

Francis David (1510-1579)

Francis David was born in Kolozsar, Transylvania, in 1510. He was a brilliant student, winning a scholarship to Wittenberg where he trained for the Catholic priesthood for four years. On his return to Kolozsar, he was appointed as rector of a Catholic school. He then accepted Protestantism, left the Catholic school and in 1555 became the rector of a Lutheran school. When the split in the Reform movement between Luther and Calvin took place, David joined the Calvinist party. The Reformation was still young and in this atmosphere the spirit of enquiry was not yet completely inhibited. Discussion was allowed on every aspect of Christianity. The Reformed Church had not yet adopted a fixed doctrine and there was room to think freely. In this situation, it was possible to advocate a freedom of belief in which each individual was only accountable to God.

The two dogmas which caused most confusion in the minds of the general public, and which defied rational explanation, were those of the Divinity of Jesus and the Trinity. David's mind was troubled by these inexplicable articles of faith. He could not see why anyone who believed in these mysteries without trying to understand them was considered to be a better Christian. He was not prepared to follow a faith blindly. Gradually he reached the conclusion that Jesus was not Divine, and affirmed belief in the existence of One God.

This belief already had strong adherents in Poland. The leaders of this group were two: Blandrata, the court physician, and a man called Socianus. While David was still formulating his idea of faith, King John of Transylvania fell ill and called Blandrata to treat him. David met Blandrata during his stay there and this confirmed his acceptance that belief in One God was the true basis of Christianity. In 1566, David produced a confession of faith which showed the position of the dogma of Trinity in the light of what the Bible actually said. In it he disowned the scholastic concept of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Blandrata, for his part, published a paper in which he formulated seven propositions refuting these doctrines both positively and negatively. In the same year, on the recommendation of Blandrata, King

John appointed David as his court preacher. As such, David became spokesman for the unitarian party in the national debates called by the king to clarify the religious issues of that time. He was an incomparable public speaker, one who, as a contemporary said of him, "seemed to have the Old and New Testament at his tongue's end."⁸

The major debates during John's reign were at Gyulafehérvár in 1566 and 1568, and at Nagyvárad in 1569. The first debate was inconclusive. The king, however, was impressed by the arguments of Blandrata and David. So, in 1567, a decree of toleration was passed. It declared that

in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation likes, so far so good; if not, no one shall compel them, and they shall keep the preacher whose doctrine they approve. None shall annoy or abuse the preacher . . . or allow anyone to be imprisoned or punished . . . on account of his teaching, for faith is the gift of God.⁹

The second synod in 1568 was called in order to establish whether the doctrines of the Trinity and the eternal deity of Jesus were taught in the Scriptures. David, who was a very powerful and convincing speaker, could not be disproved. When his opponents realised that they were losing the debate, they resorted to abuse, which only served to help convince the king that David's arguments were genuine. The debate lasted for ten days. It established unitarianism as a popular faith and David as its champion.

During this time the writings of Michael Servetus, which had been almost completely destroyed, were smuggled into Transylvania and were translated into the local language. They were widely read and served to strengthen the unitarian movement in Eastern Europe.

The third synod, held in Hungary in 1569, was, in the judgement of one Hungarian historian, "the decisive debate" which produced the "final triumph of Unitarianism."¹⁰ The king himself presided over it, and it was attended by all the highest ranking civil and military officials of the kingdom. David's arguments were these:

The view of Trinity held by the Pope in Rome is really a belief in four or five gods: one substance, God, three separate persons, each of whom are said to be God, and one man, Christ, who is also regarded as being God. According to Francis David, God is only One, the Father, from Whom and by Whom is everything, and Who is above everything, Who created everything through the word of his wisdom and the breath of His mouth. Outside of this God, there is no other god, neither three, neither four, neither in substance, neither in persons, because the Scripture nowhere teaches anything about a triple God.

The Church's God-Son who was supposed to have been born of the substance of God from the beginning of eternity is nowhere mentioned in the Scriptures, nor is a God-Son who would be the second person of the Trinity descended from heaven and become flesh. This is only human invention and superstition and as such is to be discarded.

Jesus did not create himself — the Father gave him his eminence. The Father had him begotten by the Holy Spirit. The Father sanctified him and sent him into the world.

The relationship of Christ with God is only of a kind which God gave him, God remaining in his Divine Sovereignty above everyone else.

There is no difference in time before God — for God everything is in the present tense — but the Scriptures nowhere teach that Jesus was born from the beginning of eternity.

The debate lasted for five days. It was again conclusive. In his final address, the king ordered that the unitarians be given full liberty of conscience. Melius, the leader of the Lutheran party, was warned not to play the pope, nor burn books, nor to use force to convert the people.

David afterwards summed up the debate in these words:

I followed the line of Scripture, but my opponents hid it in a bag; they turned light into darkness when they made three of the Father God and two of Christ. Their religion is self-contradictory to the extent that even they cannot present it as a whole. Nevertheless, they will see that even against their will God will prove His Truth. ¹¹

The result of this debate was that nearly the whole city

of Kolozsar became believers in One God. This belief spread out into the countryside and became the faith of a large majority of the people there. Unitarianism became one of the four officially "received religions", that is, one protected by law. By 1571, there were almost five hundred unitarian congregations in Transylvania. It was in this year that King John died. Although the popularity of unitarianism continued to grow, the new king, King Stephen, did not share King John's tolerance, and he reversed the policy of the freedom of conscience initiated by his predecessor. Life was made difficult for those who affirmed the Divine Unity, and, to make matters worse, David fell out with both Blandrata and Socianus. David was an uncompromising unitarian and could not bear anything to be associated with God, even indirectly. Socianus made a distinction between adoration and invocation directed towards Jesus. One could not invoke him, but one could adore him. David could not tolerate this. Even the Polish unitarians found the distinction too subtle, since little difference could be perceived between the two. In common thought and daily practise, this distinction tended to become blurred, and, during the course of worship, it could not be honestly said whether a person was adoring or invoking.

The Roman Catholics enjoyed the support of the new king, and the division between the leaders of the unitarian movement gave them additional strength. In a Diet at Torda in 1571, a general complaint was made that some pastors were guilty of innovations. This was repeated in Diets of 1573, 1576, and 1578, and the complaints made became more specific until they were pointedly made at Francis David. Blandrata had in the meanwhile become increasingly friendly with the king and appreciated the reputation and wealth this association brought. In 1578, he openly opposed David, and advised David not to pursue his beliefs any more. David, however, was not prepared to abandon his convictions merely to save his skin. Blandrata, after a lifelong struggle to establish belief in the Divine Unity, had become infirm and old and wanted a rest. He did not want to invite fresh trouble on himself or his friends. They knew that what David was doing was very dangerous, and felt that matters would be

made much easier for them all if he followed their example.

David remained unmoved. He not only continued to preach, but also began to write and distribute leaflets containing his beliefs, despite opposition. Blandrata invited Socianus to Transylvania in order to persuade David to change his views and accept the distinction which he made between the adoration and the invocation of Jesus. Socianus came and stayed as David's guest. His persuasion was to no avail, but it was agreed that David should summarise his beliefs in writing, and that they should then be presented to a synod of the Polish Unitarian Church. David did this, making the following four points:

The strict command of God is that no one should be invoked save God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth.

Christ, the teacher of Truth, taught that no one is to be invoked besides the heavenly Father.

True invocation is defined as that which is paid to the Father in spirit and in truth.

The forms of simple prayer are directed not to Christ, but to the Father.

Socianus wrote against these views, and David responded again in writing in support of his views. The discussion became heated and then gradually bitter and personal. The result was that Blandrata and David were now open enemies. This gave the Catholic king the support he needed and the order was given to place David under house arrest and to allow no one to see him. David found out about the order before it had been executed. He immediately began to preach in as many places as was possible, in churches, and in the public square, and openly told the people the reason for his impending arrest. He declared: "Whatever the world might try to do, it will nevertheless become clear to the whole world that God is One."¹²

After his arrest, David was taken before a Diet, and Blandrata acted both as the chief prosecutor and also as chief witness for the prosecution. The strain on David was so great that he fell ill. He had to be carried about in a chair for he could hardly move his arms and legs. He was condemned to

life imprisonment, and was put in the dungeon of a castle built on the summit of a high hill. No one knows how much he suffered during the five months he was there. He died in November 1579 and was given the burial of a criminal in an unknown grave.

After his death, a poem was found written on the wall of his cell. Part of it reads:

Twice ten years I have loyally served my country
And to the Prince my fidelity hath been proven.
Ask you the crime that the Fatherland hates so?
This alone is it: "One God not three" I have worshipped.

The last lines of the poem are:

Nor lightening, nor cross, nor sword of the Pope,
nor death's visible face,
No power whatever can stay the progress of Truth.
What I have felt I have written, with faithful heart
I have spoken.
After my death the dogmas of untruth shall fall. ¹³

Although David died, his movement continued; and indeed, for many years, the Transylvanian unitarians were referred to as "of Francis David's religion." Today his arguments are accepted as "plain, straightforward and scriptural. The verdict of all reasonable men is given in favour of David." ¹⁴ Blandrata who had played such a great part in David's death became very popular with the Catholics and the king. He became so rich that his heir was not prepared to wait for his natural death and murdered him. Although the persecution of the unitarians continued, it did not, as is usual, produce the result which the persecutors desired to achieve. David was soon sanctified as a Martyr and his example provided the unitarians with an inspiration which survived generations of organized persecution.

The number of unitarians in Transylvania diminished considerably, but began to increase in the south of Hungary which was under Turkish rule, for the Muslim rulers were

enjoined by the Qur'an to allow the followers of other faiths to live in peace, provided that they did not interfere with the practices of Islam. Thus, under Turkish rule, all Christians enjoyed a freedom which did not exist in any of the Christian countries. They were even allowed to practice their personal laws. Taking advantage of this freedom, for instance, a Calvinist bishop had a unitarian hanged for heresy. Another unitarian brought this act to the notice of the Turkish governor in Buda. He ordered the Calvinist bishop to appear before him, and after a trial, the bishop and his two assistants were sentenced to death as murderers. The unitarian minister interceded on behalf of the condemned bishop, saying that he had not sought revenge, but only that such incidents should be prevented from happening again. So the culprits were not hanged, but a heavy fine was imposed on them instead.

The unitarians enjoyed peace under the Turkish government for nearly a century. They had about sixty churches in the country ruled by the Turks. With the decline of the Turkish rule, however, this freedom of belief also declined, and the people were again forced to become Roman Catholics. Those who refused were violently persecuted. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, it no longer became possible to persecute people openly, and the number of unitarians again began to increase. The unitarian movement still survives in Eastern Europe today, and David's influence is still to be found in the hearts of this growing brotherhood.

There is some speculation as to how much contact Francis David had with the Muslims. Certainly, his beliefs come very close to Islam, and at least in one place in his writings he openly refers to the Qur'an in support of these beliefs:

It is not without reason said in Qur'an that Jesus can give no assistance to those who worship him because they would have him pass for God contrary to the doctrine taught by him. . .so they are worthy of blame who teach that we ought to worship and invoke Jesus; he himself having taught that the Father is to be invoked. . .God is not threefold but One.¹⁵

Of all the abuses which were hurled at David, however, he was never called a Muslim, perhaps because both the Calvinists

and the Catholics feared that to say this would have brought the then powerful Turkish rulers to the aid of the unitarians. The apparent ignorance of the Turkish rulers with regard to the unitarian movement, whose beliefs were so close to their own, can perhaps be ascribed to the degeneration of their own Islam. One of the main criticisms of David was that if his views were accepted, then the distinction between Judaism and Christianity would tend to disappear, and the latter would relapse into the former. Even Blandrata openly taunted David by saying that he was returning to Judaism. He never refuted any of David's arguments, but attempted to discredit him by playing on the popular sentiment against the Jews, and appeared to have forgotten that each new prophet came to reaffirm and extend the teaching of the prophet before him. Francis David's importance lies in the fact that by his affirmation of the Divine Unity he reaffirmed Jesus's position in the prophetic tradition without denying in any way the prophets who came before and after him. Further, he reminded people that true faith and trust in God together with a life lived according to the example and teaching of Jesus were sufficient for this life and the one after it.¹⁶

8) *Francis David*, W.C. Gannett.

9) *Francis David*, W.C. Gannett.

10) *A History of Unitarianism*, E.M. Wilbur.

11) *Francis David*, W.C. Gannett.

12) *Francis David*, W.C. Gannett.

13) *Francis David*, W.C. Gannett.

14) *A History of Unitarianism*, E.M. Wilbur, p. 78.

15) *Treatises Concerning the Mohamets*, A. Reland, p. 190.

16) *Francis David*, W.C. Gannett.