

TRUE REASON, LIBERATED CONSCIENCE AND CLEAR VISION
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Where did you come from? Where did I come from? What kind of family stories tells us of our origins? Were they really true? I remember stories from my mother and one of my aunts. The stories turned out not to be that accurate. So, what really happened? These are questions of importance, such as the little boy asking his mother the inevitable – where did he come from. Knowing this dreaded moment was bound to happen, after her tense and detailed exposition of how babies are made, he responded; “Well, Johnny said he came from Ohio.” Place was more important than biology. Knowing what the question means is perhaps of greater consequence than the answer, don’t you think? Asking the question of where one came from is important for many people. Biology and place are of interest. There is currently a surge in genealogy due in part to TV programs tracing individual roots and websites, such as 23andme.com and Ancestry.com. At least in this country with the intrusion upon native populations by migrating people from other continents, we all have a mix of historical heritages. It is not only a matter of a paper trail. It is recorded in our genes, in our DNA. My younger daughter is really hyped on tracing her family roots. She found in her DNA she has a West African connection going back 4 to 6 generations. Based on the relatively short span of time, that sounds like somewhere in the past the family was slave-holders. Exited by the mystery, she wants to know where that came from. She got me to submit my specimen to get a paternal DNA reading. Unfortunately for her anticipation, it turns out I’m pretty boring: northern European, with no Mediterranean, African or Asian heritage. Now she is even more fascinated to follow her mother’s heritage. I’m 99.6% European with a smattering of British/Irish, Scandinavian and German, maybe some French; including 3% Neanderthal!

So, with all this interest in family origins and personal lineage, just what is the DNA of the Unitarian side of our liberal, Free Church tradition? What started all of this Unitarian stuff? Where and how did our faith tradition get started? It had to start somewhere, somehow. It had to have committed people asking questions and seeking answers. To answer our question means getting into theology. Theology isn’t difficult for me. Not because I went to seminary, or had to explain it to the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in order to pass muster. I came from an unchurched family. So the abuses of religious language did not occur in my youth. Now, I’ll be using words that may be a burden of discomfort for some of you. For others, they may bring up joyful remembrances. In either case, I ask you to put aside those feelings from that past. I ask that you try to be present in the moment when I use the word “Bible,” “Jesus,” “God,” “salvation,” “Christian” or even “church.” Our institutional religious DNA is rooted in an ancient theological tree.

Some denominations name themselves by the way they are governed, such as Episcopalians and Presbyterians. Others are named after their founders: Lutherans, Mennonites. Yet others are named because of their practice, like the Baptists and Methodists. For us, our DNA is rooted in theology. One side of the theological argument was against Calvinism – that only an elect will obtain salvation, while the non-elect will be damned. The theological absurdity of this doctrine led to the idea of all people being saved by a loving God – universal salvation or Universalism. On the other side of our consolidated tradition was the theological issue of the nature of God and Jesus. With the background of the one God of the Jews, what is the nature of this God? Further, how does Jesus fit in? Evidence will say our Unitarian tradition began with Jesus – not the Jesus of today’s common, popular Christianity, but the Jesus before Christianity took shape.

Neither Jesus nor Paul was Christian. They were Jews, and that is of utmost importance to remember. However, with a very complicated process, this was forgotten and the founders of Christianity during

the following 3 centuries made them into something else. There was this effort in the 4th-century to make Jesus one of the three gods in the Trinity – some of you might remember that: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But a priest in Alexandria, Egypt, named Arius said Jesus was not god – maybe more than human, but less than God – the theological beginning of our Unitarian DNA. This Arian heresy was the beginning of a long, long hiatus that lasted centuries before the question came up again. Our Unitarian DNA receded, became dormant for about 1300 years. In this dormant period there were questions skirting the idea of the Trinity but nothing came of it. In the Renaissance, some people began to study ancient Greek and Latin documents. There was a resounding appeal to go “back to the sources.” This began with Martin Luther when he started the Reformation early in the 16th-century. He, along with others found some mistakes in the translations of the Bible. More importantly, there were those folks who really read the Bible. They found not a word in it saying Jesus was God. From the time of Arius the Trinity became the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. So, the question was raised; “What is more important, the teaching of the Church, or the teaching of the Bible?” The answer for some was that if the Church’s teaching was at odds with what the Bible says, then the Bible is more important. For these folks, the infallible rule of the Pope was replaced with the infallible rule of the Bible. That was the basis of the Reformation – to get back to the sources, to the roots of the Christian faith tradition.

Still, that wasn’t enough for some. Those in the German and Swiss Reformation only wanted to “reform” the Church. They did not want a revolution. So, they were timid on some points of discrepancy between tradition and Scripture. They didn’t want to go too far in this reforming business. They didn’t want to upset the powerful princes and city magistrates with freaky and far-out ideas. They needed the secular powers to protect the emerging Reformation from the Catholic Church using the military might of the Holy Roman Empire – which was neither Holy, Roman nor much of an empire. They said let’s steer the boat, but for God’s sake don’t rock the boat! Yet, there were those who believed the boat really needed rocking. They didn’t believe the tip-toeing of the timid reformers were going far enough. They wanted to go back to the earliest teachings of Jesus. They wanted to strip away the useless laminations of tradition. They wanted to skip past when Emperor Constantine I made Christianity the religion of the Empire in the 4th-century. The desire of these uppity folks was to separate Church and State. These folks became known as the Radical Reformation. This is part of our DNA.

Before we become engaged with the radical reforming people, let us not forget in this time people could easily die because of their religion. That was considered necessary by both Catholics and the reformers. This was not a flippant era of “take it or leave it.” A person either took the doctrine and dogma, or left the living in the world. This wasn’t out of meanness, as against the Jews. It was what we might consider a misplaced sense of responsibility. The Catholic and reformer churches felt responsible for the salvation of souls. Each church took that seriously. Since Church and State were one, to deny that authority meant the destabilizing of the State. So, you see, by challenging the Catholic Church, the original reformers really opened a can of worms. Where would it end? The German and Swiss reformers did all they could to keep the worms from slithering out into society. Like their Catholic counterparts, for a person not to believe in the religious, ritual and theological norms the reformers put in place, this was a sentence to exile, prison or death.

It is ironic that Luther was the first to allow the worms to slither into society. Early in his reforming ministry, he proclaimed, “The priesthood of all believers.” There was a bunch of people who really believed that. As a continuation of the Renaissance idealism, Luther transferred that ideal into a religious motivation – it is up to the individual to seek religious inspiration. Luther later regretted that proclamation. It was done at a time when the reformers thought the more recent translations of the Bible would be clear to everyone. That proved not to be the case then, and remains the case to this

day. So, eventually the reformers had to tell their congregations what the Bible says, just like their Catholic counterparts – same old, same old!

Our Radical Reformation people didn't buy that. One of the first radical objections was coercion into a religious community. They said to become a part of a religious community was a matter of free choice as an adult. With that, they proposed the Free Church – free from any government intervention. The Unitarian part of our tradition inherited the stance of separation of church and state and free choice of religious affiliation. That is part of our DNA.

These early radical folks had no quarrel with the Trinity. Preaching deeds rather than creeds, theirs was a modest campaign of love and compassion toward all, including their enemy. But such disregard for the doctrine of the Trinity did not escape the attention of a Spanish physician, Michael Servetus. He published a book emphasizing the errors of the Trinity. The Catholics didn't pay much attention to it at that time – only John Calvin took exception. After about twenty years in hiding, Calvin caught up with Servetus and had him burned at the stake with his book lashed to his thigh. But squelching a life did not dispense the message. It made its way to Poland with two northern Italians, Faustus Socinus and Giorgio Biandrata. A group of anti-Trinitarians already formed in the sparse regions of Poland beyond the reach of the Roman Church to the west and the Greek Church to the east. A Unitarian church was established with the influence of Socinus and Biandrata. This is part of our DNA. But there was a region to the south that was then the eastern-most part of the Kingdom of Hungary ripe for change – Transylvania.

The region known as Transylvania has an embattled history. Located west of the Black Sea it was one of the gateways from the east into Europe. In earliest times, from the west came the Celts, then from the east the Sythians later replaced by the Slavs. After the Romans conquered the region for access to the Silk Road from China, the Goths swarmed in from the north. They were replaced by the Huns, then the Avars and Lombards came and finally the Magyars. It was the Magyars along with the Huns who had the final word, giving the region the Hungarian language. They each spoke a dialect similar to the language stemming from Finland and Estonia. The Magyars named the eastern region the land “beyond the forest” – Transylvania. The region was not pacified. Frequent raids by the Tartars were followed by the Ottoman Turks. The cultural mix made it difficult for the Hungarian people to maintain their ethnic identity, which continues to this day.

The history of Hungary is complex since the kingdom was established a thousand years ago. By the time of the Reformation in the 16th-century, the country was caught in warfare between the Ottoman Turks and the Hapsburgs of Austria. The eastern end of the country decided to become the independent Kingdom of Transylvania. To do that, it needed help. It got it from the Ottoman Empire and Poland. Once established, Giorgio Biandrata came from Poland to be the Court physician. During this political transition, Francis David was studying for the Catholic priesthood. Born in Kolozsvár, Transylvania, sometime between 1510 and 1520, his father was of German descent with his mother from the Huns. Following David's ordination into the priesthood, he studied in Germany and became attached to the Lutherans. David jumped into the reforming activities, becoming the Bishop of the Transylvanian Hungarian Lutherans. Always asking questions, he found Luther's work incomplete, so he latched onto the Swiss reformers. Due to his vigor, he became the Bishop of the Swiss Reform Church. By this time, he was noticed by the anti-Trinitarian Biandrata.

It isn't known how Biandrata influenced David. Probably more importantly was Biandrata's relation with the monarchy. Due to this influence, David was appointed by King John Sigismund as the court preacher. By 1565, David's shift to the Radical Reformation came from his intense studies of the Bible

and the earliest writings of the founders of Christianity. He was also influenced by the books of Servetus. Undoubtedly there were important conversations between Biandrata and David while in court. David wanted the pure and simple faith of Jesus. He wanted a religious tradition that the common folk could understand and embrace. All of the stuff written in Latin about transubstantiation, Original Sin and born of a virgin made no sense to him. How could it possibly make sense to a simple farmer or merchant? He wanted to reach back to the faith of Jesus – not the faith *in* Jesus, but the faith *of* Jesus. That faith was in one loving God. That faith had no place for the Trinity. It had no place for all of the centuries of theological quibbling and mind-blowing stuff that no one could possibly understand. He wanted a religion that came from true reason, not superstition. This is part of our DNA.

Francis David preached the first Unitarian sermon in the main Kolozsvár church in January 1566. He proclaimed “*Egy az Isten,*” “God is One.” It created such an uproar with the reformer churches. The Catholics were not that prominent in either Transylvania or Poland at the time. The outrage caused the king to set up a series of debates. David honed his arguments to withstand the challenges against his stance, much to the king’s satisfaction. With the king’s blessings, David published a number of tracts along with Biandrata. The turning point came at the Diet of Torda of 1568 that lasted for seven days with the king and his court in attendance. David’s arguments were grounded in reason and a conscience liberated from past errors. He was reading Scripture afresh and finding what he believed to be the true message of Jesus. His arguments convinced the king to become a Unitarian. King John Sigismund believed religious freedom should be the currency of the land. He issued the *Edict of Torda*:

Preachers everywhere are to preach the gospel according to their understanding of it; if the parish willingly receives it, good; but if not, let there be no compulsion on it to do so, since that would not ease any man’s soul; but let each parish keep a minister whose teaching is acceptable to it. Let no superintendent or anyone else act violently or abusively to a preacher. No one may threaten another, on account of his teaching, with imprisonment or deprivation of office: for faith is a gift of God; it comes from listening, and listening is through God’s word.

The *Edict* was aimed at allowing Unitarians, Lutherans, Swiss Reform and Roman Catholics to hold public offices. Unfortunately such freedom was not granted to the majority Romanian population. They were Greek Orthodox, and along with the Jews were “tolerated.” Complete religious freedom had a long way to go. Even with that, the *Edict of Torda* is a vital part of our DNA.

The Unitarian church was formed in 1568. Later David was appointed the first bishop. There followed a wave of conversions from the Lutheran and Reformed churches to become Unitarian. Not only whole parishes became Unitarian in the cities, but entire villages in the country-side abandoned the reform stances. David could not accept the notion of the divinity of Jesus. At this stage, he was close to the view of Arius – more than human but less than God. This position was similar to that of Biandrata’s and the Polish stance led by Socinus.

King John Sigismund died in 1571, and a series of Catholic princes took over the crown. The religious reforms instigated by King Sigismund remained in place, since the new princes had no Catholic force behind them. Biandrata remained in the court due to his habit of keeping a low profile about religious matters. However, this did not prevent the dismissal of David as court preacher. David’s radical theology did not stop. Over the next two years David came to the even more radical stance that Jesus was fully human. He was a guy just like others, but with a special Jewish insight about God. He had a special office to perform. In performing that office on behalf of God, he died just like every other guy would hanging on a cross. Being fully human, there should not be any worshipping of him as a part of the Trinity. In his words;

I believe in one God, who is not a trinity We believe in Jesus Christ . . . who is man, born of King David's seed We do not confess him being God either in his essence or in his person

Since the purpose of the church was the pathway to salvation, how did David address this without Jesus being in the Trinity? It seems being a part of his age, he did believe in an afterlife. However, he rarely spoke of that doctrine. He was more concerned with the human condition, here and now. He believed to live a life following the examples of Jesus, one's salvation was secure. Salvation was not a mechanical process offered by the church. Salvation is accomplished here on earth. It is an individual seeking fulfillment through a good life.

This was more than Biandrata could take in. Suddenly, David became a threat to the well-being of the Unitarian movement in Transylvania and Poland. The Calvinist Swiss Reform church gained political power in Poland. The Catholics began to become a threatening presence in both countries. Attempting to modify David's stance, Biandrata invited Faustus Socinus to visit from Poland. Socinus stayed in David's house for four months, vainly trying to persuade him to back off. He held his ground. David was charged by the government of an illegal innovation to religious teaching. Biandrata was behind this effort with the support of about one-tenth of the Unitarian ministers. In 1579, David was brought to trial and found guilty. He was sentenced to imprisonment in a remote castle, where he died a few months later.

The legacy of Francis David was strong and enduring. The church he inspired to be formed grew in its determination to spread the gospel of the Free Church. The primary precept of institutional action was religious tolerance. In the year of David's imprisonment, the Jesuits were invited into Transylvania to teach. They set up schools in various cities. By the beginning of the 17th-century, the Catholic Church was enforcing its presence in both Transylvania and Poland. All publications by the Unitarians were forbidden. Hand-written copies were circulated instead. By 1660, the Polish Unitarian church was wiped out. Refugees flooded into Transylvania, merging with the church. The vitality of the church continued due to nearly heroic efforts by the leadership.

The Catholic government began to seize Unitarian properties, causing the seminary to be gathered in separate private houses. The persecution extended to severe censorship, although by the end of the century the Unitarians were permitted to have a printing house for hymnals. At the beginning of the 18th-century, the Jesuits demanded all prior Catholic properties that became reformed and Unitarian be confiscated. Beginning in 1716 the military seized all the Unitarian churches and property in Kolozsvár and throughout the nation, including the printing house and turned all over to the Catholics, forcing the communities to have worship services in private houses for the next 80 years. Two years later even the houses purchased earlier for the Unitarian seminary were seized, shutting down all teaching activity. There was toward the end of the 18th-century a relaxation of persecution. By the efforts of the bishop into the 19th-century, a new church was built in Kolozsvár along with 40 others and 9 schools were started. New horizons opened for the church through the 19th-century. Communication with the British Unitarians began in 1821, and in 1831 a trip to North America by Sándor Boloni Farkas opened opportunities for Transylvanian students to attend Harvard. Extensive communication with the American Unitarian Association continued from 1868. Relations with the Hapsburg regime continued to be contentious. Moral and financial support came from mid-century visits by British Unitarians. This contact provided scholarships for seminary students to attend Manchester New College. The works of American Unitarian William Ellery Channing were translated into Hungarian, helping in the curricula in the re-established seminary.

The 20th-century opened with high optimism and continued moral support from British and North American Unitarians. Then war consumed Europe. World War I and the following period had a devastating effect upon the Transylvanian Unitarian Church. The Treaty of Trianon (1920) punished the *Hapsburg Dynasty* by ceding Transylvania away from Hungary into the hands of Romania with enormous consequences. Reports of persecution against the traditional four churches – Lutheran, the Reformed or Presbyterian, the Roman Catholic and Unitarian – reached the United States and Britain, creating deep concerns for the respective kindred religionists in Transylvania as well as for the Jews and Baptists. Commissions were established through the 1920s to visit Transylvania attempting to mitigate the turmoil of forming a new Romanian Greek Orthodox government. Past animosities between Hungarians and Romanians were revived. With World War II and Nazi occupation, oppression was intensified. In 1944, Romania (and therefore Transylvania) became part of the Soviet Union, installing a Communist government by 1947. All churches were severely regulated, including consolidating all Protestant seminaries into one institution. All church properties were confiscated. The beginning of Nicolae Ceausescu's rule in 1965 started with religious freedom. After this brief period of openness, the regime became the most oppressive and tyrannical of all the regions in the Soviet Union. In order to gain more capital for the government, Ceausescu ordered all agricultural and manufactured goods for export, placing the population in extreme hardship, poverty and starvation. In order to increase agricultural production he ordered the dispersing of villages in Transylvania, breaking up traditional family and cultural ties – and the demise of the Unitarian Church, since many villages were entirely Unitarian. These alarming incidents rallied financial aid through an intense Partner Church program from the United States and Britain.

Since the overthrow of the Ceausescu regime in 1989, the need continued. Now, the relations with the government have dramatically improved. Even so, when the government demanded all churches to condemn homosexuality, only the Unitarian churches refused. Seminary professors and clergy are receiving fair compensation from a stronger church structure now. With general improvements, the village churches still remain on nearly subsistence support, requiring financial aid for a specific project from time to time. For all engaged in this process, the results are transforming. To know and meet our Transylvanian Unitarian sisters and brothers is a gift each can give to the other. The legacy in Transylvania left by Francis David is our legacy. The courage and stamina of David and the churches that survived him are exemplary of our liberal, Free Church tradition. We can learn much from the simplicity of their religious life. We can be inspired to new heights of commitment with them and in our own communities. In relationship with our Transylvanian Partner Church in Magyar-Sjovat we can share in true reason toward religious and spiritual values, express a liberated conscience unfettered by doctrines and dogmas, and have a clear vision of our futures together. These courageous people of the land “beyond the forest” are our forebears. They tragically and joyfully paved a path for us. They are a vital part of our Unitarian DNA.