

The Transylvanian Unitarian Experience
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The longest continuous Unitarian experience in the world is that of Transylvania. Beginning in the middle years of the 16th century, Unitarian ideas have had an unbroken history across 432 years in this turbulent land. To the people of Transylvanian Unitarianism today, that history is very much alive. As Professor John Erdo expressed it: "Those who remember the past find in it directions for the present and the future ... It is the duty of each generation to study history ... so that in the light of the past it may see clearly what is its own special task." In that history are to be found many examples of courage and insight that can provide guidance for the challenges of this day.

Transylvania in the 16th century was one of two centers of the newly emerging Unitarianism. Poland was the other. In both places remarkable and important events transpired. In both places religious freedom was proclaimed and nurtured. In both places martyrs left a precious legacy for religious liberals and for all humanity. At another time I shall speak of Poland and the Socinian movement. Today I shall focus on the Transylvanian experience because it is in this region that our partner church is located.

Transylvania is situated in what is now central Romania, mostly surrounded by mountains. The area was originally inhabited by the Dacs, apparently thousands of years ago. It was then settled by descendants of Attic the Hun, the Seklers, and by Magyar people from Russia. About a thousand years ago, Hungarians began living there and Saxons were invited to settle there 300 years after that. From the days of King Stephen of Hungary until the 16th century - a period of over 500 years - Catholic Christianity was the state religion of this land, throughout this period a province of Hungary.

Transylvania became independent in 1545, and remained so until 1711. This little kingdom was bounded by Catholic Hungary to the west, Protestant portions of Bohemia and Poland to the north, Ottoman Muslims on the east and Orthodox Greeks and Slavs to the northeast and south. Understandably Transylvania soon became embroiled in the religious wars of Europe. Lutherans, Calvinists, and then Unitarians joined the Greek Orthodox and the Catholics in arguing over what was the correct version of Christianity. Was the Lord's Supper a symbolic event or was the bread and wine actually transformed into the body and blood of Christ? Was God a Trinity or a Unity? To whom should one pray - only God? Christ as well? God, Christ and the saints? Such questions as these were the subject of intense debate and argument in Transylvania and the rest of Europe.

So turbulent were the disputes and so divided the people of Transylvania that the Queen and her legislature in 1557 issued a decree of toleration. It did not suffice because it did not have sufficient authority behind it. The Queen soon lost her throne, the legislature disbanded, and the battle raged on. Six years later another, similar decree was issued, this time by the Queen's son, John Sigismund, himself now the King. Still the dispute continued.

Listening to the various proponents of Christianity, John began to be attracted to the Unitarian idea. In 1566 he sponsored the first of what developed into three major and numerous national debates to resolve the question of what was true Christianity and what should therefore become the religion of Transylvania. At that first debate, the voice of Francis David was heard in defense of the Unitarian idea. He was the first in modern European history to use the name Unitarian.

Earlier David has been a Catholic educator, but in 1550, when he was 40 years old, he converted to Lutheranism. A decade later he was a Calvinist and within five more years had become a Unitarian. In each of these religious movements, Francis David became the Superintendent of the country's churches and the chief spokesperson for each in turn.

In 1566 David became the court preacher, obviously a position of great influence in persuading the King towards the Unitarian viewpoint. David was the primary debator at the great debates of 1566, 1568, and 1569. These debates ranged over several weeks. They began each day at 5:30 a.m. and stopped only in the evening. The whole country hung on every word since every person would be affected by the outcome.

1568 was the crucial year. In January of that year the King called an assembly at the town of Torda to hear the various proponents argue their separate cases. To the horror of the Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, but to the delight of the Unitarians, King John concluded that Diet of Torda with The Act of Toleration and Freedom of Conscience. This was the first comprehensive act of toleration ever enacted by a government in the western world. He did so at a time when Calvinists were still rejoicing at the execution of the Unitarian Michael Servetus by John Calvin, when the Inquisition was killing Protestants in the Low Countries for their heresies, when England was still burning people at the stake for holding viewpoints counter to the established religion, and when prison was the best that people with unorthodox views could expect.

This is what the Act of Toleration and Freedom of Conscience said, in its entirety.

His majesty, our Lord, in what manner he - together with his realm - legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same manner now, in this Diet, he reaffirms that 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, 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, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.

The one time in history when Unitarians were in governing power, unlike all the other religions around them, they did not use their power to impose their ideas but rather insisted on religious liberty for all people.

There is a mural on one wall of the town hall in Torda that depicts Francis David arguing at the Diet of Torda for both Unitarianism and for toleration. David's proposal was to allow all to teach and write, believing that in this way truth would be the victor. Reproductions of that mural are said to hang in almost every Unitarian home in Transylvania to this day.

In March of that same year, another debate took place at Gyulafehervar, after which David returned to his home in Koloszvar. He was met by huge crowds, who urged him to mount a large rock outside the town and to preach to them. That rock bears a small plaque commemorating that moment when David proclaimed that God is One, Egy Az Isten. It has the same kind of value, perhaps even greater, as Plymouth Rock does for Americans.

Like other liberals of his day, David argued for the use of reason in deciding religious questions, a view that was deeply offensive to the orthodox. He also believed that truth was not given in a single or even in several revelations in the past, but that truth was always unfolding before us as we sought it. We must continue to strive throughout our lifetime for more truth and for greater comprehension of the truth we already know. This position too set the orthodox teeth on edge.

Three years after the Act of Toleration, King John Sigismund, the only Unitarian king in history, died at the age of 31. Catholic relatives succeeded him, and diminished the impact though they did not repeal the tolerant policy of King John. David lost his influence at court, as well as his position as court preacher. In 1579, refusing to yield in his view that to pray to Jesus was blasphemous - one should, he said, invoke only the name of God in prayer - David was jailed, and soon after died in prison.

Within a few years, Transylvania became part of the battle ground between the Ottoman Empire with its Islamic faith and the Habsburg Empire with its Catholic faith. As the power of the Habsburgs increased, so too did the oppression of the religious minorities under them. Unitarians throughout the 17th century were beleaguered. For example, in 1638, the Accord of Des provided that Unitarians must worship and appeal to Jesus, must baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, could publish books only with the approval of the Catholic Prince, and were denied the right of doctrinal clarification and amendment. All of these restrictions were profoundly antiethical to Unitarianism. In traditional Unitarianism Jesus is not divine and so should not be prayed to nor used in baptismal rites. Changes in doctrine are essential to a religion that believes that neither truth nor revelation is sealed, but gradually unfolding, gradually being discovered, gradually being created. Because it was virtually impossible for many Unitarians to abide by these demands, many of their churches were seized, their property confiscated, and their religion silenced in large measure.

But Unitarianism continued. The voice of the liberals was never completely cut off. Imre Gellerd did a complete study of all the surveying sermons from the beginning of Transylvanian Unitarianism to the present. Among the ideas he found richly developed in the 17th

century and early 18th centuries were these: That eternal life was not the point of religion, but life on this earth more morally conceived and lived; whether there is eternal life is an open question to which honest persons can only adopt the point of view that we simply do not know the answer; that human beings are free to choose good or evil, that while there are natural constraints of body and nature these do not impede our choosing the virtuous life. Without ever being explicit in stating it, nonetheless these Unitarians were setting aside the doctrines of original sin, salvation by grace alone, and the structure of heaven and hell.

The 18th century was the time of the Enlightenment. While the main impact of this movement was felt in England, France and Germany, its influence was also part of the events in Eastern Europe. As a challenge to all authority, but especially to conservative, traditional authority, the Enlightenment sent shudders of fear through all monarchs. One of the results was a tightening of religious oppression in Transylvania. Printing presses were confiscated, publishing houses were closed, lands and buildings that had been the property of the Unitarians and other Protestants for several centuries were seized by the Catholic Church, and in several regions, like Kolozsvár, both churches and schools were closed and services and classes, if they were held at all, had to be held in private homes. This continued for most of the century, until the Edict of Toleration of 1781 of Emperor Joseph II.

It is not possible to know exactly the numbers of Unitarians in those years, but literally hundreds of churches in hundreds of villages have survived, and historical markers and the collective memory of the people speak of many more. It is likely that there have always been, as there are today, tens of thousands of Unitarians in Transylvania, regardless of who ruled the land or what hardships were imposed on Unitarian believers.

One of the striking things about Transylvanian Unitarianism is that whenever writing was permitted, whenever the religion could be espoused in public, it was always done so with a sense of optimism and a sense of forward movement, as though in the quieter, more oppressive periods much work was going on quietly behind the scenes, awaiting the day when once again the people could speak their faith.

Consider, for example, the great Transylvanian Enlightenment preacher and thinker Janos Kormoczi. Writing in the last years of the 18th and early years of the 19th centuries, Kormoczi hailed the freedom of human beings and the power for good that made possible. He celebrated the partnership of religion and reason, which he felt had been too long delayed and which he saw as one of the most important results of the Enlightenment.

The task of these two forces, he wrote, was to "lead humanity into the church of happiness." Kormoczi was convinced that the task before the world in his age was to create a new human being, on the outside in terms of behavior and the institutions of society and on the inside in terms of ideas and attitudes. He was not a fool. He saw the dangers of overestimating humanity's capabilities and specifically warned against arrogance and laziness. It is not enough, he said, merely to proclaim that we are new humans, we must strive constantly to become

so. Ultimately, he grounded his faith in human possibility, not in the Bible or Jesus, which he rarely mentioned.

The Revolution of 1848 and its failure to dislodge or alter the ways of the Habsburgs led to a suppression of the Unitarians and others and a period of silence enforced by the state. The monarchy rightly regarded the Unitarians as one of the sources of revolution, citing the words of ministers like Antal Koronka who declared that:

If freedom is our natural right, let there be freedom! ... The mission of religion is to give divine sanction to civil rights, to make citizens aware of their right, to support all social struggle of the nation.

The preaching of half a century at holidays and special occasions was largely historical sermonizing devoted to encouraging people to draw strength from the example of earlier Unitarian endurance and the assertion of religious liberty. This preaching was grounded in a humanistic understanding of the purpose of religion. It led to a brief period of oppression and a changed theological direction following the lifting of restrictions in the 1860's.

This new approach was that of looking inward, seeking the divine in the human heart, finding as much objective truth inside the human being as outside it. One of the historians of Transylvanian Unitarianism has called this the third founding idea of the movement. The first was David's notion of the Unitarian rather than the Trinitarian god, an idea which was developed into the teaching that God is everywhere, can be worshipped anywhere, and that all human beings can be centers of truth and revelation, not just those in the Bible. The second was the great commitment to reason, to insisting that one of the standards of religious truth must be its rationality, its comporting with the best wisdom we have as to what does and does not make sense. And this third idea, which elevates feeling, intuition, the emotions, into a place of importance as a channel of truth, completes the three philosophical-theological pillars of the Unitarians in Transylvania.

In the later years of the 19th and the early years of the 20th centuries, Unitarians began to flourish. They had earlier established contacts with British and American Unitarians, and relied on these international friends for educational and financial help. Journals were started and books published. Churches were restored, and a period of significant internal growth was ushered in.

All of this was disrupted by the coming to power of the Communists following the Second World War, by which time Transylvania was a part of Romania. The worst religious persecution ever known in the region then began. It was the worst primarily because the Communists did not, on one hand, take religion seriously, and so casually undermined it in financial, legal, and political ways, and because, on the other hand, the Communists took it very seriously and so were careful to disable it in every way possible. The Cult Law of 1948 removed religious liberty. In 1968, President Ceausescu exacted a pledge of fidelity to the state from all religious leaders, obviously under duress.

Sandor Kovacs, the minister of Third Unitarian in Kolozsvar, described the situation in this way: "Communism, corrupt leadership, injustice,

loneliness, and sometimes simple fear, have seemed to govern the life of our Church ... Generations have grown up without Sunday Schools or without religious education other than their confirmation classes. In many instances, the minister could not trust the members of his congregation, and in just as many, the congregations did not trust their ministers. Informers were everywhere. All too often, our ministers learned that taking their work too seriously could place them in jeopardy."

In the late 1980's the Romanian government under Ceausecsu initiated a plan whereby some 13,000 villages would be destroyed, including some 7700 that were mostly Unitarian. Only an outcry from the world and the demise of the Communist regime saved those villages.

Now there are new problems, new issues, new difficulties as the people of Transylvania along with their fellow Romanians seek to build a new kind of country.

Dr. Arpad Szabo, addressing a meeting at the UUA General Assembly in 1990, recalled the truth revealed by the minister of the Hungarian Reformed Church, Laszlo Tokes, who launched the revolution that swept out the Communists: that dictatorial regimes think that people will not die for justice, that they will do anything to stay alive, and thus when they encounter people who will not be intimidated, they are helpless to act.

Professor Szabo outlined the new problems that face his people now. One is to know how much free market economics to allow without driving Romania into the status of a colony of the west Europeans or other capitalistic powers. A second is trying to learn how social democracy actually works when there is not heritage of such a governing ideal in that country. A third is how to treat the large number of dispersed minorities. There are two choices: One is homogenization, or what is called in Romania, Romanization. Thus far, this has been the choice. The other is to try to develop some kind of living pluralism in which all the minorities can thrive, a lot harder to accomplish than to say.

Finally, Dr. Szabo pointed to the same problem that Moses had with the Israelites once the Egyptians had been left behind in the Red Sea. The revolt was a great success. A huge weight of oppression was lifted from the backs of the people. Unfortunately, this did not usher in utopia, and much disappointment has been experienced and expressed. How to live with that disappointment, how to deal with reality is the question still facing all the people of Romania.

The specific work that faces Unitarians in Romania is daunting. There are some 80,000 members and over 100 ministers. Too few of these are young people. Richard Beal, UU minister in Louisville and recent visitor to Romania, notes that one of the grave dangers facing the Unitarian movements is the loss of children. In one village, not untypical, there are only four children. The communist government made it almost impossible to stay on the land, so the young people left. Even the effort to lure children back from the cities has not been successful. The people of the village Beal visited, Janosfalva, invited children from an orphanage in the city to visit for the summer. They offered to adopt these children, and the children were delighted. But the government would not allow this because in their minds orphans

are orphans and belong in orphanages. There are no provisions for adoption or foster care.

Other areas have similar problems. In the region of Szekelyfold there are many thousands of Unitarians, but only two churches sharing one building. The ministers of the two churches are responsible for Sunday services, pastoral care, and for religious education, which takes place not on Sundays but in the schools. In one sense this is a step forward because religious education was forbidden for many decades. But these two ministers simply cannot keep us with the task of teaching religious education in dozens of public schools every week. They have trouble even keeping up with the funerals. It is Beal's opinion that unless vast new resources are poured into this area, and soon, there is a real danger of losing many of the congregations of Romania.

A recent publication by the UUA Commission on Appraisal points to another major problem for Transylvanian Unitarians: the long heritage of state control all religion and the complex organizational structure of the movement in Romania.

Throughout most of its history, Transylvanian Unitarianism has been either controlled or suppressed by the government. Before and after the Ceausescu regime, the government was biased toward an Eastern Orthodox model of the church and its relation to the state. Unitarianism was thus both in a theological and an ecclesiastical minority. Under various regimes, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Communism, Unitarianism was enjoined to follow strict rules that prevented changes, owing to a law that dates to the sixteenth century. Today, church buildings and contents are owned by the state. All changes must still be approved by the Department of Cults. Radical change has long been dangerous.

Authority in the Unitarian Church of Transylvania is vested in the Consistory, which is made up of lay-people and clergy from church districts in Transylvania. The lay president of the consistory is also lay president of the Unitarian Church at large. Local churches elect lay members of Consistory.

A bishop is elected by the Consistory, which meets quarterly. The bishop, who has always been male and a clergyman previously served a life term. Under new bylaws, the bishop is elected to a six-year term. The bishop is very powerful both as the executive power of the Consistory and, by serving for many years, as the most senior and experienced member of the Consistory itself. An annual General Assembly of elected laypeople meets in December. An Executive Committee also works with the bishop.

The bishop's responsibilities include appointing clergy to smaller churches and consulting with larger churches searching for clergy; administering the church at large, controlling denominational funds, and managing church property. Before World War I, the bishop had absolute control of church property and its use. The bishop controls parochial high schools and colleges (including the seminary), and supervises all church personnel, including the deans, who are executive ministers of the five districts. These deans are elected by local clergy but work with and for the bishop. The dean has pastoral oversight of local clergy, and runs district meetings.

Church membership is determined at birth by parentage (boys are assigned to the father's faith, girls to the mother's) and changing churches is rare. Before 1989, the Communist culture discouraged attachment either to a religion or a local church, but the new regime offers less hostility to religion and thus sparks more interest.

Local churches have a lay board, elected annually, with a lay president and lay treasurer. In smaller towns the bell ringer is also an office of significance, as the church bell is also the town clock. The minister relates to the board as the bishop to the Consistory. In reality and symbolically, the pastor is the most powerful person in the church. In smaller parishes, the pastor also functions informally as the village mayor and elder.

An episcopal form of polity governs the Unitarian Church in Transylvania. True to episcopacy, the bishop has power over the appointment of clergy, the disposition of certain property, and the supervision of regional executives. A Presbyterian form of polity is also at work, as the bishop is elected by a Consistory, not elevated by other bishops, and the deans are elected by the clergy. Congregational power is limited by the power of the bishop and the dean, but especially by the state. None of the customary measures of congregationalism applies: Members do not own their property, select their members, control their finances, select their clergy, or determine whether to be in association. The only power the lay government seems to have is the election of local officers, and their authority seems very limited.

Beal and Kovacs both agree that the Transylvanian Unitarians must change if their religion is to be maintained. As contacts with our own North American congregations increase - there are over 100 partner churches now - an infusion of both hope and of new ideas is helping to lead the Romanians in a positive direction. What we have to offer are living examples of churchly life that work. Maybe they will not all work in Romania, but the examples are food for thought, ways of stimulating creative thinking, illustrations that there are many ways to achieve the goal of strong congregations.

On our side there is much to learn as well, much to learn about the durability of our faith in tough times. We have by and large not had a hard go of it in the United States and Canada. So many of our ideals are the ideals that our society upholds. That is why I think too many of us take our churches for granted. There are estimated to be three times as many UU's as there are members of our congregations. Those who are members often decry even the slightest whiff of what they consider to be institutionalism. Too often our churches are weaker than they could and ought to be because too many liberals just assume that the church will always be there. That is why a dozen times a year I hear that tired old saying about how someone likes the UU church because they don't have to attend it.

I cannot imagine such a statement coming out the mouth or even being in the heart of any one associated with the Unitarian churches of Romania. They know what it takes to sustain a liberal faith, and that quality has been part of this people over four centuries. We could learn from them.

The saga of the Transylvanians reminds us of how fortunate we have been in this land to have religious liberty, how precious a right that is, how easily it can be taken away or slowly chipped away, how important it is that we who lift up freedom as our first principle remain vigilant against the authoritarians in this country.

The saga of the Unitarians in Romania calls us to support these people in their struggle for the right to be religious in the way that they choose. That saga calls to us to strengthen the cause of religious liberty wherever it may be challenged.

We have answered that call by becoming a partner church with the new congregation Tirgu-Secuesc. The future holds both challenge and opportunity for them and for us. Our responsibility is to make that future full of hope and accomplishment. It is my faith and my commitment that that is precisely what we shall do.

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