

## UPF Vienna Austria: Faith-Based Organizations Bringing Peace, Preventing Crime

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Vienna, Austria -- UPF International was a co-sponsor of a virtual conference whose two sessions examined the role of faith-based organizations in bringing peace and preventing crime. To see the webinar, [click here](#).

UPF worked together with its constituent association International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace and its partner organization Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations to hold the webinar on February 2, 2021, with the cooperation and support of the LIOS-SOIL Organization and several universities.

### **Session One: Interfaith Cooperation for Securing Peace in the 21st Century**

As the moderator, Dr. Afsar Rathor, a former United Nations diplomat and the president of the Vienna-based LIOS-SOIL Organization, emphasized that the goal of the conference was to provide a platform for an everlasting dialogue between scholars of various religions who can contribute toward educating and changing the mindset of different communities.

Dr. Rathor named the cooperating universities and partners, with a special focus on Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Pakistan, which provided the IT infrastructure.

In the introduction, Peter Haider, the president of UPF-Austria, explained the vision of UPF co-founder Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon for an interreligious council within the United Nations. Members of such a council would speak for all of humanity, supplementing the insights of the world's political leaders.

The first speaker, Professor Dr. Mohammad Nizamuddin from Pakistan, former chairman of the Punjab Higher Education Commission and the vice rector of Superior University, Lahore, proclaimed himself to be a newcomer to this group. With his 25 years of UN experience, he said he is a cynical defender of UN conferences. He stressed the need for intra-faith dialogue, saying that in Pakistan intra-faith groups are killing each other. His recommendation is to respond to real issues in interfaith and intra-faith. He proposed documenting worldwide faith issues, recording violations, focusing on particularly big faith issues and on activism.

Bishop Humphrey Sarfaraz Peters, the Anglican bishop of Peshawar and moderator of the Church of Pakistan, proclaimed that even Mother Nature is crying for peace. As a Christian Pakistani, he described the situation in the border area with Afghanistan. He reported on the cooperation that developed into an interfaith group in Pakistan in 2004, when Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians -- "faith friends" -- started celebrating each other's religious festivals together. The major breakthrough was in 2013, when they celebrated together Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. Interfaith youth camps have led to peaceful coexistence at the grassroots level. Our inner peace is key to outreach, he said; let us become a source of blessing to each other.

Professor Dr. Basmah Ahmed Mohammed Jastaniah from Saudi Arabia, of Umm al-Qura University in

Mecca, opened with a statement by the Swiss theologian Dr. Hans Küng: There is no peace in the world unless there is peace among religions. She claimed difference to be a factor for strengthening relations, not a trigger for conflict. Illustrating that religions have never been the initiators of war, she cited four organizations and then several individuals: Religions for Peace; the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Center for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue; United Religions Initiative; and the Common Word initiative. She stressed the importance of dialogue in agreeing on areas of cooperation.

Professor Dr. Musferah Mehfooz from Pakistan, Department of Islamic Studies, COMSATS University, Lahore, cited the Dalai Lama: No peace among the nations without peace among the religions; no peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions. She stressed the need for contextual understanding of the Quran, also quoting, "Let us come to a common statement between us and you." She said the Muslim world is facing false accusations of violence and extremism due to misinterpretation of the Islamic narrative. "Are we not all children of the same father?" (Malachi). She quoted a number of the prophets and pointed out tolerance as a central theme.

Rev. Professor Dr. Zaka Ahuche Peter, the acting head of the Department of Public Theology, Nigeria, stated that religious leaders should be held responsible for the errors of their followers. What you believe in should be reflected in social interaction. He reminded the audience that the Golden Rule has its expression in Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Sikhism and African religions, e.g., Zulu. Everyone is responsible for his own choice. Religious leaders have an important role to play, he said. Our differences do not have to divide us. Dialogue is important.

Professor Dr. Konul Bunyadzade, head of the Department of Islamic Philosophy, National Academy of Sciences, Azerbaijan, called her country a guarantor of peace in the region. Faith is the internal connection. Geographic location affects the way of thinking. Azerbaijan is a democratic republic that respects Islamic values, she said. It is located at the crossroads of conflicting values, and is multi-confessional and multi-cultural, tolerant in solving its own and regional problems. She referred to a troubled history but claimed that Azerbaijan's soft force of culture and tolerance was climaxed by its national music rising to universal harmony in the International World of Mugham Festival annually.

Dr. Mohammad Ismath Ramzy from Malaysia, a senior lecturer at the University of Malaya (UM), Kuala Lumpur, spoke on the perception of diversity and the role of faith communities in bringing peace. The right perception is important to manage diversity, he said. The core value of all world religions is diversity. Diversity becomes a challenge when it is mismanaged. Race, gender, color differences are meaningless. Wrong perception is very serious among rulers. The proper management of diversity is impossible without perceiving diversity as potential, he said.

Professor Dr. Roida Rzayeva Oktay from Azerbaijan, a department head at the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences, Baku, said interfaith understanding is crucial for development. Modern reality requires a new understanding of dialogue. Tolerance is grounded in the principle of equality. Interfaith understanding is crucial to peace and development, she said.

## **Session Two: The Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Social Support and Combating Crimes**

Dr. Michael Platzer from Austria, the co-chairman of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations, introduced his organization, which was founded a year and a half ago to connect Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist religious leaders and is recognized by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Professor Dr. Ridwan al-Makassary, a research coordinator on public policy, Jayapura, Indonesia, spoke about the role of faith-based organizations in the Papua province of Indonesia, a conflict-ridden area. The history of interfaith dialogue in Indonesia goes back to conflicts between Muslims and Christians in 1965. The goal of this model is to understand each other. A religious leaders' forum is a model of harmony with local wisdom.

Zainab Moin from Pakistan, a lecturer at the Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, discussed the role of faith in social support and combating crimes. Her focus was a discussion based on textual analysis. Peace is defined as freedom from disturbance or conflict, she said. Reconciliation then takes an important role in response to crime in all religions and thus in society.

Sahibzada Sultan Ahmed Ali from Pakistan, the chairman of the research think tank Muslim Institute Islamabad, spoke on the role of faith in combating crime. It is crucial to understand the multiple levels of human capacity. He referred to the Nelson Mandela rules of 2015. Faith plays a major role in human rights, values, peacekeeping. The basic tenets of faith entail truth, justice, benevolence, tolerance, respect, understanding and reconciliation in multicultural societies.

Allapitchay Mohamed Mihlar, from Sri Lanka, the vice principal at Zahira College, Colombo, said that moral values are gradually fading away. It's our moral duty to prevent crime. Faith sublimates the soul

and elevates humans, he said.

Tabassum Parveen from Qatar, a researcher working on the political economy of Arab Gulf states, expressed her belief that no one is born a criminal. Religion plays a central integrating role, she said. There are more religious leaders than health workers, and religious leaders can promote good practices in challenging times, e.g., in fighting the pandemic.



Professor Dr. Shahid Habib from Pakistan, Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan, referred to the Islamic concept of zakat to help the needy, resulting in proper circulation in a society by supporting the needy and thus bringing prosperity to the society. He said he believes that humans are naturally greedy. Islam gives the solution to abolish crime in society and provide support for the poor. Pay to the needy to purify your wealth, he said.

Dr. Suleman Tahir from Pakistan, the vice chairman of Khwaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, which provided the digital technical infrastructure for this conference, referred to the Sufi poet Khwaja Ghulam Fareed, for whom the university is named. Let's work in technology, social justice, and economics to create interfaith harmony, Dr. Tahir said. We should think that we are humanity fulfilling the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, educating the people, accepting others. Let us join hands to help humanity, he said.

Dr. Michael Platzer of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations led the question-and-answer session, which delved further into the core of the issues.

Dr. Thomas Walsh from the United States, the co-chairman of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations and the chairman of UPF International, gave the closing remarks, in which he said we need to realize the tremendous assets in the billions of people and the resurgence of religion worldwide.

In closing, Dr. Afsar Rathor mentioned that 33 countries had participated directly in the seminar, and he thanked the 14 panelists from eight countries as well as the universities which had live-streamed the webinar in their auditoriums and classrooms. He also mentioned a further webinar, scheduled for March 31, 2021, with Pakistani religious leaders and parliamentarians continuing in the spirit of interfaith education.

The National Herald Tribune, a Pakistani English newspaper, also released [this article](#) about the webinar.