

UN World Interfaith Harmony Week Event

Paris, France, February 8, 2015



By Jacques Marion

One month after the terrorist events in January, in order to mark the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week, the French chapter of the Universal Peace Federation organized on Sunday February 8 a gathering at the Islamic Cultural Center of Evry, south of Paris.

The program featured a film based on Sufi spirituality entitled “Bab’ Aziz, the prince who contemplated his soul”. In this 2005 film co-produced by Iran, Tunisia, France, Germany, Hungary and the United Kingdom, Tunisian director Nacer Khemir stated that he wished to show “an open, tolerant and friendly Islamic culture, full of love and wisdom...”

The event was co-sponsored by three organizations:

- the Islamic Cultural Center of the Evry Mosque, known as one of the largest Mosques in Europe, led by Rector Khalil Merroun
- the association Amitié Judéo-Musulmane de France (Jewish-Muslim Society of France), led by Rabbi Michel Serfaty, very active in interreligious-intercultural projects between Jews and Muslims (www.ajmf.org)

Jacques Marion greeting participants

- the French chapter of the Universal Peace Federation
Located within the Evry Mosque compound, the Islamic Cultural Center is a large hall built for lectures and cultural events. Around 150 participants gathered, mostly from the Paris area; however, due to the symbolic significance of the occasion, a few people even came a long way from northern, southern and western parts of France.

Participants included numerous UPF Peace Ambassadors from various backgrounds and faiths, including Reverend Georges M., representing Christianity, Mrs. Fatiha Bemoussat, vice president of the French Union of Muslim Women, Professor Edmond Jouve, from the Sorbonne University, as well as many UPF volunteers. Other participants came from Evry and neighboring towns.

The event began with welcoming words and a brief introduction to Sufism by Rector Khalil Merroun, rector of the Evry Mosque, himself the descendant of a Moroccan Sufi master.

Then Rabbi Serfaty greeted participants, referring to Jewish

Rector Khalil Merroun greeting participants



Rabbi Michel Serfaty giving a talk

history and scriptures and their connection to spiritual traditions in the Middle East.

UPF-France president Jacques Marion spoke on the meaning of the Interfaith Harmony Week in the perspective of the UPF proposal of an interfaith council at the United Nations. (<http://www.upf.org/united-nations/interfaith-council-proposal>)

The film was presented by Mr. Lionel Tardif, founder and long-time director of the Cinémathèque of Tours, France, and artistic director of the International Festival of Music and Images of the World. Set in a beautifully filmed desert, with dialogues inspired from the poetry of Rumi, the great 13th century Persian



M. Lionel Tardif introducing the film "Bab'Aziz"

Sufi poet, the film gives an allegoric account of spiritual truths and traditions taught by Sufism. Although it was already late in the afternoon, those who remained for the debate led by Rector Merroun and Mr. Tardif could enjoy explanations from



Rector Merroun leading the debate

Muslim scholars on some of the deeper points made by the movie. Some commented that, in contrast with the name of Islam being used with regards to recent terrorist attacks, the universal nature of the truth exposed by the film was a ground for peace and harmony among religions. Rabbi

Serfaty concluded with an insightful talk on the historical, common background of various myths taught by great religions in the Middle East.

Already planned a few months ahead, the event took on a special meaning after the January events in France. Synagogues and Mosques have been placed under constant police protection ever since. Thus, there had been concerns whether such an event, in a Mosque under police protection, had any chance to attract participants. But the number and diversity of participants showed that an interfaith gathering is a powerful motivation for action in this time of religious and cultural conflicts.



Participant during the debate - During the break - Rector Merroun leading the debate



Group UPF volunteer staff