

UPF Austria Advocates of Religious Dialogue - Speaks Out at UN in Vienna

Peter Haider
January 31, 2025



Vienna, Austria – At a high-profile interreligious conference at the United Nations in Vienna on January 31, 2025, representatives of Muslims, Christians and the Austrian Foreign Ministry spoke out in favor of a genuine, truthful and grassroots interreligious dialogue. UPF-Austria organized the conference on the theme “Harmony among Religions and Cultures – A Precondition for World Peace,” with participation from the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations (CFBO), the Women's Federation for World Peace (WFWP), the Association of UN Correspondents in Vienna (UNCAV) and the International Association of Youth and Students for Peace (IAYSP).



In his welcoming remarks **Mr. Peter Haider**, president of UPF-Austria and chair of the NGO Committee on Peace – UN Vienna, stated that UPF and its network of ambassadors for peace celebrate World Interfaith Harmony Week to encourage understanding, respect and cooperation among people of all faiths for the well-being of their communities and world peace. UPF has organized annual conferences at the United Nations in Vienna since 2013.

With more than 200 participants, the conference provided an opportunity for representatives of different religions to find common ground. **Dr. Elmar Kuhn**, president of CFBO Europe, stated: "As people of faith, it is up to us to demonstrate the power of dialogue and compromise in our societies. Let us as religions exemplify what our societies need most: the ability to dialogue."



In his keynote address, Jordanian **Amb. Mohammed Sameer Salem Hindawi** emphasized that it was to strengthen this dialogue, a weapon for the right to freedom of religion, that Jordanian King Abdullah II, together with the United Nations, launched World Interfaith Harmony Week in 2010.



Minister Alexander Rieger, head of the Unit for Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue – Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs in Austria, gave the opening talk in the first session, moderated by **Dr. Afsar Rathor**, a former UN executive. He emphasized that the creation of trust through interreligious and intercultural dialogue is an integral part of Austrian foreign policy.



He also mentioned a newly developed tool to improve civil society exchange called Dialogue Residencies. This program supports Austrian-based academics who stay in a selected country for one to three months to work on a specific dialogue project. One of the first projects is the three-month internship of a young woman in the Amazon with the NGO “Christians in Need,” with the purpose of ensuring the survival of indigenous villages whose existence is threatened by illegal gold mining.



“Christians in Need” Secretary General Dr. Elmar Kuhn, who moderated the second panel, confirmed: “This cooperation is a win-win situation. With very few resources, the ground is being prepared for long-term survival aid for the indigenous population, some of whom have been settling along the Amazon tributaries for centuries.”



Ms. Caroline Hungerländer, executive director of the Institute for Environment, Peace, and Development, said: “Perhaps harmony does not mean the absence of any conflict, but rather the ability to manage differences without resorting to violence or oppression. Instead of seeking to homogenize religious beliefs, we should accept and respect their differences. Harmony does not require full agreement – it requires an understanding that religion shapes culture and society in profound ways. Perhaps, in addressing the great challenges of the 21st century, cooperation – despite differences – must be the goal, not only between religions but also among the people of faith who uphold them.”

Dr. Hassan Mohiuddin Qadri, chair of the Supreme Council of Minhaj-ul-Quran International Foundation in Pakistan, elaborated on the Medina Constitution introduced by the Prophet Mohammed in 622, which exemplifies inclusivity, coexistence, multiculturalism and pluralism. He concluded by saying: “Global peace is well rooted in mutual respect, general understanding, and collaboration among diverse

religious and cultural communities. Let us work together for humanity's sake and become the embodiment of peace, love and tranquility for the sake of peaceful coexistence in our world today."

The second session commenced with a performance of the South-African song "Noyana –Together on the Way to Paradise" by a Peace Choir ensemble, directed by Ira Lauren.



Bishop Humphrey Sarfaraz Peters, the Anglican Bishop of Peshawar and president of CFBO's Pakistan chapter, spoke about the situation of Christians in Pakistan, including how the blasphemy law is often unfairly applied to them. But the contributions of Christians to Pakistan's education and health systems are essential. In his diocese, which nominally extends to Kabul in Afghanistan, dialogue on the grassroots level is the most important contribution to mutual respect among religions.

Dr. Marie Therese Igréc, head of education at the Austrian Conference of Religious Orders, explained the unique role of religious education in Austrian schools, where every legally recognized religious community may give religious instruction. "The prerequisite for successful interreligious dialogue in common school life is that the students are given space to form their identity in their own religious and cultural roots," she said.



Dr. Androniki Barla, theologian and Orthodox canon lawyer, spoke about "Peace, Reconciliation and Social Cohesion in Religion. The role of the Orthodox Church as a Peacemaker." She said, "Initiatives that build bridges between religious and secular stakeholders create mutual confidence and have a larger impact overall, as they improve inclusion and show that cooperation between different groups is possible."

Examples of inter-cultural dialogue in the arts were presented by Armenian photo artist **Ms. Tatev Mnatsakanyan**. Her photo project "Prayer for

Peace" contains photos of spiritual people from different religions.

Ms. Marlies Ladstätter, coordinator of IAYSP-Europe, emphasized the role of the younger generation. She stated: "We often talk about negative peace after ending a war, but religion emphasizes positive peace, inner peace. Religion shows us how to align with this positive peace." She introduced the Peace Designer program of IAYSP used in Balkan countries, and a program in Lebanon that has provided food to over 1000 people. She concluded, "Let us all become peacemakers and let peace start in ourselves."