



Spirituality and Justice

Vienna International Centre UN, Austria, October 7, 2019

By Peter Haider

The UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) on October 7th 2019 hosted a day long event on „Spirituality and Justice“ about collaboration with Faith based Organizations (FBOs) at the Vienna International Centre (United Nations) and elsewhere. It was opened by the UNODC Director of Policy Analysis and Public Affairs, Dr. Jean Luc LeMahieu and the Permanent Representative of Spain Ambassador Senen Flores. Representatives from Austria, Russia, Belarus, Canada, Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Eritrea, Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco also attended the four sessions. A list of potential topics for discussion was prepared by the Civil Society Team of UNODC.

The International Commission of Catholic Prison Pastoral Care distributed pamphlets of "Basic Principles: Religion in Prison" and organized an international exhibition of prison art at the United Nations. Bishop Franz Scharl, who is responsible for Catholic prison pastoral care, spoke at both UN and the evening event near St Stephen's Cathedral. Imam Dzemal Sibljakovic, the Muslim coordinator in prisons, Markus Fellinger, the Protestant chaplain and Mrs. Halbeisen from the Buddhist community

also participated in the articulation of the "Vienna Recommendations". Prof. Ismail Yasin shared his reflections on the situation in Syria.

Dr. Michael Platzer from the UN Studies Association and Dr. Elmar Kuhn from the European Academy of Sciences and Arts moderated the discussions of empathy and social justice, ethics and good governance, humane treatment and resocialization of offenders, restorative justice and victim assistance. Professor Karin Bruckmueller made an impassioned plea for non judicial settlements with acknowledgement of harm done to victims and and non penal community service.

Dr. Thomas Walsh, chair of UPF International in a message to the conference thanked Dr. Platzer for being a never tiring activist and addressed the topic „Spirituality and Justice“: „Religion and spirituality have been integrally related to human beings throughout all the ages. Among the many billions of people currently dwelling on this planet, the vast majority either explicitly subscribe to a particular religious tradition or have been profoundly shaped, perhaps without acknowledgement, by the ideas, images, memes, symbols, and characteristics of religion. It's death has often been prematurely predicted. Religion,

however, is sticky. That stickiness fixes itself in the minds and hearts of people, and impacts human thought and action. Religion does not dwell in a private sphere set apart from life. It is part of the fabric of life. While it is prone to failings and corruption, like all human endeavors, it also reaches the greatest heights of insight, wisdom and service. The universal aspiration for justice derives from a moral insight, which has roots in the world's great religions. Believers, by and large, are justice seekers, called to that mission by their scriptures and their founders. Justice cannot be achieved by the actions of governments alone. It requires the participation of all sectors, including academia, civil society, the media and the arts, educational institutions, AND, indeed FBOs.“

Prof. Azza Karam, the UN Co-ordinator of the Task Force for Engagement with Faith based Organizations delivered an encouraging video message from New York, while Mr. Ibrahim Salama from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights sent a positive message from Geneva to invite closer collaboration between the two offices.

The Universal Peace Federation, the Dominicans for Justice and the Women's Federation for World Peace played important roles in organizing and getting important people to the events.