

**“Tolerance in Intolerant Times:
An Old Unitarian Tradition from Transylvania” ©**

by
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INTRODUCTION

Maybe you read the book or saw the film *Fahrenheit 451*. The book was written by science fiction writer Ray Bradbury and made into a film in the mid-sixties—written and directed by François Truffaut and starring Oskar Werner and Julie Christie. The story was about a future America that had grown hedonistic and anti-intellectual. To preserve the established order, the totalitarian political regime made reading literature and intellectual books illegal. Any books found were burned, their owners were arrested, and sent to a mental institution for reprogramming.

As the story progresses in this society grown self-centered and cruel, lacking compassion, concern, and critical thought, the protagonist of the story discovers a group of people—the book-keepers— who live in a remote area and memorize books of literature, history, and philosophy so that one day when books are not banned, they can be recovered.

Hopedale Unitarian Parish has had, for ten years now, a partnership relationship with the Unitarian church in Csekefalva ("Check-a-falva") in the historic Transylvanian region of Romania.

As I studied the history of the Unitarian Transylvanian people and their lives under totalitarian rule following World War II, I was struck how much they were like the book-keepers in Ray Bradbury’s story preserving liberal religious values of compassion, toleration, and reasoned dialogue amid a cruel, compassionless political regime

We have much to learn from our Transylvanian Unitarian brothers and sisters today in this time in America of growing anti-intellectualism and religious intolerance.

THE HEART OF UNITARIANISM IN TRANSYLVANIA

The Reverend Gretchen Thomas in the latest issue of the *UU World*¹ wrote of her experience with Transylvanian Unitarian tolerance and compassion. Reverend Thomas had gone to Transylvania in 1990 with a group of Unitarian Universalists who wanted to support the Unitarian church in Transylvania that was barely holding-on following the overthrow of totalitarian communist rule in 1989.

Our fellow Unitarians in Transylvania suffered greatly for over forty years under this rule. Transylvanians endured the secret police, people disappearing who were under suspicion for illegal political activities, and people being tortured. Economic ineptness of the communist

government left the country in deep debt and the Romanian economy devastated.

I recall hearing stories from my UU ministerial colleagues who visited Transylvania then, who spoke of the poor sanitation conditions, the lack of adequate food and other necessities. It is difficult to appreciate how bad the intolerance, oppression, and hardship were during communist rule. One glimpse was in a study initiated by the president of Romania in 2006 that identified over two million Romanian victims of communist oppression—not including those who died because of starvation and poor medical care.

So in 1990, Rev. Thomas visited the Unitarian church in the Transylvanian town of (and let me try to pronounce this Hungarian name with 18 characters) Homoródszentmárton. The pastor of the church, the Rev. József Kászoni, invited Rev. Thomas to co-officiate in the church's Sunday communion. Rev. Thomas was at once honored and tentative about the offer. Her ideas of communion were associated negatively with the conventional language of communion as the body and blood of Christ. Yet Rev. József explained communion in a much different way as affirming “the strong roots of our faith—roots in our religious community and in its heritage. It is essentially about communion with God, as well as communion with our forebears and each other, and it gives us an opportunity to rededicate ourselves to the religious life that Jesus taught.”² This simple communion service in a Transylvania Unitarian church was for Rev. Thomas a turning point in her religious life.

And we can see something here of the values that held the Unitarians together. Remember this was just a year after the communist regime was overthrown. Listening between the lines of what Rev. József said, I suspect those values that sustained the Transylvanian Unitarians through those most difficult times were a sense of connection to religious roots, to each other and to living the life of loving God with all your heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself that Jesus taught.

And that is not all: a year later, in 1992 Rev. József Kászoni visited Rev. Thomas in Berkeley, California. Berkeley has a lot of homeless people. Rev. Thomas said, that because of the sheer numbers of the homeless, her habit was to ignore them—dismissing them as pan-handlers. As she walked the streets with Rev. József, with every homeless person they encountered, Rev. József reached into his pocket and gave them change. Speaking from his experience with poverty and political oppression under Soviet rule, Rev. József explained his generosity this way: “When you are desperate, even a little can make a big difference, and I am better off than they are. I need to understand everything I can about the poor in the United States, so my villagers will not find themselves walking these poverty-stricken roads as Romania plunges into capitalism.”³

This story of the Rev. József Kászoni expresses so well of the heart of Unitarianism in Transylvania that I am beginning to understand: generosity, tolerance, respect for human dignity, and thankfulness for what one has.

THEY ENDURED; WE COMPLAINED

It's remarkable that our Unitarian brothers and sisters in Transylvania have maintained these values with such events only recent in the history and memory of the Transylvanian people. When I consider their example of high ideals lived, I find myself growing impatient with the political backbiting and complaining in this country. These are relatively difficult times for our country now but only in comparison to a lavish past. Relative to what the Transylvanians endured for over forty years, the complaints we hear in this country are trivial. And worst of all the complaints of many in this country demonstrate lack positive human values and too often arise from greedy self-interest, are intolerance of others, involve ridicule and disrespect other's views, and are too often just plain mean. If we, as a country, had gone through what the Transylvanian people went through, we might have something to complain about, but as I read about these people I don't hear complaining; I hear expressions of generosity, tolerance of human differences, and thankfulness.

As a counterpoint example to these positive values, consider the intolerance and plain meanness in the most recent attacks of Glenn Beck on progressive Christians such as Jim Wallis. Glenn Beck—a political conservative and religious fundamentalist talk show host and commentator on Fox News—uses ridicule, innuendo, half-truths, guilt-by-association, and outright distortion of other's views to advance his conservative political agenda. Jim Wallis, on the other hand, is a progressive Evangelical Christian out the Christian social gospel movement.

Glenn Beck just last Monday [September 27, 2010] called Jim Wallis and his social gospel Christian views as dangerous and leading to mass death like the Nazis.⁴ In a rant about separation of church and state and the Nazi use of religion to promote its regime, Beck attempted to paint progressive Christians, Democrats, and President Obama with a broad Nazi-Marxist brush. Needless to say, Jim Wallis responded to Beck with outrage at having his views characterized as leading to mass death like the Nazis.

It's ironic that Beck, who describes himself as a devout Mormon Christian, would lump the social gospel movement in Christianity in with Marxism. There is a growing consensus among New Testament scholars that Jesus was a Mediterranean Jewish peasant of the first century who was teaching Jews of his time how to live a fully religious life under the poverty and political oppression of Rome.⁵ His religion was a religion of social justice based on mutual love of each other as the children of God. Unitarians in Transylvania understand about being poor and oppressed and finding renewed faith and hope in the teaching of that Mediterranean Jewish peasant Jesus of Nazareth "to love one another as I have loved you."

WHY NOT AN OLD FASHION TRANSYLVANIAN DEBATE?

Beck has accused President Obama of being a Marxist.^{6 7} To do this he used the old propaganda technique of transferring, whereby the words “Marxist” and “social gospel” are used together which has the effect of transferring the negative associations of Marxism to the phrase “social gospel.” President Obama, as well as Jim Wallis, have stated that they find religious inspiration in the Christian social gospel. Does that make President Obama a Marxist? Most definitely not. It makes him a good Christian who understands the soul of Jesus’ teachings about social justice and compassion.

It is too bad that we cannot put Glenn Beck and Jim Wallis up on a stage and have them debate religious issues. The public religious debate was common during the time of the founding of Unitarianism in Transylvania in the mid-1500s.

Here is another lesson of tolerance and reasoned discourse in times of high emotions and controversy that we can learn from our Transylvanian Unitarian heritage.

There was much more religious controversy in the mid-1500s than now. The Protestant Reformation was underway. There were disputes occurring throughout Christianity. One of the ways to work out those disputes was through diets—no this is not going on a fast, but diets are assemblies to consider political or religious questions. Because of the interest in religious questions, these diets about religious issues were high points of the year for people of the times. These religious diets were accompanied by a lot of hoopla similar to what happens with a Superbowl in our country today. Then teams of religious champions would square off against each other and have a debate that would last for days. The most important diets for Unitarianism in Transylvania happened in 1568 and 1569

Like today, in America, there were a lot of bad feelings and suspicion between the various religious factions then in Transylvania—particularly between the Trinitarians and the Unitarians. The principal spokesperson for the Unitarians was Francis David.

According to the Unitarian historian Earl Morse Wilbur, King John Sigismund of Transylvania was “deeply interested in questions of religion, greatly enjoyed disputations and sometimes took part in them, firmly believing that sober argument was the best way to bring out the truth on points as to which there was disagreement.”⁸ The first debate lasted for ten days, each day beginning at five in the morning. The King ended the debate after ten days to confer with scholars as to who won.

While this was happening, the King strictly charged both sides “under severe penalty, not to abuse or quarrel with each other orally or in writing, and were recommended” to spend their time praying (Wilbur). The next year there was another debate. It became clear that David was the clear winner, and Unitarianism prevailed in Transylvania. And King John became the first

and only Unitarian king.

As I think of the present situation, wouldn't it be remarkable if Glenn Beck and Jim Wallis could debate with sound guidelines of civility of debate enforced. With rules of simple civility and respect in force, Beck wouldn't prevail, I suspect, because he relies more on smirks and ridicule than reasoned civil debate. Such wonderings may be creating a bit of a straw dog on my part, but wouldn't it be interesting.

Yet most important, the example from the Transylvanian Unitarians is another aspect of toleration this time through reasoned discourse with civility and respect for the other person with a different opinion. Those are values we Unitarian Universalists promote today.

TOLERANCE AND RESPECT LIVED

If there is anything that we can learn about this present situation of intolerance and meanness in the US from the perspective of our Unitarian tradition from Transylvania, it is the call to values of generosity, tolerance, respect for human dignity, and thankfulness. This doesn't mean that we do not stand against those who espouse greedy self-interest, exhibit intolerance of other's political and religious views—who ridicule and disrespect—and are just plain mean. But what this does mean is that we respect the other person's human dignity—condemning the sin and not the sinner and engaging them in a dialogue to let them know why we think what they are doing is wrong.

A good example of just this approach happened in a UU church that my sister attended in Topeka, Kansas. One Sunday, the UU church was picketed by the members of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka who followed their pastor Fred Phelps. Pastor Phelps's followers are the people who picket funerals of gay people and even picket funerals of soldiers who died in Iraq and Afghanistan saying that their deaths were God's retribution for this country's tolerance of gays—really mean stuff! In response to being picketed, the UUs in Topeka decided to move their coffee hour to the sidewalk in front of the church where they gave coffee and food to the picketers and engaged them in a debate about their views. The Phelps protesters didn't come back. It's the sublime power of coffee hour.

No but this is really the spirit of tolerance, generosity, acceptance, and moral conscience that resides at the heart of the Unitarian Universalism here and in the Unitarian Church in Transylvania.

CONCLUSION

These inspirations come across cultures and across the centuries to us here and now. Let us then be guided by the wisdom of our Transylvanian Unitarian brothers and sisters who in the

words of Francis David tell us “we need not think alike to love alike,” who inspire us to hold high the lamp of reason informed by heart and moral conscience, who remind us that the heart and moral conscience of our faith calls us to bend always towards justice for all, who affirm, again and again, that God is indivisible and is love, and we live unflinchingly in the hope that

one day all humanity will be guided by the truth that we are truly one human family. In a world without end. Amen.

ENDNOTES

1 Thomas, Gretchen. "Walking in Others' Shoes," UU World, Fall 2010 (pp 26-32).

2. Ibid. 29.

3. Ibid., 31.

4. Beck, Glenn "GLENN BECK: TRUTH ABOUT CHURCH AND STATE," Fox News. September 27, 2010. <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,601532,00.html>

5. Cf. Crossan, John Dominic, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.

6. Beck, Glenn. "The Argument Against Idiots: So What if Barack's a Marxist?"

October 28, 2008 - 13:14 ET <http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/17374/>

7. in the September 27 program, Beck compares the social gospel movement and liberation theology as being like Marxism and then links President Obama to the social gospel movement and liberation theology.

8. Wilbur, Earl Morse. *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1945. <http://www.pacificuu.org/wilbur/ahu/book/>