

EARLY UNITARIANISM IN EUROPE

By Mike McPhee

My original intention was to cover the entire history of Unitarianism in Europe in a single instalment. However, my research got out of control as so much new information came to light, so today I will only be able to cover the first two centuries of our movement. That was a tumultuous era in Europe and the UK, as you will see, and many of our most famous forebears lived and worked during it.



Miguel Servet, better known to us as Michael Servetus, is regarded as the first Unitarian of the modern era, though most scholars argue that he was merely an anti-trinitarian. He was born in Villanueva de Sigena in northeastern Spain in about 1510, just after the expulsion of the Jews and Moors by Ferdinand and Isabella. He grew up and studied law amidst the terror of the Inquisition's relentless search for *conversos* (converts) who privately adhered to their original faiths. Convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity was the principle barrier to the sincere conversion of Jews and Muslims, Servetus set out to prepare a convincing defence of that doctrine. Instead, his studies revealed that the doctrine of the Trinity had no basis in Scripture or in the teachings of the early Church prior to 325 AD.

In 1531, Servetus published a book entitled *On the Errors of the Trinity*, which argued that the doctrine was a human fabrication and should not be the basis for persecution. After futile attempts to convince various Protestant leaders of his discovery, Servetus settled in France and studied medicine – where he eventually discovered the principle of blood circulation. He then wrote a book on the restoration of Christianity which he shared with Jean Calvin, the theocratic ruler of Geneva. Someone in Calvin's court leaked Servetus' whereabouts to the French Inquisition and he had to flee for his life. Heading for a Protestant haven at Siena in northern Italy by way of Geneva, he was recognised there, tried for heresy, and burned at the stake along with his books on 27 October 1553.



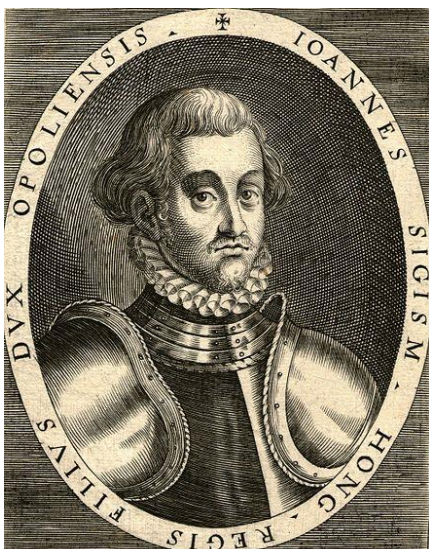
Today, the Michael Servetus Institute stands behind the façade of his childhood home in Vallneueva. It was founded in 1976 by one Julio Arribas Salaberri, a retired civil administrator. In 2011, after over a century of campaigning, a statue of Servetus was erected in Geneva.



Strangely enough, our next and most definitive Unitarian forebear was also born in 1510, far to the east in what was then Hungary. Ferenc Dávid, whom we call Francis David, grew up in Kolozsvár, the capital of the province of Transylvania, and was raised as a Catholic. He must have had his doubts, however, as he went to study at Protestant centres in Germany and returned a Lutheran – indeed, he quickly became the Lutheran bishop of Kolozsvár.

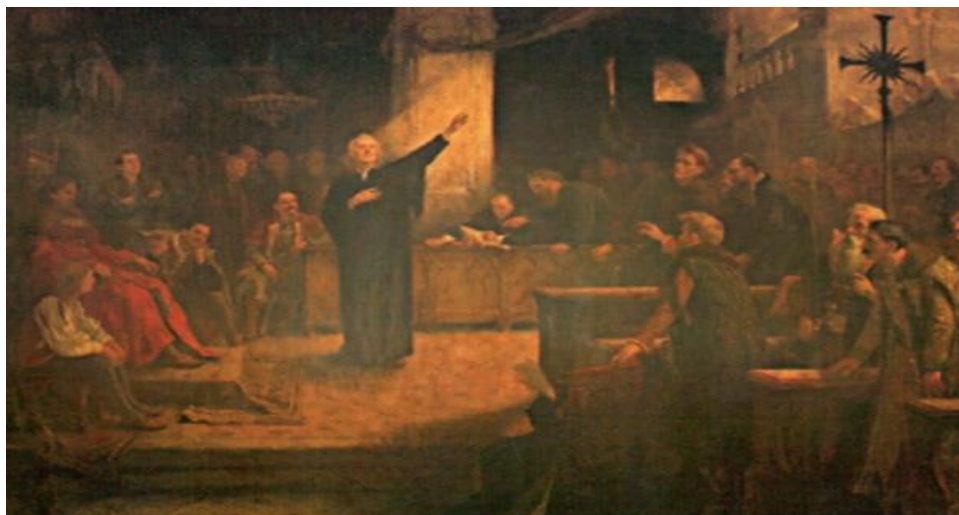


It is not clear when Dávid left or when he came back, but Hungary had been under assault from the Ottoman Emperor, Suleiman the Magnificent since 1521. After King Louis II died in the disastrous Battle of Mohács in 1526, Hungary was divided between Austrian and Hungarian claimants to the throne. Suleiman supported the Hungarian claimant, John I Zápolya, and unsuccessfully besieged Vienna in 1529. John I died in 1540, leaving an infant son, John II Sigismund, whose mother was a Polish princess. Suleiman repelled an Austrian invasion and placed Transylvania under his protection.



John II ruled in his own right from 1559, the same year that Francis Dávid renounced Lutherism in favour of Calvinism. Little is known about what Dávid was doing in the intervening years but his pursuit of Biblical Christianity had led him to conclude that Calvin's doctrines were more consistent with Scripture. He tried to reconcile the two Protestant factions but, when they formally split in 1564, he became the Calvinist bishop. The king had an interest in theological debate and a practical concern about sectarian tensions in his kingdom, so he made Dávid his court preacher.

However, Dávid's biblical and humanistic approach soon brought him to criticise Calvinist dogma, as well. He saw religious reformation as an eternal principle and its successive stages as evolutionary steps toward the perfect truth. In his preaching, Dávid continued to scrutinise the precepts of Christianity, keeping only those which originated from the Bible and were conceivable by reason. He came to reject the Trinity as a human invention and promulgated the concept of one God, based on Jesus' teachings.



Painting by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, 1896

With the king's permission, a series of debates were held between 1566 and 1571, mainly between the Nontrinitarians and a united front of Lutherans and Calvinists. Dávid did well in the debates, winning a decision at the Synod of Torda in 1566 that the only basis of the Christian faith was the Apostolic Creed. After other debates around the country, where to Protestants consistently argued that their faiths should be the official religion of the country, King John convened the Diet of Torda in 1568 and proclaimed freedom of religion and conscience for all.

“Our Royal Majesty, as he had decided at the previous debates within his country about matters of religion, confirms as well at the present Diet that every orator shall preach the gospel by his own (personal) conception, at any place if that community is willing to accept him, or if it isn't, no one should force him just because their soul is not satisfied with him; but a community can keep such a preacher whose teachings are delightful. And no one, neither superintendents nor others, may hurt a preacher by this or by the previous constitutions; no one may be blamed because of their religion. No one is allowed to threaten others with prison or divest anyone of their office because of their profession: because faith is God's gift born from hearing and this hearing is conceived by the word of God.”

The Unitarians (while not yet using that name) acquired a school in Kolozsvár which, with the support of the king and the city, Dávid developed into a college of high standing. Transylvania became a refuge for anti-trinitarian and liberal theologians from many countries. Unitarianism spread quickly in the country and into Hungary, winning over aristocrats, Protestant ministers and even Gáspár Heltai, Dávid's main opponent in the earlier debates.



Here, we need to backtrack to Siena, where Servetus tried to find refuge and where our third early Unitarian luminary was born in 1539. Fausto Sozzini, known to us as Faustus Socinus, grew up in an atmosphere of Renaissance humanism and moved between Italy, France and Switzerland as a young man. By 1563, he had written a thesis rejecting the divinity of Jesus, though he did not publish it in his own name. By this time, the Italian Inquisition had clamped down on Siena and Socinus went again to Switzerland, where he published a treatise that would change the direction of his life.

Giorgio Biandrata (better known as Blandrata) was born in 1515 and became a doctor, specialising in nervous disorders of women, which commended him to numerous positions with royal and other wealthy people. He came to an anti-trinitarian position, probably in Geneva in 1557, where he had close contact with Jean Calvin. In 1558, he became the court physician of the Italian queen dowager of Poland, where he also argued in the churches against the suppression of unorthodox opinions.

Blandrata then became court physician to King John Sigismund of Transylvania in 1563, where some of his late patroness' daughters were married to local princes. It was he that recommended Francis Dávid to be the king's court preacher – the irony of which we shall soon see.





In 1570, John II Sigismund came to an accommodation with the Austrian Emperor, Maximilian II, whereunder the latter became King of Hungary while John would be the Prince of Transylvania. Unfortunately, he died in 1571 from injuries sustained when his carriage overturned – and without an heir. The new prince, Stefan Báthory, was a Catholic and promptly dismissed Dávid and Blandrata from his court. The Unitarian printing house was confiscated and all religious publications were subjected to censorship.

In 1572, Báthory proclaimed the Law of Innovation, which forbade any further religious reforms. He became the king of Poland in 1576 and was succeeded in Transylvania by his brother, Kristóf Báthory, who proceeded with the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The Unitarian Church remained a recognised denomination, however, with Dávid as its bishop, but it was only allowed to hold synods in Kolozsvár and Torda.

Unfortunately, Dávid held the view that truth was not obtained by revelation but continues to unfold under critical examination. He came to reject infant baptism and praying to God through the mediation of a non-divine Jesus. Blandrata feared that the denomination would be disestablished and called Socinus (whose treatise he had read) from Switzerland to dissuade Dávid from his ‘Judaic’ views. However, the Synod held at Torda in 1578 confirmed the principle of free inquiry and declared that the Innovation Law was not being violated by the questioning of matters which the Synod had not yet decided.



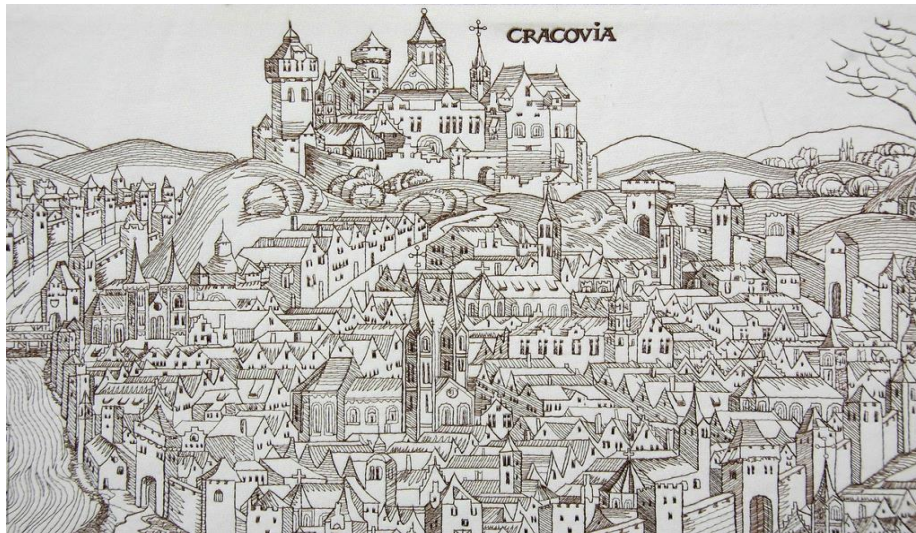
The Fortress of Deva

In 1579, Blandrata denounced Dávid to Prince Kristóf, who was happy for the excuse forbid Dávid to preach, place him under house arrest and bring his case before the Diet. He was tried for “blasphemous innovation” at the royal capital of Gyulafehérvár and sentenced to life imprisonment in the fortress of Déva.

Already ill from months of house arrest, Francis Dávid died five months later, having carved the following words into the wall of his 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.”

The Transylvanian Church, which once had 425 parishes, went into decline after Dávid’s death. Blandrata reverted to Catholicism and is thought to have died (possibly by murder) in 1588. Socinus left for Poland, which he found to be a ‘heretic’s asylum’ of religious tolerance. Its capital city of Kraków had a large Italian colony as well as a congregation of Nonconformists known as the Minor Reformed Church. They were part of a movement that had begun in 1565, after a debate convened by the king had failed to bring the various Protestant factions together.



Socinus rapidly became an influential figure among these proto-Unitarians, though he was never a formal member due to their Anabaptist requirement of total immersion as their initiation rite. Consequently, he led the movement from the outside, so effectively that by 1596 his position was unchallenged. During the remaining eight years of his life, he set his stamp upon their thinking to the point that their doctrine became known as ‘Socinianism’ in the outside world.



However, Socinus’ unorthodox beliefs led to an attempt on his life and, in 1598, he took refuge in the small country town of Raków with some of his followers. Though they were hospitably received, the town had been founded by Poles a decade before as a Utopian community, democratically run and with material possessions owned in common. This had been a failure among the individualistic Poles but it gave place to a centre, not only for the theological debates that made it famous but also for progressive thought on such matters as capital punishment and participation in war.

The Minor Reformed Church, now known as the Polish Brethren, had a major impact on the little community. Its printing press issued hundreds of titles, most of them in Latin, which meant that they could and did find a place in the libraries of leading thinkers all across the Continent. It also boasted an academy whose high standards drew students and faculty from many countries. In 1605, they produced the Racovian Catechism, perhaps the most widely influential Unitarian document in history. Though this was a year after Socinus’ death, the Catechism clearly embodied his thinking and caused consternation in conventional religious circles for many decades after it first appeared.



Unfortunately, Poland-Lithuania was invaded by Protestant Sweden in 1655 and five years of bitter warfare engulfed the whole of Northern Europe. This polarised the country, with the Catholic majority accusing all other denominations as Swedish collaborators. The Polish Brethren were expelled by an order of the Sejm (parliament) in 1658.

They went in three directions: Krzysztof Crell-Spinowski became a minister in Prussia, though he also spent time in Holland and England. Two of his sons were ministers in Lithuania while his eldest, Christopher Crell jr., became a medical specialist in London. Socinus' grandson and co-author of the *Cathechism*, Andrzej Wiszowaty, went to Amsterdam and oversaw the printing of a large number of Racovian works. His own book, *Rational Religion*, was published later by his son, Benedykt. Still others went to Transylvania but they remained separate from the Unitarian community there for over a century.



Execution of Edward Wightman in 1612

Our story now moves to England, where anti-Trinitarian sentiments were first expressed by an Anglican priest named John Assheton in about 1548. He was forced to recant, as were others over succeeding decades. Only a few were burned at the stake, the last being Edward Wightman in 1612. (He actually went to the stake twice but recanted the first time and was pulled out “quite scorched”. This experience made him more fearless, so he went back to his original preaching and got the ‘real deal’ the second time.) In all of these cases, Holland was seen as the source of these heretical ideas.

Socinianism became known in England when a Latin version of the Racovian Catechism was printed in 1609 and dedicated to King James I. While he put a stop to the execution of heretics, preferring life imprisonment, James did not appreciate the honour and ordered all copies of the Catechism to be burned in 1614. He had many other heretical texts burned before his death in 1625.



Gatehouse Prison, Westminster (dismantled in 1776)

Opinions vary as to who was the first English Socinian but Paul Best has a good claim to that title. Educated at Cambridge and independently wealthy, he travelled extensively in Europe in the 1630s, where he is thought to have encountered Socinianism. Despite having fought on the Parliamentary side in the English Civil War, he was charged with anti-Trinitarianism in 1645 and held in the Gatehouse Prison at Westminster. While there, he wrote a book called *Mysteries Discovered* in 1647 and somehow managed to have the manuscript smuggled out and printed. The books were seized and burned, and Best was sentenced to death, only to be reprieved and released at Oliver Cromwell’s request (or so it is believed).

While Best was in the Gatehouse, he may have met and influenced the man regarded as ‘the father of English Unitarianism’. John Biddle was born in 1615 (25 years after Best) and, despite humble origins, received a scholarship to Oxford and received a Master of Arts from there in 1641. Having specialised in Ancient Greek, he translated the ancient Scriptures and came to similar conclusions as Servetus had about the Trinity. He then wrote a manuscript in 1644 called *Twelve Arguments Drawn Out of the Scripture*, all copies of which were burned and he was sent to jail. Out on bail, he published his book in 1647 and was sent to the Gatehouse Prison, only to be released again and publish three more books, the last of which was an English translation of the Racovian Catechism in 1652. That was burned under an order of Parliament and Biddle was once again imprisoned. (It is a great pity that no pictures of these men can be found.)

Biddle was released, along with many other religious prisoners, under Cromwell’s Act of Oblivion of 1652. He was even able to establish a Socinian conventicle in London, which was not at all popular with the local ministers and others, who went to great lengths to have his congregation closed. Cromwell became Lord Protector of the English Commonwealth in 1653 and issued an ‘Instrument of Government’ in that year which guaranteed general freedom of worship to Protestant denominations. Biddle’s group resumed services, but his next book in 1654 was also burned and he was sentenced to six months in prison. On his release, he was charged again by the Parliament and Cromwell exiled him to the Scilly Isles for three years to get him out of harm’s way. Ironically, the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 made things worse for Non-conformists and Biddle was charged in 1662 for holding services in his home. Unable to pay the huge fine of £100, he was sent to prison and died from illness a short time later.

The Parliament elected in 1661 was solidly Royalist and pro-Anglican, so there was a fierce backlash against all other denominations. The Corporations Act of that year restricted public office to Anglicans and the Act of Uniformity of 1662 required all Church of England ministers to base their services on the Book of Common Prayer. This led to a purge known as the Great Ejection, in which some 2000 ministers were forced to resign their offices because they couldn't accept such strict requirements.

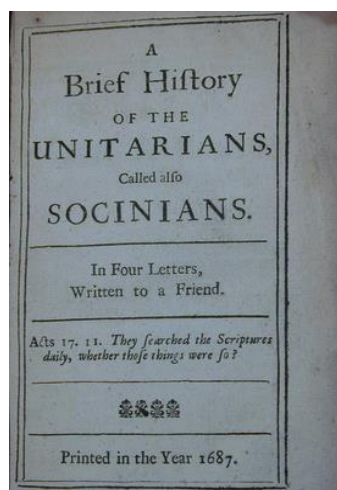
While some of these men were noted theologians and writers, the only Socinian at the time was John Cooper of Gloucestershire, a disciple of John Biddle. Nevertheless, there are Unitarian churches today whose first minister was an ejectee and so mark 1662 as their foundation date. Others date themselves from 1672, when Charles II granted temporary licences to Nonconformist ministers in an endeavour to shore up his flagging popularity.



Charles II

William and Mary

Still others were founded after the 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, when King James II was overthrown and replaced by William III and Mary II. They lost no time in assenting to the Toleration Act in 1689, which granted religious freedom to all Protestants who took oaths of allegiance to the monarchy and acknowledged the supremacy of the Church of England. However, Unitarians and Catholics were not covered by that Act and would have to wait until the 1800s for their rights to be recognised.



Thus, while no Unitarian churches were permitted at this time and most adherents hid themselves amongst the Independent churches, it was legal to publish books about Socinian and related doctrines. Stephen Nye published *A Brief History of the Unitarians, also called Socinians* in 1687, funded by Thomas Frimin, a philanthropist who had known John Biddle and raised funds for the Polish exiles in 1662.

This set off a debate, known as the 'First Socinian Controversy', between the Latitudinarian ('broad church') and orthodox factions of the Church of England. Ironically, certain staunch Trinitarians did their cause more harm than good, to the point that one of them was accused of heresy by the Council of Oxford University. That debate lasted from 1690 to 1695, with many books and papers being published by both sides, until it was closed down by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Tenison.

Just to be clear, the argument was only about whether the Unitarians were heretical enough to merit exclusion under the Toleration Act. Thus, the Unitarians lost that round but they did gain a much higher profile in religious and academic circles. Two legendary scholars, Isaac Newton and John Locke, were favourably disposed toward Unitarianism and drew inspiration from it in their work, though it would have cost them their university positions if they had said so openly. Instead, they corresponded (and sometimes met) with Unitarian leaders in Lithuania, Prussia and the Netherlands.



I will stop here and deal with events and developments from 1700 to the present in Part 2.