

UPF Stuttgart, Germany Observes the International Day of Conscience

Gudrun Hassinen and Hilde Piepenburg
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Stuttgart, Germany -- UPF held an interreligious discussion to mark the International Day of Conscience.

The April 29, 2023, webinar was titled "Here I Stand, I Can Do No Other – The Significance of Conscience as a Moral Compass."

Karl-Christian Hausmann, the chairman of UPF-Germany, moderated the event. He explained the meaning of this UN day, which was established only in 2019 and is celebrated internationally every year on April 5. It is an attempt by the United Nations to raise awareness of the importance of the individual conscience in building a culture of peace.



Christian Haubold, a teacher of Protestant religious education and mathematics, presented the circumstances under which Martin Luther addressed the Diet of Worms on April 18, 1521. The famous quotation "Here I stand and can do no other" was added to the speech later.

Luther's conscience-led decision was based on two pillars, Mr. Haubold said: 1) his insights into the Bible and church history, gleaned through the most up-to-date methods of the humanities of his time and 2) his personal experience of God's love and grace.

Mr. Haubold closed his remarks with a question to stimulate and open the later discussion: Which sources feed the conscience of other "smaller and larger" (everyday) heroes?

Pastor Johannes Bräuchle, a former Protestant youth and community pastor and a member of the Stuttgart municipal council, has been a spokesman for various movements and is included in the "civil courage" list.

He commented on the topic from his perspective as a Christian: The conscience rests in the will of God as an inner compass, with its north as Jesus Christ, the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself, and the Ten Commandments. From a practical point of view, the decision to follow one's conscience must be renewed on a daily basis, and this calls for steadfastness, backbone and the willingness to sometimes swim against the current (mainstream).

Pastor Bräuchle used the metaphor of a compass and magnet to describe the difficulty people have following their conscience: The needle of the compass is deflected under the influence of a strong magnet. When applied to Christians who desire to follow the will of God and Jesus, secular ideas and ideologies in society -- as well as certain people -- act as strong magnets distracting them from their path.



Professor Ulrich Brückner, a political scientist and currently Jean Monnet Professor for European Studies at Stanford University in Berlin, raised some basic questions on the role of the conscience in the political system. What defines us today as human beings, as possessors not only of reason but also of emotion and intuition, in an extremely individualistic environment? How does a community orient itself? What role does conscience play in politics?

He quoted Section 38 of the Basic Law (Germany's constitution), by which members of the German parliament are not bound by orders and instructions but are subject to their conscience alone. The reality, however, is that members of parliament would have to weigh their conscience in consideration of the party line that they agreed to on joining that party, as well as the groups they represent, i.e., not only as representatives of the people as a whole "but possibly also the church, a trade union or a lobby."

"Politics opens up the scope to apply the conscience, but is at the same time restrictive," Professor Brückner remarked, because the political community in the Federal Republic of Germany is organized in such a way that decisions are influenced by conflicting goals such as freedom and security or short-term versus long-term goals. If one asks the artificial intelligence ChatGPT, cultural influences are clearly decisive for the conscience. Thus, it appears, as Pastor Bräuchle also remarked, that all humans are equipped with a conscience, but it is shaped by the environment.

Professor Brückner stated that the conscience may be regarded as culturally, divinely, or biologically conceived, and the question arises: "Is there a central core of the conscience, which all humans have in common?" He ended his talk with the challenging hypothesis: "If each person were to follow the freedom of his conscience, there would be more, not fewer, conflicts."

The ensuing question-and-answer session, moderated by **Gudrun Hassinen**, offered a great deal of material to further explore on the topic of the conscience and its role in improving the quality of life on the level of the individual, societal and political systems.

(Translated from German by Catriona Valenta.)

Link to recording: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbUUEgugjSk