MINORITY REPORT: VOICES FROM THE GLOBAL FELLOWSHIP OF UNITARIANS AND UNIVERSALISTS

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The word 'Transylvania' still conjures up images of vampires, werewolves and the like for many people, but as many of you know by now, for Unitarians it has another significance altogether. Transylvania is now in Romania, for several centuries it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but for a brief period in the 16th century it was an independent kingdom. During this time it gave birth to what is now the oldest surviving Unitarian Church in the world. For some 450 years, despite the efforts of its enemies, that Church has maintained its distinctive witness. Its watchword is the statement, 'Egy az Isten' ('God is One') and its ethos has been one of religious liberty.

Once, Transylvania was a remote, inaccessible and hidden land, so much so that many people have been surprised to learn that it really exists outside the pages of Bram Stoker's Gothic horror novel, 'Dracula'. But since the fall of Communism, Transylvania has gradually begun to feature on the tourist trail, and not just for the rather tacky Dracula theme park side of things! Despite the best efforts of Communist brutalism, Transylvania is blessed with some beautiful old towns and cities. It has a great wealth of wildlife, some spectacular mountain scenery and a growing winter sports sector. It really is worth a visit!

But, as I say, Transylvania has a special significance for Unitarians, and it is this that has taken me there several times since the early 1990s. My latest visit was at the beginning of this month. I spent six days in the ancient city known today, in Romanian, as Cluj. In Hungarian it is called Kolozsvar, and so it is known to the Unitarians there, virtually all of whom belong to the ethnic Hungarian section of Transylvania's population. The city has a German name too, Clausenburg, recalling its days as an outpost of the Hapsburg Empire. For good measure it also has Greek and Latin versions of its name, and maybe a Turkish one too for all I know, all of which tells us a great deal about the complex and troubled history of the region, where rival empires, faiths and ideologies have long struggled for supremacy. The Unitarian supremacy in Transylvania was short-lived, coinciding with the reign of its equally short-lived Unitarian king, John Sigismund. But it was a time when freedom of belief and tolerance of different denominations was enshrined in law.

The city of Cluj today contains many historic reminders of that past, not least the recently restored First Unitarian Church on one of the city's main streets. Almost next door is the Unitarian headquarters building. It houses a school, a seminary, offices, hostel accommodation and the synod chamber, lined with 19th-century bas-relief portraits of past bishops of the Unitarian Church. These begin with the first, Francis David (David Ferencz), who died a martyr’s death in 1579.

But fascinated as I always am to see all this history, this wasn't why I was there. That had much more to do with the present and the future of the Unitarian witness, not just in Transylvania but also throughout the world. The occasion for my visit was the second Theological Symposium to

be held by the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU). Besides a strong 'home' presence of Transylvanians, Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists from no less than six continents were present, with a total attendance of about sixty. As is usual with such events, visa problems delayed or prevented the attendance of several people, including two from Indiaâ€™s Khasi Hills. One person was trapped in Bucharest airport for two days before getting clearance! Nevertheless, we were pleased to welcome attenders from new Unitarian groups in Indonesia, Burundi and Bolivia to this historic heart of our faith tradition.

It was a very full and busy week. We began and ended each day with some very varied worship, and I led one service myself. We heard many papers, some full of scholarship and learning, some as much from the heart as from the head. We had discussions and conversations on many topics and we had some wonderful music. We managed to see something of the city, and I was particularly pleased to make a first visit to the beautiful Botanical Gardens. We even managed to watch (on TV) the two World Cup Semi-Finals that were played that week!

I can’t possibly give you a report, even a brief one, of all that was said, but I would like to pick out one or two things that seemed particularly significant to me.

One of the designated topics for the Symposium was Liturgy and Worship, and one of the best papers of the week was on the liturgy of the Transylvanian Unitarian Church, given by a young minister named Botond Koppandi. He gave us a clear, comprehensive, frank and unapologetic account of worship in that ancient tradition. Through centuries of persecution and oppression, the tendency has been to hold fast to tradition and to introduce change slowly. Today, with many of those pressures relaxed and with increasing exposure to western - especially American - Unitarian Universalism, there is a new challenge. Can and should Transylvanian Unitarianism, which can seem very conservative to western eyes, open up to far-reaching change? After all, change is already coming to the wider society in which they worship and witness, so shouldn’t the liturgy and theology of the Unitarian Church take this on board? Botond’s answer was that, yes, of course it is necessary to adapt, but this need not mean abandoning the beliefs and worship practices that have served them well in the past. And is Unitarian Universalism in the west a good example to follow? There may be more spontaneity and informality in western styles of worship, but do worshippers in the West still have a clear idea of who, what or why they are worshipping? It was challenging stuff and indicated that Transylvanian Unitarians are not about to surrender the riches and strengths of their spiritual tradition, even though they can’t afford to be locked into the past either.

This and other papers on Liturgy and Worship prompted me to some reflections of my own on the subject. Firstly, it seems to me that there are some things that don't constitute worship or make for good worship, but which are sometimes introduced into it or put in its place. Discussion, lectures and debate are not worship. These engage the head to the exclusion of the heart and spirit, and make for division rather than wholeness. Personal performance is not worship, centring as it does on the self rather than pointing beyond it towards the Divine. Superficial and narcissistic practices that encourage unthinking emotionalism and pseudo-spiritual self-indulgence are not worship. They neither challenge us nor do they enable that true self-transcendence that is a crucial ingredient of worship.

Worship should engage the whole of our being - physical, intellectual and spiritual - and it must address our many moods and states. Worship has been called the 'celebration of life', and this is certainly part of it, but we don’t always feel like celebrating. Sometimes we are in life's shadows and worship must speak to us there too. So what is worship? It is opening ourselves to God, the Divine both transcendent and immanent, in humility, praise, thanksgiving and repentance. Worship is submission to that which is greater than ourselves. It is setting aside petty self-concern that we might experience our oneness with the community and with God. Worship is touching, nurturing and releasing our own inward spirit. It is hearing and imbibing the wisdom of our tradition and asking how we can apply it to the world's needs. Worship is acknowledging the darkness in ourselves and in the world and praying for hope and guidance amidst the evil and the horror. Worship is confessing our sorrow for all that we have done that separates us from each other, from Creation, from our own true selves and from God. Worship should comfort and challenge us according to need.

An interesting, perspective on liturgy came from Derek McCullough, a layman who leads several small Unitarian fellowships on the South Island of New Zealand, or Aoteora as the Maoris named it. The principal religious festivals that we celebrate here are Christian ones, notably Christmas and Easter, but underlying them are older pre-Christian festivals related to the changing seasons. Thus when we celebrate these Christian festivals we are also marking the winter solstice and the coming of spring. The natural and the Christian symbolism are in tune with each other. But in the southern hemisphere this doesn’t apply! Derek talked about the problems this presents if these festivals are ever to be more than an import from the remote north of the world. And this isn’t just a question of finding an appropriate liturgy, it is about having worship that connects with the earth, the natural cycle, and also with the spiritual life of the Maori people. It is a fascinating and challenging subject, not least for southern hemisphere Unitarians. To give us a flavour of what he was talking about he had us sing a New Zealand Christmas carol in the intense heat of a Romanian summerâ€™s day!

Olga Flores from Bolivia gave us another perspective from a very different part of the world. She is herself the image of one of those wonderful sculpted faces from the pre-Columbian civilizations of Central and South America. Whereas most Unitarian movements have evolved within a Protestant Christian setting, in Latin America the setting is a blend of Roman Catholicism (both Spanish and Portuguese) and the indigenous religions of the region. Blending the best of these traditions with a truly Unitarian ethos is the challenge, as well as coming to terms with the often brutal history of intolerance and colonialism. The very new Unitarians of Latin America also face the very real problems of poverty and environmental degradation that face the peoples of that region.

The environmental theme cropped up frequently throughout the Symposium. The need to reflect this in our worship and spiritual life was matched by a concern for the ethical imperative to do something about it. The ICUU's membership embraces people both from the wealthy western countries, which do most of the damage, and people from poor countries who are feeling its impact the most severely. Environmentalism, we were reminded, is not just some western lifestyle choice. It is a matter of justice and even of survival for those scratching a living from the earth in the so-called 'third world' - as if there was more than one! - and even in a country like

Romania itself on the fringes of the European Union. Some Transylvanians I talked to viewed its impending EU membership with trepidation!

Most of us non-Transylvanians had travelled to Cluj by a plane, of course, and air travel is the fastest growing source of the 'greenhouse gases' that drive global warming and climate change. That gave us pause for thought! Derek McCullough, who often has to travel by air, told us that he tries to offset his personal environmental impact by planting trees, an example we all might follow.

We heard from a great many more people than I've mentioned about a great many more issues. But one presentation I particularly appreciated was that of Aryanto Nugroho from the Jemaat Allah Global Indonesia, a Unitarian Church founded in the early 1990s. They are currently struggling with the aftermath of recent earthquakes and tsunamis. He told the story of his Church's foundation and its journey from Trinitarianism to what sounded like an almost Arian form of Unitarian Christianity. It is a journey that continues. Indonesia's Unitarians live, work and worship in a predominantly Muslim country, which beings pressures of its own. But they also face opposition and even hostility from some of the 'orthodox' Christian churches to which most of them formerly belonged. It is an inspiring story that, in many respects, recapitulates the history of Unitarians elsewhere.

Ours is a widespread and diverse global tradition, yet everywhere we are very much in the minority. But our liberal witness to the Divine Unity – to the Oneness of God, of humanity and of the whole Creation - is more necessary, more valuable and more urgent than we often realise. Let us maintain and strengthen it, in love and humility.