

Unitarianism in the East and West

Similarities and Differences

By

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As I began contemplating this morning's sermon, about the similarities between Eastern and Western Unitarianism, I realized the differences, though interesting, are insignificant compared to our important similarities. This assertion is almost incredible considering Eastern European Unitarianism was officially established in Hungary 457 years ago, and Western Unitarianism emerged separately just over 200 years ago.

The most obvious difference is the vast distance between East and West, especially between North America and Eastern Europe. We are separated by oceans, language, culture, and, in modern times, by the Cold War until the fall of communism in the late 1980s. It's now easier and safer to travel across the planet than it had been for most the past two centuries, although the vast geographic, linguistic, and cultural barriers still make it difficult for us to relate to one another. Yet, upon visiting Unitarians in Eastern Europe, including its small villages, like our Partner Church in Felsorákos, Romania, you will find, as the Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder song says, "People are the same wherever you go." This was the most startling realization during my two visits there, that people everywhere are far more alike than we are different. Regardless of our many differences, there is one common humanity that unites us all and helps us to communicate, understand, and recognize each other beyond language and culture. Just this week I read that Albert Einstein wouldn't fill out forms that asked his race unless he could write "human." We are all part of the human race, and nothing helps us realize this more than being with people we initially mistake as different from ourselves.

This should be especially so for Unitarians, no matter where we are from or what language we speak, our how different our cultures, because Unitarianism is the theological belief in the humanity of Jesus, and thus in the goodness and potential of humankind. Hungarian Unitarians famously say, "Egy Az Isten," (Egg Ya Ishten) which means, "God is One." But it's as much about their disbelief in the deity of Christ than in monotheism's one true god. Yet they greatly revere Jesus and strive, rather than worship him, to follow his humanitarian and communitarian teachings. For it is only through our actions that we can create Heaven on Earth.

Another difference is our age. Eastern European Unitarianism emerged from the Protestant Reformation and was formalized during the Renaissance when certain liberal ideas, especially the idea of religious tolerance, were still new and received mostly with suspicion and, often, responded to with violence and persecution. Calling for tolerance then could get you killed. Western Unitarianism began during the Enlightenment, after the liberal ideas birthed during the Renaissance had been around long enough for people to seriously consider.

These values, as you often hear me say, are rooted in the fundamental belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person—a dignity that is sustained through systems of freedom, reason, and tolerance. By the time of the Enlightenment, when these pro-human, pro-individual values were flourishing, the only question was what systems needed to be established to guarantee them. During the Renaissance, most people were suspicious and fearful of such radical beliefs, especially of tolerance. Intolerance, which forced everyone to think alike, was considered the only means of maintaining peace. Surely the freedom to express different beliefs could only lead to violent disagreements and disorder. The idea of tolerance was then considered an obvious evil that itself could not be tolerated, lest it spread and disturb the peace. So, it took a lot of bravery for our Eastern Unitarian ancestors to openly promote what has become the central and most necessary principle of any enlightened society.

There is also a major theological difference. Eastern European Unitarian services are more like many Christian churches are here in the West, compared to our Unitarian services. They always begin theirs with a reading from the Bible, which becomes its main focus. You won't hear any Emerson or Mary Oliver read in our Transylvanian congregations. Although they believe Jesus was only human, and that there is only one God, they very reverently speak of both. Western Unitarians, who, again, haven't been around as long, have more quickly evolved beyond our Christian roots and wouldn't describe ours as a Christian religion anymore, although there are some Unitarian churches here that do, and almost all of our churches are open to occasionally benefiting from the wisdom of Jesus' authentic teachings, although many of us are more comfortable calling ourselves humanists, agnostics, and even atheists.

In Eastern Europe, particularly in Transylvania and Poland, Unitarianism began, again, with an emphasis on Jesus' humanity, the belief that he was only human. This is what we call a humanistic Christology, the belief that Jesus was but a man. It rejects Trinitarian doctrine, and is often defined as Antitrinitarian Christianity, although the belief in Jesus's humanity existed for 300 years before the Christianity was appropriated by the Roman Empire and the Nicene creed formally claimed that the Father and the Son were one and the same. Fifty years later, in 381 CE, the Holy Spirit was added to the mix, Trinitarian doctrine was fully formed, and expressing the Unitarian mantra, "God is one," became illegal.

In the West, Unitarianism began with an emphasis on humanity itself, and was initially referred to as Arminianism, a belief that human beings are born with the capacity to do good. It was only later that its adherents decided Unitarianism was a better term. So, rather than relying upon the "One God" for which Unitarianism gets its name, its Western incarnation more readily relies upon human agency to make good things happen in the world. We are more devoted to human welfare than to any idea of God.

Unitarians in the East may have similarly evolved had it not been for the premature death of Hungarian King John Sigismund Zápolya, who died in an accident not long after adopting Unitarianism as Transylvania's official religion and issuing the first religious toleration law in history. After his death in 1571, a Catholic was appointed King who particularly disliked Unitarians. When the Calvinists took control in 1605, they were willing to tolerate the Unitarians but took 62 of their churches for their own use and required them to worship Christ, observe the Lord's Supper, and Baptize infants, all of which are antithetical to Unitarian beliefs.

So, our Eastern European brothers and sisters have been forced to express their Unitarianism—their belief in one God, in Jesus's humanity, in human dignity, and religious tolerance—under the cover of basic Christian orthodoxy. Again, this did not happen in the West where we have been freer to let go of old religious language and beliefs in favor of new ways of understanding, although we've never, until very recently, abandoned the core values that make us religious liberal to begin with.

Another difference, which I'm envious of, is Unitarian churches in the East include everyone in the surrounding community, not just those who go to church on Sundays. The Sunday attendance at our partner church in Felsorákos is very small compared to the hundreds who live in the village. But it's considered a Unitarian village, and the church and its minister work for the welfare of the entire community. The very first item we helped them purchase when our partnership began three decades ago was a badly needed tractor. Obviously, a church doesn't need a tractor, but the community as a whole did, so that's what the church asked for us to help them acquire.

In our communities here, there are many different churches, even in the smallest of towns, so it would be presumptive to think one congregation represents everyone. But in what is now considered Romania, many villages (which we would call towns) are mostly segregated by religion—Catholic, Reformed, and Unitarian—of which the Unitarians represent a very small minority, less than five percent of the population. This is not to suggest people of other religions are not allowed to visit or live in these villages, only that they are predominantly comprised of one religion.

It may also be of interest to understand the designation village is a technical one that is determined by population. A city, which is much larger than a village, gets state funding, which its City Council is then responsible for partly using to support its surrounding villages. Felsorákos is a village that has around 300 homes on streets and roads not unlike our own, which have televisions and satellite dishes and other modern conveniences. They are not living in huts under thatch roofs or on dirt floors. Churches there also get State funding. Since Unitarianism is the minority religion, those of other religions have argued it should not be considered a religion, nor receive any funding, because it is not Trinitarian.

So far that's not happened, but they do not get near enough financial support to meet their needs.

Perhaps I should also say the congregations there are not as autonomous as ours. The Unitarian Church of Transylvania was founded in 1568, is the oldest continuous Unitarian Religion in the world and has not adopted congregational polity. Rather, it maintains a hierarchical structure that includes a Bishop, two Curators General, and five Archbishops, although there is much freedom within the confines of this system.

All of these differences pale in significance compared to the important ways Unitarians in Eastern Europe, particularly those in Romania, formally Hungary, and those of us in the West are similar. The most important similarity of all, as far as I'm concerned, is our unwavering and primary commitment to the principle of tolerance. To understand why I say this, it's important to understand more about Unitarianism's Eastern European history.

Although its roots go back to the beginnings of Christianity itself, I'll begin with King Sigismund's Edict of Torda in 1568, the first religious toleration law in history. This wasn't purely ideological but was issued for practical purposes. Since the Fall of Rome, Transylvania had been the gateway through which Eastern invaders like the Goths, Huns, Turks, and others, entered Europe, and was a place with as much incivility as it had diversity. It was an epicenter of war and civil war, and by the time Sigismund was King, it had also become a battleground between resident Lutherans and Calvinists, along with some Catholics and Muslims, and was the gateway between the embittered Ottoman Empire and Austria. So religious tolerance wasn't a theoretical idea but a practical necessity. In fact, it was the young prince's mother, Queen Isabella who drafted an earlier religious tolerance law in 1557, stating, "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

So, eleven years later, her son, King Sigismund, organized the Diet of Torda to listen to all the religious leaders in the Hungarian kingdom and wisely chose Unitarianism, the religion based on tolerance, "We not think alike to love alike," and issued his famous edict soon thereafter. As Unitarian historian, David Bumbaugh says, "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 Edict of Torda states, in part, "we demand in our dominions, there will be freedom of conscience ... Therefore, none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching." 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 premature death a few weeks later.

Afterward, as I mentioned, the Catholics, followed by the Calvinists, were granted dominion in the kingdom, and the Edict was undermined by anti-innovation laws that didn't allow any new religions or new ideas to be tolerated, along with a general mood of intolerance, especially toward Unitarians. Sigismund's Unitarian Bishop, Francis David, was arrested for violating anti-innovation laws (expressing new ideas). Many called for his execution, but he was mercifully put into a cold dungeon instead, where he soon became sick and died only six months later. As I mentioned a moment ago, the Unitarians were allowed to exist but were extremely discriminated against.

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."³ They were tolerated only in the most basic meaning of the term, but were not treated well or as equals under the law.

Ever since, as mostly ethnic Hungarians, Unitarians there have been under the rule of various foreign powers and have experienced brutality, ethnic cleansing, and the denial of their right to express their own culture or speak their own language. Even today, the brilliant high school students in Felsorákos, members of our partner Church, and throughout Romania, are at constant risk of flunking their State exams each year because Hungarian is their native tongue, and the region's indigenous language. The tests, however, are administered in Romanian, the language of the country that has claimed the region since the end of World War II.

Hungary is rightly considered the birthplace of religious tolerance and the United States has been said to have founded the greatest democracy in history. But today such tolerance and the freedoms it demands are under threat in both places, as well as many others around the world. This is an unfortunate similarity shared by our respective countries in both the East and the West. Today, Transylvania, which was historically part of Hungary, then given to Romania by the Soviet Union after World War II, isn't much farther from Russia and Vladimir Putin's intent on recreating the Eastern Bloc, than Ukraine is. The threat of losing their freedoms is very real.

In the Western world, we are facing a new wave of authoritarianism on both sides of the political aisle. In the U.S., in particular, we're looking at the serious possibility of a populist despot returning to power by a political party that doesn't seem to care what's happening in the rest of the world so long as they can shut down the government here. I recall some Trump voters in the last election holding signs saying, "I'd rather be a Russian than a Democrat." Given the inability of their now fractured party to lead or accomplish anything meaningful, and their failure to safeguard our freedoms and international interests, they may get their wish. Meanwhile, liberals are continuing to cannibalize ourselves, destroying our institutions and organizations from within by accusing everyone around us of being the "bad guy" because of what they say, the color of their skin, their gender, and their sexuality.

We have become the very thing we once opposed. And many western nations, including our own, are caught up in a soft civil war in which almost all of us, no matter what side of the issues we're on, rage against anyone who disagree with us, or whom we disagree with, by using powerful social media tools to destroy their character and livelihood by lodging false information and accusations.

I won't say more about this tragic situation now. Everyone knows what I'm talking about and how bad it is. Today, there is only one way out of this this terrible milieu; to do as our Unitarian ancestors once did when such incivility was tearing their world apart; we must "demand," as Queen Isabella and Prince Sigismund did, that "in our dominions, there will be freedom of conscience ... We 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." Just imagine what our world and communities might be like if, instead of considering those we disagree with our enemies, we tolerate our differences. The world would almost instantly become a far better place if we would all only agree to disagree.

Today, as Unitarians everywhere, we must promote a renewed commitment to such civility and to peace through tolerance, the principle at the heart of the Renaissance and Enlightenment from which our religion sprang. The Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur once said, "the first and most essential" of our principles, "is that of generous tolerance of differing views."⁴ Today, our more than 30-year partnership with our friends and fellow Unitarians in Felsorákos reminds us of where we come from, of our vital place in the world, of the direction we must go together, and of the shared values that will get us there.

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

² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 59f.

⁴ Morse, Earl Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism*, Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1945, p. 208.