



AN EXPERIENCE OF  
*UNGLEICHZEITIGKEIT*  
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My overwhelming feeling during these months was one of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, non-simultaneity, of living in different worlds at the same time, experiencing different realities, different times, different histories almost simultaneously, of continuously moving from one world to another.

It had much to do with the theme of my project. Our group reflected on religious transformation processes in the present. According to many observers and theorists, there is a worldwide resurgence of religion. Others disagree, and interpret the same evidence in different ways. Integral to what we were doing was therefore the need to learn about religious transformation processes in diverse contexts and to compare the widely different case studies. This already presented us with a remarkably rich and complex picture. My own study

focused on the situation in South Africa. During the years of apartheid, religion played a major role, both in justifying apartheid and in the struggle against apartheid. With the radical social transformation processes of the last fifteen years, these roles obviously also changed dramatically. The question is therefore what exactly has been happening during these last years? What was the effect of these changes on religious communities, in particular on the formerly dominant mainline Protestant Christian Churches? What was, vice versa, the role of these communities in the transformation processes? Were they contributing or resisting these transformations, and for which reasons? What has been the impact on their self-understanding, convictions, practices, ethos, spirituality, their public presence and witness? How were they themselves perhaps being challenged and changed? In short, it was integral to the project to remember the past and how it was, to interpret the present to understand what is happening and to wonder about the future and in which directions developments are taking society, as it were, to live in different realities at the same time.

In order to answer such questions, it is of course necessary to understand the nature of these radical social transformations themselves. The group therefore discussed the many contemporary theories of modernization, globalization, secularization, searching for similarities and differences between contexts, countries, societies, movements – all in all, a fascinating experience of moving from religion to religion, from place to place, from period to period, from theory to theory, from case to case, from past to present to possible futures. During our weekly discussions, it was an amazing experience to listen to the contributions of scholars from diverse disciplines and backgrounds – ethnology, philosophy, social history, history of art, literature, Islamic, Christian and Byzantine Studies – comparing and discussing, looking at the same contemporary developments, as it were, from the perspective of different times and worlds. At the same time, it was obviously also necessary for me to keep track of developments in South Africa, to follow the discussions and debates, to read the newspapers and newest publications, to stay informed about meetings, events, speeches, controversies. Friends, colleagues and assistants had to provide regular information and interpretation. Regular visits from colleagues to Berlin also helped. This need to stay informed heightened the sense of being here yet simultaneously also being there.

The feeling of continuously moving from one world to another also had much to do with life in the community of the *Wissenschaftskolleg*. There was the diversity of languages and cultures – at any meal one could surprisingly find oneself listening to a whole new combination of languages and dialects, listening to new stories and histories, suddenly seeing the world from different perspectives, thinking from new angles. There were the different

scholarly disciplines represented by the Fellows – not only in the regular colloquiums, but even more so in the everyday discussions, the different ways of approaching the same reality, of looking, interpreting, understanding, appreciating. It was not surprising that diversity became one of the common themes for conversation during these months – first of all the amazing biological diversity of nature that the biologists could speak about so eloquently, but also the diversity of culture and language, of history and experience, and the complex moral, ethical, legal and political questions raised by these forms of diversity, discussed in the round table discussions that were already early on quite naturally improvised as forums for truly inter-disciplinary reflections. In our own group, it was not surprising that plurality and ambiguity would soon become common themes and eventually the topic of a special seminar. Diversity, plurality, ambiguity, complexity, non-simultaneity – these characterized a common experience, and most certainly my own.

This sense was without any doubt strengthened by living in Berlin. For people coming from the southernmost tip of Africa, the dramatic changes from season to season in these northerly regions always remain something special. Simply observing the changing natural scenery outside our bedroom window early every morning from the Villa Walther offered a remarkable experience – first the trees, the lakes, the water and the villas; later the clouds, the snow and the rain; but also the sounds, the birds, including the appearance of the nightingales; first the early light of dawn, later the lingering darkness; all so surprisingly different, from summer through fall through winter through spring, to begin again almost the way it all started. Sometimes my wife and I felt that we could actually see the leaves grow and change. In the same way, the whole surroundings changed, to new and different worlds, in the Grunewald itself, in the streets, during Christmas time, during spring. For us, it felt like living in four cities in one year.

Even more remarkable, however, was the sense of living in different cities based on the history that still lingers on in the streets and sites of Berlin. This feeling was truly remarkable – living in a city where the Kaiserreich, the Weimar Republic, the Nazi period, the division into two cities and two separated worlds, the fall of the Wall, the reunification, and contemporary cultural globalization all took place within one century, and where traces of all these times and realities are still tangible everywhere, has simply been a moving experience, an experience of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* in the strongest sense of the word. For South Africans, this feeling is in many ways special. There are so many similarities, together with the obvious differences, so many reminders, so many traces of home, that walking here,

visiting sites, reading notices, seeing pictures continuously reminds one of our own recent past – and the challenges of our present.

This feeling was most certainly intensified by living in Grunewald. Before we came here, we had visited the memorial at the Bahnhof on more than one occasion. This was our main association with the area, together with the names of theologians and scholars who lived here – Bonhoeffer, Max Planck, Adolf von Harnack, Walter Benjamin. Immediately after our arrival, we became fascinated by the history of the neighbourhood, or rather, the histories – the school, the churches, the houses, the buildings, the salons, the authors and actors, the bankers and industrialists, the perpetrators, the conspirators, the emigrants, the victims. Walking the streets, we could not help but imagine how life must have been here, in the 20s, the 30s, the 40s – or better, the very different lives for different people. We were intrigued during the screening and discussion of the banned Nazi propaganda movie *Ohm Krüger*, based on the life of the president of the South African Republic during the Anglo-Boer War and the experiences of the British concentration camps for women and children. It was – cynically – filmed here in Grunewald, right next to the Bahnhof, with main actors living not far from the Villa Walther. Being here was almost like re-living these different pasts – and continuously being reminded of similar complexities of life back home, and the different worlds and different histories of our own society.

This feeling finally had very material bases in the practical and particularly technological possibilities that contributed daily to the quality of our life in the Wiko. Sabbaticals far from home are of course no longer what they used to be. It was the first time that my wife and I have been away from home for longer than a semester, and the first time that it really felt in many ways as if we were not away from home at all. Through e-mail we were in such immediate contact with our home university in Stellenbosch that many of our post-graduate students and people working in the administration probably never realized that we were somewhere else – we simply kept receiving all the forms to complete, all the chapters and theses to read and all the questions to respond to. Through Skype I stayed in direct contact with the secretary so that I could participate in all the internal discussions and planning when necessary, and often knew when and where the colleagues in the building were meeting! On Saturdays, I continued writing a weekly editorial in the largest Afrikaans newspaper in South Africa. Two weeks ago I mentioned to the editor that we were on our way back, to his great surprise, because he never realized that we had been away at all! Because of the increasing possibilities presented by new technologies, life during a research sabbatical will probably never again be the way it was during what now seems a long time

ago. For us, the incredible services of the Wiko library further contributed to this feeling. Not to depend only on the collections of your local libraries, but to be able to order just about anything, with a minimum of input, and then to receive the material from just about everywhere heightened this sense of working almost within all the libraries of Europe at the same time, with almost immediate access to all the collections everywhere. For the first time, both our children were also outside South Africa, in Switzerland and Britain, respectively, but communicating with us during the evenings, so that we had the additional experience of continuously trying to imagine daily life in Bern, Reigate and Stellenbosch, while living in Grunewald, an extreme feeling of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*.

Perhaps the word “imagine” provides the key to our experiences here. The Catholic systematic theologian from Chicago, David Tracy, has argued that our “analogical imagination” provides us with the ability to deal with diversity, even with radical difference, with plurality and ambiguity. Analogical imagination helps us to sense both similarity and difference, so that we can listen, learn, see with new eyes, hear with new ears, become sensitive, remain open, and perhaps be transformed. Imagination makes “dialogue with the other” possible, the kind of challenging and enriching dialogue that one experiences so continuously at the Wiko. Imagination makes it possible to live with *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, with non-simultaneity, with the feeling that one experiences different times, different realities at once.

Religion, of course, has everything to do with imagination. For the Christian tradition such an experience of *Ungleichzeitigkeit* is constitutive. Memory of the past, experience of the present and anticipating the future hang together, and together impact on Christian life and ethics – as the Evangelical Bishop of Berlin-Brandenburg and social ethicist Wolfgang Huber has argued in the past. Weekly celebration in worship plays a major role in keeping this memory, experience and hope alive, but – as recent experience in South Africa has shown – even worship can be ambiguous, and this memory, experience and hope can become deeply problematic. Part of understanding contemporary processes of religious transformation rests on our ability to understand this ambiguous dynamic, potentially both destructive and humanizing. For me, the memories of the past year – rich and enriching almost beyond imagination – will certainly contribute to my efforts in this regard. Perhaps it may even lead to a monograph on the theme, but then again, this may only be my imagination.