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Statement by
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of
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**on the occasion of the 63rd General Assembly,
under the agenda item 45 "Culture of peace"**

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Mr. President,

The Netherlands government welcomes this opportunity to address the contribution of inter-religious dialogue to achieving a culture of peace. I would like to align myself with the statement delivered by M. Alain Juppé on behalf of the European Union. Indeed, the European Union has been built on a culture of peace after years of war, built on a set of values and ways of life that reject violence and prevent conflicts through dialogue and negotiation.

The EU Presidency mentioned three important characteristics for fruitful interreligious dialogue. Let me add on behalf of the Netherlands delegation three remarks. First of all, we should not forget that inter-religious dialogue is just one of many forms of dialogue. As stated in the *1981 Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief*: for anyone who professes either, religion or belief is 'one of the fundamental elements in his conception of life'. However, I would like to emphasize here the words 'one of': people have multiple identities, they may be Christian, but they are also men or women, they may be Muslim, but their cultural background can be Arabic or Malay, they may be Hindu, but they are also artists or journalists. In other words, inter-religious dialogue, important as it is, is only one form of dialogue. As is advocated by the Alliance of Civilizations, we should also welcome dialogue on the basis of political, social, economic or cultural identities. All these different forms of dialogue together will help in advancing a culture of peace.

Second: the Netherlands government has facilitated inter-religious dialogue on several occasions. This year, the 4th ASEM Inter-Faith Dialogue Meeting was held in Amsterdam. Participants had useful discussions on *interfaith dialogue and poverty reduction*, religious education, and communications in the digital world. The focus was on the practical aspects of dialogue. Thus, on the first day of the meeting, participants visited a number of projects in Amsterdam, where people with different religious and belief backgrounds work together in improving the lives of many in Amsterdam. Very often, dialogue that goes hand in hand with practical forms of co-operation is most effective: in working together with others, people get connected and discover that despite different religious backgrounds, they may have a lot in common. They will find that most religions share a number of universal concepts, that these concepts do not conflict with but support human rights and fundamental freedoms. And that on that basis, it appears possible to establish and maintain alliances, to bridge gaps and to really work together.

In the same spirit, the Netherlands government supports the inter-religious conference 'Faith in Human Rights' organised by a Dutch NGO, Justitia et Pax, that will be held in the Peace Palace in The Hague on 10 December. The organisers hope that religious leaders representing many different religions and beliefs around the world, will sign a declaration expressing their support for human rights, and especially for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Netherlands government is pleased to note that this instrument has become a source of inspiration not only for governments but also for our societies at large and is looking forward to the celebration of the 60th anniversary of this milestone declaration both in this hall and in The Hague.

My third point. At this moment governments are facing huge challenges: economic, social and environmental, to name a few. The time has passed that governments alone can solve all the current problems: we need the help of many parts of our societies. We need the help of business, of youth, and indeed of religious or belief communities. We see such communities first and foremost as groups of individuals. In our legal system, both at national and at international level, we deal with the rights and freedoms of individuals. Individuals can raise their voice and explain their position. It will not be possible, however, to point to the authoritative voice on behalf of religion. Every religion, even if it has a hierarchical system, has different tendencies and interpretations. It is impossible for a judge to determine if the rights of a religion or belief per se have been violated: who should he or she turn to in order to find out? The Netherlands government therefore does not support calls for legal protection of

religions or beliefs as such. We should, however, protect the rights and freedoms of individual believers: make sure that they can manifest their freedom or belief freely.

For the same reasons the Netherlands government is sceptical about establishing a new advisory body at the UN of representatives of the religious movements in the world: how would its work fit within the larger framework of the Alliance of Civilizations? Who is going to determine which religious movements should be represented? And who is going to decide who will be representing any religious movement? Considering that the United Nations does not make any distinction between religion or belief, how do we define belief in this context? To what extent can we hear the voices of those who have no religion at all? There are so many practical difficulties that I fear that setting up such a body will produce more problems than that it will solve.

Mr. President,

Inter-religious dialogue is important, especially if it includes many religions or beliefs, does not lead to exclusion of others and is always seen as part of a broader context of dialogue between people with different identities. I hope and trust that religious leaders will continue their efforts to make their dialogue inclusive and practical, so that in the end the objectives of the United Nations will be promoted by such initiatives. In this respect, the Netherlands government welcomes a number of initiatives taken this past year and it hopes that they will prove to be inclusive, practical and durable. The Netherlands government will continue to facilitate inter-religious dialogue, bearing in mind – in the words of M. Juppé - that the interreligious dialogue itself ‘is the responsibility of religious authorities, of the believers and the representatives of spiritual and humanist traditions’.

Thank you, Mr President.