

Statement of European Christian-Muslim Conference

MECHELEN, Belgium, OCT. 23, 2008

(The conference was organized by the Conference of European Churches and the Council of European Bishops' Conferences.)

Being a Citizen of Europe and a Person of Faith: Christians and Muslims as Active Partners in European Societies.

This conference brought together around 45 Muslims and Christians from 16 countries of Europe. The organisers of the meeting were the Committee for Relations with Muslims in Europe of the European Bishops' Conferences and the Conference of European Churches. It occurred as an event within the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue and the 60th anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights. It met from October 20th to 23rd 2008 and was supported financially by the European Union

As Christians and Muslims we have gathered together here in the city of Mechelen in Belgium in order to discuss the topic Being a Citizen of Europe and a Person of Faith.

Europe has undergone a process of profound transformation and is emerging as a plural, inter-ethnic, inter-cultural, inter-religious society. This has happened partly through migration, both from outside and internally.

Some European countries have state churches whereas others do not. All, however, ideally have taken a decidedly neutral stance as regards religion. This attitude has led to a situation where all churches and religions are accorded equal treatment giving them the same rights and expecting from them the same duties and the same responsibilities. There are, however, cases where one detects a process that is leading towards a progressive relegation of religion to the private sphere. In some instances this is leading to their marginalization from the public domain and, consequently, to the eradication of any sort of public manifestation of one's faith.

Whereas churches, religious communities, and ideological communities on the one hand, and the state on the other, are distinct entities with distinct domains, in a democratic society the former have a right and a duty to guide their adherents. The state should guard against confronting its citizens with the choice between loyalty towards it and fidelity towards their religious convictions. The state has a right to demand of all its citizens an open, public, commitment to democracy and an attitude of responsibility in integrating into its life, culture and traditions.

As Christians and Muslims we affirm that we are citizens and believers, not citizens or believers. We are therefore called to work hand in hand in appropriate ways with the state to which we belong without becoming subservient to governments. We say this because we believe that religious communities and the state should work together for the common good. This stems from our sense of belonging not only to our religious denominations but also to

that collective enterprise that is called citizenship. We believe in the unity and diversity of our societies which help enhance and enrich our societies.

As Christians and Muslims we believe that the future of our European societies will depend in large measure on our willingness as citizens and persons of belief to preserve and develop the cultural and religious foundations of Europe and our empowerment to contribute towards it.

As Muslims and Christians we believe in the principle of integration. This does not and must never carry with it the demand to forsake our religious identities. For example, this may happen through prohibiting the wearing or display of religious symbols in public places or neutralizing religious festivities with the pretext that their being allowed would harm the sensibilities of other believers or that they would go against the principles of the secular state.

As Christians and Muslims we acknowledge the right of freedom of conscience, of changing one's religion or deciding to live without a religion, the right to demonstrate publicly and to voice one's religious convictions without being ridiculed or intimidated into silence by prejudice or stereotyping intentionally or through lack of knowledge.

As Muslims and Christians we believe that dialogue is a question of listening as much as speaking thereby deepening our mutual understanding. We therefore affirm the need to listen to women and men in all areas of leadership in civic life.

Dialogue should be among ourselves as Muslims and Christians and also with other major faiths and humanist and life stance traditions. Where dialogue leads to action this may also include NGOs, Councils of Faiths, and other community organizations. We learn to heal the wounds of division stemming from past conflicts, in order to become truly ambassadors of reconciliation. To do this we should know each other.

As Christians and Muslims we affirm first and foremost our witness to our respective faiths and traditions. We offer our common witness that the human being discovers his/her identity through relationship with God. This leads us to affirm the utmost importance and vital role of the family, of human dignity, of social justice, of care for the environment. This should also rule out any use of violence in the name of religion. We also reject militant and hostile forms of secularism which create discrimination among citizens and leave no space for religious belief and practice. We need to endorse not just the social involvement of faith communities, but also the common calling to live by the Word of God.

As Muslims and Christians we call for mutual learning through opening up of mosques and churches to visitors from other communities and also to learning through engagement of people. This includes scholarly encounter and academic interaction. We need to get into the spirit of religions, as well as their outer clothing. We pledge ourselves to avoid generalisations about the other.

Human rights are universal and include the right to religious freedom. We express the wish for a partnership between Christians and Muslims in Europe in order to promote this fundamental right. Solidarity with those who suffer in and outside Europe must be encouraged and mediation offered where possible.

Identity has many strands, of which religion is one. Strength in a rope comes from many strands being intertwined, including our identity as Europeans, as citizens of particular countries, and our ethnic background. We are challenged to build bridges across cultures and faiths. Europe is called to be a laboratory of learning for both Muslims and Christians.

Our desire for future generations is that they live in harmony and peace within our religious differences and work for the advancement of society. Interreligious dialogue has to begin at an early stage and within the environment where children and young people encounter each other and their differences, namely within the school classrooms and the halls of our colleges, and within our religious communities. This should involve specific projects at the local level.

As participants, we pledge ourselves to communicate the content of this document within our own communities and structures and encourage its practical implementation at the national and the local level. We recommend a follow up conference, we suggest in two years' time, in order to assess progress on these challenges, and to focus upon further issues.