

VICISU



Vienna International
Christian-Islamic
Summer University 2014

Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University 3 to 23 August 2014

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
*"International Law and
Human Rights"*

Second Week

Dr. Gudrun Harrer
University of Vienna, Austria
"Religion and Politics"

Prof. Dr. Ann Elizabeth Mayer
University of Pennsylvania, USA
"Islam and Human Rights"

Dr. Edward Salifu Mahama
University of Development Studies
in Tamale, Ghana
"Religion in Africa"

Third Week

Dr. Fatimah Husein
The State Islamic University
Yogyakarta, Indonesia
"Religious Pluralism"

Prof. Dr. Stefan Hammer
University of Vienna, Austria
"Religion and the State"

Prof. Dr. Wolfram Reiss
University of Vienna, Austria
*"Building of Mosques and Churches
in Christian and Muslim Countries"*

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The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University 2014

By Irmgard Marboe and Katharina Albrecht-Stadler

The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU) is a three week summer programme that aims at bringing together students and professors from universities spanning across all five continents. It evolved from the “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table” (VICIRoTa), an initiative by academics from different fields of specialisation, such as law, theology and social sciences, which met between 2000 and 2006 to discuss the most important questions concerning our today’s world, from a Christian and from a Muslim perspective. Four resulting edited volumes and a “VICIRoTa-manifesto” were published in German, English, Arabic and Urdu (see <http://www.rti-stgabriel.at/book-listings/vicirota.html>).



The Summer University of 2014 lasted from 3 to 23 August 2014 and took place again at the Abbey of Altenburg, a Benedictine monastery in Lower Austria. It is well known for its Garden of the Religions and combines the spiritual atmosphere of a Baroque building with the comfort of a modern campus, equipped with the facilities necessary for teaching and studying. It also

offers a variety of sporting facilities as well as comfortable living space.

40 students from universities in 15 different European and non-European countries like Afghanistan, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Switzerland, Palestine, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Austria participated in VICISU 2014. The academic programme consisted of lectures and tutorials such as “Introduction to Islam”, “Introduction to Christianity”, “International Law and Human Rights”, “Religious Pluralism”, “Religion in Africa”, “Religion and the State”, “Islam and Human Rights”, “Religion and Politics” and “Building of Mosques and Churches in Christian and Muslim Countries”. In addition, round tables and discussions took place in the evenings. Prof. Andreas Bsteh, the founder of the Summer University, recapitulated the beginnings of the interreligious dialogue initiatives in Austria. Father Michael, the Prior of the monastery and responsible for guest relations, gave a guided tour through the Abbey of Altenburg and the Garden of the Religions. Martin Kienl from the Austrian Foreign Ministry informed about the “Austrian Dialogue Forum Islam”, and Dr. Michael Lugger from the Islamic Religious Community in Austria presented the Austrian Islam Law of 1912 and current reform initiatives. On August 13, Abbot Thomas Renner and the community of the Abbey of Altenburg invited all the participants of the Summer University as well as prominent guests from Vienna and Lower Austria to a celebratory summer reception.

The extracurricular programme of VICISU 2014 was complemented by an excursion to the Abbey of Melk and a boat trip on the Danube, a visit to the castle of Rosenberg as well as a number of social events and sporting activities. Two highlights of the social programme were

the multicultural talent show and the intercultural dinner, where the participants performed dances and songs from their home countries and cooked traditional meals.

The last days of the Summer University took place in Vienna where the students received their certificates of participation by Vice-Rector Prof. Faßmann of the University of Vienna. They visited the city, including the main building of the University of Vienna and the United Nations, and were invited to a reception in the Vienna City Hall and a farewell party in a Viennese restaurant.

The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University is organised by the University of Vienna and mainly funded by the Ministry of Science, Research and

Economy (BMWFW). Additional sponsoring is provided by the Austrian Ministry for Europe, Integration and Foreign Affairs (BMEIA), the Dreikönigsaktion (Austrian Catholic Children's Movement), the Province of Lower Austria and the City of Vienna. ◊





By Barbara Weitgruber, Director General for Scientific Research and International Relations (BMWFW)

The “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University – VICISU” was held for the fourth time already. This interdisciplinary summer course carried out by the University of Vienna assembles students, professors and lecturers from many renowned academic institutions around the world for three weeks and is dedicated to the scientific reflection of characteristics, similarities and differences of the two major religious movements in the world, Christianity and Islam. The relaxed atmosphere on the country side in Lower Austria is the perfect environment for academic discussions as well as for an intense and enriching personal exchange of opinions among the participants. In my view both aspects are equally important and are needed for a better mutual understanding.

Austria has a long tradition in building bridges between cultures and religions. The Austrian Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy has supported the academic Christian-Islamic dialogue activities for many years – in cooperation with other Austrian authorities – to stimulate intercultural and interreligious exchange and understanding. Since 2008 VICISU has been organized by the University of Vienna and has taken place every two years at the Abbey of Altenburg in Lower Austria, which is a truly inspiring location with a unique atmosphere and hence is the ideal place for such a challenging undertaking.

Let me take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to the abbot and the convent of the Abbey

of Altenburg for their hearty and generous support of this important dialogue initiative and I certainly hope that the Abbey will host VICISU also in the future.

In view of the recent global political developments driven by hate and mistrust we are fortunate to have initiatives like VICISU and I would like to thank every one involved in the success of this initiative for their enthusiasm and continuous personal commitment. I hope that all the participants will continue to be part of the VICISU community as I am convinced that all of them have benefited from the spirit of mutual understanding, respect, openness and have enjoyed both the intellectual discussions and the personal encounters. ♦





By Father Michael Hüttl, Prior of the Abbey of Altenburg

Let all guests who arrive be received like Christ, for He is going to say, “I came as a guest, and you received Me” (The Rule of Benedict 53,1)

WELCOME!

In August 2014, the VICISU took place in our monastery for the fourth time. For three weeks, in a way, the whole world was our guest. Already in the first evening we had a heartwarming encounter with the participants in a first round of introductions. Many told us that it was their first visit to Europe, some were outside of their home countries for the first time altogether. Such a great variety, such a broad colourfulness, Muslims and Christians from all

over the world – a bit of insecurity, perhaps also a bit of anxiety – but also much expectation and hope in view of the days to come.

It was again very new, very different, again so good to become acquainted with young people who are open for dialogue. To experience people who have a position but who are also interested in the other. To meet people who are ready to engage in something new, with open eyes and open hearts.

There was a lot of discussion in these days, perhaps sometimes too intense. There was a lot of listening in these days, perhaps not always full understanding. There was a lot of experience in these days, perhaps

also disturbing. There was full life in these days, perhaps this was the most important. The strangers who had come became people with names in these days. The strangers who had come grew close to our hearts in these days. The strangers who had come left as friends, as sisters and brothers.

Our monastery again has received a lot. We have perhaps made only a small contribution, but the world of those who were participants in this fourth VICISU has changed.

And this fourth VICISU has changed us. As prior of the Abbey of Altenburg and on behalf of Abbot Thomas and all brothers I thank the organisers of VICISU, above all Prof. Mar-

boe and Prof. Gabriel, but also all the participants for a wonderful time spent together.

You remain in our hearts!
Salam, Pax, see you! ◇





VICISU: Beyond You and Me

*By Daniel Bacher, Advocacy and Projectmanager of
DKA Austrian Catholic Children's Movement*

“At the end of my stay in Austria, I felt as a Cameroonian, an Indonesian, a Malay, a Turk, 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 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.” These are the words of one of the first participants – Lerap Zouliatou from Cameroon – who we sponsored to attend the Christian-Islamic Summer University.

Wonderful reflections of the fact that we are all one as well as striving towards freedom from fear and want despite our differences. In this regard, VICISU offers a perfect multicultural space of learning and dialogue to get in touch with other cultures and religions in an academic setting. It allows students to practice multiculturalism and even to go beyond categories of you and me. In the end the other helps us most to understand ourselves.

In this spirit we have been supporting the participation of African students to VICISU since the year of 2010. Young people from this region were actually the only ones not attending due to a lack of funds for travelling. DKA Austria (Dreikönigsaktion) the Development Cooperation Agency of the Catholic Children's Movement has been glad to fill this gap. While our main focus of work is certainly development work in the global South, we see the great need to build North-South and South-South linkages.

In 2014, though, we made the very unfortunate experience that all visa were denied on grounds of missing income and weak social ties of the students. This is an unacceptable decision by authorities given our long experience in organizing intercultural exchange with partner organisations. It shows general mistrust towards young people in Africa and confirms that intercultural programmes like VICISU are of high relevance as well as seeds for a more sustainable future.

A foreword would of course not be complete without mentioning the tireless efforts and enthusiasm of Prof. Irmgard Marboe, Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel and Katharina Albrecht-Stadler, and not to forget the support and patronage of the Benedictines of the Abbey of Altenburg. ♦





A Time to Remember

By Irmgard Marboe, Professor of International Law, University of Vienna, VICISU Director

This year's Summer University took place in the midst of political turmoil in the Arab world. In June 2014, ISIS, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, proclaimed an Islamic State in the Northwest of Iraq and in the East of Syria, under the leadership of the self-appointed caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, apparently referring to the first caliph (Abu Bakr, 573-634). The world was shocked by reports, pictures and videos of the cruelties committed by the armed militants. The cleansing of the city of Mosul from Christians in July and the expulsion of the Yessidies in August were explicitly based on religious grounds. The population had been confronted with the alternative of either embracing Islam or to being killed or expelled. The message that came across over the continents was that the aggressive actions and horrendous crimes were committed in the name of Islam.

How could in such a time Christian-Muslim relationships be addressed during three weeks in a Catholic monastery? Would the participants meet each other with suspicion or even fear? Would they be angry at

one another and blame their respective home countries for not having done enough to prevent or stop the violence, both in the Arab world and in the West? Or, perhaps even worse, would the participants just ignore the shaking realities in the Middle East, feel detached from all those events and pretend not to have anything to do with it? My experience was that, in comparison with the Summer Universities of the previous years, the atmosphere

was clearly affected. There was a mixture of concern, consternation, and sorrow. Some students were more affected because they came from countries close to the region, others felt perplexed about what was going on. Some of the professors integrated the actual situation in their courses and tried to shed some light on the backgrounds of the conflicts, from historical, political, religious and legal perspectives.

It became very clear that Muslims all over the world are themselves victims, if not the most numerous and most affected, of Islamic radical movements and of violence in the name of Islam. Also the Summer University had to make this experience. In the competitive selection process – out of over 80 applications, we could only accept half of them – a student from Iraq was selected to participate in this year's VICISU. After his first enthusiastic reaction about this success, we haven't heard from him any longer, despite numerous attempts from our side to reach him.

It is certainly not something very original to say that the real reasons for violent conflicts are not religious differences or diversities, but economic and political injustices. These have to be addressed first and foremost. The Summer University is not the place, or perhaps only indirectly, to learn how to do this, but it can contribute to this awareness and reduce irrational and wrong-guided conceptions. It can also inspire more creative approaches to overcome existing prejudices in societies, from the West to the Far East.

How strong the existing economic inequality and injustice affect our lives in Europe has also become clear during the Summer University. The fear of masses of refugees from poor countries, in particular from



Africa, has led to extremely rigid immigration policies in European countries. As a direct consequence of this, three students from Ghana, who had been selected by a long-standing partner university of the Development Cooperation Agency of the Catholic Children's Movement of Austria (Dreikönigsaktion), have been denied a visa to be able to participate in this year's Summer University at Altenburg. The reason given for this denial was that the students did not have regular income and that they did not have close enough family ties (i.e. they were not married and did not have children) in their home country. The Dutch embassy, who was in charge of the Schengen visa in this case, apparently ignored that also European students generally do not have regular income and are not married or have children. The result was that once more a chance was lost for young African people of receiving education and empower themselves to improve the situation in their continent.

To finish on a more positive note, this year's Summer University was again a moving experience of how Christians and Muslims can live together in a respectful and amiable atmosphere. It took only a few days to transform an astonishing variety of students from all parts of the world into a harmonious group of students and friends who were interested in one another, who appreciated one another, and who helped and supported one another. It was an experience that gave hope for a better future.

I must express my sincere gratitude to the main sponsor of our project, the Austrian Ministry for Science, Research and Economy (as it is named since March) for its long-standing and reliable support. It is not only the financial means it provides but also the personal involvement, commitment and support by its representatives, most importantly Federal Minister Barbara Weitgruber and Head of Department Heribert Buchbauer, which motivate us incredibly to continue our work. Over the years, we have also found other committed and reliable sponsors of the Summer University, such as the Austrian Foreign Ministry, the City of Vienna, the Province of Lower Austria and the Development Cooperation Agency of the Catholic Children's Movement of Austria (Dreikönigsaktion). We are also deeply indebted to our incredible hosts, the community of Benedictine monks at the Abbey of Altenburg with its newly elected Abbot Thomas and Prior Father Michael. They did not only bear with us with admirable patience but also participated in several of our activities and were interested in meeting and discussing with students and professors alike. On behalf of the organisers and professors of the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University I thank our hosts and all the sponsors wholeheartedly for their continuous support and for their time and energy that made this rewarding programme again possible in 2014. ♦





The Summer University: A World Reality Check

*By Ingeborg Gabriel, Professor of Catholic Theology, University of Vienna,
Co-Director VICISU*

We have to admit: good news concerning religious relations are rare these days. There are many factors, which contribute to this but all too often it is also religious actors who are responsible for bad headlines.

During the past decades the interconnectedness of the world has developed in an unprecedented way. I still remember the exhilarating feeling when we first met in a youth group from all over the world and I realized how immensely rich this world is, how colorful and how in the age of globalization mankind has a common fate.

What has – however – become of this great vision of ONE world? This is a question we cannot avoid these days and which has to be asked seriously. For me having all these questions in my mind this year's Summer University was again perhaps more than ever before a powerful experience. The central feeling which remains after these weeks of intensive talks, lectures and personal encounters is that the terrible realities on the ground, particularly in the Near East, in Syria and in Iraq, gave a new quality to our dialogues. Bloodshed, persecutions and immense suffering caused by various sectarian and ideologically motivated movements, suppression and aggression against others are a dreadful reality these days. We cannot close our eyes to this but have to bravely confront it. Dialogue for me particularly in this situation becomes a form of peaceful resistance against all forms of violence. Meeting with others from all over the world face to face, discussing all kinds of issues of mutual importance, enjoying meals and laughter together forms an encouraging reality check. The personal encounters of these days showed to me, that the violent world with which we are confronted daily through the media represents but a very small

portion of reality. The much bigger reality is that of millions of people who lead good and decent everyday lives, who study, pray and are united in love with other people. Even more: there are young, intelligent and dedicated students all over the world who want to make this world a better place and give it a better future. And they are able to better get to know people from other cultures and religions than ever before. They long to live together peacefully and enrich each other.

Thus at the Summer University we confronted the biggest challenge of our time. It may be a long way towards mutual understanding on a broad basis. But each way begins with a first step. And this was a step and one of the many efforts worldwide to change ignorance into knowledge and rejection of the other into acceptance. The better we get to know each other and the more determined we become to use the opportunities our time gives us the brighter the prospects for humanity will be. This huge task we share as Christians and Muslims. I believe that God will ask us at the end of our lives how we behaved towards our brothers and sisters of whichever creed. But apart from this it is always an immense joy and enrichment to meet, to discuss, to learn and to laugh together. This is a reality check I carry in my heart. The Abbey of Altenburg – this means for me faces of many young people, who are the future of the planet. I hope and want to encourage them to continue on this path of openness and keep up the good spirits of these days. ◊





Nothing Could Be More Urgent: Big Things Start in Small Ways

By Edward Salifu Mahama, Professor of Sociolinguistics, University of Development Studies in Tamale, Ghana

Globalization and technology have created impressions of a small world with possibilities of closeness, yet immense differences exist in people's life ideologies, particularly about the meaning of life and what people should strive for. The West has dominated in issues of democracy and economics for a long time in modern times. In the same West, there has been a gradual shift from religious to secular life. In a similar way, other parts of the world, particularly the Arab world and Africa are struggling with political and economic issues yet, at least outwardly live religious lives.

supremacy of religions such as Christianity and Islam in many parts of the world and believers or followers of these religions tend sometimes not to recognize the legitimacy as other several religions striving for the same ideals as Christianity and Islam in different ways. This seems to be yielding contrary outcomes to what globalization and technology is achieving. More and more, divisions are created in violent ways. For example, there are more and more Islamic movements that have clashed with other Islamic groups. Others have been involved in political fights as in Nigeria and Sudan.



How can this trend change? What kind of evangelization does the world need? Does the world need a religious life at all? With the extent to which the world claims its civilization now, could we expect a more peaceful world? I think personally that the answer is found in the Vienna Islamic-Christian Summer University that is organized by the University of Vienna every two years trying to bring youth around the world to dialogue and share different perspectives on religions around the

What is interesting is that though nearly all religions see God as the supreme being and creator of everything, there are different approaches to worship and because religion is about faith and not about logic or scientific analyses, more structured religions exercise supremacy over the less structured ones. Therefore, what we get is

world. The future of the world, they say lies in the hands of the youth. Many people have grown up in specific religious contexts and have no idea of other religions and therefore do not see others as religions or true religions. "Religious youth forums" such as is offered by VICISU have a potential of creating interreligious dialogue at a

world level for religious tolerance. This tolerance will not only be achieved between and amongst entirely different religions but also within religions as there are different denominations and sects within some religions that are hostile towards each other. Differences in ideologies have led to conflicts within the same religious groups leading to mass killing of each other.

The experience of some people being allowed to attend this Summer University in itself is an achievement as it is the first time such people have felt independent, have had contact with people of different faith and have co-existed with them. I have no doubts in my mind that although some people may not outwardly agree that they have learnt a lot about different religions and

will need to change their attitudes towards people of other faith now, VICISU has sown a seed and participants of this University will continue to reflect on the different religions and what they all seek to do in this world so that one day people of different sects of the same religion as well as people of completely different faith would live in harmony to respect and support each other for world peace.

I am sure that my lectures on religions in Africa and the different dimensions I shared would have woken some people from thinking that there is just the so-called World Religions. The contribution of VICISU may seem small but big things start in a small way. ◊





VICISU 2014 – A Cross-Cultural Experience

By Wolfram Reiss, Professor for Religious Studies, University of Vienna

For the first time this year I was part of the “Vienna International Christian Islamic Summer University” (VICISU). I gave a lecture on “Building Mosques and Churches in Christian and Muslim Countries”. I introduced the students into the legal situation of church buildings in Egypt and the problems that Copts are facing when they try to build a church. On the other side I showed that despite many reports in the media it is not true that it is almost impossible to build churches in Egypt and that hundreds of churches were built without problems in the last decades. I also showed that the building of mosques is restricted by Egyptian state laws as well and that the state interferes in the matters of mosque communities sometimes even more than they do in church communities.

We continued with the question of mosque building in Austria, in Germany and Switzerland and we saw that Muslims are facing similar problems in European countries when they try to build visible mosques. The result in both contexts is the marginalization of minorities. The result of them being driven out of the center of societies which leads to suspicions of the majority populations in both contexts is that the minorities try to dominate the politics. This is why church and mosque building projects often are used by radical groups to discuss questions of political participation of minorities in general. The concrete question of erecting a religious building is no longer the topic, but the question of the identity of our societies becomes the key issue. Public space becomes a visible symbol of the re-negotiation of the (political?) powers in society.

This shows that the debate on the legal level for building religious houses of worship is often not the real reason of the problems. It is often only a catalyst for a much bigger

question which has neither been solved in the societies of the Middle East nor in Europe. The underlying question is, which opportunities Christians (and other minorities) have in visible and equal political participation in countries which have a majority of Muslim population – in which way they are allowed to shape the identity of the nation. And on the other side the underlying questions is, which opportunities Muslims (and other minorities which have immigrated to Europe) have to shape a new identity of Europe, which includes Islam, Orthodox Christians and other religious groups.

Discussing these problems with a mixed group of students from about 13 different countries was a challenging experience and we noticed in our discussion also during the course how much the question of building houses of worship is linked to the general question of political participation and dealing of the state with minorities as citizens with equal rights. The debate became a very heated discussion when a Christian





participant from Pakistan suddenly began to talk openly about discrimination of his religious community and a Muslim participant from the same country replied. We saw that the question of participation, equality and possibility of publicly manifesting religious rights of minorities is existing in many countries. It is neither a specific problem of Islamic-Oriental nor Christian-Western culture, but a problem, which we all share and which can be only solved together.

And one of the most exciting moments was for me when we concluded that much more dialogue between the

different religious groups is necessary and that it is very important that those who belong to a majority religion ask their compatriots belonging to a religious minority about their evaluation of their situation in their society. We need empathy and we need the dialogue. VICISU is helping much to start such a dialogue and to involve young intellectuals from different religions and denominations in such activities. It is my hope that such conferences and dialogues will continue in Vienna and in the home countries of the participating Christians and Muslims. ◇



What if?

By Artun Akar (Austria/Turkey)

Abdullah, an Austrian teenager is attending a Federal Secondary College of Engineering in Vienna. One day Abdullah decides to join the so called *Ad-Dawlah Al-Islamiyyah*, commonly known as the 'IS' or 'Islamic State', a radical conservative movement, which claims religious authority over all Muslims across the world and seeks political control over areas, which are predominantly inhabited by Muslims. Abdullah's classmates are graduating this year, Abdullah himself is dead.

By the time I heard of Abdullah's fate, one particular question immediately aroused in my head: "What if Abdullah had joined the VICISU 2014 programme, instead of me?" This seemingly simple, yet demanding question left me no peace. I couldn't stop thinking about it, not least because deep in my heart I knew for certain, that the answer to this question would reveal the truth about the value and the effectiveness of the VICISU programme itself.

However, I found myself relieved the second I forgot about the perverse and cruel images of the current terrorist attacks, and remembered the fruitful, serene and peaceful times at the Abbey of Altenburg. At this moment I was dead certain, that the answer I was looking for so desperately, but couldn't find was one that could definitely save Abdullah. It suddenly dawned on to me that in order to satisfy my need to find the answer, I had to determine the roots of this strong positive effect VICISU gave me and which manifested itself in this massive blossoming of feelings like love and hope.

My goal in this article isn't simply to give people a clue of what impact this programme had on me personally, but also what effect it could have had on Abdullah and on other young people susceptible to manipulation. The best way to illustrate the issue being presented is to encourage people to ask themselves: "What if Abdullah had joined the VICISU programme?"

"My goal in this article isn't simply to give people a clue of what impact this programme [VICISU] had on me personally, but also what effect it could have had on Abdullah and on other young people susceptible to manipulation"

It was a wonderful summer afternoon when Abdullah arrived at this old, beautiful, huge and simply astonishing monastery in a calm, small town near Vienna. Right in the very beginning he felt the ease of mind and complacency, which he hadn't felt since his early





childhood. He expected this state of wellbeing to last throughout his sojourn at the monastery. He believed this was a perfect breeding ground for learning, experiencing and opening up. This was the perfect opportunity to sow the seeds of tolerance and to finally nourish hope, love and understanding as well as to cherish great expectations in regards to a better future - a peaceful one, a possible one. The priests of the friary contributed to this feeling, extending a warm welcome to each and everyone. The situation was unexpectedly simply so overwhelming, Abdullah struggled with the attempt to hide his excitement; who knew what else was in store for him next...

The next day at 7 a.m., everyone in the room was fast asleep after a long night, when suddenly the alarm of Cezar, one of Abdullah's roommates, went off again repeatedly for almost two hours, until all four Musketees, (this was how Abdullah had named his roomies) were awake. "Well at least he makes sure, we all get up at time", Abdullah thought to himself with a chuckle. At that time, Abdullah didn't know the lodgers of room number two very well, as a matter of fact he didn't know most of the participants, but this was about to change. The very first day at the very first breakfast, the very first deep discussion cut off by the very first class reminded him of the one he had in primary school a long time ago: it was a simple exchange of conversation between people of two different faiths.

Enjoying lessons about Christianity with his new fellow classmates immediately took away all the doubts in his mind of a peaceful coexistence not only between Muslims and Christians and not only in Austria, but between each and everyone all over the world. A few lessons later in the evening the process of getting to know each other came surprisingly early to an end. At the end of the day Abdullah had made almost 40 friends in one and a half day.

As the days went by, Abdullah realized, that this was the perfect moment and

the perfect time in his life to gain knowledge not only from distinguished Professors but also from young, intelligent and sophisticated men and women, coming together from all parts of the world. Just as Professor Gabriel had instructed them, Abdullah tried his best to absorb this knowledge "*dia logou*", through the word. And he wasn't the only one. Days and nights, immersed in a vigorous impetus to learn, to teach and to experience from deep within the heart, shrouded in an energy one could hardly describe, and all of it traversed by highly contagious laughter. It was a time of constantly giving and taking, giving and taking, giving and taking, an ongoing circle getting faster and bigger by each transaction. Looking at the campfire he realized, that bringing together people is somehow similar to huddling up wood briquette, and that all you need to fan the flame was to pray for that divine spark, the only one that can enlighten.

"The more they gave and the more they took, the closer they came to each other, starting with being friends and ending with catching oneself thinking: 'This is family, this is home!'"

Eventually as weeks passed by and VICISU finally came to an end, separation was hard; quite a few people cried. Abdullah recapitulated the time with his fellow participants and came to a realization. The more they gave and the more they took, the closer they came to each other,

starting with being friends and ending with catching oneself thinking: “This is family, this is home!”

At this point, one will agree that people normally don't even spare a thought about hurting their families let alone kill them. One would definitely not persecute them, track them down, torture and using the IS's terminology, “slaughter” them. I am not saying, that the sole purpose of VICISU is to save lives or that it's able to do so beyond any doubt, but I personally and strongly believe it can, especially in the case of those who are giving the idea of fighting for the “IS” a serious consideration. And one can be sure that such people do exist, and not only in Austria but everywhere, because anywhere and everywhere people can be manipulated.

Moreover the VICISU programme isn't simply a means to treat the symptom that is called “IS”, but rather, a cure for the illness of intolerance, egoism, bigotry and terrorism in general. Furthermore in a world, where not only politicians, but also sociologists and human rights activists demand a prevention of terrorism, programmes like the VICISU in my opinion, seem to be the obvious answer. The programme is constituted of a perfect combination of knowledge and experience imbedded in a warm and motivating atmosphere. I strongly believe that the tremor of the deep impact VICISU had in my life will still be noticeable for my descendants.

I know I am still stuck for an answer to the question posed in the beginning of this article. To be honest, I don't know for sure but most probably if not certainly Abdullah would be alive. Chances are that he would graduate this year with his fellow classmates, that he would come home after school and give his mother a warm hug. Maybe in the future he would have married a beautiful young woman and settled down to family life. And maybe one day he would sit with his children and tell them about the importance of tolerance and peace, and after bringing the kids to bed, he would kiss his wife on her forehead and thank God for the decision he made a long time ago.

I am aware that some of the skeptics out there would say: “Well, that's quite a stretch. How does he know for certain, that joining the VICISU would have such an effect on one's life?” My simple, yet cynical answer is, “I don't, but it's worth the risk!”



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Interreligious Dialogue from an Orthodox Perspective: The VICISU Experience

By Cezar Ungureanu (Romania)

The VICISU experience provided me with a new anthropological and academic perspective, different from my prior interreligious experiences and opinions. From the human point of view, I had the chance to meet people from different cultures and spiritualities and this was an environment completely different from the environment which I come from. Academically, I had the opportunity to better understand the political situation in the Middle East and other Islamic countries. In what follows, I will focus on these two aspects of interreligious understanding, namely the practical and the theoretical one.

“Although we are not praying together or to the same God and although we don’t share the same rituals, we have the same concerns, interests, jobs and lives purposes.”

First of all, what surprised me the most is that despite all our differences, we are very similar not only as human beings but also in our day to day lives common manifestations. Although we are not praying together or to the same God and although we don’t share the same rituals, we have the same concerns, interests, jobs and life purposes. We may be religiously divided, but we are being united by our common desires of a better life. And this reality is even truer for our modern pluralistic society, in which different people from different confessions or religions are somehow sharing the same secular values.

At least at the pastoral and canonical level, the Orthodox Church is still founded on a set of values that are being based on the individual religious belonging. For example, the Orthodox Church does not bless (allow) the marriage between an Orthodox Christian and a non-

baptized one (*Disparitas Cultus*) and the price such a family pays for this is living the whole life in fornication. From this point of view, I believe that the theoretical approach to the interreligious dialogue should more than ever before, start from the reality of these kinds of social relationships. Is the Church finally prepared to open its heart to the whole world and to accept at least a dialogue with it?

The thematic aspect should not stress so much the differences or sometimes the incompatibilities between us since the quotidian life proves that we are not that different. What the Church through the theoretical part should provide, is the ethical basis towards a peaceful and prosperous society and for this purpose we need to understand how Islam and Christianity can work together. This premise is especially important as the Balkan Orthodoxy shares, since the fall of Constantinople from 1453, a common history with Islam that is almost five hundred years old. Summing up, the ascent of the Ottoman Empire consolidated on the downfall of the Byzantium.

“And thanks to the experience that I have gained while attending this school, I strongly believe that we can dream of a society where we respect one another while being faithful to our own traditions and history.”

From the strictly theological point of view, I believe that the interreligious dialogue between Islam and Christianity cannot go too far along. Even after a quick overview of the Quran and the Bible one can notice that we are dealing with different kinds of revelations: The New Testament, for example, represents a collection of Holy Books, completed over more than four centuries

(the 39th festive letter of St. Athanasius the Great from 366), in which the character of the divine inspiration is based on the authenticity and apostolicity of the biblical writings; the Quran, on the other hand, was dictated word by word and integrally by Prophet Mohammed, with character of total inspiration while the original text appeared in his integrality, which cannot be ascertained for the New Testament. Therefore, the attempt to overemphasize the likeness between the two religions can compromise the dialogue itself, as it could lead to exclusivism. Therefore, I would like to emphasise the importance of the ethical aim of the Christian-Islamic dialogue and not focus as much on the theological aims.



To sum up, I believe that the Orthodox Church should provide an answer to the social challenge that brought us to the situation where we have to live together with people from different religions and cultures and to share the same secular values. And the Church should not

be like a ship that is just allowing itself to be carried in the direction of the air currents but it should have the realistic goal of providing some values for a peaceful and prosperous development of our modern society while being faithful to its tradition. If the interreligious dialogue can make that happen, then it has achieved its goal. If the interreligious dialogue can provide the means towards the development of a more tolerant and better society, without the Orthodox Church losing its identity, then it has achieved its goal. And thanks to the experience that I have gained while attending this school, I strongly believe that we can dream of a society where we respect one another while being faithful to our own traditions and history.

Cezar Ungureanu is a doctoral student of social ethics in Vienna. He decided to write for the VICISU Magazine because he wanted to present his experiences and thoughts regarding the programme. *Email: cezarungureanu1989@gmail.com* ♦



A Friend in Need Is a Friend Indeed

By *Elza Seferian (Lebanon)*

VICISU for me began the minute I landed at the airport of the beautiful Vienna city and the minute I lost my luggage there. Frustration hit us like shockwaves as Robert and I stood in front of our corresponding terminals while our bags were nowhere to be found. We decided to notify the airport authorities and hoped a miracle would happen through which our precious belongings would be returned back to us. Maybe it was bad luck or something else, but I decided not to think a lot about the issue and focused on brighter thoughts instead. Luckily, when I met the driver who was there to pick us up, there were two other people standing next to him, smiling at me as I approached them. It was the “Sultan and Sultana of Oman” who were there to welcome me with their warm Arab/Oriental greetings as soon as they found out that I came from Lebanon. But from the look on my face, they felt that something was wrong. After I told them about my lost-luggage incident, they immediately worked on cheering me up and tried to ease the situation I was in. With my new friends keeping my mind busy, the Saudi delegation made its way to our meeting point where warm hugs and greetings filled the atmosphere. They interrogated me to find out the reason behind my troubled face, but my answer was the same for the Saudis as well. They reassured me that my luggage will be found as soon as possible because the airport authorities had been notified and that I should instead start enjoying VICISU. The friendly people I met in 10 minutes really took my mind off of things and made me forget my lost luggage for a while.

In the bus we could not stop telling each other the small incidents that happened to each and every one of us on our way to Austria. I could not ignore the efforts my new friends were making to cheer me up. Some made funny

faces while others tried to increase the volume of the radio so that our dancing spirits could be stimulated. And in fact it worked! The idea of a bunch of culturally-diverse people randomly singing and dancing in a bus would be seen as bizarre by an outside viewer, but believe me, it was pure joy and very much of an “ice-breaker” between us. It did not take long until we made it to the Abbey of Altenburg where we met Katharina who greeted us. She too noticed the odd look on my face and that was when I took the liberty of telling her what had happened. She took all the paperwork and contact information I was given at the airport and told me that she would personally handle my “mysterious luggage case”.

While my friends started settling into their rooms and unpacking, I entered my chamber with just my backpack and directly headed towards a sparkling white-sheeted bed that was inviting me the minute I opened my room’s door. I shut my eyes for a few seconds and remembered all the things that happened on my way to Austria that



were now good memories. But as I was about to fall asleep, I noticed footsteps approaching my door and suddenly I heard a couple of gentle knocks on my door.

“I hope that all my future friendships would be as spontaneous and pure as the ones I made in VICISU.”

The essence of my story starts from here. It was when something astonishing happened! Nope, it was not Katharina with good news about my luggage. It was something else, something that amazed me and which drove me to think about all the people I have met throughout my life and made me visualize how friendships happen in a blink of a second. It was one of the new students I had met the minute I arrived to the monastery who had troubled herself and had walked all the way to my room to offer me a set of her own fresh clothes. To be honest, I was shocked. I never thought these new people I had encountered were “amazing telepaths” and super-friendly. At first, I hugged her and thanked her maybe a hundred times for just thinking about lending me her own clothes, but I refused to accept her offer arguing that she would be in need of fresh clothes at the end of programme and it would be unfair. She insisted numerous times for me to accept, but I became stubborn and thought it would be inappropriate to borrow clothes from someone I had just met.

After my friend left the room, I went to bed thinking that I would probably dream of finding my personal belongings back; that way I wouldn't feel like floating in the air. But a few minutes later, someone was knocking my door again but this time I could hear heavy murmurs from behind the door and wondered who it was. As I opened the door, I noticed a group of girls carrying different pieces of attire all standing in front of my door room as if it were a cultural fashion show. It turns out when I had refused clothes from that person who offered me her clothes, she thought of knocking the rooms of those who had arrived to Altenburg and thus had set the whole thing up. All of the girls had something in their hands: one a jeans, others T-shirts, blouses,

scarfs... We actually had a 5 minutes fashion show when I tried out different colourful and cultural clothing. My wardrobe was quickly filled with clothes and this made me happy, secure and I guessed that it was time for a hot refreshing bath. We agreed to meet at the cafeteria where we could get to know each other even more and continue our lovely conversations.

After I had finished my bath, I headed down the cafeteria and saw my friends pouring soup into their bowls which motivated me to have some as well. We cozily sat down next to each other on the long dining table, but they made me sit in a way where they enclosed me within them thus forming a “circle of friendship”.

Maybe it was the atmosphere surrounding the Holy Stif that made our bonding process so fast, but the friends I made at VICISU always showed how strong and important our ties were through respect, tolerance, honesty, and assistance. I hope that all my future friendships would be as spontaneous and pure as the ones I made in VICISU. Of course, all the people I met at VICISU had their way in leaving a mark in my mind and heart, but the feeling of having people thinking of me and especially coming right at the moment made me feel very special and safe. These wonderful people had sensed why I was feeling blue and had come up with a very cheerful and funny way to show empathy towards me. They showed that they were there for me when I was feeling extremely helpless and that I appreciate forever. Thus, I can blatantly say: “A Friend in Need is a Friend Indeed”!

Elza Seferian is currently pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science at Haigazian University, Lebanon. She is part of the Women's Basketball Team at the University and spends most of her time reading books on political thought, philosophy, history. She is also interested in hiking and listening to music. The reason why she decided to write down her memories and experience about VICISU is because she believes that the only way to preserve these precious moments is to have them documented somewhere. ♦



Dealing with the Static and the Dynamic: Between Religion, Culture and Modernity

By Rifqi Fairuz (Indonesia)

There are two big entities which are surrounding human life; religion and culture. Religion and culture are different to each other, but in the same time they're inseparable. The ultimate characteristic of religion is absolute, static, stable, no matter when or where it is attached to. And also religion comes from God who reveals himself through sacred texts (*Theocentric*, in monotheistic religions frame. It may differ from traditional religions). While the characteristic of culture is, arguably, far different. It is always moving through ages and times, relative, fluid. Also culture formed by human genius (*anthropocentric*), depends on the circumstances in accordance with the time and places it belongs to.

For example, Muslims in Austria and Muslims in Indonesia are the same, yet even if they may have different schools of thought, or madzhab, at least they do agree and are faithful to the same certain absolute essential principles and sources such Quran and Sunnah. The same case occurs to Christian adherents, as they may have various sects and branches in Christianity itself, but I am sure they are bound by the same certain essential principles as well.

Doctrine, dogmas and religious practices frequently seem opposing the culture and ethics in a particular community. Or perhaps opposing human rights in terms of modern society. As a Muslim, I will take an example from an Islamic perspective. For example, stoning, which is often seen contradictory to human rights. For some societies, stoning (*rajam*) is a religious-based execution for those who have surpassed the law, while for others it is an act of cruelty. Or the case of polygamy (although often underlined with sense of fairness/justice for the wives), which is allowed in the Quran, but

can not always be in accordance with prevailing norms in the society, in determining how a husband can be fair to his wife. As with slavery, which is mentioned in the scriptures as the returns from the war, but is now considered contradictory to human rights.

Unfortunately many people misunderstood with the religious and cultural ties are not able to clearly identify which is a religious domain, or a cultural one. Such ambiguity tends to foster confusion in terms of hierarchy of values, which should be prioritized between religion and culture. Such confusion also results in a lack of awareness to change and develop due to resistance and excessive fear towards change. Resistance and excessive fear have been exploited and become the motive for action and impetus for mobilization. Thus, many wars and acts of violence, have been performed in the name of religion, ideology and identity. One of the obvious consequences of such resistance and fear towards change and innovations is the emergence of religious purification, which sometimes leads to the misuse in the name of religion and (of course that led)



to violence. Violence is something that is already bad from the beginning, and the misuse of religion to legitimize it makes it much worse.

“During VICISU Programme, I learned that religion and culture should be together along in synergy and harmony, and even complement each other. Religion wasn’t coming from sky to the earth in a vacuum space.”

During VICISU Programme, I learned that religion and culture should be together along in synergy and harmony, and even complement each other. Religion wasn’t coming from sky to the earth in a vacuum space. Religion lives and grows up with the development of thought, patterns of human expressions (i.e. traditions, art, symbols, etc.) and therefore religion in some cases requires culture to sustain its continuity. Looking back at my notes during the classes, as mentioned by Prof. Ingeborg Gabriel; God reveals himself, and speaks to humans through the sacred texts, and when we (humans) speak to God, we use human terminology, because humans are bounded by their own imperfection/disabilities. Human is definite. Thus human language or expression is inevitable in communicating with God.

Religion often uses culture as medium in terms of expression of humans’ obedience to their God. Symbols such as crucifix, sounds like prayer call, songs, music, rites, dance, pictures, paintings, statues, architecture, etc. Every religion (or perhaps Islam and Christianity, in terms of the theme of the programme) is fully aware of this kind of relationship. The connection/relationship between these two is unique, and ambivalent. It might contradict on one side, but it has an inseparable strong relationship on the other side.

Among moderate Muslim societies, there is an adage to compromise this ambivalent relationship between static, absolute principle of religion and dynamic sense of culture or modernity: *“al-muhafadhah ‘ala qadim as-shalih, wa al-akhdu bi al-jadid al-ashlah”*, I translated it as “maintain/keeping the old (traditions/principles) which is good, and adopting the new (innovations)

which is better/more proper. (Because of my lack of sources, I couldn’t trace the muslim scholar or book which introduced this principle, but it is a well-known principle in Islamic legal opinion, and often cited by some Indonesian Muslim scholars such Nurcholis Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid, Muslim intellectual and the 4th president of Indonesia) Quran also explains that goodness is neither about exposing the face to the East nor to the West (*wa lillahi al-mashriq wa al-maghrib*), but goodness means if someone believes in God, the judgement day, is willingly to help his/her poor brothers, or neighbors who suffer and starve etc.

The goodness has always to be manifested everywhere, in every part of the world, through every changing age, that continues moving and moving. Thus, the values such as goodness, peace, and the aim to make a better society, should not be debated whether it is coming from the East or the West, from religion or culture/modernity, from Asia or Europe. As well it is not a matter of being religious or being modern. Goodness itself is a condition in which people and society could earn a decent living and equal justice and their rights are well-guaranteed.

Rifqi Fairuz is a graduate student from Yogyakarta, Indonesia. He is currently studying at CRCS (Center for Religious and Cross-cultural Studies) Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia. Fairuz is also affiliated with the Students Association of Nahdlatul Ulama, one of autonomous bodies of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), the largest Muslim organization of Indonesia. He is interested in Religion, History and Culture. He joined the VICISU Magazine to contribute in bridging mutual understanding between communities. He loves reading, and collecting postcards from around the world. ♦





Muhammad, Teach Me to Be a Christian: The Five Pillars Muslims Gave Me for My Own Belief and Spirituality

By Florian Mayrhofer (Austria)

“**T**empus fugit – time flies,” is a common Latin saying by the Roman author Vergil Georgics¹, expressing that time goes by so fast, that every attempt to capture it must end in a big failure. But fortunately, the human brain was created with a wonderful instrument called ‘memory’. And although our memory is always incomplete and subjective, it also contains a grain of truth. “What did I capture from these three marvelous weeks in the Abbey of Altenburg although time passed so fast? - What is the essence of this interreligious encounter to me?”

These were the questions that came up in my mind while writing this article. Time really passes fast – it has already been three weeks since VICISU is over. Thus it is definitely time to write down the related contents from my memory before all the vivid experiences vanish.

Now the title of this article might sound paradoxical. Some may call it blasphemy – for how could you learn from Muhammad peace be upon him (PBUH) something about Christianity? Wasn't it him who by proclaiming to have received the word of God, the Holy Qur'an, criticized the Christian faith of his days? Aren't there too many things that seem to divide Islam from Christianity? Wouldn't it be more logical to learn from Muhammad (PBUH) something about the religion of Allah?

Please don't get me wrong. I neither intend to monopolize the Prophet for Christian purposes nor do I want to make an implicit insult on him by saying that I as a Christian have learned something from him. But I

do believe that both Muslims and Christians can learn from each other (I don't think I have to mention the terms ‘*ta'aruf*’ and ‘*Nostra Aetate*’ to make clear that there is a basis for interreligious encounter and dialogue on both sides). In my case, I want to share the Christian perspective of what I have learned from Muslims throughout the three-week experience of VICISU. In allusion to the five pillars of Islam I call these five main points the “five pillars Muslims gave me for my own belief and spirituality” which although as time passed on, have endured after the Summer University had ended.

The 1st Pillar: “There Is no God but Allah...”

It is one of the first days in class of the VICISU Summer School. Dr. Mualla Selçuk is giving her lecture on “Introduction to Islam” and it didn't take long for me to realize two things: first, how much the devotion of the uniqueness of God meant for Muslims. And second, how big the respect regarding their Prophet was, which my Muslim fellows in the class expressed by the phrase



1 cf. Georgics, Book III, line 284

“peace be upon him” every time the Prophet’s name was mentioned.

How do I see the uniqueness of God (in which Christians believe as well despite the theological idea of “trinity”, a theological “paradox” which shouldn’t bother us now)? What does it mean to me when I proclaim the Christian creed every Sunday in mass: “I believe in God, the Father, the Almighty...”? Do I have the same respect and devotion as my Muslim brothers and sisters? What images and ideas of God exist in my mind? Hasn’t God become a mundane idea in my mind which I can bend into the shape that pleases me? How often did I forget to show the respect God really deserves? How often did I put myself implicitly in the rank of God and deny His Omnipotence – a topic which arises at the very beginning of the Bible and the history of human beings with their God (cf. Adam and Eve).

And what about the respect I show to Jesus Christ? If Muslims have an enormous respect for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), how much more respect should we Christians show to Jesus Christ whom we call *Messiah* and God? I have now realized that we sometimes forget the significance of Jesus and the respect we should have regarding Him which is crucial for our Christian faith. The Muslim *Shahada* (declaration of faith) and the all-day respect of Muslims for their God and their Prophet is therefore an appeal to me as a Christian to revise my relationship to and respect for God.

The 2nd Pillar: The Word of God

Let’s get back to our Introduction to Islam classes with Dr. Selçuk. Throughout the whole period of the classes for this subject, whenever she asked a verse or *surah* of the Qur’an, you could be sure that some of the Muslim students knew it by heart – in Arabic and of course the translation in English as well. It was astonishing and impressive to see that people knew their holy scripture by heart. That is something very difficult to find at least in my Christian surroundings. But it showed me a big devotion of Muslim believers to their holy book. The concepts of revelation may differ; there is no



doubt about it. But it was this impressive fact that I as a Christian also should know about my holy scripture, the Bible. Well, I know that it is nearly impossible to know the whole Bible by heart due to many factors: the greater amount of books we find in the Bible (for the Catholics there are 46 books of the Hebrew Bible and 27 books of the New Testament, in total: 73 books. That makes an average of 1400 pages and 750 000 words in English); the original Books of the Bible are written in three ancient languages: Ancient Hebrew, some in Aramaic, and in Ancient Greek (a big challenge to know, learn and understand them); or that due to the variety of books the text itself is divided into different sorts of texts (gospel, letters, poems etc.). Considering these facts, it is nearly impossible for a human being to learn the whole Bible by heart. But that doesn’t mean that we should not know certain passages by heart. It is the Muslims’ devotion to the word of God that re-inspired me to devote myself more to the original texts of the Bible.

The 3rd Pillar: The Bells and the Muezzin

“The story of Saint Francis shows me that I haven’t been the first person to learn from my Muslim brothers and sisters. And I think it is one of the most influential pillars I got to understand. Through the experience of the Muslim daily prayer I again decided to dedicate a certain time for prayer every day with a certain structure.”



My mind travels through the time back to my high-school years when I had a great history teacher. We were talking about the second Ottoman siege of Vienna in the 17th century – a topic every pupil learns in school and knows about. I remember this lesson because our teacher drew our attention to an important point: “What would have happened if the Ottomans had won the battle and conquered Vienna and the whole of Austria?” And after a small pause he added “... well, maybe we would have adopted our daily life to the five prayer times of Islam – That could have been nice, to have these breaks throughout the day for praying.” Some of my colleagues reacted in a very harsh way yelling a “WHAT?” – And they thought that he had gone mad.

A few hundred years before the Ottoman siege of Vienna, a very famous Catholic Saint- Saint Francis of Assisi, traveled to Egypt during the fifth Crusade in 1219 CE. There he saw or let’s say, heard how the *muezzins* called the Muslims to the five daily prayers. Inspired by this, Saint Francis of Assisi introduced the three-time call for prayer for Christians with the bells, at dawn, at midday and at dusk. A tradition we kept in Europe until today.

Nearly eight hundred years later, at Altenburg: The good thing of an encounter like VICISU is that you share your daily-life experiences with others. I had the great opportunity to share my room with a Muslim brother so I could get the chance to observe how strict he was with his daily prayers. For me, as a grumpy person in the

morning, it was amazing that he got up at 5 am to pray *Fajr*- the prayer at dawn. But it was also impressive how determined he was to do every prayer accurately and how liberating this daily structure was for him.

So what would have happened if the Ottomans had won the battle? Would I pray five times a day? Probably yes. The story of Saint Francis shows me that I haven’t been the first person to learn from my Muslim brothers and sisters. And I think it is one of the most influential pillars I got to understand. Through the experience of the Muslim daily prayer I again decided to dedicate a certain time for prayer every day with a certain structure.

The 4th Pillar: We Are One Family

It was a great pleasure for me to see that two different traditions within Islam, the Sunnis and Shiites, despite their differences came together to pray together on Friday. The path of Christian history is unfortunately paved with big schisms, quarrels and even confessional wars (and the fact that this now seems to get rougher also in the Muslim world is scaring me). The idea of the ‘*ummah*’- that all Muslims are one community and family reminded me of a verse in the New Testament, in the Acts of the Apostles. It is a book which tells the story of the early Christian community in Jerusalem after the death and the resurrection of Jesus. In Acts 2, 44 there is written:

“πάντες δὲ οἱ πιστεύοντες ἦσαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ εἶχον ἅπαντα κοινὰ” –

“But all the believers were at the same (place) [together], and had all (things) common.”

It’s maybe a utopian idea that all believers of one faith form one family. But it is an ideal that should be reached. Furthermore: despite all the things that divide Christians from Muslims or from other religions, we are created by one God. This fact is unifying. Thanks to the idea of the ‘*ummah*’ in Islam, it reminded me again of the important issue and I think that we should be much more aware of that.

The 5th Pillar: “As-Salaam” – The Source of Peace, Safety and Perfection

Thanks to a presentation I had to make in the course of Ms. Selçuk I found a very touching aspect of Islam. I had to talk about the relation between *SaLaM* – *iS-LaM* – *muSLiM*. In my research I found out that all three words derive from the same routes *S-L-M* (cf. in Hebrew it is as well *SLM* – *ŠaLoM/Peace*). “*Salam*” which means “Peace” - “*Islam*” which means “submission to God’s will” and “Muslim” - which defines those who “submit” to Allah. Allah, the Giver of Peace, gives His peace (cf. *salam*) to those who believe (and submit, cf. *Muslim/Islam*) and to those who act (which appoints the ethical perspective of religion) to those who endure also in times of suffering (which means that a life as a believer sometimes is not easy) and who are chosen by Allah. So when a believer receives Allah’s *salam* he or she is free from imperfections, safe and secure and is with *saleem* (a heart of well being). Taking these points and connecting it with the *Surah* (Verse) 49, 13:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَىٰ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ﴿١٣﴾

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.”

This verse evoked the following aspect: For Allah “the most noble” are those who are “the most righteous”, which means that those who get his *salam*, are those human beings, who are not restricted to a particular religion. This opens a greater and universal perspective and may prevent from prejudices and over-hasty judgments which lead so often to hatred and war. It is up to Allah to decide who will get his *salam* or who is considered as *saleem*. It is not up to us to judge if a Christian or a Muslim is considered by Allah as *saleem*. But we should encourage one another to hold deep respect for

each other’s religious tradition (“that you may know one another”) to reach Allah’s/God’s *salam*. For me this was the key concept for my personal Christian-Muslim encounter.

At the end I have to thank my Muslim brothers and sisters who showed me five precious aspects of their own religion. I have to thank them because they gave me the chance to get an insight into their personal religious life and thinking. I am thankful that this encounter provoked personal reflections in my own religious universe. Thank you for five precious pillars, thank you for teaching me a little bit of Christianity!

Florian Mayrhofer lives currently in Vienna where he is studying Theology and French. During VICISU he experienced the positive side-effects of interreligious dialogue as a strengthening aspect for his own spirituality. Apart from his studies he works as a trainer in a volunteer-programme, writes book-reviews for a local student magazine, and he is also an editor and co-author of the “Salesian Youth Prayer Book” which will come out in January 2015. Besides that music plays an important role in his life. Email: may.flo@gmx.at ♦





Practicing Tolerance in a Religious Society

By Hinan Javaid (Pakistan)

When I first entered Austria, my steps carried a fear with me. I was hailing from a Muslim majority country, a country where there is a certain ‘way’ to act even for other religious groups in the minority. Up until the first of August, I wasn’t even from the minority group and I didn’t understand how to conduct myself in a society that was wholly different from my own.

I had all these questions and nothing available on the internet or other forms of social media to answer them. Nevertheless, I entered and I just hoped that I would be able to represent my religion and my country in a way that would leave no chance of errors or problems. It turned out later on that I had absolutely nothing to fear. The first person I encountered related to VICISU had brought water for us and traded lighthearted jokes with us along the way. I started easing up from that moment on till the last day when I tearfully bade farewell to my VICISU companions.

“I don’t think there is anything more productive than an audience that wants to listen and then disseminate in the same setting; through VICISU I had an opportunity to become part of such an audience.”

It always seems difficult in the start, trying to live in a society that is completely unique to your own. I live in a Muslim country with a large minority of Christians and furthermore, I study in a Christian missionary college. Still, I never had such open and frank discussions about Christianity and Islam with anyone before I became a part of this wonderful experience. I remember learning about Baptism from Father Robert and also through my fellow VICISU participants in a tutorial. And I don’t



mean the idea on the surface level but the whole concept and ideology behind it. I remember helping them understand about Islamic traditions and the context in which they came to be. I don’t think there is anything more productive than an audience that wants to listen and then disseminate in the same setting; through VICISU I had an opportunity to become part of such an audience.

The programme is designed in a step by step kind of manner. In three weeks they lay down the basics for you and then build it up in such a way that you can easily relate it all to the present day scenario. I enjoyed learning about the building blocks of Christianity but I found an extreme amount of relevance of subjects like 'Religion and Politics', 'Building Mosques and Churches in Christian and Islamic States', where the current world situations are concerned.

"I got to meet a Pakistani family that was settled near Altenburg in a town called 'Horn'. I could see the respect and amiability that VICISU staff showed towards that one family and that cemented a good opinion in my heart about the programme forever."

In any dialogue the first interaction between the participants matters a lot, you gauge who is the nerd with all the facts or who is the trouble maker of the lot etc. Generally though, the first impressions are made in closed rooms on the first day of the class with everyone stiff and closed off. But the first real meeting I had with my fellow participants happened on a trek to the forest outside the monastery! Before this trek we were all awkward limbs and unfamiliar backgrounds but this one impromptu adventure turned us into a group of friends. In no time we were trading friendly jabs about our countries and eventually learned how to say 'hello' in around 6 to 7 different languages. I even became a part of an (unofficial) chess match and lost spectacularly to Palestine even with the help of Lebanon with Saudi Arabia cheering in the background; such was our everyday interaction.

My amazing experience with other people in VICISU aside, the most interesting thing about the programme became the Austrian Society. I know that 95% of the population is Christian and it is a fairly religious society. In the world at present we can see that 'tolerance' or 'acceptance' don't go with 'religious' and it isn't only one group that is responsible for the distinctions but rather a wide number of them. So even though it was to be expected, I was still surprised at the level of

hospitality and openness we received both within and outside the boundaries of the programme. I got to meet a Pakistani family that was settled near Altenburg in a town called 'Horn'. I could see the respect and amiability that VICISU staff showed towards that one family and that cemented a good opinion in my heart about the programme forever. Horn has a very small population and as you can guess, an extremely small number of Muslims settled inside. But they have an Imam, who is treated with respect and acceptance. I haven't seen many places but I can safely say that very few countries in the world, that have some religious inclination, allow this much freedom for their minorities both publically and privately.

This programme thus, gave me a very new perspective on how a religious society functions; previously I was of the opinion that 'tolerance' is reserved to at least a little amount of skirmishes and general lack of ignorance on the part of both religious parties. Pluralism and all that it entails was lost on me. Through VICISU I became a part of a programme that allowed me to include the possibility of a religious party taking genuine interest in the other partys' ideologies and concepts. I lived in a monastery and discussed Islam with Christians all due



to efforts of a country with a Christian majority and that takes sincere interest in the affairs of its minority group i.e. Muslims.

It seems repetitive to say this so many times but nonetheless like an eye opener the more you divulge into the implications of the programme. We don't need Sherlock to deduce just how this programme came into existence and why is it pertinent to the affairs of the world. What we have to understand is that right now, all we need is a dialogue conducted in a setting that is productive to our ideas. This is what VICISU gets right every time and what the world in general needs more of.

Lastly, I would like to conclude by remembering my last day in Vienna. I was hurriedly buying chocolates



while being warned whether each available option was 'halal' (permissible to eat according to the dietary laws in Islam) or 'haram' (impermissible to eat according to the dietary laws in Islam) by my dear Barbara and Ruth. Barbara took it one step further while bidding me a goodbye, I said that, "hopefully we will meet in the near future," and she replied to it with a simple, "Insha'Allah" (If God Will).



Hinan Javaid is from Lahore, Pakistan and is majoring in Food & Nutrition with a minor focus on economics & political science. She became a part of VICISU magazine because it has also become a platform to share ones amazing experience with the world and to inspire others to become a part of this insightful journey. Also, VICISU makes one experience diversity through an inter-faith dialogue which only the magazine can help convey to the world. In her free time Hinan likes to do gardening, write, participate in debates and watch reality talent shows.
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The Beautiful Spirits and the Ugly Dilemma

By Ismail El Mouttaki (Morocco)

“**R**ight is Wrong, Wrong is Right”

The irritating quietness of the cosmos is behind the existential fire burning in every heart- Jewish, Christian, Muslim, theists and non-believers. The existential dilemmas are by default unsolvable. The partiality of the rational knowledge leads to faith based/ dogmatic knowledge. Dogmas constitute the core of all Abrahamic religions. At first sight, one can easily pinpoint at the essential discrepancies between the Christian and Muslim dogmas. Thus, an interreligious dialogue between these two faiths seems impossible. A very obvious illustration of this dogmatic conflict is the Divinity of Jesus and the recognition of Mohammad’s Prophethood. These are the basic beliefs in both traditions. However, is there any way to overcome these dogmatic differences and bring both religions into a dialogue?

“It is time for mankind to emphasize more on the spiritual beauty of being rather than claiming exclusive ownership over the ultimate divine truth. For the discovery of the truth, it might take a lifetime, probably more. But, beauty was, is and will always be there.”

In fact, approaching divine scriptures with a critical spirit is a sine qua non of getting into a dialogue. A critical spirit is nothing but the self-awareness of the incapability and impossibility of the mind to reach the peak of the ultimate truth. Religious human condition is bound by the imperfect minds dealing with absolute



perfect divine messages. Eventually, such attitude would give room for bright and peaceful souls to bloom in a world where spiritual beauty has become a myth. It is time for mankind to emphasize more on the spiritual beauty of being rather than claiming exclusive ownership over the ultimate divine truth. For the discovery of the truth, it might take a lifetime, probably more. But, beauty was, is and will always be there.

Ismail El Mouttaki is from Fez, Morocco. He is majoring in International Studies and concentrating on Middle East and North African Studies and is a research assistant of a Religion and philosophy Professor. His main interests are religion, philosophy, conflict resolution studies and understanding of geo-politics in the MENA region. He joined the VICISU magazine to share his insights about religiosity and spirituality as a core subject for better understanding between different religious communities. His main hobbies are traveling, reading and meeting interesting people. *Email: I.elmouttaki@aui.ma Facebook: [Ismail EL Mouttaki](#) ◊*



Neither Is Wrong!

By Mahmoud Khairy (Egypt)

As a student coming from a place like Al-Azhar University, which is classified by many as the mecca of religious education, it is axiomatic that I have been learning about Islam and have been well grounded in the clarification and explanation when it comes to a point of contention. Subsequently, I find myself equipped with the relevant facts to back up my arguments in case I have to defend my religion.

But my knowledge of addressing non-Muslims didn't help me until I experienced two different programmes. The first happened two years ago in Egypt called *Ahlan* and the second was VICISU 2014. *Ahlan* (Welcome) was a programme in which I volunteered to help non-Muslims learn about Islam. Furthermore, in *Ahlan* where I talked to people of different beliefs, I was only delivering a message in which I would tell them a few facts about Islam and the discussion pertaining to those facts, but as this programme was just a monologue, I never

got a chance to discuss the beliefs of the people whom I addressed. And this was only possible when I got an opportunity to attend the VICISU 2014 Summer University programme at Altenburg Abbey, as this was an interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims from all over the world.

As soon as I got the acceptance e-mail into this programme, I started to read a lot of books on Islam; and to be honest, I had intended on making every single conversation a debate! When I

arrived, I was two days late and noticed that everyone was settled in the classroom listening to a guest speaker. Professor Marboe, the esteemed director of this programme, introduced me in front of everyone telling them my background and I had the warmest welcome in my life. I was overjoyed at the hospitality of everyone already present and this broke the ice and helped me feel that I was at home.

With my dogmatic aims in mind, I started realizing how wrong I was. I found that the purpose of this short programme was to learn how to coexist with students both Christians and Muslims. This wasn't a UFF match of the intellect. A priceless advice I got on my first day from Professor Mualla Selcuk, an esteemed Professor from Turkey, was that I must listen to the opinions of others respectfully, and in hindsight, this was one of the most important things that we all learned in that programme.

During the three weeks, we all discussed our views amicably both inside and outside the classroom, even though our perspectives were coloured by our experiences, our cultures, our environments and our religions. I believe that this was a once in a life time experience, a truly unforgettable one. We were in an atmosphere which harnessed religious tolerance. I learned that even if others' opinions or beliefs were contrary to mine, I had to be patient enough to respect them and accept them for what they were; after all this was the essence of an interfaith dialogue.

"I learned that even if others' opinions or beliefs were contrary to mine, I had to be patient enough to respect them and accept them for what they were; after all this was the essence of an interfaith dialogue."



There was even a time when I was afraid to pass by the church, but we were living in a Monastery and I had to work on overcoming all my fears. I had to overstep the boundaries which I created in my mind. Initially I was even shy and afraid of talking to priests, but then I overcame these fears because the others let me come near them, the others were kind enough to share their opinions with me which then helped bridge the gaps between what I knew and what they had to offer. I remember my sittings with Father Robert on a daily basis where we discussed the similarities between Islam and Christianity and to be honest, we didn't talk about the differences at all, we didn't have to as we had too many things which united us rather than those that divided us.

I can narrate a plethora of experiences but to narrate just a few, I remember studying with my friend Florian for the exams we had every week. I enjoyed watching 'Friends' with Lars who came all the way from Lebanon and after we were done, we had a question and answer session on Islam and Christianity, and both of us were content to learn from one another because we gained so much out of it.

I chose this particular name as the title of article because I have started believing that neither Islam nor Christianity is wrong. These are two divine religions revealed from Allah (God) and thus they can never be wrong and no one can say that any of them is not true.

The dilemma that faces the contemporary world currently is the way scriptures have been interpreted in both religions. It's a very serious situation because there are certain people from both religions who don't want peace and thus they interpret the verses from their religion arbitrarily for the promotion of their own personal interests. An illustration of this is the terrorist group called ISIS that exists in Iraq; these people call themselves the Islamic State. It is a deplorable situation in which they are putting the rest of the Muslims by calling themselves 'practicing' Muslims and by going on a killing spree against anyone who doesn't subscribe to their faith.

Allah the Most Compassionate and the Most Merciful, in the Holy Quran condemns terrorism by saying:

"...if any one killed a person - it would be as if he killed the mankind entirely: and if any one saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the mankind entirely." (5:32)

There is also room for peaceful coexistence and inter-religious harmony in Islam as in another verse, Allah says: ***"To you your religion, and to me mine" (109:6)***- In this one verse, Allah asks us to accept the idea of religious pluralism which He has ordained in the Quran for our understanding, 1400 years ago.

Violence as an expression of one's religion is wrong and should be condemned. It is wrong to forcefully convert others to one's religion and Islam is strictly against this practice as Allah states in the Quran: ***"There shall be no compulsion in religion" (2:256)***

Moreover, Islam is derived from the word *salam*, which means peace in English. When *Amr ibn al-As*, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad peace be upon him came to Egypt with Islam the inhabitants of Egypt were Christians but he never forced any of them to convert to Islam. Instead he asked them to pay *Jizyah*- a tax paid by non-Muslims living under the care of a Muslim government for their protection against enemies. Instances such as the closing down or burning of Churches were unheard of.

Allah is perfect, who is like no other, and He revealed these religions. Allah said in the Qur'an:

"...This day I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion..." (5:3)

"I would encourage others to come forward, do their research, read from objective sources and meet credible people so that they can challenge their perspectives just the way I did."

The interpretation of religions takes the adherents of that religion towards either a peaceful coexistence or towards isolation. It is the people who appear as bad examples, whereas Christianity and Islam both disseminate the teachings of the world's greatest men Jesus and Muhammad upon them both be peace. These two men propagated the message of One God who advocated peaceful coexistence, mutual understanding and harmony between people of different religions. Religions in this sense are not bad, only some people are bad who misuse every opportunity to create havoc and corruption in society for their ulterior gains and purposes.

I would like to conclude this article by saying that we cannot believe in everything the media tells us which mostly cherry picks verses from the Quran without explaining their context and labels almost all Muslims as extremists. And we cannot judge people on their appearances either. I would encourage others to come forward, do their research, read from objective sources and meet credible people so that they can challenge their perspectives just the way I did. I would have stayed the same person who was afraid to pass by a church or had open discussions with people from other beliefs and taken every opportunity to turn those meetings into a debate if I hadn't attended the VICISU 2014 programme.

Thank you all for this wonderful experience, I just can't find the appropriate words to thank the amazing people in charge of the programme starting from the director of the programme who streamlined everything for us to the cook who fed us all these scrumptious meals thrice a day. Everyone talked to me with wide smiles and sincere feelings. I am truly blessed to be a part of the VICISU 2014 programme and I hope I can contribute positively in my society with what I have learned from here.

Mahmoud Khairy Abdelghany is studying English Literature at the Faculty of Languages and Translations at Al Azhar University. He's from Al-Magd, Rahmánya, Behira, Egypt. He decided to be part of the VICISU Magazine because he wanted to share his experience with others. He wanted to clarify everything. He believes we are not always right and we just can't see the full truth. That's why we are sometimes in need for the other's help. Mahmoud loves football, reading, meeting other people from different and varied cultures. He is the head of the Spanish League (La Liga) in an online newspaper, an intern in MENA (Middle East News Agency) sports section and a part-time English Instructor. ◊





The Significance of Diversity: What the VICISU Programme Taught Me and what I Imparted

By Maryam Akram (Pakistan)

My intent, motivation and purpose of becoming a part of this programme all stemmed from the drive to help build a tolerant society around myself. I knew that to further this aim I'd have to step out of my comfort zone and give this belief an empirical life which was only possible if I lived in an environment where I would be a minority as this would help me step away from the parameters which I had created in my mind, parameters which I never thought of crossing. This was essential for absorbing the true meaning of tolerance and diversity. It was always easy to read and appreciate diversity in books, in social gatherings where I would meet Christians, but I knew that it would be different if I started living it.

one that the media fails to show, one that is really the essence and spirit of Islam.

The capacity in which I am currently working, which is the role of a teacher, my aim is not alien to that which this programme has to offer. Dealing every day with students of various backgrounds, I have developed an understanding with them which helps me resolve conflicts that arise between them as well as other problems that my students face. I impart in them the value of respecting the opinions of others. I help them understand and encourage the beauty of disagreeing with one another but not at the expense of being enemies with one another. I try to create a world within this world of my own which helps me improve relationships of people with each other, which helps me make them understand the value and importance of diversity of thought, opinion and belief.

Another one of my aims is to work for the harmony of the minorities within the majority in Pakistan. I want to help create better lives of Pakistani people, people who I am surrounded by but who are on the lesser side of the equation. I want to help not just people who hold similar beliefs like I do but also want to help those who are of a different belief living in my country. Being a part of the VICISU programme gave me an opportunity to understand the meaning of diversity at a greater level and this would consequently help me create more bridges at home.

Unfortunately Pakistan has been in the limelight for all the wrong reasons. When the spotlight is always on you then whatever good you do is insufficient because there is always something bad and ugly happening which is constantly being highlighted. It's similar to the filtration



Thus one of my main aims of attending this programme was to educate myself to challenge the limits of the parameters which I had created in my mind. It was to start living the meaning of tolerance. It was to understand what the other was like by living with the other. I told myself that if given the opportunity, I would prove myself as a great ambassador from Pakistan who would then portray a softer and clearer image of Islam,

process which we study in Chemistry. The scum is seen because it's evident, because it is on the top, and all the good is always on the bottom - unnoticed and ignored.

Being a part of the programme I tried to help people understand that Pakistan is no different from the country they live in. Of course, Austria is a developed first world Christian country and Pakistan is an underdeveloped third world Muslim country but we have people here who hold values of enlightenment, tolerance and peace and are contributing positively in society.

To narrate just one of such experiences of diversity at the monastery is when an Austrian woman came towards me and asked me why the ISIS is killing people of different faiths in Iraq. I knew she asked me this question because I was wearing a headscarf. She said that she heard this on the radio while driving to the monastery and was grief stricken. Then I explained to her that there is always another side of the detail missing. I told her about Israel committing genocide of the people of Gaza (and back then the ceasefire hadn't taken place). I wanted to tell her that the actions of people do not necessarily reflect the actions of their religions. Jews are peace loving people and so are Muslims. That there are extreme elements in some adherents of each faith and thus this makes them fall out of the parameters of their religion. But I also told her that whatever the agenda of ISIS is, it doesn't reflect the preaching's of the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, and it negated the essence and spirit of Islam. I told her that whoever kills in the name of Allah is committing a heinous crime because Allah ordains peace when He says in the Quran that whoever kills one person, it's as though he has killed the whole of humanity and this 'person' is not specifically a Muslim, but it is any human being, any Christian, Buddhist, Jew, Zoroastrian, Hindu, or a person who is secular. And then she told me that she has hope in humanity.



In my class on Pluralism, I learned from Professor Fatimah, that diversity can be promoted at three different levels i.e. through the government, through the academics and through the general public. I told myself that since I belong to the second category, and because I

am a teacher by profession, I need to help create bridges of diversity which are much needed in my country and that can be possible if I impart what I learned from my experience at VICISU.

There exists a school in Jurisprudence and Legal Theory called the Stoics, who believed that the mind was like a clean slate and as man would progress so would his thought process and as he learned so did he fill his mind (the clean slate) with all his knowledge to live by it. My experience as a teacher has taught me that my students are like windows that open up to the reflections of their families. What they hear, watch, understand – they learn. And thus they fill their clean slates sometimes with ideas and concepts that will cripple their innocence and in the long term be harmful to their surroundings, to their environment and to their country.

I am trying to help deconstruct their ideas which involve thinking of the other as an inferior human being. I just wish I could tell them about my attending the VICISU

programme, about how well I was treated there, about my friend Barbara from Austria, or Britta from Germany, or Lars from Lebanon, or Vivian who would sit with me and address my questions and all the others who didn't subscribe to my faith but regardless of that they liked for me what they liked for themselves. But perhaps it's too early to do this right now. Because if we have a 100 page book on diversity in front of us, and if through my attending the VICISU programme, I am on page 20, then some of the people I interact with haven't even opened the book on diversity yet. Thus I am trying my best to help them read it from the beginning.

And I have all hope and faith that we will all read this book on diversity together. For there is too much tension on the other side of the equation as well, for instance, the Christians of Pakistan, most of them are resentful towards the Muslims because the government isn't taking any measures for the safety of anyone, including both the Christians and Muslims. Thus what I have learned from Professor Fatimah's class can then be classified in a beautiful quote by Mother Theresa: "*Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person.*"

Now the question remains, how useful is my attending the VICISU programme going to be for world and this was asked by Professor Nasira Javaid Iqbal when she was short listing the candidates for the VICISU 2014 programme from Pakistan. My answer to the question was very simple, I told them that there is a need to disseminate the love for others in the heart of everyone, be it Muslims or Christians in Pakistan. That there is intolerance spread far and wide and because of lack of communication people live all their lives with preconceived notions. That their parents act as primary sources used to harness this hatred and thus the cycle goes on. My task after coming from the VICISU pro-



gramme would be to challenge this hatred and promote peace in the lives of my students. That I will through the written word express myself, share my experiences through the mediums such as my blog, my twitter, facebook etc. That I am concerned about our future and since there is injustice from the government level, we need to act as agents of peace. However, I also believe that it is too early to come to any conclusions, but the aforementioned details are something that I aim at working on. I need to educate myself further every single day.

My only concerns about the VICISU programme are that it includes the study of just so many subjects and each subject is given at least 4 classes per week and each subject is then examined through written exams once every week. I believe that it is important for students to take classes and since you experience diversity first hand by attending this programme, you realize that learning isn't just restricted to what happens inside the classroom, but also what happens outside them. This programme, I believe might perhaps be a greater learning experience for the students if the subjects are narrowed down to 3-4 and if instead of the written examination there is a written question and answer session, an open book one. Perhaps then the learning could be more focused and the outcome could be greater.

The VICISU programme is a great initiative for world peace. It helps people of two different faiths to understand that they can live under one roof for 21 days, eat the same food and drink the same water, sit in the same classroom, visit the same places, ride on the same bus/train and they can survive together. These 36-40 individuals from mixed backgrounds and religions don't have to agree on the same thing, they might even disagree on different things but they will still remain in close proximity because this is the essence of this programme. It helps create bridges between Christians and Muslims. Makes them realize that they can question one another and come to the conclusion that there are of course many differences between them but they have to focus on the similarities.

Thus the VICISU project equips its students who are from diverse backgrounds to live in harmony, to understand the true meaning of tolerance to become ambassadors of peace and tolerance. Rephrasing Professor Gabriel from my Introduction of Christianity class, "Dialogue is the opposite of use of force." VICISU, through this medium of communication helps people appreciate that they need to come out of their one dimensional black and white world and appreciate the beauty of colours which surround them. The VICISU

programme is essential and crucial for world peace, for the appreciation of the diversity of human race and for the creation of better ties between individuals of different religions.

There is need and importance for inter-religious dialogues between the youth in all the corners of the world. People all over the world should invest in projects like these for they are instrumental for world peace. I commend the initiative taken by the people who started the VICISU. If we have more of such programmes organized all over the world, perhaps this will change the perspective of the youth and bring more stability to how the world is being operated. Maybe then we can tick off the ill of intolerance from the society as this would help disseminate the feelings of love and brotherhood not just within ones religious community but also with each other outside their religion. Perhaps what we hear in the media about young people joining organizations that promote violence can be cured through the promotion of inter-religious dialogue between the young. As this would equip the youth with the sufficient knowledge and wisdom of when and for what to say 'Yes' and for what to say 'No', and it is always a big **YES** to world peace and a big **NO** to extremism.

Maryam Akram is a law graduate of University of London. She is currently a tutor at Pakistan College of law for the subject of Jurisprudence and Legal Theory. Apart from her academic responsibilities, she aspires to be a street photographer. She wants to write for the VICISU magazine because she believes in the power of the written word and how important it is to positively impart it to others. Her interests are in human development in developing countries. She loves eating ice cream. Her philosophy of life can be summed up in three words "Eat (preferably ice cream), pray, love." *Twitter @Maryumx* ♦





One Thousand and One Nights (Twenty One) in Austria

By Mazza FarajAllah (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

Religion is a word not new to controversy, but faith has formed many bonds. This is one such tale of faith & friendship. Hold on to your seat, dear reader for we are about to embark on an unforgettable journey to the mystical and far away land of Österreich!

Despite the oft askew perception of religion and its violent history, my trip to the Fourth Vienna International Christian Islamic Summer University 2014, laid to rest any such notion and proved to me personally that people of good faith whether Christians or Muslims retain their good-will and sustain confidence in each other, if they be willing and if the environment is encouraging!

Not only can we live with each other, we learn from each other, grow together and build lasting friendships with one another.

The 2014 Fourth VICISU took a swing at challenging that thought and has proved, without a shadow of a doubt, that Christians and Muslims can indeed live with each other, learn from each other and share special friendships with one another.

I must admit that meeting so many people from so many different parts of the world was so exhilarating. Despite hailing from the ancient city of Jeddah, in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a port situated on the coast of the Red Sea that is not only known for its ethnic diversity but also serves as the gate way to Makkah, I was delighted. Our intercultural, interreligious exchange began the moment we set foot in Vienna International Airport, when we met our future roomies at the programme. Immediately there was an instant connection and as we talked about our homes,

our flights and our excitement, an easy friendship sprung.

We were then picked up by the first of many courteous Austrian gentlemen, who transported us in style as he drove us through the pristine Austrian countryside. We spent the long commute singing our hearts out to the radio (minus the German parts!), taking brief 15 minute naps (an opportunity that the still-awake members used to create memorable selfie moments and officially kick-



start the Great VICISU 2014 Selfie Game) and taking turns guessing which of the picturesque buildings we passed by was to be our home for three weeks.

“Austria opened its doors wide and we were officially ready to begin the exchange. Spending three weeks in a monastery in Austria in its entirety is an epic experience, but having classes with internationally renowned professors, guest lecturers and visiting teachers was the icing on the delicious “Chrislamic” cake!”

Driving up to Altenburg Abbey was an experience in itself, and I think it will be my first and fondest memory of VICISU. Collectively, our jaws dropped in sheer awe of the grandeur of the monastery before our eyes. Nestled amidst the Austrian hills, was an image straight out of a postcard, complete with manicured lawns and an immaculate, natural beauty. The Baroque style architecture of the monastery, the exquisite statues lining the entrance, the charming cobblestones of the entrance; this was to be our home for the next three weeks, it was just too much for words. We could not wait to settle in and begin!

After spending the very first day exploring the nearby forest, the hills and the beauty of Altenburg (and impromptu welcoming of all incoming friends and family!), we took the time to know more and more about each other, effectively eliminating any beginnings of homesickness. The moment that really defined our experience in those first few days, for me, was meeting Father Michael. Just as if he was stepping out of a blockbuster Hollywood production, Father Michael approached us, his impeccable black habit blowing in the wind, his electric blue eyes sparkling behind horn rimmed glasses, with a dazzling smile on his face. It was the perfect welcome. With his arms spread wide, he welcomed us to Austria, to Altenburg Abbey, to his home. The Abbot of the Abbey, along with the other kind-hearted and wonderful monks only heightened those special first moments with their hospitality, kindness and utmost, dedication and attention. We can finally say that we returned home, having met angels wearing the disguise of ordinary people, every day.

Austria opened its doors wide and we were officially ready to begin the exchange. Spending three weeks in a monastery in Austria in its entirety is an epic experience, but having classes with internationally renowned professors, guest lecturers and visiting teachers was the icing on the delicious “Chrislamic” cake!

Courses that I’ve never taken were addressed in such detail and were brought to life with our fellow students as we engaged with one another, debated, worked,

studied, presented and discussed. The rush of the water of the fountains and the peal of the church bells chimed their approval and provided the perfect background to this eye-opening experience. Our exceptional instructors taught and educated us to the best of their ability and ignited the fire of learning, debating and conversing with one another that left us with an unquenchable quest for learning. The invaluable lessons that they taught us will live on with us for the rest of our lives. The awesome organizers, the lovely Katharina and amazing Zahra ensured that not a day went by without us experiencing something new and different, with our trips to Stift Melk, Schloss Rosenberg and the outstanding Vienna City Hall and impressive UN headquarters.



I could write miles and miles about our amazing friends and the family that we’ve formed in VICISU but for your sake, dearest reader, I’ll keep my story short and sweet. We connected academically through the courses, intellectually through debate, spiritually through attending Church and Friday prayers, culturally through cooking and eating together and most importantly, emotionally as friends laughing, enjoying and bonding together. The numbers of languages spoken and national anthems sung under one roof must have hit a world record! We connected through our love of books, music, dance, poetry and so much more and all of our mutually importantly and incredible talents were displayed in our

wonderful Talent Show (which I had the privilege of hosting alongside the always amazing Elza Seferian).

For me it was very much a family affair, because coincidentally and only an hour away, my older sister, Dr. Eilaf FarajAllah, was participating at the Muslim Jewish Conference, and once that wrapped up, she happily came and visited us at Altenburg, effectively tying up the interreligious exchange by sharing her life-changing experience with us, on meeting and making Jewish friends.

I must confess, some of the debates were heated but they were always conducted with the utmost courtesy and respect. We did not always see eye to eye, but we all agreed that open and honest dialogue were the first step to coexistence, tolerance and peace.

We did, however, ask Father Michael if we could stay forever in the Abbey of Altenburg (We're still waiting for your answer, Father!). We do know that every step we take, from now on and until the last day of our lives, will be towards achieving peace in the world.

VICISU 2014 was the highlight of my life as of yet as it has brought together students from all over in the world and showed us that despite our different languages, cultures and religious beliefs, we are bound by our humanity and our aspirations to be a part of the effort that brings about tolerance and peace in the world. And certainly if 25+ random strangers can live together, eat

together, dance together, laugh together and go on to make genuine friendships with each other for, then the rest of the world can certainly follow suit.

“And certainly if 25+ random strangers can live together, eat together, dance together, laugh together and go on to make genuine friendships with each other for, then the rest of the world can certainly follow suit.”

It has been an honor, a privilege and a great pleasure to be a part of that change, that effort, that clear, loud voice of reason and revolution, the voice that calls for peace and prosperity between our religions. I am so lucky to have attended VICISU and my days in Austria will forever be a memory that I will cherish and carry, with a smile, in my heart.

I wish the best of luck to all future VICISU alums and a big thank you, beloved reader for making it this far!

Grüß Gott and God bless!

Mazza FarajAllah is a 19 year old (soon to be 20!) recent graduate of Dar Al Hekma University, where she had studied Banking & Finance. Growing up all her life in Saudi Arabia, but being of Sudanese origins and with many frequent trips to the United States of America, has made Mazza consider herself as a citizen of the world. The icing on top of the “Mazza FarajAllah’s education” cake was her three week Summer University experience in a beautiful monastery in Lower Austria. Being a part of the VICISU 2014 delegation was not only incredible and surreal, but also further added to Mazza’s understanding and appreciation of religion. By contributing to the magazine, Mazza hopes to leave a lasting message to all future VICISU alums to encourage and inspire their applications. Mazza’s hobbies include reading, watching movies and TV shows. Please feel free to contact Mazza in the following ways: *Email: mafarajallah@gmail.com Facebook: Mazza FarajAllah Twitter: @MazzaF* ♦





“Educate, Change and Transform Lives”

By Nabeel Victor (Pakistan)

Coming from a developing country which is surrounded with socio-political and economic crisis, disparities among the citizens, religious intolerance and intolerance of social space for each and every individual - no doubt life is challenging and tough.

“We have forgotten the true essence of every religion which preaches us the message of peace, love and harmony.”

I wasn't able to understand the true meaning of love, global harmony, deeper meaning of education and transformation till I attended the VICISU programme in August, 2014. I found it to be a life-changing experience. The programme was in the peaceful and quiet atmosphere of the the Abbey of Altenburg which provided me with the room to meditate what I had learned from my time spent in the classes.

From the beginning till its end, I saw the changing of hearts and young minds learning from each other and

understanding how to make this world a better place. The three weeks spent together by the students from all over the world brought together true happiness, joy and learning. Everyone was working along with teachers to find solutions of issues that we all faced in our lives. It reminds me how “we can love another”.

Many years back when it seemed impossible to educate, change and transform lives, I took the initiative to work for the betterment of society in my home country. And now I can say that VICISU is a light in the darkness for individuals like me who are eager to learn and are working hard to change young lives alongside bringing a positive transformation in the attitudes and behaviors to accept each other.

We live in a time, where we are emotionally charged and intolerant towards other faiths and beliefs. We have become so intolerant that we are not ready to accept the views of others. Getting emotionally aggressive on little things and ‘the ready to kill’ approach has made



us barbaric. We have forgotten the true essence of every religion which preaches us the message of peace, love and harmony.

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” (John 13:34)

One can learn from the incidents of persecution and discrimination in Pakistan which make it seem impossible to live in harmony. In my country, initially very few people accepted us as Christians and we had a tough time communicating with our Muslim brothers and sisters. There were times when we were refused to get eatables. I remember when I was 6 years old, a shop keeper refused to give us a glass of orange juice, bread and cutlus (*nan- tiki*). He wanted to know who we were and what caste or religion we belonged to.

Historically, Christians were called *Chudra’s* – people from the lower castes, the untouchable’s and *karanti* – which is a derogatory, slang term used for Christians and others, because of their dark skin colour. It is an ugly fact that in my country people of all religions do get judged by the colour of their skin. Because of the imperialist mindset, everyone’s concept of beauty is defined as ‘white and fair’ and similarly most men want white women for marriage, most Pakistani girls are the best buyers of whitening creams such as ‘Fair and Lovely’ and this is what our minds revolve around. This takes us to a very primitive state of the human mind; we become irrational human beings who start demanding the impossible. We don’t like to talk to one another for the fear of being criticized. I would want to raise an important question here, and that is, if hurting, abusing, ignoring, belittling one another will ever be a solution? We need to accept and open ourselves to learn and share from each other. We need to bridge gaps, we need pacifiers and educated people to erase the hatred on which we thrive and this is the reason I started working for the betterment of the people of my community. I know that I am more privileged than they are and I hope more people like me can come up and take initiatives to fill the gaps between the Christians and Muslims



of Pakistan. Everyone has to contribute and everyone has to make an effort. And since charity begins at home, we all need to step up and work for better possibilities and this is what the VICISU programme has taught me, I have learned that: religious harmony holds the key to a peaceful and progressive world.

“Dialogue and discussion is the way to solve conflicts and it serves as a problem solving tool.”

My days spent in VICISU 2014 were truly amazing with all the students from around the world. It has been a life-changing experience for me. The issues which we were scared to discuss with the threat of being hurt were being brought on the table; they were heard and acknowledged by all the participants. Dialogue and discussion is the way to solve conflicts and it serves as a problem solving tool. The things I have learned will remain with me for forever. I will not only limit this knowledge to myself but will follow the vision of “Educate, Change and Transform lives” and share with my people and community who feels marginalized and neglected. Coming from Pakistan to Austria brought me closer to my country. It refreshed me to bring a better loving and caring environment. I didn’t miss my family because of my friends and all the participants who made these three weeks so joyful. Their love and care will always remain with me. It is important for me to walk with this verse from the Gospel of John which says:

“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34)

In the end I would like to give thanks to my Lord and His love for us all, because of Him I was selected. He made it possible for the only Christian this year from Pakistan to attend the VICISU 2014 along with some very bright participants from all over the world.

I would like to thank Prof. Justice (R) Nasira Iqbal for considering me to participate in this life-changing programme. I am also thankful to all management of VICISU, the Abbey of Altenburg and organizers for accepting my application. Especially to Prof. Dr. Irmgard Marboe, Prof. Dr. Ingeborg Gabriel, Katharina and all the respected professors for making it possible for students like me to participate in such a prestigious Summer University, which is committed to educate and change young lives.

I would also like to thank the workers of the monastery, who prepared the food, washed our clothes, put the apples, peaches and bananas for us to stay healthy. Their loving smiles and greetings made our days brighter. My special thanks to all the participants from Austria, Afghanistan, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Switzerland, Turkey, Palestine and my fellow Pakistani's who shared so much love which never made me miss my

loved ones back home. The beautiful memories made amongst the charismatic Austrian architecture and landscaping will always be part of my life's journey.

Nabeel Victor was born in a Christian family of Gujranwala city, Pakistan. He moved to Lahore after his father's death in 2001, the capital of Punjab province in Pakistan. He studied Political science and did his bachelors from Punjab University. Later, he joined Government College University Lahore, where he studied for Post Graduate diploma in Pakistan affairs. His main concentrations were “International Relations, Foreign Policy of Pakistan, Democracy and Governance and Major problems of Pakistan”. He is currently working as the ‘President’ of VOICE OF CHRISTIAN YOUTH PAKISTAN (VCYP) a youth organization working to reach out the Christian youth of Pakistan to transform their lives for Christ. VCYP with the help of its youth volunteers has started two small schools “School of Hope” for poor and orphaned children. The School of Hope also teaches women how to read, write and do basic mathematics. Joining VICISU-2014 was a life time experience that cleared his mind and gave him a deeper understanding of both religions, which share the message of peace and love. His life as an orphan and suppressed Christian youngster has inspired him to work for the poor, orphaned and marginalized communities of Pakistan. In his free time he enjoys singing and composing melodies. *Email: nabeelvic@hotmail.com Twitter: @NabeelVictor Facebook: Nabeel Victor* ♦





Places Stay, Yet Time Goes By

By Philipp Albert Sutner (Austria)

August in Altenburg
A monastery, a quiet place
Close to nature, a good place
For gaining knowledge
Through studying in class
For widening our spirituality
During Friday prayer and the holy mass
For developing our own personality
By leaving prejudices behind
By participating with an open mind
In sports, discussions and musicality

August in Altenburg
A good place for having a good time
With friends from different places
Like Morocco and Lebanon
The Sultanate of Oman
The Saudi-Arab Kingdom
Austria, Indonesia, Egypt, Iran
Germany and Pakistan
And in our encounters in the chimney room
Or in the monastery garden
Our affection reached a bloom
Where we let our friendship harden

Philipp Albert Sutner has finished his Masters in History and German Literature and is currently doing his Masters in Global Studies. He decided to write an article for the VICISU magazine because of the joy of working with a lively group on an interesting project in the magical chimney room. He has got a passion for music and is interested in history, literature and sports.
Email: philipp.sutner@kabsi.at ♦

August in Altenburg
A good place
And a good time
For sitting on a bench under a tree
In groups of four or five
Enjoying the silence of the monastery
Discussing universe and life
Exchanging thoughts in conversations
Drinking way too much black tea
And in the rain or moonshine
Listening to each other's narrations

And slowly
Getting to know each other
Starting to trust each other
It must be said,
From the bottom of our heart
Beginning to understand each other
Developing warm feelings for one another
Finally being afraid
Of getting torn apart

August in Altenburg
It was a good time: the best





Breaking Down VICISU

By Pia-Maria Jordan-Lichtenberger (Austria)

I consider myself very fortunate as I had twice the chance to be a part of the Vienna Christian Islamic Summer University. It is not only the amazing and peaceful place of the the Abbey of Altenburg that makes the weeks there so special, it is every single participant, every single person that is or was part of it. I am grateful for every encounter I had during my time there.

This year's VICISU was specifically intense for me because it was with great concern that I read about the rising of the so-called Islamic State (IS) or about the happenings in Gaza. I could continue my list of worrying happenings but instead I want to describe what was the hardest part of it all for me to believe or understand. Like any militia, the IS needs people joining it to fight for its aims. The soldiers of the IS are coming from all over the world and I was shocked to find out that even teenage girls from Vienna left their safe environment to live in and fight for the so-called caliphate. Samra and Sabina are the most famous of the 14 Austrian girls and women that joined the IS in the past months.

"We urgently need to find ways of how we can make the young Muslims and members of other religions in Austria feel like they do really belong here."

Jayne Huckerby, a Human Rights Expert of the Duke University said that these young women do not only have an idealized image of the IS but also are not aware of their atrocity. Also, the IS offers them the opportunity to be part of or create a new community. Thus it seems to be increasingly interesting for women with migration backgrounds to be part of a community because they



always feel like being part of a minority group, of being a stranger. Which means that these young women decide to go to war because they want to feel part of something; they no longer want to feel excluded.

Only about 6% of the Austrian population are Muslims, officially more than 60% are Christians. Therefore, obviously Muslims are a religious minority in Austria. We urgently need to find ways of how we can make the young Muslims and members of other religions in Austria feel like they do really belong here. We need to show them that they and their religion are appreciated and are an important part of our pluralistic society.

"The other thing that worries me is that organised events of dialogue, like the VICISU or smaller events are always just attended by people that are already interested in religion and dialogue. How can we make the beauty of VICISU, its results and outcomes – the interreligious understanding and knowledge available to more people?"

The other thing that worries me is that organised events of dialogue, like the VICISU or smaller events are always just attended by people that are already interested in religion and dialogue. How can we make the beauty of VICISU, its results and outcomes – the interreligious understanding and knowledge available to more people? For example, how can we make young school students in Austria understand the need and recognition for the appreciation of diversity in society? How can we give young non-Christians the feeling that their celebrations and traditions are an important part of the Austrian culture? How can we break down VICISU to make it available to more people?

Reading through e-mails and articles written by VICISU participants and their explaining how VICISU changed

their point of view and how much they have learned, I am convinced that if we spread the idea of the need of social integration and dialogue we can make Austria a better place to live for members of all religions and in the long run, a more peaceful place, a place of “belonging” for everybody.

Pia-Maria Jordan-Lichtenberger is currently studying Law and Romanian at the University of Vienna and working as a Teaching Assistant for Prof. Marboe. She decided to bring a few thoughts of her VICISU experiences into the magazine to also remind herself of what she learned and what still needs to be learned and done. *Email: p.jordanlichtenberger@gmail.com ♦*





Religious Aggressiveness

By Robert DerMesrobian (Lebanon)

During one of the tutorials at VICISU, we had a discussion about the role of religion in politics. We all agreed that religion has, more or less, the strongest influence on the choices that societies make. However, this led to numerous accusations against religions for promoting wars and discomfort. By natural law, there would be no conflict if there were no self-gains and possessions, therefore religion was certainly not the true cause of hostilities. For instance, Pope Urban II's call to reclaim the "Holy Land" and save Christendom from the Muslims was actually a pure strategic non-religious action. The Crusades were there to guarantee lands and territories for the young members of the Western noble families and even before the crusades the political moves done through religion are obvious. The Edict of Milan which tolerated Christianity in the Roman Empire under the rule of Constantine I, was rather enacted to unite all Romans under a single doctrinal belonging and was not due to Constantine's pioussness. Nevertheless, this edict remains one of the most important acts in the history of Rome and the whole Christian

world. Recently, new fanatical and radical movements were formed in the Near East, mainly derived from the Muslim faith. These groups heavily changed the opinion of the outer world about Islam and made the word "terrorism" a synonym to this noble faith. Such groups are the Taliban and ISIS. They are surely not fighting for Islam, as their victims are mainly individuals from "the People of the Book". Hence, I would like to end this article by saying that religions will remain influencing people in a profound way, for humans need something to believe in. Nevertheless, people of religious beliefs should educate themselves by truly understanding their own religion and the religions of their surrounding so that they may not be misguided by their egoistic leaders.

Robert M.K. DerMesrobian is in his senior year majoring in economics in Beirut. He wanted to write an article in the programme's magazine to express and share his thoughts to others. *Email: robertmesrob@hotmail.com* ♦







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