

On October 27, 1553, in Geneva, Switzerland, Michael Servetus was tied to a stake and burned, on the orders of John Calvin. Servetus' problematic books, the ones that got him into theological trouble for anti-Trinitarianism, were strapped to his legs.

Servetus was born in Spain in 1511 during the turmoil and distrust following the expulsion of 800,000 Jews and Muslims by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella in 1492.<sup>1</sup> Their funding of Christopher Columbus was not the only momentous and problematic action in that historically influential year for Spain.

Not all Jews and Muslims left; some recanted and became Christian. Not surprisingly, for some this was only done in public and behind closed doors they still practiced their faith. The Spanish Inquisition was born to ferret out these blasphemers, who were put to death. The young Servetus wondered why people would risk death rather than become Christian. He came to the conclusion that it had to do with the Trinity, which for monotheistic Jews and Muslims, seemed to require worshiping more than one God. Servetus' investigations of scripture and early beliefs and doctrines led him to the discovery that, prior to 325 and the Council of Nicea, there was no Doctrine of the Trinity. It was not a part of the New Testament. At that council, subject to political maneuverings between church leaders, the Doctrine of the Trinity became the accepted creed of the church. All other views became heretical.

Servetus also grew up during the early days of the Protestant Reformation, which began in October, 1517, with Martin Luther's 95 treatises. John Calvin followed later with more ideas for change. For neither Luther nor Calvin, however, was church doctrine, and particularly, the Doctrine of the Trinity, at question. Servetus was one of the radical reformers.

In 1531, at age 20, Servetus published "On the Errors of the Trinity," which was quickly condemned. Trying to dig himself out, he published "Dialogues on the Trinity" the following year, but only succeeded in bringing down the wrath of the Inquisition. He fled Spain, and lived under an assumed name for the next 20 years, during which time he studied medicine and then practiced as a physician. He was a pretty bright guy.

In 1552, after reading the writings of Calvin, Servetus began a letter dialogue with Calvin, arguing theology with him. He also published "Christianismi

Restitutio," "The Restoration of Christianity," arguing that the church had followed a false doctrine after the Council of Nicea. Calvin soon figured out that the author of the book was the same as his "pen pal." He was not amused, and had Servetus arrested. Servetus escaped, but was recaptured, tried, and put to death.

Soon afterward a theological seeker by the name of Francis David, living in Transylvania, was exposed to the writing of Servetus. David had started off Catholic, but in fairly quick succession became a Lutheran and then a member and bishop of the Reformed Church, or a Calvinist. David was drawn to the ideas of Servetus, and began preaching on the unity of God from his pulpit at the great church in Kolozsvar in Transylvania. His anti-Trinitarian preaching did not endure him for long with the Reformed Church, the same Calvinist church that had burned Servetus.

Giorgio Biandrata was an Italian born politico who had also been exposed to the ideas of Servetus. He also happened to be the king's physician, one John Sigismund. Through Biandrata's influence, David became the king's minister. King Sigismund appears to have been sincerely drawn to the ideas of Unitarianism, particularly the idea of the primacy of reason and the tolerance for ideas different than one's own.

As one might imagine, Transylvania, as most of Europe, was a hotbed of competing religious ideas in the 1500's. There was, of course, the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Reformed Church, and now the upstart Unitarian Church. King Sigismund issued the Edict of Torda in 1557, the first known act by a government of "Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience." King Sigismund said "we need not think alike to love alike."<sup>ii</sup>

In the next few years the Unitarians in Transylvania organized, the church of Kolozsvar became Unitarian and David became a Unitarian Bishop. Four years after the Edict of Torda, Unitarianism was officially recognized by the King's government as one of Transylvania's four "received religions." This had both good and bad results.

You see, the day after the King's edict of recognition in January, 1571, King Sigismund was fatally injured when his carriage overturned. Of course there was palace intrigue around a successor, and the winning Stephen Bathori was much less enamored of religious tolerance and Unitarianism than was King Sigismund.<sup>iii</sup>

Unitarianism was still protected, but it was locked into the theology that existed at the time of the proclamation in 1571.

This chafed at Bishop David. Always a seeker, his thinking around the Trinity and God was still evolving. Warned to curtail his explorations of radical theology from the pulpit, he couldn't do it. Betrayed by his former friend, Biandrata, he was arrested and tried for "innovation" in 1579. He was found guilty, and sentenced to prison, where he died later that year. Unitarianism would survive as a religion in Transylvania, unlike in the other places where it had sprung up-- Poland and Italy, but the theology stagnated for the next 200 years.

Let us fast forward now to Transylvanian Unitarianism in the 20th century. By this time Transylvania made up a significant portion of the nation-state of Hungary. Unitarianism was still an important religion there. Then World War I happened. Unfortunately for Transylvania, Hungary was aligned with the Axis powers. To the victor go the spoils, the old saying goes. Romania was aligned with the winners, the Allies, and was granted the entire territory of Transylvania as a reward. This was great in terms of what it did for the size of Romania, which significantly increased. It was not so great for the Romanian nationals who now had a large population who regarded themselves as Hungarian. All things Hungarian were squelched, including Unitarianism. Still the Unitarians hung on.

With the conclusion of World War II, Romania found itself on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain. The practice of any religion was difficult under Communist rule, to say the least. The upside was that the communist government was very good at record keeping and many historical Unitarian documents were committed to microfiche and later smuggled out of the country, just ahead of the looting and destruction of the library in which they had been stored.<sup>iv</sup>

As bad as things were under the Communists, they became worse under the government of Nicolae Ceausescu in 1965. There are those of you here who may remember the stories after the revolt in Romania in 1989, in which Nicolae and his wife, Elena, were executed, the stories of the orphan babies kept in isolation, no longer able to bond with anyone. The rule of Ceausescu was also a time in which the Secret Police, the dreaded Securitate, had informers throughout society. I have spoken with Balazs scholars here, studying at Starr King, who lived through that

period. One could literally trust no one, not family, not colleagues. Even Unitarian ministers were informers. Yet Unitarianism survived.

Today ministers typically serve three or four small congregations in neighboring villages. It is still very much an agrarian society. Things we take for granted here are nonexistent. Several years ago a minister colleague of someone whom I had met lost his wife in childbirth due to lack of appropriate medical care.

A talented few ministers, one each year, get to come to Starr King to study, all expenses paid for them and their families. I have had the privilege of getting to know a number of these ministers. It is a culture shock for them to be exposed to the radical theological thinking of UU in this country, and particularly, Starr King. Their own brand of Unitarianism is very much theistic, even if it is not Christian.

Let me conclude with a few words about a program that some of you undoubtedly know of from your experience at other UU churches. The program is organized under the auspices of the Unitarian Universalist Partnership Church Council. The council facilitates partnerships between UU churches in the U.S. and Canada and Unitarian or Universalist churches throughout the world. Through the council, churches here are paired with a sister church. All 170 churches in Transylvania are paired with a church here. The support they receive is invaluable to the Unitarians in Transylvania. The ethnically Hungarian Unitarians are a double minority in Romania, constituting only 5 percent of the Hungarian population. Their future is not assured, even now.

The father of Unitarian historian J. Gellerd wrote, "our religion was able to produce one of the most optimistic, constructive and humanistic religious systems." More recently a Transylvanian minister wrote, "Our future is not clear. After all these centuries it is not clear that we shall survive. But we find that there is some comfort in the knowing that you are watching, and that if we disappear, it will not go unnoticed; someone will know and someone will care."<sup>v</sup>

While our Unitarian roots here are distinctly American, home grown; there is no direct link with our Transylvanian namesake, we share with them a commitment to tolerance, reason and love.

May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> David E Bumbaugh, Unitarian Universalism: a narrative history. Meadville-Lombard Press, Chicago. C 2000. P 13.

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.uua.org/beliefs/history/our-historic-faith> Accessed 7/26.2017

<sup>iii</sup> Bumbaugh 52

<sup>iv</sup> Williams, G. M., & Gellerd, J. (n.d.). *History as Treason*. Retrieved January 29, 2012, from <http://unitarius.us.hu/cffr/essays/historytreason.htm>. Cited in Bryan Plude, "The Preservation of Unitarianism during Oppression in Twentieth Century Transylvania." January 31, 2012.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.