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Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam**

The issue of today is not a sexy issue. However, I will not stop fighting against xenophobia and intolerance in Dutch society – fighting for reconciliation as you call it. That’s why I am glad we can use Nelson Mandela as an icon too. Nelson Mandela, whose charisma, personal charm and moral influence in the world inspires us and keeps us focused. He’s not a historical figure for South Africa alone, he is important to the whole world. And we have felt his presence in the Netherlands in the past decades.

You are right Mr. Esack, when you state that reconciliation is a process, a continuous effort to keep our societies a place for ALL people to live in mutual respect and dignity. Reconciliation does not live in the past, nor does it live in the future. That is why our admiration for Nelson Mandela goes deeper. He always stays focused and he always criticises injustice in the world, whether it is sexy to do so, or not (like he did during the Iraq war).

In my response I will focus on a few topics you brought up in your lecture in an effort to relate them to the recent developments in the Netherlands. I am aware that the comparison between the recent occurrences in Amsterdam and the Netherlands and the past 10 years in South Africa is a little too easy. Our reconciliation process can’t be compared to the struggles and achievements in South Africa. The recent events in the Netherlands, culminating in the assassination of van Gogh, can’t be compared with the hardship many people in South Africa have suffered – and are still suffering. However, reconciliation is an ongoing process, it is universal in its dynamics and therefore recognisable in Dutch context.

I would like to elaborate on a few topics you have brought up in your lecture:

- Victimhood and the need for self-critique;
- ‘Us-ness’ and the need for common historical awareness;
- The process of reconciliation itself, and;
- The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in relation to Dutch society.

***Self critique and victimhood***

In your lecture you spoke about ‘The battle for the soul of Islam’. Islam and Muslims have become the ultimate ‘other’ in western societies. In the Netherlands we have to cope with this perception of reality as well. Opinion leaders, columnists and politicians speak of ‘unbridgeable cultural differences and conflicts between Muslims and Non Muslims’, they elaborate on the backwardness of Muslims and Islam (our Christian culture has matured; Muhammad started Islam centuries later, so you Muslims have some serious catching-up to do). Or they make their point by reasoning: “In the middle ages we (Christians) also fought religious battles, now we have overcome these primitive methods to make our point.”

Indeed, there is a lack of Muslim self-criticism. Muslims in the west are unequalled in stereotyping western society. Many Muslims in the west regard themselves as victims. By doing so they have an excuse to stop listening to what others might have to say. Self-critique is essential. We should not lose ourselves in the role of the victim. It’s a dead end and it easily leads

to non-realistic feelings of moral superiority. These feelings of victimhood and moral superiority leads us to – as you have pointed out already – avoiding asking hard questions about our tradition, our chauvinism, our racism, and our homophobia.

Reconciliation is a painful process which needs an effort from both sides. When I criticise the Muslim community on their lack of self-criticism I'm praised by the white majority. When I raise the discussion to de-islamise our debate on integration in the Netherlands the same white majority is blaming me I'm not standing my ground and trying to be everyone's friend. It is difficult but yes, reconciliation does require an effort on both sides. And reconciliation does require leadership.

We ALL have to deal with each other and we have to criticise ourselves, both Muslims and non-Muslims alike. We have to learn from our different pasts and we have to start building a new, common historical awareness.

### ***Common historical awareness***

In Dutch we have a proverb: **“Angst is een slechte raadgever”**. It means “Fear is a bad counsellor”.

Nelson Mandela himself once said:

**“As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others”**

I agree with Farid Esack when he states that we should be moved by our hopes and ideals. However, I think we have to work hard to convince people of this truth. What or who do we want to be in the Netherlands? In Amsterdam? How do we realise this new ‘us-ness’ in our country after the political killings and growing polarisation in the past years? I think we need to build a common historical awareness together. In order to convince people, the least we can do is to change the current repressive and muscled discourse of the public debate. Furthermore, we need to start understanding each other.

Do we have a common historical awareness of our society? No, I'm afraid we don't. In a small city like Amsterdam many historical realities and perceptions of the past live next to each other, without communicating properly. The white middle class majority assumes every inhabitant in Amsterdam knows where the statue of the ‘Dokwerker’ stands for. Many people don't have a clue. Is it commonly known why Queen Beatrix walks up to the national monument on Damsquare each year? I'm afraid a lot of people don't. Do all inhabitants of Amsterdam know the importance of our slavery monument? What happened in Srebrenica? I'm afraid they do not.

People in Amsterdam do not share the same history. They live in different realities. They react differently to new facts of history and this causes friction, tension and fear in our society. This reality leads to fear and fuels thinking in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them’, or worse. We need to get to know one another, and our different histories.

Two weeks ago I visited Auschwitz with a class of children from a secondary school here in Amsterdam. Next week a second group will make the same journey. We showed these children where racism leads us in its most extreme form: the mass-extirmination of Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, disabled people... Just because of their human-ness, their race.

I already emphasised the lesson Nelson Mandela teaches us: learn from the past, but act to fight discrimination and intolerance here and now, in the present. These children – although thoroughly prepared – have had a shocking experience in Auschwitz. One of the kids, Yassine, told us he was shocked when he realised that he too wouldn't have survived Auschwitz in the 1940's just because of the colour of his eyes and the pigments in his skin. Hopefully this experience motivates these children to act in the current circumstances they live in, in the day to day life in Amsterdam, in this day and age.

A few words then on the Israeli – Palestinian conflict.

### ***The conflict 'over there' and the perception of reality***

It takes courage to start discussing the conflict between Israeli and Palestinians, during a lecture honouring Nelson Mandela. But as we have concluded earlier, we are not dealing with sexy issues here. Following the conviction one should always take a stand against injustice and violence, I can understand why you have entangled this issue with our discussion here tonight.

However, reality is always different than it seems. In Amsterdam we have to deal with the conflict between Israeli and Palestinians on a daily basis. In a way the conflict has been imported within the Amsterdam city walls. People are discussing the issue, are busy convincing one another of their truths and their prejudices. Here in Amsterdam, I feel we are not dealing with the actual facts of the conflict in the Middle East. No. We are dealing with the different *perceptions* of the conflict. Large groups of Muslim children and their parents living here in Amsterdam are convinced their opinion is the only truth. Their opinions are confirmed by daily news brought to them by satellite TV, directly broadcasted from the Middle East. These opinions do not match with the daily life surrounding them here in Amsterdam. However, many (young) Muslims start to identify with the Palestinians and they feel connected to them.

More over many of these children and their parents suppose the majority of the Dutch population identifies with the Israeli population. And there you have it: imported polarisation.

### ***Reconciliation***

In his lecture Mr. Esack's emphasised a very important issue we have to deal with here in the Netherlands, and especially in Amsterdam after Theo van Gogh was killed last fall. Reconciliation is something we have to negotiate. Indeed it is a painful and frustrating process. We can learn from the daily struggle for reconciliation in South Africa. The beautiful start of the Reconciliation process offers us inspiration, keeps us focused on the aim of the integration process in Amsterdam. Especially the person of Nelson Mandela inspires me to stay focused. We are blessed to have a role model like Mr Mandela to help fulfil our task here in The Netherlands. The people of Amsterdam still feel the connection with South Africa and the struggle of freedom only a decade ago.

I do not agree with Farid Esack's suspicion that one of the reasons why many other countries condemned the apartheid regime was simply because it was a convenient way of not dealing with their own racism. When I speak for the Netherlands, our commitment to the struggle in South Africa has made a contribution to the emancipation of so called 'ethnic groups' in Dutch society. Many people in the Netherlands – especially migrants who came to the Netherlands in the past decades – have felt supported by the thought that Dutch society and the Dutch government was very clear in its rejection condemnation of the apartheid regime. It has supported them in their

struggle to find a place in Dutch society and to become part of it. This is essential. The struggle for freedom in South Africa has contributed to the process of integration of many migrants who came here in de past decades.

Since de assassination of Pim Fortuyn the political climate has changed in the Netherlands. It became fashionable to leave the 'politically correct' discourse in the discussion on integration and participation of large 'ethnic' – read Muslim – groups in Dutch society. People started insulting rather than instead discussing. The killing of Theo van Gogh shocked Dutch society even more. The harsh discourse leads to a growing fear and polarisation in our society. We have some serious reconciliation to do ourselves, in order to cope with the growing polarisation in our society.

**I can't change the facts, but I can change perception of facts.**

I am sure the majority of the Dutch population has a more nuanced opinion about the conflict between Israeli and Palestinians than many of their neighbours in Amsterdam think. Dialogue, education and co-operation is the only way to change these imported and harmful convictions.

Earlier I spoke about victimhood, the need for self-critique and a common historical awareness. In Amsterdam we have a lot of work to do in order to cope with our problems and to grasp the opportunities that a diverse, multi- ethnic and multi- religious society has to offer us. These frictions have made Amsterdam what it is today and we have the responsibility to write a new illustrious chapter in Amsterdam's history.

**Zonder wrijving geen glans; without friction no shininess.**

We have enough frictions of our own to let our city shine, we don't need to import more friction from abroad.

Thank you.