

UPF Co-sponsors "Many Faiths, One Belief" Discussion at UN in New York

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August 22, 2018



New York, United States -- UPF co-sponsored a discussion at United Nations headquarters about the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

The session titled "Many Faiths, One Belief" was held on August 22, 2018, in Conference Room 3 of the UN headquarters during the annual conference hosted by the UN Department of Public Information and the NGO/DPI Executive Committee at the UN.

The main organizer for the session was LDS Charities, and other co-sponsors with UPF were the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, the Episcopal Church, and the Bahá'í International Community.

Freedom of religion and belief is contested today, as some see religious belief as offensive and encroaching on other people's freedoms. However, Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights expressly protects the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.

The application of Article 18 demands attention because, despite the increasing number of religiously unaffiliated, 80 percent of the world's population belong to some kind of faith community. People of all faith traditions agree in the belief that they should be able to worship as they see fit.

The first speaker at the session, Dr. Brett Scharffs, director of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies at Brigham Young University, addressed freedom of religion and belief from an international perspective. Dr. Scharffs gave numerous examples of programs, conferences, activities, and organizations around the world that promote freedom of religion and belief. He stressed that the effort needs to be sustained and multi-layered and the involvement should include all sectors of society -- academic, political, legal, educational, civil -- and, of course, should be interreligious.

Rebecca Blachly, director of the Office of Government Relations for the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and previously with the U.S. State Department, Office of Religion and Global Affairs, described ways in which the U.S. government has been focusing on the promotion of religious freedom.

She said she was encouraged that the U.S. government recently moved from being an advocate to becoming an active partner with religious communities in promoting freedom of religion and belief and monitoring discrimination against religious belief around the world. She mentioned the recently amended International Religious Freedom Act, which requires examination of prejudicial entities such as by Boko Haram. Ms. Blachly stated that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's approach was to address "one human right among many human rights, not one human right over another" and to seek concrete ways to halt persecution and ensure greater respect for religious freedom for all.

Speaking next was Dr. Sarah Sayeed, a senior advisor in the Community Affairs Unit in the office of New York Mayor Bill de Blasio. She specializes in issues related to the city's Muslim community. Dr. Sayeed gave examples of efforts by the City Commission on Human Rights to prohibit discrimination and inform religious minorities of their rights. She said she was encouraged to see a change from the New York City government's "secular" attitude and avoidance of religion as a "private affair" to more acceptance and responsiveness to religious citizens and their culture. She gave examples of the city allowing Sikh police officers to wear turbans and grow beards and hiring Buddhist chaplains at Rikers Island jail. She said there is more effort to encourage religious people's involvement in and partnerships with the general community in order to decrease isolation of religious groups. Dr. Sayeed stated that enabling people of faith to have a voice in the community certainly enriches New York City.

The final speaker was Richard Jordan, who during his 25 years at the United Nations has represented a number of NGOs affiliated with the U.N. Department of Public Information and the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), most notably Global Education Associates and currently International Council for Caring Communities. He also served as the 60th DPI/NGO Conference chair. Mr. Jordan obviously knew his history of the United Nations in detail, as he gave an impressive list of U.N. activities, organizations, NGOs, events, and speakers -- all of which have a religious or spiritual base. It was an eye-opener to hear of the innumerable examples, and it was reassuring to think that many see and experience the U.N. as a spiritual space.

The moderator was Kelsey Korzi of Alliance Defending Freedom.

In conclusion, this program conveyed the hope that around the world, in our own community, and at the U.N., we each can practice our faith, conscience, and belief while respecting those of others. Furthermore, it seems clearer that when we live out our shared belief in this fundamental right and freedom for all, we have a greater chance of building a richer and more conscientious world community.

