

UNITARIANS & UNIVERSALISTS OF COASTAL GEORGIA

“UNITARIANISM IN EUROPE”

Presented by Is. Rapoport, October 15,2000

“BY THEIR DEEDS..UNIVERSALISTS IN AMERICA”

Presented by Robert Cummins, November 5,2000

Presented by I. Rapoport
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UNITARIANISM IN EUROPE

Most religions claim to be the earthly manifestations of the revealed truth, or truths concerning their divinity, or divinities. The problem arises in that there are so many conflicting so-called truths, and since all these truths are considered divinely inspired, they do not lend themselves to rational debate, discussion, or toleration of the other versions. Remember there are Ten Commandments, not ten recommendations. Most of these various interpretations are labeled "heresies," and are dealt with harshly, since in a sense they are revolts against God.

Christianity was, and is, no exception to this trend, and since Christianity has a convoluted theology, so-called heresies have developed from its very inception.. One of the major causes of conflict has been over the concept of the trinity. This concept can be a study all by itself. How does one rationally discuss a concept that was described by an early church father as, "A mystery based on faith."

One of the earliest and strongest of these heresies was "Arianism" based on the theories of Bishop Arias, who lived in the 4th century. Overly simplified, the good Bishop said that logically a son cannot be the same age as the father. Thus Jesus was of "lesser essence," so praying to Jesus and to God was a form of paganism: two gods. Arianism spread widely in the late Roman Empire, especially among the Goths who were the most "Romanized," or "Civilized" of all the various Germanic tribes moving or settling into, and settling into the crumbling western Roman Empire. The church in Rome favored the Franks, who had recently converted to Christianity, but were of the more orthodox Trinitarian type. The most famous of the Franks was Charlemagne, who, among his other exploits, had about 4500 Saxons killed in one day because they had refused conversion.

In 325 a.d., the eastern Roman Emperor Constantine, in an effort to stop, or at least lessen the theological controversies among the various factions of Christians in the empire, convened a council in Nicaea. He had many other political and military problems at this time. After much wrangling the council came up with the so-called "Nicene Creed," which still is, with some changes, the basic creed of Christianity. Arianism was condemned, but even with the power of the Roman government against it, Arianism did not cease to exist. It hung on for many years; in fact, the next emperor, Constantine's son favored the Arians. It eventually disappeared as a viable movement and standard trinitarian Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire and the religion of the majority of Europeans during the Middle Ages.

Moving ahead several centuries we reach the Protestant Reformation. The man given credit for its start was Martin Luther, a Dominican priest, who nailed the 39 Theses to the church door in Wittenberg. All it was intended to do was to challenge the local church authorities to a theological debate.

Under normal conditions this action would have caused as much excitement as a present day PBS special on the mating habits of the 3-toes sloth, but these were not normal times.

One of the fascinations in the study of history is the relationship of the individual and the time period that the individual lived in. The reputation of the Vatican, at this time, was at an all time low. I refer you to Barbara Tuchman's book, "Paths of Folly" and the section dealing with the Renaissance Popes. The papacy was a plaything of the Roman nobility. Money from all over Europe was pouring into Rome, in large part to finance all the great art, we still admire, and the machinations of the Vatican's political actions. The sale of indulgences had turned a tenet of the Catholic Church into a money grubbing scheme. This scheme was the final straw that led to Luther's action at the church door.

Luther's ideas were not original, variations had been around Europe for many years. In the 14th century John Wycliffe, an English priest, had translated the bible into English. He favored the authority of the bible over that of the Catholic church. Protected by powerful nobles, he died a natural death, although some forty years later he was tried, condemned, and his remains were dug up and burned.

John Hus, a Bohemian priest was not so lucky. He had been influenced by the writings of Wycliffe. Hus was called to answer charges at the Council of Constance called by the German king. Despite a safe conduct pass issued by the king, he was found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake July 6, 1415. The king's discomfort about the execution despite his safe conduct pass, was calmed when the religious authorities told him it was not necessary to keep your word to a heretic.

A central concept of Luther, and other reformers was that the Bible was the sole source of authority for Christians, and the Catholic church or the Pope was not needed to interpret doctrine. Luther wrote extensively, plus his disciples took notes of his remarks. I imagine he later regretted expressing such ideas such as, "Every man is a priest," or "The universal priesthood of believers."

Since the Bible was now available in all the local vernaculars, it opened the floodgates of religious interpretations. Luther may have rejected many of the teachings of the Catholic church, but he condemned any interpretations that differed from his own. But it was too late to put the genie back in the bottle.

Historians have divided the Protestant Reformation into the Magisterial, and the Radical. The Magisterial was led by men who were educated, many former priests. They all believed in state supported churches, and were backed by the nobility and town councils. Besides Luther, there was Ulrich Zwingli in Switzerland, who died in battle, and John Calvin, a Frenchman who lived most of his life in Switzerland and was most influential in the Protestant movement.

The Radical movement had a mixed bag of leaders, some educated, some illiterate, others self-proclaimed prophets...remember..."every man is a priest." They disagreed on many points, but all believed in the strict separation of church and state. They were against the taking of oaths, some believed in communal property, some in polygamy, and yet others expected the imminent end of the earth. Their enemies called them "Anabaptists" since most were against infant baptism, believing that a individual had to reach the age of reason before partaking of this ceremony.

Many of these movements disappeared, others were incorporated into other churches, and some still exist. Since every movement has its fringe elements, the city of Munster in Westphalia was constantly brought up as a terrible example of what can happen when you let the uneducated masses construct theology. The city had three main religious groups: it was the headquarters of a Catholic Bishop, the town council and business men were Lutheran, and most of the population were "Melchiorites." It was started by Hoffman Melchior, an uneducated furrier's apprentice, who became a wandering preacher proclaiming the end of the world, among other predictions. The Melchiorites rose up and took over the city, under two men, one a baker, the other a tailor. All unbelievers were banished; all books were burned except the bible. One of the men died and the other proclaimed himself king, establishing polygamy, and ruling brutally. The town was attacked by forces under the leadership of a Catholic Bishop and a Protestant nobleman. The leaders were tortured and put to death and the bodies were put in iron cages and hung from the church steeple. The cages hung there until 1818, a sort of civic bird feeder.

From all this religious upheaval, called the Protestant Reformation, we see the rise of Unitarianism, not suddenly but as a slow process based on the opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity. This opposition to a fundamental Christian doctrine led to the persecution of Unitarians from both the Catholics and the Protestants.

This morning we will look at three important figures in the development of European Unitarianism. The first was Michael Servatus, born in Spain to a devout Catholic family, one of his brothers was a priest. At the age of fifteen he was sent to Toulouse for the study of law. He was very well educated, and was proficient in Latin, Greek and Hebrew. He was amazed to find, in his own words..."Not one word about the trinity, nor about its persons...nor about an essence, nor about the unity of the substance, nor about the nature of several beings." He was also aware that a generation before, tens of thousands of Jews and Moslems had been put to death or banished because they would not accept this aspect of Christianity.

A few years later Servatus accompanied Emperor Charles the V to Rome, and in his words..."Revolted by the pomp and pageantry of the Vatican."

Upon his return home from his trip to Rome, he moved to the Protestant area of Basel, Switzerland. He did not reject the Trinity, but what he saw as the erroneous interpretations of the Trinity. He left Basel for Strasbourg, where he had a book published titled, "On the Errors of the Trinity." It was universally condemned by both the Catholics and the Protestants. Servatus was devastated, he wrote another book, "Two Dialogues on the Trinity," in which he confessed to some "immature thinking" in the first book, but this book was also condemned. He had sent a copy of his first book to Spain. The Spanish authorities were outraged and tried to lure him back to Spain to be tried, even using his own brother as bait.

Servatus was discouraged and depressed. He thought about moving to the new world, but instead changed his name to Michael De Villaneau and moved to Paris. He did not feel safe in Paris and then moved to Lyon, which he felt was a safer environment. He supported himself by editing books, but then returned to Paris to study medicine.

In 1546, he had another book published titled, "The Restoration of Christianity." At the same time he started a correspondence with John Calvin attempting to convince Calvin of his views. At first Calvin was friendly, but soon turned bitter toward his pen pal. Although as Micheal De Villaneau, Servatus led the outward life of a devout Catholic, he was found out, and denounced to the Inquisition by a Protestant! He was arrested and put under house arrest but managed to escape and fled to Geneva, which in retrospect was a foolish move. There he was recognized and arrested while attending church. Calvin had him tried on the charge of heresy. It was a long trial that turned into a theological debate between Calvin and Servatus. Servatus expected to be found guilty, but he thought he would receive the usual punishment of banishment, instead he was sentenced to death. He was stunned, but after he realized he could not change their minds, he requested death by the sword, but instead was burned at the stake in 1553. Gunpowder was rubbed into his hair and beard before the fire was started: the common practice for people accused of heresy.

Servatus has become known as a Unitarian martyr, but that is a stretch. He was a Trinitarian; it was only the orthodox interpretation of the Trinity he objected to. Servatus could be described as a proto-Unitarian.

The theories of Servatus became popular among the Anabaptists of northern Italy, especially Venice. The Anabaptists of northern Europe tended to be found among the lower classes. Those in northern Italy were generally highly educated Humanists, many fled to Switzerland to escape the Catholic inquisition. Since they spoke and debated in Italian, they escaped Calvin's displeasure for a time.

Bernadino Ochino, a former Franciscan Friar, was one of those who settled in Switzerland one step ahead of the Inquisition. He went to England, but was forced out when Queen Mary came to power. Returning to Switzerland, he became the pastor of a church in Basel. His humanist ideas were condemned and he was banished.

Ochino wandered about Europe looking for a place to settle, during which most of his family died of the plague. He ended up in Krakow, Poland sick and destitute, but was forced out and died soon afterwards in Moravia. His writings were condemned by Catholics and Protestants as "Anabaptist" and "Servatian," however, his writings were circulated and influenced many people.

Among those influenced by Ochino's writings was Laelius Socinus. He had lived in Switzerland, and had met with Calvin a few times. Afterwards, he went to the then independent nation of Navarre, to England and back to Switzerland. He was accused of heresy several times, but was cleared each time, mainly because none of his writings had been published. After his death his papers were inherited by his nephew Faustus Socinus, the next important figure in the development of Unitarianism in Europe.

Faustus Socinus spent most of his life in Poland, which at that time was a large nation with a weak central government. The king was elected by the nobles who held most of the power. From the viewpoint of the so-called heretical sects, it was an advantageous place to settle in. There was no strong central government to impose religious conformity. The various nobles made decisions on most things including religion. The Catholic church was fairly permissive at times; at other times, it worked against the Protestants. The Protestants were divided into three main groups: the Lutherans; the Bohemian Brethren, followers of John Hus; and the largest, the Reformed Church of Poland. There was a growing schism in the Reformed Church, as many of the clergy and laymen were taking the anti-Trinitarian position. In 1566, there was a complete break between the two factions. This could be considered the historical beginnings of Unitarianism as an organized movement.

The breakaway group became known as the "Minor Church of Poland" even though they had a majority of the members of the Reformed Church on their side. Their opponents referred to them as "Arians," the term "Socinians" did not come into use until much later. They could not agree on several points of doctrine, such as infant baptism, or Christ's place in the Trinity (Christology). (They did agree to disagree, good Unitarian principles!)

At this time, the Catholic church became active in its opposition to the Protestants, who organized a united front against these attacks, but excluded the Minor Church from their organization.

A wealthy Polish noble friendly toward the Minor Church established a new town for the Protestants about seventy miles from Krakow. It was named Rakow, (Rak, a crab, was on the noble's coat-of-arms). At first there was chaos, nobody seemed to agree on religious or social positions. People began to compare it to the infamous Munster of earlier times, but they finally reached a semblance of order under the direction of one of the town's leaders. (There was even a rare case of Unitarian intolerance. A minister was excommunicated for preaching that you should never address a prayer to Jesus. He was accused of being a "Judaizer". Judaism was attracting some converts at this time.)

In 1572, Poland and Lithuania were united. It was a huge nation, but with the same Polish-type weak central government. The new nation's Chamber of Deputies drew up an agreement for religious freedom, but only for Christian denominations.

In 1579, Faustus Socinus settled in Poland after traveling to Transylvania, at the request of Giorgio Biandretta, an Italian doctor and important figure in eastern European Protestant circles, to help him try to resolve a theological dispute in that area. After this visit, Socinus went to Poland where he spent the rest of his life. He joined the Minor Church which at this time was in disarray over religious and social issues. He soon became their leader and theological spokesman. Since he did not agree with the church's opinion on infant baptism, he was not admitted to the Lord's Supper, or even membership in the church, despite being their leader. (In the words of Earl Wilber Morse, a leading Unitarian historian, "Was there ever another such case in Christian history?")

The Jesuits then established a center in Krakow to mount an assault against the Minor Church. They, and others, said that the decree on religious liberty did not apply to the Minor Church since they were outside the Christian fold. At this same time, Socinus married the daughter of a friendly noble and moved in with the family for protection. They had a child but his wife died soon after.

Instigated by the Jesuits, mobs burned and destroyed Calvinist and so-called "Arian" churches. Socinus was beaten up by drunken soldiers, and afterwards was almost drowned by university students, but was saved by a passing university official who recognized Socinus. In 1604, Socinus died at the age of sixty four, destitute and in obscurity. Most of his writings, unpublished during his lifetime because of a lack of money, were now published. Rakow became a center for Unitarian education and scholarship, but it was not to last.

The persecution was relentless. The Socinians were ordered to leave Rakow or face death. They moved to a city 300 miles to the east, but were driven out by the Catholic church and the Eastern Orthodox church. The Socinians also suffered from the confused military and political situation in that area. Cossacks, in a revolt against Russia, invaded the area to burn and pillage. Sweden invaded the area and occupied the Socinian populated area. When the Swedish were driven out, the Socinians were accused of collaborating with them, in addition to being heretics. They were given three years to renounce their faith, or leave. This ended the Socinian movement in Poland.

A few groups went to Holland, a few to Germany, the rest set out for Transylvania. Since 1568 there had been a Unitarian movement in Transylvania, and they were friendly towards the Socinians. It was a horrendous trip, they were attacked and robbed, many died of disease and starvation, the remnants settled in the area of Kolozsvár. Transylvania, at this time, was a backwater of Europe. The mountainous topography made travel difficult. The Ottoman Turks occupied territory on the western frontier. Until 1548, it had been the eastern quarter of the Kingdom of Hungary, then it became an autonomous state and the birthplace of Francis David, an important figure in Unitarian trinity.

This area became important to Unitarian history as Francis David was the third person in the "European Unitarian Trinity."

Francis David was born in the first quarter of the 16th century to a Magyar mother and a Saxon father. Raised as a Lutheran he eventually became a Unitarian. Transylvania had been largely Catholic from the beginning of the Protestant Reformation until the 16th century. It was made up of three ethnic groups: the "Szeklers," descendants of the 4th century Hun invaders, who were mainly Calvinists or Unitarians; the "Magyars," descendants of the 8th century Magyar invaders, who were mainly Catholics; and the Saxons, descendants of German immigrants, who were Lutherans.

As usual, Transylvania was torn apart by a theological controversy concerning the Lord's Supper and Christ's place in that ceremony. The ruler at that time, young King Sigismund, called a special ecclesiastical synod to try and resolve the problem. This was the same dispute that Socinus attended before settling in Poland. Giorgio Biandretta, who had invited Socinus, represented the king. Neither side would compromise, but during the debates, Francis David so impressed the king that he made him court preacher. David was interested in the anti-Trinitarian viewpoint and preached his first Unitarian sermon in the main church in Kolozsvár in 1566. The sermon caused an uproar in clerical and layman circles.

King Sigismund, attempted again to promote religious harmony, and called for another synod, but this time the debates were to be in Hungarian so everybody could understand the first and only Unitarian king in European history. Sigismund issued the "Declaration of Torda" which granted religious freedom for his nation. Unitarianism was recognized as one of the nation's "revealed" religions along with Catholicism, Calvinism, and Lutheranism. Unfortunately, he died soon after at the age of thirty. There are two versions of his death, one by assassination, the other in a carriage accident. His death was a serious blow to the Unitarian movement.

A new ruler was then installed with the title of Prince. Although Catholic, he is friendly toward the Protestants, with the exception of the Unitarians. Unitarian writings were censored and David was replaced as court preacher. In an attempt to keep the peace, the new ruler reaffirmed religious tolerance, but forbade any innovation in doctrine. Francis David ignored this policy and preached a sermon breaking new ground, in which he said: "praying to Christ was no better than the Catholics praying to Mary." This sermon caused consternation in Unitarian circles. Biandretta was critical of David, along with others who felt that the sermon would result in a backlash against the Unitarians who were in a precarious position. David was put under house arrest, but he preached another innovative sermon -- his last-- because he is put on trial, accused of a return to Judaism, and sentenced to life imprisonment. Being in poor health at that time he died soon after in prison. Francis David became a martyr to Transylvanian Unitarians.

For a short time after David's death, the Unitarians experienced some growth under cautious leadership, but this period did not last. The Jesuits were determined to destroy the Unitarians and other Protestants. Added to this persecution, it was a period of political upheaval, several failed revolts against the government were led by prominent Unitarians. Some of these revolts were aided by the Turks on their border. These failed revolts led to harsh repression of the Unitarian movement as traitors, as well as heretics.

Between 1647 and 1657, the entire area was involved in a series of wars. Sweden forces invaded and the Transylvanian prince sided with them. When the Swedish forces were driven out, all of Transylvania suffered for their prince's actions. Next, Turkish forces invaded and Transylvania became a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire. The Unitarians flourished under Turkish rule, when the Turks were eventually driven out, the Unitarians again were accused of treachery.

Another problem was the rise of a movement called the "Sabbatarians." They outwardly belonged to one of the "revealed" religions, although most were Unitarians. They practiced their rites in secret, they believed in the absolute unity of God, held to Old Testament dietary laws, and celebrated the Sabbath on the seventh day of the week. They were forced to convert to Calvinism or face death. The Unitarians were blamed for this sect and this further weakened them.

In 1686, Transylvania came under the control of the Austrian Empire. This was the so-called Holy Roman Empire, that Voltaire wrote was neither holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire. The Austrian rulers were staunch Catholics and all Protestant groups suffered under their rule. The Unitarians withdrew from public life and tried to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. In 1740, Maria Theresa became Empress, although historians have given her high marks as a ruler, she continued the persecution of Protestants.

The situation changed for the better when her son, Joseph, came to the throne. He fancied himself an "Enlightened Despot," an absolute ruler with modern ideas of government and society. He allowed complete religious liberty, even granting some Jews noble status. Most of the ruling class was against these actions, but Joseph enforced his ideas with harsh measures. An interesting concept: you will be tolerant or I will punish you! After his death, his brother, the new ruler, rescinded many of his decrees, and eventually all of them were forgotten.

In 1848, all of Europe exploded in revolutions. Among the varied reasons was the growth of nationalistic feelings particularly in the Austrian Empire that was made up of many ethnic groups. All these revolutions failed, including the one in Hungary, led by a Unitarian. The Austrian government did what it could to destroy the Unitarian movement. The Unitarian movement survived with help by English Unitarians. Despite all their problems by the end of the 19th century, the Hungarian Unitarian Church, the name they went by, had about 75,000 members in Transylvania. Unfortunately their troubles continued into the Twentieth Century.

In World War I, Hungary sided with Germany. At the end of the war, Transylvania was ceded to Rumania who joined the Allies in 1915. They become an ethnic minority as well as a religious minority. In World War II, Hungary and Rumania sided with Germany. Transylvania was returned to Hungary. The Hungarian government was suspicious of the Unitarians because of their liberal views and their ties to the West; their churches were closed and many were arrested. The war ended with both Hungary and Rumania coming under Soviet control. Transylvania was returned to Rumania, where it remains today. Under the brutal rule of Nicolae Ceausescu, all religions and ethnic minorities suffered greatly.

In the post cold war period, Unitarians still had their problems as a religious minority and as ethnic Hungarians in Rumania. In 1996 there were about 80,000 Unitarians living in Hungary. They are much more Christian oriented than present day American Unitarians. Their theology has been compared to 19th century American Unitarianism. Many UU churches in the United States have joined the "Partner Church" program, in which they adopt a church in Transylvania and help with money, books and supplies that are badly needed.

Rest of Europe

Great Britain: Unitarianism in England developed from the dissatisfaction with the dogma of the Anglican Church. Theophilus Lindsey organized the first Unitarian congregation in 1774 in London. The most famous of the English Unitarians was the Rev. Joseph Priestly, the discoverer of oxygen. Priestly emigrated to the United States after his church, home and laboratory were burned by mobs instigated by the High Church Party. His views did not influence American Unitarianism, which developed independently in New England. Membership in the Unitarian church in Great Britain has declined in the 20th century, along with most churches in that nation. In 1995, there were 176 congregations in Great Britain, most in England with the rest in Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

Czechoslovakia: This nation came into existence after World War I from the disintegration of the Austrian Empire. Largely through the efforts of Charlotte Masaryk, the wife of the first President, a Unitarian Church was organized in Prague in 1921. Under the leadership of the Rev. Norbet Capek, it became the largest Unitarian church in the world. In 1932, it had over 3500 members. Rev. Capek is also known as the developer of the Flower Communion used in many Unitarian churches around the world. Rev. Capek was arrested by the Germans and died in Dachau. After the war the church was involved in a long drawn out financial controversy that was just settled this year, and the membership is quite small.

There are some fellowships in Paris, France, one in Geneva, Switzerland, one in Sweden, a few small ones in Spain, Latvia, and one in Poland, the first Unitarian presence in that nation since 1796. Germany has a few liberal churches affiliated with the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), that was organized in 1900, with a large Unitarian component.

This completes our look at our religious antecedents in Europe. Since so many of us are "come-outers" from other religious backgrounds, or no religious background, I feel it is important for us to have some knowledge of our history and our struggles. Our history stretches back to the Protestant Reformation -- even to Bishop Arius -- although I imagine he would turn over in his grave if he felt any connection to 21st century Unitarianism.