

Sermon delivered at Glasgow Unitarian Church on 21 January 2018 by Rev John Clifford

Edict of Torda, 450 years

Well, if anyone had any doubt about what we are celebrating today before they left home for church, the excellent Chalice Lighting words from ICUU and the two readings from the Hungarian Unitarian Catechism should have dispelled all doubt.

450 years, almost to the day, since the Edict of Torda was promulgated by the King and Parliament of an Eastern European backwater that was effectively a buffer between Sultan Suleiman of the Ottoman Empire to the South and “Christian” civilisation to the West. The Edict itself was proclaimed following several public debates between different religious groups: The Roman Catholics, the Swiss Calvinists, the German Lutherans, and the followers of Pure Christianity who would come to be called Unitarians. These four groups had special status. The Eastern Orthodox, the Jews, and any other small groups like Anabaptists were not part of this journey towards toleration.

We don't have the ceremony of Confirmation in our English speaking churches, although a few do have coming of age ceremonies. But I've been privileged to be at a Hungarian Unitarian Confirmation service. The teenagers, having been studying for some months and having completed a personal project, are gently interrogated by the minister about their self-understandings as Unitarians and their desire to become full members of the community. The youngsters were not expected to feed back sections of the Catechism verbatim, but it is the key normative document that organises their studies.

The Unitarian Catechism from which we heard excerpts in the Reading dates the foundation of the Hungarian Unitarian Church from the Edict of Torda. The Catechism focuses on Francis Dávid's central role - it is, of course, a religious history teaching text, not a political history, but King John Sigismund and his predecessor, his Polish mother, Queen Isabella, also had key roles, as did other laypeople. In common with the law and custom of the time, monarchs had central political roles. We know that mothers have a strong influence on our values, but not often do we see the political effects as clearly as we do from Isabella to her son, Francis.

So, while acknowledging the key role played in the Edict of Torda by Rev Francis Dávid, including the founding of the Unitarian Church, there are many layers in this history and we will explore a couple of them.

Isabella was the eldest daughter of the King of Poland, Sigismund I the Old. As such she was a valuable commodity and after a few alternative matches did not work out, she was married to the King of Hungary, John Zápolya, but only after he concluded a treaty with the Hapsburg Archduke

Ferdinand. Ferdinand had his eyes on adding Hungary to the Hapsburg fold and the 1538 treaty saw the Hapsburgs gain territory in western Hungary while Zápolya's holdings and crown would be inherited by Archduke Ferdinand. The treaty signed, Isabella was married in 1539. This made her the Queen consort of Hungary. It was a politically turbulent time with the Hapsburgs pushing to add to their holdings and Sultan Suleiman the Great of the Ottoman Empire wanting a vassal state as a buffer. In addition, local nobles wanted to keep Hungary independent. John Zápolya wasn't just King of Hungary, he also carried the title of Voivode (i.e. Military chief, sometimes translated as Duke or Prince) of Transylvania. Isabella and John had a son, John Sigismund Zápolya, born just two weeks before the King died. So there was an heir and the Hungarian nobility, not wanting to honour the 1538 Treaty made while there was no heir, declared the baby King of Hungary, with mother Isabella his Regent. Ferdinand was not best pleased and besieged Buda twice, the second time having to lift the siege when Sultan Suleiman came in and took over. Hungary was partitioned by Suleiman. The infant King and Regent were given vassal status to Transylvania by Sultan Suleiman and the Transylvanian Diet agreed to this. Over the next several years Isabella had to balance conflicting forces, including leaders in Hungary who were working with Ferdinand to bring Hapsburg control to Hungary. Isabella resisted but in 1551 had to relinquish the Hungarian crown and leave for Poland, where her brother was now King. The Hungarian situation remained unstable, however, and she was urged to return to Transylvania, which she did in 1556, accompanied by Ottoman troops. The next month the Transylvanian Diet authorised a five-year regency (her son John then being 16). It was about this time that the church authorities in Kolozsvár elected Francis Dávid as chief minister. He was Bishop of the Transylvanian Hungarian Lutherans from 1557 to 1559.

It was in 1557, 11 years before the Edict of Torda, that Isabella issued a "Decree of Religious Tolerance". The decree called for "each person to maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all." She had been encouraged in this liberal direction by her Court Physician, George Biandrata, an Italian who spent time with the Polish Socinians. We'll hear more about him in a few minutes. As it turned out, Isabella died only two years after her radical Decree and John became King. Biandrata stayed on as Court Physician and was influential in getting John to invite Francis to be Court Preacher.

There's no doubt that King John's Edict is a more developed proclamation than Regent Isabella's Decree, but I have the distinct impression that because she didn't call herself a Unitarian and because she was a woman, her role in the development of religious toleration has not been properly recognised. This is a common bias in history that is only recently become

recognised. At a time when Francis Dávid was a Lutheran bishop, Isabella was publicly proclaiming inclusive Unitarian tolerance (though not using the Unitarian name which had to wait another 43 years before it was used).

History is full of “might-have-been” moments and it would be fascinating to reflect on how Isabella and Francis might have fought the Counter Reformation together had she lived longer, or to reflect on how history might have allowed real consolidation of the early Unitarian Church had John not died in a road accident aged 31 only 3 years after the Edict of Torda. In a few short years the Unitarians had built up an impressive list of achievements.... a printing press, a theological school, a few hundred congregations but the protection and patronage of the crown died with John.

When King John died, Stefan Barthory, a Roman Catholic, was offered the crown of Transylvania on the condition that he recognised and abide by the Edict of Torda. He was a determined Catholic, not a religious liberal, but he did recognise that there were some limits on what he could do to push Roman Catholicism in this corner of his Kingdom. As the Catechism says, dark times followed. Barthory cleared all the Unitarians from Court except for the aforementioned George Biandrata; he confiscated the printing press and removed Francis Dávid from the post of Court Preacher. He took the church buildings which Unitarians had acquired through conversion, and returned them to their former owners. And he said, fine - the recognised groups (Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, and Unitarians) had rights to exist, but only as they were when he became King - in 1572 the Diet confirmed the Edict of Tolerance but added a prohibition to Innovation or continuing reform.

The restrictive actions of Barthory continued. He limited Unitarians to holding synods in only Kolozsvár and Torda. This crime of Innovation, of course, was the worst thing for Francis David, who understood Unitarianism to be in perpetual reformation. He was trying to create the Kingdom of God and was not minded to be limited by government decree. At a synod in Torda in 1578, with 322 ministers attending, they confirmed the principle of free inquiry, declaring that nobody can be accused of violating the Innovation Law if searching questions which haven't yet been decided by synod. That same month, March 1578, George Biandratta, who was not only Court Physician but a prominent lay Unitarian acted. He was very worried that if Francis did not abandon his latest change to theology and ritual, that as Jesus was a human being, prayers should not be addressed through him, this “Innovation” would put the Church itself in grave danger - Biandratta recognised that the protection afforded by the Edict of Torda was all they had against a Roman Catholic monarch and the Counter Reformation. If Francis pushed through his latest reform, the young Church would be destroyed. He tried hard to dissuade Francis, even bringing Faustus Socinus down from Poland for intense discussions to try to persuade Francis with

theological arguments. Surely Francis could see that his actions endangered the church he had effectively created! But for Francis, there was no room to compromise with Truth. Since Socinus couldn't persuade Francis, early in 1579 Biandratta laid charges against him and his followers at the synod at Torda. But at the end of February 1579 synod affirmed that, Unitarians did not innovate, but they only developed their previous teachings. Seeking for the religious knowledge and truth is not only allowed but it is the duty of ministers. Biandratta lost his case at synod so he went to Court and denounced Francis Dávid before Barthory, who forbade the Unitarian reformer to preach, detained him under house-arrest and brought his case before the Diet.

The Diet, however, warned the Prince that "in this case he shouldn't be carried away by any unconsidered decision but act deliberately, appealing to the advice of both the lay and the Church judges." Consideration of the case was held over for another month, when on 2 June the majority, including some prominent Unitarians, declared Francis's teaching to be an Innovation. Barthory then sentenced Francis to life imprisonment in the fortress of Déva.

One month later the Unitarian synod accepted, under pressure from Biandratta, a creed which included Jesus divinity and the appropriateness of addressing prayers to him. A Consistorium of 24 members to assist the bishop and a new bishop was nominated, who was confirmed by Barthory. A few months later, the Diet agreed with Barthory that the Jesuits could enter and work in Transylvania. Francis died in prison in November, his spirit stronger than his body. As the outline history of the Hungarian Unitarian Church says, "Prison didn't break Dávid Ferenc's spirit. This is indicated by his testimony carved on the wall of his prison cell: *"Neither the sword of popes, nor the cross, nor the image of death - nothing will halt the march of truth. I wrote what I felt and that is what I preached with trusting spirit. I am convinced that after my destruction the teachings of the false prophets will collapse."*

But through the hard repressive times, the Edict of Torda did protect the suffering and weak church, which lives on today, which is one reason we celebrate today. When Unitarians had political power and influence they enacted a law of toleration rather than entrenchment. And that made all the difference. For that reason we give thanks for the life of Francis Dávid and for the life of the Unitarian Prince of Transylvania, John Sigismund Zapolya. But we should also give thanks for the life of Isabella, one-time Queen of Hungary and Regent of Transylvania. And I suggest that we should also be giving thanks for George Biandratta who tried to save the church by moving against its popular leader. It is likely that his belief that the whole church's existence was at stake was correct.

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