

Faustus Socinus

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Introduction

Many Americans come to Unitarian Universalism membership after being reared, and attending Sunday School or religious education classes, in other faith traditions. For some, that means they have a better understanding of the historical and theological roots of their previous religious practice than they do of their current faith home.

The year 2004 marks the 400th anniversary of the death of one of Unitarianism's theologians and philosophical pioneers, Faustus Socinus. Most UUs in American congregations could easily recite the names of well-known and frequently mentioned early leaders of our movement, people like Francis Dávid or Michael Servetus. Less well known is the name of Faustus Socinus, yet he can be credited with formalizing the beliefs and positions of the antitrinitarian movement that came to bear his name, the Socinians. This group is the direct intellectual, philosophical, theological, and social policy ancestor of our own Unitarian faith tradition.

Few people are esteemed in history by having their name associated with a philosophical or social movement. Many great and amazing people act upon the stage of life and are never honored by history with the immortality of having a thought or concept, philosophy or movement named for them. Martin Luther's name survives in his association with the Lutheran denomination, but John Calvin is not so honored. Menno Simmons continues to be remembered in the name of the Mennonites, even

though he was not the most outstanding Anabaptist leader. But others who were pioneers or martyrs for their faith will not be remembered so. Faustus Socinus lent his name to a movement that he didn't start or finish; a movement that actually didn't want to admit him to their ranks because of a difference in theological perspective. Yet, through his work, his writing, his influence, and his person, he so impressed this group of people that they eventually accepted him as their leader and their religious movement bears his name.

Who was Faustus Socinus? As Unitarian Universalists, what do we need to know about him and his place in history? What did he contribute to the religious viewpoints Unitarian Universalists hold today?

The Early Years (1539–1562)

Faustus arrived in his family, the second child and only son, on December 5, 1539. Born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth, he joined a prosperous and well-known Catholic family of lawyers, politicians and independent thinkers living in Siena, located in the Tuscan area of Italy. His father, Alexander Socinus Junior, was one of seven brothers, born to a father who was a lawyer and jurist. Agnes Petrucci, Faustus' mother, was from another influential family, one associated with the papal house of Piccolomini. (In Italian, the family name is spelled Sozzini.)

Unfortunately, the idyllic life of a child in a well-to-do family was to be shattered for Faustus and his siblings. In 1541, Alexander died unexpectedly. Along with his two sisters, Faustus was brought up by his mother (who also died while he was young) and then by his grandmother. Faustus did not enroll in regular educational classes, but rather spent time reading and being exposed to what amounts to "home schooling" by his uncles and relatives at the family villa. One of his father's brothers, Celso, was an early intellectual influence on the boy, founding the short-lived Accademia die Siziensi, of which Faustus was briefly a member.

While Faustus appears to have had little systematic education before his 16th birthday, he was exposed to a variety of thought and influences. During this time in history, the Renaissance is noted as an era of renewed interest in human potential and expression. When people began to rediscover the classic works of Greek art, literature, and philosophy which had been unavailable to them for many years, they yearned to discover their own creativity, capacity, and expression. This period gave rise to great art, great exploration, and great changes in thought and philosophy. It was a ripe time for new ideas and people to think them.

Despite the family's long history in the law, it appears that it was not a field that attracted Socinus as a potential career. In 1556, when he inherited one quarter of his grandfather's estate, Faustus endeavored to begin his formal education by entering the prestigious Accademia degli Intronati. His ability to enter such an institution is tribute to his intellectual ability, his self-study and preparation. While at school, he adopted the academic name of Il Frastagliato ("the one ornamented with lace") and took as his personal standard un mare turbato de vento (a sea tossed by winds).(1) It's hard to know if these were the conceits of fanciful youth, or a commentary on the nature of his life to this point.

Not much is known of the day-to-day life or events of Faustus' youth. However, his family did not escape the notice of the Catholic Inquisition, which began in 1542. Apparently, the Socinus family was known, especially on his father's side, as independent religious thinkers. While there was only one church at this time in Italy, the Roman Catholic church, the seeds of religious reformation were growing throughout Europe. The church's strong hold on thought and innovation was cracking, as a result of many factors, but certainly influenced by the start of the Reformation in 1517. Faustus' uncle, Laelius, a well-known priest in Siena, also traveled widely (Holland, England, Austria, and Poland, to name a few) and wrote about his religious beliefs, many of which were not in alignment with Catholic viewpoints. He was known to be a skeptic and inquirer into the beliefs of the Catholic church, but Laelius was not an antitrinitarian. He knew and corresponded with Calvin and Melancthon, as well as other Protestant reformers.

Eventually, the Socinus family fell under suspicion of being Protestant-leaning heretics. In 1556, the family was declared "reputati Luterani"(2) and their assets and estates were impounded by the Inquisition. Of the six remaining brothers, who were Faustus' uncles, four were suspected of and/or charged with being heretics. One (Cornelio) was imprisoned in Rome. Laelius spent much time trying to regain the family's assets, but finally chose to leave Italy for Zurich around 1559 as a result of persecution by the church. Faustus' own religious thinking at this time is unclear, but he must have begun to reject the orthodox religious doctrines of the Roman Catholic church, since he also felt threatened by the Inquisition's interest in the religious life and thought of his uncles.

Faustus decides at this time (1559) to leave Italy for a while, as well. Feeling the pressure of the Inquisition's influence on his family's fortunes, he fled to Lyons, where he is variously described as being involved in business or commerce. He stayed in Lyons for approximately three years, although it appears he traveled to Zurich on occasion to see his uncle, Laelius. He also spent enough time in Geneva to request membership in the Italian congregation of that city.

Laelius died in Zurich in 1562. His successor in the Zurich religious community, Antonio M. Besozzi, a Milanese merchant noble, was aware that Laelius wanted Faustus to inherit his theological works. He summoned Faustus to come and take possession of Laelius' papers, books, and effects and settle his affairs. Collecting his uncle's legacy of writing and correspondence regarding religious doctrine must have influenced Faustus, but it will be several years before that influence is revealed.

A Change in Direction (1563–1574)

With the inheritance of his uncle Laelius' legacy, and a looming family financial crisis in Italy, Faustus once again returned to the land of his birth, Tuscany. Now under the rule of Grand Duke Cosmo (the Great) de Medici, a powerful ruler and eclectic thinker, Socinus finds an opportunity to serve at court. He took a position serving Isabella de Medici, Cosmo's daughter, in a job variously described as diplomat, secretary or courtier. During his 12 years in her service, he lived a comfortable life at court in Florence, a court filled with the art of Michelangelo and the thinking of Leonardo da Vinci. He traveled with the court, seeing other cities in Italy. And, he began to write.

Apparently influenced by reading his uncle's papers and also incorporating his own perspectives and philosophies, Faustus began to publish most of his writings anonymously. It was dangerous to be associated with thoughts and ideas that questioned existing religious dogma, and Socinus' patron couldn't afford to be associated with a "disturber of the peace of the church." Therefore, Faustus outwardly lived a life in alignment with the Catholic church. But his writings indicate that his thoughts on religion were in transition. His first book, "On the Authority of the Holy Scriptures" was highly esteemed by both Catholics and Protestants. It was translated many times and remained in circulation for over 150 years.

Isabella, his employer, died in 1574. By this time, Faustus seems to have been ready for a change of venue in his life. Despite the requests of the Grand Duke, Socinus determines to leave Italy permanently. He made arrangements with the Duke to have the revenues of his family's estates forwarded to him by agreeing to continue to write anonymously. He packed up his books, his writing, and his worldly goods and headed for Basel, an area known at the time for religious tolerance.

A Life's Work (1574–1604)

It is while he is in residence in Basel that Socinus becomes a theologian. During his three or so year stay in this city, he used his time to study. He began to read extensively, including a complete study of the Bible and the papers of his uncle, Laelius. As he read and studied, he began to create a systematized compilation of the "heresies of his predecessors" and worked out a "rationalized faith" doctrine.⁽³⁾ While he continued to live in outward compliance with the Catholic church, he also wrote

some of his best-known works, a prologue to the First Gospel of John (*Explicator primi partis*) and “On Christ the Savior” in which he writes that Jesus Christ is divine by office rather than by nature. It was considered a radical book for its time.(4) In the words of Earl Morse Wilbur, Socinus wrote that, “Christ is Savior not because he suffered for our sins, but because he showed us the way to eternal salvation, which consists in our imitating him; and that he did not suffer to satisfy God’s justice nor to appease his wrath.”(5)

This book establishes Faustus’ reputation as a theologian and makes him famous among religious thinkers and questioners. It is this notoriety that leads to an invitation to come to Transylvania, where he will speak with Francis David at the request of court physician and religious leader Biandrata. The goal of this meeting is to get Francis David to moderate his “non-adorant” religious views, but Biandrata, Socinus, and others are unable to accomplish this task. In 1579, David died in prison as a result of his hardships and persecution.

In 1579, Faustus Socinus moves to Poland, where he will live the remaining 25 years of his life. At this time, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was considered a leading nation, being the largest and the most religiously tolerant country in Europe. It was referred to as a “heretic’s asylum” for the relatively peaceful coexistence of Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jewish, and Muslim believers within its borders.(6) This tolerance is remarkable, since in the remainder of Western Europe at this time, heretics were being tried and executed.

Socinus settles in Rakow, considered the center of the Minor Reformed Church (also called the Polish Brethren or Minor Church.) At the time of Socinus’ arrival, there were approximately 100 congregations of the church. In the community of the Polish Brethren, he found a like-minded and welcoming group of believers, and he was moved to request membership in their congregation. His request was denied, however, because of a difference in belief about the necessity of re-baptism. Socinus’ principles did not allow him to submit to an adult baptism by immersion, since he felt this might be construed as an admission that baptism, an “outward sacrament,” was required to be considered a Christian.(7) Despite this difference of principles, and his disappointment at being denied congregational membership and access to the Eucharist, Faustus continued to work for the church. He became a vocal leader of the congregation and a thought leader of the Minor Church movement. He organized their beliefs into a consistent system and represented the group in their controversies and debates with Catholics and Protestants. He continued to write and publish his theological thoughts and positions.

Socinus is able to be influential in the Polish Brethren for a variety of reasons, which include not only his natural intellectual abilities (he was widely read and fluent in at least five languages), but also his personal traits and skills. Socinus appears to have been a skilled debater, but one who kept his temper and didn't speak rudely to his opponents (a common practice in debate at this time in history.) He remained a "good Christian" gentleman, persuasive and determined, but respectful, articulate and knowledgeable.

Sometime in the early 1580's, because of increasing Catholic pressure, Faustus Socinus was forced to seek asylum in the countryside at the home of an influential nobleman and supporter of the Polish Brethren. While enjoying the hospitality of this arrangement, he met and married the nobleman's only daughter, Elizabeth. They had a child, a daughter named Agnes, who was born in 1587. Not much is noted about Socinus personal life at this time, except that his wife did not long survive after the birth of their child.

Socinus continues to serve as the public voice and spokesperson for the Minor Church. He attends a number of synods, where he is asked to explain the beliefs of the church. He participates in dialogues and discussions of theology. He writes. And, he replies to attacks made on the philosophy, theology, and practice of the Polish Brethren. This advocacy leads to a flourishing of the Minor Reformed Church. The years between 1585 and 1638 are referred to as the "most brilliant period" of the church.(8) At the movement's height, it embraced over 300 congregations, supported an academy which enrolled over 1,000 students, and housed an influential press that published theological works in a variety of languages.

In 1587, following the death of his wife, Socinus moves to the city of Krakow. While attending the Synod of Brest (Lithuania) in 1588, he discusses the main points of belief of the Minor Reformed Church, and his eloquence and compelling argument lead him to be acknowledged as the true theological leader of the Polish Brethren. Also in 1587, the Grand Duke of Tuscany dies, ending Socinus' protection by the Medicis of Italy. The family estates are confiscated by the Catholic church and Socinus loses his ongoing source of income. This death also released him from his earlier agreement to maintain his anonymity in published writing on "heretical" topics related to theology. Socinus is now free to claim his written work as his own and to speak for himself in relationship to the doctrines of the Catholic church. His work with the movement that now comes to bear his name, to be called the Socinians, continues to the end of his life.

One more major move happens in Socinus' life. As secular and religious powers in Poland shifted, the Jesuits, under the auspices of the Roman Catholic church, began to make efforts to assert Catholic dominance in the region, to reclaim their churches and property, and to promote a return to orthodox belief. In 1598, as he approached 60 years of age, Socinus was attacked by an enraged mob of students, incited by the Jesuits, who attempted to take his life.(9) They dragged him from his bed and threatened him with drowning if he did not recant his doctrines. They looted his home and burned his books. A university professor familiar with Socinus' work happened to be in the area and he intervened in the mob's march to the river, saving Socinus' life.

Fearing for his well-being, Socinus moved to the village of Luslawice, where he spent his final years. He began writing on the Racovian Catechism, a summation of the doctrine and principles of the Minor Reformed Church, with the input and assistance of others. This document, along with others, was unfinished at the time of his death in 1604. The Racovian Catechism was completed by his friends and colleagues, to be published in 1605.

The Polish Brethren continued to struggle for survival in Poland, against the influence of both Calvinist and Jesuit oppressions. While Poland had been a religiously tolerant environment for over 100 years, through the example of tolerant monarchs and sympathetic patrons, that era was coming to a close. Catholics demanded that Socinianism be outlawed in Poland, and an edict to this effect was signed in 1638. In 1660, the remaining Socinians were expelled from Poland by the Catholic king, John Casimir. They fled to other locations, notably Holland (known as a place of religious tolerance and religious plurality) and eventually to England.

Of Interest to 21st Century Unitarian Universalists

Antitrinitarian thought has existed since the earliest times of the Christian church. It was a focus of discussion at the Council of Nicaea, as Arias and Athenasius presented their views on the nature of Jesus. With the rise of power and theological domination of the Roman Catholic church, along with their advocacy for the doctrine of the Trinity, it was unpopular and unsafe to hold or advocate for an antitrinitarian viewpoint. The rise of the Reformation, opening the door to questioning of the monolithic doctrinal power of the Roman church, ushered in an era of growing questioning and debate on a multitude of theological principles. While the antitrinitarian school of thought owes much of its character and individuality to Faustus Socinus, it arose in theological debate and dialogue before he came into contact with it. Faustus' uncle, along with Biandrata and others, were a part of a secret society in Venice that met as early as 1546 to discuss theological issues, among them the doctrine of the Trinity.(10)

While Faustus Socinus may not enter the rolls of history as the first spokesperson for antitrinitarian thought, he can be credited for being an excellent writer on the topic, for serving as an articulate and passionate advocate for and shaper of the Unitarian viewpoint in Poland, and for being a great systematizer of the set of beliefs and practices of the Polish Brethren. In reading Socinus' writings on the tenets of the Polish Minor Reformed Church outlined in the Racovian Catechism, modern Unitarian Universalists will identify many thoughts, principles, and practices that resonate with those of our own movement, especially those concerned with the doctrines of the person and work of Jesus.⁽¹¹⁾ Socinus gift to his own time was in contributing to a collection and articulation of what the Polish Brethren were about theologically, philosophically, and socially. For us, the enduring gift of his work is having these documented references as we look at the antecedents of our own theology, philosophy, and social justice positions.

What legacy did the Polish Brethren leave us? What was it that Faustus Socinus helped form, frame, and document? In the Racovian Catechism, which historian Adolf Harnack describes as "a course of instruction for producing theologians,"⁽¹²⁾ the following principles of the faith of Faustus Socinus and the Polish Brethren are outlined:

- Though he was exceptional, Jesus was human. He was without sin and was endowed with divine attributes, especially wisdom and virtue. By his suffering, we are taught how to bear our own human suffering. The resurrection is significant because it demonstrates the possibility of immortality for humans.
- Jesus' death was not an atonement for our sins, because God did not demand this. Nor did God demand that someone suffer for our sins.
- There is no scriptural evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity.
- All religious authority depends on applying reason to Scripture.
- Human souls are not immortal by nature. Humans are saved by the power of spirit that enables us to follow the example and command of Jesus. Jesus' ethical teachings, especially the Sermon on the Mount, should be our main guide in life. We attain eternal life through the study of divinely revealed Scripture.
- False doctrines include:
 - Original sin,
 - Predestination and the concept of the elect,
 - The inherent depravity of human beings, and
 - Eternal damnation.

- Faith is more than a belief that the teaching of Jesus is true, it also results from the repentance of sin and in an obedience that leads to eternal life.
- We can have faith in the good and loving nature of God.
- Religious thought should be free and all creeds tolerated. (Note: Protestants and Catholic leaders considered this the “most dangerous” of the Socinians principles.)(13)
- While humans can be sinful, we can have faith in the human capacity for reason and goodness.

Modern Unitarian Universalists would also recognize some of the liturgical and social justice principles which formed the foundation of Minor Church practice. The Polish Brethren believed in liturgical simplicity and “scriptural fidelity.”(14) They advocated that love and tolerance be present in all human relationships, and therefore they refused to bear arms or support the taking of human life under any circumstances. Their congregational polity and church structures resemble those we have in place in the Unitarian Universalist church of today. Additionally, they refused to accept civil office (though this principle was modified later in their movement’s existence.) They advocated for the separation of church and state, the defense of social equality, and active participation in community life. They were vocal in their protests against the enslavement of the peasantry. In Rakow, they formed a Christian community which was governed by the principles outlined in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

In the Socinians, and therefore in the thought and religious leadership of Faustus Socinus, we can find resonances of our Unitarian Universalist movement’s Seven Principles, our focus on social justice, and our congregational polity. Their courageous stance for freedom in religious thought and belief are a part of our heritage. Socinus’ pursuit of his own study and thought leaves us a legacy for our own religious freedom. In these ways, Socinus’ thought and religious leadership continues to live today, even 400 years after his death and the decline of the Socinian movement.

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Notes

- (1) Williams, "The Radical Reformation," p. 979.
- (2) Williams, "The Radical Reformation," p. 969.

- (3) American Unitarian Association, Unitarianism: Its Origin and History, p. 71.
- (4) Worsfold, Faustus Socinus: A Biography, on-line resource.
- (5) Wilbur, Our Unitarian Heritage, on-line resource.
- (6) Hewett, UU World, p. 72.
- (7) Wilbur, Our Unitarian Heritage, on-line resource.
- (8) Parke, The Epic of Unitarianism, on-line resource.
- (9) Hiller, "Laelius and Faustus Socini," on-line resource.
- (10) Pope, Socinianism, on-line resource.
- (11) Deniger, Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of World Religions, p. 1019.
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