

## **Declaration of Churches and Muslim Organizations in the Netherlands**

The resolve of the Dutch member of parliament Geert Wilders to release his film *Fitna* has caused considerable unrest in Dutch society and met with rejection in the Islamic world. It is the second time that a film with Islam as its subject, has led to tensions in Dutch society. In August 2004, the film *Submission* was broadcast, made by the then member of parliament Ms. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, of the Liberal party. In November 2004, the maker of that film, Mr. Theo van Gogh, was murdered. The social unrest which this triggered, led to conversations between the two national umbrella organizations of the Muslim community – the Contact Committee Muslims and Government (CMO) and the Contact Group Islam (CGI) – and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN). The outcome of these conversations was a Declaration to Society, which was drawn up in July 2005 and then presented to the Dutch government.

In view of the situation that has arisen because of the film of Mr. Wilders, the executive leaders of the CMO, CGI and PCN felt it necessary to again meet and come to further agreements. The general secretary of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands also attended this consultation. The outcome of this consultation was the decision to jointly visit a number of Islamic countries, to show that the relations between Muslims and Christians in the Netherlands are good, and to explain that the churches strongly reject contempt for another person's religion. The statements of Mr. Wilders show that his intention is to drive a wedge between the Islamic community and the rest of Dutch society.

As Muslims and Christians, we are convinced that, in these complex times, we have the task of building bridges, overcoming distrust and combining our efforts for justice and peace. The chief purpose of the visit is to draw attention to the fact that the majority of the Dutch people reject the insulting of Islam.

The Council of Churches in the Netherlands supports this initiative to contribute – at home and abroad – to the fostering of mutual understanding between believers of different religions.

The churches and Muslim organizations therefore declare the following:

‘In the Netherlands and in many other countries, unrest has arisen because of the resolve of Mr. Geert Wilders to release the film *Fitna*. Mr. Wilders is provocative in his comments on the Qu’ran and the Prophet Muhammad and presents a distorted portrayal of Islam as a violent religion.

The Dutch laws guarantee freedom of speech (the freedom to express one's own opinion) and of religion. Legally it is difficult to prevent the release of a film that no one has yet seen. Nevertheless, we already regard as provocative the remarks of Mr. Wilders about the contents of this film. We have received warnings from within the Netherlands and from abroad, which make clear to us that, with the release of such a film, the relations between population groups and religions across the world can be put under pressure in a manner that is irresponsible.

It is reprehensible when that which is sacred in our religions, is ridiculed and our faith offended. We therefore strongly reject all contempt and slander aimed at the Qu’ran and the Prophet Muhammad. Just as we would not wish this with regard to the Bible and the Christian faith. We stress that Mr. Wilders represents the vision of a small section of Dutch society. This vision is certainly not shared by the Dutch churches.

As Muslims and Christians, we find that the announcement of this film has unnecessarily and for no apparent reason whipped up opposing points of view in our country. Comments that incite fear of Islam and of Muslims, are destructive. Since the arrival of Muslims in the Netherlands in the 1970s, there have been many contacts and forms of cooperation between Muslims and Christians, both at the national and local levels. In line with the Declaration to Society, issued by the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the Muslim organizations in 2005, we discern that now more than ever, we have to persist in continuing to meet and, wherever possible and in mutual respect, combine our efforts to create a tolerant society.

We declare that religions never have the purpose of calling for violence or the threat thereof. We strongly reject all violence that is perpetrated in the name of God or of a religion. We deem it to be our task to make clear throughout the world that this is contrary to Islam and to Christianity. The purpose of both religions is to proclaim peace, mercy and justice, freedom of religion and convictions about life. To this, we feel obligated.

We are open to justified criticism about our religion, with a view to exposing real or perceived abuses. We also feel called to continue posing critical questions of each other about what is happening at home and abroad in our faith communities with regard to the believers of other religions. When necessary, we shall call religious and government leaders to account for any form of abuse of human rights, such as freedom of religion and the freedom to express one's own opinion.

In the Netherlands, we have invited everyone of the country's population to steadfastly help in creating a society in which respect and peaceful relations are all-important. Integral to this is that every person has the right to publicly express their faith and convictions about life. Fear sustained by false impressions must not serve as our guide. When there are problems between groups in society, we are obliged to solve these by means of mutual dialogue and rules that are just.

We have also called on governing councils of churches and mosques in the Netherlands, now more than ever, to meet each other; to open their churches and mosques with this in mind; to join in fostering goodwill; and to cooperate in efforts towards a peaceful society.

We appeal to Muslim organisations and churches in Islamic countries, to support us by spreading accurate information about what is happening in the Netherlands. We appeal to them to avoid making statements that aggravate the tensions between Muslims and Christians. Let us together combine our efforts, so that we make visible throughout the world the considerable contribution that Islam and Christianity can make to world peace.

*Utrecht, 17 March 2008*

Contact Committee Muslims and Government (CMO)

Contact Group Islam (CGI)

Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PCN)

Council of Churches in the Netherlands

