

Shared Theological Roots and a Shared Commitment to Religious Freedom

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Reading

from *The Edict of Torda* (1568)

In 1568, King John Sigismund of Transylvania, eager to end the religious controversy that was dividing his nation, issued what was known as the Edict of Torda, a Decree of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience, which stated the following:

"His Majesty, our Lord, ... reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well; if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God."

Sermon

In Europe in the 16th century, two groups of Unitarian Christians arose almost simultaneously. The two groups were the Polish Socinians and the Transylvanian Unitarians. In Poland, their arrival was marked by the first antitrinitarian synod, held in 1565. That event signaled the birth of a new and heretical movement, one led by a man named Faustus Socinus, and so Socinianism was named after him.

Meanwhile, and seemingly without any knowledge of or contact with the Polish Socinians, a group of Unitarians in Transylvania also appeared on the scene and converted that country's young king to their faith. In 1568, just three years after the antitrinitarian synod in Poland, the Transylvanian king issued an Edict of Religious Tolerance to pave the way for acceptance of the Unitarian faith in an already contentious religious environment.

It was an amazing coincidence.

The Polish and Transylvanian Unitarians would, in subsequent years, meet, collaborate and cross-pollinate. Their writings, in turn, would make it into the hands of other

European scholars and theologians and influence radical religious thought in England and therefore in America too.

So these Transylvanian and Polish Unitarians are our distant cousins. Their theological tracts and struggle for political recognition laid the groundwork for our own Unitarian movement.

What happened to these two sets of cousins is very different.

The Polish or Socinian Unitarians died out. The Socinians faced an increasingly hostile Catholic majority in Poland. First their churches were destroyed and they suffered regular attacks on their clergy. Then, in 1636, the Confederation of Warsaw, which was supposed to offer protection of the freedom of religion, was ruled inapplicable to the Socinians because of their Arian theology (a belief in Jesus as human, not divine). Finally, in July 1660, they were offered the choice of recanting their faith or being exiled from Poland. Most recanted, though a few did choose exile and there was a diaspora community in Holland and Germany. That diaspora community, however, never took hold in its new homeland, and the Socinian Unitarian movement died with only its writings to succeed it.

The Transylvanian Unitarians also faced hardship. The young King Sigismund, who was converted to their faith while in his 20s, would die at the age of 30. As one of his final acts as king, Sigismund did grant the Unitarians the legal status they argued for. In 1571 he declared Unitarianism the country's "received religion," of equal status constitutionally with Roman Catholicism, Calvinism and Lutheranism. This constitutional protection is probably what saved Unitarians in Transylvania from the same disenfranchisement that undid their Polish brethren.

After King Sigismund died, Unitarianism did lose its place in the sun. Transylvania signed a treaty with Hungary that placed the country largely under the rule of Hungary and its Roman Catholic king. The Hungarian king, eager to slow the growth of Unitarianism, passed a law forbidding innovation in religion. According to this law, those who suggested changes in religious doctrine, especially doctrines that might cause civil unrest, opened themselves to criminal charges. It wasn't long before Francis David, the former religious adviser to King Sigismund and the charismatic leader of the Unitarian movement in Transylvania, broke the law. Feeling there was still much doctrine to be ironed out, David began meeting with other ministers and raising controversial doctrinal questions. When word made its way to the royal court that these debates were going on, David was brought up on charges of innovation, tried, found guilty, and imprisoned in a castle, where he later died.

The faith didn't die with Francis David or the end of Sigismund's rule, but it did suffer. Indeed, the death of Sigismund and David marked the beginning of four centuries of struggle for the Transylvanian Unitarians. From Calvinist princes to Communist rule, the Unitarians in Transylvania have been a suspect class at best, a sworn enemy of the state at worst.

They persisted in defending a liberal faith and their right to believe as conscience demanded. So what were the central tenets of this innovative faith that engendered such devotion? Perhaps the place to look is what Francis David himself preached.

There were five central tenets to the theology of Francis David: a rational interpretation of scripture; Christ not as God, but as a human conduit through which God made himself known to humanity; a belief that human beings were good and moving steadily toward perfection (which they would reach with God's help); an understanding of the Holy Spirit not as an entity, but as the power that emanated from God and permeated all creation; and finally, the belief that our salvation would come not as a result of Jesus' death on the cross, but through our own deeds in this world, inspired as they were by our faith and serving God's will.

Those who survived the 400 years of struggle to defend such a faith are the great-grandmothers and -grandfathers of this part of our theological lineage.

If you visited a modern-day Unitarian Church in Romania, you would experience a rather traditional worship service, by our standards, with Christ still central, sermons preached from biblical text, regular Communion services. It appears that while our Unitarian theology in America innovated freely during at least the last two centuries, and wandered from the Christian tradition to a noncreedal stance, Unitarianism in Transylvania stayed closer to its roots. Yet as different as the liturgies and theologies might be, the theological roots we share still bind us.

We still share with our Transylvanian cousins some roots that lie in Francis David's theology. For instance, we share the respect for reason in the search for religious truth; the vision of Jesus as teacher and example; faith in humanity as innately good; a sense of the holy as infusing all creation; and a belief in salvation through deeds, not creeds. Moreover, although the Transylvanians often had to be cautious in their public life so as to protect themselves from attack, we both hear the call to innovate in religion, believing as we do that truth and revelation are always unfolding before us. So, despite some differences in worship style and current theological creeds or creedlessness, there are deep roots and core values we still share as Unitarians in the United States and Romania.

Today there are still about 80,000 Unitarians in Romania. As ethnic Hungarians, they have faced some discrimination under nationalistic Romanian regimes. Fortunately, today they face little religious persecution. Instead, what challenges them most is economic hardship. They live in a land where inflation is high and so is unemployment, and where industrial development lags behind the rest of Europe.

So, in the 10 years our church has been paired with the church in Barot, we have tried to help them flourish in the face of these economic hardships. Most of you know what we have done in these years: We have helped them to build the church building and a bell tower, helped pay for the bell (a recording of whose ringing we heard this morning as we entered worship). We helped furnish the church and refurbish the parish house, and help to heat the building and to hook them up to e-mail so we, and others, can stay connected

to them. And more recently, we have helped to repair a leaky roof. For the last few years, our budget also has included a regular line-item commitment that they can count on to help supplement the salaries of their minister and music director and pay some of the church's operating expenses (that escalate annually with inflation). Individual members of this church also support seminarians in their studies or write to pen pals in the congregation. Moreover, there have been visits to Romania, and visits of their minister and members here, all of which raise a sense of solidarity also.

So it is easy to see what we do for them. But what do they do for us?

Well, there are the gifts they have given us, like this stole and the altar cloths here today, but that is not all.

David Bumbaugh, the former settled minister in this congregation, credits the Partner Church Program with a significant transformation in the life of this congregation. He writes about how this community went from an inward-focused congregation mired in a sense of scarcity to an outward-focused congregation that saw the world in terms of abundance, and that the work with the partner church was the catalyst for this change.

"As an unexpected consequence [of what we are able to do for them] we gradually developed a new vision of ourselves and what was possible for us." Bumbaugh catalogues what that new vision meant -- a social action budget that went from \$300 to \$13,000 in one year, allowing us to begin to respond to needs of other communities around us, the painting of a sanctuary that had not been painted in 20 years, the long-delayed restoration of the organ, the building of a handicapped access ramp, the addition of a second full-time minister to the staff, the seeding of two new Unitarian Universalist churches in our area, and more. "As a congregation," he writes, "we began to realize what we were capable of. We stopped worrying about meeting the budget and began to focus our concern on realizing our dreams ... The result of our partnership with a Transylvanian congregation was that we were empowered to embrace our possibilities as a religious community and to become the people we dreamed of being."

If that were all that this 10-year partnership had meant, that would be more than enough of a justification. But I hope that part of what the connection to Barot has brought us and will continue to bring us is also a fuller understanding of who we are as Unitarians.

Henry Ford wrote that history is more or less bunk. "We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today." Ford's opinion of the place history plays in our lives is distinctly American. As Americans, we have tended to revel in being the people without history, able to recreate ourselves (as if from nothing) when we reach these shores. The Partner Church Program, however, reminds us that we Unitarians did not spring fully formed on the shores of New England. And, despite what Henry Ford says, I find some solace and strength in that fact.

The fact is, whether we like it or not, we all are rooted in other people's dreams and struggles, and it is only when we know that history that we can draw power and insight

from it. For American Unitarians, that history is about a faith that required the courage and the long-suffering commitment of body and soul of men and women for many generations to protect and promote it. And people did that because they believed in its innovation. Francis David wrote on the wall of the dungeon cell where he was imprisoned: "Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death -- nothing will halt the march of truth." We stand with him on that long march.

So, may our ongoing connection to our Unitarian brethren in Transylvania keep us connected to our shared history -- one that witnessed to a commitment to believe as conscience demanded, and that sought during its brief time in power to protect the religious freedom of all.

May this 10-year partnership continue to transform us as we, in partnership with the children and grandchildren of those who have come before us, stay rooted in a tradition and mission over 430 years in the making -- a tradition and a mission that are ours, too!

So may it be. Amen.