



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Radical Reformers”

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### Centering Thoughts

*There is no greater mindlessness and absurdity than to force conscience and the spirit with external power, when only their creator has authority for them.* Francis David

*Our view is that there is truth and holiness in other religious faiths. Our view is that there are many paths to God.* Rabbi Eric Yoffie, Union for Reform Judaism

*In the practice of tolerance, one's enemy is the best teacher.* Dalai Lama XIV

### Sermon

On the Sundays that we welcome new members I frequently focus on a topic that aids our understanding of Unitarian Universalism, answering questions such as, ‘Who are we?’ and ‘How did we get to be who we are?’

We need this because neither the Hebrew nor Christian scriptures tell our full story. Many of us come from other religious traditions, or from none, and our UU tradition doesn't readily explain itself. We don't have a single-strand of history that can be easily unwound like a ball of yarn. Instead, ours resembles a jumbled pile of yarn after a cat has played with it because our story emerges from many ideas and many people, rather than one doctrine or leader. And because we hold no single belief all must profess, understanding and concisely explaining Unitarian Universalism can be challenging. It doesn't help that our Seven Principles and Six Sources don't roll off our tongues with ease. When asked about Unitarian Universalism, I usually say, “Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal religion comprised of people who share common values and embrace diverse beliefs.” But that sentence barely begins to unravel the tangled strands of our faith.

Because we share the offering this month with our Unitarian partner church community in Okland, Transylvania, Romania, I'm pulling on one strand that leads to our eastern European religious ancestors, particularly Francis David. Given that, I want to thank our guest musicians, Klezmer Local 42, for helping us to enjoy some music from Eastern Europe. Like Unitarian Universalism, klezmer music draws from many sources, most notably Jewish and Romani, or Gypsy, culture.

Before 1510 when Francis David entered the world, in 1452 Johannes Guttenberg used his new movable-type printing press to publish the first Christian Bible that didn't require the skills of

monks or other hand copyists. Although Augustinian monk Martin Luther wasn't the first translator of the Bible, his popular German translation, completed in 1534, was followed by other languages, making biblical teaching directly available to people who could read. And that allowed more people to independently reflect on what they read and challenge what others said.

Translating the Bible wasn't Luther's first act of independence. Seventeen years earlier he publicly posted on the Wittenberg cathedral door 95 reforms he believed the Catholic Church should make. In particular, he was outraged that priests wanted payment for indulgences, or forgiveness for one's sins. After Luther famous act, more scholars and religious leaders, John Calvin among them, suggested additional reforms. Some advocated for radical reforms.

Our UU story emerges from what became known as the Radical Reformation. Our left-wing spiritual ancestors challenged the very core religious doctrine of the Christian Church, the doctrine of the trinity which stated that God is three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). Instead, they believed God is one, and since Jesus was not God, they objected to the practice of worshiping and praying to Jesus as God. These reformers did not wish to become Jewish or Muslim, two faiths that also believe God is one. They considered themselves true Christians who were trying to follow the gospels more closely and more purely. They believed Jesus was an exemplary human who had much to teach, but worship should be directed only to God.

The radical reformists weren't unified in all matters of theology and practice. According to historian George Williams, the radicals did agree that the church needed to be, quote "cut back to its roots by freeing the church and its creeds of the suffocating growth of ecclesiastical tradition and magisterial prerogative." [quoted by William R. Estep in his *The Anabaptist Story*, p. 4, footnote #6, and taken from Williams and Mergal, *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, p. 22].

It's no surprise that Roman Catholics didn't take kindly to these ideas, but neither did many reformers pushing less extreme ideas. They thought the radical reformers were spoilers who risked turning those in power, religious and political, against any and all reforms. But excommunication and threats to their lives didn't stop reformers like Michael Servetus, Menno Simons, Leilo and Fausto Socinus (Sozzini), or Francis David. Servetus and David paid the ultimate price for speaking their truths. Servetus burned at the stake and David in prison.

David's spiritual journey may sound familiar. Educated to be a priest, he served the Roman Catholic Church in Koloscvár, in Transylvania, now part of Romania. Upon hearing Luther's reforms, he became a Lutheran and was appointed their Bishop. After debating against a Calvinist, David adopted Calvinist views, and was appointed their Bishop. But further exchanges with other reformers convinced David to profess the unity or oneness of God. In time, David would be named the Unitarian Bishop of Transylvania.

Before that title became his, David received an appointment as Court Preacher to Queen Isabella, regent for her teenage son, King John Sigismund. She held Unitarian views thanks to the influence of the Court Physician, George Biandrata. Seeing the horrors caused by religious war in and surrounding the kingdom, in 1567 Queen Isabella issued this announcement:

... We and Our Most Serene Son have assented ... that each person 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, however, as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all, lest the followers of a new religion be a source of irritation to the old profession of faith or become in some way injurious to its followers...

The Queen then invited representatives to the Court to debate the merits of Lutheranism, Calvinism, Catholicism, and Unitarianism. The debate took place over ten days in January 1568. The Calvinists said that if their side won, David must be executed for his heresies. The Catholics at one point tried to leave because they were losing for lack of Biblical evidence for the trinity, transubstantiation (changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ), and other ideas and practices. David eloquently stated and supported his Unitarian case. The crowd and Queen Isabella declared David the obvious winner. Rather than execute the losers, the Queen issued the Edict of Torda, named after the town hosting the debate. It's also known as the Edict of Toleration because in it the Queen outlawed religious persecution, a first in Christian Europe. The Edict said:

Preachers shall be allowed to preach the Gospel everywhere, each according to his own understanding of it. If the community wish to accept such preaching, well and good; if not, they shall not be compelled, but shall be allowed to keep the preachers they prefer. No one shall be made to suffer on account of his religion, since *faith is the gift of God*.

With the stroke of a pen, Isabella's tiny kingdom on the far eastern edge of Europe had freedom of religion and freedom of the pulpit. Isabella also allowed for churches to call preachers of their own choice. She ushered in a time of religious toleration in an age when "the Inquisition was crushing religious freedom, the same age when Calvin and his cohorts burned heretics [like Michael Servetus] at the stake, when Luther wrote, "Let heads roll in the streets," and when the massacre of St. Bartholomew slew 30,000 Protestants in France," to quote the late UU minister Frank Schulman [from *God Is One*].

Affirming the Edict's statement that 'faith is the gift of God,' David added, "Those who have been enlightened by God's spirit must not cease to speak nor can they suppress the truth. Such is the power of the spirit, that the mind of man - putting aside every false artifice - strives only to add to the glory of God, let the whole world rage and oppose it."

[[www.unitarius.hu/english/life.html](http://www.unitarius.hu/english/life.html)]

Now free to practice the faith his God called him to, David established the very first Unitarian Church in the world. Sadly, Isabella died the following year. Now King, John gave his support to David. But after John's death two years later, the next king, Charles Bathory, held more conservative beliefs. He turned away from religious freedom. David was arrested for 'innovations', new theological ideas developed after the 1568 debate. Rather than execute this powerful, popular figure, the king imprisoned David, where he died after eight years of neglect, in 1579. His burial site remains unknown and unmarked. According to some, a poem was found scrawled in his cell with these final lines:

Nor lightening, nor cross, nor sword of the Pope,  
nor death's visible face,  
No power whatever can stay the progress of Truth.  
What I have felt I have written,

with faithful heart I have spoken.

After my death the dogmas of untruth shall fall.

David never lost hope that religious truth as he saw it would one day be seen by all. Two centuries later, the Unitarian Thomas Jefferson, author of Virginia's Statute for Religious Freedom, echoed David by writing that he expected all Americans would one day be Unitarian.

For now, we must be content to foster freedom of religion in this country even as we support it in Transylvania. We had lost our connection to the Unitarians of Transylvania but regained it after the fall of communism. Romania's brutal dictator, (*nee-kaw-lee chow-shees-koo*) Nicolae Ceausescu, joined a long line of rulers who tried to stamp out Unitarians. He made it impossible for Unitarian ministers to be trained. He forced ministers to leave their communities, effectively robbing the villages of leadership. Ethnically Hungarian, they were forced to speak Romanian. It's a miracle that these Unitarians survived centuries of persecution.

Two years ago, a band of pilgrims from this congregation went to visit Oklánd, where our partner church is located. We met the minister, Levente Keleman, and his wife Eva. They have visited here, too. Their Unitarian story and courage inspires me and reminds me to be vigilant against losing our own religious freedoms. Just recently a court instructed Madison County to change a statue placed on high school property bearing Christian scripture. The first line comes from a letter to the Romans (8:31), the second from a letter to the Philippians (4:13):

“If God be for us who can be against us?” and “I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

I imagine non-Christian athletes feel excluded from that hope. Those who argued for it claimed it was their religious freedom to let the statue stay. Those who argued against it claimed it appeared as state support for Christianity, even though the statue was donated to the school. The lack of marriage equality provides another example of the state infringing on religious freedom. These examples show we must continue to protect religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

I imagine some of you may be reluctant to proclaim you are a Unitarian Universalist for fear of a negative reaction, though I hope you don't fear to be burned at the stake or thrown in prison. But our silence serves as an invisible prison of our own making. If we stay thus imprisoned, we can't share our good news. And someone who desperately needs our free faith won't know we exist.

The radical reformation isn't over. We need to speak our truths—that all people are worthy of respect, that freedom and justice and equality are due everyone, and that Truth is found in many places and by many names. If we don't proclaim our principles, who will?

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Share a time someone's intolerance was directed at you. How did you feel and/or respond?
2. What are you most intolerant of and why? How does it show up?
3. What do you think needs reforming in Unitarian Universalist belief or practice today? Explain.