# Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University

31 July to 20 August 2016

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“Christian Reformation” | Dr. Gudrun Harrer  
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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 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 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 Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University is organised by the University of Vienna and mainly funded by the Ministry of Science, Research and Economy. Additional sponsoring is provided by the Austrian Ministry for European and International Affairs, the Dreikönigsaktion (Austrian Catholic Children’s Movement), the Province of Lower Austria and the City of Vienna.

The fifth Summer University lasted from July 31 to August 20, 2016 and took place again at Stift 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.

Over 30 students from universities in different European and non-European countries like Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ghana, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United States of America and Austria participated in VICISU 2016. The academic programme consisted of lectures and tutorials such as “Introduction to Islam”, “Introduction to Christianity/Christian Reformation”, “International Law and Human Rights”, “Religious Pluralism”, “Religion in Africa”, “Religion and Politics”, “Islam and Human Rights”, “Religion and Violence” and
“Women in Jihadism”. The courses were held by renowned professors, experts and academics from Austria and abroad, such as Prof. Nahide Bozkurt (Ankara), Dr. Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck (Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut), Dr. Gudrun Harrer (University of Vienna, Der Standard), Prof. Fatimah Husein (Yogyakarta), Prof. Nasira Iqbal (Lahore), Dr. Edward Salifu Mahama (Tamale, Ghana), Prof. Ann Elizabeth Mayer (University of Pennsylvania), Prof. Wolfgang Müller-Funk (University of Vienna), Prof. Hans-Joachim Sander (University of Salzburg) und Prof. Volker Stümke (Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal). The topics of the lectures provoked intense discussions among the students. 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 guided tours through the Abbey of Altenburg and the Garden of the Religions. On August 5, 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 2016 was complemented by an excursion to the abbey of Melk and a boat trip on the Danube, a visit to the castle of Rosenburg 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 Professor Heinz Faßmann of the University of Vienna. They visited the city, including the University of Vienna and the United Nations building in Vienna, and were invited to a reception at the Vienna City Hall and a farewell party.

At the end of the Summer University, the diverse group of students had merged into a group of friends who are staying in contact via the internet. In their messages they enthusiastically keep remembering and sharing their experiences of the Summer University. Several wrote about their increased motivation to engage in projects and activities involving interdisciplinary and intercultural cooperation in order to contribute to the enhancement of international peace and understanding.
FOREWORD

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

In 2016 the “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University – VICISU” organised by the University of Vienna assembled students, professors and lecturers from many renowned academic institutions from 17 countries around the world for three weeks and was dedicated to the scientific reflection of characteristics, similarities and differences of Christianity and Islam. The relaxed atmosphere at the Abbey of Altenburg in the country side in Lower Austria is a perfect environment for academic discussions as well as for an intense and enriching personal exchange of experience and opinions among the participants.

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 – in the early 1990s the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table at the St. Gabriel Institute for Theology of Religions and since 2008 the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University organised every two years by the University of Vienna.

In view of the recent global developments often driven by mistrust, violence and hate we are fortunate to have initiatives like VICISU. As Director General for Scientific Research and International Relations I would like to thank everyone involved in the success of this initiative for their enthusiasm and their strong personal commitment. I hope that all the participants will continue to be part of the VICISU community and I am convinced that they all benefitted academically, professionally and personally from the spirit of mutual understanding, respect and openness as well as from the intellectual discussions and the personal encounters.
On the occasion of the “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University”, Lower Austria regularly provides a platform for an encounter of nations, cultures and religions. In the summer of 2016, students from the most varied backgrounds met for the fifth time to exchange ideas, establish contacts and broaden their educational horizon. For a period of three weeks, Lower Austria served as a bridge-builder between different cultures.

Sharing ideas, understanding the positions taken by others, being open and unbiased, unencumbered by clichés – this is more important today than ever before. In our fast-paced world, flooded with information, it is essential to be mindful of what we perceive as different and alien to us. Against the background of globalisation, distances seem to shrink and exchanges are getting easier. Superficially, migration flows even appear to bring us closer to each other, but in reality there are seemingly unsurmountable barriers between people from different cultures – barriers which we sometimes encounter at our very doorstep. Therefore, we are all called upon to overcome this attitude, to broaden our horizon and to open up to otherness.

The “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University” contributes towards initiating dialogue between young people of different backgrounds and origins. My sincere thanks are due to the initiators, the organisers and the entire team who have made this exemplary project possible.
In our time, when day by day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship.” (Nostra Aetate 1)

VICISU 2016 took place under special conditions. The situation in the world can surely be called tense. Many armed conflicts are entwined with religion or even religiously and politically motivated. Austria and Europe have experienced one of the most severe refugee crises of the last decades. The students and teachers had great difficulties acquiring the necessary visas; some were even forbidden to travel to Austria. Hence, it was all the more important for us, those responsible for the VICISU, around its director Prof. Dr. Irmgard Marboe, organisation manager Mag.a Katharina Albrecht-Stadler, and we the monks of Altenburg Abbey, to realise the fifth edition of the summer university.

Something we all perhaps didn’t expect beforehand – it was an incomparably harmonious encounter for all participants during these weeks here with us in Altenburg.

I will cherish these many encounters dearly in my heart for years to come. I hope to keep contact with many of the participants. In any case, I once again had the opportunity to learn a lot in these weeks. And I saw a new shimmer of hope on the horizon of my worldview: time and again, young people – from all nations and all religions – will find new paths to one another, when they are given the chance at a good place.

So I would like to thank all the participants, the teachers, the supervisors, and especially Prof. Dr. Irmgard Marboe for preparing such a place here in Altenburg – an alternative world in small for three weeks, where new forms of encounters between people thrived! My sincere thanks to you all!
The actual political situation in July/August of 2016 did not leave the Summer University unaffected. The aftermaths of the attempted military coup in Turkey put the participation of the Turkish professor and the Turkish students into question. We are very grateful to Prof. Nahide Bozkurt whose commitment made it possible that they eventually were able to come. Violent events occurred during the time of the Summer University in various countries, such as the fatal attacks on human rights lawyers in Pakistan. Several students were personally affected (see the article by Salman Kasi on page 19). We had two refugees from Syria and two from Iraq in our classroom. When Gudrun Harrer spoke about “Religion and Politics”, it was difficult for them to stay calm.

The most tragic event occurred a few days after the end of the Summer University. A participant of VICISU 2014 from Afghanistan, Naqib Ahmad Khpul-walk, was killed during an attack on the American University of Kabul. Naqib held a Master’s degree in Law and was an alumnus of the Graduate Program of International Studies (GPIS) of Stanford University, for which he continued to be the contact person of the Stanford Rule-of-Law-Program for Afghanistan. He had helped to select two students from Afghanistan to participate in VICISU 2016. This tragic event raised the awareness of the professors and students as well as of the VICISU alumni community which is still connected via Facebook of the importance to continue to cooperate for the reduction of prejudices and hatred (see the obituary for Naqib on the next page).

Poverty and violence continue to exist despite initiatives like the Summer University. Nevertheless, this intercultural programme is a small contribution to enhancing education, international understanding and cooperation. It enables the formation of an international network of peace and friendship contrasting other networks that foster mistrust and violence. And it nurtures hope for a better world. Nevertheless, this is not entirely appreciated by everyone. Due to the restrictive visa policy currently pertinent in Europe, including Austria, two students from Ghana (see the article by Evelyn Mahama on page 21), one from Cameroon and one from Afghanistan did not get a visa for Austria and were not able to participate. The African students had been selected with the help of the Development University of Tamale, Ghana, and the Dreikönigsaktion (Austrian Catholic Children’s Movement), the student from Afghanistan, who had been selected by Naqib Khpul-walk, had to wait for more than four weeks in Islamabad (Pakistan) before he received his visa denial. They would have been important contributors to the programme and peace-builders even beyond. We see that there is still a lot of mind-changing necessary before a peaceful and more just world is within reach.
The news of the death of Naqib, an alumnus of the 2014 VICISU, in a terrorist attack in Kabul has shocked me deeply. Today we hear of such attacks all over the world on a daily basis. They have become all too common, and we shield ourselves so as to not become emotionally involved. But if it hits somebody we know, this drives home the gruesome and senseless reality. These attacks are not only inhuman and destructive to the utmost, they also are an immense blasphemy against the God of life and mercy in which we believe.

Naqib was one of the most brilliant, engaged, pious, and likeable young people I have ever met. His death is a great loss – for his family, his friends, and perhaps most of all, for his country.

I remember the first evening with the group at Altenburg Abbey very well. When he and a female Afghan student introduced themselves and said they came from Afghanistan, I said to myself: Wow! What lovely young people come from there! How nice it is to associate this country so badly hit by war and all kinds of ills with these young and promising students – and this they were indeed.

Then, on one of those wonderful summer evenings, we had a long talk in the courtyard of Altenburg Abbey. Naqib told be about his family who was (or had been) in a refugee camp in Pakistan; his sisters whom he felt responsible for. He spoke about his studies in the United States at Stanford University, where he had been offered a lectureship. But, he said, he wanted to go back to Kabul to serve his country by being a good lawyer or professor of law. He definitely had the capacity to do this and many other things.

So he became a lecturer at the Faculty of Law of the American University in Kabul. When we talked about the future he was so full of hope and enthusiasm. He told me about the new president (then about to be elected) and that he and his friends had each donated a month’s salary for Ashraf Ghani. Everything, he said, will turn to the better.

We also spoke about the difficulties of keeping one’s faith in the modern world, and we agreed that it was necessary to study and learn how to better understand it and bring it in contact with the sciences and humanities. And: he was proud, I remember, that as a Pash- tun he had been chosen in Altenburg to lead the Friday prayer, which is normally reserved to Arabs.

That all these hopes, aspirations, and potentials have now come to an end through a terror attack drives the tears into my eyes. What is going to become of his family? Why are fanatics killing the best of their own country in a savage way? Aren’t we all far too indifferent towards this evil which is spread by completely misguided people? I ask myself what can be done to make a contribution, however small, for the better – since we owe it to Naqib and others like him – so that his hopes may come true.
When my daughter Gesa and I entered the beautiful Altenburg Abbey on a hot August afternoon, we instantly ran into some students who greeted us very friendly and then went on discussing – just like on the campus of any university, but with a remarkable difference: Most of them were obviously not speaking in their mother tongues, which did not hinder them, however, in being committed and curious.

The second impression was the visit to the lecture “Introduction to Islam” held by Nahide Bozkuri on the same afternoon. Her multifarious interpretation on the role of women in the Quran was really exciting and gave me new insights, but I was even more impressed by the debates she provoked: She brought the students to a very vivid discussion, accepted quite different opinions and even sharp argumentations – against her position as well as against the opinions of other students. But even when feelings began to run high she did not stop the controversy, instead she insisted on a simple but deep discernment: first listen, and then argue. This sentence became, as far as I can assess, the unwritten motto of the summer university in 2016. And there were a lot of disputations between the students and the teachers on the different religions and the inner differences in the particular religion as well as on the political and social realities in their countries. There were liberal and conservative convictions, pious and modern believers, critical and affirmative approaches – held together by the devise: first listen, and then argue. My main subject is peace ethics, and so I hope and wish that these students will keep to this motto when they have to shoulder responsibility in their countries. In my words as a Lutheran theologian: It may and sometimes will be necessary to dispute and to quarrel, especially in questions concerning religion and faith, but believers will do this with words and arguments and neither with weapons nor violence. And that was precisely what I experienced in Altenburg in an exemplary and promising way.

Gesa and I spent three eventful and fulfilled days in Altenburg. My seventeen-year-old daughter was very soon off with the students, debating, laughing, talking, and just walking around in the wonderful abbey. I was coached attentively and unobtrusively by Katharina Albrecht-Stadler. She held the balance perfectly between academic strictness and the spontaneity in progress. And last but not least: Her laughter is really catchy – thank you for all of that. Thank you as well to Irmgard Marboe who led the whole summer school and nevertheless found time for inspiring conversations. I hope to see you again.

A note from Gesa: “I, Gesa, would also like to say thank you for the inspiring and unique experience. I think that this summer university is a great chance to debate about religion and find out about other countries and cultures. I am very glad that you made it possible for me to be a part of this.”

VICISU 2016 (Altenburg)

By Volker Stümke,
Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal, Germany
When I was invited to be a lecturer at the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University I did not really know what to expect. I have to admit that this interdisciplinary summer course was one of the greatest classes that I have had the pleasure to teach. Two months later, I still have a very vivid memory of the course sessions, my students, my colleagues, and my hosts. The beautiful Altenburg Abbey, the relaxed atmosphere, and more importantly the people from all over the world made my experience marvellous! Having people from the five continents, from so many diverse political, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds was very enriching. From the first evening when I met my students to the last night including a multicultural dinner the VICISU offered rare moments of peace, beauty, and mutual understanding. Indeed, all the students were eager to introduce all of us to an aspect of their cultures. There were no Muslims or Christians, no black or white, there were no boundaries. Instead there were generous people, who were there because of their love and thirst for knowledge. In this context and atmosphere I gave a series of lectures on “Women and Jihadism”. I tried my best to address the difficult questions of the motivational factors that lead men but also women to join jihadist groups such as the Islamic State organisation (IS). I wanted my students to gain a better understanding of the complex phenomena of political violence, and I hoped it would help develop their rich insights.
analytical frameworks and approaches – especially in an era where information is massively consumed but knowledge is poorly cultivated. I wanted them to understand that while the discourse justifying this violence is most of the time religious, the actual reasons for the violence need not be.

During my class I was happy to see that my students were all very passionate about the topic: There were a lot of questions, remarks, and also listening. I was also very proud and honoured that Father Michael Hüttl, prior of Altenburg Abbey, attended one of my classes, along with other fathers. I do believe that this experience has changed many of my students as well as their lecturers, including myself. I was profoundly touched to see that these strangers – who thought they had nothing in common at the beginning of the VICISU – became so attached to each other that tears could be seen on all faces on the last night. Not only did my students go beyond the dichotomies of “us” vs. “them”; they were all “one”. They went over their prejudices, their fears of the other, and they ultimately developed a deep sense of what multiculturalism is.

I had the chance to share this wonderful experience with my husband and my little daughter who accompanied me, and I was delighted to see my daughter evolve in such a respectful, friendly, and rich environment for a few weeks. I do believe that my lecture, but also the experience that these young and intelligent people had during those few weeks, changed their views and opinions on religion and on the fact that we can all live together in harmony. Programmes like the VICISU are needed all over the world to show that life together is possible, no matter the colour, the religion, or the ethnic background of people, because there is richness in difference.

I cannot end this without a special thanks to the wonderful people whom I will never forget, namely Prof. Irmgard Marboe and Zahra Nedjabat as well as the colourful Katharina Albrecht-Stadler, without whom all this wouldn’t have been possible.
Remembering Altenburg. 
Some Meditations.

By Wolfgang Müller-Funk, 
University of Vienna, Austria

A dialogue is a dialogue is a dialogue. Nothing more and nothing else, but nothing less. But what is important: It is not a mere instrument, a medium for something different. Dialogue is a medium and a message. It takes time and patience experiencing someone and something, who and which is different from me. It has the inherent possibility to change myself and yourself. There are people who live in permanent fear of change. Not just a few. Many.

It was pure coincidence that I spoke in a series of mini-essays (for the Austrian broadcasting station Ö1) at the same time about the topic of strangeness and the phenomenon of the “other” – culturally different or not – which always comes before the “self” (as Emmanuel Lévinas established in his influential philosophy), which we are always responding to. And that our existence is dialogical, even though we deny this aspect of our life and prefer the monologue. The overwhelming talks are monologues in the plural.

I have known the monastery for decades, but not the interreligious dialogue, which started some years ago. For the first time in my life, I think, I slept in a monk’s cell, although it was certainly much more comfortable than in the late Middle Ages. I have to say, I love hearing bells ringing, but I have never heard this calming sound so often as in the days I spent in Altenburg. This historic building was now full of young people from many countries, open-minded, curious, perhaps some of them sceptical about what would happen. The central point was that they were strangers to each other at the beginning. And it was easy to understand, for example, that a Muslim from Indonesia comes from another cultural background than one from Saudi Arabia, or from Bosnia or Lebanon. Such was the mix of young people spending time together for three weeks at a place they had no idea about before.

Maybe this is a rhetoric attitude, but nevertheless I was somehow nervous if I would succeed in making contact with the about thirty young people from all over the world. The topic I spoke about was difficult: the question of the extent to which religion, with its meditative and peaceful side, is also a massive resource for acting violently, neutralising all our emphatic capacities. This is also true for religions which claim to be programmatically peaceful, such as Christianity.
Religion is a composite that comprises sentiments, rites, narratives ("myths"), and dogma, as Whitehead pointed out hundred years ago. Moreover, religion entails the element of institution and the promise and thread to organise our way of life, every day. In a way, it was a trick when I asked the students which of these aspects is the one responsible for the outbreak of collective violence against people with other beliefs and ideas. Is it the ritual that separates communities strictly from each other; is it the affective moment that encourages irrationalism; is it the harshness of dogma or the belief in narratives that makes us so intransigent towards others? Does monotheism mean that only we have the right God, the God of the Bible, Allah, or the pure reason of the Enlightenment? Or is it the logic of institution based on the hidden narrative Nietzsche had in mind: You must be my enemy to organise ourselves? Or is it the claim for a universal system of values that prescribes human beings how to live, eat, make love, and organise their lives? I think all of the six elements we discussed fit very well together. Religion gives human beings safety, but it also provokes violence and aggression against those who are different and, moreover, against those who deny the exclusive claim of many religions to organise human life. The term "secularism" does not mean the end of religion as such, rather it gives it a completely new frame. No longer is the monopoly of a religion to be accepted but the freedom of religion within a civil society that respects it. Now dialogue as a message comes into play again. It is based on an individual who can speak freely and autonomously. Dialogue is the experience that we and our beliefs are related to each other. It is dialogue which becomes a new common rite – and the students celebrated it, in particular on the last evening in Altenburg, by cooking meals from their home cultures and eating together, by being especially curious about the meals made by others.
In the midst of our moments of doubt and weakness, when we have nowhere to head to and no one to speak to, we search for God, or at least his shadow. For some, God did not even seem to exist before this moment. For others, God is up there, but they have chosen to abandon the idea of his existence in search of a sign, a moment of clarity and something to hold on to; whereas for others, God exists in a dogmatic way, and he is evil.

As we humans find the universe a hugely difficult mystery to solve, we tend to search for a safe haven, for ourselves and our doubts, and we bury our heads in the shelter of religion, or perhaps behind the shield of science.

Where will we end up? The inevitable question of the hereafter and what a human being will do to reserve themselves a place in heaven. Is God real? And if he is, then what is he? Faith and belief do not necessarily always refer to the same things, but they are felt for the same reasons. It is about the superior power we worship, which has created all living creatures: “Allah” for Muslims, “The Holy Spirit, Christ, and Jesus” for Christians? Nonetheless, some would debate whether or not it was perceived in this way. Would you consider God a power, an idea, or just a man?

My friend asked: “Shouldn’t we acknowledge our differences as believers and people of faith? And recognise the different ways in which we practise our beliefs and religions, our sects and divisions, too?” Are you a Muslim or a Christian? Are you Sunni or Shia? Are you Catholic or Protestant? Or maybe even a non-believer! In a world where fear of judgement is taking over, it may appear easier to either ignore our plurality or simply dissolve into one.

Answering this question is a rather hard task because you might also ask: Why not have us all be the same and not pay attention to the few details that we may not agree on? Why not let all Christians receive the holy bread and not just the Catholics? Why not say I am a Muslim when asked whether you are a Sunni or a Shia? But then it hits you; difference can be scary sometimes when it hinders the acceptance of the other.

It is never a predicament of acknowledging differences rather of achieving acceptance. Saying what you are and what you are not is not an issue in but a few small societies – and VICISU is one of these societies. However, there are places – and they are the majority
of places around this world – where admitting what you are can cost you very much, and sometimes too much. It can even cost you your life simply because people do not accept that you are different. Yes, politics could be a factor, but regardless of the reasons behind it all, it is crucial that this sense of over-protection of beliefs has been instilled in societies. But as a result, the things which we have last recalled as an identity lose their weight if they no longer make us unique human beings, but more of unique savages.

Your identity loses value when you become imprisoned in your emotions and act brutally upon them, rather than being a moral rational human being with an identity that makes you unique. The turning point is when one realises that they have lost their humanity in defence of what they stand for. Here, it is imperative that you try not to argue but to understand the other. To accept them and what they believe in, without stating their beliefs as your own. You are not to become the other – you accept them.

The only way for me to truly relate to this has been through the cross: the symbol my eyes got used to over a period of three weeks, waking up and going to sleep with it everyday at Altenburg Abbey. At first, I used to stare at it feeling vaguely weird. In time this symbol became a familiar thing to me. This familiarity taught me a very important thing: not to believe in what it is but in what it is not to me. To me it represents tolerance, tolerance towards the other’s faith, beliefs, and conceptions. It made me accept but also respect our differences.

Edited by: Dua’a Amer
A Safe Space

By Michael Friedl, Austria

“T
his is a friendly environment. Use it to try out things and to train your abilities because it’s the last time. From now on every place you will work at will be hostile towards you.”

These were the words of one of my professors talking about giving presentations in his legal English class. I refer to this quote here because it was brought up during our discussions at VICISU that it was an artificial environment, biased towards welcoming diversity and tolerance. I could not agree with that more, but I prefer to see it as an advantage rather than a point of critique. Yes, it is easier to argue amongst a group of hand-selected, well-educated young students. This is a necessary advantage, though, because where else again will you have the opportunity to discuss all those controversial topics so freely, without fear of a hostile counterpart? Of course, we had some pretty heated discussions in and out of class, but there was a common point of understanding that enabled these discussions.

However, we should never forget that all the other people with whom we will be talking to did not have the same great experience to help them understand that beneath all the differences on the surface, we are all a lot alike – maybe even the same: aspiring young students at the very start of whatever we will achieve in our lives. By the way, nothing better expressed just how much we are all the same, namely young people, than when 30 people from different religions and nationalities just went crazy, singing Adele and other songs in the back of the bus.

Not only did we develop strong and hopefully long-lasting friendships during these 21 days, we can also see this group of 30+ people as a starting point. This is just the starting point of a growing group of human beings, struggling together for the gradual establishment of peace, mutual understanding, tolerance, and in the end hopefully appreciation of other cultures and religions.

So in conclusion, Altenburg was – or is, with respect to the community of people who still continue to provide that safe space – the last friendly environment. Let’s make further use of it and be prepared for all the good work we will do from now on being in a hostile one.
“Say: (O Muhammad Sallallaho Alaihi Wasallam) to these Mushrikun and Kaﬁrun": “O Al-Kaﬁrun (Disbelievers in Allah, in his oneness, in his angels, in his books, in his messengers, in the day of resurrection, and in Al-Qadar)!” (1) “I worship not that which you worship.” (2) “Nor will you worship that which I worship.” (3) “And I shall not worship that which you are worshipping.” (4) “Nor will you worship that which I worship.” (5) “To you be your religion, and to me my religion (Islam Monotheism).” (6) (QS. Al Kafirun: 1–6)

Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU) 2016 is still warm to remember. I met with 40 top students from 16 countries in Europe and beyond. The course was a very remarkable occasion – moreover, in a place so enchanting, Austria. I spent 15 hours of air travel from my country, Indonesia. I have learnt many things in foreign countries, not only that cultural diversity is full of interesting topics to be discussed, but also that the diversity of religions was very hard for me to understand. All chortled over his religion that Christianity was the true religion, included Islam. But one impression on me by the end of the programme was that I did not need to force myself to be a Christian in order to respect the religion of others, and I did not need to force them to assume my religion, to herd them to Islam. Because basically Islam and Christianity both teach the truth.

There is no denying that the views of Islam and Christianity towards God have many similarities. Both view God as sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, glorified, most just, righteous. Both Islam and Christianity believe in one God, the creator of all things. In this sense, Christians and Muslims worship the same God. At the same time, there are essential differences between Christianity and Islam in the eyes of God. Although Muslims regard God as having the attributes of love, mercy, and full of grace, God did not reveal these attributes in Christianity.

Question: I am a Muslim. Why should I consider becoming a Christian?

Three weeks just reviewing Islam and Christianity in the classroom would certainly be a bit boring, but the
opportunity to meet new people from diverse cultures and religions was to teach me more love for Islam without blaming other people and their beliefs. Interestingly, when I tried to interact outside of the classroom with delegates from other countries, who were predominantly Christian, and discussed more about their assumptions about Islam, they also raised the same question. They considered Islam a complicated religion. But Islam is essentially a religion that is simple, not complicated and confusing. Islam was originally a simple religion that later became more and more complicated. A famous hadith asserts: “al-dinu yusrun”, meaning that religion is easy. In another hadith the Prophet said: “yassiru wa la tu’assiru”. That is: Make it easy, do not make it difficult for you. A verse in Surah Al-Hajj states “wa ma ja’ala alaikum fi al-din min haraj” (Qur’an 22:78), meaning: God will not cause any trouble in religion.

Being a Muslim is easy: faith, good deeds, and living according to ethics. Being a good Muslim does not mean following the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI). A fatwa, in the tradition of fiqh (Islamic law) as we know it, is not something that is binding. Fatwas are opinions. A fatwa can come from MUI, NU, or Muhammadiyah, for example. But we can not understand what is most correct with a particular fatwa.

The basics of being a Muslim are very simple. Do not let opinions that add intricacies complicate your own. Opinions may be expressed, of course, but ethics like “tepa selira” (patience with civil improvement of conditions) or respecting the opinions of others are also important.

With all this said, I do not want to blame Muslims who deliberately want to make it difficult for you. For example, there are many Muslims who feel that Islam is not complete without wearing the veil in Arab style or covering the entire body up to the face, the “burqa” in Afghan style. Or there are people who feel Islam requires a beard, being dressed all in white, a robe, or Arab-style clothing. And there are also those who do not feel whole when Islam does not participate in an organisation that is fighting the Islamic caliphate (Islamic State or the empire of the world), for example. Likewise, there are people who do not feel whole when Islam does not include that Muhammad was the last prophet, and therefore the Ahmadiyya are misled. What is demanded by Islam of us is to believe that Muhammad was a “messenger of God”.

Through the VICISU programme I tried to understand my role as a good Muslim, I loved Islam even more as my religion, and I understood Islam in all its simplicity.

In the end we must ask ourselves honestly: What is the main purpose of religion? Is debate the purpose of religion? Is it not a shame if people profess to obey, while in everyday life they lead to noise and troublemakers in society in the name of religion? Is there any point to such religion? Good religion will be reflected in the daily lives of its adherents. Like the good seed will be reflected in the tree that grows therefrom.

Hikmawati has a bachelor’s degree in English language teaching at Alauddin State Islamic University in Makassar, Indonesia. She is a novelist and campus journalist, who spends most of her time participating in social activities as a volunteer and instructor in several communities. She decided to write for the VICISU Magazine to present her experiences and thoughts on the programme.

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I write this article standing at an important crossroads. While travelling to VICISU I didn’t expect much from this programme. How could I as a non-believer benefit from this programme? Let alone give something back. This article is a toast to all the friends I made there, who are now friends for life, who helped me out of a serious crisis.

The first week at Stift Altenburg went as normal. On August 8 I received news that there had been a major terrorist attack in my hometown Quetta, which has been a warzone for decades. On the first day I was told we had lost six relatives amongst the 80 killed, but three days later the number rose to two dozen very close relatives. I knew the families closely, and I would have nightmares for days of widows, orphans, and body parts. I was petrified. My family of activists played with fire, and now they were paying the price in blood for legally protecting minorities in Balochistan. The phone calls were especially painful; my mother could not speak through the sobs, and my family did not want me to return home.

If I had any reason to hate religion, this was the moment because the attack was religiously and politically motivated. It was very hard not to give in to the hate. I did not want to talk to my closest friends in the programme, I was completely broken as a man. Three sleepless nights later, exhausted emotionally and physically, two of my best friends Ahmed and Larissa made a blanket fortress in one of the sitting rooms and tried to cheer me up. That night I slept for the first time in what seemed like weeks, and that is where my healing began.

Over the course of the rest of the time I bonded more closely with all of my friends and mentors in the programme, and they showed me how to be cheerful and fun again. Slowly they made me forget my troubles, diluted my pain, and gave me the courage to plan a safer journey home. My time at VICISU taught me many things, but the most valuable thing was that it opened my eyes to a world where religion is not necessarily evil but part of human dignity and that religious violence was more complex than we perceive it to be.

Even now after I had to leave university and choose a completely different path, now when I don’t know how to go about life anymore and am uncertain what is going to come next, these memories and what I learnt at VICISU give me courage to look ahead with a strong heart and try to overcome obstacles without giving up.
It’s difficult to find words to describe the sheer excitement we felt upon first learning that we’d been selected to represent Pakistan at VICISU 2016. We were over the moon about having a unique opportunity to understand, explore, and challenge a wide range of religious worldviews. The thought of travelling internationally for the very first time made us a bit nervous, but this was too wonderful an opportunity to pass up. So we – Alishah and Maria – were all set for the wonderful journey ahead when the visa office decided to put a damper on our plans by delaying the process of visa application right up until the very last minute. As disheartening as this was, for us it reinforced the importance of faith-based programmes such as VISICU in helping to combat Islamophobia. As the starting date for the programme drew nearer, the excitement began to wane. But just when all hope seemed to have been lost, the visa came through!

Any lingering feelings of disappointment vanished the moment we set foot on Austrian soil. Our driver Mickey had a quirky charm, which made the hour’s drive through the picturesque Austrian countryside all the more enjoyable. Upon arrival at Stift Altenburg monastery we were extended a warm welcome by the wonderful Katharina Albrecht-Stadler and Zahra D’joun. Meeting so many people from such diverse and beautiful cultures was indeed very exhilarating.

It was with some trepidation that we entered the magnificent lecture hall the following morning, but our teachers’ friendly and relaxed approaches to teaching helped to immediately put our nerves at ease. The discussions we had with our teachers and colleagues taught us to look at the other side of the story. There were times when there were strong disagreements, but we all respected the others’ opinions because that was the whole essence of a dialogue.

Every day at VICISU 2016 offered an opportunity to get to know people from culturally diverse backgrounds, to share personal experiences, appreciate differences, and ask difficult questions. Over a short period of time we managed to make some beautiful memories together – making selfies, laughing, dancing, singing, and even gossiping!

From stargazing with friends at the nearby soccer field to engaging in enriching conversations with Fathers Michael and Robert over breakfast and passionately defending religion in discussions with non-believers, each day proved to be an incredible learning experience.

So, it was with a heavy heart that 20 days later we said goodbye to our wonderful hosts and friends whose love, hospitality, and friendship we shall cherish today, tomorrow, and forever!
As a student from Ghana, hearing about VICISU came as very exciting news. The first thing that popped into my mind was meeting new people from different places with different beliefs. The thought of sharing different ideas and cultures was even more thrilling for me. What an intercultural experience this would be – but it requires quite a lot to get to Vienna. First, it was about getting a visa. Just talking about the visa would already be enough for this magazine. It’s a whole tale, to travel to a neighbouring country, Nigeria, to get a visa. Of three students, only I was fortunate to get a visa.

Upon arrival and realising I was the only dark-skinned person, I felt I wouldn’t fit in very well. This was my second time in Europe, but I didn’t feel challenged like this time where I was the only Black African. After introductions on the first night at dinner, there was a lot of interaction and I started to feel comfortable. At that point I could see that race is not “a thing” at VICISU. The first night taught me to feel I was just like anyone, and everybody felt they were there for each other. I can’t say how much the organisers facilitated this.

The lectures were very interesting and effective, as I learnt so many things about Islam and Christianity as well as human rights and treaties. One of the most important things I learnt at VICISU is that some people use religion to manipulate others into believing and doing what they want. Another thing was that nobody should judge a whole religious group because of the behaviour or attitudes of an individual.

Life at VICISU was not only lectures. Excursions were also organised. They were very exciting and full of fun. We had the chance to visit Melk and Rosenburg and also had a boat trip on the Danube river – all of which were unforgettable. The excursions were not the only sources of fun and entertainment. We also socialised a lot, bringing us closer to one another and to appreciate each other and the different countries from which each student came. For me, it was such a great learning experience. We had a multicultural talent show and a multicultural dinner, which gave us the opportunity to “taste the world in one night”.

The peaceful environment at Stift Altenburg, the Benedictine monastery where we were housed, was a huge contribution to the success of this Summer University. Its famous garden of religions makes it the ideal and perfect place to host such a programme. The monks at the monastery were so generous to host us, and they did a great job at it.

I cannot end without talking about the great teachers, administrators, and helpers – including the cooks – that we had. They showed us to care about each other and the world through caring for us as if we were their children and as if they had known us for a long time.

I will never forget my experience with VICISU. It was a great one. I have made great friends from all over the world whom I hope to meet again someday, and with VICISU, I feel like I have another family. Let’s use our religions for development. Religious tolerance is a virtue. God bless everyone.
An Enriching Experience on Many Levels

By Magdalena Nemeth, Austria

Last August was life-changing. It expanded my horizon on so many different levels. Before I came to Altenburg I didn’t have high expectations. On the educational level, I had a few questions and was seeking answers; there were problems on my mind, and I was looking for solutions. And what I am going to tell you might surprise you – I didn’t find answers.

What I found was even more precious and valuable – I found more questions. When trying to find an answer to a question, dozens of new questions appeared, and in the beginning I found it endlessly frustrating. We were all able to agree on a question, but we would all have so many different responses. To give a very simple example, one day a friend of mine and I started asking around about the colour of the flowers next to the fountain, and each single person we asked gave us a different answer.

And then I realised the power of questions and the weakness of absolute answers. An absolute answer has to be pathetic because it claims to be universal and is never able to meet the need for differentiation. As soon as you claim to have found an answer or a universal concept, that’s the end; you find yourself in a static vacuum; it is the terminal station. Questions, in contrast, are a journey, a process of seeking and discovering.

Furthermore, I realised that questions are what connects us and answers are what divides us. If you are trying to find the absolute answer or solution, you will lose the ability to see how many various positions have their advantages and disadvantages. As soon as you are able to accept that, a variety of parallel answers exist, you come closer to enlightenment. You are able to position yourself and see the exact same thing in various lights.

A beautiful example is the Pantheon in Rome. It is a building with a nine-metre hole in the middle, which represents the connection between the earthly Roman Empire and the divine universe. If you move around in the building, the shape of the hole changes and becomes oval; the light and the strength of the colours change. If you just remain still on one spot, you miss all of the beautiful shapes, colours, and lights.

In Altenburg I met so many people with the most contrary perspectives, and we wouldn’t ever find a consensus, no matter how hard we would try to find a common ground, no matter how intensely we would try to convince each other. But finding a consensus might not be what we should be aiming for. Exploring, appreciating, and maybe just accepting the variety are so much more enriching. One of the monks, Pater Michael, gave us a wonderful example, which I will never forget: “If your friend sits in front of you on the bench facing you, he can watch your back. You wouldn’t want that friend sitting next to you.”

And that is what I found on the personal level: I found life-long friends, who have the most contrary opinions to my own, but who I can be sure of, that they will always watch my back. Moreover, I found connections,
which have left me speechless until now because I wouldn’t have thought that anyone else would ever be able to express my very own thoughts, which I assumed to be so unique and individual, in such a reassuring way.

Of course, we didn’t just have philosophical conversations, we also had such a crazy, spontaneous, and fun time! None of us went home without having laughed at least one time so hard that he or she nearly peed themselves. I dare to say that I rarely ever laughed that much in a month beforehand! And everything was so pure! I felt so purely happy and sad, exhausted and thrilled, curious and overwhelmed, safe and insecure at the same time – it was so intense, but I even appreciated the negative emotions because of their purity.

But not only the variety, intensity, and purity of emotions I felt in Altenburg fascinated me, also the deep, rational thoughts I was able to share. We had the most intense philosophical conversations under the breathtaking stars. Which leads me to the next point, which brought me closer to my inner peace: reconnecting to nature. It was like medicine for my soul to observe the stars, to be surrounded by this peaceful, quiet nature; the little bees sucking the nectar and pollen from the beautiful flowers, listening to the sound of the splashing water from the fountains, the refreshing smell after the rain, and feeling the warmth of the sunlight on my skin.

On a cultural level, I felt like I had made a long journey around the world without having to travel. People from various cultures came together and had the chance to show their traditions, beautiful clothes, and most importantly their delicious food. It was wonderful – you had the chance to move from the U.S. to Indonesia within seconds and pass by Pakistan on the way, whenever you felt like it. You could discover cultural differences and commonalities from so many countries in such a short time.

I guarantee that you will fall in love in Altenburg. Maybe not in the conventional way. But I can ensure you that you will have that feeling of the deepest and purest love. Maybe you will fall in love with the breathtaking nature that surrounds you, maybe you will fall in love with the purity and the wisdom of the monks, with the deep connections you will make, with the beauty of the old monastery, with the peaceful silence, or simply with the self-baked cookies and the jars of Nutella.

I wasn’t able to get back to the life I had before, and I don’t think I ever will or even want to. Thus far there hasn’t been a day on which I haven’t reflected upon the time I had in the summer and when I am not conscious-ly thinking about the moments in Altenburg, I am self-aware enough to see that something inside me has changed. In my way of thinking, reflecting, observing, and processing. This is a change in my life, which I am endlessly thankful for and wouldn’t want to have missed.
Expectations and Realizations

By Larissa Anne E. Valles, Saudi Arabia

Day 1

As anxiety overtook,
I questioned whether it was wise
to once again hit the books.
At such an untimely hour,
Summer was a leech feeding
at my willpower.

–
Dragging my suitcase down the
hall to my flight,
Only then did I realize my need to
rewire my laidback summer brain.
These weeks needed concentration
and utmost verbosity.
I wondered whether three weeks
of religious talk would bring me
home sane.

–

Touch down! Hurrah!
I screamed in my head.
To set foot in Austria,
I was completely elated!
My 17-hour flight was
exceedingly lonely,
It made me look forward to
seeing the faces of humanity.

–
My eyes eagerly scanned
the forests,
During our ride to the monastery.
The sight of Stift Altenburg took my
breath away,
as every brick that formed it
emanated history.

–
Heartily greeted by
welcoming smiles,
And of course our monumental
notepad and reader;
It was a lot to take in, realizing
reality took a while.
But as I flipped through the pages
of what was to be taught
by the teacher,
The content captivated me,
I knew it would be worthwhile.

–

The church bells entrancingly
called time to our attention,
It was our first dinner to finally
meet one another.
And as the doors opened...
oh, what a collection!
Because under one roof,
people from every continent were
present to learn and discover.

–
The world needed understanding
and elucidations,
For the questions and
misinterpretations.
Related to the hanging threats
and the bombs in the wrong places,
This interfaith dialogue would
inspire many races.
I expected debates and countless
stereotypes breaking.
As for the two religions,
I was aching to see what kind of
future was waiting.

–
Day 20

Three glorious weeks in Altenburg, we all resided!
To have attended mass in the church and teach the Muslim prayers,
To have gotten to know the Fathers, we were delighted!

—
A minefield of discussions.
Christianity and Islam were given introductions,
The concept of law in religions,
And as to whether religion was a work of fiction.

—
The presence of pluralism in the world,
To religions in Africa and divinations.
The thoughts and ideas unfurled,
About human rights in religious nations.

—
Notions and clarifications were provided,
At times the class was undoubtedly divided.
But at the end of the day when it was all settled,
We would all laugh at the wrestle.

—
Not only were we challenged and enlightened.
As we got to know each other, our bonds tightened.
From movie nights to game nights,
To staring at the stars lit so bright.

—
The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University,
Has opened my eyes to a world of adversity;
One in need of understanding and diversity,
One in need of more VICISUs.

—
Thirty-five students from sixteen countries with different religious backgrounds walked into that monastery,
They all came out as one.

◊
Peace Education: Enlightening Understanding of VICISU 2016

By Tabita Victor, Pakistan

There are different conflicts and battles in this world which impact our minds and behaviour, result in disrespect, hatred, violence, alienation, and discrimination, and manifest in extremist groups. This hatred promotes an ideological cancer and destroys our constructive mind and thoughts. The results are devastating, and one only desires to have peace in life. But what is peace and how to maintain it? Defining peace might be easy, but maintaining peace is the toughest task for any one of us. Peace could be explained with different terms like tolerance, love, harmony, openness, pluralism, respect, and social justice. It is commonly observed that even within a family there is a difference of opinions about any one particular situation. But by listening, respecting, and understanding each other we can remain peaceful. There are different means for the promotion of peace in the world, and one of them is Peace Education.

According to UNICEF: “Peace education is the process of promoting the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to bring about behavior changes that will enable children, youth and adults to prevent conflict and violence, both overt and structural; to resolve conflict peacefully; and to create the conditions conducive to peace, whether at an intrapersonal, interpersonal, intergroup, national or international level.” Peace education is the best transformative means to promote the significance of diversity, respect for humanity, and democratic norms. It changes minds, attitudes, and ultimately behaviours so we can co-exist and live in harmony. It encourages trust and promotes confidence building and commitments amongst all human beings. The main focus of peace education is the youth in order to develop an understanding of the conflicts, promote dialogue, and to then come up with the needed revolutionary ideas. Peace education develops an attitude to resolve problems, to recognise conflict and work to end it. It also promotes concepts of dignity, diversity, and development.

The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University (VICISU) was a life changing experience for me. I live in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan where 96% of the population is Muslim and 3% are non-Muslims. Among the 3%, only 1.5% are Christians. I have many Muslim friends from my childhood, but I always
remained reluctant to indulge in religious debate. VICISU 2016 was the platform that gave me the courage and freedom to find answers to different religious concepts, especially of Christian and Muslim dialogue, which were on my mind.

My three-week stay at VICISU and in Austria was incredible. On the night of July 30 at 12:30 am I arrived at a quiet and peaceful monastery. Katharina welcomed me with a big smile, carrying the small light of a cell phone. From that moment on, the light started penetrating inside me, enlightened my thoughts and brightened my mind. Living in the historic monastery of Altenburg with its meaningful atmosphere made it one of the most beautiful places I have ever visited. One of my favourite places was the Garden of Religions, which reflects the diversity of religions and brings all religions together. The sound of the church bell in Altenburg is like an Azan in a mosque calling us to the house of God to pray and worship. I remember when a few of my colleagues from Oman and Morocco asked me about the significance of church bell, so I related it with the Azan. The foremost aim of bringing people from different countries and cultures together was to understand each other’s lives, religions, and cultures. In the same way we can start respecting and finding solutions of our common problems.

During the programme I enjoyed the company of many new friends from Austria, Germany, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Ghana, Bosnia, Indonesia, United States, and Singapore. Sharing food, discussions, lectures, happiness, and excursions gave me beautiful experiences that I will never forget. It was a great honour to speak with all of them. Once you become part of this programme an urge builds up inside you, that it is now time to spread the message of peace to all those who are still unaware of the diversity and pluralism. VICISU puts a voice inside you to speak about peace. I believe in order to have peace building amongst us all we need to focus on three D’s: Dialogue, Discussions, and Development.

In the end I thank God for showing me the path to join this programme. I would also like to thank Prof. Dr. Irmgard Marboe, Prof. Justice (R) Nasira Iqbal, Katharina, Zahra, and all the faculty members and administration for inviting us and taking care of all our needs. Especially to the Altenburg monastery priests and people for providing us with the place to pray, study, discuss, enjoy, and rest. I am so grateful for all of the good care, the delicious food, and to the cleaning staff for providing us with fresh laundry. Also I would like to mention my gratitude to the drivers for their assistance to and from the airport.

Tabita Victor is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Kinnaird College for Women, University of Lahore, Pakistan. She holds a master’s degree in Political Science and in Philosophy in Political Science. In the future she hopes to pursue her PhD. She is committed to promote educational development, women’s empowerment, and peace and respect for human rights.
A lot of water has passed down the Danube, now as I share this, I know!

It was as if we all got a new life at Stift Altenburg. For the daily visitors the abbey was a museum with imperial architecture and beautiful gardens, for the devout congregation the monastery is the house of the Lord, women wearing dirndls and farmers in their old lederhosen from the Waldviertel area had their Sunday mass, for forgiven students it was a summer school, for me it was a bit of all. The thick walls of the Benedictine monastery pervading history and sacredness. It’s a sanctuary converging art, nature, and a deep sense of spirituality – or perhaps much of them all.

Days were ceremonial feasts and nights full of solace. I have been to Europe before. This time it was a novel experience: colleagues became friends, the abbey became home, staff as family. Ecclesiastical bells made you feel it even more, that time is running. Deep down we all knew that the summer term would be over soon.

Unripe apples from gardens, a labyrinth of bushes, artificial caves, wild grass on the pathway to the forest – I can remember it all. I would say I sensed “zenosyne”; I was passing in time so quickly, or time was moving forward with such speed, slipping like sand through one’s fingers.

The Garden of Silence, Garden of Creation, Garden of Religions, Garden of Eden (we thought no one knew this garden before us, so we named it as we liked) where we meditated. There were a lot of gardens on the periphery of the abbey, no wonder if you find yourself in a Garden of Gardens.

Daily intensive courses then an afternoon tutorial would have been enough, perhaps, were there no further assigned readings, discussions, or curricular activities. Late-night storytelling, cracking jokes, and occasional group studies. You just begin to know other participants, and then you see that the semester is almost finished. We all wished it could be a little longer
than three weeks of summer university, a two-month period, when not more.

There were four students with theology backgrounds. They had very different opinions, but to my surprise they never argued with each other or try to prove the other wrong. We knew that dense theological debates, loaded with philosophical vocabulary and vigorous arguments, are of no use. Once you are in the real world with your mates, what leaves an impression is your behaviour, your actions, and the love you give to others.

I might emphasise the difference between debate and dialogue: In my mind, debate is more of a single-sided speech, more of a sermon, whereas dialogue ought to “listen” to the other. Once we had truly listened, fully comprehended, only then could we comment. Of course, it takes a life-long struggle to tame one’s inner “cleric”, to listen and understand the “other”.

Our visit to Melk Abbey was phenomenal – the moment of collective prayer during Sunday mass when the congregation listened to words of divine love from both religions.

“A [Syrian] friend shared stories of his adventures and the culture shocks he had once he had reached Germany. “You see these fish?” He pointed at the golden fish in the pool of the central fountain. “If these would be in Syria, man! I tell you, beoble would had eaten them without cooking. Here they don’t, I was surbrized,” he continued in his Arabic-English accent, “Am I on a different blanet or what!”

Therefore, we knew that dense theological debates, loaded with philosophical vocabulary and vigorous arguments, are of no use. Once you are in the real world with your mates, what leaves an impression is your behaviour, your actions, and the love you give to others.

I might emphasise the difference between debate and dialogue: In my mind, debate is more of a single-sided speech, more of a sermon, whereas dialogue ought to “listen” to the other. Once we had truly listened, fully comprehended, only then could we comment. Of course, it takes a life-long struggle to tame one’s inner “cleric”, to listen and understand the “other”.

Our visit to Melk Abbey was phenomenal – the moment of collective prayer during Sunday mass when the congregation listened to words of divine love from both religions.

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An Austrian friend of mine told me, after plucking a fresh apple and taking a full bite, that she does not like apples at all!

No doubt, I had a few moments of “presences” there, moments in which three shapes of time were moulded into one eternal “Now”. These significant moments happened while watching shooting stars, on a twilight walk, finding the Great Wagon on a cloudy night, gazing at sunsets, counting fluffy unicorns, while delighted with a Bosnian dessert, Afghan spices, Omani dates, late night Indonesian noodles, Saudi aroma, and wearing garments from Ghana! Meanwhile, wild eagles flew over Rosenburg Castle.

We met each other as aliens in town. But it did not take us all too long before having late night fun gossip, sharing our favourite book titles and music playlists, talking about the artists we loved, places we have been to, realising that we were all same, just humans with our idiosyncrasies and habits, in our successes and misfortunes, having memories of joy and sorrow, we laughed and wept together, shared our pains and pleasures in sweet bitterness. I came back as if I had left some of “me” there while keeping precious memories of their lives as mine now.

Yes, there are a lot of similarities between a monk and a mountain – both stand alone, high up yet firmly rooted, to face the harsh conditions of life. Both have cold surroundings but a warm heart. You can come to them and find shelter in their vastness, hold on to them when in a lurch and enjoy their bounty. As my ending: All of us are monks on some level; we were all mountains in the landscape of Altenburg, holding up ourselves in histories, cultures, and in faith, not letting our communities fall, our hopes shatter, or our infatuations come to an end.

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We all are under the shadow of His mighty throne, may the quest for His wisdom keep igniting in us all.
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