

UPF Europe and Middle East's Peace Talks: The Role of Faith in Times of Crisis

Jacques Marion
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Paris, France -- The first "Peace Talk" organized by UPF for the Europe/Middle East region focused on "The Role of Faith in Times of Crisis."

The online event, held on May 12, 2020, welcomed more than 200 participants from over 50 countries.

The panelists were:

Martina Viktorie Kopecká, a minister of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, Czech Republic

Rabbi Reuven Khaskin, founding director of Jewish Explorer, United States

Sheikh Nuru Mohammed, Shia minister of religion, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Pandit Krishna Kripa Dasa (Juan Carlos Ramchandani), president of the Hindu Federation, Spain.

Mr. David Fraser-Harris, the secretary general of UPF for the Middle East, was the host of the webinar.

Mr. Jacques Marion, the president of UPF for Europe and the Middle East, stated in his opening remarks that religious leaders have a role to play now that the world is at a turning point. He expressed condolences to the families who have lost loved ones and gratitude to the UPF volunteers who have served people in need during the crisis.



Spiritual leaders are certainly needed to inspire people to live for others and help move from crises to a better world, he said.

He quoted Religions for Peace Honorary Chairman Bishop Munib Younan, saying that religious leaders need to work as prophets of truth, justice, charity and liberty toward political leaders, and UPF founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, who said that the present situation should inspire us to form one community under God, the Heavenly Parent.

Rabbi Reuven Khaskin pointed out that with this webinar UPF is sending an important message to the world at a time of both great crisis and opportunities. He referred to the Hebrew word *mashber*, which means both crisis and the seat in which a woman gives birth. In the Torah one can read about the "birth pangs of the Messiah," the Messianic age, a time of uncertainty and difficulties, he said.

Rabbi Khaskin advised religious people against giving easy and definite answers, or some prophetic divine knowledge about this time of crisis, as they may be regarded as arrogant.

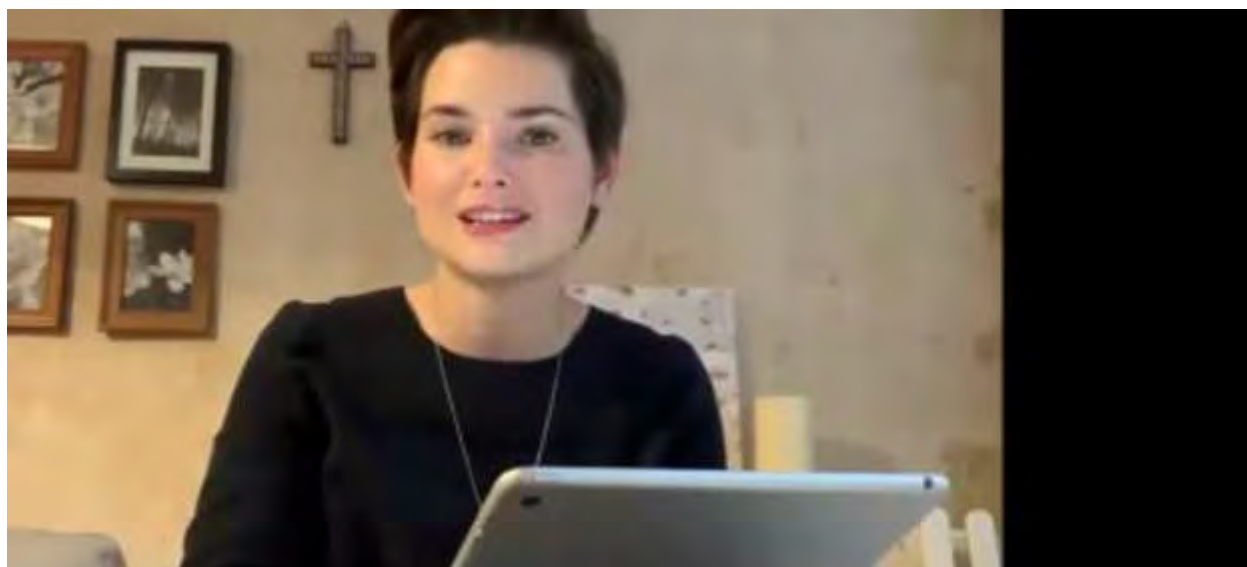
Uncertainty breeds fear; yet we should not look for comforting, easy answers, he said. All kinds of conspiracy theories about the pandemic are being spread. Religious people need to be careful about the message they convey and how they approach the present situation.

He referred to *Not in God's Name*, a book by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in which he warns that illusions that are meant to be bridges often take us in the opposite direction. Religious people should not be part of the problem, but part of the solution.

God is in constant dialogue with us, Rabbi Khaskin said. Each era brings opportunities to find a new language of communication with God. Hegel called it *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time. God uses the language and ideas that dominate our age to communicate with us.

We may need to embrace our being uncertain as part of our communication with God, instead of pretending that we have easy answers and are invulnerable. We need to fathom our faith.

Rabbi Khaskin referred to Psalm 92: "It is good to praise God and to exalt His name in a song. ... To speak of His kindness in the morning and His faithfulness at night." Day and night represent brighter and darker times in history, he said. The present times of darkness give us the opportunity to express our faithfulness in God, while God never fails to have faith in us.



Rev. Martina Viktorie Kopecká, in her video message, conveyed the traditional Christian message of Easter, a powerful, liberating message of hope overcoming fear.

In this time of the pandemic, in the spirit of the Easter message, our task is to point beyond the suffering and darkness to the morning light shed by the resurrection of the Lord, she said.

Rev. Kopecká spoke about the situation in the Czech Republic and within the Hussite Church. As soon as the pandemic emerged, many engaged in volunteer work and projects, simply believing in the value and meaning of doing something. Altruism helped them to overcome the first difficult days. Other people gave way to negativity, felt powerless or frustrated, and even turned to aggression.

Like a sudden storm, the pandemic from one day to the other put us in another reality, which has caused much fear and anxiety, she said. Most important, though difficult, is to focus on the Lord, his character and his promises. This will give us his peace, presence, and guidance.

In these difficult times, she said, we can re-establish and refresh our relationship with God, be joyful and have hope. Let's pray, sing together, worship in our homes and try out new things. We are invited to ask questions and to look for true, authentic answers. Maybe we have received a gift of time, a time of being with God, she concluded.



Sheikh Nuru Mohammed stated that faith always has been and will continue to be an integral part of people's lives. People always have turned to faith, especially in times of crisis. Faith never disappoints and will always be there to lift people up and to bring the beauty out of them.

Whenever Muslims are faced with challenges, they turn to the Quran, in which one can read the history of previous nations and find out how to cope with challenges.

Sheikh Mohammed said he believes this pandemic has taken us back to the initial days of Islam, when there were no mosques and people practiced their faith at home.

"Faith inspires me to accept the reality of coronavirus," he said. "I do not believe that the pandemic is a punishment of God." He said he is not sure this marks the end of the world. Why should God, who is love, who is mercy, punish the entire world? Challenges are an integral part of life. The coronavirus is teaching us not to take things for granted. Only through challenges can we know ourselves, our weak and strong points. The earlier we are aware of them, the better.

Faith gives us hope, he said. Faith is a language of the heart, beyond consciousness and intellect. We are all believers, irrespective of our denominations. The major role all faith leaders must play in these challenging times is to instill hope instead of fear.

Religion invites us to partner with the stakeholders, such as governments, opinion makers, medical practitioners. There are two kinds of people: your brothers in faith and your equals in humanity, he said. Islam teaches that we need to be proactive and take the first steps, he said.



Pandit Krishna Kripa Dasa said that when greeting someone, Hindus say, "Namaste." This has the meaning of offering our respect to the divine who is in every person's heart, regardless of their

denomination.

He mentioned karma, the force created by our actions that causes good or bad things to happen. The pandemic is the result of our overexploitation of the resources of Mother Earth, he said. We are not on the right path, he said. Now is the time to think, pray, collaborate.

Time is not linear but a cycle of creation, preservation and destruction, resulting in re-creation, he said. We can create a better world by keeping a balance between material and spiritual solutions. Spirituality must have 99.9 percent of common sense, he said. When doing charity work, there should be no discrimination according to denominations.

Eighty percent of the world's population declare they belong to some denomination. We all must pray as sons and daughters of the same God, the same Holy Father and Mother, he said.

Pandit Krishna Kripa Dasa referred to World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts, in which one can read that all religions have 73 percent of goals in common.

This time of confinement is to bring awareness, he said. People cannot worship in their temples. The first temple, however, is within our hearts. Let us look inside, do yoga, and create harmony with God.



The webinar closed with a moment of prayer in the form of a sung recitation from the Quran by Dr. Mohamed Al Habash, an associate professor at Abu Dhabi University in the United Arab Emirates.

A recording of the webinar can be found on Vimeo at: vimeo.com/417938458

and on YouTube at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRX5nqf_Hig

and the podcast at: soundcloud.com/upf-europe/upf-eume-webinar-12-5-2020