

UPF Austria: Vienna Conference Proposes Narratives of Peace Amid Crises

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Vienna, Austria – To mark World Interfaith Harmony Week, UPF-Austria held a conference on the theme, "Building a Peace Narrative at a time of Global Crisis: The Contribution of Religion" on February 2, 2024. The event was held at the United Nations in Vienna, with 200 guests attending.

Mr. Peter Haider, president of UPF-Austria, explained the background of World Interfaith Harmony Week, which UPF has celebrated annually since 2013. He then introduced the topic, referring to current global crises caused by wars and climate change, and stressing the urgent need for religions to assist in overcoming mistrust and promoting dialogue, cooperation, prosperity and peace.



Dr. Asfar Rathor, former UN diplomat and moderator of the first session, said that religions can support

sustainable development and help overcome poverty and environmental degradation by promoting compassion, generosity, care, and protection for the environment. He mentioned the Ebola crisis in West Africa in 2014-2015, where Christian and Muslim religious leaders successfully transformed the message of fear from the government and health agencies into a message of hope and compassion. He said that U.N. agencies, realizing that most people have a religious affiliation, now work in closer partnership with community faith leaders to help resolve conflicts.



Mr. Jean-Luc Lemahieu, director of policy analysis and public affairs at UNODOC, emphasized the need to search for common ground in times of turmoil. Amid war, conflict, climate change, and the refugee crisis, he said that religion can provide an optimistic narrative of peace and tolerance to counter extremist hate narratives. Religion can address the root causes of social and economic inequality by promoting justice and compassion, and encouraging inclusive development and social cohesion. Mr. Lemahieu emphasized the need to focus on youth, who are the principal victims of conflict and social upheaval.

Ms. Rana Abida, charg e d'affaires of Jordan to Austria, began with the Muslim peace greeting. She emphasized the need for multilateral action to address global crises, centered on the United Nations. Amid global turbulence, she said Islam calls for harmony, coexistence and peace. However, many outlaws exploit the true teaching of Islam and engage in terrorism. She said basic human rights should be enjoyed by all, including Palestinians. Ms. Abida stressed the need for interreligious harmony to overcome mistrust between people of different faiths. This goes together with securing peace and overcoming poverty and injustice since humanity is bound together by mutual interests and shared commandments to love God and one's neighbors.

Dr. Johannes Huber is a theologian, professor, and author of several books. He spoke on the topic of forgiveness, highlighting situations in European history where forgiveness was exercised: the Treaty of Westphalia; the Edict of Nantes by King Henry IV; and Louis XVIII's treatment of the murderers of his brother Louis XVI. He then spoke of the religious attitude as a daily examination of conscience. He said that personal daily reflection on our actions helps us to achieve peace for ourselves and others. Finally, he said that science, while not proving transcendence itself, indicates it is "intellectually appropriate to believe in the transcendental" and that there is a quantum code where everything is stored for eternity. Thus is it important to seek peace and goodness.

Dr. Hussain-Mohi-Ud-Din Qadari, deputy chair at Minhaj University in Lahore, Pakistan, stated that relationships between faith communities should be analyzed from various viewpoints: one's own faith perspective; the historical relationship and interaction between the faith communities; the laws and statements in religious texts about other faiths; and traditions of other religious founders. Referencing the Koran, Dr. Qadari said all three monotheistic religions are equally respected by God and all the major prophets are equal before God. He called for a movement of love to overcome narrow-minded religious

mindsets and to revive the times when Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths lived together in harmony and respect.

Dr. Elmar Kuhn, president of the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations, Central-Europe, focused on the future and how society can counteract hate narratives based on disinformation. He believes logical arguments cannot overcome the extremist's distorted image of reality; we must go beyond the arguments of reason and debate to reach the arguments of faith and belief. Religions must present the narrative of life, hope, and eternity, to motivate reconciliation.



Between sessions, the **Interreligious Peace Choir** sang "Peace Prayer Mandela," led by **Ms. Ira Lauren**, which moved the audience and raised the atmosphere.



The second session was moderated by **Ms. Marlies Ladstätter**, representative of IAYSP Europe, who emphasized the importance of finding inner peace prior to searching for peace in the world.

The first panelist, **Dr. Ille Gebeshuber** of the Institute of Applied Physics at the Technical University in

Vienna, addressed pressing issues including ongoing conflicts, climate change, population growth, and the decline of democratic values in the face of technological developments, which in turn lead to social inequalities. Dr. Gebeshuber highlighted the necessity of creating peace narratives that derive from the truth, compassion and respect for life.



Dr. Manjola Zacellari, professor of linguistics at the Aleksander Moisiu University in Durres, Albania, addressed the unique interreligious harmony and cooperation in Albania. Dr. Zacellari said key factors contributing to this are a strong national identity, which supersedes religious identity, due to the nation's historical context; the importance of the family, and educational initiatives that aim to promote such values. She emphasized the importance of individual and institutional measures to maintain the principles of interreligious harmony and tolerance.

Ms. Elisabeth Maria Ziegler-Duregger, representative of the United Religions Initiative, Austria, presented her experience in promoting cooperation beyond religious identities and differences. Her organization is helping children, women and the elderly living in tents in northern Syria, supplying them with food, water and sanitation. Ms. Ziegler-Duregger also introduced a tree-planting project in war-torn Syria as a symbol of hope for the future. She called for a global debate on the responsibility of those that support military action, and recommended holding individuals personally accountable through clear legislation.

Dr. Joshua Sinclair, an American writer, filmmaker, actor, director and medical doctor, delved into the hypothetical notion of the complete abolition of suffering and questioned the implications for art, literature, music and religious texts. He said that the essence of peace is to understand and embrace suffering. With references to renowned poets and writers such as T.S. Eliot and Oscar Wilde, Dr. Sinclair explored the profound effect of suffering on human creativity and spiritual growth. Drawing parallels between different religious traditions, Dr. Sinclair emphasized the importance of showing love and compassion through practical means. The true touchstone for religious teachings is their effectiveness in alleviating the suffering of the marginalized, vulnerable and needy, he said.

The last speaker was **Dr. Dieter Schmidt**, medical doctor and chairman of UPF-Central Europe. He recalled that the movement for the reunification of Germany began in the churches in East Germany, where people educated in atheism and communism prayed silently and stood in front of soldiers with loaded guns. This movement grew to 100,000 people chanting, "We are the people." People who live the essence of religion can bring peace by recognizing that we are one family under God, he said. Not institutions, but love will bring peace, and love is learned in the family by living for the sake of others, beyond the boundaries of nations and religions.