

UPF and IAPD Switzerland: Religious Minorities Join in Quest for Respect

Chantal Komagata and Heiner Handschin
April 9, 2021



UPF-Switzerland, supported by its Interreligious Association for Peace and Development, organized the online conference titled "The Constructive Role of Religious Minorities on the Path toward Peace and Human Development in the Society and Nation."

More than 50 participants attended the webinar on April 9, 2021.

In a time when the credibility of all religions is at stake and a growing number of people are turning away from institutionalized religions toward a more personal spirituality, there is a need to analyze why minority faiths have experienced rejection and misunderstanding and what can be done to improve the situation. Making their contributions understood in a better way could result in a broader acceptance and embrace of serious minority religions and movements.

Kevin De-Carli, a Swiss theologian and historian, served as the webinar's moderator. At the University of Fribourg he is a board member of the council of the theological faculty's Center for Interreligious Studies and Interfaith Dialogue, and president of the student body for theological studies. (As rabbi in the Orthodox Jewish community in Baden, he is president of the committee for the maintenance of Jewish culture, the work group for Christian-Jewish dialogue and the Argovian Council for Interfaith Dialogue. Recently he participated in the founding of the Swiss Council of Minority Religions, with mainly Muslim, Hindu and Sikh participation, to give mutual support and a base for the legal recognition of these religious communities by the Swiss government. In the Swiss army, he is a staff member of the military pastoral care team with the rank of first lieutenant. He is part of the competence center to integrate non-Christian religions in the army's pastoral care.)

Juerg Stettler is the spokesperson for the Church of Scientology in Switzerland and has been president of the Church of Scientology in Zürich for 33 years.

José Arnoldi, raised as a Catholic on different continents, returned to Switzerland in 2015 and moved into the Hare Krishna Temple in Langenthal to help his brother develop this center. (After school he made an apprenticeship as a clerk and immediately after that, he ventured out to travel the world and do internships at biological farm communities. This was a time of philosophical studies and talks, with a special interest in what the different cultures had to say about the origins of life. In 1993, after reading the Bhagavad Gita and being convinced that we are not only matter but essentially eternal spirit souls, he joined the Hare Krishna movement and for 11 years a monastic lifestyle, reading and studying intensely a theistic section of the Vedic scriptures pertaining to the Gaudia Vaisnava tradition. After that, driven by the desire to marry, he started to study Vaisnava Theology at Lampeter University, Wales. But after two and a half years, he got so bored that he discontinued the studies and instead moved to Spain to cultivate a vineyard, renovating an old house. He dedicated the winters to welfare work and a business in Honduras.)

Barbara Böhni founded the Brahma Kumaris outreach center in Biel/Bienne and has been leading it since 2017, traveling between London and Biel. Her mother tongue is Swiss German, and she has been living in

London since 2006, near the international coordination center of the Brahma Kumaris. By profession she is an accountant-bookkeeper. She became a Raja Yoga student with the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University in Switzerland in 1991 and has been a teacher since 2000. Most of her holidays in the past 30 years were spent at Mount Abu, Rajasthan state, India. She believes that through recharging and rejuvenating the full potential of peace and silent nature of the soul, world peace is not just a dream but in fact has been the original state of the world and will become substantial in the very near future once again.

Radomir Stantchev is the pastor of the Unificationist community in the French part of Switzerland. He graduated from Geneva University with a bachelor's degree in Protestant theology and is continuing his theological formation at Unification Theological Seminary in New York, earning a master's degree and a doctorate in religious studies.



Dr. Raffaella Di Marzio is the founder and director of the Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience Italy. She has B.A. degrees in psychology, educational science, history of religions, and religious science. In June 2016 she received her doctorate in psychology at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome. She is a professor for the master's class in prevention of the phenomenon of radicalization of terrorism and policies for interreligious and intercultural integration at the Aldo Moro University - Department of Law, in Bari. She has been a professor of psychology of religion at the "Auxilium" Pontifical Faculty of Educational Sciences in Rome. She has published some books and is a contributor to CESNUR's Encyclopedia of Religions in Italy, to Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices, and to The World Religions and Spirituality Project, established at Virginia Commonwealth University.)

Heiner W. Handschin is the permanent representative of the Universal Peace Federation at the United Nations in Geneva and coordinator in Europe and the Middle East of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development. (Furthermore, he runs a company in geriatrics and health care for elderly as its CEO.)

Kevin De-Carli, the young rabbi in the Orthodox Jewish community in Baden, Switzerland, was asked to moderate the webinar. He did so with much insight and respect toward all faith representatives. Unfortunately, the representative of the Sikh faith, Gurdeep Singh Kundan, whose wife had to be hospitalized, couldn't participate but sent his greetings and apologies. Rabbi De-Carli opened the session by introducing the topic and inviting all the panelists to describe briefly their community's contribution to a peaceful society and world.

The first speaker, Jürg Stettler, spokesperson for the Church of Scientology in Switzerland, described the changing perception of minority faiths and gave the example of the Salvation Army, which in the past was seen as a dangerous militant group and persecuted as such, but 50 years later was understood as a great contributor to the betterment of society. Mr. Stettler explained that despite his position and membership in the Church of Scientology, he remained a member of the Protestant Church in Zürich. Considering that the values, ethical standards and potential contributions of all religions are similar, he often invites other religions to present their perspectives and beliefs to his own congregation to show that we all are working in the same direction for the betterment of the world. He encouraged all religions to

combine efforts to overcome injurious media reports, knowing that all religions started as minorities at one point and that working together beyond boundaries will help to achieve a peaceful and harmonious society and world.

José Arnoldi, a representative of the Hare Krishna Temple in the town of Langenthal, explained that he came to know many minority faiths, so-called "new religions" which he had never heard of before, that do great work, like the Bahá'í Faith and the movement of Sun Myung Moon. He sees his main contribution to improving society as presenting the Absolute Being through the philosophy and literature in sacred texts like the Bhagavad Gita in order to make the wisdom available to others. The monk of the Krishna faith who translated some of the texts into English said: "The greatest formula is that the Lord seeks to benefit each and every one and all things, and any form of exploitation doesn't make people happy. All religions have some tools for spiritual development, which are lacking in our secular society."



Barbara Böhni, founder of the Brahma Kumaris outreach center in Biel/Bienne, started out saying: "When we are aware of who we are, there is no need of religion, there is perfect harmony, health and happiness." We look for religion when we lose our awareness, she said. Being close to the end of history, everything is focused on the outer things, and religion is ridiculed by materialistic views. "Minority religions have their rights to emerge and offer their help and new ideas to humanity." She continued: "Even when aggressed, they have developed the ability to cope with and overcome persecution. When the soul is lacking peace and love, it is essential to remember God as the source of everything and to reconnect to Him."

Radomir Stantchev, pastor of the Unificationist community in the French part of Switzerland, stated that the founder of Unificationism, Sun Myung Moon, always considered all major faiths as siblings of the same family. He explained that for Unificationists the essential sacrament is marriage, because we can find our best resemblance with God in the unity of husband and wife. In the Unification faith, the marriage blessing is seen as the main path to salvation. He pointed out that, in this sense, some of the key contributions of Unificationists to the betterment of society are healthy families and a moral lifestyle.

Furthermore, he stated that the dual purposes of the individual and the whole need to be understood in the right order of priorities. Clearly the whole deserves a higher priority, but a balanced consideration for both is necessary. He reflected that until recently in his own community, the individual and the family were sacrificed for the larger good in order to create a foundation for the transformation of the society and world. On the other hand, because of the strong persecution of the Unificationist faith, many members adopted a "single soldier" attitude, losing track of the importance of family and loving care. After the passing of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, Mrs. Moon has been emphasizing the fact that "peace starts with me." Individuals have to become agents for peace and practice loving care in the family, thus building a more loving and caring society and world.

Dr. Raffaella Di Marzio, the founder and director of the Center for Studies on Freedom of Religion, Belief and Conscience, Italy, emphasized the need for recognizing the good influence that all religions, including minority faiths, can have on our society. She mentioned two examples of governments handling religious minorities very poorly, by persecuting them randomly and even banning them. In one case, it was done for the sake of protecting the majority faith; in the other case, in the name of the secular state with no religious affiliation. In both cases great harm was done to the minority faiths, and people were ostracized in the name of preventing religious extremism and religious conflicts. In reality, the "sect" and

"cult" image created by governments and spread by the media was a flagrant case of discrimination that caused great trauma among members of religious minorities, with people losing jobs and livelihoods because of being a member of a minority faith. As a matter of fact, there was no conflict with religious minorities but rather the established systems feeling threatened and trying to defend themselves by blaming and silencing new and "uncomfortable" views. No society should justify religious bigotry or persecution, she said, ignoring the great contributions that minorities in general and minority faiths in particular can make to the society, once given a chance to do so!

After the four presentations, the panelists were given the chance to answer the four questions that were given to them in advance. Each presenter was invited to respond according to their perspective.



Question 1:

How do you motivate the younger generation of your community to continue on the same path?

The following key points emerged from the discussion: It is a challenge to make religion popular with youth in a society that has pushed religion out of the school system. Rather than eliminating religion from society, the speakers emphasized that it would be better to show that religion can create a vision for a better world and direct the energy of youth toward volunteerism for society. A religious perspective can help, for example, in understanding ethics and moral values and human rights. Private school systems were shown as a way of establishing a protected environment for children and youth, teaching a spiritual curriculum and showing good examples. All faiths - whether minority or major religions - face the same difficulty of maintaining youth on a more spiritual path. A spiritual message isn't that attractive to many who like to see changes and to transform things for the better in a more practical way. Finally, it is important that youth can advocate to other youth as a more powerful way to encourage to continue on this path.

Question 2:

What are your core priorities in contributing to the improvement of our society?

This question was essentially the way that those minority faiths could see themselves improving society. The panelists seemed to mention the same first priority: to improve the state of mind of the individual, thus becoming more self-determined, extroverted and spiritually more balanced by doing service activities for society and the world and at the same time improving themselves. The panelists mentioned different practical ways of doing that, ranging from chanting the name of God, as a way to be awakened, to creating educational programs for improving spiritual life, family life and even professional life. Also, great emphasis was put on a healthy community life and natural social interaction for individuals to become healthy contributors to society and world.

Question 3:

Most of the current religious minorities have originated from outside the European cultural environment. How can your specific contribution complement the religious/cultural environment in Europe/Switzerland?

Here surprisingly the panelists were not aware that the origins of their faith created an obstacle. It might well be that this awareness hadn't emerged yet. However, according to some statements, the spiritual message from outside Europe in this time seemed to be receiving mostly positive responses, rather than rejection. Maybe in the past, the multicultural perspective wasn't as well understood as it is nowadays.

The founder of Scientology, who grew up in the US but discovered much truth in Eastern religions, can be mentioned as an example of many minority faiths that combine the scientific approach of the Western world with the spiritual perspective of Oriental religions.

Question 4:

How does your community of faith view the contribution of women to society?

Again, almost all the panelists expressed that the role of women in their community was seen as very important. Some applied this perspective earlier, others later. But there was consensus that women and men should be seen as equal contributors to society. For example, the founder of Brama Kumaris encouraged women to assume public roles. In the case of the Unificationist community, the leadership of Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, the widow of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, seemed to pose less problems in the West than in the East. Generally, a gender-based prejudice toward feminine leadership seems to be a great challenge for all traditional religions as well.



Conclusion

To conclude, Heiner W. Handschin, the coordinator for Europe and the Middle East of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development, welcomed the new insights gained from the panelists and appreciated their very mature perspectives on current affairs.

He wondered why religious minorities still faced opposition at this time and age? Certainly, there were deep misunderstandings from the past that seemed to follow those communities up until the current time. He stressed the need for minority faith leaders to think "out of the box" in order to confront those old prejudices and give people a fair chance to get to know better the minority faith communities. He felt that, despite the panelists' affirmations, the "foreign" origins of these new minority faiths could still be a factor in misunderstandings, as things are expressed and done in a different manner, which certainly can create misconceptions.

As a concluding statement, he expressed that a lot has been done in the past 40 years and the minority faiths have grown in maturity and understanding of how to contribute to society in the Swiss/European sociocultural environment. This has led to greater integration of these faiths and wider acceptance of their valuable contributions to society.

He concluded that this conference was a first step toward the complete removal of the "dangerous sect" label. Interfaith dialogue and cooperation will guarantee that this goal certainly will be achieved in the not-too-distant future.