

UPF Europe and the Middle East Partners with WCC for Interfaith Conference

Heiner Handschin and Chantal Chetelat Komagata
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Geneva, Switzerland -- UPF was a co-sponsor of a World Interfaith Harmony Week event with the World Council of Churches.

"Religion in Service to Peace, Human Dignity and Justice for All," was held on February 7, 2023, in the Ecumenical Centre of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

The one-day conference was organized jointly by WCC and the Europe-Middle East branch of UPF's Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), together with Women's Federation for World Peace International and the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace, two organizations that are affiliated with UPF, and local partners Geneva Spiritual Appeal, *Fondation de l'Entre-connaissance* ("Mutual Knowledge Foundation"), Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance, and Fribourg Peace Forum.



The program began with a song performed by the Swiss vocalist **Jayhan**. Then the chair of the conference, **Heiner Handschin**, the coordinator of IAPD for Europe and the Middle East, explained the theme of the conference, emphasizing that in defense of peace, human dignity, and justice for all, there is more common ground than there are differences.

The understanding of one human family under God strongly resembles the United Nations' understanding of humanity as one family, Mr. Handschin said. One of the meeting's purposes was bringing religions together beyond creed and doctrine to solve the current problems of violence, war, polarization and injustice.

He then introduced the main co-sponsor, represented by **Rev. Dr. Kuzipa Nalwamba**, the WCC's program director for unity, mission, and ecumenical formation. She read a letter to the conference participants written by the newly elected WCC general secretary, **Rev. Dr. Jerry Pillay**, who couldn't be present due to conflicting schedules.

Dr. Pillay welcomed the participants to the Ecumenical Centre. In a context in which violence, terrorism, the climate crisis, and religious intolerance are globalized, he said, cooperation among religious players is sustained by gatherings like this which reflect collaborative service to the world.

He mentioned the six areas in which the WCC has been working on an interfaith level: peace in the Middle East, children, stateless people, migration, ecumenical education and formation, as well as all forms of discrimination.

Shared spiritual, moral, and sociocultural values can be found in different religions to promote harmony and propel collective service to peace, dignity and justice for God's people and all God's creation, Dr. Pillay said.



Dr. Katsumi Otsuka, the UPF co-chair for Europe and the Middle East, emphasized that, paradoxically, the pandemic made us realize that we should work together more, as the virus didn't know any borders. Religions could be great advocates for peace, he said, based on respect for human dignity and justice. He quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

Hafid Ouardiri, a member of the Geneva Spiritual Appeal and the president of *Fondation de l'Entre-connaissance*, emphasized the need for harmony among all faiths. He compared interfaith harmony with the diversity in nature that is based on interaction and cooperation of all entities. Religion should never be used in a negative way, to divide or discriminate against anyone, he said. No one possesses a monopoly on truth, and therefore we need each other.

Next, a simple ceremony for unity among all religions took place, in which 15 faith representatives poured water from small containers into one large container. This symbolized the coming together of all in harmony and unity. A very beautiful atmosphere emerged from this symbolic act.

Session I: "Religion in Service to Peace, Human Dignity and Justice for All"

The first session began with singer **Jayhan** performing the Whitney Houston song "The Greatest Love of All." Then the session chairman, **Rabbi Aristide Cornelius De-Carli**, the president of the Interfaith Youth Council of the Geneva Interfaith Intercultural Alliance, introduced the session theme. "Peace, dignity and justice are intimately linked," he said.

Rev. Dr. William A. McComish, dean emeritus of Geneva's St. Peter's Cathedral, gave his talk by video, as he was not able to be present for health reasons. He stated at the outset that all his life he has believed in and worked for interfaith harmony, because he has wanted to be open to other people's ideas and beliefs.

He called religion a positive force for creating harmony and peace, despite strong differences, and said we don't need to abandon our identity to create harmony, cooperation, and peace among all religions.

Interfaith cooperation would be more efficient if it could be institutionalized, he said. The UN could help in this effort. This would allow the UN to bring in many great tools of a faith-based approach, which could lead to an interreligious body within the organization.



Rev. Dr. Abraham Silo Wilar, the WCC program director for interfaith dialogue, spoke about the importance of building bridges among religions and cultures in the current times. As an example, he addressed the difficulties of migrants and displaced people, who are currently among the most vulnerable people in the world.

Treating migrant populations with respect is an absolute must for all governments, which must adopt the virtues promoted by religions and faith communities so that broken migration policies can be fixed on every level, Dr. Wilar said. Efforts at integration surely demand a lot from migrants as well as from host countries. Interfaith and intercultural efforts are needed to improve the situation of the 90 million migrants worldwide.

Mohamed Levrack, deputy director of the Grand Mosque and director of the Islamic Cultural Foundation of Geneva, stated that respect for human dignity and justice for all are strong mandates for the religion of Islam. We must not discriminate against others, according to the Prophet. Justice is of central importance in Islam, and therefore social justice must always be taken into consideration.

These are fundamental values to realize a better world of tomorrow and a sustainable peace beyond the boundaries of one's ethnicity, color, or religion, Mr. Levrack said. Contemporary Islam respects all faith communities without exception.

The valuable contributions of faith communities, faith-based institutions and their leaders, representing 80 percent of the world's population, should be considered by the United Nations as it seeks to solve the world's problems, Mr. Levrack said.

Session II: "Sustaining Peace through Solidarity among Faith Communities"

Francine Bielawski, a communication specialist and member of the board of the Center for Liaison and Information Concerning Spiritual Minorities (CLIMS), was the chair of the second session.

Rabbi François Garai, president of the Geneva Spiritual Appeal, stated that faith can lead to solidarity, which again can lead to peace. He emphasized that religions in our current times, confronted with strong pragmatism and secularism, had to abandon claims that salvation was only possible within the institution.

Having the perspective of openness would allow one to perceive the encounter with the other as enriching, Rabbi Garai said. Offering different ideas and approaches can give us a larger picture of the Divine. Religions should never be an instrument to exclude others, he said. Rather, faith can lead us to think of solidarity with the other, provided that we respect his or her freedom and individuality. Only this double requirement -- solidarity and respect -- can lead us to peace.

Professor Dr. (Emeritus) Adrian Holderegger of the University of Fribourg, the president of the Fribourg Peace Forum and a frequently mandated expert on ethics, started his presentation by focusing on Christian peace ethics.

Most peace ethics have been based on the idea that war and violence were things of the past. The current war and conflict that suddenly erupted between Russia and Ukraine shook up that conviction, he said.

Authoritarian regimes tend to justify violence and even war for the sake of maintaining and possibly expanding their sovereignty, Dr. Holderegger said. This disrespects international law and human rights, as well as rights for self-determination of peoples.

The important pastoral constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* ("Joy and Hope"), reflects the Catholic Church's relationship to the world and therefore also its relationship to political conflicts, aggression, and violence. It defends an ethical pacifism marked by the conviction that conflicts between states should be solved in a non-violent manner. This amounts to a paradigm shift.

The peace ethic of Vatican II, and therefore of the Catholic Church, is based on strengthening international institutions in the sense of conflict prevention and management. Dr. Holderegger defined the task of Christian social ethics as keeping two imperative premises: Non-violence and non-violent resistance must have priority.



Professor Boumediene Benyahia, a renowned Islamic scholar and representative of Sufism, stated that the religious dignitaries present at the conference have a great responsibility. Peace is not negotiable, he said. If all leaders in society unite with this premise, we will see a total change in the world.

Professor Benyahia cited the Sufi philosopher Ibn Arabi, who stated that his religion is love. The question of peace is a question of heart. In Arabic, "heart" means soul. Vertical and horizontal love are essential, he said. Solidarity can be realized only when love is the base for solidarity. True love must be able to impact the world, so that it can overcome our adversities, selfish desires, violence, conflicts, wars, etc.

As the final speaker of the panel, **Professor Dr. Michel Veuthey**, representing the Order of Malta, a Catholic lay religious order, presented a declaration against modern slavery. Although the declaration was signed by many religious leaders in Rome in 2014, slavery remains widespread. In light of this year's 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, he encouraged faith communities to act on this very important mandate that remains to be realized.

Jacques Marion, the UPF co-chair for Europe and the Middle East, concluded the conference by quoting UPF co-founder Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon, who stressed the importance of religious leaders whose great wisdom based on the holy scriptures could contribute significantly to a world of lasting peace.

In this context Mr. Marion reiterated Dr. Moon's call for the creation of an interreligious council at the United Nations, a body that would bring together prominent faith leaders and representatives of important faith-based organizations to create significant changes for the better.

The call for faith representatives to work together was echoed by **Dr. Dieter Schmidt**, president of UPF for Central Europe. As a medical doctor, he emphasized that, just as the harmony between mind and body creates health in a human being, harmony between different peoples creates health in humanity.

In this respect he encouraged further cooperation among faith communities in order to realize a world of lasting peace in our lifetime.