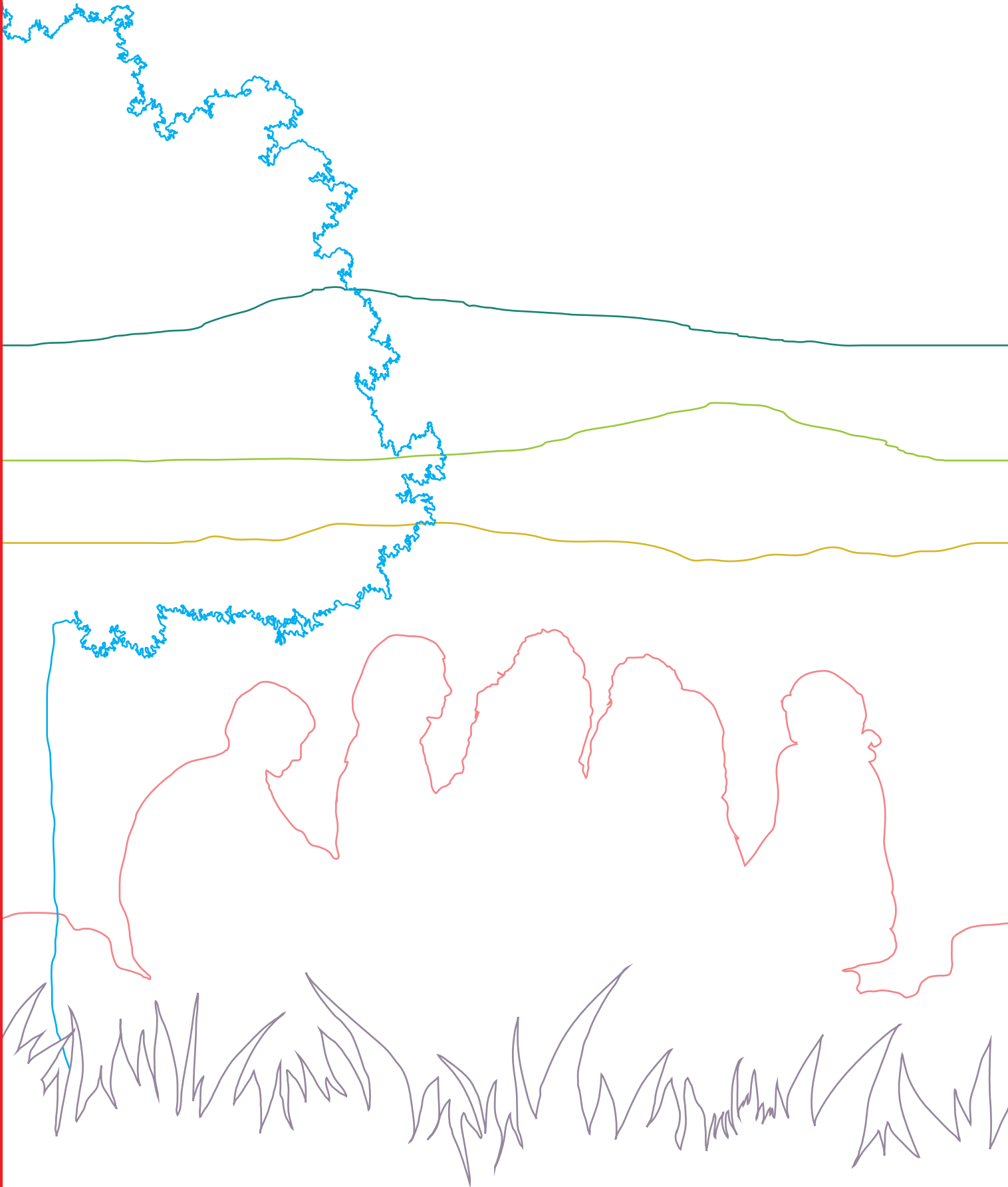


VIENNA INTERNATIONAL
CHRISTIAN-ISLAMIC
SUMMER UNIVERSITY
2010

VICISU



PROGRAMME

Vienna International
Christian-Islamic Summer University
4 to 24 July 2010

First Week

Prof. Dr. Ingeborg Gabriel

UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA
AUSTRIA

Introduction to Christianity

Prof. Dr. Mualla Selçuk

ANKARA UNIVERSITY
TURKEY

Introduction to Islam

Prof. Dr. Irmgard Marboe

UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA
AUSTRIA

Introduction to International Law

Prof. Dr. Javaid Rehman

BRUNEL UNIVERSITY
UNITED KINGDOM

Human Rights and Minorities

Second Week

Prof. Dr. Gerjes Khoury

AL-LIQUA CENTER JERUSALEM

Christianity, Dogma and
Christian-Muslim Interfaith

Dr. Angelika Walser

UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA
AUSTRIA

Gender and Religion from
the Christian Perspective

Mag. Judith Albrecht

BERLIN/GERMANY

&

Sarah Swick, MSc

DAR AL HEKMA COLLEGE
JEDDAH/SAUDI ARABIA

Gender and Religion from
the Islamic Perspective

Prof. Dr. Joseph Ndi-Okalla

UNIVERSITÉ CATHOLIQUE,
YAOUNDÉ/ CAMEROON

Social Rights and Poverty

Third Week

Dr. Fatimah Husein

THE STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
YOGYAKARTA/INDONESIA

Religious Pluralism

Prof. Dr. Irmgard Marboe

UNIVERSITY OF VIENNA
AUSTRIA

Religion and the State

Prof. Dr. Mathias Rohe

UNIVERSITY OF ERLANGEN
GERMANY

Islamic Law – Selected Topics

VICISU IN BRIEF



The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU) is a three-week summer programme that brings together professors and students from universities in Christian and Muslim countries all around the world. It evolved out of the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table, an initiative that was started by academics from several fields of specialisation, such as law, theology, and social sciences, and that attempted to deal with important contemporary issues from different scholarly perspectives.

Both the 1st Summer University in 2008 and its 2nd incarnation in 2010 took place at Stift Altenburg, a Benedictine monastery in Lower Austria. The monastery, well known for its Garden of the Religions, offers an atmosphere of warmth and spirituality that permeates a welcoming and comfortable living space.

The Summer University 2010, which lasted from the 4th to the 24th of July, welcomed 43 students from universities in 17 countries: Australia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cameroon, Germany, Indonesia,

Iran, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Romania, Saudia Arabia, Turkey, USA, UK, and Austria. The programme consisted of nine lectures, afternoon workshops, and evening talks. Professors came from the University of Vienna and from other universities, within and outside Europe.

The lectures, all in the overarching fields of law, theology, and social sciences, included introductions to Islam and to Christianity, to interreligious dialogue, to human rights, and to the topic of freedom from Muslim

and Christian perspectives, as well as discussions of gender and religion, constitutionalism in a globalised world, religion and the State, religious pluralism, minority issues, and more. In addition, the programme provided for excursions to Vienna and to the countryside, many evening programmes, sports, and cultural activities.

The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University is organised by the University of Vienna and mainly financially supported by the Austrian Ministry of Science and Research.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER

by IRMGARD MARBOE
 Professor of International Law, University of Vienna, Austria
 VICISU Director



Learning from each other—this probably was the most significant characteristic of the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU) 2010. For the second time, this intercultural and interreligious educational project took place at the Abbey of Altenburg in Lower Austria from 4 to 24 July 2010. Students and professors from Australia, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cam-

eroon, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Malaysia, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, United Kingdom, and the United States of America spent three weeks together at the monastery in the Northern part of Austria. The wonderful historic building and the generosity and hospitality of the Benedictine monks provided the optimal conditions for our undertaking. I would like to thank in particular Abbot

Christian for his continued support and warm welcome, and Father Michael, who diligently cared for the physical and spiritual wellbeing of all the participants. Our deep gratitude also goes to the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, which even in times of budgetary constraints continued to provide the financial basis for our endeavours. A number of other institutional and private sponsors

also helped this Summer University happen. All of the professors and students of VICISU recognized and highly appreciated this support. There was an agreement on the outstanding importance of Christian-Islamic understanding and cooperation, which needed promotion and improvement even—and, perhaps, more importantly—in these economically difficult times. The second Vienna International Christian-Islamic

Summer University rested on three “pillars,” namely Christian Theology, Islamic Theology, and Law. They were represented in the three introductory courses of the first week. Ingeborg Gabriel, professor of Social Ethics at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the University of Vienna (Austria), and Geries Khoury from the AL-Liqua Center, Jerusalem, taught the course “Introduction to Christianity.” They provided an overview of the foundations of Christian theology and then proceeded to discuss the importance of dialogue from the Christian perspective. Mualla Selçuk from Ankara University Faculty of Divinity (Turkey) in her course “Introduction to Islam” explained the basics of Islamic theology and discussed a variety of concepts and approaches in contemporary interpretations and practice of Islam. In my course “Human Rights and International Law in the Context of Religion,” I addressed legal aspects of intercultural and interreligious dialogue, in particular by discussing some basic concepts of international law and the importance of international human rights instruments. After these three introductory courses, more

specialised topics followed. Javaid Rehman, professor of International Law and dean at the Law Faculty of Brunel University (UK), concentrated on human rights of minorities. Angelika Walser (Austria), Sarah Swick (Saudi Arabia), and Judith Albrecht (Germany) dealt with gender issues from the Christian and the Muslim perspectives, the latter two emphasising also the importance of anthropological and sociological approaches. Joseph Okalla, a Catholic priest and theologian at the Université Catholique Yaoundé (Cameroon), dedicated his course to the issue of social rights and social justice. He also initiated

by Leonard Swidler. In the third week, Mathias Rohe (Germany), in his course “Islamic Law – Selected Topics,” dealt with legal aspects of religious pluralism on the international and on the national level. In replacement of Stefan Hammer, I

and intercultural dialogue can be meaningful only if it at least attempts to deal with the several aspects and facets of our pluralistic world. Most helpful in this respect was that all of the participants stayed and lived together for the duration of

the learning process was not only about “the other” but also about one’s own background. “Introduction to Christianity” was not only interesting to the Muslim students but also to Christian students, who got an idea how to present

Today, we are committed to continue this learning process and to stay in contact. For this purpose, we created an internet platform under the title “Network for a Better World,” to which all of the professors and our alumni are invited. This



the project of formulating the concrete outcomes and further initiatives the participants foresaw as a result of this year’s VICISU. Faimah Husein, who teaches theology and philosophy at the State Islamic University in Yogyakarta (Indonesia), analysed in her course on religious pluralism various aspects of and approaches to interreligious dialogue. She introduced and discussed, among other subjects, the “The Dialogue Decalogue”

offered the course “Religion and the State,” in which I discussed some models of the relationship between religion and the State. This multidisciplinary approach was a challenge for all of the participants of the Summer University, students and professors alike. For example, the theologians did not always find it easy to get acquainted with the concepts presented in the legal courses, and vice versa. Nevertheless, interreligious

three weeks. They also spent the weekends together and had several excursions. In contrast to other dialogue initiatives, the VICISU participants not only exchanged theoretical ideas but also experienced intercultural learning in practice. Our participants came from very diverse backgrounds, from many parts of the world. They all were dedicated and enthusiastic to contribute to the discussions and activities, and so



Christian faith and tradition in a nutshell. I would like to thank Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel for her tireless effort in co-organising this Summer University and the Faculty of Catholic

idea goes back to Prof. Father Andreas Bsteh of St. Gabriel (Austria), the founder of VICISU, who has for many decades been active in interreligious dialogue and laid the foundation for our dialogue initiative. We hope that we will be able to continue these efforts of improving Christian-Islamic understanding and cooperation and to truly live up to our vision of creating a “Network for a Better World”.

Minister Dr. Beatrix Karl

—Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research, Austria



After the success of the first Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University in 2008 the second course was held again at Altenburg Abbey from 4th to 24th July 2010. 43 participants from 17 countries (Australia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Romania, Cameroon, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Morocco, Pakistan, Malaysia, Saudi-Arabia,

Turkey, United Kingdom, USA and Austria) met for a very challenging program consisting of lectures of Austrian and international experts on topics as e. g. "Introduction to Islam and Christianity", "Introduction to International Law", "Human Rights and

Minorities", "Gender and Religion", "Social Rights", "Religious Pluralism", "Islamic Law" und "Religion and the State". In addition many discussions gave the chance to reflect the content of the lectures in the light of everyday life and to put it in the context of reality and personal experiences. More

than half of the participants were women, more than half were Muslims. This year's Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University again has been a convincing example of positive energy, friendship and mutual respect. The students learned about other religions, cultures and traditions, but also about each other. During the last years, the Austrian Federal Ministry of Science and Research has taken various efforts in

contributing to a common understanding between Muslims and Christians and to promote this intercultural dialogue. In this context let me quote my predecessor, Minister Hahn, in his foreword of the booklet of the first Christian-Islamic Summer University: "It was the right step down the long road to a peaceful and respectful coexistence in this world". And therefore, the Christian-Islamic Summer University will take place again in 2012.

Prof. Dr. Arthur Mettinger

—Vice Rector of the University of Vienna, Austria



Organized by the University of Vienna, with more than forty participants from fifteen countries and five continents, the Second Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University 2010 impressively shows that dialogue and learning from each other is indeed possible! As Vice Rector responsible

for Educational Program Development and Internationalization at the University of Vienna the success of this Summer University makes me particularly glad for three reasons: First, "Summer University" is an educational format the University of Vienna still makes too little use of despite the chances it entails. I am sure that the knowledge, skills and experiences

- technically speaking, the "learning outcomes" - the students of the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University have taken along with them by far exceed the outcomes of their regular "during-term" courses. Second, as the University of Vienna actively fosters the mobility of researchers, students and teachers within the framework of its inter-

nationalization strategy I also welcome the fact that not only Austrian students and teachers but students and teachers from so many countries have participated. This shows that the University of Vienna is an attractive place to study, learn and teach for people from all over the world and that we are successfully pursuing the path of internationalization in education and research. Finally, the advancement of dialogue

is always an important mission and universities are well-advised to never forget their contribution for a better functioning of society at large. Thus, initiatives that actively foster dialogue and learning from each other like this summer university can be regarded as active, sustainable contribution to a world of tolerance and mutual understanding. I thank all participants, lecturers and organizers for contributing to the success of this initiative!

Abbot Christian Haidinger

—Altenburg Abbey (Stift Altenburg), Austria



It was a great pleasure for me to welcome – also on behalf of my confreres – so many guests from all over the world in the Abbey of Altenburg, in a rather remote corner in the countryside of Austria. After the first Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University two years ago, it was already the second time that we could spend three fulfilled weeks together with our Christian and Muslim guests in our monastery. We feel again very much enriched and strengthened after these three weeks. It is good and important that we in Altenburg remain a place for open encounters and interreligious dialogue.

dialogue as the Second Vatican Council demands from us. This sacred synod urges, since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christian and Muslims, "to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding

Therefore, we were glad and grateful that we could host the "VICISU 2010" in our monastery. We hope that it was a good place for the discussions and talks, for presentations on various topics of interreligious dialogue, but above all for

founder, Benedict of Nursia lived in Italy between 480 and 547. He was in search of God and wrote – after many experiences – a "rule" for those who wanted to live their Christendom together in a community. Since more than 1500 years until today, many thousands of men and women decide to follow

the people by praying and working. Our community today consists of 13 monks. We try to make the people of today experience the Abbey as a spiritual centre and to serve them as priests in the parishes of the neighbourhood.

We, and in particular Father Michael who is responsible for the wellbeing of the guests in our house, tried our best to make the VICISU participants feel comfortable and to provide good working and living conditions in those three weeks spent together with us also almost like monks.

I especially thank Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel, Prof. Irmgard Marboe and all of the other professors who have contributed to the programme in the three weeks. I thank the students, for coming and hope that the experiences and encounters at the Summer University at the Abbey of Altenburg will remain important for them and strengthen them in the future. May God bless you and protect you.

I assume that the participants have come to Austria with manifold expectations. Curiosity and also insecurity might have accompanied them. In the same way, also we, the monks of Altenburg, have expected them, yet also with openness and in the mindset of Saint Benedict who asks from us to welcome every guest as if it were Jesus Christ. Since in 2006, when we opened in our monastery the "Garden of the Religions", our community engages in making a modest but perhaps not insignificant contribution to the promotion of interreligious



and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom." (Nostra Aetate 3).

living and experiencing the encounter with people of different cultures and different religious backgrounds. The ambiance of a Benedictine monastery might have been strange for many. Our

this path, living together in a community of Christians. Our monastery exists for more than 850 years. In all those centuries, the monks have lived up to their mission to serve God and

DIA LOGOS THROUGH THE WORD

by *INGEBORG GABRIEL*
Professor of Social Ethics, Faculty of Catholic Theology,
University of Vienna, Austria
VICISU Co-Director



This year's VICISU was, once again, a most memorable experience. That it would be so was already clear when all the participants introduced themselves in the Abbot's garden the first evening. What a great group of young people from all over the world—Muslims and Christians and some agnostics, women and men from different ethnic

backgrounds, who are engaged in rather different studies and careers! It was clear already then that this mixture promised three weeks of exiting encounters, discussions, and simply life together. And so it was. For me, it was again, first and foremost, an exercise in the deconstruction of any preconceived ideas. We all have some pictures in our heads of what a

Muslim, a Christian, a Westerner, an Arab, or an Asian ought to be like. But when meeting concrete persons, we learn that their identities and personalities are much more varied than our images of them. This became quickly evident during the lectures, as well as the sometimes heated discussions afterwards, and even more so as the students got to know

each other during meals, playing football, or singing together—or presenting each their cultural heritage at the talent show and at the multiethnic dinner. We also learned that all clichés are false when we spoke with each other about our faith in God. In all these encounters we realized our differences and at the same time how much we are alike despite these different

identities—in our hopes and dreams regarding the future, in our joys and in our sorrows, in our ways of acting and in our reflections on the present world situation. So there is—and these three weeks have proved it—no better way to learn about and from each other and to discover our common human heritage than to BE together. The Abbey of Altenburg showed us again that coexistence is easier in an atmosphere of peace and beauty, in a place where one is welcome and which was built by generations before us through work and prayer. This also, I think, is a general observation. We depend on good examples from the past when we want to live together in peace in our world today. Students and teachers at VICISU represented a broad variety of backgrounds—religious, ethnic, educational, and professional. This was a greatly enriching experience, which demonstrated, as nothing else can, that respect and friendship are the concrete bases for a good life together on our planet. They are forever

connected to the very special faces of those we've met, to their thoughts, their laughter, their fears and joys. Each and every one in this summer school gave us an image of his or her background and culture, which we will not easily forget but which will stay in our minds for a long time. Thus, when we hear about the countries from which our friends came, e. g. in the news, we will think about them, and this will help us escape generalizations and prejudices. It will give

us the strength to work for a world of peace and understanding between religions and countries and to use our energies to overcome the bad through the good—which is an essential teaching of both our religions, as well as of Humanist philosophy. I, for my part, have taken a lot of courage from these three weeks, and I want to thank all who participated in VICISU 2010 from the bottom of my heart.



WHAT A GREAT
GROUP OF
YOUNG PEOPLE
FROM ALL OVER
THE WORLD

NOT ONLY LEARNING, BUT LEARNING TO BE

by *MUALLA SELCUK*
Lecturer of: *Introduction to Islam*
Ankara, Turkey

In the summer of 2010, Vienna hosted two important interreligious and intercultural meetings. The first was held on 24-26 of June with the cooperation of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs and the Department of Social Ethics at the University of Vienna on Promoting Female Leadership in Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue. The other was the 2nd Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU) organized by the University of Vienna and held at Stift Altenburg on 4-24 of July, 2010. I had the honour of participating in both meetings: to present a paper “Building Bridges and Right Relations: A Study in Promoting an Understanding of Individualized Religion” for the Network on Promoting Female Leadership to teach a course “Introduction to Islam” at the VICISU. Both events left profound marks on my mind and heart of a Muslim scholar; both presented new approaches to the new frontiers of building a better global future and to religions’ contribution to world peace. Humankind is created by

God (“...I have created with My own hands...” The Quran, Sad 38:75). People have different languages and colors. These differences are narrated in the Quran as proofs of Allah’s existence and might (“And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages



and your colors: verily in that are Signs for those who know.” The Quran, al-Rum, 30:22). This difference in languages, colors, and races is presented to the audience as issues covered by the science. In other words, in the Quran our differences are accepted as the objects of research and thought not as the

reasons for conflicts and struggles. Piety can even be deepened when confronted with differences. Seeing that differences are made by God is the key for approaching people with love and empathy. VICISU 2010 created not only a teaching environment of love and empathy born of difference but also a fertile ground for, as it were, being and learning to be. At the opening reception, given in honor



of our arrival at the Abbey of Altenburg on our first day, we witnessed firsthand the meeting of different religions and cultures, and it was quite an experience to feel the warmth of the people when they came face to face. This was without a doubt an opportunity for new perceptions, new understanding, and new life experiences. The speech made by Prof. Bsteh to the students and scholars during his visit to Altenburg was one of the meaningful examples of such experiences. Fr. Bsteh’s words, “We need one thing, and that is to work hard,” were describing his life values on one hand and, on the other hand, reminding us of the purpose of all human endeavour. At VICISU, people who come from the same essence and the breath of God could see that differences enrich us and are to be treasured. An intellectually stimulating aspect of VICISU’s



programs is that they are interdisciplinary and that the main values of the two faiths—Christianity and Islam—are taught by experts, with additional tutorial hours lead, in the case of my course, by me and by Judith Albrecht. Ms. Albrecht explored the relationships among religious life, tradition and interpretation from an anthropologist’s point of view. This way, young people had the opportunity to bring new inputs into their cultural basins and to strengthen the veins and roots of peace in their cultures. I must say that the meetings at VICISU 2010 also held promise for the Christian and Muslim instructors/tutors. As an Islamic expression goes, as we consider the barakah (“fertility”) of these meetings, we have already begun experiencing the concrete results of their social, cultural, and educational activities in our fields. I particularly wish to render my sincere thanks to Prof. Irmgard Marboe and to Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel for including me into such an encounter. I extend my very best wishes to Katharina for organizing such a successful program. Finally, I present my sincere gratitude to the Altenburg family for their hospitality. I wish that many more encounters be held by VICISU that foster solidarity, peace, and love in the souls!

THE IMPORTANCE OF ENCOUNTER

by *JUDITH ALBRECHT*
Tutor and Lecturer of: *Gender and Religion*
Berlin, Germany

VICISU is an extraordinary institution where students and teachers from various countries learn about different aspects of religion and discuss them. “Dialogue” is a word which is used a lot in our days. Sometimes to such an extent that we don’t know anymore what it means. Ideally, dialogue is considered to be an exchange between two or more equal parties, but in practice it is a form of communication that takes place within certain power structures. It is important to identify these power relations underlying dialogue to analyze them and to talk openly about them. Who is allowed to talk? Who has to listen? Who represents what? Who is excluded from it?



them as narratives shaping the realities of this world. VICISU tries to create a forum where dialogue is really lived and understood as a process rather than a product. I had the unique chance to teach the seminar “Gender and Religion” at this Summer University with my colleague Sarah Swick from

Saudi Arabia and to moderate the tutorial “Introduction to Islam.” I greatly enjoyed talking with the students from a variety of countries and



Dialogue sounds nice, but it is a long process, and it can be hard, confusing, and irritating because you have to listen to explanations of phenomena and to interpretations that can be contrary to yours or that are simply controversial, and you have to accept



disciplines about such issues as nation-building, borders, minorities, gender relations, and political violence. Religion as an organized social phenomenon is connected to all of these topics. For me, as a social anthropologist, the most striking outcome of the discussions was the realization that there existed such a diversity of

interpretations, positions, and argumentations. Many of the students wanted the same things and agreed on the same goals (for example, when discussing poverty, violence, minorities and religious diversity,



or empowering women in their societies)—but they envisioned very different ways to their common goal. It was an enlightening experience for me to see that certain philosophies and scientific theories are interpreted differently in other countries and contexts. I think we should embrace our diversity and not fear it; we should not be afraid of discussion and even of oral battles. We don’t have to agree on everything, but we have to be precise in what we want to say and in our definitions and frameworks. As academics, we are comfortable within the analytical framework, and we should use it. The idea of such an experiment cannot be just to try to convince each other but to understand the other side and to learn something about our social realities. We only can achieve intercultural communication if we first listen and accept that different ideas, beliefs, and practices already coexist in, circulate around, and shape our global world.





Taking a
step back:

Learning about real listening

“So, how was your summer school?” I don’t know how often I’ve heard this question during the last few weeks and how often I’ve felt incapable of finding even approximately the right words to describe what I experienced at Stift Altenburg.

“Umm, yes, it was...fascinating, amazing, informative, hard work... Oh, it’s so hard to describe!” I don’t know how often I’ve given up, starting to recognize that it would still take some time to replace these poor and unstructured answers, simply consisting of the first adjectives that came to my mind, with a well considered reply that reflected my impressions. I knew that my family and friends would have to be patient until they got to hear the things they wanted to hear about these indescribable three weeks I had experienced at the beginning of this year’s summer holidays.

I also felt incapable of writing an article about our VICISU immediately after I had come home. My head and my heart were so full of impressions and memories that I simply could not make my way through my mind to draw a conclusion on what this experience meant to me. The image I wanted to create in my head was still blurred by the many catchy tunes of the songs we sang together, which simply did not want to get out of my ears, by the hundreds and thousands of pictures we started to upload onto Facebook and by the comments we wrote to them, as well as by the fact that I kept “seeing” my VICISU friends on the streets

of Vienna, realising a second later that they were only strangers who simply reminded me of the beautiful faces of my new friends from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Cameroon, Australia, Iran, Morocco, Bosnia, Kosovo, Palestine, Indonesia, Malaysia, USA, UK, Kazakhstan, Romania and, of course, Austria.

During this time of reflection, I thought back to my first philosophy classes in high school, where we had discussed having to move some steps away from a picture in order to see it as a whole. Recalling that, I realised that the concept of taking a step back would be useful in analysing not only how I feel now—unable to wrap my mind around what’s happened to me—but also how I felt at Stift Altenburg...

In our three weeks of studying, discussing, and living together, more than once did I find myself learning this lesson: that taking a step outside one’s own identity can be the only way to “survive in dialogue.” What do I mean by this?

It started during our group discussion on human rights. I was close to tears and about to lose my temper; I felt so misunderstood by the others. It took me several moments of reflection and follow-up conversation to realise that what I needed to do was take off my “theological glasses.” As a student of theology and ethics, I am used to seeing and evaluating everything

from theological or ethical points of view. However, the VICISU group did not only consist of future theologians but also of students of law, psychology, business, and social sciences. Today I know what a great gift this was for me! I learned how to approach human rights issues also as lawyers do—of course, without giving up my own theological arguments.

This situation taught me how crucial loosening the reins of my theological identity can be for having a successful dialogue. Of course, every one of us carries many identities—national, cultural, religious, professional, and others—that turn our encounter into an even more interesting and exciting experience. However, we can succeed only when we learn how to step back from our various identities and look through each other’s eyes.

This particular incident, though it triggered my awareness of the issue, is only one of many experiences worth bringing up here. I recall plenty of moments when I realised that my thoughts and argumentations were shaped by my cultural or religious identities as much as those of my interlocutor, who might have come from a country on the very other end of this world. Be it when talking about relationships and marriage, be it when discussing the separation or unity of religion and the State, or simply when comparing our eating habits and culinary specialities, time and again the conversation



made me very quiet. I felt unable to say anything because I knew that it was time to listen.

Indeed, next to understanding the importance of taking a step back, the most important

music. To be honest, the feeling was sometimes even stronger then. I was so deeply moved and impressed by all the talents these amazing people were carrying in them and sharing

TAKING A STEP OUTSIDE
ONE'S OWN IDENTITY
CAN BE THE ONLY WAY
TO SURVIVE IN DIALOGUE

thing I learned, possibly for the first time in my life, is what it really means to become silent in order to hear the other. Our time together was so unique, our conversations so deep and moving, so full of reciprocal trust and honesty, that I think I simply could not help becoming a curious and fascinated listener. And this I experienced not just while talking but while making

with all of us that words will never be able to describe what I felt when I heard the sounds from Indonesia, Russia, Kazakhstan, Palestine, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Columbia. And then, during many of our evening jam sessions out in the beautiful gardens of Stift Altenburg, all the different voices carrying impressions of all these precious cultures were joining in for a mighty



choir, enjoying the indescribable feeling of making music together.

After all this, I am convinced that, if we all—and here I am talking about everyone, meaning every student, every bus driver, every multi-millionaire, every gangster out on the street, every mother and every child, every teacher and every ruler and every politician—started to step back from our own identities, ideas, convictions, and creeds, and listened to the other in a respectful and appreciative way, the many different melodies of our world one day would make up one of the greatest symphonies.

Discovering Myself

We claim to live in a more informed and a much civilized world today. While sometimes we accredit this shift to the phenomena of globalization, other times simply to the widespread use of Internet. Though such technology has definitely benefited human life it seems that it has been exploited more. We are given a distorted view of how alien another religion or way of living is. We can just give us facts but not the prudence behind those facts. We rely on what is told to us by sensationalized media or by a Government more often having ulterior motives. Man has always been afraid of what he doesn't understand and misunderstanding coupled with lack of communication has been exploited and used time and again to make nations fight and detest each other.

What this generation lacks is communication and human-encounter. And not just any communication but an open and un-biased encounter. This of course is not an easy task as centuries of distrust and bigotry has widened the communication-gap. Sadly, it is a reality that if (ever) we come to any sort of peace-making or understanding dialogue, at best we might come in peace but we come with mistrust along with our historical and emotional baggage.

In this context Vienna-International Summer Christian-Islamic university was for me a revelation. For starters I have never seen inside of a monastery let alone live in one. The beauty of Stiftung caught me off-guard and everyday for the next three-weeks I discovered yet another enchanting new part of it. A Christian-monastery, but primarily a house of worships,



was a most befitting neutral ground for an inter-faith dialogue. Then I met students, more than 40 of them and belonging to around 17 countries. Each had a distinctive style, accent and culture. Countries that were only names before to me, now had faces. Initially I was a little overwhelmed. I thought 'how am I ever going to interact with all of them in just three-weeks'? All my apprehensions melted away the second day when I could recall most names without their name-tags and many knew mine without eyeing my name-tag. This effort to know and

communicate was perhaps what touched me most about this experience. I come from a land where people is extremely sensitive about their religion. We took our independence from the British in 1947 in the name of religion and established an Islamic Republic. Since then my country has been in international media's limelight for all the wrong reasons the more recent being my country's link with terrorism and our role in war on terrorism. A war chiefly linked with radical view of religion Islam. For me this was an opportunity to explain how



one erroneous view of Islam does not incriminate the followers or the religion itself. I was surprised to see that Christian students were receptive and even knew a lot about Islam than I knew about Christianity.

It was heart-warming to see that almost all christen students always signed up for the Islamic tutorial. The need to understand, speak and listen became paramount. Sometimes the discussions would run in wee hours of the morning. My favorite part was perhaps the debates we had in class. I discovered that I cannot point at someone for discriminating against something about my way of life that he doesn't understand when I am doing the very same thing concerning his way of life.

I discovered that stereotyping and labeling goes both ways. I discovered that the need of hour was tolerance and understanding, if not endorsement of another person's belief, life-choices and ideas. I discovered that the thing most worthwhile to know and read is which challenges one's convictions. But most importantly, I discovered that bigotry murders religion. The factor of human-ness that no technology

but only a simple old-fashioned human-encounter could provide was the very essence of this summer university.

For three magical weeks I experienced 17 different cultures and 17 different countries. Looking back, it feels like a mini-trip around the world or like what my friend Marsha from Philadelphia said it felt like a mini-life away from our normal life!

We laughed, danced, ate, lived, shared, sang, watched football final and even argued sometimes, though a walk in evening would sort everything out. I became friends with people so unlike me in so many ways and yet at same time we connected at so many levels. We found out that our way of life may be different but the root of our religions is same and the message of both our religions very clear; Peace and justice for humanity. Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and Jesus Christ (SAW) came when social unjust had crossed all boundaries and values of humanity were trampled. Both brought a message of Justice, Peace and Humanity. We need to tap within ourselves and find the human that exists within us and we need to see

each other firstly as a human being and not only as Muslim, Christians, Asian or African. Why bother? Is not an option anymore. Difference however, small is never insignificant we have to be that star-fish clinging little girl at the beach. "I may not be able to save all of them but I made a difference in the life of this one and another one or two more maybe" she said. This summer-university taught me that despite all our differences, disputes and history we can if, we honestly try co-exist peacefully. It's about time we stop playing victim or a silent bystander. All the bonds and friendships I formed in this summer-university left imprints on me and I learned something extraordinary from each individual student or teacher alike. In discovering others I think that I discovered myself instead.

Community in diversity

A theological view or briefly:
TA'ARUF

“Diversity” and “pluralism” seem to be modern and fashionably words of nowadays. If you know much about different cultures, you travel a lot and have friends from all over the world, you are following the trend. All these things are extraordinary, but that is the point: it should not be anything special anymore, because pluralism is not an exception in our world, nor just a trend. Pluralism is a reality, especially in countries like the USA or Canada and also in Europe. The idea of a homogeneous society, this illusion should be left behind – it is high time now. Even ourselves, our personality is diverse and we have to manage to handle that, so why should it not be able “outside” of us, in our interactions with people in our societies and in the world? I myself for example: I am an Austrian citizen, brought up in Vienna, born in Brazil with a mother from Uruguay, a father from Colombia and grandparents from Poland. People say: Latin-America and Europe are totally the opposite from each other. Well, I sometimes feel like a European Latina. My friend who also participated in the VICISU was born and grew up in the UK and her roots are in Bangladesh.

People say: The West and the East cannot go together. Well, she calls herself a UK-Muslim. A professor was a Palestinian Arab, Israeli citizen and a Christian. People say: Arabs and Israelis are antipodes. Well, he was both. The crucial point is not to say you are either Western or a Muslim or I am an Israeli citizen, but a Christian. No: you are Western and a Muslim and I am an Israeli citizen and a Christian.

A question arises here:

1. How is this “and” between differences possible? Because we cannot deny that they do are differences and as said before, diversity is reality. This leads to the other question:

2. Why do we have a dialogue between Christians and Muslims?

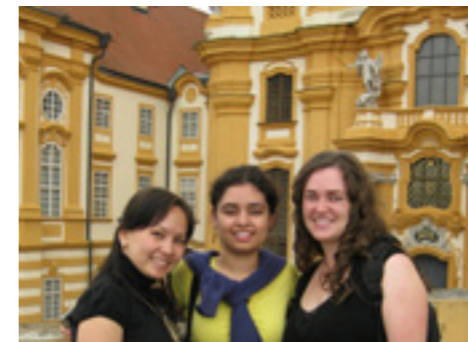
We are different and will remain different and the aim of a dialogue is not to convert the other and to make him as you are. Interreligious dialogue is still seen as something strange and unnecessary. But we always have dialogues, day by day and we often meet people, who have other points of view about politics, life, with different tastes and ways of believing than us. Even in our own religion we do not believe exactly the same. This complexity of diversity should not discourage us, thinking that we will never find a common ground (sometimes after some discussions during the Summer Univer-



sity, it seemed that many of us felt like that), because this complexity of diversity is something given from God. It is so complex as God Himself. Hence it is not our task to reduce this diversity to a common ground, until differences disappears and we can understand; first it is not possible and second regarding the diversity in our own personality, believing that God wanted us to be like that and relating to the being of God, of whom we believe that He is incomprehensible because of His divine complexity, which includes His diversity, we can also believe that a pluralistic world is something wanted by God. Our religions show us that diversity can and shall be united, because God unites them in His being - Christians believe in Trinity, Muslims have 99 names for Allah; God is only one. So the previously raised questions can be answered now: it is God, who makes this “and” between differences possible, creating us human beings, giving us this “mystery of diversity” and a way to handle it: the dialogue. Therefore having a dialogue, also an interreligious one is our obligation, to learn to understand each other and so to can live together. On this the Holy Quran says: “O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female and made you into nations and tribes that ye may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is /he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).” (Q: 49 Hujurat, 13). We shall not judge the “other ones” just from our perspective; the Bible often tells us that the only one who has the right to judge and will judge is God in His justice: “The Lord will be



judge of the peoples; give a decision for me, O Lord, because of my righteousness, and let my virtue have its reward.” (Ps 7,9) To have an interreligious dialogue is not easy, if we think about the fact that we do not even manage to live next to our neighbor or even family members, without problems, just because they have different points of view and ways of life. How can we manage then to have an interreligious dialogue, also on a theological and ethical level? To me it seems that society often takes cultural or religious differences as reason why people do



not manage to get along with each other, using this excuse for not having to keep on trying to understand the other one. It is always easier to ignore the one who is different, but this ignorance will not make us happy, because it is an illusion that we are homogeneous. But we are all equal before God. And if we believe that He created us with love, wanting the best for us, giving us the world not to rule over it, but to care after it, trying to make it better day by day, then we can also be sure, that he will accompany us in our way of interreligious dialogue.



Truly, this was my experience at this VICISU: the members were not only coming from countries all over the world and were just Christian or Muslims; we were Catholics, Protestants, Sunnis, Shia, conservatives, liberals, European, Asian, African, South-American, North-American, Australian, men, women, students of theology, law, philosophy, talented in music, talented in sports, covered, uncovered, mass-attendant, not mass-attendant, etc ... Yes, we were and are all this diversity and in this diversity it was possible to play football as a team, to laugh about the same joke, to sing, learn and cook together and to ask to pray for each other. All these little but significant things showed me that you can live together in pluralism, besides the difficulties I do not want to deny. And it was not only such named activities, it was the general spirit I could feel. The spirit of a real strong community in diversity.

BY RUFSA NA BEGUM, UNITED KINGDOM

Platform 4 Peace

Dialogue is the Heart of Peace

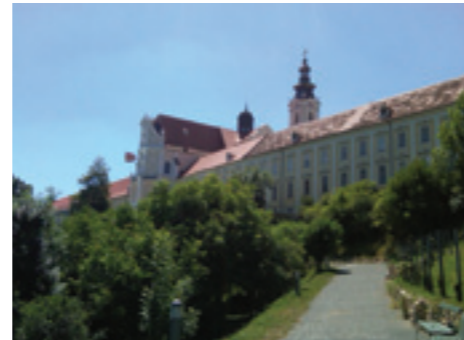
One of the greatest obstacles to peace and international security is lack of communication. Modern society has become fragmented, based on exclusion rather than inclusivity—arguably, as a result of lack of dialogue. Consequently, what we are witnessing is a polarization of religious groups today, where Islam is coming to be seen as the ‘other’ in society. Instead of engaging in talks about our differences, we tend to superficially gloss over them. For peaceful coexistence in a multicultural society, dialogue is central, as it is through dialogue that we create ideas and solutions and learn acceptance rather than just tolerance. Religious and cultural diversity is our reality. Thus VICISU seeks to engage in interreligious dialogue that promotes a platform for peace. Dialogue is the key to empowerment; through communication we can discuss our own interpretations rather than rely on bias and prejudice. This is essentially what VICISU was about: 46 students coming together and creating a platform for peace, for discussion, for dialogue. The questions are, though: How important are these discussions between ordinary people? How much influence and power do they actually have? I would argue that it is civil society that holds the potential for change. It is we who have the power to change the future for the better. And that is exactly what VICISU intended to do: it sought to create an atmosphere that gave students, scholars,

priests, imams, and all people the power to create dialogue with each other on neutral ground, to become collaborators for peace.

CREATIVE DIALOGUE

What I found so surprising and amazing about the Vienna dialogue initiative was that what brought us together were not the overwhelming issues dominating society and media today but, in actual fact, the everyday discussions we had between friends. The lack of rigid constraints and formality meant we could speak about anything and everything. Consequently, it was not what took place in the classroom that was most important but what occurred outside of it. For example, we all joined together and watched the World Cup matches, celebrating wins and expressing disappointment. There was no awkwardness; rather, the more we spoke and expressed our differences the more I felt we could enjoy the similarities we had between us. Hence we were able to convey to each other the normality of our own realities, what we saw as normal for us.

This sense of informality in the interaction allowed us to promote creative dialogue, which can be seen in an idea by Albert from Austria, who proposed having a talent show. We saw groups coming together and helping each other regard-



less of race, religion, or culture. It was amazing to see such great talent—singing, dancing, and theatrical performances! In fact, I myself took part in a parody of Islamic and Christian marriages. Here are some scenes from the play:

AN ARRANGED MARRIAGE

Dominic plays Ahmed, the Muslim groom, a shy heart surgeon
Rufsana plays the strict dad who loves his daughter
Melanie plays Aisha, the Muslim bride
The following scenes are called:
“The marriage contract”.
Dad: Can you afford this lifestyle for my daughter, son? (He points around his huge luxurious house)
Dominic: I believe I can buy a house half the size...
Dad: Well then perhaps you can only have half of my daughter!
Dominic: Umm well, I would prefer the bottom half...
Dad: Are you a religious man, Ahmed?
Ahmed: Yes I am
Dad: So tell me why is there a cross hanging in the corner?
Ahmed: Sir, this is your house.
To be honest the ending scene was probably the



most shocking. Here it is:

Ahmed is escorting Aisha to his house. Inside there are waiting three beautiful ladies: Muna, Lamees and I.

Ahmed: Here you are home.

Aisha: (She points to us) Are these my three servants?

Ahmed: No wife, these are my first three wives...

(Aisha faints)

Exit

TAARUF

It is important to note that not just the organised events promoted creative dialogue and cemented our friendships but also our own spontaneous adventures, in which we saw people as they really were and not as society portrayed them. One of those spontaneous adventures is called ‘The Lakeside Story.’

This is a story of survival, in which eight brave and courageous friends from the VICISU take a walk in the night. This, to me, was the most hilarious event that occurred during the programme. There were so many moments where I wondered if I’d gone insane, it was almost unbelievable. But the 18th of July has become a monumental day for Matthew, Barbara, Dominik Hassan, Lamees, Muna, Vivian and me. As the proverb goes, “Desperate times call for desperate measures.” At around eight o’clock at Altenburg, Matthew decided he wanted to swim, and thus began the search for the American dream. Almost four hours we spent overcoming huge obstacles and managed to survive. Yet, let me stress, it is not Matthew’s need for a swim that I wish to emphasize but that all eight of us, who two weeks before had had no idea the others even existed, suddenly came to rely on each other in such a fundamental manner. It actually amazed me then, and now, recalling

the events, I would say we bonded in a way that we otherwise would not have. It was a night that produced many great friendships. We threw away the preconceived notions we had had of each other, we rejected the stereotypes that dominate mainstream society, and we found in that place a deeply rooted friendship and the awareness that we all are just human beings, regardless of faith or culture. This is the idea in which the Qur’anic concept of ‘Ta’aruf’ is rooted: that we all are one and the same.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VICISU

What I want to convey in this article is that dialogue is not necessarily about sitting down in a room around a table and discussing serious or controversial issues; successful dialogue does not have to occur in a structured atmosphere. The VICISU created the potential for a successful dialogue, which we utilised in all manners: through a talent show, through a multicultural dinner, and through our own personal experiences. This is the way we can achieve a lasting effect in a civil society; this is what holds the potential for change. Without a strong foundation, long-lasting religious peace is impossible. This is why the VICISU’s ‘bottom-up peace approach’ is very important for achieving results. Through this programme we were able to illuminate many controversial issues that have been kept in shadows or shown by the media in a negative light. For example, it has become quite common to hear the words “Islam” and “terrorism” together in the media. This automatically tends to lead to the conclusion in people’s minds that Islam is a violent and antiquated religion and needs to be “ushered into the 21st century.” In this programme I was able to discuss out loud these perceptions of Muslims as



violent, oppressed or old-fashioned. It was incredible to see how many people held such beliefs due to images shown in society. This may explain the rising rates of Islamophobia around the Western World; this is evident in the ban on burkas and in the banning of minarets in some European States. Some can argue that we are seeing what Bernard Lewis described as ‘The clash of Civilizations,’ in this case, of the West and Islam. However, I would disagree with this statement as I am a British citizen, born and bred in England—yet I am a Muslim. There is no contradiction or conflict in my identity. I am a Westerner and a Muslim. The VICISU has proven to me that, rather than a ‘clash of civilizations,’ we can produce what I call a ‘joining of civilizations.’

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This was, perhaps, one of the most valuable experiences in my life so far and definitely one of the most significant. I was able to create great friends from different corners of the Earth and at the same time to create a network of peace through academic contacts that I can use later in life. I loved every minute of it and will definitely keep in touch with many of the VICISU members.

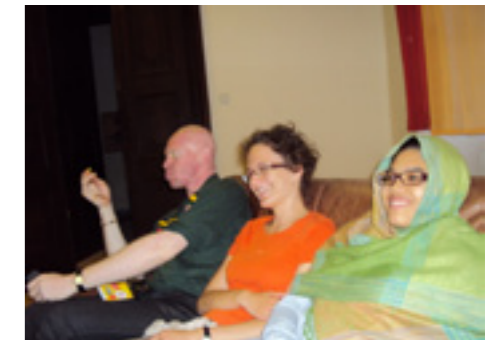
Towards an Interreligious theology of salvation?



The need for interreligious dialogue in today's world is obvious. But is it really necessary to hold this dialogue on a theological level? Wouldn't it simply be enough to come to an agreement on some moral values and to live next to each other peacefully? There've been many attempts recently to define interreligious dialogue primarily through a "dialogue of life". Particularly, the question of human rights plays a very important role in that context, and there seems to exist an assumption that it is possible

for us to agree on universal values without bearing in mind our religious traditions. Yet, to have interreligious dialogue, we need not only to consider but to re-consider our theological standpoints. It is not enough to speak of social rights, of church law, of the relationship between state and religion, or of gender from the viewpoint of social and even natural sciences. Some of our heated discussions during the VICISU 2010 have shown that this approach is too superficial. People move

into discussions as Muslims or as Christians, and a certain theological attitude, informed by our religious backgrounds, comes into play when people from different faiths discuss poverty, women's rights, or the role of religion in the State. It is this attitude that has to be reconsidered. Religion is an integral part of human life. We cannot demand that any religious person, Muslim, Christian, or any other, neglects his or her religion in public for the sake of social



or political peace. On the other hand, religions must not withdraw from public life and from encounters with "the other" and turn into reclusive sects. Consequently, the only way to achieve sustainable peaceful coexistence is to integrate "the other," at least in a neutral way, into our own theological systems. Can we, as faithful Christians or Muslims, accept different approaches to worshipping God and to living His commandments? Can we think of salvation in different ways, not just in our own? Through encounters at the VICISU, I got to know a lot of people who are devotedly seeking God and trying to live their faith in daily life. Can we, as simple human beings, judge other people's way of seeking God? From where do we take our criteria? In both our traditions, we have a lot of texts that could offer some guidance. Genesis 1, which describes the creation of the world, or Genesis 9, which tells us about God's covenant with Noah, could serve as examples for God's will for universal salvation. Yet there are also verses that speak of the one chosen people, while the rest will be eliminated. The same phenomenon can be observed in the

Qur'an. During the VICISU we heard about Surah 3:85 which some interpret in the way that everyone who does not accept Islam is lost. And then there is Surah 2:62 which says that Jews, Christians, and Sabians have "nothing to fear or to regret." Which of these seemingly contradictory passages now shows us God's will? How can, how shall we interpret our Holy Scriptures? During the VICISU we heard many different interpretations of sacred texts—the range extends from exclusivist to inclusivist to pluralist ways of interpretation. Theories of salvation are at the core of interreligious dialogue, and working them out is the most difficult task, as they need to serve two masters. On the one hand, such a theory needs to fit into its own religious system and must not contradict its own mature religious tradition; on the other hand, it needs to find ways to incorporate a possibility of salvation in other traditions without falling into inclusivism. This is a very challenging task, but it has to be done. The three weeks of living and discussing together in Altenburg have shown me how essential an interreligious

theology of salvation is. For now, however, until we find this theory, we need to agree on some basic points. These may be found in the theology of creation and the belief in the Almighty. God's love for His creation goes beyond our reason and our hearts. As human beings, we need to accept the gap between God and humankind. He is the only one who can decide upon salvation at the end of days. If God is the one who created all, as we believe, then our only duty on Earth is to care for this creation—and particularly for our neighbor. If we need criteria for judging in this world, then it can only be the criteria of love and life: loving our neighbors without preconditions, protecting and ensuring life under all circumstances. If we can include these two criteria into our theological systems, we probably have some basis for peaceful coexistence. The few thoughts presented in this article are just a very preliminary step toward a long way of deep reading and thinking—and, hopefully, toward a lot of fruitful intercultural and interreligious encounters that enrich our discussions and, even more so, our lives.

About dialogue

and coming together

L'Allah hamdulil lah (Thank God), how could I have ever imagined meeting, talking, discussing, sharing opinions with students, male and female, of different countries and religious backgrounds? On the day my participation at the VICISU 2010 was confirmed, something that had been just a dream before became reality—a marvelous experience of encounter and dialogue. Before leaving Cameroon, I had received the program of all the activities which would take place during our stay at Altenburg, but I was far from certain that everything was going to move smoothly. Unbelievably, miracles began to happen immediately when I reached the airport in Vienna, as I came into contact with Marsha from the United States of America, a kind of encounter that exceeded my imagination. As if we were long-lost friends, we started discussing a wide range of issues, beginning with our homelands. Upon arrival at the monastery, Christine Föger, an Austrian student, welcomed me with a hug. It was as if we had known each other for a while. A few minutes

later I met Esmā, a student from Turkey, who received me with a smile and embraced me as the father did his prodigal son. In the same lovely way I was welcomed by Barbara and the others. This left me with a feeling of being in a family—and, above all, at home. During the welcome reception, I encountered professors, students, and the community of the Monastery. I thought, I will never be able to call everyone by his or her name and even to get into dialogue. But from the first week I knew each person by name and began learning a few words in Indonesian, Malay, Dutch, Romanian, and Albanian. This was incredible. Stift Altenburg is a marvelous place, characterized by peace, undeniable tranquility, and admirable scenery. I had never seen such a beautiful place before. Every morning, the sounds of the bells signaled the beginning of a new day. Opening the door, one could perceive nothing but pure, fresh, rejuvenating air. During the three weeks, everything happened in



an atmosphere of community, solidarity, and happiness. We shared the same meals, went to studies together, participated in tutorials, played football together—men and women, Christians and Muslims—played billiards and lawn tennis, sang and danced, watched the World Cup matches and shared knowledge, not to mention the intercultural meal, which was a pure representation of many of our world cultures. VICISU 2010 was the world in miniature. For me, these three weeks felt like three years, since I learned and heard a lot and now have a better conception of life. I took a course in law. Despite the fact that Cameroon is a secular state where there is a diversity of religions, I had never attended a course in theology, but thanks to my sojourn in Altenburg, through the various lessons based on religion and religious diversity, I could better comprehend other religions, different from my own. I cannot keep myself from talking about the Mass I attended at Altenburg. I had never been inside a church before; it was my maiden experience. It was really unbelievable, as I had the same sensation as if I were in a Mosque—



something I had never thought could happen. I felt close to God. That is where I understood that we all are one, created by the same God, regardless of our religious differences and our social status. This was similar to when we attended the prayer at Stift Melk and during a Muslim Friday prayer, where everyone was present: both Christians and Muslims, professors and students. Everyone took part in the prayer, and I witnessed then and there a remarkable coining of a symbol of unity, an image of a united world, a future full of love and tolerance, without discrimination or violence. The fact that I interacted with all these people and that we discussed all kinds of issues from a cultural and from a religious perspective permitted me to grasp the importance of dialogue, an essential factor in understanding, studying, and respecting each person in order to better distinguish certain aspects of social reality. All this happened in a sincere and honest environment. At the end of my stay in Austria, I felt as a Cameroonian, an Indonesian, a Malay, a Turkish, a Pakistani, a

Moroccan, a Romanian. All in all, I was living in perfect harmony with brothers and sisters of diverse origins. The idea of organizing VICISU does not seem to be in vain if we are expecting a future free of ethnic and religious conflicts, terrorism, gender discrimination, and so on. I wish to address my sincere gratitude to Professor Okalla for all the attention he paid me during the summer school. Let the almighty



God bless him, as well as Katharina Albrecht-Stadler, who succeeded in putting everyone in a good mood. I also want to thank all the lecturers for their interesting and instructive courses and the whole community of the Monastery for their warm welcome and for being open to everyone. I wish and hope that more students from Sub-Saharan Africa be invited to attend the upcoming VICISU's.

WE ALL ARE ONE,
CREATED BY THE SAME GOD,
REGARDLESS OF OUR
RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES AND
OUR SOCIAL STATUS

BY MUNA ABDULKADIR, SAUDI ARABIA
AND DOMINIK GNIRS, GERMANY

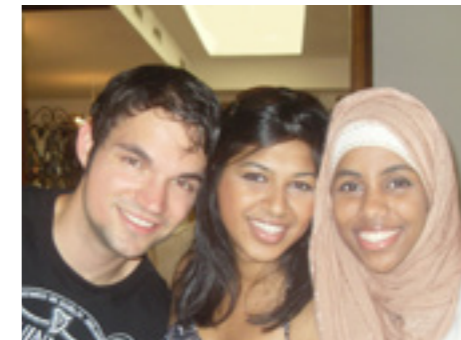
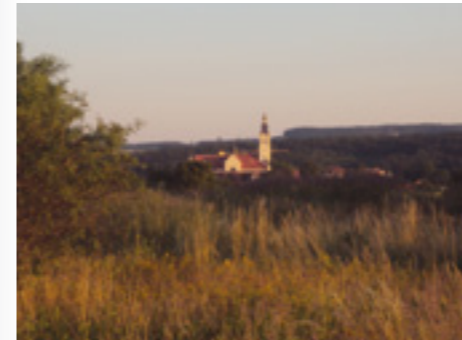
The art of discussing religion

Christians and Muslims are different? Duh, sure! Westerners and Arabs? Definitely. Yet, when we got to know each other in Altenburg, we were surprised that we have a lot in common. It's because "the other" is sometimes not different at all when you look at the faith we share in one God who created the world or when you look at our core values. Talking about "others" more different from us—like those who don't believe in God at all or fundamentalists in both religions—is when we realized that many Christians have more things in common with many Muslims than with some fundamentalists in Christianity, and vice versa. We rather concluded that belief in one God transcends borders instead of bringing us to judge and exclude others. Muna: "Thank you, that is exactly what I was trying to say." This was one of the most com-

mon sentences during our heated discussions. Although we come from two different faiths, we managed somehow to look beyond our differences in a way that already allowed for acceptance of our differences and already pointed out what's good in the other's opinion. Dominik: I am a Catholic Christian, and I share most values with my church. And here, wow, I realized, Muslims do too. For example, I am against abortion; Muslims are too. Catholics emphasize that doing good deeds in this life is crucial for salvation; Muslims do too. The monks in our monasteries have a compulsory prayer five times a day (up to 7 times). Muna and father Michael even had similar long black robes for our "Garden of Religions" tour. After all, we are so similar in so many ways that it's hard to believe Christians and Muslims are fighting each other in some parts of the world. Still, after discovering common ground, we found more and more controversial topics popping up, and now it was quite surprising to notice quarrels and disagreements leading to some cracks in the so-far prevailing harmony.

Encountering Disagreements: Muna Alamer and Dominik Gnirs are entering a discussion about

The Trinity, ethics, hijab (headscarf and veil), secularism, the role of women in society, polygamy, and other issues kept bothering us and even led to harsh words once in a while. Dominik: I was astonished to find here Muslim women partly defending polygamy, arranged marriage, and the hijab. It was difficult to learn that what we see as restrictions, they see as rights and as aspects of the social roles they also want to play. On the one hand, I can still not get it through my head that a limitation could be something good. On the other hand, long stories about how people really experience these different practices in real life made me see advantages in their different way. But when it came to secularism, I could only find common ground with the Turkish people... surprise, surprise. Muna: "I think the veil is dangerous" was one of the first things I heard Dominik say during the "Introduction to Islam" class. It was important for me to understand why anyone would think like that. But I told myself, well, I still have the other 45 students to have a dialogue with. His desperate attempts at explaining that he didn't mean what he'd said didn't stop me from being sarcastic about his statement. I used to make fun of him, joking that he should run for his life because I might be hiding a bomb under my hijab, and I kept repeating that whenever we saw some Muslim women in the streets of Vienna. I knew that he didn't mean



what he'd said, but a part of me wanted him to feel what it was like to be "the other" who is always being attacked and misunderstood. Dialogue doesn't mean fighting out opinions until one party wins. "The primary purpose of dialogue is to learn, that is, to change and grow..." (Swidler, 2003), an often quoted line in our course. For us, that meant to grow in respect for one another's opinions, to change the perception of the other. Mutually, we thus came to see the good and bad points in our own religions and in the other. This reflection also helped us to understand our own religions better, to see their depth and value, and at the same time to realize human practices and views of religions that need to be criticized and improved. Muna: I used to express my opinions and who I am as a Muslim girl coming from Saudi Arabia, and most of the time our conversations ended up in agreement that being different doesn't necessarily mean that we are against each other. Well, sometimes professors used to make statements against which I knew Dominik would raise his hand just for the sake

of disagreement, but what was more fun is that he knew I would immediately raise my hand to respond. I must say that sometimes I felt tired of explaining how we as Muslims were different and therefore had different understanding of freedom and human rights, but nothing was more challenging for me to explain than women's rights in Islam and why women don't drive cars in Saudi Arabia. Dominik: Whenever I made a controversial statement in class, I gave Muna "the look," saying with my eyes, "Come on, contradict, say something! Let's not just agree on the common points and evade the others." I wanted us to have serious and controversial dialogue, I wanted to come to understand why things are the way they are and to explain how it works in our part of the world and what it is really to be criticized from both points of views. Now I feel grateful for each person who took his or her time to explain to me the Muslim way, to discuss issues with me and to talk with me even after we totally disagreed on a certain point. Once, in a tutorial, we had to present the differences between our religions, and we

did it so that a Muslim presented the Christian points and a Christian presented the Muslim points on the flipchart. It's such a challenge to portray the other from one's own point of view but in such a way that the other agrees! How to express what one knows about the other, without speculation, without prejudices, without putting it in a way of which one of us would not approve? I promised myself, whenever I talk about Islam, to try to do it as if in that situation. To imagine having my Muslim friends there, looking at me as I was trying to find the right words to portray their religion in a way that put it right for them and for me. And that's why the best compliment I got this week was when Muna told me, "I hate to admit it, but you're more like a friend now."

Sources: Swidler, Leonard, The Dialogue Decalogue, Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 1984 – Revised 2003

Freedom of Expression



free dom
1. The condition of being free of restraints.
2. Liberty of the person from slavery, detention, or oppression.

This article deals with two provisions of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 18 which provides that “[e]veryone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; [...]” and Article 19 according to which “[e]veryone has the right to the freedom of opinion and expression; [...]”

As human beings, we tend to dwell on looking for things we cannot have. However, the concept of freedom varies widely between nations, countries and even people. Some view duties as freedom while others see their rights as freedom. Yet, nothing stands alone in this world, and a right includes also a responsibility and a duty. One should consider many things before evoking freedom. On the other hand, the word freedom can be interpreted by oppressed people who aren't allowed to express what they are feeling, and this is why the concept was introduced. The

question is: When does your freedom stop? If it's called freedom, why is it limited? How do we define freedom when it differs between each and every single person? We are accountable for what we do and we are held responsible. For instance, as Muslims, we see it as forbidden to manipulate God or the Prophet Mohammed (Peace Be Upon Him) by jokes, caricature or stories. Yet, the Danish cartoons by using the flag of “freedom of expression” showed caricatures about the Prophet. On the other hand, in Austria, a right-wing writer denied the holocaust and was prosecuted. The crime is punishable by up to ten years in prison. To some people these two cases are both examples of various interpretations of the freedom of expression. Maybe life would be easier if we knew that we aren't born to be free, or at least not all the time. Take Adam and Eve for example. God created them the first two human beings and He told them not to eat from a specific tree. If our mother and father weren't absolutely free, what makes us think we should be? Furthermore, freedom maybe defined by every single individual in a different way. Hence, a

Western individual could perceive the Indian Sari and its traditions as backward. Or, to my surprise, some perceived me and other women wearing veils as oppressed even though I wore it as a sign of freedom.

Article 19 has to be understood in relation to article 18. The term “freedom of expression”, at first sight, is equal to the “right to speak freely”. This is true, but there is more than that.

It also includes the right to access, receive and impart information and ideas. I believe that the source of good information and knowledge is what makes you hold onto good ideas. It is not just about expressing your thoughts and making them out in the public, but also processing them through information that should be available to all through the media, the internet and satellite communication. Nonetheless, censorship in newspapers and magazines is another form of limiting freedom of expression. But should bad media be available to everyone? Perhaps we should bear in mind that not every citizen is an educated person.

I believe that politics play a critical role in this regard. Each State wants to promote ideas that support it. Even the most democratic State do that one way or the other, especially when they are threatened by a foreign power. I asked some of my VICISU friends to tell me what is the first thing that comes to their minds when they hear “Freedom of Expression”: Sholahuddin Uddin: “Demonstration, walking on the street.” Ashrul Amahl: “people have the rights to do, speak, listen, etc to whatever they want without anyone stopping them...”

- Muna Alamer: “Human Rights”
- Azralij: “Hijab, Mosque”
- Mathew Lehnert: “The beauty of difference”
- Marsha: “Art and speech”
- Nadine Mojadidi: “Hate speech”
- Jenny Bauer: “no fear or no reprisals”
- Esmā Oger: “freedom to speak, no limitation, democratic rights..”
- Orhan Jasic: “Truth”
- Rufana Begum: “Democracy and diversity of views”
- Abeer Javaid: “To speak up your mind but not for degrading or insulting anyone”
- Albert Wirthensohn: “Saying what I want”
- Cornelia: “Media”
- Zainab Ranjha: “Exploited liberty”
- Yuyun Sri Wahyuni: “Articulating self rights with others”
- Christine Foeger: “basic (human) right”

In conclusion, freedom of expression cannot be taken literally in the sense of only a “right to speak”. It is necessary to know also the consequences and the limits. Nevertheless, what matters is not merely the freedom to express one's thoughts, but a free state of mind in terms of conscience, thought, belief, and ideology. This distinguishes one person from another; for their development it is important to gain knowledge through different media.

When in Austria:

among
tolerance,
romance, and
waltz dance

newspapers, which covered “westernophobia” too often. And maybe I had listened to wrong information about the old-fashioned myth of the “Clash of Civilizations.”

Regardless, now that I was here in person, all of my a priori prejudices were suddenly gone, replaced by respect and appreciation for the tolerant Austrians. Here, in this small, well-organized, and beautiful country, I witnessed the friendship and wonderful smiles of its people. I also saw the colorful faces, cultures, languages, and religions, especially Islam, on the paved streets of Vienna, elegantly interwoven with Austria’s national identity. I will never forget the waving hands of some Austrians, followed by a warm, magic word, “Hello!” Later, during my stay in Austria, I learned that this tolerance had lasted since the time when Bosnia became part of the Habsburg Monarchy. Emperor Franz Joseph was hailed as a great example of pluralist ruler after establishing the first faculty of Islamic theology in Bosnia. It seems to me, he succeeded in educating his people to respect religious minorities. The

I will always remember...

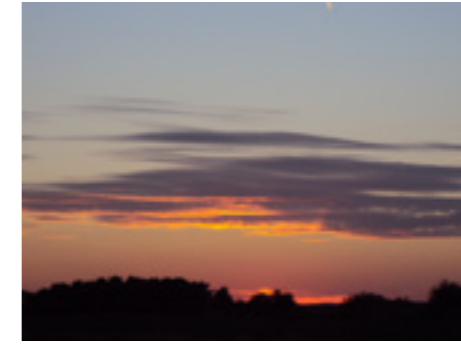
My first experience in Austria this hot, dry summer. It is the first European country I’ve ever visited. At first, as a veiling woman, I was surprised by the multiculturalism in this “Mozart” country. My admiration began with the passport check at the Vienna International Airport, which was so easy that it did not even take more than ten minutes. Before coming to Austria, I thought that the immigration office would maybe interrogate me rudely and accuse me of carrying a “hidden lethal weapon” under my veil. I also imagined that the passport check would take more than two hours because of my nationality. I thought that Austrian people would stare at me with that “what-is-that-alien-strange-veiling-girl-doing-here” look. Maybe I had watched too many Hollywood movies. Maybe I had read the wrong

*Someday many years from now
We’ll sit beside the candles glow
Exchanging tales about our past
And laughing as the memories flow
...And when that distant day arrives
I know it will be understood
That friendship is the key to life
And we were friends and it was good.
(Eileen Hehl, as cited by Fatemeh Taramirad)*



Austrians of today have internalized the concept of religious pluralism very well. No wonder, here I could see women wearing Burqa who enjoyed an amusement park like everyone else. I also saw Austrian Sikhs holding a parade in Vienna without any difficulties. Amazing! In addition, I was fascinated by the way the Austrians treat “foreigners” as they would treat other citizens: the priests in the churches of Stift Altenburg and Melk prayed for Muslims, the owner of Rosenberg castle welcomed the VICISU participants, and some employees at the monastery hugged me. This will always be part of my great memories.

I will always remember...



The gothic, old, mysterious buildings, from Stift Altenburg to the University of Vienna, from Rosenberg to Schönbrunn palace, which are keeping alive the romance of the past within the time of modernity. Every time I close my eyes, I can still hear the harmony of Stephansdom’s bell, which woke me up that morning, ringing for Sunday Mass. I can still feel the crowd in Vienna’s streets with unpronounceable names and the touch of stone at the splendid Melk Abbey, a piece of the world’s heritage. I can still taste the famous Manner chocolates that will make you feel “head over heels.” I can still see the eccentric artists in the city center dressing up as if they were in the Victorian age. I am still full from a three-euro kebab that is too big for a slim Indonesian like me. And I can still laugh at the words on a shirt in a souvenir shop: No Kangaroos in Austria.

I will always remember...

My messy debut waltz in one of Stift Altenburg’s rooms. I stepped on the feet of my dance partner Michaela, though she was teaching me how to dance gracefully. But I was just so happy and enjoyed it so much! That was my

first encounter with one of the well-known European “royal” dances. However, my “global cultural expedition” did not stop there. I also got to know the heroic Kazakh song, the enchanting European classical piano, the fascinating Romanian song, the touching Austrian local song, and the joyful Arabic dance. I tasted yummy international food from Italian pizza to Austrian apple strudel, from Malay Nasi Lemak to Judith’s birthday cake. I still have to mention the great Traubensaft and Apfelsaft, made in Stift Altenburg’s kitchen, which always seduced my throat and tongue to dance tango at meal time.

More than that, thanks to this VICISU program, I had the chance to attend my first ever wonderful Catholic Mass. This program enabled me to experience my first three-continent Jumat prayer at Stift Altenburg. I could discuss Christianity with different types of practitioners: the Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants, including a Mennonite. This meeting was enlightening and useful for me because in Indonesia there are only Catholics and Protestants. All these amazing activities gave me a better

understanding of the religious Other. Good knowledge about other religious communities triggers strong friendships, profound friendship gives naissance to love, and love, finally, can blossom into what ethical human beings call “peace,” which will then guide us to the brand new civilization of eternal ahimsa, a state of perfect non-violence. If this dream comes true one day, we will be able to live hand in hand to make a better future where there are no more prejudices, hatred, conflict, war, or frightening terrorism in the name of “God.” Indeed, this three-week summer is priceless to me, and I am grateful for having been chosen for this VICISU 2010 program.

I think, if Shakespeare came up to me today and asked me, “What’s in a name?”, I would answer, “Austria is a meaningful name because from it I get endless reminiscence that takes me on a journey of magnificent friendship, affection, and open-mindedness.” Austria, I think now that I am already in love with you!

Learning to pray

It is Friday noon of the second week. Since the beginning of the summer university, one room has been specially dedicated to Muslim prayer, and this Friday the Muslims have invited all of us to attend. This is not just looking at our friends, this is not just attending a religious ceremony. No, this is a shift to another form of communication and behavior.

Usually, we spend the whole day with each other—studying together, eating together, singing together, joking together—and so we all have gotten to know each other in a very personal and everyday manner. Yet, though I know all the people that are now gathering for this prayer, I don't know them as I see them now. This is different. Not at all disturbing, as some stereotypes concerning Muslim believers might encourage one to feel. Just different.

They all are taking positions facing in the same direction, toward Makkah, and all of the women are very extensively covered. One man is leading the prayer, all the others just collectively respond by uttering a few words. All of them are making the same movements; they do it silently, without speaking. And we, their Christian colleagues—we are just sitting next to the wall in an uninvolved way, watching all of this and not understanding the words they use. All of this might sound strange and uncomfortable to critical Western ears. It might sound like conformity, like a process of switching off one's own individual thought and disappearing into a mass collective. Is this not absolute obedience, a loss of personal freedom, a statement against emancipation? No, it is not. The atmosphere in the small room is filled with deep peace



and sincere devotion. At this moment, all the critical questions I've mentioned do not exist. The pure ceremony and the way in which it is acted out do not make me feel uncomfortable at all—they make me happy and relaxed in a holistic way, and they fill me with inner peace and calm. The prayer starts with the famous adhan, the Islamic call to prayer. One of our colleagues, whom we have known since the beginning of the summer university, is performing it. Yesterday he played football with us, and maybe he was the one who fell asleep in the morning lecture—but none of that is relevant at the moment. In this moment, he seems somehow “out of this world,” singing the holy words with devotional intensity. The adhan is a highly



developed piece of art that brings together an ancient Arabic musical tradition with the absolute concentration of the muezzin. The call of our classmate prepares the space for the holy ceremony that follows, and everybody in the room can feel that immediately. The touching and inspiring sound of the adhan will stay in my mind for years to come. The VICISU offered an intensive program of lectures and academic talks, but still, I didn't go there just to stamp more cognitive knowledge onto my mind. No, I was also there in order to look for an answer to a question: How will this intensive encounter with convinced Muslims affect my Christian spirituality? My attendance at the Friday prayer might have been the most touching experience on this path



of exploration, but all through our program I was becoming aware that Muslim spirituality fascinated me. On our message board we had a small sheet that announced prayer times for Muslims: five times a day, with an optional sixth prayer, evenly distributed over the whole day and also late at night. At first, this sounded just uncomfortable and complicated. As God is eternal and all-knowing, I can talk to Him whenever I want, can't I? Why is it necessary, then, to have such a strict and formal framework, telling me when I have to do my prayer? After seeing the prayer schedule, I began to wonder about this. The Muslim students were young people like me, similar to me in many



ways. Were they really willing to let their religion define the timetable of every single day? Were they allowing this intervention into their personal freedom to arrange the day as they wanted? Then I realized (at certain times, when I was awake) that suddenly all of them were gone—for example, after lunch. This is when I learned: “talking to God when I feel like” is not the only way. Another way is in accepting that there is always something more important than my human life and everything in this world. Everything has to wait at prayer time because it simply can never be that important. After all, this whole world and we humans are impermanent, and communicating with the eternal is obviously more important than anything else. And the form of Muslim prayer shows that this

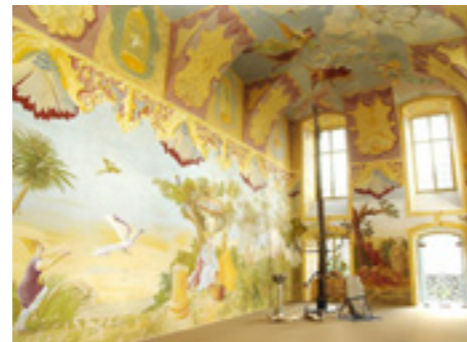


is not just an individual opinion—all of the believers agree. At the time of prayer, nothing in this world matters much. This could be felt and seen especially at the Friday prayer I was allowed to attend. I was deeply impressed by this ceremony, and I'm sure that it will influence my Christian spirituality. In my culture it often seems that praying is a useless relic of former times, before the Enlightenment took place. But what my Muslim friends have shown me is just the opposite: praying can still be a strong statement that nothing in this world is as important as our relationship with God. Muslim practice shows this in a convincing and impressive way, and this will give a new impetus to my Christian prayers!

The gift of Altenburg

monastery," I joked to my friends before leaving. "If you don't hear from me by August, call for reinforcements." What concerned me was the location's lack of neutrality. Would non-catholic Christians be comfortable surrounded by Catholic paraphernalia and monks' robes? Would our Muslim participants in particular feel out of place or under spiritual pressure among crosses and chapels, waking up every morning to church bells?

I do not presume to speak for everyone, but after three weeks at Altenburg, I came to believe that I'd worried for nothing, and realizing why I shouldn't have worried became part of one of the most profound spiritual experiences of my life. Stift Altenburg's architecture has been created, preserved, and restored for almost a thousand years by people who call each other "brothers." Today, it is a breathtaking network of marble halls, vaulted ceilings, cozy nooks, and gated gardens. A lovingly excavated little gothic chapel hides at the bottom of a winding staircase, cool and quiet, calling one to touch its ancient stones and to whisper intimately and to feel only peace. And reigning above it all, like a hymn of praise, is our church, soaring toward heavens. Tolling bells spilled their song from its tower several times a day, but not once did I see a furrowed brow in response. It did not offend. One day, I walked into the room of a Muslim friend and saw above her bed a crucifix so large that I stepped back, startled, and we both



laughed. "Wow," I could only say, "that's... prominent! If it's making you uncomfortable, I can take it to my room." To my surprise, she looked pensively at it and back at me and shook her head. Then she said, "I don't mind it. He's watching over me at night." Then she smiled. On another occasion I was giving a tour of the abbey to a friend who arrived later in the program, and it occurred to me at some point that most of the places I was showing her were, naturally, sites of Catholic worship: a church, a chapel, a crypt... Only several days after did I hear her describe to someone else how deeply



affected she was by the history and spirituality of this place just by watching the way it was affecting me, by standing next to me in the crypt as I stood before the painting of the crucified Jesus and could hardly hold back tears. Only then did it occur to me that, as much as Stift Altenburg made this dialogue possible by its hospitality and enhanced it by its natural and architectural beauty, it made our dialogue much deeper, much faster, much longer lasting by the love with which it was filled and which it exuded from every corner, from its ancient walls, from its carefully manicured lawns, from its

smiling inhabitants, and most importantly from us. It did not matter whether we would stay at a Catholic or Sunni or Mennonite or Shi'ite home. It mattered that we were in a home that welcomed, where we filled each other with our own spirituality, where love had been practiced and preached, built and grown for ages. We spent three weeks at Altenburg, and as time passed, outside of class I heard less and less conversation about who is right. And I felt more and more like part of a great and growing "one." And I abandoned myself to that oneness, happily and with little reservation. We prayed together and played ball (well, as the old and decrepit member of the group, I watched) and sang songs into the night and laughed. It does not mean our discussions are over, neither is our diversity. We will probably keep trying to convince each other as to this and that—many, many things. But how different is discussion between people who love each other? Between people who've been happy together? Between people who have stood together in a sacred place and not cared who had built it? Fr. Michael said to me in his unforgettable

and endearing Austrian German accent, right before we left, as I was thanking him for everything he had done for us, "I am just a gardener, yes? And what beautiful roses bloomed in my garden!" As we spoke, "beautiful roses" were running around the fountain, falling down on the grass, and creating impossible din, and I was thinking of going back home to my "other" life, which seemed so strange just then and so distant. In this "other" life I teach World Religions and Interreligious Dialogue, and I tell my students that they must learn about the Other because understanding is the key and the roadway to peace. But I think this year, as one key to understanding, I am going to start with "love." "Stift" means "gift." This place and this time, indeed, were a great gift to me—and, I believe, to many of us. This place is filled with the breath of God and with the breath of the ages. And it is filled with the breath of Love. And that, in the end, is all that matters.

Memories

Of VICISU 2010

The time I spent at Stift Altenburg from the 4th to the 22nd of July, 2010, on the occasion of the Vienna International Christian Islamic Summer University (VICISU) was very nice. Indeed, on Friday the 16th of July, the Islamic prayer was attended by non-Muslims invited by the Muslims. In the same way, on Sunday the 18th, Muslims were invited by Roman Catholic Christians to attend the Holy Mass. Moreover, at the multi-cultural dinner on the 19th, the VICISU participants presented various meals from about 10 different countries. Personally, I most of all keep in my mind the souvenir of the Talent Show, which took place on Saturday evening, 17th of July. The nice idea was Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel's. All participants had the occasion to show their talents in singing, dancing, playing the piano, the guitar, and the drum, as well as performing a play. I agree with Zsofia Windisch, a participant from Hungary, that it was probably our best evening at Stift Altenburg.

THE TALENT SHOW

The show started with the Islamic prayer, directed by our mate Ashrul Amahl from Malaysia, through Arabic songs. Then followed what was to me one of the greatest surprises of the evening: Professor Irmgard Marboe played two nice pieces of classical music on the piano, followed by Marsha Kaplun, a participant from Russia living in the USA. The way this evening started was a great sign of interreligious dialogue, the main topic of the VICISU. We witnessed performances of songs from Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Romania (with Father Juliu Gorea, an Orthodox priest), and Austria. A few of our actors put together

a play about marriages in different cultures ("Islamic Arranged Marriage" vs. "West-Side Story"), and it was astonishing to see a girlsgirl mastering roles of man and woman. (I am talking about Rufsana Begum, who was born in Bangladesh and now lives in the UK.) Of course, there were dancing performances: from Palestine with Issa Shaker as the teacher, from Malaysia, Indonesia, and from Cameroon. The Cameroon dance, a rhythm called "Bikut-si," was performed by Zouliatou Lerap and me, and once we were done, Professor Marboe from Austria, some monks, and participants like Christine Föger and Melanie Fink from Austria and Hassan Ali Dilawri from Pakistan began to join in. It was wonderful to see mixed teams, as far as religion and nationality were concerned: Juliu Gorea from Rumania sang while Albert Wirthenson from Austria played the drum; the girls from Kazakhstan sang and played the piano while Maria Ingrid from Indonesia accompanied them on the guitar; the play about marriage involved Christian and Muslim actors from Germany, Austria, Saudi Arabia, and Bangladesh; Barbara Karner, a Christian girl from Austria praised the Lord Jesus Christ with Zouliatou Lerap, a Muslim girl from Cameroon. We were really like a family, together, with the priests of Stift Altenburg dancing with us.



What a nice picture it was when all of us stood up and joined hands to sing the famous chorus "We are the world"! This song, written by the late Michael Jackson and various other artists in 1985 to help hungry people in Ethiopia, touches on many topics discussed during the VICISU 2010, such as solidarity, unity in diversity, and love. "We are all a part of God's great big family;" "...the world must come together as one;" "love is all we need;" "let's start giving;" "we make a better day just you and me"—these are some of the quotes from this song that relate to the main themes developed



in VICISU lectures and spirit. We discovered many talents around us that evening, many skills, and even more amazing personalities. These were really the skills acquired before VICISU 2010 started, since we didn't have enough time to rehearse for the Talent Show. Still, everyone performed so well, probably, mostly due to the fact that we were to be the only audience there, to enjoy each other's art with love and with one heart and not to win prizes for our performances. There was no stress. I would like to express my congratulations to Professor Gabriel for this nice idea, one worth

putting into practice. The same congratulations are addressed to Albert Wirthenson, our mate from Austria and my dear friend and roommate, who succeeded in organizing the Talent Show evening and participating in some group performances at the same time. Of course, I have a lot of esteem for all those who performed during this show after having only short periods for rehearsal sessions. It was also very kind of all of those who attended the Talent Show and made it cheerful and truly joyous. The floor was free for dancing until late hour, and it was midnight at the earliest when the last

of us left the room, and this was only because we were conscious of the busy schedule of the next day, namely the tour at Melk Abbey and the boat trip on the Danube. I hope a talent show will be organized at the forthcoming VICISU's. In fact, future participants should be informed about this program before they arrive at Stift Altenburg so that they be better prepared to perform. And so, in conclusion, let me say, "Hail!!" and "Bright future!!" to VICISU in general—and especially to the Talent Show.

BY MELANIE FINK, AUSTRIA

Altenburg theater conquers the World stage

Today I was walking along “Brunnenmarkt”, a marketplace in Vienna. For everybody who does not know this area, one thing I can tell you about it is that, walking along this street, it is hard to tell in which country you are and who is the minority there. To be honest, I always considered myself quite tolerant and open-minded towards other cultures and beliefs. However, I also have to admit that it sometimes actually invokes a strange feeling when I walk along “Brunnenmarkt” and pass a woman dressed in a long black robe and a black headscarf. It is completely unreasonable and I do not like admitting it, but this is just how it is.

Today as I walked along “Brunnenmarkt” and happened to meet a woman dressed in a black robe and a black headscarf, something very different took place. I laughed out loudly. Why? I had to think of my new Saudi friends, who at home also dress in black Abayas and, as I was told, usually also wear a black headscarf. So this woman, though looking very different at first sight, might be just like me and not so different at all. Such a thought, as simple as it may be, that we are all actually very similar and that clothes do not tell us as much about people as we might think, just never came to my mind before. And this made me laugh.

I cannot speak for everybody, but at least from what I can say, I sometimes feel at ease when I am confronted with traditions, religions or beliefs that are not familiar to me. The very reason for it is that they are unfamiliar. What is unfamiliar can for some people also arouse

feelings of uncertainty amounting at times even to fear. As we can experience every day through conflicts in the whole world, fear can often turn into incomprehension and is often used by others for their own benefits. So if we think of our world as a stage, this is kind of the setting that everyone, who wants to act on it, has to find a way of dealing with. It is precisely because of this setting that many people chose to act with two infamous actors in the starring role, namely stereotype and prejudice. These two actors are usually brought into being upon information received by others, by the media or just upon instinctual preference. Whatever way you look at it, they are certainly not based on reason and in depths personal encounters. As we can see, it is just easier to act with those characters, than to engage in the search of better solutions.

Every one of us, however conscious or unconscious this might be, is somehow influenced by stereotypes and prejudices that are commonly held in the community we live in. We cannot escape this. Yet, there is something we can do about it. However far away a world without prejudices and stereotypes might be, like every long journey, also this one starts with the first step. I think we students from the Vienna International Summer University, in the search of better actors than stereotype and prejudice embarked on this trip. Let me call it a model



for acting on the world stage. The Altenburg theater, starring 43 enthusiastic, open-minded, communicative, sparkling students from all over the world. The new actors we decided to invite were dialogue and respect. Our new actors had their first performance in the course of the premier of Altenburg theater, taking place during the three weeks that we all spent together in Altenburg. Through dialogue and respect, day by day we increasingly gained insight and understanding of previously unknown cultures. Prejudices and stereotypes were suddenly blurred by the accounts and sparkling personalities of our new friends. In my personal experience, the more I tried to un-



not at all easy to meet. What you certainly need for it is an idyllic monastery set in a deserted region. Give your actors no chance to mess around in a city, no chance to escape the debates. Watch out for perfect hosts, preferably kind, funny, generous, absolutely adorable monks. You certainly need the kind of students that raise their hands at any statement. Those who always think there is need of debate. Of course those who question everything. Do not forget about the reconciliators and those who keep the team spirit up. And by no means you must forget about the band of the theater, who can amaze the audience with their joyful, thoughtful or rocking songs. The most important thing, however, is to make sure that all the actors are at least one thing: open-minded, debate-loving students.

The three weeks I could spend with all these amazing people were unforgettable and enriching for me. Considering that I kind of slipped



derstand the different cultures, traditions and beliefs, the more they gained my respect and appreciation. Even though I certainly learned

to respect our differences, much more did I start to understand that these differences are at the surface. I discovered that beneath that, we have much more similarities than differences. The disconcerting feeling of being confronted with something unfamiliar turned into a feeling of joy of the variety that the world holds in store for us. Hence, it seems like in order to lose the fear or unease of the unfamiliar, we just have to be ready to make it familiar. And to make something familiar, we have to be open to get to know each other.

The premier already being such a success might sound to good to be true. Indeed, the preconditions to set up a theater like this are

into this, I just felt completely right there. Even if we might not be able to expel stereotype and prejudice from our world stage just yet, let them be nothing more than simple extras that everyone is aware of, that are there because we cannot really act without them, that are nonetheless considered quite superfluous and that are by no means in the starring role. To put it in simple words: In order to make our world a better one...

LET THE
ALTENBURG THEATER
CONQUER
THE WORLD STAGE!

BY NADINE MOJADIDI, SAUDI ARABIA

A Thought or Two

As I look at all the photos and videos and think back to the wonderful three weeks I spent in Altenburg, I am reminded of a great group of people with whom I had the pleasure of conversing and living, even if only for a short period of time. A question comes to my mind: How different have I emerged from this experience? I sit and reflect upon what I have learned from this trip. It feels as if I were a first grader trying to find the moral lessons of a children's bedtime story. It seems difficult at the beginning, until I come up with the idea of contrasting the thoughts I had before I entered this program with the ones I had in mind after it ended—a sort of “before and after” comparison of my knowledge base, or a random compilation of a thought or two. A self-reflection, maybe.



Before this summer, my knowledge of other faiths was rudimentary, limited to the very basics of other religions. However, I'd been brought up by my parents to respect people of all faiths. I had always been keen on educating myself on different religions, though I'd found



What in the world could I possibly offer to this diverse group of individuals, and what would I gain from them? I decided the best approach was to be open-minded and a good listener, to question, to engage, and to hold on to my beliefs and convictions without threatening or



offending others. I also prepared my mind and soul to absorb whatever I encountered through listening and contemplation. We were a diverse group, coming from different areas in the world and possessing different “narrative identities,” as Professor Okalla would say. We did not just come as nationals from certain countries, we came with unique backgrounds that we unfolded and narrated as stories. Faith is an integral part of that narrative identity. The more we spoke of faith, the



more I was able to understand other beliefs and better to comprehend my own. This I found refreshing. Along with our differences, an important fact binds us: we all are citizens of planet Earth. This may seem obvious to readers, but in our day-to-day preoccupations it is often overlooked. With all our diversity comes a universal attribute to our existence: our humanity. Humanity is the message of all religions. In the Holy Qur'an, a verse reads, “And verily this your nation [human beings] is a single nation.” (21:92). In the Holy Bible, a verse reads, “Live at peace with everyone.” (Romans 12:18). I realize that people are often afraid of getting involved in dialogue, specifically interreligious dialogue. They fear that their faith will be put to an ultimate test, that a contest as to which



faith is superior is meant to be at the forefront of any discussion. But this summer I've concluded that faith is greater than that and above being used in such a divisive framework. In my opinion, it is this way of thinking that widens the gap between believers of different faiths and thus leads to the current and never-ending conflicts under the pretext of religion. My point of view is that interfaith dialogue should not be about which faith is truer and more divine but rather what commonalities we have between our faiths that could be put to use for the betterment of humankind. In spite of my short stay, the experience I gained from this program is immense, and a major part of me has grown and developed. My heart, my soul, and my mind collaborated on this memorable journey. I feel a refreshing



spiritual change, one that I had never encountered before in my life. Being in an environment whereby I befriended people from different parts of the world and different religious beliefs, it dawned upon me that the ultimate dialogue of all is interfaith dialogue, if con-



ducted with an open mind and mutual respect for our faiths and for each other. Interfaith dialogue allows one to ponder the foundation of our existence as believers and our relationship with the Creator... whatever you may conceive Him to be.

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