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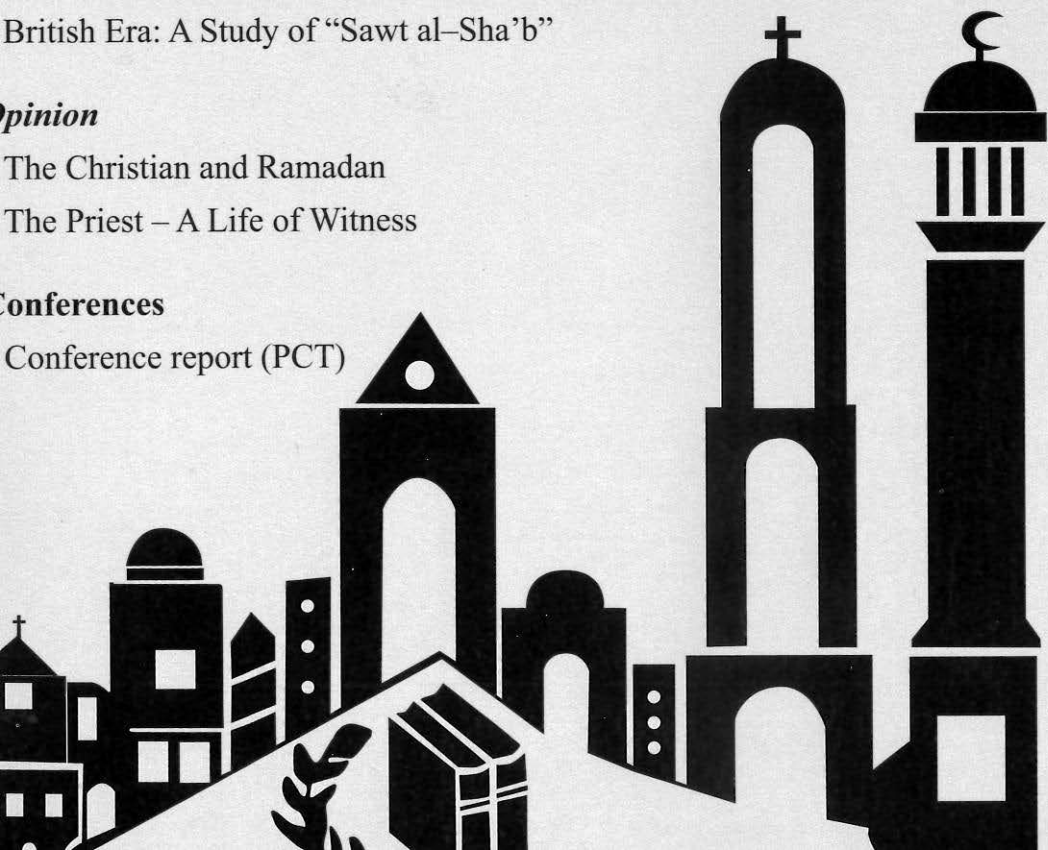
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Islam in Austria

Facts, Problems and Perspectives in the European and Global Context

Ingeborg Gabriel*

The question of the peaceful interaction of religions is of major importance in every country of the world today. This requires new thinking and adequate legal regulations as well as a multitude of activities in the civil society to foster better understanding through intercultural and interreligious dialogue, a path the Al-Liqa Centre has followed already for a quarter of a century under truly difficult circumstances.

This article will cover three points: the introduction will deal with the importance of interreligious dialogue at the level of civil society in today's world. The second part will give detailed information about the legal and social situation of the growing Muslim community in Austria. The final part will deal with the question of the future of the Christian and Islamic relations in a globalized world.

1. The present world situation: globalization, pluralism and the importance of religions

Whether we like it or not the world has seen dramatic changes during the past three decades. Let us simply remember the way we used to communicate thirty years ago: A letter would be written on a typewriter and it took 2-3 weeks to get from Vienna to Bethlehem. Counting the time for the response and the postal delivery – I could expect an answer to a simple letter within 4-5 weeks. Nowadays the same communication takes place in real time, as if we were sitting in the same office. A quick answer is possible and expected: These fundamental changes are the consequence of globalization which revolutionizes all areas of human life. The effects are highly ambivalent and cannot be analysed here in detail.¹

The Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church (1962-65) with the title *Gaudium et spes* already spoke of the phenomenon fifty years ago. It states that a world where human beings are in ever closer contact with each other (it uses the Latin word *socialisatio*) needs humane strategies to organize these developments in a way so that they further better personal relationships (in Latin *personalsatio*) and peace. This is indeed the central ethical question and shows that a gigantic task lies ahead of us which as human beings we have to tackle in a responsible way. As believers we moreover carry a high responsibility before God who will judge us on whether we contributed to the good in this world.

The first institutions which made and make most extensive use of global communication are the big international companies and particularly the banks (this is one of the reasons for the present financial crisis, mainly in the West). The internet and other media had, however, also great effects on politics, since because of the modern media it has become practically impossible to close off any territory hermetically to developments in the rest of the world.

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The information of what is happening in other countries and the knowledge that there are political alternatives make it more difficult for autocratic regimes to suppress their citizens as the latest the revolutions in the Arab world showed. This is also the basic principle and the prerequisite of democracies. The deepest impression of the Arab revolutions during past months for me was, that this will to participation (however difficult it may be to realize) and the demand for dignity have given a face to people in countries which up to now have been seen only through the lenses of long serving autocratic rulers. Personalization – as demanded in *Gaudium et spes* – as the aim of globalization has taken place there. To have a face, to be a person, also means to take responsibility and to actively participate in the events, to attempt to influence them in a positive way.

The process of globalization not only has economic and political effects it also deeply influences religions. Not only goods and political ideas are transported around the globe, but also religious ideas and migrations make societies multicultural and therefore also multireligious. These cultural and religious effects of globalization are less obvious, but probably even more important than those in the areas of the economy and politics. Global media as well as global migrations create a situation in which everybody if he or she has a mobile phone, or can go to an internet café (that means mainly but not only the ever growing urban population worldwide) has access to a wide range of information on cultures and religions in all parts of the world. In other words: religious and cultural homogeneity is no longer possible in the global village, or it becomes – in any case – very rare and precarious. The daily news confront us with information from around the globe and journalists as well as other intellectuals carry a high degree of responsibility on how they present the others. More than that, everybody is an active agent in multicultural societies and has to form responsible judgements also on questions of the other religions and how a peaceful interaction may be possible in this

new situation. For Christians the essence of Christian ethics is: to strengthen those forces which work for peace and understanding, since God – to whom we are responsible – is a God of peace, who wants that all men and women to form one human family in unity. The alternative to this fostering of better understanding is to refuse interaction and to close oneself off which carries with it the danger of becoming fundamentalist and more violent.²

Interreligious dialogue at the level of civil society is one answer to this global situation. Dialogue comes from the Greek words *dialogou*, which literally means “through the word”. It is a programme, which shows a great deal of affinity to the great monotheistic religions which are also religions of the word. God speaks to man through revelation. This is the great and astonishing message of the three monotheistic religions, which gives particular dignity and great importance to the word. Words are not only information. They are creative: God spoke and it happened – this is the first message of the Old Testament the Genesis (Genesis 1). God’s word creates the world – and so are human words to create the world of relationships with other, and also between different groups of people. Human words may, however, as we know, also be highly destructive, if they do not respect the dignity of the other and his right to live by and proclaim his religious conviction.

There are three forms of dialogue: There is dialogue in everyday life through acts and words. This is the most common and wide spread form of dialogue in all societies, where people of different religions and cultures live together and interact. Multicultural and multireligious societies increase the responsibility of each and every member, to work towards peace. Not only for the sake of peace itself, but also to honour God and our respective religion, because in a multireligious setting our good or bad deeds are in one way or another also attributed to our religion and culture – which greatly enhances their importance. We thus become ambassadors of peace or warmongers. In homogenous communities it is the

individual person and the family who are affected. In pluralistic societies it is the whole religious and/or cultural community. This is the positive chance, but it is also a risk of the new situation which has to be clearly perceived. Whole religions may be discredited by the acts of individuals who do not act in accordance with the ethics of the particular religion and who deny respect and even the right of life to others.

Many positive developments conducive to interreligious peace may thus take place, because of the good acts of a believer of another religion. Unfortunately also the opposite is true. The more important the persons are, the greater the negative – or positive effects may be.

The other two forms of dialogue besides the “dialogue of life” are interreligious dialogue on mystics and theology and dialogue on ethics and law.³ Whereas when speaking about our faith in God we may enrich and fortify each other, the question in ethics and law is a different one: here we have to find a common legal and moral ground if we are to live together in peace in one society. In my next point I therefore will give some information about the legal and social situation of the Muslim community in Austria.

2. Islam in Austria:

Facts and figures - chances and problems

2. 1. Demographic and Legal Facts:

In Austria Islam has been recognized as a religion with equal rights already since 1912, i.e. for nearly one hundred years. In fact Austria was the first country to do so in Europe – and ever since has played a pivotal role in this field. The historical reason was that Austria had been a multicultural and multireligious country (only comparable to Russia and the Ottoman Empire) with about 60 million inhabitants and with a multitude of ethnicities and creeds, nationalities and ethnicities until 1918. Moreover, Austria for a long time was a neighbour to the Ottoman Empire which not only

led to wars, but also to many forms of cultural exchange. Thus under the famous Empress Maria Theresia (1740-80) the Oriental Academy was established so as to learn more about Turkish and Arab cultures.

After the First World War the Austrian-Hungarian Monarchy was split up in several states. In the small country which now carried the name Austria there were practically no Muslims living in it (but some individuals, e.g. diplomats) and so the law of 1912 lost its relevance.

In the 1970's the Muslim population in Austria started to increase because of work migration, mainly from Turkey. In the 1990's there was a wave of migration of Muslims from Bosnia in the wake of the Balkan wars and there is more and more migration also from Arab and other predominantly Muslim countries, though the numbers remain rather small. At present an estimated 6 % of the Austrian population are of Muslim faith (at the last demographic census held in 2001 4, 2% registered as Muslims, the next census will take place in 2011). To give some general figures: In Austria Catholics are a large, though diminishing majority (in 1951 – 89%; 2009 – 66%; Protestants are a diminishing minority 1951 – 6, 2%; 2009 – 3, 9%), whereas the number of orthodox Christians is growing also because of migration (an estimated 4, 5% in 2009). There is also an increasing number of Austrians who are without confession (in 2009 an estimated 12%).

About half of the Muslims in Austria are Austrian citizens (to become an Austrian citizen 10 -15 years of residence are required). Whereas the increase in the 1980 and 1990 was mainly due to migration, during the past decade higher birth rates of the Muslim population (younger age, bigger families), as well as family reunions with relatives coming to Austria and also conversions to Muslim faith in mixed marriages, lead to the increase in numbers. The ethnic background is mainly Turkish, but there are also many Bosnian Muslims in Austria as well as refugees mainly from Chechnya, and smaller groups from Arab and other predominantly

Muslim countries.

Austria, which after the First World War had a largely homogenous population with German as a mother tongue (with small Hungarian and Slovene minorities in peripheral regions), thus has become an immigrant society, with about 15, 4% born outside the country,⁴ whereby the population of Vienna is 25% foreign born residents or citizens, and thus Vienna today is a truly multicultural city. Within 3 - 4 decades Austria thus has come to resemble more the United States of America or Canada, than the homogeneous country of the 1960's. Thus migration changed the religious landscape profoundly. This obviously constitutes a great social challenge with regard to the legal as well as to the social situation.

The Islamic Law of 1912 grants Muslims in Austria the same rights as the faithful of the other 14 religions which are officially recognized as institutions of public law. The Muslim community is represented by the **Islamic Organization of Austria** (Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich).⁵

In Europe there exist different models of the relationship between state and religion. In Austria the relationship is organized in the form of a **cooperative model**, which differs largely from the secular French model (*laïcité*). Religious freedom, however, is part of all constitutions in European countries, those which belong to the European Union (where the rules are stricter) and those which belong to the Council of Europe.⁶ What differs is whether the positive (cooperation with the state) or the negative aspect (freedom from religion in the public sphere) of religious freedom is accentuated. The essence of religious freedom is that it demands an attitude of **benevolent neutrality** by the state towards the different religious communities. The state is not to interfere in their internal affairs as long as they respect the constitution and its democratic foundations.

Neutrality in this context means, that the state is not to prefer one religion over another (e.g. there is no state religion), and she is not to discriminate against individuals holding a specific religion. If this happens, the religious community or the individual can sue the state at the constitutional court – and in a second step at the European Court for Human Rights.

The religious neutrality of the state also means that she cannot decide which orientation of a particular religion is true. This poses a problem, when there are different denominations in one religion (e.g. Shiites and Alevi in Islam, evangelical Christians in Christianity). The state also is not to take a position on practice in accordance with the religious belief, e.g. it is not for the state to decide whether it is in accordance with Islam that the head scarf be worn by Muslim women.

Benevolent neutrality means that the religions officially recognized by the state receive support and play an active role in public life. This is justified because religions are seen as making a positive contribution to the common good. This support mainly concerns religious instruction in schools. The Austrian state does not pay for pastoral care within the communities (e.g. priests, imams etc.). These have to be financed by the religious communities themselves. I will return to the question of religious instruction below since it merits a closer look.

A corporative model of religion and state, as practiced in Austria, carries considerable benefits for religions. It does however have as a precondition that there exists an official institution representing the faithful with which the state authorities can negotiate what is called “the mixed matters”, e.g. areas of common interest. Moreover, it is these representatives, who are also to give their opinion when laws are passed which touch the interests of religions. For religions which are relatively new on the Austrian territory this means that they have to build up an internal structure and give themselves a constitution so as to have representatives

which can negotiate with the state authorities. Such a structure demands that they find ways and means to deal with their own internal heterogeneity. With regard to the Islamic community in Austria this means that Turkish and Arab Muslims as well as those from Bosnia, have to find common ground and common positions on these issues irrespective of their different cultural and ethnic backgrounds and the different forms of Islam practiced in their home countries. Groups like the Turkish Alevi have to decide whether they consider themselves part of the Muslim community at all (there is a division with regard to this in the community at present). This internal consolidation process, which a cooperative state-religion relationship demands, is of course not always easy. Thus, the official Islamic Community in Austria, whose president for the past decades has been a Syrian Sunnite Muslim, does not represent large parts of the Turkish Muslims, which are by far the largest group in Austria, who prefer to organize themselves in mosque associations under private law. That these problems can be and are overcome by the next generation is shown by the Muslim Youth Organization of Austria, many of its members were already born in Austria, which has made it a major point of its program to disregard regional and ethnic backgrounds.

The right to religious freedom which has been introduced in Austria with the Constitutional Law of 1867 has a **private and a collective dimension**.

The **collective dimension** includes the right to build cult buildings, e.g. mosques according to the religious needs of the faithful. This right includes the right to construct the building in the way the community sees as fitting, e.g. mosques may and do have minarets. It includes the right to have religious instruction in schools paid by the state, the foundation of so called pious associations which are exempt from taxes, as well as pastoral care in the army, in prisons and in hospitals and pastoral care in the communities, which has to be paid for by the faithful. Religious communities are also

given time in public media (radio, TV) according to their size. The largest religious communities (Catholicism, Protestantism and Islam) have teacher training institutions as well as university chairs (respectively faculties).

Present areas of legal dispute with the Islamic communities concern mainly the call of the muezzin (how much noise is to be permitted in a non-Muslim neighbourhood?), the burying of the dead (in Austria coffins are obligatory and burial normally takes place more than 24 hours after death) and the slaughter of animals (slaughtering according to Muslim as well as Jewish rules is permitted by Austrian law, though animal protectors contest it because of lack of anaesthetics).

The **private dimension** of religion has to do with the practice of the religion by the individual in private and in public. Personal practices are permitted as long as they do not interfere with the freedom of others and the law. Where there are conflicts it becomes necessary to find the right balance between the public interest or the common good and the individual rights of the believer. The rulings of the courts in many of these matters differ because legal decisions here as everywhere depend also on the interpretation of the judges. But this is not specific for cases regarding religious freedom.

With regard to Islam a traditional issue is the wearing of a head scarf by Muslim women. This right has never been contested in Austria. Muslim women can wear the head scarf in public, and also in schools as students and teachers as well as in the public service. Austria here has definitely other traditions than e.g. laicist France, where the negative side of religious freedom has been much more accentuated not only vis-à-vis Islam, but all religions, e.g. the main emphasis has been on freedom from religion in the public space. There has been a debate concerning the niqab, which is hardly worn in Austria by Muslim women anyway and there is no law prohibiting it. However, the court did not take the testimony of a Muslim woman (a convert) who together with

her husband had been accused of planning a terrorist attack. But this is with good reasons, the more since the niqab has also been rejected as being un-Islamic by the sheik of Al-Azhar University. Muslims also have the right to take their main holidays in addition to their Austrian holidays. Areas where sometimes conflicts arise are obligatory sports in school for girls, particularly swimming lessons.

More important than these issues is the right to change one's religion (e.g. conversion), which is an essential part of religious freedom fully guaranteed by the law. In Austria conversions to Islam exist, though not in great numbers, mostly when women decide to marry Muslim men. An outstanding example is the present speaker of the Islamic community in Austria, Mrs. Bhagajati, a German married to a Syrian who converted to Islam and now plays a very active role in Austrian public life, being the Austrian face of Islam, so to speak.

Before I come to speak about the question of the social integration of Islam and Muslims in Austria, I want to give some more information about the issue of Muslim religious education in schools. The Austrian model of education is value based and children are to be instructed in their respective religion for two hours each school week, whereby the parents can opt for the child not to have religious instruction (this has been fairly rare until recently, but is becoming more frequent). From the age of 14 onward the pupils can decide for themselves, whether to attend the lessons of religious instruction or not (which poses the rather banal problem that at this age to spend a free hour in a coffee shop may be much more attractive). For this and other reasons it has been discussed, whether pupils who choose not to attend religious instruction should instead have obligatory lessons of ethics. However, mainly for monetary reasons this alternative instruction in ethics has not been introduced Austria-wide yet.

The contents of the religious instruction as well as the choice of the teachers are an internal affair of the respective religious community,

the only limitation being that the contents (also of school books) are not to be in conflict with the values embodied in the Austrian constitution and are not to be against good mores and the common good (e.g. inciting hatred against others, discrimination against women etc.).

Islamic religious instruction has been introduced in Austria in 1982/83. It took about 15 years to build a pool of qualified teachers (teachers before had no university diplomas or were civil servants of Turkey; they could only stay for 6 years and did not know the language and culture). At present about 50 000 pupils take Islamic religious instruction in Austria.⁷ In 1998 the **Islamic Religious Pedagogical Institute** was founded in Vienna to train teachers for teaching Islamic religion in primary schools. Most of the teachers at the Institute first came from Al-Azhar (as did the director) and taught in Arabic (the first courses in German were held in 2003/04). By now the number of German speaking teachers has increased. This is also due to the fact that the first teachers for Muslim religious education who have a degree from Vienna University are starting their career in schools. To train teachers for secondary education in High Schools a Chair for Islamic Religious Instruction was established at Vienna University in 07/2006, which is now held by Prof. Ednan Aslan who is of Turkish origin. A second chair is to be established for Islamic Theology to train Imams. There are even plans to found an Islamic faculty (at present the Chairs are located at the faculty of pedagogy), in analogy to the Faculty of Roman Catholic and Protestant Theology. This could become a real enrichment for the University of Vienna.

2. 2. Social discrimination and/or Islamophobia?

The legal regulations are thus – satisfactory and even exemplary in Europe. They enable Muslims in Austria to practice their religion in freedom and dignity. This is also the point of view of the Islamic Community in Austria. There are legal cases of dispute, but this holds true for all religious communities and all areas of life, since

the common good and the good of the religious communities have to be brought into a balance in specific cases.

Concerning the question of social discrimination or integration the picture is more diverse and it would be wrong to deny that difficulties exist. Here a detailed analysis is required. As stated above the presence of a large number of immigrants is – compared to the United States or Canada of a rather recent date. The fact that global migrations change societies everywhere has to be internalized by the local population. This is the case all over the world to a degree which often is not realized by the public, e.g. when not only Egyptian, but also Thai migrant workers are working in Libya. The position of these migrant workers is a very precarious all over the world for several reasons: they do the work the local population does not want to do: generally a work of low social status (unskilled labour, housemaids etc.); they lack or have a rather deficient knowledge of the language spoken in their new country, while doing menial jobs they also do not need much. They are foreigners, whose social acceptance by the local population is in general difficult. To add a personal note: my parents were refugees having been expelled from Czechoslovakia in 1945. They spoke German as their native tongue and had a good education. Still it was difficult for them to integrate in the small city they moved to. And this would have been the same all over the world. Social acceptance of people coming from the outside is a complex phenomenon, which has to do with a multitude of factors. It is a well known fact in sociology that minorities tend to be more successful than majorities, since they have to work harder to be accepted.⁸ Thus social and ethnic factors, not to forget gender, are of great importance when social integration is talked about. When low levels of education and social status, ethnic and religious differences and gender discrimination accumulate the situation for the individual becomes particularly difficult.

Another question of importance is whether a particular group of migrants has the intention to settle permanently in the new country.

This in general was not the case with the migrant workers coming from Turkey and the Balkans in the 1970th and 1990th. They wanted to work in Austria, earn money and then return to their home countries. The result is that many migrants live “between two worlds”, with the intention to go back to their country of origin after their working life, an intention which however is seldom realized. An indicator for this is that many migrants build houses in their homelands – only to discover that their children have integrated in their new homeland and do not want to go back.

All these factors give rise to varying degrees of social discrimination against migrants and migrant workers all over the world – independent of religion. Religion and with it also Islam constitutes thus one but by no means the only reason which is responsible for a lack of social acceptance and integration of the Muslim population in Austria. It is thus a multicausal relationship. For this reason the term Islamophobia has to be used carefully. It may even be better to avoid it, since it gives the false impression that Muslims are discriminated against first and foremost because of their religion. This, however, is not the case. There are other reasons for social discrimination which they share with those who migrate to Austria: low social status, gender, and ethnicity. To this religion must be added. But it has to be analysed with care as to which weight is to be given to each of these factors.

In the age of globalization, global political events also have an important influence. It would be naïve to assume otherwise. As unjust as it may be we are never judged only as individuals but also as members of a certain group. The rejection of Christians, e.g. in Pakistan, which has taken rather violent forms recently, is also a consequence of the so called “war against terror” of Christians. The same holds true of Muslims in the West. Terrorists who kill in the name of Islam may be as un-Islamic as Western governments who wage war in Arab states are un-Christian. Suicide bombings however influence the attitude vis-à-vis Muslim citizens. The value study often cited, which shows a significant increase in

the number of Austrian citizens who do not want to have Muslim neighbours has to be seen in this context. It rose significantly between 1999 and 2003, i.e. in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Centre (9/11) and other terrorist attacks in Europe, whereby the formulation of the question posed otherwise might have brought completely different results, e. g. if it had been asked whether one rejects neighbours from Bosnia (mostly Muslim) and from Turkey.

All of this has to be taken into account when one uses the term Islamophobia, which thus is a rather menopausal interpretation for a complex phenomenon and moreover carries with it the tendency to polarize. It is exactly the strategy of the Austrian as well as other populist parties in Europe to interpret the situation caused by migration according to the much cited paradigm of Samuel Huntington as a "clash of civilizations" and to give them a Christian profile. This is against Christian ethics and has been denounced with rare clarity by the Catholic Church, also by the Cardinal of Vienna, Christoph Schönborn, last year in his sermon on Ascension Day speaking up against the advertisements of this party in public.

It is most necessary to stand up against this type of polarization for the sake of global and national peace. We all do have multiple identities of which the religious identity is one, even if it is of great importance to the individual. In our social interaction, however, social status, nationality, gender etc. also play a large role. Discrimination against foreigners, or philosophically speaking the other, is a sad fact. Reducing it is a process in which we should engage. Polarizations are neither in the interest of the receiving society, in this case Austria, nor the migrants themselves.

The most important way to overcome it are personal contacts at all levels – national and international. Statistics show clearly that people who are in personal contact with those of another religion or nationality have considerably less prejudices than those who are not. This shows that xenophobia always has a strong ideological

component, e.g. has nothing to do with reality but with pictures we have in our heads.

3. Initiatives of the Austrian Civil Society and Academia to Reduce Prejudice: Some Examples

At first I briefly want to mention several activities which are sponsored by the Austrian government.

In 2003, 2006 and 2010 the European Imam Conferences were held in Austria in which more than 100 Imams from all over Europe participated and which issued rather remarkable papers. Concerning the position of Muslims in the Austrian society, the final statement of the first Austrian Imam Conference declares: "The status of recognition of Islam in Austria and the practical advantages linked to it, like the right to practice religion freely and openly, the internal autonomy of the Islamic Religious Community, religious instruction in schools and respect for religious affiliation, for instance in the army, are being perceived and highly appreciated by the Muslim citizens." The paper also contains a clear commitment to democracy, the rule of law, pluralism and the condemnation of extremism and fanaticism. It says: "The search for freedom, justice and human dignity is what we have in common with other religions, ideologies and world views." At the end of the document, the Conference calls upon a more active Muslim participation in all areas of the society, a greater emphasis on the Islamic concern about human rights and women's questions and the development of strategies to fight extreme views.⁸

In December 2008 the Austrian Foreign Ministry hosted the international conference "Europe and the Arab world" which was supplemented by several workshops, one of them dealing with the situation of women in different countries. As a follow-up our institute of social ethics organized a conference on "Women's Dignity – Women's Rights" together with the Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in which 35 women from all over the world, academicians

and practitioners, Christian, secular, Muslim and Jewish participated. It was an excellent experience for all the participants and regional workshops are planned to take place in the future.

One of the main concerns must be to give good chances for upward social mobility to young people of different social and religious backgrounds, to enable them to improve their life situation. To mention just two of these projects, called Fatimah and Mustafa project, which have been organized for several years by the Austrian Ministry for Education together with the Muslim Youth Organisation, which is very active in Austria. The Fatimah and Mustafa projects are to teach soft skills, e. g. in rhetoric, conflict resolution, communication skills for young people so that they may better serve their community and the society as a whole and act as role models for others. These courses take several months and those who attended successfully receive their diplomas in a festive ceremony presided by the President of the Islamic Organization of Austria and other dignitaries.

With many programs to support social upward mobility it may be hoped that in a decade when it will be a common sight that people with Arab or Turkish names hold medium or higher positions in the society – prejudices will decrease and social self-confidence will rise. This has been a fact all through Austrian history. 30-40% of the Austrian population are holding names of Slavic or other ethnic origin (e. g. the heads of the Austrian Government Kreisky, Vranitzky, Sinowatz and others) and nobody thinks of them as being non-Austrian. Religion does not play a major role in this process of integration, since it is largely a private affair – with the exception of some new right wing parties which try to play on religious emotions, the churches strongly rejecting this type of manipulation.

One additional remark should be made, however: Religious freedom does have the effect that religion becomes a matter of individual choice. That means that for all religions it becomes a vital question whether they are able to pass on their beliefs to

the next generation. When each and every person can and has to decide for himself or herself, whether he or she will believe in God, how he or she will practice this belief, then religious ties may become rather precarious. Family ties help to keep religious traditions alive, but they are not strong enough to guarantee faith in the long run. There is a famous sociological study of Gabriel Le Bras who already at the beginning of the 20th century wrote that Catholics who come as migrant workers from the countryside to the city lose their faith in short time. The flip side of religious freedom therefore is that the religious communities have actively and intelligently to care for their members, strengthen their faith and at the same time take into account social conditions. This is the prize for religious freedom, even in countries like in Austria, where the public relevance of religions, their visibility and their support (also financially) by the state are rather high.

There is also quite an impressive engagement of the Roman Catholic Church in the area of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. At the end of this part I want to present two projects in which I have been involved personally and name some others.

Some 35 years ago already, that means at a time when interreligious dialogue was not yet en vogue, an Austrian Catholic priest and professor of theology F. Andreas Bsteh started a high level academic initiative also involving politicians and civil society into interreligious dialogue. The first step of this long-term programme was a series of conferences in which the fundamental theological questions were discussed by the best theologians and specialists from both religions. There were conferences held on Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam to better understand how the other religion saw itself in relation to others.⁹ The two volumes on "Islam Questioning Christianity" and vice versa on "Christianity Questioning Islam" are still a rich source for these questions. The second step of this project were two conferences, in which high level representatives from both religions were present from the Austrian, the Christian and the Muslim side, including the late

president Khatami, the Great Mufti of Syria Ahmad Kaftaro, the late Cardinal König from Austria, Bishop George Khader from Mount Liban to name but a few.¹⁰

In the 1990s a new program was initiated after a state visit of the Austrian foreign minister Alois Mock with his then Iranian colleague Velajati to hold specific talks with Muslims from the Shiite tradition. Four conferences took place between 1996 and 2008, on themes of justice, values, peace and the last one on hermeneutics, the proceedings of which were published in several languages.¹¹ In 2002 the state visit of the then president Khatami took place in Vienna. Since one of his wishes was, that an official interreligious dialogue be held at the highest state level, this dialogue took place in the Hofburg. Besides the president of the Austrian Republic, the highest religious representatives (Cardinal Schönborn, the Greek-Orthodox Metropolitan Staikos etc.) several professors of law and theology were present. It was an impressive event, even though it also was a bit different from what we are used to in Austria, since it did not really fit into our perception of the separation of religion and state. Between 2000 and 2008 several Round Tables of Christian-Muslim dialogue (VICIROTA) were organized by F. Bsteh on ethical themes, such as peace, reduction of poverty and education.¹² Their main intention was to find the common values of the two religions and thus a common ground for cooperation and interaction in a globalized world, in which conflicts between religions have become a major threat to world peace.

This programme (in which I was involved from 1995 to 2008) came to an end with a conference in October 2008, which was presided by the present President of the Austrian Republic, Heinz Fischer. We decided that the next step should be a youth programme. This Christian-Muslim Summer School has been organized three times by now in 2006, and then at a bigger scale in 2008 and 2010. At the last session 45 young students after their B. A. from different academic disciplines participated and it forms part of the official programme of Vienna University. The next session of this singular

event which is held in a monastery outside Vienna is planned for July 2012. The academic programme contains courses on introduction into Islam, Christianity and into specific ethical as well as legal questions of international law and institutions. It was again a very good experience, the students showing great openness and awareness of the problems of today's world and being eager to learn about the other's religion.¹³

Last but not least I want to mention the reception given by Cardinal Schönborn at the Archbishopric for the Islamic Communities in Austria each year, which has been very well accepted.

Thus there is an ever widening range of activities from the side of the Catholic Church, but also from the University and Ministries and the Islamic Community itself to bring together people of different faiths from different occupations, academicians, diplomats and agents from civil society, but also simple people to learn more about and from each other, so as to build bridges of good will and to strengthen the common ground in ethics and personal relationships through encounters of various kinds. The number of these activities which are central for integration and peace at the local as well as the world level thus has turned from a small rivulet to a rather impressive stream during the past decades. Much more would still be needed, however, not only for academic but also for very practical purposes. My belief that there is indeed a chance to create better understanding was fortified by the young generation the most intelligent and best of which see the need of encounter and dialogue – and that a peaceful life together can only be promoted **dia-logou** – through the word – fundamentally opposed to violence and hatred of any kind.

4. Perspectives for the Future:

Some Final Reflections of a Christian Theologian

Every man and woman has been created by God in His image. This fundamental Christian belief - which in a similar form is shared by Muslims - is more than mere information. It is an ethical and legal programme. It makes high demands on the responsibility of each human being and each believer. We are to treat the other, every human being, as God's image, His creature, who has been created with dignity and a right to life. In Christianity as well as in Islam, the judgement on our life will depend on whether and how we followed this path. Whether we gave our best to honour God in the other, to act with justice, kindness and love.

In a world in which more than half of the inhabitants belong to one of our two religions the responsibility of their leaders and intellectuals of Christian and Muslim faith is particularly great. If we believe that God is a God of peace – whatever other qualities, if one may say so He has- we have to give serious thought and action to this topic regardless of the difficulties politics put in our ways. We have to find the common ground which allows us to live in peace with each other and work for understanding at many levels, the academic, the civil society and the grass root level. This is not only a demand of our time – it can, as experience shows also inspire our thinking and our beliefs. If we respect the other's religion and beliefs we can learn from each other as long as he or she is honest and acknowledges that God wants us to live together in harmony, following good laws and practices. This will also allow us to make a contribution to the contemporary world. Contrary to this: if religions are primarily seen as inducing violence then the name of God is being compromised and injured. Narrow minded fanaticism does not only do harm to humans but also to the name of God.

Sometimes the forces which promote this programme of peace seem to be rather weak in the face of all the violence, distrust

and hatred that exist. But the good will triumph over the bad, because it is sustained by the grace of God. In this context the biblical story about Abraham pleading with God over Sodom and Gomorrah may teach us a lot (Genesis 18, 16-33). The morality of these cities had fallen to such a low level, with bloodshed and corruption all over that God wanted to destroy them. But Abraham pleaded with God and argued with Him, that it would not be right to destroy the fifty just people in the city together with the unjust. Abraham bargained God step by step down from fifty to ten. And God said: "I will not destroy the city, if there are ten just people living in it." Sodom finally was destroyed because not even ten could be found. But the story may serve as an encouragement that the good is in the eyes of God stronger than the bad, and that those who engage in it not only earn their reward in the other world but also disproportionally influence this world.

Endnotes

¹ A good short account is given by the renowned British sociologist Anthony Giddens, A **Run-Away World**. New edition (London: Profile Books, 2002)

² Peter L. Berger (ed.), **Between Relativism and Fundamentalism. Religious Resources for a Middle Position**, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids 2010. The definition of fundamentalism is difficult: I would define it as the ideological basis of movements, which try to close themselves off from all others, seeing the modern world as corrupt and in decay, striving for a monoreligious and monocultural universe and excluding all others.

³ Cf. in detail Ingeborg Gabriel, Like Rosewater. Reflections on Interreligious Dialogue, in: **Journal of Ecumenical Studies** 45:1, winter 2010, 1-24.

⁴ http://www.integrationsfonds.at/publikationen/zahlen_und_fakten/statistikjahrbuch_2010/bevoelkerung/wer_hat_einen_migrationshintergrund/

⁵ For details see www.derislam.at (in German)

⁶ In general it has to be said that due to history each country in Europe has somewhat different regulations with regard to the relationship of church (religion) and state. Cf. Robbers, Gerhard (ed.), **State and Church in the European Union**, 2. ed., Baden-Baden: Nomos 2005. and Potz, Richard (ed.), **Islam and the European Union**, Leuven: Peeters 2004.

⁷ However, many pupils of the relevant age group do not attend. This has various reasons: Shiites do not want their children to be taught Sunni Islam; Turkish parents prefer that the instruction is given by an Arab or Bosnian - etc.

⁸ Cf. Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, 2 vols. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, London: University of California Press, 1978)

⁹ For the full text see: <http://www.derislam.at/islam.php?name=Themen&pa=showpage&pid=165>

¹⁰ Judaism was not part of the programme, because its relationship to Christianity is different from the other religions (the Bible includes practically all the writings of the Hebrew Bible in the Old Testament) and there are other academic institutions to deal with it.

With regard to the other three world religions Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism the following publications have been issued in the series Contributions to the Theology of Religions (BzR): BzR 1: *Universal Christendom in the face of a plural world* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1976); BzR 2: *God in Christianity and Islam* (Mödling, Verlag St. Gabriel, 2/1992), Arabic edition: Jounieh, 2003; BzR 3: *Salvation in Christianity and Buddhism* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2/1992); BzR 4: *Being as revelation in Christianity and Hinduism* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2/1992); BzR 5: *Dialogue from the core of Christian theology* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1987); BzR 6: *Faith in the search of encounter. A theological programme* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1992); BzR 7: *Listening to His word. Man as a listener to the word of God in Christian and Islamic tradition* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 1992), Arabic edition: Jounieh, 2/1999; BzR 8: *Peace for Humanity. Principles, Problems and Perspectives of the Future as Seen by Muslims and Christians* (New Delhi, 3/1998), Arabic edition: Jounieh, 2/1998, Urdu edition: Lahore, 1997; BzR 9: *One World for All. Foundations of a Socio-Political and Cultural Pluralism from Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (New Delhi, 1999), Arabic edition: Jounieh, 2000, Urdu edition: Lahore, 2003. For a detailed account of this initiative see Ingeborg Gabriel, Like Rosewater, op. cit. 4-10 Cf. Andreas Bsteh (ed.), *Peace for Humanity. Principles, Problems and Perspectives of the Future as Seen by Muslims and Christians* (New Delhi, 3/1998); Andreas Bsteh (ed.), *One World for All. Foundations of a Socio-Political and Cultural Pluralism from Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (New Delhi, 1999).

¹¹ The conference proceedings of these four conferences have been published in German, and partly in Arabic, Farsi and English. Cf. Andreas Bsteh/ Seyed A. Mirdamadi (Hg.), *Justice in international and interreligious relations in Islamic and Christian perspective* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2004); Andreas Bsteh, Seyed A. Mirdamadi (Hg.), *Values – Rights – Duties. Basic issues of a just order of coexistence in Christian and Islamic perspective* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2001); Andreas Bsteh, Seyed A. Akrami, Seyed A. Mirdamadi (Hg.), *Peace, justice, and their being threatened in the contemporary world* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2005). Andreas Bsteh, Seyed A. Akrami, Seyed A. Mirdamadi (Hg.), *Hermeneutics: Topic of the 4th Iranian-Austrian Conference* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2010).

¹² The conference proceedings of these four symposia have been published in German, English, Arabic, and partly in Urdu. Cf. Andreas Bsteh and Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Reading the Signs of the Time. Contemporary Challenges For Christians and Muslims* (1st VICIRoTa) (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2003); Andreas Bsteh, Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Intolerance and Violence. Manifestations–Reasons–Approaches* (2nd Vicirota) (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2004); Andreas Bsteh, Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Poverty and Injustice. Alarming Signs of the Present Crisis in Human Society Worldwide* (3rd VICIRoTa) (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2006); Andreas Bsteh, Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Education for Equality. An Answer to Injustice and Intolerance* (4th VICIRoTa) (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2007).

¹³ For further information see the homepage www.vicisu.com