

## UPF France holds its 2015 annual conference

Jacques Marion  
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On December 12, 2015, at the Accueil Barouillere Hall in Paris, the Universal Peace Federation (UPF) France held its annual conference on the theme "Taking up the challenges of sustainable peace and development: Vision, values and partnerships." The event was the annual assembly of peace ambassadors, gathering about a hundred participants, including guests.

The conference took place a month after the terrorist attacks in Paris, in which 130 people died, closing a year that had begun with bloodshed in Paris in January. Yet other significant milestones marked 2015: the United Nations announcement of their 2030 Global Sustainable Development Agenda, the inaugural Sunhak Peace Prize, a project related to UPF, which selected laureates for their achievements in environmental areas; and the Conference on Climate, attracting leaders from various nations in the world to Paris, which would end on the same day as our conference.

Thus, we organized the conference in three sessions representing a broader vision for peace and development: inter-religious dialogue as the conscience of society; the rise of a global, multicultural society; and the challenges of renewable energy for sustainable development.



The event began with a moving inter-religious ceremony in honor of the 130 victims from the November 13 attacks -- 130 rainbow colored origami were displayed, symbolizing the victims' souls moving toward heaven. In front, five large candles were lit one by one from one central candle by representatives of major religions, while an excerpt of each religious scripture was read by the moderator Mrs. Myriam Trachez. Mr. Emmanuel Chouraqui, son of famed French scholar Andre Chouraqui, a translator of the Bible and the Koran and a cofounder of the Fraternity of Abraham, then gave a brief testimony about his father's work. A beautiful musical piece on piano and flute played by two young UPF volunteers, Ye-Bonne Maldonado and Takeyuki Koyama, opened and closed the ceremony.

Patrick Jouan, the vice president of UPF France, moderated the first session, on the theme, "Religion and Politics, Cooperating for Lasting Peace." It began with an introduction to the values underlying the conference theme by Mr. Jacques Marion, UPF France president. Sheikh Abdelkader Achour, the imam of the Omar Mosque in Paris' eleventh district -- the district most effected by the November attacks --

gave a talk on "The value of human beings in Islam." A long-time disciple of a former Grand Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Kufaro, Sheikh Achour is widely respected by his coreligionists and other district religious leaders for his wisdom and spirit of tolerance.

He was followed by Mrs. Sabine Le Blanc, a professor of religion, who spoke on the impact and interconnectedness of spiritual experiences, beyond religious affiliation, and their potential contribution to peace.

The next speaker, Dr. Ali Rastbeen, president of the Academy of Geopolitics of Paris, proposed a geopolitical appraisal of conflicts in the Middle East and gave a broad review of groups throughout the world using religious justification for their terrorist activities. The last panelist was Dr. Jean-Luc Berlet, a professor of philosophy, who offered reflections on universal values conducive to lasting peace, emphasizing the three blessings as a framework for a meaningful life and a peaceful world.

The debate that followed, intense but respectful, focused on the connection between terrorism and religion and the role of Islam in current political developments.



Mr. Jacques Marion moderated the second session on the theme, "One global society, one human community." He began by reviewing UPF Peace Initiatives throughout the world, notably those related to the Korean Peninsula, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. He reported about the recent conference celebrating ten years of the Balkan Peace Initiative in Tirana, Albania, and raised

prospects of the UPF work in the Balkans.

That served to introduce the first panelist, Dr. Nano Ruzin, a dean of political science at FON University in Skopje, Macedonia, who had been Macedonia's ambassador to NATO. Speaking in French, Dr. Ruzin reviewed the recent history of the Balkans since the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, the ethnic conflicts that ensued, and the gradual development toward a multi-ethnic democracy in his country, Macedonia.

The next speaker was Mr. Doudou Diene, a former UNESCO high official and United Nations special rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination and intolerance. He described current societal transformations and the irreversible rise of multicultural societies, emphasizing the key role of inter-religious dialogue. Such dialogue, he said, should move from a theological to an ethical base and be grounded on human rights criteria. The final speaker was Mr. Jean-Claude Felix-Tchikaya, a sociologist and researcher at the Institute of Prospective and Security in Europe (IPSE). Mentioning his family roots in the Congo, he spoke of the challenges of the process of integration into French society, about his work with radicalized youth, yet he concluded with optimism about the prospects of multicultural society in France.

Mr. Alexandre Huard, Youth UPF coordinator moderated the third and last session on "Issues and challenges of energy for sustainable development." The speakers were a husband and wife team, Mr. Thierry Maldonado, an engineer in new technologies for the environment and Mrs. Ye-Bonne Maldonado, a doctoral student in fluid mechanics, both of whom are UPF volunteers. Giving a thorough description of the energy issues at stake regarding sustainable development and climate change and responding to questions from the floor, they stimulated the audience with a lively presentation of the key questions discussed by world leaders at the COP 21 Conference, which was coming to an end, almost simultaneously, a few miles away. Thierry Madonado concluded with a presentation on the challenges and hopes of a drinkable water implantation project in Madagascan villages, where he has been investing his effort in recent years.

The conference ended with the award of certificates to two new peace ambassadors, Mrs. Sobrino, an insurance agency director and Dr. Koue, a criminologist originally from the Central African Republic, who was moved to tears as he spoke of his war-torn country.