Foreword

Dear Readers

of the VICI-Summer University Magazine. There are so many things that trouble or even terrify us. Sadly, what looks promising today, may turn out to be dangerous tomorrow.

All the more we must do our best, day in, day out, to retain and stabilize what is good in our life and to overcome what is evil. I think the time you have spent in Altenburg this year, the programme of the first “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University”, was apt to demonstrate that it is worthwhile to strive for a better world – not to leave things to those who are only after their own interests, but to support what is good wherever we have a chance to promote and serve the interests of all our sisters and brothers, especially of those who are needy and suppressed and who are dependent on being helped by others.

I can still feel the cheerful atmosphere among all participants in this Summer University, students as well as teachers. Substantially borne by professors from all over the world who took part in the “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table”, in the years passed this new initiative was characterized by serious work, fruitful exchange of thoughts, and above all by our trust in God who wants all of us to become more and more learners of His wisdom and all-mercifulness, of His loving care for all creatures.

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to send my good wishes to all who participated in this year’s first VICI-Summer University at Altenburg Abbey. May some kind of movement for a better world evolve from this international Summer University, not least by this magazine which is meant to serve, also in the future, for uniting students and professors in their efforts to promote the cause of peace in this our present and future global village.

Andreas Bsteh, 
svD Director of the St Gabriel Institute for Theology of Religions, Austria

Programme of the first Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University

LECTURES and COURSES

Ingeborg Gabriel, Austria

Nahda Shehada, Palestine
Islam, Modernity and Multiculturalism in Contemporary Debates

Tahir Mahmood, India
Human Rights, Religious Freedom and Minority Rights from the Muslim Perspective

Wa’il Kheir, Lebanon
Human Rights, Religious Freedom and Minority Rights from the Christian Perspective

Saleha S. Mahmood, England, Maria Moser, Austria
Women, Family and Society in Islam and Christianity

Stefan Hammer, Austria, Zarfshan Qaiser, Pakistan
Constitutionalism in a Globalized World / International Law Aspects

Aicha Belarbi, Morocco
Migration in an Interconnected World and Muslim Women in Europe

Samuel Schubert, USA/Austria
Religion and Political Violence

Shahla Ezazi, Iran
Democracy and Civil Society

Aid Smajic, Bosnia-Herzegovina
Interreligious Dialogue in the Modern World from the Muslim Perspective (including: Introduction to Islam, Islamic Understanding of the Role of Religion in Human Life, Spirituality in Islam)

Joseph Ndi Okalla, Cameroon
Social Rights and Poverty

Gerhard Luf, Austria
International Order and Religion

Richard Potz, Austria
Religion and the State
The first Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University from 30 June to 19 July 2008 in Altenburg Abbey, a perfect environment for discussions on perspectives and different aspects of interreligious dialogue.

Religion forms an important part of culture. The positive response to the first Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University and the participation of more than 30 students from 10 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and 16 professors, shows that interreligious dialogue is of high relevance. The issues that were dealt with from the perspectives of two religions, such as human rights, democracy, civil society and gender in society, are also of great interest for Development Cooperation in our partner countries. Given the fact that the Austrian Development Cooperation operates in a number of countries with Muslim majorities or minorities, it is indeed indispensable to deepen our knowledge of the social and legal environments in Muslim countries.

Mutual learning, understanding, respecting and tolerating each other is a basis for a better together. Fostering dialogue among youth is especially important and a positive investment in a peaceful future and a foundation of sustainable development. This Summer University was a contribution to this end. Much more is needed and I hope especially the students who participated in the Summer University will build on their positive experience and share it with others.

33 CHRISTIAN AND MUSLIM STUDENTS SHARED THEIR IDEAS, HOPES AND VISIONS

The Federal Ministry of Sciences and Research has supported events with the focus on interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islam for many years. Thus, in the context of the “European Year of Intercultural Dialogue”, it was a significant concern for the Ministry, together with the University of Vienna, to realise an exemplary project in this domain: the first Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University.

Over the period of three weeks, from 29 June to 19 July 2008, 33 Christian and Muslim students from around the world became acquainted in Stift Altenburg and shared their ideas, hopes and visions. They lived together under one roof, studying and debating. Here “dialogue” took place in the truest sense, here friendships transcending borders, cultures and religions were formed. Even above the knowledge-transfer from an international range of top-grade lecturers, it was the human encounter that took centre stage.

The success is evident: the numerous words of thanks illustrate the overwhelming and lasting effect this stay had on all the participants, how the Summer University taught us many things.

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RELIGION FORMS AN IMPORTANT PART OF CULTURE

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I would like to share with you some impressions of the Summer University which were important for me: The first impression I remember was the following: we are sitting in a circle in the beautiful hall, where meals were served, and Father Bsteh makes everybody tell his expectations of the week to come. This was a good idea, but what struck me most – Several students, most of whom were out of their home country for the first time said: what is important for me is, that I experience and am able to learn here, I want to pass it on to others when I come home again. It impressed me very much, that from the very beginning they did not only want to make the best for themselves of this experience, but were eager to pass it on to others and thus contribute to a better world. This moment remains in my heart and gives me hope. And if I think of this one instance, it is also because it constituted something of a ground tune of this Summer University during the following three weeks. There was joy with learning, with knowing each other, with sitting together in the evenings in the court of the monastery and around the bonfire, but there was also an immense sense of responsibility among the participants: we want to contribute to the good, to peace and understanding.

This I continue to take as an encouragement for myself. The future will belong to those, who give hope. And hope is given through goodness, through peace, through God. This is another precious memory I keep from these days: Our faith never divided us, as it often has been in history and is still the case, but they truly united us. This was the basis of everything else – the learning and teaching, the shared meals and the fun, even of the little annoyances, for instance, when there was too little food (during night).

This – and more serious things – are the stuff life is made of, but what really counts are the underlying attitudes of faith and love – in which the weeks of a summer school were rich in. The monastery with its age old serenity, an atmosphere created by prayer and the beauty of the architecture past generations greatly helped us to make this such a memorable experience. They also remind us, that we are one part in a long chain of men and women – with a mission for tomorrow – I keep you in my heart and hope that God will grant you to develop the potentials you have! Greetings to you all – and I hope to meet some of you again!
From 29 June until 19 July 2008, the first “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University” took place in Stift Altenburg, a monastery in Lower Austria. The Summer University aimed to bring together students and graduates from a number of partner institutions in Christian and Muslim countries. It evolved from the “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table”, an academic initiative launched by Prof. Andreas Bsteh at the Institute for Theology of Religions in St. Gabriel. The Round Table united academics from different fields of specialisation, such as law, theology and social sciences, in order to discuss the most important questions concerning our world today, from a Christian and from a Muslim perspective.

The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University was founded in order to pass on this spirit of dialogue and exchange to the younger generation. The Summer University was funded mainly by the Federal Ministry for Science and Research and the Austrian Development Agency. It took place under the auspices of the University of Vienna and was organised by the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Catholic Theology.

The Summer University lasted for 3 weeks and offered 13 courses of approximately 10 hours each. The professors came from Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, India, Iran, Cameroon, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The 33 participating students came from Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, India, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Morocco, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. 18 of them were Muslim, 15 Christian; 17 male and 16 female.

The programme included courses on Introduction to Christianity and Islam, Human Rights from a Muslim and Christian Perspective, Migration in an Interconnected World, Women in Islam and Christianity, Political Violence, Poverty and Social Rights, International Law and Constitutionalism, Religion and the State as well as International Order and Religion. Several evening events with diverse themes were organised where, for example, Nasira Iqbal spoke on the current political situation in Pakistan. Prof. Dr. Andreas Bsteh, founder and initiator of the Round Table, came and chronicled 35 years of the St. Gabriel dialogue initiative.

On behalf of Abbot Christian Haidinger and the community of Stift Altenburg monastery, a summer festival took place on 4 July where notable guests from Vienna and Lower Austria were invited to celebrate this project within the framework of the official “European Year of Intercultural Dialogue” with the participants. Cardinal Schönborn came with 20 seminarians and warmly welcomed the international guests. In his speech, he emphasised how important dialogue, respect and the mutual understanding between religions are in order to create a more peaceful and just world.

Excursions to Vienna and Melk as well as collective dance, cooking and discussion evenings completed the programme. On 18 July, the Summer University concluded with the presentation of participation certificates by Vice-Rector Prof. Dr. Mettinger in the University of Vienna Catholic Faculty Dean’s Office, a visit to the UNO headquarters and an evening reception in City Hall sponsored by the mayor of Vienna. Upon successful completion of the Summer University, the students received 6 European Credits Transfer Systems (ECTS) from the University of Vienna, which can be recognised at their respective universities. The reaction of the participating students and professors was one of enthusiasm and praise. “Every person should have the chance to take part in such a project”, the unanimous echo.

At a ceremony at the Austrian Academy of Sciences on 25 October 2008, which celebrated the past years’ dialogue initiatives and publications and at which the Federal President Heinz Fischer, the Federal Minister for Sciences and Research Johannes Hahn, the Archbishop of Vienna Cardinal Schönborn and the former president of Iran, Seyed Mohammad Khatami participated, the Summer University was also presented. On this occasion the Federal Minister announced that the Summer University will continue to be supported and should be organised again in 2010.

The first Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University 2008
This has never happened before at Altenburg Abbey: more than 30 young people – Christians and Muslims – from many different countries and continents spent three weeks together with us. My brothers and I were very happy to welcome you in our monastery.

The monastery exists now for more than 850 years. In all those centuries, the monks here have lived up to their mission to serve God and the people by praying and working. Today, our community consists of only 13 monks. We try to make the people of today experience the abbey as a spiritual centre and assist them as priests in the neighbouring communities.

Since a few years, we also strive for contributing to the dialogue of religions, at least by providing a ‘platform’ as the Second Vatican Council demands from us. This seminal ecclesiastical convention of the 20th century urges us “to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom” (Nostra Aetate 3).

Therefore, we were happy and grateful that you came to this Summer University to Altenburg Abbey and to see you efforts for a living dialog between Muslims and Christians which is indispensable for the future of humanity.

We hope that you had a good time here in Altenburg, that you made fruitful experiences, had enriching encounters, and got valuable insights which will enable you to defend peace and justice among people also in your respective home countries and in your home environments.

We, the monks of this monastery, tried our best to make you feel comfortable and to provide you with good conditions for your working and studying. We have also accompanied your endeavours in our prayers. We thank you very much for your coming, for having been with us. We wish you all the best and god’s blessing.

I really felt like home!

It all started with a few emails; the picture was not clear at all. They told me it’s a monastery in an old village where there is no Internet, and there is no night life, no transportation to Vienna… I thought to myself, is it worthwhile to leave my job for one month and go to a monastery in the middle of nowhere to study a course? It was a hard decision to take. Nevertheless, on the 26th of June I was in the Austrian Airlines plane heading to Vienna with weird feelings because I didn’t know and people I’d never met before…

I was the first student to reach the monastery and I couldn’t believe what I saw at that moment; it was like a dream. I gradually became less and less tense. It was the most beautiful place I had ever visited. Day by day, I started to enjoy the nature and everything there. After a while, students started arriving at the monastery from all over the world. We met each other and even watched the European Championships Final football game together. The students were great; I became more and more at ease.

When the courses started, I found them wonderful; everything went by smoothly. Professors, students and organisers were all perfect. The topics addressed at the courses were astonishing; some of the courses aroused a lively discussion given that students came from diverse cultures and religions.

This, in fact, had only made the discussions highly interesting since it allowed us the opportunity to share our different perspectives and benefit from the information exchanged. Thus, I had the chance to add to my general knowledge.

Later, we had different cultures, thoughts and ideas regarding any issue. However, I sometimes felt tired of talking all day, so I took a walk in the village and enjoyed the silence and beautiful landscape. As a Christian, I enjoyed drinking the local wine which is made in the monastery, and my Muslim colleagues enjoyed the juices there. We celebrated a few birthdays, we danced and sang and we enjoyed our time in everything we did. On the weekends, we went to Vienna – the most beautiful city I have ever been to. The people, the atmosphere, the culture and, most important, the FOOD! All was great. We had the chance to visit many important landmarks. We visited the University of Vienna and the United Nations buildings. Thanks to all Austrian students who helped us all the way and for their hospitality.

If I am asked to write about an unforgettable memory, this memory will unquestionably be the one. I have travelled to the States, France, Spain and many other places, but nothing can be compared to Austria. It was not only the country that made everything special; it was the programme which made it special. Behind a special programme there are special people who made such a programme.

Thanking all of those who made this educational trip a success will never be enough. Special thanks to Katharina and Judith. It was true that on the very first day I felt like I’m going to nowhere, yet on the second day I felt at home.

Even after the classes were over, we were never bored. There were always special activities to do. At times, just sitting and having a chat with a student to discuss life, culture or religion was very interesting and special. What made it more special is that each student had different cultures, thoughts and ideas regarding any issue. We were always prepared to do anything and everything to help them to understand and feel at home. 

I really felt like home!
I think we all realised very well how different we were friends and some of them even brothers or sisters. Other countries, and after only three weeks they had become strangers from Pakistan, India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and many important to me than ever before. I got to know complete, our lives and our fields of studies. In the evenings there was time for singing, dancing, and for celebrating birthdays, and twice we were allowed to use the abbey’s kitchen to prepare an international dinner. I think these events also brought us closer together.

In the first week of VICISU 2008 I wasn’t able to remember all the strange new names of the other participants, but in the end I knew them all by heart – and for every name I have a picture in my head. I know them all and I shall always keep them in my heart.

For example there is Kalivi. She studies law in India and is a Buddhist. When I met her first, I thought that she was a very serious and quiet person. But when I got to know her better, I discovered that she had quite a good sense of humour. I saw that she is quiet, but she can also talk a lot if she is in the mood.

Then there is Nauman from Pakistan. When you meet him, you will only see that he is very intelligent and terribly conscientious. But after some time, you find out that there is more to him. And I dare to say that Nauman was the “sunshine” in our group because beside his high intelligence there is also his very kind soul.

Or Armaghan from Iran and her friend Samone, two of the warmest and nicest girls I have ever met. For Armaghan it was very difficult to communicate in English, but she has the gift of talking without words – by showing people when she is happy or sad. It’s really amazing how she does that; Dana, Nada and Nour are three lovely girls who study in Saudi Arabia. I learned that Dana is a very caring person who is involved in social projects, Nour is a very cool and friendly person with a sense of humor and Nada is very good at technical things and has a really astonishing voice (which we found out on our last evening together).

I could go on like this now and tell a story about Ritam, Rabia, Kavtar, Lamaie, Taimur, Ezrat and all the others. But I hope they will all understand that there is not enough room for that. Anyway, I think I was able to show how important the personal and social level is: When an “It” or a “Them” – and here I’m speaking with Wa’il Kheir, who also talked about Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue – becomes a “Thou”, we have gained a lot. And this is exactly what happened at VICISU. We really got to know each other and were open and – as Dana put it in a final statement – “honest” with each other. It was possible to say “you” to other participants, to reach the level of Buber’s famous “thou”, where a change takes place in oneself and where a new world can be entered.

And when we had a guided tour at the United Nations in Vienna on the last day of the Summer University, we joked that we didn’t need this tour at all because we were the United Nations. And I think this shows pretty well how much we saw the “thou” and how we were united, and I hope that, looking back on the memories we shared with each other, we can always be united in some ways. So what was the outcome of the project? VICISU? I think that the main aim of the project, to enter into real dialogue, was reached. Before the Summer University started, no one knew if the project would work out, and some people were quite nervous about it. As Father Bseth said at the beginning of VICISU 2008, this kind of dialogue cannot be made, but it can happen, and thanks to God it did happen. Now, after the Summer University we are all determined to stay in touch and set up a network, in order to share our positive experiences with others and spread the message of how important it is for us as well as for future generations to keep up dialogue.

It is necessary to understand that we are responsible for each other, no matter who we are, where we live, whether we call him “Father”, “Allah” or “God” – may ask us one day what our contribution to creating a world of peace and justice was, and that he is the one who knows everything we do, all our thoughts, and all our actions (Holy Bible, Psalm 139). His is the East and the West, wherever we turn it is his face (Holy Koran, Sura 2, 116).
How preconceptions are dismantled

Florian Mayer - Student, University of Vienna, Austria

little less conversation? How preconceptions are dismantled. In July 2008 young Muslims and Christians from Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Northern Africa studied and lived together at the first Vienna Islamic Summer University, which took place in Stift Altenburg. Our commonalities and our basic ability to become friends became in practice as well as in theory the intial points for this interreligious dialogue in which no one had to drown the other.

The interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Islam, the two leading religions of our time, seems yet to be challenged in its fundamentals by difficulties, which upon closer examination are astounding near to these religions' commonalities. While it traditionally all began with Abraham, today it mostly ends with the question of truth – and often is strife, dispute and war. Even though both religions came out of Judaism with its long monotheistic tradition and carried on believing in the one and only god, many claim that they, in fact, believe in two different gods. For Western Europe, this might seem very similar. For Muslims and Christians, living a different and often offended faith, and students from Arab countries, Asia, northern Africa and a very Western Europe should encounter each other in three weeks of study and discussion. But how to come in contact with other cultures? How to face other religions? Everyone has the same questions on their mind – and on the very first day, everyone also seems to get the same answer: you just do it. Right at the arrival in Altenburg we got into conversations – and we didn't talk about God, his entity and acts, nor about trinity, women's rights or religious fundamentals, but about movies, music and fashion. I couldn't help thinking if we haven't just emphasised our differences so badly heretofore. In a way, we all seem to be astonishingly similar.

This notion became a leading thought for the whole time in Altenburg. Don't we immediately bring in all the differences and distinctive topics when thinking about each other? Don't we start our thoughts with all the things that separate us? Of all things, my own mindset seemed to show me how hard it is to face each other without preconceptions. Even before attending the Summer University in Altenburg, I've been open for all kinds of dialogues and encounters and have always thought that I could not only be able to tolerate the other in being different, but also accept him the way he is different. The first days in Altenburg revealed that the biggest preconceptions can only be realised at the moment they're suddenly dismantled by the other, because he might not be that different and doesn't claim to be as tolerant as we claim to be. Maybe sometimes it's not the intellectual conversation about something that matters, but the daily actions of living together.

Considering conversations and discussions, it might be true that the interreligious dialogue involves two major risks: On one hand, it calls for openness and tolerance, because it might otherwise lose its aspiration and run into danger of strengthening one by running down the other. Dialogue would then just become an alibi for one's own dissociation. On the other, it needs a sharpened profile because once one could easily transpose the other into an exotic object that is beautiful to marvel at even without trying to understand it in its differences. As a result, you might give up your own position at a certain point, as there seems to be no need for distinction anymore.

Dialogue would then just become a tragicomic farce. One could easily make the mistake to forget about differences and try to smooth all the dissensions in order to be able to spend a worry-free lifetime as peaceful as possible. But dialogue can't mean seeking a basis free of differences – it would be a place without identity. Therefore, a dialogue that's just looking for easy exits won't help solving the world's problems, because they mostly result from the total contrary – heedless egoism that grows into fundamentalism with time.

But for an accurate and sensible dialogue, it is essential to choose a well-defined position and to reflect on the way you're entering the dialogue from that chosen point of view: Is the difference that we try to overcome defining my attitude, or is it our common ground that we try to build our distinctions on? In the first case it would be all about clearing up the most important difficulties to ensure a common sense – without even considering a common ground. Hence, it would be a noble aim failing on its own premises: As it's presuming the conflict, it cannot enable encounters, but only negotiations.

In the second case there might be an answer to the mentioned question of how to face each other. It might sound naïve to simply look at the common ground of Christian, Muslim and Jewish faith, but this approach might at least be able to teach us the attitude of meeting each other with a consciousness of our common background, a long, combined history and a common commitment to the one god of our faith. Since there's a difference in tearing off a plant at its head or tearing it out at its root, it might also be incomparably more effective to live the difference in the affiliation than always seeking the affiliation despite the difference.

After three weeks of Summer University in Altenburg, this way seems to be taken by many of us: We haven't tried to flatten distinctions in our thinking and beliefs, but we've focused on the biggest challenge of every dialogue – to make each other subjects of discussions, without defining the other as an object of interest or declaration, and without being forced to ultimately define oneself in front of the other. Only then you can ensure the required openness. Maybe it's this world's common mistake to presume conflict when requiring an encounter. The Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University, but most of all its participants, have on the contrary shown how close you can come to the other by simply just assuming to be brother and sisters in front of our common god. It hasn't been conflict, but friendship that has made this dialogue become an encounter of common life. Now we're talking about each other again. But we do it together.

NOW WE ARE TALKING EACH OTHER. BUT WE DO IT TOGETHER.
I made my first friends who were girls that wear the hijab. The girls I knew in India did not wear the hijab, and I had often wondered why someone would do so. But as we became closer, their friendliness brought out a warmth in me which I barely knew existed. Now, our differences of opinion were the last thing that mattered. I discovered that my new friends were also wonderful DJs, photographers and dancers – the latter mostly when there were no men around.

I soon sensed that my friends lived their lives with a sincerity that came from the deepest part of themselves. Five times a day, they would take leave for a little while because it was time to bow down to the higher reality. In comparison, nothing else mattered. The call for prayer would take them away even in bus rides and in the middle of the most rip-roaring parties. “It’s 3 AM, I have to go for the dawn prayer,” said my friend once in the middle of a stimulating late-night conversation. And I could only stare into nothingness, with awe and respect in my eyes, as she walked away to bow down to Allah, once again.

One afternoon, a monk who I had started to admire by then said to us, “One who only prays and does not work can go crazy, but one who only works and does not pray is already crazy.” I did not pray and had not done so for ten years. Was I crazy? But when I sat down to meditate every morning and evening, I felt moved by the same sense of ultimate concern that took my friends to prayer. Largely, I meditated because I felt a profound need to engage in something that gave meaning to everything else. Largely, I meditated because I felt a profound need to engage in something that gave meaning to everything else.

Besides prayer, the compassion with which we all, and especially the students from Austria, treated others was something that mattered, but the fact that he spoke from a profound inner state and by doing so, invoked the same in me. There I grasped something about Christianity that no amount of books would offer.

For those three weeks, our community of students reflected the world in all its beauty and its conflicts. We were the world. To merely accept the diversity by saying “it’s natural, we all have different paths” felt indifferent. But to seek to understand it and engage with the other was a challenge that could weaken or deepen one’s own faith. For instance, I did not find rules of behaviour necessary to live a spiritual life, but were those who did on an inferior path? Or was I mistaken?

**BY CHANGING HOW YOU ARE IN THE INNER WORLD, YOU CHANGE YOUR WAY TO ACT IN THE OUTER WORLD.**

This was the beginning of insight. I had long known that by changing how you are in the inner world, you change the way you act in the outer world. That was also partly the Buddha’s message – enlightenment from the fountainhead of compassion. But I realised that the opposite is true as well. Genuinely religious, moral action in the outer world can change one’s life just the way self-insight can.

Moreover, the rules of food, dress and behaviour that my friends followed went much deeper than the mundane things they regulated. Through them, my friends were fulfilling a profound human need – a need to respond to the experiences life throws at you with a deeply felt system of values. Its absence resulted in the rootlessness that is characteristic of modern times. I realised that I too had this acheing existential need. Perhaps my own path had something to offer too, such as how excessive emphasis on belief can be hollow or childish when not accompanied by the experiential dimension of religious life, and that dimension can be deepened by an honest understanding of what modern psychology calls the unconscious self.

On a walk in the beautiful farmland around the monastery, my friend Valentin talked of all religions being like the rods of a wheel. The closer people get to the essence of their religion – the centre of the wheel – the more they are like each other. The more superficial they are, which is the rim, the farther away they stand. For me, this image lay at the core of interfaith dialogue, and to recognise that our essence unites us did not dismantle our different paths, but breathed life into them.

Every morning the church bells woke me up and I sat down to meditate for an hour. A few minutes later, my Hindu roommate sat a few steps away and silently read scripture. Were we, reflecting on the religious poetry of the Savitri, and I, eyes shut, working with my stream of consciousness, in touch with the same reality? The question eludes a clear answer. But by the end of the summer university, something was clear – in those three weeks I had taken a tiny step towards the centre of the wheel. And perhaps the best I could do now was to help others do the same.
THE prayer: No One But HIM

‘Allahu Akbar’ (God is the Greatest)... The expression that split the East and the West and made the gap between them bigger seemed to have a different impact on the students attending the Vienna International Christian Islamic Summer University (VICISU 08).

‘Allahu Akbar’ (God is the Greatest)... Sixteen Muslim students were sitting in the gym/prayer hall of this Benedictine monastery in Altenburg, an hour away from Vienna... A few Christians were there also, trying to grasp the meaning of what was going on...

‘Ach-Hadu Anna La Ila Ila Allah’ (I witness that there is no God but Allah)... A basic principle in the two religions represented in the university, Allah is the one and only God worth being worshipped. He is the Greatest.

‘Ach-Hadu Anna La Ila Ila Allah’ (I witness that there is no God but Allah)... This is what brought the thirty-four people together. The One God, the Merciful, the Loving. They all pray to the same God... each one in his own way, toward his own direction, in his own words... They end up worshipping the same ONE God.

‘Ach-Hadu Anna Muhammadan Rassoulu Allah’ (I witness that Mohammed is his Messenger)... This is the testimony that made some Muslims and other Christians...

‘Ach-Hadu Anna Muhammadan Rassoulu Allah’ (I witness that Mohammed is his Messenger)... what made all Muslims sit there together that Friday. Shia and Sunni, all were sitting, listening to an English ‘Khutba’ (religious preaching).

about interfaith dialogue between Muslims and Christians delivered by a Bosnian Professor.

‘Harya ‘Ala Salat’ (Join Us for Prayer)... Maliki, Hanbal, Shafi’i, Hanafi, all four Sunni schools of thought, in addition to Shia tradition, were gathered there. They all forgot about the differences and came to pray TOGETHER.

‘Harya ‘Ala Salat’ (Join Us for Prayer)... Iranian, Pakistani, Indian, Saudi, Bosnian, Moroccan... They were all there, sitting side by side... They left their colour differences, languages, national food (up) behind and listened to one Khutba behind one same Imam under the same roof for the sake of one God.

‘Harya ‘Ala Al Falah’ (Join the success)... Being in God’s company was their aim. They made their ablutions, put on their clothes and came to the prayer room to get closer to God...

‘Harya ‘Ala Al Falah’ (Join the success)... Love and mercy is what they are seeking... Al Firdaws (the highest level in heaven) is their ultimate dream. There, in Al Firdaws, they can meet the prophets and visit God as long as they want...

‘Allah Akbar’ (God is the greatest)... He, the Almighty, made this happen... He made VICISU 08 a success in terms of content... He gathered all the people at the same place and time...

‘Allah Akbar’ (God is the greatest)... There is nobody bigger than God... At this stand, all human and worldly desires seem worthless... Only God’s sake matters... Allah, his love and mercy are the subjects of most discussions...

‘La Ila Ila Allah’ (There is no God but Allah)... No one but Allah, the Almighty, can bring Sunnis, with their different schools of thought, and Shia together under one roof praying one same prayer... No one but Him can get thirty-four people from different countries, from different religions, speaking different languages, from different social backgrounds to get along that easy...

...No one but Him can get their hearts and minds on the same journey, following the same beat, towards the ONE companion... No one but HIM.

Wisdom and Courage

was so motivated by the atmosphere of VICISU that I did not hesitate to call my father and promise him to learn the Holy Koran by heart, the cherished dream of his life. Because my father always used me as an example, I will work hard to achieve this dream for him, for me and for God. Who is my father I speak about?

Allow me first to mention the certificate of proficiency in the Holy Koran of my father Ahmed TAOUFIK, acquired in 2009 in Marrakech (Morocco), in connection with the numerous certificates that he feels very proud of today. However, it’s just an example of people who sacrificed their lives to learning and the dissemination of the Holy Koran, the Word of Allah.

If my father still leads a peaceful life through his work as a notary, which has served to raise us in the faith of Islam and guarantee an intellectual and prosperous future for all his children, it is unfortunately not the case for many Oulamas (Scientists and Imams) who are struggling to round off their months of suffering in silence and waiting for the end of their days. What touches me personally is that these men and women, who have become old today and those among them who have exceeded 100 years old, have not had any recognition on the part of parent organisations in their country of birth.

Of course, they do not necessarily need a financial reward, but rather a moral support for them to know the future generations and help transmit the values of religion, heritage and culture of the Arab-Muslim civilisation. Because, foremost, they are convinced that the big prize – the real, by the way – is in the final resting place, they pray day and night to achieve the noble objective of the return to the creator and the taste of the property of Paradise. These rare persons are, in reality, are exceedingly endangered when we know their importance: they possess a thorough knowledge and values such as wisdom, honesty, courage, modesty and patience in all aspects of life... to mention only that – and they maintain, without ultimately knowing it, balance in our modern societies.

Unfortunately, we can’t enjoy it all. May God protect his followers and have the dead in his Holy Mercy. As a Qur’anic verse said in Surat Al-Ahzab (The Confederates, 23).”

TO HELP TO TRANSMIT THE VALUE OF RELIGION, & CULTURE OF THE ARAB-MUSLIM CIVILISATION

of the Arab-Muslim civilisation. Because, foremost, they are convinced that the big prize – the real, by the way – is in the final resting place, they pray day and night to achieve the noble objective of the return to the creator and the taste of the property of Paradise. These rare persons are, in reality, are exceedingly endangered when we know their importance: they possess a thorough knowledge and values such as wisdom, honesty, courage, modesty and patience in all aspects of life... to mention only that – and they maintain, without ultimately knowing it, balance in our modern societies.

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Kawtar
Christia
Student, Al Akhawayn University, Ifrane, Morocco

Wisdom and Courage

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Understanding new things

First Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University of 2008. I would say that the Summer University was amazing and exceptional. Mr. Nauman Asghar, a student of Law in Pakistan, said, “Perhaps these twenty-one days spent in the Summer University have taught us what we could not learn from books in one year”. I agree with Mr. Asghar since the lectures and the interaction with students from all over the world has taught us more than what we can learn from reading books. My expectations of what I would learn from the programme were lower than what I really experienced. I applied to participate in the programme since the idea of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue attracted me. I wanted to meet people from all around the world and share with them my beliefs and thinking. Once I was selected to participate in the programme, I was glad and waited to receive the readings that would be sent to us. I found that the readings were interesting, and that all the discussions present in the books covered the main topics in understanding others’ religions and cultures.

Before attending the Summer University Programme, I had basic notions about Christianity but my assumptions were wrong. I thought that what matters most for Christianity was progress and socio-economic development. I thought the Bible was a sacred text for the Christians but did not matter a lot in their daily lives since it was replaced by reason and scientific thinking. After attending the Summer University Programme, I realised that religion still plays an important role in Austrians’ life compared to its role in the lives of the French, for instance. Mr. Ezzat Rathouch, a Syrian Abet, experienced respect and hospitality from people on the street. I was astonished by this fact and concluded that there exist differences between people’s religious affiliations and beliefs. I also realised that I was the victim of the stereotypes the media presents to us about the Western World and Westerners. I know that I come from a society where collectives play an important role. I am also aware of the fact that due to capitalism and progress, societies in the Western World are more individualistic societies where the ego matters more than the others. This is contrary to any religious teaching. In Christianity like in Islam, the individual should always behave properly and consider the other in all his/her actions. I noticed that in Austria, some people still study their religion and want to learn about others’ religions in order to understand them and to communicate with them.

The lectures we received in the Summer University Programme were very interesting. I was motivated to do all the readings before attending the lecture in order to understand the issues discussed in class. From the lectures, I understood new things related to Christianity and also to my religion, Islam. Actually, I read a lot from the Koran but was not able to understand completely some issues. The explanation of the lecturers convinced me that my religion was not a religion promoting violence and hatred as it was presented in Western media. Being a Sunni Muslim, I knew that my religion contained peaceful teachings and that the respect of others was one of its fundamental rules of conduct. I met with Shi’ite people who also participated in the programme. I was able to ask them questions related to their religious beliefs in order to find the differences and similarities between our two religious doctrines. At first, our interaction was one-on-one. Through our discussions, a friendship was built and all our religious differences were set aside. We knew how to understand the other and the way he/she thinks and behaves. A behaviour that seemed strange at first became normal without being a major issue restraining any form of interaction. My Iranian friends even invited me to visit their country and stay in their homes in the future. I knew that these persons would not have done this if we did not interact with each other. As a result, the communication between us helped to build a relationship that did not take into consideration any form of religious or behaviour differences. What was amazing during my stay at Stift Altenburg, a monastery in Austria, was the fact that I attended the Holy Friday Prayer two times. During the first Friday Prayer, theMoslem (the person calling for prayer) was a Shi’ite person from Iran. This practice is forbidden in Iran since Sunni people should pray alone without gathering with the Shi’ite people. This was a marvellous experience since it was the first time I met Shi’ite people and prayed in the same room with them. This experience may never be repeated. I learned that there should be a means to avoid today’s world conflicts. I think that if conflict happens between Sunnis and Shi’ites in some parts of the world today, it is probably due to the fact that there was no attempt to understand the other or build relationships between them. Prejudice is dangerous and can lead to consequences such as conflicts and wars. I think that if people from different religious affiliations are gathered in the same place and try to forget the prejudices they have about each other and try to communicate; today’s major conflicts would be replaced by more cooperation and understanding. The fact of not wearing the veil led some students at the Summer University Programme to wonder about my religious affiliation. They asked me if I wear the veil in my country, and when I came to Austria, I removed it. Also, some of the students participating in the programme did not even know where Morocco is. Once I told them that it was on the African Continent, they asked me why I did not have a dark skin. Then, I gave them an overview of my country’s culture, its inhabitants and religion. I even invited some Austrian people to visit my country, but one had told me that she was afraid of terrorism. I noticed that a lot of people think of all Muslims as terrorists, and that visiting their country would constitute a threat to their security. This annoyed me since I saw that I, as a Muslim person, would not necessarily be accepted by the other. The prejudices people have about Muslims, in general, would always constitute a barrier in our mutual understanding. But when I affirmed to the Austrian people that being Muslim is not synonymous with being terrorist, they told me that they would be glad to visit my country in the future. I hope that more summer university programmes and more inter-religious dialogues would be organised in the future in order to make a better life for the future generations without any conflicts or violence.
I liked the most was the affectionate and considerate behaviour of the participants.

Nauman Agha
Student, The University of Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

We, as students of vicisu 2008, were strongly burdened at all but an opportunity to have a review of a week-study. During the three weeks the cooking of multi-cultural food was arranged twice in which all the participants ardently prepared delicious native foods. I really loved eating the Moroccoesque 'kuskus'. During the second week three optional courses were offered: 'Constitutionalism in a Globalised World', 'Civil Society and Democracy', 'Social rights and Poverty' (these are the courses that I opted for). The first course was taught by Miss Zarfishan Qaiser in cooperation with Dr. Stephen Hammer. Miss Qaiser gave a profound insight into the fundamental concepts of inter- national law, from its origins to the concepts of state responsibility. Dr. Hammer focused his attention on the development of this concept in the region of Europe (which sometimes narrowed the scope of discussion). Reem, a student of PhD in law from Pakistan, often enlightened the class atmosphere with her well-reasoned arguments.

Kawtar, a Saudi student, spoke English with an Arabic accent that greatly amused me. However she had a good command on various issues. In short, it was a stupendous gathering. At Stift Altenburg monastery we also had a brief talk with the director of the Saint Gabriel Institute. He, in no uncertain terms, underlined the urgency of creating harmony between and among various faiths. He emphasised our responsibility to hold the reins of our destiny and shape our future. He further opined that there is a dire need to come out of the past and explore the vast horizons of life. Thomas Acquinas once said, “The world is complicated and time is short.” Time passes but leaves its footprints in the form of memories. Individuals are more important than things. What I liked the most in vicisu 2008 was the affectionate and considerate behaviour and attitude of the participants. Everyone tried to accommodate the other with the least regard for one’s own sensitivities. The group feeling remained preponderant during the three weeks. In the end hugs and emails were exchanged with promises to remember one another in their hearts. I bid adieu!
Throughout history, the peoples that inhabited the Earth have come to build contact among them. Characterised by conflict most of the time and by homogeneity in some rare cases, this contact was supposed to be necessary for each people to maintain its existence by challenging the existence of others living around. The idea that if you don’t combat, you will be turned against is deeply embedded in the human psyche and has stimulated nations and states into expansion and bringing the Other into submission and subordination. I haphazardly, we take off these ambitious desires from the human psyche and we make humans sit beside each other and talk frankly about their dreams, they might have avoided coming into war, or at least they would have thought of more civic methods to solve their differences. Realistically, we should not blind-believe that nations and states go into war just because they have not spoken frankly to each other. The necessity as mentioned above for each state to maintain its existence surpasses any ideal to construct a unified world. Consequently, some states may cease to exist if there are no wars; the trend a rational and realistic thinking would avoid taking. Nonetheless, the world is not always a savage place where the big fish eat the small ones; in the middle of conflict there are elements in each society that think differently, in terms of the value of the human being, building ideals, bringing different people closer and defrosting the human relations.

In that context, the First International Vienna Christian-Islamic Summer University that took place during a three week period in July 2008 is a vivid example of how miraculous adventures can have high rates of success. The event hosted students from ten nationalities, namely Bosnia, Iran, Austria, Saudi Arabia, France, Morocco, Israel, Palestine, Pakistan and India. The process of assembling quite a large number of students from 10 countries is a culmination of the efforts provided by the Vienna religious community for thirty years now. The era of the Crusades is over now and Christianity and Islam are embracing each other. On a Friday, the Friday prayer of the Muslims was conveyed in a monastery, in a place reserved for religious practices other than of Christianity. I conducted my prayer with the Muslim adherents, and it was the first time that I felt complete submission to God with tears coming down my cheeks. It was first because I never thought before that I would pray in a monastery, and second because it was the first time that I did the Friday prayer with Muslims other than Moroccans. A pertinent question sprang into my mind then: why do we fight each other when there is a chance to co-habitate? Is it because of religion or because of politics? Politics has always played and is still playing a major role in igniting conflicts between the peoples of the world. Powerful states need to monopolise and to expand their powers and have to conduct their policies in a way that the mass of their populations shares the same tendencies with the ruling class; that is to say, to propagate that other peoples with different religious and civilisation backgrounds represent a threat to their security. In various points of history, the West and the East have conflicted because of the ideological and realistic tendencies of both of them to expand, and because that involved multiple forms of monopoly; the effects of that domination were deeply engrained in the memories of the populations of defeated states. Hence the strained relationship between the East and the West did not fade away by the end of the ages of conquering, victories and invasions; it rather turned into suspicion and in some cases to the hating the Other. The East attributes all its calamities to the effects of the colonisation of the West of and sees the latter as a source of its miseries and misfortunes, while the West stereotypes the East as predisposed to that miserable faith because of its incompetence, inability to advance and its inclination to backwardness. This is how misperceptions grow and spread. During our stay at Stift Altenburg, I remarked how Austrian students expressed their admiration that the students from the Muslim countries, participating in the Summer University, don’t resemble in one way or another the persons who throw bombs and kill themselves and innocents, known as fundamentalists. They were glad that Muslim ladies with veils are open-minded, joyful, dance and sing, play sports and participate in the joys of life. I remember how a female Austrian student hugging a veiled Saudi Arabian participant expressed her feelings whole-heartedly in the following way, ‘Oh, this is the first time I stay near a Muslim woman!’

To a stranger, the homogeneity of the group would inspire that those students at Stift Altenburg have spent most of their lives together. In my life time, the Vienna Summer University is the second event where I have spent time in a foreign country and where the participants have shared their daily habits ranging from sleeping and eating together, to chatting, studying during the day and celebrating during the night for three weeks. I have come to know, and no doubt all the other participants, that within each one of us there is an inner endeavours for a better world, that as believers in God we submit to only one God, that what divides us can be mended and overcome if the dissimilaries are seen not as a source of conflict, but as peculiarities of specific regions in the world. What I have synthesised thus is that prejudgments and prejudices kill the spirit of the goodness that may tie the human race and overwhelm the will to destroy and to negate unconstructive conclusions about the Other.

Nowadays, in the light of how the West perceives the East and vice versa, it seems evident that the world needs thousands of similar events all over the globe to achieve better results in what concerns building a healthy and a sane relationship between the two poles. After three weeks of continuous intellectual uploading at Stift Altenburg, we went home laden with a new spirit and enthusiasm to share with our nationals what we have learnt during the three week Summer School. It is magnificent to retell an adventure not undergone by the most of your audience, magnificent to feel that some change is being processed within you and to discover that you can contribute in identifying some of the mechanisms that make the world move around you, and that you share the responsibility in adjusting and making improvements for the welfare of humanity, even at the lowest scale.
The Evolutionary Nature of Life on the Earth:
A little thinking leads one to accept that all the four Kingdoms of Nature on earth, viz. Mineral, Vegeta-
ble, Animal and Human, have been evolving into their respective higher and higher potentials. For example, we
find minerals yielding nuclear energy, overcoming gravi-
tational force to explore space and extending man through
computers and artificial intelligence. The vegetable king-
dom got over its old laws of growth and heredity under
time-governance and cross-breeds newer kinds containing
richer nutrients and greater resistance to the changes of
seasons. The animal kingdom has substituted animality
with human sensibility and amicability in itself. The crow-
nling human kingdom, rising from the savage stage through
civilised stages up to the present stage of partial globalisation,
goes on mastering the forces of Nature but is still under the threat of annihilation; partly due to its
discriminate dealings with Nature and the rest due to its
inherent inertia opposing the dynamism of intelligence,
sensibilities and also spiritual growth.

The Universal and Process Guiding Elements in All Religions:
Primarily and particularly in Eastern countries after the separation of
Church and State in Western countries, religions have been governing relationships between in-
dividuals, between individuals and society, between indi-
vidual and the State and in almost every sphere of human activity,
through their Commandments and their authori-
ty deemed as derived from the Supreme Lordly source.
Yet, the universal and progress guiding elements present in every religion formed the norms of conduct for the
faithful consisting of the unconditional love for each and
every creature, the respect for individual differences and
the right of essential equality amongst all, the constant
openness of one's being towards what one considers as
the Highest and, above all, the freedom to choose to
believe, to disobey the commandments. Some lines are there
that can also be interpreted as supporting the opposites
of virtues. The purpose was to allow the free play of one's
freewill, which was the product of individually attained
stages of evolution. Because the freewill is the only inst-
ment, as well as the medium, capable of leading through
the irreversible velocity to the goal of evolution.

The Constituents and Process of Progress:
Broadly speaking, the constituents of achieving progress
are twofold: individual and collective. The
aim of individual progress is to harmonise
one’s individuality with the Universality so that one
becomes the ‘All’ in consciousness. This achievement comes through one’s experiences of pain and pleasure, hatred and
love, struggles and tolerant peace... The aim of collective
progress is to make the whole earth one family in incompre-
scible reality through economic, scientific, social, political,
educational, cultural and spiritual progresses and regress-

ers. The inner process of progress is through Consciousness,
whose seed in the individual is known as the immortal
dharma, buddha or sattva in other terminologies of the Integral Yoga of
Sri Aurobindo who attains perfection through the chain of
births and deaths. The Universal Consciousness evolves
what may be termed as the Time-Spirit of the Universal
Being through the spiral chain of ages. Nature applies the
process of divisionism and integration alternately. First it
segregates people in groups, societies, nations... to achieve
progress in different areas of human activities and then brings them together to integrate those progresses. If this
alternation does not come about spontaneously through
trade, commerce and treaties etc. then it is enforced by
wars, conquests and colonisations.

The outer instrument of progress is Education, the perfect system of which is still elusive and in need of
sincere pursuit, making this instrument inefficient; hence
very slow. The other instrument is ‘Law’, which tries to
curb regress while enforcing progress. With the advent of
the UNO, the scope and evolution of the law has taken up
global dimensions, and the Universal Declaration of Human
Rights has given birth to many regional human rights
mechanisms and increases Global Constitutionalism. Its
adoption and gradual development, which is being made
by many countries, envisions in the future one unanimous
set of principles of law, unifiable by any State's law, which
would lead to the desired progress.

Our Journey from the Past to the Present:
Our journey from the past comprises of many
risks and falls of civilisations and cultures, constructions and destructions of various
political and social systems, beginnings and ends of many
religions, schools of thoughts and human values. Throug-
ghout the twentieth century, progress in science and tech-
ology were on the way to achieving the great powers and
control over the forces of Nature by means of the Matter,
which in former times a few saints achieved by means of
the Spirit. The materialistic philosophy of life recognises
the money-power as Supreme, and the money-generating
market strategies as such have let the stage of globalisation
enter the human scene, along with its concomitant
vices of competitiveness, exploitation, violence and crime.
The mortal virtues of spiritualism, having been pushed
into the background of the evolution of the mind beyond
the stages of illuminated mind and intuitive mind, are also
blocked, and the incapability of the present average men-
tal consciousness to understand the true meanings of
the scriptures has caused misinterpretations to generate fun-
damentalism, which in turn is bound to spread terrorism
and threatens the march of human evolution.
The underlying plan of Nature seems to bring about the
integration of the materialism of the West with the spiri-
tualism of the East and evolves a higher mental conscious-
ness that would initiate a new dimension of globalisation
in order to perfect individuals as well as the collective
humanity, which would further advance the pace of evo-
lution “to change earthly life into life divine”, as Sri Auro-
bindo puts it.

The Solutions to be Applied for Accelerated Progress and the ‘How’?
The solutions lie in cooperating with Nature to bring about the
integration of materialism and spiritualism; that of ever-widening love and high intellectuality and that
of tremendous outer activities and inner calm, peace and
tranquility. In every country there are persons who cherish aspirations for higher life as well as for a better world. Let
them join and live the higher life. Although the war against
terrorism should continue, it should be left between persons
of average mental consciousness to retaliate on the same
plane. But those with brighter vision have a greater res-
ponsibility. A very strong effort in this direction was ini-
tiated the world over by The Theosophical Society (1875 – current) with the objectives to promote the universal
brotherhood of humanity, the comparative study of all
religions, philosophies and sciences, and the investigation
into the hidden forces of Nature and the powers latent in
Man. Now we have better means of education in the form
of satellites, Internet and so on. If proper contents are added to them then education may become the effective
instrument in achieving human unity, world peace and
advanced stages of further evolution.

The latest wave that is swaying in people’s minds the world over is that of ‘Yoga’: the panacea of all ailments, physical
and mental, and a positive means to procure all kinds of
desired objects. Yoga does not belong to the category of
religions; it transcends them. All the various kinds of Yoga
were classified under four heads, viz. Yoga of Knowledge, of
Devotion, of Action and of Will. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950)
revelled “Integral Yoga” as the great synthesis. His and
the Mother’s spiritual practices ripened it to become an
effective force for transforming earthly life in future. Sri
Aurobindo said, “To make Yoga the main aim of human
life is the purpose for which India is rising today.” There-
fore those persons with higher vision should not only live
Yoga individually but form groups to live it collectively.
Although some pockets of such group life already exist in
many countries, it has to become the crest wave of a high-
er quality of life bringing into its fold a general accep-
tance.

Conclusion: The inevitable future is pressing through to reconstruct worldly life; hence the evolutionary flexibility inherent in all the
religions needs to become universal, and the
terrorisms and counter-terrorism of various forms would instead of endangering human existence, end their
own acceptance and throw them into oblivion. 
Dear all readers, hand in hand will change the world. I wish to talk and with my voice to flow to your soul; I will talk as a citizen born and living in Nazareth, Israel for 23 years and working in Arab media.

When I got the scholarship to go to the first Vienna international meeting between Muslims and Christians, I thought it’s normal for me having lived with Christians and Muslims together and sharing everything between them - what’s new in that?

The journey began in the airport when I searched for who will pick me up, and Austrian man asked me, “Are you Yasmine?” and I said, “Yes.” He said, “Then come with me.”

I felt peace in my heart that someone knew me, and on the way to the monastery it was two Austrians girls and one Arab girl from Palestine, and she said, “I am your partner... ah, this is the first meeting between two countries then?”

No, I am kidding the meeting not just between two countries, it’s between more than 12 countries. Yes, can you believe? Huge shock, huh? It’s a shock at the first moment, because how can you act with 30 people you never met before - but I always think in positive way so it’s not a shock; it’s a challenge for me. If I can live with them for 3 weeks and become a part of them, I will pass the challenge. You know, I always dreamed to have friends from all over the world, and in this summer my dream came true so I will search for another dream.

Wake up, the class has begun, it’s the first day and we will study together. Just imagine about these 30 people - thinking, dreaming, looking for the future, all different - how we can combine them in one room? And the teacher is from another country too, wow, the story becomes so exciting now, what can we do with this mixture?

We studied more than 10 courses on politics, culture and relations - even this sensitive topic - but the three weeks were the best three weeks in my life. Even I felt fear in my heart that maybe we will fight or some people make problems, but we lived a peaceful life together. We shared everything together: studying, shopping, cooking, dancing, singing and celebrating together. It’s an ideal life for me. We studied hard but it was not the only life we had; we visited Vienna and I was saying all the time “ich bien clokesh.”

This was my first sentence in German meaning “I am glad.” When I learned a bit of the German language I felt that I am a part of them, since I like to learn the language and the culture and such. And the funniest thing happened to me: when they taught me some words with an Austrian accent, I wanted to talk with someone to see if they understood me - then I know that I am speaking right. So I talked with a monarch the monastery and said to him, “How are you in the German language?” He said, “I am good” and then he talked to me for more than 5 minutes nonstop, and then I told him, “Oh, I didn’t understand anything you said!” He said, “Oh, from your accent I thought you are German!” I laughed and from this day on, I wanted to learn more and more about this language to start a conversation with him again and understand everything.

You know more than 100000 people listened to me when I said, “ich bien clokesh” – how come?

When a radio anchorperson came to the monastery, he wanted to interview some of my friends and I said to him, “I know some new words. Do you want to listen?” He said, “Why not.” So I spoke a few words with him and he was surprised. Then I said some on the radio. I became very interested to learn about Viennese radio because I am working in the radio station A-ashams, which mean “Sun Radio” in my home Nazareth.

So I was curious how the Viennese radio is like. The anchor invited me and my other friends, and we went there and found many differences between both radio stations: one is that most of the programme is recorded in Viennese radio whereas in our radio, it is all live, and in my country we have two studios and there more than 20 studios here. I just took in this reality but I really enjoyed it there.

And we went to many places in Vienna that I will never forget... On the last night in Vienna, I didn’t want to come back because I was enjoying every minute of my life with the 30 best friends and my leaders – I don’t want to sleep, I don’t want to lose any second in this three weeks.

It was not just three weeks – it felt like it’s more than 5 years of experience. Now I have new thinking for a better future. I know very well that the old age believe the new age will change the world, and I say it in a loud voice: “Yes, we can change! We can change the world, hand in hand, we can live in peace together with all the countries until the end of life.”

Just imagine the world without war, violence, killing... we will live in peace. In this three weeks when I lived with 12 countries - some of them I never talked with before because there was no peace – we were in the same place and we become best friends: who will stop us from making a new bridge for peace between all the countries? No one can stop our dream if we combine together and become a power, and we can combat everyone who tries to stop us because our army is one of love, respect, care, faith - these four words will change the world.

I believe in our age because we can make a change, we can make a first step for peace between the countries. For example, in this meeting between the countries from all over the world we were living in peace, and if we make sure that in the real world we do the same, what could be the change? We, the new generation, we must do the step for peace. The teachers, the leaders, believe in us, so we will change the world – hand in hand.

In the end, I wish everyone will have this experience and that we can make a stronger bridge for peace together. I am so lucky, and of course thank God, that I was in the first international Islamic-Christian meeting – and I hope it’s not the last.

In these 3 weeks I felt that I am new person with a new thinking for the future. Now I am planning to fulfill my dream that all the world becomes one, united and in peace, with no time for war because we are enjoying being together.
Dear VICISU Faculty and fellow colleagues,

It has been a real pleasure getting to know all of you over the course of the past week.

The bonds of friendship that have been cultivated in the spirit of mutual understanding and religious tolerance have enabled us all to focus on our shared values: love, peace and an unwavering commitment to building a better future. If this harmonious spirit that we shared at Stift Altenburg can be replicated on a global level, then I am certain that the world at large can also transcend the ‘misperceptions of the other’, which have been exploited in the name of religion by opportunistic political elites and clergy members.

Simply put, the potential to shape the future by focussing on our shared values is promising and VICISU is a testament to that. Strive to bring justice to your own respective local communities and build bridges to the future by staying in touch with VICISU Alumni. Our past is a common one and our future is a shared one.

And yet throughout the entire program, no minute passed in or out of the classroom without engaged discussion of the themes of the day, from the wars that ravage our world to the fleeting, yet stubbornly existent, opportunities for peace. I departed from Altenburg with a slew of new colleagues and friends and the knowledge that their brilliant idealism will be the future of inter-community relations world-wide. And yet throughout the entire program, no minute passed in or out of the classroom without engaged discussion of the themes of the day, from the wars that ravage our world to the fleeting, yet stubbornly existent, opportunities for peace.

The bonds of friendship that have been cultivated in the spirit of mutual understanding and religious tolerance have enabled us all to focus on our shared values: love, peace and an unwavering commitment to building a better future. If this harmonious spirit that we shared at Stift Altenburg can be replicated on a global level, then I am certain that the world at large can also transcend the ‘misperceptions of the other’, which have been exploited in the name of religion by opportunistic political elites and clergy members.

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Last summer, July 2008, I had the opportunity to give a lecture at the Vienna International Christian-Islamic Summer University which took place at Stift Altenburg from 30th June to 18th July. It was a truly memorable learning experience in international developments concerning Christianity and Islam. It was a logical culmination of the Muslim-Christian Dialogue which had been progressing at St. Gabriel Modling from 1977 to 2007. It is a source of satisfaction to see the dialogue initiated by Father Botsch with the blessings of Archbishop König and the Austrian Foreign Ministry develop into an educational program which will benefit the young thinkers of the 21st Century. They can take up the mission of creating understanding between the diverse communities at a time when misunderstandings and misconceptions threaten to destroy the existence of peace on earth. The scholars who have been original members of the VICISU who came to enlighten the young students with their rich experience included Professors Ingeborg Gabriel from Austria, Tohid Mahmoud from India, Saleha Abedin from Jeddah, Richard Perz from Austria, and Aicha Belarbi from Morocco. In addition, the scholars who had been invited to enlarge the teaching faculty for this course added a new dimension to my experience of Interreligious Dialogue in the Modern World. I was particularly impressed by Shab-La Ezazi of Iran who talked about Democracy and Civil Society, Aid Samir of Bosnia-Herzegovina who talked about Islamic Understanding of the Role of Religion in Human Life, and Joseph Ndi Okalla of Cameroon who gave a most illuminating lecture on Social Rights and Poverty. I was delighted to meet Father Botsch on his brief visit. His vision and efforts made this program a reality.

I joined the Summer University for the second week only since I was busy in Vienna during the first week of July participating in the World Justice Forum. Both these experiences of the mundane and the spiritual combined to make my visit to Austria in 2008 a fascinating and diverse experience where I interacted with lawyers on the one hand and intellectuals with a spiritual theme on the other hand. There was one common denominator which connected both these experiences: this was the focus on Human Rights and respect and tolerance for the views and practices of others. On my arrival at Stift Altenburg I had the privilege of attending a concert in the beautiful library of the Monastery which had been organized to honour the departing Bishop of the Monastery. After the concert we joined a lavish dinner organized by the present Bishop to which all the students and faculty of the VICISU were invited. This was my opportunity to meet all the faculty members as well as the students who had come from Austria, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cameroon, England, India, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and USA. Every one was relaxed and already familiar with the members of the group and I was impressed to see how every one shared in the singing and dancing of different countries by joining in wherever possible. The Monastery was an ideal setting for this Summer Program since it stands in a very scenic part of Austria, at some distance from the nearest Village and shopping centre which provided opportunity to the students and faculty to spend more time getting to know and interact with each other rather than going shopping. However, the students were provided an ample opportunity to visit Vienna and see the magnificent sights of this beautiful historical city. I occupied a sunny, airy and comfortable rooms which overlooked the beautiful gardens of the Monastery. The students and teachers shared their meals in the large dining room where we had lively discussions on our daily experiences. The evening seminars were also held here. I had been invited to make two presentations at the evening seminars about Pakistan. In the first seminar I talked about the current situation in Pakistan focusing on political, social and legal aspects. For the second seminar I focused on the issue of women’s rights in Islam, particularly in Pakistan. The students had already some knowledge of these issues by that time, since they had completed the first ten days of the Summer University. There were lots of questions and answers after my first presentation as the students were curious about the news appearing in international media concerning the rapidly changing events in Pakistan. The local television and press had already mentioned that I would be talking about Pakistan in these seminars, resultingantly a Pakistani couple who had settled in the nearby town of Horn called and came to attend the seminar. They obtained permission from the organizers to bring other Pakistani friends the next evening when I talked about the condition of women in Pakistan, and a lively discussion ensued after my presentation. All the participants were very anxious to find out more about the conditions in countries and cultures other than their own which was one of the basic purposes of the Summer University. I perceived that the students had to attend a very full academic program, but this did not appear to deter them from enjoying themselves during and after classes. Many students took photographs which I received by email as wonderful reminders of our pleasant sojourn together. They also exchanged small gifts as tokens of remembrance. These bonds of friendship that have developed in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and religious tolerance will go a long way to help these young people to share in building a better future for humanity based on our shared values of love, tolerance and peace. May the shared experiences of Stift Altenburg spread wherever the teachers and students live and work and may they serve as beacons of light and hope for others sailing over life’s solemn main.

I congratulate the Austrian Ministry of Sciences and Research, The University of Vienna and all the organizers, particularly Katharina, Maria, Inregard Marboe, and Ingeborg Gabriel, for having developed and implemented such a unique and wonderful program. I pray that they may continue to develop more such successful programs in the coming years, which will immensely benefit future generations.