

HERETICAL HERITAGE

Good morning, all. I chose this topic, and this title, to explore this morning where our movement came from by looking back – to the origins of Unitarian Universalism in past so-called “heresy.”

Many people here this morning, your speaker included, may consider themselves heretics. But what does this word really mean? How does it apply to us today?

In ancient Greek, the word *hairetikos* meant, “to choose.” That word made its way into Latin; in that language, the word *haeresis* meant “school of thought, philosophical sect.” Over time, even that definition changed into the one we know today – “religious belief opposed to the orthodox doctrines of the Church.” We modern UUs find ourselves, as usual, in a unique context. Since we possess no fixed dogma, no real equivalent to, say, the Nicene Creed or a sacred canon of Scripture, we are not quite a sect, or a philosophy, or a religious belief opposed to a particular established Church. In the oldest meaning of the word, heretic, we are those who choose – who choose to reject creed, to leave well-known paths, to insistently question established belief – those who choose, ultimately, to join or visit this community. That is why we are here in this space on this morning.

The right, or even the ability, to choose one’s religious path should not be taken lightly. Many were our ancestors who immigrated to these shores, risking all to practice a creed opposed to the established church of their homeland. We owe our current religious freedom to those generations of Europeans who wanted the right to practice their faith – or who simply insisted on the ability to *choose*.

History and Background

Contrary to what many believe, the Catholic Church that furnished the religious tradition of our forebears was rarely totally unified. Even during the earliest centuries of organized Christianity, a consolidating church was plagued by heretics – heretics in the sense of people who opposed the Church’s doctrine. These years saw a proliferation of many alternative Christianities – the Marcionites, the Montanists, the Arians, the Nestorians, and a bewildering array of Gnostic sects. These competing sects and cults covered a wide spectrum of views on the nature of Christ, the proper method of spiritual salvation and the meaning of Scripture. Relief from this wave of heresy came only when Church and State became entwined in the fourth century; the Church, its doctrine by then formalized, had access to the State’s power to root out and crush heretics. From the fourth century on, there was a concerted effort to destroy, or at least drive out of sight, all traces of heresy.

However, in the long run, the Church was to have no relief from heretics. Beginning about a thousand years ago, another centuries-long wave of heresies threatened the Church – one after another, the Church attacked these heretics with armies, excommunication, and torture – Lollards, Hussites, Waldensians, Cathars. Many heretics were propelled by resentment over the temporal power of the clergy and the deep corruption of the Church hierarchy. No one group in Europe succeeded on a large scale in permanently breaking away from the Church until the early 1500s.

Reformation

The culmination of this long period of ferment came in the form of a German monk, Martin Luther. He preached grace through faith, rejection of papal authority, the priesthood of all Christian believers without the need for clergy as intermediaries, opposition to the sale of indulgences and use of local language in Church services rather than Latin. He even went so far as to translate the Bible into German, giving the laity the ability to read Scripture. Many of these ideas were not original, but it was Luther's presentation of them that was revolutionary.

Ironically, Luther did not desire to use his ideas to create a new denomination. His intent was to give voice to widespread dissatisfaction with the Church's flaws and so cause effective reform. However, the invention of the printing press a few decades before meant that, unlike earlier dangerous ideas, Luther's were not so easy to silence, and as he persisted, and was eventually excommunicated, knowledge of his proposals spread all over Europe. Soon, new denominations and movements split off and organized themselves as separate from Catholicism. Seen as protesters against the established order, these rebels were labeled "Protestants."

Over the next few decades, several new strands of thought took shape as other Protestant groups were inspired by Luther's ideas. Each of these groups had its own interpretation of "correct" Christian theology, and some Protestants soon persecuted fellow Protestants as heretics just as zealously as the Catholic Church had persecuted Protestant heretics.

In those days, free speech had its limits. Those who spoke – or wrote – too freely risked imprisonment or burning at the stake. There were those, though, who were willing to risk ridicule, jail, even death for what they viewed as the improvement or purification of Christian belief and practice.

Radical Thinking

John Calvin, based in Geneva, was the authoritarian head of one of the most powerful new Protestant denominations. His doctrine included belief in the basic depravity of humanity and in the predestination of salvation and damnation. He was to find an opponent in a man named Michael Servetus.

Servetus, a native of Spain, was born between 1509 and 1511. He received a university education in law, and served under a Franciscan monk. While studying law in Toulouse, he read the Bible, and was shocked to find no explicit mention of the Trinity. While on a trip to Italy with his Franciscan mentor, Servetus was appalled by the wealth of the Church, the wordliness of the clergy, and the near-worship of the Pope. He soon made his way to Switzerland to join the Protestants.

He wore out his welcome there with his constant theological arguments and moved to Strasburg. There, in 1531, he published a book titled *On the Errors of the Trinity*. In this volume, Servetus denied that the Trinity existed, claiming that no support for it was found in Scripture. He wanted to return to the simpler, purer faith of early Christianity.

Many Protestants shied away from Servetus' radicalism, for fear of calling down even more retribution from the Catholic Church. The next year, Servetus published a second book along the same lines, making himself a real annoyance to the authorities. Copies of his books were confiscated, he was banned even from Protestant-dominated towns, and the Spanish Inquisition was about to move against him. In fear of prosecution, Servetus lived for many years thereafter under an assumed name, making a living as a book editor and as a physician. In 1553, he published another heretical book titled *Christianity Restored*. In this work, Servetus argued against the Trinity as well as against the doctrine of predestination, a direct challenge to John Calvin's beliefs.

Calvin saw to it that Servetus' alias was revealed to the French Inquisition. Ultimately, Servetus was arrested and imprisoned. Escaping, he was sentenced to death in absentia by the French Inquisition.

On his way to possible refuge in Italy, Servetus stopped off in Geneva to attend a church service. He was recognized, arrested and imprisoned. Convicted of preaching against the Trinity and against infant baptism, Servetus was burned at the stake outside Geneva.

It may not be much of an exaggeration to see in the martyrdom of Servetus the beginning, in modern times at least, of the idea of religious liberty. His execution caused such an uproar that John Calvin published a book to defend himself and quiet the criticism. Various reformers in France, Germany and Switzerland condemned the use of violence to combat heretics and publicly asserted the right of conscience in religion.

Further heresy, however, was finding fertile ground in the soil of Eastern Europe. In those kingdoms, ready ears existed for the preaching of other, and more radical, heretics.

Francis David

While Servetus was still alive, fresh heresy was brewing in Poland. A group of Catholic scholars began meeting secretly in Cracow to discuss Servetus' works and to

debate the nature of the Trinity. Within a few years, a host of Antitrinitarian groups had emerged in Poland, some preaching ideas that traced back to early Christianity, such as pacifism and holding of communal property. Soon, Poland had become the first country in Europe to officially decree religious toleration.

An Italian physician by the name of Giorgio Blandrata became a prominent figure among Polish Antitrinitarians. In 1563, he was invited by the ruler of Transylvania, King John Sigismund, to serve as court physician.

Transylvania, now part of Romania, was already a haven of religious toleration. Though Transylvania was remote from much of the turbulence in Europe, Protestantism had found a ready reception there. Catholics, Calvinists, Lutherans and Unitarians competed for converts. Transylvania was the next country after Poland to practice official religious toleration.

When Dr. Blandrata arrived in Transylvania, a local priest by the name of Francis David was prominent in Transylvania's religious community. Francis David is so central to our journey this morning that we need to take a little time to review his life. Born around 1510, he trained for the Catholic priesthood. Then, disturbed by the execution of Servetus, he converted to Lutheranism and became a bishop in that church. By that time, Francis David was renowned as the most eloquent and forceful debater in Transylvania, a thorough and knowledgeable Biblical scholar. He soon became a prominent advocate for the freedom of conscience we take for granted today in the Western world, and preached that each individual, in their personal faith, was accountable only to God.

Francis David and Giorgio Blandrata became acquainted, and began exchanging ideas regularly. Under Blandrata's influence, Francis David converted to Calvinism and became a bishop in that church. As a result of his continuing friendship with Blandrata, Francis David's religious life moved into, for us, its most important phase. Francis David soon took up the cause of Unitarianism, the last change in his religious affiliation, which set the stage for the rest of his life.

Blandrata soon persuaded King John to appoint Francis David as court preacher. Blandrata and David now collaborated in their desire to reform and purify Christianity. The young king was intensely interested in religion, but he was also intensely interested in preserving peace in his realm, and wondered how to calm the strife among the faiths practiced by his subjects. So, he tended to promote toleration and open discussion. However, once the king furnished David and Blandrata with a printing press, the two began to freely publish Antitrinitarian literature. There was an immediate and strong backlash from the more orthodox Christians and their leaders.

In those days, publicly attended debates on matters of importance drew huge crowds. The king, himself a covert Unitarian, wanted to hear the most eloquent speakers and debaters from each of the four faiths practiced in his domain, so they could explain their denomination's beliefs and theology, specifically the doctrine of the Trinity.

Several of those debates were held beginning in 1566. In these debates, Francis David lived up to his reputation as the most eloquent speaker in Transylvania. In 1568, after one of these debates, King John issued a new edict of religious toleration that was startlingly liberal for its time.

It must be remembered that, in many parts of Europe at this time, persecution and prosecution for practicing the wrong brand of Christianity were still occurring. This makes King John's declaration all the more surprising.

King John's edict stated, "... in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it ... no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, ... it is not permitted that anyone shall threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God ..."

In 1568, after King John issued his decree, he called representatives of the Unitarians and the Calvinists to debate in his palace, in a public event. Before a throng of spectators, representatives of the two denominations had to defend their religious views. In his opening statement, the Calvinist bishop said to Francis David (now the Unitarian bishop), "If I win this debate you will be executed." Replied Francis David in his opening statement, "If I win this debate you will be given the freedom due to every son of God." On the ninth day the Calvinists asked King John to end the debates; he refused. The Unitarian position, stressing the unity of God and the divine sonship of Christ as bestowed by the Holy Spirit, won the next day.

Thus was inaugurated a short Golden Age for Unitarianism in Transylvania. Soon hundreds of Unitarian churches were operating. Peasants as well as clergy and nobility converted to Unitarianism. However, Unitarianism was not the established church. Toleration was practiced in fact due to the King's decree.

Soon, however, the Golden Age ended. The young king died in 1571, and was succeeded by a Roman Catholic monarch. The Calvinists soon had the new king's ear, and convinced him that the Unitarians were dangerous heretics. Unitarians were deprived of the right to publish and were expelled from the royal court, their influence ended. Blandrata and Francis David parted ways around this time, as David became even more theologically extreme by refusing to practice the adoration of Christ, choosing to emphasize the unity and divinity of the Godhead.

Despite the darkening climate in Transylvania, David continued his outspokenness. Betrayed to the king by Blandrata, he was placed under house arrest, but escaped to preach his final sermon. At its conclusion, he was arrested and imprisoned. Within a few months, this early prophet of Unitarianism had died of disease and neglect, and was buried in an unmarked grave in 1579.

Relevance

To modern Americans, the story of Francis David may seem strange. We have become so used to the open practice of religion that we take it for granted. We forget that the freedom of religion that we enjoy today was purchased with the intellect, the work, and often the blood of many of our ancestors.

Europe in Francis David's day was politically fragmented and torn by religious dissension. The Inquisition was frequently used to enforce conformity and orthodoxy by torture and execution. To speak out, to *dare* to differ, was to risk arrest, imprisonment, torture, death.

Yet many spoke out. Early Protestants rebelled against the arrogance and oppressiveness of a corrupt church determined to preserve its temporal power. Unitarians in Poland, in Transylvania, and in other places, were galvanized by the examples of Servetus, Francis David, and others who gave voice to those who were dissatisfied with orthodoxy, who longed for an honest faith, free from what they saw as irrational and unjustified theology. Servetus was burned at the stake; Francis David was left to die in jail. Yet many still spoke out.

At first glance, we today live in a vastly different world. The religious freedom those early Unitarians sought was, after all, religious freedom for various denominations of Christianity, not for all religions. But our 21st century world is like Francis David's Europe writ large – we live in a global environment of political fragmentation, religious division, and polarization. Those dangerous ideas of Francis David are still meaningful and precious today.

We live in a time when those early Unitarian ideas need to be extended, not just to our religious relatives, not just to our ethnic relatives, but to all. We should strive to build a world in which all are free to practice a faith, or not practice a faith, as they wish. We should welcome all who wish to think, to differ, to probe, then to believe. The faith that was shaped by those early Unitarians was not an easy faith, nor was it meant to be. The task of giving ourselves, and showing the world, real religious freedom, is ongoing. That task will not be completed in our lifetimes – our ancestors undertook it, we continue it, and our descendants may one day finish it. The magnificent gift of freedom of conscience has been given to us by our forebears, those visionaries, those risk-takers; we should return the favor by passing that freedom, that vision, on to all.

I would like to present a few quotes from Francis David that illustrate the type of faith we should cultivate in ourselves, and exhibit to others.

Francis David on toleration – “We need not think alike to love alike.”

Francis David on rational religion (said after one of his debates) – “I followed the line of Scripture but my opponents hid it in a bag, they turned light into darkness when they made three of the Father God and two of Christ. Their religion is self-contradictory to the extent that even they cannot present it in a whole. Nevertheless they will see that even against their will God will prove his truth.”

Francis David, his last written words, scratched on the wall of his prison cell – “Not lightning, nor cross, nor sword of the Pope, nor death’s visiblest face, no power whatever, can stay the progress of Truth! What I have felt I have written; with faithful heart I have spoken: After my death the dogmas of untruth shall fall!”

I salute Francis David’s conviction, his courage from today, over 400 years after his death. I hope for a day when his dream of freedom of conscience among Christians is extended to include all the world’s faiths, when intellectual probing of religion is nowhere met with imprisonment, torture or ostracism, where the light of spirituality, truth and beauty is nowhere turned into darkness. “No power whatever can stay the progress of Truth.”