

The Edict of Torda
Celebrating 450 Years
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“Egy Az Isten” is Hungarian for, “God is One,” and has been the defining statement of Unitarians in that part of the world since the 16th century. But it is as much a rallying cry for equality, freedom, and justice, as it is a theological statement. To understand why this is so, and its relevance today, and why we should care that, exactly 450 years ago, Unitarians sought to protect religious freedom for all, we need to recall our Transylvanian roots.

Many historians date the official origins of Unitarianism to this period, when theologian Michael Servetus was burned at the stake in Geneva for denouncing Trinitarian doctrine, and Hungarian King, John Sigismund passed the Edict of Torda in Transylvania, the first law protecting religious liberty in human history. I personally like to go back farther, to the first century Christians, who were both Unitarian and Universalist in their theology. As Jews, like Jesus, the early Christians believed, “Egy Az Isten,” that, “God is One,” a belief that lasted well into the 4th Century, until Roman Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea to establish the Nicene Creed, which officially equated Jesus with God. Prior to this, Christianity’s first Systematic Theologian, Origen of Alexandria, born in the 2nd century, rejected the existence of eternal damnation, making him a Universalist. But after Rome Hellenized Christianity, wresting it away from traditional Jewish thought, these original ideas became outlawed and weren’t heard again for more than a thousand years.

When Unitarianism resurfaced, it was, again, in Eastern Europe during the 16th century, resulting in the formal establishment of the Unitarian Church. So, wherever we begin our story, 2000 years ago, or 500 years ago, all that happened in and around Transylvania in the mid to late 1500s, is vital to its telling. Transylvania was the part of the Hungarian kingdom closest to the Ottoman Empire, which, though small, was, thus, of strategic interest to the Sultan. It was also comprised of three main ethnic groups, the Szeklers, Magyars, and Saxons, as well as other, so called, “tolerated nations,” though most cared little for each other in the struggle to maintain their own cultural identities. Some were considered Nobility and didn’t even have to pay taxes, while others were looked down upon as serfs and peasants and had no political rights or power.

The area wasn’t converted to Christianity until 1000 CE, and, even then, became home to Catholics, Lutherans, and Calvinists, all engaging in power struggles for dominance. Given its location, the region remained influenced by Judaism and Islam too. Placed at the crossroads between the Ottomans, to the Southeast, and Europe, to the West, also made it the epicenter where these two worlds clashed during the Crusades. After the fall of Rome, Transylvania became the gateway through which Eastern invaders like the Goths, Huns, Turks, and others, entered Europe. When the Turkish army defeated the Hungarians in 1526, a civil war broke out over two would-be kings, Ferdinand of Austria and John Zapolya of Transylvania.

Although Zapolya was driven into exile and nearly defeated by Ferdinand, the Sultan, fearing the West's influence over an Austrian ruler, came to his rescue by driving his opponent's forces into Vienna in 1528.

Upon taking his throne, King Zapolya married Princess Isabella, the daughter of Sigismund I the Old, King of Poland. Hardly a year later, however, he became fatally ill and died, just two weeks after the birth of their son, John Sigismund, who was immediately crowned King of Hungary, though his mother, as Queen, was the leader in charge, with the help of her advisors. Ferdinand, who ended the Civil War only after being promised the throne in the case of Zapolya's death, tried to invade, but was again driven back by the Sultan's army. Isabella then moved with her infant son to the capital of Transylvania, the part of Hungary closest to the Ottoman border, and Transylvania declared its independence shortly thereafter, recognizing her as Queen, and little John as King.

All of this was going on during the Protestant Reformation, and, because the Catholics weren't as powerful in Eastern Europe as they were in Western Europe, it became the battleground where reformers, first the Lutherans and later the Calvinists, rivaled with them for dominance. In response, in 1557, Queen Isabella and her, now, 17-year-old son, issued a decree calling for religious tolerance, stating, in part, "that each person maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgement to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all..."¹

As historian, David Bumbaugh writes, "In view of religious intolerance of dissent displayed throughout Europe at the time, this edict is a remarkable document, designed to protect minority opinions and to keep the peace."² The Hungarian King, whose reign was mostly restricted to Transylvania, inherited his good mother's appreciation for peace, and, thus, for religious tolerance, and grew up to disdain the constant fighting and unrest caused by religious rivals in his own kingdom. He was only 19 when she died.

In the meantime, another Hungarian, Francis David, born in Kolozsvar in 1510, who had been the rector of a Catholic school and a Priest, then joined the Reformation and became Bishop of Hungary's Lutheran schools, and, still later, resigned to become a Calvinist, remained unsettled, and eventually began preaching against the doctrine of the Trinity and Christ's divinity. As King, seeking to keep the peace among such religious disagreement, especially between the Lutherans, Calvinists, and Antitrinitarians, Sigismund assembled the Diet of Torda in 1563, to hear their differences in the hope of finding a resolution. Although he wisely divided the Lutherans and Calvinists into separate bodies, giving each their own system of governance, Sigismund most agreed with Francis David's antitrinitarian arguments and ended up appointing him Bishop of Transylvania's Reformed Churches and the official Court Preacher.

¹ Bumbaugh, David E., *Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History*, Meadville-Lombard Press, Chicago, IL, 2000, p. 46f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

Five years later, in early, 1568, when Sigismund was 28-years-old, after another debate between the Calvinists and Antitrinitarians, the King issued the Edict of Torda, declaring religious tolerance—the right of each church to choose its own minster, and that nobody shall be removed, harmed, or punished for their religious beliefs. “Inasmuch as we know that *faith is a gift from God*,” the Edict says, “and that conscience cannot be forced, if one cannot comply with these conditions, let him [leave the country]...³ since we demand in our dominions, there will be freedom of conscience.”⁴ So, in addition to establishing the first religious tolerance law in Human history, and making Unitarianism an officially recognized religion in the world, Sigismund refused to live in a country where people fought over religion. “By almost any standard,” Bumbaugh says, “certainly by the standards of his time, King John Sigismund was a remarkable ruler. Following the policy of his mother, he made toleration the hallmark of his reign. When he identified himself as a Unitarian, and found the majority of the nation supporting him, he only demanded of those who disagreed that they live in peace with those with whom they differed.”⁵ On January 14th, 1571, at age 31, he officially recognized, Lutheranism, Calvinism, Catholicism, and Unitarianism as “received,” religions in his Kingdom, in addition to others that were legally “tolerated.” Sadly, the next day he was severely injured in a carriage accident, leading to his untimely death a few weeks later.

Compounding this tragedy, his desire to establish a land of unprecedented religious tolerance was also doomed with his demise. For upon his death, the Sultan appointed a Catholic in his place, King Stephen Bathori, who immediately dismissed Sigismund’s mostly Unitarian court, including Francis David. Although those protected under the previous Edict of Torda remained so, the new King forbade the establishment of any new religions or any innovations by those already established. He particularly disdained the Unitarians, many of whom he had punished, and whose works he censored. He also forbade them from holding synods anywhere outside the capital, refused to let the Unitarian Bishop visit his churches, and placed them all under jurisdiction of the Calvinist Bishop.

After Francis David began preaching that the eucharist is only symbolic, that infant baptism should be abolished, and that praying to Christ is no better than praying to Mary, he was arrested on charges of “innovation.” The Calvinists and Jesuits called for the death penalty, though he ended up being condemned to life in prison, which, for him was the same as death. For he fell ill and died in his dungeon cell before the year was out.

When the new King’s Catholic cousin, Sigismund Bathori took the throne in 1597, he began persecuting Protestants outright, especially Unitarian Protestants, seizing their property and forcing them to convert or die. In retaliation for a failed Unitarian revolt in the first years of the 1600s, the Unitarian church in the nation’s capital was taken away and given to the Catholics, and only Catholic services were allowed to be held in those considered “disloyal” cities.

³ Howe, Charles A., *For Faith and Freedom*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1997, p. 100.

⁴ Bumbaugh, *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

When the Calvinists took over in 1605, the Edict of tolerance was again respected, but, given that the Unitarian Synod was now presided over by a Calvinist Bishop, 62 of its churches were converted for Calvinist usage, and a new creed was established requiring Unitarians to worship Christ, baptize infants, and observe the Lord's Supper. "The decree had the effect of limiting the freedom of belief of the Unitarian Church," Bumbaugh says, "but securing the continued existence of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania into the twentieth century."⁶ But it's been tough for Unitarians ever since. Their churches and rights were disregarded for generations and, in 1728, there was even a failed attempt to outlaw Unitarianism altogether. As Bumbaugh succinctly explains, "the government created a fund for the conversion of Unitarian children, decreed no non-Unitarian might marry a Unitarian, prohibited any public discussion of Unitarianism, forbade conversion to Unitarianism, closed Unitarian schools, and refused to permit any new churches to be built or any existing churches to be repaired."⁷

Since then, well into the 20th century, and today, Unitarians, as ethnic Hungarians, have been under the rule of various foreign powers, and have experienced brutality, ethnic cleansing, the denial of their right to express their own culture or speak their own language. Even today, the brilliant high school students in the Felsorakos, the Unitarian village we partner with in historic Transylvania, are at risk of flunking their State exams each year because Hungarian is their native tongue, and the tests are given in Romanian, the country that has claimed the region since the end of World War II.

So, perhaps, in light of this brief history of a land and a people divided for more than a thousand years by differing religions, powers, and cultures, as well as being caught in the middle of Islamic and Christian conflicts, disputes between East and West, and later, between Germany and the Allied forces during World War II, and between the Soviet Union and the U.S. during the Cold War, you can understand why the idea of tolerance, if only a dream, remains so vital, and why the Hungarian cry that has historically united so many, *Egy Az Isten*, "God is One," is, again, far more than a theological position. It is a cry for freedom, self-determination, and solidarity amongst a people who have seldom known such glories.

Thus, a few weeks ago, on January 13th, when Unitarians all over the region assembled in Kolozsvár, Romania, the birthplace of Francis David, to celebrate the 145th anniversary of the Edict of Torda, it was an ecumenical event that took place in a Catholic Church on the main square, and included Lutheran and Catholic speakers as well as Unitarians. Indeed, dozens of religious leaders from all three traditions, were successful in petitioning the Hungarian, Romanian, and European Parliaments to issue resolutions declaring January 13th the official Memorial Day for Religious Freedom.

During the celebration, Zsolt Németh, a Hungarian economist and politician, who served as the Secretary of State until 2014, said, "Transylvania 450 years ago was the world's leading edge..." with, "the creation of freedom of religion," adding that, "today it is necessary to rethink the lost practice of tolerance."⁸ Another speaker, Zoltán Balog, a Calvinist pastor and

⁶ Ibid., p. 59.

⁷ Ibid., p. 59f.

⁸ <http://fotok.transindex.ro/?galeria=1613>

politician, told the crowds that “Christian cultural ecumenism is needed for Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants.”⁹ László Kövér, who became the Acting Hungarian President in 2012, said the occasion should serve as a reminder that, “We should live and implement our national identity and aspirations not against each other, not at the expense of each other, not in the spirit of national exclusivity, but reinforcing each other, in the spirit of national fairness,” adding that continued abuses against “Transylvanian Hungarians seems contradictory”¹⁰ to this goal.

This is why Hunor Kelemen, current president of the Democratic Union of *Hungarians* in Romania, also reminded the crowd, “The celebration and commemoration is not only about the past but also about the hope of the present, and hence the future.”¹¹ Other speakers likewise told attendees that celebrating the 450th anniversary as the birthplace of religious tolerance would be meaningless if, as a people, they could not do more to live up to it today. Perhaps most telling are a couple of Facebook posts in response to an article about the celebration. One entry simply quotes a verse from the Bible, “Go therefore, make disciples of all the peoples, baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,”¹² an obvious Trinitarian slight to the Unitarian idea of “Egy Az Isten.” Yet another replied, “As long as the Hungarians are not equal in their own country, there is not and there will be equality for none!”¹³

Today, Unitarians all over the world, including here in the U.S., are proud to claim ours as the very first religion committed to promoting religious freedom for everyone, and to living in peace with those with whom we differ. Yet, as far ahead of our time as we may have been four and a half centuries ago, our world still knows little such tolerance. So, today, rather than merely celebrating this historic effort, we must use the occasion, as they’ve done in our faith’s motherland, to recommit to truly creating such a land, such a world. And just as the Edict of Torda emerged from a part of the world divided on many fronts, between the East and the West, the right and the left, nobles and serfs, Catholics and Protestants, our commitment must be to more than just religious freedom, but to Freedom itself—to the freedom to express many ideas, and the freedom to participate as equals, and the freedom for all to enjoy all that life has to offer.

In today’s world, where ethnic cleansing still goes on, and millions of refugees, the most our history has ever seen, must flee their own countries to escape poverty, racism, or war, it’s easy to forget our own country is as divided today as it ever has been, and we all feel the daily pressures and anxieties of being caught in a battle for the mind, in a war of words, in which people on all sides of the issues are fighting to control the narrative, to restrict speech, through ridicule, condemnation, political correctness, and by owning, and buying, and controlling the media.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

“We feel dread, as do so many other Americans, even as we try to reassure ourselves that things can’t really be that bad here,”¹⁴ writes Steven Levitsky, in *How Democracies Die*;

Yet, we worry. American politicians now treat their rivals as enemies, intimidate the free press, and threaten to reject the results of elections. They try to weaken the institutional buffers of our democracy, including the courts, intelligence services, and ethics offices. American states, which were once praised by the great jurist Louis Brandeis as “laboratories of democracy,” are in danger of becoming laboratories of authoritarianism as those in power rewrite electoral rules, redraw constituencies, and even rescind voting rights to ensure that they do not lose.¹⁵

Democracy, Levitsky says, is based upon “mutual tolerance,”¹⁶ a crucial principle that is implied, but not written into our Constitution, and did not long survive its codification in the Edict of Torda 450 years ago. Yet, without such tolerance, he says, “our constitutional checks and balances will not operate as we expect them to.”¹⁷ So, today, like our Unitarian forbears so long ago, we find ourselves at a crossroads, caught between the pull of opposing forces on all sides. Like Queen Isabella, and King Sigismund, and Bishop David, we feel weary and beaten down by the endless bickering and fighting for dominance, and long for a world in which everyone is free to think and say whatever they want so long as they don’t hurt anyone else. And that’s really what ideological intolerance is all about, controlling the narrative so no one is free to tell us what we’re doing is harmful, harmful to others and harmful to the environment. Whether it involves the suppression of religious, political, or scientific ideas, the righteous indignation that justifies such intolerance is but an attempt to maintain the status quo, to keep things the way they are, to prevent “innovation,” as the authorities put it after Sigismund’s death so long ago.

So, as we consider the significance of the Edict of Torda, ahead of its time as it was, we should remember that Unitarianism isn’t and never has been about what happened in the past, but about what we’re doing today, in the Spirit of Torda, to make our world more tolerant. For it turns out tolerance can’t be written into law, into a Constitution or Edict, yet it is the heart of Democracy, and equality, and justice; and that is why, as the heirs of Torda, Unitarians everywhere must continue promoting and seeking tolerance, so that, in 450 years from now the world will look back and truly have something to celebrate. “Egy Az Isten.”

¹⁴ Levitsky, Steven. *How Democracies Die* (p. 1). Crown/Archetype. Kindle Edition.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*