

HJ International Graduate School for Peace and Public Leadership's Thomas Ward at CESNUR in France

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Professor Thomas J. Ward participated in the 2024 CESNUR Conference in Bordeaux from June 11 to 15. CESNUR (Centro Studi Sulle Nuove Religioni or Center for the Study of New Religions) is led by Dr. Massimo Introvigne, an Attorney by training with decades of experience in the study of new religions and the difficult paths that they must navigate to practice their faith in many countries around the world, including highly developed countries such as Japan and France, as well as less developed countries such as Afghanistan.

Key New Religious Movement (NRM) scholars from around the world participated in the conference including Eileen Barker, Gordon Melton, George Chryssides, and Susan Palmer. Bernadette Rigal-Cellard, a key figure in the study of New Religions and a Professor at the University of Bordeaux-Montaigne hosted the Conference and made each participant feel welcomed.

The theme of the Bordeaux Conference was "The Contribution of Minority Religions to Society." Some of the key contributions that were noted included the role that Mormonism has played in the building and maintenance of genealogical records, and the role that Jehovah Witnesses have played, as a spinoff of their restrictions on medical practices such as blood transfusions, which, over time, led to an expansion and diversification of medical procedures, allowing a number of medical procedures to be less invasive nowadays and improve medical practices.

Dr. Ward's presentation at CESNUR considered the numerous ways in which Dr. Sun Myung and Hak Ja Han Moon have contributed to the ending of the Cold War. He shared specifically about the sacrifices that had been made by Unification missionaries and members who gave their lives to further peace. Ward shared specifically about HJ International Graduate School For Peace And Public Leadership graduate Lee Shapiro who was killed by Soviet forces during their occupation of Afghanistan. He also paid tribute to the eighteen early members of the Unification Church in Czechoslovakia who in September 1973 were sentenced to five years in prison for "subverting the Republic." He recognized Marie Tivna, the young Czech missionary who died, for unknown reasons, in prison during the months that she lingered in her cell waiting for her trial. He also recognized Dr. Antonio Betancourt who traveled to Pyongyang on seventeen separate occasions and played an important part in Track II Diplomacy initiatives between Washington and Pyongyang.

One of the highlights of the event was a session on Thursday June 13 specifically dedicated to trying to understand the unjust steps taken recently in Japan to block Unificationists from practicing their faith in Japan. Participants in the Conference had an opportunity to hear directly from the Tatsuki Nakayama, the Japanese Attorney who has boldly taken on the case of Unificationism's fight for Religious Freedom in Japan and Norishige Kondo, the Japanese Family Federation Leader and Lawyer who is supporting and coordinating the efforts under way to chart a path forward for Family Federation Japan.

Participants also had the opportunity to hear from Moriko Hori, the International President of Women's Federation for World Peace, who recounted the ways in which the Japanese Government had taken back awards given to Unificationists in the past, because of intimidation from anti-Unification forces in Japan's media and politics. Dr. Michael Balcomb, the Regional President of Family Federation for Europe and the Middle East completed the program with an appeal for support to Japan and to Religious Freedom everywhere. Dr. Balcomb earned both his Master's degree and his Doctorate from HJ International Graduate School For Peace And Public Leadership and Norishige Kondo, Japan Family Federation Legal Advisor, earned his Master degree at HJ International Graduate School For Peace And Public Leadership. The program, as a whole, represented an articulate defense of the Family Federation, Chaired by Dr. Eileen Barker, introduced and contextualized by Dr. Introvigne, the Session included incisive interventions from each speaker, pointing to the aggressiveness, fear, and hate of those who have enabled this tragic and embarrassing abuse of human rights to undermine key principles in the Japanese Constitution and way of life.

On the evening of the 13th there was an additional program held regarding developments in Japan. Sam Nagasaka, an HJ International Graduate School For Peace And Public Leadership graduate, shared about his experience of deprogramming and of working to repair the relationship with his parents which had been compromised because of the deprogramming. Dr. Ward was also asked by Dr. Balcomb to share about his experience (having been deprogrammed twice) and also speak on his history in the Unification Movement, which he joined in France more than half a century ago. Jacques Marion, UPF Chair for Europe and currently a part of the HJ International Graduate School For Peace And Public Leadership Peace Studies program, played a key role in the organization of the program and he also arranged a Press Conference in Paris following the CESNUR Conference for the Japanese participants.

Dr. Ward said that he greatly appreciated the Conference. It was a unique opportunity to meet and speak with stellar scholars and leaders in the Religious Freedom and New Religious Movements. When Ward spoke at the banquet, he shared with Dr. Introvigne, Founder and President of CESNUR, that he could never forget, the basis upon which Dr. Introvigne, more than forty years ago, had explained to him why he had become involved in speaking out against the Anti-Cult Movement. The ACM, he explained back then, was a threat to all religions because "when one judges any one religion based upon purely psychological criteria, one opens the way to judge all religions based on purely psychological criteria."