Responsibility of Religions for Peace

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Opening Statement by Germany's Federal Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel at the Conference on the "Responsibility of Religions for Peace", May 22, 2017.

Your Eminences,

Excellencies,

Honoured guests,

Fellow members of the Bundestag,

Ladies and gentlemen,

What an impressive sight! It is rare to see such diversity among participants at conferences here in the foreign ministry!

It also shows that we have the right idea – namely, to focus despite this great diversity of religions and faith groups, and their various traditions, backgrounds and cultures, on one issue which all religions at least profess is their common goal: the establishment of peace. I for one can’t think of any religious group which has not – in its written or oral articles of faith – set itself precisely that goal, namely promoting peace among people and above all with God. To that extent, our focus today on the responsibility of religions for peace is almost redundant. It’s something that all religions and faith communities have already agreed on.

However, in the real world it is religions that are at the heart of many a conflict, be it only because religion has been hijacked by other interests entirely, by people who clothe themselves in religiosity in order to assume political power.

So we do need to talk. But, in my view, we need to talk to each other, not about each other.

For that reason, Germany’s diplomats are very grateful that so many of you chose to attend this event. Never before have representatives of so many religions assembled here at the Federal Foreign Office. Here with us are members of the great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Islam and Christianity – as well as representatives of various traditions and movements from Europe, the Middle East and North and West Africa.

Of course – and I hope the other guests will forgive me – I would like to extend an especially warm welcome to the representatives of the German churches and religious groups, for the German Protestant Kirchentag, a huge lay-led gathering, is taking place in Berlin this week. And not just in Berlin, but also in Wittenberg, Martin Luther's home town. I myself am a Lutheran. And I think the Reformation serves to remind us that there have been major conflicts within the Christian Church too. And not only 500 years ago.

We all still remember how Northern Ireland was divided for years by a bloody social conflict which pitted Protestants against Catholics.

And I can still remember that when I went to school the Catholic and Protestant pupils were segregated. We weren't meant to sit together. And our parents had even been told that in the afternoons, after school, they shouldn't play together. We didn't actually do as we were told – which was probably a good decision!

This all goes to show that 500 years after Luther and the Reformation we have arrived at a point where we can reach out to other religions, and can of course embrace ecumenical activities in our own country. However, this anniversary also reminds us that conflicts of interest supposedly based on religion or pursued in the name of religion are not a trait peculiar to other parts of the world. Such religious strife is also part of our history.

Germany is glad that the religions are now at peace in our country. We are a country in which the state maintains neutrality on matters of religion. But it is not secular. Religion has its place in our country.

And we are glad to see the return of some of the religious life lost during the campaign of terror and extermination waged by the Nazis against Jewish citizens. We are very glad that Jewish communities have re-established themselves in our country, because it is by no means self-evident that they should.

It is precisely when I think of our own past that the title of this event, the "Responsibility of Religions for Peace", makes me prick up my ears. For nowadays we don't often hear the words peace and religion in the same sentence. It is unfortunately far more common to hear religion spoken of in connection with conflict or even war.

At first glance, this would seem to be justified.

– The ancient city of Palmyra lies in ruins because so-called Islamic State wishes to eradicate Syrians' memory of a millennia-old cultural identity – basing its actions on what I at least consider to be a perverse interpretation of Islam.

– The conflict in the Central African Republic is escalating again, in part because the antagonism between Muslim and Christian militias has not yet been resolved.

– In some Asian countries religious intolerance is on the rise and at times erupts into violence. For example in Myanmar, where the Rohingya Muslim minority is being persecuted.

– Even in Europe we are confronted by assassins who carry out horrific attacks in the name of religion.

– And then there is the anti-Islamic, or anti-Muslim, violence in our countries, which threatens members of those religions.

And so here, too, we sometimes see how the old demons, most of which have little to do with

religion, try to utilise religion in order to promote territorial or political interests. Thus, if truth be told, peace does not reign unchallenged here either.

The question of religious radicalisation is now very much on our radar, having played a key role in recent attacks. It is not, however, a new phenomenon.

The German Protestant Kirchentag starts the day after tomorrow in Berlin and Wittenberg. This year its focus is on the 500 years since the Reformation, on the renewal of the Church, but also on schism and violence. For a cruel war raged in Europe from 1618 to 1648, ignited and kept smouldering for religious and other motives. And as I said, there are examples enough in our recent past, too.

I'm saying this to make it clear what histories, what narratives are prone to fix themselves in our minds. For it is clear that religion polarises and is made responsible for backwardness and fanaticism, for violence and even for terrorism.

In reality, things are of course far more complex. Economic, social and political motives are often combined with religious identities to produce an explosive admixture. Religion is often exploited to mobilise groups against outsiders.

But it is true that religion polarises. Not everyone wants religion to have a greater role.

I don’t think that we have to decide here and now whether religions have a propensity to foster extremism, or are ambivalent in their effects, or have rather been hijacked when things that horrify us are done in their name.

However I do think that religious stakeholders are also political players in their societies. Anyone who is active in a religious context in a given country is also part of that society and its political life. They too are caught up in worldly affairs, they too can be enmeshed in guilt and error.

People who merely promote the stereotype that religion always makes conflicts worse are, in my opinion, making a big mistake. They block out the complexity and the ambivalent effects of religion. It is important to discover what role religious motives have had or may still play in a conflict. However, I firmly believe that we must not stop there.

We have invited you all here today because we want to look closely at the peacemaking potential of religions and at their responsibility for peace in society.

We want to raise other questions that might help us take a new and fresh look at the topic. I think it’s worth looking at the constructive potential of religion and not just its apparently destructive potential which is currently foremost in our minds. We should not only ask what religions could do to foster the peaceful coexistence of societies, but also what responsibility they bear for actually doing it!

This is not a theoretical issue. Rather, it seems to me that this is a subject we must address as diplomats of a country such as Germany, whose history is closely entwined with faith and religion, whose Basic Law stipulates that it is tolerant of and open towards all religions, but which ultimately retains state neutrality in questions of religion, according freedom to all religions in our country.

At the same time, this means that no religion is above the law in Germany. No religion is above the constitution. All religions must operate within the framework provided by the constitution. We politicians also have a a big role in explaining to everyone that freedom of religion and respect for the constitution and other laws are inseparably linked. And that this is true even as concerns those aspects of our constitution which vex some religions, such as gender equality and protections for

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homosexuals. These are things that have evolved in our country. They didn't come out of nowhere. They have become part of our constitution.

At the same time, we have to explain to our populace that the words of our former President Wulff, "Islam is a part of Germany" were not just expressing a theory, but reflect our daily life – all you have to do is to walk out into the street. We have to explain that Muslims are citizens of our country with equal rights, at least that's how we see it. Explaining to people that Islam is part of Germany is a task that we politicians have not yet managed to complete.

Perhaps it is important precisely for this reason that we, in a country where ever fewer people seem to have faith in God, should concern ourselves with the question of what impact religion has as a factor in international relations. For in fact religion is gaining significance worldwide. 80% of the world population belongs to one religion or another. In contrast to what some people think, religion is not disappearing from the modern world.

I think we must face up to this reality. We must recognise something that we here in Europe have perhaps forgotten or wilfully ignored: religion and faith are not only questions of personal identity – they also often define the realities within a society. And naturally these questions of identity and religiosity pay no heed to national borders, especially those drawn sometime in the past century with little regard for local and regional contexts.

We want to do justice to this complexity with our German foreign policy. We want to try, with you, to work out how we can unlock the power of religion wherever societies threaten to drift apart or, worse, where social conflicts flare into violence and civil war. For it is my impression that in such situations societies need a great deal of strength, a great deal of courage and a great deal of optimism in order to escape this spiral of escalating violence.

Religions can be a key motor and guide in this endeavour. Above all, they can provide optimism, for they have a profound understanding of guilt, forgiveness and reconciliation. Religious actors can experience failure and futility without sinking into despair. They can stand up for fairness and justice in their societies, where others see only friends or foes. They take a long-term view – something that is needed to foster peace.

This makes me think of the vicar general of the Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad, whom I met recently. What a place! It probably had more walls and barbed wire than anywhere else in the world. But between these walls, in a small church, I met a visionary blessed with incorrigible optimism. In the midst of the chaos he maintained good relations with all religious groups, notwithstanding the many conflicts that existed. I was impressed.

If religious representatives, some of whom have experienced such horrors, look to the future with courage and trust in God in the truest sense of the word, that should give us courage here, too.

It also illustrates something else. Like him, many other religious leaders have a responsibility simply because their words and actions carry great weight in their communities. Because of this, religious leaders have a special responsibility not to contribute to radicalisation, division or conflict. I think that it is first and foremost this responsibility that we must address together.

Don't get me wrong. It is still states who bear the responsibility to act peaceably in their international relations and to adhere to human rights obligations vis-à-vis their citizens at home.

When I say that religions should – and can – also assume responsibility, I am not advocating the wholesale removal of the Westphalian order and abdicating responsibility to the religions. What I am advocating is harnessing the strength, knowledge, resilience and long-term vision of religions for practical work to promote peace. Who better to do such work than those whose scriptures and

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faiths place such importance on peace?

The Federal Foreign Office is already working along those lines.

For example, even today, we support the Community of Sant'Egidio's peace dialogue in Mozambique and the Central African Republic. Religious groups there have good access, which enables them to identify and negotiate concrete solutions to end the violence.

We also work with Dar El Fatwa and the Berghof Foundation and support a dialogue among Sunnis on preventing radicalisation in Lebanon – this is preventative action of a most concrete kind.

We work with the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue in Nigeria, where we are endeavouring to mediate between Christian and Muslim groups.

Those are the kind of options we need to explore yet further. We can do that best with you. You are the real experts.

We also want to integrate such viewpoints more systematically into our foreign policy work. For the viewpoint of the Church and religious groups enriches our understanding of an increasingly complex world. It will take practice for religious leaders and diplomats to find the right forms of cooperation. It won't come without effort. But it will come with time. I personally hope it will result in even greater religious literacy on the part of our diplomats.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We know that all of you gathered here today work for peace – in your societies and in international groups. We know that you live up to your responsibilities with authority, fixity of purpose and optimism. You have been doing this for a long time. We believe it would be good for the Federal Foreign Office and for Germany to tread this path with you, wherever possible and wherever you desire it.

What we ask of you is to share your expertise with us. Nobody knows more about how religions can discharge their responsibility for peace better than you.

These factors are what strengthened our desire to invite you to this meeting.

I am eager to see what the outcome of this first meeting will be. Do we have anything to offer that you need? And, conversely, what can you explain to us?

I trust you will view these two days as an invitation to enter into a lasting relationship, not as a one-off event. Here in this room are experienced and well-informed men and women from a wide variety of regions and religions, who could become a tremendous united force for peace. I hope you will forge lasting contacts here and build on the links you already have.

If we can do more to support your work, please let us know. And if, at the end of this meeting, you want to continue and meet each other again, then the event will have been a great success.

Thank you for coming, and thank you all for helping to make this meeting happen.

This is the challenge I would like you to rise to, the responsibility I would like you to shoulder. I have faith that you can shoulder it, even if at times some may wish to avoid it because it is so large. But I am convinced that religions must assume this responsibility and will be able to live up to it. I have faith in the great peacemaking potential of all religions.

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Thank you for listening.

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