

# World Interfaith Harmony Week

## The Role of Religions in promoting a Culture of Peace

Vienna International Center (UN Building), Austria, 1. February 2014



UPF-Austria hosted a Conference on the occasion of the World Interfaith Harmony Week. Although the time to organize the meeting was short, the 200 seats of the Conference Room at the Vienna International Center (UN Building) were all occupied. Leaders of NGOs, religious communities and societal opinion leaders were among the audience.

In his welcoming remarks Mr. Peter Haider, President of UPF-Austria, stated that the “World Interfaith Harmony Week” is being celebrated worldwide since 2011 after it was unanimously adopted by the UN General Assembly on October 20, 2010. Its purpose is to emphasize that dialogue and mutual understanding are essential for world peace. “Culture of Peace” sounds like a friendly term at first glance, but when we look closer it can be challenging to our normal concepts. Why? Because a culture of peace is meant to replace the prevailing culture of fear, violence and war. It urges us to go beyond our own feelings and concepts and interests while embracing the other side. That’s what this conference is about.



After the introduction, the movie [Creating a Family of Faith](#) was shown which introduces projects and people trying to transcend barriers between religions. Then two Buddhist nuns, Ven. Chueh Yann Shih and Ven. Yuen-Ching Lee from the Fo Guang Shan Temple in Vienna, recited prayers for peace and brought a spiritual atmosphere to the conference hall.

Mrs. Zena Eggough, Vice President of UPF-Austria, read the message of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for the World Interfaith Harmony Week saying, “The vast majority of people of faith live in harmony with their neighbors, whatever their creed, but each religion also harbors a strident minority prepared to assert fundamentalist doctrines through bigotry and extreme violence. ... Our job is to ensure that hope wins, and our task will be made easier if the followers of all faiths collaborate in common cause.”





[Prof. Dr. Hans Gerald Hödl](#), dean of the Institute for Religious Studies of the University of Vienna, spoke about the topic “Can Academic Studies contribute to Religious Dialogue?” For him it is clear that scholars cannot participate in the religious dialogue. They can only function as moderators. But the scholars’ work should have a positive effect on society, as they strive to study and analyze religions without prejudices. For example, in Vienna they published a book called *Mapping Religions in Vienna*. One question in creating this book was: Do members of a religious group play key roles in society? A lot of research had been done in the background, which helped to create new religious identities. As alternative forms of religion have come into existence, a rethinking of the role of religion has started in general.



The second contributor to the conference was Dr. Rosina-Fawzia Al-Rawi from the [House of Peace \(Haus des Friedens\) – Centre for Women’s Spirituality and Sufism](#). She said: “Our true divine self always longs for peace. This has been taught by all great teachers. In order to be able to go this path we need to experience the divine. That’s what Sufism is all about.”



Dr. Alexander Wojda, head of the Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue unit in the Austrian Ministry for European and International Affairs, explained that intercultural and interreligious dialogue is a priority of Austrian Foreign Policy in a number of relevant policy documents. From 2007 to 2013 more than 70 intercultural and interreligious projects have been implemented and supported by the Austrian government. In 2013 the 5<sup>th</sup> Global Forum of the Alliance of Civilizations was organized in Vienna.

The last speaker of the first session was Mr. Gerhard Weißgrab, president of the Austrian Buddhist Society. His main points were that we can only achieve peace by all religions contributing to it and that we are part of a system of absolute interdependence. According to the teaching of Buddha each and every one of us is called to create peace within him/herself. In order to be able to achieve this, we have to be patient with ourselves and with others. Eventually the peace within us has to be spread into all spheres of society.

After the break the program continued with Dr. Walther Lichem, former Austrian Ambassador to Chile and Canada. His topic was "Absolute Truth, Subjective Reality." He explained about absolute and subjective truth: religious truth is perceived as absolute by its believers, but today we have come to the realization that in order to build peace we have to respect the religious beliefs of others. With the plurality of religions today the relativization of the absolute truth took place. This new freedom allows us to attain happiness on a new level, although the reality today is that in many regions of the world the claim of owning the absolute truth still leads to violence and wars.



The core element of religious truth and peace building can be summarized as "religion has absolute truth, but at the same time it is of subjective nature." An example for this is the fact that the commandment to love your neighbor is not the gift of one single religion. We find it in the texts of all religions. That's why dialogue and mutual respect between religions is mandatory and will eventually lead to peace.

The concept of the equality of religious faiths is a basic element for cooperation. But to achieve it requires moving from the 18<sup>th</sup> century's thinking into the modern times. Another concept which has to be revised is the view about minorities: in order to move to global brotherhood/sisterhood we have to acknowledge the equal value of minorities. In today' Austrian society numerous efforts have been and are being made in order to overcome borders between religions and cultures.



Ms. Anja Weiskopf, member of Youth-UPF Austria, spoke about "Interfaith Education, Leadership Training and Community Service". In December 2013 Ms. Weiskopf participated in an interreligious program in Israel and Palestine, Religious Youth Service, which gave a group of some 40 young people from different faiths the opportunity to visit the holy sites of Jerusalem and the neighboring area. They also visited a Jewish and a Palestinian university and participated in a community service project, which led them to a school for handicapped children.

Finally, the young people participated in the closing banquet of the UPF peace conference which took place at the same time in Jerusalem. The following day, they walked through the streets of Jerusalem, together with scholars and religious dignitaries from different countries of the world, singing, chanting and praying together, which created an incredible atmosphere. "I came home, totally changed, seeing everything from a different perspective," Anja stated as a conclusion.

The next presentation was given by Dr. Leo Gabriel, from the Institute for Intercultural Research and Cooperation, on the topic of "Peace in Syria, the Role of Religions and Civil Society."

In human history we can observe three stages of religious manifestation:



1. Monopolizing the own religion
2. Secularization by the Enlightenment. Secularism substitutes God with something else, such as the nation state, which proved to be a false religion with devastating results.
3. Interfaith communities: people of different religions and agnostic people work together. The goal is to establish an interfaith council at the UN in order to strengthen this cooperation worldwide.

Dr. Gabriel participated in the UPF conference about Syria in Geneva. The negotiations were extremely difficult, and there was a danger that the negotiating parties would not meet anymore. While UPF Ambassadors for Peace and conference participants held an interreligious prayer in a church, the negotiating parties decided to continue the negotiations. "I could see spiritual powers intervening," he said. "Concerning the situation in Syria: the delegation of the government and the opposition cannot achieve peace. In my opinion civil society has to be included in order to achieve results. One example is the Kurds, who adopted a new constitution of 59 self-governed communities. Political figure heads are not always needed."

In order to hasten up the peace process in Syria he is planning a conference in Vienna with participants from different confessions and political formations. "I ask for your prayer that this conference in Vienna can be successful and that it will emerge as an interfaith driving force in a time when many options have turned out to be unsuccessful," he concluded.

As a final speaker Mr. Elias Rubenstein, head of the Hermetic Society in Austria and Grandmaster of the Ancient Order of Rosicrucians, choose the topic Religion and Peace: "We live in an exciting time of humanity. Many things are changing. It is most difficult to establish inner and outer freedom. Religion can be used as a powerful tool for peace, but also for war. So many wars have been waged in the name of religion, but also so many blessings have been given by religions. By that we understand that religion itself is not the source of wars, but it is man who misused it. We must learn from history now and make a decision: Do we want to live as cells of one body or do we want to live separately, selfishly? There is only one successful path in life: we need to change ourselves, and then we can change the world. We can only be satisfied when the wounds of all our brothers and sisters are healed instead of only numb them. Enough time has passed. Now is the time to realize the peaceful dream of humanity."



Lively discussions followed when the audience was included in a give and take with the speakers. The conference closed with recitations and singing by the Buddhist nuns from the Fo Guang Shan Temple in Vienna.