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At the Waldzell Symposium in Melk Abbey, the Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi answers questions on the meaning of life

## Using Your Head for Thinking

*By Susanne Bobek*

Scientists, Nobel Prize winners, artists and managers will come together at a weekend retreat in early September, and in the magnificent setting of Melk Abbey will examine questions on themes such as spirituality and wisdom. The focus will be on one question: What is the meaning of life?

The Iranian Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi is one of the most prominent participants at Melk. The lawyer from Tehran has been campaigning for human rights for more than 20 years. "I don't have any other ambitions," says the lawyer, who made a blitz career as one of the youngest judges in the country under the rule of the Shah. After the revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini, she did not think of leaving the country. She stayed, became a lawyer and over time one of the most important contact points for those persecuted by the regime.

Ebadi does not tire of criticizing the fact that the dictators in Iran only use religion to remain in power. The religious Shiite wears the veil only because she must. "People must stop misusing Islam for their corrupt and destructive interests," Ebadi is quoted as saying in the London-based Arabic newspaper *Al-Shark Al-Awsat*. "They speak of Islamic mentality to contend that women are not able to take part in decision-making. They speak of Islamic economy and thus justify the exploitation of our natural resources. They speak of Islamic education and thus justify the brainwashing of our children and youths. They speak of Islamic language, so that they can pervert it in such a way to serve their own interests."

Shirin Ebadi advises her followers to study the Koran closely so that no one can be lead astray. She believes in a peaceful transition into Democracy. For: "Society changes as soon as the behavior of many in that society changes. And precisely that is happening in ours."

**Religious.** Ebadi believes that religion is a part of humans' lives. She knows that religious convictions influence behavior and also which effect the loss of such convictions can bring with it. And that is why she exacts that no one should force their personal religious attitude on others.

When Shirin Ebadi was presented the invitation to the Waldzell Symposium by the Austrian ambassador in Tehran, she was also shown pictures of Melk Abbey. The Islamic human rights activist immediately noticed the power of this place with the world famous library. Here she will engage in a dialog with Christians and Jews.

"Instead of prescribing to women that they should be covering their heads, we should encourage them to use their heads for thinking," says Ebadi, who believes equal opportunities for women and men is a human right. "We were created equal by Allah. If we fight for equality, then we are doing exactly what Allah wants us to do."