

For whom the bells of the Bölön Unitarian church toll

On June 19th of this year, I returned from a 3-week trip to Transylvania. During my last week I spent time with Előd Szőcs, the minister of Magyaroszovat (partnered with Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship). He took time from his busy schedule to drive me on a two-day trip to the Erdővidek region of Transylvania. Erdővidek means the Forested Region, and the landscape lived up to its name with gently sloping mountainsides fully or partially covered with forests. We stopped by several Unitarian churches, but here I want to reminisce only about the one located in Bölön.

The Unitarian church of Bölön is located in that scenic Erdővidek part of Transylvania, and the white, uniquely dome-carrying, church stands out by its height and sheer volume from the village. The bell-ringer, a 30-something woman, opened the church, and guided us inside. As it is expected from a guide, she described the history and the architectural features, and decorating elements of the church. But then she also had a lot to say about those Romanian nationalists who came from out-of-town, marched through the village on Easter Sunday, and, among other things, claimed that the Bölön Unitarian church was a Roman Orthodox church before, and the Unitarians appropriated it for their use. She was visibly upset, because in addition of the Easter disturbance she heard the news of nationalist Romanian protesters demanding that Hungarians leave Romania and to use the Romanian national flag instead the Hungarian national flag at an open-air Pentecost service where hundreds of thousands (mostly Hungarian Catholic) believers gathered on a mountainside.

I felt stunned and a little even disoriented upon hearing about those incidents. I felt stunned, because in April I became an honest-to-goodness, fee-paying member of the Hungarian Unitarian Church, so the news of harassment of the ethnic and religious minority felt closer to home, more personal. I felt disoriented, because throughout my travels in the Transylvania region of Romania I've never experienced anything like that. So, at that moment, inside the Bölön church -- being at loss for words -- all I could do is

to offer my sympathy to the bell-ringer, and to say that these harassments will go away eventually.

My first chance to reflect on this came up a few days later when I found an official reaction to the incident on the unitarius.org web site of the Hungarian Unitarian Church. The Secretary General of the Hungarian Unitarian Church responded to that nationalist incitement by an open letter:

The Hungarian Unitarian Church Bishop's Office refutes the veracity of Mihai Tîrnoveanu's claim regarding the ownership of the Unitarian church in Bölön. He publicly claimed on April 5, 2026, that the current Unitarian church in Bölön is actually the third Romanian Orthodox church in the area, which was appropriated by removing the cross from the top of the tower.

In contrast, the current Unitarian church in Bölön was built by the local Unitarian parish between 1893 and 1895, based on the plans of the Unitarian architect Lajos Pákei from Cluj-Napoca. The classicist-style church has never belonged to any other church/parish, and has been continuously owned and used by the Unitarian congregation of Bölön since its construction.

We are convinced that any attempt to falsify history and any incitement based on this harms the public mood in Bölön and, in general, the peaceful coexistence of the Hungarian and Romanian communities and denominations in Transylvania. The Hungarian Unitarian Church encourages mutual respect and honest cooperation in the service of all good ecclesiastical and social causes.

After arriving home in Godfrey I had a chance to reflect further and ask: What could be possibly done? Who is minding the store when it comes to the rights of the Hungarian minority of Romania, and the Unitarian religious minority in Transylvania? For sure, there is the United Nations' statement (Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic,

Religious and Linguistic Minorities), and the European Union's guidance Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCPNM), but neither document has a clear way of enforcing the ideals put on paper.

It is encouraging that an Advisory Board of the FCPNM visits Romania every five year, and solicits input from minorities, on topics of the Articles of the Framework Convention of which I list a few here:

Article 4: prevention and protection against discrimination.

Article 5: state support for the preservation of the culture of minorities.

Article 6: tolerance and intercultural dialogue.

Article 8: the right to manifest one's religion and beliefs.

Article 10: use of minority language with local authorities and courts.

Article 11: use of minority languages to indicate place names.

Article 14: teaching in and of in minority languages.

This a very comprehensive list of topics, and over two decades the Board has addressed specific issues such as discrepancy between Romanian state census and minority self-reporting population numbers, attempt to provide autonomous minority area for Hungarian minority, examples of xenophobic reporting about minorities by media outlets, resistance to restitution of Church property and assets. I have to say that the improvements are undeniable, but progress is incredibly slow. The cycle for each instance of information gathering and the corresponding response by the Romanian state takes about 4 years.

I was happy to discover that monitoring of any violations of the Hungarian minority rights are done in real time by the local Mikó Imre Association for the Protection of Minority Rights. After the incident in Bölön that Association filed a complaint with the state authority, the National Anti-Discrimination Council. I hope that the Mikó Imre Association will bring up

this and other ethnic intimidation issues to the attention of the Advisory Board when it visits Romania next in 2027.

Then the question came to me if we, members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, should do something. Yes, what about us a few thousand miles away? Although, there is the option of not doing anything; as inaction, indifference is a lot easier than action. Someone might ask: shouldn't we just dismiss the Bölön incidence altogether? Can't we just let this one go? Can't we just look away for a minute, and say that it's only a few dozen nationalists and that we could just let them act out for a few days? How could possibly a case of social injustice in Transylvania harm us in the US?

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote this from the Birmingham jail: *Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.*

I understand that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in the context of race relationships within the United States. However, the way I see it, that his observation is also true for relationships between religious bodies, and, so, a sort of inescapable network of mutuality, that single garment of destiny stretches from Bölön to the United States. A little more precisely, I believe that the partnerships between Transylvanian and US Unitarian churches represent the manifestation of that garment of destiny, and that every church-to-church and every person-to-person connection is a thread in that garment. I hope that by making an effort to keep each thread healthy we can meaningfully contribute to the renewal of that garment. Only through such a healthy garment we can be informed when social injustice happens with any of the partners, so we can provide encouragement where needed, and create a plan of action where needed.

And just why would we, American Unitarian Universalists need a plan of action? The words from John Donne (Meditation XVII, in his Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, 1624) seem so incredibly relevant here:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

While Bölön now may look like just a distant clod, but once it's gone, the rest of the entire Unitarian world will be less. The Romanian internal political power struggle may skew the balance in favor of the nationalistic movements. If the Romanian state, pushed by the legislative or public coercive power of ultranationalists, would confiscate the Unitarian church of Bölön under the pretext of a false historical narrative, then any other Unitarian church would be at the danger of being taken away.

Then the tolling of the bells at the lost Unitarian church of Bölön would be ringing out not only the loss of a building by the Transylvanian Unitarians, but also the loss of respect, dignity, rights and freedoms of the Transylvanian Unitarian minority. And yes, the tolling of those bells would be ringing out the news of diminished respect, dignity, rights and freedoms of Unitarian Universalists in the US as well, because we allowed it to happen without noticing, without protesting, without acting. The time is now to recognize that we UUs are in the same boat as the Unitarians in Bölön are; we both are part of that vulnerable minority religion we call the Unitarian world.