

*Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich*  
الهيئة الدينية الإسلامية الرسمية في النمسا



**Conference of European Imams and Ministers Vienna 2006**

Organized by the Islamic Religious Community in Austria in cooperation with the Austrian Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the City of Vienna and the European Islam Conference

**Final Declaration of the Conference**

Islam in Europe is theologically compatible with the principles of democracy, the rule of law, pluralism and human rights. That was the view expressed by the “Conference of Leaders of Islamic Centres and Imams in Europe” in 2003 in Graz, then European Capital of Culture. Simultaneously every form of fanaticism, extremism and fatalism was clearly condemned. This was not only an important signal to Muslims, but should also, through the emphasis on participation, promote the integration and identification processes of Muslims in Europe, who now constitute a community of approximately 50 million people of diverse origin. As evidence of Muslim self-awareness, an important explanatory signal should also be sent to non-Muslims in order to counteract their fear and reservations and to strengthen cooperation in peace, mutual understanding and respect.

In 2006, the conference participants clearly had to recognize that still greater efforts from all sides are required in order to achieve the acceptance of the Muslims by the majority society. In various European countries social and economic tensions are simultaneously related to an often aggressive and emotionally charged “foreigner debate”. Muslims are used as a group in order to create a picture of “foreigners”, which in times of insecurity strengthens discrimination. It appears that a “We” feeling should be stimulated, which societies suffering under a loss of social cohesion have increasingly lost.

Simultaneously Muslims are exposed to strong pressure to justify themselves because, according to the principle “bad news is good news” in the public understanding, crisis reporting moves into the foreground pictures of aggression and violence, often from sites outside of Europe. In the discussion, criticisms repeatedly come up which, with the help of single misunderstandings, try to show “Islam” as incompatible with “Western” values. Here it will not be enough for Muslim scholars to say they are not responsible by explaining that such negative appearances, which are in contradiction to Islamic teachings, have their roots in outdated traditions. In fact, in the theological arguments lie great and proven opportunities to bring about sustainable changes in the consciousnesses. These should also be recognised and respected as part of the answer and be supported in public discourse.

Modernity moves the personal responsibility of every individual mature citizen more strongly than ever into the centre. We stand before great challenges as far as the preservation of peace and security, the question of social justice and the preservation of the environment are concerned. Religions make a significant contribution with their appeal for responsible behaviour, which should be carried by the wish for the others’ well-being. They can bring a positive balance to lifestyles focussed on consumption and individual pleasure.

Islam carries the starting point for a solution, in which variety willed by god should not be questioned but be seen as bringing about more knowledge. One of the maxims of action is “do good”. The right for interaction free from discrimination, independent of origin, religion, societal standing or age, shows how close peace and justice lie together:

*“Those who believe and do not mix up their faith with iniquity, those are they who shall have the security and they are those who go aright” (Sure 6, Verse 82).*

During the Conference, each working group focused on specific issues, bringing about the following considerations:

### Integration sociology

1. The religious claim to show personal readiness and to take responsibility for the general welfare forms the basis of an integrative access which puts each life in the radius of action. So it is natural that Muslims seek to overcome the guest worker image. They regard themselves not as “foreign bodies”, but as a living part of Europe. Large, historically grown, Muslim populations are a fact. Islam is also a real component of the European identity through the accomplishments of its grand scientific and cultural heritage.
2. The concepts of integration and assimilation should not be mixed as is often the case. The interaction with the majority society should not have as a pre-requisite the unconditional abandonment of religion, culture and linguistic variety. The assumption of the inferiority of the “other”, which implies a demand for assimilation, leads to isolation and ghettoisation.
3. Integration is not a one-way street, but a two-sided process. As an active and visible part Muslims try to participate in all areas in a complementary and enriching way: economically, culturally, scientifically, politically, socially. For this, the command of the local language as an instrument for communication is a prerequisite. From the majority society we expect a commitment to diversity, a position against racist and discriminatory tendencies. Incentives and options for improved participation lie in easier naturalisation procedures added to successful integration, family reunification, access to the employment market, diversity management, positive discrimination and quotas, the official recognition of foreign educational qualifications, democratic participation (e.g. municipal voting right).
4. More care should be taken in the definition and the use of the term “parallel society”. Legitimate fostering of culture and religion within a given space should not be immediately interpreted as conscious self-encapsulation. Interconnection, networking and dialogue with the outside show that it is not about sealing off but about building a “community”, whose goals, for instance social, should be for the good of society. In a time of growing pluralism it would be an advantage if a general attitude, which considers it as a fact that the population encompasses different tendencies and interest groups overlapping and interacting, prevailed.
5. Efforts from the Muslim side to strive for the institutionalisation of their own facilities should also be considered under this aspect. Kindergartens, schools or even the activities of the Mosque should not be interpreted as an “anti-integration model”. In fact, first records show that clever and well developed educational concepts, which also consider cooperation and networking with other institutions, can strengthen the empowerment of the young generation as well as function as bridge builders.

6. Mosques are an essential part in the Muslim communal life. Their independence, on the spiritual-moral as well as financial level, is a key for the authentic development of the identity of an “Islam in Europe”. Imams and other active members of the Muslim community, both men and women, are important multipliers and serve as role models. The participation of women is to be promoted. In order to make use of the potential of the community in the working world, not only linguistic competence (i.e. the acquisition of the local language) but also knowledge of the societal structures and developments are a requirement. In fact, in Islam, the societal framework has imperatively to be considered when responding to religious questions on the basis of the sources. In the education and training of the Imams in Europe still lies a great potential of development. They should emerge from their roll as persons of respect and become persons of trust for which they need to increase their social competence. The community needs its own educational institutions, but also specific training programmes which are oriented on the local needs. The Mosque’s traditional roll as social nodal point should also become part of public awareness through the organisation of activities which show an open attitude towards the outside. In this respect, the example from Bradford, England, where the local Mosque-communities and Imams are involved in training projects, seems very promising.
7. The freedom of press and expression is an essential right and a common property. It does not stand in contradiction with religious freedom because both are tightly connected. Freedom of expression should be practiced with responsibility and consideration of mutual respect. In Europe – with some differences from country to country – a certain societal consensus has developed in areas which need to be handled with special sensitivity. Laws also include – again in different forms – protection clauses. But we see that in dealing with Islam, such a consensus still needs to be built. As we think that dialogue is the best solution in the case of conflict, it is also the best way to reach better mutual understanding.

### Education

1. To Islam education is virtually a life attitude, lifelong learning being a requirement. The accessibility to education is to be guaranteed independently of the social strata. Many problems could be constructively tackled with educational measures when these involve the strengthening of the personality, the ability to self-reflection and self-criticism.
2. However, the expansion of horizons will also ask for a specific promotion within the majority societies. The social permeability of the education system is problematic in many European countries, and it particularly affects children and youth with immigration backgrounds. The problem of “Ghetto schools” or the high number of immigrant children in special schools should be understood on the basis of social background and not be seen as a phenomenon based on culture or religion.
3. Equal opportunity must be actively supported. This means, for instance, investing in early development of language skills, in educational monitoring and guidance, as well as mutual intercultural competence. Mosques and Muslim unions could be actively involved. Simultaneously there is a need for reduction of racism and Islamophobia. School education shapes for life, and this is why stereotypes on Islam which are propagated on that level are especially difficult to overcome, as a schoolbook study by Prof. Susanne Heine in Germany and Austria has proven. Today one tries harder to deal with Islam in schoolbooks in a more sensitive and enlightened manner. This tendency is still to be strengthened and supported.

4. The positive roll of kindergarten in the development of a child is indisputable. The advantages for the linguistic and social development are so great that here lies the seed for later positive development. The suggestion that Muslim parents send their children to kindergarten can only be accepted if the attractiveness to do so is raised, for instance by responding in a better way to their specific needs within a policy of interculturality and observance of religious practice (e.g. halal food). Muslim kindergartens, tailored to Muslim needs, can often reach those children whose parents otherwise would have refrained from letting them attend. For better integration in compulsory school, they should receive more support.
5. Religious instruction on Islam within the compulsory classes in public schools should finally be recognized as an effective instrument of integration. A treatment of Islam visibly equal to that of other religious communities has a positive effect on the feeling of belonging. The dialogue of the religions, which is of indisputable importance, will only reach the basis if also its members have religious roots and values. Moreover, religious instruction actively contributes to the forming of an identity by showing the differences between religious teaching and traditions determined by culture, and strengthening the consciousness of being part of the European community. Reality-based teaching in the respective host country language should expose extremist opinions as such and prevent a self-ethnisation through language or ghettoisation deriving from the country of origin. This quality of teaching should also positively affect the development of the Koranic schools within the communities, with an additional offer especially in the field of Koranic recitations and the fostering of the mother tongue. In doing so, special attention should be placed on the development of didactically suitable teaching materials. Song texts and books shall be in line with the officially approved curriculum and its objectives. The teaching plan and text books are being constantly reformed and adapted to the new realities.
6. Adult education is more than simply language classes. Here specific programmes should foster meaningful recreational activities.

### Politics

1. A source of great misunderstandings lies in the allegation that Muslims have a split relationship towards the state as they have not implemented the idea of the division of power and tasks between the political and spiritual leadership. Here it would be very helpful to have a historically more accurate knowledge which also takes into account the development of the Islamic countries, something which is almost completely neglected in the school curriculum. This knowledge could positively broaden perceptions which Muslims often sense as arrogant and egocentric, and question the comparability of historical developments which now, under the heading of “poor enlightenment”, has become commonplace in the European discourse. The open-mindedness towards sciences was a fundamental factor in the development of Islamic societies, and Europe also benefited from this as an impulse for the age of enlightenment. De facto the political leadership was autonomous during most of Islamic history and was not one with the religious dignitaries.
2. Conversely, a better historical understanding of the European history could explain to Muslims certain orientations and deepen mutual understanding.
3. Also the term “Sharia” is constantly being interpreted (for instance as a “penal code”) and used in a completely wrong way, and this leads to great fear and defensiveness. Here also, we appeal for the necessary objectivity and a correct definition, which would be particularly

suitable for the weakening of prejudices and would put emphasis on a dynamic interpretation of the sources. The repeated demands for the “abolishment of the Sharia” show how counterproductive bad knowledge can be. They are completely absurd because the Sharia regulates the practice of faith on the basis of the sources, e.g. questions relating to ablution before prayer, the amount of the obligatory social security or religious contributions to the needy, etc. Such unqualified comments can only hurt the necessary trust building process, because they are understood by Muslims as calls for the abolishment of Islam.

4. Official Muslim declarations have repeatedly emphasised the compatibility of a democratic system with Islam. The identification with the State is by definition particularly high, when it is accompanied by the greatest possible congruence with the personal moral concepts. Consequently, the model of the status of recognition for Islam, as it exists in Austria, is actually especially suitable, because it brings with it, beyond the emotional level of belonging, an institutionalised dialogue. Thus, Muslims become interlocutors and not a discussion topic, and factual issues in the country can be clarified without having to fall back on foreign expert opinions, which is a problem in itself, as they are neither completely appropriate of the concrete situation nor have they grown from the local Muslim community, which would then see itself not as independent as it requests, but decided for “from the outside”.
5. The participation of people with Muslim background in democratic decision making processes should be increased. The Imams recommend that not only should Muslims make use of passive individual election rights, but also actively support opportunities to participate, e.g. in parent associations at school, at employee representative bodies or inside the party scene.
6. Politics is required to take seriously its part in the two-sided process of integration. Hand in hand with political integration policies should such measures be reached which seek to reduce xenophobia in all its forms, amongst them Islamophobia. It is with apprehension that tendencies to introduce discriminatory views against Muslims into politics are detected. Here there should be no special legislation, because Muslims cannot be faced with a kind of general suspicion. The reversal of the burden of proof is a violation of the rule of law.
7. Racism is unjust and every authority based on it is illegitimate. Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia need to be eradicated. Also Muslims are not immune from racism. The Conference of Imams speaks out against every form of racism and of ethnic discrimination inside the Muslim communities of Europe.

### Economy

1. Wealth should not be acquired in Islam at the costs of others, but be combined with responsibility – at the social level in the form of social justice and ecologically towards sustainable management, which handles the resources with care and seeks to nurse and protect Creation.
2. From the Islamic economic point of view, the safeguarding of a humane life in the present and in the future is connected to a series of ethic rules. These include a ban on interest, a ban on monopoly, the proscription of speculation and the obligation to a responsible handling of consumption and raw materials.

3. Islamic economic rules assume that money should remain in the economic stream. Parallel to that there is the third pillar of Islam, which commands that, as a social-religious contribution, 2.5% of the regular wealth have to be given to the needy in order to achieve “cleansing”. It is all about redistribution in the sense of securing the basic needs of every individual member of the community.
4. Interest deals implicate that money fails to circulate due to the banks’ mechanism of capital stockpiling associated with them. The reduction of investment volume can cause unemployment and societal tension as well as distort competition. National debt is a huge problem not only in the Third World. Ruin and impoverishment affect whole population groups.
5. Muslims should further develop and support alternatives to interest deals. Inquiries have brought forth, that Western banks should offer Islamic business branches and thereby employ Muslim experts.
6. As consumers, Muslims in Europe are becoming an ever stronger factor. The market reacts increasingly to their presence, e.g. in the food sector, where halal certifications meet the purchasers’ requirements. The Islamic seal of quality ensuring purity should be used in standardised form throughout Europe and be awarded according to uniform criteria in order to guarantee security for Muslim consumers.

### Women

1. Men and women are equal partners in Islam; they carry mutual responsibility and are equal in human dignity. The right to study and teach, the right to work, financial independence, the right to vote, the eligibility for political office and the participation in the social discourse are pillars which are to guarantee this status. Women should have equal opportunities and should be able to decide maturely and freely about their orientation. These basic statements from the previous conferences should be further elaborated as women’s concerns are of interest to the society as a whole.
2. Therefore, every kind of violation of women’s rights should be criticised and fought. Forced marriage, female genital mutilation, honour killings and domestic violence have no grounding in Islam.
3. From an outside perspective, the attitude towards the religion as such is often guided by the image one has of the woman in Islam. Through this, the majority society often justifies a position of superiority. Lack of knowledge makes an objective discussion difficult. If female Muslims are predominantly perceived as “victims”, this forces them into a cliché role. Paradoxically, it proves to be very difficult to distance oneself from this role as long as the majority society holds on to the image of the “religiously detained” passive Muslim woman and retains barriers when a Muslim woman, who visibly and actively practices her faith, tries to break the cliché.
4. Here we should seek solidarity in our ways of thinking and behaving. Misogynous structures have various shapes. Religious and cultural thinking converge in working against domestic violence and structural disadvantages facing women. Reflecting on traditional roles and stereotypes can help overcome these and can support integration and co-operation.

5. A stronger differentiation between religion and tradition, which often disadvantages women and runs against Islam, is indispensable. Otherwise, there is danger that religion as a whole is held responsible for deplorable acts; furthermore, one then overlooks which theological argumentation is indicated as being informative and capable of overcoming such traditions. At the same time, a narrowing to one unique religious perspective is unacceptable as the reality of life for Muslim women in Europe is shaped by a variety of factors, which have to be analysed as such.
6. The sense of honour should be analysed by Imams and made understandable through religion as opposed to traditional and culturally influenced views.
7. The strengthened participation of Muslim women requires a thorough political framework, which stands up against discrimination and tendencies of exclusion. Measures to support girls and women, which accept a basic religious attitude, would be one such step. State funded advisory and aid institutions sensitive towards culture and religion, run by and for Muslim women, are particularly appealing and give impulse towards self-empowerment. Women should be free of dependency. Unhindered access to labour market has top priority. Independence is strongly connected to financial freedom and therefore to employment. Here, politics can take balancing and just measures so that fathers and husbands do not have to be considered mainly as breadwinners.
8. Headscarf bans are counterproductive because they exclude women from essential areas of life. In contradiction to the right to free practice of religion, headscarf bans exclude women dressed according to the Islamic tradition and lead in many cases to their withdrawal from society, a result the bans are in theory supposed to discourage. In addition, bans emotionally heat up the discussion and strengthen existing clichés by drawing their justification precisely from the argumentation which headscarf wearers try to overcome by visibly taking part in society: i.e. that the headscarf is a symbol of suppression and constraint, a political sign of extremist attitude and not in conformity with the European image of gender relations. Patronizing Muslim women by interpreting and condemning their religious practice from an outside point of view, denies them their maturity and can intensify polarisation tendencies. The right of women to self-determination should not be questioned – within as well as from the outside.
9. Even within the Muslim community there is stronger need for action. The shaping of opinions against every form of religious abuse should be supported. Simultaneously the conference admits that new Islamic theological answers should be found in the field of marriage and family in response to the challenges of modern age. These answers could lie in the re-discovery and new definition of elements like the Islamic marriage contract. This contract offers the bride couple the possibility to reconsider jointly the future and to lay down agreements.

### Youth

1. As bearers of the future, young people notably embody the vision of Muslim Europeans – European Muslims who, due to their naturally perceived sense of belonging, can be bridge builders in both directions and the connecting link between cultures.
2. In this respect, Muslim youth should be conscious of their special responsibility. For this purpose, there must be an appropriate climate, which values their specific competences, which recognizes as personal values and encourages multilingualism, quick adaptability in an

intercultural environment and open mindedness. The duty to communicate such appreciation for these values and from there to develop programmes which promote specifically these talents, lies in the hands as much of the Muslim families and communities as of the majority society. The potential of the Muslim youth should be recognized. Their self-confidence needs to be strengthened.

3. Prejudice and latent xenophobia can lead to separation and isolation which in turn can nourish a hostile attitude towards “the others”. Thus polarisations could be forged which can be socio-politically explosive. In order to prevent these, there is a need for the measures mentioned in the area of “education”. Muslim youth should have access to the same opportunities as the youth of the majority society (i.e. European exchange programmes at school, vocational training and university level, independent from their nationality). Young people need a perspective. They should have the same opportunities to gain a foothold in working life or to find a flat.
4. Furthermore, self-organisation of Muslim youth and their networking with other youth organisations should be supported. Muslim youth organisations show characteristics which are not to be found in those of the first generation: the national language as the language of communication, no membership restrictions on the basis of the country of origin, the offer of a range of activities specific to the reality of life in the country. Here meaningful leisure activities, the feeling of belonging and a sense of responsibility for a functioning community provide stability. Thereby youth delinquency, drug consumption and the spread of extremism can be effectively combated in an indirect way.
5. The role of the media in the formation of opinion has to be addressed especially amongst youth. Science should concentrate more strongly on specific phenomena which concern Muslim youth and help to rationalise the discussion with serious results.

### Ecology

1. In his/her role as advocate of Creation, the human being carries high responsibility for its protection and preservation. Natural resources should therefore only be used with care and from the point of view of sustainability.
2. The Koran warns the human being of arrogance in exercising his/her governorship: “*Surely We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to be unfaithful to it and feared from it, and man has turned unfaithful to it; surely he is unjust, ignorant*” (33:72). The natural balance of nature should be protected and preserved. Just as water, air, earth, the living and inanimate nature, the animal and plant kingdom relate to each other, the Koran describes a cycle of life in which interventions could have a negative impact on the whole system. Respect for the wonder of God’s Creation is a command and should lead to respectful interaction with it. The Koran says about the animal kingdom: “*And there is no animal that walks upon the earth nor a bird that flies with its two wings but (they are) genera like yourselves*” (6:38).
3. The balance between using nature and protecting it often results in its disadvantage. Environmental destruction as consequence of human greed for maximum exploitation is mentioned in Verse 30:41: “*Corruption has appeared in the land and the sea on account of what the hands of men have wrought, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, so that they may return*”. In their personal behaviour, Muslims are requested to



prove to be appreciative of the problems and to actively contribute to the protection of the environment.

4. There are numerous statements concerning water. It is recommended to handle water thriftily. It is frowned upon to let water run unnecessarily during ablution before prayer. There are rules concerning water protection. Water is perceived as such a precious good that access to it is defined as a basic human right. Drinking water should therefore be accessible to all and not become private property. In the field of religious donations, which believers dispose of by will, the building of a well is recommended in order to do a good deed for posterity.
5. The commandment of „being moderate“ materializes in the food issue. The “middle path” recommended by Islam is the one to be taken, e.g. the “middle path” between pleasure and health-consciousness, between consumption and consciousness for broader economic issues which are not allowed to be damaging to the environment – neither to the fellow man nor to nature. This attitude directly applies to the modern demand for mature consumers, who, in conscious purchase decisions, act according to ethical standards (“fair trade”).
6. Muslims should deal stronger with the issue of “environmental protection” and actively establish networks with environmental experts and relevant departments within the city administration for setting up specific projects.
7. Islamic traditions should be revived, such as the foundation for the feeding and housing of homeless animals or the tradition of planting trees as a sustainable good deed.
8. Islamic sites of prayer should reflect the ecological consciousness of Muslims and should be built with ecologically-friendly materials to advertise this attitude.
9. There is a need for explicitly mentioning that Muslims watch with anxiety the negative effects wars and the use of chemical weapons have on the whole nature, and demand full documentation. The warmongers are to be required to compensate also for these destructions and their effects on human beings.

Vienna, Rabi-I 10,1427 H.  
April 8, 2006