

UPF International, New York: Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations' Webinar

Thomas G. Walsh
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UPF International, New York -- On July 28, 2020, the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations held a web conference titled "In Search of Social Justice: Criminal Justice Reform and the Restoration of Solidarity and Trust in our Communities." The conference had about 100 attendees.

Dr. Thomas Walsh (Chair, UPF-International; Co-Chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) gave opening remarks. The recent killing of George Floyd by a police officer in the United States has triggered widespread protests and demonstrations, both in the United States and globally, calling for an end to racism and police brutality, as well as demanding criminal justice reform. Hoped-for reforms include greater accountability for offending police officers, ending choke holds, defunding of police, and a broad range of reforms that cut across a wide spectrum of society. Emotions are raw, Dr. Walsh noted, and polarization is at a peak. He asked, What can be done to support criminal justice reform and to restore or establish greater solidarity and trust in multi-racial, multi-ethnic societies?



Panelists

Hon. Danny Davis (U.S. House of Representatives, D-Illinois) spoke first. In spite of being the world's wealthiest nation, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. The U.S. Christian heritage, Honorable Davis contended, places a high value on both justice and redemption, but the criminal justice system falls short with regard to the latter ideal: It tends to punish criminals even after their time has been served, shutting them out of public services and employment. Honorable Davis expressed hope that change is on its way.

Rev. Amos C. Brown (Senior Pastor, Third Baptist Church, San Francisco) followed with his remarks. Reverend Brown, who grew up in Arkansas, recalled learning of the lynching death of Emmett Till, a black 14-year-old, in 1955: Two white men murdered Till because a white woman lied that he had made a pass at her. The roots of racism run deep, he reflected: Aristotle, in the fourth century BC, wrote about the dark-skinned peoples of Africa as if they were inferior and incapable of governing themselves. Reverend Brown pointed to four great foundational evils holding America back: racism, materialism, militarism, and nationalism. These evils are given life by lies about America's history and its present. He encouraged reconciliation through programs and initiatives to deal with the economic and cultural fallout of racism.

Dr. Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati (President, Divine Shakti Foundation) spoke from the banks of the River Ganges in India. He explained that we are seeing the darkness of our present situation displaced by the light of people organizing to put an end to it. Darkness can be defeated when people have the courage to look at it. The United States is divided right now, with incredible technology and power but no direction. We need to transform our values, he said, from rugged individualism to a collective approach. We must apply our energy not only to the movements and policies we oppose, but also to what we are supporting.



Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf (Founder, Cordoba Institute) said that there are three major sources of power: political, economic, and religious. In a democratic country like the United States, the people have political power and are able to make their voices heard. It is also necessary for people to influence the business community. Imam Rauf indicated the third area, religion, as particularly neglected but very important. Religious people must elevate Christian values of forgiveness, charity, and mercy and expose the un-Christian rejection of those values by American Christian leaders. For example, Christ provided health care for free, yet many who claim to walk in Christ's footsteps oppose the expansion of public health care. He concluded by advocating that we call out the "wolves in sheep's clothing."

Rev. Dr. Levi Bautista (Assistant General Secretary for UN Ministry, United Methodist Church) quoted Cornel West, an African-American philosopher, saying "justice is what love looks like in public." He said that what is needed is restorative justice: justice that stops rather than perpetuates the cycle of systemic evil. Social and ecological justice are rooted in reverence for God and the divine, he noted. Processes in society must be life-giving and life-restoring. Interreligious, intergovernmental, multilateral partnerships are vital in order to achieve an inclusive, free, and prosperous world.

Dr. Ibrahim Salama (Chief, Human Rights Treaties Branch Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) was the last to speak. Law enforcement demands a fear-based compliance. Religion, on the other hand, promotes a compliance based in solidarity and cooperation. The Faith-for-Rights initiative seeks to unify faith and justice by promoting common, overarching values shared by most religious groups. Through these values, he said, communities can be restored and justice achieved. The coronavirus crisis is a paradox, he observed; we must be distant from one-another in order to protect one-another. Spiritual unity is expressed through physical separation.

Dr. Michael Platzer (Co-Chair, Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations) gave a brief farewell statement to conclude the webinar and announced that August 12 would be the date for the next Faith-Based Organizations webinar, dealing with the human rights of people who are incarcerated.