



ICUU Symposium 2010

„Belonging: Our Unitarian Identities and the Nature of our
Relations“

The Netherlands, 13th – 20th of July 2010

Personal Report Andreas Bolhàr-Nordenkampf



Introduction

An extremely rich and intensive week lies a few days behind and now I had time to somewhat sort out my thoughts and impressions.

First of all the facts: Ali Gronner and I participated in the ICUU-organized symposium “Belonging: Our Unitarian Identities and the Nature of our Relations” in the monastery Rolduc, situated in the south of the Netherlands, in the city of Kerkrade. The symposium itself started at Tuesday, 13th of July 2010 and ended Friday, 16th of July 2010. After the symposium we took the opportunity to join a visitors program, which was organized by the Remonstrants and the NPB (Netherlands Protestant Covenant), two liberal Dutch communities and lasted till Monday, 19th of July 2010. Ali and I took this opportunity to get to know the country and its people better and rounded off the trip with a final day in Amsterdam, from where we flew back to Vienna at Tuesday, 20th of July 2010.



Symposium

More than 60 participants from 14 countries, mostly ordained ministers from UU congregations, participated in this symposium.

The focus during the 4 days was placed mainly on short presentations with even shorter subsequent discussions, which dealt with the identity of Unitarian und Universalists in general, the ICUU in particular and with the inner relations between congregations as well as between them and the ICUU.

In the morning and in the evening the option of attending a service was offered; they were held by different participants and – in accordance with their congregation or group – varied from clearly Christian-theistic to non-theistic.

With regard to contents the presentations were thematically as well as methodically very different, ranging from personal experience reports to analytical-philosophical reflections.

As I am neither a theologian nor a philosopher, I cannot (and do not want to) comment on the quality, not even on the contents. I just wanted to participate without any preconceptions and to be open for all new experiences. I wanted to clarify for myself, whether our UUF „fits” within the scope of UU congregations or groups, i.e. if major elements of our self-concept could be identified within the broad palette of the existing identities in a consistent way, and secondly, if there were discrepancies between my personal positions and the general self-concept.



However, I had not taken into consideration, what impressions all these interesting and very amiable people would make on me. I had the opportunity to talk to some of them during the breaks and in the evening while "Socializing". Believe it or not – in me the feeling arose that we as a group, but also I as a person "belong" without reservations. Today after some thinking I can say, that we as UUF would surely fit into the ICUU and that for me this question is positively settled.

As far as the question of our formal membership within the ICUU is concerned we were informed that the process of defining the new criteria for membership should be finished by end of August and that it is intended to decide on our application shortly thereafter. As we do not want anything from the ICUU (e.g. money) and furthermore are allowed to participate in activities as non-members, I do not think that question to be very important any more. The inclusion of a Link to our UUF homepage in the section "Other Contact" of the ICUU homepage was promised in either case.



Remarkable seemed to me, that the ICUU as an organization is still searching for its own identity even after 15 years of existence. The replies on my question touching this issue were contradictory – some expressed, that a common spiritual link already exists or should at least exist ("covenant"), others stated that the ICUU is a mere controlling umbrella organization.

Without any doubt some of the difficulties arise from the principle of freedom of dogma, as well as from the social and sometimes national-ethnic characteristics, which some of the congregations or groups (have to) act within.

For me the specialty of UU diversity does not lie so much in this temporal cross section profile, but rather in the way the identity necessarily changes over the time, i.e. the identity is more a process than a state: we all are obligated to revise our positions constantly and, if necessary, change them.

If this is fully understood, accepted and also realized in everyday life, then from this point directions of attitude and action for the contact among and with each other will necessarily arise; directions, which are characterized by curiosity, empathy and tolerance. In relation to these more practical aspects possible common answers to transcendent questions concerning an ulterior world, God, first causes and last goals move to the personal sphere of faith or- as the case may be - to the area of



private hypothesis. They become subject of contemplation and discussion, but no longer of “the truth”.

A visit with friends

The following days, which were organized by the Remonstrants and the NPB, were also enriching ones – and for me not as exhausting as listening for hours to theological presentations in English language. We had the opportunity to visit Maastricht and Utrecht, as well as the dike facilities in the south of Rotterdam. Of course we talked a lot with our hosts and newly won friends and met interesting people from these liberal Dutch communities.



For me as an atheist the most “exotic” experience was without any doubt the attendance of a Sunday service in the so called “Wood Chapel” in Bilthoven, a suburb of Utrecht. This liberal community, to which also our host during our stay belongs, are very tolerant, open-minded and of a special “spiritual hospitality”. We UUs were not only formally introduced and embraced (I “became” accidentally a Reverend), but during the ceremony our Chalice-Lighting was actively incorporated into the service. The relevant text passages were presented in Dutch and in English.

Conclusion

Without falling into a primitive “Austria-Bashing” I cannot help but feeling, that our country is incredibly poor on liberal facilities, be they spiritual or secular. On the one hand, this makes it very difficult for us in the UUF, because we often have to explain our attitudes and positions to interested persons painstakingly; on the other hand therein I see a great chance for us. In my opinion the international contacts opened new perspectives for our UUF.

Summarized those experiences were unbelievably enriching and gave me a lot of incentives and ideas for the further development of the UUF, as well as for my own work on philosophical, spiritual and human issues. I can only suggest to each of us to participate at least once in an international UU event.