



**Webinar: *'Peace-making activities of faith-based civil society actors'***

**Monday, November 18, 2024**

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## **Gabriela Frey, Co-chair of the Committee for interreligious & interconvictional Dialogue**

Increasingly I feel a painful resistance to watch the news and need a break from war, fanaticism and violence every now and then. Maybe you feel the same way I do? Many conflicts arise or are fuelled and justified by ideology, belief and the power-oriented instrumentalisation of religions. People seem to increasingly lack the ability to communicate and empathise. The other side is no longer seen as a sentient human being, but as a threatening 'something' that needs to be fought or even eliminated. The values that are an essential part of religions are faded out.

Figures show that nowadays only around 48% of people feel that they belong to a religion. More than half have their own world views. Thinking about the meaning of life is suppressed or does not even come up.

Ethics and empathy are as important as water for survival. And what all people have in common is the desire for peace and prosperity.

This, in turn, does not just fall from the sky, but requires constant care and fertiliser like a garden. It requires committed people who are not indifferent or despondent in the face of endless suffering and hardship, but who take courageous action and become active.

A dialogue and inspiring exchange of ideas across ideological boundaries on how to create a more peaceful society is becoming increasingly urgent.

Since the beginning of our Interreligious and Interconfessional Dialogue Committee, we have been identifying inspiring interreligious/interconvictional practices across Europe and presenting them in webinars and soon on a dedicated website.

Our aim is to promote the establishment of a permanent platform for IR-IC dialogue within the Council of Europe, so that the much-needed constructive exchange that we all sorely miss these days can take place there.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the co-chair of our committee, Lilia Bensedrine Thabet, for the wonderful annual 'Sacrées Journées' festival in Strasbourg. Making music together in the sacred places of another faith group shows in such an impressive and touchingly simple way what unites us all beyond words.

I am very much looking forward to the contribution of today's 4 representatives of faith-based organisations, who are admirably committed to peace and understanding. They show that religion in its original meaning unites and is meaningful, committed solidarity.

My colleague Thea Mohr will now introduce them to you in detail.



**Thea Mohr, Moderator** (EBU, trainer of intercultural communication):

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, esteemed participants. We extend a warm welcome, particularly to our esteemed speakers. We have once again selected a topic of great interest: the role of faith-based international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) in promoting peace.

The speakers, representing Judaism, Christianity, and Buddhism, will present their views on this topic. Before they begin, I will provide a brief introduction to them.

A brief overview of the organization is in order. It is anticipated that questions and suggestions will be posed regarding the contributions. We kindly request that you submit your inquiries via the chat function. We will be available to respond to these queries or redirect them to the presenters following the conclusion of their remarks. All speakers will present their remarks in English, and we are fortunate to have the assistance of our simultaneous translators, Elizabeth Greneron and Sanja Furnadjiska-Adams. I extend my best wishes for an enlightening and inspiring evening. I am delighted to announce that we will commence with Rabbi Danna Kirshbaum's presentation.

#### **Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, Women Wage Peace, Biography**

Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum, a dual Israeli-American citizen, helped to establish the Israeli movement Women Wage Peace in the aftermath of the fifty-day Gaza War in 2014. The thousand women who came together to cry “enough is enough” recognized that women were glaringly absent from peace negotiations and decisions about security; the movement has since grown to over fifty thousand in the past decade. Donna is pleased to add that Women Wage Peace was chosen as a nominee for this year’s Nobel Peace Prize along with its Palestinian sister movement Women of the Sun, and has also been nominated, with Women of the Sun, to receive the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the Renew Europe Group of the European Parliament. Rabbi Kirshbaum currently serves as the rabbi of a synagogue in New Hampshire in the northeastern US and continues as advocacy chair of a clergy task force devoted to the prevention of domestic violence. She is especially interested in the correlation between an increase in domestic violence during ongoing national conflict.

#### **Rabbi Donna Kirshbaum: Women wage Peace**

First I want to thank the organizers of this webinar for including the voice of Women Wage Peace, a ten-year old Israeli NGO formed in response to the 50-day Gaza War of 2014. I was among the several hundred Israeli women who helped establish the movement a few weeks after its founding at a conference on a college campus next to the Gaza border. Our origin story, however, may go back to two women professors from that college sitting in a cafe in



that same town by the Gaza border just after the war in 2014. It seems they concluded that the missing piece needed to prevent another cycle of bloodshed was the voices of women. Since then we have grown to over 44,000 Israelis with thousands of worldwide supporters. And since the Spring of 2021 we have been working hand-in-hand with our Palestinian sister movement Women of the Sun after they received NGO status from the Palestinian Authority. Together our two movements were recently honored with an official nomination for this year's Nobel Peace Prize. Before turning to your questions, I want to share a little more about the message, the messenger, and then the intuitions behind our message.

**Part One, the message.** Our conviction, and therefore our message, is simple, despite the backdrop of what feels like endless war — that is, that peace between Israelis and Palestinians *is* possible, if women of our region unite and lead the way. This is not because we think women are essentially more peace-loving than men but because certain expectations in thickly patriarchal cultures like ours make us better suited to saying what we see and knowing what we know, in the words of Women Wage Peace mentor, the psychologist Carol Gilligan. I'll say more about that notion in Part Three when I share the intuitions behind our message. Here I would like to expand on our message itself — that peace between Israel and its neighbors is still possible when women unite and lead the way. It happens that we members of the movement are not, by and large, pacifists *per se*. We understand the importance of both national self-defense and security. We recognize, however — in the spirit of saying what we see and knowing what we know — that when the need for self-defense bleeds into a need for revenge that cannot be staunched, a population is not likely to succeed in defending itself in a sustainable way nor in providing a foundation on which the next generation can build a good life. Likewise we understand that the notion of security must be expanded beyond the narrow concept of military security to include not only political-military security but also economic, environmental, and domestic security. As expressed by the Washington-based Institute for Inclusive Security, the notion of comprehensive security “transforms decision-making about war and peace” to the extent that “policymakers, security sectors, and conflict-affected populations work together, with women’s meaningful participation often making the difference between failure and success.” To this end, one of the many teams that comprise Women Wage Peace is the 1325 team whose name comes from the UN Security Council Resolution of the year 2000 to which Israel was an early signatory. Resolution 1325 calls for the inclusion of women in all aspects of peace-making and the restorative practices of peace-building.

To further expand on our message itself, we realize that Women Wage Peace must work in ways that do not perpetuate the very artifacts of hierarchical, linear, zero-sum thinking to which all men and women are heirs. Women Wage Peace as a social movement seeks to maintain a flat governing structure and shared decision-making as well as an approach to peacemaking that is simultaneously top-down and bottom-up. That is, we engage decision-makers at the highest levels while at the same time work to create a strong grassroots. (I can





expand on how we do this in the Q and A, if it's of interest). In addition, we engage not only the foreign diplomatic community stationed in Jerusalem but also peer-to-peer support groups in a growing number of countries who amplify our message that peace between Israelis and Palestinians is possible if women in our region unite and lead. This conviction can be hastened into reality by women worldwide who are willing to join this cry. In fact we call it [The Mothers' Call](#). Recently it has been signed by Pope Francis and many other internationally known public figures. [The Mothers' Call](#) is a joint statement written by Women Wage Peace and Women of the Sun. You, too, are invited to add your names to the thousands who have already signed [The Mothers' Call](#).

**Part Two, the messenger.** I would not normally inject a highly personal anecdote into such a presentation but I've been encouraged to share with you a rapid evolution I've undergone since October 7, 2023 when a founding member of Women Wage Peace, my sweet friend Vivian Silver, was murdered in her home on a kibbutz bordering the Gaza Strip. Vivian, may her memory bring only blessing, was surely Israel's most unshakeable, determined, and eloquent peace activist. I found that I was having a great deal of trouble grieving for her, both as a close friend and colleague. This was due partly to the fact that my husband had died less than six months before her murder and I was still mourning deeply for him. And partly because, for the first 38 days after the attack of October 7th, we had every reason to believe that Vivian had been kidnapped to Gaza. This made the declaration of her death over a month later even more surreal. But mostly my stalled grief was due, I think, to the way I initially fell into describing her death. I realized that I was actually saying something that made no sense when I'd say: "Vivian was murdered by Hamas." This paltry explanation left me stuck — stuck in stagnant grief. Then I realized why — Vivian was, and is, so vivid to me, so specific, while "Hamas" is so abstract. 'Hamas' is many things, not one thing. My sentence began in such vividness: "Our darling Vivian, brimming with life and love and compassion and wisdom, was murdered" and ended with an appalling abstraction: "by Hamas."

Slowly however, I began to balance out the sentence. For instance, I tried: "Vivian was probably murdered by a handful of enraged and humiliated young men." And then this: "Vivian was probably murdered by one or several enraged and humiliated young men who may or may not have had strong allegiance to the social-political-military phenomenon known as Hamas, but who surely submitted to being drugged before they crossed the border with instructions to massacre Israelis in their homes." And then, finally, I came up with a variation on this theme, when I thought about a Bedouin friend of mine in southern Israel who had a sister in Gaza City. Like my friend herself, here was a Gazan woman who also longed for peace and reconciliation. Finally, I began to speak of Vivian's tragic and untimely death this way: "Vivian was most likely murdered by one or several enraged, humiliated, radicalized young men — with the *possibility*, however remote — that at least one of them may have acted against the misgivings of his grandmother." It's true: once I was finally able to think about her murderers with even an ounce of humanity, I was able to begin grieving for my friend Vivian in all her humanity, which for me includes her specificity, her unique humanness. Indeed



Vivian herself treated each and every person she met with that same sense of humanity, getting to know individuals and communities, scarred by discrimination and injustice, *in their specificity* and then responding out of that specific knowledge.

Surely both Vivian and I were drawn to Women Wage Peace because of our affinity for naming what is ‘right there’ in front of us and our suspicion of overly-abstract ideas removed from the world of feeling and intuition. During my ten years in the movement, I’ve been surrounded by women who avoid abstraction, who seek pragmatic solutions, and who are not afraid to say what they see and know what they know. In case this last phrase “knowing what you know” puzzles you, let me share a remark made by a woman who was being interviewed by Carol Gilligan for a research project. The woman interrupted Carol’s questions with a question of her own: “Do you want to know what I think, or do you want to know what I *really* think?” It’s clear to me that we members of Women Wage Peace share a desire to be known by what we *really* think.

**Part Three, the intuitions behind our message.** Here I want to emphasize that our conviction that women have the power to make peace does not come from what is termed ‘gender essentialism’ — that women are, in their *essential* nature, either x, y, or z. No; we act instead on our understanding that in a thickly patriarchal society, women are expected to be custodians of everyone’s humanity; we’re the ones whose role is to care for, not to conquer. At a lecture I once gave about Women Wage Peace, one of the attendees nicely summed up this very phenomenon: “It seems from what you’re saying, Rabbi Kirshbaum, that boys are expected to *man up* by around the age of four, while women don’t have to *shut up* until the age of fourteen.” Yes, this is exactly it: women have, on the whole, an extra ten years to practice resisting initiation into patriarchal society and its need to dissociate. According to Carol Gilligan’s research, girls tend to resist this initiation longer than boys, often by ten years or so. Thus girls generally *have more time* to establish both a richer relational vocabulary and a better-developed internal foundation for using their authentic human voice before it is lost to the demands of patriarchy.

Being a rabbi, I often turn to the wisdom of ancient Jewish stories. For instance, to how the distraught mother of Moses fashions a tiny ark out of the most common of materials – reeds from the Nile River along with a little tar to make the basket waterproof – and then sets it by the riverbank with her precious son inside it. She chooses to act despite legitimate fear and suspicion borne out by the history of her people and by the realities of her own life under a tyrant who deeply desires to destroy her people. One could also dwell on the story’s irony: an Egyptian princess, after all, saves Moses, thus contributing to the rescue of his people. We women of Women Wage Peace have our own ark of safety to fashion, creating new language as well as expectations of normalcy despite our having such modest materials with which to work.

In conclusion, I call on you to join us. First, by signing [The Mothers' Call](#) and then by contacting us about starting a support group in your own locale. We need your help **harnessing the**



**heartbreak of this moment, for the good of all.** Help us nurture *expectations of true normalcy* in a region known for its turning the abnormal into a bizarre approximation of normality. Like the mother of Moses, we have been demonstrating philosopher Martin Buber's observation that "behind every prediction of disaster lies a concealed alternative."

#### **Robert Harrap, Co-Chair of SGI Europe, Biography**

After a degree in French and Italian literature at UCL, Robert qualified as a barrister in 1997, and worked advising and representing clients in court in areas with a human element: in particular, social housing, discrimination and unfair dismissal in employment, human rights and asylum with asylum seekers. In 2013 he left the bar to work for SGI-UK when he was appointed as General Director for ten years. A particular area of interest was raising awareness of the Soka Gakkai's activities and advocacy for the abolition of nuclear weapons. He has been a regular contributor to BBC Radio 2's 'Pause for Thought'. In May last year he was appointed as Co-Chair of SGI Europe. He lives in the village of Taplow, near Maidenhead, England, with his wife, Claire, and their dog, Whiskey.

#### **Robert Harrap: Peace Starts Here**

First of all I would like to thank Dr Thea Mohr, Gabriela Frey and the other organisers of this event for including me on this panel. I have called my talk, "Peace starts here", and by 'here' I mean in our own hearts. The Buddhist philosophy I embrace teaches that as humans we are all prone to what are called the Three Poisons: Greed, Anger and Foolishness, and these can, if they are allowed to escalate, cause problems to us, not just as individuals, but to our communities, our nations, our continents and the entire planet.

My teacher, the late Daisaku Ikeda, President of Soka Gakkai International, once said about these three poisons in a discussion he had with the American philosopher, Lou Marinoff:

"In modern terms, greed often takes the form of endless pursuit of profit; anger is a manifestation of hurt and despair erupting into aggression and violence; foolishness is the inability to recognise the dignity and worth of oneself and others. ... We need to redirect the energy manifested in selfish greed and anger toward universal prosperity and happiness, and convert the energy of foolishness to a life of service to others." (Ikeda/Marinoff, *The Inner Philosopher*, 2012)

If we want to end war, or if we want to stand up for peace, then we need to deal with all of these three poisons, and especially anger, the ego-based energy which chooses destruction and division over dialogue, and which assumes that 'I and my tribe are more valuable, more useful, more important [and we can all insert a long list of other words here] than you and yours.' Rather than the three poisons, we aim to fill our lives with the positive energy of compassion, wisdom and courage.





So that is the philosophical framework which is the basis of peace activities for members of Soka Gakkai International. We are an international Buddhist movement with roots in Japan. The issue of disarmament is at the heart of our activities for peace, and especially in two specific areas: the abolition of nuclear weapons, and also stopping autonomous weapons systems, often called ‘killer robots.’ Both types of weapons are built on the radical negation of others – of their humanity and of their equal right to happiness and life. The SGI is an active member of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN) which was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2017, and the Stop Killer Robots coalition.

### Nuclear Weapons abolition

Our activities for nuclear abolition originate from the 1957 anti-nuclear declaration made by the second president of the Soka Gakkai, Josei Toda, to 50,000 young people in a stadium in Yokohama, Japan on 8<sup>th</sup> September of that year. In his declaration, Toda condemned nuclear weapons which threaten humanity's right to live as the epitome of the destructive function in the human heart and that any attempt to justify their continued existence, for example, as a ‘deterrent’, was something which must be challenged.

He said: “Although a movement to ban the testing of nuclear weapons is now underway around the world, it is my wish to attach the problem at its root, that is, to rip out the claws that are hidden in the very depths of this issue.” He went on, ‘We, the citizens of the world, have an inviolable right to live. Anyone who tries to jeopardise this right is a devil incarnate, a fiend, a monster.’ He called on the youth of the Soka Gakkai to take up the challenge of abolishing nuclear weapons. Since then, the SGI has promoted nuclear disarmament at a local, national and regional level and internationally at the United Nations.

Sixty years later, after many initiatives in Japan and around the world, and working together with other like-minded individuals and organisations, the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (the TPNW) was adopted by the United Nations and entered into force on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2021. There are now 94 signatories and 73 States Parties.

At the heart of our activities are education and exhibitions, and in Italy, for example, the Senzatonica organisation (part of the Istituto Buddhista Italiano Soka Gakkai) has shown the exhibition entitled (Senzatonica, trasformare lo spirito umano per un mondo libero da armi nucleari, Transforming the human spirit for a world free of nuclear weapons) in more than 70 cities with more than 365,000 people having visited it, of whom more than 40% were school students. It is always a question of resources, and our membership is different in different countries, but there is always something we can do to raise awareness of the moral question around nuclear weapons, and why no one benefits from them, and certainly not the more than 180 countries who do not possess them.





SGI has advocated for the No First Use policy as an important first step towards their eradication. At the beginning of 2022, on 3<sup>rd</sup> January of that year, the leaders of the five nuclear weapon states – the USA, Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France – issued a statement on preventing nuclear war and avoiding arms races. Their statement clearly declares that ‘a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought’ and expresses the will to jointly seek ways of avoiding military confrontations. While the landscape since that declaration has changed, particularly because of the conflict on the Eastern side of Europe, the sentiment remains the same that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought.

### Stopping Killer Robots

With growing concerns over digital dehumanization and increasing autonomy in weapons systems, the SGI has joined the community of civil society organizations opposed to the development, and use of killer robots; also known as autonomous weapons systems. We believe in human dignity and hold that life and death decisions should never be delegated to machines. In 2018, we became members of the Stop Killer Robots coalition which calls for new international law on autonomy in weapons systems. We collaborated on a short film, called ‘Immoral Code’ which highlights the way our data is used in ways which we probably do not expect. Immoral Code is a 23-minute documentary that contemplates the impact of killer robots in an increasingly automated world—one where machines decide who to kill or what to destroy. As a member of the Stop Killer Robots coalition, SGI has joined a group of organizations to support the documentary’s launch and promotion, along with Amnesty International, Mines Action Canada, and Article 36.

So this is what we have been doing to raise awareness on these two aspects of disarmament both within our membership and also in the wider world, acting together with different aspects of civil society including with Faith-based NGOs.

Now it’s worth asking the question, but what can I do?

### What can I do?

What we must not do is succumb to the feeling that there is nothing that can be done, and that the vested interests which maintain and develop these immoral weapons of mass destruction will prevail. There are far more countries around the world that do not have these weapons, there are far more people around the world who do not live in nuclear weapons countries, yet we all live within reach of the effect of these weapons. A nuclear winter would not be a localised affair. As faiths we have an extraordinary grass roots reach and we can highlight the moral challenges which these weapons present in our own communities. We can challenge the thinking around deterrence and ask why Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev said in a discussion with Daisaku Ikeda: ‘It is becoming ever more clear that nuclear weapons



cannot be a means for achieving national security. In fact, with each passing year, nuclear weapons put our security even more in question.’

We can educate ourselves and our families and colleagues about the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons and see how fast the movement around the world is growing to adopt this international treaty. We can look at the website of ICAN and follow the suggestions we find there and sign up to be part of the movement.

Where are your savings? Where is your pension? Check that the bank or pension provider is not investing your money in the industries which support the manufacture or maintenance of nuclear weapons. Divestment is a powerful tool which sends a strong message to the banks and pension providers.

To conclude, there is a lot to be done to rid the world of nuclear weapons, but equally there are a lot of us who would like to see the world cleansed of them. These are instruments created by humans and they can be dismantled and destroyed by us too. Even believing that this world without nuclear weapons is possible is an important step to take. There is some action we can all take, and together that will be powerful action. And to end with the title of my talk, let’s remember that peace starts here, it starts in our own hearts, as we do what we can to transform the three poisons into prosperity, happiness and service for others. Thank you for your attention.

#### **Dr Elizabeta Kitanovic – Conference of European Churches (CEC)- Biography:**

Dr Elizabeta Kitanovic completed her studies in Orthodox Christian Theology and the Political Science Faculty, University of Belgrade in Serbia. She graduated from the Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Serbian Government. Dr Kitanovic works as human rights advocate at the Conference of European Churches. Previously she was working for the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Serbian Government as junior adviser for interreligious dialogue and PR. She is teaching human rights and religious freedom at the Faculty of Protestant Theology and Religious Studies in Brussels and does research in the area of interreligious dialogue and radicalization.

#### **Elizabeta Kitanovic:**

CEC [Pathways to Peace](#) initiative focuses on Ukraine, following country’s invasion by Russia in 2022, promoting justice, reconciliation and peace.

It is a coordinated response of the European church fellowship. The initiative strengthens the synergy among churches and partners. Implementing a variety of events and projects, Pathways to Peace enhances the ecumenical vision of just peace facilitating exchange among European churches, and promoting the voices of Ukrainian churches in the ecumenical debate.



Pathways to Peace develops cooperation between church leaders, intellectuals, and academics in preparation for peace in Ukraine. It engages in dialogue with European Institutions, addressing crucial political concerns, and advocating for the protection of destroyed religious sites in Ukraine.

The Conference of European Churches was founded in 1959 as a peacebuilding organisation following the death and destruction of World War II. We continue to honour these earliest roots through an ongoing commitment to peacebuilding and reconciliation. Pathways to Peace Initiative Justice, Reconciliation, and Peace – reflecting churches’ Call and Witness in times of war in Europe Introduction – Aim The Pathways to Peace Initiative (P2P) is designed as a coordinated response by European churches to a call for action in light of the ongoing Russian aggression against Ukraine. The aim of P2P is to maximize the effect of European churches’ response to war against Ukraine through synergy among churches and relevant partners.

The P2P initiative started as a series of consultations with resource persons from Ukraine and the broader region as well as Conference of European Churches’ (CEC) member churches in fall 2022 and is now in the process of developing ideas into concrete activities and projects. Framework – the Call and Witness strategy. The Pathways to Peace initiative is in line with CEC’s guiding principles and strategies of a focused advocacy impact. It aims at taking advantage of CEC as a fellowship of churches, with a concerted, coordinated effort to bring in resources from its constituency while addressing the most demanding, current political issues in Europe. It takes into account the political processes in Brussels and Strasburg and is designed to fit within CEC’s current capacities.

A war in the heart of Europe highlights a new the necessity of conflict prevention, peacebuilding and human rights, and the importance of peace and human rights education. It also manifests the role that religion plays in this particular conflict and the need for churches to exercise their mediating and diplomatic skills.

Churches in Europe have immediately reacted by re-affirming peace as an integral and indispensable element of the Christian gospel, calling on 2 both sides for a ceasefire, addressing church leaders in both the countries involved, exercising church diplomacy, praying for peace, and providing humanitarian aid and care for the refugees. Since February 2022, CEC has been in regular contact with Member Churches and other churches in Ukraine. CEC also addressed the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, albeit without receiving a response.

Peace and peace-making as a gift and calling connect theology with ethical witness and social transformation. The dynamic nature of peace does not allow for passivity and the acceptance of injustice. Work on reconciliation and peace is not a private and individualistic pursuit. The



witness to and practice of peace is public; peace witness is public theology in action. Reconciliation encompasses the restoration of relationships between God and human beings, among human beings, and with the whole created world. It entails the mending and building of relationships and requires the change and transformation of social structures.

Human rights for over twenty years, churches within the ecumenical movement have reflected on the concept of just peace. As part of this work, churches have highlighted justice as essential to the work of reconciliation and to the safeguarding of lasting peace.

### **Pathways to Peace main objectives**

Objective 1: Develop a network of church leaders, intellectuals, and academics in preparation for peace in Ukraine. With this objective CEC seeks to strengthen relationships between Ukrainians and partners, while discussing ongoing developments in Ukraine and discerning the role of churches in the process of preparation for peace.

Objective 2: Advocate for the protection of destroyed, damaged, or looted religious sites in Ukraine. This objective focuses on helping churches in Ukraine to reconstruct religious infrastructure, thus contributing to the overall goal of realising Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) for all in Ukraine. CEC will assist Ukrainian churches to apply for reconstruction funds from European sources.

Objective 3: Enhance the ecumenical vision of just peace. With this objective CEC facilitates exchange on just peace among European churches. It will increase their ability to address the rhetoric of exceptionalism, while examining links to theological justifications of war in Ukraine, enhancing the capacity of churches to theologies on war, peace, and reconciliation in an informed way.

**Objective 2** was further developed within the framework of CEC Summer School on Human Rights which took place this summer in Malaga addressing the topic: Advocacy for financial, security, political and legal protection of the worship places and cultural heritage in the context of war, frozen, defrozen conflicts in Europe.

Political tensions exacerbate the legal challenges facing worship places and cultural heritage in Europe. The politicization of heritage sites often leads to disputes over ownership, control, and access. Political actors frequently co-opt cultural heritage to further nationalistic or ideological agendas, resulting in conflicts over the rightful ownership or historical interpretation of religious sites.

In some European countries, political leaders have sought to assert control over religious heritage by promoting nationalist themes, often excluding minority religious or cultural groups. The protection of worship places and cultural heritage in Europe continues to be





hindered by legal inconsistencies, political conflicts, and security challenges. Although international and EU-level frameworks provide guidance, effective enforcement remains difficult in politically sensitive areas. Moving forward, greater political will, stronger legal frameworks, and enhanced cooperation between national governments and international organizations are essential to safeguarding Europe's rich religious and cultural legacy.

During the CEC Summer School on Human Rights experts from the CEC member churches and religious based organizations developed the document on financial, security, political and legal protection and resilience of the worship places and cultural heritage. The aim of this document is to provide more information about funding possibilities and access to the public funds for religious communities. CEC monitors legal and political trends in the area of reconstruction and rebuilding of the worship places in line with the EU's Energy Performance of Building Directive and UNESCO criteria. Legal, political, security and financial protection of the worship places and cultural heritage matters as it is one of the ways to protect identity and integrity of religious communities and believers.

### **Stephen Fulder – Buddhist Teacher and Founder of Tovana – Biography**

Stephen Fulder was born in London in 1946, educated at Oxford University and has a PhD. He is the founder and senior teacher of Tovana (the Israel Insight Society), which is the major Buddhist practice organisation in Israel. Stephen has been teaching classes, groups and retreats intensively for 30 years. He has written many books, including *The Five Powers* and his new title: *How To Thrive in Hard Times: A Buddhist Manual* (Watkins Publishers) will be out on December 5<sup>th</sup>. He has been deeply engaged in peace work in the Middle East for many years and is the founder of The Middleway organisation and leader of the Transformation of Suffering Palestinian-Israeli workshops funded by the Oslo peace fund.

[www.stephenfulder.com](http://www.stephenfulder.com) <https://tovana.org.il/en>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen\\_Fulder](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Fulder)

### **Stephen Fulder: Faith Based Conflict Resolution**

Conflict is pervasive and it happens on personal, familial, social and national levels. Faith based movements and initiatives can be very helpful in ameliorating and dissolving conflict because of their universal values and teachings on love, ethics, shared humanity, and the sacredness of life. But great care needs to be taken that faith does not become itself a cause for conflict when it feeds identity, labelling and tribalism. And it needs to walk its talk, and not just use empty words.

The Buddhist teachings are huge. They can be very helpful in working with conflict as the basic sources are less about belief and more about authentic practice. In this talk I would like to show how Buddhist inspired teachings have proved effective in making a difference within the context of the intractable conflict and violence in the Middle East, and offer some valuable



examples and methods that can be used anywhere. I will emphasise practical results from the teachings, with examples.

A primary core teaching within Buddhist practice is that the habits of labelling, demonising and distancing of 'the other', which is a primary source of conflict, are based on insecurity. The labels are illusory, fabrications. The sources say that putting yourself in the shoes of the other is a sacred task. Most people would accept that the pain of a Palestinian and Israeli child in war is the same. But it does need the skills, intentions and some work to help each side to soften the labelling and see each other with new eyes, to take each other into account and listen to each other.

I founded and am the senior teacher of the largest Buddhist practice organisation in Israel, called Tovana (the Israel Insight Society) which teaches thousands of people yearly courses, retreat and classes on practices such as mindfulness and compassion. It is basically secular, but the practices derive from Buddhist practice. In a natural way, we wished to use some of these spiritual and interpersonal skills in peace work in the region, and I started an organisation called 'Middleway' for this purpose. One of the projects which we did was called 'The Transformation of Suffering' which was supported by the Oslo People to People fund. The title was an acknowledgement of The First Noble Truth of the Buddha, which is that suffering needs to be acknowledged and held, and used as a wakeup call and a springboard for transformation rather than an invitation to sink into despair, victim-mind or anger and violence.

We arranged monthly workshops in the Palestinian town of Nablus in which we brought around 15 Israelis to spend a weekend with a similar number of Palestinians from all walks of life. We spent a great deal of time and some basic exercises to help each side feel safe: rituals of welcome, exchange of names, listening to each other's experiences and feelings in the present moment, and reducing the tendency to take positions or make speeches. This is based on the understanding that the source of conflict is defensiveness, and if people feel safe with each other they will reduce the sense of labelling and defining the other as the enemy. The core part of the workshop came after that. For one hour, in dyads, one Israeli and one Palestinian, shared the stories of the difficulties of their personal life. In that hour, peace was made. As the participants reported, they could no longer look at a Palestinian or Israeli in the same way as the threatening other. This was all based on the Buddhist practice of peace-making happening by connecting with the truth of others, seeing what is behind their eyes, meeting their life experience directly rather than in top-down declarations or aspirations about peace. Incidentally, it is also the way that we make peace within ourselves, as we allow the truth of the present moment experience to be accepted and seen deeply, rather than denied or covered over.



This work of allowing the presence of the other to be a gift rather than a threat, is based on the Buddhist teachings of non-attachment. Attachment to our identity, our self-story, our narrative, our traumas, our sense of being victim, our skin colour, our identity, our tribe, and so on will tend to create fights, conflict and war. They can be personal, or held by a nation, and they can last for generations. Non-attachment to them is a source of freedom and communal well-being and co-existence.

Another attachment that is a constant source of the pain of conflict is in attachment to views and opinions. As much as we hold on to our beliefs and call them the truth, without seeing that they arise and pass with conditions, experiences and tendencies, we are asking for trouble. There is no problem with having a view about a situation or a view of how it should be changed or improved. But it is crucial to see and allow that it is just a view, and no more than that. We can see the harm that is caused by strong beliefs, especially where it concerns the other 'them'. Today social media has exaggerated the attachment to beliefs, which in extreme become conspiracy theories. Beliefs and assumptions of Israelis about Palestinians and Palestinians about Israelis sustain the Middle Eastern violence. When there is a chance for beliefs to be softened by reality, by communication and by meeting the other, they begin to be questioned, or at the least to be held more lightly.

Listening and sharing circles are a key method that is used to melt long held beliefs and opinions and labelling concerning the other side. In these circles all are given a chance to speak, without interruption, though with a time limit. The participants are instructed to share personal experiences and feelings not political opinions, concepts or positions. And the others listen deeply to the words and try to empathise with the experiences of the speaker. The listening needs an intention to let go of positions and enter into a more aware space, as well as notice the personal responses and feelings that come up during listening. As such it is aligned with some basic forms of Buddhist meditation.

Mindfulness is derived directly from Buddhist teachings where it is described as a basic practice for liberation. In the Pali language it is *Sati*, also translated as: remembering to be aware, to be present. The opposite of mindfulness is running on automatic, being disconnected and distracted. It is highly important in reducing and dealing with conflict in general, and was used in our peace work. Mindfulness is used to train peace workers to listen to others within the circles and meetings as described above. It is a practice which helps us to pay attention to what others are saying and feeling and what may be expressed between the lines.

An example is the use of mindfulness to create a certain peaceful and aware ambience in vigils, peace walks and gatherings, including demonstrations. The steadiness and presence reduces the chance of confrontation and uncontrollable anger, which often makes



demonstrations and other peace activities stressful, and sometimes risky. We have done many peace walks with Palestinians and Israelis, until today, all through the region, and the instructions are to walk quietly, slowly, steadily and in silence, and be aware of the present moment experience: how it is to be walking together with others who are different from us. It calls for peace by demonstrating peacefulness. It shows others that peace is possible. Mindfulness helps to be the change which we wish to see, in the worlds of Mahatma Gandhi. It helps all participants to be in peace right now, and radiate it to others, rather than trying to chase peace or try to find it in the future. The effect can be in two directions; to make a difference in the world and also to empower the peacemakers themselves and help them to feel steady, energized, fulfilled and less subject to burnout.

One other important aspect of mindfulness is that it will help us not to be swept away by the herd mentality. So often our attention is utterly hijacked by the media and by others, and we feel lost and helpless in the face of a dominant and sometimes violent social consensus. Mindfulness can help us win back our attention, and focus on what is wise, what matters and what is really beneficial to all sides.

A key Buddhist practice and attitude is compassion. It is at the heart of much Buddhist teaching especially among those aligned to Tibetan Buddhism. Compassion is built upon the sensitivity to the suffering of others because we know what it is like within ourselves. When conflict gets overwhelming and there are no real opportunities for peace-making, compassion can become our default response. It is our wise heart in action. It is our empathic response that is potentially available at any time. The Buddhist community in Israel today have been extremely active in expressing compassion where it is possible, particularly in offering psychological and physical help to those caught up by fear, anger, or loss. The practice of compassion is to work in our inner life to extend the boundaries of compassion, so that our wide open heart becomes more and more inclusive. We can extend our compassion by seeing the other as like ourselves, without the labelling, as we discussed before, and then we can feel the same sadness and pain at the suffering of an Israeli or a Palestinian. Compassion knows no borders.

Today, at times of extreme violence and war, it may be impossible to meet the other side in the ways described above. However, all the tools can be used in whatever circles in life we can connect with, for example in our meetings, political activities, and working relationships with others who think differently. It makes sure that the darkness and heartlessness is not total.

**Lilia Bensedrine, Co-Chair of the Committee for interreligious & interconvictional Dialogue**

Conclusion and words of Thanks