

no longer 'Catholic', but the culture of Catholicism still persists.

The new Archbishop of Belgium, who was appointed in 2009, the conservative French-speaking Léonard (who also speaks perfect Dutch) has brought about a change of culture as well. Whereas his predecessor, Danneels, had led the Belgian Church for decades by diplomacy and had papered over conflicts – a strategy which did not win him any praise in Rome – his successor is a strictly orthodox shepherd who does not shrink from challenging those who think differently from himself with his pronouncements on homosexuality and Aids, among other subjects. Léonard wants a Church that can take on the world, his message is clear, unremitting and transparent. The patience for which Danneels was formerly praised is long gone, but it is now coming back to haunt him.

Be things as they may, a new relationship is being forged between Church and state in Belgium. The Church has lost its stranglehold forever and will have to find a new place in this secularized society. Some dream of a Church of an orthodox minority, a Noah's Ark. Others believe in a chastened Church more in keeping with modern times, a Church that is more than the sum of its leaders, more than the hierarchy of pope and bishops, a grass roots Church of believers.

Luc Devoldere

Translated by Sheila M. Dale

The Mayor of Rotterdam Is from Morocco

Mayor of Rotterdam since early 2009, Ahmed Aboutaleb was born in 1961 in Beni Sidel, a small clay hut village in the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. He came to the Netherlands in the 1970s and now he's in charge of one of the largest ports in the world. He is a practising Muslim, a Dutchman and a Moroccan. This is the first time that a Dutch municipality has a mayor of Moroccan origin.

Aboutaleb is a member of the social-democratic *Partij van de Arbeid* (PvdA - Workers Party). Before he became mayor, he was Secretary of State for Social Affairs, a position he held for almost two years. Over the past few years, Aboutaleb has changed job quite often. He was an alderman in Amsterdam and before that a civil servant in the Dutch capital. He was head of Forum Institute for Multicultural Development and has also held various jobs in journalism and counselling. He was a TV reporter for the commercial channel RTL, for example, and a spokesperson for the Dutch Minister of Culture.

Aboutaleb came to the Netherlands when he was fifteen. As he himself stated in a newspaper interview, he left behind 'a cow, a donkey, a well and an awful lot of rocks'. He wanted to become assimilated into Dutch society as quickly as possible from lower technical school through secondary technical school to technical college. Eight years ago already, the former leader of the PvdA, Felix Rottenberg, had the following to say about Aboutaleb: '...Ahmed's CV is the result of a sense of discipline, self awareness and perseverance that's almost pre-war in nature'. He added that Aboutaleb could easily become a minister or the mayor of Amsterdam. In the same interview, Aboutaleb's wife remarked that the Netherlands was not quite ready for that yet: 'it will probably take twenty years before someone like Ahmed can become mayor of Amsterdam'.

The Aboutaleb family didn't have to wait that long. Though it wasn't Amsterdam but Rotterdam he became mayor of. Aboutaleb's political career did begin in the capital, however. He was elected alderman there and



Ahmed Aboutaleb (second person from the left, 1961-).

attracted a lot of media attention following the murder of the film director Theo van Gogh in November 2004. Van Gogh was murdered by a Moroccan. Following the murder, Aboutaleb said that young Muslims who didn't share core Dutch values should better leave. Ever since that moment he has been threatened and has had to be protected.

And now he's the mayor of Rotterdam, a city of almost 600,000 inhabitants of 174 different nationalities. When he was being sworn in as mayor, Aboutaleb remarked that his security should not be a cause for concern regarding his contact with ordinary Rotterdammers: 'I'll meet unannounced with workers, pub-goers, business people when walking through a neighbourhood or if I ring someone's doorbell and ask for a cup of coffee or call by at a school. That will happen without the press.'

When Aboutaleb became mayor, *Leefbaar Rotterdam* (Pim Fortuyn's political heirs) demanded that he give up his Moroccan passport. During his inauguration they severely criticised the new mayor's dual nationality. He was handed an envelope addressed to the King of Morocco. Aboutaleb was supposed to put his passport in it, but he left the envelope untouched.

Aboutaleb said that he refused to accept that his loyalty towards the Netherlands should be called into question. But he did add that the 'New Dutch would have to rid themselves of any feelings of victimisation. You've chosen to belong to the Netherlands and to participate. But that doesn't mean that you have to burn all your bridges behind you.'

During his first years in office Aboutaleb wished to be known as a strict but just mayor, as someone who isn't shy of taking strong measures. *Feyenoord* supporters were not allowed to go to Amsterdam for the game against their sworn enemies *Ajax*. They had to pay for any damage they caused during a game themselves. Rotterdam plans to save 600 million euros in the next four years. The new mayor's approach is dynamic. *Blijdorp Zoo* hardly receives funding any more, for example. Aboutaleb set out these measures himself and hardly moved an inch from his original position during the negotiations that followed. This hard line seems to be appreciated by the port city's dwellers. Seldom does one ever hear severe criticism of the mayor in Rotterdam.

Aboutaleb is proud to have held various important positions in public office in the Netherlands; as he once stated when he was appointed Secretary of State: 'As a Muslim and as the child of a simple immigrant from the Atlas Mountains, I've been accepted as a member of this country's government. This is extraordinary, extraordinary, extraordinary. I'll cherish this moment. And I am very proud of the Netherlands, where this is possible. I am proud of all the Dutch people who have put their trust in me.'

Joris van de Kerkhof

Translated by Peter Flynn