

World Interfaith Harmony Week

Vienna, February 10, 2022 - UPF Austria, together with the affiliated organizations Family Federation for World Peace, Women's Federation and YSP organized an Interfaith Conference on February 10, 2022, on the occasion of the World Interfaith Harmony Week, which is celebrated during the first week of February each year. Contributions to this conference were given partly live at the conference venue and partly through video feeds.



Rev. Arthur Nzekwu of the Celestial Church of Christ opened the conference with a prayer and a brief introduction of his denomination, followed by a musical performance by James Strauss on the flute. Moderator Elisabeth Cook then turned the floor over to Peter Haider, Austrian president of UPF Austria. Mr. Haider elaborated on the background of the creation of "World Interfaith Harmony Week":

In 2010, King Abdullah II of Jordan proposed this World Interfaith Harmony Week. The initiative is based on the pioneering work of the "Common Word" project, which was launched by Muslims scholars after Pope Benedict XVI, in his Sept. 13, 2006, speech in Regensburg, Germany, roiled the Islamic world when he quoted a Byzantine emperor's dispute with a Muslim: "Show me what new things Muhammad brought, and there you will find only bad and inhumane things like this, that he prescribed to spread the faith he preached by the sword."



The Common Word project shows that there is common ground among monotheistic religions, with no need to question one's own traditions. It was later developed further for all other religions and all people.

Inspired by the idea of "World Interfaith Harmony Week", UPF has organized a big conference at the UN in Vienna every year from 2013 to 2020 with 150-200 participants on current topics. The last theme was "Faith based Organizations and the UN sustainable Development Goals".

The spirit of Interfaith Harmony Week and the Common Word project is summarized in the following quote: "This age of globalization needs enlightened people in each faith who can examine their sacred scriptures and traditions and identify the aspects that benefit all humanity, as well as those who preserve the identity of each religion. UPF and its network of Ambassadors for Peace commemorate this week each year in a way that promotes understanding, respect, and cooperation among people of all faiths for the benefit of our communities and peace in the world."

The second speaker was Prof. Dr. Mohamed Bassam Kabbani of the University of Vienna. He explained more details of the Common Word project, saying that in response to the Pope's rebuke, 38 initiators from the Islamic world began the "Good Will Project." It has spread and has been taken over by a Muslim center that includes the King of Jordan.



These 38 have been joined by 138 notable figures. The common and unifying factor of the religions is described in the Koran in Sura No.5, which reports about the Last Supper of Jesus, namely the belief in the one God and the belief in the love of our neighbour.

We have the task that we compete among ourselves who behaves better towards the children of God. The differences in culture, skin colour, religion are described by the Koran as an enrichment and a proof of God.

Today we see in a special way that we humans are all in the same boat. We have experienced this through the pandemic. We are all affected by the problems of the world, be it climate change, acts of war or famine.

Dialogue must be practiced in many ways, training in dialogue with Christianity, Judaism and other initiatives. The first task is to get to know each other, the second task is to understand: how does the other think? We need to talk to the religious representatives themselves.

Prof. Kabbani sees the third task of dialogue as showing understanding for the other religion and perhaps even learning from each other.

Two video messages followed. At the beginning of his message, Pastor Markus Gerold, Protestant Parish A.B. Steyr quoted Hans Küng's statement: "There can be no world peace without religious peace." Peace always creates a tension between religion and politics, because "world peace" is also a political goal. Religion is an expression of how I want to shape society, and thus it touches the field of politics.

Rev. Gerold reflected on how far one should endure this tension or whether one should remain purely with the spiritual. With regard to interreligious dialogue, Rev. Gerold sees the task of a church leader as helping believers to develop appreciation for those of other faiths and to facilitate dialogue at eye level with those of other faiths. He would like to see much more dialogue in everyday life.

We should not only take advantage of the opportunity for dialogue at conferences, but practice it in many small situations that will eventually come together to form a larger whole. "Peace does not mean absence of war, but presence of love". In this sense, "Let us do many small things!"

The second video message came from Fr. Richard Reinisch, monk in the Benedictine Abbey of Göttweig: He lives in a Catholic monastery having had a late vocation. After working as a mechanical engineer, he traveled to many continents. He spent several years in China. His experiences are recorded in his book "Christianity in China".

He experiences his own religion and faith through daily prayer five times a day and through social work visiting prisoners. These two areas are a living interface between inside and outside. In a prison one cannot proselytize, but only talk and sympathize. In his life he has learned to respect people of different cultures and to perceive them as an enrichment.



The next lecture came from Swami Atmavidyananda Giri, Vice President of the Kriya Yoga Institute. He, too, worked as a mechanical engineer before his spiritual career, but was already prepared for the spiritual path by his parents.

From the perspective of Kriya Yoga, there is one God who is omnipresent and whom we are all meant to love. Religions are seen as different flowers in God's garden. All scriptures affirm that God is the Creator of all living beings, and therefore we should be one.

Each religion has principles that are consistent with other religions, and some teachings differ from others. The differences concern the way the religion is practiced and the culture where it comes from. The problem is that people cannot accept these differences. A yoga master summed it up like this: People peel a banana, throw away the banana, and keep the banana peel. We should share our teachings and principles and discuss them.

After this presentation we could listen to the video message of Max Valtingoer from the New Apostolic Church Innsbruck.

Already in his childhood he was taught Christian values. He was ordained as a deacon and later as a priest. Since then, he has been working voluntarily as a priest in pastoral care, religious education, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue.

He shared thoughts on love and charity. The love we receive from Christ motivates us to act mercifully, hospitably and reconciliatively, to love even the enemy. This is not easy. But in view of Jesus Christ, it is possible. Paul says, "Let all your things be done in love!" The love of God is poured out in our hearts. Thus, acting in love is a matter of the heart.

Mr. Valtingoer concluded with a quote from Mother Teresa, "Often people feel taken advantage of when they help, but, "If you love until it hurts, there can be no more pain. Only more love." (Mother Teresa)

The last contribution came from Bishop Christine Mayr-Lumetzberger, leader and co-founder of "Ordination Ministries for Women".

It is a personal concern of hers that we should walk hand in hand on a great wide road. What is it worth if we think only of our own religion and our own greatness? God is much greater than what we can understand or what is contained in our tradition.

If we have decided to live for God, to believe in God, then we must also respect our neighbor. The commandment of love is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

Another important thought is that if my religion preaches something that harms the other, it would not be a good religion. It is always better to have the welfare of others in mind than to harm others for the sake of religion. There are many offenses in our church's past. It is a big burden I carry with me, but, "Make peace with your past" I am responsible for how I live my faith.

Closing words came from the speakers:

Prof. Kabbani: It is possible to make peace and shape society together. Religions can also be abused. But it is always the human being who is responsible.

Swami Atmavidyananda Giri: I'm happy that we are making effort in our society to create a beautiful family in this world. Let's share our ideas and create a beautiful environment of peace and harmony.

Peter Haider concluded with the thought that we are spiritual beings. "Religions are meant to cultivate and nurture the human spirit. When we share our spirituality with each other, we get more than from just one group or religious community. I also hope that we have succeeded in doing that today."

