

Consequences of national recognition of the Unification Church of Austria

Peter Zoehrer
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The regional government of Upper Austria has just published a remarkable brochure, featuring, amongst other religious groups, the Unification Community. This has been a direct consequence of the national recognition of the “Unification Church of Austria” as a confessional community (June 2015). Last year the UM has been invited to join the inter-religious council by the governor of the region. In January this year, the government has published the brochure titled „Faith and Religion – Information Brochure for Schools & Kindergartens in Upper Austria“, presenting the state registered religious communities to all school and pre-school teachers in the region.

This is an unexpected and extraordinary u-turn by the regional government of that state. Here is some background as to why this change of attitude is so significant:

Upper-Austria: A history of state sanctioned religious discrimination

Over fifteen years ago (2001) the deputy-governor has assigned the municipal family-department to create a CD-ROM, called „In Search for Meaning“(informally known as the “anti-sect-CD-ROM”). This material had the purpose of warning teachers and pupils of the danger of „sects and cults“ which are supposed to be infiltrating society and even schools. The CD-ROM was attacking no less than 350 religious groups, including the Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Baptists and of course the „Moonies“. Main author of this apologetic „masterpiece“ was the anti-cult activist (or self-declared „sect-expert“) of the Diocese Linz, Andreas G who was officially employed for his work by the Catholic Church.

Already in April 2002, some pastors of the evangelical Christian churches called the Forum for Religious Freedom (FOREF) for help. They offered to finance an expert assessment by a renowned constitutional expert if FOREF agrees to intervene. That is exactly what we did. Prof. Brünner (Graz University), one of the foremost scholars in constitutional law and human rights in Austria, agreed to cooperate. He wrote a 60 page assessment, thrashing the CD-ROM as utterly unconstitutional.

On March 15th 2003, FOREF then held a press conference in Linz where Prof. Brünner presented his expert opinion. Representatives of seven religious groups as well as all mainstream media attended. Soon after, the distribution of the infamous CD-ROM was finally stopped in May. This rare success story in the field of religious freedom has been widely reported in the international human rights community.

Still, even after this humiliation of the anti-cult agenda, state sanctioned religious discrimination continued in many different forms and shapes in the region up until recently. According to human rights advocates this particular municipal government has behaved as “enfant terrible“ of the nation by repeatedly violating the constitutional principle of state-neutrality in religious matters. To make matters worse, the local media has been willingly supporting such questionable behavior of their politicians.

Therefore, it is even more surprising, that Linz has gone through such a severe paradigm change. Now, through the establishment of the inter-religious council Upper Austria is showing the way to other regions in Austria.

The Inter-Religious Council – a great model for religious tolerance and integration

Facing the challenge of a rapidly increasing religious diversity in society and the schools, the regional politicians have taken a big step in the right direction. Several years ago they have launched the inter-religious council and last year, they have decided to produce the brochure “Faith and Religion”, an info-brochure that introduces the officially recognized Religions and confessional communities in Austria. Through this material they were responding to numerous difficulties teachers have encountered in their daily work. This is truly exemplary governance and should be emulated in many other regions and countries.

After getting legal recognition, Rev. Hans Brunnbauer, the pastor of the Unification Community of Upper-Austria has filed an official request to join the council. His participation has been granted last year. Brunnbauer is now regularly attending the meetings of the council, where the project is discussed among the government representatives and the participants. Representatives of the registered churches have been asked to describe the following themes according to their beliefs and traditions:

- Multi-religious celebrations
- How religious holy-days are celebrated
- Stations in the lives of children and youths
- Life after death
- Prayer and/or meditation
- Sunday Service and religious ceremonies

The religious leaders were advised to make comprehensive and concise descriptions of their faiths and traditions. When compiling their texts, they were told to keep in mind, that it will not be the pupils who are targeted, but the teachers of all levels including the pre-school teachers.

Furthermore, they should keep in mind all the relevant aspects of the children’s daily lives in their various faiths traditions. In other word, the explanations should not contain long theological elaborations, etc.

Through this information brochure teachers should learn, why for example one child obtains from eating pork, why another one is fasting, or whether pupils of certain minorities request days off school for their religious celebrations

Hans Brunnbauer seized the opportunity and put an editorial team together for compiling the text on the faith and traditions of the Unification Church, which turned out to become the most elaborate text ever written on this subject (page 88-96 – see attachment).

It is so comforting to read the brochure, which explains the essence of our belief and traditions, embedded in the texts of other faiths, such as the Catholic Church, the Protestant church, the Jewish community and others. The brochure will be printed and distributed to the various educational institutions. Already now it has been published on the official government website and the school intra-net.

Austrian Universities research our faith, traditions and history

Just one month ago, professors of the University of Innsbruck (Tyrol) have invited representatives of the registered religious communities (including UC) for a conference. They also asked for a description of our faith and traditions and want to publish this information in their scientific journal. Furthermore, the University of Vienna has already published several texts over the past seven years, including a research of the early years of the Unification Church of Austria (from 1965 to 1969). Now we hope that other regional governments and universities follow suit.

After over 40 years of religious discrimination and persecution, this is an astonishing change of attitude by the Austrian authorities and educational institutions. It is something we have hoped and prayed for since many decades. We will always remember True Mother’s visit in Vienna in May 2015 when she told all the members of the European movement that a new cultural revolution is just beginning. Precisely one month after True Mother has left our continent, the office of the Federal Chancellor of Austria notified the National Leader that the Unification Church has been officially accepted as the 8th confessional community of the country.

These developments are empirical indicators that our movement in Austria is entering the social mainstream. The new cultural revolution has already begun.