

UPF Istanbul, Turkey: Society's Need For Commonly Shared Values

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January 14, 2021



Istanbul, Turkey -- A diverse panel of five speakers addressed an online conference about society's need for commonly shared values.

The webinar "Universal Values – Faith, Society and the Way to Harmony" was held on December 14, 2020, as a joint project of the Western Europe and Middle East branches of the Interreligious Association for Peace and Development (IAPD), one of the UPF associations.

The moderator of the meeting was Dr. Sarah Ahmed, originally from Sudan, a medical doctor and the Middle East vice president for the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), an organization that is affiliated with UPF. Dr. Ahmed welcomed the participants and introduced a video about IAPD.

The first speaker was Professor Boumédiène Benyahiâ, a scholar of Islamic studies from Paris, France, who founded the Kalima Institute. Professor Benyahiâ spoke about some of the universal teachings of Islam. Referring to the Quran, he said God created male and female so that they may know each other. Even though we are all different, he said, we have the same work to do, i.e., to develop and manifest our best character to each other. It is a noble target but not easy, except for those who have faith. The noblest people are those who master themselves to behave in the best way.

Professor Benyahiâ asked: How can humankind, which is in a horizontal line, not in a vertical line before God, create harmony in families, societies, nations? The Quran gives us some hints, he said. God loves those who act charitably; those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity or in adversity; those who restrain anger; and, most importantly, those who pardon (all) people. We should acquire knowledge, create and spread well-being, and, above all, be open to reconciliation, he said.

The chapter in the Quran titled Al-A'râf, meaning "high fortifications," urges us to think of high fortifications that hide and protect knowledge in their inner enclosure. We are called to overcome these barriers and to reach out for this knowledge within ourselves first, Professor Benyahiâ said.

The main divine knowledge is that Allâh loves muhsinîn, those who are charitable, create well-being and wellness, and who serve humankind to reach harmony in both the macrocosm and our tiny microcosm. The best way to annihilate ignorance and violence is to live for the sake of others, he said.

The next speaker was Rev. Ari Van Buuren from the Netherlands, a Protestant minister and theologian who is involved in interfaith work. He said he wondered how the quickly changing, highly secularized but multireligious and multicultural Dutch society can be managed. He used the metaphor "As the water flows, the riverbed leads the flow, the flow changes the riverbed." Nevertheless, he said, there is the danger of ethnic, religious or secular isolation by groups living in their own subcultures.

How can religious leaders facilitate breakthroughs? Reverend Van Buuren referred to Genesis 32, in which Jacob told Esau, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" and "To see your face is like seeing the face of God."

As a hospital chaplain, he said he learned not to regard patients or refugees as his guests. However, he was humbled by feeling that he was a guest in their lives.

When Jesus spoke about a "crusade" or Mohammed about "jihad," he said, they did not mean war but the struggle against the power of evil. In that struggle, he said, divine compassion prevails over deadly passions, and compassion is the common golden rule.

Father Joseph Saghbini from Lebanon, a parish priest with the Greek Melkite Catholic Church, spoke next. Being a priest in the Church of the Lord Jesus, he related some values and truths inspired by the Bible, which he believes are shared by other religions.

First, belief in the one God, the Creator of heaven and earth. In this time of crisis, God invites us to repent and return to Him.

Secondly, belief in humans, who are created in the image and likeness of God. In this difficult time we are called to renew the image of God in us, an image of divine love, righteousness and holiness. It is also the image of the peacemaker, of sacrifice and generosity.

Thirdly, belief in the earth and its soil, from which God made humans. Belief in our homeland, which embraces us as a mother. The rulers of this world should stop their wars, which cause so many to be displaced, he said. We also should believe in the universe and all creation, which are fundamentally coherent and harmonious.

This is the way for religions to converge with each other, he said, and thus they can play an effective role in the lives of people and societies.

Following this, a video was shown of the Water Ceremony for Peace. This beautiful and moving ceremony, in which faith leaders prayed for peace, was part of the Rally of Hope held on December 5, 2020, in the U.S. city of Las Vegas to celebrate the first anniversary of the World Clergy Leadership Conference (WCLC), an organization that is affiliated with UPF.

Dr. Ye-Bonne Koyama from France, an aerodynamics research engineer and a representative of Youth and Students for Peace, another organization that is affiliated with UPF, spoke of a visit to Lebanon last year. Dr. Koyama said she had been amazed to see the close link between religion and politics, and the importance that people give to their religion, but was saddened to see that religion also had become a source of conflict. However, she said, she could see the potential for peace and development everywhere.

The recent terrorist attacks in France demonstrate that the nation's secular society desperately needs a united interreligious voice, she said. To protect oneself against terrorism is important, but even more important is to pave the way for peace. Freedom of speech should not be freedom to hurt or provoke others, she said. Secularism, or the separation of church and state, does not imply the right to disrespect religions; rather it should guarantee that religions are all equally respected.

As a member of Youth and Students for Peace, Dr. Koyama said that in the face of conflicts that are deeply rooted in time and accumulated resentment, young people, with their natural inclination to hope, may more easily boost the process of forgiveness and reconciliation. Our interconnected world creates a culture of global citizenship, she said, which is more necessary than ever to break down barriers.

Professor Hanoch Ben Pazi from Israel, the chair of the Jewish Philosophy Department at Bar Ilan University, spoke about the Tower of Babel mentioned in the Book of Genesis. That tower was a great project on which all humanity worked together, speaking the same language. However, there was one person who wondered who would take responsibility for this project, which to him was like a burning tower. According to Professor Ben Pazi, this man was Abraham.

We all live in a wonderful palace, but it is burning because of social struggles, wars, racism, injustice, inequality, and the absence of fraternity, Professor Ben Pazi said.

He said that Islamic culture has long probed the idea of divine punishment imposed on humanity. Jewish theology has pointed to human dispersal, which is the result of not recognizing diversity and human dignity. However, contemporary religious philosophy offers a new religious model, which allows a new perspective on religions based on a multicultural discourse and renewed relations between religions.

Citing the 18th-century German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, Professor Ben Pazi said that diversity is the plan and purpose of the Providence. The ethos of the contemporary Tower of Babel could allow for spiritual alliances and religious covenants based on closeness and separation, the acknowledgment of diversity, and interreligious dialogue, he said.

Question-and-answer session

Before presenting the questions of the participants to the speakers, David Fraser Harris, the UPF secretary general for the Middle East and North Africa, read the words of IAPD founder Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon from her speech at the WCLC event in Las Vegas on December 5: "There are many religions in our world today, and all these faiths have one purpose. They all share the same will to serve and attend the Absolute Being, our Creator." Mr. Fraser Harris then thanked all the speakers for just doing that, by raising their voices for the Creator.

The first question was put to all the speakers: All the speakers were preaching their own doctrines from thousands of years ago. Where can a common base for collaboration with each other be found? Have the speakers ever asked God what He wants to change in their religions?

Father Joseph Saghbini answered this question and also responded to a request to give a concrete example of interfaith cooperation in Lebanon.

He said he could give many examples from Lebanon. There is much cooperation in daily life as people of different religions and cultures live together, he said. They help the poor in these difficult times, without considering what religion they belong to.

The next question, addressed to Professor Boumédiène Benyahiâ, was why, in Islamic countries, it is so difficult to allow religious freedom and to prevent persecution of Christians.

Professor Benyahiâ answered that Islam is systematically associated with Muslims who behave badly. The problem is that Arab and Muslim countries are often governed by people who are distant from the people. Minority groups feel oppressed or ignored. The reality among the common people is quite different, though.

Another problem, he said, is how religious teachings, and in particular Islamic teachings, are interpreted in daily life. Islam has no clergy. This may be a problem, however, for individuals who do not have a vertical relationship with God. The big challenge for religions is to find a way to raise up all individuals to be spiritually connected to God. The minority groups in Arab societies live in a complex situation. Still, this cannot be generalized to all Islamic societies, as there are many righteous men and women who support reconciliation, brotherhood, and universality. The problem may be that they do not have a forum such as UPF, he said.

The next question was for Dr. Ye-Bonne Koyama, who had spoken not only about tensions and struggles and even horror in Europe and the Middle East, but also of hope. The question posed to Dr. Koyama was where she sees hope. She replied that this webinar is already a reason for hope. Also our ability to travel and meet other people and cultures is a great ingredient for peace. There are good people everywhere, she said. If they can share their thoughts and if they can be heard, there can be more hope.

Reverend Van Buuren, who had said that we are guests in the lives of others, was asked: When we are a host, we have to be a host; when we are a guest, we must be a guest. We cannot be a guest when we should be the host. This is true humility. What do you think?

Rev. Van Buuren started by saying that seeing the face of God in each other's face is fundamental to him, even though it may be difficult. There is some ambiguity in being a host and in being a guest. You are not only a guest, or only a host, as your position may change. When you host, you are not a master but a servant. Being aware that as a host you are a guest really changes the art of being a host. You are a humble host, but not humbling the guest. Being a guest allows you to learn the art of receiving.

The last question was for Professor Hanoch Ben Pazi, who had said that we should not pretend to agree when we are different. He was asked: What, then, is the next step to make peace?

He referred to the 18th-century philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who demanded us to think differently about the meaning of unity. If we all shared the same faith, the same God, or had the same agenda, this would mean the end of the world. To respect the other faith, the other perspective, the differences between religions and nations, is more important to build peace. If we all live together in one palace, with a different mode of thinking, we will think differently about peace.

As the webinar took place during Hanukkah -- the Jewish holiday known as the Festival of Lights, during which candles are lit each night -- Professor Ben Pazi said there are two ways to think of the end of history. One is the struggle between good and evil, resulting in the victory of goodness. However, there are other ways to think about history. In the spirit of Hanukkah, struggle is not important. We should light a candle in the darkness, so that day by day we make a brighter light all over the world. Diversity and pluralism, respect for other religions, other perspectives, other cultures are what give hope for humankind.