

UPF-France Holds Third Interfaith Meeting of 2015

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Paris, France—In an atmosphere of mutual respect, speakers from several faiths kept the attention and won the hearts of participants at UPF-France’s third interreligious meeting of the year.

A joint effort of UPF and its sister organization Women’s Federation for World Peace (WFWP)-France, the meeting entitled “The Role of Spiritual Groups in Public Life” was held on April 18, 2015, at “Accueil Barouillère,” a conference facility owned by Catholic sisters.



The supporting partners of the meeting were the Association France Euro Méditerranée and the Circle of Reflection of Nations, both headed by Ambassadors for Peace.

Terrorist attacks in France and violence in the Middle East have raised many debates on the role of religions in French society. Thus, the fact that we invited well-known religious figures from Catholicism, Islam and Buddhism to speak on such a theme was enough to attract a good audience composed of Ambassadors for Peace and several first-time guests.

After a few words of introduction from Mr. Patrick Jouan, vice president of UPF-France, the first session began with Father Stan Rougier, a Catholic priest.

A longtime high school and university chaplain, Father Rougier has become a well-known preacher and has authored nearly 40 books. With his warm and powerful spirit and his 84 years of rich life experience

in France and around the world, Father Rougier was able to captivate his audience from the moment he began speaking, and never let it go. His lucid comments on the spiritual wilderness of modern society, the good-natured fun he made of dogmas of all sorts, as well as his deep insights into the evil power lurking behind world conflicts, all moved the audience and revealed to anyone meeting him for the first time that he is a man of deep faith, but remarkably open to others, whatever their convictions are.

In response, Michel Thao Chan, the president of the Circle of Reflection of Nations, in his dignified Buddhist attire gave insightful and careful remarks on Father Rougier's talk, underlining the altruistic dimension of his path. Both speakers shared with heart about each other and made the panel a warmly enjoyable experience for the audience. During the break Father Rougier signed his latest book, *La passion de la rencontre* (The Passion of Encounters), a testimony of meetings he has had with extraordinary people throughout his long life.



Mrs. Brigitte Wada, president of WFWP-France, opened the second session by introducing Mrs. Lila Boukourt, head of the Association France Euro Méditerranée, a co-sponsor of our meeting. The session theme was "Interreligious Education in a Secular Society." Mr. Jacques Marion, president of UPF-France, began with a report on his experience with character education programs in Russia and the former Soviet Union in the 1990s. For several years, right after the opening of the Soviet Union and after its demise, a course on ethical values and personal development for adolescents, "My Journey in Life," was taught in thousands of schools throughout the region. The course was widely appreciated for its innovative, interactive approach and particularly for its interreligious approach to teaching values. On that foundation, UPF has developed a course aimed at ages 6 to 18, called "Discovering the Real Me," with 22 manuals for students and teachers, which is used in various countries around the world.

The main speaker of the second session was Mr. Ghaleb Bencheikh, president of the French chapter of the World Conference of Religions for Peace. The son of a former rector of the Paris Mosque, himself a brilliant scholar of Islam, Mr. Bencheikh is known to French people as the host of a Sunday morning TV program introducing Islam. In a thoughtful and incisive talk, Mr. Bencheikh analyzed some of the challenges Muslim people face today in France. He criticized the lack of genuine religiosity among Islamist fanatics, and answered with clarity a few tough questions from the audience on the Koran. Muslim people should not avoid looking at the problems within Islam, he said. At the same time, he underlined the numerous biases that are deeply rooted in French society, based on a long-maintained ignorance about Islam. Interreligious education would be difficult in French schools today, he said, and should be taken care of within the family or through NGOs.

After two sessions that captivated the full attention and heart of the audience, the event ended with our traditional awarding of Ambassador for Peace certificates. The three awardees were: Mr. Laurent Cadet, an NGO leader from the Brittany region; Mrs. Rime Al-Sayed, a Syrian writer and poet; and Sheikh Abdelkader Achour, an imam in a large Muslim neighborhood in Paris.

A seminar on the question of the family, which is at the base of value education but usually is left out of the current debates on values, was announced for June 13.