

# Interreligious Meeting on the “The Role of Spiritualities in Public Life”

Paris, France, 18. April 2015



By Jacques Marion

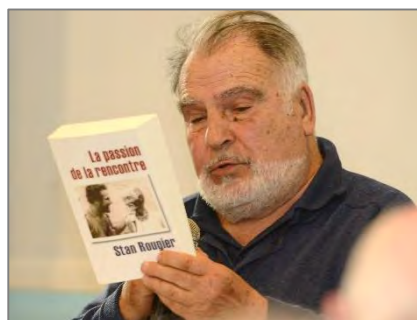


At “Accueil Barouillère”, a conference facility owned by Catholic Sisters, the French chapters of the Universal Peace Federation and the Women’s Federation for World Peace hosted their third interreligious meeting this year on the theme “the Role of Spiritualities in Public Life”. The supporting partners were the Association France Euro Méditerranée, and the Circle of Reflexion des Nations, both headed by Peace Ambassadors.

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 Peace Ambassadors 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 our Catholic speaker, Father Stan Rougier, a Catholic Priest.



A longtime high school and university chaplain, Father Rougier has become a well-known preacher and authored nearly 40 books. He spoke on the theme, “From which God Young People are Atheists?” With his warm and powerful spirit, 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 on 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.



As a respondent, Michel Thao Chan, the president of the Circle of Reflexion 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 by 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, and 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 manual for students and teachers, that 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 of 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 in the associative or family realms.

After two sessions that captivated the full attention and heart of the audience, the event ended with our traditional awarding of Peace Ambassador 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 workshop on the question of the family, which is at the base of value education, but which is usually left out in the current debates on values, was announced for June 13.



*New Ambassadors for Peace - Brigitte Wada, WFWP France president, with Rime Al Sayed, Syrian writer*