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Reading the Signs of the Time

Contemporary Challenges for Christians and Muslims

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VERLAG ST. GABRIEL, MÖDLING

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Preface

What is the most important problem humanity is facing on its way into the future and what can be done to overcome it? This important question brought to and united in the city of Vienna from October 19 to 23 in 2000 a small but deeply concerned group of Christians and Muslims coming from different parts of the world, all trying to answer it from their own perspectives. The discussions that followed furnished an opportunity to take up different points of view, ponder over them together and give them a proper place in the common deliberations of the group.

In the course of the dialogue it transpired that despite their different standpoints the participants had a common horizon of shared problems, a sense of being together in the name of God, and a deep religious commitment to the need for common action in respect of the disturbing world affairs. At the end of the meeting it was agreed upon to act as a common study group duty-bound to deal with the problems pinpointed and to work out possible solutions. With this perception and commitment, the group institutionalized its proposed work, named itself as the “Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table” [VICIRoTa] and constituted a small Steering Committee to run its affairs within the framework of its agreed principles.

The genesis of this initiative lies in two international dialogue meets held at St. Gabriel – the first in 1977 on the theme of “The God of Christianity and Islam”, and the other a few years later on “Hearing His Word: Man as the Hearer of the Word of God in Christian and Islamic Traditions”. These meets paved the way for further exploring together the proper relationship between religion and society in view of the problems and tensions faced world-wide. Then began in the capital of Austria a great exercise, later on called the “Vienna Dialogue Process”. Two important international Christian-Islamic dialogue conferences took place in 1993 and 1997 on the themes of “Peace for Humanity” and “One World for All” respectively. In addition, some Iranian and Austrian scholars held two joint conferences, in 1996 at Tehran on “Justice in International and Inter-religious Relations”,

and in 1999 at Vienna on “Values – Rights – Duties: Fundamental Questions of a Just Order of Living Together from Christian and Islamic Perspectives”.

It was with this background that VICIRoTa was born in October 2000, with a view to promoting peace and justice in the world in a fraternal spirit of ‘togetherness in dialogue’, its aim being to uncover spiritual foundations for this great cause locating them in the depths of religious traditions and to translate them into common action based on a shared responsibility towards God and His creation. The communiqué issued at the end outlined VICIRoTa’s aims and objects, ideals and basic policy and plans of action for the future.

The outcome of the deliberations at the founding assembly of this new dialogue forum is being presented in this first volume of a new series of books and monographs proposed to be periodically published under the banner of VICIRoTa.

The contributors to this volume neither could nor wanted to give exhaustive answers to the general question what problems humanity is facing on its way into the future. They have presented their respective perceptions and participated in mutual discussions – and all these are included in the present volume. What is common to all the contributions and discussions is the persuasion that today mankind has arrived at a turning point that is more deep-going and comprehensive than whatever happened before in history. Humanity now finds itself as a single community sharing a common fate. The social processes, impulses and discoveries, conflicts and crises, of the human world are no more restricted to any particular region or people; they now have a global impact. For this reason, all the strategies at all levels – economic, political, and cultural – and all attempts to solve the problems arising out of this global change of social relations can also succeed only if pursued *together*.

Due to the long history of mutual differences, commonness can develop only through a fraternal and cooperative dialogue. This is what VICIRoTa stands and endeavors for – with an unflinching faith in our common God, a firm conviction that what can unite us is and will always remain stronger than whatever can divide us, and a shared belief that a continuing dialogue – which sets out anew day by day avenues of search for what may unite us – is absolutely necessary. This first collection of VICIRoTa debates towards these goals, it is hoped, will make its aims and objects clearer and its endeavors globally acceptable.

On behalf of VICIRoTa we extend our thanks to all who helped in establishing this new international dialogue forum of Christians and Muslims and made the publication of this work possible. Special thanks are due to the Austrian Federal Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Ministry for Science, Education and Culture, and the Municipal Council of the City of Vienna. With gratitude we feel obliged to Professor James S. Rooke for reading the text and for his manifold kind and understanding advice. Our thanks are due also to all those at the St. Gabriel Institute for Theology of Religions who assisted us in this great task including, among others, Mrs. Gertrude Gruber, Mrs. Petra Gerl, and Mag. Brigitte Sonnberger.

May our common endeavors serve the cause of peace in the world. "For both the Christians and the Muslims God is 'God of peace'; they know and believe that whoever wants to serve Him must also serve the cause of peace."

Andreas Bsteh – Tahir Mahmood

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