



***Who Do We Say He Is?***  
***Adventures in Christology, Part II***

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In the first episode of our saga, we explored the debate between Arius and Athanasius in the fourth century of the common era. Our hero, Arius, had argued for the unity of God, and, therefore, the subordination of Christ. Christ, in the Arian view, was a created being, somewhat between divine and human. The Athanasian party, however, insisted that Christ was God, had always been God, and was *Homoousius*, Homousion, you may recall, was their word for of the same substance as God. The Arians had argued for homoiousius, or similar substance, which permitted greater latitude.

At the Council of Nicea, in the year--- 325, the narrow interpretation prevailed. Arius, our hero, was defeated and exiled, Jesus was promoted to the status of God, and the Holy Spirit got an upgrade and became a member of the Trinity.

In the fifth century the Emperor Justinian incorporated the doctrine into Roman law. "We... believe," the Codex Justinianus states, "the one divinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, of majesty co-equal, in the Holy Trinity. We will that those that embrace this creed be called Catholic Christians. We brand all the *senseless followers of other religions* by the infamous name of *heretics*, and forbid their assemblies to assume the name of churches, etc."

The Council of Nicea was a disaster for Christianity. First of all, by requiring belief in a concept called a Trinity, which was found nowhere in the Bible, the Church set itself above Scripture as the ultimate authority in spiritual matters.

Further, by insisting on one narrow doctrine as the only true belief, the focus of religion was distorted. The question of crucial importance became, not, How does one act, or what is one's character, but rather, what does one believe, or what is one's creed? Jesus would have been appalled.

And finally, by insisting on the narrow interpretation and branding all others heretical, European thought and debate on religious matters ceased. One could not appeal to reason, as the Arians had done, but only to tradition. Tolerance became a sin, and heresy a crime.

There were scattered outbreaks of independent religious thought and action in the following twelve hundred years. There are fascinating stories to be told about the Bogomils, the Beguines, the Brethren of the Free Spirit, the Waldensians, the Cathari, and other heretical groups which arose and were attacked by the Church during the Middle Ages.

There is John Wycliffe, (1328?-1384), who translated the Bible into the English vernacular, because he believed that ordinary people should read it and could understand it. For this he was persecuted by the church, and, after his death, declared a heretic, his body exhumed and destroyed.

There was Jan Hus, the Czech reformer who challenged the authority of the Church, preached that it was lawful to resist authority for the sake of conscience, and insisted on giving the chalice to the common people for communion. Hus was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415.

Our focus today is on the origins of Unitarianism as a separate religious movement, which took place during the Reformation, in Poland and Transylvania.

The Reformation is commonly considered to have begun with Martin Luther, and his famous nailing of the 95 theses on the wall of the Wittenberg Castle Church door on October 31, 1517.

Most of the reform ideas of Luther, Calvin, and other leaders had been advanced by Wycliffe and Hus over a hundred years earlier, but much had changed in those hundred years. The Renaissance had brought a revival of earlier classical writers, expanding theological thought beyond the desire or control of the Church. The voyages of Columbus had brought back stories of a "New World," expanding the concept of the world itself. And, most significantly, the invention of the printing press meant that people could read the Bible for themselves, interpret it for themselves, and write their opinions for others to read. The Church was losing its *monopoly* on information and thought.

Luther and Calvin originally intended a reform movement, to curb the excesses of the Catholic church. Luther made it clear that in matters of dogma there was no quarrel. But it soon became clear that to challenge the authority of the Church, and to claim Scripture as the sole religious authority meant that the dogmas established by the Church would inevitably be called into question—and they were.

Michael Servetus, a Spaniard, was the first to challenge the doctrine of the Trinity, doing it so loudly and so often that he bears the dubious distinction of being the only person in history to be burned *both* in effigy by the Catholics and in reality by the Calvinists—prosecuted by none other than John Calvin himself! Servetus' book, *On the Errors of the Trinity*, was published in 1531. Distributed all over Europe, it influenced many thinkers. Both the reaction to his ideas and to his execution did much to advance the Unitarian values of religious freedom, reason, and tolerance.

The history of the Reformation usually focuses on Luther in Germany, and Calvin in Switzerland. Eastern Europe receives at best passing mention. Yet it is in Eastern Europe that movements began that came to be known as the *radical reformation*. This is where we trace our roots.

Poland in the sixteenth century was one of the principle states of Europe. It was a little larger than our present state of Texas, with a large number of wealthy nobility — many of whom were educated in Germany, where they learned of the new Protestantism, and in Italy, where they were influenced by the spirit of Italian humanism. The teachings of the Waldensians and the Bohemian Brethren (followers of Jan Hus) were widespread. For generations, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Jew, and Muslim had lived together in relative peace in Poland. All in all, it was fertile ground for the growth of a free and independent religious movement.

The first person in our saga who can properly be called a Unitarian is a man named Peter Giezek, known as Gonesius. It was he who issued the first public denial of the doctrine of the Trinity in 1546, at a religious synod. He stated that there is no Trinity, that the very word is invented, that the Nicean Creed is a fiction, that God is one, and that Jesus is of separate substance and less than God. (where have we heard this before?)

He was admonished of his error and sent out of town, but he returned to spread what was called the Arian heresy. Further, Gonesius connected religion with social problems, advocating the application of religious teachings to bring about changes in personal life and in society. And he taught religious tolerance, saying,

*"Whoever recognizes God  
is not far from the kingdom —  
be he Christian, Jew, or Turk."*

These heresies spread to the point that the Reformed Church in Poland, as the Protestants were known, split into a conservative wing, the Calvinists, and the liberal wing, who had no distinctive name. They were known as the churches in Poland and Lithuania who have rejected the Trinity. Their opponents, Protestant and Catholic, usually called them Arians. Their official title was the Minor Reformed Church. They called themselves, simply, Christians.

The first official synod of the anti-Trinitarian churches, took place on June 10, in 1565. That meeting can be considered the historical beginning of organized Unitarianism. The main topic on the agenda for this synod was the question of infant baptism, which was of great importance in the early Reformation. Gonesius had opposed the practice some years earlier, but the idea of adult baptism was still considered quite radical, and threatened to split the new movement before it got started. After six days of debate, the conclusion reached by the church leaders was one quite consistent with our Unitarian principles — it was agreed that all should enjoy freedom of conscience and do as they were called to do by God.

Peace was not easy to come by, however. As the churches of the new movement grew in numbers, they were attacked by both the Calvinists and the Catholics. In 1567, the town of Racow (f) was founded, to provide a haven for religious toleration. Racow soon became the center of the new movement. Ministers, nobles, craftspeople, and commoners dwelled together as equals. Taking the teachings of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount as their guide, they lived out their conviction that religion centers not on beliefs, but on building the beloved community.

The social and religious experiment that was Racow was successful for many years. Racow prospered, and came to be for Unitarians what Rome was for the Catholics or Geneva for the Protestants. More than 500 titles came off the Racowian printing press in its 40 years of operation. A public library was established. The seminary, at its peak, reached an enrollment of over 1,000, sending missionaries throughout Europe to preach that God is one, that we are free to seek the truth, that God gave us reason to guide us in determining our beliefs, and to respect those who think differently. Freedom, reason, and mutual respect—values we celebrate to this day!

Across Poland, the liberal religious impulse spread.

The challenge facing its adherents was:  
to overcome persecution from without,  
to accommodate the wide variety of opinions within,  
and to unify the churches into a common faith.

A man named Faustus Socinus provided the leadership to face this challenge.

Socinus was born in Sienna in 1539. His family was admitted to noble rank, and held the highest offices. His great grandfather, grandfather, and father were distinguished professors of law at universities in Padua and Sienna. Socinus' uncle Laelius, a major influence in his life, was a well-known theologian and religious humanist, with an extensive library which included Servetus' books.

Faustus Socinus' first and most influential book, *On the Sacred Scriptures*, was published anonymously. It sought to establish the historical basis of Christianity on the basis of scholarship and reasoned argument. The book was translated into four languages, published in ten different editions, and remained in print for more than a hundred and fifty years, read by Protestants and Catholics alike until its true authorship was discovered.

In 1578, his family was forced to flee the Inquisition. Socinus was welcomed to Poland, where he soon became the spokesman for the new movement. It was here that his major theological book was published, *Jesus Christ, Savior*. Basically, Socinus believed that Jesus was born human, but elevated to divinity by God, a view later termed "adoptionist." It was not the view of Arius, though it was called Arian by opponents. The Christology of Socinus was really an evolutionary development of the Arian view, bringing Jesus one step closer to human.

The significant aspect of his belief, which relates clearly to our Unitarian faith, is that Jesus showed us the way, and that we can attain salvation by following his example.

Socinus' leadership helped organize the liberal religious movement in Poland. The churches agreed on their rejection of the Trinity, but on very little else. He attended synods, debated theology, and helped to settle several matters which threatened the very existence of the church. He supported and defended the church's stand on pacificism, but provided for some compromise. "The church must

obey the law of Christ," he argued. "The command not to kill permits no exceptions." Yet, one is obliged to obey the state, which includes paying taxes even if they may be spent on war.

Other issues the church was dealing with included baptism, Communion, the atonement, the second coming of Christ, and, above all, the invocation of Christ. Radicals within the church had taken the position that Jesus was human and therefore prayer addressed to Jesus was idolatry — one should pray only to God. Socinus argued against the radicals. He believed that prayer to Jesus was the touchstone of Christianity. Now note—he didn't tell them that they were going to hell, just that he disagreed.

His religious moderation did not impress the Calvinists and Catholics who continued to attack the liberals at every opportunity. They appealed to the King to revoke recognition of the Minor Reformed Church, and published and preached against these infidels and heretics, inflaming popular opinion against them. Socinus, now the acknowledged spokesman of the liberals, became a target of persecution.

As the Jesuits gained more power and influence throughout Poland, they were determined to stamp out the Arian heresy. Outbreaks of violence against the liberals were particularly frequent during church festivals.

At the festival of Ascension Day, on April 30, in 1598, Socinus himself was grabbed from his room by students of the Jesuit University of Krakow, and taken to the public square, along with his books and papers. These they threw into the fire, and they threatened to burn him as well if he did not recant his views on Jesus. Old, sick, yet strong in spirit, Socinus refused.

Then they decided to throw him into the river instead of burn him, the mob headed in that direction, where a couple of Jesuit professors heard the commotion and took custody of Socinus, hiding him from the students until he could leave the city.

Socinus, had few years of life remaining. He continued to write, on behalf of the church which was now being called Socinian. In failing health, called together a group of leading ministers and they held a three week synod to discuss and come to agreement on religious questions. He died on March 30, 1604.

After his death, his papers were organized by the church, and a steady stream of his writings kept the printing press at Racow busy for the next twenty five years. The most important document, developed from the final meetings, became the Racowian Catechism, which outlined the precepts of the faith. The books spread all over Europe, stimulating debate, and influencing theologians, among them Joseph Priestley, thus having an impact on the development of Unitarianism in England, and William Ellery Channing, later to be the Unitarian spokesman in Boston.

The liberal churches in Poland reached the apex of their strength in the years following the death of Socinus, until a new King was crowned. Sigismund the Third had been educated by the Jesuits, and granted them enormous influence in the country. Public debates between the liberal church and the

Jesuits continued, but now attacks against the liberals became widespread. The King refused the legal protection which had been enjoyed by the Socinians. Churches were destroyed in Drakow and Wilno, and in the seventeenth century persecution became systematic.

Racow, the capital of the liberal movement, became a target, and in 1640, by order of the Senate, the college was destroyed, the printing press abolished, and the "Arian" inhabitants were given two years to leave the city.

The story gets worse. After years of wars with Cossacks, Russia, and Sweden, the Jesuits successfully argued that the country's misfortunes were divine punishment for the nation's toleration of wicked heresies, and the minor church was banished. Former members were forced to recant or leave the country. Today, there is no trace of the movement in Poland.

The fate of Unitarianism took a much different course in Transylvania, where hundreds of Unitarian churches dating from the sixteenth century still exist. This will be the subject of another part in this series.

Let us honor our brave Polish forbears and the struggles they endured. The religious toleration of which they felt assured turned out to be only a temporary respite from religious wars.

Perhaps they believed too much in the power of rational argument, and underestimated the elements of hate and fear in the human breast.

We take our free faith for granted, yet it was won at great price.

Intolerance and hatred are not yet banished from our world.

This church, and the religious values it supports  
will continue to strive to change the world  
and to nurture us in our religious growth  
only so long as we value and defend this church  
and this religious movement.

May we be worthy of our heritage. Amen