

Muslims contribute to German society, church gathering told

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Dresden, Germany, June 3 (ENInews)--Islam is part of a modern, changing Germany and necessary to develop a vibrant society, President Christian Wulff said in a panel discussion on 2 June at the ecumenical gathering called the Kirchentag.

Christians should also be more tolerant towards other religions, Wulff said. "If one is not open to other religions, one cannot expect Muslim societies to be receptive to freedom of religion." He then went on to appeal to Turkey to do more for religious freedom.

The German president was participating in the Kirchentag, Germany's biennial church gathering, which takes place from 1 to 5 June. He took part in a discussion titled "How much integration does a democracy need?" It addressed the difficult issue of Muslim integration in German society. Other participants on the podium were second- and third-generation Germans from migrant families.

Last year, Wulff caused a stir when he said that "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." Intense debate has raged in Germany about the willingness of Muslim immigrants to integrate and learn German. A book claiming that Turkish Muslims are not willing to integrate was a bestseller last year.

Wulff said at the Kirchentag that last year's speech was intentional. "I consciously used the sentence "Islam belongs to Germany," to give a positive signal to Muslims who are well-integrated in this country that they are welcome. I wanted to take them away from the marginalised sectors of society

and put them in the centre of our society."

The German president spoke about the challenges facing a multicultural Germany in times of rapid social and global changes. He said he finds it a pity that some of the best German-Turkish academics are turning their backs on Germany.

Wulff said that after his speech he received more than 4,200 letters, of which 4,000 were worried and angry about the consequences should Islam belong in Germany. "They were worried about what will happen to our Germany as they knew it," the president said.

Before his appointment as president in July 2010, Wulff, as Minister President of the German federal state of Lower Saxony, appointed the first Muslim state cabinet minister in Germany. "I still believe that an open society will develop better than a closed society," Wulff added.

The panel agreed that schools are important for the integration of migrants into society as it is sometimes the only place where migrants and Germans meet. However the reality is often very different, with large concentrations of only migrants in some schools.

The chairperson of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), Nikolaus Schneider, told another gathering on 2 June that it is a new challenge facing Christians to get Muslims to feel at home in Germany. "Muslims and Christians could act together to achieve social justice," he said during a discussion with the Muslim Grand Mufti of Sarajevo, Mustafa Cerić.