

**OBITUARY FR. ANDREAS BSTEH SVD:
TO BE CHRISTIAN MEANS TO BE IN DIALOGUE**

“It was the one House of Humanity that stood before our eyes. How to live there in the future, we have all only started to learn. It is this learning process which the Second Vatican Council saw as one of the great tasks of Christianity. We feel obliged to further it particularly in our global congregation *Societas Verbi Divini*.¹ It is with these words that the “History of a Dialogue,” the last work of Fr. Andreas Bsteh (1933–2021), begins summing up the intention of a life-long engagement.

Born in Vienna in the ominous year 1933 (15th October) Andreas Bsteh studied at the Jesuit Theological Faculty of Innsbruck (Austria) with renowned theologians. He entered the *Societas Verbi Divini* (SVD) in 1954. After further studies at the Theological Faculty St. Gabriel he was ordained a priest in the Holy Spirit Church at St. Gabriel’s on May 7th, 1959. It was the year in which the Second Vatican Council had been announced by St. Pope John XXIII on the feast of the conversion of St. Paul (25th January), the date echoing its aim, to bring Christianity and the Catholic world church into dialogue with a radically changing world. The dialogue with major religious traditions was a central point in this programme. It was a new approach that was to open doors that had been closed for centuries and to work towards reconciliation between religions. Christian faith was “to further love and unity among the peoples of the earth” (*Nostra aetate* 1). The declaration *Nostra aetate* (1965) was the design of this vision of openness and dialogue as an essential part of the Christian Catholic mission in our time. It was this new beginning that also inspired the life and work of Fr. Bsteh. He devoted himself to it as a priest, as member of the missionary congregation SVD, professor of fundamental theology (1965–2002) and Dean of the Faculty of Theology St. Gabriel (1971–1986) as well as director of the Institute of Religious Studies (RTI) established there.

The first step on this way, which was still unclear, was the foundation of the Afro-Asiatic Institute in Vienna (closed in 2016), where he acted as a pastoral counsel for the first oversee students coming to Austria in the 1950s and early 1960s. This phase was followed by doctoral studies in Innsbruck with Karl Rahner, his doctoral thesis carrying the title: “On the question of the universality of redemption” (1965). He became professor for fundamental theology in St. Gabriel, as a privileged place of cultural encounters and research. It was this institutional backing as well as the support of his congregation, which—as he often underlined with gratitude—made his engagement possible and gave him the space to develop his ideas on interreligious dialogue. It was to be conducted with three major world religions: Islam, Hindu-

¹ Andreas Bsteh, *Geschichte eines Dialogs. Dialoginitiative St. Gabriel an der Jahrtausendwende*, Mödling 2013, 9. English edition: *History of a Dialogue. St Gabriel Dialogue Initiatives at the Turn of the Millennium*, Mödling 2014.

ism and Buddhism.² As Fr. Bsteh once said: “It was this vision and calling which made me understand why God had called me into the SVD.” This already indicates what made these dialogues so special: They were based on a firm Christian faith and identity as the basis for the acceptance of the religious faiths and identities of others. It is not a hermeneutically untenable idea of neutrality which empowers interreligious dialogue, but the fundamental insight that we each have our own standpoint, but that all these faiths are in need of a deepened understanding in view of the immensity of God and the Divine. This insight is the prerequisite for a humble acceptance of the truth of the other and the ethical imperative of peace between religions.

The second pillar of Fr. Bsteh’s work was that Vatican II showed the emergence of the world church as a demanding reality. It leads to the gigantic task for the Catholic as well as other churches to develop dialogical relationships with other religious traditions. The first of the many volumes to be published therefore rightly has the title: “Universal Christianity in a Plural World.”³ In it, eminent theologians (Karl Rahner, Walter Kasper, etc.) reflect on this new paradigm, thereby demonstrating another important feature of the Vienna Dialogue Process (VDP). Fr. Bsteh despite his personal humbleness was able through persuasive insistence to bring together the best specialists in their respective fields. At the same time, this humility made him not take part in the theological discourse by presenting his own theological position, though he was an excellent theologian himself. He dedicated all his energy and intellectual work to their conception, precise planning as well as the creation of a friendly hospitality for the participants of these conferences, which most often took place in St. Gabriel.

The first series was on “The God of Christianity and Islam” (1977); “Redemption in Christianity and Buddhism” (1981); “Being as Revelation in Christianity and Hinduism” (1983).⁴ The results of this first round of meetings were reflected in the conference: “Dialogue from the Centre of Christian Theology” (1986),⁵ the title expressing the basic intention that was to guide the interreligious dialogues organised in St. Gabriel. The VDP was not only to further mutual respect and understanding. It set its objective higher. It wanted to initiate a process of theological change through the inspiration

² Since it has often been asked why Judaism was not included: The practical and theological answers are, that Clemens Thoma SVD in Lucerne was one of the leading post-Vatican figures on the dialogue with Judaism, and theologically speaking, Judaism cannot be seen as one religion among others for Christianity, but constitutes the basis of its faith.

³ Andreas Bsteh (ed.) *Universales Christentum angesichts einer pluralen Welt*, Mödling 1976.

⁴ Id. (ed.), *Der Gott des Christentums und des Islams*, Mödling 21992, Arabic edition: Jounieh 2003; id. (ed.), *Erlösung in Christentum und Buddhismus*, Mödling 21992; id. (ed.), *Sein als Offenbarung in Christentum und Hinduismus*, Mödling 21992.

⁵ Id. (ed.), *Dialog aus der Mitte christlicher Theologie*, Mödling 1987.

other theologies may give to one's own in a global age. This approach sees all faith traditions in need of encounter so as to deepen their own theological self-understanding. In this sense, interreligious dialogues demand the readiness to have one's own theological notions challenged so as to better understand the unfathomable truth of God. This theological programme was directed against dogmatic closures and the fanaticism and fundamentalism resulting from them.⁶ Though finding common ground was imperative, differences were not to be glided over. This called for an open mind and profound knowledge. The first cycle of conferences on Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism was deepened by a second round that took place in the 1990s thematising questions Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism might pose to Christian theology and vice versa.⁷

In the meantime, however, urgent geopolitical questions changed the course of the before rather marginal field of interreligious dialogue. So, from the early 1990s on Fr. Bsteh concentrated on Christian dialogue with Islam. The decision to do so was not an easy one and took him over a year. It started again with a mapping out of the common anthropological basis of both religions as "listener to God's word."⁸ The then Foreign Minister of Austria, Alois Mock, persuaded him to organise two major conferences in Vienna. With a farsightedness rare in politics, and sadly missing today, he wanted to revive the traditional role of Austria as a bridge to the Near East and the Muslim world. Fr. Bsteh finally agreed to organise the First International Christian-Islamic Conference which took place in April 1993. Its title was "Peace for Humanity."⁹ Thus, the times were changing. It was the year when Samuel Huntington published his politically influential hypothesis of a "Clash of Civilizations"! A second major international conference was organised by the RTI of St. Gabriel in 1997,¹⁰ again in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry.

⁶ Id. (ed.), *Glaube, der Begegnung sucht. Ein theologisches Programm*, Mödling 1992.

⁷ Id. (ed.), *Islam Questioning Christianity. Lectures–Questions–Interventions*; id. (ed.), *Christian Faith in Dialogue with Islam. Lectures–Questions–Interventions*, both Mödling 2007, (German edition 1994, 1996); id. (ed.), *Hinduism Questioning Christianity*; id. (ed.), *Christian Faith in Dialogue with Hindu Religious Traditions*, both Mödling 2007, (German edition 1997, 1998); id. (ed.), *Buddhismus Questioning Christianity*; id. (ed.), *Christian Faith in Dialogue with Buddhism*, both Mödling 2010, (German editions 2000, 2001).

⁸ Id. (ed.), *Hören auf sein Wort. Der Mensch als Hörer des Wortes Gottes in christlicher und islamischer Überlieferung*, Mödling 1992, Arabic edition: Jounieh ²1999.

⁹ Id. (ed.), *Friede für die Menschheit. Grundlagen, Probleme und Zukunftsperspektiven aus islamischer und christlicher Sicht*, Mödling 1994; English edition: Delhi 1998; Arabic edition: Jounieh 1998, Urdu edition: Lahore 1997.

¹⁰ Id. (ed.), *Eine Welt für alle. Grundlagen eines gesellschaftspolitischen und kulturellen Pluralismus in christlicher und islamischer Perspektive*, Mödling 1999, English edition: New Delhi 1999; Arabic edition: Jounieh 2000, Urdu edition: Lahore 2003.

The list of participants in both events reads as a “Who is Who” of those interested in peaceful cooperation between the Western and the Islamic world.

Further Muslim-Christian dialogues were then at the centre of Fr. Bsteh’s work, organised along two different tracks. There was the dialogue with Iranian Shia scholars, an outcome of the official visit of the Iranian Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati to Austria in 1994. The meeting with his Austrian counterpart Alois Mock foresaw inter alia a series of dialogue conferences in Iran and in Austria (1996–2008). The first conference in Teheran in February 1996 was a major political event in the country. It was in its entirety transmitted on state TV! My memory of it includes vivid intellectual debates in a highly ambivalent political atmosphere and restrictions (particularly for me as the only female member of the group). Further conferences were held twice in Vienna (1999, 2008) and once in Teheran (2003), the latter being overshadowed by the beginning of the American-Iraqi war one month later.¹¹ A memorable and rather unique event was the state visit to Austria of the Iranian President Mohammed Khatami in 2002 who wanted to include a public interreligious dialogue into his programme. It took place in the Hofburg with statements of the head of states, the Cardinal of Vienna and other bishops as well as some university professors at the presence of hundreds of spectators.

The second track was a series of meetings on ethical issues on a smaller scale. The Vienna Christian-Islamic Round Table (VICIRoTa) met every second year (2000, 2004 and 2006). Half of the participants were men, half women. All were experts coming from different disciplines (law, sociology, economics, political science, and last but not least theology). The guiding idea was to map out ethical strategies to create a more peaceful world in the future. Since the participants remained more or less the same throughout the process, this led to close relations and allowed for a unique atmosphere of friendship which proved to be also intellectually stimulating.¹² Some of the personalities, with many of whom Fr. Bsteh stayed in contact to the end of his life, are therefore to be named: Professor Aïcha Belarbi, sociologist from

¹¹ Id./Seyed A. Mirdamadi (eds.), *Gerechtigkeit in den internationalen und interreligiösen Beziehungen in islamischer und christlicher Perspektive*, Mödling 1997; Id./Seyed A. Mirdamadi (eds.), *Werte–Rechte–Pflichten. Grundfragen einer gerechten Ordnung des Zusammenlebens in christlicher und islamischer Sicht*, Mödling 2001; Id./Seyed A. Akrami/Seyed A. Mirdamadi (eds.), *Friede, Gerechtigkeit und ihre Bedrohungen in der heutigen Welt*, Mödling 2005. Id./Sayed A. Mirdamadi (eds.), *Hermeneutik*, Mödling 2010. All these publications are also available in Farsi and Arabic.

¹² The conference proceedings have been published in German, English, Arabic, and partly in Urdu; Id./Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Reading the Signs of the Time. Contemporary Challenges for Christians and Muslims* (Mödling 2003); Id./Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Intolerance and Violence. Manifestations–Reasons–Approaches*, Mödling 2004; Id./Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Poverty and Injustice. Alarming Signs of the Present Crisis in Human Society Worldwide*, Mödling 2006; Id./Tahir Mahmood (eds.), *Education for Equality. An Answer to Injustice and Intolerance*, Mödling 2007.

Morocco and Ambassador to the EU; Dr. Nasira Iqbal, judge at the High Court of Pakistan; Bishop Georges Khodr from Mount Lebanon; Professor Tahir Mahmood, legal expert and former secretary of state of India; Dr. Saleha Mahmood, editor of the Journal of Minority Affairs in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; and Professor Mohammed Schabestari, an eminent Shiite theologian from Iran.¹³ As one Jesuit, himself a leading figure in interreligious dialogue, once remarked with admiration: How did Fr. Bsteh get these personalities to join? The VICIRoTA programme concluded with a high-level conference in Vienna in October 2008 with President Khatami as the guest speaker and a Manifesto summing up former publications.¹⁴

The preparatory work for all these events was immense. Fr. Bsteh and his small institute painstakingly managed to shape them making them occasions of true encounters with serious discussions and where friendly human relations could develop. Those who were there carry memories of deep gratitude for these efforts. Experience of other conferences on interreligious dialogue shows that this is by no means a matter of course. A profound attitude of respect cannot be created by the most perfect organisation and any clear vision is a fruit of inner engagement, preparation and prayer, to which the monastic surroundings at St. Gabriel contributed decisively.

The steering committee in 2005 decided to combine the last VICIRoTa (2006) with a Summer School in cooperation with the University of Vienna. The aim was to pass on the findings of the previous dialogues in a three-week course with introductory courses into Christianity and Islam as well as ethical and international legal questions. The first one with twenty-five students was successful and led to the establishment of the Vienna-Christian-Islam Summer University (VICISU) every two years between 2008 and 2018 in the Benedictine Monastery Stift Altenburg (Austria). It was highly encouraging and a sign of hope for Fr. Bsteh to meet the students thrilled by this opportunity to dialogue about their faith and life situations as well as playing football. It was a profound learning experience and many remember the memorable evenings in the courtyard of this beautiful baroque monastery with this welcoming monastic atmosphere, that allowed for interreligious exchange at a deep and existential level.¹⁵

The VDP initiated by Fr. Bsteh remains a benchmark for an interreligious dialogue and there are still theological lessons to be learned from it. In a political situation in which distrust and violence grow between religious communities, and which as Pope Francis writes in *Fratelli tutti* (2020) is close to “a world war in pieces,” requires the reconciliatory power of the Christian faith and interreligious dialogue (as he showed through his many

¹³ The Austrian delegation comprised Professor Richard Potz, Gerhard Luf, Stefan Hammer and Irmgard Marboe from the Faculty of Law, Professor Heinrich Schneider, a political scientist, and myself.

¹⁴ Vienna International Christian-Islamic Round Table Manifesto, Adopted on the Occasion of the 5th VICIRoTa Plenary Meeting at St. Gabriel on 24 October 2008.

¹⁵ <https://www.vicisu.com/>

visits to Muslim countries). Any such events are absorbed by many people, as I know, as water by arid land and as a decisive sign of hope.

At this point a practical note should be added: Andreas Bsteh believed in *bonum diffusivum sui*. He attributed little effort and thought to the distribution of the publications to a wider circle. For his 85th birthday to his great joy many of the works cited above have been put on the homepage of the Institute of Social Ethics (cf. [www.https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/forschung-kooperationen/christlich-muslimischer-dialog/](https://se-ktf.univie.ac.at/forschung-kooperationen/christlich-muslimischer-dialog/)). It would, however, be highly desirable to enhance this process since it may give hope to many readers all over the world in a time where voices are needed worldwide that man for man can and must be a companion and friend and not a wolf.

The last decade of Fr. Bsteh's life was overshadowed by a serious decline in health. It was no less of an achievement that he was able to cultivate kindness, interest in others and gratitude despite suffering and the reduction of his action radius. All who had the honour to work with him will remember him and his work with love, respect and the joy that stems from his good and timely efforts to bring religious believers closer to each other.

Let me finish with one of the aphorisms Fr. Bsteh wrote during the last year of his life: "O welche Gnade, die rechte Frage zur richtigen Zeit zu stellen, um eine gute Antwort zu finden, eine die aufbaut und nicht nur rhetorisch ist ... Sie würde befreien, nicht festnageln, und wirklich etwas bringen, was wir zurecht Zukunft nennen" (Aphorismus 12).¹⁶ His own ability to ask the right questions at the right time should inspire others to follow his path, interreligious dialogue being a work not of decades but of centuries.

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¹⁶ "What a grace to ask the right question at the right time, to find a good answer which edifies and is not only rhetorical. Where is the right answer for this time? The question that liberates, that does not nail us down, but shows new paths to what may rightly be called future" (translation IG).