

Statement of the 4th Session of the 35th Synod of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren on the Relationship with Muslims

As Czech Brethren Evangelicals we are aware of the shared responsibility of all people for living in peace, for justice and moral values, and for the preservation of creation. We consider it important that all groups of the population can participate in dialogue and the search for common values. The aim of this text is to point out what is good to know about Islam, to oppose prejudices against Muslims in Czech society, to express our readiness to dialogue with Muslims, and to contribute to peaceful coexistence.

With this statement, we appeal to the members of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren to meet Muslims in their congregations and in their neighbourhoods and to contribute to understanding and peaceful coexistence. We also appeal to Muslim religious communities and individual Muslims living in the Czech Republic with an interest in practical cooperation. We make the same appeal to the public, intellectuals, philosophers, artists, journalists, and politicians of the Czech Republic at all levels.

1. The situation

Islam has been part of Europe for centuries. There are also several predominantly Muslim societies in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, strong Muslim minorities have emerged in recent decades. Czech society came to know Muslims within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From the 1960s to the present day, students from Muslim countries have come to study at Czech universities and some of them have stayed. More Muslims came to the Czech Republic after the war in the former Yugoslavia. Other Muslims came to the Czech Republic as professionals for work, as part of the diplomatic service, or as part of natural migration - not only from traditionally Muslim countries but also, for example, from Western Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States. There is also a group of Czech converts to Islam.

We do not want to ignore the presence of Islam in the Czech Republic; on the contrary, we are trying to contribute to mutual understanding and good coexistence.

We regret the ignorance and resentment towards Muslims that is present in our society. We consider it harmful when populist movements take advantage of the presence of immigrants from Muslim countries to stir up fear and apprehension. We oppose stereotypes, depicting Muslims as religious fanatics and terrorists. We oppose the image of a world in which different cultures stand as fundamentally rival and hostile. We are part of one world, and we care deeply about a good relationship between Christians and Muslims.

2. Similarities and differences

Christians and Muslims share a number of biblical and religious traditions. A number of biblical figures are mentioned in the Qur'an. However, the same stories are often told with different emphases.

What is common is the way we relate to the texts, but the difference is in our understanding of their authority. According to Islamic tradition, the prophet Muhammad received the Qur'an directly from God through the angel Gabriel, while the Sunnah records the sayings and actions of the prophet written down by his companions after his death. For Christians, the Scriptures are the Word of God through the witnesses of faith.

Frequently the question is asked whether we believe in the same God. The Qur'an assumes that it is the same God.¹ Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have a similar approach to God as the exclusive and only Creator and personal God who speaks to man and calls him to account. What is common is that we call God merciful and compassionate. As Christians, we see a special and unique expression of God's nature in the descent, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the sending of the Holy Spirit. The figure of Jesus is also highly revered in the Qur'an; he is God's messenger, endowed with the Spirit². According to the Qur'an, Jesus himself is not God, his divine sonship is inconceivable to Islam³, and the idea that he is the Saviour and Redeemer is also alien. The meaning of Jesus is presupposed by Christianity in the trinitarian doctrine, which is alien to Islam.

Both the Bible and the Qur'an understand man as God's creation, whose beginning and end are related to God.⁴ We also see some differences in the understanding of man. The Qur'an in particular does not name human sinfulness so specifically. According to it, man is free to make choices, especially when God's revelation helps him to do so. The Bible testifies both to man's special dignity and his responsibility for creation, and to man's self-deception, from which he cannot extricate himself. The Bible and the Qur'an also agree that God will ultimately judge man's life in His merciful justice. For Christians, God's justice is determined by his grace in Christ, to whom judgment is also entrusted.

Both religions are grounded in law and justice. The Qur'an describes the true way of man in a manner similar to the ethical traditions of the Old Testament, and we find similarities with the Ten Commandments.⁵ The so-called "Golden Rule" obligates us to treat others as we wish them to treat us.⁶ Scripture teaches hospitality toward strangers. The Gospel teaches us to love even our enemies.⁷

3. Common history

There is a long history of contacts and disputes between the two religions. Western Europe came into contact with Muslims in the Mediterranean area. Central and south-eastern Europe encountered the Ottoman Empire after the decline of Christian Byzantium. These encounters took various forms: trade and cultural exchange, where Islam had and has a positive influence on European culture, coexistence in religiously mixed areas - and military clashes. In the minds of individual nations, the Turks were seen as

¹ Sura 29, 46: "Our God and your God are one." Allah is a general, not a personal, designation.

² "I have supported you with the Holy Spirit", Sura 5,110.

³ "It is not worthy of God to take a son", Sura 19, 35.

⁴ "And he created you from a single creature, and made you its companion," Sura 39:5-6.

⁵ "Say, "Come, I will recite what your Lord has prohibited to you. [He commands] that you not associate anything with Him, and to parents, good treatment, and do not kill your children out of poverty; We will provide for you and them." Sura 6, 151-153.

⁶ "Therefore, all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the Law and the Prophets." Matt. 7:12. The Golden Rule, though not directly found in the Qur'an, is recommended by many scholars in the theological tradition of Islam.

⁷ "...love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us...", Mt 5:44-45. "If you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good", Rom 12:20-21. A similar emphasis on overcoming evil with good is found in the Qur'an: 'Repel (evil) with that which is good, and you will see that he, between whom and you there was enmity, shall become as if he were a bosom friend (of yours)', Sura 41:34.

pagans and barbarians⁸; on the other hand, many states resorted to alliances with them in their quest for independence.⁹

Christians have long regarded Islam as a Christian heresy, similar to other trends that deny the Holy Trinity. Only gradually did they come to view Islam as a separate religion. The confessions of the time of the Reformation mention Muslims in two contexts: first, in the context of the doctrine of God and the Trinity¹⁰, and second, in the context of the doctrine of justification by faith alone¹¹. They place the Prophet Muhammad in line with Catholics who deny pardon by faith alone and understand salvation in a causal relationship with human actions.

We welcome the turn away from conflict and mistrust towards mutual respect and dialogue. The Catholic Church expressed at the Second Vatican Council that "we also look with reverence on Muslims who worship the one God, living and self-existent, merciful and almighty, creator of heaven and earth".¹² Since 1967, the World Council of Churches has engaged in a conversation with Islam at the global level with the participation of Muslims.¹³ Other forms of dialogue are being developed at different levels and in various interreligious meetings.

We subscribe to the 2001 document *Charta Oecumenica*, which advocates, among other things, an intensification of encounters between Christians and Muslims and recommends conversations about belief in one God and clarifying understandings of human rights. It includes a commitment to "treat Muslims with respect and to engage with Muslims on common issues."¹⁴ We recommend the 2019 document on human fraternity between the Catholic Church and Muslims.¹⁵ We draw on the richness of the dialogue fostered with Muslims by the various evangelical churches associated in the Communion of Evangelical Churches in Europe.¹⁶

⁸ It should be noted that Muslims in the true sense of the word cannot be considered pagans, since they profess one God, nor can they be called barbarians since in the Middle Ages they were the bearers of culture for Europe.

⁹ For example, the Czech Estates received an Ottoman delegation in 1620 and discussed possible military aid against the Habsburgs. Many Protestants in Austria-Hungary also took refuge under the protection of the Ottomans, where they experienced greater tolerance.

¹⁰ The Book of Covenant, Kalich – Prague 2006, p. 52, mentions "Mohammedans" alongside Arians and other movements that do not recognize the divine Trinity.

¹¹ The Book of Covenant, Kalich – Prague 2006, p. 203, mentions Muhammad as an advocate of justification by works.

¹² 12 Nostra aetate (Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, 28 October 1965), cited by: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

¹³ The conversations resulted in the documents *Christians Meeting Muslims* (1977) and *Striving Together in Dialogue. A Muslim-Christian Call to Reflection and Action* (2000).

¹⁴ *Charta Oecumenica*, published by the Secretariat of the CBK, Prague 2001, p. 11.

¹⁵ The authors are Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad At-Tajjib (he is the supreme cleric of Al-Azhar Mosque and University in Cairo and a recognized authority on Sunni Islam). The document is an invitation to all who have in their hearts faith in God and belief in brotherhood among men. It seeks to foster a culture of mutual respect and dialogue. It advocates good neighbourly relations with Muslim believers, openness in conversation, and listening together to God's message - see <https://www.radiovaticana.cz/clanek.php?id=28926>

¹⁶ Protestant Perspectives on Religious Plurality in Europe, 2018. The standard work prepared by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany is "Was jeder vom Islam wissen muss", 8th edition 2011, im Auftrag des Amtes der VELKD, hg. von Martin Affolderbach u. Inken Wöhlbrand.

4. Coexistence in an open society

Relations between Christians and Muslims are burdened by a long history of conflict. Even today, tensions and fears often accompany the relationship between Christians and Muslims. It is important for us to know that we cannot blame all the transgressions of Muslims throughout history on today's peaceful Muslims living in our country, just as we evangelicals today do not want to take responsibility for all the transgressions of Christians associated with the Crusades, forced Christianisation, colonisation and missionary expansion into the Third World.

We need to recognise the diversity of Islam, which has established itself in many different cultures. The relationship between state and religion also takes many forms in different Muslim states.

Many issues relating to the coexistence of cultures and religions need to be clarified:

1. Throughout history and in the present day, we are confronted with the misuse of religion for violence and oppression. A common problem is the hateful tendencies that today appear in different forms on both sides: on the (post-)Christian side as contempt for Muslims and on the Muslim side as the efforts of some organised groups calling for violence under the banner of Islam. We appreciate the representative voices from the Muslim side that oppose violence in the name of faith. We oppose the incitement of religion to war, hateful attitudes, hostility, and extremism.
2. Both religions follow cultural patterns in particular societies regarding marriage and the relationship between men and women.¹⁷ Despite their equality before God, they often assign women a subordinate role in society. Inequality between the sexes is not to be stigmatized religiously.
3. As Christians, we advocate freedom of religion for all people, for Muslims in the Czech Republic and for Christians in Muslim countries. Freedom includes the right to publicly practice one's religion. So too is the right to accept, change or leave a religion.

5. Encounters and dialogue with Muslims

We want to enter into an open conversation with Muslims and listen carefully to them. At the same time, we want to explain our own positions clearly and understandably. In conversation with others, we better discover who we are and who our partners are. Dialogue is a manifestation of the vitality of religious traditions.

The goal of dialogue is above all mutual knowledge and increased receptivity to the other. God's openness to man, made manifest in Christ, leads us to other people. This is our conviction and the deepest reason why we are open to encounter and why we see in Muslims above all our fellow human beings. By virtue of our tradition, we understand this concept to mean that our neighbours are not primarily those who are given to us by birth or religious affinity, but that we can become neighbours by approaching someone with openness and willingness to help.

¹⁷ For example, the veiling of women is already a good practice in pre-Islamic cultures, and we find evidence of this in the Apostle Paul's statement in his letter to the Corinthians that women should pray with their heads covered (1 Cor 11:5). Veiling itself may not be a sign of oppression, as we sometimes believe in the West, but is instead seen by some women as an expression of their self-respect and worth. We advocate that women should neither be forced to be veiled nor unveiled.

The basic form of dialogue is encounter and conversation in everyday life. We see many opportunities for understanding and cooperation in solving the problems of contemporary society and coexistence. It is also important to have a conversation about ethical issues (the concept of human rights, equality between men and women, the distinction between church and state, and opposition to violence). Dialogue can also take the form of a mutual invitation so that others are present as guests to our prayers and we to theirs. It is with gratitude that we want to build here on the concrete steps that the Churchwide Minorities Minister is taking in this area with the support of the post-conciliar congregation.

Members of the 4th Session of the 35th Synod of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren

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