



**Protestantse  
Kerk**

Geloof·Hoop·Liefde

# **Integrity and Respect**

**Islam Memorandum**

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# 1 Introduction

The synod has set an objective to develop a vision on the theme of the Protestant Church and Islam. This vision should be leading for the policy of the church regarding (the deepening of) the encounter with Muslims and Muslim-organizations and regarding the current questions which result from this encounter. The decision hereto is in line with what the church perceives to be its commission in a wider perspective, i.e. to conduct 'its work of witness and service in respectful intercourse with other religions.' (Church Order Art. XVI-4). In ordinance 14-7-5 this is concretized further. 'In its encounter with other religions and philosophies of life the church conducts its work of witness and service by holding the discussion in a respectful manner and by looking for possibilities to accomplish common tasks'. In its policy document *Learning to live out of wonder* (2005) the church underlined its service in a multi-cultural society as well: "The purpose of congregation life and (world) diaconate is to make the love of Christ visible. Therefore in this multicultural society the congregation will put lots of work in its service to people it comes in contact with." (starting-points of policy, item 10). The relation to other religions and philosophies of life always has belonged to the challenges which the church has to meet. Why it is necessary to dedicate a separate memorandum to Islam specifically, *at this time*? There are several reasons for this.

## A. Social setting: growing relations, increasing questions

- i. The significance of Islam in the social setting has increased strongly. Muslims have lived in the Netherlands since the fifties and sixties. Due to integration and education they are more assertively and prominently present in the centre of society. Christians and Muslims, churches and Muslim-organizations keep in touch with one another increasingly. Christians and Muslims meet everywhere, as neighbours, colleagues, at school and in the area they live in.

This firstly offers new chances and possibilities. The encounter with people of another cultural and religious identity is refreshing. This could result in another outlook on the reality we live in; diversity enriches and deepens our understanding.

It is however a new challenge as well, which produces a lot of social and religious questions: questions on integration and the authenticity of the Dutch culture; questions in relation to the authenticity and the identity of the Christian community in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society; missionary questions in relation to the communication of the Gospel; pastoral questions about the reception of Muslims who want to follow Jesus; questions around inter-religious relations and the upbringing of children; questions in relation to inter-religious (marriage)worships and questions around methods of practical cooperation in all sorts of areas. This context requests a closer reflection on Islam.

The Christian congregations for a long time now have not held a strong majority position in society, from which they comfortably could carry on the discussion with Muslims. This makes reflection necessary even more. The number of Muslims in the Netherlands has increased from some thousands in 1960 till about 825.000 in 2009 (source: Central Bureau of Statistics). This number will continue to increase over the next years, while the number of Christians is still declining. This being the case it is good to examine our relation with Muslims from a new perspective.

The situation in some areas of big cities merits particular attention. Many of these areas have transformed from mainly native Dutch occupancy into areas with quite a different majority population. Among this majority population of immigrants both Muslims and Christians can be found. Religion contributes to the problems; the entire problem however is more complex indeed. This requires special attention from the church and pastoral care for people who feel alienated from the area they live in.

- ii. In a more negative way the attacks of September 11th, 2001 and the murder on Theo van Gogh have put Islam in the centre of attention again. Because of these forms of violence committed in the name of Islam many Dutch people have begun to worry indeed about the increasing presence and influence of Muslims in society. 'Can we speak of Islamization indeed? Isn't this a threat to the freedom of the Dutch rule of law? Isn't Islam ad odds with the democracy in our country? Are core western values such as the equal position of man

and woman, freedom of religion and freedom of speech actually safe? <sup>1</sup>. Such questions are intensified because human rights and democracy are under discussion in many Muslim-countries. Media attention seems to be rather focussed on the negative aspects and not on positive events. This results in an atmosphere of fear of Islamization in general and of extremism in particular.

- iii. Congregation members are increasingly concerned about the position of Christians in the context of Islam worldwide as well. This position is under pressure. Regularly we hear stories of disfavour, discrimination and persecution. In Islamic countries the position of Muslims who have become followers of Jesus becomes a problem: they often have to fear for their lives. Because of this several Christians ask themselves whether this will also be the consequence of an increasing Islamization of the Netherlands.

## **B. The proper nature of Islam as a 'post-Christian' religion**

The social questions cover deeper theological issues. Islam does not only impact on the in cultural-social area, but also questions the 'core values' of modern western society critically. This concerns the church in particular. Islam came into existence later than Christianity and it periodically evolved in anti-thesis to Christianity. The Koran is by Muslims affirmed as divine revelation. Since then a fundamental part of Islamic tradition consists of the denial of essential elements of Christian faith. The Koran identifies 'Isa' as the greatest prophet second to Mohammed; however it rejects explicitly that Jesus is more than just a prophet. Over and over in the Islamic tradition the tenet of the Koran is affirmed that God has no Son; God is not three, but one. Jesus' death by crucifixion is explicitly denied. Therefore Islam challenges the church into the heart of its confession. Christianity evolved partly in anti-thesis to Islam as well. This however cannot be said of the primary sources of Christianity; it concerns the later interpretation and elaboration of Christian faith. In the congregations questions are provoked by all of this. Do Islam and Christianity eventually amount to the same or are they opposites? Do Muslims and Christians ultimately worship the same God or is this statement not true at all?<sup>2</sup> These questions urge the church to reflect on the issue of Islam.

## **C. IP memorandum**

The discussion and acceptance by the general synod of the so called IP-memorandum in April 2008 (*The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*) was the direct reason to come to an Islam-memorandum. The synod resolved that continuing reflection on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the context of the Arab world called for a deeper reflection of a Christian vision on Islam as well. The unrelinquishable solidarity with the people of Israel (confessed in the Church Order, I-7) does not only have impact upon the ecumenical communion with Christians and churches in the Middle East, but it certainly also affects the relation with Muslims. In the Middle East the Dutch Christian community is perceived to be pro-Israel. People wonder whether a theological formulation of the relationship with the people of Israel is directly linked with the unconditional support for the state of Israel. This puts a certain tension on the dialogue with the Islamic community. This tension might interfere with the witness of Christ. The church will have to be aware of this. It is an absolute necessity to indicate from a concrete theological vision on Islam how the solidarity with the people of Israel and with the Arab Christianity is related to the relationship with Islam. This is very important for the relationship of the Protestant Church with Muslims and Muslim-organizations in the Netherlands as well. The Middle East issue occupies the complete Islamic community worldwide.

By all of this we are obliged to say something on Islam *at this moment*. The church intends to be a dynamic faith-community in the 21st century, as indicated in the policy document *learning to live out of wonder*. The church therefore should be able to reflect on the relationship with Islam more profoundly.

This reflection aims at being more than a Christian perspective on the inter-religious dialogue or a vision on the encounter with Muslims. The synod has resolved to come up with a theological vision on Islam, which can serve as basis for ecclesial acting and speaking.

This might be achieved in several ways. It would be possible from tangible encounters with Muslims to determine what Christian identity in relation to Islam implies. The drawback of this method however is the difficulty to do justice to all the different experiences of Christians and Muslims in their manifold encounters. Many encounters are not documented and their content remains hidden. A different approach would be to

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<sup>1</sup> Similar questions are being asked in "The PCN and the discussion with Islam", open letter to the synod, summer 2009, Hebe Kohlbrugge and others.

<sup>2</sup> Compare "The PCN and the discussion with Islam"

phrase once again the nature of our confession and identity with the relation with Muslims in mind. This latter approach seems to be preferable, if only in the outcome the experiences of the church in its relation with Muslims and with Islam remain included. The result could serve as building blocks that have to be elaborated in the discussion with other Christian traditions and in the encounter with Islamic partners. We do not intend this memorandum to be a manual for ecclesial practice; we aim at a theological orientation first. Thinking about specific consequences comes at a later stage.

Chapter 4 is the core of this memorandum: it drafts a Christian theological vision on Islam. Chapter 5 generally indicates some consequences; those will have to be translated in concrete policy later. Chapters 2 and 3 offer a succinct context for Chapter 4.

## 2 A theme with a long history

The relation of Christianity and Islam has a long history. Muslims and Christians can't speak about each other without prejudice; they have been marked by what has happened in the last 14 centuries. In developing a theological vision on Islam we will have to be aware of that. This chapter does not offer a complete overview of the historical developments. It indicates primarily what, based on that history, engages Muslims and Christians. How does this history affect the mutual perception and encounter? There have been some very difficult times and periods of strife and conflict. There have also been periods of peace and harmony.. However it is a fact of life that negative experiences tend to leave deeper impressions than positive events do. We will try to appreciate the true value of both kinds of experiences.

We neither intend to evaluate or to comment on these experiences from a prescriptive point of view, nor do we suggest that the perceived experiences always do justice to reality. This chapter is about a description of what breadth wise in the Christian community is perceived of Islam. We try to do justice to the reality of those feelings. From an opposite perspective, we try to catch some of the perceptions of Christianity in Islam.

It should be very clear that the community of Christ in its reflecting and acting never can be guided by fear. The Christian community lives and acts from faith in Jesus Christ.

### A. A stressful relation

#### i. Concerns of Christians

Quite a few Christians are concerned about Islam. Some even feel threatened by it. Aside from sociological and psychological factors there are several historical factors for this.

##### a. Arab-Islamic expansion

The church in the Middle East became continually weaker because of the Arabic conquests during the first centuries of Islam. Finally it disappeared entirely from North Africa. The same goes for the church in Asia after the rise of the Mongols (13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century) and in the period of Ottoman empire (15<sup>th</sup> till early 20<sup>th</sup> century). The church became much weakened and almost disappeared; this happened either by gradual transition of Christians to Islam or by ethnic cleansing and violence. In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe was threatened by the Ottomans. Twice they appeared before the gates of Vienna. They gave Christians on the Balkan a protracted hard time.

Christians wonder whether the urge for expansion of the Wahabic Islam from Saudi-Arabia – through global subsidizing of Mosques and Islamic projects as well as through involvement with forms of violence in the name of Islam – is in the same category.

##### b. The position of Christians in the Islamic world

Although Christians have a protected status within Islam, they in have practice rarely been treated as equal citizens. The so-called dhimmi status implies that Christians are allowed to practice their faith with some restrictions and in exchange for a special tax. This however frequently has led to humiliation, exploitation and persecution of Christians. Muslims who converted to Christianity often had to fear for their lives. The charity *Open Doors* publishes a World Watch List of countries where Christians suffer from persecution. The top ten of this list contains no less than eight countries with an Islamic majority.

##### c. The reputation of the Islamic law, Sharia

The position of Christians in the Islamic world has everything to do with the Islamic law. The Sharia has quite a number of requirements western Christians are concerned about, like the dhimmi laws, the ban on faith-renunciation, the inequality of men and women and the commission to the holy war. By some this is perceived as a threat to the democratic constitutional state.

##### d. The threat to Israel

The attitude of the Arabic countries in general and of the inflexible Islamic movements like Hamas and Hezbollah in particular towards to the State of Israel gives some Christians the feeling that Islam is a dangerous ideology. The terrorism and violence in the name of Islam against Israel and Jews raise the impression that Islam is not a peaceful religion after all, in spite of moderate Muslims. This perception is being reinforced by numerous terrorist attacks worldwide.

In view of the above mentioned questions several Christians wonder whether the intention to conquer and to rule the world isn't characteristic for the nature of Islam. If this is indeed the case, Muslims will ultimately aim to

transform Europe into an Islamic state. Isn't there a good chance that Christians then will be left to second-rate-citizenship?

## ii. Concerns of Muslims

Conversely it is a valid assertion that several Muslims worldwide feel threatened by the West. The West is being interpreted as Christian. These Muslims have a negative picture of Christians and are inclined to mistrust their motives. This has historical aspects as well.

### a. Cross and sword

Just like the history of Islam, history of Christianity has also been characterized by periods of expansionism, from the crusades until the reconquest of Andalusia (Spain) in 1492 and until the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Muslims the fear that the Christian West is a threat to Muslims was validated in 1995 by the events in Bosnia. Christian Serbs slaughtered over 8000 unarmed boys and men in Srebrenica. Even although the circumstances were very different, to some Muslims it is significant that the indignation of Christians in the West about this tragedy was a lot smaller than the outcry about the attacks on September 11, 2001. Those attacks took fewer human lives than what happened to Srebrenica.

### b. Colonialism and imperialism

By many Muslims the West is perceived to be a Christian power. Colonialism and imperialism are experienced as exponents of Christianity. The Western rule of many countries with an Islamic population has had a great impact on Muslims. The proclamation of the Gospel often knowingly or unknowingly included the propagation of Western culture. In this context it is striking that the invasion of Iraq by Western armed forces was followed by an invasion of Western missionary organizations. For Muslims this is connected to a tradition of forced conversions and proselytism. There is a strong sense of mistrust towards Christian diaconal aid as well. Isn't this aid actually a financial attempt to win Muslims over to become Christians?

### c. Western standards and values

Several Muslims experience a strong Western expansionism at cultural and social level as well. To them it seems like the free and liberal Western standards and values swamp the world indeed. They get the impression that only a person adopting these values can actually integrate into the Western society. In this respect we might think of individualism, liberal sexual morals, unrestricted consumption of alcohol and drugs, the position of the elderly community in society, and of secularism. Because of the alleged alliance of the West with Christianity this also strongly qualifies the Islamic perception of Christians.

### d. Israel and the Palestinians

To many Muslims the establishing of the state of Israel in 1948 is an explicit example of the (last twitches of) western colonialism. What's more, the Jewish population seems unremittingly to be privileged over the other population groups. The steady and almost unconditional support from Christians for this state gives Christianity the image of being innately Zionist.

As an outcome of this history some Muslims feel threatened by the West into the core of their religious and cultural identity. Is there any guarantee that they can experience their religion in the Western context in freedom? Are the basic values of Islam and the eastern culture even secure in Dutch society? A part of the second and third generation Muslims of migrant origin is not only looking for full participation in Western society, but for an identity between their proper religious culture and the Western context as well. This goes for the younger generation in particular.

## B. A promising relationship

In the perception of society negative experiences from the past tend to prevail. Those experiences even can make the relation between Muslims and Christians stand out in bold. We should not forget however there are more sides to this case. For long periods of time there have been good relations between Muslims and Christians.

- After the first conquests of the Islamic empire, relatively few matters under the new rule changed for Christians. Some Christians (Nestorians and Monophysites) even welcomed the new rulers as liberators, because precisely they had been oppressed and persecuted in the Christian Byzantine empire.

- In the Abbasid Empire important positions in Islamic society were from 900 until 1200 held by Christians. Some Christians enjoyed the privilege of direct access to the court of the caliph. Christians played a great role in the cultural and the economic area. This only changed after the Mongol conquests of the empire.
- Islam arrived in Andalusia (the present-day Spain) in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. The Christian West recaptured Andalusia in 1492. In the centuries in between there have been several periods of good relations between Muslims and Christians. Sometimes violence erupted, both from Islamic and Christian side. Nevertheless Muslims and Christians together contributed to a flourishing culture. A fair level of tolerance existed.
- Besides countries with big tensions there are up until today also areas and regions where Muslims and Christians live together in fair harmony. In this area Ghana stands out very explicitly from North Nigeria and certain parts of Indonesia.

- Encouraging examples today

- In 2007 138 high-ranking Muslims from all Islamic schools have sent an open letter to all Christian leaders worldwide with an invitation for closer relationships between Christians and Muslims. This letter called *A common Word* emphasizes that peace in the world is impossible if Muslims and Christians, the majority of the world population, cannot live together in peace. Although this invitation is assessed and evaluated very differently by Christians, it is a unique and hopeful initiative.
- Nigeria is the example of tensions between Muslims and Christians and of violence against Christians. Precisely in this setting a Christian minister and an Islamic imam, Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa, committed themselves to work on reconciliation between Christians and Muslims. Both have been prominently involved in warring militias and both were personally affected by the conflict.<sup>3</sup>
- In the Netherlands at a national level there are good relations between the Protestant Church and various Muslim organizations. On the occasion of the release of the film *Fitna* by Geert Wilders in 2008 a joint statement has been issued by Muslims and Christians. Subsequently with this declaration a delegation of the CMO (Contact Institute for Muslims and Government) and of the CGI (Contact group Islam and the Protestant Church in the Netherlands) paid a visit to Egypt. It was an encouraging visit, not only because of the unity on this issue between the Islamic and Christian delegation members, but also because of the reactions in Egypt.<sup>4</sup>
- Before this visit, the good contacts of the Dutch organizations already had resulted in a joint appeal to the government of Afghanistan as a Muslim who converted to Christianity was about to be sentenced to death. All of this resulted in the Cairo consultations where Jews, Muslims and Christians meet. A joint statement "Allied in freedom" to which several religions and philosophies of life in the Netherlands committed themselves is on the same wavelength. All of this testifies to a mutual respect for each other's religious tradition.
- At the local level there are also increasing contacts between Christians and Muslims. These contacts contribute positively to the building of trust between the various communities in the Netherlands.
- All through history up until today groups of Christians and Muslims have been in dialogue with one another. Aside from the official relations between Muslims and Christians in ecumenical settings, e.g. the World Council of Churches, these dialogue groups often are local and personal initiatives. In Lebanon for example exists already for several years a Forum where Muslims and Christians have thorough discussions depth and theological dialogues with each other. For even a longer period of time mainly American 'Evangelicals' have been in dialogue with various Muslims. This was initiated by the World Islamic Call Society (of Libyan Islamic origin).

An important question for the future is: what experiences will prevail? Is there potential to deepen positive experiences? Are Muslims and Christians capable of putting those positive experiences into practise today as well? Can we get a grip on the deeper causes of tensions, i.e. ethnic, cultural, political, economical and religious factors?

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.iofc.org/imam-pastor>

<sup>4</sup> The statements can be found on <http://www.pkn.nl/muslims/info.aspx?page=12722>

### 3 What is Islam?

Space is lacking here for a full description of what Islam is. Quite a lot of difference of opinion exists moreover between various scholars, Muslims and believers. For the purpose of this memorandum a complete description isn't required. This chapter offers mainly a framework in which a Christian theological vision on Islam can be developed.

#### A. Diversity

In view of the encounter with Muslims it matters to emphasize first of all that there is no such thing as *the* Islam. In spite of large concordance in essentials of what Muslims believe, there nevertheless is a great diversity. On the one hand this diversity concerns the manner in which Muslims shape their religion in various cultures and circumstances. Islam in America is completely different from Islam in Europe and the Saudi–Arabian Islam differs substantially from Islam in Asia. In the Netherlands as well there are differences between Turkish, Moroccan, Surinam and other Muslims in experiencing and shaping Islam.

On the other hand this also concerns substance. Within Islam there are quite a few different interpretations of Islamic law, of the position of women, of jihad and even of the realization of the five pillars of Islam (see below). Diverse views exist on the position of the state, on life as minority among a non-Islamic majority, on the position of minorities such as Christians and Jews, and on the missionary character of Islam as well.

The mainstreams of Sunnite (85%) and Shiite Islam (15%) can be sub-divided in various sub-streams. Various movements within these streams can be identified as well. Important is mystic Sufism. Further several reform movements exist. One movement wants to return to the Koran and the interpretation of it in the first, golden era of Islam (Salafism). Another movement aims at returning to the Koran exclusively (purists). Another movement once again seeks a strong reinterpretation of Islam in the current context, which is a completely different setting than where Islam originated. There are moderate Muslims, who want to shape Islam in a democratic setting<sup>5</sup>. And we can identify extremists who want to fight unfaithfulness and apostasy by force if need be.

In this connection it is asserted frequently that a distinction should be made between *the* Islam on the one hand and Muslims on the other hand. The actual diversity originates from the fact that Muslims shape their beliefs in quite a number of ways. Behind all of this however still one – true – Islam might be claimed. For some this means that moderate Muslims may be nice persons; however they are not 'real' Muslims because real Islam strives after an Islamic state and therefore is *unable* to be moderate. For others it means precisely the opposite: extremists have disfigured true Islam because the real Islam is essentially peaceful. Both of these extremes are simplifications.

A classification like that, between Muslims on the one hand and true Islam on the other hand, does not make sense. Facing up to reality we should acknowledge that there are several forms of Islam. Obviously these diverse forms are feasible while based on the same sources. Claiming that behind the diversity one true Islam exists, means indicating which of the interpretations in this world represents the true Islam and proving why this interpretation is more in alignment with Islam than other interpretations. In Islam there is no central doctrinal authority which is acknowledged by all Muslims; there is no ultimate authority or supreme leader who decides what Islam means.

We as Christians must be aware of the diversity in Islam. We need to refrain from stereo-typing. However, the church can identify with this struggle over the nature of Islam. Ultimately this is about a hermeneutic question: how do we understand and interpret the ancient sources in the setting of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And how do we rate the history and the tradition of our faith in this connection? This question is also familiar to the church, in particular with regard to the interpretation of the Old Testament.

#### B. Unity

In Islam there is a lot of diversity. Nevertheless a common essential faith-structure can be identified. The multi-coloured Islam as a whole is clearly distinguished from other religions. There are various (clusters of) reference points which are characteristic for the faith-experience of the majority of Muslims. Therein is an important qualification of what we in a certain manner still might call *the* Islam.

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<sup>5</sup> The Centre for the Study of Islam and Democracy exists exclusively to do research on the relation Islam and democracy, see <https://www.csidonline.org/>

### i. **Koran, sunnah and interpretation and Sharia**

Islam means 'dedication' and 'submission' to God.<sup>6</sup> What this exactly amounts to is dependent on which stream in Islam a person belongs to. The specific shape of Islam that people adhere to is mainly determined by:

1. *The Koran*. The Koran is the basic principle for every faithful Muslim. It is God's direct revelation that descended from heaven literally and was dictated verbatim to Muhammad.
2. *The prophetic tradition (sunnah)*. The Koran neither gives an opinion on all things nor offers clear practical guidelines covering everything for daily life. Therefore interpretation is required. The tradition is the all-determining basis for this interpretation. This tradition consists of collections of stories about what Muhammad said, did or consented tacitly in a number of situations (hadiths). This tradition is a primary tool for explaining the Koran. The sunnah thus is a second, secondary, source in (classical) Islam.
3. *Personal or common Interpretation*. Although Koran and sunnah are guiding principles, the necessity of interpretation and application remains. The interpretations of the Islamic scholars until about the 11<sup>th</sup> century are fundamental. Nevertheless the necessity for interpretation remains today as well and every Muslim or group of Muslims shapes their faith in their own proper manner.

The Islamic law, the Sharia, which is determining for each Muslim, is built on these three pillars. The Sharia is not a ready-made law book but rather a compilation of collections of rules. These rules are guiding for the life of a Muslim. In determining the concrete Islamic juridical regulations the interpretation mentioned above consists of the consensus (idjmaa) of the scholars on the one hand and the principle of analogy (qijaas) on the other hand. Under Muslims there is contention whether the door to idjtihad, interpretation of the classic Islamic legislation, is closed or not. Are application and interpretation of laws feasible in a new context and what conditions apply for this?

### ii. **The five pillars of Islam**

The Islam has five posts or pillars which apply for each Muslim.

1. *Confession*. "There is no god but God and Muhammad is his prophet." This confession is pronounced five times a day in the call to prayer. It is also the central text on pivoting events like birth and death. In general the view is taken that someone converts to Islam by affirming this confession twice in the presence of witnesses.
2. *Prayer*. Every Muslim is supposed to say the ritual prayer five times a day on fixed hours. Male Muslims are obliged to attend the communal Friday-afternoon-prayer in the Mosque. Women may attend when possible. Aside from the regular prayer the free and personal prayer is possible, however it is not mandatory.
3. *Fasting*. During the month of Ramadan a Muslim should from half an hour before sunrise until sunset refrain in particular from eating, drinking and from sexual intercourse. This is a month of purification and dedication.
4. *Poor tax (zakat)*. Each Muslim must donate part of his property as love-gift to charity.
5. *Pilgrimage to Mecca*. At least once in a lifetime a Muslim when able has to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Sometimes as sixth pillar the holy pursuit of jihad is asserted. There is difference of opinion on this. Most Muslims will emphasize that jihad is more than an armed holy war. In general it is the endeavour to live in God's way and thus to spread Islam as submission to God. This can be a struggle against the evil in someone's own soul, subsequently it can be a struggle in word and deed to convince others of the truth of Islam as well; finally jihad also includes armed struggle to defend (or conquer) Islamic territory. The first aspect – the struggle of the individual against the evil inside – is also called the big jihad and the latter aspect – the armed holy war – the small jihad.

### iii. **Tawhid**

The core principle in Islam is Tawhid (the unity and uniqueness of God). The strong monotheism, the witness that there is no other god than God, has a large impact on the entire Islamic worldview. The absolute

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<sup>6</sup> If the word Allah is translated with 'God' in this memorandum, this is primarily a linguistic choice. Christians in the Middle East and Indonesia also address God as Allah; it is simply the Arabic word for God, which is also used in the Arabic Bible to indicate the Father of Jesus Christ. Herewith is however not stated that the images of God in Islam and Christianity amount to the same. For this see paragraph 4 Bii.

exaltedness and sovereignty of this one God implies that there is unity in life and that everything is linked together. Islamic faith has consequences for each aspect of personal and social life. The Sharia not only covers – as is mostly emphasized – the position of women or strict corporal punishment in case of sin, but ranges to each detail of life; from daily hygiene to shaping of personal and communal religious life, from financial ethics to social responsibility.

#### iv. **Islam and politics: theocracy**

The strong emphasis on Tawhid in Islam also implies the close relationship between faith and politics. The Sharia contains God's will for life in its entirety and thus for society as well. The interweaving of religion and politics can be traced back to the role of Muhammad in the second part of his acting, in Medina. Therefore the Islamic state based on Sharia is the ideal for several mainstreams in Islam. In the Islamic community there is a debate going on about the consequences of this. This is caused by the fact that Sharia is not an unambiguous written book of law, but rather a collection of principles and regulations. What an Islamic state looks like is therefore dependent on the type of law school one subscribes to. It depends also on the question whether (re) interpretation of classic principles is possible today in a completely different culture. Some may point out that Islam is a political Islam by definition; others try to distinguish religion and politics more from each other.

#### v. **Islam, minorities and abandoning Islam?**

For the Christian community the position of minorities (Jews, Christians) within Islam is a source of concern. There is a long tradition in which the people of the book, Christians and Jews (and incidentally Zoroastrians and followers of Bahai) were considered to be a protected minority; within the Islamic state they had the so called 'dhimmi' status. Dhimmi were allowed to practice their own religion with some restrictions and to handle their own social affairs; they were not required to take up arms at times of war and the Islamic authorities were obliged to protect them. On the other hand dhimmi were expected to be loyal to the Islamic state and to pay a form of protection tax.

Christians at times had a fairly good life under Islamic rule, sometimes even better than under Christian regime. The dhimmi status was an improvement compared to complete arbitrariness. Nevertheless the dhimmi-status regularly has been used as a justification for forms of severe discrimination, humiliation and persecution. The dhimmi rules are not applied in any Islamic country today. However the position of Christians in quite a few Islamic countries is very problematical.

Another source of concern is the impossibility for Muslims to abandon their religion. Although the Koran states there should be no pressure with respect to religion (Al-Baqara, sura 2:256), according to all Sunni law-schools it is impossible to convert from Islam to, for example, Christian faith. In general this conversion calls for a death sentence. In the Islamic community there is emphatic debate on the meaning of these rules.

#### vi. **Who defines Islam?**

The great danger of describing Islam from an outsider's point of view is that insufficient justice is done to how Muslims themselves perceive and shape their religion. Even when stereotyping or caricaturizing are out of the question, it still remains very difficult to make an adequate description of what this religion really means. It is peculiar indeed when Christians are assessing whether Muslims are true Muslims or not. In reverse order Christians do not like it when other persons try to tell them what Christian faith exactly is. Therefore the Christian community has to make sure that Muslims can define their own religion. Muslims should be understood as they do understand themselves. For that reason we do not pay attention here to the so called revisionism: the theories and conceptions which ask critical questions on the origin of the Koran or on biographies of Muhammad.

## **C. Current matters**

### **i. Is Islam a threat to our society?**

A part of Dutch society wonders whether Islam isn't a threat to our democratic society. Several congregation members ask similar questions. Is Islam a threat to the position of Christians?

The stream of Islam that did not go through the Enlightenment and through western culture represents a different worldview and a different approach to reality. This however applies also for non-western Christians living in the Netherlands. This in itself does not need to be a threat to western society. It forces us however to reconsider the essentials of western culture. The present time is being qualified as post-modern. This means that we define ourselves mainly by what we aren't anymore, i.e. modern; but we are not yet able to identify what we actually are in a positive way. At this vulnerable junction we are required by the presence of non post-modern Islam to look at what we as Dutch society want to be or would like to become. What is this so called Dutch culture precisely coming down to? This culture by some is branded as being Jewish-Christian. What

does religion contribute to post-modern culture? Is religion entitled to have a place in the public domain anyway?

The question however has an even deeper connotation: isn't Islam inherently a threat to the Western free democratic society? It is not a realistic expectation that the Netherlands will shortly be Islamic or that the country will be forced to live under Islamic authority. At present the percentage of Muslims in the Netherlands is too small for that (about 5 – 6 %). Moreover, the majority of the Muslims supports the Dutch rule of law and democracy. This majority experiences no problem in professing their faith within the present Dutch context. For most Dutch Muslims an Islamic state is not their primary concern, apart from the question what kind of state this should be.

Nevertheless there is concern among a great part of the native non-Islamic Dutchmen that Islam eventually will strive for establishment of its authority and political power everywhere.

We can comment on this with a few remarks:

1. Like Christianity, Islam is a "missionary" religion. Islam strives for the ideal that every human being submits to God in the manner of Islam. Even if some Muslims in the Netherlands do not emphasize this very much, it is innate to classic Islam.
2. Within Islam there are movements that advocate peaceful means in this missionary objective. These peaceful means vary from inviting and convincing people to become Muslim till participation in the democratic process to reform society and, if possible, to rule.
3. Beside that the view occurs that conquering countries and people by force and violence is justified and even is called for.

On this issue there is intensive discussion within Islam. The consequences of the various opinions should be subject of discussion in the encounter of the Christian and Islamic communities. This is required also because of the missionary character of Christianity.

#### ii. Differences in structure in Islam and Christianity

On two issues there is a structural difference between Christianity and Islam.

- a. In Islam there is more emphasis on law and jurisdiction, sharia and fiqh, than in Christian faith. Islam knows a rich theological tradition and faith is the first pillar of Islam. The religious practice however focuses on the question how a Muslim should live according to the law of God. In Christian faith there is more emphasis on the content of the faith in communion with God. The concrete actions resulting from this communion are regularly described in the Bible as the fruits of it (John 15, Gal. 5:22). On this issue there is a kind of asymmetry between Christianity and Islam, which may cause confusion in the mutual dialogue.
- b. Islam considers Koran to be the final and ultimate revelation of God. In this ultimate revelation the previous revelations to Israel (the Law and the Prophets) and to the Christians (the Gospel) are absorbed and exceeded: in this final revelation former misconceptions are corrected. Islam therefore perceives itself as the perfect religion, with which Christians and Jews should identify themselves as well. This inclusive way of thinking is however not shared by Christians (and by Jews). This results in an asymmetrical relation. Islam needs Christianity and Judaism for its identity, however the reverse is not the case.

### D. Islam in the Netherlands

The majority of the Muslims in the Netherlands is Sunnite. More important is the ethnic background of the Dutchmen who call themselves Muslims. The 850.000 Muslims generally organize themselves along ethnic lines. The largest Muslim-groups can be found among the Turkish and Moroccan Dutchmen (respectively 378.330 and 341.528; Bureau of Statistics, 2009). We come across smaller communities of Muslims among Dutchmen of Moluccan, Surinam, Palestinian, Somalian, Iraqi, Iranian and Afghan origin. In addition to those communities there is a group of native Dutchmen who have converted to Islam.

Muslims who participate in religious life and activities usually have been organized in Mosque-associations. For young Muslims in particular this isn't the case anymore. There are quite a few associations of young people, societies of women and clubs for students. These associations are important centres in which Muslims organize and educate themselves.

At national level the Council of Churches and the Protestant Church are cooperating mainly with the two Muslim umbrella-organizations which were constituted at the request of the authorities: CMO (Contact-organization for Muslims and Authorities) and the Contact-group Islam (CGI). However, they do not represent all mosque-organizations.

In the encounter with Muslims it is important to be aware that they do not consider themselves to be just 'Muslims', but also as Dutchman, citizen, father, student, employee, taxpayer etcetera. This is important in the framework of the encounter of people in our society.



## 4 Integrity and respect: a protestant vision on Islam

*Among the gods there is none like unto thee, O Lord, neither are there any works like unto thy works (Ps. 86:8 KJV)*

*For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Co. 4:6 KJV)*

A Christian theological view on Islam is about the question how Islam as a religion and as social phenomenon relates to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. What does this mean for a Christian understanding of Islam? This chapter offers an outline.. This view will subsequently have to give direction to the policy of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands with regard to the encounter with Muslims and to the questions which occur in society.

In an attempt to understand Islam, the church will have to move within the tension field between integrity and respect. On the one hand the church can not give up its integrity as community of Jesus Christ, on the other hand it will have to strive for respecting those who do not follow Christ as creatures of God; it should continue to work with them on peace for society from the love of Christ.

### A. Basic principles

#### i. Jesus is Lord (Kurios)

To begin with, the church can only understand itself as community of Christ. Right from the beginning it has confessed that God revealed himself in ultimate manner in Jesus of Nazareth. *“Immediately coming up from the water, he saw the heavens parting, and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. A voice came out of the sky, ‘You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.’”* (Mark 1:10, 11 KJV). God completely expressed himself in Jesus. *“God, having in the past spoken to the fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, has at the end of these days spoken to us by his Son...”* (Hebr.1:1 WEB).

Jesus is not one of the many instruments, whereby God announced something *about himself*. God came himself and He has made himself known in Jesus. (John 1:18). Therefore He is professed to be Lord (Kurios); He has authority over our lives. This position, which was claimed by divinities or divine rulers in the Hellenist culture, accrues only to Jesus. Herewith Jesus is placed at the same level as the God of Israel. What in Tenakh was reserved for God and could only be said about Him is now also said of Jesus <sup>7</sup>. He is God with us, Immanuel. Who has seen Him, has seen the Father (John. 14:9).

It is essential for the nature, the character and the essence of God that He came nearby in Jesus. This is typical of God: God who becomes human without ceasing to be God. In the confession of the church this was put into words with the designation of Jesus as Son of God. No physical origin is meant here, let alone a second God next to or replacing the One <sup>8</sup>. It is about God Himself in his multiple unity, in which the Son is the one in whom the Father reveals Himself completely and who as Mediator forms the bridge between God and the world.

#### ii. Jesus Redeemer

Our Lord is also our redeemer; the two ‘belong together’ <sup>9</sup>. We know no other redeemer than Jesus Christ. In Him the life that God ultimately intended from the beginning is revealed. This became necessary because the reality we live in is a broken reality, with big fissures. Life isn’t full of the glory and majesty of God anymore. Man, who was intended to glorify God, worshiped himself and other gods. Jesus however came to restore Gods Royal authority. In Him the Kingdom of God came near. The justice of the covenant with Israel became embodied in Him. That Jesus is Kurios was proven in the fact that He emptied himself for us and became obedient till death, death on the cross (Phil. 2:8) <sup>10</sup>. By the resurrection from death He broke all powers of death

<sup>7</sup> Synod document of the synods of the Netherlands Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands’, p. 6

<sup>8</sup> Compare Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Compare Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, p. 7

<sup>10</sup> Compare Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, p. 6

and sin. In this way He realized reconciliation with God <sup>11</sup> and obtained the new life. We expect Him at the end of times to establish his Kingdom in fullness; that is the ultimate liberation of sin, death and pain.

In the new life in communion with Christ the entire creation may share, also those who do not belong to Israel. Because there is only one Kurios, there is also only one Redeemer. Therefore God in Jesus reaches out to the entire creation and to all people regardless their religion. The Protestant Church in the Netherlands therefore has a clear mission, inspired by God: 'Sent into the world and called to administer reconciliation, the church bears witness to the salvation in Jesus Christ in proclamation and service to all people and to all nations. In its witnessing in word and deed the church is obliged to act in accordance with its confession.' (Church Order I 8,9).

iii. **The Holy Spirit**

The redeeming work of God is not limited to the historic person of Jesus. The essence of the God who came nearby in Jesus Christ, also becomes visible in the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not only inspire the work of Jesus Christ, but also continues this work in the congregation and in the believers. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate closeness and proximity of God. The Spirit which lived in Jesus Christ, now lives in the congregation and in the believers like in a Temple (compare 1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19).

iv. **The triune God and a plural reality**

We profess that God has made himself known in Christ and through His Spirit in an ultimate manner. This however does not mean at all that God did not express Himself in the history of this world. God really is the creator of all things; there are 'traces' of God everywhere and nothing is outside of his dominion as Lord. Jesus Christ ultimately is the redeemer of the entire cosmos. His Spirit is present throughout creation. The Lord has a history with all nations; He reveals himself in creation as well. 'For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.' (Mt. 5:45).<sup>12</sup> The Tenakh describes how God uses various people outside of the people of Israel, like Abimelech (Gn. 20:4), Balaam (Nu. 22-24) and the Persian King Cyrus (2 Ch. 36:22,23; Is. 44:28, 45:1). Christians have encountered other religions through the ages, among others in the missionary work. They have experienced over and over in mysterious ways how the Holy Spirit already had been working before the people even actually came into touch with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Time and again we can be surprised by the acts of God; this is true in the relation with Muslims as well. At the same time the presence of this triune God cannot unambiguously be told from the face of everyday reality. It is hidden from our view which way God is going with people outside of and inside of the church and with other religions. The brokenness of creation makes reality ambivalent in various ways. In order to recognize something of God's presence in this world and in relation to Islam, we continuously will have to return to Gods actions in Jesus Christ. He is the key to the secret of Gods way with this world. The Holy Spirit which pervades the entire creation is not identifiable with just any spirit or spirituality.

v. **Exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism**

Traditionally there have been three models in missiology that try to do justice to the relation between uniqueness of Christ and the plurality of the reality: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism.

a. **Exclusivism**

The exclusivist position argues that there is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ and his historic work of reconciliation through cross and resurrection. In view of salvation there usually is a strong emphasis on the requirement of an explicit and personal faith in Jesus Christ in view of salvation. Absolute discontinuity between Christianity and other religions is assumed. The religions are characterized by ignorance and by resistance against God.

Apart from that this vision does not necessarily lead to restrictivism where the destination of man is concerned. There is also an exclusivism tending towards universalism (K. Barth).

b. **Inclusivism**

Inclusivism also has as its basic principle the uniqueness of Christ as the revelation of God and as the redeemer. Inclusivism however seeks more space for Gods universal sovereign power. In this model there is more recognition of the fact that many will never hear the Gospel personally or in pure form. Non-acceptance of what one does not know or the dismissal of a caricatural image of Christ are not the same as rejection of the Gospel. Other religions are not so much roads to salvation, but may contain (traces of) truth, because the Spirit

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour, paragraph 3.

<sup>12</sup> Compare the Belgic Confession, article 2.

is working universally. God works with his mercy also outside of the church. Some forms of inclusivism go as far as approaching the third model: pluralism.

### **c. Pluralism**

Christ is just one of the roads to salvation, amidst many others. In this connection Christian faith only counts as one of the religions which are ultimately trying to climb the same mountain from various sides. Behind all religions is the one transcendent truth and each religion tries to express this truth in its own manner. Repeated references are made to the well-known Indian parable of a king, who had a number of blind men (the religions) describe an elephant. As each man describes the elephant differently, there are also great differences between the religions; ultimately they all describe the same universal truth, the divine mystery.

Regarding all three models comments can be made. The pluralistic model is not doing sufficient justice to the decisive differences between the religions and to the critical characteristic of Jesus as Kurios. Only by thorough re-interpreting each religion it is feasible to see them as different expressions of the one ultimate reality. Inclusivism runs the risk of taking over the other religions for itself. Exclusivism can easily end in intolerance. The positions may be described and valued in different ways. The church however looks for the balance between on the one hand standing by the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour in a unique way, and on the other hand recognizing that other religions like Islam cannot fall outside of God's presence and sovereign power. There is space for the acknowledgement that God works in all people's searching for the truth; the Spirit of God works in the entire reality. God can be known to the depth in Jesus Christ. This however does not mean that people outside of the church cannot have any knowledge of God. At the same time we should be aware that all religions, Christianity included, are human systems. These systems can become bastions of resistance against the One God and against the radicalism of the Gospel. They thus even can become obstructions for the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

#### **vi. Faith-vision with universal approach**

In this respect the confession of the church is a faith-position. The church professes its faith, but does not give a scientific explanation of reality. The congregation bears witness of what it has seen and beheld with its own eyes, the Word which is life (1 John 1:1,2). At the same time this is not a private opinion which is only of importance for insiders. The message of the church claims universal validity. Therefore the church is a witnessing church. In the dialogue with Islam it will have to be constantly ready to give account of its hope (1 Peter 3:15). The church does so in all modesty. Christianity does not coincide with the Kingdom of God even through the Spirit. The image of God which the church shows will always have to be questioned critically. The church will have to be guided constantly by the Spirit on the way of Christ.

## **B. A Christian theological view on Islam**

### **i. An ambiguous view on Islam**

We want to understand the nature of Islam in the light of the revelation of God in Christ. We therefore will have to take into account first of all that there are several influences on reality. One might say that there are several players in the field. To begin with: creation is the area of God's action; everything in a certain way comes under His rule and care. Subsequently this does not rule out that mankind also occupies an independent place in this creation. Human beings were not created as a puppet, but they received every possibility from God to make full choices that actually matter, also in their religion. Therefore mankind is responsible for the consequences of its actions. Finally according to the Bible there is a number of powers and structures, which play a part in the entire creation, both for the better and for the worse.

The tension that exists between these three factors can not simply be cancelled out. Whoever with respect to Islam only sees the powers, denies both the contribution of the sovereign God, who makes himself known everywhere, as well as the contribution of the free human being. In some cases this leads to an intentionally negative depiction of Islam and of Muslims. Whoever on the other hand only looks at the sovereign Divine dimension and with that states that Islam and Christianity ultimately come down to the same and that both can be qualified as "salvation-ways", not only forgets the ambivalence of reality and the presence of powers, but also disregards that God has made Himself known ultimately in Christ. Any religion that does not make this God to be the centre of its being, also has an element of resistance, of turning away from the One God (compare Rom. 1:25). Finally, whoever acknowledges Islam only as human system, forgets that religion is involved indeed in human responding God and to the powers.

ii. **God or Allah?**

A question recurring in the congregations time and again is: are God and Allah identical? Because Arabian Christians also call God Allah, this ultimately is about whether the word “God” in Islam and in Christianity refers to the same Being.

This question is answered differently, even by Muslims who became followers of Christ. Some of them strongly emphasize the big difference in image and in experience of God between Christianity and Islam. They experience their own path as a break with the past. They feel that they started worshipping a different God. Others emphasize more the continuity. They experience that they through Christ finally got to know God as Father in full depth. This issue usually does not come up in the actual encounter with Muslims. The fact that it keeps coming up in the congregation shows that there is concern. This concern mainly seems to be about fear of syncretism, i.e. that Islam and Christianity will become blended and that there will be a reduction in the special place and identity of Jesus Christ in the works of God in this world<sup>13</sup>. The concern on Islamization of society, mentioned already above, only reinforces this fear.

Not all theological aspects of this issue should be addressed here. It is important however to take this concern seriously as an important signal and to underline here that – however the question will be answered – the congregation of Christ in no way wants to say that Islam and Christianity ultimately come down to the same<sup>14</sup>.

If this basic principle is clear, the question, as an abstract issue, becomes less relevant. More than in the relationship with secular culture and new religiosity, the encounter with Islam addresses the issue *who* God is and *how* we can know Him. At the same time it time and again is obvious that in essential points the image of God in the Koran and in the Islamic tradition is quite different from the image of God in the Bible and the Christian tradition.

This final aspect however is not only an appeal to Islam, but as much an appeal to Christianity. The church as well will have to be accountable for the image of God that is shown. Is in this image the one God, who revealed himself completely in Christ, truly recognizable?

iii. **Islam is not a further realization of Christianity**

The congregation of Christ can not affirm Islam as a final revelation of God that transcends Christian faith and thus corrects, completes and absorbs the previous revelations (Judaism and Christianity). Much as close Islam and Christianity may approach each other in certain faith-issues – one God, the creator, the judgement, the necessity of salvation, angels and prophets – and however much related both are in ethical views, Christian faith has its own identity related to its understanding of Christ as the specific and decisive revelation of God.

iv. **Islam as mirror**

In the course of history several Christians have experienced and interpreted Islam as God’s judgement on a disobedient Christianity. Luther very succinctly called Islam God’s instrument to straighten out the disobedient church. From that he deduced among other things that the church was only allowed to counter the advancing Ottoman Muslims with spiritual weapons, namely with prayer and penance.

Not everyone will assent to Luther’s statements today. Still we may wonder whether Islam holds a mirror up to the church’s face. In a time of secularization and religious confusion Islam challenges Christians to explain what makes life with Christ different from secular life. We are challenged as to our alliance with Western culture and Western politics. Several Muslims worldwide look upon the West as a Christian region and upon Christianity as a Western religion. Is this impression justified? Did we give cause for this? Anyhow we explicitly reject the notion that Christianity coincides with the West. The glory of God is not linked with a certain culture or a social structure, but is made visible in the face of Christ by the Holy Spirit. The church in its actual life will have to make this obvious.

The presence of Muslims in the Netherlands also confronts parts of the Christian population with their fear of Islam. How is this fear compatible with a deep confidence in the triune God? How does the commitment to the Kingdom of God relate to the alliance with the attainments of secular Western society?

Finally because of the emphasis on Tawhid in Islam we become aware again that Christian faith covers life in its entirety with all its aspects. We must confess that faith did not just become privatized in society, but also that it can become caged in the church as an institution. Then God disappears into the margins of our existence.

Is it typical for Islam to bring these notions to our attention once more? On the one hand it is not, because it is about fundamental aspects of our faith as we came to know it from the Scripture and tradition. On the other hand it apparently is, because we are unable to step outside of our own culture and religion. Consequently we need an outside-perspective to be able to value our position as a church.

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<sup>13</sup> Compare here also “The Protestant Church in the Netherlands and the dialogue with Islam”.

<sup>14</sup> A comparable approach can be found in the Catechism of Doorn, p. 46, 47.

v. **Extremism and violence**

The church professes that the Kingdom of Jesus is not of this world. Much as it comprises the entire creation and certainly not may be spiritualized, the Kingdom can not be realized with worldly means of power and structures. The victory over the deepest roots of evil and the renewal of the entire creation are in direct connection with Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross. For this reason the Christian community opposes (as quite a few Muslims do) those forms of extremism in Islam, that intend to establish or to defend the Kingdom of God, if need be with violence – even against citizens. We acknowledge with shame and regret that the church itself has resorted to force and violence in order to establish (expressions of) the Kingdom of God on earth. We renounce this practice.

Herewith we do not say that it does not matter what happens in this world. Injustice and suffering are at odds with God's intentions with this world and in following Christ we are called upon to be engaged in these intentions. The Holy Spirit inspires, prepares and transforms the congregation to do so. In this connection the question arises whether we are really touched by the honour and glory of God in Jesus, and whether we really are deeply moved by the Spirit. Shouldn't we be so much fulfilled with the power of the glory of God in Jesus Christ, that this power becomes the driving force behind everything the church undertakes and believes? Shouldn't the gospel be so valuable to us that we even are prepared to give up our lives in the service of God and of our neighbours? These are basic questions for the church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

vi. **Islam as a Christian sect?**

John of Damascus (± 680 - ± 750) was one of the first Christian leaders to qualify Islam as a Christian sect. We nowadays cannot identify with this qualification. In the course of history in multiple ways both religions have evolved in opposition to one another. Having grown apart so far, they really are two separate religions. Nevertheless this indicates that in the beginning the distance between Christianity and Islam was experienced in a way different from today. The church continues to recognize and to appreciate that Islam has been a movement that opposes polytheism and puts up a barrier against forms of anarchy and injustice as well. Radical monotheism was a step forward indeed. In this we may recognize that God did not leave himself without witness in Islam. Nevertheless the church will continue to profess that this monotheism has to be qualified from Gods revelation in Christ. The truth that might be present in Islam can only be valued in the light of the Spirit of Christ.

vii. **Christianity, Judaism and Islam**

The relation of Christianity to Islam seems to have quite a lot of structures comparable to the relation of Christianity to Judaism.

- Just like the Christian church professes Christ as the fulfilment of Tenakh (Rom. 10:4), Islam considers itself to be the fulfilment (and hence also the replacement) of Christianity.
- Just like Judaism does not acknowledge that both Christianity of the New Testament and rabbinic Judaism are valid continuations of the Old-Testament faith community, the church does not acknowledge Islam as fulfilment of Christianity.
- Both Judaism and Islam are familiar with oral tradition that is accepted as being normative, next to the revealed written law of God. Orthodox Judaism lives with the oral law which Moses received together with the written Torah, Islam has Sunnah next to the Koran as source for Islamic life.

Despite these comparable structures the church continues to confess that the relation of the church to Israel and Judaism is different from the relation to Islam. This has been phrased explicitly in the Church Order (C.O. I.7) and has been confirmed in the IP-memorandum. For this there are among others the following reasons.

- For Jesus and the first congregations Tenakh was the revelation of God in a manner which neither Tenakh nor the New Testament ever were for Muhammad and his followers. Jesus deliberately did not position himself as the replacement or abolishment of Tenakh, but as its fulfilment. He took the revelation of God in Tenakh to its ultimate destiny, without considering this revelation thereby as expired. Islam has never professed that with regard to Christian faith.
- The church professes that Jesus Christ is first and foremost the Messiah of Israel; in Him the salvation time has come which God promised Israel. Judaism still expects this salvation time; it has yet to come. The discussion with Israel therefore is about the question whether Jesus Christ is the Messiah who has come, or that 'we are still expecting another' (compare Mt. 11:13). The church has not replaced Israel, but professes to be incorporated into Israel and thus to be part of Gods plan with this world. There is no comparable connection with Islam. The church also does not assume that Islam will be incorporated into the church, but that Muslims by following Christ will become part of the congregation of Christ which consists of Jew and gentile. Islam rather expects the other way around that Jews and Christians will join with Islam and will be incorporated into the Islamic community.

- The challenge for the church at this point is to explain to Muslims that the alliance with the Jewish people does not detract from both the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and from the universal meaning of his salvation work. As far as the confessed alliance with Israel might give the impression that Gods Kingdom is of this world after all and that the church similar to certain movements in Islam is focussing on conquest and possession of territories as a sign of true faith, this will have to be contradicted pertinently.

### **C.Theological points of agreement and theological crossroads**

On many issues Islam and Christian faith are close to one another. Both share professing the one God, creator of heaven and earth; both recognize that man is accountable to God for his life and that this has consequences for the afterlife. Christians and Muslims share quite a few values in the areas of ethics and society. Both groups look for the right way to shape faith in a secularized society. On these issues there is much mutual appreciation. At the same time essential theological differences exist to such an extent that they become implicit or explicit breaking points between Christianity and Islam. These crossroads shape a Christian vision on Islam, as much as they shape an Islamic vision on Christianity. The most important differences are:

#### **i. Jesus and the nature of God**

##### **a. Jesus or 'Isa**

In the Koran and in the tradition, Islam explicitly rejects the confession of the church with respect to Jesus. According to Islam 'Isa' is an important prophet, but not the complete revelation of God; He was not crucified, but directly taken up into heaven and His work did not bring the complete salvation. As a prophet he mainly points the faithful to the right direction. We can sometimes wonder whether the Koran always opposes the Christian confession of Christ or rather a caricature of it, in which the Christian congregation does not recognize itself either. This especially concerns the issue of Jesus as Son of God and the second person in Trinity. This is an important issue for the dialogue with Muslims.

##### **b. Tawhid and Trinity: a God from afar or from near by?**

The rejection of Christ as Lord and Saviour is neither detail nor side issue; it affects the heart of the revelation of God and the identity of God himself. As we have seen, the essence of God is that He becomes human and that He can empty himself. Therein is his greatness. Is He principally majestic or also nearby? Is it only possible to know his will or also to get a profound relationship with Him?

The profession of God as the triune is with that not a belief in three gods, but on the contrary an expression of the *unity* of God. Unity does not exclude plurality. God is one unique God, but in a completely different and more profound manner than man or not-living things. The unity of God is a plural and complex unity. The dialogue with Muslims will have to focus on this.

##### **c. Son of God?**

Islam emphasizes over and over that God has no Son. For the church this is however part of the heart of the profession of faith (Apostolicum). The ways of the church and mosque part in this as well. At the same time it is important to point out that the phrase 'Son', in relation with God, for many Muslims brings on associations completely different from what the church tries to say. 'Son' does not indicate a physical relationship in human manner. Rather a qualification is implied which at the same time indicates both the difference between Father and Son and their equalness and unity. In this sense it is a form of metaphorical language that refers to a deeper reality.

##### **d. Cross, resurrection and salvation.**

Islam denies the cross and resurrection of Christ. This affects the heart of the salvation-doctrine of the church. Although Islam also professes God to be merciful – almost all verses from Koran start with the profession that God is the very merciful one (ar-Rahmaan ar-Rahiem) – still the general tendency in the Islamic teaching seems to indicate that God is mainly merciful to those who succeed in living as good Muslims. This mercy of God however is not obligatory and, because He is completely sovereign and free to do as He pleases, not guaranteed. Here is an essential point of difference with the Christian profession of Gods unconditional love and mercy for sinful people.

For that matter a clear difference of perception of man and his situation reveals itself. The perception of man in Islam is more optimistic than in Christian faith. The capacity of man to correct his mistakes and sins is estimated to be high. Ultimately God's feasibility to be merciful depends on the question whether man has performed his religious duties, or not. In Christianity the emphasis is more on the brokenness of the existence and the human shortcomings in doing God's will. Man is ultimately unable to rescue himself from damnation.

ii. **Revelation? Koran, Bible and sunnah**

The church can not wholeheartedly regard Koran as the revelation of God, while Islam does not consider the Bible to be the pure word of God. In this respect Islamic tradition speaks often about distortion and corruption of the revelation of God. On the nature of revelation structural differences exist as well. In Christian faith Christ in the first place is the eternal Word of God; the Bible is the testimony with regard to this Word. In Islam however the Koran is the eternal and unchangeable revelation of God; Muhammad is the witness of this revelation. With that the issue rises as well that Islam and Christianity have a different view on the value of the tradition.

iii. **Muhammad as prophet of Islam**

Although the church appreciates the fact that Muhammad led his people back to monotheism as well as his zeal for God, it has difficulty to consider him to be a Biblical prophet. Based on Gods complete revelation in Jesus Christ the church is unable to acknowledge Muhammad as the seal of the prophets that transcends Christ. What God has done in Christ does not require addition.



## 5 Recommendations for the church: integrity and respect

Integrity and respect will have to be the guiding principles for the church in its acting and speaking. On the one hand this means that the church once again will consider its proper identity as congregation of Christ; on the other hand the church should relate to Muslims within a concrete framework. This framework should subsequently result in specific basic policy principles.

### A. Islam as enriching challenge to the church

The encounter with Muslims in the Netherlands is an enrichment for the Christian congregation. Islam challenges the church to reflect on its proper identity and to articulate what it is and what it believes. The church will have to take critical questions seriously as well. This has several consequences.

- The church is called to reflect on its dedication to Jesus Christ. The total submission of numerous Muslims in expressing their faith challenges the church on the depth of its actual commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- The church is called to wonder how much the Gospel counts for it. The situation of the persecuted churches in the context of Islam makes us aware of the enormous freedom we have in the Netherlands and forces us to think about the radicality of our faith in Jesus Christ. Being sisters and brothers in the one body of Christ, the persecuted churches are entitled to our support.
- The church is called to rethink its relationship to relation to government and society. Although the Kingdom of God is not of this world, it comprises the full and tangible worldly life. Islam brings home to us that faith concerns all aspects of this earthly life.
- The church is called to reflect on the relation of faith and culture. Numerous Muslims worldwide look upon Christianity as a western religion and perceive the West to be a Christian society. What is the cause of this? Is the church in danger of getting intertwined with western society to such an extent that the nature of its faith is at issue? Is the church sufficiently critical towards society and its 'core values'?
- In preaching, study-groups and catechism the church is called to give the challenge of Islam and the encounter with Muslims room in its learning to live as followers of Jesus. It should do so in a Biblical manner and in faithfulness to its confession.
- The church is called to apply itself to spiritual care with respect to the concern and fear of Islam in the congregation. Part of this is the promotion of the dialogue between those who have a very different evaluation of the meaning of Islam.
- The church is called to be open to Muslims who want to follow Christ and who are in need of special attention and care.
- The church is called to care for Christians and Muslims living in the Netherlands as refugees, both in form of hospitality as in support during often ponderous asylum procedures.
- The church is called to reflect more profoundly what it means to be a minority.

### B. A quadruple framework for the relation with Muslims

#### 1. Love and assistance

From the Gospel of the love of Jesus Christ, his self-surrender and identification with man, the church strives for building valuable relationships with Muslims and Muslim-organizations in the Netherlands. The image of the other is still strongly determined by general pictures, stereotypes and preconceived opinions. It is the calling of the church to break through this and to learn to know Muslims for what they really are, and to try to understand what motivates and occupies them<sup>15</sup>. At the moment Muslims in the Netherlands are a minority. They feel vulnerable to well-established Christianity and to the dominant Dutch culture. In this context it is an essential calling for the Christian congregations to lovingly assist the Islamic community wherever necessary. This concretely means the following.

- The church strengthens its relations with the Contact-institute for Muslims and Government (CMO) and the Contact-group Islam (CGI). These organisations however are not always representative for the entire Islamic community. It therefore is relevant to consider building relationships with other associations or communities. In principle also those who support a strong classical Islamic model and

<sup>15</sup> In a memorandum for the General Synod of the GKN (Mijdrecht 1991): "Oproep en bemoediging inzake ontmoeting van christenen en moslims", the first calling of Christians is: trying to **understand** (in accordance with Kenneth Craig).

those who are striving for a renewed Islamic community in the Netherlands will have to be involved. It is a matter of discussion in which way the church could have a unique meaning for so called extremist-Muslims. At any rate the church should not let herself be conquered by evil, but engage in good (Rom. 12:2).

- At local level the church will have to encourage congregations to make or deepen contacts with Muslims wherever possible.
- The church opposes every form of discrimination based on religion and ethnicity.
- In its association with Muslims the church commits itself to the so called golden rule: 'Treat others as you want them to treat you. This is what the Law and the Prophets are all about.' (Mt. 7:12).
- Building of relationships does not exclude that the church continues to ask attention for the difficult situation of Christians and of Muslims who want to follow Jesus in Islamic countries.

For the rest the diversity in Islam involves that the concrete form in which relations are established will differ per faction and per situation. The intentions of the church will therefore be valued differently, depending on the movement concerned.

## 2. Witness

The church is called to respectfully testify that Jesus is both the Messiah of Israel and the Lord and Saviour of the world (see Church Order XVI-4). On the one hand this means that the church maintains its integrity and that it is not ashamed of its testimony regarding the triune God. On the other hand this may not be to the detriment of respect for the religion and for the faith of the other. In its testimony the church will also take the liberty and the individuality of every human being completely serious. The church rejects each form of manipulation or force, be it by violence or by another manner. The testimony can therefore only be shaped in a dialogic manner in word and action.

In this testimony the church will whenever possible emphasize that the Gospel is not a western phenomenon and that the church does not uncritically identify itself with the (principles of the) Western society.

The Protestant Church in the Netherlands wants to commit itself to the so called ten ethical guidelines<sup>16</sup>, which were drafted, in view of the mutual testimony, by a group of Christians and Muslims in the United Kingdom, associated in the so called Christian Muslim Forum. This forum wants to build good relations between Christians and Muslims and to disperse news on this (see <http://www.christianmuslimforum.org>). The Christian community embraces these guidelines not just as a legal obligation, but as an expression of the manner in which it wants to be present giving testimony in society and to Muslims as well.

In this context the Christian community will refrain from polemics intending to put other persons in a poor light in an unjustified manner. The character of the gospel and its uniqueness do not call for discrediting, attacking or insulting another person and his religion. Apologetics however, the well-argued contradiction of the denial of the content or the form of Christian faith, seems to be more compatible with the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although Jesus himself could be very polemic from time to time, this was almost always aimed at the internal dialogue within the Jewish community on the nature of the Kingdom of God. Externally the speaking of Jesus was mostly characterized by testimony, dialogue and expressions of love. This neither does preclude critical questions about the faith of Muslims nor openness for critical questions about the Christian faith of Christians.

## 3. Prayer

Prayer is an essential element of the faith of the Christian congregation. This is the expression of the communion with God; for faith prayer is what breathing implies for life. The congregation cannot but pray. A honest and respectful theological view on Islam therefore invites the church to pray for Muslims and for the Islamic world.

For Muslims prayer - as one of the five pillars - is an essential part of religious life as well. Nevertheless Christian prayer and Islamic prayer cannot just be identified with one another. A Muslim will not without any problem pray in the name of Jesus and a Christian will not pray in an Islamic manner just like that. Whenever Muslims pray with Christians, they do so from their own identity. Whenever Christians pray for or with Muslims, the same principle applies. The prayer to the triune God and in the name of Christ fundamentally distinguishes prayer of the church from the prayer in the mosque. All of this has should be born in mind in further reflecting upon interreligious worships, including inter-religious marriages.

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<sup>16</sup> See annex.

#### **4. Cooperation on social level**

The identity of the church as a community of Christ does not exclude but does include cooperation with Muslims in society. As the Protestant Church in the Netherlands responded together with Muslim organizations to social developments (Fitna), it will also be able to do so in the future. On many issues Christians and Muslims in the Netherlands share the concern about a secular society which is becoming harder and in which committed forms of religion are under pressure. Both communities in this context need one another to make their testimonies heard. Working together it is also possible to make a more powerful voice heard in the discussion on freedom of religion and the freedom of conscience.

Aside from that Muslims and Christians can cooperate in the service to society. While social security becomes less affordable in the Netherlands there is a greater appeal on the care of people for one another. Church and mosque can play an important part in this, for example in social and charity projects. This does not need to be limited to the Netherlands.

## **6 Finally:**

The church lives out of the love of Christ and perfect love expels fear. Bearing this in mind the church of Christ wants to be present in the Netherlands, building peace in society, in faith without fear, based on its own identity in Christ.

Although we profess that there is only salvation and hope for the world in Jesus Christ, the church opposes any form of discrimination and of ethnic or religious registration, through which the supposed superiority of western culture based on its Christian history denies other cultures and religions a place in our society. The congregation has no other possibility to bear witness that the Kingdom of Jesus Christ is not of this world, than the testimony of love of Jesus Christ, who did not convulsively hold on to the shape of God, but took on the form of a slave, became equal to man and humiliated himself until death on the cross (Phil. 2:6-8). In following Christ the church is prepared to give itself in love, going any length for the salvation of the world.

## **ANNEX with the Islam memorandum of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands**

### **Ethical guidelines for Christian and Muslim Witness in Britain**

As members of the Christian Muslim Forum we are deeply committed to our own faiths (Christianity and Islam) and we wish to bear faithful witnesses of them. As Christians and Muslims we are committed to working together for the common good. We recognize that both communities actively invite others to share their faith and acknowledge that all faiths have the same right to share their faith with others.

There are diverse attitudes and approaches amongst us which can be controversial and raise questions. This paper is not a theology of Christian evangelism or mission or Da'wah (invitation to Islam); rather it offers guidelines for good practice.

The Christian Muslim Forum offers the following suggestions that, we hope, will equip Christians and Muslims (and others) to share their faith with integrity and compassion for those they meet.

1. We bear witness to, and proclaim our faith not only through words but through our attitudes, actions and lifestyles.
2. We cannot convert people, only God can do that. In our language and methods we should recognize that people's choice of religion is primarily a matter between themselves and God.
3. Sharing our faith should never be coercive; this is especially important when working with children, young people and vulnerable adults. Everyone should have the choice to accept or reject the message we proclaim and we will accept the people's choices without resentment.
4. Whilst we may care for people in need or who are facing a personal crisis, but we should never manipulate these situations to gain a convert.
5. An invitation to convert should never be linked with financial, material or other inducements. It should be a decision of heart and mind alone.
6. We will speak of our faith without demeaning or ridiculing the faiths of others.
7. We will speak clearly and honestly about our faith, even when that is uncomfortable or controversial.
8. We will be honest about our motives for activities and we will inform people when events will include the sharing of faith.
9. Whilst recognizing that either community will naturally rejoice with and support those who have chosen to join them, we will be sensible to the loss that others may feel.
10. Whilst we may feel hurt us when someone we know and love chooses to leave our faith, we will respect their decision and not force them to stay or harass them afterwards.

