ENCOUNTER BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS

The following text is a guide to encourage dialogue and encounter between Christians and Muslims. It was developed by a group of Protestant theologians at the request of the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in the Federal Republic of Germany and Berlin (West) (Evangelisches Missionswerk, EMW).

In recent years contact has been made between Christians and Muslims in the Federal Republic of Germany and West Berlin: at conferences, between official representatives and also at the congregational level, forming the basis of this guide, are the new experiences gained and the ensuing theological reflection, frequently in dialogue with Christians from other European countries and representatives of minority churches in predominantly Muslim countries.

The guide begins (chapter I) with an analysis of Islam as it currently presents itself worldwide and in the Federal Republic of Germany. The following chapter (II) describes experiences that Christians have had in dialogue with Muslims and the opportunities and difficulties facing the Christian-Islamic movement. The main section (III) deals with fundamental theological issues which center on the biblical understanding of Christ and the prophetic ministry of Muhammad. These issues have emerged as the most important themes in the theological dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

Although the emphasis is on theological issues, the guide is primarily aimed at those who come into regular contact with Muslims. We are aware of the fact that the European churches are only beginning to theologically reflect on the relationship between Christians and Muslims. A responsible Christian interpretation of Islam adapted to the present day can only grow out of continued experiences of living side by side with Muslims and will also lead to a new formulation of the Christian faith that accepts the challenge of this encounter.

We are making this document available in English for the benefit of our partner churches and Christians and Muslims in other countries. We would be pleased to receive responses and comments from readers.

The document was prepared before the unification of Germany and relates to West Germany and West Berlin only. Hence the terminology.
Of course, it was drafted before the present crisis in the Gulf. However, it may be even more timely and necessary to publish it now.

Joachim Wietzke

I. The Context of Christian-Muslim Encounter

(We) Christians in the Federal Republic of Germany have yet to learn how to coexist with people of other faiths. We live in a society where (we) Christians are no longer on our own. Muslims, too, have difficulties orientating themselves as a minority in a secular society rooted in Christianity, more so since many of them have a very strong sense of belonging to the Islamic world community.

This means that we can only understand Muslims and their communities living in West Germany and West Berlin if we become aware of the historical and present-day ties which determine their thinking and action.

1. Islam as an International Force

1.1 New Muslim Self-Confidence

"A Muslim is once again proud of being a Muslim" - this sentence serves as a succinct description of the present revival in the Islamic world. This complex process is often referred to as re-islamization. It is primarily a reaction to developments which have shaken the "House of Islam" over the last few centuries, in particular:
- the decay of the Ottoman Empire ("the sick man of the Bosporus") and the resulting conflicts;
- the political control and economic exploitation exercised during more than two centuries of colonial rule by Western powers (from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 to the end of France's Algerian war in 1962), which still continue in various forms of economic and political dependence;
- cultural and religious domination by Christian and secular influences from the West and from socialist countries.

As a reaction to both inner decay and foreign domination and dependence, Muslims are re-turning to their own values and rules. Re-islamization is a protest movement seeking the establishment of an autonomous Islamic identity and increased self-determination.