

German president says 20 years later, Islam now part of Germany

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Trier, Germany, 4 October (ENI)--Islam is part of a modern, changing Germany, the country's president, Christian Wulff, told the nation in an address on the 20th anniversary of the reunification of the once divided nation.

"Christianity is, of course, part of Germany. Judaism is, of course, part of Germany. This is our Judeo-Christian history. But, now, Islam is also part of Germany," the president told the assembled dignitaries in the northern city of Bremen, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, on 4 October.

Before his appointment as president in July 2010, Wulff, as Minister President of Lower Saxony, appointed the first Muslim state cabinet minister in Germany.

"When German Muslims write to me to tell me 'You are our president' - then I answer wholeheartedly: Yes, of course I am your president! And with the same dedication and conviction of which I am the president of all the people who live in Germany," Wulff said.

Wulff spoke about the challenges facing a multicultural Germany in times of rapid social and global changes. "Twenty years after reunification, we stand before the huge task of finding new solidarity in a Germany that is part of a swiftly changing world," he said.

For her part, Merkel, endorsed Wulff's words, but also expressed reservations with regard to the position of Islam in German culture. Merkel demanded that Muslims living in Germany also conform to "fundamental German values," saying there can be no leeway on the issue.

In recent weeks an intense debate has raged in Germany about the willingness of Muslim immigrant to integrate and learn the language. A book claiming that Turkish Muslims are not willing to integrate reached the top of the non-fiction bestseller list.

"The future belongs to those nations who are open to cultural diversity, to new ideas and who do not shy away from debating with foreigners," Wulff noted.

He also paid tribute to the role the churches played 20 years ago in enabling the peaceful revolution that led to reunification. "The churches gave a shelter to the new, courage for freedom," he said.

In the autumn of 1989 prayer meetings for peace grew from week to week, ending in mass demonstrations against the totalitarian East German state.

"The growing together of German unity was especially an act of great solidarity, " the chairperson of the German Roman Catholic Bishops' Conference, Archbishop Robert Zollitsch of Freiburg, and the Rev. Nikolaus Schneider, the chairperson of the Protestant umbrella, the Evangelical Churches in Germany, said in a joint statement on 1 October.

Citing the book of Luke (1:37) in the Bible, "For nothing is impossible with God," they said the impossible became possible in late 1989. They added that the unity of Germany "has to be understood as part of a pan-European unity. The integration of a united Germany into a reinforced and extended European Union is maybe the biggest merit of the German unification," they concluded.

About two thirds of the German population belongs to a Christian church. Before 1989, West Germany had a majority Roman Catholic population, while East Germany was predominantly Protestant. Today there are 25 million Catholics and 24 million Protestants in the country. While people of Turkish origin account for 2.4 percent of Germany's people, Muslim's account for 3.7 percent of the 82 million population.