

Unification Theological Seminary students' Peace in the Midst of Diversity dialog

Jizly Dohou
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In the densely populated city of Manhattan, New York, nine students from the Ecumenism and Interfaith course at UTS ([Unification Theological Seminary](#)) organized a program based on their field of study: a multifaith dialogue on the topic "Peace in the Midst of Diversity." The five religions represented: Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity engaged in an interfaith dialogue.

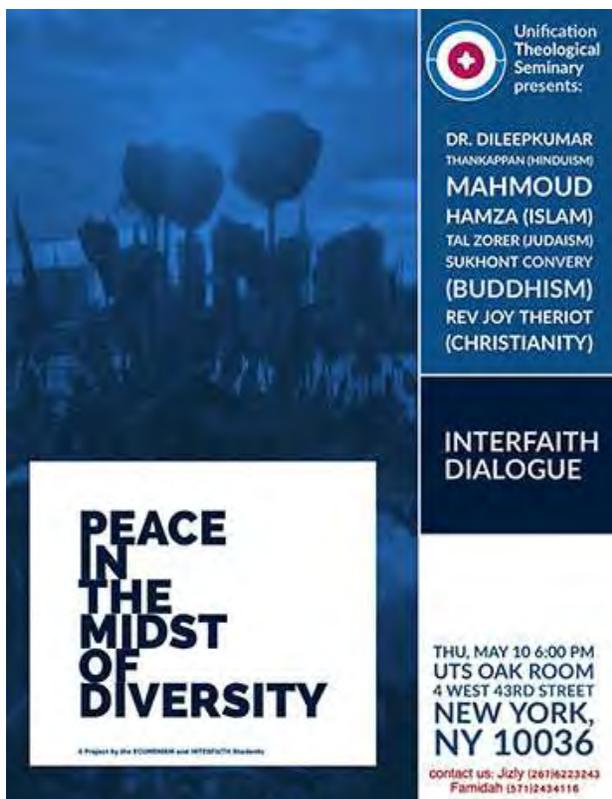
On the lovely evening of May 10, 2018, Bishop Rene Ballenas coordinated this fascinating event at the UTS extension center in New York City. The speakers, students and guests were welcomed by Theophile Zongo, followed by a reading of the guidelines recommended to conduct an effective dialogue by Emmanuel Ndupu. The acronym R E S P E C T was presented to define the program's framework: Responsibility, Empathy, Sensitivity, Ponder, Examine, Confidentiality, Tolerance. Each panelist was asked to speak on their respective faith for up to 12 minutes.

The program started with [Hinduism](#), represented by [Dr. Dileepkumar Thankappan](#), who is the founder and president of the World Yoga Community. He is also involved in the promotion of Interfaith at the United Nations and is currently an adviser for the [UNSRC-Wellness](#) network. His opening remark was that "as a universe we are all equal." Grounded in Hindu tradition his experimentation in religious faith exposed him to various religions, cultures and locations. Stating a "universal family" as a vision of Hinduism, Dr. Thankappan emphasized how the structures of planets is patterned to the alignment of our body system and the vital parts of the human being. The active points in our body can make a substantial change in our life if discovered.

The second speaker, Imam Mahmoud Hamza, was from the Islamic tradition. He stressed the, "Let us keep faith between ourselves and God, argument about faith is nonsense". He informed us that the [Qur'an](#) teaches us to be "firm and just" as well as to be moderate, humble, and show mercy to every person on earth. He emphasized that faith is between each of us and God and the common ground is for us to work together and to agree on what we are going to do for the sake of what we call "PEACE".

Our third speaker was Sukhant Convery (UTS'83) who represented [Buddhism](#). She introduced us to the "peace of mind" achieved by following the teachings of Buddha; right mindset and meditation which have been practiced for centuries. The way of life of Buddhism is to accept everybody from all diverse faiths.

[Christianity](#) was presented by Bishop Joy Theriot, who began with her experiences from her Catholic background. She stressed the concept of the traditional family to promote peace. She clarified this position by honoring [Mother Theresa](#) as a peacemaker who sent the message that taking care of one's family must be the priority in uplifting peace. Bishop Theriot also emphasized that the mother needs to take the lead role in bringing the family into peace and spreading unending love to everyone.



The fifth speaker was Tal Zorer, representing the [Jewish](#) faith. She was born in Israel in a traditional Jewish family and studied law in university. She has also attended several programs of the [Middle East Peace Initiative](#) in Israel. In her presentation she showed a different idea of Jewish interfaith and Jewish understanding of peace. She introduced us to the broad sense of Jewish spiritual redemption - that the Torah has guidelines about the acceptance of diverse religious standpoints, and that the Jewish acceptance of different opinions is a great tradition. From her point of view, spreading religion is not a great way of strengthening faith. For her, showing "sincerity" in our faith is the best practice of Interfaith. Having no fear of being converted will allow us to have a cooperative spirit, and accomplishing things by working together with others is the best Interfaith practice.

Questions and answers followed. The first question was "What is the role of religious leaders in attaining peace despite all the differences." Dr Thankappan answered that ethics and values with the heart of a servant is key to eradicate conflict.

According to Imam Mahmoud, the religious leader needs to maintain moral standards, and request that people behave with respect and care, plus that they value each other equally. His maxim for the religious leader: "Do not take sides in serious matters". Educating one's congregation, and informing them about the different beliefs of other religions can also be a great step. Bishop Theriot suggested that religious leaders could follow in the steps of [St Francis of Assisi](#).

The conversation continued, with the group agreeing that the more we get together and the more we know each other, the less conflict is created. Everyone has their own way of worshipping God, but this does not stop each person from working together.

UTS student, Ms. Muriel Itturalde proposed that religious leaders and the mass media need to promote the more positive elements present in religion. She emphasized that each person's unique and personal relationship with God can be highlighted.

Another student, George Glass, raised the relationship of faith with practice and how that might be tracked and even measured. He asked how might this relationship be understood in the realm of politics? What about the dismantling of nuclear weapons?

We agreed that political issues could best be addressed by providing ground rules for discussion, and that polarization in hot button issues could best be avoided by not taking sides. We were reminded of Imam Mahmoud's advice: "Do not take sides in serious matters". However, to counter that position, Tal Zorer added that loving people in a polarized situation is critical – and that was neglected under the Nazi system. A final comment on denuclearization was that the United Nations needs to be more involved in accelerating its support for NGOs to achieve the [UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Goals](#).

The session concluded with the vision that having the mind to treat each other as family and creating more interfaith gatherings can be effective methods of attaining "Peace in the Midst of Diversity". Cooperating and collaborating on joint projects and putting them into practice will be the best contribution for creating a peace network.

The program was planned and organized by Jizly Dohoua 2nd year student at UTS, together with the support of her classmates. Jizly is studying for a [Master of Arts in Religious Studies](#).

[Dr. Drissa Kone](#) adjunct professor of Ministry (Peace and Justice) taught the class "Ecumenism and Interfaith". He also serves as UTS Director of Student Life.