

# The Continuing Reformation

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There's hardly an American alive, over the age of two, who doesn't realize that this coming Tuesday is Halloween, even though many of them will turn off their lights and pretend to be away from home when costumed revelers appear on their doorsteps. Far fewer will know that, according to tradition, the last day of October is the anniversary of that auspicious day in 1517 when Martin Luther, in a dramatic rebellion against the corruption of the church of his era, nailed his 95 theses to the door of the cathedral at Wittenberg. So began what came to be called the Protestant Reformation, the single most cataclysmic age in the history of Christendom.

Although I come from a family whose Unitarian connections now span five generations, part of my childhood was spent attending a Lutheran Sunday school, for reasons which are too complicated to go into here. Suffice it to say that family systems are always curious things and inertia is a powerful motivator in its own peculiar way! For the most part, it was a positive experience and I have happy memories of my two or three years as a guest among the Lutherans, which was complicated only by a few unfortunate incidents where my liberal religious home life conflicted with the received doctrines and accepted behaviors of the Icelandic Evangelical Lutheran Synod. There was the church picnic, when I was six years old, where I scandalized the delicate ears of Luther's disciples, with ukulele in hand, by singing Irish drinking and bawdy songs for their entertainment – songs I had learned from my father. Then there was the Christmas pageant the year that I was cast as Joseph, innocently disrupting the event—*innocently*, I say—because of my inability to understand the subtle mysteries of the Holy Trinity, which was reflected in my insistence that it was I, Joseph, who was father of the little baby Jesus. (Evidently, those bawdy songs had taught me something about human biology.) But it was ultimately green string licorice that did me in as a prospective Lutheran. Since my parents' only real religion in those days was the worship of St. Mattress, I was sent to Sunday school rather than taken. I discovered that the 40¢ I carried with me each Sunday – 25¢ for the children's offering and 15¢ for a return bus ticket – could be converted into 120 pieces of green string licorice at the corner store next to the bus stop. I can testify from experience that it takes about as long to eat that much green string licorice as it takes to attend Sunday school, and like so many bold sinners before me, I descended into substance abuse, having become hopelessly addicted to confections. It didn't even matter that large amounts of licorice made me sick, whereas Sunday school did not.

Despite my wayward proclivities, I liked Sunday school. My teacher, Mrs. Honey, taught me that I was unique and precious and she encouraged me to be friendly towards Miles what's-his-name and to leave Wendy Barrett alone – “girls are just like that,” she said, “and there’s nothing you can do about it.” While I do remember the story of Palm Sunday, when Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, I was never much interested in Jesus, who seemed at the time to be so, well, “Middle Eastern.” But I was captivated by the stories we were told about Martin Luther, who seemed so *real* to me. Even at seven or eight years old, he struck me as the kind of person with whom you might toss back a pint, chew a little licorice – or tobacco, perhaps – and sing a bawdy song or two.

Most of all, I admired Luther’s courage – I still do! I loved to hear the story of Luther the monk nailing his theses to the cathedral door, although my father quickly disabused of nailing documents to the back door of our house, which was not – he was quick to point out – a cathedral in Wittenberg. And I was moved by the tale of his trial at the Diet of Worms, when he concluded his defense by proclaiming, “Here I stand; I can do not other” – even though that line never once worked at the principal’s office. My favorite day of the liturgical year was Reformation Sunday, the last Sunday in October, when we told the story of the guy whose trademark name was actually on the sign. Never mind that it never happened that way. Never mind that the 95 theses were simply published in a low-key, everyday fashion. There was a door, even though there was no hammer and nail, and there was a point to be made. It makes little sense to ruin a good story just because it doesn’t represent the facts. Whatever the real facts may have been, it is enough to say that long before I was ever allowed to use a ballpoint pen in school, in place of an HB pencil, I had cast my lot with the Reformers.

**A**cross town, on a less convenient bus route, stood the Unitarian church of my youth, which traced its history back to 1891, when it was founded by Icelandic immigrants who had rebelled against the more conservative Lutheranism of their adopted country. That year, there was a mass exodus of liberals from the Icelandic Lutheran Synod but, as with most secessionist movements, Icelandic Unitarianism continued to betray vestiges of the Lutheranism against which it had rebelled. To this day, there is a “Lutheran feel” to some of the Unitarian churches with Icelandic or Norwegian roots. Reformation Sunday continued to be observed but the story got bigger and better, stronger and deeper, for as Unitarian Universalists we were—*we are*—heirs to the Radical Reformation, the left wing of the Reformation, which did not immediately settle down into a new conformity, a comfortable new creedal consensus. No, the Radical Reformers continued on in their zeal for change and transformation, authenticity and faithfulness.

For nearly a century, a picture showing Francis Dávid speaking at the Diet of Torda in 1568 has hung on the wall of the Unitarian Church in Winnipeg, like an icon allowing us to peer back into the earliest years of our history as a distinct religious movement. The late Donald Harrington, who was the longtime minister of Community Church of New York, described Francis Dávid as, “the first of those intrepid leaders of the Left Wing of the Reformation, those who like Luther and Calvin set out to reform the Christian Church, but in his case, not only from a tyrannical, outdated and corrupt church polity, but an over elaborate and hardly understandable theology as well.”<sup>1</sup>

Francis Dávid was born in Transylvania in 1510, the son of Saxon and Hungarian parents. After completing his childhood education, he apparently took a trade and did not embark upon his theological education until he was nearing middle age. After finally training for the priesthood, his rise was meteoric. He studied at Wittenburg and appears to have been ordained to the priesthood there, later serving at Frankfurt before returning to Koloszvar, Transylvania, to become rector of the Catholic school there.

By mid-century, Francis Dávid had become bishop primate of the Roman Catholic Church in Hungary but his slow journey to Unitarianism was already underway. “This was a period of great political and theological ferment,” noted Donald Harrington, “when the new ideas of the Protestant Reformation were raising all kinds of questions concerning Catholic Church polity and elaborate, iron-clad dogmas; in addition, the presence of the Turkish army in Central Europe prevented the Vatican from bringing military force to bear, to put down the new answers which were being offered to some of these questions.”<sup>2</sup> Perhaps it’s not surprising that Francis Dávid, having trained at Wittenburg, fell under the influence of the Lutheran reformers, becoming the first Lutheran bishop of Hungary, a country which, at the time, had been reduced to a principality in present-day Transylvania. But he didn’t stop there. In time, he became the first superintendent of the Reformed (or Calvinist) church in that country and then, in the fullness of time, the first bishop of the emerging Unitarian Church in Hungary. It’s not that he couldn’t keep a job—it’s that he couldn’t keep still in his faith.

Along the way, Francis Dávid became court chaplain to John Sigismund, the young king of Hungary whose reign spanned just three short years. This theological transformation was not without the expected dust and heat, so the liberal bishop often found himself at the center of controversy. At the height of his power and influence, when Dávid might have crushed his opponents and moved to make Unitarianism the state church in Hungary, he instead advocated the adoption of an edict of religious toleration, which, when it was passed in 1568, put Transylvania at the forefront of religious liberty.

Among the central tenets of Francis Dávid’s teachings was *semper reformanda* – “the continuing reformation.” This early leader of our faith understood religion to be

dynamic, evolving, changing. It is in him and his teachings that we catch the first glimmer of the adaptability and openness to change that have become hallmarks of our way in religion.

This led him to initiate more changes in the church than any reformer from the time of the Reformation until the emergence of the Transcendentalists and the Free Religious Association in the nineteenth century. He was eventually tried and imprisoned for "innovation," where he died a martyr's death in November 1579.

Two decades ago, now, I was speaking with the wife of one the great Universalist ministers of the twentieth century. She recalled how, when she and her husband were young adults, he a newly-minted minister and she a devoted school teacher, they were astonished by the resistance they encountered from old New England Universalists, who viewed the flowering of humanism during the years following the Second World War as a great threat to the tried and true ways of Universalism over the generations. How intransigent was the older generation! She knew in her heart that she and her husband could never possibly be like the stuffy old Universalists of rural Maine. They would adapt to the inevitable changes in religion and society, as they occurred, remaining forever on the cutting edge of our liberal faith. Then the decades passed. McCarthyism flourished for a time, while the Cleavers ruled television land, and these forward thinking Universalists joined in the struggle of faithful religious liberals to neutralize and reverse its toxic effect on American life. On his retirement, Eisenhower warned Americans to beware the threat of what he dubbed the Military-Industrial Complex, and the minister and his wife devoted themselves, full of liberal religious fervor, to countering its growing influence in politics and economics. The Universalists merged with the Unitarians and, full of optimism and hope, they dreamed of an America where our free faith would grow with each passing year until, at last, what A. Powell Davies called "America's real religion" would take its rightful place among the leading denominations of the land. The denominational hymnal was revised twice so that our repertoire now bore little resemblance to the old, red *Hymns of the Spirit*. During the Vietnam War, they spoke prophetically of war's evils and counseled young men in the virtues of conscientious objection and even helped a few escape to Canada in a modern-day underground railroad. They struggled to help their congregation embrace the civil rights movement and racial justice as spiritual activities, not just secular political issues. They survived the drug culture and the Sexual Revolution, both of which must have looked, at times, more like extended adolescence than real movements of human liberation. After several decades of faithful service to our liberal faith, they retired from active service to enjoy the fruits of the faith they had long nurtured and loved. They had remained faithful to their aspiration to change as change demanded, to bring eternal verities to bear upon the contemporary issues facing

the world. They had evolved spiritually as surely as our species has evolved biologically. For them, the reformation had continued.

And then the pagans arrived. Plush carpeting in the social hall gave way to a labyrinth. After decades of successfully avoiding use of the word God except in footnotes and quotations, it reentered the devotional vocabulary. Amen was joined by “blessed be” and “so be it” and shalom. So-called prayers replaced the so-called meditations that had replaced the earlier prayers. Some folks wished to replace the harpsichord with a pipe organ. Under a charismatic and energetic successor, the congregation bid farewell to its beloved home of half a century and relocated to a spacious, newly-acquired facility. Buddhists mumbled sutras and the earlier pagans were joined by self-described Wiccans who looked and acted nothing like the witches of New England lore. Deep ecology and spirituality came to be talked about as much as social justice and reasonable religion. Spiked hair, nose piercing and tattoos joined the Birkenstocks, turtlenecks and pony-tails which had long since joined the business suits and dress shoes, ladies’ hats and even gloves of an earlier time. The categories of sexual orientation multiplied in hitherto unknown ways, while rites of passage expanded and changed. Christians reappeared, or at least came out of hiding, and we became increasingly aware of Jewish customs and Native American spiritual traditions. Garrison Keillor raised awareness of Unitarian Universalism, although he always forgets the Universalist part, by making light of our open and tolerant ways.

Their friends complained. Some members of long standing found these changes more than they could bear, so they left. My friend and her husband, still faithful and involved, have experienced changes and challenges that they could not have imagined when they first believed that they could never possibly be like the unchanging church members they knew when they were still young. They have been amused and perplexed, troubled and concerned, refreshed and delighted. Who could have blamed them if they, too, had found it all more than they could take? Yet through it all, they have been able to discern the flame of our liberal faith, glowing brightly at some times, and dimly at others, but always glowing amidst the twists and turns of fate and circumstance. For they have been disciples of the continuing reformation, able to discern the spirit, the essence of our faith, amidst its changing forms and expressions.

**W**e Unitarian Universalists must never indulge ourselves in the fantasy that we have somehow already arrived spiritually and that we have no more growing to do, either individually or collectively. This continuing reformation is the animating spirit of our liberal religious faith, the wellspring of our spirituality, the genius of our prophetic witness, the hope of our future relevance.

“Whereas the old verities were changeless and unchanging,” according to Edwin Buehrer, “the new religion must, for better or worse, attach its loyalty to change and

renewal.” And so it is that, as “deep-sea Unitarian Universalists,” we are ever called to “cease hugging the shallow shoreline” and to “launch out upon the main” where we may discover new lands of the spirit, reforming and refining our faith until, like a precious metal, it glistens in the light of day.

And so, here we are: disciples of the continuing reformation, pilgrims on the road forever new, grasping each new moment as an opportunity for change and renewal, growth and transformation. Amidst the revelry of Halloween, take a moment to pause and recall ninety-five thoughtful theses and seven precious principles, and remember that, underneath all the costumes we wear, we remain the people of the continuing reformation.



### **First Reading – “Deep-Sea Unitarians” by Amandus Norman:**

*The Reverend Amandus Norman was a Norwegian American journalist and minister who served as pastor of the Nazareth Church in Minneapolis and later the Nora Free Christian Church in Hanska, Minnesota. Not long before his death, Norman reflected on the spirit that animated his Norwegian Unitarian companions who had left the fjords to settle on the plains of the Upper Midwest, never surrendering their free spirited ways.*

**W**e claim kinship, mental as well as physical, with those unafraid mariners of the North, who, in the early Middle Ages ceased to hug the shallow shoreline, launched out upon the main, sailed the uncharted sea by the sun, and when that failed them by the never-setting stars, and found “Vinland the Good.” We are deep-sea Unitarians. As such, we are not overly concerned about the eddies and cross-currents to the right or to the left of us on the surface of the mighty stream of liberal thought. But let there be no misapprehension as to our essential position. We cherish no undue reverence for the mythologies of old, whether Norse, Greek, Hebrew or Christian. We accept them, not as special revelations of ultimate truth, but rather as the disclosures of the best that [women and] men of old could embody in words after pondering the problem of existence. And if their findings no longer serve to feed our souls, let us not give way to whining about the meagerness of our heritage, let us like resolute and resourceful men and women dive deeper, soar higher, and formulate the findings of our explorations in the world of space, time, and mind into nobler and more soul-satisfying concepts to sustain the loftier [human] race that is [yet] to be.<sup>3</sup>

## Second Reading – “The Passing of the Old Religions” by Edwin T. Buehrer:

*Edwin T. Buehrer was minister of the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago from 1941 until 1969. This is from his 1971 anthology, The Art of Being:*

The age of horse-drawn vehicles lasted more than 2000 years, and some of us who were born in that age have been swept through the whole transition to automobiles, to diesel-powered trains, to propeller planes, to jet planes, to space travel. When this happens to things, it happens also to ideas. And even the theologians – unless they have been completely immobilized in their traditional ways of thinking – know that great world religions have passed, and are still passing, and that Christendom itself is doomed to change and at last to pass away. It will not happen tomorrow or next year, but it is very likely to happen during the next century. Things are not immortal and society is not eternal. No millennium that we can now blueprint or foresee is likely to descend upon humanity.

When religions get old and tired, they begin to dissolve around the edges. They no longer stand out *against*, but go along *with* the mainstream of culture, and they become just another accepted institution with no claim to distinctiveness. They lose their capacity, therefore, to challenge or excite – to stir the minds and emotions of people.

That is what’s happening in our time. Religion is the most conservative institution in the history of [hu]mankind, slowest to respond to new ideas, last to accept scientific progress for what it is. But whatever else it is, it is the search for enduring values, for basic truths upon which to construct one’s life. Whereas the old verities were changeless and unchanging, the new religion must, for better or worse, attach its loyalty to change and renewal.<sup>4</sup>

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### Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Donald Szanthe Harrington, “Francis David’s Martyrdom After Four Hundred Years,” a sermon preached at the Community Church of New York (September 16, 1979), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Harrington, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Amandus Norman, “Deep-Sea Unitarians,” in *Faith Forbids Fear*, The Unitarian Lenten Manual for 1943, ed. Frederick May Eliot (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1943), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Edwin T. Buehrer, *The Art of Being* (Chicago: Third Unitarian Church of Chicago, 1971), 106.