more relevant forms appropriate today for each of the ecological/cultural zones of Islam” (Ardalan 1983, 55-56). Rising from this first round of Aga Khan Architecture Awards was the confident belief that Islamic architecture had always developed regional styles in the new Muslim territories; that contemporary objects somehow no longer followed that development; and that modern architects needed to come up with solutions that once more made appropriate use of local cultural characteristics – especially in the West, where oriental-looking mosques would only provoke undesirable associations with fairy tales.

In 1985, these tenets were combined by the architect Ihsan Fethi in a second volume by the Aga Khan Award for Architecture. According to Fethi, the arrival of modern technology and a general liberalization in architectural design had resulted in the breakdown of tradition and in a new permissiveness that was the cause of “some sound innovation” but also of “much misguided experimentation”, resulting in what he saw as “stylistic transplants” and “strange hybrids” (Fethi 1985, 54). Diametrically opposed to the few mosques that showed “a remarkable degree of originality and purist simplicity”, stood what Fethi called “Arabian Nights Mosques”, in which “whimsical and often bizarre combinations of Islamic forms and symbols have been used. The eclectic use of symbolic elements from various regional architectural styles, such as multifarious onion domes and frilly minarets, curious arches, and the excessive

use of decoration, evoke Hollywood images of the Arabian nights” (Fethi 1985, 55-7). However, whereas Haider had still merely warned other architects against the undesirability of such forms in light of what they evoked among outsiders, Fethi suggested a reason for their persistence, which he placed in “a resistance on the part of the Islamic clergy to all design innovation” (Fethi 1985, 59).

In 1990, in another publication by the Aga Khan Award, Haider described how, despite all his attempts to change the oriental imagery of western mosques, most of his Muslim clients still generally refused to cooperate. As an example, he mentioned his design for the Bait ul-Islam Mosque in Toronto, commissioned by an Ahmadi community which initially simply wanted to “express its Islamic presence in Canada”, but whose mosque would eventually carry a towering dome and minaret. Haider suggested that he was confronted with an overly ambitious committee, grandly imagining to plant “the seeds of a Muslim town in North America on the model of the Prophet’s Medina” (Haider 1990, 157). Six years later, when the number of oriental-looking mosques in the West appeared to be rising nonetheless, Haider started supporting his argument by way of visual analogy, printing photographs of orientalist theaters and a casino next to actual mosques (Haider 1996, 32-5). As a reason for the phenomenon that “the demand for what is seen as visual authenticity in the mosque ... has intensified over the past decade”, Haider now suggested that “efforts at “melting into the pot” have given way to assertion of a Muslim identity as a better alternative. There are also global movements afoot that have given Muslims in the diaspora a sense of identity and linkage as part of the *umma* [the collective community of Islamic peoples]” (Haider 1996, 41). It needs to be said that Haider did not think very highly of his Muslim clients, suggesting that they often were simple, impoverished and unknowledgeable immigrants who could do no more than rearrange cut-outs from mosque calendars into child-like pastiches (Haider 1990, 158). He even compared himself to “a volunteer nurse in a room full of Alzheimer’s patients at various stages of their condition” (Haider 1996, 38).

This critical dismissal of ‘orientalist mosques’, as well as the belief that a strong conservatism among contemporary Muslims stood at the basis of the popularity of such architecture, subsequently had a great impact on the way in which the subject of modern mosque design was studied at the influential Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT, where new generations of western Muslim architects were being trained. The head of its library, Omar Khalidi, signalled that both clients and architects considered with pride the “capturing [of] the essential symbols of Islamic architecture” (Khalidi 2000, 322). However, by refusing to engage in a dialogue with the dominant culture, “[t]he mosque and its community are in danger of reinforcing Western views about the

“otherness” of Islam” (Khalidi 2000, 328). In 2004, as a countermeasure to such tendencies, the Aga Khan program director and architect Nasser Rabbat devised a methodological framework that focused on Islamic architectural history as a continuous cultural dialogue. As modern examples, Rabbat mentioned “some recent modernistically sensible mosques such as the White Mosque of Visoko or the Parliament Mosque in Ankara, to list but a few” (Rabbat 2004, 21). In his opinion, however, since the presence of this process had been negated in Orientalist scholarship, and obstructed by the use, over and over again, of cultural standards such as the arch and the dome, elements such as the latter had come to permeate all religious structures built by Muslims in the last century. Importantly, the author suggested that the producers of such design thereby “resurrected” – although “unfortunately and possibly unwittingly” – “the defamed Orientalist view that identifies Islamic architecture with sedate, static and supra-historical forms” (Rabbat 2004, 23). In effect, Rabbat hypothesized that contemporary oriental-looking mosques not only provoked unwanted associations with orientalist look-alikes, but that they were being produced by Muslims who had actually been influenced by orientalist stereotypes – imposing the latter upon themselves even if they did not realize it.

Expanding on Rabbat’s hypothesis, the architect Nebahat Avcioğlu then ascribed the use of (what she considered to be) non-innovative oriental imageries in western mosques wholly to a generalized postcolonial member of the diaspora (Avcioğlu 2007). In her eyes, the latter looked to identify himself as ‘the other’ by adopting orientalist stereotypes. In support, she further developed the visual analogy that Haider had applied earlier, chronologically strengthening her argument by the pictorial presentation of what she presented as a “genealogy” of mosque building in the West (Avcioğlu 2007, 95). Starting from eighteenth century garden ornamentations such as the ‘Turkish Mosque’ at Kew Gardens in London, and moving through nineteenth century “Islamically clad” industrial buildings such as a steam driven pump station in Potsdam (Avcioğlu 2007, 93-94), the author finally arrived at late nineteenth and early twentieth century mosques, which she illustrated by the 1889 Shah Jehan Mosque in Woking, the 1926 Great Mosque of Paris, and the 1973 Iranian mosque in Hamburg. However, instead of moving beyond the mere mention of the powerful patrons involved and the historical examples they used, and empirically researching the available archives in order to find out what they did and what they wanted, Avcioğlu simply signalled “an astonishing visual proximity” (Avcioğlu 2007, 97) and “an uncanny resemblance” (Avcioğlu 2007, 98) to structures like the fake Kew Gardens mosque. To support this subjective connection, the author described the Orientalist projections that had been applied to these mosques in the western societies where they had been built.

And she subsequently implied that such external and post facto form comparisons and meaning attributions were what the imperialistically subordinated Muslim minorities themselves had in fact aimed for (Avcioglu 2007, 96-98). In her eyes, this “genealogy” of mosque building in the West also “has important implications for our understanding of post-colonial purpose-built mosques because what emerges is not a rejection, but a continuation of such formally authorised, yet equally disenfranchising, modes of diasporic self-representation” (Avcioglu 2007, 98-99). Even the most recently built mosques supposedly presented Islamic space as “either unchangingly distinct from the “West” or identical everywhere in the “East”...” (Avcioglu 2007, 99). Importantly, among the rare examples of mosques that prove the contrary case, the author mentioned the *Nour Mosque* in Gouda. “These mosques have none of the identity politics trappings; they are not conceived as religious signposts. ... These mosques foster a sense of cultural context and artistic concentration, and can be seen as not only contesting the *modes* but also the dominant *forms* of representation” (Avcioglu 2007, 105).

In 2009, Avcioglu repeated her conviction that modern exoticism in western mosques was self-inflicted by displaced Muslim communities, embedded as they were in colonial stereotypes represented by English garden ornaments and German pump stations. Now, however, she also saw several Dutch mosques as examples of “an introverted neo-colonialism where the post-colonial diaspora are unable to negotiate their identity outside the context of a colonial discourse” (Avcioglu 2009, 65). A project such as the *Westermosque* in Amsterdam, for example, which she thought was a copy of the *Hagia Sophia* in Istanbul, “harkens back to European Orientalist visual practices, ... testifies to the dead-end of identity politics as far as architecture is concerned, ... reduces the architectural gesture to a mere ‘not from here’” and “can do nothing but hinder both the process of architectural creativity and distinction” (Avcioglu 2009, 65). Also the *Essalam Mosque* in Rotterdam she found to be “traditional looking” (Avcioglu 2009, 65-66). Nevertheless, the author expressed hope that, since the mosque had always showed “strong regional variations”, the notion of a European mosque was not doomed to fail (Avcioglu 2009, 67).

Another international author to expand on the argument, also highlighting a number of Dutch mosques as case studies, was the architecture critic Christian Welzbacher. After having closely copied Avcioglu’s visual and textual ‘genealogy’, he similarly claimed that “this model is adopted and perpetuated by Muslims themselves. ... In so doing, Muslim immigrants confirm European clichés, taking on the “foreigner” role of their own accord. This mirrors their actual self-image insofar as they actually do feel – for a wide variety of reasons – that they are foreign in Europe” (Welzbacher 2008, 38-43).

Welzbacher, however, lifted the argument to a different – and politically rather more dangerous – level by suggesting that this self-imposed orientalism reflected a wilful refusal to assimilate. “The dome and the minaret, transferred to the suburbs of European cities, thus become visible symbols of the opposite of integration” (Welzbacher 2008, 43). Turning his attention to concrete Dutch examples, Welzbacher claimed that in the *Essalam* Mosque in Rotterdam “we see a radical turning away from the present, a layering of numerous historical models, and above all a reduction to the “image” of a mosque, i.e., dome and minaret” (Welzbacher 2008, 37). In his formulation, “four young architects [calling themselves MemarDut©h] were especially irritated by the *Essalam* Mosque ... For their alternative proposal, they demonstratively chose the exact requirements and location of this building – and did everything differently” (Welzbacher 2008, 86). According to the author, their design, which they called “the Poldermosque”, was “a protest project by self-confident young Muslims who no longer wished to be labelled as exotic” and “evidence of a process of Islamic-European assimilation that is taking place across the continent. [...] They have no need for the kind of illustrative architecture that has been built in the West since the Kew Gardens mosque” (Welzbacher 2008, 91).<sup>1</sup> Another positive Dutch example to the author was the catalogue of mosque projects designed by the architect Erdal Önder and commissioned by the Turkish organization *Holanda Diyanet Vakfi* (‘Dutch Islamic Foundation’). “Almost all of the projects are adaptations of the formal vocabulary of classical Modernism. The subdued basic approach and the use of brightly coloured building material recalls the work of the Delft firm of Mecanoo, not outwardly distinct from the Dutch tradition of sober protestant rationalism” (Welzbacher 2008, 93).

After its publication, Welzbacher officially presented his book to the Dutch Minister for Housing, Communities and Integration (*Minister van Wonen, Wijken en Integratie*) as the ‘solution’ to the issue of mosque design in the Netherlands. The critical author also appeared in a radio interview, during which he was taken by a Dutch journalist to the *Taibah* Mosque in Amsterdam. Confronted with a building he obviously did not know, but nonetheless encouraged to explain it from his particular vantage point, he stated:<sup>2</sup> “It has an Oriental style. ... It is, of course, really not a European building. ...You never know what really goes on inside a building. But, of course, if a building has a societal meaning, and aspires to be a symbol, then the style does say something about what goes on on the inside, indeed, about the idea of religion and the idea

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<sup>1</sup> See Sunier (this issue) for an illustration of the *Poldermosque* design.

<sup>2</sup> Radio 1, interview on 14 October 2008, min. 6-10, translation from Dutch to English by author. <http://www-test.radio1.nl/items/1908-euro-islam-architectuur>.

of cohabitation, and naturally also of integration. ... This is what I call a cliché mosque.”

### **Iconographic studies of religious architecture in the Low Countries**

Meanwhile in the Low Countries itself, a quite different view of religious architecture has emerged. It could offer a much deeper understanding of amalgamated Islamic iconographies than seeing the overwhelming majority of western mosques as temporary conglomerations of eastern bells and whistles, caused by a need of suppressed orientals to distinguish themselves as ‘the other’. This view was developed by the architectural historian Aart Mekking, who expanded the methodology of architectural iconography as introduced by the architectural historian Richard Krautheimer, and who particularly applied it to the built environment of the Low Countries (for a short historiography, see Bosman 1994).

In 1995, Mekking initiated a large scale long-term project at Leiden University named ‘Art and Region’, with participants from Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. They dismissed the ideology behind the formalist perspective that imagined ecclesiastical architecture as having always progressively followed a neat pattern of styles, determined by semi-autonomous architects who creatively reacted to shifting geographical and cultural environments. Instead, they turned their attention to the continuous process by which rivalling Christian patrons, spreading throughout Europe, had been using contemporary religious connotations of venerated historical prototypes. The patrons did so by reshuffling and recombining strategic aspects of these prototypes, as well as of buildings with a more local importance, into wholly new and creative iconographies that nonetheless were claimed to exude historical authenticity, and that effectively served to legitimize their own authority versus that of contested Christian patrons. With an endless variation in politico-religious circumstances and prototypical connotations, historical examples from for instance Jerusalem and Rome had thus come to be transformed to the Low Countries in extremely divergent ways. Any intended connections between the actual origins and the multifarious New Jerusalems and New Romes in this part of Europe would often have been recognizable only to the immediate allies and opponents involved, positioning themselves in their limited but ever-shifting struggles for religious power.

Once the empirical field in the Low Countries was closely studied, the paradigm of the regional consistency of styles, the natural evolution of forms, and the determining role of architects, proved to have been founded on artistic ideals formulated since the nineteenth century within design institutes, not on actual architectural historical research. Thus, the numerous empirical instances



in which existing building schemes were incorporated into new ones should not be passed over as lamentable expressions of nostalgia temporarily disturbing some ideal aesthetic evolution, but as the main target of architectural historical scholarship. And since any apparent chronological and/or geographical coherencies in building elements – ‘styles’, if you will – would have been largely the result of the social agency of networks of patrons positioning themselves in alternate religious hierarchies, any changes in their political contexts and architectural connotations could result in the immediate adoption of completely different building programmes (Bräuer et al. 2004).

Although the Art & Region project ended in 2004, Thomas Coomans, erstwhile participant from the Catholic University of Louvain, has recently shown that Christian patrons did not suddenly stop competing with each other when they spread across the planet, but that they continued to affirm their contemporary, and mutually exclusive, religious identities once outside Europe (Coomans 2012). In China, from Guangxi to Manchuria and Inner Mongolia, Christian missionaries of all sorts built churches in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, but thus far these were left unstudied. Coomans’ aim was to look further than the evident polarization between Chinese and western architectures, and instead to analyze the wide range of internally deviating ‘gothic styles’ (French, English, Flemish, early gothic, late gothic, etc.) and attempt to understand their specific meaning in the Chinese context. He thus found that Scheutists – originating in Belgium – were inspired by a Flemish gothic, while Lazarists – originating in France – referred to a French gothic. To most Chinese, such differences would have been unrecognizable and irrelevant; the Chinese looked at gothic churches in particular as arrogant colonialist representations in contradiction with Chinese building traditions, and as a consequence they were frequently demolished during anti-imperialist revolts (Coomans 2012). To the modern missionaries, however, as to their premodern forebears spreading their messages within Europe, it would have been these differences that determined their design choices in the first place. Explaining the latter through the eyes of local observers, projecting their own ‘occidental’ attributions onto the actual producers, would therefore not lead to an understanding of the objects and their iconographies.

That an iconographic perspective could also have value for the study of contemporary Islamic design in the West, was shown in my own doctoral research study of modern Dutch mosques, conducted at Leiden University between 2005 and 2009. As we have seen in the discussion of the international literature, the plans for the *Essalam* Mosque in Rotterdam and the *Westermosque* and *Taibah* Mosque in Amsterdam have been critically evaluated as self-inflicted representations of a being ‘from the East’; exceptions were the

*Nour* Mosque, the *Poldermosque* and the Turkish HDV mosques, that were considered artistically creative and socially integrative. My own empirical reconstructions of the design processes of these Dutch mosques, however, showed that their forms, within a variety of municipal restrictions, were largely generated by an internal competition between Islamic interpretations, represented by patrons who positioned themselves in mutually exclusive religious hierarchies by selecting and reshuffling diverging aspects of venerated models, and by recombining the results with strategic aspects of other prototypical buildings (see Roose 2009 and 2012). In order to speed up the design process, from among a wide range of competing architects those were selected whose oeuvre was presupposed to best fit the ideal. What the surrounding western communities would make of the complex end-results only became a concern after construction, when verbal representations to the public would be specifically geared towards reaching the greatest social acceptability possible. In the remainder of this section I will briefly discuss the actual actions and intentions of the patrons behind these three Dutch mosques, as well as those of the patrons behind their supposedly more innovative opposites.<sup>3</sup>

#### *The Essalam Mosque, Rotterdam*

Contrary to the above mentioned critical reflections on the supposedly traditionalist *Essalam* Mosque (built 2010), its Moroccan patron, Ahmed Ajdid, in fact intended it as a highly topical and contemporary representation of his choice for the Islamic Movement of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the Egyptian-born sheikh associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and propagating a pan-Islamic vision exceedingly popular among young western Muslims. Al-Qaradawi strove for a reinstitution of an authentic caliphate by returning to a state of unity through religious abstraction, stripping each Islamic view of its excesses in order to extrapolate an original essence. His ideal rejected nationalist Islamic visions as for instance embraced by followers of the Moroccan king, who used a Malikite interpretation of Islam in legitimizing his own claim to being the successor to the prophet. It also rejected the Sufi visions that circulated among other Moroccan religious communities, who resorted to their living Sufi saints as the real heirs to Mohammed and who practiced the worship of graves, with a large role for the tomb of the prophet. And this ideal rejected the growing popularity of Salafism, which also dismissed the theology underpinning the Moroccan throne, since it was not according to the purity of the Sunna (the example and the teachings of the prophet), but which aimed for a complete de-culturalization instead.

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<sup>3</sup> For the social and political ramifications surrounding the building projects of these mosques, see Sunier (this volume).

Within these politico-religious circumstances and the ensuing prototypical connotations, Ajdid took the modern Saudi extension to the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina (the place where the first Muslim community was established) as a perfect model since in his eyes it had been built by all Islamic nationalities using all Islamic building styles (Figure 1). Ajdid then selected the most recognizable elements of this Saudi structure and planned to reshuffle these around the municipally prescribed space in Rotterdam (Figure 2). While forcefully steering the Dutch architect, Wilfried van Winden, in this direction, he first removed any suggested Moroccan building elements, since these had been predominantly applied by Malikite patrons. He then reworked the green dome of the prophet into a colourless version based on contemporary examples in Dubai, since the original had been so often copied by Sufi patrons in other mosques. And throughout, he dismissed a number of Dutch building elements, as these had been favoured by Salafi patrons in their aim to get rid of fake-Islamic imagery (Roose 2009, 210-236; Roose 2012, 293-303) (Figure 3).



Figure 1. Prototypical image selected by Ahmed Ajdid for the Essalam Mosque, 2001. Archive Wilfried van Winden. Reproduced with permission.

Surprisingly, the *Essalam's* supposedly more artistic counterpart, the critically acclaimed *Nour* Mosque in Gouda (built 1993), had in fact been meant to be based on the same prototype. Its board had engaged a shift away from Malikite Islam and Malikite imams towards a more universal alternative, which they located in Saudi Arabia and which they needed to be represented by a large and freestanding building modeled on the modern Mosque of the Prophet in Medina. It was only due to municipal resistance that the design was altered to

the seemingly integrated prayer house that it is now, replacing an old garage in a row of town houses (Roose 2009, 293).

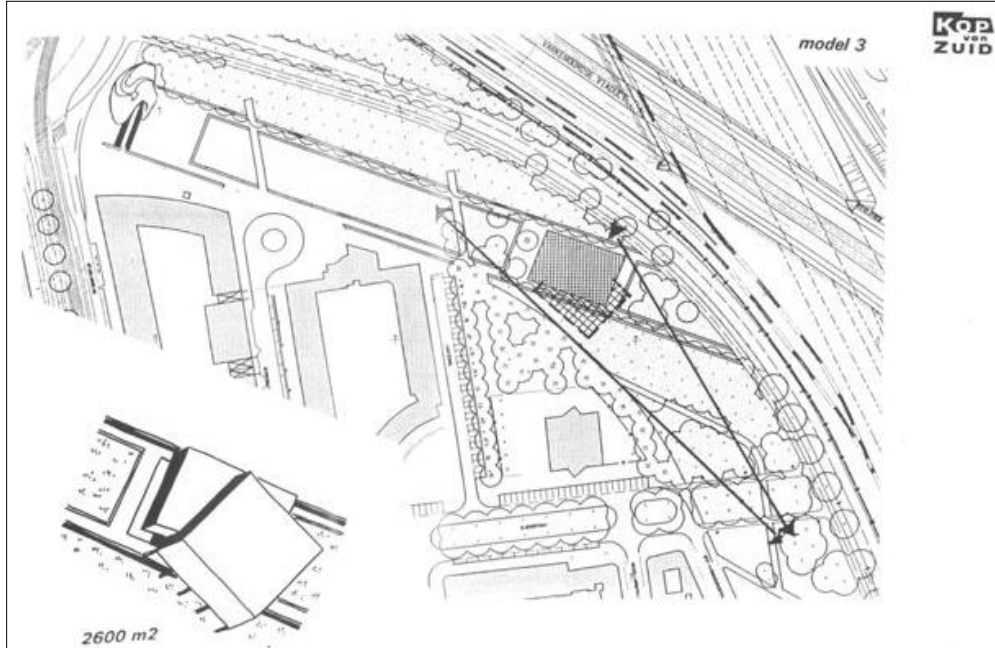


Figure 2. Volume prescribed by Municipality of Rotterdam for the Essalam mosque, 1997. Archive Wilfried van Winden. Reproduced with permission.

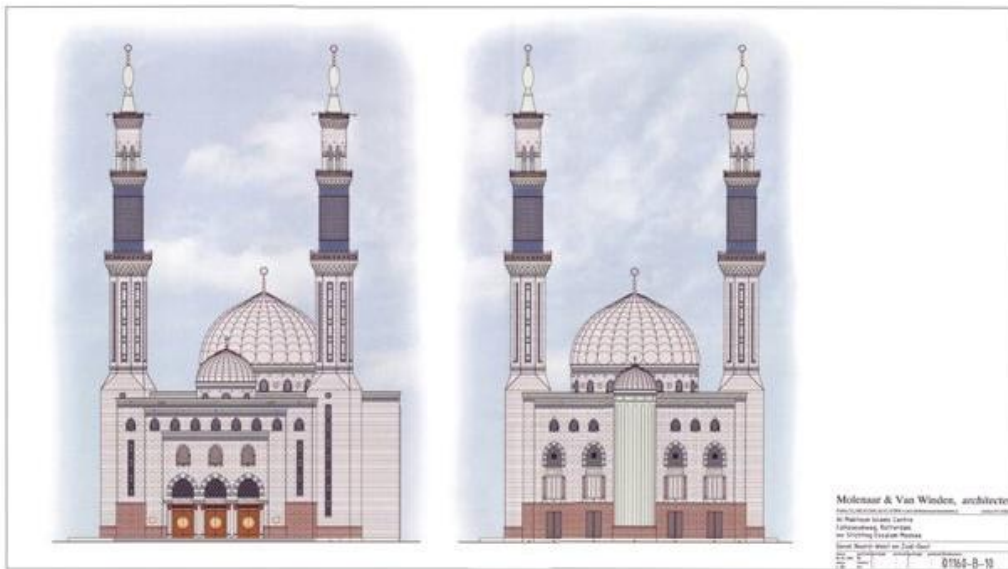


Figure 3. Design for the Essalam mosque by Wilfried van Winden, 2003. Archive Wilfried van Winden. Reproduced with permission.

Similarly, the much heralded alternative for the *Essalam*, the *Poldermosque* design (2003), was adopted by a Moroccan imam who attracted large numbers of Salafi youth and who kept referring to the pre-cultural simplicity of the first mosques during the time of the prophet and his companions (Roose 2009, 250-255). The *Poldermosque* was never built, but recently a Salafi group in the Hague rebuilt their old Soennah Mosque into a similarly 'non-Islamic looking' version (built 2011), lacking a dome and a minaret and even a *mihrab* ('prayer niche'). It was based on scriptural claims that the first mosque was not the house of the prophet (now the mosque in Medina that, in the eyes of the Salafi, has become tainted by the blasphemy of tomb worship), but instead an austere structure on the outskirts of Medina, no longer existent but supposedly created by the prophet himself just before he entered the city (Roose 2009, 294).<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Westermosque, Amsterdam*

In a similar vein, the patron of the allegedly orientalist *Westermosque* (design 2005) was a Dutchman of Turkish origin, Üzeyir Kabaktepe, whose aim was to establish a contemporary representation of the Milli Görüş movement of which he was the local leader. This movement strives for a much larger role of Islam in the public sphere in Turkey, idealizing the religious heydays of Ottoman empire and rejecting the secular-republican (or 'Kemalist') downplay of overly Islamic behaviour and the role of religious institutions in public space. Thus, Kabaktepe looked for the grandest representation of Ottoman grandeur and creativity, leading his French architect, Marc Breitman, away from any Byzantine forms suggested by him, towards the main aspects of the Selimiye Mosque in Edirne, Turkey, aiming to create a similar traditional mosque complex (or 'Külliyeh') to be financially maintained by the exploitation of shops (Figure 4). Meanwhile, he dismissed any modernization or stylization of Ottoman architecture, since this had been applied by his opponents in the Netherlands, the mosque leaders associated with the Turkish Dutch Islamic Foundation (HDV) that was sponsored by the Turkish government. In fact, he took his designer to see some prominent examples of HDV mosques, explicitly showing him what not to do. He even ruled that in a genuine Ottoman mosque complex, shops should be kept away from the sacrality of the main prayer building – thereby becoming more Ottoman than the Ottomans ever were themselves (Figure 5). The only thing he allowed for, under heavy pressure of the municipal government, was the use of Dutch bricks, but only since he reasoned that brickwork could also be found in Ottoman mosques (Figure 6). However, when his ties with the European headquarters of Milli Görüş in Germany (which was suspected of being opposed to integration)

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<sup>4</sup> See also 'De Eerste Moskee', Fatwah by the Soennah Mosque, published on its website on 21 March 2010. <http://www.al-yaqeen.com/va/vraag.php?id=799&zoek=moskee>.

were suddenly revealed, however, the mosque was never built (Roose 2009, 163-179).

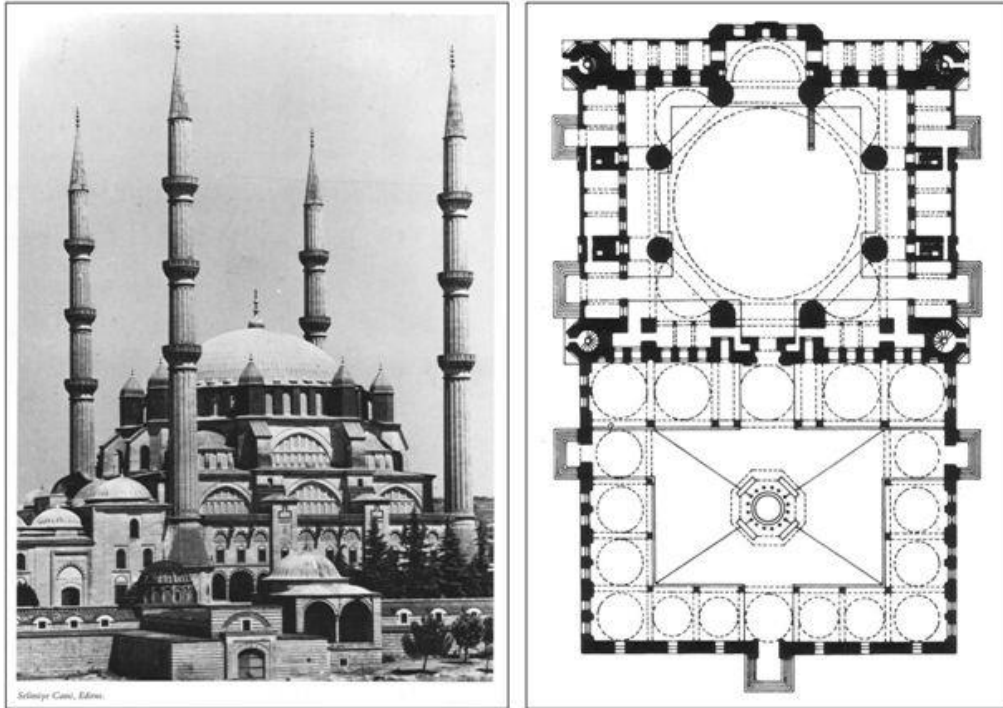


Figure 4. Prototypical image for the Westermosque selected by Üzeyir Kabaktepe, 2002. Archive Westermosque. Reproduced with permission.

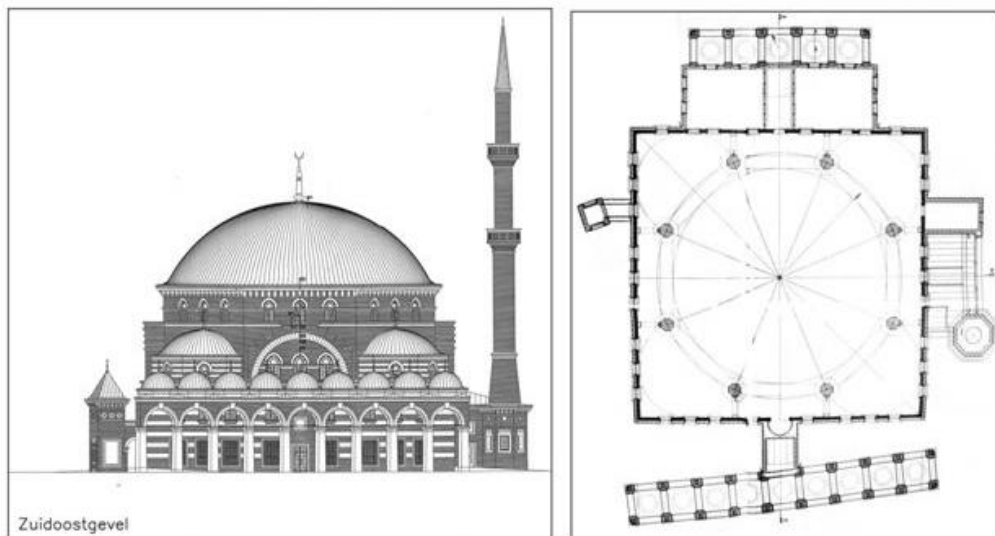


Figure 5. Design for the Westermosque by Marc Breitman, 2004. Archive Municipality of Amsterdam. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 6. Model for the Westermosque, by Municipality of Amsterdam, 2005. Archive Municipality of Amsterdam. Reproduced with permission.

As mentioned, the HDV or Dutch Islamic Foundation, the organization behind the mosques that were seen to be the modernist opposites to the *Westermosque*, is in reality politically and financially connected to the Directorate of Religious Affairs (or '*Diyamet*') in Turkey. In Turkey itself, this state organization had been steering important mosques, such as the Parliament Mosque in Ankara, away from overly Ottoman imagery and towards modernization through abstraction and application of pre-Ottoman and western building elements. Member mosques in the Netherlands propagated a similarly secular vision of Islam and the state, using official *Diyamet* preachers and architecturally favouring Ottoman elements that were, however, always modernized, the extent to which initially varied with individual patrons. At a certain point Bedri Sevinçsoy, a secular Turkish architect living in the Netherlands, had come to be predominantly used by *Diyamet*, and he eventually devised, loosely based on Ottoman models, a standardized and much-used model for a dome and minaret that could be recognized as Turkish and modern at the same time. After his retirement and an intermittent period of searching for an appropriate successor during which some Dutch designers were hired, eventually the Turkish architect Erdal Önder emerged as the newly favoured architect for *Diyamet* mosques in the

Netherlands, and he also devised a stylized and standardized version of a Turkish dome and minaret for his patrons (Roose 2009, 134-163). Meanwhile in Turkey, the steady rise to power of Islamist groups has resulted in a plan for a mosque in Istanbul that has given rise to much controversy among secularists, since its imagery closely follows that of Ottoman prototypes while its minarets are even claimed to be higher than those of the Mosque of the Prophet in Medina.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The Taibah Mosque, Amsterdam*

Lastly, the allegedly cliché-like design for the *Taibah* Mosque (built 2004) had actually been intended by Mohammed Yunus Gaffar, its Hindustani-Islamic patron from Surinam, as a representation of the Barelvi Sufi vision of Islam, led by his venerated Pakistani leader and living Sufi saint Noorani Siddiqui. The latter, a claimed successor to the prophet, had established the World Islamic Mission to counter puritanical Islamic visions that attempted to outstrip Sufi leadership of its divine authority and that were mostly propagated among the Ahmadi and Wahhabi schools. The Barelvi vision was named after a mystic who sought to reinstitute Mohammed and his Sufi successors as the only channels to receive the divine light, as well as to reinforce the veneration and building of domed graves. Thus, Gaffar took what he considered to be the most perfect model of a Sufi tomb, the *Taj Mahal*, and combined its most important aspects, such as its quincunx structure, its arched galleries, its entrance iwans, and its fourfold corner turrets, with the green dome of the prophet and its adjacent Mamluk minaret (Figure 7). Contrary to the aforementioned patron of the *Essalam* mosque in Rotterdam, Gaffar carefully avoided any elements of the modern Saudi-built complex around the latter, since he associated these with the despised Wahhabism. When steering his Dutch architect, Frank Domburg, in this general direction (Figure 8), he added some creative material expressions of basic ideas from Barelvi theology, cosmology and devotion, such as a multitude of starry lights in the inner dome representing the saints distributing the divine light; windows in the shape of the silhouette of the prophet's dome symbolizing the Light of Mohammed falling into the mosque; marble plates based on those of the Garden of Heaven or the area between Mohammed's grave and pulpit in which to directly experience the divine; a sculpture adjacent to the prayer niche in the shape of the doors to the prophet's grave; layers of marble plating in the entrance hall that symbolized the word of god brought from the heavens to the earth by Gibreel to Mohammed; and an enormous poster on the inner balcony that imaged the tombs of the most important claimed Sufi predecessors of

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<sup>5</sup> See <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/11/29/252449.html>.



Noorani Siddiqui – including the prophet himself (Roose 2009, 83-92; Roose 2012, 285-293) (Figure 9).<sup>6</sup>



Figure 7. Prototypical image for the Taibah mosque in Amsterdam, selected by Mohammed Yunus Gaffar, 1997. Archive Frank Domburg. Reproduced with permission.

<sup>6</sup> Compare the new design for the *Barelvi Noor ul-Haram* Mosque in Oakville, Canada – indicated by Noorani Siddiqui to be “a land thirsty for the *adhan*”. Also this building appears to combine an ideal Sufi tomb with the prophet’s grave, and in many ways it is akin to the *Taibah* Mosque. See <http://www.wimcanada.com/>.



Figure 8. Design for the Taibah mosque in Amsterdam, design by Frank Domburg, 2000. Archive Frank Domburg. Reproduced with permission.

As previously mentioned, the patron of the *Taibah* mosque detested both Salafi and Ahmadi Islam and, consequently, opposed the mosque designs of these two strands of Islam. Several Dutch Salafi mosques have been discussed above, but the oldest stand-alone brick mosque in the Netherlands is actually Ahmadi: the Mubarak Mosque in the Hague (built 1955). Although its age prevented its treatment as an example of modern mosque design in the international literature, in the Netherlands it was described as perfectly adapted to the Dutch context, much along the lines of the international acclamations of the *Nour* Mosque, *Poldermosque* and HDV mosques. But also here, looks may deceive: it had actually been modeled on the holy mosques of the claimed prophet Ahmad and his caliphate successors in Qadian, India – it just had been heavily restricted in its details by the municipal government. In fact, the mosques in Qadian had been taken as ideal models by a multitude of Ahmadi missionaries after they had moved headquarters to Rabwah, Pakistan, following the partition of British India (Roose 2009, 43-47, 50-65). Over time, a growing number of Ahmadi patrons shifted from merely referring to Qadian, where Ahmad’s early construction had already referred to what was then known of the prophet’s mosque, to incorporating features of Medina itself as an even more authentic prototype, following the motto “Mosques will be constructed on the model of the Prophet’s Mosque and

make every land the land of Hejaz” (Rehmatullah 2001). The model was taken to be the building as it stood before the anti-Ahmadi patrons in Saudi Arabia extended it, with elements from its substructure, its multiple domes, and its variegated turrets visualized both in photographs and, at times combined with the North Indian prototypes, in actual mosque design (Khan 1994).



Figure 9. Additions for the Taibah mosque in Amsterdam, by Mohammed Yunus Gaffar, 2004-2013. Photo Eric Roose.

Recently, the prototype has come to be represented, in Ahmadi photography as well as in mosque architecture, as particularly consisting of the prophet’s dome combined with its Ottoman corner minaret (Khan 2008).<sup>7</sup> The latter was perhaps less adjacent to the dome than its Mamluk counterpart, but also less tainted by the inappropriate religious connotations vested in the latter by anti-Ahmadi patrons such as the Bareilvi.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Also see the image on the main Qadiani website. <http://www.alislam.org/gallery2/v/mosques/>.

<sup>8</sup> Compare the design for the *Ahmadi Bait ul-Islam* Mosque in Toronto. As mentioned earlier, its patrons wished to plant “the seeds of a Muslim town in North America on the model of the Prophet’s Medina”. See <http://www.alislam.org/gallery2/v/mosques/>. In a similar manner, compare the Shia Ismaili centre in Vancouver, commissioned by the Aga Khan himself, with the Great Mosque of Mahdiyya in North Africa, built by the first claimed Fatimid caliph and grandest among the Aga Khan’s predecessors, imam al-Mahdi. The latter also modeled his mosque on the

## Conclusion

Where the architect Gulzar Haider initially only advised other architects against oriental-looking mosque design since it would evoke images from the Thousand and One Nights among westerners, the architect Ihsan Fethi went one step further and placed the ongoing popularity of what he thought of as Arabian Nights mosques in an assumed conservatism among the Islamic clergy. Haider then followed by suggesting that the supposed use of orientalist imagery in western mosques had something to do with the need to assert a global Muslim identity through resorting to a false idea of visual authenticity. At the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at MIT, the head of library Omar Khalidi subsequently rejected oriental-looking mosque design as caused by a misplaced Muslim pride in capturing an essential symbolism, dangerously reinforcing the western view of Muslims as ‘the other’. Program director and architect Nasser Rabbat then set the argument in a methodological framework and devised a perspective that pre-supposed the imposition of orientalist stereotypes by the producers of oriental-looking mosques themselves, whether they experienced it as such or not. This led the architect Nebahat Avcioglu to represent orientalist buildings and oriental-looking mosques as a historical continuum, using subjectively projected similarities between the two categories in support of the idea that the great majority of diaspora Muslims had evidently not been able to escape the bindings of architectural self-orientalism. Finally, the architecture critic Christian Welzbacher put all of these ideas together and implied that even if you did not have any knowledge about a particular oriental-looking mosque, you could safely say that its community had embraced western clichés of the foreigner from the East in order to wilfully resist the idea of integration.

Whereas all of these authors offered international examples of oriental-looking and (much rarer) non-Oriental-looking mosque design, it is especially in a closer study of Avcioglu’s and Welzbacher’s examples from the Netherlands that the flaws in their argument come fully to the fore. It shows that as soon as critical and social ideals are left behind and actual design processes are studied, a number of methodological assumptions on mosques in the West turn out to be artistic projections rather than historical facts. The objects appear not to have been built by circumscribed Muslim communities, generalized diaspora members, or semi-autonomous architects, but by ambitious patrons. The latter do not aim for the enhancement of a singular Muslim identity, but for that of

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house of the prophet, but explicitly substituted a monumental portal, in Shia scriptures associated with Ali, for the massive minaret that had been preferred among his Sunni rivals (Bloom 1989, 99-103).

their own religious legitimacy among their newly expanding Islamic constituencies. Since their target group is not ‘the West’, the public recognizability of their complex iconographies is not an issue at the time they create them. As public acceptance does become an issue after construction, their verbal representations do not necessarily reflect their actions during the design process. And thinking of the resultant forms in terms of Western Mosques versus Orientalist Mosques may do justice to our own hopes and fears, but not to those of the people who produced them.

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### About the author

Eric R. Roose is a cultural anthropologist and an art historian with an ongoing interest in the comparative iconography of modern religious architecture. Between 2005 and 2009 he was an affiliated PhD fellow at Leiden University, where he conducted a research project on Dutch mosque design. Between 2009 and 2012 he completed a study of Sufi sanctuaries in Europe as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Amsterdam, where he was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO). From 2012 to 2013 he was an affiliated fellow at the Institute for Religious Studies at Leiden University, preparing a research project on the iconography of modern Jewish and Christian architecture in the West.

### Le mythe de la mosquée orientaliste: vers une iconographie de l'architecture islamique aux Pays-Bas

Les grandes mosquées des Pays-Bas figurent souvent dans les discussions internationales de l'architecture islamique moderne. De plus en plus souvent, elles sont citées comme preuve d'une tendance parmi les musulmans défavorisés à utiliser des stéréotypes exotiques pour affirmer leur propre identité, dans un milieu qui leur est étranger et qui les considère comme des étrangers. Les rares exemples néerlandais qui ne semblent pas évoquer des mosquées historiques sont alors présentés comme preuve que certaines communautés ont su dépasser cette sorte d'« auto-orientalisme. » Dans cet article, je commence par donner un survol chronologique de la littérature pertinente, puis je démontre que tout rapport causal entre l'orientalisme et les mosquées occidentales à l'air oriental est basé plutôt sur des projections critiques et non sur un examen empirique. J'offre ensuite une approche alternative, élaborée

d'abord à Leyde pour étudier l'architecture chrétienne des Plats Pays, qui permet aux chercheurs de voir un édifice religieux comme un ensemble complexe d'aspects révélateurs. À l'aide de recherches déjà faites sur les processus de conception de mosquées aux Pays-Bas, je démontre que pour la plupart des mosquées considérées internationalement comme exemples de conception soit orientale soit innovatrice, les donateurs d'ouvrage avaient en fait des buts tout à fait autres. Un examen plus à fond des buts et actions présidant à la conception et construction de ces édifices suggère plutôt qu'on voulait combiner des exemples prototypiques, réels ou idéalisés, de l'histoire architecturale de l'islam. Leur but n'était pas de se placer comme « oriental » ou « occidental » aux yeux de la société néerlandaise, qui serait en tout cas incapable d'interpréter les subtilités de ces formes. Ils cherchaient plutôt à se placer parmi les diverses communautés musulmanes, comme des chefs qui se faisaient concurrence, ayant des interprétations et des bases de pouvoir qui s'excluaient réciproquement, dans une lutte interne toute pareille à celle que l'étude de l'histoire architecturale chrétienne a déjà révélée.

### **De mythe van de oriëntaalse moskee: Naar een iconografie van Islamitische architectuur in Nederland**

Prominente moskeeën in Nederland blijken herhaaldelijk te worden gebruikt in internationale verhandelingen over moderne islamitische architectuur in het westen. Zij dienen daarbij steeds vaker als bewijs van de mate waarin sociaal achtergestelde moslims in de diaspora gebruik maken van exotische stereotypen, om zo hun eigen identiteit te benadrukken in een voor hen vreemde (en bevreemdende) omgeving. De enkele Nederlandse voorbeelden die niet lijken terug te grijpen op historische moskeeën, worden vervolgens gepresenteerd als bewijs dat sommige gemeenschappen zich blijkbaar wel hebben kunnen ontworstelen aan dit soort 'zelf-oriëntalisme'. In dit artikel geef ik een chronologisch overzicht van de betreffende literatuur, waaruit blijkt dat het causale verband tussen oriëntalisme en oriëntaals aandoende moskeeën in het westen minder is gebaseerd op empirisch onderzoek dan op kritische projecties. Vervolgens presenteer ik een alternatief perspectief dat ontwikkeld werd in Leiden om christelijke architectuur in de Lage Landen te bestuderen, en waarmee onderzoekers dieper door kunnen dringen in een religieus gebouw als een samenstelling van betekenisvolle elementen. Aan de hand van verwijzingen naar eerder onderzoek dat ik verrichtte naar ontwerpprocessen van moskeeën in Nederland laat ik zien dat in de gevallen die internationaal aangehaald werden als voorbeelden van hetzij oriëntalistisch, hetzij innovatief ontwerp, de opdrachtgevers in werkelijkheid een heel andere bedoeling

hadden. Door te kijken naar de opeenvolging van intenties en acties tijdens het creëren van de gebouwen, wordt duidelijk dat de betreffende opdrachtgevers een samenstelling nastreefden van prototypische voorbeelden uit de islamitische architectuurgeschiedenis, hetzij bestaand of geïdealiseerd. Hiermee positioneerden zij zich niet als ‘oosterlingen’ of ‘westerlingen’ tegenover de Nederlandse samenleving, die dit soort complexe samenstellingen toch niet zou begrijpen, maar tegenover elkaar, als de elkaar betwistende leiders met hun wederzijds met elkaar onverenigbare geloofsinterpretaties en machtsposities die we eerder al herkend hadden in de christelijke architectuurgeschiedenis.