

UNU Book Launch and Panel Discussion

“World Religions and Norms of War: Exploring the Links”

A panel discussion entitled, “World Religions and Norms of War: Exploring the Links” organized by the United Nations University Office in New York (UNU-ONY), was held on 19 February 2009, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York and on 20 February 2009 at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), who were also co-organizers, in Washington D.C. The discussion was held to showcase a new publication by UNU Press 2009 of the same name.

The New York event was moderated by UNU-ONY Director, Jean Marc Coicaud and was opened by the Permanent Representative of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations, H.E. Ambassador Khalid Al-Nafisee and the Permanent Observer of the Holy See, H.E. Archbishop Migliore. Ambassador Al-Nafisee commented on how the book was complementary to the initiative of inter-faith dialogue launched by H.R.H King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

Two of the editors of the book, Vesselin Popovski and Nicholas Turner of UNU as well as Henrik Syse of the International Peace Institute, Oslo (PRIO) were present at both events to offer their insights. At the events, the editors elaborated on the underlying themes of the book and the increasing importance of inter-faith dialogue. They also illustrated how the secularization of the combined beliefs and norms of war of various religions have contributed to the UN Charter and how the core principles of religions correspond with the norms of international law. Henrik Syse of PRIO offered his philosophical point of view on religions and how they need to learn from each other and be open to all goodwill, as well as be willing to explore their own weaknesses. He disputed the notion that different religions had different sets of ethics and emphasizes on how the book sees religions as vital sources of common morality and ethics amongst human beings.

The New York event also saw Walter Dorn of the Royal Military College, Canada, and Bawa Jain, Secretary General of the World Council of Religious Leaders as discussants in the forum. Walter Dorn underlined the importance of codifying the ethical commonalities between religions, some of which stretch back millennia, in order to more effectively address the question of when the use of force can be justified. Bawa Jain emphasized the need for a form of religious diplomacy to complement political diplomacy and that the book could be a basis for inter-religious dialogue.

The Washington D.C. event was moderated by David Smock, of USIP. Marshall Breger, a Professor at the Columbus School of Law reiterated the significance of the book, in particular its potential contributions to the field of international law. He also mentioned how specific case studies of historic and current events of how secular and religious principals have interacted with each other could significantly contribute to the discourse initiated by the book.

A wide range of questions were presented to the panels at the respective events. At the Washington D.C. event, a question emerged from a member of the audience regarding the causes of “religious” conflicts. Vesselin Popovski pointed out that while religion or ideological persuasions were effective tools in rousing up support in conflict situations, the deeper causes of conflicts normally lay in economic, political and social situations. Professor Breger reinforced this argument by illustrating how many religions used to share holy sites and works, until the question of nationalism arose from the struggle for resources.

Some of the consensus reached during both of the events included the importance of reaching out to the moderates of each religion, inter-faith dialogue and the inclusion of religious factors in diplomatic efforts.

A quote by Albert Einstein, cited by Archbishop Migliore in his opening remarks, appropriately summarized the general theme of the discussions; “Past thinking and methods did not prevent world wars. Future thinking must.”