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Address on the occasion of the meeting with the Holy Father
with Muslim representatives
on 23 September 2011 in Berlin

The criterion of love and mercy in Islam and Christianity

Your Holiness,

Your Eminences, Your Excellencies, Dear Brothers and Sisters in Faith,

Your Holiness, during your visit to Cologne in August 2005, you sought a dialogue with Muslims in Germany. On behalf of all the Muslims gathered here, I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for doing so on this visit also. I consider this – and I am certain that most Muslims in Germany see it in precisely the same light – as a gesture of acknowledgement of Muslims in Germany which gives recognition and honour to us as Muslims, but also constitutes a further major signpost for the peaceful co-existence of the Christians and Muslims of this world.

We in Germany are in the midst of a process of establishing Islamic Theology as a subject at German Universities. As an Islamic theologian at the University of Münster, it is a great honour and a joy for me to stand here and to be able to speak as a representative of many Muslims in Germany.

The Catholic-Muslim Forum, launched in the Vatican in 2008, is a major platform for Muslim-Christian dialogue. The establishment of Islamic theology at German Universities also provides a forum not only for a constructive reflection on Islamic theology, but also for an objective exchange with Christian theologians in which we can learn with and from one another. This applies to Münster, where two of the largest Christian faculties in Europe are located, as well as to Osnabrück, Frankfurt, Erlangen and Tübingen.

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We, Muslims and Christians, emphasise in our encounters that we believe in the same God, in the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob und Ismael.

However, when Muslims speak of God, are they all speaking of the same one? When Christians speak of God, are they all speaking of the same one? Both religions have a range of ideas about God.

We therefore need a criterion by which we can know whether we are speaking about God at all and not about a subjective or even a political projection. In Christianity, one would name Jesus himself as a criterion, given that Jesus is regarded in Christianity as the revelation of God. And what do things look like in Islam?

The property of God occurring most frequently in the Koran is the designation ar-Rahman or ar-Rahim, which translates as “the Compassionate or the Merciful”. God’s description of Himself in the Koran as merciful is however not enough by itself to perceive His mercy. The revelation of God and His mercy mean more than a mere communication; they mean that this mercy of God is accessible to Man, that is that he can experience and live it, that it becomes possible to experience God. God has revealed His mercy not only in words, in the Koran, but in Creation itself. Each act of mercy in this world is a manifestation of the revelation of the merciful God; the mercy of God encompasses all things, as emphasised by the Koran in Sura 7, verse 156.

The Koran provides an indication of this manifestation of God’s mercy, and calls on us to perceive it: “So observe the effects of the mercy of Allah - how He gives life to the earth after its lifelessness” (Sura 30, Verse 50). Man can make the Earth fruitful through his actions, and can therefore make God’s mercy real. Hence, the revelation takes on the character of a dialogue, given that Man himself can cause it and make it real by acting in a kind and merciful manner. This is also Man’s mandate.

The Catholic-Muslim Forum, launched in 2008, stresses love of God and of one’s fellows as the central binding link between Islam and Christianity. The following story by the Prophet Mohammed reminds us of the Gospel according to Matthew:

“Allah will ask a man on the Day of Resurrection: ‘I was sick but you did not visit Me, I asked food from you but you did not feed Me and I asked drink from you but you did not provide Me’, at which the man will ask in astonishment: ‘Thou art God, how can you be sick, thirsty or hungry?’, and Allah will answer: ‘On that day a friend of yours was sick but you did not visit him. If you had visited him, you would have found Me by him. On that day a friend of yours was hungry and you did not give him anything to eat, and on that day a friend of yours was thirsty and you did not give him any thing to drink.’”¹ Where someone stretches out the hand of mercy and kindness, this is where God is manifest, there is mercy, there is God. Where a mother embraces her child, where we smile at someone, everywhere one makes a sign of kindness, love and mercy, is where the revelation of God’s mercy is made real, where it is made possible to experience God.

¹ told in Muslim, Hadith No. 2569.

God describes His mercy in the Koran as absolute. The only thing which God has “obliged” Himself to do in the Koran is mercy: Sura 6, verse 12 reads as follows: “He has decreed that mercy is His attribute.”

Expressed in Christian terms as love, and in Islamic terms as mercy, God therefore reveals Himself in love and mercy experienced and lived here and now in this world. According to this understanding of God as being in dialogue with Man, Man can, indeed should make the revelation of God real. Love and mercy are therefore the criterion which we as Muslims and Christians share in order to distinguish between a divine offer and a non-divine offer. These are the words of 1 John (4:16): “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him.”, and in the same vein the words of the Prophet Muhammad²: “God says: ‘When I make him My beloved I become his ears to hear, and his eyes to see and his hands to grasp and his feet to walk. When he asks Me I grant him and when he seeks My protection I protect him.’” I wish to see Muslims and Christians growing in mutual understanding and in God’s love and mercy, and I would like to wish to you, Your Holiness, God’s blessing on this path.

² told in Muslim Bukhari, Hadith No. 6137.