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**The unity of love of God and love of neighbour: first steps
in Catholic–Muslim Dialogue –
Laudatory address on the occasion of the award of the Eugen Biser Prize
to H.E. Shaykh Prof. Dr. Mustafa Cerić,
Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Dear Award-Winners, Your Eminence Mustafa Cerić, Minister Schäuble,

The great letter of the scholars, of which you, Your Eminence, were among the signatories, means that a new age is dawning in dialogue. It is a pleasure for me to recognise you, Prof. Cerić, on this occasion awarding you the Eugen Biser Prize, and to invite you all to take a few steps on this newly-opened pathway in dialogue.

In October of last year, the Open Letter caught the attention of the Christian world. Christians received a message that surprised them with a renewed, more detailed offer of discourse, which was enriched by remarkable approaches. Never before has a message in the name of Islam been sent to Christians all over the world which was able to claim such a degree of representativeness. The initiators are highly familiar with the complex history and the complicated structures of world Christianity. They present Jesus of the Gospels with quotes from the New Testament and not from the Qur'an. The Open Letter explores Biblical texts which are quoted literally from the authorised Christian and Jewish Bible translations. This is a good sign, indeed as the Catholic Islam expert Prof. Troll SJ says, a sensational sign. Muslims and Christians must be willing to an equal degree to increasingly better understand one another on the basis of each others' Holy Scriptures.

If we analyse the structure, content and vocabulary of the Open Letter, we are able to stress as a major novelty of the message from 138 Muslim scholars that in their view, as in Christianity and Judaism, love of God and love of neighbour are inherent in Islam as the heart of its faith. For the first time in history, Muslims have agreed in a joint initiative on the fundamental principles which link them with Christianity: love of God and love of neighbour.

This finding has been confirmed by Prince Talal of Jordan himself. Cardinal Bertone invited him to Rome on behalf of the Pope on 19 November 2007, and at the same time proposed talks with a delegation of the 138.

This cleared a pathway for the establishment of the Catholic-Muslim Forum in March 2008 and set the topic for its first meeting: Love of God, Love of Neighbour. "*No one is a believer until he wishes the same for his brother as he wishes for himself*" are the words of a *hadith*, in

one of the depictions of the words and deeds of Mohammed. The Pope recalled this passage in his address to the participants in the forum by quoting Saint John: *“Those who say, ‘I love God’, and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen”* (1 John 4:20).

In line with these words, the Catholic-Muslim Forum systematically analysed what consequences must arise from the dual commandment of love that is common to Christianity and Islam for an understanding of human rights and freedom of religion. If love of God and love of neighbour form an indissoluble unit, and hence the foundation for the incomparable value of every human being, it must be possible for Christians and Muslims to agree in their understanding of human beings; their value, their dignity and their rights. In their final declaration the participants drew up the following statements, amongst others:

“Genuine love of neighbour implies respect of the person and her or his choices in matters of conscience and religion. It includes the right of individuals and communities to practice their religion in private and public. Religious minorities are entitled to be respected in their own religious convictions and practices. They are also entitled to their own places of worship.”

With his arguments, Mustafa Cerić, our award-winner, turned the balance for agreement by the Muslim delegation.

The dialogue continues. The most recent forum took place in Rome from 4 - 6 November 2008 under the chairmanship of Cardinal Tauran. It was the subject of particular attention in Germany, and it adopted a remarkable final document. The next round of dialogue is to take place in a majority Muslim country.

Mustafa Cerić was one of the first Muslims who understood the Pope’s Regensburg speech not as a provocation of Islam, but as a challenge and an opportunity to enter into a discourse by new channels. He signed both Open Letters. Mustafa Cerić has been a highly-regarded scholar and a popular partner in dialogue for years in Europe and other parts of the world. A German daily newspaper has rightly called him a *“Mediator between the religions.”*

Born in 1952 in Visoko, Bosnia, he quickly became well known in Europe after taking over the office of the Reisu-l-Ulama, the Head of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, on 28 April 1993. At that time, he was already highly experienced in important religious as well as political functions. After attending the Madrasah in Sarajevo, Mustafa Cerić studied at Azhar University, took his doctorate in 1987 at the University of Chicago under the guidance of the famous Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman with a thesis on Abu Mansur al-Mauridi (a 9th and 10th-century Islamic theologian) and taught in Sarajevo, Zagreb and Kuala Lumpur. Mustafa Cerić was one of the founding members of the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) of Alija Izetbegović. In 1992, he was a member of the delegation of the Bosnian President on his visits to Saudi Arabia and Iran, and took part in the talks with King Fahd and President Rafsanjani. During his teaching in Malaysia, he acted at the same time as the representative of Bosnian President Izetbegović and then as official representative of the Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

As the Head of the Islamic religious community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mustafa Cerić experienced the Bosnian war in the besieged capital of Sarajevo as it was under constant Serbian barrage. With Cardinal Pulić, the Archbishop of Sarajevo, he shares not only the war experiences, but also collaboration in the World Conference of Religions for Peace. For instance, he launched the Interreligious Council in 1997 in Sarajevo together with Cardinal Pulić.

Bosnian Islam was also brought to Germany by the at one time more than 400,000 war refugees. There are roughly 50 Imams working in Germany at present. Mustafa Cerić is their religious leader, as he is for other Bosnian communities in Europe. Time and time again, Mustafa Cerić honours Germany with his visits. I myself met him as a member of the delegation of the Muslim World League when it came to Germany in June 2002 and a meeting took place in Berlin with Cardinal Lehmann, President of the German Bishops' Conference.

Bosnian Islam did not come to Europe with labour migration, but has been at home in Europe for centuries. No one stresses this as consistently as Mustafa Cerić, who has been rightly referred to by one German newspaper as the "*Face of European Islam.*" An Islam that is at home in Europe must deal with European realities in an exceptional way. Its indispensable characteristics include the ideal of human rights and of a modern, secular state based on the rule of law. Mustafa Cerić takes part in these processes in prominent functions: as Grand Mufti and Head of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a founding member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, headed by Yussuf Qaradawi, and as an author of programmatic writings such as the "*Declaration of European Muslims*" or of the text entitled "*The Challenge of a single Muslim authority in Europe.*" In the latter article he argues in a visionary manner for the formation of a European Imamate. Critics wanted to interpret this as a call for a European Caliphate. It is possible that the outcries of some in the media are based on a mistaken understanding of what is meant with the idea of a single Muslim authority in Europe.

The discussion on future Islamic structures in Europe is in full swing. As the Head of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the winner of the Eugen Biser Prize Mustafa Cerić is a living testimony that democracy and Islam are compatible. An Islam which defines itself as European cannot be about overcoming the secular legal and state system in Sharia-linked religious thinking and action. It must find ways to understand Sharia that lead to true reconciliation with the European-born ideal of human rights and the legal orders guaranteeing it.

Shaykh Mustafa Cerić stands for this.