

Historically Speaking: An Intergenerational Service

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

The Reverend Alison Wohler

March 12, 2006

PART I

You might already know, or perhaps you will remember when I tell you, that of the first six American presidents, three were Unitarian: John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and John's son, John Quincy Adams. The same principles that formed our religious tradition were also very important to the founding of this country. I'll talk more about this in Part II of this sermon. But did you know that long before there were Unitarian presidents in our country there was a European king who was also a Unitarian?

Once upon a time, in a country far, far away, called Transylvania, there ruled a King named John Sigismund. Transylvania was at the eastern tip of what was in those days the old kingdom of Hungary. It existed as an independent country for roughly 150 years, from 1543 to 1691. Today, the region known as Transylvania is a part of the country called Romania.

King John Sigismund is important for us as UUs because he did something no one on earth had ever done before. In the year 1568 (that's 438 years ago), as a self-proclaimed Unitarian, he signed into law the very first "Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience", called the Edict of Torda. This edict granted permission to congregations to listen to and worship according to their own conscience, as well as permission for preachers to interpret scripture according to their [own] inner wisdom. This Transylvanian king favored a policy of open discussion of religion and broad toleration of all viewpoints. This was a liberal position pretty much unheard of in the world at that time.

John Sigismund had been influenced to these, so called, heretical religious views by a preacher named Francis David. Francis David, along with a few other brave men, notably Michael Servetus, was outspoken in his opinion that he could find no biblical basis for the idea of the Trinity, that is, that God was of three parts: the father, God, the son, Jesus or Christ, and the holy spirit. For David, and Servetus, Jesus was a human being and not God himself. God was one entity – thus the name Unitarian as opposed to Trinitarian. Francis David created the world's first Unitarian church, which survives till this day. He is perhaps best known for the wonderful words: "We need not think alike, to love alike."

The Edict of Torda remained in effect for only eight years, ending when King Sigismund died and all his good works were violently undone by the subsequent king, his own brother. Unitarianism was banned and Francis David was thrown in jail for heresy and eventually died in prison.

Although Unitarian beliefs and practices were forced to go underground for hundreds of years, today there are again 170 Unitarian churches in the region that was Transylvania. These Unitarians are ethnically Hungarians, religiously a 5% minority among the 2.5 million Hungarians still living in Romania. They are, unfortunately, barely tolerated by the nationalistic

Romanian state government. Many of our UU congregations in the United States maintain a “sister-church” relationship with Transylvanian congregations.

We would not particularly recognize the theology of modern day Transylvanian Unitarians as very similar to our own, since they have remained much more grounded in Protestant tradition and theistic language. But in the history and very existence of these brave and isolated congregations we find the same basis for the *way* in which we do religion, with our emphasis on the practice of reason, freedom and tolerance. Our spiritual identities will be forever linked by these ideals.

King John Sigismund, his mentor, Francis David, and their edict of religious freedom and tolerance are historical examples of Unitarian ideals brought to life, not just to the mind, despite the hostility and danger inherent to that period in time. It is something to look back on, and up to, with admiration.

PART II

Thomas Jefferson was something of a religious rebel in his time, although he was not very outspoken about it, particularly during his presidency. He once physically cut up a Bible, eliminating everything supernatural including the miracles, leaving what he felt were the pure motives and statements of the man called Jesus. It was called The Jefferson Bible, and is on display today at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Was Thomas Jefferson a Unitarian? Here’s the story: “Like many others of his time (he died just one year, 1826, after the founding of institutional Unitarianism in America), Jefferson was a Unitarian in theology, but not in church membership. He never joined a Unitarian congregation,” (www.famousuus.com/history.htm) theoretically because there were none near where he lived. He is quoted as saying he would just have to be content “being a Unitarian alone upon my mountain top” at Monticello. (A Faith People Make by Stephen Kendrick, p. 27)

What is important about Thomas Jefferson, as with many of the other founders of this country, is that he so resolutely believed in religious freedom and the separation of religion from the government. We have our particular American freedoms, today, because Jefferson and others had the fortitude to insist on the unique wording that went into our Constitution and its amendments

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The First Amendment to the United States Constitution (also known as the Bill of Rights) had its roots in a bill originally written by Jefferson in 1777 for the Virginia legislature, guaranteeing freedom of (and from) religion to the people of that state. We tend to forget that this First amendment works in two directions. It protects religion from the state – and – it protects the state from religion.

These famous documents are crucial to the freedoms we have in this country compared to people in many other parts of the world. The same principles that guided King John Sigismund, of

Transylvania, freedom, reason, and tolerance, guided Thomas Jefferson and the many other like minded leaders who just happened to be around when this country was being born.

We can look to Unitarian, Thomas Jefferson, as another example of truly living out one's religious principles. Fortunately for us, Jefferson believed that the most religious act of all was to free the human mind.

PART III

As a woman, I am well aware of those who have paved the path before me into the field of ministry, a field of professionalism dominated by men for so many hundreds of years. We can be proud, today, that it was the Universalists who ordained the first woman minister in our country. It was 1863 and her name was Olympia Brown.

Not that the Universalists really wanted to ordain her. It was a painful process and the chair of the ordaining body was against it, but yielded, eventually, both to her determination, and to the democratic vote of his committee to grant her ordination. Olympia had decided to become a minister during her years in college, despite what she knew would be a difficult struggle with custom and prejudice against the ability of women. She believed, though, that "If God's love is universal, then half of the world cannot be cut off from proclaiming that love." (Kendrick, p. 96)

What I find remarkable about the life of Olympia Brown lies not *just* that she was our first ordained woman minister. What impresses me, also, is what she then did with that ministry. Within two years of her ordination she was immersed in the fight across this country for the right of women to vote in our national elections. Over the course of only 5 months in the year 1867, she made 205 speeches in Kansas alone. She served as president of the Wisconsin Woman's Suffrage Association for 30 years. She was what we would now refer to as a community minister, rather than a parish minister, like I am.

Olympia Brown is worthy of our respect, just as are King Sigismund and Thomas Jefferson, for the manner and determination with which they lived out their Unitarian and Universalist religious ideals.

Unitarian Universalism emphasizes our freedom to exercise our minds in religious thinking. It also emphasizes our responsibility to act upon that religious thinking. We are encouraged to live our principles.

May the men and women we have talked about today serve as inspiring examples of our continuing responsibility to our country and the world.