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THE PHILOSOPHICAL LEGACY OF THE XVI AND XVIIITH CENTURY SOCINIANS: THEIR RATIONALITY

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Several religious and intellectual movements today claim the right to the heritage of the religious group, the Socinians, that developed in Poland and in Transylvania in XVIth and XVIIth centuries. The claimants vary from the Christian churches to the atheistic or deistic Humanists and each of them usually selects a specific set of Socinian views ignoring the rest. The Socinians were known under various names as the Polish Brethren, Antitrinitarians, Arians and Unitarians. The name Socinians was used mostly in western Europe.¹ They were eventually expelled from Poland in 1660 to fulfill the King John Casimir's religious vow to the Holy Virgin to avenge the denial of the Divine Trinity by "heretics." Such a denial was deemed an act most blasphemous according to Catholic ideology.

The doctrines of the Polish Brethren represented a humanistic reaction to a medieval theology based on submission to the Church's totalitarian authority. Though they retained the Scripture as something *supra rationem*, they analyzed it rationally and believed that nothing should be accepted *contra rationem*. Their social and political thought underwent a significant evolutionary process from the very utopian pacifistic trend condemning participation in war and holding public and judicial office to a moderate and realistic stand based on mutual love, support of the secular power of the state, active participation in social and political life, and defense of social equality. They spoke out against the enslavement of peasants, a recurring issue in Poland not solved until the XXth century. They were the first to postulate the complete separation of church and state, an idea never before discussed in Christian societies. The spirit of absolute religious freedom

expressed in their practice and writings, "determined, more or less immediately, all the subsequent revolutions in favor of religious liberty."² The precursor ideas of the Polish Brethren on religious freedom were later expanded, perfected and popularized by John Locke (1632-1704) in England and Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) in France and Holland. Their ideas on religious freedom, toleration, their philosophical and religious arguments, coincide with those used by the Polish philosophers. The ideas of John Locke were in turn transplanted directly to the American continent by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson who implemented them for the first time in American legislation. They were philosopher-statesmen who shared a strong conviction on absolute freedom of conscience and distrusted any kind of established ecclesiastical institution. The rationality of the Socinians set the trend for the philosophical ideas of the Enlightenment and determined the future development of all modern intellectual endeavors. After expulsion they were forced into oblivion for three centuries, forgotten in a country that continued to be dominated by the Catholic Church.

Historical Outline

At the roots of Polish Antitrinitarianism are the theological ideas transplanted from western Europe and the social ideas borrowed initially from the Anabaptists and Moravian Brethren. Discussions at the meetings of the secret society of Catholic scholars in Cracow since 1546 had, as a purpose, reform of the church and included the works of Michael Servetus. Several visitors from abroad including Adam Pastor from Holland and Lelio Sozini from Italy transplanted the Antitrinitarian ideas and the doctrines of the Radical Reformation. About the middle of the XVIth century a variety of Antitrinitarian sects emerged that were separated from the Helevetian church. They called themselves Christians or Brethren, hence the Polish Brethren, and also the Minor Reformed Church. Their opponents labelled them after the old heresies as Sabellians, Samosatrinians, Ebionites, Unitarians, and finally Arians.

We can differentiate three stages in the development of the Unitarian movement:

- 1. The early stage from the formation of the Minor Church between 1562 - 1565 to the end of the XVIth century;**
- 2. Late Unitarianism or Socinianism from the establishment of the Socinian doctrines to the expulsion in 1660;**
- 3. The diaspora and radiation of Socinian ideas as precursor to the development of the Enlightenment.**

Only the late stage of Polish Unitarianism can be properly labelled as Socinianism, from Faustus Socinus (Fausto Sozzini, nephew of Lelio Sozini; sic, he spelled his name with one "z") who at the end of the XVIth century became a prominent figure in the Raków congregation for systematizing the doctrines of the Polish Brethren.

The most brilliant period for the Polish Brethren was between 1585 and 1638 with the center at Raków which won the name of the Sarmatian Athens. They founded a world-renowned school in 1602. Its rector until 1621, Jan Crell, codified the ethical system of the Brethren. Their famous printing press filled Europe with treatises written in Polish, Latin, Dutch, and German. They were well praised and read by people like John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Isaac Newton and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. They represented a small number but held high ethical values. The Polish Brethren lasted in Poland for about 100 years from the time when Peter of Goniadz delivered his credo at the Calvinist synod in Secemin on January 22, 1556, to the death of Samuel Przykowski in 1670. But they made an outstanding contribution to Polish literature and had the most advanced and pioneering ideas in the social, political, and religious fields. They left about 500 treatises largely unexplored and still waiting to be examined. They were inspired by a sincere application of original Christianity to personal, social and political relations. Their ideology was characterized from the beginning by: 1. propagating freedom of religious thought; 2. the principle of applying reason to the interpretation of the Scriptures, the Revelation, and theological matters in general; 3. absolute tolerance of all creeds; 4. the struggle for social equality among people. At their first synod, the Polish Brethren settled the matter of freedom of conscience: "Everyone has the right not to do things which he feels to be contrary to the word of God. Moreover, all may write according to their conscience, if they do not offend anybody by

it."³ Protestant and Catholic reaction termed the freedom of conscience and tolerance propagated by the Socinians as "that Socinian dogma, the most dangerous of the dogmas of the Socinian sect."⁴

Rationalism of the Socinians

One of the characteristics of the Unitarianism/Socinianism from the very beginning was the insistence on applying reason to interpret Scripture, Revelation, and theological matters. The immediate reason for the establishment of the Antitrinitarian church was the denial of the traditional dogma of the Trinity and the arguments used in support of this view were based on the rational interpretation of the Scripture. This early "rationalism" was, however, very particular and limited. The conviction was maintained that one was supposed to believe God and not reason. The false dogmas were presented as the product of human reason. Thus among the early Antitrinitarians reason was contrasted with the Scripture which was accepted as self-evident. At the same time it was believed that for the understanding of the Scripture one has to rely on the supernatural assistance from the Holy Spirit.

In Socinianism or mature Unitarianism a question was raised on what was the role of reason in religious matters and especially what was the relationship between reason and Revelation. Socinus maintained that:

1. the content of the Revelation must be exposed in accordance to reason, and whatever is contradictory to reason must be rejected;
2. the true religion must remain in accordance with reason;
3. human reason is not able by its natural powers to acquire the knowledge of the fundamental truths about God including the fact of His existence;
4. natural religion does not exist either as an innate knowledge or *a posteriori*, i.e., deduced from reflection on the world;
5. all what people know about God derives from Himself through His Revelation.

From the 30's of the XVIIth century this Socinian thesis against natural religion was questioned by Racovian post-Socinian theologians and with time their new views became recognized as the classical Socinian doctrine. They attempted now to provide philosophical arguments for the natural religion and develop a scriptural exegesis to support this view. Traditional views among orthodox Catholics maintained that:

1. interpretations of the Revelation (Old and New Testaments) may vary;
2. the teaching authority of the Church inspired by the Holy Spirit and actuated in the pronouncements of the Roman bishop and Councils, known as the Tradition, is necessary for their correct interpretation;
3. the Church is at the same time the guarantor of the correctness of the interpretation.

The Protestants maintained that:

1. the Scripture is self-evident;
2. the believer is only reassured about the truth of the Scripture by the inner illumination from the Holy Spirit.

In fact the Protestant theologians often used the Tradition, the pronouncements of the Fathers of the Church, in the same way as their Catholic brethren did.

The new post-Socinian theory was exposed in 4 treatises⁵:

Brevis disquisitio (1633) and *De iudice et norma controversiarum fidei* (1644) by Joachim Stegmann Sr., *Animadversiones apologeticae ... in ... J.A. Comeni ... libellum* (1660) by Samuel Przypkowski, and *Religio naturalis* (1670) by Andrzej Wiszowaty.

The main tenets of the doctrine can be summarized as follows:

The norm in religious matters is God, but nowadays He does not express Himself personally. The Scripture left as His Word is considered only as a norm of faith like a legal code is a norm for the law; but the actual judgment is pronounced by the judge. Someone has to interpret the Scripture, but it cannot be the Holy Spirit as it is maintained by the evangelicals. Our post-Socinians demand a rational argument and not faith. Also, the invoking of the authority of the Church or the pope is baseless, since this authority in turn must itself be somehow justified. This would lead to a vicious circle: the Church authority is justified from the testimony of the Scripture and the Scripture's veracity in turn is affirmed by the Church authority! The solution which the post-Socinians proposed is as follows:

1. the highest judge in matters of faith on earth is human reason;
2. the Scripture must be interpreted in accordance with the principles of reason;
3. the doctrines formulated from the Scriptures must also be formulated in agreement with reason; they cannot contradict reason;
4. reason is also the measure of the veracity of the Scripture, i.e., whether it contains the Word of God or not.

Hence if we draw all conclusions together, we must assert that human reason becomes the sovereign authority, and that it also judges the provenience of the Scripture and its interpretation.

The remaining issue to be clarified concerns the understanding of the truths defined as "above reason" (*supra rationem*). Socinians used it with two meanings. However, none of them agreed with the traditional, orthodox usage.

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First meaning:

the mysteries of religion are the truths which cannot be reached without Revelation, but the human mind is capable of understanding them. As an example to this Socinians gave the mystery of the salvation of mankind by Christ. The mystery was mentioned in a vague and enigmatic way in the Old Testament. It ceased to be a mystery and truth "above reason" when Jesus revealed and explained it.

Second meaning:

the truth "above reason" is a truth that can be reached by independent human reason, but reason is not able to explain it completely. It is perceived as something in accordance with reason and in a certain way, necessary. This is exemplified by the truth of God's eternity. This truth is often treated as something inconceivable, however, reason convinces us that it is not impossible, and God even becomes a necessity as the first cause of all causes.

These types of truths "above reason" constitute the content of the natural religion accepted by the Deists. Of course, such a concept of religious mystery is quite different from the traditional one.

One of the post-Socinian writers, J. Stegmann, went further in his rationality and claimed that the concept of religious mystery is not necessary in the Christian religion, and the term the truth "above reason" becomes inadequate. Everything that is taught by a religion is measured by human reason. He agrees that certain religious truths cannot be understood completely, but the same can be said about natural ones.

Everything, matters pertaining to nature, to God and religion, remain within the reach of human reason. Hence we can know and understand the truths exposed in the Scripture which are necessary for eternal salvation. Thus, the divine matters contained in the Scripture are not "above reason." We may, however, say that some truths are "above reason," (*supra rationem*) since we are not able to know them by natural means - i.e. without the Revelation.

This was an extremely radical position, and it was not accepted among the Socinians - it was simply too radical for the Christian world. So later Przypkowski and Wiszowaty used the term "above reason" in the strictly Socinian meaning. Orthodoxy was not concerned with the mysteries of religion mentioned by the Socinians such as: the eternity of God, the creation of the world, or even the resurrection of the dead.

This specific rationality of the Socinians was not acceptable to the orthodox mentality and was dramatically and erroneously evaluated by Pierre Jurieu, the French Huguenot:

We saw that mysteries were so necessary for the religions that there was none which would not have them ... Socinianism created a religion that differs from all other religions on the earth, a religion without mysteries ... a religion in which one does not believe in anything because one wants to see everything clearly. They created a religion in which reason governs sovereignly and in which there is no room for faith. Where is the majesty and the grandness of Christianity? Everything is determined here in accordance to the light of that false reason. Reason cannot comprehend how is it possible for the three persons to exist in one essence, so this dogma is superfluous. Reason cannot comprehend how it is possible to unite in one and the same person the human and the divine natures, so the dogma has to be rejected ... Human reason does not comprehend how the death of one person could be for God an expiation liberating from death all people, so it is also deemed to be a pure fantasy. Human reason does not see how it is possible that the particles of the human body dispersed after death to the thousand places in the world, could have been reunited in the day of resurrection, so this is deemed to be a fable. The human mind does not understand how it is possible for a substance to be infinite and without limits, so God is deemed not to be without limit, but he must be enclosed in the Heaven. I do not know how it happened that by the same principle these godless people did not come to a conclusion that God is not eternal since human reason does not comprehend better the God's eternity than His infinity ... Oh miserable people, where are the mysteries of your religion?

The Fate of the Socinian Doctrine

As we have seen since the 30's of the XVIIth century certain post-Socinian writers present their doctrine as remaining in accordance in all aspects with human reason and impute to the human mind the obligation to decide how to understand Revelation and the privilege of deciding about the veracity of the Revelation itself. From the rational point of view these declarations are subconscious mystifications - the Socinians had never intended to submit to the critical evaluation the authenticity of the Christian Revelation contained in the Bible since it was for them a self-evident fact. Their attitude vis-à-vis Scripture was not critical but apologetic.

The claim, however, made by the Socinians that one should believe in the Revelation because natural reason

dictates so, was the link uniting the traditional form of religion with the Deism of the Enlightenment. This thesis suggested that as soon as human reason finds a justification, it will be completely in a position to question the divinity of the Revelation. Socinianism itself in its post-Socinian form provided enough reasons for this to state that they served as precursors to the later critical intellectual trends of the Enlightenment. Socinianism thus played a double role for the development of religiosity during the Enlightenment: one role was positive, the other was negative.

Its positive role was expressed by the fact that:

1. it considered the moral content of religion as its center and minimized the importance of dogma, reducing at the same time almost to zero the ritual side of religion;
2. it propagated the "religion in accordance to reason" (*religio rationalis*) and traced such a model of the relationship between Revelation and reason such that reason was to be an absolute hegemon. These two postulates became adopted in the ideological program of the Deists.

The negative effect of the Socinianism was that:

1. in the opinion of the ideologues of the Enlightenment, the Socinians were supposed to undertake the final attempt to rationalize Christianity. According to them it was the most ambitious and the farthest reaching attempt that ended in a fiasco. They deemed unconvincing the Socinians' attempts to rationally interpret the behavior of the biblical Yahweh and to show that it can be understood in the categories of humanistic morality. The Socinians, standing on the position that Jesus is identical with the Messiah promised by the Old Testament, also had to defend the authenticity of the Old Testament Revelation and consequently of its cruel God of Josue and David with the God of Gospels. Hence, they claimed that there arose some deep inadequacies resulting from the impossibility of including the moral image of the Biblical Yahweh into the system of religion in which moral values were considered the highest.

From such analysis of the Socinian doctrine, which they considered a failure, the thinkers of the Enlightenment drew two conclusions:

The first one was formulated by Pierre Bayle who claimed that religion is in its essence irrational and that any attempt to reconcile it with the demands of rational thinking, is futile and doomed to failure.

Later this conclusion led the most radical thinkers to the conviction that the irrationality of religion is not a proof of its supernatural origin, but on the contrary, it constitutes a proof that it is a product of human mind.

The second conclusion served to build Deistic religious conceptions, namely, the failure of the Socinians does not prove that they undertook an impossible task, but that they chose the wrong approach. The Socinians are right in claiming that religion is in agreement with reason, and also with the humanistically understood morality. If the Christian doctrine does not agree with these postulates, it is an evidence against them and not against religion. In order to understand this, one has to go further and break the ties with the Old Testament. Then Jesus will cease to be the Messiah, and instead He will become still more meritorious of reverence as the one among very few moral leaders of humanity who have shown the ways to return to the pure sources of natural religion that is as unchanging as is God, the Creator of Nature.

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