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President's speech unleashes new Islam debate in Germany

EarthTimes (07.10.2010) / HRWF (07.10.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The assertion made by German President Christian Wulff at the weekend that Islam "belonged" in Germany has unleashed a new wave of debate over immigration and religion, with the issue arising in parliament Thursday.

In his ceremonial speech to mark the 20th anniversary of unification on Sunday, Wulff said: "Christianity belongs, without doubt, in Germany. Judaism belongs, without doubt, in Germany. And by now, Islam also belongs in Germany."

But by Monday, conservatives were reacting with horror to the suggestion that Islam could be afforded equal status to Germany's Judaeo-Christian culture.

Germany has some 4 million Muslims, most of whom are of Turkish ethnicity. The two main Christian churches have a quasi-state identity, and members pay a "church tax" on their incomes.

"Integration cannot be allowed to set off the weakening and neglect of our own culture and value system," Christian Democratic Union General Secretary Alexander Dobrindt said on Thursday.

Wulff's outreach to German Muslims - telling them that he was "their President too" - came after weeks of acrimony over the place of Islam in German society.

The left, however, has reacted positively to Wulff's words, with Social Democratic Party leader Sigmar Gabriel saying Thursday that "of course Islam belongs now in Germany." Gabriel called for Germans to distinguish between Islam and the political ideologies of Islamism.

Tuebingen University to offer Germany's first imam training course

EarthTimes (05.10.2010) / HRWF (06.10.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The University of Tuebingen is to offer Germany's first training programme for Islamic clergy from 2011, the education ministry for the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg announced on Tuesday.

The university, near the south-western city of Stuttgart, plans to appoint six professors in the coming years, to train up to 320 imams to work at mosques as well as performing pedagogical and social work, the ministry said.

Experts have said that the integration of Germany's 4 million Muslims is hindered by the fact that most imams come from Turkey, speak little German and are not familiar with western European culture.

Baden-Wuerttemberg's state government decided on Monday to open a faculty for Islamic studies in a year's time. The state is currently applying for federal funding for the project.

At present, very few of Germany's Islamic religion teachers are trained in the country. Those who are mostly attend the university of Muenster.

Tuebingen University aims to appoint Muslim theologians who have completed a part of their academic career in Germany, principal Bernd Engler told the German Press Agency dpa.

German professor named UN's top expert on religious freedom

German human-rights expert Heiner Bielefeldt has been named the new UN Special Rapporteur on the Freedom of Religion or Belief. He starts the job in August

www.dw-world.de (21.06.2010) / HRWF (23.06.2010) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - The 52-year-old German philosophy professor Heiner Bielefeldt was named to the post after Malaysian candidate Ambiga Sreenevasan was deemed unsuitable by several Muslim countries due to her sometimes critical stance on Islam.

Big shoes

Since September 2009, Bielefeldt has held the newly created interdisciplinary Chair for Human Rights and Human Rights Policy at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. He will be taking over the UN post from Pakistani lawyer Asma Jahangir, who is leaving at the end of her term.

Bielefeldt said Jahangir left him a pair of "especially large shoes" to fill. For example, he said, in the controversy over the Mohammed caricatures, Jahangir stuck to principles of "unbeatable clarity" on the issue of religious freedom. In addition, she clarified the "innate ties between religious freedom and freedom of expression."

Freedom to choose one's religion and world view is one of the basic foundations of human rights. But this freedom is breached around the world, so the UN Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Religion is one of the 40 current special mandates of the UN Human Rights Council.

Challenges from weak regimes

Human rights are often abused in conjunction with the limitation or suppression of religious freedoms, "especially in regions with weak governments, where minorities are threatened and excluded," Bielefeldt said.

He sees particular challenges in countries like Iran, where religion is a major part of the state identity and regime. It is also relevant in Europe, where an attempt to create a culture led by Christian values comes into conflict with freedom of religion.

On the subject of integrating Muslims in Europe, Bielefeldt - who studied Catholic theology and history as well as philosophy - has published numerous books and papers.

His academic career contained stints at the universities of Tuebingen, Mannheim, and Heidelberg. In 2003, he was named founding director of the Institute of Human Rights in Berlin after that body was created by the German parliament, the Bundestag.

Pro-integration, anti-exclusion

In that post, he had to deal with the issue of the right of Europeans to criticize Islam, and warned against defamation and exclusion of Muslims in European society. He urged Muslims to use the opportunity offered by Germany's secular, constitutional state to integrate into European society.

There are some in the Human Rights Council who say they want to see Islam depicted as a cultural identity before which other religions and the principles of human rights would have to take a secondary position, but Bielefeldt's response to that is clear. He says: "Over and over again, the important thing is defending the freedom and rights of individuals."

Author: Ulrike Mast-Kirschning (jen)

Editor: Michael Lawton
