

Speech at the International Conference:

**“Religious and cultural Pluralism and peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East”**

(Athens, 18.-20. October 2015)

Your All-Holinesses and Your Beatitudes,  
Eminences and Excellences,  
dear Sirs and Madams,

I am very grateful for the invitation to this conference. It is my pleasure to join this important meeting at this symbolic place, the capital of the first democratic state in the world. My deep gratitude goes to the Hellenic Republic.

I bring greetings from my colleague, Brother Professor Dr. Heinrich Bedford-Strohm, Bishop of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Bavaria and Head of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, which represents a number of 24 million Christians in Germany.

The Middle East is the cradle of our civilization, not only from a religious point of view but also in a cultural way. This is the area where three continents meet: Europe, Asia and Africa. Due to its geographic location, the importance has even increased in modern times. What happens in Syria, Israel and Palestine has an immediate impact on Europe as we can see these days as hundreds of thousands of refugees from that area are coming to us. No country in Europe has accepted more refugees than Germany. Public administration and church organizations keep working very hard to help to integrate the refugees.

Therefore, this conference on ‘Religious and Cultural Pluralism and Peaceful Coexistence in the Middle East’ of the Greek Republic is of prime importance. It is time to draw the attention of the political and spiritual leaders to this important topic. It is not much time left to save the richness of cultures and religions in the Middle East. Soon, the world which created our occidental culture could come to an end. And it is not only about culture. Millions of people from these cultures are dying and their way of life and their belief die with them. That is why I give thanks to the Hellenic Republic for its initiative. Let us hope that it is not too late.

The situation of Christians in the Middle East is close to my heart. In my responsibility as the president of the German Jerusalem Society I am deeply concerned about the situation and the future of Christians in the Middle East. For 160 years, our society has supported Christians in Palestine. I do not need to tell you that the exodus or extinction of Christianity in the Middle East may be the tragic ending of a history that began with Christ and the apostles themselves. But let me point out that we do not only worry for Christians. Many other minorities are emigrating, too. Christians, Yezidis, Baha’i and other religious believers are part of the societies in the Middle East, together they have created a vital cultural and spiritual life which is now heavily endangered.

As a bishop in the North-East of Germany – a region called Pomerania – I come from a Lutheran background. And I see the consequences of almost 60 years of anti-Christian politics during the national-socialist 'III. Reich' and the socialist GDR. Christianity has had a rough time.

I speak to you as a protestant theologian. I want to add one argument to the already mentioned ones. The time of Reformation had a deep influence on our understanding of the church. In pre-Reformation times, Western Europe was a complex but basically religiously homogenous society. Church and state had strong ties that bound them together. Church and state were closely connected to each other.

Our reformer Martin Luther fought against this. He reminded society and church of the teaching of Jesus Christ, who said: "Give Caesar the things that are Caesar's and God the things that are God's" (Mt 21:21).

Jesus Christ spoke about the two kingdoms. There is a kingdom on the left which is the kingdom of kings and dukes. Their reign was strict and rigid. On the right side there is the kingdom of religion. This kingdom is invisible. It is the kingdom of the word of God which shows us the way of grace and forgiveness. As servants of God we live and act in both kingdoms and have to obey God, our Lord. But the state has no power over the souls. And in the kingdom on the right hand, the church that means religion should rule 'sine vi humana sed verbo', (CA 16) which means without political but through spiritual power.

As human beings, our whole life belongs to God the creator and our father. Politics and religion have to be distinguished but not necessarily completely separated. Politics and religion are no contradiction to each other but of course, they are not the same, either. Politics without religion is dangerous, but religion instead of politics is murderous – as you see in Iraq and Syria where the so called "Isis" shows us just that. Secularized power without any last and higher religious authority is a dictatorship of human plans and programmes. It has lost any corrective. The same, however, applies to religion when turned into politics, when human action is understood as the enforcement of the divine will.

Let me formulate a statement: We as church have learned the following: We do not need political power. Religion can and will survive not by exercising political power but by God's grace and his almighty will. This idea of relation between state and religion is very important for modern states and societies.

The church has no political power indeed. BUT: The church has a prophetic function. We have to tell people, politicians and presidents the gospel of the mighty and loving God. We have to stand up for the poor, the refugees, the powerless and those who suffer injustice.

What does this tell us for our present context? Let us resist and preach powerfully against those who terrorize people in the Middle East. Let us stand together against the

extinction of the Christians and the Christian culture and the other minorities in the Middle East. The international community is called to action.

The existence of the different Christian Churches is not only the outcome of history of the last 2000 years. The existence of the different Christian Churches is also a guarantor for a pluralistic society in the Middle East. The separation of religion and state is the precondition for justice and peace. And without justice there will be no peace in that region. Peace – which is what everybody needs everywhere in the Middle East.