

## **Evaluation report on the visit to Cairo by the joint delegation of the churches and Muslim organizations, from 24 until 27 March 2008**

### **Summary of the joint declaration**

*From 24 until 27 March, a delegation of Muslims and Christians from the Netherlands visited Cairo. Prior to this visit, they issued a joint declaration. This declaration was presented and/or read out to their interlocutors in Egypt.*

*The key points in this declaration follow herewith.*

The churches and the Muslim organizations 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 Qur’an 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 Qur’an 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 organizations 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.

## **The meetings**

**Tuesday, 25 March 2008**

### **1. Meeting with Sheikh Tantawy**

The delegation first met with Sheikh Tantawy. During this first meeting, emotions ran higher than at first expected. Tantawy himself reacted with much emotion to the presence of the delegation. The Dutch ambassador in Egypt had also visited him, the previous day. The ambassador had handed him a letter from the Dutch minister of foreign affairs. Tantawy was very upset by the contents of the letter. He seemed disappointed at the stance of the Dutch government and said to us: "Why do you continually have to attack our faith? Why can the Dutch government not stop the film of Wilders from being shown?" Nevertheless, he reserved judgement about the film until he had actually seen it. Via us he invited Mr. Wilders to come and discuss with him.

We could understand his reaction as an example of the tension that was rife prior to the release of the film. In the end, he expressed appreciation for the delegation's efforts and for the declaration. Three times he personally thanked the delegation members. When there is criticism of Islam, one must talk with Muslim scholars, contended Tantawy. Moreover, he stressed that he is a spiritual leader and not a politician.

After the meeting ended, Tantawy went outside with the delegation to wave them goodbye and again thank them for their stated position and for their commitment.

## Wednesday, 26 March 2008

### 2. Meeting with the Rev. Dr. el-Bayadi

The Rev. el-Bayadi is the president of the Evangelical Church of Egypt. He stressed that freedom and responsibility are two concepts that are closely related. Freedom of expression is not absolute but has to be exercised responsibly, he contended. The Roman Catholic Church and the Al-Azhar Mosque had drawn up a draft declaration on *Freedom of Speech and Religion*. This declaration had been signed by Sheikh Zifzaf, the then head of the Al-Azhar dialogue commission, but not by himself. When radical movements within Islam expressed fierce opposition to this declaration, Tantawy had to distance himself from it. Dr. el-Bayadi regards this as a loss resulting from the controversies that are exacerbated by actions such as now that of Wilders.

El-Bayadi also contended that the ‘grassroots’ have to take notice of the delegation’s stance. More information has to be given. But how does one reach millions of Muslims in the Middle East? Conversations such as those with the delegation, are often held behind closed doors. One of the problems is that Egypt is a religious country. The popular view is that the Netherlands is a Christian country. That this is not the case, is scarcely conceivable here.

### 3. Press conference

At the end of the morning, the delegation was invited to a press conference in the Press Syndicate. About 30 journalists were present there, among other from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, France, Spain, Germany and the Netherlands.

Speaking in Arabic, Dr. Marzouk began by outlining the purpose of the mission. The decision to hold talks with the Al-Azhar University was a deliberate one, given the weight of its authority in the Islamic world. This was, among other, why Egypt was chosen. Another reason was that Egypt has a relatively large Christian minority and internal dialogues also take place there.

The Declaration was then read aloud twice, in English and in Arabic.

The first to react was Dr. Hassan Mohammed Wageih. Seen from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, he argued that provocations such as the film of Wilders should not be used as a ‘test’ of each other’s culture and religion. This only results in a lose-lose situation. He stressed that lack of knowledge can be a great danger to having a good discussion about matters of substance. Freedom of speech does not, of course, mean the freedom to insult. To better understand each other’s views, he proposed that a new ‘strategy of negotiation’ be developed to overcome the chronic crisis between the Arab world and the West.

Dr. el-Bayadi, who had come with the delegation, again underlined the importance of freedom with responsibility. Egypt could serve as an example to the world, because Islam and the Christian minority get along well and have a strong bond. Characteristic of Egypt is the openness. If the West cannot be an example of this, then Egypt has to take on this role.

The president of the Press Syndicate, who arrived late because of a law-court judgement on a journalist, then took over as moderator of the press conference. He drew attention to the history that Jews, Christians and Muslims in Egypt have in common. One has to be correct in how one writes about the film of Wilders, because in Egypt too there is a problem with freedom of expression.

It was then the turn of the journalists to pose questions. “Why does the Dutch government not prohibit the film?” That would not work. It is better to make a moral appeal to common sense and sound judgement.

A Dutch journalist asked: why are there no protests in Cairo against crimes committed in the name of Islam? Dr. Wageih's answer: "Because here we still find ourselves at a low point of the circle of civilization. We still do not yet have a culture of demonstrating for issues that seem unrelated to the needs of daily life." Wageih also spoke of a silent majority who do not make themselves heard in these cases. At the same time, the delegation could outline the situation in the Netherlands and the freedom that Muslims have in the Netherlands, among other, to set up their own organizations and freely practise their religion. The delegation leader again expressly stated that Islam too has a problem, namely that the image which the West has of Islam, is – to a large extent – of their own making.

#### **4. Meeting with Prof. Jafaar Abdelsalaam**

Dr. Abdelsalaam is the general secretary of the League of Islamic Universities, an international organization.

The conversation began about the religious developments in the West. But also about the distorted perception of Islam in the West. Because Islam is not a religion of violence, as the film of Wilders would have us believe.

Is the general public afraid of Islam? Here the conversation dwelled mainly on the position of Muslims in Dutch society.

Delegation member Driss el-Boujoufi drew attention to the many possibilities available to Islam and to Muslims in the Netherlands: "There are 450 mosques in the Netherlands, more than 50 Islamic schools, an Islamic university, an imam-training programme, two Islamic broadcasting companies. And this is all subsidized by the government. Would a country that makes all this possible, hate Islam?" El-Boujoufi stressed this during several of the meetings. There was much interest in the question as to why a part of the Dutch population has such a problem with Islam and the social integration of Muslims. The delegation named several root causes, whereupon a lively discussion ensued, which ended up being more about the position of Muslims in Dutch society, than about the film of Wilders and its possible consequences. In this meeting, as in others, it seemed that Muslims view the primary purpose of dialogue as being to sketch out an image of Islam that is more correct.

#### **5. Meeting with Bishop Qulta in Nasser City**

This Coptic Catholic (in full communion with Rome) bishop presented the delegation with some clear statements:

The church does not tolerate any form of insult, no matter against which faith. But Muslims also have to learn to react in an adult way to Wilders' film and other forms of criticism. That Muslims have so much difficulty with a critical approach, according to Qulta, has to do with the position of weakness in which Islamic religion and culture currently finds itself, in contrast to the position of strength that it had in our Middle Ages. Qulta did not shy away from voicing strong criticism. What are the two biggest problems? The intellectuals. They are cowards. They run away (with a lot of money, going abroad), but they should instead concern themselves with the protection of ordinary people. The other problem group is the elite of Egyptian society. They have power and ensure that corruption continues to thrive. His criticism also extended to the *men of religion* of all faiths in the Arab world. But few of them seem ready to risk their life for the sake of the poor.

In closing, he contended that the Muslims in the West should be grateful that there they have the freedom they cannot enjoy in their home countries, many of which are ruled by dictatorship.

**Thursday, 27 March 2008**

### **6. Meeting with Bishop Marcos**

This Coptic Orthodox bishop is, among other, charged with looking after his church's foreign relations.

He called for believers to respect each other's religion. And not destroy symbols of religions. During his trips to Europe he is repeatedly confronted with the low numbers of people who still go to church. For him, this is a signal that Europe has lost its spiritual and moral beacons. On the other hand, he was rather offhand about the problems that Coptic Christians have in Egypt, and this led to a discussion with the delegation.

### **7. Visit to Cairo University, meeting with teaching staff and students**

The visit to this university may have been the – hopeful – highlight of this trip. The meeting was moderated by Dr. Pakinam Sharqawi, who stood in for Prof. Dr. Nadia Mahmoud Mostafa. Dr. Mostafa is head of the *Program for Civilization Studies and Dialogue of Cultures* at the University of Cairo. The programme works together with the Center for Arab-West Understanding, headed by Kees Hulsman, which organized a substantial part of our schedule in Egypt. This programme organizes combined student projects, in which Egyptian, European and North American students work together on a joint study project.

A Muslim student told of how she had read texts from the Bible together with Coptic students. She had also read the Qur'an with an American theology lecturer at a Christian seminary in the US. Professors and students are looking for ways to reduce tensions. The same student told, with much enthusiasm, of how she had benefited from a study programme of the CIDT, an institute that, together with the University of Cairo, has set up a programme of cross-cultural study projects.

The questions posed by the students showed a high level of insight into interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Groups of foreign students regularly come to take part in a project for one or more days. But how fine it would be, sighed Dr. Pakinam Sharqawi, if the exchanges would be two-way and Egyptian students could go to foreign universities more often. Such programmes should be given more support, said Dr. Plaisier, who agreed to send a letter to the Dutch ministry of foreign affairs on behalf of the delegation.

The fact that these students will soon be in leading positions “gives a glimmer of hope for the future, because you are the future,” according to Plaisier. He urged them, above all, not to react aggressively to the awaited film, because then Wilders would feel himself vindicated. He further urged them to stand up for human rights and for a peace-loving and tolerant Islam. For this, he received enthusiastic applause.

### **8. Visit to the offices of CIDT**

In the afternoon, we visited the offices of the CIDT – *the Center for Intercultural Dialogue and Translation* – which is headed by Kees Hulsman, who assisted the delegation with his many contacts and local knowledge. He gave a tour of the offices, where people of different countries, cultures and religions work. For further information, see [www.cidtegypt.com](http://www.cidtegypt.com). This impressive work, which involves important documents about the relations between different religions in Egypt being translated into Arabic or English, makes an important contribution to breaking down stereotypes. In so doing, it also puts up a dam to protect against unfounded accusations or insults.

The institute receives support from various quarters, but would also like to get more substantial support from churches and Muslim organizations in the Netherlands.

### **9. Meeting with the Dutch ambassador in Egypt**

Finally, the delegation accepted the invitation of the Dutch embassy to have a conversation with the ambassador. He said it was a pity that the embassy had not been informed in advance of the delegation's trip. He also declared himself to have been rather unpleasantly surprised by the negative reactions to his meeting with Sheikh Tantawy, because, in his opinion, relations had actually been improving in recent years.

Delegation leader Plaisier replied that it had not been the intention to bypass either the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Embassy, but the lack of advance notice was due to the haste with which the mission had to be organized (during Holy Week). Ambassador De Zwaan opined that much had been achieved in recent years with regard to dialogue. He offered the help and support of the embassy in the event of there being follow-up visits by this or other delegations.

### **10. And then ... there was the film.**

As coincidence would – bizarrely – have it, it was while we sat with the ambassador, that the film of Wilders was released. During our last meal, we watched the film *Fitna*. The images fell short of our worst fears. Perhaps there will therefore not be (all too) violent reactions in the Islamic world. And maybe the delegation's mission in Cairo was able to make a substantial contribution to this end.

### **The press conference of the delegation's leader in Utrecht on Friday afternoon, 28 March 2008**

*The following report\* was made about this press conference (\* original Dutch text on [www.pkn.nl](http://www.pkn.nl)):*

“The film *Fitna* by Member of Parliament Geert Wilders is misleading and suggestive.” Synod secretary Bas Plaisier said this on 28 March after his return from Egypt. Plaisier was there last week as head of a delegation of Dutch Muslims and Christians. The delegation had meetings with Islamic leaders and representatives of Christian churches, with the purpose of outlining the religious and social relations in the Netherlands.

#### **Suggestive effects**

“When the film was released in the evening of Thursday, 27 March, we delegation members crowded around a laptop,” said Plaisier. “Sometimes we shut our eyes, because of the gruesome images. I acknowledge: terrorists do gruesome things in the name of Islam. That is a small group and they have to be thwarted with vigour. But these film images are rabble-rousing, as if Islam is synonymous with terrorism.” An obnoxious generalization, according to the synod secretary.

#### **Five percent**

“Recent research shows that 95 percent of Muslims are completely opposed to violence. You cannot, in a film about Islam, put the spotlight on those five percent and just leave it at that. On the one hand, there is relief that only existing images have been used. But, for sure, I am concerned about the impact of the suggestive combinations of image and sound: the sound of paper being torn and the bang at the end. I hope and pray that peace can be maintained in the Muslim community worldwide.”

#### **Relaxed appearance**

The success of the trip to Egypt was, according to Plaisier, especially due to the delegation

acting together on behalf of Dutch Christians and Muslims. “A unique case of teamwork, with which I am very happy. We did not come to blows and were relaxed about speaking on each other’s behalf. This came as a pleasant surprise to the Egyptians, because the commonly-held image of us in many Islamic countries is very different. In this context, Plaisier described as “particularly impressive” whenever during the meetings delegation member el-Boujoufi outlined the situation in the Netherlands. El-Boujoufi said: Muslims often complain that there is a hate campaign against them in the West, but I ask you: which country that hates Muslims, gives the freedom for 400 mosques, two Muslim broadcasting companies and 40 Muslim schools, etc. etc.? It is just not true that in the West we are considered an inferior group.”

### **Declaration**

The delegation had conversations, among other, with Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawy, head of the imam-training programme at the influential Al-Azhar University, with the chairperson of the Al Azhar University and with some Christian leaders, including a bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church and a leader of the Evangelical Church of Egypt. Plaisier: “We began each meeting by reading out a declaration in which we jointly declare how proud we are of the freedom of religion that we have in the Netherlands and that we hold respect in high esteem. In it, we also appeal to the Dutch population to live together in peace and with mutual respect. Your freedom may never impinge upon another person’s freedom. I believe that we were able to get this message across. There is much to be gained, but only if one is open to it.”

### **Church and state**

How differently in Egypt one looks at the situation in the Netherlands, became apparent in the meeting with the influential Sheikh Tantawy. Plaisier: “The day before, he was presented with a letter from the Dutch government, about freedom of religion. He thought that we too had come on behalf of the minister. The imam (Tantawy) expressed his indignation at the lack of understanding about the feelings in the Muslim world. He could also not understand that a member of parliament (Wilders) can assert something with which the Dutch government disagrees. In many Eastern countries that is unthinkable. We had much explaining to do, but during the conversation with him, he personally thanked us three times and, at the end, he personally gave each of us a handshake and posed with us for a photo.”

### **Heart-warming**

In addition to the contacts with representatives of various churches in Egypt, Plaisier called the conversation with students of the Cairo University “surprising and valuable”. Plaisier: “The press was there, the meeting was moderated by a woman and most of the students were female. That was so striking, causing one of the Islamic delegation members to remark: if only we had taken Wilders with us. This too is Islam!” The synod secretary described as heart-warming, the openness with which one could speak with the students and professors, even about the errors in Islamic countries. “They were genuinely interested in the question: where does the bad image that others have of us come from? I pointed to the influence of terrorism, the lack of democracy and the right to freely expressing one’s opinion, to practise and express one’s own faith,” said Plaisier.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it can be said that this trip was important, because the situation in the Netherlands could be outlined to a wide audience, by Muslims and Christians cooperating harmoniously. The delegation had the opportunity to point out what the real situation is in

Dutch society, in which you can – in all freedom – explore and share your faith. It was each time also possible to speak with our interlocutors about the need for democratization and improvement of human rights in the countries of the Middle East, whereby freedom of religion and the freedom to express and practise one's faith is of great importance. Just in its composition, the delegation already showed how much Christians and Muslims in the Netherlands can, when needed, do things together. Moreover, it was clear that, when it comes to expressing their faith and espousing the 'freedoms of Western society', the Dutch Muslims express unstinting support for the achievements of the democratic constitutional state.

De delegatie demonstreerde door haar samenstelling al hoezeer christenen en moslims in Nederland als het nodig is met elkaar optrekken.

The voice of the delegation was heard by leaders of the religious groupings, universities and the press. The appeal for moderation in the reactions to the (at the time) yet-to-be-released film, was broadly understood. Time will tell whether this effort received broad approval in the Islamic countries.

### **Delegation members**

In addition to the delegation leader, *Dr. Bas Plaisier*, on behalf of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (and also member of the board of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands), the Dutch delegation to Egypt consisted of: *Mr. Ahmed Driss el-Boujoufi* (chairman of the Contact Committee Muslims and Government, CMO), *Mr. Abdelmajid Khairoun* (board member of the Contact Group Islam (CGI) and chairman of the Netherlands Muslim Council, NMR), *Ms. Zainab al-Touraihi* (secretary, CMO), *Dr. Marzouk Aulad Abdellah* (lecturer at the Free University of Amsterdam), *Dr. Ton van Eijk*, until recently chairman of the Council of Churches in the Netherlands and priest in the diocese of Rotterdam of the Roman Catholic Church, en *Jielis van Baalen* on behalf of Kerk in Actie, also lecturer of theology and philosophy at the Windesheim University of Applied Sciences in Zwolle and guest lecturer in Cairo. The delegation is very grateful for the work prior to and during the visit, of *Kees Hulsman* of the CIDT, who was present at all the meetings and who arranged many contacts.

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