

UPF Vienna, Austria's Interfaith Cooperation as a Basis for Social Cohesion

Peter Haider
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Vienna, Austria -- UPF-Austria held an online conference with the title "Interfaith Cooperation as a Basis for Social Cohesion."

Although UPF-Austria has a tradition of commemorating World Interfaith Harmony Week by organizing an annual conference at the United Nations offices in Vienna, this year the only possibility was to do it virtually.



Approximately 150 guests attended the webinar on February 5, 2021, which was organized together with the Austrian chapter of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), a UPF association.

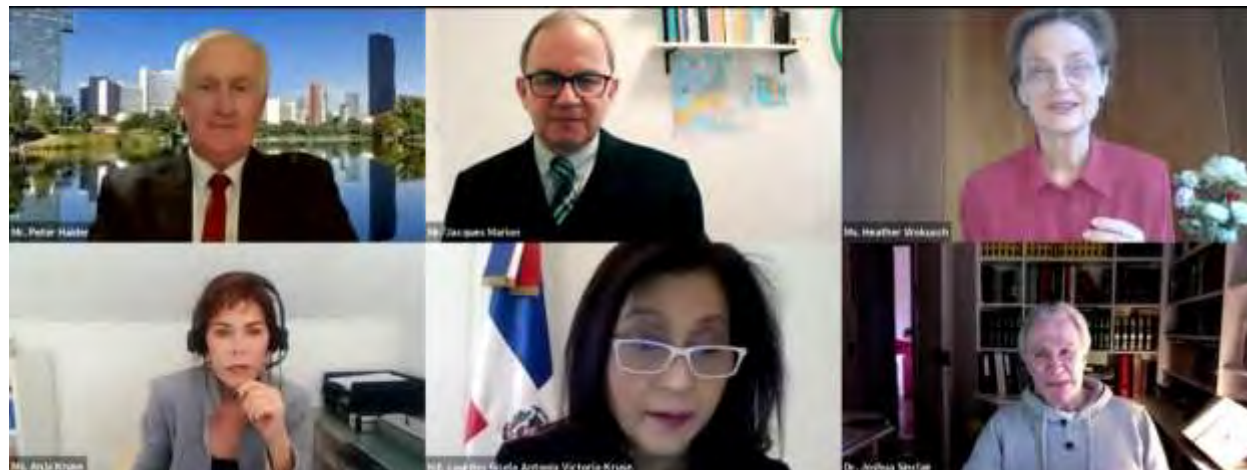
In his opening remarks, UPF-Austria President Peter Haider reminded the audience that in 2000 UPF co-founder Rev. Dr. Sun Myung Moon proposed that an interreligious council of spiritual and religious representatives be established within the structure of the United Nations.

Mr. Haider said that the first years of the new millennium saw the birth of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the King Abdullah International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID). In 2010, H.M. King Abdullah II of Jordan spoke before the UN General Assembly to propose the establishment of [World Interfaith Harmony Week](#). These events show a global awareness

of the importance of religion for international relations.

Communications consultant Heather Wokusch served as the webinar moderator.

The first speaker, Dr. Joshua Sinclair, a medical doctor, filmmaker and professor of comparative theology, spoke about the 2020 encyclical "Fratelli Tutti – On Fraternity and Social Friendship" of Pope Francis, and how it relates to the Abu Dhabi declaration in 2019. Dr. Sinclair compared it to the meeting in 1219 of St. Francis of Assisi with Malek al-Kamil, the sultan of Egypt.



He conveyed this message: "We should not become digital people and lose our humanity. We are forced to be born again and find ourselves again, when we will take off our masks post-COVID-19. We have to stop blaming each other and be as close as possible to each other. Our human rights and our human dignity are innate to us, given by a universal power and not by a state. St. Francis gave up everything so he could belong to everyone. Are we willing to give up all our prejudices and bigotries in order to be embraced by the society of all men and women?"

H.E. Lourdes Gisela Antonia Victoria-Kruse, the ambassador of the Dominican Republic to Austria and the international organizations in Vienna, expressed her gratitude to be part of this conference which promotes a culture of global peace and harmony of all people regardless of their faith. In this time of pandemic we must bring joy to people, she said, so that they see this as an opportunity to grow and become better human beings.

She explained that the Dominican Republic is a place of many historical events, first discovered in 1492 by Christopher Columbus. In 1938 it was the only country in the world to receive Jews who were fleeing the Nazi persecution in Europe. She finished by quoting this phrase from the invitation letter to the conference: "This age of globalization needs enlightened people in each faith who can examine their sacred writings and traditions and identify the aspects that can benefit all humanity as well as those that preserve each religion's identity."

H.E. Aftab Ahmad Khokher, the ambassador of Pakistan to Austria, Slovakia and the UN in Vienna, stated that the theme for this year's World Interfaith Harmony Week is "Building Bridges across Borders." The ideal of interfaith harmony and cooperation has assumed an even greater importance and urgency since it was established over ten years ago, he said.

We live in a globalized world, not just in a physical sense but also in the realm of ideas, he said. All nations and societies inhabit a shared sphere of thoughts. Such a tightly integrated world calls for a new mind, social behaviors and a renewed commitment to tolerance, respectful dialogue and celebration of diversity. Islam is a religion that not only recognizes the essential unity of humankind but also accepts the diversity which creates the mosaic of cultures and civilizations, he said.

He spoke of Pakistan's rich tradition of humanism that permeates the great Sufi saints and poets and emphasizes the shared humanity of all people. The shrines attract devotees of all religions. During the last years "interfaith harmony committees" comprising members from all religious minorities have been established in each district. There are reserved seats for minorities in the legislature. Recently Kishoo Bai became the first Hindu Dalit woman member of the Senate, a milestone for the rights of women and minorities. Most recently Pakistan spearheaded the UN General Assembly resolution "Promoting a Culture of Peace and Tolerance to Safeguard Religious Sites."

Anja Kruse, a German film and television actress and author of the book *My Way with Buddha*, explained how she managed this difficult time by living a spiritual life, including prayers, meditation, chanting, right thinking and right acting. The answers can be found in ourselves, and faith is the key word, she said.

She found her faith in the teaching of Buddha, which she called understandable, practical and reasonable. "It helps to overcome all obstacles in life. At this moment we understand that the pure human life is the most precious of all treasures in the world and we are all connected to each other: many bodies, one mind. This means that peace is our constant goal.

"Shutting down all kinds of social, cultural and economic life creates negativity, fear, anger, desperation, jealousy, egoism and hatred among people. This makes us blind to feeling compassion or tolerance for other people and leads to the dangerous path of a war culture. This is a challenge to people of all religions. It is vital to maintain a peaceful mind; otherwise we will not survive. The power of the universe exists in our own life. Every human being has an enormous potential and the power to change any poison into medicine."

She explained how the Buddhist practice based on the Lotus Sutra shows the way to overcome obstacles and leads to happiness. It helped her to survive in peace and harmony. She wants to become the utmost, best version of herself and so be a bridgebuilding member of society, in order to have the power to change things; every winter turns into spring. "Hope is not the conviction that something is going to work out well, but it is the certainty that whatever happens to you makes sense."

After a lively discussion among the speakers, answering questions from the audience, the conference closed with the hymn of the World interfaith Harmony Week, "[Sami Yusuf – The Gift of Love](#)."

After a short break, a second webinar began, organized by the Swiss chapters of UPF and IAPD, titled "How Can the Korean Cultural and Religious Heritage Contribute to a Rapprochement and Unification on the Divided Peninsula?"