

***Religious diversity and social cohesion  
in Germany***

**Speech**

**by the Federal Minister of the Interior,**

**Dr Wolfgang Schäuble**

**at the award ceremony**

**for the Eugen Biser Prize**

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*(Check against delivery.)*

“Any comparison, from whatever point of view, between Europe and Islam soon encounters a sense of conflict.” With these words Italian historian Franco Cardini begins his wonderful book “Europe and Islam: The History of a Misunderstanding”. Anyone who knows this history knows how important – and how difficult – it is for Christians and Muslims to understand each other. The Crusades, the conquest of the Iberian Peninsula and the siege of Vienna continue to resonate as myths of an historical opposition. The attacks of September 11, 2001, the Gulf wars and most recently the controversy over the Muhammad cartoons have reiterated this opposition in the present day. Although Muslim- and Christian-influenced cultures have mainly enriched each other, many people today focus only on what divides them.

This makes the achievement of those we are honouring today all the greater: Prince Ghazi bin Talal, Sheikh Al-Habib Ali Al-Jifri and Sheikh Mustafa Ceric. Your initiative, “A Common Word Between You and Us”, has built a bridge of communication between Muslim and Christian scholars. This initiative fosters hope for better understanding between Muslims and Christians by focusing on the call to love one’s neighbour as a basic principle of co-existence.

In today’s society, religion has a greater influence on our co-existence than many might think. Faith can unite us, but it can also divide us. Many good works are per-

formed in the name of faith, but some people take the command to “subdue the earth” (Genesis 1:28) all too seriously. It is these two sides of religion which seem to create a contradiction between religious diversity and social cohesion.

In Europe, we long thought we had overcome this two-sidedness of religion. After many conflicts, we had secularized the relationship between “our” religion, Christianity, and the state. In most European countries, religion today is allowed a rather narrow role in the political sphere. In Germany too, church and state are separate in principle.

The separation of church and state is based on an understanding that state authority and religious authority each set limits on the other. We Europeans have learned from our wars of religion that there is little room for tolerance if the religious claim to possess the truth is coupled with a political one. For this reason, our state respects the spiritual authority of religions while asserting its own authority to govern. Our Basic Law both upholds and sets limits on the freedom of believers. For example, the freedom of religion does not free anyone from allegiance to the constitution.

The limits that state and religious authority set on each other have created state institutions which are neutral with regard to matters of religion and personal belief. Such neutrality is essential for social cohesion in a world of many religions, because it creates a framework in which people of different faiths can live peacefully with one another without having to fear having someone else’s beliefs forced on them. This is important especially when a society, like ours, experiences growing religious diversity due to immigrants from Muslim-influenced societies.

Some are disturbed by the growing presence of Islam in our country, because it is changing our surroundings. Others are disturbed because this has reopened the debate over the relationship between church and state. They worry that Muslims may try to undo the emancipation of state authority from religious authority. And some Muslims are indeed worried about the separation of church and state: They fear that religious faith may be forced to retreat into the private sphere.

The fears on both sides are unfounded. They are also based on a false understanding of our constitutional law which applies to religious organizations. Our system is specifically not hostile towards religion. Unlike France, for example, we do not have an absolute separation between church and state. The state works with religious communities, for example to organize religious instruction at state schools. The state even collects taxes for religious communities which have the status of a corporation under public law. That would be unthinkable in France, with its *laïcité*. Scholars of state law on religious organizations therefore refer to an “imperfect separation” of church and state in Germany.

This relationship and interpretation has developed over centuries. For the drafters of the Basic Law, it was so self-evident that they largely copied the provisions of the Weimar Constitution of 1911 where religion was concerned. They did so also because the importance of religious values for a liberal society was obvious: After the failure of the Weimar Republic and the horrors of the Nazi dictatorship, the foundation of Christian values was necessary in order to set up a system dedicated to upholding human dignity.

Religion continues to play an important role today in determining what we make of this system in practice. The democratic state depends on conditions which it is unable to create itself. A liberal order requires that its citizens use their freedom responsibly, which in turn requires fundamental, ethical values and orientations. Responsibility comes from the recognition that personal freedom has certain limits. A relationship with God is an important motive for accepting limits. Belief in a higher power beyond our control helps contain our human tendency to excess. Even those who have their difficulties with faith can look to religious ethics to find answers for living a meaningful life in harmony with others.

Taking responsibility for oneself and others is easier when we feel that we are part of a community. For this feeling to develop, there must be something which unites us at a deeper human level. This quickly brings us to very fundamental questions, such as birth, death, and the meaning of life. Scientific knowledge about the big bang and black holes provide no answers to questions about what comes before we are born

and what happens after we die. For that, we need religion. It gives us the sense of community which is so important for feeling that we belong.

Our secular state depends on religion's power to generate meaning. This is why the state works with religious communities, for example on religious instruction. Whenever religions provide orientation and a sense of belonging, they contribute to social cohesion. Religious diversity enriches society, because it gives every individual the chance to become part of a meaningful whole through the faith of his or her choice.

Religious diversity may become a challenge for social cohesion if believers do not accept our country's relationship between religion and the state, if they seek to turn a religious claim to possessing the truth into political authority or a claim to power. Then the liberal nature of our society may be threatened, and the fear of domination by others may easily lead to rejection.

The same thing happens when religious communities are not allowed or refuse to participate in public life. The first case leads to exclusion and discrimination; the second to a separate, closed society which creates mistrust. Both end up dividing the larger society, as all focus on what divides us, rather than what we share. When such processes become established, neighbours can turn against each other.

Now, in Germany and Europe there is no reason to speak of a "clash of cultures". All in all, most people are open-minded about religious pluralization. Germany now has about 2,000 mosques, and most of them have not caused any controversy. The largest – and many say the most beautiful – mosque in Germany recently opened in Duisburg. In Germany today, there are as many mosques for every Muslim to worship in as churches for every Christian.

Despite some debate, our society's relationship with religious diversity is in a process of normalization. The Christian churches, organizations and many individuals are active participants in this process. They – like the Eugen-Biser-Stiftung – are trying to promote agreement and point out ways to deal with religious differences.

That – promoting common interests and overcoming differences – is precisely the key to social cohesion in a religiously diverse country. That is the fundamental principle according to which complex, pluralistic societies function. Sociologists refer to “complex processes of negotiation” when very different attitudes and interests come together. In the context of religious diversity, we speak of interfaith and intercultural dialogue. What the religious communities achieve in this dialogue has an important influence on how we interact with each other in society. It reinforces what religions have in common, thereby reinforcing public confidence in social cohesion. This is why the state encourages such dialogue.

Now, it is not enough to point to others’ good works or provide funding for them. The federal, state and local governments and we as a society must establish a good relationship with the Muslims in Germany. That means promoting religious diversity and helping Muslims feel at home here. To do so, we launched the German Islam Conference in 2006. For the first time, we now have a framework in which representatives from every level of the state meet with representatives of the broad diversity of Muslim life in Germany.

At the latest plenary session in March, we agreed on recommendations concerning issues central to our co-existence, from building and using mosques to the introduction of Islam classes at state schools. This dialogue leads to common positions on both practical and fundamental issues. All participants in the Islam Conference have declared their allegiance to Germany’s system of democracy and to the values enshrined in our Basic Law. The Muslim organizations also recognize their responsibility to work with the state and German society to fight extremism. This demonstrates how productive the dialogue is for social cohesion.

But every dialogue has its limits. Some of these limits can be pushed by the pros and cons of arguments. For example, the German states are now allowing Muslim burial rites.

But other limits are non-negotiable, especially the need to reject every form of extremism. Our constitution protects and guarantees the fundamental rights of all who live here, regardless of their origin, skin colour or religion. This also means that

women have the same rights as men. And it includes the right to freedom of expression and freedom to profess and practise one's religion. That also means the right not to practise any religion, or to change one's religion. No one may suspend these rules, not even by referring to cultural or religious exceptions. In every community, respecting binding rules is essential for cohesion.

Nor is there much room for manoeuvre when it comes to the prerequisites for working with the state which are set by our constitutional law. Legal recognition as a religious community or corporation under public law is tied to certain conditions, for good reason, as it does not constitute an act of political recognition, but the bestowing of legal privileges by means of a close partnership with the state. This means that special conditions must be fulfilled. According to Article 140 of the Basic Law in conjunction with Article 137 from the Weimar Constitution, to be granted the status of a corporation under public law, a religious society must have the assurance of permanency. Decisions by the Federal Constitutional Court additionally require the assurance that the religious society abides by the law and the constitution.

Due to the principle of neutrality, the states responsible for verifying allegiance to the laws and the constitution do so by examining not the applicants' beliefs but their conduct. This process takes time – the requirement of permanency leaves no other choice. Anyone who is annoyed at this and therefore implies that the German state discriminates against Muslims endangers the process of understanding. Anyone who demands an exception to rules which apply to everyone else also refuses to do their part for social cohesion.

Even where criticism may be justified, rejecting legal procedures is problematic also because it reinforces stereotypes among Muslims and the rest of society. This can sow mistrust and harm the acceptance of religious diversity for the long term.

We must all help to overcome such difficulties. The state wants Muslims to feel at home here. It wants them to found institutions anchored in our liberal democracy. The Islam Conference has encouraged many in our society to work towards this goal. But ultimately it is up to Muslims themselves. If they want not only to be tolerated in Ger-

many and Europe but to participate fully in every aspect of society, then their organizations must conform to the applicable laws.

This does not mean that the state wants Islam to be more like the Christian churches. Our constitutional law applicable to religious organizations offers a variety of options for organization and partnership with the state. The model experiments for religious instruction in Islam at German schools are a good example: They show that the state takes differences between Islam and the Christian churches seriously and is willing to accommodate Muslims. But Muslims do have to make the greater effort to adjust to the situation in their new homeland.

That is what the law requires. It also requires respect for the Christian culture and tradition which inform our state law applicable to religious organizations. Minorities are not the only ones who deserve respect; the majority does as well. Without respect for others, religious diversity cannot be perceived as enriching. We need a culture of reciprocity in which each group listens to and respects the others. This applies to us in Germany as well as to Christians and Muslims throughout Europe and the world.

For precisely this reason, the initiative "A Common Word" gives me a feeling of hope. This initiative is not only the hoped-for response to the Regensburg speech of Pope Benedict XVI; it is also the response to many calls for Islam to say where it stands at a time of upheaval.

The world of globalization forces us all to take our bearings. The conflict with Islam and within Islam is at the same time a debate over the individual's role in the 21st century. In this debate, we Europeans should reflect on the hypothesis put forward by Muslim intellectuals that the Western model of society is excessively marked by economic rationality and relativism of values. We don't have to agree. But we should consider whether the process of secularization does not also lead to the loss of certain valuable things. This can lead to a new openness towards religion and can help us see what values are intrinsic to Islam, such as a life in accordance with one's ethical convictions or the importance of the family. We will have to learn to accept

Islam as part of our societies. And we should make even greater efforts to help with the process of making Muslims feel at home in Germany and Europe.

By the same token, Europe's Muslims face the challenge of modernizing their interpretation of faith. This process is essential for Muslims to truly become part of modern European society. Islam must become a bit more European if Muslims hope to play a greater role in their communities as European, German and – since we are here in Munich – Munich Muslims. This also means renouncing any claims to social or political absolutism.

If we master these challenges, we will write a new chapter in the history of Europe and of Islam. Then greater religious diversity will not only enrich us but also strengthen social cohesion in Germany. In order to achieve this, we need role models, visionaries who are not afraid to act: religious leaders like those we are honouring today.