

UPF Austria's annual conference titled: Building a Peace Narrative at a time of Global Crisis - The Contribution of Religion

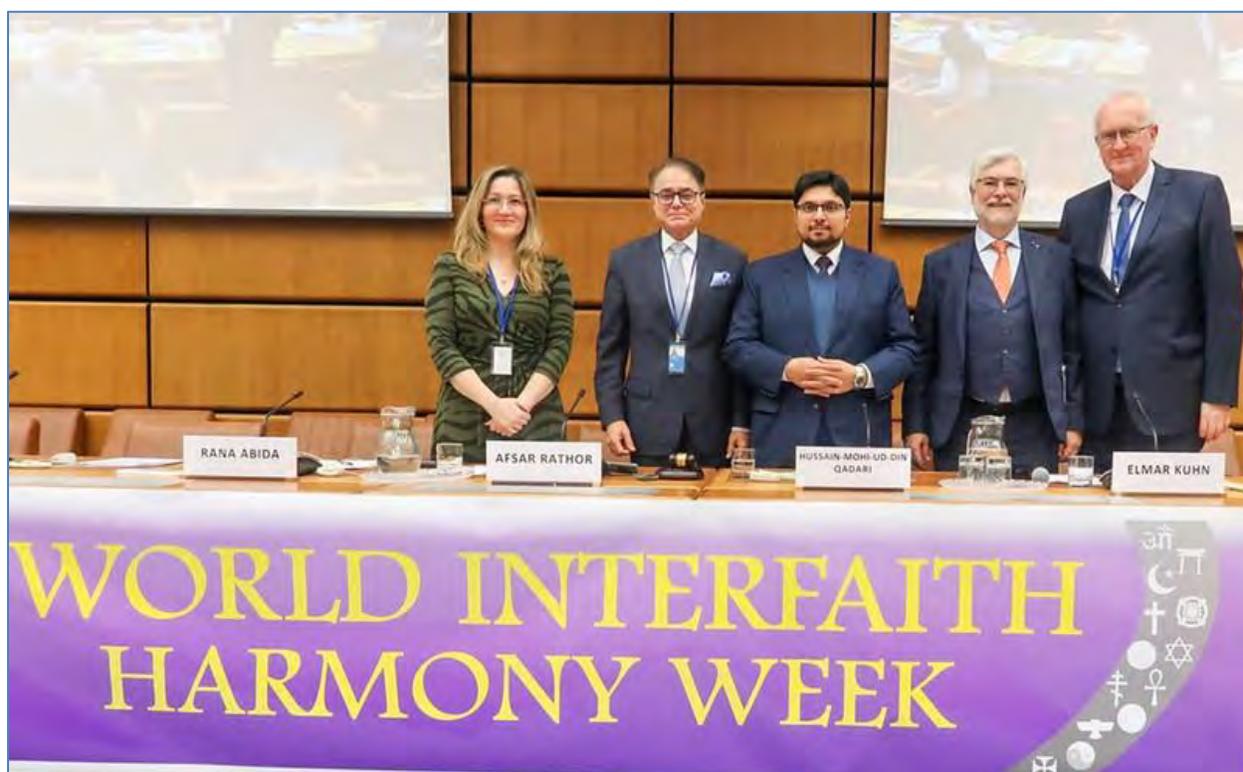
Peter Haider
February 2, 2024



Mr Peter Haider, President, Universal Peace Federation, Austria, welcomed everyone to the conference.

UPF Austria launched its annual conference entitled: "Building a Peace Narrative at a time of Global Crisis: The Contribution of Religion" at the UN in Vienna celebrating the World Interfaith Harmony Week on Friday Feb, 2nd 2024 with 200 guests attending.

Mr Peter Haider, President, Universal Peace Federation, Austria first thanked the panellists, participants, sponsors, and contributors. He highlighted the background of the World Interfaith Harmony Week, first proposed by King Abdullah II of Jordan in September 2010, and unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly the following month.



Left to Right: H.E. Ms. Rana Abida; Dr. Afsar Rathor; Prof. Dr. Hussain-Mohi-Ud-Din Qadari; Prof. Dr. Elmar Kuhn; Mr. Peter Haider

Referring to the need for enlightened people of different faiths who can draw on aspects of their traditions to contribute to society's wellbeing, he said that UPF and its Peace Ambassadors have celebrated the week annually since 2013 to encourage understanding, respect, and cooperation for the well-being of society and world peace.

Considering the current global crises caused by wars and climate change, Mr Haider reiterated the urgent need for religions to build a peace narrative to overcome mistrust and promote dialogue, cooperation, prosperity, and peace. In conclusion, he posed the question to the panel: How can religions contribute to the peace narrative?



The event took place at the Vienna International Centre (United Nations)

Dr Asfar Rathor, former UN diplomat, moderator of the first session, welcomed all contributors and participants and referred to the theme of building a peace narrative in a global crisis and the role of religion and the UN SDGs in achieving peace. Religions can support sustainable development and overcome poverty and environmental degradation by promoting compassion, generosity, care, and protection for the environment. Such values advance social and economic well-being by raising awareness and helping to create a sustainable world. Dr Rathor mentioned the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014-2015, where Christian and Muslim religious leaders successfully transformed the message of fear from the government and health agencies into a message of hope and compassion.

Dr Rathor concludes that UN agencies, realising that most people have a religious affiliation, now work in closer partnership with local community faith leaders to help resolve conflicts.

Jean-Luc Lemahieu, UNODOC Director, Policy Analysis and Public Affairs, emphasised the need to search for common ground in times of turmoil. Referring to the pessimistic narratives of war, conflict, climate change, and the refugee crisis, he said the world should hear optimistic narratives as 25% of the global population is children under 18. However, Africa, with a median age of 18 years, has the lowest life expectancy. Hence, the youth, who hear pessimistic narratives, escape through migration, crime, radicalisation, or drugs. He believes that religion can fill the void for an optimistic narrative of peace and tolerance. The UN annual World Interfaith Harmony Week promotes dialogue, understanding, and cooperation among people of various faiths; it fosters respect, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. It encourages interfaith activities to promote a harmonious and inclusive society based on shared values of compassion, love, and respect.

This optimistic peace narrative of religion counters extremist hate narratives, addressing the root causes of social and economic inequality by promoting justice and compassion; this encourages inclusive development and social cohesion. Mr. Lemahieu emphasised the need to cooperate with international organisations, such as UNODC, which deals with transnational crime, focusing on the youth - the principal victims. In conclusion, he highlights the need to embrace the universally shared values promoted by all religions to foster dialogue and peace.

HE Ms Rana Abida, Chargé d'Affaires of the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan to Austria, began with

the Muslim peace greeting and emphasised the need for religion and coordinated multilateral action to address multiple global crises and cited HM King Abdulla that 'no country can face these crises and provide for its future in isolation.' Highlighting the central role of the UN, she said the key lies in using its tools with respect and humility and learning from each other. Amid turbulence in the world, she said Islam calls for harmony, coexistence, and peace. However, many outlaws exploit the true teaching of Islam and engage in terrorism. Basic human rights should be enjoyed by all, including Palestinians.

Ms Abida stressed the need for interreligious harmony to overcome mistrust between people of different faiths. This goes together with securing peace and overcoming poverty and injustice since humanity is bound together by mutual interests and shared commandments to love God and neighbour. Concluding, she called on the global community to come together to create world peace.



Left to Right: Ms. Ira Lauren; Ms. Elisabeth Maria Ziegler-Duregger; Dr. Dieter Schmidt; Prof. Dr. Ille Gebeshuber; Ms. Marlies Ladstätter; Prof. Dr. Manjola Zaçellari; Dr. Joshua Sinclair; Mr. Peter Haider

Univ.-Prof. D.Dr. Johannes Huber, Theologian; Professor of Endocrinology and Interdisciplinary Gynaecology; Author of several books, speaking as a gynaecologist and a Christian, approached the topic of forgiveness from three perspectives and introduced his address by referring to the end of the Lord's Prayer.

Firstly, Dr Huber focused on the historical aspect. He highlighted situations in European history where forgiveness was exercised: the Treaty of Westphalia; the Edict of Nantes (Henry IV); and Louis XVIII to the murderers of his brother Louis XVI. The Austrian philosopher Rudolf Burger suggested that 'You shall forgive' be the 11th Commandment. Dr Huber mentioned that forgiveness originates from the Greek word 'amnesia,' which Christianity transformed to 'forgiveness'. It has become an essential aspect of Christian faith, which, if practised, can eliminate much misery.

Secondly, Dr Huber focused on the religious aspect, where we should be aware of our personal inborn corruption as highlighted by St. Augustine, who recommended daily examination of conscience. European philosophers (Fichte, Schelling, and Goethe) were also influenced by St Augustine's writing. Dr Huber concluded that personal daily reflection on our actions helps us to achieve peace for ourselves and others.

Thirdly, Dr Huber focused on the scientific perspective. He mentioned Nobel physicist, Anton Zeilinger, who said the beginning of the Gospel of John could be rewritten 'In the beginning was *the Information*' instead of *the Word*'. If the *Information* for all elements and each person was always there, it will be there after our body decays. As part of the greater whole, the universe, and the very small, the quanta, our actions remain stored for eternity.

Referring to other Nobel Prize physicists, he remarked that science, while not proving transcendence itself, indicates it is 'intellectually appropriate to believe in the transcendental' and that there is a quantum code where everything is stored for eternity.

Finally, Dr Huber mentioned the French phrase for dying, 'rendre l'âme', which means 'to return our soul'. The key question for every believer is the level of intactness of our soul when it is returned. He concluded that this was the main reason to seek peace and goodness.

Prof. Dr Hussain-Mohi-Ud-Din Qadari, Deputy Chair Minhaj University, Lahore, Pakistan, stated that relationships between faith communities should be analysed from various viewpoints: one's own faith perspective; the historical relationship and interaction between the faith communities; the laws and statements in religious texts about other faiths; and traditions of other religious founders.

Prof Qadari analysed relationships with other monotheistic faiths from the Islamic perspective based on writings in the Koran, sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, and historical relationships with Jewish and Christian communities. Referencing the Koran, Dr Qadari said all three monotheistic religions are equally respected by God and all the major prophets are equal before God. The Koran praises the qualities of both Jewish and Christian communities and promotes interfaith relationships. Prophet Mohammed encouraged persecuted Muslims to find refuge in a Christian community under a just Christian ruler. Both the Koran and Prophet Mohammed support freedom of worship for minority and majority faiths.

Regarding his home country, he said the Pakistani Constitution protects the rights of minorities. The problems besetting Pakistan, however, are due to the mindset of narrow-minded conservatism. In conclusion, he called for a movement of love to overcome this mindset and to revive the times when Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths lived together in harmony and respect.



200 guests attended the conference celebrating World Interfaith Harmony Week at the UN in Vienna

Prof. Dr. Elmar Kuhn, President, Coalition of Faith-Based Organisations, Central-Europe, first thanked the panellists for enriching his knowledge of history, essential for understanding the present and envisioning the future. His presentation focused on the future and how society can counteract hate narratives based on disinformation.

All are vulnerable to such distorted narratives such as the false narratives of the Koran by ISIS and Hamas and subsequent terror attacks as well as the Christians' false narrative of Jews, resulting in the pogroms of the Middle Ages. This begs the question how civil and religious groups can counter such false narratives.

He believes logical arguments cannot overcome the extremist's distorted image of reality. Such hate narratives destroy the rational basis of the listening and debating culture, built in Europe from the time of Thomas Aquinas, through Erasmus, to Kant and Voltaire, resulting in our current democratic culture of dialogue.

Now, he is convinced we must go beyond the arguments of reason and debate to reach the arguments of faith and belief. Religions must present the narrative of life, hope, and eternity, to motivate reconciliation. Bridges of hope and tolerance can rewrite negative false narratives. The failure of religions to act wisely allows false narratives to develop. Similarly, the failure of the UN to find compromises through cooperation allows conflicts to continue.

Prof. Kuhn sees hope for the future through religious and ethical value-based education of our youth. The practise of dialogue and respect in schools and universities prepares youth for civil society and the development of positive peace narratives. Religious communities need to initiate interfaith dialogue,

where neither side denies its identity but sincerely seeks reconciliation. In conclusion, he stressed the need to replace negative narratives of hate with positive narrative of life, hope and reconciliation through ethical and faith-based education, showing respect for the other.

Video recording of the first session.



Left to Right: Dr. Afsar Rathor; Prof. Dr. Hussain-Mohi-Ud-Din Qadari; Mr. Peter Haider

Left to Right: Ms. Maria Pammer; Prof. Dr. Ille Gebeshuber; Mr. Peter Haider

The second session of the conference started with the anthem of the **Inter-religious Peace Choir `Peace Prayer Mandela`** led by **Ira Lauren**, which created the right atmosphere for the upcoming presentations and discussions.

The session was elegantly moderated from **Marlies Ladstätter, Representative of IAYSP Europe**, who emphasised the importance of finding inner peace prior to searching for peace around us and the world.

The first panellist, **Prof. Dr. Gebeshuber from the Institute of Applied Physics at the Technical University in Vienna and President of the Austrian Association of Catholic Academics**, addressed some of the most complex issues that are of major concern for the world in the current situation, such as the ongoing conflicts, climate change, population growth along with the decline of democratic values in the face of technological developments which in turn lead to social inequalities. Professor Gebeshuber emphasised the need for immediate solutions by taking a thousand small steps that lead to clear plans for a sustainable future, rather than delayed actions. She highlighted the necessity of creating peace narratives that derive from the truth, compassion and respect for life.

The next speaker, **Prof. Dr. Manjola Zacellari, Professor of Linguistics (Multilingualism and Intercultural Dialogue) at the Aleksander Moisiu University in Durres, Albania**, addressed the unique case of interreligious harmony and cooperation in Albania, a country known for its religious tolerance.

Prof. Zacellari mentioned some of the key factors that have contributed to this phenomenon, such as a strong national identity which is above any religious identity, due to the historical context of the country; the importance of the family as a key factor for promoting interreligious harmony and various educational initiatives that aim to promote such values. She emphasised the importance of concrete measures, both on an individual and institutional level to maintain the principles of inter-religious harmony and tolerance.

The session continued with Ms. **Elisabeth Maria Ziegler-Duregger, representative of URI Austria, Association "Education Brings Peace"** who presented her initiative and experience with **URI (United Religions Initiative)**, a global organization that promotes cooperation beyond religious identities and differences.

One of their main projects is helping and supporting children, women and the elderly living in tents in northern Syria, by supplying them with food, water and sanitation. In addition, Ms. Ziegler-Duregger introduced a tree-planting project in war torn Syria as a symbol of hope for the future. In her speech she called for a global debate on the responsibility of those that support the military actions and recommended holding individuals personally accountable through clear legislation. She considers the Interreligious

Harmony Week as a starting point towards important further discussions.

Dr. Joshua Sinclair, an American writer, filmmaker, actor, director and medical doctor, the fourth panellist, gave a thought-provoking speech by sharing a compelling anecdote about a visit to the Vienna Zoo. He recounted an encounter with a gorilla through which he explored the concept of suffering and its connection to the human experience. Dr. Sinclair delved into the hypothetical notion of the complete abolition of suffering and questioned the implications for art, literature, music and religious texts. He emphasized that the essence of peace is to understand and embrace suffering. With references to renowned poets and writers such as T.S. Eliot and Oscar Wilde, Dr. Sinclair explored the profound effect of suffering on human creativity and spiritual growth.

He challenged the audience to move beyond theological discussions and focus on concrete actions that address immediate needs. Drawing parallels between different religious traditions, Dr. Sinclair emphasized the importance of showing love and compassion through practical means. The true touchstone for religious teachings is their effectiveness in alleviating the suffering of the marginalized, vulnerable and needy. Dr. Sinclair concluded his speech with a poignant quote from Oscar Wilde about Christ's ability to bring peace and comfort and challenged the audience to reflect on their own impact on the lives of others; are they making a difference in the world and bringing peace to the lives they touch? In essence, Dr. Joshua Sinclair's speech called for a shift from theoretical debates about religion to practical demonstrations of love and compassion. For the transformative power of individual action can promote peace and alleviate suffering.

The last speaker was **Dr. Dieter Schmidt, medical doctor and Chairman of UPF in Central Europe**. As a follower of UPF founder, the late Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon, Dr. Schmidt was involved in activities leading to the fall of the Berlin Wall. He recalled that the movement for the reunification of Germany began in the churches in East Germany, where people educated in atheism and communism, prayed silently and stood in front of soldiers with loaded guns. This movement grew to 100,000 people chanting "We are the people". For him, the essence of unification lay in the power of Almighty God who ensured that there was no bloodshed. The purpose of the UN, where we are now, is to create world peace. We must go beyond our national interests and realize the goal of all world religions to create world peace. He remembered a rally for peace in Jerusalem in 2002 as part of the Middle East Peace Initiative and spoke about his impressions of two visits to Ukraine. Instead of simply following the evening news, he felt the suffering of an entire people. People who live the essence of religions can bring peace by recognizing that we are one family under God. In Vienna in 2018, a rally with the message "Peace begins with me" was held. Not institutions, but love will bring peace, and love is learned in the family by living for the sake of others, beyond the boundaries of nations and religions. We cannot wait any longer but must bring true peace rooted in love.



Video recording of the second session.