

The spoken word is final.

**International Christian-Muslim Consultation
“Transforming Communities:
Christians and Muslims Building a Common Future”
Geneva, 1 November 2010**

Welcome Speech

Rev. Dr. Thomas Wipf

President of the Council of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches
and the Swiss Council of Religions

Your Royal Highness,
Your Eminences,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor and joy for me to be able to convey to you the greetings of Switzerland's Protestant churches. I can also convey the greetings and best wishes for this conference on behalf of Peter Maurer, the State Secretary of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, who told me in a personal letter how important he sees this conference and interfaith dialogue “in a time where there seems to be a tendency to focus on the differences between religions and their adherents.”

It is of great importance to us that this conference is taking place in Switzerland and here in the City of Geneva. The percentage of people from other cultures and religious traditions is particularly high in our country. With some 350,000 members, Islamic communities make up the third-largest religious group in Switzerland, following the major Christian churches. In light of increasing cultural and religious diversity, this conference is focusing on a challenge facing us both here in Switzerland and throughout Europe: To be transforming and transformed societies and communities in which Christians and Muslims can shape our future together.

This challenge must be answered at all levels. As the highest representatives of Muslim communities and Christian churches, we bear particular responsibility for ensuring that our dialogue on the opportunities and difficulties of living together in our globalized world is held in a constructive manner. It has filled me with hope and gratitude that the WCC and its Muslim partner organizations have succeeded in bringing about this conference at the highest level.

I am deeply convinced that all religions are rooted in a profound yearning for peace, one which overcomes all religious, social, political, and pragmatic boundaries. I experienced this myself when, in March 2003, just before the beginning of the Iraq War, the three monotheistic religions in Switzerland, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, came together to host a common gathering at Bern's Münster cathedral. A declaration was signed that included the following sentences: "This witness to God is incompatible with a call to mutual hatred and war. ... Our holy scriptures ... call us to make a concrete contribution to love, justice, and peace. ... We declare our wish to maintain the confessional and religious peace in Switzerland. We oppose the temptation to create chasms of mistrust and enmity based in political conflicts among our communities of faith. The tensions and the looming wars in the world motivate us to maintain respect for one another here in Switzerland, to expand the dialogue among us, and to solidify our ties of peace." This occasion inspired the foundation of the Swiss Council of Religions, a European first, which includes the highest national and mandated representatives of the monotheistic religions. The continuous dialogue, which, within this group, focuses on issues of religion and integration policy in particular, permits mutual trust to grow and supports religious peace. This trust also allows for an open exchange of views on the difficulties that can arise when people of different cultures and religions live together in a secular society.

The "Week of Religions" now taking place for the fourth time throughout Switzerland also serves to boost mutual trust between Christians and Muslims. At countless events, members of all religions can meet, get to know each other, and enter into dialogue together at the grassroots level.

Dialogue and trust are also able to bear strains. We have indeed seen this in Switzerland and continue to do so after the passing of the voter initiative "Against the Construction of Minarets". Many members of Muslim community, of whom many were either born or grown up here, were disturbed by this and now feel marginalized. I can understand this and regret the decision of the Swiss electorate. At the same time – and as paradoxical as this may sound – this electoral result should not be viewed as a rejection of Muslims living here in Switzerland. As expert analyses of voter behavior have shown, voters were influenced in their reaction to the minaret question by their uneasiness regarding international events. The electorate was willing to accept limitations on the religious freedom of a minority of considerable size due to their concerns for the democratic state and its laws.

The Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, together with numerous other churches and social forces, worked to raise awareness for this contradiction in the run-up to the vote, and was clear and vocal in its opposition to the initiative. As part of the freedom of belief and conscience, our federal constitution protects the public expression of every faith. Religious freedom is a basic human right. All individuals must be able to express their beliefs both individually and as a community, and this includes the construction of a worthy house of worship in accordance with the expectations of their own religion and within the framework of the law. As a poster in opposition to the initiative expressed it in words set over an image of a minaret among church steeples beneath a blue sky: "The sky over Switzerland is large enough".

As Christian churches, we are reliable partners for the Islamic associations in this country when it comes to strong political support for the full exercise of the basic right to religious freedom. As churches and religious communities, we are obliged before our state and society to do what we can to promote social cohesion and the protection of religious freedom. This of course also requires that we discuss the requirements of living together.

As a Christian and as a person of faith, it is, however, also of particular importance to me to develop a religious dialogue within the framework of our interreligious cooperation in addition to dialogues on religious and social policy. If we wish to live together in peace with people of other faiths, and seek to discover our commonalities and tolerate our differences, we must find the will to do so within our own faith and must also lay the religious foundation for it. We have therefore warmly welcomed the publication in 2007 of the open letter of 138 Muslim leaders entitled "A common word between us and you", which recommended that we derive such a basis of understanding from the connection between loving God and loving one's neighbor in both religions. This dialogue will entail a lengthy learning process. I appreciate the WCC's invitation to its member churches to join with their Muslim dialogue partners in examining this "understanding of love" and to provide the WCC with the results of these exchanges for the WCC's dialogue with its Muslim partner organizations.

This conference represents a milestone in this process of mutual learning. I view it as particularly promising that the conference is focusing its efforts in particular on concrete topics with specific examples in matters such as the relationship between minorities and majorities and the role that religion plays in conflicts. I would again like to quote from the letter of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs addressed to the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches: "Of course, a dialogue per se will not necessarily bring people together. Especially so, if the discussion remains in the general and primarily touches upon values. It is my firm conviction, however, that an inter-faith dialogue will have positive results if it concentrates on concrete issues and problems and tries to identify solutions. Being familiar with the work of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches, I am confident that this pragmatic approach will characterize the debate during the conference."

If we continue to focus on our religions' commonalities and potential for peace, we can construct a common future for Muslims and Christians alike. I would thus like to wish you all trusting, open, and constructive discussions in the days to come as well as a pleasant stay here in Switzerland. Thank you.