

The Edict of Torda & Religious Freedom

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Reflection: A Brief History of the Origins of Transylvanian Unitarianism by Rhys Dovey, joined by Krystal Kyer

The Unitarian theological movement originated along with other non-Catholic movements during the Reformation era of the 16th century. This was largely the result of mass publication that was made available by the development of the printing press, developed by Gutenberg in the previous century.

The availability of Bibles for a lay readership allowed people to read for themselves and ponder many theological issues, whereas previously any questions about God and the nature of reality effectively had to be spoon-fed by official authorities of the Church. People quickly realized that there were no Popes or Saints sanctioned in the text, and this was the start of a revolution in Western theology.

After Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, Germany, many different sects arose in opposition to the Catholic authorities, who were broadly deemed corrupt for the selling of “indulgences,” or payments to the church in exchange for forgiveness of sin. At first, these sects were limited to the rejection of Papal authority. Over time, however, they branched out into a broader opposition to various doctrines that governed how ministers and people interpreted the meaning of scripture.

Unitarianism proper began as a rejection of the concept of the Holy Trinity, the personality of God, and the pre-existing divinity of Jesus. Such thinking had its origins in parallel movements in Italy and Poland, brought by Lelio Sozzini and his nephew, Fausto. These ideas were later picked up and expounded upon by the Hungarian theologian, Francis David, who founded the Unitarian movement as we know it today.

Our present form of Unitarian Universalism promotes the use of the democratic process. I find it significant that the origins of Unitarianism extend from a form of democratic decision-making amidst historical change in Medieval Eastern Europe.

In 1526, The Kingdom of Hungary was invaded by the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman.

At the Battle of Mohács, the Hungarians were defeated, and their King Louis II died during the army's retreat. Because the King had no heir, the Hungarian legislature convened a Diet at Székesfehérvár, where the landed nobility voted to decide their next king. On November 10th, 1526, the majority voted for John Zápolya, a fellow nobleman. But the titled nobility, a minority of higher status than the gentry, insisted that the late king's brother-in-law, Sigismund, be crowned instead.

The resulting dynastic dispute led to a civil war that lasted nearly two decades. Sigismund took the majority of Hungarian lands, while John held the lands of the Eastern Hungarian Kingdom. The two kings reached a compromise in 1538, agreeing that whoever outlived the other would get the whole kingdom.

John cheated, however. He married and had a son in 1540, bequeathing his Eastern Kingdom to him. Two weeks later, John Zápolya died. His son, John Sigismund, became the new ruler with his mother, Isabella acting as regent. This did not help the dispute.

Taking advantage, Suleiman invaded again. He declared John Sigismund the puppet ruler of all Hungary. Very little resistance occurred, as most of the nobles' energy was spent. Before the invasion, Europe was in the thralls of the Counter-Reformation, and the success of the Islamic Ottomans was taken as a sign that the corrupt Catholic Church was unholy. Former attempts to repress the Reformation failed, since the popular interpretation was that the wrath of God facilitated the Ottomans' success.

In a spirit of unity, the various national groups within Hungary convened their most influential noblemen to declare a Union of Three Nations at a series of Diets in the early 1540s. As part of these agreements, religion was declared to be an internal affair of each nation—Hungarian, Székely, and Transylvanian Saxon. Because of this,

Reformation ideas were able to spread freely.

In 1548, the Ottoman governor formally forbade local Catholic authorities from persecuting Reformist ministers, declaring that people “should be able to listen to and receive the word of God without any danger.” These laws laid the foundation on which Francis David was able to articulate his interpretations of Unitarian belief.

Francis David was a man of extraordinary flexibility in his interpretation of various teachings. He tried to broker peace between Calvinist and Lutheran sects. Although this failed, he developed a reputation as a peacemaker, and became very influential in the court of John Sigismund.

David became a pastor and later headmaster at various religious schools. He began publicly debating with more conservative ministers as he gained a following. In 1555, he delivered a famous speech from atop a large rock in Kolozsvár, during which he passionately persuaded the crowd that God was one being, and only through unity could people reach salvation. His words were so influential that the crowd picked him up and carried him to the nearby cathedral, where they demanded he be made the chief pastor.

He became John’s court preacher in 1559. This gave him direct access to the royal court, where his Unitarian ideas took root. After organizing a series of debates, King John Sigismund was firmly persuaded by the belief of ultimate salvation through unity, and in 1568, a Diet was convened in the city of Torda, where it was formally declared:

“In every place the preachers shall preach and explain 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... 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 and this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word

of God.”

This high point did not last long. Three years later, King John died in a horse-riding accident. His successor was Catholic, and passed a series of decrees against religious innovation. To make matters worse, David had begun preaching more radical propositions questioning the divine nature of Jesus. He was imprisoned in 1579 in a fortress at Déva, and died shortly after.

Although the Edict of Torda did not directly acknowledge the right of individual belief, it was the first formal declaration of the freedom of conscience in European history. This major achievement laid the foundations for freedom of thought and expression on which modern secular humanism would be based. It gave us the ability to make laws without theological scruples getting in the way, and that was no small feat.

Sermon/Homily: “Reimagining Religious Freedom” Rev. Mary

We have lived through historic events this week. Not only the culmination of one of the most clear-cut yet contested elections in history, but seeing the Confederate flag flying in the nation’s capitol and a record number of deaths from the novel coronavirus. One of the values of history is that it reminds us that we have survived challenging and horrific times before. Rhy’s telling of Unitarian history reminds us that our faith tradition’s story includes conflict, broken promises, cheating, violence and war.

Yet out of the conflict so long ago came one of the most inclusive declarations of religious tolerance ever. In a time when religion was determined by royalty and its observance was enforced with violence, King John declared that his people would be free to choose the preacher and religion that satisfied their souls. Out of conflict came inspiration.

The freedom to worship in a way that feeds our souls is part of our nations’ history, but that includes conflict, too. Early colonies were established by the French Protestants

and Spanish Catholics, and led war between them. The sacred practices of the Native peoples were not recognized by colonizers at all, let alone tolerated. The Puritans fled religious persecution in Europe seeking a new place to practice their faith, but set up their religion as the only one allowed in early settlements. It took the radical act of Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island in 1635, to create the first colony with no prescribed religion and that welcomed all, or most anyway. More than 150 years later, James Madison would draft the First Amendment to the Constitution that provided protection for individual liberties that included freedom of religion.

The founders rightly were concerned about the power of the state to impose and enforce religious practice. The history of religion is full of stories of abuses when the state and the church join their power. While religious beliefs can be a driving force for justice and peace, they can also be used to justify oppression and violence. The events of this past Wednesday were just the most recent example of sacred ideals and figures being used to justify violence.

There have been challenges and interpretations of the First Amendment freedoms, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom to assemble, freedom of religion. And, we have not always lived up to the tolerance we espouse. The history of Joseph Smith and the Mormon faith is one story of persecution of believers in a particular religion. Discrimination against those who are Catholic, Jewish, Seventh Day Adventist, Muslim, and others is also present, historically and now.

It is one thing to declare religious freedom; it is another thing to practice it. We tend to focus on our own freedoms, our right to do or say whatever we want. The constitution affirms our individual right to religious freedom. And yet there are limits on our freedoms; there always are. For example, although we have broad freedom of speech that even protects hate speech, we cannot say something that incites immediate violence or retaliation to the recipient. Sometimes UU's say that because we have no required creed, you can believe whatever you want and be a UU. This is not true, there are limits to the practice of our faith tradition. And that's a sermon for another day.

We humans are always testing limits. I know this to be true in my life and I notice that we are wrestling with this as a nation. What are the limits of freedom?

This tension between individual and communal freedoms has been tested most recently as wearing masks in the pandemic was made a political issue by those in power. The president and others claimed that public health orders to wear masks, stay home when possible, use distancing--all of these were illegal infringements on individual freedoms and abuses of government power. Some religious leaders argued that restrictions on gathering in religious settings was an unconstitutional limit on religious freedom, taking this challenge to the Supreme Court. The Court ruled that restrictions on religious gatherings cannot be more restrictive than other gatherings, but did not say that no limits were allowed.

There is no doubt that the pandemic restrictions have limited our individual freedoms--we have all lived with the restrictions these past 10 months. Unitarian Universalists, including OUUC, have chosen to limit our gathering in order to protect each other, especially the most vulnerable among us. We have acknowledged and accepted the limits on our individual freedoms in order to protect the common good.

As we wrestle with the limits of freedom, the question that I come back to is: what are the responsibilities that come with freedom? Those who serve or who have served in the military remind us that "freedom isn't free," meaning that some sacrifice to protect our freedoms. I believe that some of us, those of us with privilege, are called to sacrifice our individual freedoms to protect the freedoms of others. Or, as James Baldwin puts it "We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist."

This past week we witnessed more testing of the limits of freedom. We are asking about the responsibility of a leader to speak truth and denounce violence. We affirm that freedom of assembly does not include domestic terrorism and desecration of the

property of We, The People's. We saw once again and so clearly, the effects of centuries of racism and a culture of white supremacy.

The fourth and fifth of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles say that we affirm and promote:

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning, and

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

In these I hear a recognition of the tension and balance needed between our individual freedom and our obligations to each other. We are free to explore / in our search for meaning, and we have a responsibility to others in choosing the means by which we do so. We bring our own conscience to deliberations and we use a democratic process to make decisions.

The extraordinary history of our nation has brought us many freedoms. Now we are being called to explore the limits of individual freedom and our responsibility to each other, to the common good, and to justice. Those of us who enjoy freedom, those of us with privilege, have a responsibility to those whose freedoms are only on paper and not real. None of us is truly free until all of us are free.

We can thank King John for a Unitarian lineage that includes the right to question, doubt, and seek our own answers. Our calling now is to take this further to explore the responsibilities that come with our freedom; responsibility to our faith tradition, to our community, to each other, and to justice.

The events of this past week have left many of us wondering, "what now?" Next Sunday I'll speak about how we'll address that question at OUUC. This week, responding to our spiritual theme of imagination, Linda Selsor offered this quote from Jean-Jacques Rousseau: "The world of reality has its limits; the world of imagination is endless." As

we move into the new year, may our imaginations soar with all that is possible, may we remain firmly rooted in what is real, and may our actions lead to true freedom for all.

May this be so. Let's be in silence together.