

UPF Vienna, Austria: Why Religions in Dialogue Matters for Achieving the UN SDG

Peter Haider
February 3, 2023



Vienna, Austria -- The Europe-Middle East branch of UPF co-sponsored a World Interfaith Harmony Week event at United Nations headquarters in Vienna.

"Why Religions and Cultures in Dialogue Matter for Achieving the UN SDGs" was the title of the one-day conference held on February 3, 2023, in the Vienna International Centre with an audience of about 200.



UPF and two of its affiliated organizations -- Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP) and Youth

and Students for Peace (YSP) -- sponsored the event together with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([UNODC](#)), the United Nations Correspondents' Association Vienna (UNCAV), and the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations.

In his welcoming remarks, Peter Haider, the president of UPF-Austria, explained the background of World Interfaith Harmony Week, which was proposed by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2010, adopted by the UN, and observed during the first week of February. UPF celebrates this week annually to encourage understanding, respect, and cooperation among faiths to enable peace, Mr. Haider said.



The conference theme poses the following questions: Do religion and culture matter? Why is dialogue important? Are religions and cultures important for achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals? At a time of war in Europe and global climate crisis, Mr. Haider asked the speakers to offer a response.

Session I: "Why Religions and Cultures in Dialogue Matter"

Dr. Afsar Rathor, a former UN diplomat and the president of LIOS-SOIL, an environmental NGO, was the moderator for the first session. In his talk, he drew on decades of experience at the UN. Dr. Rathor highlighted the significance of the topic at a time when rising nationalism and race supremacy create a need for interreligious dialogue to achieve the UN SDGs.

Religious leaders can educate communities to promote values that support social and economic well-being by inspiring action locally and globally, Dr. Rathor said. Religious and cultural dialogue can support inclusive development.

He mentioned the success of Muslim and Christian leaders engaging their communities to solve the Ebola outbreak in Africa after governments had failed. Messages of fear were replaced by messages of hope based on trust, resulting in cessation of some traditional funeral practices. Since 85 percent of the global population have a faith affiliation, governments and UN organizations need the cooperation of faith leaders to achieve UN SDGs. Conferences such as this raise awareness as speakers share their expertise to enlighten people on best practices.

Jean-Luc Lemahieu, director of policy analysis and public affairs of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, stated that religion and cultural diversity are essential when facing multiple crises. Dialogue, understanding, and mutual respect are critical for peace, he said.

UNODC believes collaboration with faith-based and cultural organizations is key to reducing violent crime, drug abuse, and corruption, as seen in the successful tackling of violent extremism in Indonesia, Mr. Lemahieu said. Due to changing geopolitics and the war in Europe, he observes the focus shifting away from other conflict zones and underdeveloped areas, such as Africa, whose economy has contracted, causing migration, crime, violence, drug abuse, making the UN SDGs unattainable. Access to justice is impaired by corruption, particularly in conflict zones.

Interfaith and intercultural cooperation can accelerate joint work based on UN SDG 10 ("Reduce inequality within and among countries") to promote social, economic, and political inclusion. Religious freedom is critical for promoting health, education, gender equality, access to justice, and climate action.

Referring to the ubiquitous increase in drug abuse driven by several risk factors, Mr. Lemahieu emphasized the value of faith-based organizations in reducing drug addiction. He concluded that interfaith initiatives for harmony, understanding and peace help to achieve UN SDGs and alleviate suffering.

H.E. Dr. Haitham Abu Alfoul, ambassador of Jordan to Austria, thanked UPF and co-organizers and emphasized the importance of World Interfaith Harmony Week for Jordanians, who uphold mutual religious respect and promote values of peace inherent in all religions.

King Abdullah II saw the need to promote harmony and uphold positive values entrenched in all religions to enable a secure world. Dr. Haitham quoted the king's acceptance speech for the Templeton Prize in 2018: "The great commandments to love God and love one's neighbor are found again and again in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and other faiths around the world. It is a profound message calling every one of us to struggle to look beyond ourselves and discover inside what is the source of all hope of all coexistence."



While global challenges call for joint action at the international level, that alone is insufficient, the ambassador said. The key is how we use these tools and learn from each other with respect and humility. SDGs aim to transform the world, but to achieve these goals, people need faith in God and collaboration with those seeking peace and harmony. Referring to the Middle East, he called for an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the establishment of a two-state solution and social justice for all. He concluded with a timely call to action, again quoting King Abdullah II: "Let us not ignore the alarm bells ringing around us. We must act."

H.E. Dr. Eglantina Gjermeni, the ambassador of Albania to the international organizations in Vienna, emphasized the need for religious freedom, which protects human rights and promotes social and economic development. She highlighted Albania as an example of interreligious harmony in Europe, describing the harmonious coexistence of three religious faiths as supporting national unity.

Dr. Gjermeni mentioned Albania's protection of persecuted Jews from Europe during World War II. Acceptance of the other is part of the Albanian heritage, as the first Albanian constitution starts with the words "The house of the Albanian belongs to God and to the guest."

In the post-communist period in Albania, there is a sense of community and mutual respect among religious institutions, she said. Spiritual leaders underwent a revival, avoiding political mobilization along religious lines, and politicians have not manipulated faith for political purposes.

Interfaith cooperation in rebuilding the post-communist state creates cultural cohesion and stability, and supports modernization, Dr. Gjermeni said. Although Albania is a secular state with no official religion and a pluralistic landscape, religious freedom is guaranteed by the constitution. Albanians support the separation of state and religion and respect for human rights. Interreligious marriages and attending religious festivals of other faiths are commonplace. Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis both noted the harmonious coexistence of religions in Albania and encouraged the country to become "the home of the

ecumenical and interreligious dialogue." She concluded that faith actors should engage in social issues to support the UN SDGs.

Professor Dr. Paul M. Zulehner, a theologian and professor of sociology of religion, commenced his address by revealing its hidden title: "Religions: Hope for a Tumbling World?"

He recounted an experience with Ukrainian theology students from the Russian Orthodox and Greek Catholic faiths, whom he tasked with creating an island of peace. The response of one student who wants to love as a Christian but cannot overcome hatred begs the question: Can religion bring hope in a tumbling world?



Quoting the Beatles song "All You Need Is Love," Dr. Zulehner qualified the type of love needed – love combined with peace and justice, based on respect for nature.

Referring to the phrase "tumbling world," which was coined by a speaker at a conference in the Ukrainian city of Lviv precisely on the day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Dr. Zulehner said the tumbling world's challenges are interwoven, causing hopelessness and fear, resulting in a culture of rivalry.

Some political populists and religious fundamentalists use this to fuel hatred, violence, and nationalism. As a counter-development emerged with people seeking courage, an ecumenical, international appeal was formulated in response, whose main messages are: religions provide hope, overcome fear, and inspire universal solidarity; religions need renewal as they can be part of the problem; religions present the current challenges as the birth pangs of a world of justice and peace in harmony with nature.

Dr. Zulehner concluded by quoting Pope Francis: "God has created all human beings equal in rights, duties and dignity, and has called them to live together as brothers and sisters."

Dr. Elmar Kuhn, the president of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations, who had just returned from a trip to Egypt to help Christians in need, said this event was a sign of hope for bringing people together. Referring to the integration of culture and religion, he noted how world religions can integrate into different cultures. Cultural behavior can change while central religious values remain unchanged, but religions re-adapt in cultural environments as with Christianity in South America and Islam in Bosnia, he said.

The Coalition of Faith-based Organizations seeks to connect world religions to bring peace and social development through connecting with global organizations, Dr. Kuhn said. Since religions are partners in the development of cultures, they do not stand alone; thus, interfaith cooperation focused on common spiritual values brings cultures together for peace-oriented activities and cultural developments.

Religions must tread a fine line to avoid being part of the problem, Dr. Kuhn cautioned, as interreligious disharmony can cause rejection of religious values, resulting in a failed society. A liberal secular state

cannot guarantee itself, nor can religious values be dictated by the state, he reiterated. Shared religious values are preconditions for a society to guarantee human rights, defend cultures and support the achievement of the UN SDGs.

In conclusion, he noted that religions gain value through seeking common denominators with their faith values through harmonious cooperation in partnership with the UN to develop peaceful global coexistence.

Dr. Katsumi Otsuka, the co-chair of Universal Peace Federation for Europe and the Middle East, thanked the co-organizers and expressed UPF's support for the attainment of the UN SDGs.



Comparing two Olympic Games -- 1920 in Belgium after World War I, during a pandemic, and 2020 in Japan during a pandemic -- he noted that both events gave people courage and hope to move forward. Highlighting how joint international events create unity and give hope, he called on participants to revive the spirit manifested in the Olympics.

Dr. Otsuka referred to the experiences of UPF founders Dr. and Mrs. Sun Myung Moon under Japanese occupation, World War II, and the Korean War. He believes such experiences motivated them to pursue peace by dialogue and to encourage people of faith to participate in peacebuilding, as expressed in the UPF Principles. Applying external political methods alone cannot solve global problems, Dr. Otsuka said, but should be combined with a faith-based approach to devise better solutions. Thus in 2000, Reverend Moon proposed an Interreligious Council as the upper house to renew the United Nations.

UPF implements its policies through an interfaith network, respecting human dignity, the main pillar for harmony and unity. Dr. Otsuka spoke about a Muslim friend who won the hearts of his neighbors in a small Japanese village through dialogue when building a mosque. The mosque opening was broadcast on local TV. This taught him the importance of interfaith dialogue.

In conclusion, Dr. Otsuka quoted John Lennon: "A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality."

Session II: "Interfaith and the United Nations' SDGs"

The moderator of the second session was Dr. Farida Valiullina, UPF's liaison at the UN Vienna office. She emphasized that faith-based organizations are particularly able to make progress toward sustainable development and that almost every religious, indigenous and spiritual tradition teaches the moral obligation to protect the planet and to live in harmony.

Tatjana Christelbauer M.A. from the Agency for Cultural Diplomacy Austria (Orange Feather Dance Meditation 4 Peace) tried to convey the message of love and peace, saying we all should do the same wherever we are and however we feel. Art cannot solve the problems created on the political stage. However, art can engage in activities that support an end to violence. Together with her colleague Ursula

Wagner, she performed a dance meditation for peace.

H.E. Aftab Ahmad Khokher, the ambassador of Pakistan to Austria, drew attention to rising Islamophobia in many European countries. Such actions which disturb peace cannot be ignored, he said. He strongly believes that religions and cultures play a crucial role in promoting values such as tolerance, empathy, cooperation, understanding, and reaching out to others.

Professor Dr. Ille Gebeshuber, Institute of Applied Physics, Technical University Vienna, focused on living in balance with nature through new ways of cohabitation.



Religious organizations have the ability to promote and raise awareness of the UN SDGs in their communities, thus encouraging people to act and behave in ways that realize a sustainable lifestyle, Dr. Gebeshuber said. Interfaith initiatives can bring people from diverse backgrounds together to collaborate on projects that address specific UN SDGs, such as poverty, health, and education. Religious teachings and values also can inspire individuals and communities to live sustainably and act as stewards of the environment.

In conclusion, she said that interfaith dialogue can promote understanding through creating a more inclusive and harmonious society, which is key to achieving the UN SDGs.

Dr. Joshua Sinclair, an American writer, filmmaker, actor and director, and a medical doctor, emphasized that truth is not the result of a specific religious belief, a theological dogma, or a way of thinking. In his view, truth is something much deeper; it is the basis of life. It can be found through living a sincere and authentic lifestyle in relationships with our fellow human beings.

The final speaker, Dr. Rahela Kaveer, the chair of the World Hazara Council, representing the Hazara minority of Afghanistan and Pakistan, spoke about the current situation in Afghanistan, focusing on women's role in economic development and their potential contributions to society. She made an earnest appeal for people to come together to eliminate prejudice and fear and to foster peace, freedom, and development.

The session continued with reflections and questions from the audience addressed to the panelists. To conclude the conference, Peter Haider, the president of UPF-Austria, acknowledged four members of Afghan communities in Austria, Europe and the United States for their efforts for peace and goodwill. In recognition of their achievements, they were appointed as Ambassadors for Peace. The certificates were presented to them by Jacques Marion, the co-chair of UPF for Europe and the Middle East.