

Four hundred and sixty three years ago, in January of 1556, Peter Gonesius publicly declared his anti-Trinitarian views during the general synod of the Reformed Calvinist churches of Poland, held in the village of Secemin. (A synod is an ecclesiastical assembly of believers, for those of you not up on your church lingo.) Three months later, he was excommunicated. So begins a schism that culminates in June of 1565, when Peter, along with a number of other clergy and laity, break all ties with the Calvinists and form their own synod, the Minor Reformed Church of Poland, AKA the Polish Brethren.

Four hundred and sixty three years later, the consequences of these events still affect our lives and our faith.

Peter Gonesius was born in 1525 to a peasant family. He became a Catholic monk, graduated from the University of Krakow in 1546, and was ordained to the priesthood. In 1550 he represented the Catholic position in a debate against the Reformation. In 1551 his bishop sent him to Italy to attend the University of Padua, where in 1554 he graduated with a doctorate in theology, and was appointed to the faculty. It is in Italy that he was exposed to some radical new ideas, and in 1555, after lecturing in defense of the anti-Trinitarian theologians Michael Servetus and Matteo Gribaldi, he was dismissed from the university.

He converted to the Protestant faith, returned to Poland, and his story picks up where we began.

The Polish Brethren are an interesting bunch. They were Socinians - named for the Italian theologian Fausto Sozzini. They rejected the views of orthodox Christian theology on many points, including the doctrine of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ, and the idea of original sin.

Even more radically for the times, Gonesius claimed that true belief resided with the authority of the laity and that individual conscience superseded that of civil authority. He opposed the

feudal system and serfdom, in spite of which he managed to maintain the patronage of at least one member of the nobility to support him as a pastor.

In Britain and North America, "Socinianism" later became a catch-all term for any kind of dissenting belief.

The Brethren were pacifists, against capital punishment, and they advocated the separation of church and state. They taught the equality and brotherhood of all people; they opposed social privileges based on religious affiliation, and their adherents refused military service, and they declined to serve in political office.

In 1602, the Brethren established the influential Racovian Academy and printing press, which spread their ideas across both western and eastern Europe via their graduates and publications.

Two overarching principles emerged in the history of the Brethren: reason and tolerance. The tradition of discussing theology was based on the faculty of reason and the democratic process. They emphasized rational discussion in clarifying their beliefs. Even the phenomenon of prophesy had to be interpreted with reason. Their approach to dialog included propagating ideas via published books and then discussing and debating them at synods. They accentuated a nondogmatic reflection of religion.

Although they did not reject authority, they did not agree on who or what could be that authority. Their structure became a peership of equals, rather than hierarchical. They emphasized rational thought, critical interpretation of the sources, and verification of theoretical claims. This led to the idea of religious tolerance, as they emphasized reason instead of belief in doctrine or dogma, although their tolerance had limits.

Doesn't that sound familiar?

Their movement was Unitarian, although they didn't identify as such until later, and they precede the Transylvanian churches by a couple of years.

Let's zoom out to a bigger historical view for a moment.

This all taking place roughly a thousand years after the decline of the Western Roman Empire. Europe has emerged from the Middle Ages and is in the middle of the Renaissance period. Martin Luther had published his *95 Thesis* thirty years earlier, and the Reformation is fully established.

Then the Counter Reformation kicks in.

The Racovian Academy was shut down in 1638, under the pretext that several students had allegedly destroyed a roadside cross. The local Catholic bishop forced the closure of the school and all its buildings were razed. Most of the teaching staff and students went into exile in Transylvania or the Netherlands.

In 1658, the Polish nobility – who were largely Catholic – banned their religion and expelled the Brethren from Poland. They were given two years to sell their belongings and move, or they could embrace Catholicism and stay. Most chose to leave, and they scattered – some to Transylvania and Prussia, a few to England, but most to the Netherlands. They settle in Amsterdam, a hotbed of social, political, and religious radicalism.

It is in Amsterdam that two things happen: First, they take on the label of Unitarian, and second, the leading figures of the movement decide that the works of theologians and intellectuals connected with the church should be collected and published in one enormous compilation. Which they do in 1668, with the publication of *Bibliotheca Fratrum Polonorum quos Unitarios vocant* or *The Library of the Polish Brethren called Unitarians*.

In 1674 the book was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, a list of books prohibited by the Catholic church. Some Catholic theologians went as far as calling it ‘one of the most dangerous publications to Christianity’, together with other classics of philosophy such as Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* and Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Just as side note, the Index was finally suspended on March 29, 1967.

The Brethren and their published works are considered to have influenced many Enlightenment thinkers, including John Locke, who owned a complete set of all 9 volumes of the *Bibliotheca*. Isaac Newton, who was privately anti-Trinitarian, also collected many of their works.

The Brethren certainly informed the development of English Unitarianism. John Biddle, known as the “Father of English Unitarianism”, translated several of their publications into English. And through American Unitarianism, their ideas also influenced many of the Founding Fathers of the United States. We know that James Madison and Thomas Jefferson attended sermons of their friend and Unitarian preacher Joseph Priestley, who openly cited Polish Brethren as influences.

So we can trace our presence here in this room today to a bunch of radical Polish Christians who lived and thought and worked four hundred and sixty-three years ago. Give or take a decade or two.

They were part of a larger rationalist revolt against religion, a broader social reaction taking place, one that embroiled the whole of Europe in religious and political conflict. People fought and died over ideas and beliefs like Arianism and Socinianism, or whether you were Protestant or Catholic. Reason slowly asserted itself, culminating in the Enlightenment and the rise of democratic nation states.

What triggered that revolt was the invention of the printing press in 1440, which made knowledge available to growing numbers of people. The historian Oswald Spengler wrote that

similar movements arose in every civilization in which literacy escapes from the control of the priesthood, and a significant secular literate class emerges.

There have been several Ages of Reason in the human story. In ancient Egypt, there was one that started around 1500 BCE, in China, around 750 BCE; in India and Greece both around 600 BCE; in what Spengler called the Magian culture, the mix of competing Middle Eastern monotheisms that finally came under the rule of Islam, about 900 CE. The equivalent point in the history of the West was reached around 1650, around the time the Brethren peaked as an organization.

Every one of these rationalist revolts passed in history: the rationalist movement of the Egyptian New Kingdom ended in 1340 BCE with the restoration of the traditional faith under the Pharaoh Horemheb; that of China ended with the coming of the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE; that of India faded out amid a renewal of religious philosophy well before 500 CE; that of Greece and Rome ceased to be a living force around the beginning of the Christian era; that of the Muslim world ended around 1200 CE.

Each of them was followed by what Spengler called the Second Religiosity—a renewal of religion fostered by an alliance between intellectuals convinced that rationalism had failed, and the masses that had never really accepted rationalism in the first place.

I think we see that happening now in our denomination.

Many of our clergy seem to be saying that reason is a tool of oppression, not liberation, and that the Unitarian thread of our heritage has run its course – and maybe it has, but not because its ideas are invalid.

An Age of Reason is passing, and we are simply left to deal with that fact. But because reason and rationality are no longer a dominant cultural force, that doesn't mean they simply go away. They are just no longer dominant.

Every literate urban society, Spengler argued, followed the same trajectory from an original folk religion rich in myths, through the rise of intellectual theology, the birth of rationalism, the gradual dissolution of the religious worldview into rational materialism, and then the gradual disintegration of rational materialism into a radical skepticism that ends by dissolving itself; thereafter you get ethical philosophies for the intellectuals and resurgent folk religion for the masses that provide the enduring themes for the civilization to come.

I believe what is happening in the West is just as Spengler predicted.

On the one hand we are seeing the consolidation of an educated and more-or-less wealthy elite with their own social and political philosophies, and on the other hand, fundamentalist-ethno-nationalist populism. A multiplicity of social-political-religious movements are arising, some progressive, many reactionary.

What is certain is that we are in a time of change as dynamic and uncertain as the time of the Brethren. Like them, we do not know what will arise from the social forces boiling around us. Those forces will move with a logic – or illogic – all their own. An old order is fragmenting and falling away, and a new one is a long way from coalescing out of the increasing chaos.

New myths will be born, and trying to control myths is a fool's errand.

One of the lessons of the Polish Brethren is that institutions are not necessary for ideas to thrive and spread. Despite the destruction of their academy and their expulsion from Poland, their ideas survived to influence greater movements.

Like the Brethren, what we can do is keep the faith.

Faith is the normal and necessary human response to those things that can't be known on the basis of any form of proof, but have to be answered in one way or another in order to live in the world. The question that deserves discussion is why keep *our* faith? The answer is that every act of faith rests on a set of values.

We have a set of values that have survived through some 500 years or more, and I believe can survive through at least 500 more, if we hold true to them.

Reason and tolerance may go in and out of fashion, but they never go out of style.