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“This Is Where the World Holds Its Breath”

International symposium in Melk Abbey with three Nobel Prize winners on the meaning of life

By Susanne Bobek

Nobel Prize winners, theologians, managers: 180 participants – mostly men – came together on Saturday at the Waldzell Meeting in Melk Abbey to explore the search for meaning. Easy answers were not to be expected.

First the participants had to master three journeys in silence through the abbey's garden in order to slow down the pace of the every day grind. The mood was peaceful, concentrated, and full of expectation.

Provincial governor Erwin Pröll, who held the opening speech, admitted honestly that he was thankfully never confronted with these existential questions. Melk Abbey was a kind of recess where one felt “this is where the world holds its breath, a place to think outside the box.” Nowadays ever more people are seeking the genuine in themselves.

Shirin Ebadi, the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner, held a fiery speech, in which she sharply scoured the non-relationship between democracy and religion in the Islamic countries. More and more intellectuals are struggling against their autocratic governments, against terrorists and fundamentalist stone age people.

“This united front has no name, no leader, no place – its place is in the minds of each thinking Muslim who no longer tolerates suppression.”

The only problem is that education is denied the masses and the “correct and true Islam” is not taught. But most long to combine their Muslim existence with democracy and human rights.

She pointed out that in earlier times, Muslims, Christians and Jews in the Middle East had always lived together peacefully and accepted differences in views. All people in all cultures and religions strive for democracy and human rights. “Terror and violence, torture and humiliation are frowned upon in each society and in every belief. When an innocent is killed in the name of Islam then you can be sure that the name of Islam was abused.” The quantum physicist Anton Zeilinger replied: “What does one say when one's heart is overfilled? What can an insignificant natural scientist contribute after this?”

Zeilinger pointed out that he was privileged to have been born in a democracy. As son of an agricultural professor and as only academic child in the village, he was already considered “whacko” back then.

He came into contact with quantum physics only at the end of his studies: “The big things have always been discovered and invented out of curiosity. We know today that there is objective chance. Nothing happens without an underlying reason. This means for me that the world is much more open than we think.” The natural sciences are only at the beginning: “We have only ever scratched the surface. For we cannot answer the question of the nature of things,” says Zeilinger.

New World View Because one cannot differentiate between reality and knowledge, they are two sides of one and the same coin. This new world view goes against pure idealism as well as pure materialism but shouldn't lead to naïve esotericism. "Clear thinking and modesty are needed."

The London Chief Rabbi David J. Goldberg declared that the followers of clergy, no matter in which belief, would have much more in common with each other if they were liberal and more humanitarian. He wants nothing to do with the fundamentalists in his own religion: "I feel more at home with liberal Protestants and Catholics than with a fundamentalist Jew. Compassion for the poor is an article of faith in all religions."