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Welcoming Speech to the "Islamic Studies in Germany" Conference

As Chairman of the German Council of Science and Humanities, I warmly welcome you to our conference on "Islamic Studies in Germany". I am extremely pleased that Professor Annette Schavan, the Minister of Education and Research, will give her welcoming speech at the very beginning of our session. In doing so, she not only indicates her interest – and I must add “her personal interest” – in our activity. It is also a clear sign that the Ministry supports the establishment of Islamic Studies in our country.

I also cordially welcome our guests from both Germany and abroad. I'm afraid I cannot introduce all of you by name at this time, but I would like to express my extreme satisfaction at the great interest with which our endeavor has been met from Indonesia, to Turkey, and as far as Morocco. Even those invitees who – at very short notice in the period from late June to early July – had to retract their offers to participate have signaled their willingness to support the concept of the creation of Islamic Studies in Germany. For example, Professor Mahmoud Zakzouk, Egypt's Minister of Religious Affairs, has informed of us his willingness “to provide both moral and practical support in the realization of these plans (to establish Islamic Studies)”. |¹ Also, Iran's former Minister of State, Seyed Mohammad Khatami, has assessed our plan and conference as "very important in the direction of constructive cooperation between the Islamic World and the West". |² For various reasons, primarily related to current affairs and foreign politics, we will have to engage in our discourse with Iran, Egypt, and Bosnia-Herzegovina on another occasion.

|¹ Cf. the correspondence from Professor Dr. Mahmoud Zakzouk of 21 June 2010.

|² Cf. the correspondence from Professor Dr. Mahmoud Zakzouk of 21 June 2010.

Thus I am all the more pleased to be able to greet Professor Amin Abdullah as the representative of Indonesia's Ministry for Religious Affairs and Professor Ali Dere, Head of the Department of Foreign Relations in Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (DIYANET). Since the recommendations of the Council of Science and Humanities in regard to the establishment of Islamic Studies is a reaction to religious pluralism, I am also pleased to welcome Professor Sarah Stroumsa, the Rector of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and an expert on the intellectual exchange between the Jewish and Islamic traditions.

In January 2010, the Council of Science and Humanities adopted the "Recommendations on the Advancement of Theologies and Sciences Concerned with Religions at German Universities" (cf. Raphael) in which it advocated that and suggested how an academic theology of Islam should be established and developed at German public universities. At the outset of this conference (cf. Scharvan), I would like to place the Council's recommendation to establish Islamic Studies at two or three German universities in the broader context of the entire document on the training of theologians and religion-related sciences.

The premises of the recommendations can be succinctly encapsulated in five theses:

1. The thesis circulating in various versions of secularization theory that religion is rapidly losing its meaning in modern societies is untenable. Even if we do not want to moot – as F. W. Graf has done – a "Return of the Gods", we nonetheless cannot overlook the fact that religious ties impact manifold aspects of life, define collective group identities, and also represent a major dimension in numerous conflicts – both local and global.
2. The religious realm is not losing its significance but rather its homogeneity: German society today is marked by a process of increasing religious pluralization, including approximately four million Muslims – five percent of the population. They come from a range of countries |³ and cultures and adhere to various shades of religious convictions. Islam's internal plurality of structures presents a great challenge.
3. As articulated by the Council's working group, the modern secular state governed by the rule of law has "a vital interest in making its citizens' and residents'

³ Most are from Turkey, (2.5 million), but many (550,000) stem from other areas of southeastern Europe, and others are from the Near East, Southeast Asia, as well as from Iran and Africa.

religious orientation a fertile domain for the stability and development of the community." |⁴

4. This creates a challenge for Germany's public education system as to how to react to the significance and pluralization of the religious sphere, both intellectually and institutionally! The Council's recommendations have developed relevant educational policy replies, to which I will refer here.
5. The reaction to the previously mentioned manifestations of religion must entail a strengthening of the secular, scientific dialogue with them: that is, Religious Studies (including Religious Studies-based Islamic Studies). Furthermore, the society and its educational system – which in this context means the universities as the system's organizational epicenter – are, at the same time, also dependent on the intellectually responsible, academically structured self-reflection of the living religious forms that characterize Germany, i.e. on theologies – and my use of the plural here is indeed intentional!

And at this "systematic" venue, we must address the issue of Islamic theology. As I mentioned earlier, approximately five percent of the population of Germany – Germany, a land of immigration – are Muslims. However, unlike the case of Christianity and Judaism, a scientific self-reflection of pious practice and Islamic tradition has not yet found a fitting place in German universities. The Council does not feel this state of affairs is justifiable, and so it has outlined the place for such theological self-reflection in the public university system. We call this theological place Islamic Studies. The choice of this particular phrase was made bearing in mind that the term "theology" itself is marked by Christian historical associations and because the secular state is interested in furthering the scientific foundation of Islamic self-reflection but not in its Christianization. This, I assume, will become another discussion point on the podium in regard to the question, "What is Islamic theology?"

In closing, allow me to stress one more point in regard to the objectives of the Council's recommendations, and that is that they most certainly view Islamic Studies as having an important integration policy dimension. Having said this, their primary application is definitely in the realm of education policy. In the foreground is the question of how the scientific self-reflection of Islam can be put into practice in public universities within the frame of the constitutional law applying to religion. In a moment, Mr. Raphael, the

⁴ Council of Science and Humanities: Recommendations on the Advancement of Theologies and Sciences Concerned with Religions at German Universities. Berlin 2010, p. 57

Chairperson of the working group, will go into greater detail concerning the special stipulations concerning religion in German constitutional law. Here I would only like to underline that the Council feels that the existing practice of sporadically creating chairs of Islamic instruction at a few universities – as important as they are – is inadequate. Didactics, including the didactics of religion, that is not based upon a genuine scientific examination of the instructional content will sooner or later become merely a sterile technique of instructional forms.

Because German society – due to pluralization - urgently requires better religious training of its members, it is far preferable to anchor and advance the independent discipline of Islamic Studies at two or three campuses. The university context will secure the discipline's recognition in society, will allow it to operate in close proximity to other scientific disciplines, and will guarantee that it meets accepted scientific standards. The academic development of a scientific, theological discipline of Islamic Studies that is held in this regard will enable it to establish the requirements for a qualified program of training for certified religious instructors, as well as for science and research. At the same time, the individuals trained within this framework can also be considered for the assumption of religious and social responsibilities in the communities. This development would likewise contribute to the integration and recognition of Muslims.

The great approval that the Council's recommendations have enjoyed in the last half year – including the view toward the establishment of Islamic Studies – demonstrates that the time has come to integrate the systematic self-reflection of Islam into the university system and put it on par with Christian theologies and Jewish Studies. There is consensus that institutional solutions must be found, rather than ones carried out on a project-by-project basis.

Therefore, the German Council of Science and Humanities seeks to foster the implementation of its recommendations by creating a forum for interaction among representatives from the political, religious, and scientific communities in the form of two conferences. Four weeks ago, the Council discussed the full scope of the recommendations with reference to all theological and religion-related subjects. During the next two days, the issue of Islamic Studies is the focal point.

As a result of the public discussion of the Council's recommendations, the establishment of Islamic Studies as a new academic discipline in Germany is no longer at issue. The recommendations have smoothed the way for this, and the necessity has been recognized throughout Germany – which we perceive as a major success. Now, the way to implement the endeavor has to be laid out. It is no longer a question of *whether*, but rather *how* to accomplish the establishment of Islamic Studies. To give shape to this

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how, we in Germany - where Islamic Studies is a new discipline - require Islamic theological competence from abroad. For this reason, I am all the more pleased that you have found your way to us here in Cologne. The discussions in Berlin, in which some of you participated, can now be continued with a view toward the question of the organization of Islamic Studies.