

UPF New York: Refugees and the Culture of Peace, What Spirituality Has to Offer

Genie Kagawa
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New York, United States—“Refugees and the Culture of Peace: What Spirituality Has to Offer” was the title of a program held by the Culture of Peace Working Group.

UPF is chairing the NGO Committee on Spirituality, Values and Global Concerns-New York, of which the working group is a part.

Alarming levels of famine, poverty and forced displacement have caused a movement of refugees on an unimaginable scale in recent months. The February 23, 2017, program, held at the UN Church Center across the street from the United Nations, discussed ways to head off a potential humanitarian crisis that would result in untold suffering and instability.

As the chair and moderator, Brigadier General John Digilio, the UN representative of Knights Templar, recalled that the history of refugees dates back to pre-biblical times in the Middle East, as well as in Egypt, China, Europe and Africa. Being a refugee is nothing new, he said. However, what is different nowadays is that the forces that push refugees out may have ulterior motives.

General Digilio asked: Do the refugees truly want to leave their homeland, where they were born, where their parents and ancestors existed? Do they want to emigrate to another country? Would they rather return to a stabilized environment in their homeland, where they could continue to thrive as they did in the past before a conflict forced them to leave? Sometimes we assume that refugees want to leave permanently. Is there a right answer? The “Culture of Peace” program was meant to find the key how to solve the problem and acquire deeper insights into the challenges and possibilities.

The first speaker, David Kirshbaum, the UN representative of Non-Violence International, described the refugee crisis as a humanitarian crisis with devastating effects on refugees. The refugee problems are twofold, he said: There are the problems back in the homeland which drove them to become refugees, and there are all the problems outside their homeland as they wander looking for new land.

More and more people are saying that sustainable development and sustainable peace are interdependent. It is important for refugees to find peace and development in order to have a new life, Mr. Kirshbaum said. UN Resolution 53/243 on the Programme of Action on the Culture of Peace and UNESCO emphasized the transformation of cultures and the coming together of every sector of society to solve the problems, in particular for the education of the public and youth, with major efforts of the media and social media.

Mr. Kirshbaum explained that a second framework, from Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, the founder of the discipline of peace and conflict studies, proposed three stages: peacemaking to transform attitudes; peacekeepers to change behavior to end violence; and peacebuilding to rebuild society so that violence is not repeated. The last element is the importance of spirituality, for if a person does not have inner peace, he or she cannot be effective in outer work. And everyone must work together. We cannot depend only on the United Nations; we must work in partnership with others.

Colin Woodhouse, the financial advisor and UN representative of Unitarian Universalists, related his personal experience and that of his wife, Latifa, of the horrendous tragedy of the lives of refugees. His appeal was powerful, as he pleaded to all present not to think of “them” but “us” and to answer the call to the most catastrophic human migration in our lifetime and in the history of our globe.

Refugees deserve a life, Mr. Woodhouse said, affirming that it is necessary to apply pressure on all institutions to eradicate the cause of forced migration: war, deprivation, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, and colonialism. This crisis will not end. Changes will come when we change the culture to say “We are them.”

Mr. Woodhouse described the conditions of refugees under the care of the High Commission on Refugees, which as an institution was in crisis, with only 40 percent funding to handle the overwhelming numbers of refugees. Refugees ended up being housed in hot warehouses and torn tents, replete with scorpions, mosquitos, snakes, and miserable food. Refugees lost everything: their language, money, relatives. Mr. Woodhouse spoke of volunteers rushing in to make up the gap, pulling people off the shore and into centers for medical care, clothing, tickets and money to be on their way. He spoke of the need for sustainable help, such as education for youth, as young refugees are milling around, bored, losing many years of education, and they are going to lash out. Without justice, there can be no peace and no solutions in a sustainable manner.

To the next speaker, Latifa Woodhouse, the refugee problem was personal. Regarding refugees, she saw her own family, who had fled political persecution following the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan and were granted asylum in the United States.

Being a daughter of refugees, she went through life after the Russian invasion and knew firsthand what it was like. Because refugees were traveling in boats that are designed for 20 people, but have 80 people aboard, many refugees have drowned at sea.

Mrs. Woodhouse talked about the importance of volunteers, and said that if it had not been for the volunteers, hundreds of people would have died. Volunteers raised their own money to personally give donations of food, clothing and medical care to the refugees. Volunteers provided trailers and bought raw food so that the refugees could cook their own kind of cuisine.

The number of people unable to communicate with volunteers because of the lack of translators highlighted just how difficult it was for refugees to continue their journey. If they couldn’t get even basic instructions, what were they supposed to do? Mrs. Woodhouse realized that she could be the voice for war-weary refugees who otherwise would not be able to get a word across in communication. Even large organizations didn’t have a translators’ camp. Mrs. Woodhouse was honing her translating skills to help others, but more volunteers are needed, she said.

Juliana Taimoorazy, the founder and president of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council, is a former refugee. She was smuggled into Switzerland in 1989 to avoid religious persecution in her native Iran. After spending seven days in a monastery in Zurich, she was smuggled into Germany, where she sought asylum in the U.S. Embassy. In 1990 she immigrated to the United States with refugee status. As an Assyrian Christian living in Iran, Ms. Taimoorazy became multilingual in four languages, earned a master’s degree and became a journalist.

Ms. Taimoorazy spoke about living as a Christian in Iran. Christianity has been in the Middle East for two millennia, as well as being a major religion around the globe. She realized that Christian values are needed in the Middle East and that Christians need to build bridges between East and West, Muslims and other cultures, to resolve crucial issues.

In her experience, she said, United Nations aid doesn’t go directly to the people; therefore, her organization raises funds which go directly to the people. The small NGOs are the most helpful, she said. People will give when they see the realities. When you make sacrifices for everyone, it can greatly impact thousands. What can we do? Everyone holds the key, she said. She told the participants: Write, report, appeal to your government about the humanitarian crisis.