

UPF Vienna, Austria's conference supporting Pakistan's Interfaith Harmony Council

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Vienna, Austria -- UPF co-sponsored an international virtual conference in support of Pakistan's Interfaith Harmony Council.

The webinar, titled "Faith, Ethics and Education," consisted of two sessions on March 31, 2021.

It was organized by the Coalition of Faith-Based Organizations (CFBOs) together with UPF International; the International Association of Parliamentarians for Peace (IAPP), one of UPF's constituent associations; and the LIOS-SOIL Organization, Vienna, in partnership with several universities in Pakistan, South Africa and Austria.

The initiator, Dr. Afsar Rathor, a former United Nations diplomat and president of the Vienna-based LIOS-SOIL Organization, emphasized that the goal of the conference was to support the newly established Interfaith Harmony Council of Pakistan, which will establish further councils across the country with the goal of including religious tolerance in the school curriculum. Another goal of the conference was to highlight for Western audiences the council's objectives.

Two sessions -- "The Role of Religious Leaders in Crime Prevention" and "Faith, Ethics and Education" - brought together religious and community leaders, academics, politicians and experts from politics, religion, philosophy, education, medicine, business, and agriculture to offer their views and address current concerns from the perspective of religious tolerance and acceptance.

Session One: "The Role of Religious Leaders in Crime Prevention"

The first session was opened by the host and moderator, Dr. Afsar Rathor, who stated that this second interfaith conference is contributing to nation building, interfaith harmony, and a peaceful society.

Dr. Michael Platzer, the co-chair of the Coalition of Faith Based Organizations, noted that FBOs can fight corruption and contribute to resolving numerous issues, including climate, violence against women, social justice, urban safety, ethics, and good governance. Dr. Platzer said that the Vienna-based United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has welcomed religions as a valuable stakeholder and partner to prevent crime and to improve the criminal justice system.

HE Syed Hussain Jahania Gardezi, the minister for agriculture of the Pakistani province of Punjab, a former minister of food, and a practicing farmer, presented an in-depth analysis of the significance of religious peace and harmony. He proposed that a code of ethics for religious journalists be developed, on how to deal with incitement that may lead to atrocities.

HE Lal Chand Malhi, the parliamentary secretary for human rights (deputy minister) of Pakistan's ministry of human rights, a journalist by profession as well as a human rights activist, observed that

religious leaders can more effectively work with juvenile substance abusers, or with the inmates returning to the community, who then become a key resource of crime reduction. Religious leaders can influence society in a positive manner by not remaining silent when other communities are targeted, he said.

HE Archbishop Sebastian Francis Shaw, the bishop of Lahore (Catholic Church), said he has been inspired by St. Francis and by the Vatican Two document. Dialogue is the way to bring peace, to express yourself and listen to others, he said. There is no need to convert anybody; let us make interreligious dialogue more visible. "Let us plant olive trees," as is mentioned in the holy Bible and in the holy Quran. Let us go beyond tolerance to acceptance; let us work together for the restoration of human dignity, he said.

HE Ramesh Singh Arora, a member of the Provincial Assembly of Punjab, stated that the fundamental belief of Sikhism is the universality of God, duality, interfaith harmony, humanity, and sharing. People from all faiths and those who do not profess any faith are welcome in the Sikh gurdwara (place of worship), he said. Pakistan's National Assembly and all the Provincial Assemblies and the Senate have reserved seats for minorities, so they don't consider themselves vulnerable. Also 5 percent of jobs are reserved for minorities in Pakistan, so they consider their livelihood is protected. He suggested we need to take tolerance and acceptance one step further to respect.

HE Sardar Masood Khan, the president of Pakistan's Azad Jammu and Kashmir region, stated that communities should reach out to each other and try to understand the basis of their faiths, and banish Islamophobia, Christianophobia, and anti-Semitism. We need dialogue, he said. At the same time, there should be a system for prosecution, a system for accountability, and this culture of impunity for hate crimes committed by followers of a faith should be abolished. No religion is a monolith, he said. He also elaborated on human rights violations against the Muslims of India and the Kashmiris living in Indian Administered Kashmir.

Rounding up the first session, Dr. Afsar Rathor noted that dialogue is the only way forward. Thus we are looking forward to more interactions between communities for result-oriented dialogues. He said that there was outstanding collaboration with the universities in the last webinar on February 2, 2021.

Professor Dr. Suleman Tahir of the Khawaja Fareed University of Engineering and Information Technology, Rahim Yar Khan, Pakistan, stated that dialogue between the faiths is necessary to decrease the distances and promote relationships. We need to address corruption overall, he said. Corruption is not only the money: It's also in tolerance; it's also in ethical values; it's also to respect each other, he said. We should follow ethical values, but these cannot be taught. These are the practical values we must practice, as it is in engineering. We learn something in engineering lab. That cannot be in teaching only in the classroom.



Session Two: "Faith, Ethics and Education"

The second session of the conference was moderated by Heather Wokusch, a communications consultant from Austria.

Peter Haider, the secretary general of UPF-Austria, reminded the audience that in August 2000, during a conference at the United Nations in New York, UPF co-founder Dr. Sun Myung Moon from Korea

proposed that an interreligious assembly be created that would serve as a senate or a council within the United Nations. Mr. Haider then congratulated the nation of Pakistan for establishing Interfaith Harmony Councils at the local, provincial, and national levels to promote dialogue and resolve sectarian conflicts.

HE Professor Dr. Qibla Ayaz, the chairman of the Council of Islamic Ideology, Pakistan, speaking on the theme of education, said that ethics, particularly with reference to interfaith, should be transferred to the coming generation. It is important that it should be part of the reading contents and the overall curriculum, he said: There should be stories that help us to understand why in the post-globalized world it is important that we live in harmony, coexistence, and respect for each other.



HE Professor Dr. Meher Taj Roghani, a member of the Senate of Pakistan, is the chair of the Senate Committee on National Commission on Women's Status, and a medical doctor. She said that when patients came to her, she never thought for a minute of their race, religion, or color. Harmony can mean the agreement of ideas, feelings, or actions, or it may mean a situation in which people live or work happily together. Now, as a politician, she believes that politicians should be the first example for honesty, because this will have a trickle-down effect.

HE Dr. Samia Raheel Qazi, a former member of Parliament and the president of the International Muslim Women's Union, urged us to agree to disagree, and to work together, enhancing intercultural and interfaith dialogue and understanding. She urged us to promote tolerance and harmony and the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge, people-to-people contacts, and education. Beginning is half the task, she said.

HE Bishop Humphrey Sarfaraz Peters, the president of Bishop Church of Pakistan and the bishop of Peshawar, stated that we are dealing with faith, ethics, and education. In the first place, before a society can be safe, harmonious, and peaceful, it must care for the well-being of the other. Secondly, good deeds should become part of our character. But for a safe, harmonious and peaceful society, education, ethics, and faith are essential -- education at the practical approach and faith are the base for a change in the mindset.

HE Isphanyar M. Bhandara, a former member of Parliament, a businessman, politician, and philanthropist, said that having faith without education leads to intolerance. We have rather too much unguided faith with too little education, he said. "I largely blame the primitive education system in the third world, which encourages prejudice, intolerance and hatred toward minorities, at least in the common schools in the rural villages and backward areas," he said. The curriculum has to be revisited in order to eradicate anything that is derogatory toward minorities.

HE Sahibzada Sultan Ahmed Ali, the chairman of the MUSLIM ("Mission of Unity, Stability, and Leadership in Muslims") Institute, a research think tank in Islamabad and London, stated that education lays the foundation for the prosperity of the nation. Practicing such ethics on a larger scale demands their inclusion in the educational syllabus and dissemination through the modern methods prevailing in society, he said. We need to harmonize traditions and prevailing educational systems: a blend of traditional and modern methodology for faith-based societies for peace, prosperity, and stability, as desired by the teachings of all great religions.

The closing remarks were offered by Dr. Thomas Walsh from the United States, the co-chairman of

CFBOs and the chairman of UPF International. He underscored the advances made and the need to continue in interreligious and intra-religious dialogue, which is important for peace, development, crime prevention and criminal justice. He suggested that dialogue does not mean talking all the time. It means spending 99 percent of one's time listening -- and not just listening with one's ears closed but listening to try to learn.

Dr. Afsar Rathor concluded that morality refers to the set of standards that enables people to live cooperatively in groups. Sometimes, acting in a moral manner means that individuals must sacrifice their own short-term interests to benefit the society, and that is the ideal situation to which we look forward. Furthermore, he mentioned that the partner organizations can only provide a platform for an everlasting dialogue between the various religious communities for better understanding, more tolerance and peaceful society. He thanked the panelists and the partner organizations and universities for their positive contributions.



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