

## 'The Edict of Torda at 450'

Reading: 'The T-Word' by Eric Cherry

Let us travel across time and space. We are now in Eastern Europe in the Kingdom of Hungary, 450 years ago.

It is a time of religious chaos. For hundreds of years, this tiny Kingdom has been a place of constantly negotiated borders and boundaries, religiously, politically, and culturally. Different ethnic groups and speakers of different languages live alongside one another. This is where the Catholic Church meets the Orthodox Church, with the Muslim Ottoman Empire not too far distant and very influential. Before the Protestant reformation even officially began, there were dissenting Christian movements taking root in the region, including the Hussite Church who were the first to use a chalice as their symbol, a symbol we Unitarian Universalists borrowed centuries later. That is another story for another day. When the Protestant reformation began and new religious ideas about the nature of God and how church should be organized began to spread they quickly took root in this already religiously diverse corner of Europe. The followers of Lutheran and Calvin are spreading their good news. There are also some radical Protestants that others call Unitarians because they believe in one God, not the trinity, sharing their good news.<sup>1</sup>

Into this time of chaos comes King John Sigismund of Hungary and Transylvania. He ascended to the throne as an infant and his mother ruled in his stead for years. It was not just a time of religious chaos, but political chaos as well. King John's father had been the richest nobleman in Hungary and when the other lords elected him king, a significant number dissented and began a civil war that lasted throughout John's life. When John was young, his mother serviced as his regent and brilliantly played competing political interests against each other and forming alliances with the Ottoman Emperor... even so he spent a number of years in exile.

As King John grew, he became a religious seeker. He had preachers from all the major Christian factions preach to him and debate one another – and converted three times to new faiths, finally settling on being a Unitarian. This made him the only Unitarian King in history.

King John recognized the value of the religious quest and wanted his subjects—at least some of them—to be free to seek the truth. In 1568, 450 years ago this month, a legislative assembly gathered at Torda issued an Edict proclaiming religious tolerance, under the strong urging of King John and his court preacher Francis David.

Why, I think King John Sigismund is here right now to proclaim it to us anew.

*(King John Sigismund, portrayed by church member Matthew Morris McCormack, appears and reads the Edict of Torda and answers a few questions before leaving.)*

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<sup>1</sup> My sources for this sermon are my previous study and the resources provided on the 'Torda450: History, Context, and Further Reading.' webpage found here: <https://www.uua.org/international/torda450/history-context-and-further-reading>

Don't tell King John this, but his story doesn't end well. There continues to be tremendous conflict between him and the people who don't think he should be King, with much of the opposition to John rooted in opposition to his radical religious ideas.

Two years after the Edict, King John signed a treaty with the other faction in this civil war. To make peace, he renounced his title of King and became a Prince of Transylvania instead. Transylvania is a region that spans what is now Eastern Hungary and Western Romania. Thus beginning Unitarians long association with the region of Dracula and other scary stories.

Less than a year after that treaty was signed, John Sigismund died. He was 30 years old. He left no heirs. The nobles elected Stephen Báthory, a Roman Catholic Lord the next Prince of Transylvania.

And what of the little-known edict that we are remembering today? What is its legacy?

First, it is important to know that the edict itself is not as sweeping a declaration of religious freedom as one first might think. Religious freedom was allowed for only the four "national churches" of Hungary – the Catholic Church, the Reformed Church, the Lutheran Church, and the Unitarian Church. Others were not granted religious freedom – and there were significant numbers of others, including Christian Orthodox, Muslims and Jews.

Another way that the Edict might not meet our modern expectations is that it grants religious freedom to communities, not to individuals. The freedom is granted to congregations to determine who their leaders are without interference from the bishops, but not to individuals to follow the teachings of their own conscience. When the freedom granted to is a community and not an individual, it often means that the only people with actual freedom are the most powerful people within the community. Less powerful people, women, children, men who are not rich or influential did not have their lives change much under this edict.

And even with all those nuances, the Edict was a powerful idea. In a time when disputes about doctrine were fueling wars, here was a small kingdom trying to chart another path. In a time of religious violence, here was a small kingdom attempting peaceful coexistence for some. In a time when people were being forcibly converted when their rulers changed their minds religiously, here was a king who told his subjects that no one should compel them or threaten to imprison them because of their beliefs. That, in itself is a powerful example.

What of the larger legacy of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania? The truth is the historical connections between King John and the other Transylvanian Unitarians and our American Unitarian heritage are tenuous. It's hard to track the spread of ideas, centuries later with any certainty. Were the English and American Unitarians that we can trace a direct lineage to influenced by the Transylvanians or did they come to similar radical conclusions about the nature of God on their own. We might never know. Perhaps some writings made their way west and influenced the people who founded our tradition. Perhaps not.

Regardless, it still matters. Regardless, it is important to be connected to the people who claim a theological position similar to ours, who believed in freedom of religion long before such ideas were proclaimed in this hemisphere.

Our connections to our siblings in spirit matters in part because they can remind of us the sacrifices our faith calls us to make. The reality is that religious tolerance and religious freedom are not common in

most of history and much of the world today. Transylvanian Unitarian flourished for a brief few years during the time of King John and Francis David, his influential court preacher. The Unitarians then endured centuries of struggling to survive. There were laws passed saying that the four protected denominations could not change their doctrines – which does not work for a faith tradition like ours that recognizes that reason and experience continually shape our faith, that revelation was not handed down in one place and time to last forever, but truth is continuously revealing itself around us. Not long after that rule was put in place, Francis David, the leader of the Transylvanian Unitarians was found guilty of “innovation in religion” and died in prison. In the decades and centuries that followed the Transylvanian Unitarian community endured hostile monarchs and communism. They endured religious wars and attempts at forced conversion. Nevertheless, they persisted. Nevertheless, they are still there, in their historic villages, practicing the faith that shares a name, if not every detail, with the faith we practice. I know People's Church has had a partner church relationship with one of these communities and some of you have gone to visit them.

While the Edict of Torda and the brief season of religious tolerance it began is a noteworthy historical moment, the longer story of endurance is much more compelling to me. I—and many of us—have not been called on to suffer or sacrifice for our faith. I've been insulted, called a heretic or told I was going to hell, but that's the extent of it. That is not the case for so many Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists in other parts of the world. We know that the Unitarians in Burundi are largely in exile now because of the political chaos in their country. Universalists in the Phillipines are struggling as a religious minority in their land. As Eric Cherry wrote and Cylis read earlier, we have much to learn from our siblings who suffer for our shared faith. “As dangerous as being actively Unitarian has often been in Transylvania over centuries,” he writes. “People held on. Transylvanian Unitarians learned what it means to sacrifice for their faith. They know something we only grasp occasionally, that the existence of Unitarianism, a historic tradition we share, is worth suffering and dying for. In the consumerist culture that effects American religious movements, even in Unitarian Universalism people sometimes walk away from the church after they've decided they've gotten as much as they can from it. In Transylvania, the Unitarian Church would have faded long ago if people didn't ask, instead, what does the Church need from me? And how ironic that this question comes from people who often have very little materially to share. Yes, they give generously even of that. But what they have given that has sustained their Church is spiritual commitment.”<sup>2</sup>

We are not all called to be martyrs for our faith – and that is a very very good thing. But we do need to know the stories of the people who took bold stands for religious freedom, like King John Sigismund and Francis David. More importantly, we need to remember the communities who persisted through nationalism, war, and oppression to cling fast to the ideas that there should be no compulsion in religion, truth is ever unfolding, and we reserve the right to change our minds when it comes to our religious beliefs.

May we remember these stories and these truths.

May we go out into the world to live our stories and our truths in ways that are worth remembering.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Cherry, Eric. 'The T-Word.' Retrieved from <https://www.uua.org/international/torda450/worship/readings>