

World Interfaith Harmony Week in Vienna
UPF Austria, Vienna February 9th, 2012
Peter Haider



Two Buddhist nuns from the **Fo-Guang-Shan temple**, which had opened a year ago in Vienna, chanted the “Heart Sutra” to open the „World Interfaith Harmony Week” commemorative event of UPF Austria of February 9th, 2012. They explained that this beautiful recitation was dedicated towards peace in the world.



After welcoming remarks by the President of UPF-Austria, Mr. Peter Haider and the showing of a recently released Video on UPF activities during the past year, **Dr. Ismail Nawaishe**, a Vienna-based medical doctor from Jordan explained shortly about the religious situation in his country. It was His Majesty, King Abdulla II. bin Al Hussein from Jordan, who introduced the idea of a „World Interfaith harmony Week“ for the first time to the United Nations. It was then accepted and supported by the General Assembly shortly afterwards. Dr. Nawaishe emphasized that in Jordan Muslims and Christians used to live together without conflict, visiting each other during religious Holy Days.



The main program of the evening was a panel discussion of representatives of the generation under 30. The first speaker was **Ruwan Jeewantha Fernando**, president of the Austria-Sri Lanka Society. He gave a short overview on the religious situation and the culture of his country: Buddhism is the prevalent religion there. It spread to Sri Lanka in the early period of its existence. Therefore 70% of the population is Buddhist. But there are also Muslims, Hindus and Christians. He himself was raised as a Catholic and grew up with his Buddhist friends. They didn't know any conflict. Later he studied theology and moved to Austria where he joined the monastery of Heiligenkreuz, which recently became famous for producing with Universal Music the album “chants - music for paradise”, Gregorian chants which hit the charts of popular music. But he left it again and went back to his country to serve his people. He got married, and his wife is a Buddhist. They had a Christian and a Buddhist wedding celebration. “I never felt that I did anything against my beliefs for: “Deus est caritas – God is love!” Mr. Jeewantha explained, and he also stated that “Once you feel God's love, you cannot fight against other religions”. Mr. Jeewantha came with his wife and their baby girl to the event.



The second speaker was **Ana Govedarica**, a religion teacher of the Serbian-Orthodox Church. Her parents came from Bosnia-Herzegovina. She was born and raised in Vienna, but she feels that she has two identities: the Bosnian-Herzegovinian and the Austrian. She learned about the Serbian-Orthodox religion from her father, who taught her the traditions of their original home country.

Anna reflected: "For the Serbians and Bosnians who live in Vienna the Orthodox Church is more than a religion. When they arrive here the religious community serves as an information pool, which helps them to settle down in the new environment. Also, whenever they visit the Church they meet their compatriots, they cook their food and they feel they've got a little bit of their home country in a not always familiar environment. That's why religion is more important for most of the immigrants than it is for the Austrians, where the Catholic Church is faced with a high number of believers leaving the church each year. That's probably one reason why the Catholic Church handed over several church buildings to different Orthodox Church communities during the last 20 years.

The next speaker was **Akio Friesacher**, an 18 year old high school graduate, who had spent six months in South Africa as part of an exchange program of his school. He himself grew up in two cultures by having a Japanese mum and an Austrian dad.

In South Africa he experienced a great variety of cultures and religions which he enjoyed very much. "The first month I lived with a Muslim family, the rest of the time with a Christian family. At school Muslim children sat beside Christians, but there were no conflicts." Religion played an important role at school: Every morning would start with a prayer in one of the religious traditions of the children present. Also, moral education was emphasized a lot, even by the mathematics teacher. They even had a subject on "Life Orientation", where teachers taught how to live a good and meaningful life.

As many pupils came from a poor background they were much more eager to study hard and to be successful than pupils in Western countries usually are. Even with 40-50 pupils in one classroom there was mutual respect and the feeling of belonging together. In conclusion Akio stated that he could learn a lot about other religions and cultures during that six months stay in South Africa.



Minas Sweha from the Coptic Church of Vienna explained some important facts about the Coptic people: Egypt (Coptic means "Egypt") was christianized by the apostle Marc, thus being one of the first Christian countries in the world. The Coptic culture has preserved many elements of the ancient Egypt culture, such as the Coptic calendar, which is practically the ancient pharaonic calendar, with the new year starting on 11th of September. Also their Christian hymns go back to the Egypt hymns which people used to sing for the pharaohs.

The Coptic Church is known for having been the birthplace of monasticism. This tradition started with Saint Antonius the Great, who was called by Jesus while praying in the church. We can find many monasteries in the Coptic culture. Also, the Coptic Church is a Church of martyrs, until this day. Jesus' teaching of loving one's enemy has always been the central teaching for them.

There are three Coptic churches in Vienna and one monastery. The young generation is well integrated in the church communities, because also for them going to church means coming home to their own culture. When riots occurred in Egypt and many Coptic people were killed, the Coptic youth organized a protest march with the Roman Catholic Cardinal attending. They learned that it takes a lot of effort to organize such a public event.

Marlies Haider, a Tourism Management student, has spent two years in Oceania, organizing interreligious and intercultural activities as a UPF youth program. She was part of an international team of young people who did service work on the Solomon Islands, the Fiji Islands, Australia and New Zealand.

Marlies explained some of their activities, such as renovating or rebuilding kindergartens and schools or building a bridge in rural areas. Part of their strategy was to involve the local community, which meant to cooperate with different Christian groups. Through their common service work they could create beautiful harmony between the different Christian churches. They also introduced lectures on character development in schools, a program which was gladly accepted by most of the schools.

Marlies and her group were specially impressed by the religious attitude of the people of Oceania: Most of them are Christians, and on Sunday morning you would not see people on the street, because everybody is attending the service at Church, including the young generation. Because of the limited time Marlies could not report all her activities.

After these presentations Ewald Schenkermayr, who had introduced the speakers, asked each of them to shortly summarize what the World Interfaith Harmony Week means to them.

Ana Govedarica said that for her it is most important that love is above all. She quoted the Serbian-Orthodox Patriarch, who used to say: "First comes the human being the religion comes second!"

Akio Friesacher: "Religious harmony should not be restricted to this one week. It should be brought into our daily life."

The **Coptic representative** said: "In Egypt there is no religious harmony yet at the moment. For us this is a dream which hopefully comes true in the future."

Marlies Haider: "Every religion has a core teaching, which coincides largely with other religions. We should concentrate on these core teachings."

Mr. Jeewantha from Sri Lanka answered one question from the audience: how do they educate their daughter? They baptized her, his Buddhist wife doing most of the preparations for the ceremony, as she knew this meant a lot for her husband and would benefit their little daughter.

As the evening progressed the people moved on to the buffet. The fact that more than 70 guests attended the meeting on this really cold winter day showed the importance of this newly installed UN project of a "World Interfaith Harmony Week" and encouraged us to continue with interreligious programs. Also the fact that most of the speakers were young people helped to create a lot of attentive listening from the audience.