

Freedom of Speech and Social Responsibility

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“Freedom of speech has to have responsibility at its heart”, declared Mr. Colin Gardiner in a Universal Peace Federation (UPF) meeting on the 28th February, as he, a journalist with over 50 years of editorial and writing experience, commented on the tragic outcome of recent terrorist attacks in Paris.

This concluding sentiment was supported by several speakers and expressed in the participants’ discussions at the conference held at the Peace Embassy, Thornton Heath, on the topic “Freedom of Speech and Social Responsibility”. A group of over 30 associates and guests of the UPF gathered to listen to contributions delivered from various perspectives

– educational, journalistic, moral and religious. Powerful insights were conveyed by the four speakers on the exercise of free speech in the context of responsibility and respect within our multi-cultural society. The first contributor, Nicola Bailey, Assistant Head Teacher at Archbishop Lanfranc School, mentioned the importance of getting to know people as individuals not as stereotyped representations of their ethnic background and religion, opening the path to respect and thoughtful communication. In her opinion, what is most important is the choice of words we use when talking with our children, which sets the pattern for how they communicate with others as they grow up.



Satish Desai OBE, a distinguished retired civil/structural engineer, presented a wonderful synthesis of understanding drawn from the separate worlds of engineering and Hindu religious tradition, asserting that freedom without responsibility leads to a loss of equilibrium which can destabilize a nation. Describing responsibility as restraint through inner strength, he said that the right to express one’s views should be for the purpose of comforting, encouraging and educating others and warned that careless and irresponsible use of speech can start and escalate conflicts.



Colin Gardiner took the audience through what it was like to be operating as a journalist in an atmosphere of heavy government censorship, where an inadvertent use of the wrong adjective can cost you your job. We all recognise that freedom of the press is a precious democratic right that has been earned at great sacrifice, amidst almost daily reminders of such liberty being compromised by ruthless despots.



The final speaker, Nigel Barrett, a lay preacher, provided a clear analysis of the principles by which free speech is in practice constrained, for example by the harm principle whereby certain modes of expression such as pornography and hate speech are limited due to the offence they cause. He stated that free speech is one of several social goals that we must prioritize

with respect to other societal objectives, for example national security, and compromises must inevitably be made. He concluded by mentioning that the UPF Founder, Father Moon, has taught that the way to

change people and society is to win people's hearts through service rather than by words alone.

Following the speaker presentations, the participants divided into 2 groups and discussed the question: "How should we encourage responsibility when exercising freedom of speech?" Various recommendations were put forward, including encouraging teaching of respect for others in our education system, promoting exchange between people from different backgrounds, creating practical service projects that promote understanding and acceptance, and developing an open mind to listen and accept constructive criticism. Several of the participants explained how they were attempting to put these ideas into practice in their local projects or community service organizations.

The event was graced by the appointment of 8 Ambassadors for Peace, who were awarded for their wonderful service to the community and their example of living for the sake of others through their work in social welfare or leadership positions in local faith communities.